

AMERICAN HUMOR

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American humor comprises such a massive amount of material that it needs to be divided into thematic units and analyzed accordingly within various sub-categories like frontier humor, ethnic humor, political humor, feminist humor and negro humor. (1) There is also of course humor that may be drawn from general humor traits.

Furthermore this bulk of diverse humor which is growing everyday is conveyed through even more numerous media; mainly literary works like almanacs, diaries, poems, short stories, novels and plays, movies, TV sit-coms, TV shows, stand-up comedies, comic strips, newspapers and magazines.

So there arises the necessity to limit the subject matter in one way or the other. Thus, in this paper a brief chronological survey of the major American literary humorists from the early practitioners of the eighteenth -century until the late nineteenth century will be covered.

It might be a good idea to start off by defining humor. What is humor? A very extensive and common answer could be, "Anything that is comic and laughable." The word, however, derived from

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1 There is also another kind of humor known as black humor which should not be confused with negro humor as it has nothing to do with race. Black humor does not cover a particular thematic unit; it refers to a certain absurd, grimly comic, grotesque style of humor in the novels of the post-modern writers of the sixties like John Barth (*The Sot-Weed Factor*, 1960 and *Giles Goat-Boy*, 1966), Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. (*Slaughterhouse - Five*, 1969), and Philip Roth (*Portnoy's Complaint*, 1969).

humorem actually meant "fluid" or "moisture" in Latin. (2) According to the theory of humorism which was popular in the medieval period and the Renaissance, the four fluids i.e. blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, that exist in equal amounts in man's body balanced his temperament. If, however, one fluid were in excess the person would be humorous. For instance, if blood were in excess the person would be sanguine, that is greedy, hot, lecherous; if phlegm were in excess he would be phlegmatic, that is dull, passive, cold; if yellow bile were in excess he would be choleric, that is angry, fierce, aggressive; and finally if black bile were in excess he would be melancholic, that is depressed. (3) Thus this lack of balance rendered man an object of laughter.

In the later half of the seventeenth-century, the word picked up its connotations for which it is known today and was defined in the *Oxford International Dictionary* as: "That quality of action, speech, or writing, which excites amusement; oddity, comicality. The faculty of perceiving what is ludicrous or amusing, or of expressing it..."

When do people need humor? What is its function? What is its justification? Anthropologists, psychologists, sociologists have tried to find answers to these questions over the years. One most outstanding study is Henri Bergson's "Laughter" where he analyzes the comic in general and the comic elements in movements, words, character and situations and states that, "... we have regarded laughter as first and foremost a means of correction." (4)

It is true that as an alternative to heavy moralizing in correcting human follies, the use of humor is equally effective as man feels superior to the fools while roaring with laughter at their physical, intellectual or moral defects and other deficiencies.

2 "Humour, Humor", *Oxford International Dictionary*, 1958 ed.

3 English dramatist of the seventeenth-century Jacobean period Ben Jonson has made use of this theory in his satiric comedies of humors like *Volpone*, *Everyman in His Humor*, *Everyman Out of His Humor* and *The Alchemist* in which he created sanguine characters like *Volpone* and *Dol Common*, phlegmatic characters like *Dame Pliant*, choleric characters like *Kastrill* and melancholic characters like *Tribulation Wholesome*.

4 Henri Bergson, "Laughter" in *Comedy* (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1956), p.185.

conscious of the fact that he too will be ridiculed if he acts in a similar manner.⁽⁵⁾

Another justification for humor is found in the words of the great Roumanian - French dramatist Eugene Ionesco who, in line with the pessimism of the absurdists, states that, "The comic alone is able to give us the strength to bear the tragedy of existence." ⁽⁶⁾ Nietzsche, too, confirms man's need for the comic for its therapeutic nature by stating that, "The most acutely suffering animal on earth invented laughter."⁽⁷⁾ Undoubtedly, humor relaxes man and relieves him of stress and tension, thus putting him into a gay disposition with its tranquilizing effect.

Among the tools of the humorist writer one can state satire, wit, parody, pun, burlesque, and the disparity between what one expects and what he encounters.

Though humor is itself funny, light-hearted and trivial, the study of it is a serious matter. Moreover, the more we examine it, the more it is elusive because of its ephemeral nature. As E. B. White states, "Humor can be dissected as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind." ⁽⁸⁾

What is it that makes American humor distinctly and uniquely American? How and why does it differ from British humor for instance? The answer mainly lies in the unique historical, social, political, cultural and economic experiences that the Americans themselves have lived through; namely, immigration, the frontier, Indians, the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, segregation and the emancipation of blacks, the beginnings of the women's liberation movement, the rise of the hippy and beatnik

5 Yet the complexity of the function of humor is apparent in the words of Louis Kronenberger who states that, "Humor simultaneously wounds and heals..." ("Humor," *The International Thesaurus of Quotations*, 1983 ed.) As it affirms the dignity and superiority of the one who laughs, it heals his ego; and as it ridicules and degrades the one who is laughed at, it wounds his. If this dual nature of humor is carried too far, it loses its healthy nature and comes to be known as "sick" humor.

6 Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed., *The Comic Relief* (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1979), p.1

7 *Ibid.*

8 Norris W. Yates, *The American Humorist* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1964), p.11.

cults, sending a rocket and later a man to the moon, and being a foremost world power. The amalgamation of this mass of experience in the subconscious of a nation will no doubt be reflected in its humor.

In Turkey when a certain joke is not understood or liked, there is usually the tendency to discard it with a sneer and a wave of the hand as "Amerikan espirisi!" (American humor) whereas the humor of other nations is not particularized as for instance "Alman espirisi", "Italyan espirisi" or "Arap espirisi". The reason for this may lie in the fact that to a certain extent we share a common European and mid-Eastern heritage and frame of reference. Thus, in order to appreciate the humor of a nation, one has to be fairly familiar with its history, society, culture and politics.

Furthermore, what is humorous is mainly a subjective matter; what would make one roar with laughter could easily bring tears to another's eyes or make him frown or be offended. Such diverse attitudes to the same joke can even be witnessed among the compatriots of the same nation.

Therefore, the criteria for the choice of material to illustrate American humor in this paper was to a certain extent subjective. For example, some critics and anthologists argue that there exists streaks of humor, though Gothic, in some of Poe's works. ⁽⁹⁾ "Hop Frog" and "Cask of Amontillado" are generally chosen to prove this point as in the former Hop-Frog, the court jester, avenges himself on the coarsely jocular king and his courtiers by setting fire to their highly flammable costumes and burning them alive, and in the latter Montresor kills Fortunato by masoning him alive in a vault as a punishment for an insult. Both Hop-Frog's and Montresor's modes of revenge were omitted from this paper because the alleged "humor" in them was not compatible with the taste of this writer who still prefers to read Poe as a narrator of the grotesque.

9 See Hennig Cohen, "A Comic Mode of the Romantic Imagination: Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, in *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1973), pp. 89-91; Constance Rourke, *American Humor* (New York: Doubleday, 1931), pp. 145-49; Brom Weber, ed., *An Anthology of American Humor* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1962), p. 226-27; Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill, *America's Humor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 498.

As Walter Blair suggests American humor can be said to have begun in 1830 "because during that year both Down East humor and frontier humor were well-represented, in American almanacs and newspapers then (and thereafter) hospitable to native comedy, and because that year marked the birth date of Jack Downing, (10) the leader of a century - long parade of similar popular native figures."(11). Nevertheless, sporadic specimens of humor were present before this date as well.

In America humor was slow to develop because the early settlers, the sternest of which were the pious Puritans, were too busy working hard to make a decent life for themselves in the wilderness to have time for entertainment or humor which are mainly products of a society at leisure. (12) Therefore, it is only two hundred years after the first pilgrims landed in the early seventeenth-century that we see any substantial mass of humor in America. (13)

The writers of early humorous pieces were mainly influenced by English jest books covering ludicrous anecdotes and by Addison and Steele's essay - periodical *Spectator* (published daily between 1711 - 1712) in their humorous tone, familiar yet refined and urbane style and choice of subject matter comprising social and moral commentary and sometimes literary criticism.

Among these writers is America's first literary humorist of significance, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) who is mainly

10 Northern humorist Seba Smith's *The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing* (1833).

11 Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (1937; rpt. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Company Inc., 1960), p.39.

12 Nevertheless as time passed and some settlers moved on further out West, among the North Easterners and in their newspapers and journals anecdotes were told about the coarseness, crude manners, tactlessness, bluntness and bragging habits of the frontiersmen, the heftiness and the lack of charm and grace of the belle of the frontier who could scalp Indians, and the lawlessness of the West, thus destroying its romantic image. See Mody C. Boartright, *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier* (1942; rpt. New York: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 9-25, 43-67.

13 Although, for instance, Brom Weber commences his *An Anthology of American Humor* with Nathaniel Ward's *The Simple Cobbler of Aggawam in America* (1647) and includes extracts from the works of numerous writers until the early nineteenth - century, it is still reasonable to bear in mind the date 1830 as suggested by Walter Blair for the reasons stated above, as the true beginning of the American humorous tradition.

known for his *Poor Richard's Almanac* (published annually between 1733-1758) and *Autobiography* (begun in 1771; unfinished). In the former he displays his didactic Puritan tendency as he instructs settlers on when to plant crops, how to cure an illness and even how to bake a cake. In the meantime, he also provides witty proverbs, maxims and humorous anecdotes.

The following lines are chosen from Franklin's "Old Mistresses Apologue" (14) (MS) in which the writer praises marital bliss yet gives advice to his friend on why he should prefer older women in his amours should he insist on remaining single. Shocking as they are coming from the pen of the Puritan Franklin, these lines would undoubtedly offend today's feminists:

2. Because when women cease to be handsome, they study to be good... They learn to do a thousand Services small and great...

3. Because there is no hazard of Children, which irregularly produc'd may be attended with much Inconvenience.

5. Because in every Animal that walks upright, the Deficiency of the Fluids that fill the Muscles appears first in the highest Part : The Face first grows Lank and wrinkled; then the Neck; then the Breast and Arms; the lower Parts continuing to the last as plump as ever: So that covering all above with a Basket, and regarding only what is below the Girdle, it is impossible of two Women to know an old from a young one.

7. Because the Compunction is less. The having made a young Girl *misérable* may give you frequent bitter Reflections; none of which can attend the making on old Woman happy. 8 thly and Lastly, - They are so grateful⁽¹⁵⁾

John Trumbull (1750-1831) follows Franklin as a major literary humorist. He is a member of the Connecticut Wits. ⁽¹⁶⁾ He

¹⁴ "Apologue" means "a moral tale."

¹⁵ Weber, *An Anthology of American Humor*, pp. 108-109.

¹⁶ A circle of poets: David Humphreys, Lemuel Hopkins, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow.

is known for his long poem the "Progress of Dulness" (1772-73) in which he is successful in creating humor by means of his poignant and witty satire. In this work he satirizes contemporary educational attitudes at Yale, his own alma mater. The work falls into three parts. In part one the foolish country bumpkin Tom Brainless turns into a dull, incompetent scholar who practises plagiarism; in part two Dick Hairbrain who attends college grows into a fop; in part three the coquettish Miss Harriet lives through a frustrating love affair with Hairbrain, finally settling down in marriage to Brainless, thus preparing herself for a dull lot. (17)

Two years after the Northern Seba Smith's *The Life and Writings of Major Jack Downing* (1833), in the first half of the nineteenth century, the South witnessed its first major collection of humorous stories with Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835) which is the first major book of "frontier" humor. Written in the vernacular with a colloquial style it realistically yet in a humorous tone portrays the hardships of the "frontier."

It might seem strange at first to include Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) among humorous writers as he is generally known for his somber novel *Scarlet Letter* in which he discusses moral issues, and his short story "Young Goodman Brown", a moral allegory. Nevertheless, he has also written humorous pieces you would not expect from him. His short story "Mrs. Bullfrog" (1837) is one of these pieces in which he satirizes the ludicrous aspects of the greedy human nature.

The finicky Mr. Bullfrog is rather picky in choosing a wife and is resolved "to wed nothing short of perfection... In a word, if a young angel just from paradise, yet dressed in earthly fashion, had come and offered me her hand, it is by no means certain that I should have taken it" (18) However, he meets a woman and within a fortnight woos and marries her. In their journey to Mr. Bullfrog's future place of business, he gradually realizes that she is not at all what he dreamed as she drinks and violently beats up the coach driver when he carelessly capsizes the coach. The jolt of the coach has removed her wig and false teeth and all her earlier

17 Peter Briggs, "English Satire and Connecticut Wit" in *American Humor*, ed. Arthur Power Dudden (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), p.9.

18 Weber, *An Anthology of American Humor*, p. 203.

good temper is gone. Mr. Bullfrog observes in bewilderment that "The blows were given by a person of grisly aspect, with a head almost bald, and sunken cheeks... There being no teeth to modulate the voice, it had a mumbled fierceness... Who could the phantom be? ... for this ogre, or whatever it was, had a riding habit like Mrs. Bullfrog's..." (19) Hawthorne is superb in his description of the metamorphosis of Mrs. Bullfrog from a refined little lady with rich dark ringlets and pearl white teeth to a coarse bald and toothless woman with a nasty temper. In addition, the discovery that his new bride had been jilted by an earlier fiancé because of her ill - temper, adds to the discontent of the fastidious Mr. Bullfrog. Nevertheless he is quick in forgiving these imperfections in his wife, her "little defects and frailties." (20) When he finds out at the end that she has been rewarded \$ 5,000 in the case she opened against her former fiancé and is willing to use it to help him establish his own shop, once again Mr. Bullfrog is a happy man!

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) is also quite successful with his tongue - in - cheek humor as he recounts his observations of the *English Traits* (1856) which he wrote after having visited England.

In the piece called "Cockayne" from this book he satirizes the English for taking national pride in an "impostor":

George of Cappadocia... was a low parasite who got a lucrative contract to supply the army with bacon. A rogue and informer, he got rich and was forced to run from justice. He saved his money, embraced Arianism, collected a library, and got promoted by a faction to the episcopal throne of Alexandria. When Julian came, A.D. 361, George was dragged to prison; the prison was burst open by the mob and George was lynched as he deserved. And this precious knave became, in good time, Saint George of England, patron of chivalry, emblem of valor and civility and the pride of the best blood of the modern world. (21)

19 *Ibid.*, p. 205

20 *Ibid.*, p. 208.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 198.

Until the mid- nineteenth century most humorists wrote in newspaper columns or journals. But in the 1850 s, 1860s as humor began to be collected in books it flourished more rapidly . Among the writers of this period who helped advance the American literary humor tradition is Charles Farrar Browne known as "Artemus Ward" with *His Book* (1862) and David Ross Locke knows as "Petroleum.Vesuvius Nasby" with his *The Nasby Papers* (1864).

The first major American humorist is no doubt Mark Twain (1835-1910). He is an outstanding practitioner of the tall tale, or in other words, the yarn which is a narrative based on exaggeration, full of repetition and digressions that do not advance the story and told by a narrator who uses the framework technique. The yarn is spun in a very serious tone and in non-standard English. The latter feature naturally gives the tale an oral quality. In such stories the subject matter may not be as important or interesting as the manner in which the story is told.

Among Twain's famous tall-tales which can be said to have launched his career as a literary humorist is "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865). During his years in the West, Twain had heard the story of the magnificent jumping frog and later chose to write about it. In the story a traveller inquires after a Reverend Leonidas Smiley. Yet the talkative narrator starts telling a tale about a Jim Smiley who one day caught a frog, trained it and named it Dan'l Webster. This frog could jump so quick and high that it could outjump any frog in the near vicinity.

"Dan'l Webster was the name of the frog-and sing out, 'Flies, Dan'l, flies!' and quicker'n you could wink he'd spring straight up and snake a fly off'n the counter there, and flop down on the floor ag'in as solid as a gob of mud, and fall to scratching the side of his head with his hind foot as indifferent as if he hadn't no idea he'd been doin' any more'n any frog might do. You never see a frog so modest and straightfor' and as he was, for all he was so gifted." (22)

22 Mark Twain, "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, " in *The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Doubleday 1961) p. 265.

Smiley bets with a stranger on the unheard of skills of his frog. Nevertheless, he is double - crossed by the stranger who secretly fills up the frog with quail shot, and loses \$ 40.00. Immediately after this story comes to an end, the garrulous Wheeler is about to spin another yarn but our traveller manages to slip out.

Another of Twain's very well - known humorous tall-tales is "The Blue-Jay Yarn" (1880) in which the narrator Jim Baker starts off his story by humorously personifying the little birds, "A jay will lie, a jay will steal, a jay will deceive, a jay will betray; and four times out of five, a jay will go back on his solemnest promise." (23) Then he tells the story of the blue-jay who tries to fill up a hole in the roof with acorns, "You never see a bird work so since you was born. He laid into his work like a nigger, and the way he hove acorns into that hole for about two hours and a half was one of the most exciting and astonishing spectacles I ever struck... Well at last he could hardly flop his wings, he was so tuckered out." (24) Although the poor bird claims that he has not put any less than "two tons" of acorn into the hole, he is astonished to discover that hole is still not full. Jays from all over come together to solve the mystery and it is soon understood that all the acorns have fallen inside on to the floor of the house. Thus, they "fell over backwards suffocating with laughter.. It ain't any use to tell me a blue - jay hasn't got a sense of humor, because I know better... They brought jays here from all over the United States to look down that hole, every summer for three years. Other birds too. And they could all see the point, except an owl that come from Nove Scotia... said he couldn't see anyting funny in it." (25)

Mark Twain practises humor not only in his short tales but in longer narratives as well. *Roughing It* (1871) is a perfect example. Yet in this work it can be observed from time to time that Twain's humor surpasses the ludicrous exaggeration of the tall-tales and borders on the grotesque:

(Miss Jefferson) was a good soul- had a glass eye and used to lend it to old Miss Wagner, that hadn't any, to receive company in; it warn't big enough, and when Miss Wagner

23 Weber, *An Anthology of American Humor*, p. 347.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 349.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 350.

warn't noticing, it would get twisted around in the socket, and look up, maybe, or out to one side, and every which way, while t'other one was looking as straight ahead as a spy-glass. Grown people didn't mind it, but it 'most always made the children cry, it was so sort of scary. She tried packing it in raw cotton but it wouldn't work somehow - the cotton would get loose and stick out and look so kind of awful that the children couldn't stand it no way. She was always dropping it out, and turning up her old deadlight on the company empty, and making them uncomfortable, becuz she never could tell when it hopped out.... so somebody would have to hunch her and say, 'Your game eye has fetched loose, Miss Wagner, dear' - and then all of them wold have to sit and wait till she jammed it in again - wrong side before...⁽²⁶⁾

In this narrative, as in the tales, it is not the content that is so humorous but the telling of it. This can be observed in the following lines on the cycle of life; one ends up thinking that all things are actually not so lovely:

Providence leaves nothing to go by chance. All things have their uses and their part and proper place in Nature's economy; the ducks eat the flies - the flies eat the worms - the Indians eat all threee - the white folks eat the wild cats- eat all three - and thus all things are lovely. ⁽²⁷⁾

Furthermore, in the following lines Twain catches the humorous in the marginal feminine behavior of a woman who idly passes the time on a stagecoach. "The humor here depends upon a unique female behavior described in sporting terms. ⁽²⁸⁾

She would sit there in the gathering twilight and fasten her steadfast eyes on a mosquito rooting into her arm, and slowly she would raise her other hand till she had got his range, and then she would launch a slap at him that

²⁶ Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (1871, rpt. New York: Harper and Row, 1913), II, p. 100.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 261-62.

²⁸ Richard Boyd Hauck, *A Cheerful Nihilism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1971), p. 144.

would have jolted a cow; and after that she would sit and contemplate the corpse with tranquil satisfaction-for she never missed her mosquito; she was a dead shot at short range. (29)

However, it can be observed in the later writing of Twain that his humor grew slightly bitter and piquant. This is especially true for the humor in "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1900). In this story the narrator returns to a mid - American town, which is not quite hospitable to strangers, to avenge himself. By exposing their love of money, he eventually proves to these so-called puritanical and self - righteous townspeople that no one is incorruptible. Not typical of Twain's style, the story is a poignant satire on greedy human nature.

Another outstanding literary American humorist is Joel Chandler Harris (1848-1908) with his Uncle Remus stories created in the image of the South. Thus, his writing is note-worthy as it successfully illustrates regional humor based on local color. The first of the Uncle Remus books was *Uncle Remus: Songs and Sayings* (1895); nine more followed.

Among these stories in which Brer Rabbit is always fighting for survival with the fox, bear or wolf, (30) "Tar-Baby" is one of the most popular. In this wonderful story written in the Southern dialect, the fox slyly sets up a contraption made of tar and turpentine on a road to catch the rabbit. He lays quietly in the bushes until the rabbit comes along "clippity-lippity" and says, "Mawnin" to the tar-baby. He naturally gets no answer and is upset:

" 'nice wedder dis mawnin' sezec.

Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

.....

" 'Is you deaf?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezec. 'Kaze if you is, I can holler louder 'sezec. Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

29 *Roughing It*, I, p.8.

30 Identifying with the weak, helpless Brer Rabbit, who most often came out victorious in his encounters, the Southern negroes attained a sense of superiority.

" ' Youer stuck up, dat's w'at you is.' says Brer Rabbit,
sezee. (31)

As the tar-baby remains silent, the rabbit takes a swing at it in rage. Yet, the more he punches the tar-baby, with his feet, legs, hands, head and all, the more he gets stuck. The fox comes out of the bushes but Uncle Remus does not tell us whether he ate the poor rabbit or not.

Despite the long line of male literary humorists who wrote until the late nineteenth-century, it can be said that women have not played an essential part in the development of the comic spirit in America in the same period. As the first female literary humorist, Sarah Kemble Knight is note - worthy with her *The Journal of Madam Knight* (1825) which includes her satirical humorous observations on local customs and stereotypes during her five - month journey on the East Coast. Another female literary humorist of significance in the same period is Frances Miriam Whitcher whose humorous observations began appearing in magazines in the 1840s and were later collectively published as *The Widow Bedott Papers* (1856).

In conclusion, it can be observed in the literature between the early eighteenth - century and the late nineteenth - century that American humor was alive and well. It were these writers who set the American humorous tradition and paved the way for the humorous writing of the men of letters of the twentieth - century.

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³¹ Weber, p. 408.

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