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# Mark Twain, James Thurber, and David Sedaris: American Literary Humorists

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MARK TWAIN, JAMES THURBER, AND DAVID SEDARIS: AMERICAN LITERARY  
HUMORISTS

A Dissertation

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## **ABSTRACT**

This analysis is an attempt to study funny texts without destroying their funniness. To wit, I examine the works of three writers who I have identified as the hallmarks of the institution of the American Literary Humorist during the generations through which such individuals have existed. These include Mark Twain, James Thurber, and David Sedaris, all of whom are often identified as the standout funny writers of their generation, and all of whom are often compared to each other in content and personality. To understand their texts, I examine each of them in light of the times in which they live and the ideologies that populated their contemporary public spheres. I use that as a fulcrum to examine how their works resonate in their own times and also to speculate how they might rub contemporary readers as they continue to be celebrated as pinnacles in the pantheon of American letters.

## CHAPTER ONE: DEFINING THE AMERICAN LITERARY HUMORIST

“Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.” ~Mark Twain in *Following the Equator* (1897/2011)

“Well, there isn’t a trace of humor in communism, is there?” ~James Thurber, *The New York Times Book Review* (1952/1989)

“If you aren’t cute, you may as well be clever.” ~David Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000)

The following chapter lays some groundwork for the analysis ahead. It defines terms, overviews theory, and previews arguments. Its goal is to find the sticking place where the interplay of the American Literary Humorist with the American public can be analyzed. This spot lies, cheerfully, at the intersection of funniness, rhetorical impact, aesthetics, and ideology. Without any of these components, we lose one of the quintessential characteristics of this purportedly unique cultural figure. Without funniness we lack laughter, without rhetoric we lack an audience, without aesthetics we lack writing, and without ideology we lack the common ground of American-ness.

As such, this chapter is going to flesh out the parameters of this theoretical intersection. Its interior, of course, is far too vast and diverse to categorize here. We must focus on the container or be swept away by the limitless potential of the thing contained. But as we overview each of these components, we gain some idea of how they come together to form the niche in which the American Literary Humorist hones his craft. To begin, we’ll delve right into the theoretical meat of the humorist’s work, which is the nature of his funniness.

### Defining the Funny

Although we use the term “humorist” throughout this analysis quite simply because it has long ago been coined as the go-to moniker for men like Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris, it actually

over-essentializes the nature of their material. “Humorists” may work in either comedy *or* humor, for example, or more specifically they may wield satire or burlesque, or they may employ any of a number of other strategies to create a buildup toward the tension-releasing payoff of laughter. As such, this analysis will not refer to the content of these writers’ work exclusive as “humor;” instead, it will revolve around their quality of “funniness,” or their tendency to deal in “the funny.” This terminology will avoid semantic confusions that might result from trying to identify particular instances of work as either “comedy” or “humor” or some other instance of the broad range of species of funny discourse. Furthermore, whereas “comedy” and “humor” sound like awfully stuffy academic terms for a concept that is supposed to be lighthearted and whimsical, it seems much more appropriate to refer to the institution of “the funny” with a phrase that often makes people smile or giggle. “The funny” it shall be, therefore, and it shall itself be a little funny. Having established this overarching term, though, we’ll proceed to flesh out some of the distinctions that it glosses over, why those distinctions are important, and how all of the subgenres of The Funny come together under the umbrella of things that elicit laughter.

The Funny is often intuitively defined in a gratingly tautological way: something exhibits funniness if it’s funny, and it’s funny if it exhibits funniness. Alternatively, The Funny is often approached from an “I know it when I see it” angle, since it’s assumed that everybody can figure out what funniness is for themselves because most people have the capacity for laughter. But these definitions, while useful in everyday conversation, give us little idea of the craft or cognition that leads up to that happy affective payoff of laughter.

Tension reduction gives us a great springboard toward understanding the funniness of things. Laughter is sometimes understood as an evolutionary response to a threat being neutralized, which is why many individuals laugh in a way that seems reminiscent of sobbing or



actually cry when they laugh too hard – or why infants laugh during a game of peek-a-boo when their parent emerges safely from their brief but provoking disappearance behind their hands (Morris, 1967; Sroufe and Waters, 1976). When something is funny, therefore, it follows a period of mounting discomfort, a momentary shift in perspective during which the discomfort is neutralized and revealed to be safe, and then a resulting ease of tension, often through the physical act of laughing (which evolutionary theorists argue is a sound designed to carry to others and spread the word that safety is at hand, thus our greater tendency to laugh aloud when we’re around other people and the bonding effect of social laughter).

A story must build its own tension, but a funny utterance can capitalize on the tension rippling through the word around it without having to bother with rising action. The complications behind funniness are often enthymematic – that is, they may already reside in the consciousness of the audience and are called to mind organically by a situation or explicitly by a comedian (“Airline food – am I right?”) instead of being the product of artificial turns of events. Our own memories thus become part of the craft that precedes *The Funny* (Wyer & Collins, 1992). This beginning stage of understanding humor involves reveling in the status quo rather than creating a way out of it. All the issues of “crafting” a joke – including setup *and* punchline – are part of this aesthetic component.

Cicero (2001), in *De Oratore*, notes the co-importance of form and content in long list of the sorts of things that create funny payoffs (“The Categories of the Humorous”), ranging from paronomasia to inverted poetry to exaggeration and insinuation. Other thinkers put their efforts toward grouping micro-level structures that might precipitate laughter, or “material,” in other words – any huckster who professes to teach people how to be funny follows this trail of thought, and a quick Amazon search reveals scads of such tomes, several of which are actually and

explicitly entitled *How to be Funny*. These structures, of course, can be executed through a diverse array of media, allowing room for an array of comedy forms like the standup routine (Mintz, 1985), the political cartoon (Lamb, 2007), and the comic strip (Sills, 2013). Comedians rarely limit themselves to a single mode of expression, of course. Twain was a darling of the funny lecture circuit of his day as well as a famous writer. Thurber doodled cartoons for the *New Yorker* as he wrote stories. Sedaris reads his work aloud on the radio both before and after it's published in print. The bottom line of all of these approaches is simply that they build tension and release it during a moment of realization that precipitates an awareness that the something about the situation is funny.

Within this diversity of aesthetic approaches lies the aforementioned conflation of different genres of the funny into sometimes confusing synecdoche, like calling writers “humorists” when their work spans lots of genres of The Funny including and beyond humor. Burke’s (1937) schema of distinctions between comedy, humor, satire, and burlesque gives us some idea of the diversity under the surface of these overarching terms. “Comedy,” for Burke, is a term that specifically denotes a frame which renders

people not as *vicious*, but as *mistaken*. When you add that people are *necessarily* mistaken, that *all* people are exposed to situations in which they must act as fools, that *every* insight contains its own special kind of blindness, you complete the comic circle (p. 41).

If we laugh at comedy, then, we laugh because we identify with the universality – the essential humanity – of the ludicrous mistakes before us. Humor, on the other hand, is rather an opposite enterprise for Burke. Its funniness consists in the culpability of a single individual whom we laugh at rather than with: “...it takes up the slack between the momentousness of the situation and the feebleness of those in the situation by dwarfing the situation.” (p. 43). Satire is a form of

aggrandized self-flagellation. Burlesque ridicules a *reductio ad absurdum* understanding of others' behavior. Although Burke's categories of funny discourse are not necessarily authoritative or unproblematic, they do illustrate the myriad forms of craft that unite under the distinction of The Funny. Comedy and humor are not the same, but both build tension that can be released with a new understanding of the situation that leads to laughter.

After craft has been devoted toward building whatever species of tension is necessary, there is some sort of punching magical moment in which we realize The Funny. Davis (2000) notes its existence in a memorable way in her landmark iteration of the functions of laughter, *Breaking Up [at] Totality*, when she says that "To be possessed by this movement of energy, laughed by a co(s)mic Laughter, is to be thrown into a *petit mal* in which one's consciousness, one's capacity for meaning-making is suspended (p. 18)." Bergson (2008) harbors a more intense view of this notion and insinuates that the mind is actually altogether absent during this moment. Whatever degree of absence the mind enjoys during this moment, its temporary release gives us freedom to change the way we see the world. Drawing on Kant and Herbert Spencer, Bergson refers to this instance that precedes laughter as a "void" in which built-up expectations yield no results and which therefore thrusts us into nothingness (p. 45). There is still a sort of cognitive activity going on, of course, as psychologists note in various studies of the process of laughing. Perhaps the "mind" that escapes is composed primarily of preconditions and premeditations, leaving room for novelty in thought. Wyer and Collins (1992) cite Freud's notion that the greater the cognitive activity involved in the moment where The Funny is realized, the greater the intensity of the resulting laughter.

After that moment in which The Funny is realized, people experience some degree of happiness which is often expressed through laughter. It is "the physical reaction, as a convulsion

no longer containing thought” (Kundera, 1999, p. 323). Here, we may find the health benefits of laughter, the new perspectives gained through regarding things as funny instead of scary or oppressive, and the communion of laughing together. These effects may occur right after the joke is told, or they may be latent. This aftermath, furthermore, is where a joke can have a rhetorical impact beyond the immediate emotional and physiological reaction of laughter. Despite some scholars’ opinion that funny material has very little material, real-world impact (Westwood, 2004), others point out that it can affect the way that people process the world around them, which influences their orientation toward ideas and toward other people. Collinson (1988), for example, memorably analyzes ways that humor can function as both control and resistance in organizations in his case study of British shop-floor workers.

Thus, defining the nature of funny discourse in a workable way entails a surface-level understanding of the fact that it involves the building and release of tension. It then must progress deeper to the level of appreciating the vast array of options available for the aesthetic craft that spurs funniness, the creation of the empty potential energy of The Funny moment itself, and the physical, mental, and social/rhetorical outcomes of the act of laughing alone or together. Because the analysis to come is going to focus on the rhetorical hold that the American Literary Humorist has on his public, we must move on to probe more intensively the nature of rhetoric itself.

### **Defining Rhetoric**

Basic, digestible understandings of rhetoric are often gleaned from the observations of Aristotle (2007), who lived in an age of powerful chatter and had good reason to analyze its impacts on the *polis* around him. (Of course, Aristotle didn’t invent the thing, and other

civilizations than the Greeks were practicing rhetoric during or even before Aristotle's time. But there's a particular felicity of expression in Aristotle's notions that gives them a sort of brief clarity that suits our purposes of definition quite nicely.) Rhetoric, for Aristotle, is an assessment of the available avenues of persuasion in a given situation of public address. Often, this assessment is followed by an understanding that allows the student of rhetoric to practice these means toward whatever end he chooses, giving rise to the colloquial understanding of "rhetoric" as "that which allows me to underhandedly manipulate others to get what I want." Its importance lay, in Aristotle's time, in the sort of public speaking that made possible the fledgling Athenian democracy. Rhetoric was a way for speakers to air out agendas in a way that made people agree with them. Public address in this setting was a lucrative means to a political end, and the more attention paid to cultivating those means, the greater likelihood that they would achieve their end.

A rhetorician in the Aristotelian line can observe a multiplicity of tools available to a rhetor. They can notice someone employing Ethos, or making arguments based on their projection of their own character. They can observe Pathos, or the rallying of people around a particular emotion toward a particular object. They can also see Logos, or the exercise of reason (less in the sense of sitting down to reason among equals than in that of the speaker employing his own reasoning and expecting others to follow it.) In employing these tactics, speakers can use *topoi*, or laying the groundwork for sense-making within the boundaries of a given situation, and enthymematic knowledge of the audience's context that leads them to coincide with the speaker's train of thought. The speaker's use of context broadens as they employ *kairos*, or timeliness, as well as a tone appropriate to the specific occasion at which they are speaking.

The study of rhetoric has gained ground and diversified since Aristotle's time, of course. Importantly, the current approach to observing and using the available means of persuasion much more multifaceted than someone simply turning wordplay on passive listeners. Hauser (2002) points out the importance of action as the object of rhetoric. The fact that persuasive elements exist is, of course, vital – but persuasion has little importance unless it gets some practical traction. Hauser explicitly defines rhetoric, then, as “concerned with the use of symbols to induce social action” (p. 3). He further points out that rhetoric thrives only in conditions of discontinuity. If human social organization was cohesive and predictable, after all, there would be no need for us prompt social action to fix things. Thus, we need rhetorical events to close our fissures and bring about some (albeit temporary) stability.

Bitzer (1968/2005) takes a less verbal and more contextual approach to rhetoric in his famous treatise on “The Rhetorical Situation.” He argues that there can be no rhetoric unless the context allows or demands its presence: “Nor should we assume that a rhetorical address gives existence to the situation; on the contrary, it is the situation which calls the discourse into existence” (p. 59). For a situation to perform this feat of precipitation, he says, three elements have to be present: First, there must be an exigence, an urgent imperfection that demands resolution. Next, there must be an audience, who can only facilitate rhetoric if they are able to be influenced and if they are capable of making change. (Otherwise, of course, what's the point?) Finally,

every rhetorical situation contains a set of *constraints* made up of persons, events, object, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence [emphasis in the original] (p. 63).

If rhetoric were merely a matter of telling people what to do in order to make change, it would not be nearly so complex or complicated. Instead, there are always myriad things in the way, as it

were, that prevent the solution to the exigence from being accomplished in any expedient way. Bitzer concludes that only in “the best of all possible worlds” (p. 67) could communication exist without rhetoric. As is, challenging situations that demand change are so prevalent that we need rhetoric, and we need to appreciate the three-dimensional challenge that a rhetor faces when he tries to use the sorts of tools outlined by Aristotle.

To make matters even more fraught, Crick (2010) points out that the rhetorical situation is open to interpretation and therefore subjective. An exigence is not problematic unless someone interprets it as such and then decides to look to someone else (i.e. the rhetor) for guidance toward resolution. Thus, the rhetorical situation is in the eye of the beholder, in a sense, and as a result it is not a simple matter of dispassionate reasoning based on outside influence. “A rhetorical situation features the presence of a moral conflict that cannot be resolved by logical reasoning alone” (p. 42) instead of simply devising a universally accepted expedient means toward an end. Crick’s vision of rhetorical morality involves that which has implications for the public sphere and which has equally public consequences. “More than just a feeling of uncertainty, rhetorical situations demand the tension of conflict that arises when two competing value systems clash within the context of judgment” (p. 43) – so not only is rhetoric situational, the context in which it is based is massive and unwieldy. A rhetor thus must address a sea of subjective interpretations within divergent value systems. As the rhetor tries to bridge gaps among such a large and divergent population of audience members, he must provoke a resolution to an exigence that affects an equal or even larger number of people. So much more than simply piquing people’s emotions for his own personal gain, then, a rhetor must address some facet of the greater good as he plans the persuasive turns of his address.

Thus we have arrived at a nicely complex definition of “rhetoric.” It is a means of persuasion whose components can be categorized and laid out item by item, ready for use. With these tools in hand, a rhetor can instigate social action to address problematic divisions in the society around him. His ability to enact social action is contingent on three different aspects of the “rhetorical situation” at hand: the divisive exigence, the audience’s capacity to make change, and the constraints on that change that he must navigate during his persuasive efforts. Finally, any exercise of rhetoric, given these presuppositions, is perched within a large group of people who are either directly or indirectly affected by the social action being prescribed. As such, a rhetor must at least appear to be upholding a Benthamite utilitarian notion of the betterment of that large group when he expresses his persuasive undertaking. Although this conception of rhetoric is more unwieldy than Aristotle’s early iteration, it more fully expresses the difficulties encountered by rhetors like Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris as they hone their art toward their reading publics. Given these, burdens, then we can move on to see how the forebears of these authors combined elements of The Funny with the obligations of rhetorical discourse to appeal to their own audiences.

### **The Funny and Rhetoric**

These elements of American Literary Humor – The Funny and rhetoric – do not, of course, exist in a vacuum. They often come together in artistic forms like the ones we will scrutinize in later chapters of this analysis, like short stories and funny drawings and so on. Although the role of the aesthetic in the public sphere will be more thoroughly explored in Chapter Two, it is also worth probing the prototypical examples of this synthesis now so that the groundwork for the existence of more recent artifacts in this vein is apparent. For now, we will



satisfy ourselves with some simple appetizers from the ancient Greeks, ancient Romans, and Renaissance Europe to see this sort of unity in action.

The Greeks – specifically the Athenians – were some of the first to put The Funny in the service of rhetoric beginning in roughly the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Comedy was one of the Greeks’ three genres of stage performance, in good company with tragedy and the satyr-play. All three types had intertextual relationships with each other, but each had distinct origins – the tragedy as an offshoot of Homer, for example (Dobrov, 2007). The genres were unified by their employment of solo actors speaking in verse backed up by a chorus of actors who spoke in unison throughout the plays. All were presented at the Athenian dramatic festivals in staging areas that included space for the performance and a *koilon* – an amphitheatre-style seating area that could accommodate as many as 17,000 spectators, in some instances (Chourmouziadou & Kang, 2008). Men (and perhaps even women) of all facets of society would attend the performances, which was reflected in many plays’ incorporation of populist issues rather than just the cares of the people in charge of the *demos* (Henderson, 1991). Plays were presented competitively, and writers made their name in Athenian society with success at the festival. There was a great sense of importance surrounding the festival, for all its mission was lighthearted entertainment of the public – so serious was its mission that tampering with the selection process of the panel of judges could be punished by death (Pope, 1986).

Aristotle offers a nice analysis of the funny plays of his day in the *Poetics* (1961), including the famous works of Aristophanes (1962). He juxtaposes the comic form with contemporary tragic plays to arrive at his notion of how the genre works. For Aristotle, comedy is rife with something like the trinity of “Chaos, Clouds, Tongue” (p. 114) revered by the satire-Socrates of Aristophanes’s *Clouds*. It isn’t linear; even Aristotle, despite his puritanism about the proper

causal form of tragedy, admits that its multiple plot threads allow for an appropriately convoluted form. In the *Clouds*, for example, we find that various characters with various agendas pop up seemingly at random, although their significance to the overall story congeals and becomes clearer later on. An interlude between Right Logic and Wrong Logic, for example, who are apparently throwaway characters whose purpose is odd at best, takes a significant amount of time within the play as they debate their own importance (with Right on the side of education and the gods and Wrong simply on the side of winning arguments) and engage in a mock-Socratic dialogue about the relative merits of a “sprung bum” (or a stretched-out, roomier anus) (131). Only later, when the play’s other characters engage Wrong Logic for their own pursuits and face the consequences, do we see the true implications of that branch of the plot.

The characters in a Greek comedy, in direct opposition to those in a Greek tragedy, begin their narratives in a thoroughly debased state – a lower baseline than real life, even (whereas characters in a tragedy start off much more fortunate than the average man). The beginning of the *Clouds*, for example, presents us with a man in the midst of an unfortunate, unwanted marriage and his son who is swiftly depleting the family’s money with his gambling addiction. But although comedy begins with ugliness, in Aristotle’s eyes, its ugliness is of a sort which does not seem threatening. The aggravating wife never appears in the *Clouds*, so the man’s perturbation is more of an angry resentment than a real fear. Furthermore, the man immediately arrives at a solution to his money woes (or at least thinks he does), which is emphasized so soon that the audience does not have time to legitimately fear for the welfare of the household before they are whisked along toward the distractions of satire-Socrates’s Think-shop. A similar premise marks the beginning of the *Birds*, as two friends begin to build their Utopia in the sky before the audience really has time to consider the forces that drove them away from human

civilization in the first place. So although comic characters are base at the beginning of their stories – and indeed stay pretty base throughout the duration – they revel happily in their ugliness as the atmosphere around them surrounds them with cheerful contrasting details.

There is little sense of consequence in ancient Greek comic narratives. The *Clouds* do punish the man and his son for their lack of piety, but the punishment seems like an afterthought and takes a backseat to the ludicrous jokes that precede it. The civilization in the *Birds* – comprised, unsurprisingly, of birds – openly defies punishment when the citizens declare their own divinity and, with Prometheus's help, get the previous gods to grant them boons in exchange for an agreement to peaceful co-existence. Their blasphemy actually goes rewarded instead of punished. This lack of comeuppance falls in line with another of Aristotle's observations about comedy: that it deals in probability. Although he does not flesh out this comment much, it meshes well with the fact that although the plot turns within a comedy are fanciful, they also ring true with real life. If a man tries to get out of paying his debts by proclaiming the collection agency to be full of ignorant fools, like the man in the *Clouds*, his argument is probably not going to be received favorably. If an attorney tries to use supernatural means to boost his caseload, like in the *Birds*, the endeavor probably won't work. Whereas the events in ancient Greek tragedies don't seem likely to actually occur (for all they are very cosmic and remarkable), comic events smack happily of the everyday.

Thus we have an ancient Greek vision of funny artistry. To give the audience some practical application – some take-away – these comedies also embodied a particular vision of the capacities of rhetoric. Comedies like the *Clouds* and the *Birds* show rhetoric as an effective tool of the man on the street (in contrast to tragedies, in which persuasion often falls on deaf divine ears). Of course, the consequences of effective rhetoric in a comedy are not always exactly what

the rhetor envisioned. The protagonist's son in the *Clouds*, for example, learns the Wrong Logic (presumably akin to Sophistic rhetoric) too well and launches a campaign to punish both his father and his mother. To begin his efforts, he befuddles his father through off-kilter sense-making that actually makes weird sense and ends up changing the father's own rhetoric, with unfortunate results for both father and son. More positively, the characters in the *Birds* repeatedly wield rhetorical tools against men who try to infiltrate their utopia with various forms of bureaucracy. Their arguments do not fail to fling undesirable characters out of their community – even, indeed, the gods themselves. Overall, Greek comic rhetoric embodies real power to make change through persuasion and gives characters much greater agency than they could muster in the hands of the gods during a tragedy.

By the time ancient Rome had reached the peak of its influence, funny artistry had become prevalent in two influential areas: the stage and the rostrum. While the principles of ancient Greek comedy performances had evolved into the distinct genres of Roman satire, they had also found their places in deliberative and judicial rhetoric in so noticeable a way that Cicero (2001) devotes a great deal of attention to them in his dialogic treatise *On the Ideal Orator*. This division illustrates nicely the evolution of the funny as a force permeating popular voices as well as something for audiences to passively receive from a one-sided performance (an evolution that will become clearer in the discussion of funny Renaissance rhetoric below). Although it's plausible that audiences of ancient Greek comedies were “taking it with them” in the sense that comic rhetoric might have made their thinking more consequence-centered and their everyday rhetoric more reasonable, ancient Rome saw people making more of an effort to put comedy into practice toward specific ends. In fact, funny discourse had become such a mainstay of persuasion

that Cicero was able to document scads of court cases in which its use had been an argumentative mainstay.

Performance of comedy in ancient Rome was distinct from its ancient Greek predecessor thanks to the development of the subgenre of satire. Although the Roman satires have roots in Greek satyr plays and Greek Old Comedy, they began to follow their own unique trajectory beginning around 239 BC with the works of Ennius and gaining real ground in the writings of Gaius Lucilius in the 100s BC. Early satires were marked by first-person narration and explicit attacks or commendations of the ethics of contemporary politics. This unveiling of explicit political sentiment was perhaps most vehemently shown by one of the latter great satirists, Juvenal, whose unabashedly angry influence colors the way we understand the genre of “satire” today. Much like in the court cases of the day, Juvenal’s use of funny discourse had persuasion explicitly in mind. Braund (1996) explicitly describes Juvenal as a rhetor:

Juvenal experimented with satire as he wrote and...he developed his satiric voice from one of anger to one of ironic detachment in the later satires. Throughout, he uses the ‘grand style’ inspired by rhetoric and epic to set satire on a new level, very different from the lowly ‘conversations’ of Horace (p. xiii).

In fact, Humphries (1958) identifies eloquent rhetoric and “Rabelaisian humor” as the true distinction between Juvenal’s satiric anger and “compulsive obsession” (p. 9).

Given their rhetorical expertise, among other areas of finesse, scholars identify Roman satirists as quite witty and invitational in their poetry. Braund (1996) observes that satirists gained great authority in their communities with their verses. Their power did not come from their impeccable use of the truth, necessarily, but from their ability to write realistically in ways that resonated with the everyday lives of their audience. But Roman satire was also marked by room for audiences to disagree with the voices on stage, no matter how angry or aggressive they

seemed. Many satiric personas are there for the audience to condemn, just as many are there for the audience to espouse. Much like modern satire, where people see shows like the spoof-news program *The Colbert Report* and sometimes agree with the anchor's false persona so much that they don't realize he's an exercise in satire (Lamarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009), Roman satire was open to polysemous interpretations from different audience members.

Although different writers employed different artistic forms to achieve their satiric ends, including monologues, dialogues, and poetic letters, the content of the satires is always open to audience deliberation. Braund (1996) notes that

The author tends to play games with us by creating a mask or voice, a satirist who is persuasively and seductively authoritative, and then undermining that authority. This he does by writing into the mask some equivocation, inconsistency or ambivalence which creates uncertainty for us about the relationship between author and mask, between poet and persona....It suggests that there are no final 'right answers,' no 'correct' way of reading the texts of satire....We are part of the drama...we take an active role in...interpreting it for ourselves (p. 59).

With explicitly greater audience agency in Roman satire than in Greek drama, playwrights employed an invitational rhetoric that could more freely spur public deliberation and dissent. Rather than being spoon-fed opinions, audiences were free to form opinions for themselves.

Take, for example, Juvenal's famous Tenth Satire, "On the vanity of human wishes" (Juvenal, 1958). True to his style, it is very grand and very, very condemnatory. Indeed, the thrust of the verse is that mankind doesn't know what's good for it because people clearly ask for all the wrong things when they pray to the gods. "Few indeed are the men who can tell a curse from a blessing," he observes disdainfully, and

In peace, in war, in both, we ask for the things that will hurt us.  
Many a man has found his flood of eloquence fatal,  
Many have perished who trusted too much in the strength of their muscles,  
Even more have been choked off by the money they hoarded (121-2).

One by one, Juvenal dismisses each of the things that people customarily pray for, including wealth, power, long life, and beauty, by pointing out the advantages of being disadvantaged in these respects. In the end, he advises his audience that they should simply pray for health in mind and body, reconciliation to death and trouble, preference for labor over decadence, and tranquility through virtue. Maintaining the sweeping scope of the grand style, he concludes that “If men had any sense, Fortune would not be a goddess. / We are the ones who make her so, and give her a place in the heavens” (p. 134). Indeed, he falls directly in line with the mandates of “humor,” as defined above, because he chastises his audience while holding up a higher standard for them to follow rather than simply resigning himself to the fallibility of humankind.

During all of this condemnation of the things which might be considered great, though, one cannot help but notice that Juvenal himself is not innocent of the follies with which he accuses mankind. Scholars muse that he must have been wealthy himself, for instance, since had received a rhetorical training reserved for the Roman elite and since he never dedicated any of his poems to a patron (Braund, 1996). A man with as great a following as he enjoyed could not be said to be without power, despite all his bemoaning the dismal fate of the great rhetoricians before him, like Demosthenes and Cicero. His poems would not gain their audience, in fact, if they lacked that grandiloquence that made them so distinct from the other satires of his time. The fact that his sixteen well-known satires were published in five different books shows that he enjoyed a literary career for a rather extensive period of time. Finally, a man who made his livelihood in the realm of the grandly aesthetic cannot have been blind to the attractions of physical beauty.

In fact, even if the audience chooses to ignore these inconsistencies between Juvenal's personal character and the message of this particular poem, they cannot escape the Tenth Satire's reification of the advantages it seeks to dismiss. Before the poem condemns wealth, it points out the reasons that people seek it in the first place. Before it observes Cicero's grisly death, it points out the power he gained through his rhetorical prowess. Long life and beauty also each have their moment in the sun before they are vituperatively scorned by the poem's narrator. Although this is not properly *dissoi logoi*, since one side of the argument eventually wins out in all these debates, the audience is still presented with two different dispositions toward each issue, and they are free to choose which of them to espouse. They may heed the advice at the end, or they may (in fact, they probably will) continue to lust after the luxuries that Juvenal's narrator condemns. In the end, the funny rhetoric gives them a choice.

In the midst of another species of performance, humor was gaining great rhetorical ground in the political scene amid which persons like the aforementioned Marcus Tullius Cicero spent their days. An orator, a philosopher, and a practicing politician, Cicero (prior to being assassinated having his head and hands nailed to the Rostrum by his political enemies) put great stock in documenting the various uses of rhetoric he saw used in the political speeches and court cases of his day. Although he admits that he has little knowledge of the nature of The Funny itself (he dismisses the question of defining laughter with a quick "let Democritus see to this"), he eagerly dissects the impacts of its execution. "It is indeed clearly fitting to for the orator to stir up laughter," he observes in *On the Ideal Orator*,

Because cheerfulness by itself wins goodwill for the one who has excited it; or because everyone admires cleverness (often a matter of just one word!), especially of someone who give a retort, and not infrequently also of someone who provokes another; or because laughter crushed the opponent...or because it shows the orator himself to be refined, to be educated, to be well bred (p. 186).



He spends nearly twenty pages of his “excursus on wit” categorizing various ways an orator can cause his audience to laugh. This includes “jokes depending on words,” like puns, poetry, and paronomasia. Furthermore, he observes “jokes depending on content” - such as exaggeration, insinuation, and irony. Throughout these descriptions, Cicero draws on examples from the comic theatre here and there, but also relies on a trove of knowledge from court cases. For instance, he mentions Gallus testifying against Piso that the latter’s prefect had taken money away in his belly, “like a naked man collecting nuts” (p. 197). (The translator notes that this was probably funny at the time because it was based on some popular contemporary proverb or story, despite its lack of resonance for modern audiences.) Another instance falls under the category of wittily censuring stupidity:

In a legal case Scipio, as praetor, assigned his own host, a well-born but rather stupid man, an advocate to Sicilian: ‘Please, Mr. Praetor,’ said the Sicilian, ‘assign that advocate to my opponent, then you won’t need to assign anyone to me’” (p. 201).

In any of these cases, we see *The Funny* doing directly persuasive rhetorical work on the level of unabashed public address. Cicero adds the caveat that “anyone who wants to speak with humor must be permeated, so to speak, with a nature, a character that is suited to these types” (p. 204), implying that funny rhetoric can’t be executed well by just anyone. But the point is that this convergence of art, funniness, and rhetoric had stepped off the stage and onto the street, and was seen as something that could be practiced by any student of the persuasive arts rather than a fixture of the satyr plays.

While *The Rhetorical Funny* made its initial forays into everyday life during the heyday of the Romans, it had gained much greater ground during the defining days of Renaissance Europe. Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) identifies the work of Francois Rabelais as characteristic of the funny spirit of his times. Indeed, Rabelais may be one of the prototypical Literary Humorists,

since his work was published through the printed word rather than an oral medium and made use of the developing genre of the novel.

Importantly for our evolution, Rabelais's material comes largely from contemporary folk traditions of humor, meaning that his content trickled up to his expression of it rather than him expecting the message of his work to trickle down into his audience. Bakhtin breaks down the comic folk traditions of the Renaissance that inspired his subject into three broad categories in his introduction to *Rabelais and His World*:

1. Ritual spectacles: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. Comic verbal compositions: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. Various genres of billingsgate: curses, oaths, popular blazons (1984, p. 5).

He notes that in a society dominated heavily by the Church, gatherings like feasts included an often officially sanctioned comic element to balance the gravity of life under strict sacred doctrine. He furthermore points out that everyday life of the period was accented by clowns and fools, who “stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors” (p. 8). The goal of these sorts of institutions and the overall species of aesthetic funniness that Bakhtin calls “carnival laughter” is a levelling one, reminding author and audience alike of their universal humanity (something in line with Burke's conception of comedy). He points out that although today's satire – like ancient Roman satire – laughs at its topic with the goal of making it inferior, the Renaissance carnival spirit revels in the fact that anyone who can laugh at the world must also be a part of it.

In the first chapter of his analysis of Rabelais, Bakhtin speculates about the roots of Renaissance funny rhetoric as a progression of the public sphere of the Middle Ages. There was a marked divergence during that period between what we might identify today as High Art and

Low Art, or what Bakhtin refers to as that within the official sphere and that which remained unofficial. (The distinction was even more stark because official literature was written in Latin, and unofficial literature in the more common parlance.) Unofficial literature, he claims, was marked by a great degree of freedom thanks to its lawlessness. Folk humor thus proliferated and developed freely.

Given the prevalence of Christian religious spirit at the time, it is perhaps unsurprising that the church was one of the first loftier arenas to be permeated by the “low” culture of folk humor. Early Christianity was strictly serious and services prohibited laughter, a sentiment which officials hoped would trickle into the everyday lives of their congregations. But people found that the oppressive seriousness of the times demanded some sort of “safety valve,” or release, that could be gained through the tension-releasing qualities of laughter. Bakhtin does not beat around the bush about this:

But this intolerant seriousness of the official church ideology made it necessary to legalize the gaiety, laughter, and jests which had been eliminated from the canonized ritual and etiquette. Thus forms of pure laughter were created parallel to the official forms (p. 74).

Different forms of hilarity swiftly became associated with various church festivals, including Easter and Christmas. In a more secular sphere, the Feast of Fools and the Feast of the Ass ritualized laughter as much as the traditional church service had ritualized solemnity, the latter of which was often celebrated with parodic “asinine masses.” At all levels of the church hierarchy, laughter was becoming intertwined with official rhetoric.

At the same time, the written word was becoming a medium more and more accessible to the public at large, and folk humor began to spread under its auspices as well. Collections of funny stories and jokes were occasionally published by noted thinkers, including Melander and

Johannes Pauli (himself a man of the cloth). Rhetorically, the content of their collections was marked by a few trends that made the humor of the Middle Ages distinct from what came before, at least to Bakhtin. Parody, for example, was quite trendy, but it didn't follow in the footsteps of scathing humorous Roman satire. Instead, it remained purely within the realm of the comic – the collective celebration of human imperfections. The *eidos* of this spirit comes from medieval funny discourse's consciousness that it is part of a much larger universe of events (a sense of cosmic consciousness that one might speculate comes from living in an atmosphere so permeated with spiritual fervor). Carnival rituals and other parodies are aware that they enthymematically touch upon a huge body of experience within the audience, spurring a structure marked by humble aims and huge scope.

One of the great universals tapped by medieval laughter, of course, is the defeat of the crushing sense of fear that marked the height of the Middle Ages. In Bakhtin's words, "Victory over fear is not its abstract elimination; it is a simultaneous uncrowning and renewal, a gay transformation. Hell has burst and has poured forth abundance" (p. 91). This transformation of universal negative pathos – fear being such a primal emotion – adds to that universal scope of laughter's tension-reduction and the massive consciousness with which it interacted. Because it was such a stress relief, then, and because its advent occurred in opposition to the Church hierarchy, Bakhtin sees medieval laughter as a source of strength and trust: "It was related to the future of things to come and was to clear the way for them" (p. 95). Humor was a powerful force in a society devoid of many other outlets for populist feeling.

Given its vital function as a form of release, it is unsurprising that the popular funny discourse of the Middle Ages should trickle (up?) into the "high" literature of the Renaissance, including the novel. Bakhtin opines that this trend reached its apex in the novels of Rabelais, for

example *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. He describes the author's customary structure as something that is often misinterpreted thus:

A specific character or event can be found behind each of Rabelais's images. The entire novel is a system of historical allusions. The method of deciphering is based on tradition, dating from the sixteenth century; it consists of comparing Rabelais' images to the historic events of his time.... (p. 113).

This erroneous – to Bakhtin's mind – method of interpretation has arisen because comedy has changed so much since the Renaissance. Understanding Rabelais's work is difficult now, says Bakhtin, because laughter lost its universal nature in the wake of his works, beginning in the seventeenth century. He urges readers to, instead, analyze him in the spirit of “popular-festive laughter that informed [his] work” (p. 115). Without understanding folk humor, he says, “we cannot understand cultural and literary life and the struggle of mankind's historic past” (p. 474). It is with this lens in mind, then, that we observe Rabelais's use of funny rhetoric in his novels.

Bakhtin observes myriad examples of Rabelais channeling the spirit of his times into his work – *Gargantua* in particular. He adds a caveat important to all of the above examples from the Greeks and the Romans as well as the analysis of American Literary Humorists to come, which is that Rabelais does not consciously sit down and attempt to make his writing a reflection of the world in which he lives. Rather, as Bakhtin says, “Rabelais was consciously and artistically in possession of his style, the great style of popular-festive forms” (p. 212). Style is a somewhat intuitive endeavor in that way.

Regardless of willful intent, however, Rabelais does manage to channel a great of the legacy of medieval funniness into his writing. According to Bakhtin, he illustrates element of carnival like the up-ending of the government to make the clown a king, in the process uncrowning kings like Picrochole in *Gargantua* and the aptly-named Anarchus in *Pantagruel*.

The latter of the two is even physically thrashed (keeping with the carnival notion of abuse-as-metamorphosis) and dressed as a clown. Pantagruel's heroic feats are often connected with food, which reflects the importance of the banquet to the culture of the time. "This is no commonplace, privately consumed food and drink, partaken of by individuals," Bakhtin points out. "this is a popular feast, a 'banquet for all the world'" marked by a "mighty aspiration to abundance" (p. 278). Consumption of food is also related to the medieval "grotesque body," which is characteristically unfinished in that it is always openly interacting with the world.

One of the most memorable carnivalesque tropes in Rabelais's work, of course, is his (or his culture's) preoccupation with what Bakhtin calls the "Material Bodily Lower Stratum." This entails any and all of the body functions that might be understood as denizens of the human nether regions. The untouchable quality of this stratum's characteristic activities is meant to call to mind "debasement and interment," which call to mind "carnival uncrownings, related to blows and abuse" (p. 370). The most famous – infamous – example of this trend can be found in the vignette from Gargantua's childhood where he experiments with different "swabs" with which to clean his rear end after pooping. The series is lengthy and contains many trials, beginning with "the velvet scarf of a damozel" (p. 371) and arriving at the neck of a downy goose as the most choice material for the task. Rabelais and contemporaries are not alone, of course, in their use of base or even scatological humor – Aristophanes in particular is rife with similar examples. The difference, or evolution, involves the significance of this type of joke. Within the context of medieval humor, excrement represents both a debased counterpoint to the grave presence of the sacred in all aspects of society. Furthermore, it represents a universal humanity (Gomi, 2001) and that collective celebration of human imperfections that marks the comic genre. As such, Rabelais's references to the Material Bodily Lower Stratum are quite the symptom of his times.

Thus, we see how The Funny has evolved over the early stages of its mass publish dissemination to become a powerful rhetorical force. The combination of funniness and rhetoric can spur public deliberation, it can vent public frustrations, and it can even symbolically uncrown government leaders. But given the nature of rhetoric as a response to an exigence, all of this volition will have little effect unless the discourse can motivate an audience to think or act differently than the status quo. In order to gather than audience together, then, funny rhetoric has to give people some common ground – other than the inherent draw of the promise of laughter - that makes them want to pay attention. Fortunately, channeling ideology gives us a solution to this problem of audience cohesion.

### **Defining Ideology**

Our ability to use the funny rhetorically in appealing aesthetic ways matters little if we lack a united audience to respond to our rhetoric. Anything funny is at least slightly enthymematic – it relies on embedded major premises within the audience’s knowledge base in order to draw its conclusions. Without some sort of social consciousness, then, there is practically no hope of fighting off polysemy enough to get more than one person laughing at the same thing at the same time for similar reasons. To achieve at least some semblance of this unity in order to gain and maintain a popular following, American Literary Humorists like Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris rely on the ideologies of their times to access their audience members as a group. In Novick’s (1988) words, ideology precipitates “substantial agreement on values, goals, and perceptions of reality” (p. 61). Although such sweeping consensus is a tall order, and is never by any means completely monolithic, the concept allows us to understand agreement in the aggregate during our various eras of increasingly mass-mediated communication.

Ideology translates roughly as a system of political thought. It implies a collective, and it implies the theories that imply the decision making that keeps that collective functional. Often, because they are so closely linked to governance, ideologies become associated with political parties or other official institutions – the Conservative party is sometimes (but not always) conservative, for example. Liberalism and Socialism have followed this trend in various governments. Other ideologies become synonymous with the gestalt functioning of an entire state: Communism, Nazism, and Fascism number among these. These examples are often considered authoritarian ideologies, since they have the power of nations behind them (Freeden, 2003).

Ideology is also associated with political expression and having some say in government, although any authoritarian ideology usually precludes or only mimics this function: “Through it, citizens had a stark choice: they could either find their ‘true’ political voice or be silenced” (Freeden, 2003, p. 92). Ideology, in these cases, can be an overwhelming force toward groupthink, a hiccup in the overall theory behind the term that lends it some unpopularity in colloquial parlance. In fact, distaste for the word “ideology” became especially staunch during the Cold War, when it was seen as synonymous with oppressive dictatorship. Even in academic circles, scholars proclaimed “The End of Ideology in the West” in favor of democratic principles (which are, of course, a species of ideology, although the language of the contemporary bipolar international structure made this hard for some theorists to imagine) and especially in favor of empiricism. For example, Novick (1988) cites scholars who “made a sharp distinction between the ideals and ideology of Jeffersonianism” and opined that “The true Jefferson is not the ideological Jefferson,” something of an attempt at celebrity endorsement during the “crusade against ideologies” (p. 300). Of course, given our less emotional definition of the term and our



distance from the late 1900s, we can agree that all of this anti-ideology was itself highly ideological and the debate was more of a clash of ideologies than a negation of the entire concept.

In fact, side from totalitarian states, however, ideologies often engage in dialectic and allow citizens to converse with their administrators and with each other about the ideal functioning of their society. Indeed, one of the most famous conceptions of the term comes from Karl Marx (2000), who sees ideology as a focal point of struggle among social classes. He frames his empowerment of the proletariat as a direct rebuttal to what he sees as the guiding philosophical and political ideals of his day:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrative, though of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active, men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process (p. 180).

In short, Marx is presenting a material ideology to combat the oppressive abstract hierarchy that he observes oppressing the working classes of his day. Marxism is an ideology whose origins are explicitly dialogic. Remarkably, its problematic aspects only become exposed when it is no longer countered by another ideal, as when it became the inspiration for more totalitarian ideologies. But when it functioned as a counterpoint, Marxism was a dynamic voice of the working classes.

Of course, ideology has no life if it is only discussed and practiced by ontologists and politicians. Its real pizzazz lies in its ability to resonate in the discourse and practice of the population at large so that they might achieve some degree of unity under its auspices. At this

level, ideology might be generally described as an impression of the way society is supposed to function. Novick (1988) breaks this more everyday iteration of the concept into

...three elements: (1) a picture of the way the world is; (2) a picture of the way the world ought to be; (3) a set of propositions about the relationship between the first and the second. (The third element has several dimensions: sheer distance, getting closer or getting farther apart, moving slowly or rapidly, evolving smoothly or requiring ruptures, etc.) (p. 62).

This progressive schema leaves room for interpretation at the level of individual cognition – it emphasizes ideology as a sort of propulsion for a particular Burkean terministic screen. A person might simply content themselves that the current functioning of the world around them is tantamount to what it ought to be, for example, if the ideology they espouse seems to resonate with a state of harmony in their everyday lives. They might be more inclined to protest if they see fissures between the current state of affairs and what ought make society run to their standards. Thurber, Twain, and Sedaris are great examples of this, in fact, because all three begin to show symptoms of political dissent through critical writing later in their careers. All have found reason to feel that their work-worlds are rife with inconsistencies that impede their functioning. In cases like these, people might jump ship to espouse a different ideology that better suits the times, or they might make efforts toward getting society back on track toward a better standard of functionality.

### **The Funny, Rhetoric, and Ideology**

Because ideology is such a great force of unification it creates a great basis for comedy or humor that has broad public appeal. Even in the instances where ideology is divisive and spurs debate among the population, a well-crafted humorous presentation of that discussion can bring everyone together through the common denominator of laughter and illuminate aspects of the public debate in the process. As such, we will now turn to observing some full-fledged

intersections of funny rhetoric and ideology that bring audiences together through a unique species of discourse that precipitates a powerful kind of public discussion.

We begin, again, with the Ancient Greeks, returning particularly Aristophanes's *Birds*. Konstan (1995) offers a particularly explicit and useful analysis of ideology in this piece in his *Greek Comedy and Ideology*. The *Birds*, he says, is commonly understood as a discussion of Athens's militarily expansionist ambitions, specifically the contemporary expedition to conquer Greek cities on the island of Sicily, who had allied themselves with Sparta during its most recent conflict with Athens. The link to the comedic text is intuitive, as he points out – the protagonists of Aristophanes's play mean to conquer the sky and use their territorial gain to exploit higher powers that might stand in the way of their ambitions (namely, the gods). But Konstan points out that, although ideological, this reading is marred by the fact that the play and the events of the day do not resonate with each other completely, and the exceptions are too staunch to ignore. He turns to an analysis of the political tropes of the text to get a better picture of how Aristophanes was informed by ideology.

After overviewing the various (and sometimes conflicting) types of Greek utopia that present themselves throughout the building of the ideal society of Cloud-cuckoo-land, Konstan finds that there is actually some correspondence with contemporary Athenian politics in the text of the *Birds*. The ideology under scrutiny, however, is not necessarily an international one. He observes that one of the protagonists, Pisthetaerus, becomes the autocrat at the top of a new avian hierarchy that closely mimics the one he had left human civilization to avoid. When some of the birds protest his rule, he is seen roasting them and eating them, so as to make an example of them. In Konstan's words,

It may well be that an allegorical reference to contemporary politics has entered the text here as a subtle hint of dissent in the promised land. The tyranny of Pisthetaerus mirrors the role of Athens as the tyrant city, suppressing domestic opposition to its dream of empire (p. 42).

But even that connection may be a spurious one, he points out, in light of the diversity of governmental utopias he has already observed, which potentially tap myriad other political issues of the day. As such, he concludes that *Birds* is ideologically an “interrogative text” (p. 43) which poses questions and invites answers in a sort of cognitive dialogue with its audience. Thus the contradictions in the text should not be over-scrutinized, because they may simply be designed to enable polysemous interpretations from different audience members. It seems that funny rhetoric in ancient Greece may have been a window toward public deliberation, as discussed above, and the ideology it reflects may have been deliberated by a population who was unwilling to completely kowtow to the party line.

The ancient Romans were not stranger to ideology in their comedy, either. In fact, the vituperative nature of Roman satire makes much more sense in light of the political ideology that such satire was designed to critique. Larmour (1991) gives us a rousing critique of the ideological involvements of Juvenalian satire that discusses Juvenal’s poems in light of the political climate in which they were published. The angry satirical voice that’s so emblematic of his verse, according to Larmour, comes from a strong desire not just to critique social problems, but to heal them (apparently by as forceful means as become necessary, judging by the strong anger behind the poems). That is to say, “The assumptions behind the text...betray an intolerant and authoritarian desire to dictate human behavior” (p. 46). To understand Juvenal’s dictatorial spirit, of course, we must examine his exigence.

In Juvenal's eyes, according to some interpretations, he is the voice of the social outcast. This is not to say that he supports the underprivileged – far from it, in fact. Juvenal sees the hierarchy inherent in Roman society of his time slowly eroding, and being a wealthy man he doesn't like this trend. He wants to rectify – if you will – the fact that the upper echelons of society are becoming ousted from their place of authority. “He lives in Rome, but is in social, economic and, above all, moral exile,” Larmour observes. The underlying culprit here, for Juvenal, is the fact that social polarities have become degraded and people are dabbling in the middle of the spectrum and even the opposing ends. Women are acting like men, for example, and Romans are acting like Greeks, and the people who are staying in their proper poles are getting thrown out with the wash. Juvenal reacts to this marginalization by attempting to re-marginalize groups that had been on the outskirts of the society in his vision of the correct functioning of Rome. Larmour points out that Juvenal never attacks the social system itself. Instead, he turns against the people he perceives to be blocking the elite from garnering the full benefits of their status.

Juvenal's funny anti-change rhetoric is incredibly vehement – so much so that it appears to make Larmour uncomfortable. To offer readers some escape from the apparent inevitability of agreeing with Juvenal's persuasion, he outlines a series of ways to be a “resisting reader” of the ancient texts. His instructions include prompts such as “Evaluate the polarities upon which the text rests,” “Locate the ‘silences and scrutinize them,” and “Pay particular attention to abstract nouns.... What ideological baggage do they bring with them?” (p. 47). Given Braund's (1996) observation that individual deliberation was probably a large part of Roman satire-viewing, audiences at the time may not have needed these suggestions to interpret satiric verses according to their own dispositions. But the fact that Larmour feels the need to outline this method for

readers today makes clear that ideology and counter-ideology during Juvenal's time were both being approached from something of a totalitarian stance. Nothing that was wishy-washy would elicit so strong a response, after all. Although its terms were staunch, though, we can see that ideological dialectic was alive and well at the time, and that Juvenal's funny rhetoric was playing a significant part in that conversation.

On the other hand, cautions to modern audiences about their interpretations of the literature of bygone eras might be apt, as some theorists point out. Booth (1982) notes, in an analysis of Rabelais's ideological underpinnings, that

I do not possess Rabelais' works *then*; I possess them, if at all, *now*. I read him as I read anyone: in my own time. Whatever he does to me will be done in my time, not his....even at best, I still have only the Rabelais I have and not the Rabelais that any one of his contemporaries could have enjoyed (p. 72).

As such, Booth identifies Rabelais's works as antifeminist, an ideology that only modern audiences might identify as a distinct stance. He observes that women are ridiculed heavily in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, that there is no real female voice in these works, and that there is no implied female readership to boot.

Berrong (1985) uses Booth's analysis as a springboard to argue that such problematizing of historic texts, even according to values that were not in vogue at the time they first became popular, is a valuable endeavor. A critical search for ideologies like medieval antifeminism, he argues, is essential lest the unwary reader pick them up without recognizing the downfall of such absorption. Berrong's argument extends Booth's (1982) observation that

Whatever harm Rabelais might do in reinforcing his contemporaries' willingness to burn heretics or to witness the burning without pity is, viewed from our time and place, scarcely threatening. But there is no modern reader, however up-to-date, who is immune to the effects of reading about how men and women treat each other (p. 73).

For Berrong, then, the goal of the critic is to make sure that the reader does not misread a text so as to interpret problematic contemporary ideologies literally within the context of modern everyday life. Perhaps the fact that so much meta-commentary on ideology came from criticism of a funny text shows just how strong the influence of ideology on funny rhetoric can be, for all it might not be completely explicit. Of course there are more simple, overt glances at ideology in Rabelais. Hampton (1993) reflects upon the texts' reflection of charitable Christian humanism, for example. The entirety of the discussion about him, though, makes clear the notion that funny rhetoric made powerful through ideological resonance can have an incredible legacy in its own time and for generations to come, as we will see in our analyses of Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris.

To drive home the link between rhetoric and ideology, we will conclude with some homage to Kenneth Burke, whose interest in the conflation of the two drove his inquiry into man's symbolic action. In point of fact, Burke viewed ideology as a manner of dramatizing symbolic action (Jameson, 1978). In an appendix to *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (1973), Burke discusses ideology in terms of the division which predicates his notion of identification. Namely, he sees ideology as a way to identify an opposing out-group so that the in-group may coalesce by rallying against it. (The ideals of the in-group are discussed, conversely, in terms of "sociology" rather than ideology – Burke is conscious of the push-back against the term "ideology" in the public sphere of his day.) Viewing ideology thus as a motivational force, Burke sees political rituals as a sort of spectral performances that belie the "true" or "real" actions that motivate the politics of a particular society.

But real or surreal, ideology is an animating force, and symbolic action is action nonetheless. In fact, Burke points out that because our primary mode of access to politics is mass mediation, "we almost necessarily use 'ideological' terms when thinking of other nations and of

our policies regarding them” (Burke, 1989, p. 304). Because if its necessary presence in political discourse, then, Burke finds that ideology can transcend its more obvious turf and enter the artistic sphere via its link to myth. At first he observes that the two concepts seem foreign to one another, since ideology (like rhetoric) is related to the realm of ideas whereas myth (like poetry) is more closely correlated with images. But the two spheres can merge, he notes, through the use of terms that can move between the two planes, “terms that were not strictly social or political at all” (p. 307). This bridge is important in terms of linking ideological purpose to a grounding mythic purpose. Reason must have some practical grounding, after all, and myth gives ideology that kind of basis. Burke cites origin myths as an example of this process, because they often lay groundwork for the social and political processes that make society tick in the present and reify that the way things are is the way that they should be. Thus, the two planes are not mutually exclusive: “We may treat the mythic as the nonpolitical ground of the political, not as antithetical to it, but as the ‘prepolitical’ source out of which it is derived” (p. 310). Thus, imagery primes ideas, and sustains them by making them seem self-evident and essential.

Burke’s connection of these two dots of ideology and myth creates a nice space in which to discuss the impact of funny rhetoric on the political public sphere, or the realm of ideology. As a Literary Humorist plies his trade he works in the realm of mythic imagery by creating works of art such as novels, stand-up routines, cartoons, and short stories. In his way, he recycles ideology into myth and back into ideology again. He begins by gaining information about the world around him that, according to Burke, is necessarily couched in ideological terminology. He turns that knowledge into mythic art that is consumed by the public. That myth then informs the public’s understanding of the political currency of the day that primes their symbolic participation in that arena.



The connection may be clearer through an example. David Sedaris, for instance, is immersed in a society where class distinctions, or pretensions toward them, are demarcated as separatist snobbishness that revolves around the material trappings of the so-called finer things in life. This ideology frames the way he interprets his personal experience of the world around him. From this perspective, he writes a short story about a trip he took to an expensive restaurant in New York City where such snobbishness is evident in full force. The jeremiad-like story creates an artistic image of a man who recalls a time in his life without such snooty aspirations, and who fights the snobbishness he perceives in his fine dining experience by stopping at a hot dog stand on the sidewalk and indulging himself in the enjoyment of humbler fare. The story he presents is imagery even in a visual sense, since the reader can picture the events in the plot unfolding as he consumes it, and the story is mythic furthermore in the poetic creativity behind the crafting of the narrative (“Today’s Special”) and the volume in which it is included (*Me Talk Pretty One Day*). Because of this aesthetic, mythic appeal, the reader is attracted toward using the story as a heuristic framework through which he can interpret the world around him. When the reader sees food snobbery happening in the world around him, he now has a blueprint for a reaction (eating hot dogs in defiance of the untouchability of fine dining) that can transcend similar situations beyond culinary concerns. When he encounters other forms of snobbishness, he can draw on Sedaris’s example to react – in the ideological realm of people-affecting-other-people – according to his mythic understanding that baser is better.

Naturally the example I’ve given here is a little glib, but it represents a deeper, more pervasive potential. The phenomenon of life influencing art influencing life-cum-ideology is not limited to Sedaris, of course, nor is it limited to one sort of medium working with a single body of theory. But what may be true here in the microcosm may also be true of the workings of many

other comic writers and artists who both consume and influence the symbolic action of the era in which they live. This process primes the importance of understanding humorists as rhetoricians whose discourse changes the world around them after it gains its audience through its artistic attractiveness. Other species of artist engage in a similar process of cycling ideology and myth, but the particularly absorbing and tension-reducing nature of comedy and humor make the American Literary Humorist an interesting case in this regard. People are often drawn to humor because of its potential as a safety valve that releases societal angst in an enjoyable way. That interpretation of its potential, though, belies the fact that it can form the groundwork for the ideological discourse of its day and leave a legacy of symbolic action that has a very real – and sometimes very serious – impact on its public sphere. The comedian or humorist, then, is indeed a rhetor in his own right, and his effect is palpable beyond the moments of laughter that his art catalyzes.

### **Next Up**

We have established in this chapter that the American Literary Humorist has three basic tools in his belt: funniness, rhetoric, and ideology. But these things alone do not a popular following make. In order to reach their publics, our artists must find a medium that people find attractive, and they must also make sure that they address the public sphere of their era in a way that their audience can appreciate and feel empowered by. As such, Chapter Two will examine another theoretical intersection, one that exists externally to the humorist but must be the object of his concern as much as the triangulated internal intersection described above. To wit, we will now turn to the intersection of art, media, and the mass public that consumes them both.

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## CHAPTER TWO: QUESTIONS OF ENTERTAINMENT

In chapter one, I established how a humorous writer acts as not only a literary figure, but as a political rhetor whose work has persuasive impact on the audience he addresses. This chapter, then, moves on to probe the particular nature of that audience and the arena in which our authors address their crowd. The issue is multi-faceted given our buffet of authors under scrutiny. It is fraught, moreover, because the funny content that reaches the public is heavily influenced by the channels that transmit it.

Every funny author needs a medium, or several. Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris all gained their following through some form of mass mediation. Each author used different media, however, which changed the nature of the content they projected. Furthermore, each medium they used was only a small component of a larger public sphere that has a huge effect on the way the audience interprets the funny discourse that's been transmitted toward them. Each humorist must, therefore, adjust their style of funniness according to the environment they've been dealt. Our mission here is to understanding the various forces behind the exigence for an American Literary humorist to alter his style according to his media environment.

After taking his first dip into the world of letters by publishing his first famous short story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," Mark Twain decided to attempt to build his popularity into a sustainable career. He began trying to publish more stories, many of which revolved around an adventure he'd had in the Sandwich Islands (modern-day Hawaii). Unfortunately, Twain pieces met with dismissal from the editors of the most prestigious journals of his day. Sid Fleischman (another American Literary Humorist in his own right who travels a path that he observes was forged in large part by Twain) describes Twain's state of mind memorably:

Despite the jingle of coins remaining in his pockets, [Twain's] future now looked uncertain and depressing. His ironclad optimism quickly rusted out. He later confessed to holding a gun to his head, but that seemed to have had less conviction in it than stage business and dramatic flare. Exaggeration in life and in his fiction was the oxygen of his genius (2008, p. 135).

Because of this restlessness, Twain took an opportunity to hang his hat on a different medium. He entered the burgeoning lecture circuit, following on the coattails of friend and fellow humorist Artemus Ward, a personage in whom Twain saw “a figure very like himself, only much richer and more famous” (Powers, 2006, p. 131). He greeted his first lecture audience with one minute of debilitating stage fright three or four more of nervousness, and then entered a realm of contentment (with occasional hiccups, e.g. the infamous Whittier after-dinner address) that reigned over a lecture career that would last for the next thirty years. As one of America's prototypical stand-up comedians, Twain became known for his stage mannerisms, his method of memorization, and his ability to transfix his audience. Only after his stage popularity had begun to ascend did Twain become the fixture of printed stories and novels whose legacy has become so pivotal for American letters.

James Thurber met the mediated public sphere of his day on a different extension. He had already established a career as a writer for the *New Yorker* magazine, then an emerging journal trying to break into the already-populated publishing world. As he sat writing and editing in his shared office with E.B. White, Thurber often doodled on odd scraps of paper as a counter-irritant to offset the staggering amount of work in front of him. He also enjoyed inflicting his hobby on his co-workers, “dropping into offices while their occupants were out and filling their memo and telephone pads with his doodles that nobody then took seriously as art but did take seriously when they needed paper to make a note during a phone call” (Kinney, 1995, p. 397). Eventually White, his officemate, submitted one of his drawings to an art contest for *New Yorker* staff,

where it was rejected as devoid of artistic merit. But after his doodles gained fame as illustrations for the book *Is Sex Necessary?: Or Why You Feel the Way You Do* (co-authored by Thurber and White), the magazine began requesting Thurber doodles as cartoon with whimsical captions. He began to use drawings to illustrate his own books, and as they and he gained prominence his doodles-cum-cartoons became part of the trademark *New Yorker* look. He began to sell his drawings at art venues and his signature characters began to appear in some of the print advertisements of his day:

In several mass-circulation magazines one could find the Thurber Man holding a flower pot and pointing at the Thurber Woman, who sits at a table with a cooking pot, all in the service of Heinz soup. For the American Radiator Company, the Thurber Woman is seen bawling out the Thurber Man and Dog (Kinney, 1995, p. 501).

Even back at the *New Yorker* office, Thurber's capitalization of the cartoon medium had become so well-known that there was a policy against disposing of his drawings – even when he had drawn murals on his co-workers' office walls.

Unlike Twain and Thurber, David Sedaris made his public sphere debut through an innovative medium of his day well before he turned to the literary standby of the printed word. Specifically, Sedaris appeared on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* reading his reflections on a holiday season spent working as Crumpet the Elf at Macy's Department Store. (He was afforded this opportunity thanks to a public reading of the piece at a Chicago venue where NPR radio personality Ira Glass heard it and invited him to appear on his show.) Later published as "The SantaLand Diaries" in his collections *Barrel Fever* and *Holidays on Ice*, the story became a bastion of the contemporary oral tradition. Such was his radio fame, in fact, that reviews of Sedaris's first printed short stories identified him as "NPR Storyteller Sedaris" in reference to his previous fame. He continued to publish many of his stories first through NPR



broadcasts before they made it into a book collection. So enamored was his public of his soothing voice that the NPR recording of “The SantaLand Diaries” was replayed upon occasion even after he had established himself as a best-selling author, and his voice remained a major fixture of his fame during his later public readings from his written work (discussed in the Prospectus to this analysis). Sedaris later spurned the oral qualities of SantaLand piece, observing that

I’ve got to say, it doesn’t do a thing for me. When I read it now, I just cringe. The writing seems really choppy to me, you know? The sentences don’t have a rhythm. It’s actually very difficult to read out loud (Raymond, 2014, p. 1).

But because he somehow trekked through his fledging prose through the right medium, Sedaris gained a platform through which he got attention toward his other pieces. Like Twain and Thurber, Sedaris is a literary man whose avenue toward letters was paved or solidified through another medium.

This seems, overall, to be a set of kneejerk observations: Different writers used different media at different times. But the issue has deeper layers. To begin with, although it seems like Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris all used the innovative media of their time to broach the literary sphere based on the printed word, it is hard to classify them all as “literary” ultimately because their pieces became books. The nature of lofty literature has changed over time even in the United States, and the nature of the printed word has been similarly malleable. This change, and the interplay between these different types of media, will have a clearer impact once we gain a better understanding of what “media” mean and what role they play in the public sphere. As such, this chapter will broach the definition and function of media in general, discuss how different media beget different literary forms or different types of funniness, explain how media

affects different public spheres in different ways, and preview how the analysis to come will use this knowledge toward its probing of the American Literary Humorists in question.

In particular, this chapter asks a series of questions that will give us a framework for the more concrete analyses to come. Asking them now gives us a theoretical framework that we can later turn on our American Literary Humorists. To begin, we probe the relationship between author and audience – a primary concern for any rhetorical analysis, this one being no exception. We ask what sort of audience an author is addressing: How much diversity exists among its members? How much agency do they have to choose the art they consume? How does the audience live the boundaries between everyday life and ideology? We then move on to funny art in particular. Why is literary humor popular and lucrative? Does it allow its audience to contemplate serious topics? Does funny commentary really stick in the minds of audience members, or is it just throwaway entertainment? If it does stick, what impacts does humor have on everyday life? Finally, we reach concerns of humor in context. What situates funny material in its particular place and time? Can people appreciate humor from places and times other than the ones they're familiar with, or do they lack the necessary frames of reference? On the other hand, can cognitive (or literal) distance from objects of humor help us appreciate a funny artifact's role in its time? All of these questions will give us a toolbox for examining the artifacts that will frame the remainder of this investigation.

### **Defining the Media of an Author's Time**

To Understand Media, we turn to Marshall McLuhan (1999), whose media theories have proved both pervasive and oddly prophetic in their explanations of the role of technology in the evolution of civilization. His definition has utility first and foremost because it is hugely

inclusive, painting tools like spoken words as “media” as much as our more colloquial examples of the idea like television and radio. Furthermore, his theories are so easily understandable that they are both useful and resonant, which will add to the impact they have for our purposes. Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris each live in different American generations marked by different media technologies. These developments structure their everyday lives right down to the way they think, making their connection to their era inextricable. Each American humorist is writing for a different America – *Understanding Media* helps us recognize why that is.

The subtitle of McLuhan’s quintessential treatise on the subject (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*) hammers home his basic definition of his topic. For McLuhan, “media” encompass anything that extend man’s senses and/or abilities beyond what his human body can achieve on its own. Media allow people to simultaneously grasp and let go of things in the world around them. We grasp new stimuli, and in doing so we must let go of others and leave them behind. If James Thurber writes a cartoon, for instance, he might gain the image of a man and a woman in bed with a seal above them, but he might also lose the felicity with plain language for which is known, as well as the ability to describe the context of the scene beyond what the audience can gather from the bare lines of his doodling. The eye is still extended, but its reach grasps entirely different objects.

McLuhan is famous for his quip that “the medium is the message,” whose meaning runs much deeper than such a brief iteration:

“[‘The medium is the message’] is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (p. 7).

Each new technological marvel, that is, tells us something about the state of society at the time: how it functions, for instance, or how individuals find their place in it. Twain's age of print structured society quite differently than Sedaris's digital world, for example.

Because media are so specialized at transmitting messages about the state of society, the only kinds content they can really channel are the previous media upon which they build. The content of a McLuhan medium is always another medium. That is, "The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph" (p. 8). Each new development simply extends previous extensions.

We can see this principle put into practice in each of our three humorists. Thurber, for example, had to adapt his work for the emerging silver screen. Although he did most of his work during the period between the wars, the arrival of World War II coincided with a plethora of new communication technologies that Thurber was forced to work into his repertoire in order to stay connected with his audience. He had already made forays into radio in 1945 when "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" was transmitted over the airways with Robert Benchley voicing the leading role. But Samuel Goldwyn bought the rights to make a film out of that same story at around the same time, and Thurber was aghast at some of the changes that were made to the basic nature of the story in order to translate it into film. The author felt that the adaptation was simply too melodramatic to be a faithful reproduction of his story. Upon leaving the theater after the premiere, he quipped "Did anybody get the name of that movie?" (Kinney, 1995, p. 725). But despite Thurber's misgivings, the film medium was in many ways a magnification of the print and radio mediums through which the story had already evolved. It even included jokes that Thurber himself had written and sent to Goldwyn. The 1947 *Mitty* film remains faithful to McLuhan's notion of media, then, both in that its content is the media that came before it and in

that it magnified the man himself. In fact, the medium of film combined with the medium of money propelled Thurber from being a popular writer toward being a commercial success on a large scale. But the point is that the film didn't contain Walter Mitty himself or any of his adventures in Waterbury. Instead, it contained – and extended the previous medium of a printed story.

But our humorists encounter different intensities of media and have to react to them differently. Some media are overwhelming to their audiences while some invite participation, which has huge effects on the nature of the comedy they exact. To make the implications of media easier to analyze, McLuhan divides them into two categories: hot and cool. The distinction between the two involves how many senses a particular medium extends, and in what manner. To clarify: A hot medium extends a single sense in very high definition (that is, containing a high concentration of data), whereas a cool one is more low definition (without much information) and can affect multiple senses in its low intensity. Hot media do not involve the audience much. Cool media, on the other hand, ask the audience to meet the medium halfway and fill in the blanks, as it were, to make sense of the content being transmitted. For McLuhan, hot media include radio, movies, and photos, whereas the spectrum of cool media includes the telephone, the television, and the cartoon. Lectures are exclusive hot media; seminars are cool and inclusive. Thus, Twain and Sedaris sometimes utilize hot media (lectures and radio), making their personal ethos a much bigger part of their literature so that it can transmit humor without so much audience involvement, whereas Thurber's uses of primarily cool media (the cartoon) place leave much more to the audience's imagination.

Of course, no medium operates in a vacuum and hot and cool media often interact with each other. McLuhan notes that "...no medium has meaning or existence alone, but only in

constant interplay with other media” (p. 26). When a hot medium succeeds a cool on the effect on culture is disruptive and can even precipitate cultural collapse. Consider the effects of cutting-edge hot media on “cool” developing cultures. Intense, hot media become associated with progress and often overwhelm their cooler counterparts. For example:

The hot radio medium used in cool or nonliterate cultures has a violent effect, quite unlike its effect, say in England or America, where radio is felt as entertainment. A cool or low literacy culture cannot accept hot media like movies or radio as entertainment. They are, at least, as radically upsetting for them as the cool TV medium has proved to be for our high literacy world (p. 30-31).

But remarkably, especially for this analysis:

And as for the cool war and the hot bomb scare, the cultural strategy that is desperately needed is humor and play. It is play that cools off the hot situations of actual life by miming them. Competitive sports between Russia and the West will hardly serve that purpose of relaxation. Such sports are inflammatory, it is plain (p. 31).

When a hot medium meets a cool culture, the culture is overwhelmed. Industrializing nations leave their culture behind in the wake of technological innovation. They have not enjoyed the benefits of all the different media that a new, hot medium contains, and as such they are forced to scramble to adapt to all of them at once. They experience a “break boundary,” or a point at which one system becomes another without any prospect of return to the first. This can lead to a state of shock. Thurber writes about just such a predicament in *My Life and Hard Times* (1933).

[My mother] had the idea that the Victrola might blow up. It alarmed her, rather than reassured her, to explain was run neither by gasoline nor by electricity. She could only supposed that it was propelled by some newfangled and untested apparatus which was likely to let go at any minute, making us all the victims and martyrs of the wild-eyed Edison’s dangerous experiments....She came naturally by her confused and groundless fears, for her own mother lived the latter years of her life in the horrible suspicion that electricity was dripping invisibly all over the house. It leaked, she contented, out of empty sockets if the wall switch had been left on....Nothing could ever clear this up for her (p. 16).

People become so numb in the face of intense amplification of themselves that they are driven toward self-amputation of the media extension. Many, therefore, find a counter-irritant to distract

themselves from their numbness. Drawing cartoons was actually a counter-irritant for James Thurber, who doodled to distract himself from more intense aspects of life in his day.

Although all hot and cool media are extensions, though, each one extends a human sense in a different way. In that light, we will here briefly examine the differences McLuhan observes between various developments in media, including oral, written, print, cartoon, and radio media. Each of these, and the transitions among them, are relevant to the different historical periods during which Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris craft their most important works.

We begin with orality, one of the primordial media which McLuhan refers to at the very beginning of his analysis as “...Flower of Evil?” (p. 77). Cultures surrounding oral media rely on understanding that is neither linear nor causal, since art forms like storytelling do not give the audience time to pause, reflect, and consider. Oral media are highly collectivized in nature, given that privacy is necessarily limited when information must be transmitted aloud or not at all. But there is a species of movement involved in orality because it must, at its most basic level, include a language that can be spoken. McLuhan cites Henri Bergson’s observations about the capabilities of humans with language:

Language does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet and the body. It enables them to move from thing to thing with greater ease and speed and ever less involvement. Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties. His collective consciousness or intuitive awareness is diminished by this technical extension of consciousness that is speech (p. 79).

That is, mankind is separated from the cosmic consciousness by language. (The only entity that can be connected in that communion, for McLuhan, is the computer, which at least in his day and age was quite literally speechless.) Because of the mobility and connection that language – especially spoken language – allows us, we sacrifice a sense of harmony and peace with the universe.

Only after the development of written language, in McLuhan's timeline, was mankind able to begin the trajectory of development that has brought it where it stands today. Whereas the spoken word is necessarily participatory (rather than private), the written word can be individualized and therefore can enable specialization. In its early development, that specialization came with a great deal of power, since literacy gave scribes and other men of learning a monopoly over knowledge. With the development of the phonetic alphabet came greater accessibility through uniformity (although less accessible sense-making in the moment, since sense and function are dissociated). "Civilization" – at least the conception of a large group of people united by a codified legal system – began to develop. So did linear, causal, logical thinking, which got its kick in the pants from the newfound ability of audiences to go both backward and forward in a text and re-read particular passages to determine the causation of their elements. Even people's value systems went from being largely visual in orally-dominant cultures to causal in ones marked by writing. McLuhan goes so far as to argue that the psyches of audiences for written artifacts are fractured compared to those of oral audiences, and in particular that people in written cultures must separate their imaginations from their emotions from their sensory experiences. In the end, for McLuhan, written culture gave people an ability to be mobile in groups but to simultaneously to cultivate individual ambitions – another species of fracture that would be perpetuated in the public spheres created by much later media.

Eventually, the written word begat moveable-type printing, which again altered society as people collectively changed the way they extended their senses. McLuhan is blunt about the societal implications of the printed word: "...typography ended parochialism and tribalism, psychically and socially, both in space and time" (p. 170). Whereas the written word brought civilization in its wake, the printed word brought a sense of uniformity to that grander scope of



organizing. The notion of a “popular” text gained meaning as sources of knowledge were standardized through the publication of works of antiquity and the Middle Ages. While society was thus altered, the individual found that his own visual point of view became a focal point of life where previous generations had lacked that perspective. Thanks to easy reproducibility, the printed word also created a channel for mass individual expression for anyone with the expertise and the means. People were able to detach themselves from the collective and choose to be uninvolved with things that seemed inessential from their personal perspective. A new division arose between public life and private life, with the understanding that the public self could gain immortality by dint of passing printed records on to posterity. Given this idea of destiny, people developed a sense of nationalism about the political associations to which they belonged – a fervor which could only be fueled by the quick reproducibility of ideas that came with the printed word. Books, a product of this innovation in media, could be carried, borrowed, and shared so that ideas could flourish throughout a group of people – but flourish with individual transmission rather than group instruction.

The comic, borne on the wings of reproducibility, is a medium that is often (and sometimes unnecessarily) associated with the funny. McLuhan observes that the comic depends almost completely on the individual perspectives of its audience members since the images that make up a cell or strip are ostensibly simple and separate, so that detail and connection must be added by the viewer. That coolness – that distance – is often employed by even modern audiences as a counter-irritant to more intense hot media. McLuhan takes special notice of *MAD* magazine, a collection of comics that often parodies or comments on photos, radio broadcasts, and film. In fact, McLuhan says that as popular media have cooled down (particularly with the advent of television), comics have also become cooler and the corrective they offer has become

less necessary. He concludes that the comic heralds the death of the pictorial consumer age and the advent of the age of the icon. Because this age is one of depth involvement, audiences are more attracted to media like comics than they are to written word – one reason that children might gravitate toward comic books more than their textbooks. The funny aspect of comics gave icons a sense of individual distance, as well. People tend to giggle at the difficulties of others while failing to identify that struggle with their own lives. This distance affects the nature of consumer culture, entertainment, and human perception itself.

Each dominant media has great cultural impact, as the succession of cool and hot media discussed above made apparent. Its impacts particularly effect the scale, pace, and pattern of a society. Scale is affected when roads connect primitive tribal cultures to each other and enable cultural connections between them. Pace changes when electricity makes information instantly available across distances. Social patterns alter when automation eliminates a particular stratum of human jobs and the workforce has to reorganize itself to account for other forms of livelihood.

Each of our humorists – Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris - interacts with a society that is undergoing these levels of change thanks to the development of new media. Twain, for example, was writing during the heyday of movable-type printing when mass distribution of information was making community awareness a thing of much grander scale. Not only did literary journals take off as a standard of the American culture of letters of the period, but the popular press made personal celebrity a much more cultivated currency than it had been. By the end of Twain's life, people on opposite American coasts were able to comment on debates about the same issues with a common awareness that indicated a truly American culture had developed.

Thurber, who was roughly fifteen years old when Twain died, saw that grand scale acquire a much more rapid pace as the electric age took hold and radio communication became medium *du jour*. He also saw developments in military technology that brought new gravity to the prospect of war because of both its scale and its pace, which distributed instantaneous slaughter on a global scale. Sedaris, finally, writes in a digital age after McLuhan's prophesied cultural implosion and has witnessed a decisive change in societal patterns of organizing. He chronicles a period where television and radio give way to Internet-mediated communication, giving society at once a much smaller and a much grander scale.

But with the development of all these different new media, each of our humorists has faced a similar difficulty as a celebrity author: the challenge of mass culture. Twain sees a people who are trying to reunite after being fractured by civil war and who are living in the beginnings of the postbellum "Gilded Age" of commercialization. Thurber negotiates the individual who is trying to find themselves within the popular-culture monolith that the Gilded Age left in its wake. Sedaris then navigates the demands of the consumerist spirit as a means to simultaneously be an individual and a member of a culture that places a high premium on owning the right thing at the right time. Each of these writers, being a humorist who wields the comic corrective as a means of cultural critique, pokes holes in the governing ideals of their day so that people can think critically about their lives and hard times, to paraphrase Thurber. They are not alone in addressing these issues, although they are notable for being the dominant funny voice to do so. For a more explicit iteration of this kind of social commentary, however, we turn to a set of academics who specialize in theories of mass publics.

## **Finding an Audience for the American Funny**

Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris are all artists, and the popularity of their works suggests that their art found resonance with a large public – and the longevity of their impact has shown us that that resonance is diachronic. But to reach that public – and to continue to reach later ones – these writers had to find some kind of bridge between themselves and the public.

Notwithstanding what media in particular are being used, getting humor to have that kind of impact demands some analysis of how it gets to the public in the first place. Art, as we have established, exists in various harmonies with and distinctions from the culture around it. Its resonances are heavily affected by the media through which it is transmitted, though, and the relationship between those media and the audience they reach. Some scholars argue that media determine audience dispositions; others argue the reverse by pointing out the role of human agency in the development of technology and the proliferation of social dialogue. So that we may later understand our artists in their own idioms, we rest here and briefly examine a few theories of the way that media and publics relate to each other. The concepts we discuss will provide us with a toolbox for our later analysis.

Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris are all noteworthy for finding a way to address their audience members as individuals so that people feel like they have a personal relationship with these authors. That spirit demands first that each of these audience members understand himself or herself as an individual who has a potential to be personally involved with something larger. Only after that realization can they find a piece of themselves in funny literature. To address the question of how an author writing to a huge crowd can foster that kind of personalized touch, we turn first to the work of Jacques Ellul, who argues that media perpetuates itself without the aid of humanity and eventually comes to dictate the way that human society functions, leaving

individuals trying to find a way to recognize themselves in the midst of a homogenized mass. We then move on to the works of Carl Schmitt, who addresses media as a form of governance that separates the people from the apparatus that administrates their political lives. Following Schmitt's theory, Herbert Marcuse theorizes that consumption of the products of mass media has made the population "One-Dimensional" in their inability to think outside of the parameters of public discourse other than recognizing its limitations. All of these theories give us a buffet of ways to understand how people access funny literature as consumers of a broad range of media products in a variety of public spheres.

### **Jacques Ellul – Technique and the Individual**

One tool we gain from Ellul's writings is his notion of *the individual within the mass*, a growing concern in an age when mass mediation was becoming increasingly prominent. Ellul sees each individual as being adrift in a huge constellation of other individuals, a condition which can give a person something of an identity crisis. The personalization that comes about with the hyper-specialization of technique has led each person in society to feel somewhat special, befitted with their own identity and their own unique place within the crowd – they are able to exercise their *Jemeinigkeit*, as it were (although Ellul does not indulge in that particular term). But since technique is also totalitarian, and living in a culture marked by any species of totalitarianism involves some goose-stepping, people have to figure out how to function efficiently and with unity under the singular force that leads them and find their place in *Mitsein*, or the necessary condition of being around and with other people.

In the age of technology-based mass communication, media faces a dilemma about addressing an individual or addressing a collective mass. In point of fact, in order to traverse this dual existence of the individual, media must address each person while acknowledging the way

each person must feel as part of a huge group which can make his personal existence seem less and less significant. Mass-mediated information must account for “individuals enclosed in the mass and...participants in that mass, yet it also aims at a crowd, but only as a body composed of individuals” (1965, p. 6). This boundary can be traversed, Ellul says, by sending an idea out in the form of several sub-ideas, each of which might give an individual something to grab onto but the gestalt of which can lead the individual back to the collective idea that must be implanted within the mass in order for efficiency and tranquility to remain the words of the day. Consider Thurber’s brief *New Yorker* cartoons and quips, or Sedaris’s book readings all around the country crafted differently for different audiences. This process is not as close to large-scale brainwashing as it might sound. It is a way to negotiate everyone’s place within the group and make sure, at the end of the day, that the group can still function with some kind of homeostasis. A smoothly functioning society can catalyze the sort of linear progress that individuals associate with the efficient technique they consume. People must figure out how to organize socially to make the most productive use of the automation that has been thrust upon them by previous generations.

Consider, as a more recent example, the 1980s US armed forces advertising campaign that featured the tagline “Be All that You Can Be.” The promotion straddles people’s roles as unique individuals in a collective by appealing to dual sets of interests. It first acknowledges people’s need to find a place in the group by encouraging them to join the well-policed social group that is the United States Army – commercials in this campaign show soldiers working together, supporting each other, and gaining accolades from the people around them. But the campaign acknowledges that part of the ultimate take-away is also individual. The tagline itself

encourages self-actualization and individual ambition within the collective, making clear that the army still fosters opportunities for individual distinction.

### **Carl Schmitt – Homogeneity**

How much similarity exists among each of the individual's in Ellul's "lonely crowd?" That is, how much diversity do our authors really have to address as they talk to their respective Americas? To answer this, we have to take the democratic American political system into account since it structures the way people coalesce so that media can reach them – or does it? Beginning to answer that question, we turn to Carl Schmitt, who sees a democratic mass as one that is encouraged toward *homogeneity*. Famous for his critiques of democracy, Carl Schmitt's views of his Weimar Republic-era individual in a collective society are more dismal than Ellul's. Observing the *de facto* nature of parliamentary governance, Schmitt observes that if it is to function according to its theoretical roots, democracy relies on the equalization of everyone so that the people's voice melds itself into something practical that the government can respond to. To achieve that end, democracy deals with people who are naturally unequal in many ways by encouraging uniformity. Schmitt quips that "Democracy requires, therefore, first homogeneity and second—if the need arises—elimination or eradication of heterogeneity" (1988, p. 9). Functional democracy, therefore, is necessarily at odds with any notion of liberal individualism. Like Ellul, Schmitt sees the individual adrift in the masses. Whereas Ellul finds hope in propaganda that addresses that dichotomy, though, Schmitt simply decides that the two entities are irreconcilable. Although media create some room for public discussion, Schmitt says, that discussion necessarily pits a winning majority against a losing minority. The minority, no matter how large it actually is, must in turn resign its opinion to the individualized, ineffective private sphere instead of seeing its needs addressed by its government. This precipitates a sense of

futility for all individuals, since everyone (including Schmitt himself) finds themselves in the minority sometimes.

...there are not many more who believe that these freedoms still exist where they could actually endanger the real holders of power. And the smallest number still believe that just laws and the right politics can be achieved through newspapers articles, speeches at demonstrations, and parliamentary debates (1988, p. 50).

To be sure, Schmitt was writing in the age of a media revolution. Instead of seeing democratic salvation in technology, however, he perceived that the people saw new forms of technique as extensions of the elite rather than extensions of themselves. “Social issues” come under the banner of private discussion rather than of state redress. As Schmitt points out, “There exists a liberal [individualist] policy of trade, church, and education, but absolutely no liberal politics, only a liberal critique of politics” (1996, p. 70). The people, if they are to remain individuals, cannot participate in a democracy that subsumes that individuality – they can only observe and comment on it.

The World War II-era propaganda campaign “Loose Lips Sink Ships” and other catchphrases of its ilk that closely followed the period in which Schmitt was theorizing illustrate his principle of uniformity nicely. In an effort toward uniform behavior in the interests of national security, the government encouraged the people to actually rob themselves of their own voice. With such an ideological imperative toward silence, the people were encouraged to remove their input from domestic politics as well as foreign affairs. Thanks to the homogeneity imposed upon them, the people were barred from real democratic participation during the war years, an idea that seemed tangential in practice but becomes causally connected in light of Schmitt’s analysis.

If Schmitt’s theory is true, humorists have a much harder row to hoe since their use of mass media paints them as one of the elite instead of one of the people. If that is the case, they



must take extra special care to target the everyday lives of their audience members so that they can appeal to them as equals rather than superiors. We see evidence of this need in the works of all three of our authors, meaning that they have seen this dilemma and tried to bridge the gap. On the other hand, this does not explain the phenomenon of personal identification with our writers. For that, we must address other corners of democratic media theory.

### **Herbert Marcuse – Unfreedom and One-Dimensionality**

To find personal resonance between audience members and funny authors, we need to discern how much agency of selection and interpretation audiences actually have when they're consuming art. Writing in the wake of the Fascist upheaval that had been primed in part by thinkers like Schmitt, Marcuse and his compatriots turned liberal critique toward the media apparatus of their day, and found that its impact was similar to Schmitt's observations. Specifically, he feels that the proliferation of mass information created a public dependence on homogenous public opinion that precipitates a state of what he refers to as mass *unfreedom*, a state marked by dominion and dependence.

The technological transformation of nature alters the base of domination by gradually replacing personal dependence (of the slave on the master, the serf on the lord of the manor, the lord on the donor of the fief, etc.) with dependence on the 'objective order of things' (on economic laws, the market, etc.) (1964, p. 144).

Marcuse notices little resistance to the dictates of the messages circulating in the public sphere.

In direct contrast with McLuhan's freely wandering nomadic gatherer of knowledge in the electric age of automatic, mechanized instantaneousness, Marcuse observes that people seem to be living at the mercy of technology. The newly technological nature of elite domination gives it a different spirit that is less rooted in objective reality (despite the materiality of its orchestration) because its power revolves around ideals that are not much related to the practical business of everyday life. Even science, which is supposed to make nature objective in its truth-

seeking and is often seen as an alternative to value-saturated discussion, has answered the Enlightenment's quashing of the superstitions of the Middle Ages in ways that have "merely raised another myth instead" (1964, p. 155). This "myth" involves making elements of social life seem calculable in ways that support the domination of technology and, transitively, the "unfreedom" of man that technology inevitably creates in Marcuse's mind. This is a science devoid of *eidos*, which to Marcuse's mind makes it the prisoner of "hopeless relativism" (1968, p. 45) that only adds to its malleability for elite use in public discourse. When everything is abstract, everything is a potential tool for mass manipulation and a catalyst of unfreedom.

The current state of the radio industry exemplifies Marcuse's notion of unfreedom. Consumers take their cues about their music preferences from Top 40 radio stations that are infamous for playing similar song lists across sets and across frequencies. Many stations have severely downplayed the prominence of the DJ, whose patter now serves as light entertainment between songs rather than a creative force behind the order of the presentation. Other stations, including independent outlets like college radio, combat this mythical imposition by reifying the importance of the DJ's personal song selection and often branding themselves as explicitly anti-Top 40. But the majority of the popular listenership favors the mass-marketed radio model, and musical unfreedom drives many audience members to turn away from alternative stations toward ones that market the "popular selection."

Because the goal of unfreedom is governable homogeneity, elite domination through media cultivates sameness among individuals – *One-Dimensionality*. Marcuse notes that the value-laden discourse distributed to the masses affects not only concrete, everyday decision-making but abstract thought as well, making it impossible for the general population or even the intellectuals to think outside of the box they have been given:

The self-styled poverty of philosophy, committed with all its concepts to the given state of affairs, distrusts the possibilities of a new experience. Subjection to the rule of the established facts is total—only linguistic facts, to be sure, but the society speaks in its language, and we are told to obey. The prohibitions are severe and authoritarian (1964, p. 178).

When even philosophy is thus constrained, resistance to the control of the elite, as executed via media, seems like a far-fetched notion. Because thought is thus so limited, he finds that people have been stripped down via their One-Dimensional Society into a state of One-Dimensional Thought.

Thus, we arrive at Marcuse's famous One-Dimensional Man, a creature who drowns his unfreedom in the comforts cultivated by the technology that constrains him. He can occasionally use philosophy, for example the kind of critical theory that Marcuse practices, to illuminate the "unfreedoms and inequalities with which the new era inevitably will be burdened" (1968, p. 145) – but even critical theory lacks the ability to get the concrete social liberation that is its goal because of its "rigorously scientific character" (p. 155) and general inability to bridge the consciousness of the people and the forces that control them. Marcuse concludes his treatise on his *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) on a decidedly glass-half-empty note by quoting Walter Benjamin:

*Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben.*

It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us (p. 257).

Marcuse's work itself is an example of the One-Dimensionality of even critical theory, as he himself readily admitted. Despite being so disillusioned with the state of the mass media of his day, for instance, he was forced to publish a mass-marketed book in order to get his ideas across. Furthermore, *One-Dimensional Man* was published relatively late in his academic career. He made his name, initially, on more well-trodden paths like studies of Hegel and Freud before he branched off into more independent theorizing. He had no avenue to publish *carte blanche*

outside of the box, that is. He had to pay his dues within philosophy's one dimension before he could make tiny dents in it. This analysis transfers easily to the role of the comedian, who wields the comic corrective in a way that is nothing if not well-targeted critical theory. Our authors may have original ideas, but they are at the mercy of the checks and balances of the publication apparatuses of their day. Many of Mark Twain's most critical works – pieces explicitly critiquing Christianity, for example – were not published during his lifetime for fear that they were too controversial. Thurber was chronically (and occasionally abusively) frustrated with editors of his work, and rued the translation of his writing into film, as discussed above.

### **Countering Mass Society**

The humorist is an artist. Like most artists, his work has a goal – the comic corrective, in particular, used to precipitate critical discussion about complex issues. Humor must be scrutinized as something which has a purposeful genesis within a human being, and also as that which is consumed by other human beings who incorporate it into their pre-existing cognitive schemas. Ruskin (2004), writing about Gothic architecture, frames his analysis as a probe of first Mental Expression and then Material Form. This mediated humor will take his precedent a step further, examining first Funny Mental Expression through some theory about the genesis of humorous art, then the Figurative Form via some aesthetic theory. This approach will make our ever-expanding toolbox are more directed heuristic kit.

Although I've already devoted some time in Chapter One to discussing what The Funny is, I would now like to turn to an examination of what the Funny does – the Affect part of the process of interpreting and understanding funny discourse. Scholars like Davis (2000) and Bergson (2008) concern themselves with the immediate effects that interpreting something as funny can have on our thought processes from a philosophical perspective. Carroll (2014) gives

us an objective look at the topic from an emotional and evaluative standpoint. Meyer (2000), finally, gives us a glimpse at the rhetorical outcomes of funny discourse.

#### **D. Diane Davis – Realization Through Chaos**

Why do our artists all come back to the common ground of literature for their social commentary? After all, as we have established, each of them dabbles in other media to get their humor across. But since all publish novels or novel-length collections, we have to assume that there is something distinct about that genre that aids the funny in a lucrative way. To understand that craft, we have to understand the long buildup that the humorist often needs to create his moment of corrective – a “fit,” in the understanding of D. Diane Davis.

In her field-rocking treatise *Breaking Up [at] Totality*, Davis (2000) suggests that laughter is a reaction to a particular construct of time – *Kairos* – a type of funny reaction that is “not the controlled chuckle but the co(s)mic rhythm that laughs you” (p. 29), or Kairotic Laughter. It is a convulsion, a “schizoid f-f-fit” (p. 30) which, rather than being devoid of meaning and memory, is a space without thought that follows the *realization* that a number of elements we have cognized have come together in the instant where we find their combination funny. It fights meaning and therefore creates meaning. Much as the Foucauldian person must understand himself as both the subject who knows and the object of knowledge, laughter can change the things it sees because it can change perspective during its thoughtless space. The funny has not faith in truth, but rather exists in the space before knowledge (a condition to which Davis attributes its apparently lack of consequence in philosophical study). She concludes that the product of laughing has a particular, unique outcome in the space it creates:

The hope is that the experience of abandoning oneself to abandonment in this affirmative alliance will nudge our perceptions into a space where a different and post-humanistic Being-with-others might be/come possible....This community....certainly would be worth laughing for (p. 68).

For Davis, laughter is the chaos that both follows and precedes knowledge; it is also a space for transforming Being, or at least our perspective on it.

To understand Davis's notion of a fitful release, we have to build to it and watch it happen. Toward that end, here is a passage from Graham Roumieu's *Me Write Book*, a mock-memoir ostensibly written by the legendary figure Bigfoot.

Everyone think I fragile since I last of kind and so on. Funny part is me not sure if there is or ever was other Bigfoot. One bad thing about it thought that I attract lots poachers. Apparently me gal bladder give Chinese people boners. Funny cause Chinese people give me boner too but Bigfoot digress (Romieu, 2005).

There are a number of things in this passage that different audience members might find funny. There is the carnivalesque humor of Bakhtin's material bodily lower stratum. There is the juxtaposition of the affected curmudgeon's syntax with the word "digress." There is the broader idea that Bigfoot is reflecting on his own life experience. But during all of this intermingling of affect, the audience is forced to abruptly change its perspective toward the object at which it laughs. It cannot think about that change, or that element of the unexpected that can make the passage funny would not be present. It has to be ready to seize, perform a turnabout during that seizure, and then reflect on that fit in the wake of its interruption.

### **Henri Bergson – Absentminded Elasticity and Artifice**

Despite all the buildup, though, our artists also have the benefit of wielding social commentary in a happy environment. Part of the public draw toward humor is that they see it as a positive affective relief of their daily stressors. Successful humorists use this attraction to bring the audience a new perspective on those everyday nuisances. In order to get their audience to shed their negativity enough to laugh/think/change, the humorist has to create a space of what Henri Bergson would call absentmindedness.

Bergson (2008) approaches comedy at the very outset of his analysis by observing that it says first that the comic (as he calls the funny) is “strictly *human*” (p. 10), then that it is accompanied by an absence of feeling, and also that it is social. Like Davis, he finds a species of thoughtless f-f-fit in the comic that he calls “*absentmindedness* (my emphasis):”

Absentmindedness, indeed, is not perhaps the fountain-head of the comic, but surely it is contiguous to a certain stream of facts and fancies which flows straight from the fountain-head....How profound is the comic element in the over-romantic, Utopian bent of mind! And yet, if you reintroduce the idea of absentmindedness, which acts as a go-between, you will see this profound comic element uniting with the most superficial type (p. 14).

That is, all species of funny discourse, highbrow and low, can be generalized together because they thrust their audience into this space without thought. (The “void” discussed in Chapter One is a result of this reaction.) Unlike Davis, however, who holds that laughter breaks up its object (the schizoid nature of the f-f-fit), Bergson finds that laughter promotes *elasticity*. The comic, in its work as a corrective, sees the rigid objects of the world and juxtaposes them with the malleability of imagination. In fact, he views the intensity of laughter as something determined by the size of the contrast of material rigidity and spiritual elasticity being exposed in a given situation. Originality in comedy is defined by the imagination with which the author confronts the resistant material with the imaginative immaterial. In fact, Bergson goes so far as to claim that people who laugh are operating under a unique kind of logic:

So there is a logic of the imagination which is not the logic of reason, one which at times is even opposed to the latter, -with which, however, philosophy must reckon, not only in the study of the comic, but in every other investigation of the same kind (p. 26).

Imagination is not rational, for Bergson, but that is not to imagination’s detriment.

Because it is so far afield from reason, the logic by which Bergson’s comic audience interprets funny material as *artifice*. Bergson finds the funny in a space halfway between nature and art (nature being the material and art the imaginative or spiritual). When people congregate

in this space, they are united there, individual to mass, because their imaginative logic has put them all on the same plane. Once they come together there, they can use the corrective potential of comedy together, a situation in which “society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it” (p. 92). That is, existing in the thoughtless space where imagination meets objects allows people to reconsider the nature of both art and nature and, having gained the perspective that comes from freedom from both, can carve their own path through both of them. If they perceive their everyday life to be unjust, they can take advantage of their temporary liminality to identify ways to rectify it. The “artifice” of the comic can therefore influence both art and life.

Bergson’s theory comes to fruition in the popular 1980s-1990s daily comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*. The strip’s storylines revolve around the adventures of a little boy and his stuffed tiger who comes alive and engages in (pretty sophisticated philosophical) dialogue when nobody else is around. Hobbes is a very high-functioning imaginary friend indeed, and a lot of the strip’s gags center around the fact that an stuffed animal friend should be so intelligent. But early in the course of the series, a lot of laughs around Calvin and Hobbes stem from the fact that the material reality of the character does not match the behavior ascribed to him by Calvin. One such strip features Calvin sitting in bed (with a clearly toy version of Hobbes sitting next to him) being scolded by his father for making too much noise at night. He insists that Hobbes was jumping on the bed, not him. His father does not believe him, but as soon as he has left the room in frustration Calvin turns to his stuffed friend, who has changed into a more “real”-looking guise that only appears when he and Calvin are alone. “You were TOO jumping on the bed!” Calvin insists. “Well, YOU were the one playing the cymbals,” retorts Hobbes, who is himself holding a pair of cymbals. The nature of the elastic artifice here is made even clearer, though, by commentary from the strip’s author, Bill Watterson: “I don’t think of Hobbes as a doll that



miraculously comes to life when Calvin's around. Neither do I think of Hobbes as the product of Calvin's imagination. The nature of Hobbes' reality doesn't interest me, and each story goes out of its way to avoid resolving the issue" (Bodenner, 2011, p. 1). Watterson remains faithful to Bergson's vision because he strives explicitly to maintain the level of cognitive elasticity that gives audience member room to see things as funny, and because his artifice traverses the boundary between reality and imagination.

### **Noël Carroll – Emotional Affects, Cognitive Rehearsals, and Social Effects**

If the humorist wants to have a lasting impact with his comic corrective, then the audience has to see his conclusions as important so that they will remember them and potentially re-cognize or act on them. Something has to make the funny stick, that is. All of our authors worry about their perceived importance throughout their careers. Twain in particular is infamous for seeing funny writing as a fallback because he lacked a more important calling, and he spent his early career dreading that he might be remembered as a buffoon instead of a great writer – he cautioned those who wanted to following his footsteps to fame that they needed to incorporate more than “mere humor” into their work. But all three of them have gained enough appeal to last, and now we turn to philosopher Noël Carroll so that we can begin to explain why.

Carroll (2014), in his brief but thorough overview of theories about the funny in *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, offers commentary on the relationship between humor and pathos as well as funny discourse's effect on audience perception of significance. In terms of *affect*, he observes that there are myriad arguments for humor being something akin to an emotion: it is directed toward an object, it is a definable state, and it can infect the people around us. He also observes, however, that unlike an emotional state, the levity that follows an understanding of humor does not give us any motivation to act (as anger might, for example). He cites John

Morreall, who observes that there is no congruence between our positivity toward the experience of laughing and that toward the object that has made us laugh. Whereas things we don't like make us mad and things that we do make us happy, we gain levity from laughing at both things we don't like and things we do. The usual emotional correlation is absent in funny situations.

Although laughing might not operate rhetorically in quite the same way that many forms of pathos do, Carroll observes that it has its own special effects. Humor *rehearses concepts*, for example, and can reinforce them as they are aired in funny ways. Furthermore, laughing distances us from the categories we internalize throughout everyday life and lets us examine them as if they are somewhat alien. In that way, humor interrupts our sense-making and derails our reasoning. Much like Davis and Bergson, Carroll arrives at the notion that

Comic amusement erupts in the process of discerning the way the cognition-emotive system has misfired. Or, to change metaphors, it is part and parcel of the cognitive cleansing process we undergo—which process is stoked by pleasure....Pleasure is connected to comic incongruities in order to flag the pitfalls to which our mental apparatus is irresistibly prone.... (p. 73).

Although he does not go so far as to identify a f-f-fit or any other sort of absentmindedness, Carroll concurs that the funny can be a protected space in which transformation can occur, or at least valuable distance can be gained. When we hear the joke “What’s the difference between the US and yogurt? If you leave yogurt alone for 300 years it develops a culture” (Stockton, 2014, p. 1), Americans can take advantage of that protected space that is The Funny and turn to look at their culture in a new light: collectively, at that.

Just as important for the purposes of this analysis is Carroll’s list of the *social effects* of humor. He notes the physiological advantages of laughing (an interesting study in its own right, although more faithfully the purview of a different quandary than the one we currently face), but also sees those consequences trickling out on a larger, more abstract scale into audiences who

laugh together. The “corrective” element of humor can, in Carroll’s observations, reproduce norms as well as challenging them, in part because it can expose the sometimes negative consequences of transgression in a way that is both enticing to witness and memorable after the presentation. Of course, because humor is so enthymematic, he points out that you have to have knowledge of the norms being observed or critiqued in order to get the joke and enter the realm of the funny: “Postscript,” he notes as an example, “a downside of the current aggressive wave of atheism is that we’ll lose a great source of humor” (p. 83). He also observes that laughter unites individuals within a cultural community, in part because of its examination of norms, and in doing so gives them a method through which to commune with others. The communion only lasts for the single instant in which that moment of the funny occurs, but repeated humorous instances can invite cohesion. Humor also reflects, changes, or reifies power dynamics as well as in-group/out-group relationships in Carroll’s notes. Those who lack power are often the object of jokes, of course, and laughing at out-group stereotypes can desensitize audiences to their implications and perpetuate the oppression they enable. The perceived appropriateness of a joke also indicates relationships between people and communities: “...one Jew might give a pass to another Jew telling a joke about a financially savvy rabbi, but she will not be open to a skinhead reciting with transparent malice a token of the same story type” (p. 89). There are probably different reasons for laughter at play here for the two different parties telling the joke, meaning that the space of communion that laughter can create does not come together for these two individuals and they do not gain a space of agreement that might come from shared laughter.

### **John C. Meyer – Unity and Division**

So humor can stick and seem significant – what then? Can it have any real effect on its audience beyond in-the-moment entertainment? John C. Meyer argues that humor does indeed

have material effects (fighting a separate body of scholarship that argues it does not), and that these effects are rhetorical in nature. Contrasting Mark Twain's disdain for "rhetorical buffoonery" (Kaplan, 1968, p. 25), we should note that both Twain and Sedaris are prominent orators with powerful persuasive pulls, each in their own way, and that Thurber's stories usually make a clear argument in their contexts (some more thinly veiled than others). Meyer helps us unpack exactly what kinds of rhetoric effects our authors might have.

While Carroll does a great job of outlining humor's potential effects on its audience, Meyer (2000), in his article "Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication," takes these effects and makes them explicitly rhetorical. Two of his rhetorical functions of humor (identification and clarification) serve to unite a rhetor with the audience, and two of which (enforcement and differentiation) divide her from them: unification and division.

The first two rhetorical functions of humor serve to, in the author's view, *unify* the source of the humor with the audience—thus falling into Burke's (1937) celebratory comic category that pits all humans as equally and necessarily mistaken at one time or another. Identification, to begin, takes place when an audience is "highly sympathetic to and quite familiar with a topic of humor" (p. 317). Sometimes this sympathy is enhanced because there has been a previous lack of a socially acceptable outlet for a common sentiment, and the acknowledgment reduces tension. The ultimate effect of this function is that the credibility of the speaker is increased, and he can bridge the gap between himself and his audience through mutual release of laughing together at the same thing. The second potential effect, clarification, occurs when the audience and speaker enjoy a lower degree of familiarity or common understanding at the outset of a humorous situation. Clarification can be achieved when the humorous punch lines are brief and/or memorable, allowing them to be recalled more easily later. Clarification can reiterate and

reinforce social norms “without a sense of correction or censure of anyone involved” (p. 319). Through both identification and clarification, speaker and audience become unified in understanding and purpose.

Consider as an example of unification from a stand-up routine by Jim Gaffigan. During this sketch, he uses a common sense of fallibility to address the continued success of the popular fast food chain McDonald’s despite publication of the fact that its food offerings are unhealthy:

No one admits to going to McDonald’s. They sell six billion hamburgers a day. There’s only 300 million people in this country. It’s like, ‘Hmmm. I’m not a Calculus teacher, but... I think everyone’s lying.’ You ever been to McDonald’s and you see a friend for a second and you’re like ‘Oh, crap!’ (jimgaffigan, 2012).

Given the widespread popularity of the restaurant, as Gaffigan notes, this seems to be a clear-cut example of identification. People are already familiar with McDonald’s – they have to be, in fact, to appreciate the enthymeme that makes the joke resonant. But, as Gaffigan points out, consumption of this unhealthy food is widespread thanks to a human weakness that many of his audience members share, and which he can accordingly celebrate.

The latter two functions *divide* an object from the audience—but without losing humor’s happy affective payoff, so that the audience can bid a *heiteres Abschiednehmen* (‘cheerful farewell’) (Bytwerk, 1988, p. 313) to something or someone undesirable. They lend themselves toward Burke’s (1937) definition of humor that dwarfs the situation and focuses instead upon the human agent. Enforcement, the first divisive function, “allows a communicator to enforce norms delicately by leveling criticism while maintaining some degree of identification” (p. 320)—he cites humor surrounding the naiveté of children as an example of this function in action. This effect of humor can teach mores by ridiculing deviations from them in a way that makes clear the need for correction but still lets the audience experience a happy affective payoff in some

manner. The violation is made more than clear, here—it is made clearly undesirable.

Differentiation, then, directly contrasts the speaker with an opponent and creates a clear in-group and out-group beyond a single violation of a social norm—the agent is criticized as well as the deviation—and the audience is highly pressured to side with the in-group.

The same Gaffigan routine provides also provides an excellent example of divisive funniness:

I know some of you are like ‘Sorry, White-Trashy-guy, I don’t eat McDonald’s.’ I have friends that brag about not going to McDonald’s: ‘I would never got to McDonald’s!’ Well, McDonald’s wouldn’t want you because you’re a dick. I’m tired of people acting like they’re better than McDonald’s (jimgaffigan, 2012).

Clearly this is differentiation. In case the name-calling wasn’t enough evidence, observe that Gaffigan is critiquing the behavior of acting superior to the popular fast-food chain, but his critique extends further to the character of the individuals who engage in the behavior.

Remarkably, this particular example is a sort of meta-division, because Gaffigan divides his audience from people who are themselves divisive. It is also worth noting that he proceeds to bring the critique back around to a unifying comedic voice later in his lampoon:

It’s like you may have never set foot in McDonald’s, but you have your own McDonald’s. Maybe instead of buying a Big Mac you read *US Weekly*. Hey, that’s still McDonald’s. It’s just served up a little different. Maybe your McDonald’s is telling yourself that Starbucks Frappuccino is not a milkshake. Or maybe you watch *Glee*. It’s all McDonald’s. McDonald’s of the soul.

Thus, we arrive once again at a celebration of common human culpability.

All of these observations ring true with some aspect of the works of our humorous authors. But the funny does not transmit from one person to another on a purely psychic, emotional basis. There is a priming aesthetic element to funniness that draws people toward it and makes it appealing. Despite Bergson’s (2008) insistence that funny things are the product of “artifice” rather than “art,” we need to acknowledge the role of the aesthetic in the works of our

authors in order to get a better grasp of the messages that are being transmitted to their audiences. For that, we turn to some theories of art interacting with the public sphere.

### **Conclusion**

Comedy and humor are lucrative ways to get people to think critically about complex issues. If laughing about something makes us think about it, then mass distribution of that laughter can engender widespread critical discussion among its large audience. The comic corrective, under these circumstances, can reign free. But we need a means through which this dissemination of funniness can occur. Media provide us a distribution mechanism, and the aesthetic parts of laughter-craft give us material. That craft is an art, however, and unless we understand it as such we cannot fully grasp its capacities and its limitations.

All of these perspectives help us understand the unique contributions of our three focal American Literary Humorists. They will help us navigate our artists as they navigate the ideologies of their days through the comic corrective. Twain critiques nationalism and explores the identity of the new, powerful American persona. Thurber critiques the homogeneity and of an increasingly mass consumer-based society. Sedaris relates the possibilities and challenges that come with the new freedoms given to the individual in a global age of self-fashioning. The tools we have amassed in this chapter will give us frameworks through which to dissect those critiques. Now that we have achieved this level of theoretical sophistication, we will turn to examine each of our authors, one at a time in chronological order, and probe the species of American-ness that drives their work and how they handle its nuances.

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### CHAPTER THREE: MARK TWAIN

*In order to apply for the post of reporter-at-large on the Territorial Enterprise, Samuel Clemens walked 130 miles to Virginia City in Nevada Territory. He arrived at the newspaper's offices one hot afternoon in August, a dust-covered, weary stranger in a slouch hat, with a revolver slung on his belt, and a roll of blankets on his back. He wore a blue woolen shirt and dusty trousers tucked into his boots. Dropping into a chair, he announced, 'My starboard leg seems to be unshipped. I'd like about one hundred yards of line; I think I am falling to pieces.' He added, 'My name is Clemens, and I've come to write for the paper.'*

*~Bartlett's Book of Anecdotes, 2000, p. 543*

Mark Twain is often identified as the prototypical American humorist. He was a celebrity in his own time both in the States and abroad. Over one hundred years later his international popularity has been canonized into Required Reading. His writings are both funny and serious. The impact of his satire was – and is – as material as its subjects. During his life he was in turns a poor child, a newspaper businessman, and an esteemed member of high society. His fortunes seemed to ebb and flow with those of the post-Civil War nation he addressed and memorialized in his texts. His work has been identified as quintessentially American on many counts. This chapter will discuss what sort of American-ness that pedestal might entail and why Twain's work soars above the funniness of his contemporaries to skyrocket him to the esteemed premier Literary Humorist status he enjoys today.

To probe his resonance both during the Gilded Age of American history (so named by Twain himself) and today, we address the questions raised in the previous chapter. We will start by parsing out Mark Twain's audience. What was the American public like during his heyday? (What social strata composed its ranks? Amidst that crowd, what access did various individuals have to entertainment? How did contemporary ideologies seep into everyday life and govern those entertainment choices?) Then, moving in particular to Twain's funniness, we must address what made his style of humor so lucrative with his particular audience (What serious issues did

its happy affective payoff broach? What made it stick in the audience's mind after the joking was over?) Finally, we situate Twain uniquely within and without his time (What made his material so funny within that particular context? Can today's audiences laugh at his material for the same reasons? Why or why not?). All of this fails to bring us to any conclusion about why-Twain-is-so-funny. Again, funniness is polysemous and can't be definitively explained in the aggregate. But we can, in the end, observe general trends that might contribute to Twain's synchronic and diachronic resonance; the trends, in turn can inform us about what makes him among all of his contemporaries the godfather of the humor scene in the United States.

### **Twain's Audience**

#### **Diversity: America's Burgeoning Social Classes**

Twain often struggled with his rhetorical direction as he struggled with facets of himself that reflected the divisions of society in his day. On the one hand, the child of small-town rural America knew what appealed to the lower classes having once been a member of the *hoi polloi* himself. On the other hand, finding esteemed outlets for publication meant appealing to the literary set, and as Twain's marriage to Olivia Langdon catapulted him into the wealthy class he struggled with his ambition to identify with the smart set. Although he enjoyed the wide popularity of his funny work, Mark Twain wanted to be a serious writer whose work was taken seriously by critics as well as the public at large. His work addresses different crowds at different times: Travel pieces like *The Innocents Abroad* were broadly popular among the literate American public. More serious pieces like *The Prince and the Pauper* gave Twain some pull in literary circles. As his career progressed Twain capitalized on a few potboilers for mass readership based on earlier work, *Tom Sawyer*, *Detective* being prominent among them. The pieces that have lasted the test of time (like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, which is much more

widely read now than it was at the time of its publication) are a concern for later in this chapter. For now, we remain fixated on the rhetorical situation which bore so much diversity from one writer.

The Gilded Age, the period with which Mark Twain's writing is customarily identified, is usually demarcated as the years between 1877-1920, a period that survives the lifespan (but not the legacy) of Samuel Clemens by ten years. It begins with a country picking up the pieces after a Civil War and ends with one facing the consequences of a global conflict. America was in many ways defining its identity as a state and as a nation; its constantly shifting social composition made that definition an ongoing conversation rather than an goal to be achieved. Twain's writing played into that negotiation and had great effect on the public's notion of American-ness.

After the end of the Civil War, Americans were encouraged to emphasize the union implied by the moniker "*United States*." According to popular ideology, a coast-to-coast homogenously agreeing nation sprang fully formed from the head of the War Between the States – "nation" being a deliberately chosen word to describe a cultural as well as political union among the peoples of the country (Wiebe, 1967, p. 11). Indeed, the post-war movement toward urbanization created city communities that seemed to embody this sentiment with a surge of novelty and diversity unified and tamed in the name of the nation. On a larger scale, then, nationalist fervor created a sense of sweeping identification – one that Lears (2009) describes as an almost desperate drive to make sense of the carnage of the 1860s. Ceremonial symbols of reconciliation abounded in spectacles such as joint "Blue and Gray" reunions of veterans of armies from both sides of the civil conflict. By the late 1800s, Union and Confederate veterans were running mates for political office in the Populist party (Novick, 1988, p. 74). That vision of

cohesion became one in which America in its new sense of togetherness would turn to the world stage and begin to rescue other states in a move toward global hegemony. This was the kind of narrative necessary to address the problem of social cohesion that was so troubling to American political theorists of the day (Wiebe, 1967).

But the nationalist vision of America as a global influence coexisted with a divisive legacy in a nation that had not magically completely congealed again after its great and violent division – a division that gave Twain great traction for his funny material. Novick (1988) observes bluntly that “deep, vicarious identification with one of the two sides [the North or the South] was the rule until well into the twentieth century” (p. 74). Members of both the Union and the Confederacy had made great sacrifices for their causes and were not about to cast their loyalties aside lightly. Eventually loyalty begat nostalgia. Jefferson Davis remained a popular hero in the South long after the collapse of the Confederacy – much more so than he had been during his term as its president. When the Memorial Day holiday was established to commemorate fallen soldiers on both sides, it was policed at Arlington by Union veterans out to ensure that Confederate graves would not be honored (Summers, 1997). Even as veterans of the armies of both the North and South ran for national office on the Populist ticket, Southerners largely veered away from third-party affiliation to prevent themselves from being isolated from the traditions of their communities (Wiebe, 1967). Post-war division between factions did not end at Appomattox Court House, and its legacy colored the so-called United States for decades to come.

Of course, America was socially divided or stratified along many lines other than its previous martial conflict, very much including the social classes that Twain straddled. A more material concern for most U.S. citizens during this period was the dialectic between the rich and

the poor and the emerging middle class and the ability (or not) of individuals to move among these groups. Of course, social stratification had existed previously in U.S. and colonial American history. One of the innovations of the Gilded Age, however, was radical separations between strata:

Far from being fluid, class lines were distinct. The worlds different classes inhabited were more separate than in the past. Except when passing each other, on Broadway, rich and poor never mingled. The children of the affluent went to the academies and then college; the miners' children went no further than the public grade schools, if they went at all (Summers, 1997, p. 123).

As urbanization increased, cities became microcosmic illustrations of this trend. Poorer areas of cities got the brunt of urban filth, including the excrement of the horses that provided a primary mode of transportation - "A thousand horses, after all, dropped five hundred gallons of urine and ten tons of dung on pavements every eight hours , and even a small city had many thousand" (Summers, 1997, p. 198). Where tap water was available, it was neither clean nor clear. Slum neighborhoods had an eighty percent higher mortality rate than the rest of the country. Working conditions were dangerous, and both workplaces and homes were riddled with disease. These and other problems spurred periodic bouts of social reform throughout the period that brought public exposure to the hardships of poverty and instigated civic measures to ameliorate its effects. But Social Darwinism popularized the notion that some of the underprivileged were more deserving of rescue than others, and reform efforts often made sharp distinctions between those who were poor through no fault of their own and those were poor by dint of laziness or excessive lifestyles (Lears, 2009). Help from above was available – sometimes, for some people.

Meanwhile, the upper classes had entered Veblen's age of Conspicuous Consumption, or spending to attract attention, which proliferated more in the comfort (and small ponds) of towns like Hartford, Connecticut than the chaos of urban centers like New York City. Protestant,

Anglo-Saxon merchants, bankers, and well-to-do farmers promoted this practice enjoyed luxury in the public eye and maintained their privilege easily. Policing themselves with intermarriage, exclusive educations, and the trappings of the good life, America's aristocrats maintained their status even through economic turmoil (Wiebe, 1967). When reform promoted the lower classes, the rich made strategic compromises so that their comfort would not be harmed. When popular protest threatened their lifestyle, they emphasized the symbolic clout of hope and national identity embedded their trappings (Lears, 2009). The educated elite laid claim to intellectual authority, emphasizing the difference between objective truth and uneducated armchair speculation. Controversy and criticism (which might erode this veneer of authority) were strongly discouraged in the academy, usually being derided as "unprofessional" behavior (Novick, 1988, p. 58). The power struggle was subtle, but the rich of the Gilded Age managed to weather threats to their status with a genteel outlook.

But with the spirit of social progress that followed the Gilded Age's notions of betterment through scientific progress, many people held out hope that the impoverished could escape lower status through hard work much like Twain did. Indeed, the skilled trades flourished, giving people opportunities to advance beyond familial careers. The poor in America had better access to food (and spent less of their paycheck on it) than impoverished people Europe. Workplace reforms in the late 1800s led to better conditions, including mandates like the eight-hour work day. Increasing amounts of people disengaged from their ethnic identifications and saw themselves instead as primarily members of the working class, a group united by residential communities, social lives, and politics (Summers, 1997). Thanks in part to these reforms and also to the spirit of American unification and equality that came on the wings of the Civil War's end, increasing amounts of Americans dreamed that they would enjoy the rags-to-riches prosperity

imagined in the Horatio Alger novels of the period (Wiebe, 1967). Thanks to this sense of hope, reform movements saw some genesis among the people who benefitted from them as well as from benevolent members of the upper classes: farmers' movements, especially, called attention to the producers of the nation's quality of life. More and more, "poor folk confronted a novel sight: themselves, acting effectively in public" (Lears, 2009, p. 158). Although rescue from above wasn't always dependable, self-help began to seem like a more realistic prospect and the myth of pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps maintained great traction.

Perhaps as a result of this mentality of class transcendence, the period immortalized by Mark Twain saw the emergence and development of the U.S. middle classes. Skilled tradesmen, fueled by urban-industrial development and the dependence of their customers on their specialization, found themselves living comfortably enough to look beyond their everyday subsistence and find their place in local and national concerns. The group did not intentionally set itself apart from the rest of society as a separate class, but its members mingled in everyday life and shared an outlook different from that of the poor or the rich. Their identity meshed thanks to their outward focus on the future; they maintained ranks, something after the fashion of the upper classes, with exclusive entry requirements into their professions. A middle-class approach to education eventually surfaced as well amid the grade schools of the lower classes and the exclusive academies of the well-to-do: utilitarian, career-based programs flourished at the college level with specific training programs supporting them at the preparatory school level (Wiebe, 1967).

Of course, poverty and riches were not the only social concerns being buffeted during the Gilded Age. Women, increasingly, became visible parts of *de jure* American life. Feminine voices were prominent in reform movements, for example, education, and other lines of work



associated with morality and nurturance. Furthermore women slowly began to uphold a presence in historically male professions like law and medicine. Thanks to the public presence of female voices, women's suffrage became a hotly debated topic (Wiebe, 1967). In short, women of the period were making significant strides toward notoriety, if not equality.

African-American members of the population were a different story – a notable exception which provides a backdrop for some of Twain's most famous pieces, including *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Although notions of social class were slowly eroding white ethnic concerns, they remained largely separate in the public mind. Racism was a governing ideology in both the North and the former Confederacy and found a huge variety of outlets in public discourse. Remarkably, the vehemence of racial division was not a direct product of the Civil War. Lears (2009) points out that the aftermath of the conflict was marked by easy mixing among races, even in the South. "Hunting, fishing, cooking, shucking corn, tending to the sick and midwifing babies – all involved cooperation and sometimes camaraderie between the races" (p. 92). But by the 1890s, white people began to assert dominance over their black neighbors. With the intellectual clout of scientific racism and biological superiority in their arsenal, white elitists instigated a campaign of hate that expressed itself through legislation, religion, eugenics, and lynching. But the most virulent vestiges of racism lay more in everyday life and private thought than in legal or violent spectacle. White people commonly regarded black people as exotic, savage, and less than human. Even in the enlightened, abolitionist North, charity organizations turned away black people in need (with Social Darwinist principles, as always – or even just Darwinist ones) and white people flocked to minstrel shows to laugh at blackface lampoons of African-American culture (Summers, 1997). When Congress undertook to make public spaces like cemeteries and streetcars open to black bodies bred threats of "“dead negroes”" across the

North. The law eventually omitted cemeteries and schools from the integrated spaces – but Summers observes that “it might as well have left out everywhere else, too. Most communities ignored it. Just the same, the Supreme Court overturned its provisions in 1883” (p. 27). Thus, while hope was the ruling ideology for white members of the working classes, black communities did not see the same glimmering opportunity. Any hope for equality they might have had at the end of the War was quickly and decisively quashed.

Biologically-based racist thought did not confine itself to U.S. borders, and in fact it fueled the beginnings of the American imperial ambitions that Twain would find troubling later in life. As the supposed might of the reconstructed, unified nation turned toward world politics, much of its ideological thrust involved white racial superiority. Conquest of the world’s darker-skinned peoples had much the same motives as the movement to isolate America’s black population, but global initiatives were much more explicitly militarist. The United States would, in theory, act as God’s chosen people and regenerate the world for the benefit of less advanced peoples who had illustrated that they could not be trusted to govern themselves. This mindset began with the Civil War and survived in some sense through the First World War – a period during which America’s presence abroad significantly increased (Lears, 2009).

And while America boosted its influence in the rest of the world, the rest of the world was famously coming to America (among other places). Immigrant populations swelled during the Gilded Age and found themselves on the fringes of society, often trapped in the slums and excluded from the hope of social mobility that encouraged other members. Wages remained low for newcomers even during reform initiatives, because immigrant workers could easily be fired and replaced with other desperate new arrivals if they complained or protested. Many were unused to a money-based economy and had difficulty adjusting to shopping without a barter

system. Non-Christian immigrants found little tolerance for their religious practices from their employers. Many were separated from their families either temporarily or permanently, although many immigrated with a group of their peers and found neighborhoods of their countrymen in American cities. In the end, some immigrants could not handle the hardships of their new home and returned to their countries of origin. But large numbers stayed, and by the end of Mark Twain's life one in seven Americans had been born in another country (Summers, 1997). Immigrant populations were not without stratification themselves, of course. Lears (2009) notes that "...while the Chinese were eventually excluded and black people were gradually segregated, Europeans (if they stayed) had a fighting chance of assimilating into the emergent definition of what it meant to be 'an American'—that is, a Caucasian" (p. 110).

"But this would take decades," Lears (2009) continues (p. 100). And during those decades, immigrant communities faced a great deal of resistance from "nativist" members of the population who laughed at stereotypes like "The Heathen Chinese" that populated Twain and Bret Harte's stage adaptation of *Ah Sin*. Much of the immigration to the United States up to that point had been English-speaking and Protestant, and the large numbers of people who were Turkish or Russian or Jewish or Eastern Orthodox or generally different from the status quo felt threatening to the homeostasis of previous generations. Several movements struck against the wave of immigration, sometimes violently. A notable example of extreme resistance to change occurred in 1871, when an effort to push back against the growing numbers of Chinese people employed as cheap railroad workers led to mob rioting in Los Angeles's Chinatown. Nativism was not a universal mentality. In fact some pushback against it came from the ranks of the intellectual elite, including celebrities like reformist minister Henry Ward Beecher and even Mark Twain himself

(Summers, 1997). The sentiment had very material consequences, however, and created a great division in Gilded Age society.

### **Twain's Rags-to-Riches Success**

Twain reacted to all of the social rings of his day – and the potential for transcendence among them – in his writings. What's more, he lived a variety of social intersections throughout his life. At times he seemed to provide evidence of class mobility. At others, he turned his back on either his poorer past or his wealthy present. But whatever his stance du jour he was always conscious of social divisions in a way that made him a blatant product of his time.

Having married money after beginning his career as a fancy-free Western scamp, Samuel Clemens relished his newfound trappings of the upper classes. Powers (2006) describes him as “the provincial town boy turned Eastern squire” (p. 435). At the height of his career he and his family occupied an opulent home in the exclusive Nook Farm neighborhood of Hartford, Connecticut, at the time a great niche of affluence where a famous man of letters could flourish among his own kind. His lifestyle there was luxurious, right down to donating his excess to charitable causes and reaching out in person to the needy both through lecturing and physical labor. While the poor enjoyed his donations, Twain himself consumed such delicacies as “claret and champagne, filet of beef and canvas-back ducks, Nesselrode pudding and ice-cream angels” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 208). The family employed six servants. Neighbors regarded the Clemenses' fortune as “inextinguishable” (although like many Gilded Age men, Samuel Clemens would later try his hand at business and find that his tap could indeed run dry). He was immensely proud when an honorary degree from Yale established him – in his opinion, anyway – as a member of the intellectual elite as well as the wealthy class. Given his humble Hannibal beginnings, the story of Mark Twain's journey to Nook Farm seemed like concrete proof of the Horatio Alger

myth. Indeed, some modern criticism of Twain's work emphasizes his "ideology-constricted bourgeois Victorian [attitude], caught in social pathologies of his time with regard to gender, money, and race" (Michelson, 1995, p. 36). Some commentators argue that he would never have reached the celebrity status that he enjoyed in his own time and today if he had not been a man (a white man) of privilege – a member of a segment of the population that was always visible in the public eye (Walker, 1998).

Although he had leapt from the poorer classes to the echelons of the rich, Twain's primary audience ended up being the emerging middle class. In Kaplan's (1966) words,

He both entertained and mocked these people; sometimes he alienated them, but often he showed his eagerness to take on their social coloration. He was outraged by their parochialism, but he envied their sense of rootedness, and they gave him a sense of belonging that delighted him (p. 37).

He was able to look both up toward and down upon the middle classes thanks to his own social mobility, which gave him a useful perspective from which to address their unique place in the world. The fact that many of his major works were specifically designed for children (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and the Pauper* prominent among them) is a great indication that Twain was speaking to a class of people who had a good education available to them at a very early age. His literary expertise brought the "gigantic" humor of the American West to an audience with cultivated taste that was often only a generation removed from the folk culture Twain channeled (Keough, 1998).

Despite finding such a secure middle-class following, though, Twain remained conflicted throughout his life about whether true literary success could come from such a target audience. At times he seemed content to be a popular success rather than a critical one: "My books are water," he quipped. "Those of the great geniuses is wine. Everybody drinks water" (Powers, 2006, p. 512). At others, he felt himself in the grips of a dilemma about the nature of his legacy.

After the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which received negative reviews from the literati but was hugely popular among Twain's middle-class readership, Twain found himself facing a clear example of America's stratification. His problem, in his words, was a choice between writing "for the Head" or "the Belly and the Members." More explicitly, he found himself trying to juggle "the cultivated class" or "the mighty mass of the uncultivated" (Kaplan, 1966, p. 316). *The Price and the Pauper* (published three years before *Huckleberry Finn*) is the product of this inner conflict, since despite its humor its style is meant to smack of literary respectability rather than the frontier folk humor of Twain's early work (Michelson, 1995). But a few years later, in 1890, Twain seemed to have swayed toward his fans rather than his critics: "Honestly, I never cared what became of the cultured classes; they could go to the theater and the opera, they had not use for me and the melodeon" (p. 38). Throughout the stages of his life and literary career, however, Twain managed to transcend boundaries and appeal to a variety of audiences without becoming the champion of any one class of reader. Obviously, Twain's resonance was not directly his choice. It had more to do with the ability of members of his middle-class audience to select his work for their own enjoyment and demand his continued popularity. In some cases he was able to meet demand face-to-face, given that his celebrity began with his tours on the lecture circuit. In others, he had to rely on the communication media of the time to reach his audience. As such, we now turn to the Gilded Age entertainment scene to examine the platforms – literal and otherwise – that appealed to crowds in search of Twain's funniness.

## **Audience Agency**

### **Contemporary Entertainment Media**

McLuhan's electric age was in full swing as Mark Twain began his career and it had a great impact on the latter's success as an entertainer. Although he first began to accrue his literary reputation on the West Coast, the relatively instantaneous transmission of information brought about by the availability of telegraph technology brought Twain's name to the big publishing houses back East (Fleischman, 2008). In fact, the technology that enabled the literature of the day was also a highly McLuhanesque central subject of its narratives. Lears (2009) points out that

A signature scene in the literature of colonization involved the confrontation between dumbfounded natives and Western technology. Clocks, compasses, magnets, photographic equipment, matches, telescopes, bilge-pumps—all became tokens of the white man's mystifying power (p. 38).

Despite the popularity of these nostalgic tales of America's colonial and frontier past, America during the Gilded Age found itself on the threshold of an entertainment revolution in an age when electric lighting made nightlife a safer, more enjoyable prospect (Summers, 1997). Audiences could simultaneously seek out traditional entertainments like hoochie-koochie shows and patent medicine fair while they steadily drew closer to the advent of the commercial entertainment industry with its staples like vaudeville, Hollywood, and radio (Lears, 2009). For the moment, live public gatherings remained very much in vogue, and throngs of people showed up to see lectures, public readings and recitals, musical concerts, and demonstrations of scientific progress. Trends of the East Coast entertainment scene slowly wended themselves west as well with the increasing popularity of mail-order catalogues, meaning that a fad (literary or otherwise) could for the first time have truly national popularity. On the tails of this development in transportation came the ride of mass production to meet the vastly increased demand for a single

product in the new national market. Once these progressions were fully instituted, consumer culture was born. No place exemplified the new approach to life than the urban department stores and rural chain stores. Both institutions brought mass-made products to the consumer, who was expected to buy that product for the pure sake of retail enjoyment and keeping up with the Joneses. Materialistic though the new culture was, women (particularly in the middle classes) found themselves liberated from a lot of household chores thanks to the availability of ready-made products. Suddenly, they had increased leisure in which they could indulge in the other entertainments of the day (Summers, 1997).

Twain's background in the newspaper business gave him a boost into this media world. During his childhood and much of his adult life, newspapers were the primary means of broadcasting information to the general public. They demanded a degree of literacy, to be sure, but newspapers were often read aloud in public gathering places like taverns so that even illiterate could plumb their contents. The papers catalyzed other entertainment media by advertising events before they happened and reporting about them after the fact, and Twain himself turned to newspaper publicity when his lecture tours needed bolstering (Kaplan, 1966). Further subverting the interplay of social class and education, apprenticing with a newspaper was often a path for children from the lower classes to learn both reading and business and ensure a skilled trade that would help them rise above their inherited class status. (Benjamin Franklin is a famous example of such a maneuver – Samuel Clemens is still another.) Most American towns – even small communities – had a newspaper, making the media a lucrative outlet for its creators and the public alike (Pasley, 2001).

More to the point for the career of Mark Twain, newspapers were the primary outlet for popular humor. Papers, since they were not at the time bound by any pretense of journalistic



objectivity, often alleviated the dry reporting of their news columns with satirical pieces and spoofs of more serious stories. These interjections were no funny paper inserts – they were printed alongside the regular news, with no ostensible differentiation (Walker, 1998). When Samuel Clemens began his work as a printer’s boy, he discovered the freedom of print humor at the knee of Joseph Ament, who when challenged by Disciples of Christ founder Alexander Campbell not to abbreviate anything in the published version of Sunday sermons, dutifully spelled out “Jesus H. Christ” at every mention of the deity (Kaplan, 1966). Later, Clemens began to make his own fame with a widely reprinted story of a petrified man who had been discovered in a position that a close reader could identify as thumbing his nose at the throngs of people who were allegedly flocking to see him. Much to Clemens’s surprise, though, many readers did not see the story for the hoax that it was, and he “reacted with dismay at the gross humbugability of his fellow man” (Fleischman, 2008, p. 83).

When Clemens ventured to New York to negotiate his exodus from newspaper writing into the world of travel writing and fiction, he found a city teeming with entertainment media. Speaking to his roots, the city had five major newspapers. It also had at least twelve theaters featuring a variety of spectacles. In the interests of Twain’s future it was also a center of publishing and book-printing and a cultivated literary scene bolstered by authors who, like Twain, had their roots in journalism. Both literary and popular culture thrived there, giving writers a variety of audiences to attempt to impress (Kaplan, 1996). Literary journals united the intellectual elite while mass-circulation magazines like *Good Housekeeping* and the *Saturday Evening Post* were popular among the middle-class masses (Lears, 2009). Opinion journals like *Harper’s Weekly* kept anyone who was inclined engaged in politics and other ideological revolutions going on around them (Summers, 1997). When the Clemenses eventually moved to

Hartford, they found just as fruitful a publishing scene – but unlike New York’s literary crowd, this one was far removed from any real reminders of poverty other than their voluntary charitable works. Creature comforts governed the community and its members prided themselves on their manners and their ideals, with social calls functioning as an important medium in their own right (Kaplan, 1966). In high society and elsewhere, this was the age of “style” and the age of modern austerity, both of which reflected the period of transition between romanticism and the scientific age of fact (Novick, 1988).

All of this speedy and overwhelming development in media was pivotal for the funnier spirits of the times for a number of reasons. First, this was the beginning of the development of mass entertainment, meaning that large numbers of people across geographic distances could be culturally savvy about the same texts and trends. Twain himself noticed this when he revisited New Orleans, “The Metropolis of the South,” as he wrote *Life on the Mississippi* (1960):

The New Orleans electric lights were more numerous than those of New York, and very much better. One had this modified noonday not only in Canal and some neighboring chief streets, but all along a stretch of five miles of river-frontage. There are good clubs in the city now—several of them but recently organized—and inviting modern-style pleasure resorts at West End and Spanish Fort. The telephone is everywhere. One of the most notable advances in is journalism....The editorial work is not hack-grinding, but literature (p. 200).

Since mass production and retail had given people so much more leisure, they had more energy to spend on entertaining themselves, and electric lights gave them more hours of the day in which to do so. Finally, the Gilded Age brought about a novel development in American culture in which entertainment began to usurp politics as the major focus of the public mindset. The political science was not dead, of course, but Summers (1997) equivocally observes that “Americans went to Coney Island and the polls, too” (p. 262). Political culture had competition

where before it had been the primary concern for Americans outside of their working lives, and interest in local and federal government decreased as a result.

### **The Draw of Oratory – Twain and the Advent of Stand-Up Comedy**

Although Twain's rise to fame began with newspaper writing and culminated with more what he viewed as serious literary contributions, his rise to fame between those two media resulted from his vast success as a funny man on the national lecture circuit. He made his first stage appearance as Mark Twain on October 2, 1866 with a staggering bout of speech anxiety, but he regained his footing and made such an impact that Powers (2006) marks the moment he began his address as the first step toward Twain becoming "The nation's first rock star" (p. 164). The medium of oratory had distinct advantages for the burgeoning celebrity. Travelling through both large and small towns, it gave him real face-to-face interaction with a public who could therefore feel a greater level of intimacy with his tales of the Sandwich Islands and hometown Hannibal. Repetition of stories gave Twain time to rehearse them before committing them to print publication. Although the platform did not afford much complexity of narrative, it did encourage humor with its necessary clarity and brevity (Michelson, 1995). Of course, Twain was no champion of his own rhetoric:

The person who makes frequent speeches can't afford much time for preparation, and he probably goes to that place empty, (just as I am in the habit of doing), purposing to gather texts from other unprepared people who are going to speak before he speaks (Twain, 2010).

But despite his nonchalant impromptu attitude, by the end of his life Twain had become quite famous for his stage presence and his ability to enrapture large crowds with his storytelling.

Kaplan (1966) describes Twain as "intoxicated with oratory" (p. 15). He was able not only to entertain, but to moralize, philosophize, educate, transport, and identify with diverse audiences.

He alternated serious material with comic relief to rivet the crowd's attention. His finesse

became so great that he could raise thunderous applause just by standing on the stage without saying a word. Although Twain came to hate the lecture circuit later in life (or said he did), his popularity as one of its masters kept him coming back for new tours, each one widely attended. He depended on the stage even as a literary writer when he authored pieces like a successful adaptation of his *The Gilded Age* and a less successful Bret Harte collaboration and “Chinaman” vehicle called *Ah Sin*.

Throughout his long career of oratorical efforts, Twain was paving the way for what we know today as stand-up comedy. He was not alone in defining the genre, of course. But as he and his contemporaries took the spotlight humor was largely confined to the newspaper realm (Fleischman, 2008). Lyceum lectures were often populated with melodramatic, educational, or otherwise serious fare and featured orators like Frederick Douglass, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. But a small crop of humorists popped up among their ranks and met with great demand for their work. Artemus Ward, a direct influence on Twain, led the pack, followed by Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby, among others. Twain was a standout member of this set that led the lecture toward pure entertainment and was certainly one of the most famous funny celebrities to make it part of his career (Kaplan, 1966). In his efforts, he helped hone a truly American genre of humor marked by an immensely valuable comic persona. Although Walker (1998) traces the standup comedian back to the circus clown and the minstrel show as well as the lecture platform, she identifies Twain’s Huck Finn as possessed of the standup comedian’s voice as well as Twain himself. “The stand-up comic... gives voice to what the audience might secretly feel but dare not say, and often does so by using the guise of a socially unacceptable persona,” she summarizes, “whose views we can superficially reject” (p. 53). Although Twain’s lecturing ethos was not exactly repugnant in the manner of later stand-up

comedians, he did encourage his audience to pause and reflect about themselves and their society in the same manner that we expect to elicit from comedy shows today. Twain's oratorical skills brought light to an innovative genre that would underpin American culture for generations to come.

### **Ideology and Practice**

Twain was a product of the ideologies that structured his public sphere as much as his influence helped bolster them. Although he had little background in the intellectual elite (and spent a good deal of energy trying to compensate for that circumstance), the ideals of his day seeped into the material world and trickled down into everyday life for the well-educated and the poor alike. As such, this section will expound some of the theories that governed philosophical conversation during the Gilded Age and provide some example of their effect on Mark Twain's life and works.

### **Contemporary Philosophies**

In his intellectual history of the American academy, Novick (1988) identifies the Gilded Age first and foremost as rife with scientific method as the measure of all things modern and cannon – a serious undertone that begged the degree of levity Twain's humor afforded the contemporary climate. "Objectivity" was a buzzword with God-term underpinnings and empirical facts were considered the atoms of knowledge. The scientific method reigned in the academy, in business management, and in broader social issues with its emphasis on statistical data-gathering (Wiebe, 1967). Despite the drive for truth through observation, though, there was little consensus about the way the world worked.

This was the era of the populist revolt and the free-silver campaign, of anarchist and trade-union violence; a time of unprecedented, unresolved social problems in cities which contained a larger body of unassimilated immigrants than ever before or since; a period

which saw the rise of the Wobblies, and the Socialist Party seemingly on the verge of becoming, as in Europe, a serious contender for power (Novick, 1988, p. 63).

Thanks in part to this pervasive uncertainty, positivism and objectivity did not reign unchallenged even in academic circles. Scholars like William James observed that empirical fact could not explain away everything in the world, leaving institutions like religious faith unaccounted for (Lears, 2009).

With its emphasis on biological racism (among other flavors) addressed above, the U.S. was also embroiled in imperialist spirit that intellectuals at the time (including Twain) found controversial. The militarism of the Civil War turned itself abroad and maintained a spirit of masculine might at home. Nationalism was also the word of the day in the American West as white troops finally conquered American Indian tribes through military force, completing the cultural work begun generations before. Lears (2009) identifies one of the direct results of this pugnacious pathos: scarcity psychology. Even in the age of conspicuous consumption, people were governed by a fear that there might only be so much to go around, making conservation a key focus of everyday life. This message was distributed by health care workers, religious leaders, and popular culture in general. Sexual health was supposed to be a direct result of maintaining what was supposed to be a finite amount of bodily fluids. Protestant ethic encouraged thrift and steady accumulation rather than gratification through instant wealth (although mail order shopping, department stores, and gambling posed serious challenges to religious admonition). Much of the literature of the day promoted a simple reliance on the self and the family unit through economic independence and discipline of character (Lears, 2009). Morality was closely intertwined with merit in this spirit. Self-reliance was indicative of righteousness and indicated one's fitness for success (Summers, 1997). Popular literature lauded the self-reliant virtue of frontiersman, small villages, and children. Twain explores and

problematizes this vein of thought when Huckleberry Finn runs away and lives briefly with only the company of a conflicted internal monologue on a Mississippi island in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1994).

I knowed I was all right now. Nobody else would come a-hunting after me. I got my traps out of the canoe and made me a nice camp in the thick woods. I made a kind of a tent out of my blankets to put my things under so the rain couldn't get at them. I caught a cat-fish and haggled him open with my saw, and towards sundown I started my camp fire and had supper. Then I set out a line to catch some fish for breakfast. When it was dark I set by my camp fire smoking, and feeling pretty satisfied; by by-and-by it got sort of lonesome, and so I went and set on the bank and listened to the current washing along...there ain't no better way to put in time when you are lonesome; you can't stay so, you soon get over it (p. 29).

Three pages later, though, when Huck's friend (and escaped slave) Jim shows up on the island, Huck observes that "I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome, now" (p. 31).

In a way, all of this individualist thrust was happily nostalgic for people who had grown up in more rural settings (Hannibal, Missouri, for instance), given that continued urbanization made functioning alone in the wilderness a much hazier prospect than it had once been (Wiebe, 1967). But the presumption of autonomy had its drawbacks: It placed a great deal of emphasis on male individualism (since women were regarded as naturally dependent in an age that romanticized the female invalid), making the division of labor between the sexes a more rigid binary than previous generations had purported and certainly a more political phenomenon as women became *persona non gratas* in the public sphere (Lears, 2009). (Remarkably, Huck disguises himself as a girl when he wants to slip back into town from his island camp with Jim without being conspicuous.)

As went morality, so went religion – one of the most monumental sources of ideology that Twain directly opposed in his writings. Protestant Christianity dominated the religious outlook of mainstream Gilded Age society, making the times rife with notions of final judgment

such that everyday behavior would affect the immortal destiny of the human soul. Summers (1997) points out that the role of this type of religion was particularly pivotal in Twain's day:

Take away religion from most history textbooks, and scarcely a line would be lost. Take it away from a history of the Gilded Age, and the times lose their meaning. Foreigners noticed at once how many churches, cathedrals, and synagogues there were. The 1870 census counted 72,000. At least half of a largely Protestant America worshipped on Sundays, prayed through the rest of the week, and glimpsed the hand of the Lord always (p. 164).

Thanks to this scope, Christian labors impacted many spheres. Women and black people were able to gain leadership roles and personal agency within their religious communities even though they lacked broader political traction. Beyond the walls of the church, Christian ideals mingled with the scientism of the day to spur a movement toward Scientific Philanthropy and other social reforms. Reform societies were run like businesses according to the principles of scientific management. Recipients of donations were researched and ranked to determine which causes were the most worth of beneficence. As noted above, poverty that was associated with human culpability was less likely to be aided than poverty that could not be traced back to personal fault. "At its most severe," notes Summers, "philanthropy looked like police work" (p. 169). Meanwhile, moral reformers attacked urban problems like pornography, prostitution, alcohol, and failing to observe the Protestant Sabbath – all in the name of religious ideals.

Although tied to military readiness, this scarcity psychology was also a product of Social Darwinism – the sense that every man had to prove his own fitness for survival. Groups who were unfit to survive in such stringent conditions were simply written out of the political picture. But some individuals – exercising their individual autonomy – pushed back against this mindset. Sociologist Albion Small, for example, championed the importance of civic life as well as individual self-reliance. With his philosophy that "every citizen shall be a public servant" (Lears, 2009, p. 199), Small hoped to bring some sense of togetherness into the public outlook.



And indeed, democratic ideals did flourish in some venues. John Dewey echoed this sentiment as he advocated a movement toward decentralized community democracy. Indeed, small towns maintained a great deal of participation in their local governments. Churches often governed themselves in democratic ways. Groups whose mission was to rectify social problems promoted civic engagement for a cause (Wiebe, 1967). All was not completely lonely in the ideology of the Gilded Age.

But federal political involvement continued to wane compared to previous generations throughout Twain's lifetime. Again, this had something to do with the rise of various entertainment media and leisure activities that took away the "free" time that people might have otherwise devoted to politics, and something to do with the emphasis on individual self-reliance. But apathy was the political system was on the rise regardless of these factors. Politicians were increasingly viewed as corrupt, parties lost their cohesiveness, and decentralized social communities drew away from national issues. Even the President was often regarded as a minority leader whose efforts did not represent the broader interests of the entire nation (Wiebe, 1967). Emphasizing a civic-minded mentality was thus a great challenge for political theorists.

### **Twain's Ideals**

The ideologies that structured the Gilded Age public sphere were a great influence on Twain, who came of age alongside these schools of thought and found his everyday life rife with their implications. He didn't always follow the party line in his writings – in fact, he often used his celebrity status as a venue for protesting dominant modes of thought. His work bolstered and changed the scope of important philosophical conversations; later segments of this chapter will probe exactly what satiric impacts he might have had as well as ways he reified particular ideals. For now, we concentrate on some of Clemens's personal attitudes toward the world around him.

One concern toward which Clemens fell right in line with the scarcity psychology of his day was sexual behavior. Although he had enjoyed the occasional company of women before his marriage, he was notably shy about any public outlets for lust. His first trip to New York found him offended by sexy shows and in his steamboating days he was offended by ports of call featuring overt prostitution – although he did see the institution as a necessary evil (Powers, 2006). Later in life during a trip to France he was perplexed by a culture which promoted open sexuality as one of the finer things in life. He experimented with the notion during his Parisian lecture tour with a speech entitled “Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism” which discussed with some relish the practice of masturbation. But his reactions were more puritanical when he was faced with Titian’s *Venus* in the Louvre, which he was afraid would wrack ruin upon young ladies who beheld its nakedness. (He did observe, however, the double standard that allowed painters to produce such works and thrive as progenitors of high art while writers who portrayed any sort of sexuality would be censored out of existence.) Like many men of his time, he was opposed to the idea of female sexuality while viewing its male counterpart as an unstoppable force of nature. Clemens loved a good dirty joke in interpersonal private life, but his work as Mark Twain was if anything prudish. Modern critics have noted that to preserve moral high ground Twain often replaces sexual references with monetary ones. In Kaplan’s (1966) words, “He was notoriously reticent about depicting mature sexual and emotional relationships, but he did write a kind of pornography of the dollar” (p. 105). Perhaps this omission was Twain’s attempt at sexual conservatism in public life – an effort to be an influence on the moral purity of his audience.

In more overtly political terms, Twain remained noncommittal about many issues until later in life, but as a product of the individualist American frontier he remained skeptical of

governance. He once famously observed in a speech of thanks for recognition at a meeting where a police force was criticized, ““You complain of the police. You created the police. You are responsible for the police. They must reflect you, their masters. Consider that before you blame them” (Twain, 2010, p. 410). In fact, earlier in his career Clemens had been no supporter of the police himself. As a newspaper reporter he once wrote a piece about police overlooking an attack on a Chinese man on the streets of San Francisco. The piece was rejected on the grounds that it was too controversial, and Clemens resigned from the paper’s staff as a result (Fleischman, 2008). Twain often wrote in support of Chinese populations (the heavily stereotypical *Ah Sin* being a gaping exception), but as this analysis will show he was not so supportive of other races despite his reputation in the wake of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a benevolent bender of racial oppression.

Twain’s dislike for American democracy was not an isolated thought. In 1876, after the publication of *The Gilded Age*, his satiric efforts had brought his discontent to a head. Twain confided to a friend that he had lost faith in the governmental system. He found the voting system to be a sham, since the learned and ignorant alike had equity of voice. His sympathies lay more and more with European models. Germany in particular called to him with its cultural emphasis on hard work, order, and spendthrift. He favored this Protestant sensibility over the disorder of contemporary America and the sensuality of Catholic France and Italy. He would continue to be critical of America as a nation – an entitled monarchy, in his opinion - in one shape or another throughout the rest of his life. He once expressed that he would not mind a Socialist overthrow if only his own property would not be affected (Kaplan, 1966).

Like many intellectuals of his day, Twain’s distaste for American ideals made him critical of American expansion; his writings were sometimes overtly anti-imperialist. He

objected to the U.S. presence in the Philippines. He denounced the role that Christianity played in America's face to the world. In the New York *Herald* Twain went so far as to compare American/Christian expansionism to piracy. His political writings, along with those of Jane Addams, William James, Ambrose Bierce, Carl Schurz, and George Frisbie Hoar and other public figures, created an alternative discourse to the narrative of militarism being promoted in the popular mindset at the time (Lears, 2009; Summers, 1997). Despite his fervent distaste for American actions, though, Twain never crossed the boundary between critic and activist. He maintained that his interests were confined to literary pursuits and were too scattered to boot to form any consistent political agenda from which to mount reform (Kaplan, 1966). American reform, like American democracy, may have been too constraining a notion for Twain.

Michelson (1995) sees in Twain a rugged individualist (very much a product of his period, perhaps) who resisted the streamlining of both ideology and anti-ideology:

Complex works from this period gain in resonance when they are allowed to reveal a mind in combat not merely with confining and *defining* dogma, but also with the very *idea* that a given formulation, or any culturally fostered swarm of them, ought to transform, limit, or define an individual self. Mark Twain's combat is Fabian, often confused, and artistically dangerous, full of retreats and surrenders as well as all-out insurrections (p. 174).

Indeed, some of Twain's writings show a man who has set out to continually challenge his own moral nature. Even politically charged passages seem more dialectical than conclusive (Powers, 2006). Mark Twain, in short, embodies the curious dichotomy of his period: he struggled to remain an individual in the face of collective concerns.

### **Funny Popularity**

What made Twain's humorous writing so particularly lucrative in his day? He did, after all, write serious pieces as well as funny ones – but his serious work wasn't hugely popular during the Gilded Age and it is rarely considered part of the must-read Twain cannon today.

What about being funny in particular made Mark Twain such a success? To answer that, we turn to his conflation of the funny and the serious – the gritty topics that undergirded his lightheartedness. In order for a joke to resonate, after all, it must speak to something beyond itself – otherwise it cannot release tension and therefore be considered funny. What beyond entertainment can an audience get out of reading Twain’s work? Furthermore, what impact does the funniness have beyond the instant in which it is heard or read?

### **Philosophical Undercurrents**

Although Twain’s approach was often to spoof his subjects, he was well-versed in serious literature as well as comic and fluctuated between those two ostensible poles throughout his career. In point of fact he was once dubbed the “laughing philosopher” for his unique combination of wit and grit (Kaplan, 1966, p. 116). In his youth Clemens consumed Shakespeare, Greek history, Darwin, and the Bible alongside Cervantes (Fleischman, 2008). But his friends worried about him when he expressed this background. Lifelong friend William Dean Howells showed discontent with Twain’s success later in life as a serious writer of theatrical pieces. He was afraid that his success with seriousness would usurp Twain’s fame as a funny man, a title which Howells (and others) found more valuable to his legacy (Kaplan, 1966).

Twain’s approach to humor reveals his inherent mix of the funny and the grave in a society that intermingled its joy and its suffering in the wake of the War. “Joy was not the raw material of humor, Twain was to discover,” intones Fleischman, “The dark source was sorrow” (2008, p. 82). The sorrow, for Twain, was in many ways more illustrative of life than the humor – but he often left his audience with a happy affective aftertaste when his observations were less than sweet. He exercised this principle well even as he described his own philosophy of humor: “Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it

would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 123). This orientation led Twain to see satiric scorching as one of the most important functions of humor:

...with all its lightness, and frivolity it has one serious purpose, one aim, one specialty, and it is constant to it—the deriding of shams, the exposure of pretensions fallacies, the laughing of stupid superstitions out of existence; and...whoso is by instinct engaged in this sort of warfare is the natural enemy of royalties, nobilities, privileges and all kindred swindles, and the natural friend of human rights and human liberties (p. 166-7).

Satire cannot function without morals to police. Thus, Twain’s humor, for all its chaos and disruption, can occasionally be seen taking the high ground and fostering a sense that the world has been left better for its disruption (Michelson, 1995).

There is some speculation about how much of the gritty truth of his life made it into Twain’s writings, and how much of it he fabricated. (Thurber and Sedaris, who are as much or more ostensibly autobiographical in their writings, of course face similar speculation.) Twain liked to say that he remembered things whether they happened or not (Fleischman, 2008). He also observed that the only people who are truly free to speak the truth are the dead. Dictating his own autobiography, Twain noted that he had told the truth, but only between the lines (Kaplan, 1966). Even if the facts behind his assertions and prognostications proved to be incorrect, Twain rarely revised his statements (Michelson, 1995). This tenuous dichotomy between fact and imagination, the “impulse to improve memory with fiction,” was a continual source of tension in Twain’s work (Powers, 2006, p. 51). Although it left it difficult legacy for biographers to trace, it also gave America great literature, so in the end it seems to have been a fruitful boundary for him to walk.

### **A Case Study in Sacrilege**

A good testing ground for Twain’s ability to navigate the serious undercurrents of his funny work can be found in his treatment of religion, a huge force in his day and therefore a

volatile subject for satirization. Although he was raised in a Protestant environment and made an effort to uphold religious principles for the sake of his (comparatively) devout wife, Sam Clemens became increasingly disenchanted with organized religion throughout his life. When he aired such sentiments in his work they were often censored at the outset by his wife or soon afterward by his publishers, but he continued to probe and spoof Christian principles undaunted. Some of his most notable works in this vein include “Extract from Adam’s Diary” (and, complementarily, Eve’s), “Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven,” the Mysterious Stranger tales, and a series of sketch commentaries on God and the Bible (Michelson, 1995; Twain, 1995). All of these pieces made blatant what myriad other passing observations throughout his writings approached: Twain, despite the religious fervor of his day, was no evangelist.

Fortunately for his interpersonal relationships (particularly his marriage) Twain did not often begrudge others their beliefs – he simply wrote to elaborate or exorcise his own (Fleischman, 2008). But his tendency to air his agnostic laundry in public created a stir amongst many of his contemporaries. Kaplan (1966) describes one notable offending incident early in Twain’s career when he gave a lecture about his travels abroad with stops at some sites considered holy by the Christian tradition on the *Quaker City*, the inspiration for *The Innocents Abroad*:

Despite his promise to [his sister] Pamela not to scoff at ‘sacred things,’ his lecture offended many and revived their indignation at his reports from the Holy Land. But he was pleased to hear that he had been denounced from one pulpit as ‘this son of the devil, Mark Twain,’ and he was even friendly though only politely apologetic to a young Baptist minister who scolded him as ‘this person who visits the Holy Land and ridicules sacred scenes and things.’ Some of the newspapers took up the cry and attacked the lecture as ‘sickening,’ ‘foul with sacrilegious allusions, impotent humor and malignant distortion’ and the lecturer himself as a ‘miserable scribbler,’ a man ‘lost to every sense of decency and shame’” (p. 72).

Despite such pushback, Twain persevered in his sacrilege upon the Holy Land. The “Tomb of Adam” passage is one of the most famous sections of *The Innocents Abroad* and in many ways gave his readership a taste for Twain’s tendency to go above and beyond the standards of good taste and genteel humor (Michelson, 1995). Perhaps fed by notoriety’s fame, Clemens continued to broadcast his radical sentiments. In 1907, speaking with no less than Andrew Carnegie, he disparaged the United States motto “In God We Trust” after it had been abolished by Theodore Roosevelt: “It always sounds well—In God We Trust. I don’t believe it would sound any better if it were true” and he continued by observing that the United States was supposed to be a Christian country but, he closed, “so is hell” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 432). Clearly Clemens did not revile his reputation for blasphemy even when his career had catapulted him to the highest level of celebrity.

Twain’s commentary on things Christian was not uninformed – he lived in a highly religious atmosphere. He had read the entirety of the Bible in his youth and knew well its proscriptions and inconsistencies. The personal predilection – even romance - with death that he harbored more and more as he aged gave him especial reason to focus on notions of the afterlife. He even considered the ministry as a vocation before settling on his calling to “literature, of a low order” (Powers, 2006, p. 156). In actuality, much like his political stances, his religious skepticism rarely gained much apparent traction beyond speculative writing. But the speculation was always quite to the point and usually adamantly opposed to the notions of spirituality with which the Gilded Age surrounded its audiences (Twain, 1995). His religious commentary even blended with his political thoughts. He disliked the Christian undercurrents that had fed propaganda for the Civil War and reviled them in retrospect when asked to commentate on the war’s mythic legacy for later generations. In his “To the Person Sitting in Darkness”, Twain



cautioned that “Wouldn’t it be prudent to get our Civilization-tools together, and see how much stock is left on hand in the way of Glass Beads and Theology, and Maxim Guns and Hymn Books, and Trade Gin and torches of Progress and Enlightenment” (Lears, 2009, p. 218). Clearly his anti-Christianity was entwined with his anti-imperialism in a spirit of general damning-the-man protest against the spirit of the Gilded Age.

### **The Importance of Humor**

Twain tended to write off humorous literature as “low” or unworthy of the same laud as more serious stuff, and he was not alone in his age (or this one) for having this stance. But clearly there was something in the culture of the day that needed or wanted humor – otherwise Twain would not have skyrocketed to international popularity and then maintained his position as a premier American man of letters. As such, this section of our analysis will discuss the nature of funny literature as something that might have the potential to stick in the minds of its audience after it has outlasted its veneer of throwaway entertainment.

#### *Mark Twain’s Funny Contemporaries*

The fact that Twain rose to the prominence that he enjoyed is even more remarkable for the fact that he was not remotely alone in the comedy scene of his redefined America. Aside from the significant population of newspaper humorists alluded to above, some funny men (and women) travelled in the same lecture circuits as Twain and similarly published funny novels and short stories. In fact, he was once considered part of a trio of funny personages memorialized in a photograph titled “The American Humorists.” Although he never worked in cahoots with his alleged counterparts, Petroleum V. Nasby and Josh Billings, all three stemmed from the same progenitor, Artemus Ward, and all three were widely popular presenters. But Nasby and Billings only found transient success and their careers soon fizzled out, seemingly reifying the lack of

lasting punch that funny material could have. Twain, on the other hand, continued to follow the trajectory of celebrity, and continued to watch other supposed colleagues end their careers. “I have had for company seventy-eight other American humorists,” he once noted. “Each and every one of the seventy-eight rose in my time, became conspicuous and popular, and by and by vanished” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 122). Clearly not all funniness was equally important in the eyes of the public.

The trend toward transient humorists, though, was not a universal law, so their despair was perhaps not the direct result of the comedy and humor of their material. Some funny writers and lecturers of Twain’s time did manage to maintain their cultural traction during their lives and throughout later generations. Bret Harte, for example, also came of age as a humorist in San Francisco and even collaborated with Twain on the play *Ah Sin* based on Harte’s popular poem about that “Heathen Chinee.” Twain initially credited Harte for helping him preen his stage presence and often felt competitive with his success. In the end the two humorists were separated by irreconcilable (even tempestuous) differences and Harte eventually became a diplomat while Twain stuck to writing. But Harte remained a popular figure in the American mythos for his generation (Fleischman, 2008; Kaplan, 1966).

Twain is not the only funny man of his generation that we remember today. Harte was one of a handful of the day’s preeminent funny figures who are still popular. Charles Dickens was a great influence on American culture during the Gilded Age, and even on Twain himself, although Twain confessed that although Dickens published some funny works like the *Pickwick Papers* to great acclaim, Twain found many of his passages ornamental and dull. He was also a contemporary of Walt Whitman, a literary figure notable for spurning the trappings of society at the same time that Twain was acclimating to them (Kaplan, 1966). Ambrose Bierce (another

famously blasphemous humorist) finalized his legacy in American funny literature around the time of Twain's later writings with the publication of *The Devil's Dictionary*, which provided an intentionally sophisticated counterpoint to the kind of folk humor that made Twain famous – written for “enlightened souls who prefer dry wins to sweet, sense to sentiment, wit to humor and clean English to slang” (Bierce, 1993, Preface). Recent scholarship in feminine humor has even begun to recall the former prominence of satire and other funny works by women like Marietta Holley, whose fame was tantamount to Twain's; her popularity came from lampooning the sentimental literature directed at the young ladies of the Gilded Age (Walker, 1998).

The contemporary with perhaps the most lasting effect on Twain's work was of course his mentor, Artemus Ward. Powers (2006) describes this early fixture of the American funny lecture circuit as “foppish, merry, tubercular, doomed” – and all of these adjectives certainly play a role in Ward's life. He too met Twain in San Francisco, but unlike Bret Harte he was already an established name in his field. Ward also got his start in the newspaper business and began his lecture career after a stint editing *Vanity Fair*. He was famous for his performance persona, which spurned sophistication and levelled with the ordinariness of most of his audience members. To that effect Ward also satirized the somber side of literary culture, lambasting figures like Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Mark Twain began meeting success with his presentations of his debut work, the “Jumping Frog” story, his style of delivery was often compared to Ward's – it was hard to escape the comparison, since many successful lecturers of the day owed a debt to Ward's genre-defining work (Kaplan, 1966). Thus, it would seem that the idea of humor-that-mattered had its genesis a little before Twain's literary genius entered the arena. But it was Twain's felicity with the genre, his relentless efforts toward bettering himself in the eyes of both the literary elite and the public at large, and his channeling of Ward's notions of

persona-crafting to create a public figure that remained a fixture on both the page and the stage – and even everyday life.

*“Mark Twain” as a Celebrity Persona*

Although he was not the only comedian who adopted a carefully crafted public face (indeed, he was following directly in the footsteps of Artemus Ward in doing so), Sam Clemens’s decision to become Mark Twain gave his celebrity an accessible face that was wildly popular among his audiences. In the beginning of his career the Mark Twain persona gave Clemens some anonymity and some leeway to adopt character traits that may or may not have been his own, but could be expressed in openly reprehensible ways for the funny enjoyment of his readers. Later in life as Clemens lost most of his immediate family members, adopted his white-suited conspicuousness, and generally reveled in his notoriety, the Mark Twain character became less distinguishable from Sam’s private life. The point, however, is that despite this evolution of his public/private self-dichotomy, Twain created an appealing guise that made his humor all the more outrageous and more memorable. Powers (2006) describes it as “the most recognized alias in world literature, if not the history of aliases, and the most analyzed” (p. 118). Clemens eventually even had the name trademarked.

Clemens famously adopted the name “Mark Twain” from a measure of depth commonly heard on steamboats, the decks of which he spent much of his young adulthood inhabiting. Kaplan (1966) describes the evolution of the Twain character in Clemens’s days as a newspaper writer for the *Alta California*:

‘Mark Twain’ was accompanied by a fictitious character named Brown, a comic *Doppelgänger*. ‘Mark Twain’ was high-minded, something of a gentleman, bookish, eager to learn, refined. ‘Brown’ was the savage American: he was in turn gullible and outraged, he drank a lot and he washed a little, he was impatient with what he could not understand, he was raucous and derisive, his idiom was the slang that [Clemens’s more conservative friends] abhorred, and he was no gentleman. ‘Brown’ was a mouthpiece for

low vulgarisms, for comments on dirt and smells, for chauvanisms and solecisms that would have been out of character for the original Mark Twain (p. 73).

Later, however, the Twain character became less calculated and more of an unpredictable, Bakhtinian sort of hero. Clemens sometimes observed that Twain functioned independently of his (good?) intentions, and his contemporaries observed that Clemens could not be held responsible for Twain (Powers, 2006). Some critics have credited the more liberated Twain figure as a force that “helped free [Clemens] from his temptations toward bourgeois respectability and blandness—and, as bereavements piled up in his life, as a means of protecting his sanity” (p. 118-9). The full-fledged Twain is alternatively conceived in authorial persona literature as a stopgap and a conduit for Clemens’s baser instincts. He is an excuse to be an imposter, an identity that can free itself of identity (Michelson, 1995). One is reminded of Tom Sawyer’s introduction of himself to Becky Thatcher in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: “[Thomas Sawyer] is the name they lick me by. I’m Tom when I’m good. You call me Tom, will you?” (Twain, 1998, p. 39).

Occasionally, though, Mark Twain’s celebrity sent Sam Clemens scrambling to regain the anonymity the character was designed to protect. He considered publishing anonymously at times, and when he travelled he referred to himself by a small array of secondary pseudonyms. Although he poked fun at his own celebrity and enjoyed the perks it brought him and his family, throughout his career Clemens found it more and more difficult to escape the lasting sensation of Twain’s brand of humor, so great was the fervor it inspired in his audience. By 1884 Twain had been nominated as one of forty American “immortals” recognized by the *Critic*. To date his fame has eclipsed that of some of the other names on the list, including his rival Bret Harte (Kaplan, 1966). By the end of his career he considered himself well on the way to becoming the “most conspicuous person on the planet” (p. 453). And as well he should have – Twain’s celebrity was

international, spanning the United States, Europe, and parts of the East as well. His combination of humor and gravity, wit and irreverence was overwhelmingly appealing to millions of enthralled observers.

### **The Climate for Humor Writing**

Although Twain was eventually a huge success, he had to fight for his recognition amid the clamor of the growing entertainment scene. His compunctions about committing himself to the profession of humor writing discussed above were not simply the product of a negative self-image (although Clemens did occasionally display a tendency to kick himself when he was down). The literary world was snobbish about humor writing that entertained the masses, asserting that it simply carried no artistic merit or no grit. Funniness was often associated with vulgarity – rightly, in some cases, but even Twain’s less outrageous contemporary Ambrose Bierce had to pepper his work with high-minded literary excerpts to boost his critical appeal (Bierce, 1993). Twain, given his more folksy approach, spent his early career being continually peppered with derision that there was nothing of substance to a writer who is simply funny. He dreaded being called a “mere buffoon” and became highly sensitive – perhaps to a fault – about his public image, developing “a monomania that only grew more violent with age” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 249). Even Clemens’s own beloved daughter Susy bemoaned his career as a funny man in her childhood biography of her famous father. “She knew he was a great man,” of course, “but she was not at all sure a humorist was any better than a clown, and more and more she wanted him to be a great man in some other way” (p. 363). It is likely that Susy picked up these sentiments in part from press about Twain and in part from Twain’s own fraught conception of himself. Her ideas ring true with the literary criticism of the times, though, and their resonance illustrates the spirit of the criticism haunting the trajectory of Twain’s career.

But Twain remained for the most part undaunted, and eventually won out with a reputation as both a popular humorist and a man of great literary talent. His success correlates with a shift that was happening in Gilded Age popular culture surrounding funniness – a move toward a “New Humor.” Folk humor was falling out of fashion at the time, especially that funniness of the West that was marked by violence and rambling tall tales told during casual interpersonal encounters. The brand of entertainment that made Twain his name, in short, began to fall out of favor. In its place arose something more burlesque and visual, a funniness that lay in exaggeration and spectacle such as one might find in the vaudeville shows that became popular with the rise of entertainment culture. This New Humor was “a brazenly burlesque style dominated by fat women in evenings gowns and skinny men in baggy pants, full of pratfalls and double entendres” and a “carnival celebration of bodily excess” that had to be experienced more than retold. The age of reform leaked into Gilded Age funniness, making social issues fodder for jokes as well as silly situational comedy. While debates over women’s suffrage raged in political arenas, for example, female comedians flourished on the vaudeville stage lampooning changing feminine ideals and engaging in the same kinds of physical humor as their male counterparts. Humor powerfully lent itself to subversive performances (even in the institution of the minstrel show), making it an ideal mouthpiece for underrepresented populations who could enjoy a new spotlight in the public sphere (Lears, 2009). Because the New Humor was so attention-grabbing and popular it had the power to influence conversations in a wide variety of sectors. Despite its reputation as an art without traction, funniness expressed through a variety of media carried a great deal of weight in the way Americans viewed themselves and their times – not “mere” humor, but influential literature.

## Everyday Life and the Funny

If humor had all this great capacity to influence the masses, what impact might it have on them beyond their initial experience of amusement? Might the importance of the content that undergirded the structure of the jokes remain in the minds of readers and viewers even after laughing had eased their tension toward its gravity? In short, did Gilded Age satire like Twain's material actually scorch the earth? In case Twain's happy notoriety is itself not enough evidence to support this claim, we turn to other expressions of his effect on the daily lives of his fans.

### *Twain's Satire*

Examples of satire of sources of popular authority abound in Twain's writings, with *The Gilded Age* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offering a smattering of examples that comprise only the tip of the iceberg of scathing critique. Twain also plied his funny criticisms in oral venues, making waves more than once for his statements on the lecture circuit and even during special-event speeches. His celebrity gave him a bully pulpit so that his statements attracted attention. Being criticized by Mark Twain, therefore, meant being criticized in the public eye to a growing and devoted audience. Contemporary criticism singled out Twain in particular among other humorists (including Artemus Ward) for promulgating a breed of satire that maintained a depth beyond that of throwaway farce. Twain's humor, said William Dean Howells in 1882, belied a sense of morality and justice and held its objects to a high standard, making its ridicule a policing rhetoric act rather than a simple spoof (Powers, 2006). But Clemens was a hotheaded man, which occasionally disrupted Twain's satirical output. Even though he recognized the need for satirical criticism to address "the wash of today," he found he could not write in this vein of humor when he was truly and deeply outraged; when his anger



was too fervent, Twain lacked the ““calm judicial good humor”” that enables the humorist’s critical distance (Kaplan, 1966, p. 192).

Of course, some of Twain’s criticism was funny without being truly satiric and attacking the problematic aspects of some power structure. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, for example, although funny and full of commentary about Arthurian times as well as the Gilded Age, was not satire, and Twain fervently denied it was such. Rather than any insult, he said, he only intended contrast between two eras that provided a funny juxtaposition for each other. Michelson (1995) generally cautions us away from assuming that Twain’s work always has high-minded motives; sometimes Twain simply creates a funny disruption without restoring any sense of preferable order. He subverts his ostensible subversion, in other words. Even *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, usually lauded as Twain’s pinnacle of cultural commentary, may not be as scathing a denouncement of racism as it is often reputed to be. Twain himself observes at the outset of the text that “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (Twain, 1994, Notice). Granted, the novel does offer some scorching spoofs of Southern culture written from Twain’s desk in his well-appointed Hartford, Connecticut billiards room. But the novel also does not offer any stable line of criticism that belies some moral imperative in a different direction, as decisive satire should. Again, Twain was not a constant satirist for all his personal frustration with various iterations of the status quo.

Other Twain works, however, that seem to be merely incongruous funniness are in fact well-hidden satire. Some critics argue that books like *Tom Sawyer* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* that appear to celebrate the American frontier are actually meant to criticize it as Twain turned his back on his boyhood roots and assumed the pose of the society gentleman (Kaplan, 1966).

Consider his description of Tom Sawyer's small-town Aunt Polly and her supposedly cutting-edge consumer habits:

She was one of those people who are infatuated with patent medicines and all newfangled methods of producing health or mending it. She was an inveterate experimenter in these things. When something fresh in this line came out she was in a fever, right away, to try it; not on herself, for she was never ailing, but on anybody else that came handy. She was a subscriber for all the "health" periodicals and phrenological frauds; and the solemn ignorance they were inflated with was breath to her nostrils....She was as simple-hearted and honest as they day was long, and so she was an easy victim" (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 1998, p. 66).

There is a difference between irreverence and satire, and although Twain's dabbling in both is not always what it seems, there are moments where his work so directly attacks everyday life that the burn cannot be ignored.

Some of Twain's most scathing criticisms were actually delivered orally and are not as widely known as his written literary achievements. One of these great commentaries occurred in 1879 at the Palmer House hotel in Chicago at a banquet to honor Union general and former President of the United States Ulysses S. Grant. Freshly returned from a reinvigorating trip abroad after his presidency, Grant had spent some time with Clemens and respected his ability to keep the interest of a crowd; Clemens, in turn, respected Grant as a national hero despite having fought for the Confederacy in his youth. When he was informed that he would be the last speaker at the event (the fifteenth, in point of fact), Twain was thrilled. He did not speak until after two o'clock in the morning, and when he rose to address the (probably exhausted) audience he was met with a room full of Civil War veterans who had just spent an entire evening getting their patriotic dander up about the legacy of the conflict and the greatness of the nation it had helped found. Grant was a powerful link the U.S.'s transition from the post-bellum period to the Gilded Age and he packed serious symbolic punch in that vein. It was in the midst of all this prolonged gravity and import that our American humorist rose and began his remarks. His assignment was

simply to end the event with everyone's attention intact. In that light, he raised his glass and proposed a toast: to

‘The babies—as they comfort us in our sorrows, let us not forget them in our festivities.... When the toast gets down to the babies we stand on common ground’ (Kaplan, 1966, p. 261).

He proceeded with a lively narrative detailing how even the most stalwart soldier who had faced the horrors of mortal battlefield peril could be brought to his knees by the demands of taking care of an infant: “...when he clawed at your whiskers, and pulled your hair, and twisted your nose, you had to take it.” He even added a hilarious image of the illustrious Ulysses S. Grant himself as a baby in a cradle with all of powers of strategy preoccupied by the insurmountable task of getting his big toe in his mouth – and given his famed military success, Twain concluded, “there are mighty few who will doubt that he *succeeded*” (Powers, 2006, p. 430, emphasis in the original). He elicited some gasps from the audience for his audacity to acknowledge that Grant had, like everyone, once been an unruly infant. But his last line brought the house down. To be clear, Twain did not here satirize the great General-turned-President; he simply humanized and then celebrated the man. But that humanization was a tool toward satirizing another lofty institution: the nationalistic banquet speech. Instead of turning his vim on the object of the banquet, Twain directed himself toward the nature of the event itself and in so doing made a great impact on the real-life experience everyone in attendance.

The fact that Twain did not directly criticize Grant may have had motivations beyond his hero-worship of the former Union general. Two years earlier, Twain had unknowingly begun the institution of the celebrity roast and was met with some public chagrin and his own immense embarrassment – so great that his departure abroad shortly thereafter was interpreted by some contemporaries as a way for him to escape his shame. The speech in question occurred in Boston

at the seventieth birthday celebration of poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier. His audience included such eminent personages as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow as well as Whittier – an august body whose celebrity lay in the realms of serious literary greatness to which Twain so fervently aspired. When he rose to speak, Twain offered a farcical narrative rife with the folksy Western humor that was a staple of his appearances on the lecture circuit in an intentional contrast with the talent he was addressing. His tale was of a simple Gold Rush-era miner who finds himself the unwilling host of three horrible houseguests – Emerson, Holmes, and Longfellow themselves. As Michelson (1995) summarizes the speech, “the gag” is that “these hard-drinking ruffians are clumsy frauds who could dupe no one except each other, and this isolated fool” (p. 19). Twain actually meant to lampoon himself as much as the celebrities in the audience – at the end of the speech the miner is supposed to turn to his newest visitor, Mark Twain, and inquire pointedly whether he is an imposter such as they. But as Twain’s roast-by-another-name progressed he found himself faced with a puzzled Longfellow, a distracted Holmes, and a completely stoic (perhaps senile) Emerson rather than the warm laughter he had expected for satirizing them (Kaplan, 1966). His confidence completely deflated, and the final, levelling self-criticism at the end of the story came out a barely audible mumble. His aim to put himself on the level of these literary stars – or bring them down to his own plane – had failed, and all that had happened was a dose of apparently mean-spirited criticism. In the wake of the speech Twain polished off apology letters to the objects of his ridicule – some of whom were more offended than others. “I shall never be as dead again as I was then,” he confesses in his autobiographical dictations. “I shall never be as miserable again as I was then....I shall never be as wretched again as I was then....It was an atmosphere that would freeze anything” (Twain, 2010, p. 266).

Later in life, though, with the potential damage to his reputation now a distant memory and the interpersonal embarrassment he felt among his learned colleagues somewhat dimmed, Twain returned to his address and found himself rather proud of the satire he had purveyed.

Now then, I take the speech up and examine it....I have read it twice, and unless I am an idiot, it hasn't a single defect in it from the first word to the last. It is just as good as good can be. It is smart; it is saturated with humor. There isn't a suggestion of coarseness or vulgarity in it anywhere. What could have been the matter with that house? It is amazing, it is incredible, that they didn't shout with laughter, and those deities the loudest of them all (Twain, 2010, p. 267).

We can all rest easier knowing that Twain eventually regained his sense of self-satisfaction. We can also recognize that this incident, whatever its aftertaste, is an excellent example of direct attack on established power – a true incident of satire. In this case, as well as many others, Twain had a direct impact on the structure of the world around him simply by being funny and entertaining.

### *Twain's Depression*

The bitter shame Twain felt immediately after his performance at the Whittier birthday celebration was a symptom of another practical real-world impact of Twain's humor – the great gravity that being a funny man brought to Clemens's own self-concept. Throughout his career (and much like James Thurber after him, as well as many other people who make their living writing funny material), Clemens was prone to periodic bouts of depression and low self-esteem. The pressure he felt to underline his jokes with seriousness took its toll as the darker side of the subjects he spoofed stuck with him. Examinations of Twain's psyche are diverse (and often performed through analysis of his writings rather than his behavior), but the one common denominator they share is that he did not escape the practical impacts his humor had on the world around him.

Clemens described himself as a man subject to “‘periodical and sudden changes of mood...from deep melancholy to half-insane tempests and cyclones of humor’” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 138). Although it remains something of a chicken/egg conundrum to decide whether this was his natural disposition or whether it was wrought by the pressure he felt to be funny, there is no reason why both theories can’t be true to an extent, or even that one of the circumstances might feed into the other. His “deep melancholy” could be intense indeed and was often marked by a strong sense of guilt or shame. These depressions often found their way into his writing, which could be quite self-deprecating at times. Although these stabs at himself can be understood as an attempt to joke away his faults, they may also be an exercise in self-punishment in a very public venue – a deliberate interaction between humor and very personal seriousness. A contemporary critique of his works by Sam Webster observes that it may have been for the better that these literary purges did not succeed in improving Clemens’s temperament: “If he had worked too hard to improve [his character] he probably would have lost his humor. You never read about a saint who had much humor” (Powers, 2006, p. 520). Remarkably, Twain once considered using humor quite intentionally as a method of self-interrogation and occasionally jotted ideas in his notebooks about a piece in which Samuel Clemens interviews Mark Twain. Although the “interview” never came to fruition, it did reveal that not only was Clemens contemplative about the differences between his public persona and his private personality, he was periodically in the mood to turn one on the other in an intensely critical setting.

Later in life, with the successive deaths of his family members that mirrored those experienced by many members of his generation, Clemens became quite preoccupied with the idea of dying and even began to romanticize it. His initial brush with the parting of a loved one was the death of his baby son Langdon, which left him with a sense of jealousy for the child’s

escape and pity for those who had to remain on earth behind him. He later observed on multiple occasions that he saw “advantages” or “joy” in the state of being dead (Kaplan, 1966, p. 247). His despair and preoccupation with death eventually made him wax philosophical about the nature of life – he found the human race entirely selfish, obsessed with power, and silly with the pursuit of happiness. Michelson (1995) cautions us to be wary of painting Twain as an American Job whose personal tragedies overwhelmed him and leaked into his writings. But given the comedian’s need to let himself go and write in fragments as they come to him so that they may be innovative enough to be funny, there seems to be little doubt that there is some stream of Clemens’s consciousness at work in Twain’s output. In fact, as Michelson continues, “I have proposed that Mark Twain’s turmoil provides part of the pleasure of his writing, and part of his legacy to America, as a culture still embroiled in defining itself as something undefinable” (p. 175). The “nightmare tales” Twain wrote toward the end of his career, including “The Great Dark,” “Which Was the Dream?” and “The Mysterious Stranger” seem to be staunch examples of unabridged turmoil. The latter story in particular is full of darkness, elevation of death, and critical speculation about the failings of humans:

For a million years the race has gone on monotonously propagating itself and monotonously reperforming this dull nonsense – to what end? No wisdom can guess! Who gets a profit out of it? Nobody but a parcel of usurping little monarchs and nobilities who despise you; would feel defiled if you touched them; would shut the door in your face if you proposed to call; whom you slave for, fight for, die for, and are not ashamed of it but proud.... (Twain, 2005, p. 794).

Although there is nothing particularly funny about “The Mysterious Stranger,” we should observe that it was written toward the end of Twain’s life, after funniness and hard living had made him perhaps over-contemplative. The spirit of the analysis, though, is the same bent that drove the funny observations that made Twain’s career. Being funny, in short, was an avenue for him to dwell upon and critique the less lighthearted aspects of himself and his America.

## **The Resonance of Twain's Funniness**

So far, we have established what sorts of people comprised Twain's audience and how his life and work interacted with their ideologies. We have also enjoyed a romp through the climate for humor during the Gilded Age, highlighting not only its influence but also its importance. Establishing this precedent brings us, then, to the meat of our analysis of Twain's American-ness in his town time and the implications of that context for current readings of his work. To position Twain in his own time, we will first discuss what makes his life and his writing so resonant for the Gilded Age. We will then move on to address his reception with modern audiences: What are the hangups preventing a breed of humor that was so well-rooted in a culture that existed over a century ago from speaking to readers today? In turn, however, how has time given us the ability to appreciate Twain differently than his contemporaries could?

### **Clemens as a Gilded Man**

The fact that the popular name for the era in which Twain lived – “The Gilded Age” - was invented by Twain himself in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner should speak to his ability to resonate with his target public. In their popular novel of the same name, Twain and Warner follow a protagonist named Colonel Sellers who peddles in investment scams and a master manipulator of appearances. Credit, they observe satirically, is “The foundation of modern society” and lampoon the economic and social system that was borne in its wake (Lears, 2009, 53). The businessman was indeed the great symbol of the times, and shrewd manipulation was one of the prerequisites for his greatness (Wiebe, 1967). Colonel Sellers was something like many of the great business leaders and philanthropists of the day, and Twain was in practice something like Colonel Sellers (although the character was loosely based on a distant cousin of Twain's James Lampton), right down to the character's burlesque spirit and occasionally even



his business acumen. In short, some of Twain's resonance may have stemmed from Clemens's position as a Gilded Age man extraordinaire. He did critique the times, of course. But don't forget Twain's penchant for self-deprecation in his writings. Kaplan (1966) notes that "Mark Twain's disgust with his times was partly the index of his involvement in them....He could observe in himself the same wild speculative mania he saw all about him" (p. 179). He was guilty of many of the faults he lambasted as well as enabled by so many of the social conditions that colored the lives of his generation, so his self-reflection had much broader implications than his own psyche.

Like many of his middle-class readers, Sam Clemens had risen from the anonymous ranks of the working classes. Granted, Clemens's parents were not considered poor; his father John was a sometime inventor, investor, and leader in his small Missouri town and the family owned some land back East. John was not always the best custodian of the family funds, though, and when he died Sam and his siblings eventually had to find work (Fleischman, 2008). Although not many of his contemporaries were able to catapult themselves into the gentry by marrying money like he did, they did share a common vehicle for their upward mobility: The newspaper business.

Twain describes his initial experience as a printer's apprentice in his autobiographical dictations:

...I was taken from school at once, upon my father's death, and placed in the office of the Hannibal *Courier*, as printer's apprentice, and Mr. Ament, the editor and proprietor of the paper, allowed me the usual emolument of the office of apprentice—that is to say board and clothes, but no money (Twain, 2010, p. 455).

Eventually Clemens was removed from the *Courier* office by his older brother Orion, himself a printer, and as time passed began marketing his abilities to several small newspapers and climbing the ranks among their writers thanks especially to the funny material at his command.

His journey brought him out to the mining communities of Nevada and then to California, and it was there, as a journalist in San Francisco, that he began to publish in earnest as a writer of literature as well as news. He was very much a part of the journalist culture – so much so while writing for the Territorial Enterprise in Virginia City, Nevada he once challenged the editor of a rival paper to a duel. Fortunately for posterity the conflict was cancelled by a new law that made dueling illegal – and also to our good fortune, that law ran both Clemens and his opponent out of town and into San Francisco, where his career began in earnest (Fleischman, 2008). Entering the newspaper profession thus was to Clemens’s benefit in its opportunity to elevate his station in life, and he was not alone in his fortune. Printing afforded many young men at the time a chance for power over their own destinies, respect for their labor, and the intellect that came with easy literacy (Michelson, 1995). Twain, in short, began his career in a fashion much like many members of his readership.

Clemens’s similarities with the other men of his generation didn’t end when he married into the East Coast aristocracy. Like his father, he was a sometime inventor in an emerging culture of intellectual property – he patented an “Improvement in Adjustable and Detachable Straps for Garments,” the famous “Mark Twain’s Self-Pasting Scrapbook,” and a few other gadgets as well as a board game (Kaplan, 1966, p. 170). During his intermittent depressions, some of the heaviest burdens laying on Twain were his business duties rather than his literary responsibilities – while literature could be funny and escapist even for its author, business was always serious. Like many of his colleagues, Clemens was a victim of the economic recession or depression of the years between 1873 and 1897. Also like many of his colleagues, he lost a great deal of his fortune investing in humbug new technologies: in Clemens’s particular case, he sank most of his money into James W. Paige’s ““mechanical marvel”” typesetting machine, a

development which piqued Clemens's interest as a former newspaper man and would have been a great revolution in the industry had it ever actually worked. This and other developments in industrial technology left those who came of age in Gilded times watching their past fall irretrievably into the history books. What nostalgia there is in Twain's Hannibal-esque narratives might be attributed to the days before locomotive travel and Boss politics. Although Twain lived a decade into the twentieth century, he never felt any identification with it. His time was the transition between frontier and urban America – a time in which his writings remained immersed.

William Dean Howells speculated after Twain's death that his species of irreverent humor (rather than more concerted pretensions to literary greatness) might have helped America realize its personality in ways that more serious analyses ever could (Powers, 2006). Kaplan (1966) finds a reciprocal relationship between the man and his times, arguing that much like the Gilded Age could not have found itself without Twain, he similarly could not have found himself without the Gilded Age:

Clemens was a child of the Gilded Age. At no earlier time in American would he have found conditions so favorable for his talent to flower and be richly rewarded. Just as the subscription publishing system, long committed to works of piety, patriotism, and history, welcomed a humorous writer, now the lyceum circuit long committed to cultural and educational discourse, welcomed a humorous lecturer (p. 89).

Thus was Twain a man specifically suited for his times – and thus were the times suited to Twain. There is something uniquely American about him, as those who sing his praises often intone; but it is a specific, Gilded kind of America. Twain was American at a time when America was forging a national identity in the wake of complete schism. He became popular at a time in U.S. history when becoming a cultural mainstay was possible and influential – and he did it in part by simply being a man of his age.

## **Twain the Popular Humorist**

Because of his resonance – both personal and literary – Twain was indeed immensely well-followed during his own time. His debut book, *The Innocents Abroad*, was an immediate bestseller (Fleischman, 2008). He was called many flattering things in the popular press, including ““the people’s author ”” and ““first among American humorists”” (Kaplan, 1966, p. 61, 116). Although he repudiated business moguls in *The Gilded Age*, he counted such celebrities among his close friends later in life. His acclaim transcended international borders, and he achieved special acclaim in the centuries-old humor establishment in England. His books were perused by Bismarck, the Czarina of Russia, and the President of Chile. The people of India placed him alongside George Washington in their list of commonly known Americans. Of course, public adoration did little to heighten his increasingly negative self-image—although he did continue to seek popular attention until the end of his life (Fleischman, 2008). But even after 1900, when Twain was at his most disenchanted, his popularity continued to soar (Kaplan, 1966). He may well have been “the nation’s first rock star” (Powers, 2006, p. 164). Washington Irving may have been the father of American humor (Haweis, 1998), but Twain took the show on the road and made the literate middle class his own. Blair (1998) observes that American humor – humor that was tied to the nation by culture, not just by geography – did not truly emerge until the 1830s, which happens to have been the decade that Sam Clemens was born. The genre was thus in its infancy when he rose to celebrity and he was able to make himself a valuable progenitor.

## **Twain’s Hiccups Today**

So sure, Twain was popular in his time – and America has kept his name and his legacy great ever since. But since he was such a man of his times, can Twain really resonate the same

way today that he did in the Gilded Age? Can modern audiences, to be blunt, really get it? There are, of course, some aspects of the universal human condition in his writing that we can all relate to – love, jealousy, money, etc. On the other hand, modern readers may be hard pressed to truly relate to some of Twain’s message – or at least not in the way he intended. We will flesh out two of those problematic areas here: Twain’s uses of folk humor and Twain’s very real racist undertones.

### **Folk Humor**

Twain, as we have established, got his start on the wings of folksy frontier humor of the kind he heard and created living in Missouri, Nevada, and California before he made his big literary break. His writing – particularly his early stuff - is rife with examples of the genre. For example, Chapter Three of *The Innocents Abroad*, “Baker’s Blue-Jay Yarn,” amounts to a written preservation of an oral animal story, with the narrative offering quips like ““A jay hasn’t got any more principle than a Congressman”” (Powers, 2006, p. 422). Twain was not unique in his use of animal tales – his contemporary Joel Chandler Harris was more famous for it than Twain was. But Twain is notable for riding out the genre as its success ebbed along with the wild frontier and rural common sense with which it had flourished. Since he himself grew disenchanted with it, we can only assume that today’s readers who lack any of its original context cannot hope to grasp its nuances – at least not without a lot of extra reading, an enterprise during which the unexpectedness which bears the funniness of these tales cannot hope to survive.

Take Twain’s character Captain Stormfield, a man who famously visits heaven (in “Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven”) and finds himself occasionally critical of the place. Like the salty old sailor he is, Stormfield observes that “When I had been in heaven some time I

begun to feel restless, the same as I used to on earth when I had been ashore a month....” (Twain, 1995, p. 179). This personage was based off of Captain Ned Wakeman, a real-life folk hero of the day whom Clemens had enjoyed the good fortune to meet during his sea journeys:

Bearded and big-bellied, he was tattooed from head to foot – with the Goddess of Liberty holding the Stars and Stripes, a clipper ship under full sail, Christ on the Cross, and an assortment of Masonic devices. Wakeman was a blasphemer of remarkable vividness, something of an eccentric theologian, and above all a teller of stories about rats as big and lean as greyhounds, about snakes as long as a ship’s mainmast was high, and about the Monkey Islands, where his first mate counted ninety-seven million monkeys before his pencils wore out and his arm became paralyzed with ciphering (Kaplan, 1966, p. 5).

Now denizens of Twain’s day were used to hearing of such personages as licentious storytelling sea captains and read “Stormfield” (the last of Twain’s stories published during his lifetime) with a context toward humorous caricature and even admiration. Today’s audiences, however, may find distaste with a man who appears to be dissatisfied with the Christian vision of heaven - the inconsistencies of which Twain does not hesitate to lampoon:

When I found myself perched on a cloud with a million other people, I never felt so good in my life....I gave my palm branch a wave or two, for luck, and then I tautened up my harp-strings and struck in. Well, Peters, you can’t imagine anything like the row we made. It was grand to listen to, and made a body thrill all over, but there was considerable many tunes going at once, and that was a drawback to the harmony, you understand; and then there was a lot of Injun tribes and they kept up such another war-whooping that they kind of took the tuck out of the music. By and by I quit performing, and judged I’d take a rest (Twain, 1995, p. 157).

Furthermore, the story makes several references to celebrities of the day whose stars have waned now, making the political dynamics of heaven harder to grasp for some readers. More importantly, though, the folk humor involved may simply have lost its folk.

More troubling still, considering the reverence that modern Twain fans hold for *The Adventures of Tom Sayer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as important texts in the author’s cannon, is our easy ability to miss Huck Finn’s trappings as a stock folk character rather than a progressive individual who revolts against racist institutions and symbolizes Twain’s flight from

the biological racial superiority theories of his day (which, as you will see immediately below, was very far from the case). A closer reader will notice, of course, that even throughout his inner conflict in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* about turning in his runaway slave friend Jim he never explicitly condemns the institution of slavery. He actually sticks with the values of Southern culture when he decides that he will go to hell for what he sees as the sin of not returning stolen property (Walker, 1998). Aporia about racism aside, Michelson (1995) delves into the corpus of Twain's writings about Huck and finds not a political innocent trying to do the right thing but a bumbling buffoon straight out of the folk culture of the time:

Unfortunately for us, the Mark Twain publications and papers give us more of Huck as an ignoramus, or fool, or ordinary boy – which is to say as a morally incomplete or uncoalesced man – than they do Huck as the achieved moralist, Huck the humanist rebel, or any other Huck celebrated in classrooms and journals for much of the twentieth century (p. 100).

Throughout most of his vignettes, Huck is painted as a happy follower rather than a moral leader. In fact, one of his ultimate decisions about morality is that he will always do ““whichever come handiest at the time”” when ethical questions arise (p. 136). In short, Huck is no hero. He is a younger version of his often-vilified bum of a father and shows a great aversion to any attempt to make him otherwise. Huck is more common than uncommon.

The most infamous instance of Twain's folk humor, one that was considered riotously funny in its time but fails to rub audiences the same way today, is his first famous work, “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” The story was not actually Twain's original work; he had heard the story in and around the gold rush mining camps where he worked as a newspaper reporter. It was so influential after Twain's rendition of it was published, though, that it became famous in the East as well as the West. (The story was not the instant bestseller that Twain had hoped for – but it did make his name famous, which was a solid start to his literary

career [Kaplan, 1966]). The story was so famous that Michelson (1995) notes that “for years after [the story’s] first appearance, an untitled frog picture on handbills was advertisement enough for a Mark Twain stage show” (p. 25). As he analyzes the story, Michelson finds that the story is full of Twain’s felicity with rustic dialects related in a way that makes them easily readable and understandable. It is also marked by characters that Western miners and those who were familiar with their place in popular culture could easily recognize – including a rambling narrator who sees the conclusion of one story as an excuse to begin another cracker-barrel yarn (Walker, 1995). But although more current readers are familiar with the stereotypical rustic old miner (much as they are aware that sea captains like Ned Wakeman once existed), they are unlikely to have enough intimate knowledge of such characters to appreciate the gamboling prose of the venerable Simon Wheeler. Powers (2006) makes this explicit in his Twain biography:

The humor of ‘The Jumping Frog’ sometimes eludes contemporary readers. Those lucky enough to hear it declaimed by an accomplished reader are more likely to enjoy it in the way of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans who recognized it in a familiar American archetype; the deadpan vernacular narrator....The vernacular that the serenely innocent Simon Wheeler uses is that called ‘Pike County’—the same evocative Missouri regional dialect that Mark Twain would later put to transcendent use in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” (p. 155).

If the dialect is key to the story’s humor and modern readers cannot appreciate the context in which contemporary ones would have heard this sort of language, the story can never hope to be funny in its original way – or even funny at all, for especially distant adventurers in its pages. Modern readers may actually struggle to understand phrases like “Well, thish-yer Smiley had a yaller one-eyed cow that didn’t have no tail, only just a short stump like a bannanner” (Twain, 2005, p. 7). As such, although they may appreciate the story’s literary devices at a critical level, these readers may miss appreciating it through laughter.



## Racism

Twain is often venerated in the cannon of American writers as a man who stood up for the plight of black people in the wake of the Civil War and the era of biological racism. The scene in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Huck decides not to turn in runaway slave Nigger Jim is usually cited as a hugely progressive event in the history of American letters. Fortunately for his legacy but unfortunately for a full picture of the man, Twain's lack of real multiculturalism is often just as whitewashed as Tom Sawyer's fence. All history is revisionist history, of course, but Twain's common-knowledge biography in particular tends to leave out some choice examples of Twain more faithfully following the stratified spirit of his times. Occasionally popular culture is understanding of hiccups like naming a character "Nigger Jim." An innovative NewSouth Books edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* announced in 2011 omitted the N-word altogether and replaced all uses of "injun" with "Indian" so that the text would be less distracting for modern readers – but nobody seemed to condemn Twain himself for anything but being a relic of the past whose transgressions could be forgiven in the name of great American literature (Levy, 2015).

"I am as uplifted and reassured by it as a mother who has given birth to a white baby when she was awfully afraid it was going to be a mulatto," proclaimed Mark Twain after reading a complimentary review of his book *Roughing It* (Kaplan, 1966, p. 168). This sort of language was part and parcel of the folksy style of humor that marked Twain's early career, and his upbringing gave him ample opportunity to wallow in such language. He himself observed that he grew up regarding the institution of slavery as a comfortable status quo endorsed by God rather than something to be protested – a sentiment that was echoed both in his own home and at church (Fleischman, 2008). His notions were reinforced in the popular culture of his childhood

and youth, particularly in the travelling minstrel shows that toured rural areas like the one the Clemens family inhabited. As a boy Clemens found resonance between the burlesque of the shows and the lifestyle of the slaves around him.

Powers (2006) sees that all of Clemens's life after he shed the trappings of his back-country youth is "in many important ways a self-forged path upward and outward from that Original Sin, toward an egalitarian vision of the races expressed in his best literature" (p. 36) and finds hope toward this notion in scenes from *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (the latter of which, although it may have seemed sympathetic to black people, was decidedly less so toward American Indians [Michelson, 1995]). But consider Twain's journey to foreign lands that inspired *The Innocents Abroad*, where he proclaimed the Arab people he met to be "ignorant, depraved, superstitious, dirty, lousy, thieving, vagabonds" (Kaplan, 1966, p. 51). Consider his farewell "Give my love to the niggers" as he saluted a friend on his way to the interior of Africa (p. 142). Consider his collaboration with Bret Harte on the play *Ah Sin*, the "Heathen Chinees" (p. 232) which is very much like one might expect having been based on a poem of that name (profiling "ways that are dark" and "tricks that are vain" by the title character [Harte 1870]), despite Twain's political sympathies for the Chinese population in the West noted above. Even that famous scene regarding Huckleberry Finn's anti-slavery decision-making, as we have noted, ends in *aporia* for the reader rather than direct moral instruction.

All of this is not to condemn Twain and paint him as a reprehensible, backwoods racist, but rather to show that he was indeed a man of his times with many of the sympathies that such a climate might engender within a person. We cannot hang Twain for his generation. We can, however, observe that modern readers might have trouble accessing the humor behind some of

his statements much like NewSouth Books has predicted. Readers may – and should – react negatively toward the exploits of Nigger Jim thanks to his name, his Uncle Tom-like behavior, and the folk humor behind many of his jokes that simply cannot resonate with modern readers the way it did in his own time. Imagine the chagrin that readers of Middle Eastern descent might feel at reading some passages of *The Innocents Abroad*. Twain is who he is as an author, but that identity, when it remains un-whitewashed, obfuscates his diachronic resonance.

### **Appreciation from a Distance**

The full impact of Twain's humor may be lost on his modern readers. They may find him funny, but they will probably not do so for the same reasons that his contemporaries did. That circumstance, however, may not be a death knell of Twain's longevity or status as a preeminent American humorist. Far from it – our distance from Twain may allow us to see things about him and his time that he and his contemporaries would have taken for granted, and the universal aspects of his funniness achieve a new prominence as the legacy of his style of humor. As such, this chapter will wind down with some observations of attributes of Twain and literary legacies of his era that we can appreciate more today than audiences could in his own time.

### **The Status of the South**

Clemens remained racially insensitive in many ways throughout his life – but he did appreciate the shortcomings of the contexts that bred racist culture, particularly in the former Confederacy, and spoofed them mercilessly. Critics speculate that Twain's aspirations toward the East Coast literati made him increasingly critical of his childhood home in Hannibal, Missouri and the lifestyles it promoted. Even work that seems to laud that simpler time and place may be self-deprecating according to some scholars, and Twain's special nostalgia for the steamboat culture that delivered him from his childhood trappings should not go unnoticed. In

short, as the South declined in prominence in the American mindset, so it declined in Twain's writings, giving us a valuable retrospective on the cultural shift as it occurred.

Toward the end of his life, as he dictated his autobiographical sketches, Twain periodically waxed something less than nostalgic about his childhood:

But a boy's life is not all comedy; much of the tragic enters into it. The drunken tramp—mentioned in 'Tom Sawyer' or 'Huck Finn'—who was burned up in the village jail, lay upon my conscience a hundred nights afterward and filled them with hideous dreams [Clemens had given this man the matches that started the fire out of pity for his confinement]....The shooting down of poor old Smarr in the main street at noonday supplied me with some more dreams....All within the space of a couple of years we had two or three other tragedies, and I had the ill luck to be too near-by on each occasion. There was the slave man who was struck down with a chunk of slag for some small offence; I saw him die. And the young Californian emigrant who was stabbed with a bowie knife by a drunken comrade: I saw the life gush from his breast (2010, p. 157-8).

His misgivings about his home deepened age. Although he was raised with decisive Southern sympathies, Clemens quit the Confederate army after serving only two weeks. In retrospect, he treated his contribution as a joke more than as any illustration of ideological conviction and became close friends with Union general Ulysses S. Grant, directly spurning his former allegiances (Fleischman, 2008). By the time he had achieved literary greatness, he directly and overtly repudiated the South, often reminding himself how poor and backward it was. Evidence of his musings peppers the latter half of *Life on the Mississippi* and the better part of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is especially notable for lampooning such fixtures of Southern culture as slave-owning disputes and family feuds. His distaste became so great that on at least one occasion editors had to ask him to delete certain passages that would hurt his Southern sales (Kaplan, 1966). *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is notable for its comparisons between the South and England during the Dark Ages, right down to the armed conflict, economy, and code of chivalry.

By the late 1800s, when he returned to Hannibal to visit as a celebrity native son, he had developed some rose-tinted affection for the town - he also recognized his own physical and cultural distance from the place. Accordingly, Twain conjured up paradise-esque memories of the place that diverted from its reality – hence some of his later writings, including drafts of diverse new Tom and Huck stories, celebrating his time there. When he returns to Hannibal in *Life on the Mississippi* he notes

I stepped ashore with the feeling of one who returned out of a dead-and-gone generation. I had a sort of realizing sense of what the Bastille prisoners must have felt when they used to come out and look upon Paris after years of captivity , and note how curiously the familiar and the strange were mixed together before them (1960, p. 249).

Remarkably, this shift in Twain’s perspective on his roots is contemporary with the proliferation of “Blue and Gray” soldiers’ reunions and members of both Civil War armies running on the same political tickets. Twain’s nostalgia for the “soft, reposeful summer landscape” of the antebellum South (Lears, 2009, p. 137) had roots laying right alongside that of the rest of his nation.

While Twain was going through his evolution of disenchantment-turned-nostalgia, the rest of the nation was experiencing a similar attitudinal shift. Twain’s romanticism with steamboat culture memorialized in *Life on the Mississippi* followed a general shift in the outlook of river towns from Confederate allegiance to Gilded Age commercial involvement (Lears, 2009). Inklings of distaste for the South could be seen in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and direct condemnation of it is evident throughout *Huckleberry Finn*. Although these books were not as popular then as they are today, the fact that they sold as well as they did shows that Twain’s disregard had traction with his public (Summers, 1997). By the time he reached his phase of nostalgia, Twain was continuing to resonate with the climate of the U.S. culture around

him which looked to the past for relief from the irreversible changes brought about by industrialization and new technologies. As Wiebe (1967) puts it:

...countless citizens in towns and cities across the land sense that something fundamental was happening to their lives, something they had not willed and did not want, and they responded by striking out at whatever enemies their view of the world allowed them to see. They fought, in other words, to preserve the society that had given their lives meaning. But it had already slipped beyond their grasp (p. 44).

Twain repudiated the South when the rest of the country did and waxed rhapsodic about it when it was similarly appropriate. His contemporaries, who were going through the same shifts in mores that his writings chronicle, might not have recognized this transformation (although they certainly felt it at an unconscious level). From a distance, however, modern audiences have a better grasp of what each of the writer's stances may mean for his public sphere.

### **The Death of the Wild West**

While the South was transmogrifying itself in the American mindset from errant rural desolation to the stage for antebellum nostalgia, the Western frontier was becoming more populated, more modern, and less and less romantic and mysterious. The rugged life that Sam Clemens knew working the newspaper trade in the Nevada mining camps became a thing of the past with the proliferation of the railroad and the mail-order catalogue, and the Western way of life became a relic along with the "Jumping Frog"-style humor that had served as one of its chronicles. Another perspective on the American Adventure – or the decline thereof – that we can gain from Twain's writings, then, is the West's journey from dayspring of hope to the stuff of dated legend.

The West as we understand it here is cultural as well as regional, making it a translatable backdrop for the stuff of Twain's early career. Its spirit is that chronicled in Boorstin's (1953) *The Genius of American Politics* as one of the primary motivational identities of the United

States even after its residents no longer lived in that vein. For Boorstin, the West gave the nation its sense of “Givenness,” or “...the belief that values in America are in some way or other automatically defined; given by certain facts of geography peculiar to us” (p. 9). That geography is explicitly that Brave New World which can always be expanded by the rugged discoverer, where Paul Bunyan tames the wilderness and faces uniquely American opportunities that his European ancestors could only read about in books. Exploration of this Land of the Free gives Americans ““coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things...;that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism”” which are all necessary for survival at the fringes of the frontier (p. 26). The true American is Dewey’s well-adjusted man who can handle a wide variety of situations, and he would never have achieved his felicity for adjustment without living on the edge in a state of perpetual exploration.

As we have alluded, the West bred its own species of funniness along with its peculiar kind of Americanness: a recognizable oral folk tradition rooted in storytelling. In fact, the 1830s heyday of the frontier and westward expansion is where culturally American humor is said to find its genesis. The style was marked by storytelling and was predominantly an oral form (Walker, 1998), which is part of the reason that Twain’s successful transformation of the “Jumping Frog” narrative into a written form seemed so remarkable to his audience. The genre is marked by exaggeration in particular (filling a frog with buckshot, for example) and often surrounded that sort of black humor that seems appropriate when one is “being buffeted by nature, being stalked and pounced by wild critters, besieged by Indians, and hexed by witches” (Blair & Hill, 1998, p. 124). The exaggeration became more pronounced as the original Western settlers found their ranks thickened by newcomers looking for cheap homesteading as well as

tourists and myriad other people who were green to the dazzling novelty of their adopted home. Crudity and violence were also trademarks of the style, given the fixation on basic survival that punctuated everyday life in the West, the stories are rife with people who have friends in low places (Keough, 1998). But this frontier tradition continued well after the West became a more comfortable, less life-threatening place, as evidenced by the fact that Twain could launch his career on its principles well after the Civil War.

As Twain's career progressed, though, the sod huts and grazing bison of the Wild West gave way to a very different lifestyle. Exaggerated frontier tales lost their appeal for audiences who no longer romanticized the stalwart settler and his uniquely American struggle. Eastern notions of enterprise and good work through good business followed in the wake of the spirit of adventure. Summers (1997) points out that by the apex of the Gilded Age, "the real hero was not the gunslinger. It was the promoter and developer" (p. 66). Although business on the erstwhile frontier was slightly different than it was back East (often being, for instance, more violent), money swiftly pre-empted survival as the regional ideal. The frontier officially closed, according to the census, in 1890, and by that time the Western ideals of rugged individualism had been relegated to the American mythos rather than the precepts of everyday life (Lears, 2009) – and its style of humor followed along with it. Twain's blustery reception at the Whittier birthday dinner after he delivered a yarn very much in the style of the exaggerated Western curmudgeon's funny story shows that popular culture had become much less willing to live in the moment of the Western ideology, preferring to see it as a founding myth instead of a status quo.

Twain's perspective on the urbanizing-cum-dying frontier is made apparent by the fact that he bailed out of San Francisco and sought an East Coast backdrop for his career. Meanwhile,



his colleague Bret Harte actually began the process of canonizing the myth of the West with the rose-colored nostalgia of his more serious literature. Twain's perspective changed decisively as well. Kaplan (1966) points out that while he had once accidentally started a forest fire on the shores of Lake Tahoe, he began to repudiate that sort of wastefulness in both his lifestyle and his literature:

[At the Western-inspired outset of his career] His writing table and manuscript trunk could never hold the projects he began in a forest fire of enthusiasm and then put aside, when the flames started leaping, in favor of some other conflagration. Like America's untouched forests and inexhaustible herds of buffalo, there was always more where the first or fiftieth or hundredth came from. Now, in the early twilight of his life, having suffered frightful affronts to his sense of plenitude and possibility, he felt frugality and defensiveness forced upon him, conservation, limits, self-inquiry, inwardness. He was no longer working a bonanza claim (p. 401).

As went the frontier, so went Twain's writing style and his lifestyle. The collected corpus of his works shows a shift from crude Western exaggeration to Eastern refinement and business sense that allows the modern reader to see a microcosm of the national character as it transformed during the Gilded Age. Just like Twain's attitudes toward the South, inklings of this shift might have been taken for granted by his contemporary audiences. Now, however, we can appreciate them as a funny chronicle of American history.

### **Twain's Growing Popularity Today**

Generational perspective aside, there is something universal about aspects of Twain's humor that can appeal to even modern audiences. He is quite talented at pitting serious style against ludicrous content, for instance, and by doing so he creates a sense of hilarious contrast through juxtaposition that any reader might appreciate to some degree (Powers, 2006). His continued prominence today shows that his readers have more affection for his style than whatever sentiment can be enforced through making him required reading. There is a plethora of

evidence to support this diachronic appeal and show that Mark Twain maintains his *je ne sais quoi* during his own time and today.

The fact that Twain is a resonant cultural mainstay is prominent simply in the diverse forms of legacy that his name has gained. The former Nook Farm neighborhood in Hartford, Connecticut, for example, boasts an apartment complex and a liquor store named after Twain (Kaplan, 1966). Metairie, Louisiana boasts a pizza joint named after him (Michelson, 1995). (Maybe the incongruity here is just further evidence of his current prolonged fame.) The Disney World theme park boasts an attraction called Tom Sawyer Island as part of its tribute to traditional Americana, and Disneyland features a *Mark Twain* riverboat. Twain is cited more than eighteen hundred times in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. His funny and serious quips are memorialized by quote dictionaries and live-action impersonators alike. We call him the Dean of American humorists, and all the literary funny men who follow in his wake (like James Thurber and David Sedaris) gain prominence by being compared to Twain. His life is legend and persistently symbolizes the culture it chronicled and exemplified. Fleischman (2008) encapsulates our current outlook on the Mark Twain legend when he says:

Genius is not catching, like the measles. No one will ever be another Mark Twain. But he is in the DNA of every modern American writer. He loosened up the language for us. He gave us our unique sense of humor (p. xii).

If a man is to have that kind of stature a hundred years after his death, he must be a genius indeed.

Granted, we have elevated works of Twain's that were ignored at the time, and we ignore pieces that were popular with his immediate audience. For example, his contemporaries lauded the privately-circulated *1601: or Conversation as It Was by the Social Fireside in the Time of the Tudors* – a relic of Twain's aspirations toward literary respectability that is rarely read today.

*Tom Sawyer*, on the other hand, only sold half as much in its own time as *The Gilded Age* even though it has eclipsed the latter's popularity for modern audiences. Even the now apparently immortal *Huckleberry Finn* was ill-received at the time of its publication. Louisa May Alcott cited the book as a reason that "Mr. Clemens" should stop trying to write children's literature. But the fame of both characters grew in popularity until Twain could write potboilers about them to make some fast cash, and their stories have continued to be immortalized through different media even after his death. Tastes changed as American culture continued to develop, and we have been choosy about which of Twain's pieces we remember him by. We can rest leisurely on our laurels of critical distance. The point, though, is that we do remember him – and we make a big deal about the prominence of his memory in the annals of our nation. He represents so many aspects of the American character at different points in his career that we love him for being a time capsule as much as we love him for finding the funniness in everyday humanity. He would perhaps be gratified to know that his decision to speak to a popular voice escalated him to literary greatness after all.

### **Conclusion**

Mark Twain was a man of his time. We have probed his time, we have probed his life, and we have found the two to have more in common than not. Because of that, we have found that he was particularly suited to the kind of humor that was popular among the emerging middle class audience of his time. He resonated then and he resonates now, and although some aspects of his presentation may not pique people's funny bones today the way they did during the Gilded Age, we can better appreciate the *kairos* of his work when we read it from our critical distance of more than a century. We immortalize Twain as the first quintessential American humorist, a title he gains from living in the right place at the right time as much as being a skillful writer. We

know the Gilded Age better because of Mark Twain; we know Mark Twain better because of the Gilded Age.

Twain's short story "The £1,000,000 Bank-Note" gives us a nice summation of the appropriateness of Twain's collective works with which to end our analysis. It begins with a young mining-broker's clerk in San Francisco who finds himself accidentally swept across the ocean to London, where he comes ashore alone, in tatters, with only a dollar to his name. He lives as a homeless man for a day. Without provocation, two wealthy gentlemen pull the man into their home and loan him five million dollars on the condition that he report back to them in thirty days so that they may settle a bet between them. Although he has some compunctions about the motives of his benefactors, the young man soon falls to enjoying the creature comforts of the wealthy and gains a reputation as an eccentric millionaire. "You know, I even kept my old suit of rags," he observes, "and every now and then appeared in them, so as to have the old pleasure of buying trifles, and being insulted, and then shooting the scoffer dead with the million-pound bill. But I couldn't keep that up" (Twain, 2005, p. 387). He thrusts himself into the upper echelons of society and hob-nobs with the rich and famous while winning the admiration of a beautiful woman he intends to make his wife. His newfound cultural capital combined with his previous line of work allow him to make some highly lucrative investments during his month of wealth. By the time he reports to his anonymous donors, he has made back their loan and then some. They are impressed with his industry as well as the fact that the woman's he's been dating is the stepdaughter of one of them. As such, they offer to establish him in any situation he would like. He demands the situation of son-in-law, and he and his love live happily (and richly) ever after.

Hopefully this yarn sounds vaguely familiar. A young man sets off from San Francisco with little to his name, makes himself known for his eccentricities, meets high-society individuals, finds a wonderful woman among them, and nestles down comfortably amongst their ranks. This is, with little alteration, the story of Sam Clemens's transformation into Mark Twain. He finds improbable good fortune by investing the support of a public who enjoys his works and is able to maximize his return beyond his wildest dreams – and marry Olivia Langdon in the bargain. His success is predicated on forces beyond his control, but he is aware of this and thankful for the context that brought him to fame. Granted, Twain was no wise investor in business matters, which during the Gilded Age was a great hiccup for a public figure. But he clearly appreciated the importance of this failing as he wrote, since he corrected it for his alter ego. When the story was made into a film in 1954 (starring Gregory Peck as the American protagonist), it proved that Twain's rosy vision of himself had lasted in the public mind. When it was remade under the title of *Trading Places* in 1983, it indicated that Mark Twain's stories had something universal enough about them to resonate through the centuries.

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## CHAPTER FOUR: JAMES THURBER

*When The Secret Life of Walter Mitty, with Danny Kaye in the title role, became a hit movie, Sam Goldwyn decided that he would like to have Thurber as a permanent part of his team of writers. He tried to lure Thurber to Hollywood with an offer of \$500 a week. Thurber, quite content to go on working for Harold Ross at The New Yorker, wrote back after a decent interval, declining Goldwyn's offer with 'Mr. Ross has met the increase.' Goldwyn wrote again, raising the offer to \$1,000 and week, then \$1,500, and finally \$2,500. On each occasion the response was the same. Goldwyn decided to drop the matter for a while. Then one day he wrote again, but this time the offer had dropped to \$1,500. Back came Thurber's reply: 'I am sorry, but Mr. Ross has met the decrease.'*

*~Bartlett's Book of Anecdotes, 2000, p. 534*

James Thurber's fame during his own time and beyond earned him recognition as Mark Twain's literary successor. He was not a lone humorist of his generation by any means, although he did often bemoan that he lived in a world with too few comedians. His compatriots included such famous names as E.B. White and Dorothy Parker, both of whom were his friends and colleagues. But Thurber is the one of his tribe who is most often compared with Twain and whose recognition includes similar superlatives to his preeminent predecessor, as we will discuss below. Thurber stands out, in short. Our task now is to give him the same treatment we just gave Twain both so that we may appreciate him in his own right and so that we can enjoy the contrast between the two. Although they are supposed to be cut from the same (red white and blue) cloth according to the American literary mythos and indeed they have some temperamental similarities, these two men possess stark differences. They wrote for very different Americas, they came from very different Americas, and their humor resonates with today's America in different ways.

To make sure that similarities and contrasts between our literary humorists are as stark as they can be, we will ask the same questions of Thurber that we asked of Twain: What was the American public like during Thurber's heyday – who was his audience? (What social strata



composed its ranks? Amidst that crowd, what access did various individuals have to entertainment? How did contemporary ideologies seep into everyday life and govern those entertainment choices?) What made Thurber's style of humor so lucrative with his audience such that he could rise to his level of fame? (What serious issues did its happy affective payoff broach? What made it stick in the audience's mind after the joking was over?) Then, in the end, why do we choose Thurber as our elevated symbol of the humor of the periods surrounding World War I and World War II? (What made his material so funny within that particular context? Can today's audiences laugh at his material for the same reasons? Why or why not?). This analysis will be like the previous chapter in that we will not achieve the impossible task of explaining exactly why Thurber is so funny to so many people. But we will find something of his resonance, and we will discern what makes it *his* resonance for *his* audience and beyond.

### **Thurber's Audience**

Although Thurber's life overlapped Twain's by roughly fifteen years, the former wrote for a very different audience than the latter. Twain had died before Thurber reached college, where his writing career had its roots. Just as importantly, let us not forget that Twain never really considered himself a denizen of the twentieth century, and thus his writing stayed determinedly structured by the nineteenth. We should also note that Thurber never cited Twain as one of his paramount influences – although we can assume that he was at least tacitly familiar with Twain's corpus just the same as the rest of his generation.

During the apparently brief span of time in which American letters were handing off their humorous baton, the social makeup of the public who formed their readership changed immensely. Gilded Age social structures were uprooted by the World War I draft, the rebuilding between the wars, and then again by World War II. Social classes shifted their composition and

members of ethnic groups who had been thrust to the fringes found different niches than their parents and grandparents had occupied. If they were still marginalized, they were sometimes marginalized in different ways and for different reasons. The ideologies that governed these masses of people were vastly altered as well. And from within their places in their lonely crowd with its limited buffet of ideologies, individuals had to negotiate their agency when it came to their selection of entertainment. Although entertainment culture continued to thrive in urban areas and beyond, it had simultaneously more serious and more playful undertones thanks to the U.S.'s new, graver presence on the world stage.

### **Audience Composition**

The ability for audiences after the Gilded Age to consume literature hinged upon a variety of factors, all of which Thurber treaded well. Enrollment in schools remained roughly the same as it had during the previous generation (for white people, at least – the legacies of biological racism had quite decreased the number of black children who were enrolled). Most of the people who were educated did not progress beyond the eighth grade – although the options made available by the G.I. bill at the end of Thurber's heyday did something to mitigate this stagnancy. At the same time, though, literacy rates grew by leaps and bounds as Twain's readership gave way to Thurber's. While roughly twenty percent of the adult U.S. population was illiterate in 1870, that number had fallen to about ten percent in 1900 and had stunted below five percent by 1930. Thus, even if Thurber was not required reading in school, he had the capacity to reach a great deal of the American public through the printed word. This literate population also reaped the benefits of the Gilded Age philanthropy of Mark Twain's industrialist friend Andrew Carnegie. Between the 1880s and 1920, funds from the Carnegie fortune built 1,679 libraries across the United States so that audiences could have free access to quality

reading material. The stage was set for the reign of the printed word in the United States, and Thurber's capitalization of that medium skyrocketed him to celebrity.

To emphasize the literary culture of the period, consider Thurber's own literary influences. (These are especially enlightening since Thurber famously had a very average middle-class Midwestern upbringing.) He was a big fan of Henry James. He loved Lewis Carroll. He quite enjoyed the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. His favorite books included *Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis, *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Sun Also Rises* by Hemingway, and *One Man's Meat* by his dear friend E.B. White. This diversity (which is naturally not an exhaustive list) is evidence of a society in which reading was a concerted pastime and books of all stripes were widely available.

Of course, all of this access to books does little if an audience does not prioritize leisure activities like reading. Fortunately for Thurber, he came of age as a writer during the 1920s, a period immortalized (at least in middle- to upper-class urban areas) by throngs of people who made entertainment one of their top priorities. Speakeasy culture emphasized fun and frolic and the enjoyment of the individual in the present moment over working toward the collective future. That fun was in part a response to the Prohibition movement's (hard-fought reform-movement) traction with the government toward illegalizing alcohol and creating a culture marked by the homogeneity of sobriety. The ban, of course, achieved just the opposite, and tended to unite people instead around their support of drinking and the debauchery it encouraged. Even ostensibly sophisticated media like *The New Yorker* magazine published price estimates for bootleg liquor, and locations of speakeasy clubs where illicit booze flowed freely were common knowledge.

Kinney (1995) describes the Americans of this generation generally as people who “turned night into day, ate improperly, smoked, slept too little, and drank too much Prohibition booze” (p. 375) – people, in short, who were willing to laugh. Thurber himself was no exception to these traits during his early days at *The New Yorker* and was often seen drinking and carousing late into the night before coming into work the next day and producing a prodigious amount of truly funny material, apparently not the much worse for wear. (Although his social circles were often injured in the process – his second wife Helen once observed that ““When Thurber throws a party, it always hits someone”” [p. 844]). The period was, in short, marked by rebellion and fun and recklessness and togetherness. Thurber examines the mores of the period from both sides two decades later in his animal fable “The Bear Who Let It Alone”:

In the woods of the Far West there once lived a brown bear who could take it or let it alone....He... took to drinking by himself most of the day. He would reel home at night, kick over the umbrella stand, knock down the bridge lamps, and ram his elbows through the windows. Then he would collapse on the floor and lie there until he went to sleep. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened.

At length the bear saw the error of his ways and began to reform. In the end he became a famous teetotaler and a persistent temperance lecturer....he would lie down on the floor, tired by his healthful exercise, and go to sleep. His wife was greatly distressed and his children were very frightened.

*Moral: You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backward* (Thurber, 1945, p. 253).

Thurber’s perspective may have arisen from the circumstance that members of the literary set in particular were frequent members of clubs to ensure they had a place in a social set, and commonly engaged in rowdy scenes, bar fights, sex, and camaraderie together.

Times had changed for society’s minorities as well, particularly for women and people of color. Women found themselves on roughly equal footing with men in the party scene (if not in the home), an emancipation from which the iconic figure of the flapper arose. Women’s right to vote was ratified in 1920, and many women seized *de facto* equality from this *de jure* measure.

One of Thurber's female colleagues at *The New Yorker*, Lois Long, observes that "We women had been emancipated and weren't sure what we were supposed to do with the freedom and equal rights, so we were going to hell laughing and singing" (Kinney, 1995, p. 378). Women still faced criticism from many circles if they chose to engage in the speakeasy culture, but the fact that great numbers of them still flocked to its embrace shows that its allure was a social fixture. Birth control in the form of diaphragms encouraged sexual freedom, and when the diaphragm failed many circles had an abortionist on call. This need arose in part because urban entertainment environment encouraged women to drink right alongside men, metabolic differences in gender biology aside. Long notes that "You were thought to be good at holding your liquor in those days if you could make it to the ladies' room before throwing up. It was customary to give two dollars to the cabdriver if you threw up in his cab" (p. 379). Although such parity did not survive the sexual segregation brought about by World War II, it did give women a niche beyond the home and a sense of autonomy beyond that of their mothers.

Members of the African-American population also saw some emancipation from the biological racism that pervaded the Gilded Age, although theirs was by no means a state of "freedom and equal rights" as Thurber's writings often make clear. Society had begun to turn a disgusted eye toward lynchings and other manifestations of outward Southern racism and the intellectual elite in particular began to pay attention to the role of people of color in the history of human development. The Great Depression that began in 1929 was an unconscious levelling force as it united both black and white tenant farmers in their poverty much as they had been in the early days of Reconstruction. As the Civil War became an increasingly distant memory popular culture began to re-examine its origins. The view that had pervaded the spirit of coast-to-coast American nationhood emphasized so vehemently after the war was over emphasized the

role of constitutional issues, a deliberate rhetorical move designed to emphasize the primacy of the Constitution as a backbone of a united nation. Increasingly, though, later generations focused on the controversy surrounding slavery as a primary catalyzing force that had split the country. In retrospect, Americans began to see slavery as tragedy of brutal repression that placed undeserving black people on an unequal playing field (Novick, 1988).

The assumption of biological inferiority that had previously legitimized racial separation fell out of vogue first among intellectuals, and then increasingly among the general population as well. Although discrimination was still very legal, its underpinnings were finally beginning to be questioned, and black members of the population could find some traction toward speaking out for their own rights and freedoms (Novick, 1988). At the same time, though, the majority of the black population missed the financial prosperity that so marked the 1920s, since many black people were living in poverty in the rural South. While the American dream seemed to come to fruition for so many members of the growing middle class, the black population was still largely excluded from its message of hope (Jeansonne, 1994).

### **Audience Agency**

Given that Thurber's audience placed such a high priority on entertainment, then, especially during his debut years as a writer, we now turn to examine the types of entertainment they had available and the amount of agency they had to choose their own material for consumption. We know that this was a more literate population than its predecessor and one that had books freely available at public libraries. We also know that they enjoyed their leisure time. During World War I and World War II, entertainment provided a refreshing distraction. During the 1920s, it allowed a sort of dogged liberation. During the Great Depression, it provided a

reminder of better times and hope for the future. Thurber, a fixture of *The New Yorker Magazine* and purveyor of popular books and cartoons, was always there to meet this growing demand.

The urbanization process that began after the Civil War had come to a head by Thurber's period of modernization between 1921 and 1945 and brought with it a culture that was simultaneously more collective and more individual. According to the 1920 census, more Americans lived in urban areas than rural ones, and that prevalence continued to grow during the decades to come. This led to some opposition between urban and rural values that played out in the popular humor of the day, with the urban lifestyle representing progress and sophistication and rural, folksy appeals representing backwardness and crudeness (Walker, 1998). With the rise of the urban public sphere came the rise of the outlook that we call "modern" today. Its genesis came at the end of World War I, which left America struggling to reconcile social and civic structures that had been turned topsy-turvy. In Jeansonne's (1994) words, "The war required reorganization of politics, rationalization of industry, consolidation of transportation, centralization of government, and rapid implementation of scientific discoveries" (p. 7). Although the results of these necessities seem fairly self-evident, it is worth noting that they gave people who lived in cities and towns (again, the majority of the population) a greater sense of choice about their lives. Thurber and White allude to their out-and-about outlook in a passage about marriage from *Is Sex Necessary?*

The young husband, hearing all this tinkling and rattling and shoving going on around him [at home], smelling paint, listening to hammering, etc., will begin at once to have a fear of being trapped or 'caught.' He will strive to get out of the house, and his wife should allow him to go (1978, p. 134)

Although the urban lifestyle was marked by crime, pollution, and an uncomfortable population density, it was also rife with opportunity. Urbanization bred jobs, education, entertainment, and a

wider (potentially a bit anonymous) social life. The middle class continued to rise, and its lifestyle was the one most directly affected by society's developments.

Thanks to popular interest in leisure, entertainment was a field that benefitted a great deal from the rapidly accruing scientific developments of the day. Thurber's period saw the emergence of radio and film (both of which he dabbled in at some point during his career, such as the case of the film version of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*). The notion of "mass" media took off as people listened to the same radio programs and watched the same movies, which engendered a culture of common popular discussion. It also created a kind of nationwide commonality that some critics of the day saw as a positive unifying force and other saw as unnecessary homogenization (Walker, 1998). A great deal of the media theory of the day revolved around this debate between innovation and stagnation, as we will discuss. The film industry in particular, which had its start on the East Coast before it headed West to Hollywood, was an international phenomenon as well as an American one, and bred its own distinct types of comedy that changed the ways that Americans laughed by asking them to question apparent visual truths (Mast, 1998). Comic strips peppered newspapers and added levity to the often otherwise depressing roster of the world's events, and were a primary medium through which Thurber made his name (Miller, 1939/1989). He once noted in an interview that "'I'm not an artist. I'm a painstaking writer who doodles for relaxation. But it's those doodles they go for. Do you wonder why I think it's a screwy world?'" (p. 5).

Although Thurber did indeed associate himself with all of these emerging popular mass media forms at some point in his life, he always stuck to the short story as his preferred idiom and found wide appeal there. He credited this penchant in part to the fact that he was writing humor, and there is something felicitous about the combination of humor and brevity. Humor,



for Thurber, was itself composed of short, trivial observations. But he also stuck to his short stories for more ostensibly literary reasons:

‘But brevity in any case—whether the work is supposed to be humorous or not—would seem to me to be desirable. Most of the books I like are short books: *The Red Badge of Courage*, *The Turn of the Screw*, Conrad’s short stories, *A Lost Lady*, Joseph Hergesheimer’s *Wild Oranges*, Victoria Lincoln’s *February Hill*, *The Great Gatsby*.... You know Fitzgerald once wrote Thomas Wolfe: “You’re a putter-inner and I’m a taker-outer.” I stick with Fitzgerald. I don’t believe, as Wolfe did, that you have to turn out a massive work before being judged as a writer’ (Plimpton & Steele, 1958/1989, p. 60).

His love of brevity made Thurber a perfect candidate for success in the emerging magazine market, and he got his foot in the door at *The New Yorker* in the publication’s early days. This was not far removed from the newspaper business, where Twain got his start, and where Thurber claimed to have roots as well. He had written for an Ohio State campus newspaper during his time there and also worked a bit as a reporter for the Columbus, Ohio *Dispatch*. Later in life he enjoyed giving interviews to newspaper reporters, with whom he claimed to feel a kinship. He never made it big as a reporter, of course, a fact which he explained away by observing that “there was never any news in Columbus, and the *New York Post* couldn’t have known what use to make of his kind of talent” (Kinney, 1995, p. 980). But the fact that reporting was Thurber’s first real writing outlet should be recognized as a decisive influence on his career.

Although this list of available media grew tremendously between Twain’s heyday and Thurber’s, there is thus far one glaring omission: the lecture circuit. Although live oral entertainments had paved the way for the future of stand-up comedy and were by no means completely out of the picture, they were no longer nearly as popular. Their absence coincided with the death of the travelling vaudeville show, both of which fell out of vogue as more and more of the population flocked to the cities. Since rural audiences were declining, media that catered to them had little hope of flourishing as they once had. This trend is clear in the fact that

although James Thurber ostensibly inherited Mark Twain's humorist mantle, he was no great shakes at public speaking like his predecessor. He was, in fact, terrified of speaking to live audiences. He once made a speaking appearance at the Ohio State University Faculty Club, after which he wrote a letter to the alumni monthly detailing the message that he had failed to get across in his live presentation. His second wife Helen later observed that Thurber got through his live radio and TV appearances mostly because there was not a studio audience – otherwise his presentation was stilted and fumbling. Toward the end of his life, on the other hand, he was able to capitalize on his own celebrity by appearing in a Broadway production based on his collection *A Thurber Carnival*, a role which he relished as one of the highlights of his life.

So Thurber had the capacity to use and change a variety of different entertainment media. But did his audience? Again, this was the period that really brought about debates over audience agency in the first place (Novick, 1988). Our literature from Ellul and Lippmann that bred this very concern about our humorists is drawn from Thurber's period (and Thurber was very aware of Lippmann's status as one of his popular intellectual contemporaries). Living in the age of propaganda made achieving appeal in the public sphere a questionable enterprise – a topic that Thurber addresses directly in his animal fable "The Very Proper Gander."

One day somebody who saw [the gander protagonist] strutting up and down in his yard and singing remarked, 'There is a very proper gander.' An old hen overheard this and told her husband about it that night at the roost. 'They said something about propaganda,' she said. 'I have always suspected that,' said the rooster, and he went around the barnyard the next day telling everybody that the very fine gander was a dangerous bird, more than likely a hawk in gander's clothing (Thurber, 1945, p. 251).

If mass media were indeed creating homogenization among the public, then perhaps Thurber's popularity was spoon-fed to his audience instead of developing slowly from increasing amounts of popular acclaim.

This debate over audience choice is still raging, and it would be an exercise in futility to come to a definitive answer here about whatever options Thurber's public truly had. All we can say for certain is that they did, somehow, find his work and stick with it. We will instead indulge ourselves in a small spectrum of possibilities from the various decades of the period and assume that there was something of a heuristic circle going on between Thurber and his audience that intersects with some of the possibilities we outline. During the 1920s, for example, there was a great deal of audience demand for a new diversity of leisure activities which precipitated the birth of what we think of today as the overwhelming force of the entertainment industry. Institutions like jazz music emerged from working-class traditions rather than the mandates of the intellectual elite, and it spread like wildfire through all levels of society once it was coupled with big band culture. But music turned to radio, and by 1930 half of all American families owned one. Movies began to sell sex appeal to the public in the early 1920s with such gusto that the industry hired Will Hays to oversee the moral fiber that reached audiences. In terms of literature, Jeansonne (1994) summarizes the public appetite thus:

The public's insatiable curiosity about Lindbergh reflected its appetite for simplistic stories about heroes, juxtaposing hazards and courage, good and evil. Few Americans read serious books.... Although most Americans were too busy or too impatient to read serious literature, the masses devoured periodicals such as newspapers, whose ownership was increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few chains, the largest owned by William Randolph Hearst.... The tabloids sensationalized and simplified news; they included a large sports section, comic strips, and puzzles. Tabloid circulation soon exceeded that of established dailies. The reading of magazines increased, and magazines that appealed to entire families had the largest circulations (p. 76-77).

This debatable national streamlining also gave way to cross-country fads. Games like Mah-Jongg spanned the nation, as did crossword puzzles and flagpole sitting.

The Great Depression of the 1930s brought about a whole new set of tensions surrounding entertainments which changed the nature of what the American public was willing

to laugh at. Many Americans were out of work, so leisure time was still a currency of the day, but in this case it was more a cause of chagrin than celebration. Artists of all stripes found themselves out of work alongside the rest of the country, to the point that in 1935 Congress allotted \$27 million to fund artistic projects in writing music, the theatre, and the visual arts. Members of the Federal Writers Project were discouraged from writing fiction, however, and were encouraged instead toward business writing and contributing to the nation's archives. What novels did flourish during this period tended toward proletarianism and focused on the plight of the tough life of the out-of-work laborer à la Steinbeck and Faulkner. Magazines continued to be more widely read than books, however, and demand for their brief articles and low cost was actually quite prevalent (good news for *The New Yorker* and Thurber's career). Radio continued to be a huge influence with a great variety of programming and continued its reign of debatable homogenization since most of the country tuned in to the same programming. In short, art during the 1930s was even more closely aligned with the interests of the elite, but deviations from this norm were remarkable and radical when they occurred. Originality was not the currency of the realm, but there was still a great demand for entertainment despite the decade's newfound economic constraints (Jeansonne, 1994).

### **Contemporary Ideologies**

The period between the wars (and even the wars themselves) were marked in popular discourse by change and resistance to change – a great fluctuation in which to find funniness, if Thurber's work is any indication. The 1920s saw vast social developments while the 1930s were more marked by politics. The public harbored polar views about the economy, which was not nearly as prosperous as it had been during the Gilded Age that had bred such high hopes for the nation. Progressivism was opposed by fundamentalism. The urban lifestyle clashed with the

rural. Traditionalism clashed with modernism. Although these tensions were fostered initially during the 1920s, they festered throughout the Depression and came to a head during the New Deal era, the politics of which were rooted explicitly in decisions about whether or not to change the status quo (Jeansonne, 1994).

The turning point toward all of this debate, of course, and the ideological division between Thurber's time and the Gilded Age, was World War One. The onset of an armed conflict at a global scale created a great impetus for the United States to turn from its individualist morality to a more coherent vision of itself as a collective where everyone depended on everyone else. Popular culture was pervaded with notions of good and evil with America on the side of the good and the Germans being the hallmark of the latter. (They were, of course, only one symptom of "the wrong-headed and savage European system of nationalism, imperialism, and secret diplomacy and militarism" [Novick, 1988, p. 210]). Novick observes that "With the declaration of war on Germany, doubts about the righteousness of the Allied cause all but disappeared....Virtually all shared the patriotic enthusiasm which, overnight, became de rigeur" (p. 116). People feared falling outside of the propaganda party line or being accused of following its notions hypocritically. In short, patriotic pitching in with the war effort was the dominant ideal of the day, and its legacy was much longer than the actual war.

Thanks in part to the need for intensely speedy technological development brought on by World War One military efforts, science became the great American intellectual fixation and scientism bled into other spheres of the academy as well as everyday life. The smart set saw value in transferring the principles of quantum mechanics to the social sciences, and Einstein struggled to keep other scholars from applying his theory of relativity to other fields: "I believe that the present fashion of applying the axioms of physical science to human life is not only a

mistake but has something reprehensible to it,” he warned his colleagues (Novick, 1988, p. 139). But physical science continued to hold sway and became something at odds with the arts and with issues of faith as a popular alleged intellectual conundrum. One of the landmark illustrations of the apparent break between science and other fields leaking into everyday life was the 1925 Scopes Trial. The case challenged a high school teacher for breaking a state law that (on religious grounds) discussion of the theory of evolution was banned from state-funded classrooms. The case drew attention across the country as a battle between fundamentalism and modernism and between science and other-than-science. Although Scopes was convicted only to have the sentence overturned, sides regarding scientism had clearly been deeply drawn and could not be ignored. Although Thurber did not often take a stance about the relevance of science (or a lack thereof in his work), he did not completely escape the culture of controversy surrounding it. “I have arrived at what I call Thurber’s Law,” he proclaimed, “which is that scientists don’t really know anything about anything. I doubt everything they have ever discovered” (Kinney, 1995, p. 249). He was, perhaps, a true member of the arts camp after all.

Concurrent with the rise in scientism was a turn toward pragmatic philosophy that reflected a more artistic approach to science wherein creativity and funniness might flourish. The vanguard of this train of thought included thinkers like Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. This was a philosophy mired very much in the present. Although pragmatists did not separate themselves from scientism like much of the rest of the academy, theirs was a “critique from the inside,” in Novick’s (1988) words:

Both Peirce and James were practicing scientists; Dewey always operated within a scientific frame of reference. Though the pragmatists were relentless critics of the vulgarization of Baconian induction which was still widely considered the proper scientific (and historical) method, their criticism went further. They rejected the dominant view of the world as, in David Hollinger’s words, ‘a hard object gradually being discovered by means of the suppression of human subjectivity’” (p. 152).

In this frame, truth was subject to change and agreement rather than concretization. Knowledge was contingent rather than certain. Thurber's Law, indeed.

While all of these ideological debates and more gripped the population between the wars, World War Two created still more varieties of turmoil that made lightheartedness a suspect concept. In fact, the War mentality flew directly in the face of whatever advances had occurred in pragmatic thought: "The aftermath of World War I ushered in a period of negativity and doubt, the climate in which the relativist critique flourished. The coming of World War II saw American culture turn toward affirmation and the search for certainty" (Novick, 1988, p. 281). Totalitarianism became a buzzword – and a devil term at that – and was painted in opposition to the freedom that American democracy represented. Authoritative regimes were associated with violence and destruction and should be quelled by the patriotism surrounding goodness and liberation. Remarkably, though, the forces of democratic choice were abandoning the pragmatic outlook that eschewed totalitarian notions of ideological certainty. Instead they turned to faith and commitment both to the country and to both Protestant and Catholic visions of a higher power. In a world enveloped by war, Christianity was emphasized as a higher standard by which the devastating actions of men on both sides could be judged. Morality was a strong force in everyday life, and the popular mindset equated moral relativism with indifference. Thurber's short story "The Greatest Man in the World" (1931/2001) dwells on this theme as he presents the idea of a man who is supposed to be a cultural hero because he flew all the way around the world nonstop – but who is also a reprehensible human being.

'Come awn, come awn,' said Smurch. 'Let's get the hell out of here! When do I starting cuttin' in on de parties, huh? And what's they goin' to be *in* it?' He rubbed a thumb and forefinger together meaningly. 'Money!' exclaimed a state senator, shocked, pale.... Smurch stood up and walked over to an open window, where he stood staring down into the street, nine floors below. The faint shouting of newsboys floated up to him. He made out his name. 'Hot dog!' he cried, grinning, ecstatic. He leaned out over the

sill....Charles K.L. Brand, secretary to the Mayor of New York City, happened to be standing nearest Smurch; he looked inquiringly at the President of the United States. The President, pale, grim, nodded shortly. Brand...stepped forward, seized the greatest man in the world by his left shoulder and the seat of his pants, and pushed him out the window. 'My God, he's fallen out the window!' cried a quick-witted editor (Thurber, p. 75-6).

Cultural relativism was viewed similarly, meaning that minority viewpoints were effectively quashed for the duration of the conflict and any prospect for domestic insurgence was off the table. This was also the era where "ideology" itself became a dirty word, as we have previously discussed, because of its apparently synonymy with the notions held by totalitarian regimes. (Rest assured, though, that everything we're discussing here about the mindset of the home front falls well under the definition of "ideology" regardless.) World War Two, in short, brought about a climate of conformity and self-censorship – and its restrictions were eventually perpetuated by the Cold War and other apparent foreign threats.

Throughout all of this debate, dissent, and change, Thurber engaged his own spectrum of ideologies. Occasionally his views would seep into his work. Mostly, however, he avoided direct discussion of social and political controversies through literature. He was wont to engage in political discussions with his friends and colleagues, but his participation was the product of his love of arguing rather than his ideological convictions. An associated once noted that

'Thurber loved controversy; he'd take both sides. He could be a tenacious bastard on either side of an argument. If he decided he was winning too many people to his point of view, he'd switch viewpoints and begin attacking those who had been agreeing with him.....Everyone thinks Thurber was always trying to start trouble, but all he really wanted was for someone to yell back at him. He enjoyed yelling....' (Kinney, 1995, p. 551-2).

If this is true, then perhaps Thurber was just the man for an age where disputes were marked by two vehemently opposing sides since he was in the game mostly for the opposition. His politics were marked by a similar aggressive playfulness during the outset of his career. He tended to



vote Republican while he lived in Columbus since that was the family party affiliation. He voted for Wilson in 1916 without much gusto and remained bored with the elections that followed World War One. He was a member of a Socialist committee on behalf of a restaurant workers' strike; he arrived at the first meeting in a cab, disregarding the fact that the cab drivers in the city were also on strike. He went to the Players club for martinis afterward.

As he grew older Thurber began to veer away from his political apathy toward allegiance with the liberal Democrats in large part because he found Republican candidates laughable. He also took a decisive political stance during World War Two, although his convictions did not fall in line with the mainstream. Indeed, Thurber was radically opposed to the popular rooting out of un-Americanism and the demand for conformity with the patriotic cause. He found "loyalty" to be a fraught concept, and similarly problematic to him were the people who enforced its rigor. As the McCarthy era brought about its blacklisting of prominent members of the artistic community Thurber began to take a decisive public political stance (probably mostly because he was finally faced with politics that directly affected his everyday life). Kinney (1995) notes that since Thurber's stance became more decisive at this time, "The Freedom of Information Act has led to the discovery that Thurber was under FBI surveillance for nearly twenty years, starting in 1939, his file running to a hundred and five pages. This wouldn't have surprised Thurber" (p. 939). His last political splash came with his support for the Adlai Stevenson campaign thanks to its decisive opposition to McCarthy. Perhaps Thurber was not always in line with the ideologies of his day, but he was consistent about his proclivity to push back when he was pushed, whether he was pushed by a friend at a cocktail party or by a United States senator.

## **Thurber's Funny Influence**

As we might conclude just from the sales of his books and the myriad adaptations of his work for the stage and the screen, Thurber was intensely popular during his own lifetime and is still widely read today. His work is translatable to a variety of both contemporary and current media. His resonance is synchronic and diachronic. He struggled slightly less than Twain did to come to terms with the dichotomy of humor and critically acclaimed literature, thanks to his position at a magazine that was supposed to be a hallmark of sophistication for its culture, but he did struggle. This section will accordingly focus on the factors that made Thurber's work something more relevant than simple throwaway jokes and point out traits that make his particular brand of funniness something that appealed to such a huge cross-section of the American people during a period so marked by wars, disagreements, and other forms of turmoil.

### **Thurber's Humor vs. Thurber's Seriousness**

While it is tempting to legitimize Thurber by observing all of the serious material that undergirds his funny stories – and we will do so shortly with great ease – we should also observe that Thurber began his writing career during the 1920s age of entertainment for entertainment's own sake. The nation had just emerged from a dismally depressing war, its economy was prospering, and it wanted to celebrate. People prioritized fun without bothering to look for its deeper meaning. Then came the Great Depression, which was depressing indeed, and escapist funny material had an important part to play in the American mythos. Then came World War Two with its own plate of woes – and although funny relief ran the risk of being labeled as dissent, it did form an important sort of protest, and by that point in his life Thurber was actively political enough to engage in just that sort of spirit. All in all, Thurber wrote during an age where

a humorist could flourish just by making people happy if only for a brief time, and his short stories were designed to do just that.

The levity that comes with laughter has great benefit for people who enjoy it, as a great deal of psychological, medical, and sociological research has established – benefits that people who have experienced war and economic hardship particularly relish. Freud was one of the first scholars to recognize the power of relief hidden within the happy affective payoff of the funny. He recognized humor as a form of liberation from a perhaps dismal reality. For Freud, laughing releases us from the strict rules of the superego and lets us live a little, as it were. The humor of Thurber's era in particular was a deviation from the Gilded Age toward exactly this type of function, as Walker (1998) notes:

The element of the humor...that was particularly 'new' in the American humorous tradition was its almost complete lack of reference to social reality. From its earliest days, American humor had largely been a response to the practical realities of settling a wilderness, experimenting with a democratic political system, and negotiating the needs of different groups of people within a common national experience. Seldom had our humor been merely for fun, without serving some sociopolitical purpose, and what we might call the humor of reality—as opposed to the humor of fantasy—has maintained its dominance throughout American literary history. One reason for this trend is that the humor of wit and whimsy, the literary parody, and other forms requiring education and sophisticated tastes necessarily appeal to a small audience (p. 41).

Although this passage smacks of intellectual elitism, American was turning toward this very sort of literary appeal – sophistication and abstraction – during the 1920s and 1930s, as the bent of the material in Thurber's primary outlet, *The New Yorker Magazine*, makes clear. The Great Depression era, perhaps because of its grim reality, followed this trend. The wit of the sophisticated literary scene colonized the silent film industry, where it was coupled with silly visual gags and fueled by a drive toward escapism in the popular culture. Several comedians rose to this challenge during the era, including members of the Algonquin Round Table, a group that met at noon in the Rose Room of the Algonquin Hotel in New York. The Round Table's

astute ranks included Thurber's associates (although never officially Thurber himself) including Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, Robert Sherwood, George. S. Kaufman, and Edna Ferber. Although their popularity was stunted by the atomic bomb and the advent of World War Two, these comedians offered exactly the kind of escapist, literary "New Humor" the public was looking for (Kinney, 1995).

*The New Yorker* was a publication explicitly designed to eschew the sociopolitical thrust of the old era of American funniness in favor of the cutting-edge whimsical style. It was determinedly apolitical. It prioritized the arts. Its popular concerns were social ones – like the price of bootleg liquor (Walker, 1998). Its founding editor, Harold W. Ross, issued this happy mission statement for the magazine:

'The New Yorker starts with a declaration of serious purpose but with a concomitant declaration that it will not be too serious in executing it. It hopes to reflect metropolitan life, to keep up with events and affairs of the day, to be gay, humorous, satirical but to be more than a jester....It will try conscientiously to keep its readers informed of what is going on the fields in which they are most interested. It has announced that it is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque. By this it means that it is not of that group of publications engaged in tapping the Great Buying Power of the North American steppe region by trading mirrors and colored beads in the form of our best brands of hokum' (Kinney, 1995, p. 329-30).

The magazine stuck to its guns regarding this mission statement so fastidiously that it occasionally came under fire from political groups as an "annoying and irrelevant distraction" (p. 618). The fact that it still exists and is popular today shows that it survived this species of criticism and that there was something to the silly, sophisticated New Humor after all.

Thurber himself saw great necessity for humor during dark times. "'Humor is a gentle thing,'" he observed. "'That's why it is so necessary if our species is to survive'" (Nordell, 1959/1989, p. 64). Late in life, Thurber bemoaned the dearth of humorists in the wake of the second World War. In his view, the number of popular humorists grew throughout the 1920s,

peaked in 1930, and then continued to fall through the forties. Even though the fifties brought a few new names into the spotlight, Thurber protested ““But the young people are not funny...”” (Brandon, 1961/1989, p. 106). He saw the roots of the decline in popular funniness in the “shattering effect” of the Great Depression (Breit, 1949/1989, p. 16) – and he was not at all a fan of television comedy. After World War Two, though, he found that humor was marked by a grimness that eschewed the escapism of the previous decades. It was so grim, in fact, that Thurber denied that “humor of horror” could really be considered humor at all.

### **The Question of Throwaway Entertainment**

If the humor of Thurber’s era was purposefully whimsical and escapist and distracting from a reality with was at turns overwhelming and depressing, then was it all throwaway entertainment by design? Could it have any hopes of sticking in the minds of its audience and making some difference in their everyday lives? Did it matter, in short, beyond its much-needed release of tension? Remarkably, in several cases that illustrate Thurber’s real virtuosity as a funny writer, there were important real-life implications embedded in this stories and novels that gave his audience something to chew on when they were done laughing. This gumption is the probably source of his celebrity and the longevity of his works as much as his ability to be silly gave him such popularity in his day. In fact, he may have helped his contemporary audiences deal with their frustrations despite his fluffier New Humor veneer.

As it works to relieve tension, comedy and humor also have the capacity to give their audiences some understanding of that tension that unfunny stress might have prevented people from recognizing – matters of home front security, for instance, might cloud inconsistencies in wartime rhetoric. Styles like dark irony and matter-of-fact treatment of horrific events allow audiences to not only laugh in the dark but illuminate a small corner of that darkness. Mast

(1998) cites Kafka, Beckett, Brecht, Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner, and Joseph Heller as practitioners of this breed of funniness. These are writers who can find the lighter side of bitterness, sorrow, and even death that combats overwhelmingly negative emotions. Serious comedies can be iconoclastic or they can be apologetic or any number of other literary orientations, but the point is perspective. That is, they give their audiences another way to process the reality around them, even when that reality is dismal. As Thurber liked to observe, humor is built from the small stuff of everyday life – and when everyday life is full of negative emotions, so then is the humor that is garnered from its events (Plimpton & Steele, 1958/1989).

Of course Thurber's everyday life was rife with catastrophe, giving him great experience with darker material that may have given him some felicity with escapism-cum-stealth-gravity. He was half-blinded as a child, completely blinded in late middle age, and abandoned by multiple lady loves including his first wife, Althea. He often appeared to sublimate his emotions in favor of the happy tone of his writing, with the philosophy that someone who is funny for popular entertainment “‘expects to have his work taken as fun, his connections as comic devices, and his deeper emotions as thyroid imbalance’” (Robb, 1957/1989, p. 41). Three years after publishing that statement, though, Thurber made his orientation toward his career clearer in a different interview:

‘I don't think anyone should write comedy nowadays that is pure nonsense; it must have meaning. I'm always astounded when my humor is described as gentle. It's anything but that, and I intend to beat up the next person who says that about me' (Gelb, 1960/1989, p. 81).

Thurber's humor comes from the truth of the human situation. At times, laughing at the truth recognizing its seriousness, thinking about it, and then allowing the hidden levities of a new perspective shine through (Brandon, 1961/1989).

This process of seeing funniness in the everyday is very much the wellspring of a great deal of Thurber's material. In the words of his biographer, Harrison Kinney, "Other humorists obligingly take pratfalls, laugh along with you, and get up again. Thurber stays down. One worries for him" (1995, p. xiv). Someone who has chronicled Thurber's tempestuous life has every bit of business being preoccupied with his welfare, but the statement also rings true for his humor. Thurber is a writer (and a person) who stays down so that his audience might be uplifted. Commentators on Thurber's work have often noted that his funniness was a mask and possibly a coping mechanism for his private tribulations. His best work lampoons situations that are ostensibly no laughing matter. But as he said of the McCarthy administration, so he lived his life: "I want to kid it rather than tear it apart" (p. 911) Thurber's drive really was laughing in the face of dire seriousness and depression.

Nowhere is the serious undertone of Thurber's escapist, silly work more accessible than in his animal fables, which he released in the 1940 *Fables for Our Time* and its 1956 sequel, *Further Fables for Our Time*. He broke the unofficial ban on humor during World War Two to publish the first installment, and although the surface-level content of his derring-do is simply a series of animal fables, the whimsical characters belie very serious material taken from everyday human life at the time. Issues of propaganda and home-front self-monitoring arise in "The Very Proper Gander," the satiric moral of which is that "Anybody who you or your wife thinks is going to overthrow the government by violence must be driven out of the country" (Thurber, 1945, p. 251). "The Bear Who Let It Alone," again, critiques the error of becoming just as gung-ho about virtue as others are about vice ("You might as well fall flat on your face as lean over too far backward" [p. 253]). Possibly the most famous of the bunch is "The Unicorn in the Garden," which is simultaneously a classic Thurber Man/Thurber Woman dialogue and a

critique of the Gilded Age-era mental health system that was still in full sway during Thurber's time – a system in which the “booby hatch” was the destination of many of the nation's mentally ill of a variety of stripes. Thurber saw the fables as his ““shield and sword”” during tumultuous times (Kinney, 1995, p. 714). If ever there was a time for America to gain perspective on the seriousness of its actions, Thurber had seized that moment and found his niche within it.

Thanks to the contemporary currency of his species of funniness and thanks indeed to his own sense of *kairos*, Thurber was an esteemed celebrity in his day before his legacy was so solidified as a hallowed ancestor of American humor. Kinney (1995) gushes about Thurber's status by referring to him in the introduction to his Thurber biography as a “restless god of literature and high comedy [that] had condescended to take the spectral form briefly” (p. xvii). Although praise during Thurber's own time was perhaps no so lofty, it was prevalent. He established himself as a literary leader in the popular mindset with the publication of *My Life and Hard Times* in 1933. His cartoons achieved their own fame at around the same time and elicited several comparisons with the art of Henri Matisse. When *The Thurber Carnival* was published Thurber received a fan letter from two seniors at Smith College that proclaimed him ““the funniest man in the world”” and offered him (or any sons he might have) their hand in marriage (Kinney, 1995, p. 857). He was hailed as a fellow celebrity by H.L. Mencken and S.J. Perelman. He gave interviews to various agents of the press later in life, and these stories often hailed him with over-the-top (but sincere) superlatives: “He is the foremost humorist of our time,” gushes *The Columbus Dispatch Magazine* (Vincent, 1959/1989, p. 72), for example. He received a deluge of letters from high school students who proclaimed him their favorite American writer. Awarded an honorary degree at Yale in 1953, Thurber was welcomed to the Ivy League fold by the following citation:



Creator of a whole gallery of real but incredible people, and a world of almost human animals, your generosity of spirit, independence of thought, and sense of the incongruous have combined to make you master of all the arts of comedy; champion of the wisely absent mind and the secret life, you have taught us to laugh at ourselves amid the predicaments and frustrations of our time (p. 962-3).

As if the honorary Doctorate were not enough (although he also received degrees from Kenyon and Williams), that statement seems enough solidification of Thurber's status and his contribution to the generations for which he wrote. There was gravitas to his work indeed, and it did not go unnoticed.

### **Thurber's Impact**

Since we seem to have ample evidence that Thurber's funny stories and cartoons had real impact beyond their provision of escapist entertainment, we can now tease out the nature of his effect on the everyday lives of his audience. Thanks to his own particular philosophy of humor, Thurber was able to gain traction with a variety of people in a variety of areas. Thanks to his position at *The New Yorker*, he contributed some sophistication to the world of American humor that became more of a force as he became more popular. He was able to unify his audience in their common lifeworld based on his own rendition of the truth of everyday experience. At the same time, he was able to fight the homogenization of culture apparently being proliferated by the onset of mass media. Finally, much like Twain, the graver undercurrents of his humor were marked by deep personal depressions throughout his life, a condition his second wife Helen referred to as "The Thurbs."

Since *The New Yorker* adhered to its promise of providing its readers with sophisticated fare (while being daring enough not to cater to that conservative old lady in Dubuque), Thurber's stories were perennially held to a complimentary standard. There was a more English style of humor than the frontiersy folk sensibility and burlesque gags that had preceded them – a genteel affect that smacked of logic and sentimentality. "Low comedy" was pushed quite intentionally

out of vogue – sex was never a *New Yorker*-approved topic, for instance, despite the free canoodling practiced by its staff members (Plimpton & Steele, 1958/1989). Of course Thurber was not alone in promoting the refined legacy of the period, being in good company with the magazine's other writers including E.B. White and Robert Benchley as well as the posh, funny wits of the Algonquin Round Table (Keough, 1998). Thurber was a harbinger of the urban intellectual elite's sway over the domain of the funny and the overall transformations in American life going on during that period (Walker & Dresner, 1998).

By promoting this particular brand, Thurber contributed to a larger ideological shift in American letters toward cultural unity. Throughout the World Wars and during their aftermath the academy turned toward the need for consensus and a greater focus on what united the American people rather than what divided them (Novick, 1988). Comedy and humor based on the foibles of everyday life were a great way to express this sentiment beyond the ivory tower and project it into the public sphere. Mast (1998) points out what many scholars of humor including Burke and Meyer have noted when he observes that

...comedy either (a) upholds the values and assumptions of society, urging the comic character to reform his ways and conform to the societal expectations ; or (b) maintains that the antisocial behavior of the comic character is superior to society's norms. The former function of comedy underlies most pre-twentieth-century theory (and practice) [p. 240].

Thurber dabbles in a little bit of both functions, as we will discuss momentarily. But the fact that so many people from so many different walks of life were able to identify with the everyday snafus of Thurber's characters shows that they had great capacity for public unification.

Everyone may have been laughing at slightly different aspects of his stories and cartoons, as per polysemy, but they were all laughing, and laughing together is a powerful unifying force in any context.

This high-nationwide identification with Thurber's life experiences is often reputed to stem from the fact that his stories are so life-like – truthful, in fact. Unfortunately, this author of funny short stories came under criticism during his heyday (and continues to today) from some corners who delight in holding him accountable for the veracity of every fact chronicled in his narratives of his youth. Granted, Thurber had a wonderful capacity for colorful invention, a trait he had inherited from his mother Mame. He was aware of his elaborations on history and was also held accountable for them by the immediate family members who were the subjects of his tales. Naturally they had good reason for their close monitoring of his work given that their long-past exploits were being laughed at by legions of complete strangers. Thurber became sensitive to his family's reception of his alterations on the past and once wrote home with the entreaty that “In writing any story...it is necessary to make up a few things, and I hope you won't be too literal about minor facts” (Kinney, 1995, p. 69-70). Less understandable, perhaps, are the critics who researched fastidiously and discovered that the bed had fallen on one of Thurber's brothers rather than him, or that a song mentioned in a story actually came out years after the narrative was supposed to have taken place – crimes for which they attack Thurber as a representative of the Truth of his America. But Thurber himself was quite surprised that members of the public held so much stock by the facts of his stories, or indeed that they took them so seriously to begin with. He was taken aback when he wrote a story called “Extinct Animals of Bermuda” – clearly, in his mind, a satire of the naturalistic voice – and found that readers had held up his farcical claims up as facts of nature (Robb, 1957/1989). In short, Thurber's work traverses the boundary between being true and ringing true, the latter of which he achieved at a level of bestseller identification with a huge public. In light of his success at observing and tapping the cultural unity of his time, we might consider forgiving him for fudging a few of his facts.

Although he did promulgate the unifying potential of comedy, though, Thurber was also a fervent practitioner of the comic corrective of Burkean humor when it came to aspects of the collective mindset he did not support. As the talking points of mass media created sameness across distance and promoted an increasingly homogenized consumer culture, Thurber's characters fought back against that mass mentality:

'I wish you wouldn't call them *dog-wagons*,' she said. He pressed the klaxon button and went around a slow car. 'That's what they are,' he said. 'Dog-wagons.' She waited a few seconds. '*Decent* people call them *diners*,' she told him, and added, 'Even if you call them diners, I don't like them.' He speeded up a hill. 'They have better stuff than most restaurants,' he said. ("A Couple of Hamburgers," 1945, p. 93).

Thurber was part of a phenomenon called the humor of the "little man" that had its origins between the World Wars as mass media continued to rise in influence. The public had seen devastation on a grand scale, it was moving into urban areas where individualism was a difficult commodity to come by, it was using the universal line of consumer products promoted by corporate advertising, and it was enjoying the same entertainments across the board. People felt overwhelmed and they felt anonymous (Walker, 1998). They were enmeshed in Ellul's (1965) "lonely crowd" with no foreseeable hope of escape or of asserting autonomous selves.

Thurber balked at the homogenous spirit of his time in funniness and in serious writings. He was fervently anti-technology to begin with thanks in no small part to the culture it created (Brandon, 1961/1989). His most spirited protest against mass culture, though, came through his famous recurring character type referred to by today's scholars as the Thurber Man. This personage is often reputed to have its roots in Thurber's observations of his own father Charles, who was a quiet man who appeared to be dominated by his outgoing, exuberant wife Mame and failed to achieve much prominence or esteem during his lifetime. (When Thurber includes drawings of a Thurber Man in his cartoons the figure wears a derby hat like the one Charles often

wore and often misplaced.) Unlike Charles Thurber, though, the Thurber Man is a site of resistance to the collectivizing mainstream. When the Thurber Man is represented he is often accompanied by a bossy, henpecking, castrating Thurber Woman who refuses to allow her partner his individual identity. Although this relationship seems ostensibly to represent the battle of the sexes (of which Thurber could of course be a hugely misogynistic proponent), there is an undercurrent of social protest. The Thurber Man is the Everyman of his period, swept unwillingly into a predetermined structure (marriage between spouses writ large into the imprisoning media and commercial confines of the day) and the Thurber Woman represents everything that keeps him from holding forth as himself. The Thurber Man is a victim of the Thurber Woman, but the forces she wields on him often involve shopping, self-presentation, and otherwise adhering to popular social mores. Consider this passage from the opening of *Is Sex Necessary? Or Why You Feel the Way You Do*, a collaboration between Thurber and E.B. White which is addressed to the Thurber Man even if it does not feature him as a third-person protagonist:

In America it's half, or two-thirds, psyche. The Frenchman's idea, by and large, is to get the woman interested in him as a male. The American idea is to point out, first of all, the great and beautiful part which the stars, and the infinite generally, play in Man's relationship to women....The American would be lost without the psyche, lost and a little scared (p. 25).

Man is thus inflated as American ideal.

The Thurber Man first appeared in the 1928 piece "Tea at Mrs. Armsby's," where he is immediately confronted with a verbally abusive Thurber Woman, and became established in the "Mr. and Mrs. Monroe" series which is reputedly based on interaction between Thurber and his first wife, Althea. Its culmination, though occurs in one of Thurber's most famous pieces, "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty." Throughout this narrative, Walter Mitty as the quintessential

Thurber Man is ordered around by his wife, whom he has driven into a classic American downtown setting of the time to run errands. While his wife has her hair done (conforming to popular beauty standards), Mitty sets forth with a shopping list of very specific items including a particular brand of dog biscuit. His only escape from the strictures imposed on him by his wife and society at large is his fantasy world where he escapes (at often inopportune times) to become a daring pilot or a famous attorney or a rugged outlaw. In short, he can only assert himself as an individual in his own head – but he does assert himself, and that is the true value of the story. He is not liberated in life, but he can be through his imagination, perhaps the only aspect of his psyche that he can truly call his own. Thurber was not the only person in his day to write about timid men (Dorothy Parker being a notable contemporary in the vein) and the sentiments surrounding the Thurber Man could easily be ascribed to women as well, but perhaps that generalization shows that Thurber had tapped into something that spoke beyond his brief narratives to the nature of the broader world around him (Kinney, 1995).

Finally, as noted above, the serious impetus behind Thurber's funny work was accented by the writer's periodic depressions. Although many funny celebrities have a similar tendency and it might be a chicken-vs.-egg discussion to probe whether the funny causes the depression or vice versa, no other comedian had their low times turned into a catchphrase based on their names. Thurber's emotional downturns were so pronounced that his editor at *The New Yorker*, Harold W. Ross, objected to him indulging himself in serious writing and thereby “going grim” (Kinney, 1995, p. 217). The advice may have been misguided, unfortunately, since humorists are marked as a profession by their potential to succumb to their neuroses. Personal tragedy punctuating a generally tumultuous lifestyle did not liberate Thurber from the potential pitfall of his profession. He wrote about his everyday life in a great deal of his work, and thus he was

hyper-vigilant about the shortcomings of the world around him so that he could lampoon them in writing. (His personal turmoil was certainly the stuff of his literary material, especially his divorce from Althea.) He suffered his first clinically diagnosed depression (coupled with anxiety and a lifestyle marked by a lot of alcohol and very little sleep) in 1935 and checked himself into a sanitarium in the Catskill Mountains. Even after he abandoned the hard-partying lifestyle of his early career, he suffered from work-related depressions and occasionally relapsed into his old ways. Later in life he made quite an impression when he once again attempted to have a rest, this time at Foord's Moore Sanitarium. He had himself driven by a chauffeur and was accompanied by his former flame Ann Honeycutt (since his wife Helen had enjoyed enough of his mood swings to enjoy a reprieve). On the way the two of them drank an entire bottle of whiskey. They made a memorable entrance upon their arrival during the ladies' tea hour when the chauffeur attempted to help the staggering Thurber out of the Cadillac only to be met with a loud, slurred, "Take your hands off me, you Methodist cock sucker!" (p. 786) – the pair of them were subsequently thrown out of the establishment.

Thurber enjoyed his psychological quirks, though, in the capacity that he thought they made him a better writer. He was dismayed, in fact, when he filled out a psychological profile test and came out normal – a state which he did not find conducive to funniness. He may have been satisfied in that regard that he spent a great deal of the last years of his life enveloped by the emotional distress of "The Thurbs" (Kinney, 1995, p. 808) marked especially by intense nostalgia for his glory days of magazine writing. He yearned for his former fluidity and his eyesight – in the burgeoning age of television he had to wait for Helen to describe the action to him before he could understand the plots of the shows they watched together. A 1953 interviewer described him as "happy again—as happy, that is, as James Thurber, sensitive and frequently

disturbed by goings-on, can reasonably be expected to be” (Ferris, p. 39). That statement may be one of the best summations to date of the intertwined nature of Thurber’s writing and his personality.

### **Thurber’s Resonance, Then and Now**

So Thurber was a man of his time, and he was funny, and his funniness struck a valuable chord within his audience. But does that chord resonate in a harmonious way? That is, while Thurber’s stories and cartoons ring true do they influence the truth of the world around them for their readers? Thurber had a lot to say that was well-loved by the people of his time, a result of his origins, his New Yorker outlet, and his method of garnering material out of the little tidbits of everyday life. There are aspects of his work that do not translate, of course. He was known even during his heyday for being a rabid misogynist, and his stance seems even more galling now than it did during the 1930s. But a great deal of what he wrote does still have some appeal today. He is valued especially for succeeding Twain in the funny corner of the American literary mythos, a mantle he was granted for a variety of reasons, and scholars today continue to find reasons to revive his work and his celebrity.

### **Thurber in his Place and Time**

Thurber’s personal life trajectory followed that of so many of the members of his generation that it seems little wonder his work struck a chord with such a large audience. During a great period of urbanization he migrated from a childhood in the Midwest to city life in New York before retiring into the life of a wealthy globetrotter with tentative roots just outside the city in a relaxing part of Connecticut. Despite his celebrity, he came from much more humble origins. He lived a nuclear family life punctuated by time with relatives and friends of the family. He attended a large public State university (and dropped out, even, because of the lure of



working as a writer abroad [Kanode, 1950/1989]). Thanks to being accidentally half-blinded by one of his brothers, he was confined to an indoor childhood full of reading instead of roughhousing outdoors with the other boys. He had inauspicious beginnings, in short, but he made the most of them and took advantage of the mobility offered by the continually rising middle class. His life was a sign of hope for success and the content of his work was simply a sign of his America.

Thurber's first ideas about funniness came from life in his neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio. Although many of his family members were accomplished wisecrackers and mimics, his mother Mame in particular was prone to practical jokes and outgoing antics. Thurber is said to have suffered a great deal of anxiety as a toddler when he saw his mother dress up as a witch to play a joke on a friend. As he grew older, though, he was often a collaborator in her schemes. Eventually he would credit her as "one of the finest comic talents I think I've ever known" (Brandon, 1961/1989, p. 101). She was intensely proud of his success as a humorist (especially since a lot of his humor resonated with her own), but she was so enmeshed in her small-town idiom that she could never match the urban sophistication of her son's later lifestyle. Kinney (1995) relates the story that

...when she was buying a train ticket back to Columbus [after visiting Thurber in New York City], the jovial clerk said, 'Columbus, eh? James Thurber's hometown.' 'Yes, I'm his mother,' Mame proudly replied. The clerk studied the diminutive elderly Mame, asked her to wait a moment, and alerted his supervisor that an unchaperoned lady of unreliable age with delusions of grandeur was about to board the train for Columbus (p. 21).

The Thurbers had some prominence in their community thanks to Mame's bubbly personality and her husband Charles's low-level involvement in state politics. The family kept up on civic events through dedicated perusals of the local and state newspapers, the source of Thurber's

initial fascination with article-writing and cartooning. But Thurber's brothers remained content with their low-impact lifestyle as their sibling continued to chase greatness on the literary stage.

Although his writing career didn't really take off until he had the good fortune to get a spot on the staff of *The New Yorker*, Thurber began his work in prose for the *Sun-Dial*, the Ohio State University campus humor monthly. Although he later had his qualms about being stuck as a humorist and occasionally took steps toward more serious, ostensibly respectable writing (like Twain before him), he found that being funny got him camaraderie and the respect of the campus community – a happy distinction for a half-blind, skinny young man who otherwise had little hope of being Big Man on Campus. He used this experience as a platform for the brief stint in journalism at the *Dispatch* that solidified him as a writer. After he had established himself as a literary great he often waxed rhapsodic on his early career as a newspaperman, but an early interviewer, Joseph Mitchell, makes clear that this tendency may have been a product of Thurber's depressive nostalgia:

'I was surprised in later years when Thurber began to tout himself as a hot-shot newspaperman,' Mitchell said. 'In The Years with Ross he would have us believe he had been a newspaper reporter par excellence. I don't think he can have it both ways. I rather suspect his earlier assessments of himself were closer to the truth, even after one eliminates the exaggerations' (Kinney, 1995, p. 563).

These "earlier assessments" include a comment he made to Mitchell to the effect that "...I would know a big story had broken and I would grab my hat and go home. I never cared for big stories..." (p. 563). But although that sort of orientation toward journalism was not an asset to his newspaper career, Thurber's preference for the everyday over the spectacular may have given him the attention to detail that made him a singularly funny writer. Naturally, working primarily in an outlet like *The New Yorker* gave Thurber's particular talents some fruitful soil in which to germinate.

Thurber's method as a literary humorist had a great deal to do with his contemporary appeal. Fortunately for posterity, he really liked to talk about his manner of writing. His creative process was marked by spontaneity. While he retained his eyesight and was able to draw his famous cartoons (which lasted throughout the apex of his career despite his later fame as America's sightless observer) he rarely planned what he was going to draw. He simply sat and doodled and waited to see what his hand would produce. Importantly, the characters in his cartoons never act of their own volition – they are always reacting to a situation in a way that channels Thurber's own reaction to the doodled scenario he is suddenly faced with. When it came to his writing, on the other hand, he gathered material from the world around him. Many of his stories are based on his childhood and the incidents that happened amid the general clamor of his immediate family. Critics speculate that his parents' relationship compounded by Thurber's own relationship with his first wife Althea provided the inspiration for the archetypal Thurber Man/Thurber Woman relationship. But Thurber denied that all of his work had secret autobiographical undertones: “Everybody thinks my characters are myself and my wife. They are not. I get my ideas from things people tell me or things I see others doing” (Miller, 1939/1989, p. 8). So although his inspiration was indeed spontaneous observation about everyday life, that observation did not always happen with a truly phenomenological perspective. He was such an intent observer that an old family friend describes him as someone who “...never wanted to draw attention to himself. He didn't move from place to place so much as he transplanted himself from one observation post to another. He acted like a spy, in a sense....He wasn't just eating at the Ritz on this occasion; he was experiencing eating at the Ritz” (Kinney, 1995, p. 195). All of that material Thurber accrued as a spy in his own life

became the stuff of his writings, and thus he gave his audience less-than-covert intelligence about its own life world.

Thurber was fastidiously detail-oriented about his writing – the source, perhaps, of his everyday appeal. Once he had written one of his New Yorker pieces he would obsess over it and rewrite its nuances *ad nauseum*. Early in his career Althea, after watching him worry a number of pieces down to the point that they were universally rejected, suggested that he set an alarm clock to alert him when he had been working on something for forty-five minutes, at which point he would have to begin work on another piece. This process brought him much greater success. He became prone to off-the-cuff storytelling for friends and family as a way to rehearse his pieces (Kinney, 1995). He later abandoned his clock in favor of a system of spontaneous first drafts after the fashion of his cartooning method followed by as many as fifteen rewrites (van Gelder, 1940). One interviewer noted that “He feels that the longer you work on your stuff, even after it is presumably finished, the better it becomes. Consequently he hates to turn in a manuscript” (Deitch, 1951/1989, p. 27). The spontaneity was still there, but it was a revised sort of impetuosity. But the point is that he was by nature a stickler for the small stuff. That attribute, complimented by his fixation on the small stuff of everyday life, made him perceptive of and receptive to the basic building blocks of synchronically resonant funniness.

All of these traits made Thurber truly a man of his age. He knew that he was timely, and he relished the trait. During one of the last interviews he ever gave, he closed with the following observation:

‘But I’m satisfied living in this century. If you lived in any other century, you would miss some of the greatest and most appalling things... Well, to use the phrase of the greatest phrasemaker of our time, Sir Winston Churchill: “The awful and the magnificent.” He was speaking of the A-bomb—that awful and magnificent weapon. Well, this is an awful

and magnificent century to live in, and I wouldn't miss that (Brandon, 1961/1989, p. 116).

Even at the end of his days, Thurber remained dedicated to his *kairos* and was observant of the fact that it was one of his defining characteristics.

### **Thurber's Modern Hangups**

While Thurber was clearly ragingly popular in his own time for sound reasons, we are left to wonder whether he speaks to modern audiences to the same effect with a similar appeal. He is still read today for fun and for edification, but we naturally turn to his work with a different sort of critical lens than his contemporaries. While audience members during his time looked for the truth of each of his supposed facts to make clear his current relevance, the skeptics of today might focus more on his cultural salience. To wit, we will now examine a couple of aspects of James Thurber's legacy that may seem problematic to readers who are currently encountering his work for the first time.

Cultural sensitivity is an important concept for people who live in the aftermath of various revolutions toward equal rights and recognitions for members of various minority groups and who have benefited from sociological retrospective about American culture. Things like this text that you're reading right now give you a different sort of mindset about where we've come from and where we're going. Although the current conception of the unified American nation had its genesis in Twain's time and Thurber's era was giving people some perspective on less egalitarian aspects of that supposed unity, the available material for funny spoofing during the 1920s through the 1940s could in many instances be considered quite offensive today. Thurber, being so faithfully a man of his times, ridiculed minorities much like many of his contemporaries. Kinney (1995), despite viewing Thurber with a great deal of adulation, made no

secret of his penchant for minority dialect mockery (for which he had a great deal of talent since he had a remarkable memory and could be a keen listener):

Negro patois was big in the Thurber inventory in a day before it connoted heartlessness toward the conditions that had given rise to it. Thurber's puritanical, self-appointed guardianship of his beloved language left him fated to note every misuse or mispronunciation. His reaction was annoyance, if the mishandling was done by the reasonably educated, who should have known better; it was one of delight if done by an innocent. In 1929 he told a New York Evening Post interviewer, 'My favorite line in all of literature is in the play *The First Year*, when the wife says to the colored maid, "Did you seed the grapefruit?" and the maid answers "Yesm', I see'd it'" (p. 484).

Thurber's stories are occasionally marked by characters whom he describes as "a comely and somber negress" or "a fat and mumbly old Negro woman" who regard their dealings with other with observations like "Neither one ob 'em is is messin' round *me* any mo'" or "*Dey ain't no way!*" (Thurber, 1961, p. 50, 52). Although dialect mimicry is not in itself racist, the terminology surrounding it seems insensitive to today's audiences and the hint of the old insensitive burlesque show will undoubtedly give current readers some pause. People can still appreciate the intention behind culturally problematic humor (understanding that the seed/see'd dichotomy is a pun), but they may not find that the tension surrounding the underlying cultural issues has been reduced enough to allow them to really laugh.

More pronounced, and certainly more widely discussed in the critical literature about Thurber's work, is Thurber's misogyny. To be blunt, Thurber was hostile to women both in his writings and in his personal life. Scholars tend to blame his bitter divorce with his first wife Althea for this tendency, although more recent observations have noted that she was often supportive of his work and that Thurber's own austere views toward sex and marriage were in part to blame for their downfall. But his work is full of castrating, overbearing, insufferable women throughout his career even after he had embarked on his second and much happier

adventure in marriage. What's more, he was often hostile to the women he worked with as well as his male friends' wives. His view of women became such a staple of his public personality that interviewers often point-blank asked him about it, which gave him ample opportunity to mitigate his popular image. But his works have outlived his interview statements, and thanks to their longevity he continues to be seen as something of a woman-hater – perhaps not without just cause.

A psychological evaluation of Thurber might identify his vivacious mother as the root of his view of women as a particularly daunting force, given her need for attention and dominating (if charming) personality. But much of his ideology was gathered from male influences, including writers like Robert O. Ryder who were popular in Ohio during his youth. Thurber quoted some choice examples of Ryder's one-liners in *The Thurber Album*, including ““We suppose every women who has been married a good long time has her moments of depression, as she cleans up after her husband, when she feels that she'd rather have the insurance money”” and ““The night has a thousand eyes, and the neighbor women at least twice that many ears”” and Thurber's avowed favorite, ““A woman is either hearing burglars or smelling something burning”” (Kinney, 1995, p. 136). Before he established the evolved nature of the Thurber Woman, Thurber tended to follow Ryder's example and give women a Dumb Dora sort of sensibility in his writing. He was also a devoted fan of the writings of Henry James, whose novels are peppered with women who seem “nameless, faceless,” and “inhabited English drawing rooms” while “Prufrock-style men stopped, started, hesitated, circled, wondered, dared, hoped, and withdrew—all out of a magnification of romantic possibility and a genuine dread of commitment” (p. 197). Imagine Thurber's shock, then, to find the dating world populated by women with names, faces, and their own strong, individual personalities. Being what was

considered a feminine man at the time, it seems likely that Thurber felt particularly fascinated with and in turn cowed by strong women.

In 1934 *The New Yorker* published a series of drawings by Thurber collectively entitled “The War Between Men and Women.” The series of events is painted as a legitimate battle, with maneuvers, prisoners taken, and in the surrender of women to men. It was at this point that the general public became privy to Thurber’s outlook on differences (and echelons) between genders and they continued to pay rapt attention as the relationship between Thurber Men and Thurber Women became increasingly abusive at the Man’s expense. A few psychiatrists enjoyed poking about in what little of Thurber’s psyche they could reach through his writing. But the general public had very little objection to the apparent misogyny being demonstrated by their beloved *New Yorker* staple. Because Thurber’s stance against women was couched in humor that revolved around self-deprecation of his own inadequacies, readers may have been just as likely to pity the author as pity the his viciously stereotyped characters. None of Thurber’s work (until the publication of *Fables for Our Time*) seemed like explicit commentary on social issues, which made it less likely that his readers would interpret much real resentment amid his jokes – they were in the game to be entertained, and he met their expectation.

A clear example of Thurber’s stance on women (chosen from many possible illustrations) is “Mr. Preble Gets Rid of his Wife,” a short story published in *The New Yorker* in 1933. Its Thurber Man is “a plump middle-aged lawyer in Scarsdale” named Mr. Preble who had decided to leave his wife and run away with his stenographer. His solution to his predicament is to murder Mrs. Preble. She, however, performs a ridiculous mixture of compliance and protest through nagging, annoying Thurber Woman behavior. When her husband suggests that they go down in the cellar, an enterprise that he says means a lot to him, Mrs. Preble shows no interest in



her husband's request. He then shows his hand and tells her that he's killing her so that he can be with someone else. She knew that all along, of course, and tells him that he had to hatch the plot because he knew he'd never get a divorce out of her. She then ridicules his murder plans:

'Don't you suppose you would get caught, you crazy thing?' she said. 'They always get caught. Why don't you go to bed? You're just getting all worked up over nothing.'

'I'm not going to bed,' said Mr. Preble. 'I'm going to bury you in the cellar. I've got my mind made up to it. I don't know how I could make it any plainer.'

'Listen,' cried Mrs. Preble, throwing her book down, 'will you be satisfied and shut up if I go down in the cellar? Will you let me alone then?'

'Yes,' said Mr. Preble. 'But you spoil it by taking that attitude.'

'Sure, sure, I always spoil everything. I stop reading right in the middle of a chapter. I'll never know how the story comes out—but that's nothing to you.' (Thurber, 1933/2001, p. 135).

Mrs. Preble proceeds to criticize her husband for his proposed murder location and for the inconsiderate time of year in which he chooses to kill her before she sends him off into the night to find a better weapon than the one he had chosen – one that cannot be traced back to him rather than the family shovel. "'Don't you dare stop at the cigarstore. I'm not going to stand down here in this cold cellar all night and freeze....And shut that *door* behind you!....Where were you born—in a barn?'" (p. 136) she yells after him as he hurries out to fulfill her augmented version of his plan. The story shows us a classic Thurber Man/Thurber Woman dichotomy. The Man has plans and the Woman makes him conform them to broader societal ideas (in this case, the ideal crime). The Woman is abrasive, uncaring, and hypercritical. The Man kowtows to her will even as he makes good on his mission to murder her. The message seems to be that Man can find no escape from the tyranny of Woman.

Thurber publicly brushed off any contemporary charges of elevating male interests with charm and candor that belied some of the criticisms against women he had made with equal

charisma. "I would like to see a matriarchy," he told *The New York Times Magazine* in 1949. "As a matter of fact, girls are bigger and stronger these days, and most of them are wearing a size 10 shoe. Maybe nature is working it out" (Breit, p. 16). He often repeated that line of reasoning that women should be in charge of men instead of ostensibly vice versa: "'Wouldn't it be marvelous to see Mrs. Khrushchev take over from Mr. Krushchev?'" (Gilmore, 1961/1989, p. 89). He did admit that his cartoon depictions of women were crass, though, and observed that he never meant to take such a decisive stance in any gender conflict (Brandon, 1961/1989). Often, though, his apologia was halfhearted or tongue-in-cheek: "'People have the impression I dislike women. That is entirely wrong. I always praise women highly. We get along fine,'" for example, or "'I consider the American women the greatest potential power in the world and altogether too complacent and lazy to do anything about it,'" (Associated Press, 1953/1989, p. 33). (Some of the women in Thurber's life may have been disinclined to corroborate that latter assertion, tepid as it is.) At times Thurber seemed to forget his reformed persona even in the midst of his newfound praise for women: "'I don't think the American girl cares much about knowledge. She is interested only in her home town and her home state. She should show a wider interest than that'" he once observed as he worked his way up to a vote of confidence for women's potential to run the world more effectively than men which culminated in a call for greater "'househusbands'" in America (Haufe, 1960/1989, p. 83). He even went so far as to blame women for their own lack of authority:

'Women are the greatest power on earth, but the sad thing is their lack of cooperation....One woman meets another. They both run their eyes over the other's clothes, but they don't see what's really there. What's in the other's brain. Why, if they're the greatest power on earth, don't they get together?' (Gilmore, 1961/1989, p. 91).

The above quotation comes from an interview that Thurber gave in the last year of his life, showing that his repentance was perhaps never complete and his ideology stayed largely intact. He cannot be solely blamed for his stance, as we have outlined. His views were popular because they were not unique for the times. But modern readers may find them harder to swallow than his contemporaries.

Thurber's unpublicized personal life made clear that the sentiments he wrote about with such outlandishly funny exaggeration were actually dead serious. "He hated [womens'] goddamn guts!" observed his close friend Joel Sayre. E.B. White, an even closer friend, agreed in so many words:

'There isn't any doubt about it. James Thurber does not like women. To begin with, he doesn't trust them, and any possible allure they might have is to him just a snare and delusion. Whether he is writing about them or drawing them, he portrays them as selfish, driving, demanding and thoroughly unlovely' (Kinney, 1995, p. 832).

Even so, the women in his life tended to take his comments with a grain of salt, and many women found his braggadocio attractive. He also counted many women in his fan base. "...for every 100 letters I get, 95 are from women, and they're generally friendly," he maintained (Dolbier, 1957/1989, p. 47). When Thurber's daughter Rosemary was asked to comment on her father's work, she said that she believed her father when he voiced his hope that women would one day take power and save men from themselves. If his treatment of and attitude toward his daughter are any indication, the Jamesian misogynist in him was opposed by a real capacity for tenderness toward the opposite sex. But today's readers see little of this context and the other literature that catalyzed and complemented it. Instead, modern readers see a writer who consistently paints men being antagonized by women who are not worthy of their attention and are perennially displeasing to the rational male mind. Even toward the end of his lifetime, a critic

noted that the central theme of Thurber's work was "'The domination of the American male by the American female'" (Arnett, 1960/1989, p. 75). That theme is even starker today in the wake of the second and third waves of feminism, making a current audience increasingly likely to be hostile toward it.

Remarkably, Thurber himself was highly cognizant of the potential for his humor to expire and expressed his fears about becoming dated as much as a decade before the end of his life. Part of that fear was based on the topical nature of his material. Another chunk stemmed from a recognition that humorists tend not to be recognized as literary greats. He opined in a 1952 interview that

'Humor isn't considered one of the major arts,' Mr. Thurber said after the briefest pause. 'The best essay on humor that I know was written by Andy [E.B.] White in "A Subtreasury of American Humor." I guess books of humor don't last because, like passions, humor is a changing thing. It is likely to date because it deals in the modern idiom. I wonder about *Babbitt*, whether the humor in that wouldn't date?....Most humorous books date and the serious ones don't....And don't forget, there's a cult around the old work which makes it difficult to know when it's funny and when it's supposed to be funny' (Breit, 1952/1989, p. 31).

Thurber actually recalled his second wife and editor Helen making him take a scene out of "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" in which Mitty prevented Ernest Hemmingway from getting into a brawl at The Stork Club, a popular night spot in New York City at the time. Of course, there is a great deal of dated material in Thurber despite Helen's best efforts. His characters' cars have klaxon buttons for car horns and they eat hamburgers at establishments they refer to as "dog-wagons" (Thurber, 1935/2001, p. 134). They sing songs like "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" and "The Barney Google March." Their slang includes phrases like "'Well, nuts to that, see?'" (Thurber, 1931/2001, p. 75). But this material comes across as simple, happy nostalgia in

contrast with Thurber's cultural gaffes. In the end it was his own unconscious context that produced his most alienating instances of *faux pas*.

### **Appreciation from a Distance**

Despite his cultural insensitivity, Thurber is widely read and popular today. We appreciate him in the tenor of literary greatness – exactly the field from which he feared he would be excluded. Whereas modern readers of Mark Twain gain insight into the social milieus of the Gilded Age as they evolved and passed on, we read Thurber today as an exercise in the universal humanity of everyday life. As his circumference was narrow, so we relate to and enjoy him on his plane. Although he slept in a different sort of bed than we do, we can appreciate the sort of upheaval that might have occurred when a bed falls on someone as they sleep through the event – the meat of the narrative in Thurber's "The Night the Bed Fell" (Thurber, 1961). We can still appreciate the timing of Thurber's Airedale Muggs, who "Bit People" so often that he was reported to the police but saved from restraint by Mame Thurber's unconditional love – although she did send a box of candy to all of Muggs's victims. Anyone who has ever taken college courses can identify with Thurber's struggle in "University Days" to pass botany and his professors' struggle to meet the needs of student stars of the football team (even if Thurber's difficulties with compulsory military drilling involves a reference that has fallen out of vogue in most U.S. institutions of higher learning). We gain identify Thurber's hindsight as he identifies with his own past. That critical distance plays an important role for both author and audience in Thurber's case:

The sharp edges of old reticences are softened in the autobiographer by the passing of time—a man does not pull the pillow over his head when he wakes in the morning because he suddenly remembers some awful thing that happened to him fifteen or twenty years ago, but the confusions and the panics of last year and the year before are too close

for contentment. Until a man can quit talking loudly to himself in order to shout down the memories of blunderings and gropings, he is in no shape for the painstaking examination of distress and the careful ordering of events so necessary to a calm and balanced exposition of what, exactly, was the matter (Thurber, 1961, p. 85).

Thurber's small perspective on his own life echoes our collective ability to interpret his work.

Because it is not modern and because it does harbor differences in lifestyle, ideology, and social structure, we can appreciate it more deeply as part of the mythos surrounding our canonized American literary humorists.

Part of our appreciation for Thurber is based on our observation that he is in so many ways a faithful sequel to Twain. This analysis has pointed out many ways in which the two writers are similar (and left many others open to strokes of insight on the part of the reader). They had similar temperaments, practiced similar methods of writing, and enjoyed many small, coincidental similarities of lifestyle. Both of them skyrocketed them to popularity within their own lifetimes and remained well-read beyond their generation. We identify Twain as a symbol of the beginning of a proud American literary tradition. Thurber, in his turn, is perhaps a reassurance that what we have is indeed a tradition and not a fluke of Twain's genius. America breeds great humorists and it seems that we are proud to elevate generational examples to reify that fact.

Thurber was no fan of Twain, but after achieving some celebrity he spent his career being perennially compared to his Gilded Age predecessor. As noted above, Thurber preferred the funny writings of Robert O. Ryder and found much more inspiration in his work than he did in Twain's. In 1949 Thurber informed an interviewer that he had never read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. When challenged that he had once claimed in a preface that he had in fact read and reread both books, Thurber explained that he "wrote that in

order to keep people from running him out of town” (Breit, 1949/1989, p. 17). By 1958 he had actually purchased a copy of *Tom Sawyer* – but hadn’t gotten around to reading it (Plimpton & Steele, 1958/1989). But his contemporaries insisted on comparing the two authors, hence the repeated interview questions about Thurber’s relationship to Twain’s work, and modern critics have promulgated that trend.

Thurber’s biographer Kinney (1995) sets a strong exemplar for comparisons between Twain and Thurber. He points out the legacy of American humor created by the former and maintained almost exclusively by his memory until Thurber’s generation came along. Indeed, Twain seemed remarkable to the public between the wars primary because his work had survived over fifty years beyond its debut and thus had ascended to the lofty halls of great literature as well as great funniness. Then Thurber (and, to an extent, others) succeeded Twain’s greatness – but Thurber has the distinction of being right next to Twain in the Dewey decimal system. Kinney elaborates the interplay between the legacy of these two great writers at the beginning of the Introduction to his Thurber biography:

James Grover Thurber (1894-1961) is considered the preeminent American humorist of the twentieth century by those who keep score in grand matters of this kind. Mark Twain, who had previously worn the crown, lived ten years into that century, but he had stopped being funny by the mid-1990s. Both men contributed a perennial classic to literature. Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* gave intelligent humor a significant and respectable place in fiction and demonstrated the power of narration expressed in simple declarative sentences. Thurber’s *My Life and Hard Times* raised the bar of comic literary reminiscence to a height that no other practitioner of the genre has come close to clearing (p. xxi).

Not only does he crown Thurber as Twain’s successor, but he brings the two together as compatriots in a war against literary humor. It’s a remarkable comparison given that their generations and their media and their styles of funniness are very different, but they both seem to

find commonality in their status as esteemed funny men who have achieved literary credibility as well as a popular following.

But comparison between Thurber and Twain proliferated during Thurber's lifetime as well as in the aftermath. A colleague at *The New Yorker*, Brendan Gill, found that Thurber deserved a comparison to Twain more than any of his contemporaries (even E.B. White) because of Thurber's ability to abandon himself to his imagination and revel in fantasy. He also found that while White was generally a nice person and an agreeable man to be around, Thurber's personality was much more akin to Twain's stormy precedent. He observed that "Thurber, like Twain, was full of rage and hatred, while eager to be loved, accepted to be made much of by the world..." (Kinney, 1995, p. 390). It's worth interjecting that both writers spent a great deal of time abroad later in their careers and both enjoyed their choice material vices, and both turned to politics at the end of their lives rather than at the apex of their careers. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, perhaps. Thurber was also the only American humorist other than Twain who was invited to sign the legendary meeting table at the prominent British humor magazine *Punch* (although E.B. White had received an invitation to do so and refused). More to the point, Thurber even compared himself Twain upon occasion despite having supposedly so little anchor in Twain's work. In a letter to E.B. White in 1937, Thurber said of himself that "I sound like Mark Twain talking from the grave" (p. 681). White, in turn, liked to compare his friend Thurber to that very mustachioed ghost, but amended his commentary by saying that "I preferred Thurber as a humorist to Twain, who was awfully uneven and sometimes downright annoying" (p. 798). All in all, it seems that Thurber's place in the annals of American humor was paved for him by Twain's legacy and some need on the part of the American public to make sure that the latter had the successor he needed to create a tradition rather than just a funny fluke. Thurber was



humorous in his own right and was able to gain celebrity without any real inspiration from Twain. But it seems that his literary greatness came on the coattails of his forebear.

Regardless of Twain's trendsetting, though, Thurber's popularity grew in its own right for myriad reasons and remains a fixture of American letters today. The year 1994 was celebrated as Thurber's centennial upon which his image was made into a commemorative postage stamp. His hometown of Columbus, Ohio named one of its streets Thurber Drive, an apartment building Thurber Towers (and Thurber Club Apartments and Thurber Square Apartments), and a shopping center Thurber Village – which includes a Thurber Village Barber Shop, a Thurber Village Cleaning Center, and a Thurber Village Pharmacy. His boyhood home on Columbus's Jefferson Avenue is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places and is open to the public as a living museum and a home for a series of writers-in-residence. It also gives out the only award for humor writing in the U.S. – the Thurber Prize for American Humor. Ohio State University, Thurber's alma mater, offers a program in Comics Studies which has roots in attention to Thurber and the university also harbors a professorship in Thurber Studies as well as a Thurber Collection. Thurber, we must admit, chose to will a great deal of his papers to Yale instead of OSU in thanks for his honorary doctorate. But his legacy lives on in Ohio perhaps despite his druthers.

The lauded legacy that followed Thurber's career was ushered in by novelist Peter De Vries, who was one of the first members of the intellectual elite to recognize Thurber as one of their own. He published a review of Thurber's works in *Poetry* magazine in 1943 that compared his writing to that of Eliot, Proust, Yeats, and Joyce. Four years later, Thurber succumbed to his progressing blindness and drew his last original cartoon for *The New Yorker*, at which point he discovered that he had drawn three hundred and seven (published) images for the magazine of

which one hundred and seventy-five were subsequently printed in one of his own books. The images had become such a staple that Harold Ross asked Thurber if *The New Yorker* could continue to print the images with new captions by staff writers – and Thurber accepted to the betterment of his literary longevity.

There is some timelessness to Thurber's legacy as much as he capitalized on his own *zeitgeist*. Colleague William Maxwell thought that “What may have haunted Thurber most [toward the end of his life] was the thought that the period was moving away from him, but no period will move away from White or Thurber any more than it will from Twain” (Kinney, 1995, p. 1032). For the staff of *The New Yorker*, Thurber lives as an archetype of a mean-spirited, almost supervillianous figure whose literary brilliance formed an invaluable part of the company mythos. For his friends, Thurber stands out as a purveyor of beloved narratives. E.B. White summed up his work by saying that “His character and ideas are developed with sympathy, with love, with compassion. If his people were not lovable and universal, they would be insupportable” (p. 853). For his biographer, always brimming with effervescent praise, Thurber is an American fixture- even an international one:

His work has been translated into many languages and appeared in many forms: as ballet, opera, radio drama, a half-dozen feature-length movies, short films, musical revues, and a long-running television series. *The Male Animal*, the play Thurber coauthored with Elliott Nugent, is standard fare for summer stock and amateur theater groups. Each year brings more Thurber—previously uncollected pieces published in book form, new anthologies containing Thurber stories, and reissues of his old classics, both for children and adults (Kinney, 1995, p. xxiii).

In short, the American public has a long memory for Thurber and his creative output and there seems to be little reason to imagine that his memory will fade as long as it is associated with our pantheon of definitive literary humorists.

## Conclusion

James Thurber's effect on American letters was huge and his works are appreciated today as evidence of the literary greatness primed by his celebrity of yesteryear. In light of Thurber's legacy, we cannot forget that he was precipitated not only by his ability to resonate with his own times but by his ability to project universal humanity into the future while simultaneously capitalizing on the funny works of the previous generation whether or not he had actually read them. It seems likely that without Twain there could have been no Thurber; then again, without the solidifying effect that Thurber had on the funny corner of the American literary scene it may be that without Thurber there might have been no lasting Twain, either. Thurber's work establish tradition if nothing else and deserve to be recognized proudly in that light.

In 1949, although he was still only just coming down from the high point of his career, Thurber mused about how he would be remembered by future generations in a *New Yorker* piece called "The Notebooks of James Thurber." His approach was gloriously tongue-in-cheek and self-deprecating, keeping it well within the confines of his usual tone. He observed that he took a trip to Europe and returned home to find that his friends had disposed of the letters he had written them instead of properly filing them away so that they might become part of a collection of Thurber correspondence for future generations to ponder. As we are aware, such a collection does indeed exist today spanning the libraries of both Ohio State University and Yale and beyond. At the time, though, Thurber "began to poke around one day to see what I could find in the way of memoranda and memorabilia of my own." He finds "at least seven major deterrents" to the project and several minor ones: "persistent illegibility, paucity of material, triviality of content, ambiguity of meaning, facetious approach, preponderance of juvenilia, and exasperating

abbreviation” (p. 211-2). He finds, scrawled in the margins of his Ohio State biology notes, some of the self-ascribed “horrible” jokes he submitted to the University humor magazine, including

HE: The news from Washington is bad.

SHE: I thought he died *long* ago (p. 212).

He also finds evidence of some plots for stories that never came to fruition, which he generally finds uninteresting barring some one liners like “‘Nuts to all the sons of butchers.’”

Much of what Thurber finds in his fictionalized real-life literary legacy (an apt residue for a man who so skillfully walked the line between truth and interesting reading) is probably closer to the real stuff of his writing process, namely “odds and ends, or, to be exact, odds and beginnings.” He says he has jotted down small observations about the goings-on around him as well as turns of phrase he finds interesting and would like at some point to employ in a piece:

‘The beaver is a working fool who went to manual-training school.’ I have never been able to fit this in anywhere....’Guinea pigs fight when empty milk bottles are clicked together.’ They do, too, but I wrote that up for *PM* in the summer of 1941 and there is no need to go into it here (p. 214).

These scraps are the stuff of topical funniness – the building blocks of the intense observational experience that allowed Thurber to be so timely and which gave his works such great everyday appeal. And it is that talent, despite personal setbacks and professional restrictions, that kept him afloat as a recognizable voice of his America. He was a man of his times, a faithful descendant of his funny forefathers, and a denizen of the cultural future of his people. From collecting scraps about small animals Thurber became a star member of the pantheon of American literary humorists.

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## CHAPTER FIVE: DAVID SEDARIS

*On a recent flight from Tokyo to Beijing, at around the time that my lunch tray was taken away, I remembered that I needed to learn Mandarin. ‘Goddamnit,’ I whispered. ‘I know I forgot something.’ Normally, when landing in a foreign country, I’m prepared to say, at the very least, ‘Hello,’ and ‘I’m sorry.’ (Sedaris, 2013, p. 77).*

There is a small population of literary humorists alive and thriving in our time, but none have so much potential to enter the pantheon occupied by Mark Twain and James Thurber so much as short-story writer and public radio personality David Sedaris. For starters, he has spent a great deal of his career being compared to those two predecessors. He has revived some of the oral humor tradition so expertly honed in part by Twain. He writes semi-autobiographical short stories like Thurber and has also followed his footsteps by writing for the *New Yorker* as well as publishing his own texts. Like both Twain and Thurber, Sedaris is wildly popular and respected in his own time. His books tend to be bestsellers and his stories find themselves reiterated in a variety of venues by both the author and his fans. Although his legacy for posterity cannot yet be ascertained, it seems safe to predict that he will be considered the predominant literary funny man of his generation. As such, we devote the final chapter of this analysis to his work.

Since Sedaris is still alive and thriving, there will be some differences between our previous excursions into America’s literary humorists and this one. Sedaris was born in 1956, which means that his life overlapped with Thurber’s by five years just like Thurber’s childhood overlapped with the end of Twain’s days. (A similarity also presents itself that Thurber was finished with the most productive part of his career while Sedaris was alive much as Twain had finished his landmark works well before Thurber was born.) His lifespan saw great changes in American culture, media, and politics. Since his life is still going, though, those changes are still evolving. It is therefore harder to say definitively how his work channels his times. Furthermore,



we lack the perspective to answer with authority how future generations might interpret Sedaris's work and whether any aspects of his funniness will outlive his writing career. Our critical distance simply has not yet arrived. Historians have not yet made retrospective decisions about the entirety of Sedaris's time. But this particular chunk of analysis will be a shift from the prevalent academic paradigm of writing to honor and amuse the dead more than to educate the living and their children (Seery, 1996). We cannot fantasize about having a dialogue with Sedaris from beyond the grave the same way we can with Twain and Thurber. But we can identify with his life and we may even discourse with him in person (as I did at the book signing referenced in the introduction to this piece). More importantly, we can interact with his work in the moment we encounter them with all the relevant cultural context necessary to appreciate them at their greatest currency. We will be able to find enough foundation for educated speculation, however, and as such the latter part of this chapter should prove fruitful enough regardless of our being Sedaris's contemporaries.

Just as we face a dearth of resources since Sedaris's time is not quite yet history, so we face a lack of literary analyses of his work. This seems remarkable since Twain and Thurber had both met some critical acclaim as well as popular accolade when they were similarly established in their careers. We must remember, though, that American letters is no longer in such a hurry to establish itself as an institution on par with other world cultural fixtures and also that the gulf between what's popular and what's considered fodder for academic inquiry. As we embark on this preemptive journey through Sedaris's legacy we keep in mind the mantra of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association: "If it's not popular, it's not culture" (Southwest Popular/American Culture Association, 2013, p. 1). Just as importantly, Sedaris's resonance with

modern readers means that it may well be time to address this gap in the literature – this analysis will be an important step toward rectifying it.

There has been one scholarly volume published to date that focuses exclusively on analyzing Sedaris's work: *Sedaris* by Kevin Kopelson (2007). Although the book does contain some nuggets of information that will be useful to our work here, we must acknowledge that the volume is not the most astute critical resource. To begin with it is largely psychoanalytical. There is nothing very wrong with approaching great writers as human beings with unique personalities, naturally. But Kopelson analyzes Sedaris by probing his stories rather than his biography – he focuses on the persona rather than the man. There would be nothing very wrong with this if Sedaris's stories were all concrete fact. But as we will discuss, Sedaris has met much the same criticism that Thurber has for fudging real-life details to enhance the flow of his narratives and we forgive him for sometimes being less than rigorous with his fact-checking because he entertains us so well. Using these fictionalized accounts as a basis for any real insight into Sedaris's everyday life is, though, a fraught undertaking. Kopelson seems particularly vindictive toward Sedaris's parents' treatment of him both as a child and as an adult, and spends a great deal of attention to pointing out how they have abused him – clearly the theory that comedy works as a safety valve to release tension does not apply in his reading of Sedaris's stories. Psychoanalysis aside, though, the *Sedaris* volume spends a lot of time comparing Sedaris to Proust, using lengthy pulled quotes from both authors to prove various similarities, and generally indexing the various themes that can be found in Sedaris's stories that had been circulated at the time of Kopelson's writing. (At this point, since Sedaris has continued to publish original work since the release of *Sedaris*, the analysis is not exhaustive. My own

analysis will, God willing, be subject to the same hangup.) The book is perhaps best summed up by its opening lines:

Sedaris calls himself an asshole—not to mention scumbag, shithead, and son of a bitch. Or various characters do....Not that Sedaris is the only satirist to deprecate himself. The British poets John Donne (1572-1631) and Alexander Pope (1688-1744), for example, acknowledge their own failings along with those of primary targets....Sedaris, however, is primarily autobiographical—not to mention hilarious, brutally honest, and painfully sad. By reviewing roles he's played in his life as well as roles others have played with him, he reveals in alarming detail how he has managed to become an asshole (p. 1).

Thus we see that Kopelson's circumference around Sedaris as a person is a narrow one that finds fact in all of his writings and views those "facts" through a highly sympathetic lens.

My goal here is to zoom out and broaden the critical circumference through which we read Sedaris. As we analyze together the times and media that make Sedaris the sensation that he is, we will follow a similar trajectory to that of our perusal of Twain and Thurber. We will look at the times that made the man, the humor that marked those times, and the ways in which Sedaris is enough of a faithful denizen of his generation to make his funny work appealing to a broad section of American society. At the end we should be able to make some diagnosis of Sedaris's ability to resonate through future generations – which is a very palpable potential, if the research to come is any indication. What we lack in biographies of Sedaris's life we will make up for with analysis of his work since his writing is to a degree autobiographical and his public persona is so well-crafted and prominent. What we lack in historical perspective we will supplement with academic musings about current events. In the end, we will arrive at a vision of Sedaris's legacy that places him well on the path toward joining his predecessors in the halls of funny American letters.

## **Sedaris's Audience**

Sedaris's lifespan has been immersed in McLuhan's information age. He is the first of our humorists to write for a global audience in the age of instantaneous worldwide communication. His audience is also the legacy of a sweeping American literacy and a population that has become increasingly educated in the wake of World War Two, the Civil Rights movement, and various waves of feminism. The middle class has continued to rise, of course, as it has since the Gilded Age, but at the same time literacy and other forms of entertainment indulgence are no longer the exclusive purview of that group. The working classes are now reading and watching and consuming as well, and have even gained some common currency with other groups thanks to their greater access to mass media. (The impoverished, of course, remain on the fringes with much less benefit from the information revolution.) Sedaris's America is, in short, able to access his works (and an infinite variety of other stimuli) with immense ease.

## **Diversity in the World of Instantaneity**

The onset of globalization (as academics tend to officially demarcate its origins) has created a flexibility of homogenization and difference within the American population that leaves very funny gaps of understanding in its wake. Kellner opined in 2002 that

Globalization appears to be the buzzword of the 1990s, the primary attractor of books, articles, and heated debate, just as postmodernism was the most fashionable and debated topic of the 1980s. A wide and diverse range of social theorists are arguing that today's world is organized by accelerating globalization, which is strengthening the dominance of a world capitalist economic system, supplanting the primacy of the nation-state with trans-national corporations and organizations, and eroding local cultures and traditions through a global culture (p. 285).

But is the global village enabled by instant communication really a totally homogenizing factor? It certainly does encourage cultural comingling. Americans eat sushi and follow the British royal family as much as they maintain their own cultural traditions. Although Twain and Thurber both spent their post-celebrity lives travelling the world, Sedaris is able to do so much more casually if his stories are any indication, and travel abroad has become much more feasible for many of his contemporaries as well. Travelling aside, people work, chat, and play online with people from many other countries (predominately, it must be noted, residents of the global north – but a broad span of people nonetheless). Kellner finds that globalization has emancipatory functions as well as negative ones in his efforts to develop a critical theory of the phenomenon. He observes that globalization “is imposed from above and yet can be contested and reconfigured from below” (p. 286). He discusses the kinds of technological determinism predicted by theorists like Heidegger and, notably, Ellul and the technophobic trend that has followed their wake in the academy. But, he notes, globalization is also pocked with democracy and spirit of power from the people. It is also pervaded by a nuclear-age realization that everyone in the world is connected to and dependent upon everyone else. He concludes that “...it is important to present globalization as a strange amalgam of both homogenizing forces of sameness and uniformity *and* heterogeneity, difference, and hybridity, as well as a contradictory mixture of democratizing and antidemocratizing tendencies” (p. 292). In short, America is not alone and it is caught up in a power structure that ebbs and flows with the world around it.

Rather than a stifling hegemony, some scholars find the global village to be full of potential for intercultural dialogue. Ganesh and Holmes (2011), for instance, assert that when they’re performed respectfully with a mind for understanding (rather than simple tolerance) that conversations between members of different cultures can achieve creativity and expression if not

consensus. Such dialogue appreciates difference instead of trying to homogenize it so that cultural boundaries still exist even as dialogic interaction brings them alongside one another. Power structures are still present, of course, and in some instances it seems overambitious to imagine that the effects of this kind of discussion will resonate beyond the interpersonal sphere. But even small-scale meeting of the divergent minds has its effects. It can address conflict. It can bring attention to historically marginalized groups. It catalyzes the sharing of positive values. In short, Americans abroad and Americans at home in Sedaris's generation can both find some communicative and material advantage from the increasingly intercultural world in which they are immersed. Sedaris makes this clear as his stories chronicle his travels in France, England, Japan, China, and various locales around the United States whose norms differ from the North Carolina upbringing he so famously vaunts and critiques.

Meanwhile, as global forces both change and reify American culture, the population that comprises Sedaris's audience navigates shifts in domestic diversity. African-Americans, for instance, have made strides toward incorporation since the ideological ground gained during Thurber's time. The 1960s especially were a time of great tumult for black communities. Leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and the activists of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee brought attention to the daily injustices of black daily life in the United States, particularly in the South, through rallies and other demonstrations. Some figures, like Louis Farrakhan, the Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X, were more radical and separatist in their social critiques and more paternalistic in their approach to guiding others (Marable, 1998). From this diversity of method came a very real change of consciousness and decisive steps toward desegregation and recognition of equality among races that began to improve the quality of life for many African-American people across the country.

But a national movement does not create equality overnight. Black communities still struggle for representation even in the aftermath of so many great steps. One of the greatest roadblocks to integration is actually the mass-mediated public sphere – even its fictional components. Entman and Rojecki (2000) probe public sphere inequalities in their volume *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* and find that United States mass media is thoroughly whitewashed to the point that black people have a difficult time finding positive role models in movies, television, or any other entertainment outlet. African-Americans are mired in a liminal state in the popular cultural mindset: Although any given black person is not necessarily destructive or polluting, s/he always harbors the potential to become so.

For Whites, the prototype of the Black person is a lower class or ‘under’ class individual of little economic attainment or status. That means Blacks [sic] of outstanding attainment in several of the dimensions will be seen as atypical, as the exception. However, the very fact that most Whites now recognize frequent exceptions evidences cultural progress—the movement of Blacks into liminality from the less desirable region of the hierarchy (p. 53).

This opinion is bolstered by news programming, which usually gives black faces to drugs, violent crime, and poverty. Black leaders are usually painted as separatists and radicals instead of supporters or arbiters of constructive change. Television sitcom portrayals of black people tend to be rife with racial stereotypes, and the exceptions are regarded as just that – exceptions. *The Cosby Show*, a 1980s-era sitcom which portrayed an affluent black family whose problems rarely included drugs or violent crime, was generally interpreted by white viewers as evidence that America’s black population was capable of pulling itself up by its bootstraps if it really wanted to, bringing increased (if possibly unconscious) blame on the black population for its own misfortunes. Advertisements for desirable products usually feature white people. Black characters in blockbuster movies are portrayed as driven largely by violence and sex.

There is some hope for alleviation of this situation that comes primarily from the entertainment scene that includes Sedaris's books. The prominent rise of hip-hop culture during the 1990s and 2000s has associated black faces with wealth and power - although it still couples them with drugs and violence (Brown, 2010). Cheerios cereal drew attention (and some racist backlash) in 2013 for a commercial featuring an interracial couple whose small daughter is interested in her parents having a healthy diet. The election of Barack Obama as the first black President of the United States in 2008 gave American culture a stately image of black power that could be associated with tradition and international influence. These are promising steps, but they are not a complete alleviation of the trends mentioned above.

Women have also seen a shifting public regard during Sedaris's writing career that his writing sometimes probes as he discusses his mother and his sisters. Women have instigated and experienced the so-called Second and Third Wave of feminist movements, the former lasting from the 1960s to the 1980s and the latter ranging from the 1990s until today. The second wave began with the popularization of the slogan "The personal is political," which invited women to appreciate that the oppression they found in their everyday lives from the pressures of being subservient wives, mothers, and other enforced female roles of the period were in fact a pervasive and problematic public issue. The progression of the movement was marked by a gradual process of consciousness-raising. In Siegel's (2007) words, it was

...the facilitated awakening of women who had been brainwashed into mindless, floor-mopping automatons or, in the case of New Left women, pliant defenders of male political privilege. The practice of consciousness-raising spread quickly, educating women much as the Vietnam teach-ins had educated individuals and raised awareness during the antiwar movement. Women across America met in kitchens, living rooms, and church basements to discuss common conceptions of oppression in their daily lives. But CR was more than what some would call a simple bitch session. Anselma Dell'Olio described it as using language that invoked spiritual and erotic catharsis.... (p. 39).



What began in kitchens and living rooms began to have hard-hitting implications in the public sphere. Women began to appreciate their role in the sexual politics of their own bedrooms. They began fighting for changes in legislation that marginalized them and organizing into activist groups to give their efforts greater publicity. Special schools were created to teach women the skills to vie for traditionally masculine jobs, like auto repair. They brought attention to women's issues in health care, workplace sexual harassment, rape, and child care for working mothers. Increasingly women saw themselves united as a sisterhood instead of isolate in their own individual home.

The Third Wave of the movement brought about a different set of priorities. Often equated with "postfeminism," it rose after the Second Wave had slowed to a crawl during the conservative 1980s and many feminist success stories were being overwritten. But the 1990s brought about something of a revival, one that was marked more by charismatic pop culture fixtures than by grassroots activism. It emphasized women's personal power and fed the narratives of the day with kick-ass female heroines who can run with (and defeat) the boys while retaining the influence of their femininity. Part of that power comes from women owning and controlling their own sexuality, sometimes in promiscuous ways. A critic in 1994 scoffed the shift in the movement as "'do-me feminism'" (Siegel, 2007, p. 116). After asserting itself in these ways, Third-Wave feminism has in a manner of speaking reversed the movement. Its emphasis on individual power and problem-solving for the self, indicates that "Social problems were not social anymore. They were, to many, personal once again" (p. 123). The sisterhood of the Second Wave collapsed into something like a re-emergence of the Ellul's Lonely Crowd – or McLuhan's information-age nomad.

The distinctions between the waves are not impermeable, of course. Many Second-Wave feminists are still alive and practicing their political involvement today and many of the social problems they fought to alleviate are still unsolved. In 2000, for example, the National Mall in Washington, DC attracted roughly 750,000 people as throngs marched and rallied around gun control legislation precipitated by a shooting at a Los Angeles day care center. Although both men and women participated in the event, it was touted as the “Million Mom March” and the rhetoric surrounding it was marked by appeals to maternity and second-wave feminist issues like child care and activism (Hayden, 2003). But the cultural shift has been prominent, leaving today’s women boosted on the shoulders of the previous generation but struggling to find their own power in their private spheres.

Alongside women’s issues has risen attention to other gender-related concerns, including efforts toward LGBTQ liberation that have been such an accent to Sedaris’s work as a prominent gay writer. Some issues of the lesbian “Lavender Menace” were, of course, mingled with both feminist movements, both of which have featured some species of women dating or sleeping with other women as a means to escape everyday male domination. The history of the queer rights movement is harder to trace than that of feminism since its emphasis has often been less on *de jure* matters and more on the experiential facts of everyday ostracism. The movement has also been fragmented among its various groups, such that transgender interests are often seen as far removed from those of gay males, for instance. Queer theory also intersects with issues of race and class (Maynard, 1999). But all of these fractured and often individualized efforts have made some palpable impacts on American culture and life. In a word, the formal and informal norms of Sedaris’s generation are more complex than those of the past. Same-sex marriage is now legal in many parts of the United States. LGBT characters and activities are increasingly

prominent in popular narratives in television, cinema, and written fiction. Popular culture has begun to explore and occasionally celebrate androgyny or the practice of “genderfuck” – “a reinvigorated reading of the discontinuity between sex and gender, during sex, in ...performance...on the streets, and in intellectual pursuits in the realms of phallogocentrism” (Reich, 1992, p. 114). The trend creates “a libidinal economy of multiple sexualities” (p. 126) that destabilizes gender and gives new meaning to the notion of a marketplace of ideas. The progression of this aspect of the popular mindset is clear in the corpus of Sedaris’s work: In his early stuff he only implies that he is gay, but his later work openly outs him as such, with great gusto.

### **Audience Agency in the Digital Period**

Readers (and listeners) of David Sedaris’s work operate within just as unique an intersection of media as did those of Twain’s and Thurber’s times. Some outlets from previous eras still exist, clearly, since Sedaris has dabbled in radio just as Thurber did and since all three of these men have made their literary name primarily through the written word commodified in book form. But this electric age of communication has also brought about great new inventions and developments in the technologies we use to entertain ourselves. Today’s audiences have ready access to a great variety of both print and electronic media, and thanks to consumer culture they have some ability to select what suits them and participate actively in the market. Here, we will briefly overview the options available, the impacts of those options, and the ways comedy and humor flourish through them.

One of the most glaring (literally) innovations of Sedaris’s time has been the television. Although it had its advent in the 1940s, the television was not a fixture of American homes until

the 1950s. It rose to prominence so quickly that in 1948 there were less than two hundred thousand television sets in American homes, but four years later in 1952 there were something in the neighborhood of seventeen million (Walker, 1998). Its material was very much a product of its predecessor, the radio, but it rose to a much greater plethora of types of expression. It faced its audience with a complexity of sound and image in the comfort of their own homes and confronted them with the ability to watch themselves, or at least fictionalized, idealized versions thereof. In the wake of the tumult of World War Two television promoted a sense of tranquility by presenting nuclear families whose demeanor was cheerful and whose problems were inconsequential. Not until the 1970s did shows begin to address social issues like race, sexuality, and politics, most notably with the cutting-edge comedy and commentary of *All in the Family*. Comedy is, in fact, has been a huge staple of television programming much like it had been a fixture of radio, leading cultural critic Gilbert Seldes to observe that “Comedy is the axis on which broadcasting revolves” (Marc, 1984/1998, p. 249).

The film industry gained new significance between Thurber’s and Sedaris’s times as well. Its great migration from the East Coast to Hollywood brought about a so-called Golden Age that lasted through the 1960s and created a cannon of classic American films that were hugely influential in U.S. culture as people across the nation all flocked to see the same movies in their local theaters. As the age of movies progressed it bred a great number of types of narratives (including several species of comedy) and made national and international stars out of its popular personalities. In short, it was influential, and its influence continues today through in-home film watching through VCRs, DVDs, and newer forms of publication like Netflix and Amazon Prime that give movie viewing the ease of television watching – and make it similarly cheap for middle-class audiences, to boot.

Sedaris's day has also seen a return to a form of entertaining expression that Twain would have found very familiar and that Sedaris seems happily at home using – the oration. Today, of course, we package it as stand-up comedy and televise it as well as seeing it live on stage. It had its origins in the pre-Gilded Age lecture circuit, survived in some form through vaudeville and nightclub acts, and gained new ground through television and Internet publication of remarkable routines. The comedian, as a figure, is a person who seems to have some license to deviate from the cultural norm so that he may be an example to his peers – sometimes of what to do, sometimes of what not to do. He can be a negative exemplar or he can be a comic spokesperson. Mintz (1998/1985), in his landmark 1980s analysis of the functions of standup comedy, reaches this conclusion:

Given this analysis, it is possible to see that our modern American stand-up comedians provide us with some of our most valuable social commentary. While some critics of popular entertainment try to distinguish between a traditional stand-up comedy characterized by an irrelevant quest for laughs, and a so-called new wave comedy which is more socially and politically satiric or insightful, such categorization belies the consistent role of stand-up comedy as social and cultural analysis. Traditional comics like Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, and Alan King are less openly 'counter-culture,' certainly, but their complaints contain a critique of the gap between what is and what we believe should be (p. 199-200).

He later elaborates the audience is not a completely passive part of this process, since they “laugh and enjoy themselves, but they also express themselves, nodding concurrence, applauding, and offering verbal encouragement” (p. 201). This orality is perhaps the medium that most expressly unifies the past with the present, since it takes an older form of leisure and turns it on its head for the current generation.

Televised entertainment brought about the need for a new kind of literacy, and while print media continued to thrive and its narratives proliferate throughout popular culture, more oral media brought about an entirely different sort of audience that approaches Sedaris for

different reasons than do his fans who access him primarily through print. And since access to television and films has become increasingly cheaper and easier to come by, we have come a long way indeed since the pre-Gilded Age days where entertainment was the purview of the wealthier classes. Today's media scene is, in fact, saturated with entertainment. For better or for worse, though, we have retained traditional notions of the rift between what the intellectual elite values as "good" literature and what concurrently reigns supreme in the popular public sphere. We adhere, in short, to distinctions between high art and low art, or in a more American sense between sophisticated urban entertainments and country folklore. Different television shows and different comedians offer different types of comedy that fall along a spectrum of sophistication and lower, even "bluer," material. Entertainment value is subject to interpretation, it seems.

So pervasive is this discussion in a culture where entertainment is an everyday aspect of home life and a paramount investment of income for many individuals and families that Neil Postman (1985) famously declared that we were *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. His criticism, hailed in one review as starting "where Marshall McLuhan left off," hinges on the allegation that entertainment is devastating the value of public discourse. For instance, he notes that "You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content" (p. 7). He argues that electronic media have changed the way that people think (in alignment with McLuhan) and in that light have changed our process of attitude formation and affected the way we experience the world. But these attitudes and experiences, he says, are overwhelming our information-gathering ability in stark contrast to McLuhan's prediction that we would all become nomadic hunter-gatherers of knowledge in the universally accessible media landscape:

How often does it occur that information provided you on morning radio or television, or in the morning newspaper, causes you to alter your plans for the day, or to take some

action you would not otherwise have taken, or provides insight into some problem you are required to solve? (p. 68).

His analysis arrives at a vision of "...a peek-a-boo world, where now this event, now that, pops into view for a moment, then vanishes again. It is a world without much coherence or sense....But like peek-a-boo, it is also endlessly entertaining" (p. 77). Our drive to be entertained causes us to turn from one thing to another rapidly, evaluating how captivating each thing might be, and then quickly moving on to the next diversion. For Postman our value system lies not in practicality but in getting carefully digested knowledge presented in twenty-two comfort-filled minutes like we can from a nightly news program.

Many scholars have argued Postman's claims – and we will problematize them ourselves now by looking at the particular nature of Sedaris's comedy and humor in this current mediated entertainment scene. Although we have been alluding to the nature of comedy in these media off and on already in this section, it behooves us to investigate more of its nuances. We turn particularly to the television medium, where comedy has retained immense popularity and found a great deal of its influence. Marc (1984/1998) noted simply in the 1980s that "TV is culture," and his statement rings true no matter which side of the debates about the influence of mass media to which a person has to adhere. That is, whether you think media reflect culture or create them (or both), TV programs expressed both traditionally or through online avenues give us a remarkable window into what might make America tick. He identifies televised wrestling as the bridge that illuminated the potential for a medium that was originally dominated by sports broadcasts to be funny – especially the antics of celebrity wrestler Gorgeous George and his colleagues. From there, Marc theorizes, television begat two distinct forms of comedy: situation comedies and variety shows. The situation comedy (or "sitcom") is the more popular of the two forms and is a direct legacy of radio comedies like *The Burns and Allen Show* and *Amos 'n'*

*Andy*. Fifties sitcoms focused on the material and to some extent the moral with the everyday exploits of characters like Lucy Ricardo in *I Love Lucy*. Once the passage of time had made the social tumult of the 1960s a less tense topic of discussion, though, the 1970s brought sitcoms with more explicit social commentary like *All in the Family*. In the meantime, though, viewers found solace in escapist or even supernatural fare like *The Andy Griffith Show* and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Variety shows, meanwhile, were consistently bringing other forms of funniness to the airwaves, most notably standup and musical comedy. The variety show was eventually usurped by the more depressing fare of the nightly news program, though, leaving sitcoms to carry the bulk of the television medium's comic relief.

Even the shift away from the variety show toward more ostensibly serious fare, however, has not dulled the edge of television comedy. Instead, mediated funniness has transmogrified itself once again to express itself through this new genre that had seemed to supplant it. Jones (2010) chronicles this process in his *Entertaining Politics*, which examines a variety of ways that comedy has welded itself to serious issues in a way that provokes audiences toward contemplation of things like politics and cultural and social concerns. He points out, in a clear refutation of Postman, that "...in the era of convergence, including social networking, streaming video, e-mail, blogging, and so forth, the conception that television is synonymous with passivity is no longer tenable" (p. 25). Instead, in a climate of "postmodern politics," citizens are free to use the media landscape as a marketplace of ideas from which they can create their own interpretative frameworks through which to address the political sphere. What's more,

...it is clear that citizens do not segregate their practices of citizenship into 'information' over here, 'entertainment' over there....My argument is that for political life to be meaningful, its presence in venues that we ritually attend to, understand, are comfortable and familiar with, and maintain feelings and commitments to should not necessarily be seen in a negative light....the political oriented entertainment shows of new political



television carry the dual quality of accessible popular culture and meaningful political material (p. 38).

Perhaps, then, current media (especially current funny texts) have done something to broach the apparent gap between what's esteemed and socially salient in an intellectual sense and what's diverting for the public at large to consume.

A famous (infamous, at this point) example of this principle of entertainment politics in action is the Comedy Central television network's spoof news program *The Daily Show*, which premiered in the late 1990s and continues to air new episodes through the time of this writing. It is not the only program of its genre to air in television history: counterparts include *The ½ Hour News Hour*, *D.L. Hughley Breaks the News*, *Chocolate News*, and *Huckabee*. None of these have been so successful or so notorious, though, as *The Daily Show*. Not only does the show satirize members of the U.S. government and other celebrities through funny fake news reporting, it also features a talk-show style interview that includes high-profile guests, many of whom are the government officials being satirized. In 2003 Senator John Edwards announced that he was going to run for the presidency on the show. In 2011 President Barack Obama made an appearance. Even though it has consistently maintained its funny nature, the show (and its faux-conservative spin-off, *The Colbert Report*) has become a legitimate source of political news and involvement for many viewers. Its funniness is usually based in fact as much as any more ostensibly legitimate news program: Sound bites from politicians, for instance, or video clips from major network news. But the show plays with this evidence and often ridicules it for its exaggerations and inconsistencies. For example, the *Show's* host Jon Stewart ridicules the repetitiveness of then-president George W. Bush's repetitive speechmaking by observing, "First step is to let people know you are aware of their questions. Then the president can reduce these nuanced concerns into a simplistic, misguided concern that he can easily refute" and then play a

series of clips of Bush repeatedly talking about the number of times people have asked him about withdrawing the American troops that were currently stationed in Afghanistan and Iraq (Jones, 2010, p. 123). So we see that television in an environment of media convergence has allowed comedy to thread its way into even the very serious genre of news reporting – and the merger has met with wide public acclaim.

Media convergence through the Internet has made our welding of entertainment and serious political matters even more steadfast – we may even expect to find something to laugh at when we access the political sphere. The video-sharing website YouTube, for instance, has allowed people to post their own self-created media to a potentially huge audience (although amateur videos are rarely the most widely viewed, with notable exceptions) and has given a populist spirit to the public sphere. This ostensible voice of the people (along with input from social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter) has been incorporated into more traditional political venues to give them more visibly democratic for non-elite members of their audience. In 2007, for instance, the collaborative CNN/YouTube Democratic Debate merged a traditional debate forum with input selected from over 3,000 YouTube video submissions from people from all walks of life around the country. One of the chosen submissions featured a stop-motion animated snowman who asked the candidates about climate change. Although the moderator of the debates, CNN journalist Anderson Cooper, confronted the assembled candidates with the fact that “‘It’s a serious question,’” some members of the political establishment were neither amused nor given pause by the whimsy of the issue’s framing (Jenkins, 2009, p. 187). Republican front-runner Mitt Romney, for instance, issued a statement that “‘I think the presidency ought to be held at a higher level than having to answer questions from a snowman’” (p. 188). But digital democracy had thrown down its gauntlet, and thanks to

the grassroots power of YouTube Billiam the Snowman issued another video had the last word on the subject. Our age is one in which the entertainment media are not only widely enjoyed by a huge section of the public, but the public is able to create and participate in them as well.

### **Ideology and Everyday Life in Sedaris's Time**

Sedaris's lifetime has spanned several remarkable shifts in the American outlook, beginning during his childhood in the 1960s. The American mindset changed again during the 1980s, taking a pendulum swing toward a very conservative contrast to the previous decades. Finally the current spirit of the 2000s held sway, and it is in this time that Sedaris has begun to express his own political leanings quite explicitly in his writing. The political leanings and other worldviews of the period changed radically over the years, and although the American material lifestyle did not necessarily change along with them public discourse and cultural attitudes did, and these are the shifts we will discuss here.

The 1960s brought about something of an end to the sense of unity and collective affirmation (which included glaring but undiscussed omissions of various social groups) that had pervaded the United States since the end of World War Two. Novick (1988) describes the period succinctly:

During the decade of the sixties the ideological consensus which provided the foundation for this posture collapsed, and it was not to be reconstructed in subsequent decades. The political culture lurched sharply left, then right; consensus was replaced first by polarization, then by fragmentation; affirmation, by negativity, confusion, apathy, and uncertainty (p. 415).

This was the time of militant second-wave feminism, of staunch African-American bids for equal rights, and of the Vietnam War. The American public lost a great deal of the trust in its government that had been so strictly enforced during previous conflicts abroad. Government

officials were increasingly seen as sources of misinformation about the war and about domestic dangers. Many members of the population leaned politically left against oppression against minority groups and even fragmented the existing liberal corner of the nation for and against the global presumptuousness of America's involvement in Vietnam. Citizens found themselves, in the wake of this debate, re-examining their notions of American-ness and its implications toward isolationism or world paternalism. The academy saw a resurgence in Marxist principles – a New Left – that emphasized critical theory and, to an extent, activism. Student protests at universities were popular and well-publicized and emphasized the moral imperatives that undergird knowledge. By the end of the decade these various currents had become to some extent institutionalized, or at least they were recognized as an integral part of the American ideological landscape and as part of a diverse array of ideas now (sometimes violently) present in the American pantheon.

The institutionalization of radical ideals was met with the spirit of protest that had promoted them in the first place at the end of the 1970s through the 1980s with a switch in the nation's climate to a push toward so-called neoconservatism. The ideology was expressed as a reactionary need for change, just like its predecessor had been, but its object was to quash the turmoil that had become such a trademark of American culture. Some corners of the country remained staunchly liberal, but the general drift sent a great deal of the population toward the Right. Elections leaned Republican. Progressive social programs were no longer a government priority. Federal tax cuts redistributed income so that the poor became poorer and the rich became richer. Tradition was the word of the day, and liberal values were seen as “parasitic not only on older values but also and more importantly on older institutions and communities” (Novick, 1988, p. 466). The Ronald Reagan presidency was an international symbol of

America's swing within the political spectrum (as was the George Bush administration that followed it), as was the anti-abortion Right to Life movement (Siegel, 2007). Although their political motivations were rather different, though, Americans continued to take a stance on social issues in the private sphere as well as the public and found great personal investment in the lives of others in their democratic community.

The high-stakes personal investment in social issues that had pervaded the United States came to a head in the 1990s during the so-called domestic Culture Wars – the stuff of some of Sedaris's more serious pieces. The election of Democrat Bill Clinton to the White House ushered in an era of hotly contested trigger issues and Americans drew decisive lines between a liberal or conservative orientations toward them. Clinton appointed five women to his cabinet, some of whom supported causes like sex education, distribution of birth control, AIDS prevention (Siegel, 2007). Clinton and his wife Hillary themselves had a reputation for supporting causes like LGBTQ rights, personal choice about abortion, and women's empowerment in traditionally male institutions like the armed forces. Liberal Americans felt freer to come out of the woodwork, but conservatives still felt that the political turf was theirs. Popular culture resounded with these debates, with ostensibly objective sources of information – like the news – taking stances for or against all of these divisive, polarized issues.

The 2000s have been more faithfully the age of McLuhan's individualistic nomad, who had found his resting place in the infinite niches of the Internet. People have been more individualistic about their politics, and the age of uncompromising protest seems to be giving itself over to a period of more passive (but heated, to be sure) discussion. That discussion, though, is more likely to be backed by individualist stance than by party affiliation or vehement espousal of a particular ideology. One of the legacies of globalization has been a turn toward

cultural relativism, meaning that people look to the root of belief systems as they make their decisions about them rather than simply operating from their usual kneejerk platforms (Novick, 1988). As noted above, gender and sexual fluidity have gained great traction, and racial and class barriers are subject to some flux as well. The generation currently on the rise, the so-called Millennials, has made individualism its trademark so much that it is routinely accused of being completely selfish and narcissistic, lacking roots in any causes greater than the daily life of each of its members. It is, on the other hand, the most educated and informed generation in American history and has suffered from an economy that make it very difficult for its members to find well-paying jobs, which may explain some of its priority on the self and personal happiness rather than broader or more material concerns (Smith & Aaker, 2013).

It is only in this last iteration of ideology during his lifetime that Sedaris has really taken a political stance and voice his personal opinions to the wide audience that listens so intently to him. His latest collection at the time of this writing, *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013), is the most prominent example of this. One of its stories, "Obama!!!!," expresses Sedaris's perspective as an American living abroad and voting absentee while acting as a representative of the American political scene for his European friends and neighbors. He very much felt a pro-Obama pressure leading up to the 2008 election, and being an Obama supporter himself he joined in, to an extent. But he was highly conscious of the expectations of his social circle:

So then, of course, it *did* happen. And everyone was like, 'Obama!' Even people I didn't personally know, cashiers at the supermarket and such who identified me by my accent. 'Obama!' they cried, and, 'You did good.' I'd like to say that their tone was congratulatory, but there was something else in there as well. Not 'How wonderful that you have a thoughtful new president' but 'How wonderful that you elected the president we thought you should elect' (p. 154).

Of course, he admits later in the narrative, “Obama too was against gay marriage. Except for a couple of decided long shots, all the candidates that year were” (p. 156). But he joined in the celebratory spirit of his French neighbors and, in a very 2000s fashion, was willing to celebrate some ideological victories while waiting for others.

Later in the same volume, to really drive his political allegiances home, Sedaris offers two farcical pieces (designed for oral interpretation, as a response to the popularity of his work in such venues) that lampoon arch-conservative philosophies by channeling them through unsympathetic characters in ridiculous ways. The first, “I Break for Traditional Marriage,” features a man who is so distraught about New York State legalizing same-sex marriage that he begins a dangerous spiral of behavior based on the snowball philosophy that anything goes now that gay men and lesbians can get married. “This might sound inexcusable, but if homosexuality is no longer a sin, then who’s to say that murder is? If it feels good, do it—that’s what the state legislators seem to be saying. Who cares what all the decent people think?” he muses (Sedaris, 2013, p. 168). So he shoots his daughter, and he shoots his wife (“like I’d been wanting to every day for the past thirty-nine years”), takes an ice pick to his elderly, infirm mother-in-law, and hits a small child with his car. When he is finally caught and sent to prison, he finds himself having a homosexual romantic affairs and decides that “as long as you keep your eyes shut, it’s really not that bad” (p. 173). Another spoof on the Right’s answers to the culture wars, “Health-Care Freedoms and Why I Want My Country Back,” features a female protagonist who is penning a message to her “Fellow Patriot/Patriotesses” (p. 201). Her activities include carrying signs calling Obama a “Kenyan Socialist Baby Grandma Killer,” posting fliers, and doting over her very artistic reformed liberal son who lives with a man (his college roommate, his mother insists) and seems to get his kicks from tricking his mother into hoisting herself on her own

petard. He gives her a t-shirt reading “Big Dyke” that he explains is meant to signify that she “holds back the flood of encroaching socialism” (p. 202). He makes her a sun visor reading “A.S.S.H.O.L.E.,” which he says is an acronym for “Another Savvy Senior Hopes Obama Loses Everything” (p. 203). In short, her gay son is having a field day with her die-hard conservatism, and outwits her every time.

### **Sedaris’s Popularity and Importance**

Since we have established the audience for whom Sedaris is writing, we can now address the nature of his popularity. His legacy is still a matter for future generations, perhaps, but his appeal today is something we can wrap ourselves around with some felicity. We will attend to the same concerns about contemporary resonance that we addressed with Twain and Thurber, namely whether Sedaris’s humor has the capacity to channel serious topics, whether it sticks in the minds of its audience beyond the moment of laughter, and what impact it might have on everyday life. Discussing these things in terms of Sedaris’s work gives us a nice sense of perspective not only regarding his work, but regarding ourselves.

### **Sedaris’s Seriousness**

Although Sedaris has never shunned grave topics in his writing, he has consistently displayed a remarkable divergence in how he treats them. In some stories he finds the gravitas behind his subject matter, reveling in its darkness and probing its problematic aspects – using humor, in short. At other times he treats serious issues with comedy and makes his serious work a vehicle for laughter rather than food for thought. The more serious sides of everyday are bread and butter for Sedaris. Instead of questioning whether they exist, we will explore and emphasize how they are expressed.



Sedaris's first published work, *Barrel Fever* (1994) features more overtly fictionalized short stories than the semiautobiographical material for which he has become most famous (a trope to which he has since returned, especially in *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls*). But maybe because fiction gives him some distance from any immediacy with his own life, Sedaris confronts his audience with a number of contemporary events that were quite controversial at the time. "This is the Last You'll Hear From Me" channels a woman who is committing suicide because her boyfriend is cheating on her. "Glen's Homophobia Newsletter Vol. 3, No. 2" is the fictional product of a gay man logging instances of homophobia in his life. "Season's Greetings to Our Friends and Family!!!," certainly the most chilling of the bunch, chronicles the year of a family whose son brings home a pregnant Vietnamese wife, much to the chagrin of his parents, who are condescending to her to the point that they frame her for murdering her own child. But all of these treatments are exaggerated for comic effect and make clear that laughter is their object rather than contemplation of the issues behind them. The cheating boyfriend has selected as his paramour a chubby woman with a bald spot whose top two teeth are browning "as a result of a cheap root canal" (p. 20). The gay man is hypersensitive and the homophobia he chronicles is often a different species of repudiation inflicted on him as a result of his own actions. The grisly details of "Season's Greetings!!!" are ludicrous when they are described in the matter-of-fact tone of a Christmas newsletter – particularly one in which the mother is clearly so biased and intolerant: "We combed the entire house, the officers and I, before finally finding the helpless baby in the laundry room, warm but lifeless in the dryer. The autopsy later revealed that Don had also been subjected to a wash cycle – hot wash, cold rinse." (p. 91). In short, these are comedy stories. Their subject matter is serious, but their execution is not, and in the end we walk away with little to condemn about these characters but their own buffoonery.

Sedaris's next volume, *Naked* (1997), began his trend of populating his books with renditions of stories from his own experience. It is here that he begins to dabble in humor, expressing funny scorn for some of his characters (and for Sedaris as well in his self-deprecating moments) in a way that encourages his readers to evaluate their moral fiber and avoid behaving like them. Sedaris's eighth-grade Spanish teacher, for instance, announces the school's new racial integration policy by relating the following story:

"I remember the time I was at the state fair, standing in line for a Sno-Kone,' she said, fingering the kiss curls that framed her squat, compact face. 'And a little colored girl ran up and tugged at my skirt, asking if she could touch my hair. "Just once," she said. "Just one time for good luck."

...The members of my class...inched forward in their seats, eager to know where this story might be going. Perhaps this little Negro girl was holding a concealed razor blade. Maybe she was one of the troublemakers out for a fresh white scalp.

I sat marveling at their naivete. Like all her previous anecdotes, this woman's story was headed straight up her ass.

'I checked to make sure she didn't have any candy on her hands, and then I bent down to let this little colored girl touch my hair.' The teacher's eyes assumed the dewy, far-away look she reserved for such Hallmark moments. "Oh," she said, "I wish I could be white and pretty like you." She paused, positing herself on the edge of her desk as though she were posing for a portrait the federal government might use on a stamp commemorating gallantry (p. 81-2).

This woman provides us with a deliciously train-wreck-style appeal (we can't look away) toward not being anything like her. Racial integration has been reinforced a hundredfold by the antics of a woman whose vanity is a complete turnoff.

This trend continues in other stories throughout Sedaris's middle period between 2000 and 2010. *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000), arguably his most famous collection of stories, broaches homosexuality, the burdens of leading an artistic lifestyle, class conflict, the death of family pets, food snobbery, urban vs. rural sensibilities, body image issues, and global perspectives on America, among many other topics relevant to Sedaris's generation. ("Big Boy,"

a story that involves an encounter with an unusually large turd, is of course carnivalesque comedy. But it is a stylistic exception to the overall thrust of the volume.) *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004) adds topics like parenting, bullying among children, money, 1960s culture, long-term romantic relationships, and intercultural views regarding race.

2008's *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* straddles a couple of different eras of Sedaris's work. It has its roots in the sort of humorous commentary that preceded it, but it is also marked by Sedaris's consciousness of his own celebrity and the lifestyle of a famous author and a return to more overtly fictionalized work that becomes the stuff of his later pieces. Its purview adds interesting issues to the Sedaris corpus such as problematization of the classist roots of white privilege, social anxiety, and aging. *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013), the most recent installment of Sedaris's work at the time of this writing, tends largely toward the comic celebrations that marked his earlier work. The stories mentioned during our discussions of Sedaris's politics are exceptions to this spirit, however, as it a particularly remarkable narrative about a time Sedaris's sister Gretchen was attacked at night in a neighborhood where he as a man could walk with little danger – and Sedaris's father's subsequent racism as he rationalizes his process of protecting and defending his daughter. This last example in particular is especially noteworthy for its probing of intersectional issues and its cultivation of a gray area of understanding (relativism) about the situation that led up to the attack (all peppered with topical humor). On the other hand, essays like "Standing By" are mostly laced with Sedaris's commentary about the people around him and other nuggets from the notebooks of details he records about his daily life. Although his humorous bent has not escaped him, then, Sedaris seems to be once again dabbling in the realm of comedy.

It is worth noting that Sedaris followed in Thurber's footsteps in ways beyond *New Yorker* publications. In 2010 he published *Squirrel Seeks Chipmunk*, a book of animal fables. While Thurber's fables were conceived as a palatable way to publish funny commentary about political controversy, Sedaris's stories, while moralistic, tend more toward more everyday social observation of people's foibles. "The Faithful Setter," for instance, uses anthropomorphized animals to tell the tale of a couple weathering infidelity:

'Can you believe the nerve of that dick?' she'll say to me, her nose pressed flat against the dining room window. Then she'll bark, 'Hey, asshole, go trash somebody else's fucking yard.'

I attribute my wife's language to the fact that she's one-quarter spaniel. She says she's only an eighth, but the ears say it all. That and her mouth.

Still, though, I can't help but love her—forgave her even after she cheated. 'They are too your children,' she'd said.... I knew they are fathered by the English bull terrier across the street, but what are you doing to do? Everyone's entitled to one mistake, aren't they? (p. 62).

It later transpires that the setter is a dog who, being purebred, is hired to service other setter females. In other words he's cheating as well (although he thinks that doesn't count as infidelity), and so the marital plot thickens. So instead of critiquing propaganda geared toward a collectivized society like Thurber did, Sedaris focus on the individual and cultural problems faced by the nomadic generations living in a globalized world.

### **Sedaris's Sticktuitiveness**

We now arrive at the question of whether Sedaris's work is simply throwaway entertainment or whether it has the capacity to linger in its audience mindset, stick its culture, and make a difference on a societal scale for all it is so widely popular. To answer that question, we will observe the growing trend that oral interpretations of Sedaris's work have become hugely popular in the competitive speech and debate circuit in high schools and universities. The

act of performing Sedaris's work, I argue, not only reifies it but encourages competitors to identify with his stances as they iterate them.

As noted above, *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* includes a handful of fictional narratives that are clearly written from perspectives that are not Sedaris's own in order to satirize particular social practices or political beliefs. He explains some of his motivation to include these pieces in an Author's Note at the beginning of the volume:

Over the years I've met quite a few teenagers who participate in what is called "Forensics." It's basically a cross between speech and debate. Students take published short stories and essays, edit them down to a predetermined length, and recite them competitively. To that end, as part of the "Etc." in this book's subtitle ["Essays, Etc."], I have written six brief monologues that young people might deliver before a panel of judges. I believe these stories should be self-evident. They're the pieces in which I am a woman, a father, and a sixteen-year-old girl with a fake British accent. (p. xi).

What Sedaris has gathered from his own interactions with fans in the Forensics community has been well-documented by other sources. For the sake of perspective, we should note that the Forensics community itself is quite a formidable institution. The website of the National Speech & Debate Association (or National Forensic League), the governing association for most high school-level Forensics initiatives, sums up its mission thus: "We connect, support, and inspire a diverse community of honor society members committed to fostering excellence in young people through competitive speech and debate activities" (2015). To date, the Association involves over 130,000 students and coaches across the United States each year. Its alumni as well as newcomers to the activity feed somewhere between fifteen and twenty competitive college Forensics associations that hugely bolster the ranks of people participating in this sort of competition. So when *The Atlantic* refers to Sedaris as "a hero in the world of competitive high-school forensics" it is not granting him custodianship of a tiny nice of the population. His influence here really is noteworthy.

Fetters (2013) describes Sedaris's work as interpreted by Forensics practitioners as "wacky one-man mini plays," and although her description is glib it's also accurate. She credits his popularity on the Forensics circuit as tantamount to his *Entertainment Weekly* magazine-ascribed title as "the preeminent humorist of his generation" as symbols of his literary achievement. She elaborates that

Sedaris's simple-yet-entertaining storytelling format fits surprisingly well within the strict stipulations of high-school speech. According to the annual Competition Events Guide issued by the National Forensic League (the nationwide speech-and-debate governing body also known, amusingly, as the NFL), every piece performed at a speech tournament must be selected from a published work. Each presentation has to clock in under 10 minutes and 30 seconds, and speakers are prohibited from using costumes, props, or staging. So Sedaris's short, dry, amusing, single-narrator stories often lend themselves beautifully to competition categories like Humorous Interpretation, in which speakers present a comedic selection from a novel, short story, play, or poem from memory, and Prose Reading, in which the presenter reads a selection from a published work written in sentences and paragraphs (as opposed to poetic verse).

In 2010, a high school student won a national title performing "The SantaLand Diaries," the piece that Sedaris himself performed so famously well on National Public Radio that it launched his career. Fetters notes that "Go Carolina" from *Me Talk Pretty One Day* and "Cyclops" from *Naked* are also popular and competitive pieces. Sedaris's work has become so popular in this vein that some coaches now actually consider him "too mainstream" to be competitive.

I should observe, on a personal note, that my own introduction to Sedaris's work was through Speech and Debate competition. I have been involved with both high school and college-level Forensics. Early in my high school career, I saw a colleague perform, indeed, "Go Carolina" at a weekend meet and the piece stuck with me as both funny and memorable. I find it noteworthy that the experience of years ago should ring true in this chapter. The point, of course, is just that I can corroborate the observations I cite in this section with material from my own experience.

The practice of using Sedaris's work in Speech competitions illustrates his resonance beyond the moment of laughter in multiple ways. These students are notable for choosing the same piece to commit to memory and rehearse *ad nauseum* throughout the school year, meaning that they repeat their selection multiple times for multiple audiences. Thus, at least within the microcosm of society immediately surrounding the performer in the moment of the performance, Sedaris pops up again and again, sometimes decades after his pieces were published. Furthermore, this species of performance allows people to rehearse ideas as well as recite them. "Go Carolina," which centers around Sedaris's youthful lisp as a metaphor for his burgeoning homosexuality, might be a safe mouthpiece for a young gay man to express feelings similar to Sedaris's before is comfortable expressing them as a facet of himself. This adds another layer to Sedaris's resonance. But even performers who do not already identify with Sedaris's stances are obliged to mimic him – or at least his thought process – as they adapt his pieces for oral interpretation. Tanner et al. (2008) observe that mimicking others creates a sense of rapport with them and can even influence future behavior to fall in line with the person being mimicked – consider the sense of emulation inspired by television commercials and other advertisements in which eating behavior on the screen begets similar eating behavior from audience members. People who mimic others find that they feel affiliation or closeness with the person they mimic – and the person being mimicked feels some satisfaction that their feelings have been illustrated by a compatriot. So students who perform Sedaris's pieces are not only likely to come to sympathize with him, but they may feel deeply acquainted with him and thus may be more likely to take an interest in other pieces of his as well as his overall career as a literary celebrity. Once again we have broadened the circumference of David Sedaris's resonance through the Forensics

community – and with the publication of the *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* pieces we can assume that, “mainstream” though they may be, his influence in this vein will continue to grow.

### **The Impacts of Resilience**

Having established that Sedaris’s funniness does have some gravitas to it and that it circulates in the popular mindset well beyond the initial moment in which it makes us laugh, we now move on to address the potential impacts of Sedaris’s work on the everyday lives of members of its audience. This is the hardest part of this particular segment of our analysis to conceive during his lifetime, because we lack the benefit of hindsight and being immersed in said effects prompts us to take them for granted. What we will examine at the moment is primarily speculation, but we will try to make it insightful speculation with significant traction. To wit, we will probe how Sedaris’s recurring trope of resilience both reflects that trait in the society around him and also encourages his audience to continue to emulate it in a society that often emphasizes individual turmoil.

Although it seems irresponsible to follow in Kopelson’s (2007) footsteps and paint Sedaris’s family as chronically abusive and most of the rest of the people in his life as somehow similarly oppressive (especially since I for one have never met any of these people except through one-perspective fictionalized short stories that are meant to be lighthearted rather than sentimental and dramatic), we should recognize that Sedaris has faced his share of personal turmoil during his life. He has mentioned in several stories, such as *Naked’s* “A Plague of Tics,” that he has obsessive-compulsive tendencies and even as a child found himself fighting his own psyche:

I might touch the telephone pole at step three hundred and fourteen and then, fifteen paces later, worry that I hadn’t touched it in exactly the right spot. It needed to be



touched again. I'd let my mind wander for one brief moment and then doubt had set in, causing me to question not just the telephone pole but also the lawn ornament back at step two hundred and nineteen. I'd have to go back and lick that concrete mushroom one more time... (1997, p. 9).

He mentions in *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*'s "The Girl Next Door" that even as an adult he has a fixation with punctuality: "The good part about being an obsessive compulsive is that you're always on time for work. The bad part is that you're on time for everything.

Rinsing your coffee cup, taking a bath, walking your clothes to the Laundromat..." (2004, p. 114). In short, he suffers from high anxiety by dint of nothing more than his own brain.

His internal struggles are compounded by unfortunate events in his external life. As a young man he was kicked out of his family's home by his father for being gay (and that's not the only discrimination he has faced regarding his sexuality). In middle age he struggled with the death of his mother. He loved and lost before nesting with his famously long-term partner, Hugh – although he makes clear in his stories that their domestic life is realistic in that it is less than idyllic. He has lived in poverty. He has emancipated himself from drug use and smoking tobacco. These are all recurring themes in his autobiographical narratives, and he does not understate the impact these incidents and more have had on his worldview.

In the end, though, even as Sedaris relates all of these negative forces in his life, he always enjoys the heuristic of humor to work his way through them. The stories where he exercises this talent don't always end on a happy note, indicating that Sedaris does not always laugh away his negative emotions and does not want to discredit them. At the same time, he uses comedy and humor to illuminate these situations with some useful perspective. The brief narrative "Hejira" from *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004), for instance, describes his forced exodus from living at his parents' house because of his father's discomfort

with the fact that Sedaris is gay. His mother drove him and his belongings to stay at his sister Lisa's apartment until he find his own living space. Interestingly, Sedaris has no idea why he has been kicked out because his father was uncomfortable uttering the word "gay" when he explained the situation to him: "I guess I could have pinned him down, but I just hadn't seen the point. 'Is it because I'm a failure? A drug addict? A sponge? Come on, Dad, just give me one good reason'" (p. 89). He revels in that obliviousness and confusion as he relates the story and finds mild funniness from juxtaposition in his own lack of closure about the incident:

The car light was on and I wondered what the passing drivers thought as they watched my mother sob. What kind of people did they think we were? Did they think she was one of those crybaby moms who fell apart every time someone chipped a coffee cup? Did they assume I'd said something to hurt her? Did they see up as just another crying mother and her stoned gay son, sitting in a station wagon and listening to a call-in show about birds, or did they imagine, for just one moment, that we might be special? (p. 89-90).

Although this passage is not laugh-out-loud funny, it is certainly more whimsical than most stories about this subject matter have the chutzpah to be. It plays with perspective, it indulges in a moment of rhetorical perspective, and it finally rests on the ludicrous commonality of the truth behind the scenario. Sedaris is clearly not laughing away the incident, but he is using humor to process it and make it more accessible to both himself and his readers.

In short, Sedaris seems to use his funny narratives to foster a sense of resilience about his own life. In a world where societal issues are conceived and interpreted at the level of the millennial individual, the solitary information-age nomad, his individual journey invites buy-in from those who might emulate it to navigate their own personal travails. Reliance on the self is a hallmark of this individualistic America as much as it was during the Gilded Age – perhaps more, because our monism is bolstered by the machines we interact with instead of being confronted with other human beings during our daily errands and in our workplaces. Self-help

books and windows into our own personal consciousness are important literary currency as people handle the effects that their cognitions have on their ability to handle everyday life. People strive to become resilient, to become able to work past setbacks and push forward to better things.

The tendency that we have here written small at an individual level can also be expanded to the collectivity of the American nation – a concept that has not been abandoned during all of this push toward the loneliness of the more and more crowded public sphere. The America of Sedaris’s generation has proved resilient toward a number of stressors, both internal and external. The sixties saw tragedy through international military involvement as well as a many-faceted domestic fracturing across the country. The people of the 1970s attempted to unify and rebuild that fracturing only to face the further impediment of the nationwide culture wars brought on by “issue”-centric politics and a sense of popular governance over morality – all that coupled with the War on Terror that brought American soldiers into new conflicts abroad. Today, as Sedaris explores *Diabetes with Owls*, people face a new period of rebuilding and something of a sense of political renewal through elections and an increasingly global perspective on ourselves. As Sedaris and other Americans have been resilient, so has the United States as a whole. His work is perhaps more resonant because of this harmony. It may also prove encouraging.

Sedaris once famously and wittily observed that he was the most important person in the lives of everyone he knows and even in the lives of some people he’s never met. Although the quip is hyperbolic, Sedaris’s influence is indeed important in his resilient America because of his invitation to happy emulation. His funny resilience can help others handle their own crises and gain their own doses of perspective – and the benefits we can gain from Sedaris’s example are myriad. Southwick and Charney (2012) in their treatise on the psychological benefits of

resilience, note that successfully navigating trauma and anxiety toward a more positive outlook on life can have a wide array of advantages for people who can manage that task. It can engender acceptance, which allows people to tolerate higher levels of stress without having a breakdown. It can turn traumatic events toward healthy personal growth instead of defeat – in other words, people engage in cognitive reappraisal and find the benefits of their experiences rather than focusing on the setbacks involved. The authors explicitly discuss humor as a powerful way to cultivate these benefits:

Humor provides distance and perspective, but it does so without denying pain or fear. Humor manages to present the positive and negative wrapped into one package....Without Pollyanna-like optimism, humor can actively confront, proactively reframe and at times transform the tragic....humor can be a creative way to confront and cope with what we fear or find painful (p. 177).

The passage above about Sedaris's confused car ride with his mother, emblematic of the spirit of many of his stories, performs just this feat.

Sedaris encourages us to invoke the confrontational and coping capacities of humor in our lives. Readers can use his example to find the lighter aspects of their own life events without discrediting their graver counterparts. And readers have stated that they do find this very inspiration from their consumption of Sedaris's work. Florez (2013), for instance, mentions in his *Lambda* review of Sedaris's narratives about his experiences with own homosexuality that he reads Sedaris when he wants help analyzing the social behavior of others. Sedaris himself elaborated on the value of his approach to digesting life in an interview with *The Washington Post's* Lillian Cunningham (2014):

I said to someone the other day—I don't know who I was trying to kid—I said 'It's not that hard being nice to people.' Which makes me sound like such a good guy. Then I thought about it later. And I thought, 'No, it's not that hard to be nice to *nice* people. It's really hard to be nice to people who aren't nice.' That's work right there.

A comment on the article from a reader who identifies themselves as DonnaMariainChicago highlights the utility of Sedaris's sentiment: "I love David Sedaris...There's a magical alchemy the way he turns pain into laughter. He makes me rethink my past and try to find a humorous side to old wounds. It's very healing." Eight people gave that post a thumbs-up, indicating that DonnaMaria is not alone in her reaction and her personal execution of Sedaris's style of resilience. He reflects an American sense of resilience so that people may echo it in their own lives. Even readers who did not experience the Vietnam War or who have little identification with the issues of the culture wars of the 1990s and the early 2000s can take Sedaris's outlook into their personal lives – the realm in which he himself seems to gain the most satisfaction from it.

### **A Contemporary Look at a Contemporary Author**

Like Twain and Thurber before him, Sedaris's life has been rife with many of the hallmarks of life in his generation. Many of the issues we discussed at the beginning of this analysis that affect the everyday lives of the body of people that make up Sedaris's audience have also touched his life in important ways. These traits make him identifiable to his audience. On the other hand, his popularity is not without his hangups. He does dabble in controversy, most notably that which Twain and Thurber also suffered surrounding the truth of their autobiographical narratives. His appeal is also spotty in some areas of the globalized world. He is an international phenomenon on some levels, but there are notable gaps in his appeal. But in the end he is representative of the America for which he is writing, and his appeal seems broad and resonant enough that we can foresee a legacy for Sedaris alongside the noteworthy funny literary Americans that preceded him.

## Sedaris as a Man of His Time

Sedaris is popular among today's audiences in part because his life events have been so remarkable and he is able to express his feelings about them in an unusual way. At the same time, audiences feel like they know him on a personal level thanks to the semi-autobiographical nature of his work and his focus on the funny aspects of the everyday. This identification would not be possible unless there was a thread in Sedaris's life that is, in many ways, a lot like other people's experiences. In an age of globalization, for instance, Sedaris has used his fame and fortune toward an investment in a globetrotting lifestyle that many members of his audience enjoy or to which they aspire. In an age of gender fluidity he is openly gay. And in an age that is nothing if not the product of the generations before it, Sedaris is a second-generation American who is highly conscious of the cultures that paved his way.

Sedaris was born, as he makes clear throughout his work, in upstate New York and raised in Raleigh, North Carolina. His beginnings were inauspicious in that regard, as are the origins of most of his middle-class readers. But since the success of his writing has earned him the means to attain some creature comforts, he has spent a great deal of his time travelling abroad as well as spanning the United States with his book tours. (Many of his more recent narratives are travel-focused and are set in hotels or airports if not at various stops along his book tours.) He seems to have developed a taste for international travel early in life, if the story "A Guy Walks into a Bar Car" from *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013) is any indication. He details a trip to Greece he took with some of his family members when he was twenty-five. After his Grecian experience he continued his explorations by sailing to Italy by himself, a trip that he remembers as a missed opportunity for a romantic entanglement with a handsome stranger. But most of Sedaris's travels abroad seem to have stemmed from his relationship with his long-term partner Hugh. As Sedaris

elaborates in *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000), Hugh's childhood in Africa predisposed him to a cosmopolitan comfort with visiting other places and blending in with other cultures: "When I was seven years old, my family moved to North Carolina. When he was seven years old, Hugh's family moved to the Congo. We had a collie and a house cat. They had a monkey and two horses named Charlie Brown and Satan" (p. 194). Sedaris adds in *When You are Engulfed in Flames* (2008) that Hugh's family roots are in Kentucky, but throughout Sedaris's stories Hugh represents comfortable exoticism and global savvy.

It is Hugh, therefore, who spurs a lot of Sedaris's time abroad. And it seems he had acclimated to it so well that he has lived outside of the United States for most of the latter half of his career. The two have lived both in Paris and in the French countryside, and more recently they've migrated to West Sussex, England. Although he paints Hugh as a cultural chameleon, though, he himself is more conscious of the various clashes he experiences while moving abroad. His stories about learning French from *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (2000) are funny for their linguistic analysis: "I find it ridiculous to assign a gender to an inanimate object incapable of disrobing and making an occasional fool of itself. Why refer to Lady Crack Pipe or Good Sir Dishrag when these things could never live up to all that their sex implied?" (p. 170). But they also offer something about the confusions Sedaris experienced as he acclimated to French culture. In one memorable scene from "Jesus Shaves" he tries to explain American Easter traditions to his French language teacher (in French, no less):

'A rabbit?' The teacher, assuming I'd used the wrong word, positioned her index fingers on top of her head, wriggling them as though they were ears. 'You mean one of these? A rabbit rabbit?'

'Well, sure,' I said. 'He come in the night when one sleep on a bed. With a hand he have basket and foods.'

The teacher signed and shook her head. As far as she was concerned, I had just explained everything that was wrong with my country. ‘No, no,’ she said. ‘Here in France the chocolate is brought by a big bell that flies in from Rome.’

I called for a time-out. ‘But how do the bell know where you live?’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘how does a rabbit?’ (p. 178).

But notice that although he is trying to learn about this culture he has moved into, Sedaris never disowns America (like Twain was prone to doing). He does learn to blend in and get to know his neighbors – another *Me Talk Pretty One Day* story, “Picka Pocketoni,” relates his feelings about being mistaken for a native Frenchman by some American tourists on the Metro who assume he doesn’t know English and ridicule him as smelly and as a probable pickpocket. Despite his newfound international flair, though, Sedaris has not relinquished his U.S. citizenship and most of his stories of his travels have been written from the perspective of an American abroad instead of some species of citizen of the world.

The contrast of Sedaris’s U.S. sensibilities with his experiences in foreign climes is clear in his stories of international travel written since he has attained the bulk of his celebrity. In *When You Are Engulfed in Flames* (2008) he capitalizes on the jarring effects of international travel by taking an extended vacation to Japan with Hugh that seems to have made a favorable impression: “It might be different for actual Japanese people, but as a visitor I am regularly overwhelmed by how kind and accommodating everyone is” (p. 287-8). Note that he is conscious that he is always interpreting places as a visitor, and he gets some enjoyment out of that status. He also visits Australia in *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls’s* “Laugh, Kookaburra” (2013), an experience which seems to have moved him to recollect his childhood in America where he learned traditional Australian songs and remembered them mostly for their apparently abstract, nonsensical lyrics. Again, his international travel is interpreted through a lens of American-ness. This trend comes to a head when, in the same volume, Sedaris relates a trip to



China. The story has roots in a piece he wrote for *The Guardian* that was criticized by at least one reader as “condescending, xenophobic, and thoroughly venomous” (Yang, 2011). He begins the piece by unfavorably contrasting China with his visit to Japan, which he found “aggressively clean” by comparison (p. 190). He revels in descriptions of bodily waste:

I saw wads of phlegm glistening like freshly shucked oysters on staircases and escalators. I saw them frozen into slicks on the sidewalk and oozing down the sides of walls. It often seemed that if people weren't spitting they were coughing without covering their mouths, or shooting wads of snot out of their noses....Another thing you notice in China are the turds. *Oh, please*, you're probably thinking. *Must you?* To this I answer, 'Yes, I must,' for if they didn't affect the food itself, they affected the way I thought about it (p. 191).

In this particular case the American in Sedaris comes out with its judgmental aspects blazing. This is the piece that makes it most glaringly clear that for all his travelling, Sedaris shows that despite the scholarly fears voiced above that globalization will erode cultural distinctions he still approaches the world from a perspective firmly rooted in the United States. The point, though, is that he is comfortably able to approach it.

Sedaris's Americanness is notable for another reason that makes him a compatriot of many of his audience members – he was born and raised in the States, but his ancestry is very much a product of the international immigration that has marked American culture since the Gilded Age. His ancestry on his father's side is Greek (as his last name indicates), and in some of his pieces he acknowledges the assimilation evident in the climate in which he was raised. In “Jesus Shaves” he remembers celebrating Greek Orthodox Easter instead of the holiday more commonly celebrated in his area of the U.S. He also remembers his mother, herself raised Protestant, speculating that the Greeks had their Easter later so they could get their candy and decorations at sale prices. “‘The cheap sons of bitches,’ she'd say” (p. 176). But this appeal toward a grudging melting-pot-style blending of cultures is mitigated throughout Sedaris's books

by the occasional presence of his Greek grandmother, his Ya-Ya or Yia-Yia. In *Naked* (1997) he describes her problematic relationship with his immediate family, which was marked by her distaste for his mother “the girl,” (p. 25) who is an outsider to Greek culture and therefore unwelcome as a partner for her first-generation Greek-American son. He remembers his grandmother casually engaging in behavior he found embarrassing by American standards – using the kitchen floor as a surface for kneading bread dough, for instance, or emerging from department store dressing rooms in her underwear. She doted on her grandsons and disregarded her granddaughters. Her marriage had been arranged. When Sedaris’s mother’s frustration with Ya-Ya eventually leads to her taking up residence in a senior citizens’ home instead of the family house, Ya-Ya is unable to assimilate into her thoroughly American surroundings. She dies while Sedaris is in college, and while his father grieves for his deceased parent the fictionalized Sedaris and his roommate indulge themselves in acid and idle conversation. Almost two decades later, though, in *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013), Sedaris gives us another glimpse at his relationship with his Greek grandmother. Living in West Sussex he finds that his European neighbors are inclined to dump their trash along the roadside without any thought to the piles of litter (“Rubbish”) they’re leaving behind. This reminds him of his grandmother, whom he now refers to as Yiayia, who was prone to collecting her trash to eject from the car window during drives: “The important thing to Yiayia wasn’t a clean outside, but a clean inside. A tidy station wagon reflected upon you personally, while a tidy landscape, what was that?” (p. 222). He finds that his English neighbors have a similar regard for their surroundings.

In some ways, Sedaris’s time as an American abroad seems to have helped his perspective on his ancestry come full circle. As a second-generation American he found his grandmother out of place and at times embarrassing. As an American living in Europe he finds

himself surrounded by people who might not find her behavior strange at all. His intercultural dynamic is an important and fluid aspect of his identity, as it is for many other Americans of his generation. It has always been a lauded and pivotal part of American-ness, and Sedaris's stories allow us to take a step back from ourselves and our own ancestries and witness just how much it influences the way we look at our niches as well as the rest of the world.

On top of all of these international cultural concerns, Sedaris piques an aspect of domestic American life that has become more and more focal during his generation – he is an openly gay man. As noted above, sexuality and gender fluidity are a great topic of public discourse in today's political and social scenes - but their implications are personal as well as political. Sedaris's discussions of his experiences that involve being gay, which pepper all of his books, give us a useful window into the changing climate for LGBT lifestyles during his time. His experiences chronologically throughout his life have gone from intensely private musings to public declaration and discrimination. What's more, the way he discusses these events has changed over the course of his career, from tacit language to more frank and open declaration.

Sedaris's stories revolving around his own sexuality have not been published in chronological order. In fact, his first forays into that realm of disclosure are not about him at all, but rather about the subject of homosexuality in the abstract – held at a distance, it seems. Barrel Fever's "Glem's Homophobia Newsletter Vol. 3 No. 2" is a third-person narrative about a character who does not seem immediately reminiscent of Sedaris. On the other hand, "My Manuscript" in the same volume seems like a more sympathetic portrayal of a gay man's first experimentations with his sexuality, but it is still clearly not the part of the Sedaris cannon established in later books and does not mesh with the timeline he later discloses about his process of experimentation and coming out. As time has gone on and Sedaris has become a more

established celebrity in a culture that is increasingly open about various LGBTQ issues, though, he has discussed the topic more frankly and in more personal terms. He has also become less confrontation about his sexuality and more matter-of-fact about its role as one facet among many other traits that color his life.

Sedaris's initial foray into discussing sexuality in the first person occurs in *Naked* (1997) with a story bluntly entitled "I Like Guys." It relates his experiences at a summer camp where he bonds with another boy his age and finds that they have a great deal of sexual tension between the two of them. Since they're in an environment populated by authority figures who drop the word "faggot" as a casual insult the two exercise their feelings through wrestling and teasing rather than more overtly sexual behavior. Their gay-themed pranks against each other escalate until Sedaris finds himself framed with a piece of paper that reads "I LIKE GUYS." In retrospect, Sedaris observes that "Presented as an indictment, the document was both pathetic and comic. Would I supposedly have written the note to remind myself of the fact, lest I forget?" (p. 91). But fortunately for Sedaris the other boys in the camp find his tormentor guilty by association and he is spared direct ridicule. When he returns home and works as a volunteer at a local mental hospital he is affronted when a patient shout at him that he is a "faggot!" Although the woman was clinically insane, Sedaris, in print, admits that "She got the faggot part right, so maybe she was onto something" (p. 93). In the volume's other stories, he is propositioned for sex by a man who lives in a trailer with his mother and decorates his bedroom with artificial penises (Sedaris flees from the invitation). He works for a man who forcefully encourages him to pray away the gay, as it were. He begins "Ashes" with "The moment I realized I would be a homosexual for the rest of my life..." (p. 234) leaving the reader little doubt about his stance on himself.

By 2000, in *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, Sedaris had begun discussing his sexuality more often but with less ostentation. “Go Carolina” details his childhood speech therapy sessions to remove his lisp, which he links to his gayness: “...a more appropriate marker [for the door of the Speech Therapy lab] would have read FUTURE HOMOSEXUALS OF MAERICA. We knocked ourselves out trying to fit in but were ultimately betrayed by our tongues” (p. 10). A similar indirect tone permeates the next installment of the volume, “Giant Dreams, Midget Abilities,” in which Sedaris takes music lessons from “Not a dwarf, but an honest-to-God midget” (p. 21). He finds himself highly sympathetic to his short teacher after seeing him being ridiculed by a group of adolescent boys. He is dismayed, however, when he sings for his teacher in an effeminate voice and finds the man backing off in dismay and calling him a screwball. “He’d used the word screwball, but I knew what he really meant. He meant I should have named my guitar Doug or Brian, or better yet, taken up the flute” (p. 29). Despite this indirectness as Sedaris manages to find myriad creative ways to phrase the fact that he’s gay without directly making that admission, this is also the first time he introduces his audience to his partner, Hugh, and uses the term “boyfriend” to describe him. The narratives that include Hugh do not revolve much around a gay lifestyle, but they do involve their domestic concerns as a cohabitating couple that pairs of multiple genders might identify with. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, in sum, presents the reader with a sedate, everyday perspective on being gay in America (and abroad).

More direct narratives emerge in *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (2004), including the coming-out tale “Hejira” discussed above. The word “faggot” makes a return appearance, this time from the mouth of the “The Girl Next Door” who, although ostensibly sweet and pitiful, turns on Sedaris when he tells her mother that she’s been stealing small objects from his home. “‘Little faggot, little tattletale,’ she whispers into his keyhole, ‘You think you’re

smart but you don't know shit” (p. 120). Sedaris moves to a new neighborhood shortly thereafter. A less causal incident occurs when Sedaris, working for a housecleaning company as he begins to attain fame as a writer, is mistaken for a member of the staff of an erotic cleaning service by a man who spends the duration of Sedaris's cleaning time propositioning him and masturbating. “...you'd think that on seeing me, he might have realized his mistake,” Sedaris observes. “I've never dealt with an erotic housecleaning service, but something tells me the employees are hired for their looks rather than their vacuuming skills” (p. 135). But he recognizes that both he and the masturbating man are gay, and despite not being remotely attracted to him he manages to find some brotherhood in the experience. This story is followed by an introspective about his continuing relationship with Hugh, which at this point has all the trappings of a long-term relationship that has found a comfortable equilibrium. One of the last stories in the volume, “Chicken in the Henhouse,” is an especially telling story of the effects of homophobia on gay men as it details Sedaris's increasing paranoia as he helps a small boy get breakfast from a hotel lobby and fears that someone will perceive him as a gay pedophile.

Sedaris's ostentation about being gay has only increased in his most recent two books. *When You are Engulfed in Flames* features stories about travels with Hugh, men's fashion recommendations, questions like ““So this boyfriend....Let me ask. Which one of you is the woman?”” (p. 163), and fears of living near a convicted child molester and being associated with him by dint of being a homosexual. One story, “Old Faithful,” gives us especially sympathetic insight into his relationship with Hugh as ““an aging monogamous couple”” (p. 239). In *Let's Explore Diabetes with Owls* (2013) we find Sedaris musing over missed chances at romance with various men, finding impressive presents for Hugh, and otherwise going through everyday life as an over-fifty gay man. He does mention his sexuality occasionally, but these comments are ships

in the night compared to the content of *Naked* or *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*. It is also different from the glib observances of *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Sedaris seems very offhand about who is he, and rather than proving himself to his readers he is now simply bringing us along on his journey.

Earlier in his career, Sedaris's work was emphasized for its LGBTQ themes – although it is less so today. In 2007 an interviewer had a frank discussion with the author about his public perception in this light:

**Interviewer:** *When we were talking earlier, I told you I first found your books in the gay and lesbian section of a bookstore. From what I've read about you, though, it seems important for your work not to be put into a category, such as humor or gay writing.*

**Sedaris:** I don't think that you can avoid it. In terms of the gay and lesbian section, whenever I see one in a bookstore, I think, "What's that doing there? What's that *section* doing there? Why are these books segregated? Why are we deciding this? What are they so afraid of? I use the word "boyfriend," so I go next to the fisting manual? Because I use the word "boyfriend"? It's not that I'm ashamed of being gay. It's just that first on my list right now is that I'm foreign. If my average day-to-day life said one thing, if it said, "What are you?" I'd say a foreigner. Living in France, I feel like a foreigner more than anything else (Sedaris & Knight, 2007).

Sedaris does not feel defined by his homosexuality. But his ability to indulge it in his writing is a litmus test of his generation's stance on the topic and part of what makes him such a man of his times.

### **Sedaris in the Future**

In our discussion of Mark Twain and James Thurber we were able to discuss ways in which the works of these authors might not resonate with modern audiences. This is a slightly futile endeavor in this particular chapter since modern audiences are Sedaris's only audiences. His popularity has its hiccups even now, of course. He has been subject to the same criticism that

Thurber faced that his ostensibly autobiographical stories are not entirely truthful (Sicha, 2012) – and we may cross-apply our earlier defense of Thurber to Sedaris’s situation. At the same time he has faced criticism for being too truthful in some contexts – particularly in his descriptions of the bodies of some of the denizens of the nudist colony he visits in *Naked*, which are detailed enough that some of the people who inspired them can be identified by those who know them (Heard, 2007). Finally, although he does enjoy a degree of international popularity, that appeal has glaring gaps. He has become notorious in his West Sussex neighborhood for picking up trash along the roadside (the inspiration for the story “Rubbish” in 2013’s *Let’s Explore Diabetes with Owls*) – so much so that a local garbage truck was named “Pig Pen Sedaris” to honor his efforts. Remarkably, the distributors of his honor seemed to have no idea that Sedaris is a celebrity for other reasons – his British appeal is apparently not so much a sensation as his American popularity (Dowling, 2014). (He differs from Twain and Thurber in this regard.) But these fluctuations in the draw of Sedaris’s works are not enough evidence to draw any real conclusions about the future of his stories.

What we can determine now, without casting unwarranted aspersions, is that Sedaris is highly praised as an emblematic literary humorist by a great deal of people in our generation of American culture. Five of his books have become *New York Times* bestsellers. A promotional flier for one of his public appearances musters praise for his corpus including the *New York Observer* calling him “the preeminent humorist of his generation,” and *People* saying that he is “certainly worthy of hero-worship” (BookCourt, 2012). His diary entries have been made into short animated movies published on YouTube. One of the stories from *Naked* (1997), “C.O.G.” is the inspiration for movie of the same name by Kyle Patrick Alvarez that was released in 2013. His readings and book signings are renowned for attracting huge crowds – even in Carnegie Hall,



a venue in which he can draw as much as \$25,000 in lecture fees (Marshall, 2004). I myself have attending two such events and found myself surrounded by enraptured crowds who – just like me – waiting for extremely long periods of time for a brief, simple interaction with Sedaris.

Perhaps it is appropriate that a literary humorist who is so famously self-deprecating professes to be baffled by his own popularity, as much as he admits he enjoys the chances he gets to meet so many people from so many places. In 2004 he confessed to the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer's* John Marshall that he hadn't a clue why he's so popular:

'I go into bookstores,' he relates... 'and I even ask the people who have come to hear me, "What are you doing here?" I just don't understand it....And I never think I deserve it. Never. That's why I work as hard as I can. I'm not going to feel bad about what's happened since it did not come to me because I was lazy. I am not someone who does not get out there, someone who does not care about what I read or speed-signs books.....That makes me feel at least like I'm working. Otherwise, it would feel too freakish....I tend to write better from the viewpoint of a person who has to struggle for things' (Marshall, 2007).

We have hazarded to guess some of the reasons that Sedaris is popular. We have examined the composition, freedoms, and ideologies of his audience. We have examined his potential to resonate beyond the moment in which people are laughing at his jokes. We have found instances where his writing very much reflects the fact that he is a product of his times, and that his work becomes identifiable to his audience because of that. As for the rest, we will end here and let future generations pick up with their own explanations.

Because he is so iconic for his times, and because he relates so well to his audience, and because his work is accessible, fun to read, and funny, David Sedaris has been hailed time and again as our generation's American literary humorist. The fact that he is so often compared with Twain and Thurber only bolsters our notion that he might follow their footsteps into the most esteemed archives of American literature. At the moment, for all our prognostication, we can at

least revel in the fact that we can enjoy him during his own lifetime and let history make its own decisions.

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## CONCLUSION

*You see when you write these stories, you're not writin' 'em for, God forgive me, posterity, you're writing' 'em for a weekly magazine hopin' some people will laugh at it, see? If I had sat down and said, 'I'm going to try and write some literature,' do you know what a mess that would've been? Can you imagine? But it's accidental, the fact that somebody will re-read these things? That makes me feel, I tell you—that people will go into a store and... The damn book costs a lot of money!*

*~Joseph Mitchell, New Yorker writer*

Robert Benchley (a contemporary and colleague of James Thurber) once authored a *New Yorker* piece entitled “Why We Laugh—Or Do We? Let’s Get This Thing Settled, Mr. Eastman” (1937/2001). The essay is a no-holds-barred satirization of academic analysis, complete with footnotes and diagrams. Its opening delves right into ridiculing the process of attempting to analyze funny artifacts and our understanding of them:

In order to laugh at something it is necessary (1) to know *what* you are laughing at, (2) to know *why* you are laughing, (3) to ask some people why *they* think you are laughing, (4) to jot down a few notes, (5) to laugh. Even then, the thing may not be cleared up for days....Incidentally, by the time you have the ‘humor’ analyzed, it will be found that the necessity for laughing has been relieved” (p. 344).

That is, as we observed in Chapter One, if you take dissect a joke too rigorously or too much, it is no longer funny – and then what’s the point, really?

Thankfully, because the object of our analyses in these chapters has been the resonance of particular humorists in the America for which they wrote, we have hopefully left the funniness of their texts intact. Now, when you go back and read the great works of Mark Twain, James Thurber, and David Sedaris, you should still be able to enjoy them. Your enjoyment may be more self-conscious, which is to say that may catch yourself wondering exactly *why* you are enjoying them, but hopefully you can quell that fleeting impulse as you live in the moment of Tom Sawyer feeding snake-oil medicine to a cat, James Thurber’s feeble-minded grandfather

angrily mistaking police for Civil War army deserters, and David Sedaris sitting in a doctor's waiting room in his underwear because of a communication mishap.

What we have accomplished has been more constructive than destructive, and our product is this idea: Being one of the quintessentially American humorists is just as fluid a concept as being American is in general. Just as much as the American of today is not remotely the America of the Revolutionary period, or of the Civil War, or the Gilded Age, or the period Between the Wars, or the Cold War, or the Culture Wars... so too are our emblematic funny men vastly different from one another. Each of their Americas is different, so each of their audiences is different, so each of their approaches to funniness as a rhetorical enterprise must necessarily be different. They do not exist in a vacuum, and each of them influences those that follow him. But James Thurber could not take a folksy, Western, storytelling approach to being funny any more than Mark Twain could have maintained that shtick throughout his entire career. Sedaris's audience would certainly never bite point-blank onto a story about two frogs engaging in a jumping contest, one of whom has been filled full of bullets in a casual way that would no doubt enrage environmentalists who have probably not been raised with the notion that the American wilderness exists to be utilized by mankind.

We do seem to esteem our middle-class white men, though, don't we? Although they are not completely part of America's traditional elite, they are well on their way, and perhaps that gives them enough traction to get noticed without having to waste too much of their career proving themselves. They certainly dominate the funny pages of American letters. Scholars like Nancy A. Walker, among others, are having to work hard to bring the history of popular female American humorists to better academic attention – an endeavor which is as valuable as it is difficult. As yet, though, literary humorists such as Marietta Holley, Dorothy Parker, and Erna

Bombeck are better known as feminine counterpoints to their male colleagues instead of trendsetting voices of their generations. Even Olivia Clemens and Helen Thurber, who edited their husbands' work so fastidiously that they might easily be considered coauthors, are almost always omitted from popular treatments of Mark Twain and James Thurber. Ethnic comedians, as well, tend to be viewed as voices of their culture rather than a broader America. Perhaps as future generations choose what voices to immortalize in the academy they will be more inclusive.

As we have established, though, there are other (happier) similarities between Twain, Thurber, and Sedaris. All three, again, rose to prominence from the ranks of the continually growing middle class and found their largest audiences there because of the easy identification they could cultivate. All three displayed similar temperaments marked by periods of depression juxtaposed with periods of high-strung enthusiasm. All three developed fractured personas to separate their private selves from the scrutiny of their public popularity. None of them have escaped accusations fudging the details of their stories. None have written for that little old lady in Dubuque and stayed firmly within the boundaries of what their generation considered good taste – naturally, because they would hardly have been as funny or appealing had they done so.

While we have been enjoying these revelations about our writers as individuals, we have also illuminated the nature of what they do. That is, we have gained an appreciation of the niche that belongs to the American literary humorist. This is a figure who is enmeshed in a very specific media environment that transmits to an audience of a particular composition that is awash in standpoints brought on by the ideologies of the day. The humorist has to display a great deal of savvy awareness of all of these factors or his career will not survive. All of our subjects dabbled in multiple media sources and exploited their novelty as they were developed. Twain

used the lecture circuit, Thurber capitalized on the magazine and the burgeoning movie industry, and Sedaris eked out a corner of the radio world as well as flourishing in the auspices of the new orality of speeches and other public appearances. Our humorists all also manage to write material that has enough of a serious undertone that it remains thought-provoking to his audience even after the moment of laughter (and occasionally haunting to the humorist's own psyche). People have found so much traction in the work of these three writers that they have continued to reanimate their work through new and different outlets, giving them longevity that begs a great deal of pause from those aspiring to follow in their footsteps. Finally, they are all so appealing especially because they are men of their generation and as such they speak to large segments of their peers. Each has his hiccups that prevent future generations from experiencing him in quite the same way, but each is also recognized for so many other funny accomplishments that we have also chosen to forgive them a bit and stay with the spirit of their writings instead of the full letter.

We celebrate all three of these men – despite their diachronic cultural hangups – not only because they speak to their generations, but also because there is something universal to their humor that helps them resonate beyond their time. We can all identify with Tom Sawyer as he attends his own funeral, since many of us might have had that fantasy before we read Twain's narrative. We can find ourselves in the family tumult of Thurber's childhood as his mother rallies around a family pet who happens to mercilessly bite everyone but her, and we can feel something of the *schadenfreude* she must have enjoyed when it happened. We can sympathize with Sedaris as his father tries to defend him when he is attacked by one of the cool kids at school – and, because Lou Sedaris is no more a cool kid than his son, only makes the situation worse. There is something of the human experience in all of our writers, regardless of the



ideological climate in which they wrote or the media they used to make themselves well-known. We can all therefore find comedy in them as well as the humor for which each of them is more famous – we can use their work as an outlet to collectively chuckle at our own foibles and the situations that give rise to their expression.

Mark Twain, James Thurber, and Davis Sedaris have all been called America's greatest humorist – or something tantamount to that title – during their lifetimes (and beyond, in the cases of the former two). Actually, so have a lot of other people. If our focus on these three was based exclusively on that sort of superlative elevation this would be a much, much longer work as we struggled to chronicle the times and writings of everyone who had been attributed such a title. What's more interesting for our purposes is less of a name and more of a space. Twain is usually identified as the prototypical American humorist. Thurber is often compared with Twain, or at least identified as someone who is following in Twain's footsteps. Sedaris, increasingly, is likened to both. The evidence seems to point to some kind of cultural passing of the baton occurring as successive generations of Americans look for the happy affective payoff of laughter. We have chosen the people we immortalize, and we increase their ranks with people who are somehow comparable to them. There's a selection process going on, and not everyone who's considered a popular, definitive humorist passes muster. Hopefully our work here has shed some light on the reasons that these select few have been chosen for greatness and the factors that help us, their readers in their particular Americas, choose them.

## References

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## VITA

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