**STEPHEN LEACOCK - "On Humor and Humanity" - 1938**

Page & Chapter:  
 1.) On the Nature of Humor:  
12-Take all the growls and grunts out of language, and you have the toneless talk of radio announcer - vox et praeterea nihil- admirable for information, but powerless to persuade.

13-It squares exactly with the remarks of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, of the seventeenth century, who expressed his incisive thought with a point and brilliance given to few. "The passion of laughter," he says, "is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminence in ourselves, by comparison with the inferiority of others, or with our own formerly."

13-It thus appears that our sense of humor, like so much else about us, sprang from lowly and even discreditable origins. With certain races of mankind, humor never seems to have got beyond this primitive brutal stage of cruel exultation.

15-Humor meant exultation, the sense of personal triumph over one's adversary, or the sense of delight in seeing something-anything-demolished or knocked out of shape.

15-It expressed itself in action, not words.

16-They would turn the world upside down when Mickey Mouse and such defy, and demolish, in their speed and their transformations, all the laws of the physical universe. The take a laugh out of Isaac Newton

16-But from the earliest stages of human development malice had to take account of the contrary principle of sympathy.

17-As a consequence of humor, all through the period that we call civilization, has been undergoing a refining process.

17-But we of today would keep our 'Homeric laughter' for a man who had slipped on a banana peel, or limped with 'pins and needles' and wasn't really hurt.

17-Humor, in other words, has changed from a basis of injury or destruction, to what one may describe as a basis of ‘incongruity’ or ‘maladjustment’.

18-It is in this form that began to find its place more and more with the rise of literature when the spoken and written word becomes the prevalent method of communication of human beings in place of the pantomime and grunts and 'direct' action of primitive beings.

18-It becomes therefore a principal thesis of this treatise that both the sense of humor and the expression of it undergo in the course of history an upward and continuous progress.

20-The new age sees the beginning of real toleration, of inquisitive science, and of the geniality in literature that finds voice in the humor of the Steeles, the Addisons and the Goldsmiths.

20-Yet is is not implied in this these that the movement of the humorous impulse or the expression of the humor or the expression of the humorous idea was in all cases consistently inspired by human kindliness. The original devil of malice was not so easily exorcised. It still survives. The development of humor was not always and exclusively of a refining character. One is tempted to think that perhaps the original source parted into two streams. In one direction flowed, clear and undefined, the humor of human kindliness. In the other, the polluted waters of mockery and sarcasm, the 'humor' that turned to the cruel sports of rough ages, the infliction of pain as a perverted source of pleasure, and even the rough horseplay, the practical jokes and the impish malice of the schoolboy...Not even death, if we may believe the spiritualists, terminates the evil career of the practical joker.

2.) The Expression of Humor: Words  
25-But repetition used, so to speak, for 'fun' was born early and has never died.

34-[Punsters] Common observation shows that his activity is a menace to society. It runs easily to a sort of mental degeneration in which the unhappy victim tries to make puns all the time, hears only sounds and not ideas, his mind as vacant as a bell waiting for its clapper. Many people hate the idea of drinking because of drunkards-and so do many hate puns because of punsters. Poetic justice therefore warns them in time.

38-But after all any humor that can be got out of bad typing is under the same limitation as the humor of bad spelling. It reaches only the eye, not the ear. It is even more limited than bad spelling since it can't be explained in words even if one tries.

43-[Private life of Gregory Gorm] “Lord Porcupine began on the ground-floor by throwing the dining room into the front hall. He then proceeded to throw the smoking-room into the billiard-room, and the drawing-room into the study, and, by throwing the library into the gun-room, provided an excellent dining-room to replace the one he had thrown into the front hall. This, however, involved throwing the pantry into the kitchen, and the kitchen into the servants’ hall, and having gone thus far, it became inevitably necessary to throw the servants’ hall somewhere, and there was nowhere left to throw it except into the garden.”

44-Twisted uses of words are sometimes made with a further artful implication of a new meaning, just as the pun carries a genuine second meaning when legitimately used.

44-It seems more or less clear that certain sounds still retain for us something of their primitive qualities as growls of anger, groans of distress, or yelps of delight...The tones have a sort of instinctive subconscious sound-appeal.

45-We can define wit as being an expression of humor involving an unexpected play upon words. Thus wit is far the lesser term of the two [humor]: it is all included under humor. There could not be real with without humor. It is possible indeed for people with more cheeriness than brains, more voltage than candlepower, with high spirits but low intelligence to chatter away on a line of imitative jokes and second-hand effects without any real humor.

46-But this is only in the same way as a person may be sentimental without sorrow, pious without religion and didactic without learning. It is this possibility of replacing true with with imitation, gold with dross, that has led to a tendency to degrade wit as the crackling of thorns under a pot.

3.) The Expression of Humor: Ideas  
53-This remains indeed the word ‘burlesque’, but it has somehow acquired a rather different sense. To ‘burlesque’ anything means to make fun out of it, not of it; a burlesque version of a play means the treatment of the same theme in a comic way, not anything derogatory to the theme itself.

53-This lack of proper terms to designate their art, as felt by humorists, has been felt and remedied in other branches...But the humorist still has no better terms than to ‘write a take-off’, or ‘make up a parody’, or to ‘give an imitation’, and so on. This cheapens his whole art in the literary sense.

55-Yet notice the kindliness of it: one calls Aesop’s fable of the wind and sun, contesting to see which first could compel the wayfarer to lay aside his coat. At the cold blast he drew it together: the warm sun soon had it off him. *Ex uno disce omnia.*

57-*The boy stood on the burning deck  
Eating peanuts by the peck.  
The flames rolled on, he would not go  
Because he loved the peanuts so.*

60-But the essential point is the use of parody as a corrective to over-sentiment, of humor as a relief from pain, of humor as a consolation against the shortcomings of life itself. This aspect rises larger on the horizon as our study proceeds.

60-Those who try to make people laugh, necessarily get afraid that they may not see the point and won’t laugh, or won’t laugh enough. Hence the tendency to make the point sharper and the angle of vision wider, to respond to the cruel demand, ‘louder and funnier’.

61- But those who wish to qualify as writers of humor should learn to resist the tendency to overdo the method and over-sharpen the point. Never mind if other don’t see it: if you have it all to yourself that is Scotch humor of the highest kind.

67-The chief danger in the path of historical parody is to try to find ‘fun’ in the horrors and cruelties which form so large a part of the world’s history. They must be far, far away indeed to be safe ground...But the highest reach of humor attainable in this kind of wok is where the parody of history is used to suggest the hidden truths of history.

68-One is speaking here of education, not of fun, and in this connection comic history has its noxious aspect. It is all right for people who know history already and get their amusement out of a satirical presentation of it. It is all wrong for those who don’t. To learn history out of a comic manual is to debase and injure, perhaps for good, one’s sense of the realities of the past.

68-The merit of success here is greater because there is a preponderance of the higher motive of correcting error over the lower motive of having fun.

74-So the darky narrator took for granted that a man as high up as the ‘Lawd’ would of course carry a gun. And the beauty of it is that his auditors wouldn’t see anything queer anything laughable about it...It has a kind of wistful primitiveness that carries us back to our nursery days when angels played on harps.

4.) The Humor of Situation  
76-...but just as a surveyor measures a landscape into lines and contours, so we can measure and analyze the field of humor. The surveyor’s chart somehow knocks the beauty out of the landscape. So perhaps does ours.

76-The price paid for knowledge is the loss of the eye of innocence. Very likely we enjoy things better if we don’t know too much about them. I have often noticed that music seems to give great pain to people really musical and that an art gallery irritates the artist.

76-“When science from creation’s face enchantment’s veil withdraws,” so sang someody, “what lovely visions yield their place to cold material laws.”

77-...humor of situation. Educationists tell us that this is real way to learn – from the concrete to the abstract.

78-The interesting point in theory is to notice that the humor arises from the *situation*, not the words, not the people; and no character – they haven’t any.

78-…; a sudden juxtaposition of incongruities.

79-The humor of situation arises, therefore, out of any set of circumstances that involve discomfiture or disaster of some odd incongruous kind, not connected with the ordinary run of things and not involving sufficient pain or disaster to over-weigh the pleasures of contemplating this incongruous distress: or it may arise without any great amount of personal discomfiture when the circumstances themselves are so incongruous as to involve a sort of paradox.

80-Humor of situation – discomfiture, incongruity – could be traced back to the earliest forms of what we call ‘horseplay’.

81-Next to these two stages, the mythological and primitive, can be set what we might call a medieval, the rough horseplay that passed for diversion in the Middle Ages – ducking people in ponds, and other merry tricks of the sort.

82-The tendency is stimulated by the need, or at least the demand, in the drama at any rate, for ‘comic relief’, the protection afforded by laughter against tears, by amusement against horror.

82-To what extent the ‘comic relief’ is a sound principle of art is a question. The Greek drama, the tragedies, knew nothing of it. The Greeks liked to ‘take it straight’ just as people in Kentucky never dilute their whiskey. The Greek notion of a tragedy was that once it began it never stopped: it went on at the same place and in the same continuous duration till it was all over. Similarly when the Greeks wanted comedy they sat down to laugh, not to cry.

82-Many of our games originated in whole or in part out of this humor of discomfiture.

84-The moving picture has fully taken over the convention. The muse Cinematographia is the sunken sister of the arts, beautiful but wicked. She will do anything for money. Hence she mixes up tears and laughter as a barmaid mixes a gin fizz: all she wants to know is, not what the public wants or needs, but what the public will pay for.

84-This is not to say a word against situation: in the long run the world must live or die on what it is and what it wants and what it will pay for. You can’t control it from above, and if you could you would have to be very sure which direction was above and which was below.

85-Hence we find them taking over without question the ‘mixed program’ idea, the mingling of tragedy and fun, of wisdom and foolishness.

87-The pleasing ingenuity – which lies in the juxtaposition of the incongruous – a fond father feeding his children and a crook getting a free dinner, excites our sense of humor.

88-It helps, as will be developed later, to convert the humor of situation into the humor of character, or rather it begins to combine the two.

88-Even today we find it in actual life when criminality, entirely dissociated from cruelty and suffering and not directed against the poor, often excites a laugh for its sheer ingenuity.

91-The literary counterpart of the practical joke is what some may call the ‘humor of discomfiture’…This turns upon the blunders and misadventures and minor miseries of which the characters concerned are the perpetual victims. The laugh is at their ineptitude and distress. Their misfortunes are never serious and never permanent or the fun would be out of it.

94-A milder shade of the humor arising out of discomfiture is found in the humor of confusion. The humor here turns on incongruities arising out of ‘a mix-up’, a misunderstanding of a mistake in identity.

96-It will be realized that in all these cases of humor arising out of situation, the particular character of the persons concerned does not enter, or only in a secondary degree.

96-But this humor keeps merging towards and suggesting the higher humor that turns on character: in which the situation is rendered ‘funny’ (to use our simplest word) because of the person concerned.

97-Take then the humorous character, place the personages in humorous situations, and us for its transmission all the art of words and verbal technique, and you have the work of humor in its fully developed form.

5.) The Humor of Character  
98-The truth is that the queer[strange, weird, funny] people are all around you, plenty of them, if you have the eyes to see them. If you are lacking in sense of humor, or in that angle of it, you won’t know that they are there.

99-If you have a commonplace mind absorbed in things rather than people, and in money rather than imagination, people will look all pretty much alike. If you have a serious mind, full of some particular content or purpose, you will classify them on different lines.

99-Later when you sink down again with the dead weight of your own individuality, you say to yourself, “Those are not *real* people, they are just caricatures.” But you’re quite wrong.

100- “The Humor of Character” >> By this is meant difference and oddities in character of a nature to involve an incongruity, contradiction or paradox, and thus set up that ‘frustrated expectation’ which we have seen to be the basis of all humor.  
 -Thus it is contrary to expectation that a huge man should have a tiny voice as huge men sometimes have, or that a meek little rat should have a ferocious mustache.

100- These are appearances only. But it is equally incongruous…

100-Even oddities or gait of dress make ‘character’ because they break a rule and so set up an incongruity – or, as it were, start an exultation.

100-So with the humor of a character; a man who has the habit of keeping on repeating some phrase or form of words - “Yes, yes, yes,” or “Very good, very good,” becomes ‘funny’.

102-Modern life, in raising the level of the mass, lowers individual eminence...Mass economic life compels a new kind of cohesion in which the individual is forced and fitted into a pattern…:unless everybody chooses the same, nobody gets anything.

102-The human mind, or rather the human outlook, is already accommodating itself to this idea: people accept social regimentation, expect to be told what to do and what to be and how to be it.

102-The very scope of our mechanical invention makes us all the more sheep-like. In the morning all the sheep listen...in the afternoon all the sheep look...in the evening all the sheep listen to a lullaby.

102-Our uniform life reduces everyone’s routine to that of every other: enables each to look down the little vista of his lot in life as down an alley lined with trees...The future looks as close as the present: there is no uncertainty but death: and that is coming. No wonder that in such an environment ‘character’ cannot live, or not visibly and obviously.

103-‘Character’ springs like a plant and individuality blooms like a rose: and forthwith there are gay people, brave people, and queer people – room for everybody to be something; not the crushed dead-level uniformity of the metropolis.

104-The uniformity of life interposes a medium of similarity of dress, habits, amusements and reading which tends to obscure ‘character’...With sameness and uniformity and mass ideas and mass audition of mass news and mass amusement, soon to be increased by television where everybody sees everybody, will ultimately do to human kind we don’t know.

106-When science analyses the human body till it can find no further element to disintegrate it still cannot find the main thing it looks for – the principle of life, the soul. This may be so with literature. There is perhaps an elusive essence that escapes us, an inspiration that analysis cannot find.

106-Queer characters, humorous characters, when analyzed present incongruities that do not clash with reality. The incongruities must be real and possible: if not, what is produced is a comic character.

107-These contrasts and oddities of dress and talk, these inconsistencies of rough exterior and smooth insides, of vociferous words and kindly actions – these make up the characters of humor...Humor and human kindliness are one.

108-...It is when character and situation combine to produce a truly humorous conception that we feel ourselves rising far about the level of the mere comic, the burlesque, and scarcely needing the artifices of wit and verbal forms to convey the situation.

109-...elusive element called atmosphere...How is it done? I think largely from the ‘tone’ or ‘tune’ of the writing, and partly by inflection from the other characters.

110-Narration through a character is marvelous when well done, but if unsuccessful is tiresome beyond words.

111-To live in an imaginary world, seeking to set wrong right, is to be ‘quixotic’.

127-Motion pictures applied to the world’s masterpieces produce not the thing they start from the but something else. It may be something worse, or something better.

127-The Moving Picture, be it said by the way of digression, is instantaneous and it suffers from its very ‘instantaneous-ness’. It cannot *dwell* on anything: or only in the artificial and purely conventional way of pausing in the narrative to present a ‘cut in’ of a huge face with a we tear, five inches, about to fall.  
 -Hence the purpose of humor of character it is dependent on jumps, jerks, and spasms of action to replace the pauses of reflection.

6.) Comic Verse: The Lighter Notes

133-Yet all of these efforts or achievements in a way are connected with laughter. Like all that goes under humor, they rise to superior forms where mere merriment is ifted into reflection, sharpened into satire or saddened into pathos.

135-Poetry can say in a word what prose must say in a page: poetry can convey in a flash what prose loses in a fox. Poetry can breathe life and color and pahtos into the texture of words, where prose fails to animate.

136-PARODY – Poetry that is made a little sillier that we still reveal its silliness.

136-MOCK-HEROIC POETRY – Meant to be majestic or heroic, it misses its mark so completely in trying to present a mighty theme of tragedy of magnificence, that we can get a glorious effect by applying the same heroic measures to a mimic theme of not great consequence.

136-BURLESQUE – The merry re-editing as fun of a theme already written seriously.

136-NARRATIVE LIGHT VERSE – With a good verse, we can turn it to narrative and tell with it a whole merry story.

136-EPIGRAMMATIC VERSE – Short explosions of poetic forms that can say much in little.

136-SUPER COMIC – If born with more poetic feeling than our limited education can properly express, we write the poetry of good intentions that is meant to be exalted and becomes this.

137-PURE COMIC VERSE – When the verse written is intentional, and successfully to create laughter.

137-SATIRICAL LIGHT VERSE – The written verse isn’t only amusing but takes on the added intention of exposing faults, not of other people’s verse, but of society at large.

137-TRAGIC LIGHT VERSE – This verse forces laughter even in tragedy and horror.

137-POETIC HUMOR – When one reaches the highest form in which, as ever, laughter and tears join in contemplating the incongruities of life itself.

138-The humor of narrative is the humor of discomfiture.

139-But if one can make a distinction it would be that in Narrative Light Verse there is a more or less real and possibly story and in the other forms there isn’t.

139-This [mock heroic method in prose and verse] rests for its humor on the pretense of terrific importance of ludicrously small, and tremendous exploits that really amount to nothing.

143-*Swans sing before they die - ‘twere no bad thing  
Should certain persons die before they sing.* [Coleridge]

144-For obvious reasons Epigrammatic Verse has found its most distinctive historic use in epitaphs. Last words have got to be short, or at any rate there’s a limit to them.

144-The process of breaking speech up into analytical words instead of synthetic inflections gives modern languages their great superiority for general power of expression and shade of meaning – I say it openly and boldly – over Latin and Greek.

145-...epigrammatic comic poetry at times pleases by its sheer lack of meaning, the delight of being in the thought that words can be so utterly without meaning.

146-*Small boy,  
Pair of Skates,  
Hole in ice,  
Heavenly Gates*

156-It is a good mark of comic verse that at times the very simplicity, the ‘effortlessness’ of the meter and rhyme, make it, most oddly and amusingly, seem to turn back into ordinary speech.

7.) Humorous poetry: The Undertones

168-The very doing is a form of study, even if done with unconscious art.

173-People of minds constitutionally feeble are unable to withstand the sudden shock stupendous natural scenery.

178-No can humor, even where it is meant to be merely comic and harmless, venture to associate itself with images or recollections of pain, cruelty and death.

180-SUPER COMIC POETRY – written by people who never had the education to give them the power to express it.  
 -super-comic poetry blows out the fuse of seriousness into the explosion of a laugh.

181-The super comic poet is an intensely serious person: he feels all the tragedy of life: he thrills at its emotions: he sorrows at its inevitable end. But all he can say is “Oh my!”

8.) Humor and Craftsmanship  
188-It is not derogatory to a person who paints that he tries to do it and doesn’t do it by accident, that he does it of set purpose, and even in part for an ulterior motive. But there is no such general attitude towards the production of ‘humor’, using the word objectively to mean humorous writing, talking or drawing. Humor is supposed to grow as a wayside flower without cultivation.

189-Art cannot be entirely free and self-promoted and self-inspired…art cannot be left to inspiration, nor letters to the happy flow of ink…Those who know academic life will know how many of the academic class dream away their lives, still talking of the work the mean to do and at the end fall asleep…

189-There is no need, then, that humor should be left as a wayside flower. Humor – meaning the feeling of it – can be intensified by cultivation, and humor, meaning the expression of it an conveyance to others, can be taught, and native faculty heightened by effort and instruction.

190-SAXON words carry a more intimate feeling:  
 -home, hearth, sunrise, dawn, daylight, even-song, dark, aurora, grave-yard, church-yard, God’s acre, burial ground, cemetery, necropolis

190-LATIN words have something harder about it, but definite and exact like a steel frame  
 -deliberate, expostulate, terminate

192-Very often, in return, the absolutely correct use of a word that seems inevitable produces in itself a pleasing humorous effect. There is such an unexpected matching of words and sense that it has the shock of humor.

192-Another general consideration of very high importance in expressing humor is the use of comparisons by smiles, metaphors and by subtle implications.

192-Comparison is the very soul of humor.

193-It is the discovery of resemblance and of the lack of it that builds up the contrasts, discrepancies and incongruities on which, as has been insisted throughout this treatise, humor depends. To make metaphors demands both originality and training.

193-Metaphors are the very life of humor: very often the effect can be got merely by extending the use of a word to a new case or cases, where it fits in with surprising aptness.

194-A joke may be defined as an item of humor reduced to a single point or particle. It represents the breaking up of humorous matter into its elements, so that we can examine and appreciate one little bit of it without any extraneous context. One might say that a joke is a self-contained humorous thought. Its essence is its isolation.

9.) Humor and Sublimity  
211-Humor in its highest reach touches the sublime: humor in its highest reach mingles with pathos: it voices sorrow for our human lot and reconciliation with it.

211-Life, for many people, is not satisfactory explained: but at least as it passes into retrospect it matters less. “We are such stuff as dreams are made and out little life is rounded with a sleep,” – so said Shakespeare: and again, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more.”

211-…convey the point of view from which the greatest humor seems to start. It is born, as it were, in perplexity, in contemplation of the insoluble riddle of existence.

212-But humor is saved from that by having made first acquaintance and then union with pathos, meaning here, pity for human suffering.

212-United, each tempers and supports the other: pathos keeps humor from breaking into guffaws and humor keeps pathos from subsiding into sobs.

212-the underlying thesis is that humanity has as a while grown better, and its literature has grown also from simpler forms to higher meaning and complexity.

215-…it seems a psychological law that when pain steps out of the window joy comes in at the door. We look back in retrospect and the anger turns to laughter, the bitterness to fun.

216-…out of these subtle elements, delicate as gossamer, that the humor of sublimity is made. It views life, even life now, in as soft a light as we view the past.

225…breathe from its pages the mingled tears and laughter, the smile that is a sigh, which mark the highest form of humor. Seen in this light humor is not the lower level of the field of literature, but lies around the summits of its highest range.

Things to Investigate:

Canterbury Tales

Acrostic, Anagram

Nascent Humor

Ontology, Humanism

Jean Paul Sartre - Existentialism & Human Emotions - Book Depository

Homeric Laughter

inimitable

Anglo-saxon

primulacae

Bill Nye – Comic History

Xenophon

Risorgiment, sploggio

Ex uno disce omnia

Bon Gaultier Ballads

maudlin

‘scotch humor’

sophism, sophist, sophistry

Janus Mask/Faces

Till Eulenspeigel

Theodore Hook

Babbit – Sinclair Lewis

Quixotic, Moliere, epitaph

Coleridge [poet]

Brett Harte