

## HORATIAN SATIRE AND STEPHEN LEACOCK: AN OVERVIEW

*Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is widely regarded as a satire. To understand the nature of Leacock's critique, one needs to understand the nature of satire. However, coming up with a definition of satire is difficult. Leonard Feinberg, a leading 20<sup>th</sup>-century satire theorist, says that "the more one studies satire the more likely he is to permit the widest possible latitude in defining terms"<sup>19</sup>. This leads Feinberg to only reluctantly define satire as a "playfully critical distortion of the familiar"<sup>20</sup>. Feinberg's contemporary, Robert C. Elliott, is even more cautious about defining satire. He declines to give it a precise definition, and instead says "satire is notoriously a slippery term"<sup>21</sup>.

Even though these two theorists are reluctant to define satire, they are willing to spell out the purpose of the satirist. For Feinberg, the satirist's purpose is to "serve a function that the realist and romantic do not fulfill, by dramatising and exaggerating objectionable qualities in man and society"<sup>22</sup>. Similarly, Elliott says that the satirist's purpose is to "stimulate in his reader (or in Roman times, his listener) the appropriate negative response which prepares the way to positive action"<sup>23</sup>.

One of the tools that satirists use to accomplish their purpose is humour. As a writer, Stephen Leacock gave much thought to the concept of humour. Not only did he write nearly 30 books of humorous stories, but he also wrote two books and several articles on the theory and technique of humour. His writings on the theory and technique of humour have not stood the test of time and have been largely forgotten. However, these writings do provide insight into Leacock's personal ideas about humour. Leacock believes that humour should be gentle and should not cause harm: "it becomes a condition of amusement that no serious harm or injury shall be inflicted but that only the appearance or simulation of it shall appear"<sup>24</sup>. Because of his belief in gentle humour, Leacock says that laughter should function as "a relief from pain... a consolation against the shortcomings of life itself"<sup>25</sup>. These beliefs—that laughter should not cause harm but instead serve as a relief—can help us better-understand exactly what kind of satire *Sunshine Sketches* is.

Satire finds roots in the ancient Roman poets Horace and Juvenal. Their two different types of satire laid the groundwork for its modern conceptualisation. Horatian satire is characterised by good-natured laughter; Juvenalian satire is characterised by rage. Elliott best-contrasts these forms when he says that "Horatian satire seeks to displace the social mask by the flick of laughter; Juvenalian satire would cleanse a rotten society in the fire of its hate"<sup>26</sup>. Because Stephen Leacock intended to create good-natured laughter to bring levity to the inconsistencies of life, the satire of *Sunshine Sketches* can be put into the category of Horatian satire. It is gentle and not meant to hurt people.

---

19 Feinberg, Leonard. *Introduction to Satire*. Iowa State UP, 1967, p. 19.

20 Feinberg, p. 19.

21 Elliott, Robert C. *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art*. Princeton UP, 1960, p. viii.

22 Feinberg, p. 17.

23 Elliott, p. 111.

24 Leacock, Stephen. "American Humor." *Essays and Literary Studies*, John Lane, 1916, p. 90.

25 Leacock, Stephen. *Humor and Humanity*. Henry Holt and Company, 1938, p. 60.

26 Elliott, p. 115.

It is worth considering how Stephen Leacock learned about the importance of gentle humour. In his incomplete autobiography *The Boy I Left Behind Me*, he shares an experience he had when he was a student in Teachers School. It shaped his conception of humour throughout his life. The lesson is just as valid for people today as it was for Leacock when he learned it in the 1890s:

When I duly found a boardinghouse (across the lapse of years I quite forget it and where it was), and had entered the Teachers School next day, I found it all very simple and easy beyond words after the hard study to which I was habituated. The little group of teachers in training moved about the school, listened to sample lessons (in no ways different from the lessons and classes we had all taken for years), and presently were entitled to stand up and “take the class” themselves under the supervision of the teacher.

In doing this I learned on the side a lesson on how not to be funny, or the misuse of a sense of humour which lasted me all my life and echoed back to me in a strange way nearly thirty years later. The principal of the Strathroy Collegiate was Mr. James Wetherell, the well-beloved “Jimmy” Wetherell whose memory is still dear to the heart of a thousand pupils. He seemed to us old at the time, as all adult people do to the eyes of eighteen, but he must have been relatively young, for he lived on and on, passed the opening century, still in harness when the Great War came, and died at a ripe age later on. He was a fine scholar, his chief subject, at least the one he liked best to teach, being English. But he had acquired, as most scholars do if absorbed in their work and exulting in the exposition of it, little tricks of speech and manner all his own and all too easy to imitate. I had at that time a certain natural gift of mimicry, could easily hit off people’s voices and instinctively reproduce their gestures. So when Jimmy Wetherell, halfway through a lesson in English, said to me most courteously, “Now will you take the lesson over at that point and continue it?” I did so with a completeness and resemblance to Jimmy’s voice and manner which of course delighted the class. Titters ran through the room. Encouraged as an artist, I laid it on too thick. The kindly principal saw it himself and flushed pink. When I finished he said quietly, “I am afraid I admire your brains more than your manners.” The words cut me to the quick. I felt them to be so true and yet so completely without malice. For I had no real “nerve,” no real “gall.” It was the art of imitation that appealed to me. I had not realized how it might affect the person concerned. I learned with it my first lesson in the need for human kindness as an element in humour.<sup>27</sup>

From this early-life lesson we can understand that Leacock did not intend to create Juvenalian rage with his humour. Instead, he meant to create Horatian fun.

## DISCUSS

1. Do you agree? Is it important that humour be kindly? Should you always think about how the target of a joke will be affected?
2. When is a joke not funny?