

IN DEPTH: IRONY AND THE INTRUSIVE NARRATOR OF *SUNSHINE SKETCHES*

The preface to *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is Stephen Leacock's self-introduction to his readers. Understanding this preface is important to understanding the book as a whole. *Sunshine Sketches* is written using a technique called the intrusive narrator. The intrusive narrator is an omniscient narrator who "not only reports but freely comments on and evaluates the actions and motives of the characters, and sometimes expresses personal views about human life in general"²⁹. Sometimes the intrusive narrator is a completely unique character that the author creates for the purpose of telling the story. However, in the case of *Sunshine Sketches* the character of intrusive narrator is almost indistinguishable from Stephen Leacock himself.

One reason why we may be able to consider Stephen Leacock as the intrusive narrator of *Sunshine Sketches* is because Leacock had a very close relationship with the book's material: *Sunshine Sketches* is largely exaggerated anecdotes of things he had heard about or witnessed first-hand in his summer hometown of Orillia. In fact, noted Canadian book editor B.K. Sandwell recalls that he "heard Leacock tell practically every one of the *Sunshine Sketches* as dinner-table anecdotes, always with the most explicit reference to Orillia and to Orillian personages"³⁰.

Another reason why we may be able to consider Stephen Leacock as the intrusive narrator of *Sunshine Sketches* is because the sense of irony in Leacock's autobiographical preface is continued into the book. This continuation leads Leacock scholar Gerald Lynch to say that the distinctions between the two are "blurred"³¹. However, Lynch also says that the voice of the person behind the preface and the voice of the narrator of the sketches "should be distinguished from one another"³². Nevertheless, Stephen Leacock is very closely related to—if not indistinguishable from—the intrusive narrator of *Sunshine Sketches*. Given the shared sense of irony, and given that *Sunshine Sketches* is an (exaggerated) recounting of things that Leacock heard about or experienced first hand, it may very well be that *Sunshine Sketches*—like a memoir—is being narrated by Leacock himself.

Because of this close relationship between author and narrator, it is important to understand who Stephen Leacock is. The preface helps accomplish this by providing readers with an autobiographical introduction to Leacock. However, the preface also establishes the tone for the book. This includes establishing Leacock's sense of irony.

UNDERSTANDING IRONY

Irony is a complex concept. Verbal irony—the kind of irony used in the narration of *Sunshine Sketches*—is "a statement in which the speaker's implicit meaning differs sharply from the meaning

29 Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th ed, Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1988, p. 145.

30 Sandwell, B.K. "Leacock Recalled: How the 'Sketches' Began." *Saturday Night*, vol. 67, issue 46.

31 Lynch, Gerald. *Stephen Leacock: Humour and Humanity*. McGill-Queen's UP, 1988, p. 63.

32 Lynch, p. 63.

that is ostensibly expressed”³³. Quite simply, something different is meant than what is said. To better understand irony, it is helpful to look back at its ancient Greek origins:

In Greek comedy the character called the *eiron* was a “dissembler,” who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was, yet triumphed over the *alazon*—the self-deceiving and stupid braggart. In most of the critical uses of the term “irony” there remains the root sense of dissembling or hiding what is actually the case: not, however, in order to deceive, but to achieve special rhetorical or artistic effects.³⁴

Knowing how Leacock directs irony towards himself in the preface can help readers understand Leacock’s kindly attitude toward Mariposa and its people.

The preface is based in verifiable facts and observations. In this sense, Leacock is not trying to deceive. For example, Leacock tells the reader that he earned a PhD from the University of Chicago. This is true. However, Leacock then throws in something that is not true. Leacock then claims that having a PhD means that “the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life, and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him” (viii). This is not true. After finishing his PhD, Leacock gained a professorship at McGill University, became the head of the university’s Department of Political Economy, and went on to become a world-renowned public intellectual and humour writer. It is probably fair to say that Stephen Leacock continued to learn after receiving his PhD.

By ironically writing himself off as incapable of learning anything new, Leacock ridicules and minimizes his own accomplishments. Like *eiron*—the “dissembler” who characteristically spoke in understatement and deliberately pretended to be less intelligent than he was—Leacock understates the importance of his qualifications and accomplishments. What this signals is that Leacock is willing to laugh at himself just as much as he is willing to laugh at others. Such an approach lightens the satire of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*: it helps establish Leacock the narrator as a person who is not mean-spirited but rather good-humoured about things, including himself.

DISCUSS

1. Leacock closes the preface by saying: “If [*Sunshine Sketches*] fails in its portrayal of the scenes and the country that it depicts the fault lies rather with an art that is deficient than in an affection that is wanting” (xi). How does this statement enforce the idea that Leacock is laughing with and not laughing at small towns?
2. Leacock says in the preface that “I must disclaim at once all intentions of trying to do anything so ridiculously easy as writing about a real place and real people” (xi). History has shown this is not true. Leacock was very much writing about a real place and real people. Why do you think Leacock wrote this?
3. What do you think? Is the intrusive narrator of *Sunshine Sketches* an imagined character. Or is the intrusive narrator Stephen Leacock himself? Think about this as you read through *Sunshine Sketches*.

33 Abrams, p. 91.

34 Abrams, p. 91.