



Realistic Humor — Ridiculing Human Behavior in Stephen Leacock's Works

KEYWORDS

irony, humor, satire

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ABSTRACT *Stephen Leacock an English born Canadian writer expressed his artistic talent to satirize the ridiculous behavior of society and its people where a man like the narrator confronts fear of facing the dentist to remove his tooth in his famous short story 'The Dentist and the Gas'. Humor flows from the strange treatment of the dentist. This paper aims to focus on the mental agony a man faces when he visits the dentist for treatment.*

INTRODUCTION:

Stephen Leacock is best known for satirical sketches that poke fun at human foibles. His conservative stance is reflected in his humorous sketches of individualism, materialism and worship of technology. Leacock enjoyed enormous popular success with his short stories and sketches. Beginning with the publication of short pieces in magazines, he quickly found a large audience that appreciated his down-to-earth comic sensibility with its elements of silliness and absurdity. He is aware of the tensions between appearance and reality; but he keeps them in playful suspension; he does not resolve them in a burst of indignation. He writes not satires but pastorals with a satirical element.

DEFINING REALISM AND HUMOR:

Almost every work of literature has some degree of realism. This is because it is important for readers to recognize and identify with the characters and the world they inhabit. But realism as a distinct style and literary movement dates back to France in the early 1800's. That was when authors began writing works that possessed several unique characteristics: The stories or plots were simple and were secondary to the characters; the characters tended to be from the lower or middle class and spoke as people really did, not in poetic language; and the author's voice such as in comments or asides, was rarely heard. Realism has been chiefly concerned with the commonplace of everyday life among the middle and lower classes, where character is a product of social factors and environment is the integral element in the dramatic complications.

The term "humor" is one which is applied in a general sense to refer either to a work of art or to a characteristic which may occur in any kind of writing. Similarly, the term is used to describe a teller of funny stories or one of man's natural endowments, his sense of humor. Humor to be successful, must bind the writer and reader through the recognition of some incongruity in language, situation, character or life. Everyone has a certain number of concepts either personal or merely as knowledge content which he uses every day. But it takes a mind of a particular bent to discover the objects which can be made the source of laughter and humor. The humorist criticizes the limitations of certain concepts thus giving a clearer perception of the essential nature of the object. The reader responds by being jolted out of a whole frame of reference which he had thought absolute.

Literary humor can operate in any one of three ways—it may be a rational resulting in nonsense writing; it may be humor of the intellect acting as a social corrective; or it may be humor of the heart offering sympathetic insight into life and reality. Leacock defines humor as the "the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof," and this emphasis is, of course, on the word kindly.

The title of the story is humorous and it says about the fear every human being possess in taking treatment from the dentist. Leacock's stories is based on what he saw as the reality of human nature as people struggle to maintain their dignity in a time of change imposed by impersonal forces. The humdrum of daily life is what kept mankind connected to what is truly human, and it was a rich source of material to Leacock. This story is about a man who has dental issues longs to take treatment but fears to bear the pain and mental agony.

The position in which the narrator is caught clearly says that it needs a special skill to get the work done easily; it is the common experience of the vulnerable people that dentists are fearsome people. The writer realistically presents how the narrator of the short story terribly feared when the dentist uttered the word gas. The narrator shares the fearful state thus:

"Yes", he repeated. "Gas, or else ether or a sulphuric anesthetic, or else beat you into insensibility with a club, or give you three thousand bolts of electricity". " I could see the light of primitive criminality shining behind the man's spectacles".

The narrator wanted to get rid of the tooth decay. For that he decides to consult a dentist and take treatment. He felt very comfortable when he was lying on the dentist chair and fell half asleep listening to the twittering of the birds. Taking a gas proved to be very embarrassing and humiliating experience for the narrator. For every few minutes he pretends as if he is being hurt just for precaution. He was in a state of confusion. The way the narrator behaves makes the readers laugh at their own experience they had come across in their life. The narrator was little bit nervous of the treatment he was going to take. As soon as he heard the word gas he became alert. It seemed to him that the dentist eyes glittering like a villain. He wanted to escape from the danger for some days. He got scared and says:

"No, not now, I can't stay now," I said, I have an appointment, a whole lot of appointments, urgent ones, the most urgent, I ever had". I was fastening my shroud as I spoke,

The narrator thought that the dentist would stop his treatment on seeing his recklessness. No sooner does the dentist learn that the narrator was not ready for any of his appointment, the dentist stopped the narrator saying.

"Hold on ", said the dentist, speaking very firmly. You come tomorrow morning; I will write the engagement for ten o'clock ".

I think it must have been hypnotism.

The narrator started enquiring each and every passerby about the experience in removing the tooth. He heard everyone saying that it was nothing. He enquired nearly fifty persons and came to a conclusion that it would not hurt and it was nothing and decided to visit the dentist. Mark the humorous situation of the narrator.

"The dentist was there with two assistants. All three had white coats, as rigid naval uniforms.

"I forget whether they carried revolvers.

I was tied down. It simply felt like being tied down by three strong men armed with pinchers."

The readers go on laughing at every stage of his behavior. Leacock gives here minute details of the fearful experience of the narrator who longs for a painless treatment. Humor stems from the peculiar behavior of the narrator who finds the way of removing the tooth. The humor of this piece is achieved not only by the exaggerated situation but also by a skillful use of short clips of dialogues. The narrator's psychological intimidation clearly presented

"Of course I didn't feel it. All I felt was that someone dealt me a powerful blow in the face with a sledgehammer. After that somebody took a pickax and cracked in my jaw with it. That was all."

Leacock's style is simple and straight forward allowing the comedy to flow from closely observed absurdities of daily life rather than from verbal pyrotechnics. The experience of a man like the narrator at the dentist does not differ much. Even from young to old people fears to remove the tooth. It was the first time for the narrator. He was not aware of the treatment given, and to be alert when they were operating. Without realizing the danger he fell asleep. He believed that the dentist was an expert and he would take care of everything. His assumption was wrong he lost all teeth because of his recklessness. It made him feel embarrassed. It has been rightly noted:

"I didn't happen to wake up till they had practically finished. So I really missed the whole thing."

"I went home no teeth. I only meant them to remove one, but I realized that they had taken them all out."

"In return I sent in my bill \$400 "The narrator here is a helpless fellow whose frightened state of mind and over confidence on the dentist takes him to this state. His visit to the dentist proves futile.

CONCLUSION

Leacock is undeniably the English speaking world's best known humorist. His comic works are all about "laughing at ourselves, not taking ourselves too seriously". He holds up the mirror to us. When reading his stories readers may think of the same situation they had come across in their life and laugh at their own foolishness they had done. Humor is the result of someone's embarrassment, discomposure, and loss of status or control, however slight. Leacock himself as a protagonist recount actual occurrences. The author narrator usually represents himself as a naïve bumbler, a person belied by the skill of his story telling. Leacock was always an educator. He had a need to reach people, to enlighten them, to change them, to examine with them the ultimate questions of life. He prided himself on his knowledge and his ability to express complex ideas in a clear and entertaining way.

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