



Genial Humour Frailties of Human Nature in Stephen Leacock's Story

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ABSTRACT

Stephen Leacock a Canadian humorist exposed his creative genius to satirize the absurdities of the world and its people where an ordinary man like the narrator experiences fear which creates distrust in him on the occasion of visiting a studio to take a photograph in his much acclaimed short story 'With the Photographer'. Humour stems from the peculiar behavior of the photographer. The present research paper aims to focus on the insults, an ordinary man with an ordinary face faces, when he visits a studio to take a photograph.

KEYWORDS

Humour, satire, irony

INTRODUCTION

Stephen Leacock was an English born Canadian writer, teacher, political scientist and humorist. He was a polyglot having proficiency in English, French, and German. Leacock's stories are masqueraded with humor and mainly revolve around him and his life events. His works reflect a noticeable satirical element – a fine line between hilarity and absurdity. Leacock was always an educator and his trait was clearly visible in all his literary and creative pursuits. He efficiently combined pathos with satire and topped it with subtlety and irony. He always saw 'humor' as the ultimate expression of human kindness and progress and during 'great depression' he attempted to soothe the miserable souls through his writings. Leacock was traditionally conservative which was clearly evident in his satiric norm and the way he valued the community over the individual. He remained devoted to his first love, humor

DEFINING HUMOR

A humour is the heart of literature. It has been part of human civilization since time immemorial. People have been using it in everyday communication through conversations, exchanges in oral and written forms, songs and other literary devices.

Humour is not a genre. It is a substance. Humor is often used in literature. Sometimes it is the witty banter of the characters, other times it is characterization itself or events that are ironic or absurd that lend humor to a book, poem, story, play, or other literary piece. Since Chaucer's Canterbury Tales 600 years ago, writers have been making us laugh with humorous writing from down the ages. Humor concerns with emotional aspect. It is the tendency of particular cognitive experiences to provoke laughter and provide amusement. The term derives from the humeral medicine of the ancient Greece which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as humors, control human health and emotion. People of all ages and cultures respond to humor. The majority of people are able to experience humor, i.e., to be amused, to laugh or smile at something funny, and thus they are considered to have a sense of humor.

The title of the story is itself humorous as the title of the story tempts the readers to believe that the writer must be talking about each and every individual's feel about their appearance. This is a story of an ordinary man with a medium face longing to take a photograph of his in a good way, which he wanted to leave for his friends after his death. With much hesitation he enters the studio for taking photograph. His first encoun-

ter with the photographer creates a kind of fearfulness because the photographer looked like a scientist with a drooping shoulder with a gray suit and a dim eye. The narrator shares his situation thus:

"I waited an hour. I began to see that I had done an unwarrantable thing in breaking in on the privacy of this man's scientific pursuits with a face like mine." (Behind the Beyond pg. 1)

The situation in which the narrator is caught clearly suggests that it requires a special skill to get the work done easily; it is the common experience of the vulnerable people that photographers are hardly co operative. The writer realistically presents how the narrator of the short story pathetically suffers when he visits the studio. The narrator wants to take a photograph which his friends could keep after his death. For that he decides to visit a photographer as he has such an idea in his mind that the photographer is the right person to bring all his features in a snap.

Visiting a photographer proved to be a very embarrassing and humiliating experience for the narrator. He entered into the studio with lots of hopes and fear. He was totally in a state of confusion. The way the photographer behaves makes the readers laugh at the miserable condition of the narrator. The narrator shares his mental situation thus:

"He came over and took my head in his hands and twisted it sideways. I thought he meant to kiss me, and I closed my eyes.

But I was wrong.

He twisted my face as far as it would go and then stood looking at it.

He sighed again.

I swung myself round on the stool."

The narrator was quiet adjustable and co-operative because he wanted to get his photograph in a good manner. So he followed all the instructions given by the photographer. The apathy of the photographer unnerves him. He mustered patience to bear the insults. At last unable to bear the insults he got wild and says:

"I know, I answered quietly,

"I have always known it".

The narrator thought that the photographer would set his face right if he adjusted a three quarters full. No sooner does he learn that the photographer was not the efficient person, he stopped him from taking the photo saying that

"This face is *my* face. It is not yours, it is mine. I've lived with it for forty years and I know its faults. I know its out of drawing. I know it wasn't made for me, but its *my* face, the only one I have—"

On saying so the narrator started to rise from his seat. The photographer stopped him from doing so and pulled the string. He also said that he had caught the features just in a moment of animation. When asked, to show the photograph the photographer asked the narrator to get it on Saturday. The narrator left the studio with a sigh of relief. It was a nightmarish experience for him. Mark the humorous situation of the narrator:

Is it me, I asked,

"The eyes, "I said hesitatingly, don't look very much like mine"

"Oh no, he answered, I've retouched them. They come out splendidly, don't they?"

Fine I said, "But surely my eyebrows are not like that?"

"The eyebrows are removed. We have a process now the Delphide for putting in new ones".

The readers go on laughing at every stage of his behavior. Leacock gives here minute details of the painful experience of the narrator who longs for a good picture, the photographer and animations made by him feel embarrassed. Humor stems from the peculiar behavior of an ordinary photographer who finds the way of animating the features to its full extent. Even an ordinary human being finds it difficult to have a bad face. The humor of the piece is achieved not only by the exaggerated situation but also by a skillful use of short clips of dialogue. The narrator's psychological intimidation is clearly presented by an inferiority complex in which the scene richly suggests more than it relates.

Leacock's sympathy clearly lies with the victims of inhuman behavior of the uncaring professionals. And that is the job of the humorist. He picks up characters and situations from the world around. The experience of the ordinary man like the narrator at a studio does not differ much. Even a matured person finds it difficult to bear such insults. It has been rightly noted.

"Go on, then, with your brutal work. Take your negative, — dip it in sulphide, bromide, oxide, cowhide,—anything you like,—remove the eyes, correct the mouth, adjust the face, restore the lips, reanimate the necktie and reconstruct the waistcoat. Keep it for yourself and your friends. They may value it. To me it is but a worthless bauble."

I broke into tears and left

Not only the photographer is responsible for this, the narrator's choices of the studio are also the factors that made him fail. First the photographer in the studio is not enthusiastic enough and not willing to accept the original features. Second the narrator has an inferiority complex about his face, which was making him more nervous. Lastly the narrator was impatient and spoke to the photographer abruptly after realizing that the man was not a suitable one. It made him feel very embarrassed.

The narrator here is a helpless fellow whose frightened state of mind, lack of confidence about his own face takes him

back to his original state. His visit to the studio proves futile. He defines it that he wanted something that his friends might keep after his death, to reconcile them to his loss. What he wanted was no longer done.

CONCLUSION

Laughing feels good. However, we expect our literature to do something more than simply entertain us. True purpose of literature is uplifting our spirits, shining a cold light on dark truths, giving audience to under-represented voices, or toppling the bourgeois hegemony. Humor can only help in accomplishing these goals. Humor is a tool, like characterization or dialogue, and it is foolhardy for any writer to rise to the impossible task of communicating the unspeakable with less than all available tools at their disposal. Humor is seen as a necessary element of fiction. Leacock held that humorous literature serves a more private purpose: it provides temporary, illusory respite from a life that is fundamentally disillusioning. By providing temporary escape from disillusionment, humor functions as a kind of enchanting spell to charm hard reality. In Leacock's view, disillusionment is the truth about 'human life' which is perceived by the humorous vision and which humor makes bearable.

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