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HUMOUR IN ENGLISH LITERATURE.

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Humour is a distinctive characteristic of English literature--humour of a quality peculiar to English literature only. We have humour in French literature, a certain, to English minds at least, heavy humour in German literature, but none just like that of our own English authors.

Humour is a facetious turn of thought; playful fancy; jocularity. Specifically, in literature, it is the sportive exercise of the imagination that is apparent in the choice and treatment of a theme and that delights in the incongruous, the ludicrous, and the droll. Wit is the ready perception and the happy expression of unexpected or amusing analogies or other relations between ideas apparently incongruous or unrelated. Wit's analogies are superficial and artificial. Humour's are real analogies of a diverting, amusing, or entertaining kind, or with traits of character that are seen to have a comical side as soon as brought to view. There is in humour greater sympathy, geniality, and pleasantry, and less of keen, cold analysis. "Wit is abrupt, darting, scornful, and tosses its analogies in your face. Humour is slow and shy, insinuating its fun into your heart. Wit is negative, analytical destructive, while humour is creative. The couplets of Pope are witty, but Sancho Panza is a humorous creation." According to Carlyle, Cervantes is the purest of all humourists, so gentle and so genial, so full, yet so ethereal in his humour. The materials for humour are drawn from situations and characteristics, while wit seizes on unexpected and complex relations.

The English mind finds in humour a quality more congenial than wit. Humour consists primarily in taking up the peculiarities of a humourist, and drawing them out as Addison did those of Sir Roger de Coverley, so that we enjoy a hearty, good natured laugh at the unconscious development he makes of his whims and oddities. From this original sense the term has been widened to embrace other sources of kindly mirth of the same general character. "Snap, snap,

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quick, and home, it rejoiceth my intellect - true wit," says Armado. So does wit, in the more modern sense, rejoice the intellect. We see wit, but we feel humour. Wit effects the eye and the mind, humour, - the heart.

A well known caricature of English reserve represents an Oxford student as standing on the brink of a river, greatly agitated at the sight of a drowning man, and crying out "Oh that I had been introduced to that gentleman, that I might save his life." The following story of Sir Walter Scott may appear more to the Scottish sense of humour. A gentleman talking with Scott said that he believed that perfect happiness might be enjoyed even in this world. Sir Walter dissented. His friend continued firm, and cited the case of an idiot, who seemed the beau ideal of animal contentment. The daft individual was moving along, humming to himself when Sir Walter addressed him. "Weel Jamie, hoo are ye the day?" "Brawley, ou brawley". "Have you plenty to eat and drink, Jamie?" "Ou ay." "And keep you warm?" "Ou ay." "And are a' the folk kind to ye?" "Ou, ay." "There," said the poet's antagonist, is a perfectly happy creature." "Not so fast," said Sir Walter. "Is there naething, Jamie, that bothers you at a'? " "ou ay," said the idiot, changing his tone, "there's a muckle bubblyjock that follows me wherever I gang." "Now, said Sir Walter," you see from this that the simplest and most stupid of mankind are haunted by evil of some kind or other. In short, every one has his bubbly-jock."

An attempt to analyze even in brief the humour of all of the standard writers of English literature would be futile. Let us confine ourselves to four authors only. Four, however, who portray humour perfectly in their several departments. These are Addison, in the essay, Thackeray and Dickens in the novel, and Shakespere in the drama. It has been thought unnecessary to consider humour in poetry. There is a certain grim humour in Browning, another style of humour in Tennyson, but we see at a glance that humour is not a sufficiently distinctive quality of poetry to warrant any extended

treatment of it.

Jonson says "Addison's prose is the model of the middle style, on grave subjects not formal, on light occasions not grovelling; pure without scrupulosity and exact without elaboration; always equable and always easy, without glowing words and pointed sentences. His page is always luminous, but never blazes in unexpected splendor. He is never feeble and he did not wish to be energetic; he is never rabid, and he never stagnates. Whoever wishes to attain an English style, familiar but not coarse, elegant but not ostentatious, must give his days and nights to the volumes of Addison."

Addison has no superior in refined and delicate humour. It flows from him in an inexhaustible supply. It was that which made him the best conversationalist among his friends, and which makes Pope regard him as

"Blest with each talent and each art to please,
And born to write, converse, and live with ease."

He gave to the world in the Spectator something of that pleasantry which only a privileged few had before gained from him, when anecdotes, jests, and good-natured reparted flowed from his lips at the Kitcat or at the table of Halifax, Swift, or Chesterfield.

The great English Novelists have Addison as their fore-runner. The craving for fiction, strong at that time as now, was partly met by the delightful productions of Addison and Steele. It was felt that roughness did not go to make up a gentleman: that Whigs and Tories, churchmen and dissenters, might hold different views, and not act in such a manner as to sow the seeds of civil war. Frivolity was attacked by gentle and pleasing words, and with a smile. The lady who had her mind occupied with a "new head dress," a gossiping visit, some cracked china, or an affection of learning, read through an essay at breakfast and was charmed with its quaint humour before she recognized that it was a "satire on her pet folly." Lord Mulgrave says "Satyr well writ has oft successful proved, and cured, because the remedy is loved." By an imaginary letter from a friend, by some eastern fable, by some well constructed allegory, or by a

fictitious dream, hypocrisy is rebuked, prejudices are removed, or some absurd fashion is ridiculed. We see the modest English woman, domestic and grave, wholly taken up with her husband and children. We see the man who goes to his club, learns the news, yawns, studies his barometer, and thinks his time is well spent.

To the mere literary lounger the comic sketches of society, the whimsical autobiographies, the exposure of social weaknesses and follies, in petitions, letters, or skilful allegories, offered themselves as supplying the place of the worn out comic stage. For those who were something more than idlers, there were held out objects much higher; objects of contemplation which lead us to think better of the age than we could if we had only Pope or Swift to look to as expositors.

"Addison in the display of his humour," says Dr. Johnson," never outsteps the modesty of nature or raises merriment or wonder by the violation of truth. Figures never divert by distortion, nor amuse by aggravation. He copies life with such fidelity, that he could never be said to invent; yet his exhibitions have an air so much original that it is difficult to suppose them not merely the product of the imagination." Macaulay thus compares Addison's pleasantry with that of Swift and Voltaire. "Voltaire is the prince of buffoons. His merriment is without disguise or restraint. He gambols; he grins; he shakes his sides; he points the finger; he turns up the nose; he shoots out the tongue. The manner of Swift is the very opposite. He moves to laughter, but never joins in it. He appears in his work much as he did in society. All the company are convulsed merriment, while the dean, the author of all the mirth, preserves an invincible gravity and even sourness of aspect." Addison differs from both. "He neither laughs out like the French wit, nor, like the Irish wit, throws a double portion of severity into his countenance while laughing inly, but preserves a look peculiarly his own a look of demure severity disturbed only by an arch twinkle of the eye, an almost imperceptible curl of the lip. We own that the bumour of Addison is, in our opinion, of a more delicious flavour than the humour of either Swift or Voltaire. This

much, at least, is certain, that both Swift and Voltaire have been successfully mimicked, and that no man has yet been able to mimic Addison."

The mirth of Addison is that of one who felt that there was much to be admired in human character. He aimed to cure without inflicting pain; to use ridicule without abusing it: to advance virtue without uniting it to fanaticism, and to draw attention to human follies by a mirth consistent with tender compassion for all that is frail and with profound reverence for all that is sublime.

There is a natural transition from a consideration of the humour of Addison to a consideration of that of Thackeray our great novelist. Thackeray's style is one singular and delightful, of extraordinary vivacity, and with a particular attitude to life and letters. He has a quality of humour and of unsurpassed pathos, a power of presenting scene and personage, and of depicting and immortalizing character. It was Thackeray's not so much to argue as to observe, to feel, to laugh, and to suffer. His style corresponding to his sphere in literature, had great flexibility and facility of adaptation.

Thackeray looks upon life with a smile alternately caustic and tender. He is not, as some have thought him, cynical, nor is his humour, as some have pronounced it, merely of a satirical nature. It is probable that on Vanity Fair has been largely based the foolish cry about his cynicism a cry which he himself with his keen knowledge of men, foresaw and provided against at the end of the eigth chapter. The passage is perhaps the best commentary ever written on the author's method. It is as follows. "Occasionally to step down from the platform and talk about them; if they are good and kindly, to love them, and shake them by the hand, if they are silly, to laugh at them confidentially in the reader's sleeve; if they are wicked and heartless, to abuse them in the strongest terms politeness admits of. Otherwise, you might fancy it was I who was sneering at the practice of devotion, which Miss Sharp finds so ridiculous; that it was I who laughed good humouredly at the railing of old Silemus the baronet,-- whereas the laughter comes from one who has

no reverence except for posterity, and no eye for anything beyond success. Such people there are living and flourishing in the world. Faithless, Hopeless Charityless. Let us have at them, friends with might and main. Some there are, and very successful too, mere quacks and fools, and it was to combat and expose such as those no doubt that laughter was made. "Perhaps most readers of The Newcomes think first of the grand and simple figure of the Colonel, who stands out in the relief of almost ideal beauty against the crowd of more or less imperfect personages who move through the novel. At the same time, to say, as has been said, that this book is full of satire, is not just. There is plenty of kindliness in the treatment of the young men, who, like Clive Newcome, and Lord Kew, possess no shining virtue besides that of being candid, in the character of J. J. Reilly there is much tenderness and pathos, and no one can help liking the Bohemian F. B. It may be that both the fiendish temper of Mrs. Mackenzie and the sufferings she inflicts on the colonel are too closely insisted upon, but we must remember that this heightens the singular pathos of the closing scenes of the Colonel's life.

Esmond seems to some readers Thackerays capital work. It has not been rivalled, and only a few times approached by Mr. Besant, as a romance producing with unfailing interest and accuracy the figures, manners, and phrases of a past time, and it is full of beautiful touches of character. Apart from the fact of Beatrix being an unpleasing character and Esmond somewhat of a prig, the story is like the illusion of a past time in the narrative, so harmoniously worked out that there is little room for criticism. The Adventures of Philip contains scenes of humour, pathos, and satire which rank with Thackeray's best work.

Thackeray's aim in writing Pendennis was "merely to follow out the development of the mind of a worldly and selfish, but not ungenerous or unkind or truth avoiding man-- not a hero, but only a man and a brother,"-- a man whose maxim was that he owed allegiance to all acts of parliament so long as they were not repealed." The Begum is not refined, certainly, and calls Apollo Apoller, but she has some

heart. "She never did anything but kindness to you or any mortal soul. As far as she knows, she does her best. She does not set up to be more than she is. She gives you the best dinners she can buy. She pays the debts of that scamp of a husband of hers. She spoils her son like the most virtuous woman in England. Her opinion on literary matters, to be sure, is not worth much, and I daresay she never read a line of Wordsworth, or heard of Tennyson in her life." Arthur's mother and sister are "not so witty as the London ladies, but they are certainly as well bred." These brief excerpts from Pendennis may serve to reveal in part Thackeray's treatment of humanity.

No better argument for Thackeray's humour may be given than that which he advances in the preface to the work on Snobs. He says-- "Snobs are to be studied like all other objects of natural science, and are a part of the Beautiful. They pervade all classes.--- First, the world was made; then, as a matter of course Snobs; they existed for years and years, and presently the people became darkly aware that there was such a race. Not above five and twenty years since, a name, an expressive monosyllable, arose to designate that race.

"I have, (and for this gift I congratulate myself with a Deep and Abiding Thankfulness) an eye for a Snob. If the Truthful is the Beautiful, it is beautiful to study even the Snobbish. An immense percentage of snobs, I believe, is to be found in every rank of this mortal life. You must not judge hastily or vulgarly of Snobs; to do so shews that you are yourself a snob. I myself have been taken for one."

Even giving those who argue against Thackeray's style a wide margin, we can, after reading some of what may seem satirical writing, and falling upon a statement like the following enter heartily into the thought of the author -- "It is not straps that make a gentleman, or highlows that unmake him, be they ever so thick. My son, it is you who are a snob, if you lightly despise a man for doing his duty, and refuse to shake an honest man's hand because it wears a Berlin Glove." Elsewhere, too, Thackeray says-" I ask you

to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing. If truth is not always pleasant at any rate truth is best, from whatever chair--from those whence grave writers or thinkers argue, as from that at which the story teller sits as he concludes his labor and bids his kind readers farewell."

The novels of Dickens are of a variety very different from those of Thackeray, though each writer had probably at heart the same aim. The style of Dickens' novels never bore much reference to any public taste or demand, and Dickens developed himself more strictly according to his own bent than any writer of English literature not born to fame. He knew the lower and lower middle classes of his own day with wonderful accuracy; he could inform this knowledge with an indefinable comprehension of man as man; and over and above this he possessed an imagination now humorous, now terrible, now simply grotesque, which stands entirely by itself, or is approached only by that of Balzac. This imagination, essentially plastic, so far outran the strictly critical knowledge of mankind as mankind, that it has invested Dickens' books and characters with a peculiarity found nowhere else, or only in the instance just excepted. They are never quite real; we never experience anything or anybody quite like them in the actual world, and yet in their own world they hold their position and play their part quite perfectly and completely. They obey their own laws, are consistent with their own surroundings.

Dickens' humour was almost unfailing, and thanks to his gift of projecting imaginative characters, it was never exactly the same. According to his own account, intensely as he felt the shame and misery of his early life, he saw even then its humorous side. With Coleman's "Broad Grins" before him as a stimulus, he sketched the barber, who came to shave his uncle, the old charwoman, who helped his mother, and he laid the foundation of many of his characters and scenes. At a very early stage we find in full swing the unflagging delight in pursuing the humorous side of a character, and the inexhaustible fertility in inventing ludicrous incidents, which had only

to be elaborated to place him on a pinnacle of fame.

An ordinary boy, being put to the test to which Dickens was subjected, in early life, would have either died or become a rogue and a vagabond. Instead of sinking into the depths of thronging atoms, Dickens rose above them and became their describer. His early life fitted him perfectly for his task. He lived the life of his favorite characters. The bitter contrast between the ideal world in which he had lived and the miserable poverty in which he spent the first three years of his life in London helped to fix in his mind indelibly certain experiences and scenes and characters with which they brought him in contact.

Dickens' attitude to society in the narrow sense of the term was always peculiar. He constantly struggled against a fear that the circumstances of his early life exposed him to contempt, and this is perceptible in his work. Critics have argued that he never painted a single aristocrat or big wig generally with any degree of accuracy. It is more correct to say that he never tried to paint a gentleman, than that he did not succeed. The question can hardly be raised without giving it undue importance, an importance which Dickens himself would have made light of, for though he had his full share of humanity's vanities, he was a great man in the heart and temper as well as in genius, and littlenesses were of the accidents and not of the essences of his being.

Dickens and Thackeray were both great humorists. Dickens want of perfect sympathy with the cultured society of his time incapacitated him for that kind of novel which answers to comedy in dramatic composition, although it left him free for work of a higher and more enduring kind. What may be called the comedy novel, the novel of Thackeray in Dickens' generation is much less sure of enduring fame, because the sentiments on which it rests are more fugitive and pass sooner into the province of the historian. Dickens' novels will live longer because they take hold of the permanent and universal sentiments of the race, sentiments which prevade all classes, and which no culture can eradicate. His fun may be too boisterous for

the refined tastes of his own time or of posterity, his pathos may appear maudlin, but they carried everything before them when they first burst upon our literature, and however exaggerated, they were exaggerations of what our race feels in its inner heart. Unless culture in the future works a miracle, and carries its changes beneath the surface, Dickens will keep his hold.

And now for Shakespere, the prince of the dramatists. At whatever issue Shakespere arrived, that precise issue is arrived at in part by virtue of Shakespere's humour. Shakespere, who saw life more widely and wisely than any of the seers, could laugh.

Shakespere's humour is many sided. He does not pledge himself as a dramatist to any one view of human life. If we open up a novel by Charles Dickens we feel assured beforehand that we are condemned to an exuberance of philanthropy; we expect the author to hold out the right hand of fellowship to man, woman and child; we are prepared for the bacchanalia of benevolence. The lesson that we have to learn from this teacher is that, with the exception of a few inevitable and incredible monsters of cruelty, every man naturally engendered of the offspring of Adam is of his own nature inclined to amiable virtue. Shakespere abounds in kindly mirth, he receives an exquisite pleasure from the alert wit and bright good sense of a Rosalind; he can dandle a fool as tenderly as any nurse qualified to take a baby from the birth can deal with her charge. But Shakespere is not pledged to deep dyed, ultra amiability. With Jacques he can rail at the world, while remaining curiously aloof from all deep concern about its interests. With Timon he can turn upon the world with a rage no less than that of Swift, and discover in man and woman a creature as abominable as the Yohos. In other words, the humour of Shakespere is dramatic.

Then again, although Shakespere laughs incomparably, mere laughter wearies him. He has written but one purely farcical play, The Comedy of Errors, and even that has a serious back ground. "With beauty or with pathos or with humour Shakespere can mingle his mirth, and then he is happy," says Dowden" and knows how to deal

with play of wit or humorous characterization, but an entirely comic subject somewhat disconcerts the poet.

Unless it be its own excess Shakespere's laughter fears nothing. It does not, when it has once arrived at its full development, fear enthusiasm or passion or tragic intensity, nor do these fear it. The traditions of the English drama had favored the juxta-position of the serious and comic; but it was reserved for Shakespere to make each a part of the other; to interpenetrate tragedy with comedy, and comedy with tragic earnestness. Shakespere is disposed to let no side of a fact escape him. If it have a trivial, ludicrous aspect by all means let us have that put on record. The valet de chambre range of emotion is as undeniable a piece of reality as is the heroic; and the world, somehow, is wide enough for both valet and hero. It is desirable to ascertain what lights the one may throw on the other."

The apparent holding himself aloof from and above his own creations, his impartiality to persons and actions, is not real aloofness. It rather proceeds from his professional interest in his subject, his determination to do justice to every side of it. "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art,"exclaimed Lear to the shivering Edgar, and yet he is at the same time "How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an Angel! In apprehension, how like a God! The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" Shakespere recognized both our human imperfections and our greatness; he denied the one as little as the other; hence his enthusiasm is not suppressed by, but at one with, his tenderness, his pity, his pathos.

Saintsbury in his criticism on Shakespere's humour may be quoted here verbatim. "Shakespere is never, in the vulgar sense of the word, unnatural. He has not the slightest objection to horrors. His horrors are never sought beyond a certain usual and peculiar round of circumstances, and are always tempered and humanised by touches of humour or pathos or both. Shakespere's attitude to mortality is unique. Nobody can call him squeamish. But he never makes those

forms of vice, which most trouble and corrupt society, triumphant; he never diverges into the morbid pathology of the amatory passion; and, above all, he never makes his personages show singular toleration of the most despicable immorality, which most all of his contemporaries exhibit. He is in his own sense liberal as the most easy going can demand, but he never mixes vice and virtue."

Shakespere is equally alone in his use in comedy and tragedy of the element of humour. To many persons his humour and its use have been a stumbling block. His clowns are believed to be red rags to some experienced play-wrights and accomplished wits; the porter in Macbeth, the grave-digger in Hamlet, the fool in Lear, even the humours in Love's Labour's Lost and the Merchant of Venice, have failed. But the constant presence of humour which ranges from the fantastic quintessence of Falstaff, through the fantasies of Feste and Edgar, down to the sheer nonsense which not unfrequently occurs, is one of the chief of those spells by which Shapespere has differentiated his work in the sense of universality from that of all the other dramatists. Nonsense is no small part of life, and it is a part, the relish of which Englishmen are almost alone in enjoying and recognizing. "He must be a fool indeed says Rolfe," who cannot at times play the fool, and he who does not enjoy nonsense must be lacking in sense." It is because Shakespere dared to be foolish that he is so preeminently wise.

The Elizabethan drama gives us life, the coarse with the fine, the mean with the heroic, the humorous and grotesque with the tragic and terrible. Its object is to hold the mirror up to nature. It is written on a purely human basis, is mundane. There is ever present in Shakespere a sense of truth, a realization of fact, and of the moral order of the universe. His sanity and strength is religious. In his early writings we see wit or fancy, cleverness or intelligence at work; he is tender and enthusiastic. In his later writings we have imagination and thought, wisdom and mirth and charity, experiment and surmise playing into one another. Shakespere's genial laugh is free from amiable

cynicism. " It is like the play of summer lightning, which hurts no living creature but surprises, illuminates and charms." We have no need to be impatient with the grotesque portions of humanity. We may only understand them and smile.

The history of this laughter is divided into four periods. The first, in which are "Love's Labour's Lost, Comedy of Errors, Two Gentlemen of Verona, is the tentative period. It is deficient in the material of deep thought and emotion. But even here we see the humanity of the writer- e.g. the main intention of Love's Labour's Lost is a protest against idealizing away the facts of life. It is interesting to compare the treatment of the characters and natures of Shakespere's women. We notice that the women of this first period are either emotional women, deficient in delicacy of heart, in refinement of intellect, or intellectual women, bright and clever, but over confident, forward and defiant.

By the second period, that of the histories, and later comedies, Shakespere was gaining a sure grasp of the facts of his life, but has not investigated life thoroughly. Here his mirth was freest for disport. His women now are, on the one side distinguished by the single element of human strength on the other they are studies of feminine incapacity or ignobleness.

The third period is that of the great tragedies. The dramatists' laughter is now pathetic, tragic, and terrible. Human life is now studied with reference to its most solemn issues. There is no unalloyed mirth, no bright and tender fancies. The women now on the one hand are those who, like Desdemona and Cordelia, make the world beautiful and sacred; on the other hand, those who like Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan, make it strange and sorrowful.

By the fourth period, all is serenity. We see here mirthful figures like Miranda and Perdita,--girlish and innocent, or the figures of great sufferers, like Hermione and Queen Catherine, who are beyond sorrow.

The greatest achievement in Poetry, of the Teutonic or Northern genius is found in Lear. Here all else of Shakespere's

art attains a deeper and more intense life than elsewhere in his works. The interpretation of humour is complete. "It is as if the writer were looking down at human life from a point of view without and above life, from which the whole appears as a monstrous piece of farce comedy, in which all that is ludicrous is terrible, all that is terrible ludicrous. The comedy is not like that in the Comedy of Errors, but is titanic burlesque overhung with impending horror, and inspired by an idea of world destruction. The satire now is the deep fierce complaint against the world, not airy satire on affectations and fashions.

Such is Shakespere's humour." We may learn from Shakespere gravely, studiously, profitably, and we may after, laugh with him, gayly, mirthfully, joyously, and still with profit to ourselves.

It is with men like Addison, Thackeray, Dickens, and above all, Shakespere, that we can enjoy true humour.--For have they not seen, in their heart of hearts, queens weeping like ordinary women, and tears starting in the eyes of kings. They remember that men and women have heavy burdens to carry, and hard battles to fight, and they know how to help to lighten the burdens and brighten the fight. Strange, passing strange is it, that the same hand which touched so tenderly a "Tiny Glint of Light", drew a chord across the strings of Humanity that awakened a world to the sufferings of "Les Miserables," And yet such is the truth. To enjoy and enter into the humour in any great work we must take possession for the time being of the heart and mind of the writer. We must remember that humour's prosperity, like that of a jest, lies in the ear and heart of him who hears and reads it, as well as in the pen and heart of him who creates it.

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Flora B. Folson