

## Humour as Social Critique in *Pickwick Papers* & *Three Men in a Boat*

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Humour is one of those marginal aspects of human civilization that, until recently, has been overlooked as an area worthy of systematic academic research. Yet for over two millennia many prominent thinkers have included some thoughts on humour, its origins and functions in their writings. Although Aristotle, in his *Poetics* clearly states that comedy is a lesser art than tragedy, he was perhaps the first to recognize the importance of comedy. Humour, being creativity and innovation, exists in opposition to seriousness. As the popular language of subversion, humour poses a challenge to the rigidity and dominance of 'traditional logic'. Hence it has often been seen as a form of corruption and therefore actively suppressed.

The term 'humour' is derived from Latin meaning 'moisture' or 'body fluid', and in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance period it was used to denote the four humours of the body- blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile, which determined a person's mental disposition, character and temperament. In the sixteenth century the theory of humours is

employed in drama for the first time when Ben Jonson names the characters in his comedy *Every Man in His Humour* (1598) in terms of their prevailing bodily fluids. However it is not until the seventeenth century that 'humour' is used to refer to the comic and ridiculous and in the eighteenth century the word gradually got in all the European languages.

Traditional theories of humour have been divided into three very broad categories: *superiority theories*, which date back to the Ancient Greek philosophers and suggest that we laugh at others who we perceive as inferior to ourselves; *relief theories*, which originated in the early psychoanalytic writings of Freud and claim that people joke in order to relieve pent up psychical energies that would otherwise manifest in more damaging ways; and *incongruity theories*, a concept that also originated in philosophy and argues that humour arises when there is an incongruity between what is expected and what occurs. Essentially each of these categories of theories offer useful insights into certain instances of humour; superiority theories provide a good explanation for ethnic humour, relief theories are useful for explaining political humour, and incongruity theories explain why puns and wordplays are funny, but none totally explain humour in its myriad of forms and functions.

Humour, in the sense that we commonly use it today has its first recorded usage in England in 1682 and for a long time it was considered a peculiarly English form as "A form of irony, at once pleasant and serious, sentimental and satirical, that appears to belong particularly to the English spirit". Some writers even claim that the English language by itself promotes a certain amount of humour and playfulness. The current English definition of humour refers primarily to qualities such as 'being amusing' and the 'ability to take a joke', or as any type of stimulation that elicits 'the laughter reflex.' Obviously funniness is an innate quality of humour. So when humour is defined as 'something funny' and funny being defined as

‘something humorous’ and both of them evidenced by the laughter of another, the fundamentally social nature of humour becomes clearly apparent. From the ancient myths of trickster gods, to the classical Greek comedies, to medieval jesters, to political cartoons, humour has played a vital role in providing a public forum for oppositional socio-political commentary.

A culture’s humor not only provides invaluable insight into that nation’s values, perceptions and how they view others, but it also reveals how they view themselves. The use of humour in social interactions is a very important convention in England and the use of humor to promote ethno-cultural identity remains an essential facet of English culture. Humor not only provides “inside” cultural jokes, but easily allows readers to distinguish as to what is essentially the English sense of humour. English society, with its class system and regional differences provides rich opportunities for character-based comedy. The many recognisable types and accents produced by this society offer rich material for caricature, and a substantial amount of English humour is still class-based.

It is a common supposition that there exists a dialogic interchange between the humorous text and its culture. Humor literature can be split into two broad categories: first, the individual level—why individuals use humor, and second, the societal level—the function humor has within a social setting or society. However there are alarmingly few sources addressing mid-nineteenth-century humour although several of the great Victorian humorists blended genres by using comic techniques for strengthening a collective sense of “Englishness”. Thus, if we measure a culture’s capacity for humor by its audience’s collectively perceived sense of ‘Englishness’, then Victorian England seems especially suited and well adapted for humorousness. This paper, therefore, examines how the two Victorian novels-- *Pickwick Paper* and *Three Men in a Boat*, present humor as quintessentially English and also how this

humor, as a unique cultural product, has been used by the authors as social critique of Victorian society.

Charles Dickens, one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian period, is famous for his humor, satire and keen observation of character. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, known more commonly as *The Pickwick Papers*, is a burlesque of the touring and sporting clubs in England in Victorian times and is Dickens's first novel. It narrates the hilarious adventures of the benevolent but accident-prone Mr. Pickwick and the blundering but enthusiastic members of the Pickwick Club. The novel also contains a series of inset stories featuring alcoholism, poverty, domestic abuse, squalor and death, all of which focuses on the dark underbelly of life. However the strength of the novel lies in its satirical portrayal of society especially on two particular aspects of English society in Victorian England: laws dealing with breach of promise in a marriage situation; and debtors' laws and prison.

Mr. Samuel Pickwick is an "observer of human nature," and enjoys traveling about England and meeting new people. Like Don Quixote, Mr. Pickwick desires adventures (although he is in his 50s) and wants to seek more experience by heading away from his comfortable life in London. As the president of the Pickwick Club, he decides to take along with him three younger club members who are also his closest friends (Mr. Nathaniel Winkle, a humbug of a sportsman who constantly fails at every single sporting activity he tries; the romantic Mr. Augustus Snodgrass, an aspiring poet who has never written anything; and the pudgy and good natured Mr. Tracy Tubman, a ladies' man). Soon, he finds a wonderful servant in Sam Weller and their team is complete. However, their adventures were quite unlike those in *Don Quixote* and it revolves around the basic, amusing things that happen to Victorian persons every day, from losing a hat in the street to watching a political battle unfold in a small town. A traveling actor and conman, the street-savvy Mr. Alfred Jingle and his servant, Job Trotter,

repeatedly cause trouble for the naive Mr. Pickwick and the Pickwickians, often with hilarious results. Jingle with his staccato way of speaking and the cockney witticisms and humorous observations of Sam Weller, Mr. Pickwick's incredibly loyal and streetwise servant provide some much humour in the novel. However, most of the humour of the book lies in the discrepancy between the narrator's interpretation of the notes taken by the Pickwickians and on the likely reality of the situation.

*The Pickwick Papers* seems to be primarily humorous, focusing on four fairly eccentric, harmless central characters, but the novel is, as with most of Dickens' other works, full of commentary about British society and of social issues pertinent to nineteenth-century England after the Industrial Revolution. The comic techniques used Charles Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers* highlights the innocence of Mr. Pickwick against the deceptive and often dangerous nature of his society, both socially and legally. Dickens' verbal comedy exposes social deception and in the novel, verbal humour is best exemplified in the character of Alfred Jingle who is in many ways the embodiment of Dickens' linguistic humour. Jingle's speech pattern interrupts the otherwise eloquent dialogue of the Pickwickians with its fragmentary, compressed and somewhat breathless execution. An example of Dickensian humour is of Jingle's marvellous staccato delivery: "Terrible place – dangerous work – other day – five children – mother – tall lady, eating sandwiches – forgot the arch – crash – knock – children look round – mother's head off – sandwich in her hand – no mouth to put it in ...". (15). Gullible to his lies and naive about his character, Jingle's comic verbosity draws Mr. Pickwick and the club members into his deceptive character. Jingle's rhetorical humour highlights and underscores the deceptive nature of the world beyond the safety of the Pickwick Club and exposes the dangers that such social deception poses.

Throughout the novel there are a number of instances in which Mr. Pickwick finds himself in awkward and humorous situations. This seems to be especially true when it comes to women. One of the most hilarious escapades of the many that unfold during the Pickwickians quest for justice and benevolence is the episode of the mistaken hotel room. The members have been separated temporarily due to unforeseen circumstances and Mr. Pickwick finds himself on his own. Unfortunately, the confused Mr. Pickwick has tucked himself into bed in the wrong room. He is about to succumb to slumber when a middle-aged woman enters the chamber in her dressing gown and begins to prepare herself to bed. Sitting bolt upright, Pickwick is panic stricken. He pokes his head out of the bed curtains, sees the woman primping before the mirror, and pulls back in horror. What can he do? The honourable man that he is, he announces his presence but the woman goes into hysterics. Pickwick is dishonourably ejected from the room. The next morning Pickwick has mostly recovered when, to his dismay, he is introduced to this very same lady by her fiancée, a man who the evening before befriended Pickwick in the bar and with whom he shared a nightcap. The lady is distraught. Suspicion and jealousy run rampant, complications ensue, threats are made, and it all ends with the police taking Pickwick into custody.

Dickens' uses parody of institutional authority as a means of exposing the prevalent corruption in the legal system. In scenes such as the Bardell versus Pickwick trial, where he is sued by his landlady, Mrs. Bardell for "false promises of marriage", as well as Mr. Pickwick's arrest and consequent introduction to Mr. Nupkins, Pickwick is shown to confront with the evils of the outside world where he becomes little more than a means of making money, not only for Mrs. Bardell, but also for Dodson and Fogg. However, Dickens' legal parody is best revealed through Weller's mockery of its overseers, such a Sergeant Buzfuz. Ultimately, what appears on one level as

superficial comedy is transformed into a comment on the legal system for it clearly demonstrate how the law is open to manipulation by skilled officials such as Buzfuz. *The Pickwick Papers* thus exposes the corruption of the judicial system and consequently, society in general.

Leslie Simon notes that *Pickwick* was Dickens's "tale of travel, exploration and movement toward some better understanding of what it means to be 'at home' (23) which Dickens achieved primarily by "restricting his hero's journey to the frontiers of his own domestic space—that is, England" (33). Thus, funnily enough, the *Pickwickians* may perhaps be the first group of bachelors in a travel comedy who never really leave "home" anticipating Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, which would appear fifty-three years later.

Travel writing and geography each have well-drawn connections to ethno-cultural sentiment and Victorian travel writings have in particular contributed to creating and reinforcing collective socio-geographic memory. Travel humor frequently involves comically questioning not only people's nostalgic connections with the physical landscapes through which they travel but also how people categorize "types" of people they meet in course of their journey. Readers' familiarity with extra-textual references is essential in any parody, satire, or otherwise self-critical bit of humor; and while the satirical and humorous travelogues, *Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog!)*, does not explore distant lands or exotic foreign countries, it is replete with a sense of domestic identity. The novel with its slap-stick humor is a parody of Victorian travelogues. In late-Victorian England there was a vogue for recreational boating on the Thames and Jerome and his two friends, Harris and George and their dog, a fox terrier called Montmorency, attempting to escape the stresses of city life, decide to take a boat trip in order to relax and rejuvenate. The trip commences when the narrator discovers he has every disease except housemaid's knee and basically exhibits a

"general disinclination to work." And so the trio decides: "What we want is rest." But what they find instead is one hapless catastrophe after another what with soggy weather, humiliating dunkings, the irritating behavior of small boats, the 'contrariness of teakettles', the atrocities of English food and the vicissitudes of suburban life. Yet beneath all the light-heartedness, it's plain that the author is also offering a sharp critique of the selfishness and ignorance of the English upper class. The jabs are subtle but pointed. In some parts of the novel, social criticism comes to the fore when Jerome comments on social issues such as poverty, greed, superabundance of wealth and excessive accumulation of possession, criminality; kindly mocks various types of characters, among them villagers, fishermen, railway employees, boasters, oversensitive ladies; and last but not least makes fun of the three main characters themselves. Consequently, the novel is a deft mixture of biting satire and brilliant comedy.

Jerome, as one of the foremost humorists of his day brings out British absurdities and traditions in a comic way by using everyday language. *Three Men In A Boat* (1889) is strange mix of *travel journal* (observations on the various spots of interest along the Thames from Kingston to Oxford), *storytelling* ( a series of humorous stories and anecdotes, many unrelated to the main story), *social commentary* (mostly sarcasm in the guise of cluelessness). Although replete with humour, the novel does not begin with a joke but with a map—"The River Thames, from Kingston to Oxford." Thereafter many chapters of *Three Men in a Boat* begin with some nod to quintessential English landscapes and geography. The first sentence of Chapter 2 is "We pulled out the maps, and discussed plans" (10); Chapter 6 mentions "the quaint backstreets of Kingston, where they came down to the water's edge...quite picturesque in the flashing sunlight, the glinting river with its drifting barges, the wooded towpath, the trim-kept villas on either side..." (40); In Chapter 13: "Marlow is one



of the pleasantest river centres I know of” (108); to name only a few. The novel infuses humorous commonplaces into a Thames narrative. However, what is unusual in this travel narrative is that many of these geographic references are directly associated with a humorous past occurrence or are immediately followed by a comic scene. Jerome notes in the first sentence of Chapter 7: “It was while passing through Mousley lock that Harris told me about his maze experience” (50). Harris’s comic escapade of getting his party thoroughly lost in a hedge maze—an error blamed, incidentally, on a faulty map: “the map was once more consulted, and the thing seemed simpler than ever, and off they started for the third time. And three minutes later they were back in the centre again...Harris drew out his map again, after a while, but the sight of it only infuriated the mob, and they told him to go and curl his hair with it” (49). Another humorous instance described in Chapter 8 is when Jerome reminisces about Harris’s various failed attempts to sing comic songs—“you don’t look for much of a voice in a comic song. You don’t expect correct phrasing or vocalization....But you do expect the words” (60); similarly in Chapter 17: “We stayed two days at Streatley, and got our clothes washed. We had tried washing them ourselves, in the river, under George’s superintendence, and it had been a failure...the river between Reading and Henley was much cleaner, after we had washed our clothes in it, than it was before. All the dirt contained in the river between Reading and Henley we collected, during that wash, and worked it into our clothes” (147).

Jerome K. Jerome satirizes and critiques the English pride of the Thames. One of the most humorous moments of *Three Men in a Boat* occurs when J. recalls a previous river trip and his attempts to hire a boat aptly named *The Pride of the Thames* which turns out to resemble “a Roman relic of some sort, – relic of what I do not know, possibly a coffin” (162) while his friend thinks it is possibly “the fossil of a dead whale” that “must have belonged to the pre-glacial period” (162). Often,

travel humor mocks Anglo-specific historic legends and icons. Jerome frequently slips into historical musings, intertwining the action currently at hand with events which happened “on this very spot” X number of years ago: “I mused on Kingston, or “Kynningestun,” as it was once called in the days when Saxon “kings” were crowned here. Great Caesar crossed the river there, and the Roman legions camped upon its sloping uplands. Caesar, like, in later years, Elizabeth, seems to have stopped everywhere: only he was more respectable than good Queen Bess; he didn’t put up at public-houses She was nuts on public-houses, was England’s Virgin Queen. There’s scarcely a pub of any attractions within ten miles of London that she does not seem to have looked in at, or stopped at, or slept at, some time or other.” (41). Here, Jerome fuses Historical “facts” with humorous irreverence, cultural iconography (the public-house), and geography (the river and its “sloping uplands”). In addition to English history, Jerome also satirizes current and contemporary topics in English culture. Maybe his thoughts on New Women made him pen this: “The girls that have lovers never want them. They say they would rather be without them, that they bother them, and why don’t they go and make love to Miss Smith and Miss Brown, who are plain and elderly, and haven’t got any lovers? They themselves don’t want lovers. They never mean to marry. It does not do to dwell on these things; it makes one so sad” (43).

Jerome continually emphasizes the universal commonality of humorous events related to river travel. Perhaps one of the best examples is the tinned-pineapple scene in *Three Men in a Boat*. As J., Harris, and George struggle to open a tin of pineapples we are first struck with the physical hilarity of their predicament. Discovering that they have forgotten the tin-opener, “Harris tried to open the tin with a pocket-knife, and broke the knife and cut himself badly; and George tried a pair of scissors, and the scissors flew up, and nearly put his eye out. While they were dressing their wounds,

I tried to make a hole in the thing with the spiky end of the hitcher, and the hitcher slipped and jerked me out between the boat and the bank into two feet of muddy water, and the tin rolled over, uninjured, and broke a teacup. (105). Other famous examples of humour in the novel is Uncle Podger's trying to hang a picture and the story of the cheese.

In the creation and reception of humour in general what is important is the social context although it would differ from society to society. However the study of language features that contribute to humour is far less demanding. In *Three Men in a Boat* the most significant of these devices of humour is those of irony. Irony plays a vital, if not, leading role in the novel and represents an element that contributes most to the overall humorous tone of the novel. Jerome employs irony, both verbal and situational, mainly to observe and criticise human weaknesses. Verbal irony is found in large numbers in the narration itself. An example from the novel that expresses the narrator's ironic attitude: "It is not that I object to the work, mind you; I like work; it fascinates me. I can sit and look at it for hours. I love to keep it by me; the idea of getting rid of it nearly breaks my heart. You cannot give me too much work; to accumulate work has almost become a passion with me; my study is so full of it now, that there is hardly an inch of room for any more. I shall have to throw out a wing soon. And I am careful of my work, too. Why, some of the work that I have by me now has been in my possession for years and years, and there isn't a finger-mark on it. I take a great pride in my work; I take it down now and then and dust it. No man keeps his work in a better state of preservation than I do. (148- 9). The author often makes the characters of Harris and George the targets of his irony as in the instance below, in which George's job is made fun of: "Harris and I would go down in the morning, and take the boat up to Chertsey, and George, who would not be able to get away from the City till the afternoon (George goes to sleep at a bank from ten to four each day; except Saturdays,

when they wake him up and put him outside at two), would meet us there. (17). Jerome also uses formal language to establish irony. When the character of George asks a lock-keeper for some drinking water, the keeper maliciously offers him to take as much as he wants, pointing to the river and saying that he has drunk the river water for the last fifteen years without any harm. George, in response to the keeper's impoliteness, uses formal and very polite language to make an ironic insult: "George told him that his appearance, after the course, did not seem a sufficiently good advertisement for the brand; and that he would prefer it out of a pump." (132).

Wordplay is another powerful device for creating humour as it captures reader's attention because it stands out from the surrounding text, for example: "For the next four days he lived a simple and blameless life on thin Captain's biscuits (I mean that the biscuits were thin, not the captain) and soda-water . . ." (14). Jerome immediately explains what he means in brackets and thus draws attention to the ambiguity in the wordplay even more.

## Conclusion

Humour that transcends the time and place of its origin and can be understood and enjoyed centuries afterwards, is indeed difficult to achieve and the reason why *Pickwick Papers* and *Three Men in a Boat* continue to be enjoyed is because they deal with issues of universal human interest and reveal truths about ourselves as individuals and as society. Dickens' comic techniques, which include *comedy of language* to highlight social deception, *physical humour* to exemplify the safety of the interior domain and finally, *legal parody* to expose institutional corruption and promote Pickwickian benevolence, act as tools to adequately portray Mr. Pickwick's innocence against the deception of his society. Jerome K Jerome's classic humorous tale of boating misadventure, on the other hand, is the

quintessential example of the charm and wit of Victorian England. His comic technique which includes humourous devices like irony and wordplay satirize Victorian England's values, beliefs, and mannerisms. Both novels present verbal humour at its best.

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