

On Appreciation of American Humor

Jian Zhong

Department of College English, Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University

No. 293, Zhongshan Avenue, Guangzhou 510665, Guangdong, China

E-mail: jzhong7@163.com

Received: March 31, 2012

Accepted: May 22, 2012

Published: June 1, 2012

doi:10.5539/ells.v2n2p125

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ells.v2n2p125>

Abstract

American humor is a mirror that reflects American culture to a certain extent. To help enhance readers' understanding, corresponding methods are introduced as shown in the detailed analysis of writing skills and characteristics that involve pun, anticlimax, incongruous juxtaposition, comic simile and comic metaphor, comic definition, trick, understatement, antithesis, irony, malapropism, hyperbole. As for appreciation of American humor, three aspects discussed are appropriate psychological distance, perceiving incongruity, and commanding reading rhythm.

Keywords: Appreciation, American humor, Writing skills, Characteristics

1. Introduction

With a deep insight and unique artistic skills, American humorists have revealed to us the American image and the panorama of American society. Exposure to American humor makes us more aware of the culture and helps us communicate well with each other. Unfortunately, we can seldom perceive the laughter therein. The reasons are that we know little about its culture, its characteristic as well as its manifestation and that we are in lack of the corresponding methods and psychology to appreciate it. Now let's take a look at Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In Chapter 21, the so-called "duke" began Hamlet's soliloquy: "To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin/ That makes calamity of so long life; / For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to Dunsinane,/ But that the fear of something after death/ Murders the innocent sleep,/ Great nature's second course, /And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune /Than fly to others that we know not of./ There's the respect must give us pause:..." We'll never feel the humor in it unless we have appreciated Shakespeare's works with Mark Twain's writing skills and a proper distance from the character. Equipped with the knowledge, we will sense the grotesquerie of the soliloquy. The whole soliloquy is scraped together with some of them from *Macbeth* and some coined by the "duke" himself. Take the author's derision of the character's ignorance and pretense. If we are acquainted with the writer's skills like incongruous juxtaposition and twisted quotation, we would have felt its humor and its artistic appeal as well.

Concerning the knowledge of American culture, we can simply keep learning so as to get the essence of it. Here we will detail the analysis of writing skills, characteristics of American humor and the required methods to appreciate it.

2. Writing Skills and Characteristics of American Humor

Humor manifests the culture of a specific group in a certain period. With unique feature, humor differs from ethnics in both contents and writing skills.

American humor normally adopts the following methods:

2.1 Pun

Pun makes use of diversity of words and sentences to produce a humor effect. Here are some types of pun:

2.1.1 Pun of Words

As we know, the word "country" in the ensuing dialogue has two meanings. We can either understand it as "country" or as "rural", therefore humor produces according to its context.

- a. I'm happy. I've got a good job, a wonderful home, and the cleverest wife in the country.
- b. With your wife in the country, why shouldn't you be happy?

___The Comic Encyclopedia

2.1.2 Pun of Sounds

The black writer Langston Hughes (1902-1967) once uses pun of sounds like “but”, “butt” and “butts” to disclose American democracy ironically. In *The Policeman’s Ball*, Donald Barthelme (1931-) uses “Horrows” as a policeman’s name (“horrow” means “horror”).

2.1.3 Pun of Surface Sentence Structure

In the sentence of “The fat sailor’s wife likes to cook”, the part underlined is a pun. We can either interpret it as “a fat sailor” or as “a fat wife”.

2.1.4 Pun of Deep Sentence Structure

In the sentence of “The shooting of the Indians was bad”, the part underlined is a pun. Here it can either refer to “Indian’s shooting” or “the way to shoot Indians”

2.2 Anticlimax

A famous humorist once said that when you were manipulating the method of anticlimax rather than a coherent perfect sentence to express a kind of odd ideas, you have achieved a laughably effect. Anticlimax is to make a significant meaning plain or absurd in the aspect of content so as to achieve a humor effect. Here are some examples:

a. When I see people of shallow understanding, extravagantly dressed, I always feel sorry---for the clothes.

___Josh Billings (taken from Walter Blair. *Native American Humor*, 120)

b. I like an affectionate familiarity between parents and children, though I want it understood that I’m the boss of the family, that is, when Mrs. Arp is away from home.

___Bill Arp (ibid)

2.3 Incongruous Juxtaposition

Incongruous juxtaposition refers to the arrangement of totally different things put together. Here’s the example:

The contributions were as characteristic: a silver tobacco box, a very beautiful embroidered lady’s handkerchief (from Oakhurst the gambler),... a slingshot, a Bible (contributor not detected), a golden spur...

___Bret Harte. *The Luck of Roaring Camp*

2.4 Comic Simile and Comic Metaphor

Comic simile is also a kind of abnormal simile. Its humor is based on the connection of the different things that people can hardly imagine. When we describe the moon as a silver plate, it’s a common simile. If we say “The moon is like a piece of battercake”, it becomes a comic simile. The similar examples are as follows:

a) Her mouth was as wide and as red as a slice of watermelon.

___John Collier. *Another American Tragedy*

Similarly, there is comic metaphor. For example:

b) Young Swain... blushed to the top of his ears when he saw “Trees Dressed in White”, a loud, raucous splash on the wall.

___Rube Goldberg. *Art for Heart’s Sake*

2.5 Comic Definition

The method is to expose the nature of the things by poignant and sagacious definition, which reflects the author’s unusual view. *Devil’s Definitions* is just such a classic of comic definition. Here are some examples from it.

a) Politics, n.: A strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles; the conduct of public affairs for private advantages.

b) Diplomacy, n.: The patriotic art of lying for one’s country.

c) Presidency, n.: The greased pig in the field game of American politics.

2.6 Trick

There are many examples of works of arts that put a trap to cheat you. In Mark Twain’s *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer*, the hero Tom Sawyer takes advantage of other children’s curiosity of whitewashing the fence so that he can

get a dead mouse, a half apple and several pretties in turn. Also, the other hero in Johnson J. Hooper's *Simon Suggs* defraud the superstitious and peacockish people of a large sum of money.

2.7 Understatement

Understatement means the use of moderate diction so as to mention the referent lightly. For example, in *Georgia Scenes*, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870) prefers to say that Bob "was presented a finger as a gift" rather than that "Bob's finger is bitten off by Bill."

2.8 Antithesis

Antithesis requires parallel or symmetrical structure to bring contrary or opposite concepts into correspondence with each other. Here's the example:

No country ever had more, and no country ever had less. Ten men in our country could buy the whole world, and ten million can't buy enough to eat.

___ Will Rogers

2.9 Irony

Irony uses words against the implication of the narrator or writer. We might as well appreciate the following examples:

a. The Chinese are the most fortunate nation in the world, for they know that nothing, absolutely nothing, that happens to 'em can possibly be any worse than something that's already happened to 'em.

___ Will Rogers. *Wise and Witty Sayings of a Great American Humorist*

b. The Blessings-of-Civilization Trust, wisely and cautiously administered, is a daisy. There is more money in it, more territory, more sovereignty, and other kinds of emolument, than there is in any other game that is played.

___ Mark Twain. *To the person Sitting in Darkness*

From Example a, we can feel the writer's sympathy with Chinese people. Similarly, Example b is full of Mark Twain's indignant irony to church which acts as accomplice of aggression.

2.10 Malapropism

It is farcical to misuse words of similar pronunciations or spellings but opposite meanings. For instance, Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber (1814-1890) described that Mrs. Partington proceeded her argumentation without knowing that she had regarded "women's new (costume)" as "women's new (custom)" by mistake. The dramatis personae in O Henry's writing once pretended to be a famous Indian doctor, yet he confused Uranian terms with anatomical ones. So are the examples of malapropism. Besides, American humor especially lies in its exaggeration.

2.11 Hyperbole

Hyperbole is to represent as greater than is actually the case. Next we will explore this point.

As early as the year of 1838, there was a saying that exaggeration was American humor's particularity, which was put in an article called "Slick, Downing, Crockett, Etc." in *The London and Westminster Review*.

On arriving America, the early immigrants had been fascinated by so many breath-taking miracles. In *New England Plantation*, Francis Higginson once said that it was better to breathe the fresh air in New England than to drink the old beer in England; that it was no wonder to find out the gemination of the total corn output; that wolves and foxes are as large as bulls; that a draught of fish could fill two boats. There were so many unbelievable things.

A superman called Mike Fink was created from the folklores of the bar in the nineteenth century. He was so brave and could never fail to shoot the target. The other hero in the folklores was a hunter called Crockett who was able to swallow Mississippi River and killed six cord of bear (one cord equals the cube of 128 foot) a day. All these tales are for the mentality of pioneers in the risky situations, manifesting a young, healthy and energetic ethic. People imagined resourceful characters according to their own images, through which they extended their vision beyond themselves.

Hyperbole develops from those great lands, which are enriched with abundant natural resources, varied areas and ethnicities. In Iowa, people must climb to the top of a ladder to harvest corns; Germans will be frozen to death in Michigan even in slight snows. To survive the snow, they have to be put in the fireplaces for two hours to stay alive. There are so many ostentations or mock shown in the dimensionality of Texas and Alaska, like fog in California, hurricanes in Kansas, and many more examples.

Objects of hyperbole vary in societies and time periods. In a mechanical and extremely unhuman society, the

individual voice is devoured and individual existence is diminished. As Russel Baker wrote in 1925, “A cosmic corporate monster might break my spirit some day”, “I believe they are in the business of training corporate workers to be assigned to berserk corporations all over America to speed up the breaking of the human spirit.” (Veron E. 1976: 228, 229). In the 1900s, people exaggerated their anxiety and inability together with terror of the society, machine and great corporations. As a columnist, Dave Barry once depicted a ridiculous vision of New York where the stinking dustheap was as high as Appalachian Mountains; taxi drivers overcharged fares, sufficient for his whole life of trips and an artificial plastic organ in the human body could be as large as a military pontoon.

Hyperbole is one of the characteristics of writing skills, whereas the characteristic of American humor is striking in reflecting American culture or its native features.

3. How to Appreciate American Humor

3.1 Appropriate Psychological Distance

According to Hobbes’ theory of “Sense of Superiority” (McGhee P, Goldstein J H 1981: 86), it is that we think we are superior to the comedians, that we feel they are fun. Although comedians are pitiful, we had better keep a certain distance from them. Otherwise, we will be too close to them to perceive the drollness within.

On the other hand, we are expected to get close to the average readers in America at that time while reading the works of a certain period so that we can feel the humor. Take O. Henry’s *Waugh-hoo* for instance. The mayor trapped him because he sold false drug. Unfortunately, the mayor not only failed to arrest him, but was cheated \$250 by *Waugh-hoo*. The readers at that time are sympathetic to shrewd businessmen and are bitter against the regime. If we show our sympathy in an opposite way, the plot of the whole story will be too dull.

3.2 Perceiving Incongruity

Incongruity inspires humor. We can find plenty of incongruity in *Another American Tragedy*. Here are some examples: A “nephew” ripped out all his perfectly good teeth, which was incongruous with an ordinary person; the “doctor’s” abnormal nostrum was to play cards, drink excessively, and play with women; the nephew’s visit was to kill the uncle for the property while the uncle was anxious to meet his nephew so as to trick him, which sounded like unhuman. The most notable one of the incongruous characteristics of the work is the combination of horror and waggery, a characteristic of Gothic novel and American Black Humor writings. We may sense the horror when “the doctor, unpacking him like a Gladstone bag, kept up a running commentary.” Meanwhile, the waggery shows that the “nephew” was still mocking at the doctor’s “unprofessional” caress for women even after his internal organs had been taken out. Therefore, incongruity underlies humor. The above examples are just the incongruity in contents of writings.

Incongruity between readers’ expectancy and results of stories also inspires sense of humor. However, it’s not sufficient for a reader to find that the outcome is out of expectation, which can only make a reader to feel puzzled. We shall have to perceive the connection between outcomes and language hints in order to realize the logical points and the humor. Here is an example. In *Art for Heart’s Sake*, we wonder the reason why a moneybags called Ellsworth won “Lathrop Prize” that talented artists in the U.S.A have long been longing for, although he knew nothing about art. If we find how interested the moneybag was in whoever would be responsible for the works selected, how he bumbled in the ward after his “works” was sent out, what he stated at the end of the story, we are sure to find that he bribed. That is why it is an amusement rather than wonder. So comes out incongruity between expectation and outcome.

In *How to tell a story*, Mark Twain pointed out that the basis of American art style is to combine all the incongruous or absurd things aimlessly in the guise of sheer ignorance of it. As one of America’s first and foremost realists and humorists, Mark Twain left us a slew of humor works, such as *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* and *The Mysterious Stranger*. Nearly all the narrators in his writings are stating in a serious mood as other humorists. Hence, we are required to be skillful at extracting funny elements from the solemnity appearance.

3.3 Commanding Reading Rhythm

The highlights of jokes or humors are just the punch lines, which are always placed at the end of the story. To produce an ideal humor effect, oral speakers often pause for a while before the punch line while leaving audience suspense to speculate. Similarly, the author has his own conception as to the rhythm of the written format. Therefore, readers will have to take their initiative to read with rhythm in accordance with what the author has designed. Here are some examples:

- c. He plays a fair game (pause) when you watch him.
- d. I’m the boss of my family (pause) when my wife is away.

e. "I know not wat uthers may do, but ez for me, (pause) I cant go."

As the case stands, not only does rhythm concern with the matter of pause, it also involves intonation, reading speed, and etc. Take the above three examples for instance. Those sections after the pauses should be slowed down and emphasized in oral statements. In a word, all those requisitions mentioned above must be kept in mind while reading.

4. Conclusion

American humor is a mirror that reflects American culture to a certain extent; constructive methods are suggested to help comprehend and appreciate the essence of the unique artistic skill reflected in conventions and common threads that tie together humor in the United States. With examples of the classic American literature, the essay explores a detailed explanation of the writing skills and characteristics of American humor. The extent to which an individual will personally find something humorous obviously depends on a host of absolute and relative variables, including, but not limited to geographical location, culture, maturity, level of education, and context. In the future study, much more contemporary literature has yet to be referred in the deep and extensive analysis of the exclusively American style of humor.

References

- Blair W. (1960). *Native American Humor*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.
- Mcghee P., & Goldsrein J. H. (1981). *Handbook of Humor Research*. New York: Springer- Verlag.
- Rourke C. (1953). *American Humor*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc.
- Veron E. (1976). *Humor in America*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.