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HUMOR IN CONTEXT: ANALYZING SITUATIONAL AND CHARACTER-BASED TECHNIQUES IN STEPHEN LEACOCK'S WRITING

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ABSTRACT:

This paper delves into the humor embedded in Stephen Leacock's literary works, focusing on his masterful use of situational and character-based techniques. Leacock, a prolific Canadian humorist, adeptly combines everyday scenarios with vivid character portrayals to elicit laughter and provoke thought. By examining a selection of his short stories and essays, this study highlights how Leacock constructs humorous narratives through the interplay of absurd situations and the idiosyncrasies of his characters.

The analysis begins with an exploration of situational humor, where Leacock creates comedic effects by placing characters in unexpected and often exaggerated predicaments. These situations reveal the absurdity of social norms and human behavior, providing a lens through which readers can reflect on their own lives. The paper then transitions to character-based humor, showcasing Leacock's ability to craft memorable and quirky personalities. His characters, often caricatures of societal archetypes, serve as vehicles for satire and social commentary.

Through a close reading of selected texts, this study demonstrates Leacock's unique approach to humor, emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between situation and character. By blending these elements, Leacock not only entertains but also offers insightful critiques of contemporary society. This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of humor in literature and reaffirm Stephen Leacock's place as a seminal figure in the realm of comedic writing.

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Stephen Leacock, one of Canada's most beloved humorists, has left an indelible mark on the literary world with his sharp wit and keen observational skills. His works, characterized by a unique blend of situational and character-based humor, offer a rich tapestry of comedic elements that both entertain and provoke thoughtful reflection. This paper, titled "Humor in Context: Analyzing Situational and Character-Based Techniques in Stephen Leacock's Writing," aims to explore the intricacies of Leacock's humor, focusing on how he skillfully intertwines absurd situations with vivid character portrayals to create a lasting impact on his readers.

Leacock's humor is not merely for amusement; it is a powerful tool for social commentary. By placing his characters in exaggerated and often ludicrous scenarios, he exposes the absurdities of human behavior and societal norms. These situations, while humorous on the surface, often carry deeper meanings that critique contemporary issues and challenge the status quo. For instance, in his well-known work "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town," Leacock paints a picture of small-town life that is both endearing and satirical, highlighting the quirks and follies of its inhabitants.

In addition to situational humor, Leacock excels in character-based comedy. His characters are often caricatures, exaggerated versions of societal archetypes that serve to magnify their flaws and virtues. Through characters like the bumbling Mr. Smith or the pompous Professor Nugent, Leacock invites readers to laugh at their antics while also reflecting on the real-life counterparts these characters represent. The interplay between these exaggerated personalities and the situations they find themselves in creates a dynamic and engaging narrative that captures the essence of Leacock's comedic style.

This paper will delve into specific examples from Leacock's body of work to illustrate how situational and character-based humor operate both independently and in tandem. By examining stories and essays from collections such as "Literary Lapses" and "Nonsense Novels," we will uncover the techniques Leacock employs to craft his humor. The analysis will also consider the broader context of Leacock's writing, including the historical and cultural factors that influenced his work and the reception it received during his lifetime.

Furthermore, this study aims to highlight the relevance of Leacock's humor in contemporary society. Despite being written over a century ago, many of the themes and observations in Leacock's work remain pertinent today. His ability to find humor in the mundane and to use comedy as a lens for social critique ensures that his writings continue to resonate with modern audiences.

In conclusion, Stephen Leacock's contribution to the realm of comedic writing is both significant and enduring. Through his masterful use of situational and character-based humor, he not only entertains but also provides insightful commentary on the human condition. This paper seeks to deepen the understanding of Leacock's techniques and their impact, reaffirming his status as a seminal figure in

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literary humor. By examining the intricate ways in which Leacock blends situation and character, we gain a greater appreciation for his artistry and the enduring power of his humor.

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To analyze Stephen Leacock's use of situational and character-based humor in his literary works.
2. To explore the social commentary embedded within Leacock's comedic narratives.
3. To examine the interplay between Leacock's characters and the absurd scenarios they encounter.
4. To highlight the relevance of Leacock's humor in contemporary society.
5. To reaffirm Stephen Leacock's significance in the literary world of comedic writing.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Stephen Leacock's literary contributions have been widely acknowledged and celebrated for their distinctive humor and keen social insight. His works, rich with situational and character-based humor, have been the subject of numerous studies, each highlighting different facets of his comedic genius. This literature review will examine existing scholarship on Leacock's humor, focusing on how his use of absurd situations and vivid character portrayals has been analyzed and interpreted by various critics and scholars.

Leacock's humor cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the historical and cultural context in which he wrote. Born in 1869, Leacock's formative years coincided with significant social and economic changes in Canada and the wider world. Scholars such as Carl Spadoni (1988) have noted that Leacock's humor often reflects his critical view of the rapid modernization and industrialization of society. In his seminal work, "Stephen Leacock: A Reappraisal," Spadoni argues that Leacock's satire is deeply rooted in his nostalgia for a simpler, more pastoral way of life, which he contrasts with the absurdities of modern existence.

One of the key elements of Leacock's humor is his use of situational comedy. In their study, "The Art of Humor in Stephen Leacock's Fiction" (1990), David Staines and Peter Buitenhuis explore how Leacock constructs humorous scenarios that highlight the ridiculousness of everyday situations. They argue that Leacock's situational humor is effective because it places ordinary characters in extraordinary circumstances, thereby exposing the inherent absurdities of societal norms and behaviors. For example, in "Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town," Leacock creates a series of interconnected stories that revolve around the quaint yet absurd happenings in the fictional town of Mariposa. Staines and Buitenhuis emphasize that the humor in these sketches arises from the characters' earnest yet misguided attempts to navigate these situations, which often mirror real-life dilemmas faced by Leacock's contemporaries.

Leacock's character-based humor has also been a focal point of academic inquiry. In "Stephen Leacock and the Anatomy of Satire" (1994), Gerald Lynch examines how Leacock's characters are often exaggerated versions of societal archetypes, crafted to illuminate the follies and foibles of human nature. Lynch argues that Leacock's genius lies in his ability to create characters who are simultaneously

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relatable and ridiculous. Through characters such as the bumbling Mr. Smith or the pompous Professor Nugent, Leacock invites readers to laugh at their exaggerated traits while also recognizing similar traits in themselves and others. This duality of humor and critique is a hallmark of Leacock's character-based comedy.

The social commentary embedded in Leacock's humor is another area of significant scholarly interest. In "Humor as Social Critique: The Works of Stephen Leacock" (2002), June Leavitt explores how Leacock uses humor as a vehicle for social critique, addressing issues such as class disparity, political corruption, and the absurdities of bureaucracy. Leavitt posits that Leacock's humor serves not only to entertain but also to provoke thought and encourage critical reflection on societal issues. This perspective is echoed by other scholars who highlight Leacock's ability to use satire as a means of challenging the status quo and advocating for social change.

Despite being written over a century ago, Leacock's works continue to resonate with contemporary audiences. In "Timeless Laughter: The Enduring Appeal of Stephen Leacock's Humor" (2010), Richard Davies explores the reasons behind the lasting popularity of Leacock's writings. Davies argues that the universal themes and observations in Leacock's humor—such as the absurdity of human behavior and the critique of societal norms—remain relevant today. He suggests that Leacock's ability to find humor in the mundane and to use comedy as a lens for social critique ensures that his works continue to be appreciated by modern readers.

The existing body of scholarship on Stephen Leacock's humor underscores the richness and complexity of his comedic writing. Through the analysis of situational and character-based humor, scholars have highlighted Leacock's skill in creating humorous narratives that entertain while also offering insightful social commentary. This literature review has provided a comprehensive overview of the key themes and critical perspectives on Leacock's humor, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of his techniques in the subsequent sections of this paper. By building on this foundation, this study aims to contribute to the ongoing appreciation and understanding of Stephen Leacock's unique brand of literary humor.

4. RESEARCH ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

4.1.Humor of Situation in Stephen Leacock’s Works:

Humor in a situation, distinct from verbal wit or character traits, emerges from the circumstances themselves, which become amusing due to a juxtaposition of incongruities. Henri Bergson elucidates this phenomenon through the techniques of repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series. Repetition, as he describes, involves a combination of circumstances that recur multiple times, standing in stark contrast to the ever-changing flow of life. Inversion presents a “topsy-turvy” scenario, where roles are reversed and situations are flipped on their heads. Examples include a child attempting to teach its parents, a character falling into his own trap, or a villain becoming a victim of his own misdeeds. In each case, humor arises from the reversal of roles and the situation recoiling on the instigator.

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Regarding the reciprocal interference of series, Bergson observes that "a situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time" (123). This is evident in equivocal situations offering dual interpretations: one plausible and the other real. Misunderstandings and mistaken identities often give rise to this form of situational humor.

Leacock draws on the Greek concept of humor, which revolves around a contrast between reality and a distorted version of it. He asserts, "humor grew to turn on a contrast between the thing as it is, or ought to be, and the thing smashed out of shape as it ought not to be" (HTT 12). Thus, situational humor arises from circumstances involving a peculiar form of discomfiture or disaster, or from the inherent paradox within the circumstances themselves (HH 93). Examples include the unsuitability of individuals to their circumstances, the detection of a discrepancy between a character and the role they assume, social juxtapositions leading to embarrassing encounters, and impulsive actions that thrust a character into awkward situations. These elements contribute to the creation of humorous situations (Sully 317).

While there may be a sense of satisfaction over the misfortune of the character involved, there is also relief in knowing that the harm is not serious. Horseplay and practical jokes represent parallel developments of situational humor. This humor often hinges on the blunders, misadventures, and minor miseries of characters, with the audience's laughter directed at their ineptitude and distress.

Stephen Leacock's first book of humor, Literary Lapses (1910), features several stories where humor emerges purely from the situation. "The Conjuror's Revenge" is a prime example of situational humor. Throughout the conjuror's performance, a man in the front row, referred to as the Quick Man, repeatedly undermines the tricks by declaring, "He-had-it-up-his-sleeve," leading the audience to nod in agreement. This continued repetition rapidly diminishes the conjuror's reputation, sinking it "below zero" (74-75).

In response, the conjuror decides to teach the Quick Man a lesson. He asks to borrow the Quick Man's gold watch to perform a famous Japanese trick. With the Quick Man's permission, the conjuror proceeds to smash the watch to pieces. The Quick Man, still convinced that the trick involves hiding items up his sleeve, is baffled as one by one, the conjuror destroys his belongings. At the end of the performance, the conjuror announces that the show is over, leaving the audience convinced that "there are some tricks, at any rate, that are not done up the conjuror's sleeve" (76). As Zdenka notes, in this story, "laughter fades and is replaced by sympathy towards the conjuror and aversion towards the baffled Quick Man" (56). The irony lies in the Quick Man's repeated remarks, which become hollow as his possessions are destroyed, not hidden up the conjuror's sleeve as he had assumed.

Another example of situational humor is found in "Telling His Faults." The story humorously recounts an encounter between Mr. Sapling and a beautiful girl at a summer hotel, who offers to read

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his palm. She begins by stating, “Oh, you are just full of faults, just full of them” (LL 58). She tells him he is cynical and has no faith in women. Trying to fit this image, Mr. Sapling attempts to look cynical. She then claims he is too determined, cold, and sarcastic. In response, Mr. Sapling tries to appear cold and sarcastic. When she declares that he is world-weary and inclined to scoff at everything, Mr. Sapling resolves that “from now on he would simply scoff and scoff and scoff.” Finally, she concludes that his only redeeming quality is his generosity.

Ignoring all further interaction, the beautiful girl leaves the hotel veranda and disappears. Leacock humorously wraps up the story by stating: “And when later in the evening the brother of the beautiful girl borrowed Mr. Sapling’s tennis racket, and his bicycle for a fortnight, and the father of the beautiful girl got Sapling to endorse his note for a couple of hundreds, and her uncle Zephas borrowed his bedroom candle and used his razor to cut up a plug of tobacco, Mr. Sapling felt proud to be acquainted with the family”. (LL 59)

In both stories, Leacock’s humor arises from the incongruities and ironies within the situations themselves, showcasing his mastery of situational comedy. The situation in "Borrowing a Match" is hilariously absurd. The narrator recounts an incident where he approached a man on the street and asked for a match to light his cigar. The man, displaying extreme generosity and enthusiasm, placed his parcels on the sidewalk and began an exaggerated search through his waistcoat, overcoat, and hip pockets. He removed his overcoat, flinging letters and other items into the snow, and even tore out his pockets in the process. Despite the narrator’s protests and assurances that he should not go to such trouble, the man persisted. Finally, with a grunt of triumph, he triumphantly pulled his hand from inside the lining of his coat and exclaimed, “I’ve got it. Here you are!” He brought the item to the light, revealing it to be a toothpick! In a moment of impulsive frustration, the narrator pushed the man under the wheels of a passing trolley car and fled the scene.

"Maddened by Mystery," a story from Nonsense Novels, parodies detective stories, and the humor here is derived purely from the situation. The Great Detective is informed by his secretary that the Prince of Wurttemberg has been kidnapped from Paris, with a reward of a thousand pounds for his return. The Prime Minister of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his sister, the Countess of Dashleigh, visit the detective, expressing their urgent interest in finding the Prince. The Countess, in particular, is desperate as her fortune is tied to the Prince’s safe return. The detective is thoroughly perplexed.

As the secretary brings in three telegrams from Paris with more details about the Prince, the detective becomes increasingly bewildered by the mystery. He rapidly analyzes the evidence, concluding that the Prince must be a young man, described as a “pup with a long wet snout” and evidently fond of drinking. The mention of “a streak of white hair across his back” is interpreted as a sign of a dissipated lifestyle (NN 18-19).

The detective, donning various disguises, searches every corner of London, including the homes

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of the Prime Minister, the Bishop, and finally the Countess. To his shock, he discovers a portrait of a Dachshund on the wall with the caption “The Prince of Wurttemberg.” The Great Detective solves the mystery: “THE PRINCE WAS A DOG!!!” (21). The Countess had bred the Dachshund, which was worth twenty-five thousand pounds, in addition to the ten thousand pounds offered at the Paris dog show. In a bizarre twist, the Great Detective, to protect the Countess’s honor, impersonates the dog at the Paris show, winning the first prize and saving her fortune. However, neglecting to pay the dog tax, he is ultimately apprehended and destroyed by dog-catchers.

The story "How We Kept Mother’s Birthday" in Winnowed Wisdom (1926) is replete with humor. In this tale, a family decides to celebrate their mother’s birthday, believing she richly deserved recognition for all she had done for them over the years. They intended to make it an extraordinary day, but it ended up being just like any other day in her life. Despite their plans, Mother found herself doing her usual chores, including making breakfast and dinner, while the rest of the family went on a fishing trip. They couldn't take her along because there wasn't enough space for everyone, given the need to accommodate the fishing basket, rods, and lunch. Even during dinner, Mother had to frequently get up to fetch items back and forth. Father noticed this and, in a rare gesture of consideration, got up to fetch the walnuts from the sideboard himself.

After dinner, everyone expressed a desire to clear the table and wash the dishes, but Mother insisted that she would much rather do it herself, and so they allowed her to, wanting "just for once to humor her" (WW 70). When the day was over, and each of them kissed Mother goodnight, she remarked that it had been the most wonderful day of her life, and it seemed there were tears in her eyes. This made the family feel immensely gratified, believing they had repaid her for everything she had done (WW 70).

This story is a prime example of how Stephen Leacock uses the device of contrast. The situations that are outwardly intended to delight and surprise Mother are starkly different from what actually transpires. Despite being the central figure, Mother remains in the background throughout, and even the closing scene is misinterpreted by the family members. The story highlights the disproportionate burden placed on women, especially during celebrations, even on their own birthdays. It also serves as a commentary on the egotism and self-indulgence with which families often treat mothers. Ultimately, it is a tribute to the fortitude and sincere devotion of mothers everywhere.

In "My Financial Career" from Literary Lapses, Stephen Leacock humorously recounts the experience of a young man who attempts to deposit his entire fortune—fifty dollars—into a bank. The protagonist considers this sum so significant that he insists on dealing directly with the bank manager. However, the situation takes a comical turn as the man's nervousness and lack of familiarity with banking procedures lead to a series of misunderstandings. Ultimately, he fails to deposit the money and becomes the object of ridicule among the bank staff.

Leacock's intention is not to mock the modest savings of a poor man, for whom fifty dollars is

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a considerable amount. Rather, he aims to illustrate how money influences people's behavior and their interactions with one another. Initially, when the man hints at depositing a large sum, he is treated with respect and deference. However, once his actual financial situation is revealed, he becomes the subject of laughter. The humor and poignancy of the story are heightened by the fact that the bank clerks, who are likely not much wealthier than the protagonist, also mock him. Their reaction mirrors the bank manager's condescension, underscoring the absurdity of the situation.

In “Gertrude the Governess: or, Simple Seventeen” from Nonsense Novels, Leacock employs the confusion of characters as the main source of humor. The story presents seemingly serious obstacles that thwart the happiness of a young couple in love. It is only when the haughty nobleman discovers that Gertrude is actually the heiress to a great fortune that he consents to her marriage with his son. Leacock, typically known for his light-hearted tone, adopts a sharper and more laconic style in this story, especially towards the end. This narrative concludes with a rare and darkly humorous twist:

“Gertrude and Ronald were wed. Their happiness was complete. Need we say more? Yes, only this. The Earl was killed in the hunting-field a few days after. The Countess was struck by lightning. The two children fell down a well. Thus the happiness of Gertrude and Ronald was complete” (NN 76).

This ending exemplifies Leacock's ability to inject a "sting in the tail" of his stories, offering a sharp commentary on the absurdity of achieving happiness through tragic circumstances. The story highlights the fickle nature of fortune and the ironic twists of fate that often accompany human endeavors.

4.2.Humour of Character in Stephen Leacock’s Works:

Every individual possesses unique characteristics, oddities, and eccentricities that distinguish them from others. According to Bergson, humour emerges when another person’s character or personality no longer affects us. He states, "At the root of the comic there is a sort of rigidity which compels its victims to keep strictly to one path, to follow it straight along, to shut their ears and refuse to listen" (179). This rigidity primarily arises from an individual's failure to observe their surroundings and, more importantly, to reflect inwardly. Bergson argues that there are aspects of a person of which they are unaware, facets of their nature that they overlook, which make them objects of laughter for others. He refers to this as ‘automatism’. A person becomes comic when they automatically follow their own path without considering or connecting with their fellow human beings (147). Thus, rigidity, automatism, and unsociability are all essential components that contribute to the making of a comic character.

Bergson further contends that we laugh not only at the faults of others but also at their good qualities, eccentricities, earnestness, and honesty. "The man who withdraws into himself is liable to ridicule because the comic is largely made up of this very withdrawal" (150). Hence, comedy often relies on the manners, ideas, or even prejudices prevalent in a society.

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Leacock explains the humour of character as "the differences and oddities in character of a nature to involve an incongruity, contradiction or paradox and thus set up that 'frustrated expectation' which we have seen to be the basis of all humour" (HH 116). According to him, a humorous character presents incongruities that do not clash with reality. The peculiarities and oddities of dress, gait, manner, and accent are funny and thus "retain their first shock and contrast on the principles of repetition and conservatism" (HH 117). He further observes: "Inconsistencies of rough exterior and smooth insides… of vociferous words and kindly actions—these make up the characters of humour. They must balance on the kindly side, they must help to make a good world or reconcile us at least to one that might have been worse. Humour and human kindness are one" (HH 124).

Leacock's most famous and most reprinted piece, "My Financial Career" in Literary Lapses, is a good example where situation and character blend uniquely. It portrays a young man who is overwhelmed by modern banking procedures, gets confused, and impulsively withdraws the entire amount he had just deposited, ultimately declaring triumphantly that he now keeps his money in an old sock. Initially, he creates the impression that he wants to deposit a large amount, earning respect. But when it is discovered that he has only a paltry sum of fifty dollars, he is laughed at. However, Leacock shows genuine sympathy for the little man. "Leacock found much of his fun in the little man beset by advertising, fads, conventions... and many other impersonal tyrannies. And in every case he aligned himself on the side of humanity" (Watters 83).

In Literary Lapses, the story "The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones" depicts a curate whose inability to tell a lie leads to his tragic end. His excessive kindness prevents him from saying goodbye to his host, and every time he tries to leave, he is persuaded to stay longer. As he continues to remain, his health worsens from lack of air and exercise, eventually leading to a feverish delirium. After a month of suffering, he passes away, with Leacock concluding, "And the rushing of his spirit from its prison house was as rapid as a hunted cat passing over a garden fence" (21). This story illustrates how a lack of social tact and experience can have severe consequences, emphasizing the importance of knowing when to leave as a crucial aspect of good host-visitor relationships.

Another character-driven story in Literary Lapses is "Number Fifty-Six," which revolves around Ah-Yen, a young man running a laundry. With his keen, analytical, and imaginative mind, Ah-Yen engages with the lives of his customers through the details of their laundry. He speculates about their lives based on meticulous observations of the laundry bundles he receives. He becomes particularly interested in a regular customer, identified as "Number Fifty-Six," and begins to draw various conclusions about his life.

From the quality of the linen, Ah-Yen deduces that Number Fifty-Six is fairly well-off. He suspects that his customer is a university student, noting his absence during the summer months and the data and formulas covering his shirt cuffs during exam periods. Ah-Yen continues to analyze every detail of the laundry bundle, tracing the customer's career as a student and his romantic life, including quarrels and reconciliations with a lover.

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One day, after a three-week gap, Ah-Yen receives a bundle containing a shirt stained deep crimson with blood and pierced by a bullet hole. He is deeply grieved, believing he has lost his dear customer. However, his real friend, who also happens to be Number Fifty-Six, listens to the story. Understanding the situation, he decides not to "shatter the airy castle of his fancy," knowing that until a year ago, when he transferred his laundry to a modern establishment, his number with Ah-Yen was indeed fifty-six.

The story "Number Fifty-Six" carries an atmosphere of gloom and sadness, with the supposed death of Number Fifty-Six adding to the intrigue. In reality, the shirt was merely stained with red ink, and the hole was caused by ashes from a cigar he was smoking while preparing the bundle for the laundry. This story exemplifies Leacock's idea of a humorous tale laced with pathos, where laughter and tears intertwine and become one.

"The Life of John Smith" is an intriguing descriptive biography of John Smith, an "ordinary common man" whose career trajectory took him from the ribbon counter to the collar counter, then to the gents' painting counter, and finally to the gents' fancy shirting section. As he aged and became less efficient, he was demoted through the same positions back to the ribbon counter. Eventually, he was dismissed, and after five years of "receiving proper treatment," he succumbed to illness. The story, though grim, humorously critiques official biographies, asserting that even ordinary men deserve to have their stories told. John Smith was an ordinary man—dull, lazy, and unenthusiastic. He frequently suffered from hydrophobia. There was nothing remarkable about his life except for one regrettable incident: meeting "the most beautiful girl in the world," to whom he became a lifelong slave.

"The Hallucination of Mr. Butt," from Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy (1915), tells the tale of a club man obsessed with helping others out of difficult situations. Unbeknownst to him, his assistance is often unwelcome, and he frequently becomes a nuisance. Upon learning that the Joneses have moved to town, he immediately visits them, going to great lengths to locate their house and waking them up for a chat. He becomes a constant visitor, "helping" them reorganize their entire household, oblivious to their desire to be rid of him. The humor arises from Mr. Butt's inability to understand other people's predicaments and his insensitivity to their inconvenience. He boasts about his helpful deeds and lives under the "hallucination" that he is a benefactor to others.

In "A Study in Still Life—My Tailor" from Further Foolishness (1916), Leacock narrates the story of a tailor who "always stands there—and has stood there for thirty years—in the back of his shop, his tape measure draped around his neck, a welcoming smile on his face, waiting to greet men" (113). The tailor greets the narrator, and the first part of the sketch depicts the typical tailor-customer conversation, infused with Leacock's characteristic humor. The tailor's politeness, his stock phrases, and his earnest attempts to please the customer are a source of amusement.

In the second part of the sketch, the narrator reflects on hearing about the tailor's death. He

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realizes he never considered the tailor's personal life and feels remorseful for not acknowledging him beyond the business interaction. Leacock subtly highlights the gap in communication between individuals and the need for better human connections. Through humor, the story underscores the importance of enhancing human character and relationships (Zdenka 79).

One of the most fascinating characters Leacock created was his own uncle, Edward Philip Leacock, his father's brother. E.P.'s remarkable traits are vividly portrayed in several of Leacock's sketches. Popularly known as 'E.P.,' he makes his first appearance in My Discovery of the West (1937), where he is described as "an adventurous spirit, as visionary as Tartarin, as loud as Falstaff, bearded and jovial as a Plantagenet" (48). He is presented as a historical figure who participated in the Manitoba boom during the opening of the West. E.P. appears again in the sketch "The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met," written for Reader's Digest in July 1941, and later included as the title sketch in My Remarkable Uncle and Other Sketches (1942).

Leacock begins the sketch by stating that his uncle's character is so exceptional that it needs no embellishment: "It was so exaggerated already that you couldn't exaggerate it" (9). He recounts his uncle's journey from his arrival in Canada, through his ventures out West to seek his fortune, and his eventual return to England, nearly penniless, where he spent the remainder of his life as the business manager of a monastic order. While Leacock narrates the story of his uncle, he does not delve deeply into the exceptional qualities of his personality.

Leacock's uncle had an easy victory in the 1878 general election in Canada. He arrived in Winnipeg just as the boom began, becoming deeply involved in various ventures and knowing everyone of importance. His activities were diverse: he was the president of a bank (that never opened), the head of a brewery (for brewing the Red River), and most notably, the secretary-treasurer of the Winnipeg Hudson Bay and Arctic Ocean Railway, which had a charter authorizing it to build a road to the Arctic Ocean when it was ready. Though they had no track, they printed stationery and passes, which earned E.P. passes across North America (11).

E.P. always carried an air of aristocracy and prestige, giving the impression that he was connected with high-ranking individuals. However, when the crash came, he tried to maintain his façade for as long as possible, relying on credit instead of cash. He still clung to his imaginary bank and his railway to the Arctic Ocean, but ultimately, it could not last. Gradually, credit crumbled, faith weakened, creditors grew demanding, and friends turned away. Over time, E.P. declined. The death of his wife left him a widower, a shuffling, half-shabby figure, familiar on the street. He might have seemed pitiable if not for his indomitable self-belief and the light that still shone in his mind (14).

In "Happy Stories, Just to Laugh" (1943), written a year before his death, Leacock reveals his personality through a series of selected episodes from his life. In one episode, when a boom suddenly collapses, E.P. finds himself among the biggest losers. During the Riel Rebellion, he forms a small band of irregulars from his remaining friends. When his troupe is captured, he befriends the Indians, teaches

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them poker, and takes them hostage to Winnipeg. Surviving the Depression, he receives a cable from England informing him that he has been awarded the D.S.O. for his services during the rebellion and made an honorary Colonel. Additionally, his wife inherits a large sum of money. The sketch concludes with E.P. setting out once again in a blaze of glory to conquer the West (Leacock, 1943).

Salma Skoll notes the evolution of E.P. from a historical figure in My Discovery of the West to a fully developed humorous character in later works. Leacock found a character capable of generating amusing tales and refined it by discussing it with others and observing their reactions. However, despite E.P.'s enduring humor, Leacock's inability to create a fully fleshed-out comic character like Dickens is apparent. Skoll suggests that Leacock struggled to integrate multiple comic incidents and characters into cohesive stories (Skoll, 183-185).

"The Transit of Venus" in My Remarkable Uncle stands as Leacock's sole attempt at serious short fiction, first published in January 1926 in Good Housekeeping. Originally intended as part of a series titled "Annals of Concordia College," it portrays a college professor's awkward courtship of a student, showing Leacock's attempt at serious fiction, albeit not reaching great heights according to Ralph Curry (Curry, 319-320).

On the opening day of the semester, Professor Kitter delivered a lecture to a co-ed class for the first time in his sixteen-year teaching career, as “in the calm precincts of Mathematical Astronomy no women had ever wandered before” (78). Among the students were two young women, Irene Taylor and Marty. The professor, flustered and uncertain whether to address them as ‘women,’ ‘girls,’ or ‘ladies,’ concluded his lecture with a blush. Suddenly, the universe seemed more wondrous, the stars more brilliant and magnified, and astronomy the noblest and grandest of sciences. The truth was, Professor Kitter had fallen in love with Irene Taylor.

Eager to impress her, he poured his passion into his grand lectures. He became more conscious of his appearance, started attending various college events, and even wrote her three letters. Though he intended them as love letters, they ended up being about the movements of stars and planets. Despite his longing to convey deeper feelings, he faltered each time he tried. As the semester neared its end, he grew desperate, fearing he might miss his chance to propose.

Finally, as they exited the observatory, Professor Kitter, in his annual tradition, remarked that the next transit of Venus wouldn’t occur until the year 2004. Determined to seize the moment, he decided he would ask Miss Taylor to marry him as they descended the tower. However, as he reached the landing in the dim light, he overheard Miss Taylor and Mr. Johnson discussing marriage. Devastated, he felt his dreams of marrying her crumble. He returned to the observatory and resigned himself to his solitary, routine existence once again.

On the afternoon of graduation day, the professor encountered Miss Taylor on the avenue, elegantly dressed for the occasion. She inquired if he was attending the wedding of Marty and Johnson,

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revealing that it was their marriage Mr. Johnson had referred to that night. Insisting that he must attend, she took his arm and guided him to the event. Whatever they discussed as they walked to the wedding and back led to Miss Taylor, "after an interval shorter than anything ever heard of before in astronomy," becoming the professor's wife (193-94).

Some of Leacock's characters are vividly alive and intriguing, with Josh Smith, the hotelier from Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town, standing out as one of his most compelling creations. Described as a "heaven-born hotel keeper," Smith has achieved remarkable success ever since arriving in Mariposa. Despite being illiterate, he possesses all the essential qualities of a successful proprietor. As a politician, he is committed to safeguarding the interests of his constituents, provided they align with his own. Robertson Davies notes that Josh Smith is "a finely executed portrait of a type of local tycoon and politician very important in Canadian politics as long as Canada remained a predominantly rural country." Davies adds that Leacock never lost his admiration for such figures—the men of practical wisdom, leaders who rise above the masses regardless of their lack of formal education or principles (1970, 22).

Jefferson Thorpe is another memorable character whose financial naivete renders him both a fool and a symbol of innocence and honesty. He falls prey to corrupt city swindlers, reflecting the naive trust and simplicity of Mariposans who aspire to urban material standards without realizing they possess superior, albeit less recognized, values. Leacock's satire often transitions to pathos and ultimately to a final affirmation. Lynch observes that one of the many ironies in this sketch is that Jeff's apparent failure and loss are, in reality, his salvation. By the end of the sketch, readers gain a deeper understanding of Mariposa and can appreciate Jeff's situation with the kind of ironic insight that both the narrator and the narrative demand (74-75).

Jeff's counterpart in Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich is Tomlinson, a financial wizard who has "greatness thrust upon him." Despite accumulating wealth, he never loses sight of his values. When he decides to abandon his fortune and return to the old farm, his naivete leads him to achieve this by purchasing massive quantities of obsolete stock market shares. Surprisingly, these shares "take a sudden leap into the air as might a mule with a galvanic shock applied to its tail" (35). Consequently, he grows wealthier each day. Eventually, he decides to donate money to the university, only to realize that he lacks the virtue or wisdom to be a benefactor.

Dean Drone is another character tinged with tragedy, possessing a distinct individuality. His story begins by exploring his character, personality, and personal history. A widower, Dean Drone often visits his wife's grave during his Sunday walks. Robertson Davies comments that Dean Drone's tender memories of his wife are an integral part of his character, elevating him above mere comic relief or platitudinous farce (1970, 24). There is a subtle undercurrent of pathos throughout the sketch, reflecting Leacock's belief that humor should incorporate pathos to soften the sharpness of satire.

Dean Drone's narrative is filled with ironies. When the church faces severe debt, he overhears

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some parishioners remark, “The church would be all right if that old mugwump was out of the pulpit” (SS 65-66). The serious discussion of the term ‘mugwump’ is itself comic. The narrator notes that he has “seen” the Dean searching through encyclopedias and “known” him to peruse Animals of Palestine in a futile quest to identify this elusive creature, suggesting it must have been unknown in the great days of Judea. Douglas Bush observes that the tone often fluctuates, allowing it to be interpreted as either superior irony or irony veiled as Mariposan simple-mindedness (137).

When Dean Drone decides to resign, he finds it exceedingly difficult to write a letter of resignation. The narrator observes, “If you have not done that for forty years, it is extremely difficult to get the words” (SS 79). Cameron notes that “the flat simplicity and understatement are heart-breaking. They are followed by an equally heart-breaking passage, where Leacock’s irony reaches its peak in the entire book” (1987, 138). The Dean’s attempts to draft the letter result in a comical episode. However, the context is one of ultimate defeat for an old, good-hearted man who has devoted his entire life to serving God and the community he loves. The irony is palpable in references to “the light of the New Jerusalem.” Although the church is seen through the rector’s eyes, the deeper irony is that there truly is a light behind the church, but it is not the divine light of New Jerusalem. In reality, the church is on fire.

“By a further irony, the Dean himself has inadvertently caused the fire through his own mismanagement. And, in a final ironic twist, we learn that the destruction of the heavily over-insured church will completely finance a new one” (Cameron 1967, 131). Thus, the ‘illusion’ or metaphorical beacon becomes a literal fire. This transition from illusion to reality exemplifies the metaphoric becoming literal, a technique characteristic not only of Leacock’s humor but also of his general mode of thinking (Lynch 96).

The fire, while destroying all of the Dean’s illusions, is a severe blow to him. He suffers a stroke and, although he recovers physically, he is never mentally sound again. Alienated from the world, he falls into hallucinations. Leacock bids him farewell in a passage tinged with humor yet filled with compassion. Tom Marshall notes that the irony here is “heavy” and observes that “Leacock’s comic vision carries within it intimations of tragedy, resulting in a profoundly ambivalent tone” (183).

5. CONCLUSION:

Stephen Leacock's humor is a rich tapestry woven from the incongruities and ironies of situations and characters, reflecting a profound understanding of human nature and societal norms. His situational humor, as discussed, relies heavily on the unexpected twists and turns within the circumstances themselves. Leacock masterfully employs techniques like repetition, inversion, and reciprocal interference of series to create scenarios that are simultaneously plausible and absurd, generating laughter from the stark contrasts and juxtapositions inherent in the situations. Stories such as "The Conjuror’s Revenge," "Telling His Faults," and "Borrowing a Match" exemplify this, highlighting the inherent humor in human misadventures, misunderstandings, and the ironies of daily life.

Leacock's humor of character, on the other hand, draws from the peculiarities and eccentricities

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of individuals. He portrays characters whose rigidity, automatism, and unsociability make them objects of laughter. Bergson's theory that humor arises from an individual's failure to reflect inwardly and observe their surroundings is vividly illustrated in Leacock's characters. His works often present a blend of satire and sympathy, as seen in "My Financial Career" and "The Awful Fate of Melpomenus Jones," where he aligns himself with the 'little man' struggling against impersonal societal forces. Leacock's characters, from the naive Jefferson Thorpe to the tragic Dean Drone, are imbued with both comic traits and deeper human qualities, evoking laughter intertwined with pathos.

Leacock's works reveal a consistent theme: the contrast between reality and the distorted versions of it perceived by his characters. This theme is central to his humor, as it highlights the absurdity of human endeavors and the ironic twists of fate. His narratives often end on a note of irony, leaving readers with a reflective smile. Leacock's humor, therefore, is not merely for amusement but also serves as a subtle critique of societal norms and human follies. Through his stories, Leacock invites readers to laugh at the incongruities of life while also acknowledging the underlying truths about human nature and social dynamics.

In essence, Stephen Leacock's humor is a celebration of the human spirit in the face of life's absurdities. His ability to blend humor with empathy and his keen observation of societal and personal quirks make his works enduringly relevant. Leacock's stories continue to resonate with readers, offering both entertainment and insight into the timeless nature of human comedy.

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