THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF RING LARDNER

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THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF RING LARDNER

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PREFACE

It is not the purpose of this study to support a pre-conceived argument by selective use of source material. But rather it represents an investigation into all available sources of information in order to present an objective account of the critical reception of the works of a much-debated author, Ring Lardner. By this means it is possible to formulate an unbiased conclusion as to Lardner's relationship to the tastes and tempo of his times.

Because of Lardner's contemporary standing, I am chiefly indebted to periodical literature and newspaper reviews of his work. The investigation is almost exhaustive of source material on the subject except for some anonymous reviews in the Springfield Republican and the Boston Transcript which were not available to me.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Dr. E. P. Lawrence, who devoted much of his time to aid in the preparation and final presentation of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

A study of the critical reception of an author is important because it is a means of arriving at certain conclusions about his relationship to his milieu. First, a gradual change of critical evaluation on the part of the reviewers should reflect a similar change in the literary tastes of the times; and second, by comparing past critical predictions with contemporary evaluations, it should be possible to judge the soundness of past predictions, and, perhaps, to ascertain a path that opinions concerning the future influence of the author may follow.

In the study of the critical reception of Ring Lardner there is still another factor that adds interest to the problem; the critics have not been able to agree whether Lardner should be classified as a realist, a satirist, or a humorist. Some reviewers praise him for his "genuine understanding of life"[1] while others laud his "wild inextinguishable laughter."[2]

The problem concerning the extent of Lardner's realism, satire, or humor is further complicated by the fact that few critics will risk a general statement of opinion that covers the entire body of Lardner's writings or the different aspects of Lardner's

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[1] Lewis Mumford, "The Salt of Our Generation", Books (April 14, 1929) 5.

[2] Anon., "Ring Lardner", New York Times (September 27, 1933) 20:3.

writing. For example, one critic may classify his depiction of character as realistic but maintain that his dialogue is merely literary. Another reviewer may take just the opposite stand.

Humorous writing has always been linked with realistic writing in America. Shortly after the Revolutionary War when all the polite novels of the day simply superimposed characters from English fiction onto an American background, it remained for the humorists to utilize local characteristics and Yankee types. Therefore, comic writers were our first realists.[1] The Civil War humorists continued this tradition with variations and refinements. Although Billings, Nasby, Ward, and their contemporaries seem unrelated to any modern development, yet their realistic, cynical, somewhat pessimistic outlook is hailed by some critics as the forerunner of Ring Lardner's attitude.[2]

The question of whether Lardner is a realist-satirist or a clown is especially significant because of the nature of his writings. Because his subject is America, and his characters Americans, and his treatment a little contemptuous, if his writing is interpreted as realistic or satiric it must be accepted as social criticism. On the other hand, if his purpose was merely good natured humor, there is no reason to search for motivation.

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[1] Napier Wilt, Some American Humorists, XI.

[2] Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America, 405.

The reviews of Lardner's work follow no rigid chronological pattern. However, in the labyrinth of critical opinion, one thread of thought is apparent which, eventually enforced by the fiber of evidence, seems to lead out of the maze. Therefore, time is a definite factor in the evaluation of Lardner's critical reception.

THE BIOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

When Ringgold Wilmer Lardner was born in Niles, Michigan, on March 6, 1885, he arrived in a newly industrialized world that was to furnish him with subjects for his stories three decades later. "Big business", "free enterprise", "assembly line production": that is the vocabulary he grew up with. The effects of big business, free enterprise, and assembly line production on human beings: those were the things he was to write about.

That he alternately condemned and ridiculed his competitive environment is ironic, for it was this same industrialized world that provided an outlet for his stories. The mass production of goods demanded advertising, which, in turn, demanded periodicals as media; and these same periodicals welcomed short stories as the form of writing best adapted to their use. Thus was created an unprecedented market for short stories.[1]

Lardner did not immediately become a writer, however, after his graduation from high school in 1901. Instead, he studied a year in Chicago at the Armour Institute of Technology in accordance with his father's wishes, and later he left to sample a few odd jobs. Finally he tried newspaper work and continued as a newspaperman until his death in 1933.[2]

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[1] Mark Sullivan, Our Times, 101-2.

[2] Fred B. Millett, Contemporary American Authors, 429.

His first big chance came in 1913 when Hugh E. Keogh of the Chicago Tribune died and Lardner started to write his sport column, "By Hek." At first the Tribune got twenty letters of complaint a day. So Lardner tried writing in dialect. During the World Series he created the character of a "south-paw" pitcher to report the games, and the resulting stories were so effective that Charles E. Van Loan suggested he send one to the Saturday Evening Post. Whether this first story was accepted is uncertain[1] but it was not long before editors were anxious to print stories by Ring Lardner.

His earliest stories were for the Post and Collier's; his last fiction was for the American Magazine and the Delineator. After six years he joined the Bell Syndicate and his sports articles began to appear in papers from coast to coast. The New York Times considered him important enough to mention in connection with the new management and the new policy of the Morning Telegraph, which had appeared with "changed format and formula and Ring Lardner."[2]

The height to which his reputation rose in the barometer of popular acclaim was indicated at the Democratic National Convention of July 6, 1920. Lardner received one vote for the nomination to the presidency.[3]

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[1]Fred B. Millett (Contemporary American Authors, 429) said it was rejected, but a detailed biographical sketch in the New York Times (September 26, 1933, 22:1) said it was immediately accepted. An investigation resulted in no more conclusive information, due to the lack of available evidence as to which story was the first one submitted.

[2]Anon., "A Second Blooming," New York Times (Dec. 5, 1928) 30:5.

[3]Anon., "How the Convention Voted at the Day Session Yesterday," New York Times (July 6, 1920) 4:1.

His You Know Me Al stories were appearing regularly in the "slicks" by then, but Lardner lamented, at the time of the publication of Gullible's Travels in 1917, "I'm tired of this sort of writing - I'd give anything to be able to stop writing dialect stories."[1] A few years later, after The Real Dope and Treat 'Em Rough and My Four Weeks in France, the critics got tired of it, too. It seemed to be generally agreed that "he has not yet written his best work. In fact he is only just beginning."[2]

Finally, in 1924, his How to Write Short Stories brought him his first serious critical recognition. Mencken had already praised the accuracy of his dialect[3] but this new critical approval was different. They began to say that he "is more than a humorist, he is a fundamental realist,"[4] and that "he is developing a strain of wild imagination of something approaching fantasy,"[5] and that "there are indications in this volume that he is trying to cut away now and then from the path he has beaten for himself."[6]

These early reviews had set the pace. The others responded even more enthusiastically to The Love Nest two years later. Henry Logan Stuart remarked:

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[1] "Three Stories a Year are Enough for a Writer," New York Times, VI (March 25, 1917) 14:1.

[2] Thomas L. Masson, Our American Humorists, 196.

[3] "The Library," American Mercury, II (July, 1924) 376.

[4] William R. Benet, "Civilized Laughter," Literary Review of the New York Evening Post, IV (May 24, 1924) 772.

[5] Gilbert Seldes, The Seven Lively Arts, 124.

[6] J. D. Adams, "Ring Lardner Writin' Serious," New York Times, III (May 25, 1924) 16:2.

> So his work remains to us, full of drolleries which create laughter, but which laughter never created, full of a certain bitter and mature intention, but fullest of all of rich and pregnant silences.[1]

And Stuart P. Sherman said that "It is quite possible that ten years hence these stories will be sought for as the tales that O. Henry wrote in Texas are sought for, or the tales that O. Henry's master, Kipling, wrote before he came out of India."[2]

Round Up, his next book of short stories, included the stories which had previously appeared in periodicals as well as between the covers of his other books. They were praised as "among the few that will be readable twenty years hence"[3] and John Chamberlain reached the conclusion that "Lardner is pre-eminently our best short story writer."[4]

During these years he wrote What of It?, a collection of saucy essays and nonsense plays; The Story of a Wonder Man, his burlesque autobiography;[5] and a baseball scene which featured Will Rogers in the Ziegfield Follies. He collaborated with George M. Cohan on Elmer the Great, a baseball epic, which opened on Broadway

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[1] "Mr. Lardner at the Passing Show," New York Times (April 4, 1926) 5:1.
[2] "Hard-Boiled Americans," Books (April 18, 1926) 1.
[3] Lewis Mumford, "The Salt of Our Generation," 5.
[4] "Ring Lardner Listens In on the Life About Him," New York Times (April 7, 1929) 2.
[5] Millett, op. cit., 430.

with Walter Huston playing the title role.[1] In 1929 Lardner wrote the lyrics for June Moon, and four years later his last book, Lose With a Smile, was released for publication. It reverted to the original baseball pattern of his earliest fiction.

Concerning these works, a few unappreciative critics affirmed that "Mr. Lardner's endowments are not remarkable"[2] and that his latest books were "funny in spots, but thin, a little forced and restless,"[3] and the Story of a Wonder Man "read in broad daylight ... resolves itself into just so much piffle."[4] But for every dissenting comment there were three or four complimentary ones.

With his plays he was not so successful.

> Lardner has never been fortunate in his stage ventures. Seemingly unable to write a play himself, he has turned to collaborators who could point up his wise-cracking fun, but could not, or would not, get to the bitter meat below.[5]

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[1]Anon., "Ring Lardner Dies; Noted as Writer," New York Times (Sept. 26, 1933) 21:1.

[2]Allan Nevins, "The American Moron," Saturday Review of Literature, V (June 8, 1929) 1089. The complete quotation is: "But beyond skill in reporting, thorough knowledge of the ordinary American and his mind, and a satirical talent which gives the slightest of his sketches an edge, Mr. Lardner's endowments are not remarkable ... We fail to find in him that richer comprehension of life, that intensity of feeling, which we find not merely in a very great short story writer like Kipling, but in the short stories of Mary E. Wilkins or Hamlin Garland. The ability to identify himself with his characters, to present their strongest emotions, to show how even the moron has his relations with heaven and hell, to touch on the deeper chords of life, love, and death--this ability he lacks."

[3]In a review of What of It? by Robert Littell, New Republic, 42 (April 15, 1925) 3.

[4]Anon., Independent, 118 (April 9, 1927) 400.

[5]Walter Eaton, "June Moon: a review," Books (June 29, 1930) 17.

Lardner died at his home at Great Neck, Long Island, in September, 1933. Messages of condolence came from all parts of the country and from all types of people. Irving Berlin, Alexander Woollcott, Irvin S. Cobb, and members of the Hollywood motion picture colony sent telegrams of sympathy to his family.[1] One of his closest friends, F. Scott Fitzgerald, regretted that he "got less percentage of himself on paper than any other American author of the first flight."[2] And an anonymous editorial stated:

> And we suspect that if his publishers can be persuaded to bring out a volume of carefully selected short stories, his best writing will prove to belong to the really important literature in English of this generation.[3]

A post mortem anthology of his work, First and Last, was accordingly collected and published the following year, and after the reviews disappeared from the newspapers, the critics continued to evaluate Lardner's reputation in terms of humor and realism.

The growth of his acclaim had been amazing. In twenty years he had grown from an obscure sports writer to an outstanding author of short stories, novels, and plays. In the years after his death, when no new books were forthcoming, his popularity with the public waned a little, but his reputation with the critics seemed to in-

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[1] For information about the funeral and more complete lists of celebrities who sent messages refer to "Ring Lardner's Funeral Today," New York Times (Sept. 28, 1933) 21, and to "Lardner Funeral Will be Private," New York Times (Sept. 27, 1939) 21.

[2] "Ring," New Republic, 76 (October 11, 1933) 255.

[3] "Ring Lardner," Saturday Review of Literature, X (October 7, 1933) 160.

crease more than ever. In 1939 a writer from his home state of Michigan spoke guardedly of him as Michigan's "one slim chance" for literary fame.[1] But almost a decade after his death, William Lyon Phelps expressed the opinion that "he was a brilliant short story writer; his influence will be felt for years to come."[2]

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[1] Arnold Mulder, "Authors and Wolverines," Saturday Review of Literature, 19 (March 4, 1939) 4.

[2] "I Wish I'd Met ...," Good Housekeeping, 114 (Jan., 1942) 39.

THE PROBLEM EMERGES

In 1927, with the outlook on Lardner's reputation becoming increasingly optimistic, it is no wonder that Will Cuppy remarked:

> It is ancient history now that Ring Lardner has completely lived down the disgrace of being funny and is sitting pretty with the high-priced critics, as well as with us poor, benighted lowbrows, who practically invented him. The very Shakespeare commentators now treat him on terms of perfect equality and laugh fit to kill at all the wrong places.[1]

But even at that time Mr. Cuppy was mistaken, and the situation did not greatly change throughout the years. The critics have not yet come to a complete agreement as to whether Lardner's reputation is to be built upon satire or upon humor. Realist or clown? They still dispute the question. Yet, in fairness to Mr. Cuppy, it must be admitted that the tendency is increasingly toward accepting Lardner as a realist-satirist and not as a mere humorist.

Since this new critical estimate appears as a trend, we are led to inquire the cause. Three factors: the era, the critics, and the author himself, determine the reception of Lardner's literary work, and in his case the emphasis seems equally divided among the three.

An editorial in the New York Times on the occasion of his death ascribes Lardner's reputation as a realist-satirist to the wave of disillusionment that accompanied the depression.

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[1] "Believe It or Not," Books (May 8, 1927) 2.

> It was the fashion to satirize and debunk and dissect, and the established practice was to seize upon a humorist and discover that he was really nothing of the kind. He was at bottom a merciless realist, or at least he should have been.[1]

It was in the spirit of the times to designate Lardner as "the satirist of morons and illiterates."[2] A similar instance is that of Van Wyck Brooks, who, in The Ordeal of Mark Twain (c 1920), interpreted Twain's writing as that of a frustrated person. T. S. Matthews substantiates this, writing:

> It always becomes fashionable, among civilized people at a certain point of decadence, to admire the low, the vulgar and the criminal; and though there may be other qualities which Ring Lardner's stories best exemplify, these subjects are present in his work, and they form the principle reason, I think, why he has become almost a fad with the intelligentsia.[3]

Simon Strunsky objects; he blames Lardner's new reputation on the critics. These "lonely inhabitants of the ivory tower," he says, enjoying Ring Lardner's work just as much as the crowd below, try to justify their enjoyment by discovering some latent artistic basis for their appreciation. As an example, note that Charlie Chaplin was praised as a tragedian, not a comedian, by these same critics. "The intellectualist has consented to like the same thing that the vast majority of his neighbors like, but insists on a totally different reason."[4]

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[1] Anon., "Ring Lardner," New York Times (Sept. 27, 1933) 20:3.

[2] Ibid, 20:3.

[3] "Lardner, Shakespeare and Chekhov," New Republic, 59 (May 22, 1929) 35.

[4] "About Books, More or Less - The Permanent Contributor," New York Times Magazine (May 2, 1926) 4.

A third opinion is that Lardner himself was most responsible for his tardy acclaim as a "serious" writer, because he did not take himself seriously until the last decade of his life. Oscar Cargill, in his volume entitled Intellectual America, points this out. Another writer agrees that although the earlier stories did contain the elements of satirical realism in that the characters were "eccentric Yahoos" or "boasting braggarts, irrascible and childish in their vanity," it was not until later that he emphasized these points with "greater melancholy, with increased scorn."[1]

But whatever the cause of Lardner's reputation as a realist-satirist, the argument continues as to the extent of his realism and his satire. Satirist or funnyman -- opinions are divided. This bone of contention is the main ingredient in any critical stew over Lardner's merits, so that all discussions of his plots, characters, and style are flavored by it, while they, at the same time, add their own piquancy to the brew. Let us investigate what the critics have to say on each of these points, turning to Lardner's works in order to substantiate or disprove their arguments.

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[1]James T. Farrell, "Ring Lardner's Success-Mad World," New York Times Magazine (June 18, 1944) 3.

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF LARDNER'S PLAN OF COMPOSITION

1. The Critics Review His Plots

Lardner's plots or story outlines are often criticized as the weakest part of his work. Those who refuse to consider him a realist point out this shortcoming. The others tend to ignore the problem of plot altogether, or else try to avoid a discussion of the mechanics in favor of a discussion of the moral purpose behind the subjects chosen for satire.

Admittedly, if one sits down to read a volume of his short stories at any one sitting, one perceives that the characters are different, the locale changes, but the effect is much the same. A few short stories even seem to use, not only similar, but identical plots. This is an unavoidable coincidence if a writer's repertoire runs into the hundreds, but is rather significant when encountered in such a small collection as Lardner's. For instance, "A Caddy's Diary" and "Mr. Frisbie" both describe golfers who are unable to play the game merely for the sake of playing, but instead must cheat for low scores in order to build up their own egos. In the first story, the caddy explains that he is writing in order to practice composition, because some day he hopes to become a "pro" and write books. Mr. Frisbie's chauffeur writes the second story in the hope that he will be able to sell it to the newspapers. The caddy relates that all the "best people" at the golf club falsify their scores. Only the good players tell the truth, and they are forced

to, because a falsified score would be impossible to attain under the circumstances.

> So if they make a 4 and claim a 3 why people would just laugh in their face and say how did the ball get from the fair way on to the green, did it fly? But the boys that takes 7 and 8 strokes to a hole can shave their score and you know they are shaveing it but you have to let them get away with it because you cant prove nothing. But that is one of the penaltys for being a good player, you can't cheat.
>
> To hear Joe tell it pretty near everybody are born crooks, well maybe he is right.[1]

Mr. Frisbie's chauffeur caddies for his employer on lonely rounds of golf and witnesses his lapses of memory where the score is concerned. Mr. Frisbie's ego is also extremely sensitive.

> Your father will not play golf with anyone and certainly not with a good player and besides that your father is not the kind of a man that wants anyone giving him pointers. Personally I would just as leaf go up and tickle him as tell him that his stance is wrong.[2]

Another pair of stories that show startling similarities are "I Can't Breathe" and "Zone of Quiet." Both have as their story outline the amours of a young woman, stressing her fickleness, insincerity, and thoughtlessness. "I Can't Breathe" is the rapt exclamation of a high school girl who has become engaged to several young men at the same time and cannot bring herself to

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[1] Round Up, 399.

[2] Ibid., 83.

break off with any of them, because, as she rationalizes, she doesn't want to hurt anyone's feelings. "Zone of Quiet" is the saga of a slightly, but not much, more mature individual, a nurse who recounts to her recuperating patient the long sad story of her life and loves. When her current conquests include the BF (boy friend) of her GF (girl friend) she rationalizes that the GF didn't appreciate the young man nearly enough. Both stories mention night-clubbing at "Barney Gallant's," although this particular name does not appear again in Lardner's works. It is interesting to speculate if the repetition of theme and style in the two stories forced the author's mind into an involuntary iterative pattern in which even details are recalled and recorded.

Beside this occasional sameness of story outline and detail, another common criticism of Lardner's plots is expressed by Robert Littell when he says:

> There is a curious contrast between the restraint and naturalness of his dialogue, his language and his characters and the artificially farcical mechanics of the story.[1]

To find an example of this patness we have only to turn to a story entitled "Now and Then,"[2] a series of letters written by Irma to a girlfriend on two different occasions. The first group of letters, penned during a honeymoon in Nassau, describes a tenderly devoted

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[1] In a review of How to Write Short Stories, New Republic, 40 (Sept. 3, 1924) 25.

[2] Round Up, 237.

bridegroom. The second group, sent from the same place three years later, reveals that the husband is definitely more interested in avoiding his wife than in wooing her. The same details are included in each group of letters, and they occur in almost identical chronological order. These details, of course, provide material for contrasting treatment, but the contrast seems too perfect for realism. There seems to be no room for the inconsistancies of daily life. The pathetic quality of the situation is lost because the reader gradually recognizes the stereotyped path that the author followed in setting up the plot. Let us look at a few examples from the first group of letters and note how carefully they are counterbalanced in the second group.

1. ...I was deathly seasick all the way down on the boat, but it may sound funny but I am honestly glad I was because Bob was so perfectly dear and would not leave me for a minute ...
2. I thought it was quite rough, but Bob said it was just like a billiard table and he was quite provoked at me being sick and threatened to leave me home the next time he was going anywhere on a boat.

1. As you know I don't play bridge and Bob says he can't take any interest in games unless I am in them ...
2. After dinner he phoned up to say that he got tangled up in a bridge game with these people and I had better go to bed and not wait for him.

1. I had some pictures taken ... and I wanted to buy two or three of each ... but Bob said I could only buy one of each and that would be for him and he didn't want me sending my pictures around to other people.
2. ...he said I needn't waste money on pictures of myself for him as he already had enough of them and I better send these to my friends ...

1. ...Bob won't use the automobiles here as he says the carriages look more in keeping with the place they are so quaint and it would be sacrilegious to use the automobiles.
2. ...Bob says it is silly to ride in the old broken down carriages they have got here when you can get a car and get to places ten times as fast.

1. I don't read aloud very well, but he says he loves to have me as he can sit and look at me while I read and it don't make any difference if I read well or not ...
2. He said ... he could hardly understand me when I read because I mumble my words so ...

Even Lardner's play, June Moon, is criticized on the basis of its story outline.

> If held to its story values, the play would obviously be inconsequential, as would Mr. Lardner's own short stories were they similarly restricted.[1]

Carl Van Doren firmly believes that these occasional labored contrivances destroy any effect of realism in the stories in which they occur. He admits that Lardner "has created convincing characters; he has put convincing words into their mouths; he has set them going in a convincing dance of life. But there he has stopped, too often content to play old tricks until the action seems mechanical and his audience wonders whether his characters are convincing after all."[2]

This stereotyped patness of plot is not found very often in

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[1] J. Hutchins, "June Moon," Theater Arts Monthly, XIII (December, 1929) 880.

[2] Carl Van Doren, "Beyond Grammar, Ring W. Lardner," Century, 106 (July, 1923) 475.

Lardner's works, however. On the other extreme are most of his full length novels and some of his short stories which appear to lack any definite outline or plan. Lardner himself said, "When I begin a story I have no idea what it is going to be about. I force myself to make a start and then just flounder along."[1] This is instantly interpreted by one critic as a discovery that "contemporary life being an entirely fortuitous affair, the literature that sought to convey it not only did not gain but lost in effectiveness by being conducted on any settled plan. For this reason admirers of form have not often praised his technique. Many of his sentences and paragraphs begin with an air of conscious adventure and end with a sense of having forgotten just where they started."[2] This critic, therefore, would classify Lardner a realist.

2. The Critics Review His Themes

On the other hand, the majority of the critics who call Lardner a realist or satirist maintain that the mechanisms of the plots have nothing to do with the question. Instead they point to the themes, or story ideas, and praise them as being both the true reflections of the American scene and as being salutary in their moral effect. As one critic phrases it:

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[1] Walter Tittle, "Glimpses of Interesting Americans," Century, 110 (July, 1925) 314.

[2] H. L. Stuart, "Mr. Lardner at the Passing Show," 5.

> It is a world in which the principle of caveat emptor applies recurrently in social relationships, in human relationships of love, friendship, or family. Thus the satire of Ring Lardner reveals the working out of the mechanisms of American civilization. By depicting in terms of social life, an extension of the competitive system, Lardner reveals certain consequences of the rise of American economy and American civilization.[1]

This critic believes that Lardner's story ideas all prove to the reader that contemporary society looks on the decent person as a "sucker" and regards the person with genuine feeling as a "comic," regardless of the deficiencies or excellences of the story outlines.

Other critics, agreeing that the satiric quality of Lardner's themes overshadows the mechanisms of his plots, point to his emphasis on hypocrisy and rationalization. As an example, "Anniversary" is the story of a woman who cheats at solitaire in order to compensate for an unbearable marriage. "The Caddy's Diary" stressed the idea that every man has his price; that Mr. Crane, who ran away with the bank funds and a pretty girl, is no more dishonest than Mr. Thomas, the bank president, who falsifies his golf score for a tournament prize of three golf balls.

> Well I said it seems to me like these people have got a lot of nerve to pan Mr. Crane and call him a sucker for doing what he done, it seems to me like $8000 and a swell dame is pretty fair reward compared with what some of these other people sells their soul for, and I would like to tell them about it.
>
> Well said Joe they might tell you this, that

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[1] Farrell, op. cit., 3.

> when Mr. Thomas asks you how many shots he has had and you say 4 when you know he has had 5, why you are selling your soul for a $1.00 tip. And when you move Mrs. Doanes ball out of a rut and give it a good lie, what are you selling your soul for? Just a smile.

Louis Mumford compares Lardner with Chekhov in respect to his story ideas, saying that neither had any intention of preaching but that "there is scarcely a story in Round Up that does not have a salutary moral effect." And he adds:

> ...his stories betray the reaction of a sensitive spirit, a man who values kindliness and human decency and intellectual distinction in a society that has crabbed kindliness, given decency a price, and made intellectual distinction one of the major sins.[1]

Still another group of critics, believing that Lardner is more than a humorist, maintain that the realism in his stories derives from the skillful blending of the moral effect of his themes with the mechanical contrivances of his plots. This, they say, is a faithful facsimile of the "ritual" of life itself. Just as Marcel Proust understood and applied the principle of self-hypnotism in depicting characters, so does Lardner. Take, for example, the story in which a movie magnate continually refers to his home as a "love nest" and to his wife as a "perfect little homebody."[2] Despite the billings and cooings, the reader instantly comprehends that all is not what it seems in the supposedly happy

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[1] Mumford, op. cit., 5.

[2] "Love Nest," Round Up, 1929.

home, but the honeyed vocabulary is the ritual "by which that affluent gentleman fools himself into believing in his own importance." Mr. Chamberlain concludes that "the ritual is part of the hypocrisy of life, and Lardner is a great student of hypocrisy, both conscious and unconscious."[1]

Thus we find that no critic will dispute that Lardner's plots are mechanical and occasionally labored, but we do find a definite difference of opinion as to whether this is a shortcoming or an advantage; as to whether this was involuntary or premeditated, a literary failure or a triumph of realism.

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[1]Chamberlain, op. cit., 2.

THE CRITICS LOOK AT LARDNER'S CHARACTERS

It is in Lardner's depiction of character that the critics hunt for clues to his intentions, serious or otherwise. And it is in their critical interpretations of Lardner's characters that we find many amusing contradictions. When we see the various ways in which trained readers react to the same set of characterizations, we begin to give credence to the story of the three blind men and the elephant. Some critics finger the surface and say that Lardner is innocently amused. Others grope cautiously along the entire length and decide that his amusement manifests kindly condescension. The third group grabs at the powerful sweep of the tale and says the author's motive is unadulterated hate.

Foremost among the advocates of considering Lardner's portrayal of character merely a comic device is Henry Longan Stuart, who says of the bumbling ball-player in You Know Me Al:

> Jack Keefe is a great creation. In view of the inexhaustible supply of dullness on hand, his creator is in the nation's debt for proving that amusement can be extracted from it.[1]

And Stuart P. Sherman tends to agree with Mr. Stuart. Although he suspects that Lardner realizes that he is depicting "Vanity Fair," he feels that, at the last minute, "his primitive western humor sardonically bursts through his 'defense mechanism',

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[1] "Mr. Lardner Burlesques America," New York Times, III (April 19, 1925) 1:1.

and he can't quite bring himself to go to press without divulging his sense that it is impossible to take these hard-boiled Americans of his seriously."[1]

From there it is only a step to Allen Nevins' opinion that Lardner is a good reporter, but a satirist as well. But note how he qualifies this statement:

> If not precisely an urbane satire, it is nearly always kindly. There is nothing sardonic, mordant, or superior about it. It is the satire of a man who takes it for granted that most human beings are rather little, limited, and dull, and a good many are mean-souled, without particularly caring about it; who strips without condemning; and who is sometimes quite Olympian in his detachment. When he goes deepest, you find that his note is rather amused pity than scornful amusement.[2]

Other comments in the same spirit are that "there is often a touch of human sympathy, even in the cruel strokes; the humor, far from being metallic, sometimes has the deepening quality of pathos."[3] This writer uses as an example the story of the girl who is unable to attract her husband because she is moronic, and who pours out her heart to her girl-friend, not comprehending that she is explaining more than she understands. The satire focuses on her tremendous stupidity, and we laugh at it, and yet there is a hint of tragedy, too, in the manner in which it is presented.

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[1] "Ring Lardner: Hard-Boiled Americans," The Main Stream, 174.

[2] "The American Moron," Saturday Review of Literature, V (June 8, 1929) 1089.

[3] Lewis Mumford, "The Salt of Our Generation," Books, 5.

A reviewer of The Love Nest also remarks that in eight out of the nine stories in this book, Lardner benevolently despises his chief characters. The single exception is "Haircut," the tale of a village practical joker whose jokes are more painful than amusing. This review accuses Lardner of despising the joker, Jim Kendall, malevolently instead of benevolently "but Mr. Lardner is not at his best when he is righteously wrathful."[1]

At the final extreme are the critics who maintain that Lardner is almost a complete misanthropist, and that his stories reflect the most bitter realism as well as the most sardonic satire. He becomes the deadliest, and the coldest, of American writers in their eyes. If a few of his more serious stories are taken into consideration, such as "Haircut," "Champion," "A Day with Conrad Green," "The Golden Honeymoon," and "My Roomy," we find the judgment passed on his attitude toward his characters as this:

> He really hates his characters, hates them so much that he has ceased to be indignant at them. There is almost no emotion left. His satire is absolutely negative; that is why it will never cause a revolution in American manners, as "Main Street" in its minor way did. No one is uneasy under the whiplash of Mr. Lardner's scorn for he is really not worked up about anything ... He never rails at the crowd because he has passed beyond raillery.[2]

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[1] Francis Newman, Literary Review, VI (April 10, 1926) 3. Perhaps Mr. Newman should be regarded with an uplifted eyebrow and a grain of salt, for he is guilty of referring to How to Tell Short Stories, when the author's original intention was to describe How to Write Short Stories.

[2] Clifton Fadiman, "Pitiless Satire," Nation, 128 (May 1, 1929) 537.

H. L. Mencken does not limit his remarks to a consideration of only a few stories. He includes all of Lardner's work from the very beginning, and he condemns it all as bitter and acid satire. Like Swift's, it lacks "the least weakness of amiability, or even pity." Although the author enjoyed his characters as comedians, he held them in contempt, according to the reviewer. But Mencken abandons the objective interpretation of Lardner's attitudes and ends with a characteristically sweeping observation:

> I can recall no character in the Lardner gallery, early or late, male or female, old or young, who is not loathsome.[1]

Although not all the critics are so emphatic, most of them do agree that Lardner's characters are "the most terrible collection of individuals who manage to be at once selfish and brainless that any single writer has ever gathered together in one book ...."[2]

The reason for this unattractiveness becomes apparent as we read on. These characters are symbols; they stand for futility, or stupidity, or competition, depending on the story, and, of course, the critic. Lardner's trick is to take some familiar national trait, one that is usually treated with good-natured humor, and to show the basic viciousness beneath it. For instance, "Sun Cured" demonstrates the unpleasantness of washroom sociability, practical joking becomes repulsive in "Haircut" and "The Maysville Minstrel;"

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[1] "A Humorist Shows His Teeth," American Mercury, VIII (June, 1926) 255.

[2] Fadiman, op. cit., 537.

"Liberty Hall" and "Mr. and Mrs. Fixit" take all the charm out of good old American hospitality; and marriage becomes dull and deadly in "The Golden Honeymoon."[1]

Keeping in mind, therefore, that the characters are symbols, the preface to You Know Me Al becomes meaningful as well as humorous to us. Lardner says that the original of Jack Keefe was "not a ball player at all, but Jane Addams of Hull House, a former Follies girl," and S. P. Sherman comments that there is this much truth in that statement: "Jack is a gross bulk of human nature, who would retain all his essential points of interest if he were exhibited as an iceman aspiring to be a sausage manufacturer, rather than a 'busher' aspiring to hold down a position with the White Sox."[2]

Futility is the keynote to so many of these characters. What could be more futile than the life led by the principles in "The Golden Honeymoon?" This elderly couple on a trip to Florida has become "so drained of inner life, of feelings, of curiosity, that the time-table itself has become highly meaningful ..."[3] In order to emphasize this feeling, Lardner has all his characters dwell on the insignificant and the trivial. They are preoccupied with prohibition, or with their golf scores, or with the mistakes of their partners at bridge. Under these three classifications would come almost a half

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[1]Clifton Fadiman, "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," Nation, 136 (March 22, 1933) 316.

[2]Sherman, op. cit., 171.

[3]Farrell, op. cit., 3.

of the stories that he wrote. And the majority of the remainder are the baseball stories, those epics of the diamond, which ponder in devastating detail each second of every game that Jack Keefe pitched or watched. Lardner is constantly criticized for his inclusion of so much material of limited appeal. Perhaps he intended it as part of a grand plan to show, again, futility. No one in his stories escapes it. The rich have often been portrayed as foolish and footloose; here the poor are likewise damned. No one has a goal, nor even an interest, that extends beyond the gratification of the primary senses. Farrell sums it all up with:

> ...the terrible irony emerging from his stories is that here they are, these rugged individualists, doing what they claim they want to do--enjoying the fruits of money, fame, prestige, buying the comforts available to American wealth--here they are, alike as rubber stamps. Their main desire is to be a better rubber stamp than the next man. And they are so proud of themselves! ... As is usually the case in satire, vices are paraded as virtues; here they strut, eager for praise and applause![1]

Another symbol expressed in the characters of Lardner's stories is the result of free competition. From the pre-Civil War days, when the thinking men of New England first expressed a fear of the consequences of the industrial revolution and its rigorous competitive system on the society of America, we have not been without examples of attempts of this same society to escape from the system. Brook Farm was just such an escape. It failed, for

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[1] Ibid, 3.

the system defeated it. Lardner's characters are the offspring of several generations of competition. Failing to escape from their environment, they have become conditioned to it. Like certain tropical fish, they change their color according to their habitat.[1] And just as the fish cannot prevent their scales from glistening brown or yellow or green on the variegated ocean floor, even if there is no danger, just so do Lardner's characters react competitively, whether there is justification for such a course of action or not. They apply the principles of hard-boiled business to their social relationships, so that friendship becomes a matter of utility, and marriage, a problem in economics. Their happiness is measured in victories: a bigger car, a "ritzier" vacation, a more expensive house. They are cynical and sarcastic, for the more they can discredit the success of others, the more superior they will appear by comparison. Even their recreation has become so competitive that it no longer remains recreation. An outing on the golf course is exhilarating only to the victor; it is a tragic interlude in the lives of the losers. This competitive instinct is so deep rooted in Lardner's characters that <u>they even compete with themselves</u>. Why else does a solitary golf player like Mr. Frisbie cheat on his score? Why else the cheating at solitaire in "Anniversary?" Why else the rationalization, the hypocrisy? These creatures not only must convince others of their prowess in a "success-mad world," but

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[1]Some of these are the Mediterranean flat-fish (Platophrys podas).

they must convince themselves over and over again. As this happens, the attainment of their goal becomes so over-emphasized that any means to the end is fair play and the rules of the "game" are quietly disregarded, when no one is looking. Therefore, Lardner's characters demonstrate that competition, turned and twisted into unnatural outlets, results in hypocrisy and in the absence of ethical standards.

If nature has provided the tropical fish with a protective change of coloring in order to adapt it to its environment, she has gone a step farther with the barracuda. Here the conditioning is for offensive, not defensive purposes. In the world of the survival of the fittest, the barracuda intends to survive; in order not to be overcome, he becomes the aggressor. So it is with certain of Lardner's characters. In "Champion" Oscar Cargill points out that:

> Lardner has produced without a quiver of emotion and without yielding the slightest to the temptation to accord poetic justice, a pee-wee brained sadist, irresistible in achieving his desires because of the singleness of his purpose, everything concentrating on self. Such a portrait belongs conspicuously in the new gallery of supermen.[1]

Not only do these futile, hypocritical, and competitive creatures symbolize past and present problems, but they may foreshadow future ones. In a discussion of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, V. S. Pritchett says that the title role shows that "The peculiar power of American nostalgia is that it is not only barking

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[1] Intellectual America, 341, 2.

back to something lost in the past, but suggests also the tragedy of a lost future...These people are the price paid for building a new country."[1] If we look for similarities in Lardner's works, we need not hunt far. "The Caddy's Diary" shows the boy still wondering at the compromises that people make with themselves, but gradually realizing that these compromises are universal in his small world. He will eventually comply.

Therefore, we find that as a symbolist, Mr. Lardner is unanimously acclaimed. His characters are effective symbols. But are his symbols effective characters?

Here again the old question of realism versus humor determines the attitudes of the critics. Are his characters realistic? Yes, comes the answer from some directions. Louis Mumford, especially, believes that Lardner was apt in creating convincing people, and compares him quite favorably with Sinclair Lewis in this respect. Whereas Lewis documents and describes, he points out, in Lardner's writing "the story itself is the document and it needs no other aids. The coarseness and flatulence of Conrad Green, the theatrical manager, is portrayed in and through Conrad Green."[2]

Again, are Lardner's characters realistic? No, comes the answer from some directions. An anonymous reviewer of Lose With a Smile says that here the author "descends to the mechanical ....

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[1] "Huckleberry Finn and the Cruelty of American Humor", New Statesman and Nation, 22 (August 2, 1941) 113.

[2] Mumford, op. cit., 5.

One doesn't know whether Danny (the baseball hero) is nature's nobleman under the skin, or just plain thick and unconsciously cruel. Ring Lardner doesn't bring Danny's fundamental quality out."[1] Mr. Van Doren states it a little differently, but is apt to agree. He regrets that Lardner's principals merge so that only two characters appear from the crowd; "one is Jack, bragging about his prowess in love and war (including baseball), and the other is a case-hardened low-brow, under whatever name, seeing the world with his slightly snobbish wife."[2]

Having already considered Lardner's attitude toward his characters, the symbolism implied in his characters, and his skill in depicting character, let us follow Mr. Van Doren's lead into the subject of the types of characters that Lardner employs. First let us inquire what is his source of character? Then let us investigate what he finally does with them.

From the early American humorists Lardner has drawn the types for his characters. He has developed them and modernized them, but their eighteenth century beginnings are evident. From the tall tales of the boastful backwoodsmen like Davy Crockett come his brawny bragging athletes of <u>You Know Me Al</u> and <u>Lose With a Smile</u>, as well as of individual stories like "Harmony," "My Roomy,"

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[1] "A Rookie's Letters," <u>New York Times Magazine</u> (March 26, 1933) 6.

[2] "Beyond Grammar," 474.

"Alibi Ike," and "Hurry Kane." From the Yankee glorification of the shrewd untutored businessman, such as Jack Downing and Hosea Biglow, comes Lardner's wise-cracking, penny-pinching husbands of Gullible's Travels, The Big Town, and several short stories. From the southern Civil War rascals who delighted in torturing the gullible and unsuspecting, such as P. V. Nasby, Sut Lovingood, and Simon Suggs, come the characters of the practical jokers in "Haircut" and the "Maysville Minstrel" and the minor characters that manufacture hoaxes in all the baseball stories. Since almost all his creatures, even the females, fall into one or more of these categories, it is no wonder that Henry L. Mencken accused him of having but two stock characters, and both of them "lowly ignoramuses."[1]

Those critics who claim Lardner is merely a humorist are inclined to use Lardner's indebtedness to the humorous tradition in America to prove their point. On the other hand, those who believe he is a realist-satirist say that human life is merely a series of repetitions, and that Lardner's method of utilizing stock characters is not only effective satire, but that "the effect is indistinguishable from that of life itself."[2] Thus the controversy continues.

Having discussed the externals of characterization in such detail, it might be interesting to turn to a few direct examples.

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[1] Prejudices. Fifth Series, 377.

[2] "The Library," American Mercury, II (July, 1924) 376.

We may have to read an entire story before we can prove that the people in it are lowly, but it takes only a minute to discover that they are ignoramuses. Jack Keefe is a prime example.

> He says I will spare you this one for three dollars. I says You must take me for some boob. He says No I wouldn't insult no boob. So I walks on but if he had of insulted me I would have busted him.[1]

Then later in the same book, Jack's prowess at pitching comes in for a little criticism, and he says:

> This smart alex McGraw was trying to kid me to-day and says Why did not I make friends with Mathewson and let him learn me some thing about pitching and I says Mathewson could not learn me nothing and he says I guess that right and I guess they is not nobody could learn you nothing a bout nothing and if you was to stay in the league 20 years probily you would not be no better then you are now so you see he had to add mit that I am good Al even if he has not saw me work when my arm was OK.[2]

Lardner's characters are further distinguished by the complete lack of a sense of humor, but they, of course, are unaware of this. They go bumbling along, getting their biggest laughs from the most trite jokes, and congratulating themselves on their own second-hand wit. Jack Keefe is notorious for the typical snappy comeback:

> And then he says I wish we had of sent you to Milwaukee and I come back at him. I says I wish you had of.[3]

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[1] *You Know Me Al*, 63.

[2] *Ibid.*, 220.

[3] *Ibid.*, 55.

As well as;

> He hit it all right but it was a line drive right in Chase's hands. He says Pretty lucky Boy but I will get you next time. I come right back at him. I says Yes you will.[1]

If this is a horrible, but typical, example of the wit of the brawny athletic type in Lardner's works, should we expect more from the shrewd wise-cracking husband type? We should, but we are bound to be disappointed. Note this sparkling originality:

> I suppose you people wants to hear about my trip across the old pond. When I say the old pond, I mean the Atlantic Ocean. Old pond is what I call it in a kind of joking way.
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> Well, the wife hadn't never been to Europe, but she was half scared to go on account of sea-sickness which she even gets it on a bicycle. Personally I am a good sailor. Of course when I say good sailor I don't mean I would be any good sailing a boat, but it's just an expression I got up for a person that don't get sick easy.[2]

Along with this happy confidence in their own wit, Lardner's characters have inherited from the early backwoods humorists a supreme ego, which manifests itself in other directions.

> They was a letter here from Violet and it pretty near made me feel like crying. I wish they was two of me so both them girls could be happy.[3]

And another example is:

> So I says I would do the best I could and I thanked him for the treatment I got in Terre Haute. They always was good to me here and though I did

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[1] Ibid., 57.

[2] What of It?, 3.

[3] You Know Me Al, 66.

> more than my share I always felt that my work was appresiated. We are finishing second and I done most of it. I can't help but be proud of my first year's record in professional baseball and you know I am not boasting when I say that Al.[1]

As a result of this egotism, these same people are repulsive for their self-centered thoughtlessness. They are tight with their money; they are callous and hard-hearted; and their lack of tact shows that they never, no, never, give a single thought to the other person's feelings. Even romance cannot make Jack Keefe loosen up, and marriage is just another business deal with him.

> My new brother-in-law Allen told me I should ought to give the priest $5 and I thought it should be about $2 the same as the license so I split the difference and gave him $3.50. I never seen him before and probily won't never see him again so why should I give him anything at all when it is his business to marry couples? But I like to do the right thing. You know me Al.[2]

The callousness of the husband in The Big Town, although often cropping out, is so exaggerated that it gives the reader the impression that it is just for effect, as if the characters are ashamed of showing emotion, and so cover up by going to the other extreme. On the other hand, regardless of their motives in acting hard-hearted, their actions prove that they do consider anyone with any sensibilities a comic. You have to be hard to survive in Lardner's world. In telling of the death of his rich father-in-

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[1] Ibid., 10.

[2] Ibid., 84.

law, the husband says:

> I immediately had a black bandage sewed round my left funny bone, but when they read us the will I felt all right again and tore it off. Our share was seventy-five thousand dollars. This was after we had paid for the inheritance tax and the amusement stamps on a horseless funeral.[1]

And the women are more cold and calculating, if possible, than the men. One poor girl was deeply in love with a young aviator who was perfecting a new plane, which crashed, killing him. Her brother-in-law describes her insurmountable grief:

> Sis is taking it pretty calm. She's sensible. She says if that could have happened, why the invention couldn't of been no good after all. And the Williamses probably wouldn't of give him a plugged dime for it.[2]

In some cases it is hard to determine whether stupidity caused unconscious thoughtlessness, or whether the cruelty was directly intended. Is it possible that anyone writing a letter to a friend and his wife could be so obtuse as not to know how this sort of thing would make the recipient feel?

> You and Bertha and I and Florence will have all kinds of good times together this winter because I know Bertha and Florence will like eachother. Florence looks something like Bertha at that. I am glad I didn't get tied up with Violet or Hazel even if they was a little bit prettier than Florence.[3]

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[1] The Big Town, 2.

[2] The Big Town, 133.

[3] You Know Me Al, 81.

And when Jack asks Al to do a favor for him, you suspect how it will turn out. As a satire on human nature in general, this is particularly appropriate.

> I am grateful to you Al for trying to fix it up but maybe you could of did better if you had of went at it in a different way. I am not finding no fault with my old pal though. Don't think that. When I have a pal I am the man to stick to him thru thick and thin.[1]

From these critical appraisals of Lardner's characters it is possible to draw the following conclusions. The critics are in substantial agreement on two points; that the author despises his "puppets" although he sometimes softens his scorn with humor, and that he uses his characters as symbols of unpleasant attributes of the human race. But, since all of his characters fall into certain limited and well-defined groups characterized by stupidity, vulgarity, and callousness, the critics continue to debate two other points. They are prone to doubt his skill in portrayal of individual characters and to question his range of artistic and realistic characterization.

To risk a generalization is dangerous, in view of the differences of opinion expressed, but it may be assumed that Lardner is realistic in his depiction of character within the limitations that have been mentioned above.

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[1] Ibid., 95.

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF LARDNER'S STYLE

1. The Critics Evaluate the Quality of Lardner's Humor

Besides his plots and his characters, Lardner's style of writing is the third factor that one must consider before classifying him as a humorist or a realist-satirist. Any discussion of his style should include an investigation into the aptness and accuracy of his dialogue and into the types of literary devices that he employed.

Since a critical judgment on the quality of his humor must rest on these external evidences, it is surprising to find such varied opinion among the reviewers as this:

> Along with a few other men who have lived, Mr. Lardner has the power to make even the most atrabilious reader laugh out loud...He is, to me at least, the funniest writer alive today...[1]

> We were not amused. Except for an occasional twitching smile, we found ourselves impervious. ...We hope it will have a large sale in England, where they admire American humor. They could not possibly understand it there, but they would be perfectly certain that it was funny.[2]

With the first critic, two others side; one calls Lardner's prose "sheer irresponsible nonsense, of the kind that only Lardner can turn out—easy, uneven, surprising, not quite up to his mark as a

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[1] R....,D...., "The Reigning Jester", Independent, 114 (May 23, 1925) 590.

[2] Anon., "How to Write Short Stories: a review," Outlook, 138 (Sept. 17, 1924) 100.

whole, but dotted with those wild flashes of 24 carat craziness which make one laugh out loud."[1] The other states definitely, "For Mr. Lardner is a humorist, not a satirist, not even an ironist."[2]

Siding with the opposition are critics who comment that "some people think he is very funny--but that is just his collection of professional humorists bag of tricks,"[3] and "there is hardly a trace of good-natured humor in him."[4]

Ordinarily this wide discrepancy of opinion could be accredited to the individual tastes of the critics, some of whom have a wider appreciation of humor than others. But another factor is also involved in Lardner's case. This factor is the interpretation of humor, not merely its appreciation. Some reviewers classify Lardner as a mere humorist and judge his humor for amusement's sake alone. Would they not tend to be more exacting in their demands on the quality of his humor than those reviewers who believe Lardner is primarily a realist-satirist and only incidentally a humorist? For example, Edith Walton suggests that Lardner cannot be evaluated by external evidences because it is his stunt to "play dumb, to indulge in comic misspellings, to imitate the meager moronic lingo of most Americans--and so to heighten the satiric humor which crackles just below the surface."[5]

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[1] L(ittell), R(obert), "The Story of a Wonder Man: a review," New Republic, 50 (March 30, 1927) 178.

[2] Anon., "Ring Lardner's 'Autobiography' is Buoyant Burlesque," New York Times (April 3, 1927) 5.

[3] Stuart Sherman, The Main Stream, 170.

[4] Gilbert Seldes, "The Singular--Although Dual--Eminence of Ring Lardner," American Criticism, 227, ed. by William A. Drake.

[5] "Homage to the Genius of Ring Lardner," New York Times Magazine (June 10, 1934) 2.

2. The Critics Evaluate the Realism of Lardner's Language

If it is true that Lardner uses humorous devices not for the sake of humor alone, but to characterize his people and to develop the story idea, then the accuracy of his reporting must be considered. In the first place, the accuracy or realism of the moronic dialogue and illiterate letters of his characters are causes for controversy.

Since 1848, when John Russell Bartlett published his Dictionary of Americanisms, reviewers have been very conscious of the philology of their authors. In his introduction, Bartlett said that literary writing was poor, but praised writing in the vernacular as practised at that time by the creators of Jack Downing and Sam Slick. Later he added Lowell's Biglow Papers to his recommended list.[1] Lowell, who was noted for his scholarly approach to the study of linguistics, wrote, "True vigor of expression does not pass from page to page, but from man to man, where the brain is kindled and the lips are limbered by downright living interests and by passions in the very throe."[2]

But writing colloquial language has its disadvantages; they are threefold. The writer must avoid the influence of the past; he must avoid misspelling words merely for a humorous effect of illiteracy; and he must be on his guard against words which are misspelled in order to appear phonetic, but actually are not.

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[1] Walter Blair, Native American Humor, 52.

[2] Atlantic Monthly, IV (November, 1859) 638.

In order to be realistic, each writer who attempts to report contemporary speech must chart his own path; his pitfalls occur where the going was smoothest for his predecessors. Since the spoken language of a people is changing constantly, he has no tradition to follow. The linguist-humorist has a dual problem in this respect because of the great temptation to copy comic ideas and dialects from his predecessors, and because his humor must sound perfectly spontaneous although the language must be worked over carefully. Lardner has been accused of unoriginality by critics who point out that his Young Immigrunts resembles Mark Twain's Innocents Abroad and that there is more than a suspicion of Mrs. Malaprop in some of his most successful characters. However, it is difficult to find any criticism directed at the ease and seeming spontaneity of his dialogue.

Again, in order to be accurate, each writer must be constantly aware of what he is writing, and must make the fine distinction between misspelling for phonetic purposes and misspelling merely for the effect of illiteracy and humor. Lowell analyzed the problem in regard to his Hosea Biglow:

> As for Hosea, I am sorry that I began by making him such a detestable speller. There is no fun in bad spelling itself...You see I am getting him out of it gradually.[1]

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[1] Blair, op. cit., 54.

There are many traditional misspellings utilized to produce humorous effects, and, among them, the letter "r" has developed special comic significance. In an article entitled "Notes on the Vernacular," Louise Pound states:

> To return to r, we have been educated in these days to recognize its omission as well as its addition to be humorous. The moment we encounter the added r's of purp and dorg in our reading we know that we have to do with humor, and so with school-marm. The added consonants are supposed to be spoken if the words are uttered, but, as a matter of fact, they are less often uttered than seen. The words are, indeed, visual forms; the humor is chiefly for the eye.[1]

With this principle in mind, Artemus Ward wrote of his "orfice," his "pollerticks," and his "perlitical" connections; Josh Billings and P. V. Nasby used "hoss," "fust," "pusley" (parsley), and similar misspellings. In Lardner's works we find few counterparts except in the "arsked" and "becarze" of "The Young Immigrunts."

Another method of obtaining a facetious, but not exactly an illiterate effect, was through the use of final "r."[2] Although other humorists have written "feller," "otter" (ought to), "popper," and "mommer," Lardner is innocent of the artifice. Admittedly he does use "holler" (from halloo) and "idear," but the one has become a standard word in American colloquial speech and the other is regional.

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[1] American Mercury, III (1924) 233.

[2] Ibid., 234.

Dialect writers often resort to adding the wrong termination to unexpected adjectives in order to designate illiteracy.[1] When Dickens wrote "leakingest" and Walt Whitman wrote "lovingest," there was novelty in the idea. Such is no longer the case. But it is Lardner's publishers, not the author himself, who are guilty of using this device. Their advertisement for Treat 'Em Rough calls it "the latest and laughingest book by the author of My Four Weeks in France."

Finally, one other linguistic pitfall for the humorist is the temptation to misspell a word in order to make it appear a phonetic representation, although the misspelling does not change the actual pronunciation of the word. "Wuz" for "was" and "az" for "as" are our most common examples. Although these misspellings cannot be condemned as inaccurate, they should not be praised as a contribution to realism for they are of much more value to the humor of the writing than to the linguistics. Lardner is not even tempted to try this, except again in "The Young Immigrunts" and in a few other instances where "nerly" and "haveing" and "curage" occur in letters written by his characters, and not in dialogue or exposition. Thus they testify to the supposed youth or ignorance of the authors and absolve Lardner of any responsibility for their use.

Clearly, Lardner does not regularly utilize any stock

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[1] Ibid., 235.

method for producing an effect of illiteracy in the written or spoken English of his characters. He does not sacrifice accuracy to entertainment. Therefore, humor seems to be the result of his misspellings, but realistic reporting seems to be their motivation.

The illiteracy of Lardner's characters points not to a lack of formal schooling, but to a peculiar state of mind. They are all handicapped by that sloppy kind of thinking that results in common grammatical errors, substitutions of words that sound alike, and weirdly jumbled sentences. His characters are not aware that they are illiterate and comical. Instead, they seem to be trying their best to be correct. In their letters, for example, they will use "am not" instead of "ain't," and "do not" instead of "don't," in an attempt to be formal in the midst of a mass of grammatical blunders.[1]

Lardner seems to emphasize the sloppy thinking itself, not the errors which it produces. Gilbert Seldes said that "Lardner has understood the habits of mind which 'make' our speech much more than our mispronunciations do."[2] The author draws an indirect moral: that a person who cannot think logically, cannot speak clearly.

With this purpose in mind, Lardner does not merely record language. He does not reproduce, like a court secretary, every slip and every error. Instead, he exercises an extremely selective

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[1] Henry L. Mencken, The American Language, 276.

[2] Seldes, American Criticism, 224.

judgment in order to sketch illiteracy with deft, light touches; but not to mirror it completely. Thus he earns the praises of critics who commend "the consistancy of his character and his talk"[1] and say that he "writes vernacular like an artist and not merely like a clever journalist ..."[2]

Therefore, in order to emphasize this careless habit of mind, when Lardner's characters depart from the grammatical path mapped out by authority, they depart along rambling detours, by way of the double negative and along amazing tenses of verbs. Jack Keefe writes:

> I guess you have not never had no chop suye Al and I am here to tell you you have not missed nothing but when Allen was going to buy the supper what could I say? I could not say nothing.[3]

And he also writes:

> They have gave me plenty of work here all right. I have pitched four times but have not went over five innings yet.[4]

"The Young Immigrunts" represents the attempt of a small boy to chronicle a vacation trip, and since it attempts to reproduce a child's efforts at phonetic spelling, can scarcely be judged by the same standards that we use in evaluating the dialogue or letters of a more mature character. However, it often exemplifies the

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[1] Littell, New Republic, 42, 1.

[2] Edmund Wilson, "How to Write Short Stories: a review," Dial, 77 (July, 1924) 70.

[3] You Know Me Al, 85.

[4] Ibid., 23.

type of jumbled sentence that does double duty as humor and realism.

> It was nerly midnight when we puled up in frunt of my ants and uncles house in Detroit that had been siting up since 7 expecting us.[1]

To add to their errors, Lardner's uneducated Americans often confused words that are phonetically similar. They are among the first to recognize "of" as an auxiliary verb. Thus they say: "I opened the serious here and beat them easy but I know you must of saw about it in the Chi papers,"[2] and "They should only ought to of had one but Bodie misjuged a easy fly ball ..."[3] And his characters substitute "another" for "or other," as in this example: "... and for some reason another when authors starts in on that subject it ain't very long till they've got a weeping jag."[4]

Even when his characters were not so illiterate, Lardner found their foibles of speech and reproduced them. Evidently it was these attempts on his part to recreate realistic speech that led an English reviewer to remark that "his gift of dialogue was as great as Chekhov's."[5] Certainly it is true that the dialogue of his characters was tailored to fit them exactly, and because of this they spoke for themselves, with very little help from the author.[6] One of his short stories in Round Up, entitled "Dinner,"

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[1] What of It?, 231.

[2] You Know Me Al, 62.

[3] Ibid., 23.

[4] The Big Town, 15.

[5] Elizabeth Bibesco, "Lament for Lardner," Living Age, 345 (December, 1933) 367.

[6] Littell, New Republic, 25.

revolves completely around the characterization of two young ladies by their small talk at a party. It describes the plight of Harry Barton who is seated at table between Miss Rell, who talks continually, and Miss Coakley, who never finishes a sentence.

> Mr. Burton, I was just telling Mr. Walters about --- I don't know whether you'd be interested or not — maybe you don't — but still everybody I've told, they think — it's probably —

And so Miss Coakley goes on and on until poor Harry turns to his other partner, Miss Rell, who asks him:

> Do you play golf?
> Yes.
> You ought to try it. It's lots of fun especially for a man. I mean men seem to have such good times playing together, the nineteenth hole and all that. And I should think it would be such wonderful relaxation for you over the week-end after that Wall Street grind.
> I'm not in Wall Street.
> Oh, now that I've got an expert here, I wish you'd tell me what are bulls and what are bears ...[1]

A final evaluation of Lardner's use of the vernacular should determine if it is mere humor, or literal transcript, or satirical in intention. We find reviewers with all three views. One says that because of his language "...he has produced true humor--a kind of humor that carries along with it a gentle glow of freshness and gayety...."[2] Another maintains that "...he has an unexcelled, almost

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[1] This story finally becomes hilarious when Harry Barton leads Miss Rell right around in a conversational circle so that she starts all over again with golf and Wall Street, having never once listened either to his remarks or to his answers.

[2] Masson, Our American Humorists, 187.

unrivaled, mastery of what has come to be known as the American language."[1] A third critic calls his characterization through dialogue, satire, saying, "His gift of mimicry has possibly been praised because it is accurate, but that is the wrong reason. He uses it to show up the dull miserable mind of the American moron."[2]

Finally, a fourth group of critics appeared who claimed that Lardner's linguistics were neither accurate nor realistic. Dissenting opinions accused him of using a vernacular "which is hardly the American language, but Mr. Lardner's own invention"[3] and which "appears merely as a refinement on the daily efforts of a dozen sports-writers and journalists whom one might readily call to mind."[4]

Henry Longan Stuart disputes Lardner's claims to originality of diction, saying that "some of his 'vulgarisms' are no more vulgar than the Vulgate" and adding as an example that Chaucer used "He told me how ..." Mr. Stuart goes on to say that Lardner's use of the double negative and his preference for the strongly inflected verb, such as "clang" for "clung" is "a return to the pre-Addisonian flexibility which makes English of the sixteenth and seventeenth

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[1] Wilson, op. cit., 70.

[2] Fadiman, Nation, 136, 317.

[3] Donald Douglas, "Ring Lardner as Satirist," Nation, 122 (May 22, 1926) 584.

[4] Fadiman, Nation, 128, 536.

centuries, even when tinkers and sailors wrote it, so noble an instrument for thought and emotion."[1]

Regardless of the opinion expressed by these last few critics, the majority of the reviewers agree that Lardner's dialogue is original, accurate, and even brilliant. In fact, it is in his careful use of contemporary speech that his greatest claims to realism seem to lie.

3. The Critics Evaluate Lardner's Literary Devices

For a while it looked as if the emphasis on the vernacular in Lardner's writings would completely overshadow the other merits of his work. As Gilbert Seldes phrased it, "Perhaps when You Know Me Al had run as long as it needed to run, one might have feared that Mr. Lardner, having discovered the American language as his medium, simply didn't know what to do with it."[2] Yet Lardner eventually overcame this obstacle. He solved the problem by making

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[1] "Mr. Lardner Burlesques America," 25. In an article a year later (New York Times (April 4, 1926) 5:1) Mr. Stuart allowed himself to be rather carried away by his subject, and made the statement that "It is interesting to note, as one proof the more of a scholarship few contemporaries suspected, his revival of a device common with De Foe and other pre-Addisonian writers, namely, the rather free use of the phrase "I mean!"

> No amount of money is too much to spend on home. I mean its a good investment if it tends to make your family proud and satisfied with their home. I mean every nickel I've spent here is like so much insurance...(from the "Love Nest")

This latent scholarship must have surprised Lardner himself.

[2] The Seven Lively Arts, 112.

this casual colloquial English the keynote of his entire style, so that the emphasis on the vernacular eventually became evenly distributed over all the component parts of his writing. That he was successful in coordinating dialect to style is evidenced by this comment from another critic:

> By itself, his practised illiteracy is unimportant except as it contributes to the wealth of Americanisms. But in clothing his stories this vernacular creates a perfect style, less melodious than Moore's, less colorful than Cabell's, less conscious than Doughty's, yet fully as agreeable and perhaps not so tiresome as that of the last two named.[1]

Since the language of his characters is loose and casual, the remainder of his style appears just as unconscious and innocent of literary subterfuge. But the sentences and paragraphs that appear so casual, prove to contain, on closer observation, many skillfully planted literary devices, humorous and otherwise. Although Lardner gives ambitious young writers this warning, he does not follow his own advice:

> We was taught in rhetoric class that the main thing to remember in writing was to be terse and concise and etc. and not to use no wds. that was not necessary. I don't know if this teaching is still in vogue, but if so I advice young men who expects to write for a living to forget it as soon as possible a specially if they aspire to membership in the Baseball Writers Assn. of America.[2]

There are no useless sentences in Lardner's novels, no useless words in his short stories. His style of writing "Haircut," a famous

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[1] Thomas Boyd, "Lardner Tells Some New Ones," Bookman, 59 (July, 1924) 602.

[2] "What I Ought to of Learnt in High School," American Magazine, XCVI (November, 1923) 78.

short story supposedly narrated by a town barber, is praised as an example of conscious economy of words.

> Though the method chosen to narrate this tale would seem to one unacquainted with it wasteful, actually every word is probably more effective than the accompanying snips of the barber's scissors. Lardner had become marvelously adept at securing economy within garrulity, and at the height of his powers produced models that imitators have found spare enough when they tried to secure the same results with equal brevity.[1]

The only occasions when Lardner appears to ramble is in his baseball stories, where paragraph after paragraph of minute detail concerning the game becomes dull and tedious. Perhaps this was a concession to the lovers of the sport, but it is an unfortunate concession, for it gives his fiction a false appearance of athletic didacticism and anchors his lightest wit. A paragraph or two from a single story should demonstrate the point. The story is entitled "Women," and is a pitcher's account of the many times that the "fair sex" brought about his downfall.

> Well, we come into the ninth innin's with the score tied and it was gettin' pretty dark. We got two of them out, and then their first baseman, Jansen, he got a base on balls. Bill Boone caught a hold of one just right and cracked it to the fence and it looked like Jansen would score, but he was a slow runner. Davy Shaw, our shortstop, thought he must of scored and when the ball was thrown to him he throwed it to me to get Boone, who was tryin' for three bases.

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[1] Cargill, op. cit., 342.

> Well, I had took in the situation at a glance; I seen that Jansen hadn't scored and if I put the baseball on Boone quick enough, why the run wouldn't count. So I lunged at Boone and tagged him before Jansen had crossed the plate. But Pierce said the score counted and that Boone wasn't out because I'd missed him. Missed him! Say, I bet that where I tagged him they had to take stitches!
>
> Anyway, that give 'em a one run lead, and when the first two fellas got out in our half everybody thought it was over. But Davy Shaw hit one to right center that a man like I could of ran around twice on it, but they held Davy at third base. And it was up to me to bring him in.[1]

This quotation neither brings the theme of the story into focus, nor does it further the plot.[2] It is almost completely extraneous. And yet the material above was preceded in the story by three paragraphs of similarly detailed matter and followed by one paragraph, making seven paragraphs in all to delay the action of the story.

With the exception of the detail in the baseball stories, Lardner's method of writing moves the stories along rapidly without apparent effort. There seems to be an easy swing to his style, and a sprawling lack of consciousness of his form. Although his humor appears natural and spontaneous, it is founded on the traditional elements of exaggeration, surprise, and faulty reasoning.

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[1] Round Up, 156.

[2] There is a possible explanation of the inclusion of this detail. Lardner may have put it in just because it was tedious in order to demonstrate the garrulity of his character and to emphasize the monotony of his conversation.

Like the old Yankee humorists he delights in exaggeration for effect, both in over-emphasis and in flat understatement. His description of the main character in "Hurry Kane" is in the old ante bellum tradition.

> Standing six foot three in what was left of his stockings, he was wearing a suit of Arizona store clothes that would have been a fair fit for Singer's youngest Midget and looked like he had pressed it with a tractor that had been parked on a river bottom.
>
> He had used up both the collars that he figured would see him through his first year in the big league. This left you a clear view of his Adam's apple, which would make half a dozen pies. You'd have thought from his shoes that he had just managed to grab hold of the rail on the back platform of his train and been dragged from Yuma to Jacksonville. But when you seen his shirt, you wondered if he hadn't rode in the cab and loaned it to the fireman for a wash-cloth. He had a brown paper suitcase held together by bandages. Some of them had slipped and the raw wounds was exposed.[1]

One of the characters in "Frame-Up" handles a description in a similar manner.

> He was made up for one of the hicks in "'Way Down East". He'd bought his collar in Akron and his coat sleeves died just south of his elbow. From his pants to his vest was a toll call. He hadn't never shaved and his w'iskers was just the right number and len'th to string a violin. Thinks Howard to himself: "If you seen a stage rube dressed like that, you' say it was overdone."[2]

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[1] Round Up, 88.

[2] Ibid., 419.

Lardner's figures of speech are as far-fetched and exaggerated as his descriptions, and yet are perfectly suited to both the characters he portrays and the form in which he writes. If, in his dialogue, his metaphors are fantastically muddled, it is because these metaphors are spouted by characters who never knew what a metaphor was and would probably deny emphatically that they ever used one. When the sarcastic husband in The Big Town has to wait in the diner of the train with his wife and sister-in-law, he tells of his experience with the two hungry, impatient ladies like this:

> ...I've often wondered what would of happened in the trenches Over There if ladies had of been occupying them when the rations failed to show up. I guess the bombs bursting round would of sounded like Sweet and Low sang by a quextette of deef mutes.
>
> Anyway, my two charges was like wild animals, and when the con finally held up two fingers I didn't have no more chance or desire to stop them than as if they was the Center College Football Club right after opening prayer.[1]

Lardner's characters may lack grammatical sense, but they are richly endowed with the talent for using out-of-the-way modes of expression. Therefore, instead of telling us that a man is elderly, the shrewd husband says:

> He'd seen baseball when the second bounce was out. If he'd of started his career as a barber in Washington, he'd of tried to wish a face massage on Zachary Taylor.[2]

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[1] The Big Town, 20.

[2] Ibid., 70.

Thus, exaggeration makes up one element of Lardner's humor.

Another element is surprise. Sheridan invented Mrs. Malaprop for the express purpose of surprise, and succeeding humorists are greatly indebted to him. Shillaber's Mrs. Partington carried on the tradition in America.

> And so, from Artemus Ward, with his "Book of Goaks", to Ring Lardner, with his "Gullible's Travels", we have a fairly clear line of traditional humor, a kind of philosophical ribaldry, and the creator of a new set of trick words is generally well rewarded. George Ade did it. Peter Dunne did it ... In Mr. Lardner's case it consists of a combination of bad spelling and bad grammar, often unerringly applied in a particular way.[1]

Lardner's particular application results in a number of humorous devices, such as puns, misuse of learned terms, misquotes, triumphant use of trite expressions, etc. Therefore we find that his use of the vernacular was realistic in its conception, but that the end result is often humorous. Basil Davenport points out that Lardner differs from a great many humorists in this respect; that he used his illiteracy for comic effect, and not merely to display it "as medieval jesters displayed idiocy." We do not feel tempted to laugh at Lardner's characters because they are stupid, but because their stupidity leads to insane and ridiculous puns.[2]

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[1] Thomas L. Masson, ..., Literary Review of the New York Evening Post, V (May 2, 1925) 6.

[2] "Lardner at his Best," Saturday Review of Literature, X (July 7, 1934) 793.

> What have you been doing even since 3 oclock arsked my mother as it was now nerly 5.
> Haveing a high ball my father replied.
> I thought Detroit was dry said my mother shyly.
> Did you said my father with a rye smile ...[1]

The young "immigrunt" writes about his father's experience with a short cut, which ended, as most short cuts do, quite unfortunately.

> The lease said about the results of my fathers grate idear the soonest mended in a word it turned out to be a holycost of the first water as after we had covered miles and miles of ribald roads we suddenly came to a abrupt conclusion vs the side of a stagnant freight train that was stone deaf to honks. My father set there for nerly ½ a hour reciteing the 4 Horses of the Apoplex in a undertone but finely my mother mustard up her curage and said affectedly why dont we turn around and go back somewheres.[2]

Another of Lardner's gentlemen made the sage observation that "the ladies was shaking like an aspirin leaf,"[3] and Jack Keefe wrote to his friend that "She wasn't no good Al and I figure I am well rid of her. Good riddance is rubbish as they say."[4]

When he writes a personal essay, Lardner is just as surprising and irrepressible. Telling us how it feels to be thirty-five years old, he demonstrates an advanced vocabulary, terribly mutilated.

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[1] Lardner, "The Young Immigrunts," What of It?, 232.

[2] Ibid., 238.

[3] The Big Town, 70.

[4] You Know Me Al, 48.

> When a guy is named Ring W. and is expected to split their sides when ever somebody asks if your middle name is Worm which is an average of 365 times per annum over a period of 35 annums, why it can't help from telling on you.
>
> Well it was 5 or 6 yrs. ago when I realized that I was past my nonages as they say.
>
> I seen then that I wasnt no longer a larva and I guess maybe it hurt at first.[1]

Such humor, depending on surprise for effect, is humor on a very low plane: it is terrible. But that recalls one characteristic of Lardner's characters. They have no sense of humor themselves, so that when they indulge in terrible repartee, and everyone laughs derisively at them, they think they are being original and witty. Dan Longwell points out that Lardner occasionally pretends this same egotism, and "loves to pass off poor stories and puns, knowing full well that a story can be just as funny for the wit it lacks as for the wit it has."[2]

In addition to exaggeration and the element of surprise, Lardner depends on faulty reasoning to draw a chuckle from his readers. We have already discussed his use of rationalization in the depiction of character. This same rationalization is equally effective as a humorous device. There is something irresistibly funny about a person who misconstrues his own motives, or who draws a faulty conclusion when confronted with facts, as in the following example. Lardner looked at statistics concerning age groups and

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[1] What of It?, 266, 268.

[2] "Loud Laughter," New York Tribune, I (May 10, 1925) 9.

found that 749 out of 10,000 people die between 10 and 11 years of age, and that:

> ... After that the older you get the longer you live up to when you are 59 and then you can just about count on liveing 14 and seven-tenths yrs. more. In other wds., if you ain't one of the 749 that crokes between 10 and 11 why you are safe untill about June of the yr. when you are 73. So a person is a sucker to try and take care of himself at my age and from now on I am going to be a loose fish and run wild.[1]

Upon Lardner's linguistics and style rests the final evaluation of his reputation as a realist-satirist or as a humorist. The accuracy of his language and the naturalness of his dialogue tend to assure him the former title. On the other hand, he is not completely innocent of misspelling for comic effect, and not for linguistic reasons. Moreover, his literary devices label him a humorist, for he employs time-tested methods to obtain humorous exaggeration, surprise, and faulty reasoning.

As a result of the effect of his linguistics as opposed to his manner of expression, the debate of style, too, ends in a draw.

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[1] "Symptoms of Being 35," What of It?, 262.

THE AUTHOR ADDS HIS OPINION

Ring Lardner never seems to have made any direct statement as to his intentions in writing, nor has he given any clue to the interpretation of his work. In turning to his few personal essays and to his numerous interviews for indirect evidences, we find ourselves somewhat frustrated for two reasons. First, there is so little material that appears to be frankly sincere; and second, there is so much spoofing on Lardner's part, even in his interviews, that it is almost impossible to determine where the funnyman leaves off and the honest thinker takes over. Henry Longan Stuart comments that although some satirists had formed the practice of writing with their tongues in their cheeks, it was Lardner's great discovery that writing with his tongue stuck out lent impressiveness to his work.[1]

A typical instance occurred when a newspaper woman asked several prominent authors to contribute to a symposium. Each author was to write an essay showing how his wife had helped him in his career. Lardner wrote:

> I was never one to keep a diary, and so must depend on an unsteady, Volsteady memory for the things my wife has done for me. In 1914 or 1915, I think it was July, she cleaned my white shoes. In 1918 she told the man at the draft board that she and three kiddies were dependent on me for support. In 1921 and again in 1923 she brought in some ice, White Rock, and glasses.

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[1] "Mr. Lardner at the Passing Show," 5.

> She dusted my typewriter in 1922. Late one night in 1924 we got home from somewhere and I said I was hungry and she gave me a verbal picture of the location of the pantry ...[1]

Another poll of famous men asking the question "To what do you attribute your success?" received this unqualified answer from Lardner:

> To Home Run cigarettes and a family with extravagant tastes which always needs money.[2]

He poked fun at established conventions in writing as well as at conventions in living. Yet it is hard to determine if his fooling is genuine satire or merely humor for humor's sake. His introduction to How to Write Short Stories is a hilarious parody of the advice given in all "how to write" books. When his publishers suggested an autobiography, Lardner responded with The Story of a Wonder Man, a "burlesque autobiography made up of nonsense and absurd anachronisms."[3] As he lambasts with laughter all the time-worn tricks and familiar literary cliches, Wonder Man deserves the recommendation that "it should be made compulsory reading for all who are about to undertake an autobiography; after reading it, no one could possibly take himself seriously."[4]

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[1] John M. Wheeler, "Ring Lardner," Collier's (March 17, 1928) 44.

[2] Ibid., 44.

[3] Anon., "The Story of a Wonder Man: a review," Booklist, 24, (October, 1927) 17.

[4] Anon., "The Story of a Wonder Man: a review," Nation, 125 (July 20, 1927) 69.

Even Lardner's Christmas cards, containing original jingles by the author, were humorous and materialistic.[1]

Instead of a serious appeal for support of the second Liberty loan, Lardner wrote a characteristic "Jack" letter which was published in the newspapers. In his illiterate bumbling manner, the bush league baseball player tells how he is going to invest his portion of the prize money of the "World Serious" in Liberty bonds.[2]

Lardner's comments in advance of the showing of his Broadway ventures were calculated to leave no doubt in the readers' minds that the dramatic productions would be both gay and unpredictable. He seemed to be foreswearing all responsibility for their outcome, which was, perhaps, a prudent and somewhat clairvoyant action, since none of his plays found an appreciative critical audience.[3] In an interview concerning his musical, June Moon, a satire on Tin Pan Alley life, Lardner strains to keep his answers funny.

> A good pianist was required for the role of Maxie. Mr. Harris did not realize this and signed Harry Rosenthal, who at once admitted that he knew nothing about the piano, but thought he could pick it up in two weeks. They say the country's hospitals are littered with people who thought they could pick up a piano in two weeks.

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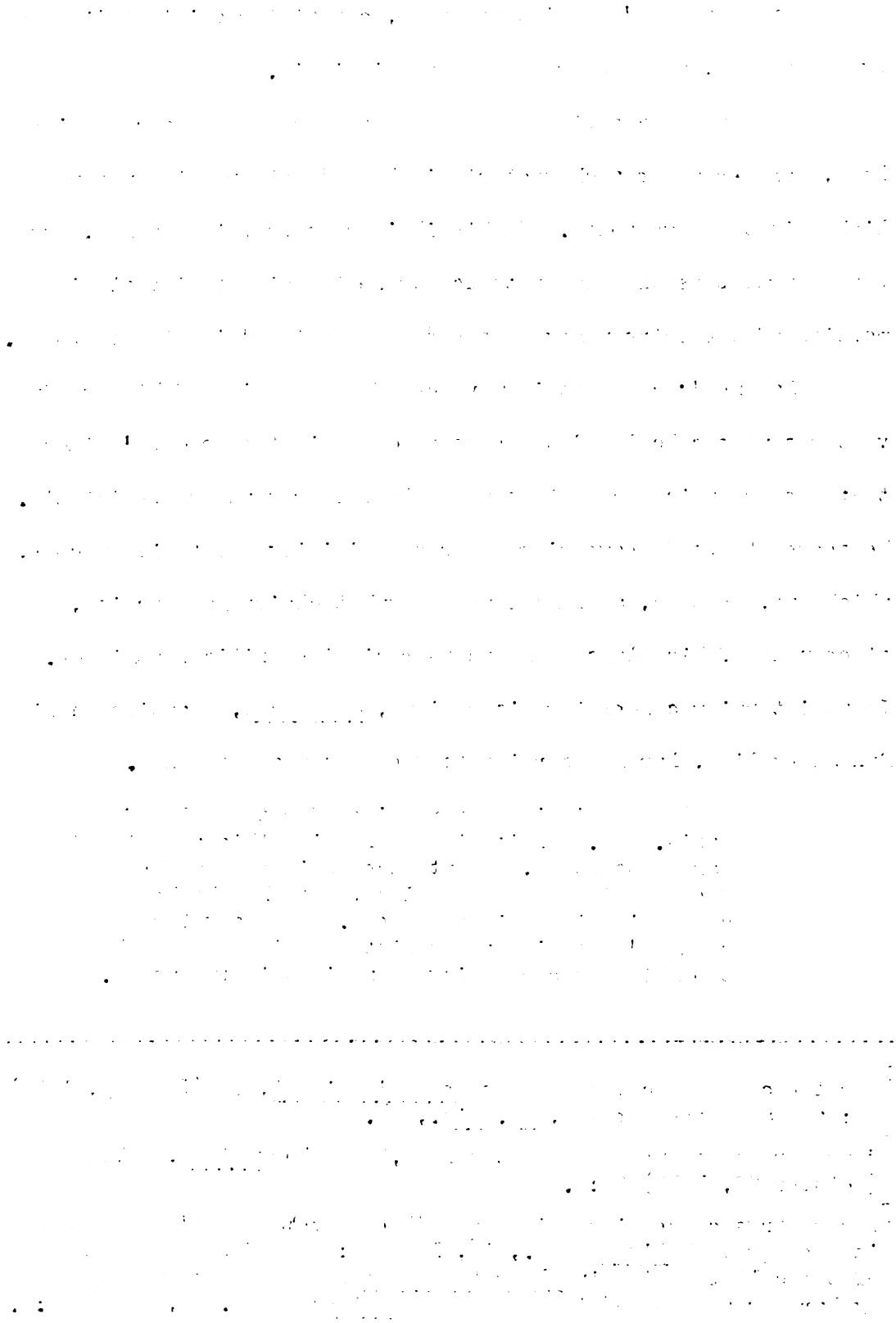
[1] For the complete cards see the Reader's Digest, 28 (January, 1936) 86; and also see Wheeler, op. cit., 44.

[2] "Lardner Bends One Over for the Loan," New York Times, LXVII (October 22, 1917) 22:4.

[3] For remarks concerning Smiles see "The Slave's Lament" by Lardner in the New York Times (Nov., 16, 1930) 2:2 and for the announcement of the collaboration in Elmer the Great see "New Baseball Comedy by Lardner and Cohan" in the New York Times (Sept. 29, 1927) 31:2.



> Even two men, working in shifts, are likely to find it irksome, Mr. Rosenthal, however, took it as a duck to golf and at the same time learned to say his lines with so many variations that the authors have to attend the theater every night to find out the name of the play.[1]

These joking rejoinders to everyday situations are frankly flippant, and their intentions cannot be misinterpreted. In other instances it is not so easy to distinguish the satiric from the sincere. Although Clifton Fadiman insists that Lardner "just doesn't like people,"[2] and Heywood Broun in the World Telegram maintains that this accusation worried Lardner because he did not believe that it was true that he despised the human race,[3] still it seems impossible to find any sincere direct statement from the author on the subject. A few words would have cleared up the controversy as to his satiric or humorous intentions. Lardner preferred to jeer and to keep everyone guessing.

In only one story can we find a definite indication of personal interest. In "Contract" Lardner ends with an "Author's Postscript" that laments:

> This story won't get me anything but the money I'm paid for it. Even if it be read by those with whom I usually play -- Mr. C., Mrs. W., Mr. T., Mr. R. and the rest -- they will think I mean two other fellows and tear into me like wolves next time I bid a slam and make one odd.[4]

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[1] "Mr. Lardner Has His Fun," New York Times, IX (Oct. 6, 1929) 4:1.

[2] "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," 315.

[3] See Anon., "Ring Lardner, Interpreter of Life," Literary Digest, 116 (Oct. 14, 1933) 19.

[4] Round Up, 139.

Also, the collection First and Last includes some jocular comments on politics which could be taken as indicative of the author's opinions in this field.

On the other hand, almost all his other stories are objective; he seems to be very careful that none of his own personality or his own opinion creeps in. This has been labelled an attempt to imitate Flaubert's objective method,[1] but no matter what its cause, its result is a complete routing of all attempts to classify a Lardnerian philosophy or aesthetic viewpoint.

However, in two articles about his favorite subjects, sports and writing, the author did step out of character long enough to develop what appears to be a perfectly sincere commentary.

In a volume entitled Civilization in the United States, Harold E. Stearns collected an anthology of essays pertaining to contemporary American life written by authorities in each field, and Lardner's contribution was on "Sports." Here the former baseball reporter and the creator of moronic sportsmen attacks the spectator sports; baseball, football, racing horses, and boxing, as unhealthful for the spectators, and sometimes even for the participants. We are not a sports-loving nation, he maintains, because we do not play; we merely watch.[2] This is a result of a lack of imagination and a

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[1] Stuart, "Mr. Lardner at the Passing Show," 5.

[2] Edited by H. E. Stearns (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.) 1922, 458.

morbid predisposition toward hero-worship, which he calls:

> ...the national disease that does most to keep the grandstands full and the playgrounds empty. To hell with those four extra years of life, if they are going to cut in on our afternoon at the Polo Grounds, where, in blissful asininity, we may feast our eyes on the swarthy Champion of Swat, shouting now and then in an excess of anile idiolatry, "Come on, you Babe. Come on, you Baby Doll!" And if an hour of tennis is going to make us late at the Garden, perhaps keep us out of our ringside seats, so close to Dempsey's corner that (O bounteous God!) a drop of the divine perspiration may splash our undeserving snout -- Hang up, liver! You're on a busy wire![1]

After reading this straightforward condemnation of hero-worship, it seems that a critic could scarcely be justified in saying that Lardner wrote "Champion," the story of a bully who became a famous fighter, as good-natured humor. Nor would one insist that there is nothing morbid about his bridge fanatics and baseball lovers.

When a writer writes about writers, he is apt to be very careful that he cannot be misinterpreted, so again, in another article, we find an apparently sincere discussion. In a critique of writers, two things which he applauds most are careful workmanship and contemporary portrayal. The first is not significant except as a clue to his style; the second points directly to an appreciation of realism as opposed to mere humor for humor's sake.

Lardner criticized Theodore Dreiser for sloppy work[2] and

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[1] Ibid., 461.

[2] Anon., "Ring Lardner, Interpreter of Life," 19.

praised Henry Sydnor Harrison as "our best short story writer" because he "seems to take pains with his writing."[1] This attitude may account for Lardner's small output of stories and for their highly polished veneer.

When it comes to humorists, he prefers George Ade before Mark Twain because "he belongs to our time," and enjoys Booth Tarkington more than Mark Twain, also, because "I've known Booth Tarkington's boys and I've not known those of Mark Twain."[2] In writing this, Lardner is not pretending to set critical standards; he is merely expressing his own preferences. However, if he places such emphasis on timeliness and realism in his reading, it stands to reason that he would not ignore it in his writing. This one honest commentary from the author is of value in determining whether he intends to be a realist or a humorist.

Therefore we find that Lardner left a great deal of good-natured spoofing and very little sincere opinion in his personal writings. But the little serious material he did leave, points to a desire on his part to ridicule useless conventions, to lambast undesirable characters and customs, and to portray realistically the foibles of contemporary American life.

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[1] Lardner, "Three Stories a Year Are Enough for a Writer," 14.

[2] Ibid., 14.

CONCLUSION

The investigation of the critical reception of the writing of Ring Lardner has made three contributions to the understanding of the author's relationship to his milieu. Even though too little time has passed since his writing for the critics to have formulated any definite opinion from an aesthetic distance, still, certain conclusions are justified.

First, many of the predictions of the earlier reviews can be evaluated by comparison with modern reviews. Those who forecast literary oblivion for Lardner within two decades are already proved wrong. Even H. L. Mencken's rather ambiguous statement that "professors" would "shy away" from Lardner for fifty years[1] must be discredited, for contemporary anthologies used as texts in college composition courses usually include one story by Lardner. In fact, the prediction that "in the years that follow his death he will be regarded with increasing respect as a remarkably gifted man, a genuine artist of wide and powerful influence"[2] seems to have come true. Not only is his work admitted occasionally to academic circles, but a testimony to his perpetual appeal to the public is seen in a recent advertisement from Hollywood, announcing the filming of The Big Town.

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[1] "The Library," American Mercury, 2 (July, 1924) 376.

[2] Anon., "Ring Lardner, Interpreter of Life," Literary Digest, 116 (October 14, 1933) 19.

Nevertheless, this optimistic outlook on Lardner's influence must be qualified somewhat. Since Lardner's plots, characters, and style of writing were inspired by his early days of Niles and baseball, his limitations are severe and should be recognized as such. One critic phrased it: "However deeply Ring might cut into it, his cake had the diameter of Frank Chance's diamond."[1]

Second, this investigation of the critical reception of Ring Lardner contributes to our knowledge of the times. We find a majority of the reviews discrediting humor for humor's sake and praising reportorial accuracy or satiric intent in writing. The critics wanted to be entertained, but they were suspicious of mere entertainment. As a steady diet their literary appetites demanded that even humor should have a serious purpose at bottom. Lardner, writing for the public, reflected the tastes of his reviewers. He was not equally humorous or equally realistic in all his stories and books. His early baseball works seem to be created primarily for amusement, but, taught by the reviewers, his later short stories, such as "Champion," "There Are Smiles," "Haircut," "Love Nest," and "The Golden Honeymoon" became much more realistic and satiric. In the final analysis, a more nearly accurate classification of Lardner's place in literature would be that humor, satire, and

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[1]Fitzgerald, op. cit., 254.

realism are combined in all his works in varying amounts. The author's intention was probably satirical; he used realistic detail; and he acheived humor as an end result. This is best expressed by an annonymous reviewer, who said:

> He loved generosity and truth in all things, hated human depravity, and expressed his resentment by using the writer's most powerful weapon - laughter.[1]

Third, this conclusion that Lardner is basically a realist-satirist is significant for one reason. It has been shown that the reviewers agree that Lardner's characters are repulsive and moronic. If the reviewers admit that these characters are also realistic; if "his stories develop the basically democratic character of America;"[2] then it is evident that these works are as bitter and condemning a social criticism as has ever been written about American life. In addition, the reviewers who accept Lardner's works as realistic are likewise participating indirectly in social criticism. This is an example:

> ...the devastating thing about Lardner's work is that no American exists who has not a thousand times heard these accents, seen these faces, observed these gestures. These bitter and brutal stories belong not only to literature but to the history of civilization.[3]

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[1] Anon., Scholastic, 35 (September 25, 1939) 12.

[2] Fadiman, "Pitiless Satire," 537.

[3] Ludwig Lewisohn, Expression in America, 515.

Therefore, it may be reasoned that Lardner's influence is recognized by the majority of the recent critics as both social and literary in import. Those critics who claimed that he was a mere humorist were probably attempting to discredit the social significance of his work, rather than its literary value.

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