Mark Twain’s Humor—With Examples

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OUT ON THE LECTURE CIRCUIT, Mark Twain did not want to be introduced by anyone. His aversion to introductions of himself by others seems to have begun one evening when he was presented to a large audience in the following manner: His host, the presiding officer, said: “I don’t know anything about this man except two things, one is, he has never been in the penitentiary, and the other is, I don’t know the reason why.”

My subject today is not the sources of Mark Twain’s humor, though I should at least point out that he is usually placed in the tradition of Southwestern humor, the humor of the tall tale, myths, and frontier sketches found in the period before the Civil War. None of the reputations of writers in this tradition have survived outside of the academy. Mark Twain, who drew on this heritage, is the exception. His own early experience was saturated with the attitudes that make up this tradition, which he encountered as a youth in Hannibal, as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi River, and in a different form as a gold miner and journalist in Nevada and California. Whatever the Far-West influences, the experience of the lower Mississippi Valley is at the heart of this culture.

Rather than speak of the background of Mark Twain’s humor, I am simply going to look at it more or less from the inside—what it was, its character and its purposes, in particular as he understood them. I would like to claim that what I am about to say reveals the essence of his humor; perhaps it does, but all I can really claim is that I have given you a taste.

In his own day, as well as ours, Mark Twain was known for his aphorisms, his maxims, one-liners we might say. In this respect he resembled

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1 Read 29 April 2005.
Benjamin Franklin, as in other ways. In Franklin’s hands, such sayings, often funny, made a point, almost always a point about the conduct of human beings. Franklin’s humor falls into the category Freud called “tendentious wit” in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. The maxims offer advice or they reflect in deadpan directness on the propensity of humans to behave foolishly, outrageously, or in some untoward way. They are rarely shocking or extravagant. There is almost no whimsy or nonsense in Franklin’s humor. Franklin’s life was happy, and he seems to have felt fulfilled before he died; but there was no rapture, no joy, certainly no silliness in his appreciation of human experience. About as close to whimsy as he came can be found in a handful of maxims he offered, for example an epitaph supposedly on a grave marker. The epitaph is entitled

_Epitaph on a Scolding Wife by her Husband._
Here my poor Bridget’s Corps doth lie,
She is at rest,—and so am I.

And consider the following maxims of advice:

1. On marriage: Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.
2. On success: Success has ruined many a man.
3. On vanity: He who falls in love with himself will have no rivals.
4. On vanity in women: She who paints her face thinks of her tail.
5. On visitors (houseguests): Fish and visitors stink in three days.
6. On secrecy: Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.
7. On doctors: God heals and the doctor takes the fees.

Franklin achieved his effects by indirect statement, or understate-
ment—“If you’d know the value of money, go borrow some,” he once said—or by evoking an image—“A countryman between two lawyers is like a fish between cats.”³ Mark Twain used some of the same tech-
niques, but his one-liners were different from Franklin’s, and not only his maxims but his humor generally—in his stories, sketches, his casual conversations with friends. Unlike Franklin, he often gave way to whimsy that had no social purpose. The humor is simply whimsical exuberance, bizarre extravagance, and joy in laughter.

Not surprisingly Mark Twain’s maxims are characteristically extrav-

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³The quotations are all from *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, in the order here from the years 1745, 1738, 1752, 1739, 1736, 1736, 1737, 1754, 1737. The almanacs may be found in Leonard W. Labaree et al., ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 37 vols. to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–).
Mark Twain’s humor—with examples

agant, even exuberant, and sometimes sheer burlesque. Here is an array of his sayings:

1. Rise early—it is the early bird that catches the worm. Don’t be fooled by this absurd saw. I once knew a man who tried it. He got up at sunrise and a horse bit him.  

2. Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence in society.

3. Always acknowledge a fault frankly. This will throw those in authority off their guard and give you opportunity to commit more.

4. Do good when you can, and charge when you think they will stand it.

5. To be good is noble, but to show others how to be good is nobler, and no trouble.

6. It is the foreign element that commits our crimes. There is no native criminal class except Congress.

7. Senator: Person who makes laws in Washington when not doing time.

8. Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.

The best and most amusing of Mark Twain’s humor is found in his tales and sketches and stories. Although he was not a conceptual or systematic thinker, he had a theory about such forms that arose from his own practice as a lecturer and storyteller. He argues in “How to Tell a Story” (1895) that the American humorous tale was different from the European comic or witty story. What made a European story funny was its matter, its content; in contrast, the American story depended not on its matter, but on “the manner of the telling.” The European story went right to the point—its humor came at the end, with a “nub, point, snapper.” He gives a story called “The Wounded Soldier” as an example:

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6 Ibid., 2:941.
7 Ibid., 2:942.
8 Ibid., 2:946.
9 Ibid., 2:944.
10 Ibid., 2:946.
11 Mark Twain, Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World (first published in 1897; many editions), headnote, chap. 27.
The Wounded Soldier

In the course of a certain battle a soldier whose leg had been shot off appealed to another soldier who was hurrying by to carry him to the rear, informing him at the same time of the loss which he had sustained; whereupon the generous son of Mars, shouldering the unfortunate, proceeded to carry out his desire. The bullets and cannon-balls were flying in all directions, and presently one of the latter took the wounded man’s head off—without, however, his deliverer being aware of it. In no long time he was hailed by an officer, who said:

“Where are you going with that carcass?”

“To the rear, sir—he’s lost his leg!”

“His leg, forsooth?” responded the astonished officer; “you mean his head, you booby.”

Whereupon the soldier dispossessed himself of his burden, and stood looking down upon it in great perplexity. At length he said; “It is true, just as you have said.” Then after a pause he added, “But he told me IT WAS HIS LEG!!”

When an American told this story, Mark Twain said, he would “conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it.” The European “tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through.” The American, on the other hand, tells it in a “rambling and disjointed” fashion and pretends that he does not know that it is funny at all. The European, when he prints it, “italicizes” parts of it, uses “whooping exclamation points liberally,” and then sometimes explains it in a parenthesis. “All of which,” Mark Twain sadly comments, “is very depressing, and makes one want to renounce joking and lead a better life.”

Many examples of American humorous stories came from Mark Twain’s pen. I am going to discuss one in some detail—“The Late Benjamin Franklin,” which was first published in 1870. It is an almost perfect illustration of the qualities Mark Twain found amusing in the humorous story. It is told with a straight face—Mark Twain said it should be told gravely—and its teller seems not to have any idea that there is anything funny about it; it is rather disjointed as its points are not always connected or in a comprehensive pattern. The teller of the story pretends to a kind of innocence and simplicity; he is apparently unaware that anything he is saying is unusual; certainly nothing in his story seems out of the way, let alone funny to him. What he seems to believe is that he is offering pure truth. The story ends quietly—it does not have a nub or snapper.

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12 All the quotations are from “How to Tell a Story,” in Mark Twain, *Collected Tales*, 2:201–06.
“The Late Benjamin Franklin” begins with a maxim of Mark Twain’s fashioning, which he attributes to Benjamin Franklin: “Never put off till tomorrow what you can do day after tomorrow just as well.” And then the sketch goes on this way: “This party was one of those persons whom they call Philosophers.” It is clear from this point in the sketch that the writer has little use for those bearing such designation:

He was twins, being born simultaneously in two different houses in the city of Boston. These houses remain unto this day, and have signs upon them worded in accordance with facts. . . .

The subject of this memoir was of a vicious disposition, and early prostituted his talents to the invention of maxims and aphorisms calculated to inflict suffering upon the rising generation of all subsequent ages. His simplest acts, also, were contrived with a view to their being held up for the emulation of boys forever—boys who might otherwise have been happy. It was in this spirit that he became the son of a soap-boiler; and probably for no other reason than that the efforts of all future boys who tried to be anything might be looked upon with suspicion unless they were the sons of soap-boilers. With a malevolence which is without parallel in history, he would work all day and then sit up nights and let on to be studying algebra by the light of a smoldering fire, so that all other boys might have to do that also or else have Benjamin Franklin thrown up to them. Not satisfied with these proceedings, he had a fashion of living wholly on bread and water, and studying astronomy at meal time—a thing which brought affliction to millions of boys since, whose fathers had read Franklin’s pernicious biography.

Mark Twain then runs through a list of Benjamin Franklin’s sayings and misdeeds. Mark Twain’s voice here is the voice of a cranky country bumpkin. He repeats several of Benjamin Franklin’s maxims, concluding with the querulous comment on “Early to bed and early to rise/Make a man healthy and wealthy and wise.” He says that “the sorrow that that maxim has cost me through my parents experimenting on me with it, tongue cannot tell.” And he attributes to it his “present state of general debility, indigence, and mental aberration. My parents used to have me up before nine o’clock in the morning, sometimes, when I was a boy. If they had let me take my natural rest, where would I have been now? Keeping store, no doubt, and respected by all.”

And what an adroit old adventurer the subject of this memoir was! In order to get a chance to fly his kite on Sunday, he used to hang a key on the string and let on to be fishing for lightning. And a guileless public would go home chirping about the “wisdom” and the “genius” of the hoary Sabbath-breaker. If anybody caught him playing “mumble-peg” by himself, after the age of sixty, he would immediately appear to be ciphering out how the grass grew—as if it was any of his business.
Playing on Franklin’s achievements in this uncomprehending fashion provides the basis for the humor. That anyone could state them in Mark Twain’s way confounds the reader, or listener; the appeal here is to the absurd, absurd to the point of whimsy—“hang a key on the string and let on to be fishing for lightning”; lying on the grass playing “mumble-peg” at age sixty, while pretending “to be ciphering out how the grass grew—as if it was any of his business”—uses absurd images and puts Franklin in a picture that violates rational understanding.

The story ends on a note of modesty, a note achieved by contrasting the teller, much plagued by the model of Benjamin Franklin’s experience, with a man of genius. “When I was a child I had to boil soap, notwithstanding my father was wealthy, and I had to get up early and study geometry at breakfast, and peddle my own poetry, and do everything just as Franklin did, in the solemn hope that I would be a Franklin some day. And here I am.”

There is no snapper here (to use Mark Twain’s term to describe a surprising ending). But the humorous effect is achieved nonetheless; it ultimately rests on the pretense established by the character of the teller—a simple-minded, even stupid individual, an uncomprehending character who misunderstands everything that comes his way about Franklin. We, the audience, or the readers of the story, naturally feel superior to the teller. This relationship allows us to laugh at him and the badly warped picture he paints.

Twain used the technique often. He clearly took great satisfaction in it and in a great variety of other devices that led to laughter. Humor was essential to his very being. He once said, “Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.” He picked his targets carefully—and took pleasure in destroying sham, fraud, and pretense. And when those targets were not available, as they were not in his sketch of Benjamin Franklin, he let his whimsical side express itself. He had fun. He was a playful man, as his friend William Dean Howells said, a man with the “head of a sage and the heart of a boy.”

Mark Twain would have agreed, I’m certain, with what Benjamin Franklin once said about lecturers: “You may talk too much on the best of subjects.” Mark Twain would have added—“So stop,” and so I shall.

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13 Quotations ibid., 1:425–27.
15 Poor Richard’s Almanack for 1745, in Labaree et al., eds., Papers of Benjamin Franklin.