Nation, Social Class and Style: a Comparison of the Humour of Britain and America

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The United States has had very different styles of written and spoken humour to those of Britain. These differences in styles can in some measure be accounted for by differences in the way the countries are divided into social classes in the two countries, not through differences in economic organisation or degree of economic inequality but in the nature and legitimacy of status hierarchies. There is one important additional factor, the strong and increasing Jewish influence on the style of American humour in the twentieth century.

Britain is the older of the two societies and until relatively recently was notable for the marked differences in status and in culture between its social classes. Although Britain was the first country in the world to develop a modern economy based on the market place, largely because it was a far more open society than its European rivals, an aristocratic culture persisted strongly long after the country had become a predominately commercial nation (Wiener 2004). Individuals were sorted out and classified themselves into an aristocracy and its subsidiary the more substantial gentry, an upper middle class, a lower middle class, a respectable working class and a rough working class. The upper middle class consisted of substantial businessmen, members of the established free professions, senior managers and state officials. Many of them adopted or admired aspects of the culture of the class above. The lower middle class were the more routine white collar workers and small businessmen. The upper working class were in the main skilled and regularly employed workers, some of whose tasks might well demand a degree of

thought as well as dexterity, in contrast to the lower working class whose work was unskilled in nature and fitful and irregular in employment. There was considerable mobility between each of these classes and especially between adjacent classes but everyone knew and spoke about what the classes were like and where their boundaries lay. Each had its own culture and outlook and yet also aspired to aspects of the way of life of the class immediately above.

Such class distinctions obviously also existed in America but they were not emphasised and indeed even denied within the ruling ideology and values of a society that believed in "the American dream" (Lipset and Bendix 1967: 78-9, Warner 1952: 73, Warner, Meeker, Eells 1949: v, 3,16-7).

The British class system affects the style of British humour in two ways. First, perhaps surprisingly for a more homogenous society, British humour was until recently far more diverse than American, in particular it could be more sophisticated and also more subversive than its American counterpart. Second, much of British humour is concerned with the marked differences in cultural style between the classes and particularly their use of language. It may take the form of a member of a higher group mocking or putting down a lower group or members of a lower group deflating, undermining or ridiculing a group above them. Likewise laughing at social awkwardness and embarrassment, sometimes to the point of cruelty, generated by differences in class-based cultural styles lie at the centre of much British humour. The very openness of British society made this more likely; due to substantial social mobility people often found themselves in a social class different from the one into which they were born. Much British humour is about *arrivistes*, the 'new-rich', those uncomfortably straddling the boundaries of very distinct classes, those whose social standing and wealth do not match, either because they have suddenly come up in the world or because they do not have the economic means to underpin the style of life that their upbringing led them to expect they would have. Hilaire Belloc, the radical Catholic distributist caught the British humour of class well when he wrote:

The Garden Party

The Rich arrived in pairs
And also in Rolls Royces;
They talked of their affairs
In loud and strident voices...

The Poor arrived in Fords,

Whose features they resembled:
They laughed to see so many Lords
And Ladies all assembled.
The People in Between
Looked underdone and harassed,
And our of place and mean,
And Horribly embarrassed [Belloc 1939 (1930)].

The reader should note at this point the ambiguity created by the two meanings of the words *style* and *culture* in English. Style can mean literary or artistic style or it can be used in the sense of 'life-style', how people live. The same problem arises with the word *culture* which can refer to a capacity to create or enjoy the literary or artistic excellence known only to the cultured or used in an anthropological sense to describe the mores and outlook of a group. However, the two sets of meanings are closely connected in a context where British humour is being analysed, so I will not try fully to disentangle them.

In contrast with the hierarchical complexity of British society, America, supposedly the country of the frontier and endless free land had for much of its history only the culture of a single dominant group, that of a class of often self-sufficient but market-oriented farmers and the small town merchants and minor professionals and manufacturers who dealt with them. The country had largely been founded by this class in opposition to the ideas of aristocracy, the big city and the elaborate state that they associated with the corrupt Old World. It was a society that stood for simplicity as against sophistication, for the folksy popular egalitarianism of the small town as against urbanity, for know-how not science, for comfort not art, for a general sufficiency of education and literacy but not an intelligentsia. These features were to survive, if uneasily, the transformation of America into a great industrial capitalist nation of huge cities and the most advanced technology in the world. It is impossible to understand contemporary American politics with its still flourishing small town moralism and religiosity and the absence both of any conservative and of any socialist parties, unless this is borne in mind. The American novelist Sinclair Lewis in his *Unpublished Introduction to Babbitt*, written not as fiction, nor as humour but as sociological comment wrote of the new cities:

> Villages-overgrown towns-three-quarters of a million people still dressing, eating, building houses, attending church, to make an impression on their neighbours, quite as they did back on Main Street, in villages of two thousand (Lewis 1954: 26).

In his novel Babbitt, which American sociologists have praised for its accurate portrayal of class distinctions in America (Warner, Meeker, Eells 1949: 232-241) Lewis the satirist laughed at this dominant class as it existed in urban America just after World War I:

> The Good Citizens League had spread throughout the country but nowhere was it so effective and well esteemed as in cities of the type of Zenith, commercial cities of a few hundred thousand inhabitants, most of which – though not all – lay inland, against a background of cornfields and mines and of small towns which depended on them for mortgage-loans, table-manners, art, social philosophy and millinery.....all of them (the members of the Good Citizens League) perceived that American Democracy did not imply any equality of wealth, but did demand a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals and vocabulary (Lewis 1920, Chapter 34: 311).

Lewis' comment, indeed his entire work, tells us two things about American humour. First, it shows us why that humour was so limited in its range of styles prior to the 1920s which produced Lewis and also the savage, corrosive H. L. Mencken (1982). It was a society that believed in a "wholesome sameness" of thought and vocabulary and thus of style, of humour and of the style used in literary humour. Second, in breaking from these, albeit only in part, Lewis employed a humorous style in which the action of his novel is *interspersed* with humorous comment on an American cultural order in which "art" and "social philosophy" are an extension of mortgage loans and millinery. In Britain it had long been a familiar humorous device, one best found in the humour of H. G. Wells [1928 (1910)], whose style greatly influenced Lewis (1954: 158-166). The humour is carried as much by the comment as by the action. It is the main reason why films and television productions based on Lewis' and Wells' humorous work have been such complete failures. You can not turn humorous reflections and comment into dialogue and the restrictive conventions on style obeyed by film and television producers only allow a minimal use of voice-over.

The style and outlook of the humour of the dominant American class (satirised by Lewis) had earlier been much praised in his comparative study of the humour of many nations by Charles Johnston (1912). Johnston believed that American humour "stands pre-eminent throughout the world and through all time" (Johnston 1912: 377) and was superior to all others and in particular to that of the Jews. Johnstone is a spokesman for the American humour tradition up to 1912 and loves its limitations. Here is Johnston on the dominant and distinguishing characteristics of American humour.

> To show the visible presence and sunlit transparence (sic) of the best American writing, I instanced chiefly four story-tellers – Bret Harte, Mark Twain, G. W. Cable and Mary Wilkins. But all four of them and especially the first two, irresistibly suggest another quality besides the American spirit – namely, the quality of humor. And so up springs the new demon, the infinitely tantalizing problem. What is American humor?.... In this binding quality of humor Mark Twain's best work stands easily supreme. Take the scenes on the Mississippi in which the immortal trio, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn and Jim the Nigger play their parts: they are...saturated with the sense of our common life..... (Consider) the robust out-of-doors vitality of Tom Sawyer's Mississippi days: and it is this quality, this buoyancy and excess of power, which forms the necessary atmosphere of humor....the Tom sawyer trio.. is and probably will remain the high-water mark of humor and imaginative creation for the New World – the most genuinely American thing ever written... *The Outcastes of Poker Flat* [Harte 1887 (1869)] is full of the same levelling quality; a levelling up, not a levelling down...(In the finest American humor) there is none of that instinct of egotism which prompts a man to laugh at his fellow, to show how much wiser and cleverer he himself is. It is all free, generous, and bountiful as the sunshine of the land where it was conceived (Johnston 1912: 380-387).

Johnston's account fits American humour to the American ideology, the ideology of its dominant class – egalitarian, moralistic, optimistic. According to Johnston, these qualities suffuse the work of those who then as now, are seen as the leading American humorists up till that time, notably Twain and Harte. In turn this had an effect on style because it limited the kinds of humour that could be produced in America with any chance of widespread acclaim. If the culture dictates that humour MUST be good-natured, good-hearted, laughing with and not at, then it has to be written in this way. The humour of angst, bitterness, cynicism, conflict, malice, misanthropy, nastiness, savage satire, superiority and put down, understatement (Davies 1990: 250-3) and undermining is excluded from the American humorous canon and with it many of the styles of humour present in English and European humour. When American humorous characters speak they do so in demotic English and the deficiencies of any one of the dialects used are not made the subject of mockery by their being placed in a hierarchy and this constrains the range of styles that can be used. It usually also means that the vocabulary used may not be too elaborate or extensive and that overly difficult, indirect, arcane allusions and sub-texts are avoided because there is also an egalitarian relationship with the reader.

It is, of course, right that the marked talents of Twain and Harte should be fully celebrated but the crucial point emphasised here is that many other forms and styles of literary humour were missing from American humour, particularly from that part of it that was celebrated in its own time both for its quality and for being typically American. Twain could in fact be a much more complex, bleaker, blacker de-

eply cynical and sceptical writer than Johnstone or most of the American public would allow or admit (see Twain 1983), yet he felt himself very much constrained by public opinion and pressure. Some of Twain's work was only published posthumously; some he has banned from publication until 2406.

Let us in the light of this ask the question "which celebrated British humorists in the period 1776-1912 could have been American, well more or less, and which could not have been?". It is conceivable that there could have been an American Charles Dickens or Jerome K. Jerome, but not that there could have been an American Saki, Lewis Carroll or Oscar Wilde. There is an interesting intermediate category where much of the author's style might well be used by an American writer but yet where aspects of that style derived from a consciousness of social class differences could not have been employed in America, as with, say the humour of Rudyard Kipling, Robert Smith Surtees, George and Weedon Grossmith or H. G. Wells. In this category, a great deal of the humour relates to class differences expressed either in observation of hierarchically arranged differences in patterns of behaviour and language or by being directly reflected on by a participating character. Here in turn are examples from Wells and from the two Grossmiths.

> His (Mr. Polly's) evidence was simple and quite audible after one warning from the superintendent of police to "speak up". He tried to put in a good word for Parsons by saying he was "naturally of a choleraic disposition" but the start and the slow grin of enjoyment upon the face of the grave and Reverend Signor with the palatial Boko suggested that the word was not as good as he had thought it. The rest of the bench was frankly puzzled and there were hasty consultations.
> "You mean 'E 'as a 'Ot temper", said the presiding magistrate.
> "I mean 'E 'as a 'Ot temper", replied Mr. Polly, magically incapable of aspirates for the moment.
> "You don't mean 'E ketches cholera?"
> "I mean – he's easily put out".
> "Then why can't you say so?" said the presiding magistrate [Wells 1928 (1910): 422].

Mr. Polly is giving evidence in court when one of his fellow shop assistants, Parsons, is charged with an assault on his employer. In and of itself the setting is not funny for Parsons loses his job and becomes unemployable since although the assault was trivial it was on "the guv'nor" ('the governor' i.e. the boss). Parsons leaves town and Mr. Polly is very upset at being severed from his closest friend. Yet Wells uses differences in the way social classes as well as individuals speak to extract humour from the situation. Mr. Polly is relatively uneducated but he has a love of literature and of playing with words shown in his nicknaming in his mind the one distinguished upper-middle class magistrate of the four on the bench "The Grave and Reverend Signor with the palatial Boko", a mixture of fine phrases and

slang. He tries to use the word choleric but it comes out absurdly as "choleraic". The one educated magistrate is first startled and then quietly amused as is the knowing reader. The others, local small businessmen are baffled and their ignorance is as comic as Mr. Polly's mistake. Much fun is then had with the magistrates' dropping of their aitches, very much a marker of uneducated lower middle class speech. Mr. Polly who does not usually drop his aitches now also loses his aspirates as he had done the day before when the police officer investigating the case had irrevocably forced into his mind the phrase "'E then 'It 'Im on the 'Ead – 'Ard" [Wells 1928 (1910): 420].

It is possible to argue that it is only the content that is distinctly British and that the tricks of style used by Wells here could be used, albeit in a more egalitarian context by an American humorist. I think not, but I grant that the matter hangs on fine differences in the meaning of the word style. Nonetheless I would argue that sense of hierarchy determines style. The same point may be made in relation to the piece below from the diary of Mr. Pooter, a clerk in a City office with pretensions.

> April 6. Eggs for breakfast simply shocking; sent them back to Borset with my compliments and he needn't call any more for orders... In the evening, hearing someone talking in a loud voice to the servant in the downstairs hall, I went down to see who it was and was surprised to find it was Borset, the butterman who was both drunk and offensive. Borset, on seeing me, said he would be hanged if he would ever serve City clerks any more – the game wasn't worth the candle. I restrained my feelings, and quietly remarked that I thought it was possible for a City clerk to be a gentleman. He replied that he was very glad to hear it and wanted to know whether I had ever come across one, for he hadn't... When he had gone, I thought of a splendid answer I ought to have given him. However, I will keep it for another occasion [Grossmith and Grossmith 1994 (1889): 5].

The writers Saki and Oscar Wilde could not have been produced by the United States because of the speed and intensity with which they move from one witty twist to another within a single continuous narrative. They have managed to fuse the techniques of the comedian and the *rakugo* reciter with a high-flown written style. Let us consider, as an example of this *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* a short story by Oscar Wilde. It has, like much of Wilde's work an aristocratic setting but it would have had a wide readership, one predominantly drawn from other social classes. The setting alone allows Wilde to develop forms of humour difficult for an author to employ in egalitarian America or Australia but here we are concerned with style, with the development of humour within an aristocratic *aesthetic* that permits and encourages frivolity, refinement, discernment, allusion to esoteric knowledge outside the common culture and intellectual playfulness. It is the importance of being witty and not being earnest. Lord Arthur Savile's Crime:

> It was Lady Windermere's last reception before Easter, and Bestwick House was even more crowded than usual... at the end of the picture gallery stood the Princess Sophia of Carlsruhe a heavy Tartar-looking lady, with tiny black eyes and wonderful emeralds, talking bad French at the top of her voice and laughing immoderately at everything that was said to her...a perfect bevy of bishops kept following a stout prima donna from room to room, on the staircase stood several Royal Academicians disguised as artists...Early in life she [Lady Windermere] had discovered an important truth that nothing looks so innocent as an indiscretion; and by a series of reckless escapades, half of them quite harmless, she had acquired all the privileges of a personality. She had more than once changed her husband; indeed Debrett credits her with three marriages; but as she had never changed her lover, the world had long ceased to talk scandal about her. She was now forty years of age, childless, and with that inordinate passion for pleasure which is the secret of remaining young [Wilde 1979 (1887): 19-20].

What is striking about this passage is as Salvatore Attardo (2001: 163-201) has shown is the sheer speed and frequency with which the jab-lines come, in which one script is opposed to another, one image undermines another and a propriety is subverted. A high-flown text is self-undermined by alliteration and cliché and indeed later in the work by melodrama. Inappropriateness is all and all for comedy. The star guest of the party is a princess but a vulgar German one, who speaks bad French at the top of her voice, *the fin de siècle* language of elegance rendered as grossness. Lustful bishops go in pursuit of a zaftig opera singer. Royal Academicians from the pinnacle of British academic art are disguised as the artists they aren't. It is all playfulness, paradox, contradiction. In the second half of the quoted passage, Wilde takes the conventional nineteenth century notions of proper sexual and marital conduct and plays with them, ending in a clever inversion of the conventional idea that dissolute hedonism undermines the freshness, fitness and innocence of youth.

Wilde was able to exercise his wit at the expense of bourgeois morality because the British elite was divided on the subject of morals in a way that was not true of America. In Britain the morality of a raffish, profligate section of an aristocratic rentier class with a sense of its own innate and unassailable status competed with that fierce respectability that came from the bourgeoisie but which was also embraced by other sections of the elite and most of the working class (Davies 2004). In America by contrast, even the wealthy and the established felt themselves bound by middle class opinion and would certainly not have dared fiercely to oppose American moral crusades against alcohol, prostitution and gambling in the way that British aristocratic conservatives did (Davies 2004: 220-221). Ethnically homogenous Britain was more diverse in morality as well as aesthetics than America because of its hierarchy of classes and this too influenced its humour. Those who

produced this 'unAmerican' humour were not themselves aristocrats but the conflict of outlook at the top of society gave them more room for manoeuvre than in America. They could if they wished ignore middle class sentiment, pressure and opinion.

They could also reach across and play with and to the imperial nationalism of the working class, something alien to much middle-class opinion, and produce a humour that is both rooted in the 'culture' of that class and yet part of high culture. This required the humorist to draw upon and make his own the styles of the popular entertainment of that class. We can see it in Kipling's comic poem *Loot.*

Loot

If you've ever stole a pheasant-egg be'hind the keeper's back,
If you've ever snigged the washin' from the line,
If you've ever crammed a gander in your bloomin' 'aversack,
You will understand this little song o' mine.
But the service rules are 'ard, an' from such we are debarred,
For the same with English morals does not suit.
(*Cornet*: Toot! toot!)
Why, they call a man a robber if 'e stuffs 'is marchin' clobber
With the—
(*Chorus*) Loo! loo! Lulu! lulu! Loo! loo! Loot! loot! loot!
Ow, the loot!
Bloomin' loot!
That's the thing to make the boys git up an' shoot!
It's the same with dogs an' men,
If you'd make 'em come again
Clap 'em forward with a Loo! loo! Lulu! Loot!
Whoopee! Tear 'im, puppy! Loo! loo! Lulu! Loot! loot! loot!

Now remember when you're 'acking round a gilded Burma god
That 'is eyes is very often precious stones;
An' if you treat a nigger to a dose o' cleanin'-rod
'E's like to show you everything 'e owns.
When 'e won't prodooce no more, pour some water on the floor
Where you 'ear it answer 'ollow to the boot
(*Cornet*: Toot! toot!)
When the ground begins to sink, shove your baynick down the chink
An' you're sure to touch the—
(*Chorus*) Loo! loo! Lulu! lulu! Loo! loo! Loot! loot! loot!
Ow, the loot!..... [Kipling 1994 (1892): 410-11].

It is a vigorous music hall ballad. It conveys the tension between the moral code and legal rules imposed by a respectable middle class in Parliament and a disciplined army and the violence, dishonesty and xenophobia of the lower end of the unskilled working class from which the army volunteers for the Empire came. But in order to do so, Kipling, the Nobel prize winner, has to write in the idiom of the music hall including the stage-prole dialect. Those who read his comic poems and laughed were drawn from all classes but his verses could easily have been recited for or sung by the very class that did long for loot.

Many will see in Kipling's poem the cruelty that the Hungarian humour scholar George Mikes (1980: 9-37, 55-67) sees as a distinctive indeed characteristic feature of British humour. Mikes is wrong. There is cruelty in the humour of all countries; it is merely that the cruelty Mikes has fastened on to in English humour differs in kind and in style, from, say, the contrived and vicious plots of Guy de Maupassant or the rollicking tales of the *Good Soldier Svejk* or the relished physical violence between social equals in American fiction including the humorous works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. What is distinctive in British humour and it is this that really shocks Mikes when faced with W. S. Gilbert or Evelyn Waugh (Mikes 1980: 64-66) is that the British version of cruel humour can be shamelessly hierarchical, directed downwards from the dominant to the subordinate, whether defined in class or in ethnic terms. Kipling laughs openly with the British Empire but the Americans pretend that 'we don't do empire' just as they pretend 'we don't have classes'. The whole of American history, the entire creation of the United States is imperial, the American expansion to the Pacific was as imperial as that of Tsarist Russia but this can not be relished in American humour anymore than class differences can. Imperial America is present in the work of Bret Harte, whose style probably influenced Kipling, but it can not be celebrated. 'We don't do inequality' is the myth that constrained American humour.

Mikes was incensed by the 'cruelty' in the writings of William Schwenck Gilbert of Gilbert and Sullivan and particularly their comic opera *The Mikado* with its Lord High Executioner and in the novels of Evelyn Waugh. Mikes (1980: 65) hated Waugh's work so much that he attacked him personally and blamed the 'cruelty' in the humorous writings of his son Auberon Waugh on his father's supposed deficiencies as a parent. Yet it is the *style* of Waugh's writing as much as its content that provoked Mikes. Waugh's technique is to provide a calm and indifferent narration of a gross injustice inflicted on an innocent weaker party. Just as Wilde subverted the British middle class morality of earnest respectability, so Waugh subverted the British middle class morality of fairness and just desert. Waugh was not an aristo-

crat, merely the son of a publisher and a snobbish devotee of the old order but he had taken the aristocratic ethic of detachment and combined it with a comic use of the absurd. Here is an extract from the beginning of Waugh's (1928) first novel *Decline and Fall* in which the members of the Bollinger Club, a group of aristocratic drunks at an Oxford College attack Paul Pennyfeather, a harmless undergraduate studying to be an Anglican clergyman, as he returns from a meeting of the League of Nation Union on the plebiscites in Poland in the 1920s. Angry at Pennyfeather because he seems to be wearing their club tie to which he is not entitled, they tear off his clothes and chase him trouserless round the quad of Scone College.

> Out of the night Lumsden of Strathdrummond swayed across his path like a druidical rocking-stone. Paul tried to pass. Now it happened that the tie of Paul's old school bore a marked resemblance to the pale blue and white of the Bollinger Club. The difference of a quarter of an inch in the width of the stripes was not one that Lumsden of Strathdrummond was likely to appreciate.
> "Here's an awful man wearing the Boller tie", said the Laird. It is not for nothing that since pre-Christian times his family has exercised chieftainship over uncharted miles of barren moorland.
> Mr. Sniggs was looking rather apprehensively at Mr. Postlethewaite [they are respectively the Junior Dean and Domestic Bursar of Scone College who are watching from an unlit window above]
> "They appear to have caught somebody", he said. "I hope they don't do him any serious harm".
> "Dear me, can it be Lord Reading?..."
> ...At length the crowd parted and Mr. Sniggs gave a sigh of relief, "But it's quite all right. It isn't Reading It's Pennyfeather – someone of no importance."
> "Well that saves a great deal of trouble... What a lot of clothes the young man appears to have lost!"
> Next morning there was a lovely College meeting [to impose fines on the drunks which were then spent on high quality port for the dons]...
> "The case of Pennyfeather", the Master was saying "seems to be quite a different matter altogether. He ran the whole length of the quadrangle, you say, *without his trousers.* It is unseemly. It is more: it is indecent. In fact I am almost prepared to say that it is flagrantly indecent..."Perhaps if we fined him really heavily?" suggested the Junior Dean.
> "I very much doubt whether he could pay. I understand he is not well off...I think we should do far better to get rid of him altogether. That sort of young man does the College no good".
> Two hours later, while Paul was packing his three suits in his little leather trunk, the domestic Bursar sent a message saying that he wished to see him.
> "Ah, Mr. Pennyfeather", he said, "I have examined your rooms and notice two slight burns, one on the window-sill and the other on the chimney-piece, no doubt from cigarette ends. I am charging you five and six pence for each of them on your battels (payments). That is all, thank you.
> As he crossed the quad Paul met Mr. Sniggs.
> "Just off?" said the Junior Dean brightly.
> "Yes, sir", said Paul.
> And a little further on he met the Chaplain.
> "Oh, Pennyfeather, before you go, surely you have my copy of Dean Stanley's *Eastern Church*?"

"Yes. I left it on your table".
"Thank you. Well goodbye my dear boy. I suppose that after that reprehensible affair last night you will have to think of some other profession. Well you may congratulate yourself that you discovered your unfitness for the priesthood before it was too late...
..."God damn and blast them all to hell", said Paul meekly to himself as he drove to the station, and then he felt rather ashamed, because he rarely swore" [Waugh 1934 (1928): 12-15].

Sniggs and Postlethwaite knew from direct observation that Pennyfeather was an innocent victim of an attack by the drunken Scottish laird, Lumsden and the Bollinger hooligans but this was not even discussed at the Scone college disciplinary meeting. Because he is "someone of no importance" he is dispensable and can be expelled with ignominy. The final twist comes when Postlethwaite calmly and coldly asks him for a petty sum of money as he leaves. The chaplain, himself an Anglican priest, is equally matter of fact about Paul Pennyfeather's loss of the sacred career to which he felt he had been called. A tragedy and an injustice is treated as an ordinary event in *quite inappropriate flat mundane language*. It is a *masterpiece of understatement* culminating in the victims meek and silent curse after he has left, a mild curse that is even further undercut by his regret at having even thought it. If this were a serious text in which an institution knowingly penalised an innocent person with such severity and in such a routine way we would feel indignant, but the sheer extravagance of the situation and the inappropriate tone reassures us that this is humour. The story of an individual unjustly accused and condemned by an inept institution and then struggling heroically to clear his or her name is a very familiar theme in British myth (Brandon and Davies 1973) and fiction and indeed may be based on a real case as in Terence Rattigan's play *The Winslow Boy* (1942). There the style is that of high drama. The style of Waugh's comedy is exactly the opposite. Injustice is taken for granted. It would have been culturally difficult for an American humour writer to employ such a combination of style and story in 1928. Waugh goes on to treat kidnapping, castration, the white slave trade, a prison chaplain having his head sawn off by an insane convict and bigamy by deception in much the same vein, exactly the right style for a humour of callousness. However, as with all styles even indirectly related to irony, Waugh runs the risk of being taken seriously. Hence Mikes' indignation. In Waugh's treatment of the criminals and low-lifers Pennyfeather later encounters there is not a hint of the sentimentality or facetiousness present in, say, the work of the American humorist Damon Runyon [1950 (1937-8)].

Likewise there is no limit to the comic scorn heaped by Waugh on 'underdog' ethnic minorities such as the blacks or the Welsh, a deliberate flouting and mockery

of liberal opinion. Here the style is the opposite – one of wild exaggeration to the point of invective as in Waugh's description of the arrival of a Welsh band to play music at the sports' day of an English school in Wales:

> Ten men of revolting appearance were approaching from the drive. They were low of brow, crafty of eye and crooked of limb. They advanced huddled together with the loping tread of wolves, peering about them furtively as they came, as though in constant terror of ambush; they slavered at their mouths, which hung loosely over their receding chins, while each clutched under his ape-like arm a burden of curious and unaccountable shape. On seeing the Doctor they halted and edged back, those behind squinting and mouthing over their companions' shoulders...
> ... "We are the silver-band the Lord bless and keep you" said the station-master (and band-leader) in one breath, "the band that no one could beat whatever but two indeed in the Eisteddfod that for all North Wales was look you" [Waugh 1934 (1928): 78-9].

The humour of Wilde or Max Beerbohm, Saki (H. H. Munro) or Waugh does not exhibit the levelling up tendency that Johnston (1912: 383) sees as the distinguishing feature if American humour and which I have argued restricted the range of styles as well as narratives and settings that can be used. There is in British humour a willingness to laugh *at* rather than *with* the other man or woman, a willingness to employ bitterness, a willingness to use that wit condemned by Johnstone (1912: 376, see also 372) as a "sense of scoring off the other man, a triumph over him, a sense of our excess and vitality as contrasted with his weakness, a mentally pushing him into the mud and gloating over him". These are distinctively English qualities, though oddly, Johnston sees them as more characteristic of Jewish humour. He ascribes Benjamin Disraeli's very English crushing wit and "courtly insincerities" to his Jewish origins when condemning them as un-American (Johnson 1912: 378).

However, the main point that has been made is that British humour is more varied, it contained within it all the good natured 'laughing with', happy and sentimental elements that dominated American humour (notably in Dickens) but also wit, bitterness and disdain. The British of 1912 or 1928 were not in their way of life in any sense a more cruel people than their American counterparts, but they were able to produce and willing to consume forms of a hierarchical cruel humour with an appropriate style. Americans were not.

Today when America is easily the world's intellectual leader in pure science, economics and philosophy and can match Britain in comedy it is difficult to remember how culturally limited, indeed backward, America was in 1912 or even 1928. America at that time was already the richest country in the world with the technically most advanced economy and the most effective forms of business orga-

nisation but compared with Europe it contributed very little to mathematics, pure science and particularly scientific theory, philosophy or art. The narrowness of American humour is part of that picture as well as being a product of the small-town moralism that still enfolded the culture of the world's economic giant.

It was bound, of course, to change but the change was accelerated by the impact of mass Jewish immigration into the United States from Poland and the adjoining Pale – Byelorussia, Ukraine, Lithuania that had once been part of Poland. The immigration took place in the late nineteenth century, mainly of poor unsophisticated Jews from the shtetlach of eastern Poland but it was their well educated English speaking grandchildren who were to civilise and to transform America into the world's intellectual leader. Poland's loss was America's gain. They were also to transform and in time to dominate American humour. The incomparable Leo Rosten was born in Łódź.

James D. Bloom in his *Gravity Fails: The Comic Jewish Shaping of Modern America* (2003, see also Davies 2002) shows how the descendants of Jewish immigrants introduced angst, literacy and irony into American humour and thus transformed it. They gave it the *variety* it had previously lacked. They brought two things to American culture in general and to humour in particular. First a respect for things of the intellect for their own sake and not simply as a means to an end, an ethic similar to that of the British elite but derived from the Jewish religious tradition rather than a British hierarchical social one. The Jews freed America from its previous narrow materialism. Second, a realisation that an American humour that took for granted the progressive, egalitarian and optimistic nature of its own society was shallow and indeed also insular.

That is not to say that there were not important Jewish contributions to the 'happy' American tradition such as Milt Gross' (1927) *Nize Baby* or Leonard Q Ross (Leo Rosten)'s [1944 (1937)] *The Education of Hyman Kaplan*; these have a new setting but they were not innovative in the way that say Nathanael West (Nathan Wallenstein Weinstein) was.

Nathaniel West novel *A Cool Million or The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* [1975 (1934)] describes the gradual physical dismantling of an ideal-typical American Lemuel Pitkin, a farm-boy born in that land of freedom and opportunity close to the home-town of ex-President Shagpoke Whipple and to which he has now retired to run a small bank. It is also about the dismantling of the body politic of American democracy.

Following the projected sale of his widowed mother's farm by the landowner to an interior decorator who wants to place the farmhouse in a shop-window in New

York as advertising, Lemuel Pitkin asks banker Whipple for a loan from the Rat River National Bank. Instead the generous ex-President Whipple gives him advice:

> "America", he said with great seriousness, "is the land of opportunity. She takes care of the honest and industrious and never fails them so long as they are both. This is not a matter of opinion, it is one of faith. On the day that Americans stop believing it, on that day America will be lost" [West 1975 (1934): 285].

In the light of what happens later in the novel, this is one of the great comic paragraphs of American literature. Pitkin does go out to seek his fortune as advised, taking with him a meagre loan advanced by Whipple, leaving the good banker in possession of his mother's only cow and source of income. Pitkin heads for New York to seek his fortune but is arrested by some characteristically dumb and brutal Irish cops and, though innocent, sent to jail where his teeth are extracted "to ward off infection". After his release he heroically saves a rich old gentleman and his daughter from being trampled by runaway horses, a traditional route to success in American fiction but instead of gaining a reward he loses an eye. Later he loses a thumb in a motor accident. When travelling West the one-eyed, bedentured Pitkin loses a leg in a bear trap and is scalped by Indians. Finally he is shot through the heart. The story is gruesome, unjust and fantastic and involves prison, corrupt politics and the white slave trade but is often presented in a flat, bland way. The story of Lemuel Pitkin in theme and style has something in common with that of Paul Pennyfeather. Here is the first stage in Pitkin's dismemberment:

> The warden of the state prison, Ezekiel Purdy was a kind man if stern. ...The warden leaned back in his chair and sucked meditatively on his enormous calabash pipe. When he began to talk again, it was with ardour and conviction.
> "The first thing to do is to draw all your teeth", he said. "Teeth are often a source of infection and it pays to be on the safe side..."
> "But I am innocent", cried Lem, when the full significance of what the warden had said dawned on him. "I am not morbid and I never had a toothache in my life".
> Mr. Purdy dismissed the poor lad's protests with an airy wave of his hand. "In my eyes", he said, "the sick are never guilty. You are merely sick as are all criminals. And as for your other argument; please remember that an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. Because you have never had a toothache does not mean that you will never have one" [West 1975 (1934): 298-9].

Only after his death does Lemuel Pitkin become an American hero but as the exalted martyr of the National Revolutionary Party, the Leather Shirts, an Ameri-

can fascist party led by Shagpoke Whipple, no longer mere ex-President but *Duce* of America.

> It is Pitkin's Birthday, a national holiday, and the youth of America is parading down Fifth Avenue in his honour. They are a hundred thousand strong. On every boy's head is a coonskin cap complete with a jaunty tail and on every shoulder rests a squirrel rifle...The youths pass the reviewing stand and from it Mr. Whipple proudly returns their salute. The years have dealt but lightly with him. His back is as straight as ever and his grey eyes have not lost their keenness.
> But who is the little lady in black next to the dictator. Can it be the Widow Pitkin? Yes, it is she. She is crying, for with a mother glory can never take the place of a beloved child...
> The marchers have massed themselves in front of the reviewing stand and Mr. Whipple is going to address them.
> "Why are we celebrating this day above all other days? He asked his hearers in a voice of thunder. "What made Lemuel Pitkin great? Let us examine his life.
> First we see him as a small boy, light of foot, fishing for bullheads in the Rat River of Vermont. Later he attends the Ottsville High School, where he is captain of the nine and an excellent outfielder. Then he leaves for the big city to make his fortune. All this is in the honourable tradition of his country and its people..." [West 1975 (1934)].

We are back where we started when Whipple first exhorted Pitkin to go and seek his fortune. Whipple's address to the massed storm troopers of America is a standard, familiar, uplifting if crass speech to any gathering of young people imbued with Americanism. It is banal reality. Not only is the speech crowded with flat clichés but so, and deliberately so, is West's description of it: 'a hundred thousand strong', 'the years have dealt but lightly with him'. 'Can it be the Widow Pitkin. Yes it is she', 'voice of thunder'. It is made funny by its sheer badness; a parody yet one very close to what the reality and the real world reporting of that reality would have been. Pitkin's boyhood spent fishing for bullheads in the Rat River could have been that of Tom Sawyer. The coonskin caps and squirrel rifle are also part of the same rustic idyll as well as hinting of the frontier. Lemuel Pitkin was even a sporting hero at the kind of local school where American character is forged before setting out in search of the American dream of 'making it'.

The speech is funnier than Whipple's original heavy advice to Pitkin because we now know that the innocent and virtuous Pitkin was to come to a bad, or rather unfortunate and unjust, end and that Whipple has become a fascist dictator. The squirrel rifles are those of a Nuremberg rally in New York and the Lemuel Pitkin song is sung by the Whipplejugend.

What is very striking is how the styles of Waugh and West have unexpectedly converged. The two novelists have nothing in common in background, outlook, ideology or intention, Waugh's novel was written for mere sheer amusement by a

man of conservative inclinations but in 1928 of no serious commitments, one who courted inclusion in aristocratic society with a reasonable hope of attaining it. West by contrast was radicalised by the collapse of the American economy from 1929 onwards and a Jewish outsider at a time of rising anti-Semitism. Yet they both came to use a style based on flat, understated, absurd description of events wildly at odds with the standard liberal pieties of their respective countries, interspersed with other passages of grotesque exaggeration.

In each case they created forms of humour that often clung closely to reality but employed styles totally removed from those of everyday story-telling. Waugh and West are a universe away Johnstone's image of "the best American humour (which) stands pre-eminent throughout the world and through all time" (Johnston 1912: 377).

Waugh and West have achieved a form of sophistication that would have horrified Johnstone. Waugh had merely to draw on and innovate from an existing British literary tradition and an aristocratic aesthetic of playful detachment. West had to break with previous American ways of telling a story. It was at this point that American creators of literary humour caught up and began to employ styles of humorous writing as varied as those of the British.

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Nation, Social Class and Style: a Comparison of the Humour of Britain and America

Historically a much greater range of styles of literary humour were to be found in Britain than in the United States because Britain was a much more hierarchical society with a divided elite and an aristocratic as well as a bourgeois aesthetic. In America there was a single dominant class, that of independent farmers and the businessmen and professional people of medium sized cities whose optimistic, egalitarian, moralistic, culture restricted the range of styles an aspiring American humorous writer could use. This restrictiveness remained long after American had become the world's leading, richest and most technologically advanced economy. British humour alone was able to use styles that valued detachment from conventional morality and also took inequality for granted and hence devised forms of aggressive mockery that could be directed downwards. British humour was also able to employ a greater reach of allusiveness, vocabulary and sophistication than was possible in America. It was the rise of Jewish humour in America from a new initially immigrant population that valued things of the intellect for their own sake and which had also mastered the arts of detachment that enabled American literary humour to achieve a comparable degree of variety and sophistication to that of Britain in the course of the twentieth century.

Key words: *America, Britain, class, cruelty, culture, hierarchy, moralism, sophistication, style.*