

James Thurber's Humor Represents Typical American Humor

ZHANG Jie

China Youth University for Political Sciences, Beijing, China

Humor is needed universally. The ability to make jokes or to appreciate humor is both necessary for living a happy or smooth life. Different nations have different humors. The paper is to analyze the definition of humor, the difference between British and American humor, and take James Thurber's stories to show the typical American humor. The English appear to be deeply serious people. English humor is more conserved, subtle, and silent. The British are known for their sense of humor. However, it is often difficult for foreigners to understand their jokes. The key to understanding British humor is to know that the British often use "understatement". American humor tends to be more "obvious" and less oblique, and can sometimes be considered by other English speaking cultures to be over the top and ridiculous.

Keywords: humor, British humor, American humor, James Thurber, loud and laughs

Introduction

Humor is something that is funny, amusing, and comical. Humor is a sign of intelligence. Everybody and every society need it. It is the ability to see, appreciate, or express what is amusing or comical. Different nations or cultures have their own humor. Sometimes it is hard for the outsiders to understand the humor beyond his perception of the culture. Usually people believe the same language may share the same humor, nevertheless, they may be different although the people may understand it, not amusing. The British humor is more conserved, subtle, and silent while the American humor is more loud and obvious with much noises and laughter.

The Definition of Humor

Humor is a phenomenon which is influenced by culture. It can be difficult to determine what aspects define a certain sense of humor. A nation's wit is linked to the historical development of the country. How funny somebody finds a certain incident depends on many factors including age, personal experience, level of education, and geographical location. Therefore humor is something which is not always transferrable in another country. What somebody from one area may find hilarious may not be amusing at all to somebody from another location. Whether or not someone gets a joke is determined by their interpretation, filtered by the cultural context.¹

A sense of humor can be defined as the ability to perceive one or more of the universal characteristics. Therefore, one's sense of humor involves the capacity to appreciate incongruity, absurdity, an unexpected

ZHANG Jie, associate professor, master, Department of Foreign Language and Literature, China Youth University for Political Sciences.

¹ See <http://www.lexiophiles.com/english/english-humour-vs-american-humor-is-there-a-difference>.

future, a pleasant surprise, a startle, getting it or emotional chaos remembered in tranquility.²

British Humor

In popular culture, British humor is a somewhat general term applied to certain types of comedy and comedic acts from the United Kingdom. Many UK comedy TV shows typical of British humor have become popular all around the world, and, for good or bad, have been a strong avenue for the export and representation of British culture to an international audience, but like many things the “typical” British sense of humor does not really exist.

The English appear to be deeply serious people, which, by and large, they are. This gives an added piquancy to the English sense of humor. English humor, like the will-o'-the-wisp, refuses to be caught and examined and just when you think you have cracked it, you realize that you have been duped once again. Their humor is more conserved, subtle, and silent.

Since the English never say what they mean, often with the exact opposite, and tend towards reticence and understatement, their humor is partly based on an exaggeration of this facet of their own character. So, while in conversation they avoid confrontation, in their humor they mock that avoidance.

The British are known for their sense of humor. However, it is often difficult for foreigners to understand their jokes. The main thing to remember is that the British like to make fun of themselves as well as others. They also like to make jokes about situations that are quite serious. Another key to understanding British humor is to know that the British often use “understatement”. Understatement means saying less than you think or feel. For example, if someone gets very wet in the rain, they might say, “It’s a little damp outside”. Or, if someone is very impolite and shouts at another person, someone else might say, “She’s very friendly!”. Understatement is often used in unpleasant or difficult situations to make someone look stupid. Understatement is important to understand British humor. There are three popular categories of humor in Britain: “everyday” humor, “stupid” humor, and “social” humor. In “everyday” humor, the British often laugh about the silly and unpleasant things that happen to people every day like when someone accidentally falls over in the street. “Stupid” humor involves crude, simple, and stupid jokes that are so unfunny that they are actually funny! In “social” humor, jokes are made about people from different classes of society. In particular, jokes are made about accents, the way they people dress, and the way they behave. Included in “social” humor are people who do not know how to behave. Mr. Bean is an excellent example of this. Mr. Bean was created by Rowan Atkinson in 1990. Mr. Bean rarely talks, and instead, uses his body movements and facial expressions to make people laugh. Perhaps Mr. Bean is so funny because in real life people would never do what he does.

American Humor

American humor refers collectively to the conventions and common threads that tie together humor in the United States. It is often defined in comparison to the humor of another country—for example, how it is different from British humor. Humor usually concerns aspects of American culture, and depends on the historical and current development of the country’s culture. The extent to which an individual will personally find something humorous obviously depends on a host of absolute and relative variables.³

The character of the “Yankee” as the first American comic figure (1931), the first widely accepted

² See <http://www.humormatters.com/definition.htm>.

³ See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_humor.

American character that the nation could find funny, make fun of, and even export for the amusement of the world—a gangly traveler who told stories, played elaborate practical jokes, was ingenuous, sly, perhaps uneducated. She reports that American comedy sprang forth after the American Revolution, when the country was “freed from the worry of self-preservation” and its citizens began to regard themselves as “works of art”.

The Difference Between British and American Humor

The American sense of humor is generally more slapstick than that in Britain. This arises from a cultural difference between the two. Their jokes are more obvious and forward, a bit like Americans themselves. British jokes, on the other hand, tend to be more subtle but with a dark or sarcastic undertone. There is usually a hidden meaning. This may stem from the fact that British culture is more reserved than American culture.

Although British and American have so many similarities, when it comes to their sense of humor, there are still some differences between them. These differences can be so obvious that you may easily tell them apart, especially in their movies and TV shows. Although both nations have subtle differences in their wit, they can both appreciate the others' sense of humor. Some great insight into differences between American and British English separated by a common language serves as inspiration for this article.⁴

One of the major differences seems to be how often both nations use irony. Brits use irony on a daily basis, whereas it is not the foundation of American humor. I think Americans understand British irony (most of the time anyway), what they do not understand is the need to use it so frequently. When Americans use irony, they tend to state that they were “only kidding”. They feel the need to make a joke more obvious than Brits do, maybe this stems from a fear of offending people.

Ask any Brit about British humor and they will tell you, in absolute seriousness, that it is unique, indigenous, and incompatible with any other country's humor. Ask them what is special about British humor and they will often reply by mentioning “irony”—that ingredient of jokes that foreigners, and particularly Americans, “do not get”. Irony is defined as a character speaking on a subject about which the audience knows more than himself. It is the presentation of a lack of self-awareness.

Americans have no sense of irony, and they also lack subtlety. It depends on the venue. The great thing about America is that there are a multitude of stylistic voices that run the gamut from ridiculously asinine to multilayered, witty masterpieces of subtle irony. British humor is fantastic, but it tends to only come in two flavors: dry and witty.

Features of American Humor

American humor might also be distinguished by its most common type of humor, for example, more slapstick and physical comedy. There is less emphasis on understatement, and so the humor tends to be more open, rather than satirizing the social system through exaggeration. This is why American humor tends to be more “obvious” and less oblique, and can sometimes be considered by other English speaking cultures to be over the top and ridiculous. American humor prefers more observational techniques. However, the style of observational humor is very much a staple of the American style of humor.

Humor began to emerge in the United States soon after the American Revolution in written and spoken form, and delivery methods have continued to evolve since then. Literature appears before cartoons although

⁴ See <http://www.lexiophiles.com/english/english-humour-vs-american-humor-is-there-a-difference>.

newspaper cartoons in the modern sense began in the 1840s. Radio and film came out roughly at the same time. Film is covered after radio because it led more directly to the television section. Stand-up comedy began to receive renewed attention in the 1970s which is the reason why it was placed directly after television.

They are some important humorous writers in America. The typical figures are Mark Twain, O. Henry, and James Thurber. In the paper, James Thurber's humor will be analyzed. And with the analysis, James Thurber's humor will be outstanding among the American humorous writers.

James Thurber's Humor as the Typical American Humor

James Grover Thurber (1894–1961) was an American humorist and cartoonist. Thurber was best known for his contributions (both cartoons and short stories) to *The New Yorker* magazine. An annual award, the Thurber Prize, begun in 1997, honors outstanding examples of American humor. His typical stories are *The Unicorn in the Garden*, *The University Days*, *The Catbird Seat*, *The Night the Bed Fell*, *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, and *Further Fables for Our Time*.

The paper will take *The Night the Ghost Got in* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (1939) as examples for the analysis of American humor.

Woman is a humor target in most of James Thurber's stories. James Thurber almost made fun of women in his stories to achieve humor, in story *The Night the Ghost Got in* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, the mother and the wife were no exception.

She does things intuitively, impulsive but mother had made one of her quick, incomparable decisions. She "flung up a window of her bedroom which faced the bedroom windows of the house of a neighbor, picked up a shoe, and whammed it through a pane of glass across the narrow space that separated the two houses. Glass tinkled into the bedroom occupied by a retired engraver named Bodwell and his wife" (YANG, 2010, p. 171).

She was just abnormal. "After he had disappeared from the window, mother suddenly made as if to throw another shoe, not because there was further need of it but, as she explained later, because the thrill of heaving a shoe through a window glass had enormously taken her fancy. I prevented her" (YANG, 2010, p. 172).

The mother was innocent or naïve or silly, superficial. "'What was the matter with that one policeman?' mother asked, after they had gone. 'Grandfather shot him', I said. 'What for?' she demanded. I told her he was a deserter. 'Of all things!' said mother. 'He was such a nice-looking young man'" (YANG, 2010, p. 174).

The second humor James Thurber made was the heroic daydream episodes in *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. In the story, the character was a Pilot Mitty, Surgeon Mitty, Assassin Mitty, then as a cool assassin testifying in a courtroom, facing the bickering attorneys, then he was a magnificent surgeon performing a one-of-a-kind surgery, Captain Mitty.

As a Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot volunteering for a daring, secret suicide mission to bomb an ammunition dump. The powering up of the "Navy hydroplane" in the opening scene is followed by Mrs. Mitty's complaint that Mitty is "driving too fast", which suggests that his driving was what led to the daydream.

Mitty's turn as a brilliant surgeon immediately follows his taking off and putting on his gloves (as a surgeon dons surgical gloves) and driving past a hospital.

The courtroom drama cliché "Perhaps this will refresh your memory", which begins the third fantasy, follows Mitty's attempt to remember what (besides overshoes) his wife told him to buy, and also a newspaper vendor using news of a trial to sell his papers.

Mitty's romanticized version of British pilots in the early days of World War I is inspired from his looking at "an old copy of liberty", which contains images of a war in which the United States was not yet involved at the time of the story's publication.

The closing firing squad scene comes when Mitty is standing against a wall, smoking. Walter Mitty escapes from the routine drudgery of his suburban life into fantasies of heroic conquest.

The fantasy Mitty is not scared of anything; the real one behaves cautiously. Similarly, people's admiration on Mitty in the fantasies contrasts with much fewer pleasant interactions with real people. Aside from being ordered around by his wife, Mitty is yelled at by a policeman and a parking lot attendant, and laughed at by a woman who hears him say the words "Puppy biscuit".

However, it is more or less tragic that none of the fantasies end with Mitty winning through in each dangerous situation; the first four fantasies are interrupted, and the fifth ends with Mitty facing the firing squad. He was henpecked by his wife.

The third humor in the story is that the writer—"I" is always in the right position.

The hero is rational, quite but sensible. In the story, the hero always shows his rational perception and quietness "I could see the faint shine of plates on the plate-rail; I couldn't see the table. The steps kept going round and round the table; at regular intervals a board creaked, when it was trod upon. I supposed at first that it was my father or my brother Roy, who had gone to Indianapolis but were expected home at any time. I suspected next that it was a burglar. It did not enter my mind until later that it was a ghost" (YANG, 2010, p. 170).

The hero is calm. They caught me standing in my towel at the top. "Who are you?" he demanded. "I live here", I said. "Well whattsa matta, ya hot?" he asked. It was, as a matter of fact, cold: I went to my room and pulled on some trousers. On my way out, a cop stuck a gun into my ribs. "Whatta you doin' here?" he demanded. "I live here", I said. (p. 172). "We'll call the police. Since the phone was downstairs, I didn't want to see how she was going to call the police—nor did I want the police—but mother had made one of her quick, incomparable decisions". Compared with the police, the hero is more calm and professional.

The hero is watching with a certain degree of aloofness. For the whole story he is the outsider, although the hero knows the accident from the beginning. And at last the hero concludes: "I told them I would bring it to the station house the next day" (YANG, 2010, p. 174).

The policeman's behavior is the humor in "*The Night the Ghost Got in*".

The police are devoted and responsible, but they are on hand in a commendably short time and behaved hoarsely: "...two on motorcycles, and a patrol wagon with about eight in it and a few reporters. They began banging at our front door. Flashlights shot streaks of gleam up and down the walls, across the yard, down the walk between our house and Bodwells. 'Open up!' cried a hoarse voice" (YANG, 2010, p. 172).

The police are rude in front of the public. "...hear a rending of wood and a splash of glass on the floor of the hall. Their lights played all over the living-room and crisscrossed nervously in the dining-room, stabbed into hallways, shot up the front stairs... Downstairs, we could hear the tromping of the other police. Police were all over the place, doors were yanked open, drawers were yanked open, and windows were shot up and pulled down, furniture fell with dull thumps. A half-dozen policemen emerged out of the darkness of the front hallway upstairs. They began to ransack the floor, pulling beds away from the walls, tore clothes off hooks in the closets, pulled suitcases and boxes off shelves. One of them found an old zither that Roy had won in a pool tournament" (YANG, 2010, p. 172).

The policeman is uneducated—they used informal language. To my “No sign of nobody, lady”, he said. “Musta got away—whatt’d he look like?” “There were two or three of them”, mother said, “whooping and carrying on and slamming doors”. “Funny”, said the cop. “All ya windows and doors was locked on the inside as tight as a tick”. “No sign o’ nuthin’”, said the cop... Grandfather was turning over in bed. “What’s ‘at?” snapped Joe (YANG, 2010, p. 173).

The grandfather: The grandfather was a funny character in the story. “Back, ye cowardly dogs!” roared grandfather. “Back, t’ the line, ye goddam lily-livered cattle!” (YANG, 2010, p. 173). The grandfather is especially fun in the story.

Conclusion

Humor exists everywhere. Sometimes people undervalue the great power of humor, people do not think it is the best way to solve problems. They dare not to be humorous in a seemingly serious situation. In fact, the most serious problems can be tackled by humor. A sense of humor would be the best method to deal with dilemma. With the understanding of the differences between British and American humor, more humorous literary text or conversation will be understood. And after the analysis of the James Thurber’s typical American humorous stories, more American cultures will be accepted and appreciate deeply. So in both *The Night the Ghost Got in* and *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, the total scene and atmosphere was open and loud; the humor was achieved by the noises, actions. The American humor is easily noticeable, if it is understood. Of course, how much can a reader can appreciate it is another thing.

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