LEACOCK'S DUNCIAD

by

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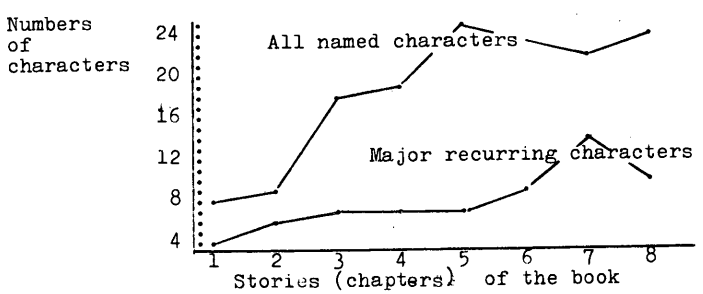
It is generally considered that Leacock, though a master of the humorous short story, was no novelist. It is also generally held that he developed some facility for unifying collections of his stories. Ralph Curry, for instance, comments:

> In *Arcadian Adventures* Leacock comes closer [than in *Sunshine Sketches*] to a unified structure. Although this quasi-unity is achieved for the most part by cross references between the stories, it is true, nevertheless, that some of the characters are not fully understood until after their appearance in several of the stories. In short, a sense of growth and development is evident . . .[1]

> There is a sense of completeness in the *Arcadian Adventures*. . . . There is thus a unity of tone and purpose if not of plot.[2]

A structural study shows, however, that in *Arcadian Adventures* not only cross reference, character development, tone, and purpose, but also structure and plot contribute to unity of effect, and that structure and plot in fact embody the meaning of the book.

Consider, for example, the deployment of characters:



[1]"Introduction," *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1959), xiii. All subsequent page references are to this text.

[2]*Ibid.*, x.

In addition to the evidence in this graph, seven of the major recurring characters appear in at least four of the stories: Lucullus Fyshe in five, Rev. Furlong in four, Furlong snr. in five, President Boomer in six, Dr. Slyder in four, and Asmodeus Boulder in four. Characters thus appear and re-appear in a way that increases the cross referencing climactically through the book as a whole, the fifth, seventh, and eighth stories being most resonant with character interaction, so that in reading one experiences a sense of culmination of one's acquaintance with and awareness of the characters.

In the narrative deployment, each story opens with a descriptive setting, then introduces a conflict — often in the form of a paradox — and finally ends with a resolution. Story One describes the Arcadian setting of the dollar elite of a North American city, then shows one of its leading shysters, Lucullus Fyshe, planning how to borrow money from a visiting English Duke, who has himself come in order to borrow money. Fyshe, learning the true situation, pawns the Duke off on a busines rival. We are not told what follows. In Story Two, Tomlinson, on whose farm gold has been found, tries to give away his unwanted wealth by buying poor market stocks, only to find himself wealthier still because the graspers around him follow suit. In Story Three he gives it all to the local university — after being approached by the scheming President of the institution — just as the disclosure comes that the gold was salted and his wealth is gone. In Story Four, a con man dupes the wealthy until he is caught — although some members of Arcady remain deluded about his "mystical" powers. In Story Five, a naive but young and wealthy bachelor ignores the real love under his eyes and is hooked by a shyster window with four grown sons. In Story Six a naive church rector is convinced by a lay financial juggler that the true debits and credits of a religious organization are its dollar receipts and expenditures, and that the "business" must show a profit. In Story Seven a new minister begins to upset the ecclesiastical balance of the Arcadian community by the popularity of his sermons on the Hell and Damnation in store for the worldly, but leaves his church just as soon as he is offered more money by another. In the last story, the business men of Arcady take over the city government on a campaign of "clean government" but turn out to be less "clean" than the administration they displace.

This elementary plot of situation-conflict-resolution applies to the book as a whole as well as to each of its eight stories. The nexus of each story is the interaction of one or more schemers with one or more simple or naive people. But as these patterns repeat, the recurrence of the same schemers — acting more and more in unison, until in the last chapter they constitute a united organization — creates a "schemer" power group which acts solely and irresponsibly in its own interests, and consequently, as a group, acts against the interests of the rest of society. Individually the members of the Arcadian power group seek their own ends even at the

expense of their peers, as well as at the expense of the simple or naive fellow members of the dollar elite of Arcady. All of them live above "the roar of the elevated railway, carving dividends" (2). As a group they seek their own ends with a great indifference to the area outside of Arcady, where "the City sinks lower, and is choked and crowded with the tangled streets and little houses of the slums" (2). Mr. Newberry comments: "I blew up two Italians on the last job. . . . Hardy fellows, the Italians. I prefer them to any other people for blasting" (92).

Each story suggests that the meek shall never inherit the earth. The book as a whole, like Pope's *Dunciad,* culminates in the inauguration of a rule of disorder, in which the Arcadian power group physically intimidates political opponents from running for office and uses goon squads wielding baseball bats and axe handles to ensure that they are voted "democratically" into power — the guiding principles of Arcady made manifest.

Much of this gets carried on patterns of paradox and of illusion versus reality. Fyshe and the Duke in the first story each thinks he can borrow from the other. Professor Gildas in the second, analysing Tomlinson's gold, must learn the facts of life from his young student lab demonstrator. In the fifth, Mrs. Buncomhearst is President of many societies under whose by-laws she is ineligible even to be a member. The Newberrys' country "cottage" in the fifth story is "as primeval as Scotch gardeners and French landscape artists could make it" (85). The losers of the civic election in the last story are cast as villains — "the cohorts of darkness were so completely routed that it was practically impossible to find them" (156) — yet the victors are the true servants of the Queen of Dulness. And throughout the book the ironic voice of the narrator takes pains to kep us informed that Arcady and its shepherds and shepherdesses constitute a double world of illusion and reality.

Sometimes we apprehend this duality obliquely, as, for example:

> Thus did the whole fortune of Tomlinson vanish in a night, even as the golden palace seen in the mirage of a desert sunset may fade before the eyes of the beholder, and leave no trace behind. (55)

Or, again: Mr Lucullus Fyshe "had the best collection of broken Italian furniture on the continent; there wasn't a sound piece among the lot" (58). But over and over again the narrator specifies by direct statement, clearly differentiating for us the two worlds of illusion and reality:

> "When you come to our side of the water, Fyshe," said the Duke, "I must show you my Botticelli."
>
> Had Mr. Fyshe, who knew nothing of art, expressed his real thought, he would have said, "Show me your which?" (15).

The ironic voice leaves no doubt: "For the truth was" (29); "But in reality . . ." (29); "Yet what had happened was very simple." (50); "There was another part of it which was perhaps more real," (59); "In fact . . ." (60); "But in reality . . ." (63); etc.

These patterns of paradox and of illusion and reality occur with such incremental frequency that they, like the patterns of character deployment and narrative deployment, build up to the final story in which all values are turned topsy turvy and the ominous cloud of Arcady darkens the entire metropolis.

One can with justice speak of the humour of *Arcadian Adventures.* It glitters with wit, irony, sarcasm, ridicule, slapstick, and many other devices of humour. The stories, taken singly, tickle the sense of fun. But cumulatively, taking the book as a whole, the humorous devices function to highlight the sham exterior of Arcady and in doing so indict the vicious reality of its interior. Arcady is a dream, like Tomlinson's wealth, glossing an ugly nightmare that is all too real. But Leacock was no dreamer, and the structured unity of *Arcadian Adventures* embodies a sombre, pessimistic theme.

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