

“Beyond the money, he would take nothing”

A literary analysis of Stephen Leacock’s stereotyped characters /

“Além do dinheiro, ele não levaria nada”

Uma análise literária dos personagens estereotipados de Stephen Leacock

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ABSTRACT

Cognisant that humorous narratives rely in many occasions on some stereotypes that have already become second nature for those who are reading them, the purpose of this analysis is to make out if and, if so, how the narrator of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) makes use of these stereotypes as to put them into question. For that to be achieved, we shall highlight and scrutinise the ironic tone of his/her descriptions especially in two specific moments of the narrative: 1) The hiring of a metropolitan speaker for addressing the candidacy discourses prior to the elections; and 2) The investigation carried out in Mariposa to solve the bank mystery. As to identify how the narrator develops this critique upon the stereotyping of both the novel’s saviour and the villain (i.e. the speaker and the vagrant who robs the town’s bank), we recur mainly to the elaborations on irony as a humorous artefact set forth by Constance Rourke in the book *American Humour* (1959) as well as to Peter Flynn’s ideas on stereotypical images available in *Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology* (2015). The results demonstrate how the narrator of our research object provides us with an effective mirror image of social stereotypes, giving us an opportunity to make out how we might tend to overemphasise the surface layer of a matter instead of looking deeply into that very same matter.

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RESUMO

Tendo em vista que narrativas de humor podem recorrer a alguns estereótipos que já se tornaram senso comum para o público por elas direcionado, o objetivo dessa análise é identificar se e de que maneira o narrador de *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) se utiliza desses estereótipos para colocá-los em cheque. Assim, enfatizamos e estudamos o tom irônico de suas descrições especialmente em dois momentos específicos da narrativa: 1) A contratação de um orador da metrópole para fazer os discursos de candidatura que precedem as eleições e 2) A investigação feita em Mariposa para solucionar o mistério do banco. Para identificar como o narrador desenvolve sua crítica sobre o estereótipo tanto do herói quanto do vilão do romance (i.e. o orador e o criminoso que assalta o banco), recorreremos às reflexões sobre ironia como artefato humorístico articuladas por Constance Rourke no livro *American Humour* (1959), bem como às ideias de Peter Flynn sobre imagens estereotipadas em *Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology* (2015). Os resultados demonstram como o narrador do nosso objeto de pesquisa nos fornece um claro reflexo dos estereótipos sociais, nos oportunizando reconhecer o modo em que costumamos superestimar as camadas superficiais da matéria ao invés de aprofundar nosso olhar por através dela.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Leacock. Estereótipos. Humor. Estudos canadenses.

1 Introduction: Leacock's Colourful Individuals¹

Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town (1912), considered by many one of the most enduring classics of Canadian humorous literature, comprises comic scenes taking place in a fictional village called Mariposa. According to Gerald Lynch, the fictional Mariposa represents a typical Early XX Century Canadian town divided between the urban and the rural; populated with what he calls colourful individuals, “it is the place from which many affluent city-dwellers migrated, the community which they have partly forgotten, and the ‘home’ towards which they nostalgically yearn. Mariposa is the past, at once individual and collective” (1984, p. 10). These “colourful individuals” are gradually introduced to the reader throughout the chapters, each focusing on some specific situation going on with each of them. The town and its inhabitants are presented by a narrator who talks to the readers, asks them questions, and even complains about their ignorance. Leacock’s (1912) narrator also confuses readers in terms of spatial and temporal localising since the construction of the narrative does not follow a chronological linearity: past, present, and future are interchanged in what may be an attempt at making us experience Mariposa as a timeless town – as a space that has never existed in reality, but that shall always be “real” in imagination. The reader can easily identify the moments when the narrator “has trouble at times with the chronological development of his narrative” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 4). This is also related to the fact

¹ This article is a reformulated excerpt from a PhD. thesis written by the author of this article and advised by its co-author. Such thesis is entitled “*Moving and changing in Mariposa*”: A literary analysis and infidel translation of humour in Leacock’s *Sunshine Sketches* available in the following address: <https://repositorio.ufsc.br/bitstream/handle/123456789/187083/PGET0350-T.pdf?sequence=-1>

that the novel intermingles the past, present and future through the advent of memory and imagination – asking us to accept the unacceptable and to follow the illogical structuring of “facts”.

For this brief analysis we shall focus on two comic scenes developed by Leacock’s (1912) narrator in the chapter where s/he tells us about the day before the elections as well as in a previous chapter, in which the event concerns a supposed attempt to rob the bank of Mariposa. The analysis, thus, is divided in two topics: “An unnamed speaker: The art of sophism” and “Looking for a Suspect: When justice is more blind than it should”. Cognisant that humorous narratives rely in many occasions on some stereotypes that have already become second nature for those who are reading them, the purpose of our analysis is to make out if and, if so, how the narrator of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) makes use of these stereotypes as to put them into question. For that to be achieved, we shall highlight and scrutinise the ironic tone of his/her descriptions in two specific moments of the narrative: 1) The hiring of a metropolitan speaker for addressing the candidacy discourses prior to the elections; and 2) The investigation carried out in Mariposa to solve the bank mystery. Setting off from the hypothesis that the narrator of the sketches mocks the usual structure of social stereotypes – both when it goes to the excessive credit given to a subject who masters linguistic artifices in our first discussion (the city speaker) and to the excessive suspicion directed to a peripheral individual in the second (the vagrant with a wooden leg). As to test such hypothesis and identify how the narrator develops this critique upon the stereotyping of both the novel’s saviour and the villain (i.e. the speaker and the vagrant), we recur mainly to the elaborations on irony as a humorous artefact set forth by Constance Rourke in the book *American Humour* (1959) as well as to Peter Flynn’s ideas on stereotypical images available in *Interconnecting Translation Studies and Imagology* (2015). Thereby, as the following topics are gradually developed, we shall 1) present more thoroughly our object of research, 2) provide a more general discussion regarding the relevance of stereotypes for meaning making and identity articulations, 3) analyse if and, if so, how Leacock’s (1912) narrator makes use of stereotyping as a humorous artifice, and 4) reflect upon the manner how any of this proves to be relevant when the process of translating this novel into Brazilian Portuguese is brought onto the arena.

2 An unnamed speaker: The art of sophism

It is important for one to have an idea on the historical reappearances of Leacock’s Mariposa before entering our discussion on the analysis and translation of his novel. The first



adaptation of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* happened in 1952, when the book was turned into a television series by CBC Television. In 2012, there happened a second television adaptation, also by CBC, this time into a film which was proposed as to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of this which is considered the most remarkable among Leacock's body of productions. Besides these clear manifestations of acknowledgement towards Leacock's legacy, since 1946 Canada has been promoting the annual award of the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour, which comprises a prize given to the best Canadian humorous writings. That taken into account, and as mentioned before, one could conclude that the relevance of Leacock's work is blatantly unquestionable. Moreover, this book, which is his most enduring and has intriguingly never been translated into Portuguese – notwithstanding its literary importance within not only Canada but actually throughout the Anglophone realm – has already been adapted twice into television series and film. Just like the CBC's adaptation of Leacock's sketches to the cinema in 2012 as to celebrate the 100 year anniversary of the *Sunshine Sketches* first edition from 1912, there have been many other moments and events in this same year whereby, one century after its production, the magnitude of this Canadian classic was reaffirmed by Canadians. One of them comprises Daphne Mainprize's non-fiction book named *Stephen Leacock's Mariposa: One Hundred Years of Sunshine, a Walking Tour of Orillia* (2012).² The author, Daphne Mainprize, is the curator emeritus of the Stephen Leacock Museum, a National Historic Site situated in Orillia, the "real" town which was Leacock's chief inspiration for creating Mariposa. The book deals with the history of Orillia, and with how Leacock has become of paramount importance for the city's and its inhabitants' immortalisation. In her book one gets to know that, because of Leacock, many people know Orillia by the name of Mariposa or by the epithet "Sunshine City". More than a chance for one to revisit the history, landmarks, and people that still belong to the conserved "Mariposa" of 100 years after Leacock experienced the city, this "century phenomenon" affecting the Mariposa experience is also conceptually relevant when it goes to literature per se as a whole.

In one of the last chapters of Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), the narrator reflects upon the social events accompanying the candidacy of some characters from

² The title of Daphne Mainprize' book – *One Hundred Years of Sunshine, a Walking Tour of Orillia* – published by the Canadian Council for the Arts, makes reference to Gabriel García Márquez's masterpiece, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1970) – whose original title is *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967). The novel has been brought up previously when I propose a comparison between his and Leacock's narrative – perhaps both the parallels that can be drawn between the two works, together with the fact that *One Hundred Years of Sunshine* was published 100 years after Leacock's novel, are possible reasons for motivating her choice.

Mariposa for governing the county. These subjects, who are competing against one another, have already been presented to readers at that moment: the honest Drone, the political Bagshaw, and the opportunist Mr. Smith. As such scenery is painted, something curious happens: the narrator observes that nobody from the town is asked to carry out the election's speeches that are about to occur. Instead of hiring someone from the town for the job, those in charge of the campaigns organisation make another choice, and their decision is rather unusual. "They had imported a special speaker from the city, a grave man with a white tie, who put his whole heart into the work and would take nothing for it except his expenses and a sum of money for each speech. Beyond the money, he would take nothing" (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 146). Here the narrator is, at any cost, trying to defend the idea of having this speaker who comes from the city especially for Mariposa elections, but his/her discourse sounds absurd, and, apparently, even s/he is capable of identifying that, to some level, his/her logic makes no sense. Even though it might sound strange for readers the idea of having a speaker from the city coming especially for the elections in Mariposa, this behaviour reveals a lot regarding how the inhabitants of Mariposa themselves undermine their own rural setting, idealising everything that comes from the metropolis. This special speaker who had been imported from the city – a seemingly very respectful grave man – is described by the narrator as a very self-sacrificing and altruistic subject who puts his whole heart into the work even though he would be given nothing in exchange. So far so good – if that were true. In this event, as it happens in many other literary evidences collected throughout the book, what comes after the narrator's allegations contradicts the whole image that the reader might have created theretofore. The speaker, we learn, would take nothing apart from his expenses and a sum of money for each speech.

"Well", the reader might ask him/herself, "beyond money what else could he take, anyways?" This is what makes irony such an important piece in this narrative, since the reader needs to recognise how much the narrator – in his frustrated attempt at convincing us about the connection felt by Mariposa inhabitants to the town – builds his speech in a biased manner. Evidence, as suggested, tends to point at the opposite direction of the narrator's arguments. There is a sense of community shared by Mariposa inhabitants, but it is not those who are worried about social welfare that trigger the interest of this voice that tells the story. The narrator demonstrates admiration towards those that take money from the inhabitants and make profit out of every opportunity that they find to do so, deceiving and making use of people's naiveté. However, the narrator, during all the narrative, does not accept this fact. In the specific case that we discuss at

this point, we have the arrival of this character, serious and in a white tie, who personifies the well-known figure of the sophist.

From the moment it was conceived, sophism has been related to the connection established between language and power – for, when it emerges in Sicilia, five centuries before Christ, democracy follows the expulsion of previous governing tyrants. Power, as a result, became a trophy, and those willing to possess it needed to master the art of rhetoric – e.g. during events when lands were passed on for new owners (RASSIER, 2014, p. 59). This context would be responsible for swelling the “market of sophists” – as the ability to use language with wisdom and property became a valuable item. Travellers would go from one city to another for teaching people discursive strategies in exchange for money.

When the inhabitants of the town accept to contribute financially for the speaker to take part in the elections, they demonstrate to be worried about the discursive aspect of local politics. The most important thing is not which candidate he is going to talk about, or if he is going to criticise or defend him. Sophist strategies work in both cases, and all everyone is eager to pay for it; the interests are mixed up and, being just one, the speaker shall have to deal with a panoply of demands. The sophist is a classic figure, but its role keeps up to contemporaneity – after all, language is still an arena for power battles. The hierarchy is still at work: professionals who “speak better” are, for instance, better paid and admired by all other social spheres. Those who communicate through discursive channels far too distant from the formal ones, on the other hand, are often ignored or undermine, regardless of how sage their arguments might be. The narrator’s opinion, and of the other characters living in the town, is that Mariposa needs someone to play the role of a sophist. Supporting such action, the narrator seems to agree, then, with common sense. In this sense, he is coherent with the stereotype that those who speak “poorly” should not be part of political campaigns, and those who speak “well” is very welcome, since we need someone able to be granted with the credit of truth – convincing the interlocutor about this or that. “The notion of ‘commonplace’ means that stereotypes are invoked without conscious awareness of their source and provenance, as an unspecific ‘it is said’” (FLYNN et al, 2015, p. 4). Obviously, to say something clearly, in a beautiful and convincing way, is not necessarily the same as “telling the truth” – the way how a message is transmitted becomes gradually to be more important than the message itself. The picture is clear: it does not matter what one says, it matters how s/he says.

After all, the sophist quality acts not in the rational aspect, but in what concerns rhetorical affection – evincing thereby the pragmatic character of the rapport that is constructed between

speaker and interlocutor. It is a two-way road: discursive positions are a result of social stratification, but they also determine such stratification. Leacock treats the idea of sophism with sharpness and sarcasm – but, for getting his point, one must be willing to go beyond the surfaces of meaning present in the first layer of the text. The joke is there for it to be found and interpreted, the inversion is a prerequisite for the ironist to achieve its purposes – what an ironic sentence means is, generally, the opposite of what it says. In Leacock's (1912) sketches, therefore, the comic effect is only tangible if the reader grasps the ironic charge of narrative discourse, aware that just a little of that which is being said configures the real sense of what is in fact taking place. "The ironist sees the mask for what it is, and when he shares this perception with an audience, he is on the way to becoming a dramatist. Nature is ironic (or yields irony), then, when you choose to regard her from the standpoint of unforeseen possibilities" (ROURKE, 1959, p. 227). Not only does the ironist see the mask for what it is, but s/he also helps readers do likewise by sharing this perception with them. In this sense, literature operates not as an attempt at showing us the face behind the mask, but by raising our awareness to the fact there is a mask – only masks, actually, and no face.

There are, indeed, many unforeseen possibilities that have perhaps never been envisaged by most subjects, and it is the role of art to open people's eyes to such possibilities, for them to choose how to regard what is seen with a new and less predictable array of tools to make out an image. Rourke (1959) articulates a deep reflection on how our laughter and tears are related to this unpredictable observation. At this point, comedy and tragedy engage in dialogue; humour makes the artist a humourist and a playwright: laughter does not emerge on its own, but depends objectively on the interlocutor identifying himself within the tragic details hidden behind something that seems to be funny. Not perchance, one may easily laugh of his/her own misfortune or of the misfortune of the other – adversities are generally related to what makes us laugh. Everything, in the end, is ironic or – at least – yields irony; and literature, in this sense, is transfigured into a manner of exploring language in its most dramatic, tragic, comic and, of course, ironic totality. literature, on its turn, becomes not a means to teach us something about the world that surrounds us; it is, on the contrary, a means to provide us with the necessary tools for us to find out how we can learn all these things by ourselves. Literary discourse, therefore, is an inner gaze that watches all the linguistic potentiality permeating each page of the narrative text. In a way, literature brings the reader to dialogue not only with the text itself, but with his/her own self, granting an opportunity for him/her to listen to his/her own imagination, fantasy, and the very meanings that were already there present in his/her mind – even before the book was opened. Inevitably, stored within our mind

there are many preconceived concepts and stereotypes considerably concrete and immobile: and these are precisely the elements that, mostly, humour rearticulates – kidnapping them.

3 Looking for a Suspect: When justice is blinder than it should

As our discussion on the sophist demonstrates, humour and irony are then overtly used in Leacock's (1912) novel as to unveil many hypocritical aspects of society – as the author seems to make fun of its superficiality. Permeating the narrative, many events make it difficult for the linear logic of modern society to operate successfully, and it seems Leacock is asking us to pay attention to such details, as they take place in several occasions and varying forms. Besides the chapter preceding the elections day, one of these moments emerges in the novel during the supposed robbery of the town bank – which becomes a huge mystery in Mariposa, even though it is not a robbery at all, but just a misunderstanding between two officers who, scared and confused, shoot one another. The first step for trying to describe the occurrence in the bank is also a first step onto all the future disorder that shall follow the police, narrator, and characters' attempt at making out the mystery – which takes a whole chapter, and is not solved at all. Even concerning the time when it happened one cannot be sure. Nevertheless, the narrator seems to trust in the evidence of the character Gillis – although such evidence is far from being comparable to any sort of evidence at all, as demonstrated by the following excerpt.

All of this must have happened at about three o'clock in the night. This much was established afterwards from the evidence of Gillis, the caretaker. When he first heard the sounds he had looked at his watch and noticed that it was half-past two – the watch he knew was three-quarters of an hour slow three days before and had been gaining since. (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 116)

The watch Gillis uses as data to situate when the scene had taken place is one that is far from reliable; therefore, bearing in mind that he knows he should not look at his watch without counting, he makes a senseless calculation as to interpret when the incident really occurred. Thus, how can anyone just trust in his “evidence”? Evidence requires a logical substantiation for a fact to be taken as true, and, in an investigation like the one taking place in Mariposa, the first step must be a coherent and consistent approach towards *when* and *how* someone had broken into the bank, causing all that commotion in the town. One could read Leacock's ironic perception of temporal facts, here, once again as a reflection upon our tendency to have faith on some people's discursive

ability rather than believing in palpable facts. Like the police and every other characters, the narrator collects data and attempt to put all such data together into a logical and sensible history to solve the mystery. That is, his/her worry is not to find out which discourses are coherent with the most plausible order of events – but to manipulate the events themselves as for them to fit in those discourses. The irony in Leacock's tone is responsible for showing how "the evidence of Gillis" does not prove anything; much on the contrary, no one has any reason for believing he really knows when the scene has taken place within the bank. This is what defines irony, the process of asking readers' to go beyond what is being said and provide a distinct interpretation to it – for us to understand how ridiculous our belief to "know time" might seem to be. In the end, "every understanding is actively interpretative. Even the most literal statement (what, actually, is a 'literal' statement?) has a hermeneutic dimension. It needs decoding. It means more or less or something other than it says" (STEINER, 1975, p. 280).

If even the simplest information depends on a whole set of interpretations concerning what surrounds it, one shall eventually assume that indeed every understanding is inherently interpretative. Here the narrator knows Gillis' evidence is not an evidence, and that it would be preposterous to rely on it; the reader thus cannot endeavour to make sense of the literary information without opening their eyes to the ironic load such information carries. We must interpret what is said by the narrator – who is either unable or, more likely, pretending to be unable to see the facts "as they are" – aware of the fact that such descriptions need methodical decoding. During Leacock's ironic portrayals of the facts, they usually – if not most often – mean more or less or something other than what is objectively said. This hermeneutic dimension, which provides the basis for us to understand how important it is to read and interpret every linguistic instance that is produced, is also responsible for allowing readers to establish a new set of frames. Afterwards, during the follow-up of the investigation on the robbery, eyewitnesses start to be briefed, and the issue of inconsistency among their versions of events emerges anew.

There was Pupkin's own story and Gillis's story, and the stories of all the people who had heard the shots and seen the robber (some said, the bunch of robbers) go running past (others said, walking past), in the night. Apparently the robber ran up and down half the streets of Mariposa before he vanished. (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 118)

There seems to be a total lack of connection between what is heard and seen by those Mariposans who allege to have information concerning the incident – for they do not agree on rather simple information such as the quantity of robbers or if they were walking or running after the crime. The narrator emphasises how important it is to listen to everyone who had (seemingly) been able to see or hear the action of the robber. This is, indeed, a rather funny moment. The inconsistencies are numerous: some Mariposans said they saw one robber while others saw more than one; moreover, some saw the robber walking whereas others saw him running. However, albeit all this confusion, the mystery is about to come to an end. Regardless of how unfeasible it would be to put all the pieces provided by each witness together, clearly the narrator looks eager to believe in all of them (people do not lie in Mariposa!). These several eye-witnesses whose portrayals and descriptions of the robber and of his acting were extremely incompatible would also require something very unlikely to have taken place: which is for the robber, motivated by no particular reason, to have taken a stroll around Mariposa before he left the town.

How likely the idea that “the robber ran up and down half the streets of Mariposa before he vanished” is? It is of course much more likely that these eye-witnesses were not witnesses at all, they are probably just inventing stories and alleging they have seen or heard things that did not actually occur – just so that they can live their fifteen minutes of fame while providing police with their testimonials. However, the narrator’s connection to Mariposa, his/her admiration for the town and its people, makes him unwilling to look beyond what is being said. This is the reason why s/he becomes so obsessed about extracting a logic unit out of purported facts and evidences – that can never make sense if other supposed facts and evidences are not taken as lies, inventions, or, at least, misunderstandings. The huge and evident atmosphere of illogicality surrounding the bank robbery is a channel for Leacock’s irony to get to those readers who cannot believe in how blind the narrator is to the impracticality of the supposed evidences he comments upon – but probably s/he is laughing at our attempt at making sense out of that event. After all the lengthy investigation both by the police and by Mariposans, after they were capable to identify the “unsub” for them to finally look for “the right man” – taking into account all the collected data and information (which, the reader has to agree, was far from being conclusive) – the supposed robber is finally arrested. The narrator is relieved with the information that the town is saved and shares it with the readers.

One man was arrested twenty miles away, at the other end of Missinaba county, who not only corresponded exactly with the description of the robber, but, in addition to this, had a wooden leg. Vagrants with one leg are always regarded

with suspicion in places like Mariposa, and whenever a robbery or a murder happens they are arrested in batches. (LEACOCK, 1912, p. 122)

Counting on the possibility that there might still be readers who have not realised yet there was no robbery – and that the two employees shot one another – more inconsistencies emerge. Is not it at least suspicious that the man who tried to rob the Mariposa bank would be at the other end of Missinaba County so soon? Even though he matched the description (wouldn't anyone match the description?), how could he be twenty miles away from Mariposa in such a short time? Here, besides the lack of this single pattern for concretely identifying any suspect, no witness had mentioned that this man had a wooden leg, and the narrator talks of it as if it were not a hindrance, but actually helpful for police officers to be assured that this was, indeed, the right person. That is, notwithstanding the fact that there were several descriptions emerging from the stories told by Mariposans and, regardless of that, none included a wooden leg, the fact that the arrested man had one is taken as evidence of his guilt – simply because wooden legs would be symptomatic of criminals. Curiously, what should prove his innocence attests he is the one the police are looking for. The narrator is most likely not trying to convince readers to be suspicious towards vagrants or people with wooden legs – if that were the case, his/her technique is ridiculous, for s/he gives us all signals that the arrested person is not guilty of anything. The narrator's ironic logic makes the reader laugh while s/he exposes in a farfetched exaggeration how preposterously justice works when looking for a villain – strategy deployed throughout the novel. The police just wanted to arrest someone, and vagrants are much easier to be arrested (especially if they have a wooden leg!); the idea is not to stop the crime, but to stop the commotion of Mariposan population. Through irony, our narrator opens up a very rich and deep discussion.

Here prejudice emerges as vagrants with wooden legs are made responsible for a crime no one knows if they committed – they are simply the most like suspects. In this sense, one could easily exchange these subjects for other ones, such as poor, black, and/or immigrants, of course when they come from peripheral countries. Bearing in mind that a prototype is defined as: “a set of inaccurate, simplistic generalizations about a group that allows others to categorize them and treat them accordingly”³, it is easy to notice that here the narrator is playing with such an idea. Justice has a conventionalised mould wherein criminality fits; and those who resemble the according inaccurate and simplistic generalisation are doomed to be regarded as potential criminals. As well

³ TFD.com. The Free Dictionary © 2013 Farlex, Inc. <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/digression>.

posed by Repsiene (2012, p. 18), “collective stereotypes are passed from generation to generation, ideologised and hardly susceptible to transformations, but their evaluation horizons can be broadened by forming and changing the direction of thinking”. Such broadening of evaluation horizon might occur also through humour, as far-fetched as this may seem; and, by making fun of the whole justice system, the fact that Leacock’s joke still makes sense is an evidence that, indeed, collective stereotypes are passed from time to time, and from space to space. The process of deploying stereotypes as a literary artifice activates readymade pictures in our heads, moulded by previous ideas assimilated through objective events and/or reinforced by the discourses that pervade our social environment – and this is true both for the speaker from the city and for the unknown subject who is believed to have invaded the bank. Making fun of such logic is precisely what Leacock’s narrator does, by unveiling the sort of social stereotyping that can be found in every corner of the world questioning, as a result, the idea that certain subjects are most likely to be inherently guilty for robbing banks while others are most likely to have their discourses taken as the truth.

It is a given that a great part of our context defines who we are – it is the interaction between text and context, between self and other, that constructs the subjectivity of being – and there is no escape from that. Notwithstanding the problems facing the translation of Leacock’s *Mariposa*, thus, this is a very interesting opportunity for us to see how impossible it would be for him to simply think of a city out of nowhere; Leacock’s memories could never let him forget his background context when he constructs the narrative, the events of the past never stop existing. Furthermore, even though the characters and the atmosphere of the book are undoubtedly connected to the local, readers from distinct nationalities have received the narrative rather positively due to its “universal appeal”. This is because the author emphasises *Mariposa*’s importance, and through this technique convinces his readers that the identities of both the village and its inhabitants are not necessarily restrained to their original place just because the local is a protagonist; in the end, there is no universal if there is no local for it to come from. Peter Klouda (2010) seems to endorse this notion that Stephen Leacock is able of addressing the local without necessarily creating stereotypes for it to function. In his view characters are not simply devised as good or evil; on the contrary “*Mariposa* is a small fictional Canadian town with a community composed by colourful characters with both their flaws and virtues portrayed in an affectionate manner” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 31). There is nonetheless no utopia without dystopia, no genesis without apocalypses; and, thus, “Leacock’s *Mariposa* is definitely not ideal, in the sense that its inhabitants are rather imperfect, yet at the same

time it is idealized. The community has both positive and negative qualities” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 32).

There are flaws and there are also virtues, but “the flaws are always depicted in a kind and humorous manner and are an essential part of the picture just like the virtues” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 33). Between virtues and flaws, selfishness and sense of community, the writer creates an identity equilibrium – one that does not try to evade the possible limitations of the town since its contributions to other parts of the world seem much more important. “By continually returning Mariposa to the state of balance, Leacock created a Mariposa that resists all changes and becomes permanent – as if viewed from the readers’ memory” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 34). “Real” cities disappear every day, but the fictional ones shall always remain. Fictional as it is, Leacock’s readers have to rely on the narrative to know what town is this “Mariposa”, where every tale described is taking place. But the descriptions regarding the town are far from being simple for one to deal with, for altogether there are three narrators in the sketches, all of whom bring distinct perspectives. We have Leacock (1912), the author, introducing his works and himself in the preface; the narrator in sketches number one to eleven, who is probably an inhabitant of Mariposa as he is not only omniscient but also shares the attitudes of other Mariposans. This is the narrator in “sketch number twelve, who is a former inhabitant of Mariposa and now resides in a city” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 18). It can safely be concluded, though, as affirms Gerald Lynch, that the ironic existence of three narrators to tell stories taking place at the same time and space is what “prohibits the assertion of simple or unequivocal truth” (1984, p. 5). This is so because an increase of the number of voices telling a story decreases its singularity; the advent of the plural makes one view on a matter rather impossible to be developed in fictional terms.

Moreover, for that conflict between the unequal forces represented by the metropolis and the countryside to be discussed effectively, *Sunshine Sketches* presents the character Smith in opposition to the life of the community. “If it were not for the cohesive vitality of the community and for Mariposa's childlike resilience, the little town in the sunshine would wilt in the shadow of such a presence” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 15). The “shadow” of Smith’s presence is the shadow that still shades every corner of contemporary society, the threat of commercial selfishness, of commoditising every aspect of one’s life and forcing him/her to be part of the society remodeling implied by market globalisation that is, supposedly, the best move for everyone. In this sense, Mariposans seem to have this “childlike resilience” not because they foster immature or dull reflections when compared to Smith – the mature and experienced man who has come from the city – but because they still

carry less greedy and ruthless behaviours. The narrators themselves, apparently unconsciously, prove to feel much more compassion towards Mariposa and Mariposans than towards the “city” or those who belong there. Such empathy becomes so strong in moments of tension that they do not care at all about pretending not to be biased during their descriptions: “In each instance of contrast, the narrator favours Mariposa” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 10). This is because all narrators realise that, if the city and Smith are characterised by selfish ambitions that aim only at making money to the detriment of others, “Mariposans [...] possess an ingrained instinct for communal life” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 15). Nevertheless, and as mentioned before, what makes it so easy for Smith to manipulate Mariposans is their will to see their town transformed into a city. What betrays them is their admiration and respect towards the metropolitan centres, and their fear of looking “rural”, as if they were “losers” if compared to those who come “from the city” for being unable to take the “right choices”.

Leacock ironically plays with this idea, showing that Mariposans, living in the margin of the great urban centres, have learned (as most of us are also still taught) that accurate decisions are those proposed by the supposed majority, and that if you deviate from the hegemonic position your opinion shall not only be ignored but also ridiculed. In the narrative, a clear illustration of this issue is Mariposans’ participation in Smith’s election. To win the Dominion election Smith once again manipulates with appearances, exploiting “Mariposans’ fear of voting for the losing side by having his clerk Billy send a fake telegram message announcing his victory from the city” (KLOUDA, 2010, p. 30-31). That is, Mariposans only vote for Smith because they mistakenly believe he is the one who is going to win; they do not care about voting for the candidate who better represents them, but about voting to the “right” one. The event Klouda highlights shows how Smith is sagaciously able to exploit one of the liabilities that most marks the character of Mariposans, which is their concern about the opinion of the others, about the others’ judgements, decisions, and conclusions which, wise or not, must be endorsed by them. Mariposans would indeed be probably ashamed if they voted for a candidate that ended up failing to win the election. Nevertheless, superficial as it might look, this fear is curiously also related to the fact that people in Mariposa are still worried about sharing an opinion, and this is so because “particularly, and in opposition to Smith, Mariposa’s most obvious virtue is its nature as an interdependent community” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 13). The ambivalent dualism is clear: Mariposa is an extremely interdependent community that stalwartly esteems the most independent person living therein.

Therefore, Mariposans' liability is also their asset; being accepted and respected by their comrades in their interdependent paths and choices is for Mariposans more important than voting for the candidates who best represent their individual interests. The election proves to be, in the end, just another of the several events that manifest Mariposans difficulty when faced by the necessity to separate the "selves" from the "others". Curiously, what is a real dilemma for them is nothing but a joke and opportunity for Mr. Smith to succeed since what Mariposans do possess in opposition to Smith is a concern for their community. This besides "a frequently nagging conscience which enable the reader to pass judgment on Smith's rampant individualism and materialism" (LYNCH, 1984, p. 9). This persistent consciousness of a reader who gradually gets to understand how the individual and the communal are opposed is not, nonetheless, evidence that the novel elaborates upon a simple dichotomy. In fact, at least in my reading, the sketches are scenes whereby Mr. Smith impersonates this sense of selfishness that accompanies the material interests underlying the will of Mariposans to become closer to the city. In this sense, I do not agree with Lynch when he develops an analysis emphasising how opposed Smith's needs are if compared with those of the other characters, especially for he only gains his importance within the narrative because he is praised and supported by such characters: evidence that there is some level of familiarity and/or esteem connecting them to this metropolitan gentleman.

Smith's rampant individualism and materialism are, thus, an embodiment of everything Mariposans understand as enviable; his characteristics are not condemned or denounced by those who surround him – they are, actually, what make them covet his condition. Such problematic ambivalence is addressed by Lynch (as the title of his article, "Mariposa vs. Mr. Smith", suggestively implies), who acknowledges and praises Mariposans altruistic connection with their town, traditions, and people while he also reckons their inability to realise that the seemingly selfless Mr. Smith is just a mask veiling the real interests of this supposedly superior character. Humanly there is nothing superior in Mr. Smith, and, surely, there is nothing altruistic in his acts; on the contrary, since the beginning "Smith acts in every instance for patently selfish reasons. He moves into Mariposa, exploits its deluded residents, and by the last sketch is on his way out" (LYNCH, 1984, p 2). The fact that Smith leaves Mariposa without showing any guilt or regret for deceiving and later abandoning those who elected him demonstrates that Mr. Smith used Mariposans while they were handy for his political ambitions. It is very likely that, eventually, he would probably leave the town and its inhabitants, for he had expectations that superseded Mariposans' ability to meet them. Mariposa has always been too small for Mr. Smith; in fact, the town was never a home for him;

from the first to the last sketch, “Mariposa is for Smith but a stopover, a springboard to greater things, if political life in Ottawa may so be termed” (LYNCH, 1984, p. 7).

Final Remarks: Irony as a social mechanism

As our analysis demonstrate, the narrator of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (LEACOCK, 1912) provides us with an effective mirror image of social stereotypes, giving us an opportunity to make out how we might tend to overemphasise the surface layer of a matter instead of looking deeply into that very same matter. Complex as it may seem, this is not much for humour to do – it is precisely the reason why it is there. Regardless of one’s ability to realise it or not, the comic is seemingly always related to a social issue; we can only laugh at that which is not acceptable or feasible because we do have an imaginary social inner organisation of our minds that makes us identify what is supposedly acceptable and feasible. Humour, in this sense, can and does work as a social mechanism either as to provoke the maintenance of hegemonic values through the demoralising of marginalised subjects – as an illustration one could think of the “vagrant with a wooden leg” as well as of the several jokes that ridicule black people, women, homosexuals, Jewish, immigrants, etc. – or it can be taken to the contrary direction: as to provoke the inversion of hegemonic values through the demoralising of people who are acknowledged by the social system wherein they are positioned – such as the narrator’s ironic description of the hired speaker as well as other discursive moments ridiculing politicians, U.S. citizens, lawyers, footballers, etc. It is important to bear in mind, in this sense, that the first approach to humour that is described hitherto is the easiest and, thus, also the most recurrent.

To laud the sophist and condemn the vagrant is the simplest; what is complex is to invert such logic – as Leacock (1912) does. That is, when the purpose of the humorist, parodist, or ironist is to make people laugh by reaffirming former arbitrary values that still underlay the social organisation of contemporaneity, nothing new is being proposed: they are just repeating the kind of practice that always made people laugh. Nevertheless, if there are those whose humorous comments aim at making people laugh through strengthening social values that should have been obliterated long ago – bearing in mind that the historical consequences of any sort of discrimination are unquestionable – there are also others who help subjects to see the ridiculous in the very core of hegemonic values. Finally, it is worth reminding that this text is but a single restructured topic from a much broader thesis that encompass a panoply of other elements. These elements are directly

related to the theme of the study herein proposed, reason why we would like to finish this text inviting all readers to consult our complete research in order to deepen your understanding towards the subjects that have surfaced from this handful of pages.

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