1968

An Analysis of Stephen Leacock's Treatment of the Detective Story

Beverly Lamb

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AN ANALYSIS OF STEPHEN LEACOCK'S TREATMENT
OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

BY
BEVERLEY LAMB

A thesis submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree Master of Arts, Major in
English, South Dakota
State University

1968

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AN ANALYSIS OF STEPHEN LEACOCK'S TREATMENT
OF THE DETECTIVE STORY

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Thesis Adviser

Head, English Department

Date
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On any list of Canadian writers, Stephen Leacock's name would have to appear at the top because of his achievements in humor. He has won for himself a unique place in the Canadian scene as economist, historian, critic, essayist, lecturer, and teacher, but above all, as a writer and speaker who is the incarnation of humor.

Born in the south of England, at Swanmoor in Hampshire on December 30, 1869, he moved, in 1876, with his family to Canada. For some time he had a tutor for his schooling but when his father left the family, Stephen was sent to Upper Canada College in Toronto.

After he graduated from Upper Canada College, he taught school, at first in country schools and then, in 1891, at Upper Canada College. He kept his position there for eight years during which time he obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Toronto, but he hated school-mastering on the secondary level and said he had "profound sympathy for the many gifted and brilliant men who are compelled to spend their lives in the most dreary, the most thankless, and the worst-paid profession in the world."¹ For this reason, presumably, in 1899, he borrowed some money, went to the University of Chicago, and took his degree as Doctor of Philosophy in economics and political science.

In 1901 he joined the Department of Economics and Political Science at McGill University in Montreal and remained there until 1936 when he was forced into retirement. He loved his college work and hated having to leave.¹

While he added lustre to the staff of McGill University for thirty-four years, his ability was acknowledged by honorary degrees from Brown University, Queen's University, Toronto University, Bishop's College, Lennoxville, and his own university in Montreal. As author of numerous books on many subjects, he has contributed greatly to the growing reputation of Canadian letters.

In 1938 he received the top literary award in Canada in the non-fiction class—the Governor-General's Prize. In total he was honored three times with significant medals for literary excellence, and in 1944, he was honored in the United States by having a liberty ship named after him. He was the only non-citizen of the United States honored in this way.²

Leacock was a writer all of his adult life, but his real career as a writer did not begin until he was about forty. At that

¹Stephen Leacock, along with thirteen others, was retired from McGill over a matter of policy. According to Ralph Curry in Stephen Leacock, Humorist and Humanist (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1959) Leacock never forgot nor forgave this. In 1937 Principal Morgan who had been involved in the retirement issue was asked to resign.

²Curry, Stephen Leacock, p. 341.
time he gathered up some pieces he had written and published them at his own expense. A copy of the publication fell into the hands of John Lane, an English publisher who made him an offer. Thus, *Literary Lapses* came to be published in 1910. This book really introduced Leacock to the world, encompassed the literary forms he was to use, and displayed his basic approach to humor.¹

Strangely enough, Leacock was at first recognized in England, then in the United States, and finally in Canada. Robertson Davies attributes this to the fact that "we were not sufficiently sure of ourselves in this country [Canada] to realize that a humorist may be a serious literary artist."²

One reason for Leacock's popularity in the United States was the fact that the people could look objectively at Europe. They were, in a sense, divorced from it and its traditions (many of which Leacock made fun of), while Canada was still closely tied to Europe. Another reason for Leacock's popularity was, no doubt, his use of exaggeration. Rapidity of American progress and the bigness of the continent has led to a familiarity with exaggeration, a common aspect of frontier humor. And finally, Leacock was popular because his writing contained the universal element that Mark Twain's had also possessed.

¹Curry, Stephen Leacock, p. 83.

Among those writing in the United States at the same time as Leacock were Frank P. Adams who turned classics into newspaper jargon, and George Ade who found material in fables, but neither of these had the sophistication in his humor that Leacock did. The American humorist Robert Benchley was his only real literary disciple.¹

In a way, Leacock represented the paradox of Canada. He was born in England, moved to Canada, and his humor is American. He, therefore, illustrates Canada's ties to both the new and old world. He was the first Canadian to attain a fame comparable to Mark Twain among all of the English-speaking people.

At the time of his death, Leacock had written sixty-one books in more than a half dozen fields. His record includes thirty-five volumes of humor, six in political science, two in economics, nine in history, one in education, five in criticism, and three in biography. Besides this and the humor he published in periodicals, he had written eighty-eight articles on many subjects. But despite this very versatile and admirable record, Leacock is best-remembered and best loved for his humor about which he himself said,

Many of my friends are under the impression that I write these humorous notings in idle moments when my wearied brain is unable to perform the serious labors of the economist. My own experience is exactly the other way. The writing of solid, instructive stuff, fortified by facts and figures is easy enough. There is no trouble

¹Curry, Stephen Leacock, p. 130.
in writing a scientific treatise of the folk-lore of Central China, or a political inquiry into the declining population of Prince Edward Island. But to write something out of one's own mind, worth reading for its own sake, is an arduous contrivance, only to be achieved in fortunate moments, few and far between. Personally, I would rather have written *Alice in Wonderland* than the whole of the *Encyclopedia Britannica.*

Although several writers have discussed Leacock's humor generally, none seemingly has taken any one phase of it and examined this in detail. The purpose of this paper is to consider Leacock's treatment of the detective story in light of the specific humorous techniques that he used and his attitude toward mystery fiction as a literary type. Since he plays such an important role in Canadian literature which is only now coming into recognition, he well deserves some study.

In a humorous way, Leacock wrote several stories or articles related in some way to detective literature. However, before any analysis of Leacock's detective story parodies or his other works relating to detective literature can be made, it is first necessary to examine the detective story framework upon which Leacock's parody is based and the humorous techniques that he uses to destroy this framework. Chapter Two will deal, therefore, with an examination of Leacock's humor, and Chapter Three will recount the essential or set elements found in detective story fiction. Chapter Four will then consider his parodies of the detective story and Chapter Five

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will contain a discussion of his articles or stories that criticize the detective story, but not in parody form.

Pertinent Literature

Leacock's best book of humor is probably *Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich* (1914). Two books that would rank next to it are *Literary Lapses* (1912), and *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), although these do not include his detective story parodies. *Laugh with Leacock* (1930) and *The Leacock Roundabout* (1965) are both anthologies of the best Leacock wrote.

His detective literature, with which this paper deals, is found in four sources. *The Leacock Roundabout* (1965) contains the following stories: "The Great Detective," "My Revelations as a Spy," "Maddened by Mystery or the Defective Detective," "Living with Murder," and "An Irreducible Detective Story." *Too Much College* (1939) contains the article "Twenty Cents Worth of Murder," and *Harper's Magazine* (1920) contains the "Who Do You Think Did It?" parody. Leacock's attitude toward detective literature is in part revealed also in an article entitled "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" contained in *Collier's* (1924).

A detailed analysis of any one phase of Leacock's humor is seemingly non-existent, although his humor in general has had some treatment. *Humor: Its Theory and Technique* (1935) and *Humor and Humanity* (1938) are two volumes on humor written by Leacock himself. Although both deal with the history of humor and Leacock's philosophy
about humor, in neither does he really dissect his own work. C. K. Allen's *Oh, Mr. Leacock!* (1925), which is supposedly an analysis of Leacock's humor, is a poor attempt by Allen at a Leacockian type of humor and is, therefore, of not much help. Mildred Strubble in an unpublished master's thesis entitled "Stephen Leacock, Jester" (Washington, 1920) compares Leacock to a jester, but once again treats his humor only in a general way.

Leacock's autobiography, *The Boy I Left Behind Me*, (1946) while full of color and insight has been found to be unreliable in places so that Peter McArthur's *Stephen Leacock* (1923) is a better source of biographical material.

Some information can also be gained from the section on Leacock in such general reference works as W.S. Wallace's *McMillan Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (1963), Kunitz and Haycroft's *Twentieth Century Authors* (1942), and Kunitz's *Authors Today and Yesterday* (1933). If Leacock is to be seen in an American setting, Thomas Masson's *Our American Humorists* (1922) is of value. Leacock is not mentioned in Constance Rourke's *American Humor* (1931), which is the classic study of humor, or in E.B. White's *Subtreasury of American Humor* (1941).

The best attempts at understanding both the man and his work have been made by Ralph L. Curry in *Stephen Leacock, Humorist and Humanist* (1959), and Robertson Davies's article "On Stephen Leacock" in *Masks of Fiction* (1961). Ralph Curry's book is an all-encompassing one that includes biographical material, analysis and appreciation
of Leacock's humor, and publication dates and content outlines for many of his works. Robertson Davies's work is significant in that it points out the particularly Canadian point of view toward Leacock.

In regard to information on the history and framework of the detective story as a literary type, both Marie Rodell's *Mystery Fiction, Theory and Technique* (1943) and Dorothy Sayers' *Omnibus of Crime* (1929) are standard scholarly works dealing with the analysis of the story as a type. Howard Haycroft's *Murder for Pleasure; The Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941) provides excellent detailed historical background on the detective story.
CHAPTER 2

LEACOCK'S PARODY AS A FORM OF CRITICISM

The techniques that Stephen Leacock uses to achieve his humor and his treatment of the detective story are so intimately tied together that they may be said to be one. His parodies on the detective story are utterly and totally successful because of the fact that the detective story is faulty in its original form in certain ways. The parody, then, simply shows up the faults through exaggeration and overstatement.

However, in order to fully appreciate the skill that Leacock displays in his treatment of the detective story, one should be familiar with his beliefs about his humor and with some of his specific techniques. This chapter will attempt to reveal these in the hope that such knowledge will give the reader more insight into the specific parody of the detective story.

Leacock felt that humor evolved and that there were several stages to the evolution of humor. The original basis of humor in mankind, he believed, was merriment at the sight of someone's misfortune. But this seemed contrary to the principle of sympathy, and humor, thus, had to undergo a refining process. The basis for humor changed from that of injury or destruction to that of incongruity. The shift occurred from the appearance of destruction simply to the incongruous and
the final stage of the development of humor is reached when amusement no longer arises from a single funny idea, meaningless contrast, or odd play on words, but rests upon a prolonged and sustained conception of the incongruities of human life itself.  

Humor evolved, then, from a basis of seeing something funny in another's misfortune, to seeing incongruity between objects or words, and, finally, to seeing incongruities in human life.

When the reader uses this analysis of the development of humor, he sees Stephen Leacock as a manifestation of the final stage in this development when he writes his parodies on the detective story because they are parodies on a particular class of literature. They show up the incongruity between the happenings in the story and the happenings in life. What are the chances of one man's discovering a murderer or a thief on the basis of clues that no one else can comprehend? Leacock would say that the probability is extremely unlikely.

Ultimately, he is perhaps pointing out the incongruity between the human desire for a society free of crime and the human curiosity about crime and interest in crime stories. In the article "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" Leacock is concerned with the percentage of the newspaper devoted to criminality and says the

1Stephen B. Leacock, "American Humor," Living Age, October 10, 1944, p. 94.
record will compare favorably with the Dark Ages. He wonders if we are not too morbidly fascinated with crime.¹

But, much as he may have been criticizing society, or a good part of society, for spending so much time on the detective story when it is incongruous itself, the mark of his humor was his sympathy for man—and usually, man beset by impersonal tyrannies like advertisements, fads, institutions and the like. He had sympathy for man whom he saw as too systematized, but he made fun of the system and not the man. His favorite humorous character was the little man in a society that was too complex for him. For example, in "My Financial Career" the little man becomes extremely rattled by the bank when he tries to open a savings account with fifty-six dollars, and ends by opening the account and at once, without realizing it, drawing out all the money again.² Leacock turns our sympathy, though, toward the man and not toward the bank. In much the same way, he does not attack the person who reads the detective story, but rather the faults within the story as a type.

Leacock's little man wants to continue to live in the complex world by making changes in it to suit himself, but, if this is impossible, to live without sacrificing his self respect, his

¹Stephen B. Leacock, "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" Collier's, November 1, 1924, p. 16.

principles, or his continuing identity. Incongruity between real and ideal is always a basis for Leacock's humor.

Although there was never malice in his humor, Leacock did believe that humor should "fight back" on occasion. In his writing and through his humor he liked to destroy romantic notions, so that much of his parody is directed against romantic literature. The detective story is an example. He starts with a logical beginning for a detective story, and, by using exaggerated caricature and burlesque, he works toward an absurd conclusion. In "Maddened by Mystery or the Defective Detective" he begins his story in the detective's office which is a natural beginning. The conclusion, however, is absurd, in that the detective, disguised as a dog, has failed to pay the dog tax and is destroyed by the dog-catchers.\(^1\)

But, whatever target he chose to direct his attack against, his humor was humane even though he felt that one of the essential good points of humor was its use "as a corrective to over-sentiment."\(^2\) He was an admirer of anti-romanticism and had a love of irreverence, although he was not a cynic.\(^3\)

Probably his true study and interest was humanity, for he seemed to feel that human kindness was a necessary element of good

\(^1\)Leacock, "Maddened by Mystery or the Defective Detective," in Leacock Roundabout, pp. 111-118.


\(^3\)Curry, *Stephen Leacock*, p. 279.
humor and no doubt felt that "humor is a way of saying things which would be intolerable if they were said directly." And because, as stated above, humor is a constant corrective, it is invaluable in the world as a kind of ballast. No criticism is really more effective than Leacock's type of ridicule because it is without malice.

In regard to the form that Leacock's humor assumed, he felt that burlesque and parody were probably the hardest forms of writing to do properly. However, he had great imagination for character, language, situation, and plot.

In his *Nonsense Novels* Leacock shows himself to be a parodist of extreme skill, for this book contains ten short parodies of almost as many kinds of stories. "Maddened by Mystery," for example, is a parody of Arthur Conan Doyle's type of story, while "The Man in Asbestosite" is a parody on Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Leacock felt that the man whose future Utopia was socialistic would need an asbestos suit because it would be Hell.

Ralph Curry reveals that "Gertrude the Governess or Simple Seventeen" is a caricature of Robert W. Chambers's historical novels. He further states that Leacock also parodied Marie Bashkirtseff, a writer of heart-rending confessions; Upton Sinclair; and Sir Walter

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Scott. The detective story was far from the only type he parodied. He poked fun at the sentimental novel, the Gothic tale, and the medieval romance.

Leacock picked the weakness in the style and then attacked it. Curry makes clear that he pointed the finger at Scott's insistence on using Scottish dialect and terminology where English would have served as well or better. With Bellamy he made a logical extension of the socialistic Utopia until it became so perfect all the citizens wanted to die. As a parodist, Leacock showed himself to be an astute student of literature. He copied structure; he copied types; he copied mannerism of character. With a practiced eye he picked the weaknesses in a type or genre and these became the strong points of his humor.

Leacock called his parody and burlesque "parasitic," but for him this really involved no offense because he felt that biology had nothing against a parasite and even calls the animal upon which it feeds a "host" which implies a genial relationship. He felt that the parody could invigorate and sustain the original works just as a parasite can bring to the parent plant elements of life and sustenance and purify it from disease.

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1Curry, Stephen Leacock, p. 92.

2Ibid.

3Ibid.

This parasitic literature includes "the whole range of humorous writing--achieved or attempted--which consists in getting fun out of something already written."\(^1\) and there are several kinds or types. Of these types Leacock felt that the highest level is reached when the parody not only reproduces the original but reproduces it in such a way as to show its weaknesses, its oversentiment, its bombast or what not. In this case the parody is often better than the original for such a form of parody could not be made against a poem that was not faulty.\(^2\)

This highest stage of parasitic literature occurs when the parody moves away from the single poem or story and reproduces and satirizes a type or genre. In fact, "this represents the dividing line between parody and burlesque. The one is a reproduction of a particular thing, the other of a class."\(^3\)

Parody, then, according to Leacock, is "a brilliant form of criticism drawing attention to literary defects or philosophical fallacies in a way as legitimate or exalted as a critical essay."\(^4\) He distinguishes it from burlesque which he says simply makes fun out of a particular story or article. Burlesque is "treatment of the

\(^1\)Leacock, *Humor, Its Theory and Technique*, p. 47.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 52.

\(^3\)Ibid., p. 54.

\(^4\)Leacock, *Humor and Humanity*, p. 52.
same theme in a comic way, not derogatory to the theme itself,"\(^1\) while much of parody is a protest against the over-sentimentality, or the over-reputation of the original. Parody has the function of criticism of a type implied in it, while burlesque is the humorous reproduction of a work simply for fun. As stated previously, Leacock parodied the sentimental novel, the medieval romance, the Gothic tale, and detective novels. Among his burlesques are obituaries, scholarly articles, verse, outlines and oratory. And his subject was not always literary. "Boarding House Geometry" is a burlesque based upon a mathematical theorem.\(^2\)

Parodies of literary style are as old as literature but seem to be always fresh. Leacock defines their use as that of "rendering defects visible by heightening the colors to the point of visibility...Hence a parody of style becomes an effective mode of criticizing style, often more rapid and effective than criticism itself."\(^3\)

Most parody depends upon exaggeration or improbability and Leacock really uses no new techniques, but his parody is good because he is acute and truly deadly in his analysis of an original work.

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\(^1\)Leacock, *Humor and Humanity*, p. 53.


\(^3\)Leacock, *Humor and Humanity*, p. 61.
Within his parody Leacock had four main tools which he used rather extensively to shape his philosophy. His principal tool, under many guises, was overstatement. In Leacock's case, overstatement most often took the form of simple exaggeration or an involved, frequently incorrect extension of an obvious statement. For example, in "Why I Am Leaving My Farm" Leacock exaggerates the language of the labels of bottles, manuals, and the old small-town newspapers.\footnote{Leacock, "Why I Am Leaving My Farm," in \textit{Leacock Roundabout}, pp. 36-39.} He makes the exaggerated point that he would have to return to school and study a great deal more to ever be able to return to the farm and to survive. He used exaggeration or overstatement everywhere—in character, in language, and in situation.

He used understatement in some cases, especially to achieve his anti-climactic humor. He extravagantly built toward a climax which he proceeded to knock down with an empty or trite phrase not foretold by the buildup at all. Sometimes his anticlimax appeared as a complete disintegration of reason, as if the idea were simply coming apart. He managed this by using statistics or details followed by a completely unwarranted and illogical statement.\footnote{Curry, \textit{Stephen Leacock}, p. 239.}

For example, in "Gertrude the Governess or Simple Seventeen" Leacock describes how the days passed as Gertrude awaited Lord Ronald. Leacock goes into a detailed description of the ordinary routine as the days go by, but then complete disintegration follows with the
statement, "It was already July 15, then within a day or two it was July 17, and, almost immediately afterwards, July 18." ¹

Because, in his philosophy, Leacock believed that humor was based upon seeing incongruity in human life, he recognized the value of using incongruity in his works. He liked putting together things which did not belong so. He placed objects that were not of the same group together. For example, he equates a boarding house and a mathematical theorem in "Boarding House Geometry." ² Often, too, he put together words that did not match or silly ideas with very high-sounding language, while he himself seems entirely removed. The result of using these techniques is a kind of "intellectual nonsense." ³ For example, in "Gertrude the Governess or Simple Seventeen," Lord Ronald "flung himself from the room, flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions." ⁴

Leacock was interested in techniques of humor, and in its language, for he had an astounding gift for using words and images so that laughter could not help but result. When he takes a humorous character, puts him in a humorous situation, and then uses the verbal technique with which he was gifted and the incongruities which he

¹ Leacock, "Gertrude the Governess or Simple Seventeen," in Leacock Roundabout, p. 65.


³ Curry, Stephen Leacock, p. 240.

⁴ Leacock, "Gertrude the Governess," p. 60.
saw in life, the reader finds unequaled humor. This humor which Leacock calls American, he says,

is based upon seeing things as they are, as apart from history, convention and prestige, and thus introducing sudden and startling conquests as between things as they are supposed to be—revered institutions, accepted traditions, established conventions—and things as they are.¹

¹Leacock, Humor and Humanity, p. 218.
CHAPTER 3

THE DETECTIVE STORY BACKGROUND FOR LEACOCK'S PARODY

In addition to examining Leacock's humor, in order to appreciate the excellence of Leacock's parody of the detective story and in order to understand his criticism of it, the reader must also examine the original that is the object of his attack. This chapter will discuss the standard elements to be found in mystery fiction.

All of mystery fiction has been defined as any story in which one or more elements are hidden or disguised until the end of the story. The reader of mystery fiction might expect to find in any story the thrill of the manhunt, the punishment of the criminal, a sense of reality about the story, and a sense of identification which makes him feel heroic.¹

Marie F. Rodell classifies mystery fiction into four types—the mystery novel, also called the character or literary mystery, which is essentially a study of people under stress with an analysis of their motives and convictions; the detective story, which is concerned with a puzzle presented to a detective or detective substitute, which is supposedly the most intellectual type of mystery fiction; the horror story where the appeal is largely emotional,

¹Marie F. Rodell, Mystery Fiction, Theory and Technique (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943), p. 17.
and the purpose is to solve the puzzle and bring the horror to a close; and the adventury-mystery which often combines the detective and horror story.¹ This study will be confined to the detective story since Leacock deals mainly with that specific type which depends for its success upon the intellectual processes of the reader. However, existence of detection in all of the types of mystery fiction presupposes a detective, the things with which he must work (clues, alibis), and the things with which he detects (his analysis, intellect).

Although puzzles, mystery stories, stories of crime and stories of deduction and analysis have existed since earliest times, the detective story is really a development of the modern age since detective stories could not exist until there were detectives or a police force, and this did not occur until the nineteenth century. The Metropolitan Police of London were organized by Robert Peele in 1829 although previous to that time there had been a night watch and many special police. Paid police forces in America followed shortly afterward--1839 in Boston and 1844 in New York City.²

Edgar Allan Poe, an American writer, laid down the general principles for the detective story and anticipated much of its future development. Nothing of real essence has been added to the modern detective story since Poe completed his trilogy--"The Murders in the

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, pp. 17-30.
Rue Morgue," published in 1841; "The Mystery of Marie Roget," published in 1842; and "The Purloined Letter," published in 1845. Poe, in these stories, established the external framework of the detective story and also many of the internal characteristics. Many of his techniques are still observed in detective stories today. Some of these standard elements are the blundering of the law, the eccentric detective, the pointing finger of unjust suspicion, the analysis of deduction by putting one's self in another's position, the surprise solution, and the final explanation when everything is over.

Poe's master-mind, Detective Dupin, draws deductions that the police have overlooked and discovers clues that the police had not thought of looking for. In him, Poe really set the stage for the "eccentric and brilliant detective whose doings are chronicled by an admiring and thick-headed friend."¹

Forty years later Conan Doyle, a British author, took the Poe formula, enlivened it, and made it popular. The year 1886 marked the "birth" of Sherlock Holmes, although he was not publicly known until about one year later.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had been a great reader as a young boy and M. Dupin of Poe's stories fascinated him. In later years this character reminded him of a former teacher in medical school who had

been marvelous at observation and deductive diagnosis. Doyle felt that if this teacher had been a detective he would "surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business \[\text{that of crime-solving}\] to something nearer an exact science."¹

Doyle's stories are more popular than Poe's because Doyle "cut out the elaborate psychological introduction, or restated them in crisp dialogue."² Sherlock Holmes, Doyle's creation, remains today to be probably the best-known and best-loved fictional detective. The stories have withstood the test of time and are today looked upon as classics. But for the tales in which Sherlock Holmes appeared, the detective story as we know it might never have developed. His fame is unequalled. Leacock says of Sherlock Holmes that even in our world Sherlock has long since become an idea which corresponds to a god in the ancient world. Conan Doyle has ceased to have anything to do with him...Sherlock soon broke loose from his interpreter's control. He dragged the unwilling Doyle after him, pleading and protesting, and when Doyle could write no more, Sherlock set up for himself as an idea.³

In the Conan Doyle stories, Watson, the narrator and foil for Sherlock Holmes, followed almost a set formula. First, there was the Baker Street setting and the mysterious great detective, the statement of the problem, and the insufficient evidence; then, the

²Sayers, Omnibus of Crime, p. 31.
³Leacock, Humor, Its Theory and Technique, p. 75.
mystification and suspense, the elaboration of the problem, the adventure; and, finally, the anti-climactic explanations of the great detective, revealing how easy it all had been.¹

After Conan Doyle there was an avalanche of mystery fiction so that

book upon book, magazine upon magazine pour out from the Press crammed with murders, thefts, arsons, frauds, conspiracies, problems, puzzles, mysteries, thrills, maniacs, crooks, prisoners, forgers, garrotters, police, spies, secret-service men, detectives, until it seems that half the world must be engaged in setting riddles for the other half to solve.²

Detective stories are among the most popular works of contemporary fiction and some of the most popular authors are Ellery Queen, Agatha Christie, and Mary Roberts Rinehart.

That there is detection involved in these stories means that some crime has been committed or some puzzle has come about. In the story, then, a motive for the crime, a means of committing it, and an opportunity to commit it must be provided. The motive is the reason for committing the crime; the means refers to the method by which the crime has been committed, the weapon used, and the availability of weapon and method to the criminal; while the opportunity refers to the access to the weapon and the victim, and the inability


of the criminal to prove he was elsewhere when the crime was
committed.¹

One of the first requirements for a detective story is that
it must play fairly with the reader. All the clues must be laid
before the reader and no evidence should be known to the reader that
is not known by the detective. Nothing should fail to contribute to
the development of the plot—-not even innocent suspects, since this
may be confusing to the reader. Suspense must be progressive so
that the problem becomes more and more complicated, but the reader
should see all the facts upon which the detective bases his as-
sumptions. The ultra-scientific detective does not make for a good
story because the reader feels a sense of inferiority; he is left
behind in the untangling of clues and this leaves him only to wonder
and admire. If a false impression is to be created, it should be
done by a character in the story and not by the author in order to
deceive the reader. The detective, then, should not know something
unknown to the reader, nor should the author of the story deliber-
ately attempt to confuse the reader.

The second requirement upon which the detective story is based
is that the story must have action and read like a story. It should
not be merely a static puzzle. The story must fit the crime and the
writer of mystery fiction must keep in mind that the reader wants to
feel some sense of identification with the hero. With the detective

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, p. 37.
story the identification is with the detective or the heroic character even though the sense of participation comes from the viewpoint character. This occurs in the split situation such as the Sherlock Holmes-Watson combination in Doyle's stories where the narrator is usually not intelligent and asks all the obvious questions. The master-mind then stuns the reader with his brilliance, while the foil draws attention to all the wonderful talents of the hero.

The novel which will offer the fullest measure of escape to its readers is one in which the characters are enough like the reader to make identification possible, the world near enough his own so he can believe its events may some day happen to him, but the whole sufficiently more glamorous or exciting so that it offers a reasonable exchange for his own humorous existence.¹

It would be highly improper for the hero in the story to expound his own virtues, so the foil may "utter expressions of eulogy which would be unbecoming in the mouth of the author, gaping at his own colossal intellect."² This foil serves another function in that the reader is always more ingenious than this person, so that the writer indirectly flatters the reader.

The setting and the character determine, quite obviously, at least in part, the nature of the crime, the motive and the way it is carried out. Innocent suspects are frequently used in the story first for expository reasons and second to distract the reader from the real criminal.

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, p. 77.
The clues to be found in any detective story are the traces of guilt that the criminal leaves behind him. According to authorities in the field of mystery fiction, a good clue points in the right direction but seems at first to point in the wrong direction—to mean something other than it does, or to point nowhere at all. Clues are usually buried in the story by the writer's introducing some action immediately following them so that the reader forgets them, or by putting clues among casual happenings so that they seem to have no significance. Sometimes the actual clue and its application are separated by a number of pages.¹

As will be indicated in Chapter Four, Stephen Leacock utterly destroys the intellectual framework of the story by the stupidity of his detectives and the absurdity of the clues in his stories.

These stories are certainly readable and the plot fits the crime in that the crime and the solution are equally ridiculous and, because of the humorous techniques outlined in Chapter Two, the reader cannot help laughing aloud as he reads. Ironically, in Leacock's stories, the reader's sense of identification comes from the fact that the reader feels completely superior to both the supposed heroic detective and his foil.

Leacock takes, then, the basic elements of any detective story. He exaggerates them; he uses understatement, incongruity,

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, p. 49.
and the verbal techniques with which he was gifted. He copies structure, style, and character, and the result is a hilarious destruction of the detective story as a literary form. He picks at the weak points until the entire framework comes crashing down.
CHAPTER 4

LEACOCK'S DETECTIVE STORY PARODIES

The detective story as a type, as the reader can see from Chapter Three, really invites parody, since there is a specific setting, certain characters, and always, the theme of deduction from small details unnoticed by the ordinary observer.

Stephen Leacock uses exaggeration, understatement, incongruity, and appropriate language to achieve his humor. He incorporates these into the detective story, and, in this way, uniquely criticizes the story as a literary form. This chapter will examine each of the detective story parodies that Leacock wrote and will reveal his particular techniques in the light of detective story techniques. The chapter will deal with the following stories: "The Great Detective," "Who Do You Think Did It?" "Maddened by Mystery or the Defective Detective," and "An Irreducible Detective Story."

Leacock's main technique is that of exaggeration, and he exaggerates the setting, the characters, and the theme found in detective stories.

First, then, he exaggerates the setting. In "The Great Detective" parody, Leacock says that detective stories are beautifully easy to begin because all the author needs is a murder. Leacock exaggerates the setting by revealing that there are only two ways the story can begin. Either a gentleman sitting alone in his office is
"about to get a crack on the nut"¹ or the writer can "begin with
The Body itself right away."² While Leacock does exaggerate the
setting of the story (because in actuality there can be many begin-
nings), he is probably correct in assuming that "as long as the
reader knows that there is a Body right away, or that there is
going to be one, he is satisfied."³

Secondly, Leacock exaggerates the characters in the detective
story. A requirement of every mystery story is that it have some
super-hero with which the reader can identify. Poe's Dupin and
Doyle's Holmes are master-minds who draw deductions and discover
clues that have been overlooked. Although Leacock's detective is
nameless, he is the embodiment of the stereotyped detective. Leacock
uses the exaggeration for which he is famous and sketches his "Great
Detective" as such a hero that "he only speaks about once a week.
He seldom eats. He crawls around in the grass picking up clues.
He sits upside down in his armchair forging his inexorable chain of
logic"⁴ and when he has solved the crime "takes a night off at the
Grand Opera, the only thing that reaches him."⁵ The picture of the
eccentric detective is thus parodied in its extreme form, for the

²Ibid.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid., p. 87.
⁵Ibid.
reader is at once reminded of the thin, sinewy figure of Sherlock Holmes, master of the violin, who on his knees traces some culprit's trail through a sodden garden.

In "Maddened by Mystery" Leacock again refers to his main character as the "Great Detective" and at once injects humor into his story by his exaggerated description of this detective who "wore a long green gown and half a dozen secret badges pinned to the outside of it." As usual, the detective never reveals anything so that his face "was absolutely impenetrable." The police are, according to detective story protocol, completely baffled, but Leacock exaggerates this to the point of nonsense by saying that they are "so completely baffled...that they are lying collapsed in heaps; many of them have committed suicide."

This "Great Detective" is, of course, above telling the story. As Leacock says, with tongue in cheek, modesty wouldn't allow him to show how truly clever he is and how wonderful his deductions are, so the foil must act as narrator.

In addition to exaggerating setting and characters Leacock also exaggerates the theme of detective stories, that of deduction from small details or minute clues. According to Rodell's criteria

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1 Leacock, "Maddened by Mystery," p. 111.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

for good mystery fiction, clues should not be ultra-scientific and all of them should be known to the reader. The suspects, even the innocent ones, are to contribute to the plot. Leacock grossly exaggerates and says that "a good writer in the outset of a crime story throws around suspicion like pepper"\(^1\) and introduces all sorts of suspicious characters who really have nothing to do with the story. In his "Who Do You Think Did It?" parody, he introduces a host of characters, many of whom have nothing to do with the story except to perform the function of confusing the reader.

Leacock also pokes fun at the method by which detectives arrive at their conclusions by saying that the "Great Detective" is "equipped with a sort of super-scientific knowledge of things, materials, substances, chemistry, action, and reactions that would give him a Ph. D. degree and the criminal is as good as caught."\(^2\) The reader is again reminded of Sherlock Holmes who is master of a dozen obscure sciences and whose brilliant analytical faculties and indefatigable interest can solve any detective problem that is utterly baffling to Scotland Yard.

In "An Irreducible Detective Story" Leacock makes fun of the detective character in mystery fiction and his deductions from clues, by again working with probably his most effective tool—that of exaggeration. The clue, in this story, is a hair in the lapel of

\(^1\)Leacock, "The Great Detective," p. 89.

\(^2\)Ibid., p. 95.
a dead man's coat—a hair that the detective finds by using his microscope. The detective then ridiculously assumes that all he must do to solve the crime is find a man who has lost a hair. When he finally makes an arrest and finds out his suspect is completely bald, he assumes "he has committed not one murder but about a million."¹ This deduction makes fun of those that are made in detective stories and shows the weaknesses in them because of their flimsy basis and the false assumptions that are made.

The detective in the "Who Do You Think Did It?" parody is faultless and once again proves to be the hero as "sleepless, almost foodless, and absolutely drinkless, he was everywhere."² He does find the square of cloth missing from the victim's jacket and by holding it under his magnifying glass indicates "it's been stamped upon—by a man wearing hobnailed boots—made in Ireland—a man five feet nine and half inches high..."³ Leacock makes fun of the deductions in detective stories by having his detective announce that he can tell this by the "depth of the dint."⁴

Unlike other detective story endings, in this story, even the detective admits that there were points about the solution that he

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³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.
"didn't get exactly straight somehow."¹ This is incongruous to the reader because of the fact that in the typical detective story all the clues fit together and the detective must smugly unravel the mystery at the end for the others involved.

The mystery of the "Madden by Mystery" parody revolves around the fact that a certain Prince of Wurttemberg has been kidnapped. From the word "pup" the "Great Detective" assumes that the Prince is a young man. Because he is described as having "a long wet snout"² the "Great Detective" assumes he must be a drinking man and from the clue that he has "a streak of white hair across his back"³ the "Great Detective" decides that this must be the "first sign of the results of his abandoned life."⁴ Leacock derives his humor from the exaggerated fact that despite the many pointed clues that the Prince is a dog, the "Great Detective" does not realize this until he sees a picture. Rather than forming all the correct conclusions as detectives are supposed to do, Leacock's "Great Detective" forms all the wrong ones and his errors are humorous because they are so obvious to the reader and not to him. By means of exaggeration Leacock has reversed the principles of the detective story.

¹Leacock, "Who Do You Think Did It?", p. 610.
²Leacock, "Madden by Mystery," p. 115.
³Ibid.
⁴Ibid.
Suspects are used to create suspense and to distract the reader from the real criminal. Leacock pretends that the mystery in "Maddened by Mystery" is so full of suspense that even the suspects must be disguised. The humor comes in the exaggerated manner of entry and the exaggerated disguise. For example, as the first witness or suspect entered "he crawled stealthily on his hands and knees. A hearthrug thrown over his head and shoulders disguised his identity."¹

In addition to his principal tool of exaggeration, Leacock makes frequent use of understatement or anti-climax in his stories. He uses these especially when referring to clues and to characters. Leacock uses his mastery of understatement in the outlining of the clues to the murder in "Who Do You Think Did It?" He describes the victim as being

dressed in his evening clothes, lying on his back on the floor of the billiard room with his feet stuck up on the edge of the table. A narrow, black scarf, presumably his evening tie, was twisted tightly about his neck by means of a billiard cue inserted in it. He apparently died from strangulation. A couple of bullet holes passed through his body, one on each side, but they went out again. His suspenders were burst at the back. His hands were folded across his chest. One of them still held a white billiard ball.²

Then, in a pointed example of the type of understatement or anti-climactic humor of which he was capable, he adds that "there was no

¹Leacock, "Maddened by Mystery," p. 113.
²Leacock, "Who Do You Think Did It?" p. 600.
sign of a struggle or of any disturbance in the room."\(^1\) Although everything in the previous statements leads up to the fact that there was a struggle, he adds that there was none.

The clue which gives the detective the solution to the mystery in "Madden by Mystery" is a portrait of a Dachshund. In an anti-climactic manner, Leacock says "in a fraction of a second the lightning mind of the Great Detective had penetrated the whole mystery."\(^2\)

With most detective stories the ending is anti-climactic. Leacock makes his ending anti-climactic in "Madden by Mystery" by its being entirely absurd. Since the dog's markings have been changed in the kidnapping process, the detective, in one of his disguises, impersonates the dog at the show, takes first prize, but is destroyed by the dog catcher as he has failed to pay the dog tax.

Leacock uses understatement in the case of the characters as well as the clues. The foil, as stated previously, has the function of revealing the great intellect of the detective. In "The Great Detective" parody Leacock pointedly calls this character the "Poor Nut" and tells us that he gives the reader compensation in that "however much fogged the reader may get, he has at least the comfort of knowing that the Nut is far more fogged than he is."\(^3\) That the "Poor Nut" is rather slow-witted, Leacock reveals by his use of

\(^1\)Leacock, "Who Do You Think Did It?" p. 600.
\(^2\)Leacock, "Madden by Mystery," p. 115.
\(^3\)Leacock, "The Great Detective," p. 90.
understatement in the fact that the words "Restauranto Italiano"
lead the "Poor Nut" to deduce that "it was an Italian restaurant."

A third technique that Leacock uses is that of placing side
by side in his detective parodies absurd clues along with ridiculous
assumptions to point out the incongruity between the clues in the
true detective stories and the deductions made from them.

The clues by which Leacock's "Great Detective" solves his
crimes are hilarious. Although they are gross exaggerations of the
type of clues found in the detective story, they serve to point out
the impossibility of the type of deduction the detective makes. For
example, he finds the footprint of the criminal and figures out the
length of his foot "by measuring the print of the rubber...and then
subtracting from it the thickness of the material multiplied by
two."2 The "Poor Nut" asks why he has multiplied by two and the
"Great Detective" replies "for the toe and the heel."3 Anti-
climactic humor is revealed here also by the completely illogical
statement after the build-up of detail.

Later, the "Great Detective" finds another clue—"the letters
ACK clearly stamped, but in reverse, on the soft green of the
grass,"4—and at once realizes "they are the last three letters of

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2Ibid., p. 90.
3Ibid.
4Ibid., p. 94.
the word DACK, the name of a well-known shoemaker in Market Croydon."¹ Then there are the letters ILTON stamped in the mud which the "Great Detective" says comes from Bilton, the name of a tailor. The conclusion, according to the "Great Detective" is that the criminal is wearing a pair of trousers bought in Kings Croft and a shoe bought in Market Croydon. From this deduction, he assumes in an incongruous manner that the criminal lives half-way between the two.

In another case the arrest of the murderer is achieved by computing algebraically the path of a bullet fired three miles away. The "Great Detective" calculates back the path of the bullet. The incongruity between truth and the situation created here is great.

In the "Who Do You Think Did It?" parody, the detective assumes simply from the footprints that they are the "tracks of a man with a wooden leg...in all probability a sailor, newly landed from Java, carrying a Singapore walking stick, with a tin whistle tied around his belt."² The assumption made is entirely incongruous with the clue.

Leacock uses incongruity in his "Maddened by Mystery" parody by having the Prime Minister of England and the Archbishop of Canterbury involved in the kidnapping of a dog.

¹Leacock, "The Great Detective," p. 94.
²Leacock, "Who Do You Think Did It?" p. 601.
In addition to exaggeration, understatement, and incongruity, clever use of words promotes humor in Leacock's parodies. In the classic detective story statement about the police in "Who Do You Think Did It?" Leacock says they were "leaning against the fence in all directions. They wore that baffled look so common to the detective force of the metropolis." The words used in the first part of the statement appear to make sense and yet upon close scrutiny make only a ridiculous statement.

Through his expert use of words Leacock pokes fun at the detective stories which use scientific analysis when he says in "Who Do You Think Did It?" that the body

showed evident marks of violence. There was a distinct lesion to the oesophagus and a decided excoriation of the fibula. The mesodenum was gibbous. There was a certain quantity of flab in the binomium and the proscenium was wide open.

The detective in mystery stories is frequently tall and thin. Leacock makes fun of this by asking "why a cadaverous man can solve a mystery better than a fat one." Frequently, also, the detective is described as having a hawk-like face. Leacock feels that the mystery writers do not realize that a hawk is one of the most stupid

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1Leacock, "Who Do You Think Did It?", p. 600.
2Ibid., p. 603.
animals and in his humorous way says, "a detective with a face like an ourang-outang would beat it all to bits."

Leacock uses, then, his techniques of exaggeration, understatement, incongruity, and effective language; he applies these to the elements found in detective stories and shows how really absurd the stories become.

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CHAPTER 5

LEACOCK'S CRITICISM OF THE DETECTIVE STORY AND CRIME

Chapter Four dealt with the specific detective parodies that Leacock wrote. This chapter will attempt to examine other pieces that he wrote which further reveal his attitude toward crime literature. The chapter will examine the following stories: "My Revelations As a Spy," "Living with Murder," "Twenty Cents Worth of Murder," and "Such Fine Murders We're Having!"

While neither "My Revelations As a Spy" nor "Living with Murder" is a parody of the detective story, both, no doubt, have their roots buried in it. In both, Leacock uses only one main technique of humor and that is the use of detail until the point that the speaker is making either becomes utterly absurd or is entirely lost.

"My Revelations As a Spy" is a narrative supposedly relating the kind of work a spy does. The narrator-spy, in his stupidity, reminds the reader at once of the "Great Detective" when he says,

Us Spies or We Spies--for we call ourselves both--are thus a race apart. None knows us. All fear us. Where do we live? Nowhere. Where are we? Everywhere. Frequently, we don't know ourselves where we are...One of the most brilliant men in the Hungarian Secret Service, once spent a month in New York under the impression that he was in Winnipeg. If this happened to the most brilliant, think of the others.\(^1\)

\(^1\)Leacock, "My Revelations As a Spy," in Leacock Roundabout, p. 103.
"Living with Murder" is the nonsense story in which a great reader of detective fiction finds he must time everything that he does or sees in order to be able to use it as evidence. In it, LeacocK uses the same technique as he did in his spy story, but this time he exaggerates the timing that is done in detective stories. His anti-climactic type of humor is revealed in the story when the narrator says:

we sat down to dinner at 7:30 P.M. Of this I am practically certain because I remember that Douglas said, 'Well, it's half-past,' and as he said it the Ormolu clock chimed the half-hour. A further corroboration is that the Chinese servant entered at that moment and said, 'Half-past seven!' I gather, therefore, that the hour was either seven-thirty or possibly a little before or a little after.\(^1\)

The last statement totally destroys the build-up of detail.

Nowhere is Leacock more successful at spoofing the detective story than in "Twenty Cents' Worth of Murder" where he proposes himself as an avid reader of detective fiction and feels he should offer to the authors of this type of story a few suggestions. All of these suggestions are entirely opposite to the standards followed by mystery writing and those demanded by protocol. In this way, Leacock points out the rigidity in detective fiction and the sense of falseness upon which it is based.

The first suggestion that he makes is that the detective story author should not simply begin with the body. He says that

\(^{1}\)Leacock, "Living with Murder," in *Leacock Roundabout*, p. 120.
the reader should be given

a chance to learn to know the man a little, and like him, and then his death is like that of a friend; or let him be such a mean hound that we get to hate him; then when his body is found, who is happier than we are?¹

It is true that according to standards in the detective story the reader must form some sort of identification, but it is supposed to be formed with the detective or master-mind, and not with the victim. Attachment to the personality which is ultimately to become the "body" in the story is too morbid a beginning and the victim's death should be a rather inconsequential part of the story.

The second suggestion that Leacock makes is that there should be "no string of people, a houseful of them, who have to be under suspicion one after the other, so that we can see it all coming."² The irony here is that the suspects are a good part of what makes up mystery fiction. They are a part of the puzzle that the detective must solve and they supposedly serve to divert the reader from the true criminal. Leacock is also contradicting what he himself did in his parodies. He had many suspects—in fact, too many for the reader to keep in mind.

Leacock further suggests that an author of mystery fiction cut out any diagrams, for he "can't study all that out,"³ while the truly


²Ibid.

³Ibid.
avid mystery fan wants to study everything out—to try to outwit the
detective in the story. If the reader has no time to be interested
in the clues, he is not truly interested in the story.

The clues in the story, according to Leacock, should be of the
scientific type and not of the footprint or fingerprint variety.
According to Rodell the story should not include the too-scientific-
type clue as the reader becomes lost.¹ Good stuff, though, ac-
cording to Leacock, would be "blowing powder into a footprint of
mud, filling it up with cement and then taking out a perfect over-
shoe."² In reality this would be very poor detective story material.
It is too fantastic to be believable and all the material must be
both readable and believable according to authoritative criteria.

Leacock, in concluding, says he wants no great climax to the
story and in the conclusion the criminal should be hanged. In good
detective fiction the climax of the story occurs when the mystery
is solved, because the actual puzzle forms the heart of the story.
The fate of the criminal, like the fate of the victim, should be
rather inconsequential.

Leacock, in this and in his other works relating to detective
fiction, is basically criticizing the lack of variety in this type
of literature. No element can really be changed without destroying
the framework upon which the story is based. Plot, characters,

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, p. 49.
setting, and suspects become so repetitious that they easily can become boring to the intelligent reader. The plot always includes some puzzle to be solved, the characters who solve the puzzle are always a detective with a master mind and his partner who acts as narrator and foil. While the setting can have some variety, it frequently involves either the detective's office or the home of the victim. And finally, innocent suspects appear one by one throughout the plot before the criminal is finally caught and the puzzle solved.

However, Leacock is making fun of a system and not of a man. His stories indirectly poke fun at the type of person who thrives on detective literature, but he does this by showing how static crime literature really is. There is seldom diversion in any one part of the formula.

Perhaps Leacock feels that by pointing out the faults in this type of story, he can induce at least a part of the public to acquire some critical awareness of what they are reading. That this is so is affirmed in the article "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" where Leacock does identify himself as a mystery reader, but also as a moralist who is asking where this unhealthy interest in crime and crime literature will lead us. He wonders if "we are not getting morbidly fascinated with crime and liable to suffer for it."¹ Our

¹Leacock, "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" p. 16.
newspapers are filled with crime, and stories that sell best are probably murder mysteries, for, according to Rodell, mystery fiction is the easiest form of fiction for which to find a publisher.¹

We seem to be fascinated by the daring criminal or demonstrations of violence and leave stories of patriotism or bravery for children.

Although the interest in crime and punishment is as old as humanity, we no longer are confined to the crimes of our own neighborhood. Due to advances in communication we can read and hear about crimes all over the world. Leacock feels that this everlasting dwelling upon crime will eventually lead to corruption, but ironically adds "not yours, of course, my dear reader, because you are so strong-minded. But they corrupt the feeble mind."²

The chief cause of the crime wave we are experiencing, says Leacock, is crime literature, crime news, and universal outbreak of crime interest, and it is time that each of us starts a movement to improve society by beginning with himself. If each becomes conscious of the morbid interest in crime, the cure will have been started.

We in this country, have, of late, heard much about the violence on television, the violence in motion pictures, and the violence in the newspapers, and what this violence is doing to the minds of the people in our society. Leacock seems to become, then, a prophet for our time. However, his outlook upon the solution is

¹Rodell, Mystery Fiction, p. 7.
²Leacock, "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" p. 16.
quite different from that which many are advocating today. Many in the United States and Canada are blaming the laws of the country, the motion picture industry, the television industry, and other things. Leacock says we have too many "prohibitive and preventive statutes already" and pointedly adds "in point of news and amusements and pictures the public always gets what the public wants. This is a pity, but it is so." What we need, he advocated some forty-four years ago, is not a national movement, but an individual one in which each person is more inquiring and critical about the worth of what he is reading.

But, Leacock, once again not making fun of the little man, and speaking as a little man in a complex society, is well aware of human weakness and human nature for he adds that he will have just one more peek at a murder story before he turns "to the kind of thing that improves the human mind."

Leacock's parodies imitate the stagnant plot, the typical characters, and the style of a true detective novel. In them he points out the incongruity between the "eccentric detective" and the man on the street; he points out the incongruity between the clues and the deductions made from them; and he points out the repetitious nature of so much of our detective fiction. In this way and in his article

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1 Leacock, "Such Fine Murders We're Having!" p. 37.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
"Such Fine Murders We're Having!" he is hoping to persuade mystery readers to be aware of the faults inherent in this type of literature and commit themselves to an individual program of critical consciousness about the type of literature they are helping promote.
CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY

Although Stephen Leacock's humor is without malice, upon examining all of his work having to do with mystery fiction, the reader is left with two main ideas: first, that there are basic faults inherent in the detective story as a type and the public should develop a more critical awareness of what it is reading, and second, that there is a basic incongruity in our society between the public's expressed desire for a society free of crime, and yet public obsession with crime and violence.

Leacock leads the reader to these beliefs first through his parody of the detective story in "The Great Detective," "Maddened by Mystery," "Who Do You Think Did It?" and "An Irreducible Detective Story," and second through his added criticism in "My Revelations As a Spy," "Living with Murder," "Twenty Cents Worth of Murder," and "Such Fine Murders We're Having!"

The basic faults Leacock finds with detective literature are the rigidity in the framework and the incongruity between the real world and the world contained in mystery fiction. Leacock makes his point by using his ever-effective humor, the tools of which are exaggeration, understatement, incongruity, and appropriate language. He picks out the weak points in the detective novel--the certain setting, specific characters (the brilliant detective, his dull-witted assistant, the innocent suspects), and the plot with its
theme of deductions from small details deciphered only by the master-minded detective—and makes these the strong points of his humor. The humor, in turn, creates awareness of the faults.

But Leacock does not stop simply with the parody which points out the faults in detective stories. He brings out the moralistic point of view that inquires where this interest in crime literature is leading society, and further states that each person needs to make a commitment to himself to be critical about what he reads and thus supports.

Leacock's writing on the detective story, therefore, moves through three levels, from simply the level of amusement, to that of pointing out fault, and, finally, to that of criticism leading to the betterment of society.
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