

Sunshine sketches: frame narratives



**ASSIGN
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The frame narratives in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* provide a profound sense of meaning to the short story cycle. Leacock's preface presents the reader with a simplified version of the story of his life, in which we can see many parallels to the lives of the Mariposans, thus making the stories seem more realistic. Similarly, the final narrative, "L'Envoi: The Train to Mariposa", makes the small-town ways of the Mariposans seem more authentic by instilling the reader with a genuine sense of nostalgia. Without these opening and closing anecdotes, the reader could still appreciate Leacock's clever use of irony and satire, but it would be impossible for them to walk away from the short story cycle with the same sense of identification with the small town. The use of satire in the preface and romantic nostalgia in "L'Envoi" create a tension that makes an important statement about the small town as a part of the Canadian identity; for better or for worse, the small town is a symbol of Canadian life and, for all of its follies, we still crave its familiarity and endearing qualities. Stephen Leacock's preface mirrors the entire short story cycle in both narrative tone and content. Throughout the telling of the story of his life, Leacock frequently employs both irony and satire to make a sort of social commentary on the events that he is describing. For example, when speaking about his education, Leacock tells the reader that he attended the University of Toronto and received his degree. However, he also notes that, "Very soon after graduation I had forgotten the languages, and found myself intellectually bankrupt. In other words I was what is called a distinguished graduate" (Leacock, 3 - 4). Later in the preface, we are told that, as a teacher, Leacock found that out of all his students, "Those who seemed the laziest and least enamoured of books are now rising to eminence at the bar, in business, and in public life; the

really promising boys who took all the prizes are now able with difficulty to earn the wages of a clerk in a summer hotel or a deck hand on a canal boat” (Leacock, 4). It is clear that the author is making a statement about the value we place on scholastic education, yet he never actually comes out and states that doing well in school is not all that important in the grand scheme of things. To reflect the lessons that Leacock has learned throughout the course of his life, we are presented with the character of Josh Smith. In the town of Mariposa, Mr. Smith is a business mogul of sorts and is held in high regard among the members of his society. One would expect that this sort of man would have a plethora of credentials attributing to his success, but the reader soon learns that Josh Smith cannot even read, let alone have received an extensive education. Continuing through the story, it becomes apparent that Mr. Smith is a very important part of Mariposan society. He finds solutions to many of the town’s problems even when some of the most educated men cannot seem to find the answers. By presenting us with his experiences regarding education and then placing a character like Josh Smith in the story, the reader is given a reason to believe what Leacock has to say, because they see the story played out through this fictional character. In essence, the author tells us how things are and then shows us how this can be true through the character that he has created. The tone of Leacock’s preface is also similar to that of the narration of the short story cycle and the attitudes of the townspeople. Like the people of Mariposa, Leacock ascribes himself an inflated sense of importance. “ I am not aware that there was any particular conjunction of the planets at the time [of my birth], but should think it extremely likely” (Leacock, 3). Both the author and the fictional characters speak about themselves in a manner that shows that

they believe themselves to be great people, but at the same time, they do not seem arrogant. Instead, to declare their outstanding qualities is simply to state a fact and not necessarily to rub it in the face of someone who does not compare. Correspondingly, Leacock narrates the story of his own life in much the same manner as the nameless and omniscient narrator who relays the stories of the people of Mariposa. He pokes fun at his own faults while maintaining a sort of pride in his work. The passage where Leacock lists his accomplishments – “ These things, surely, are a proof of respectability” (Leacock, 5) – has much the same ironic tone as the passage at the end of “ The Beacon on the Hill” story where the narrator wonders whether the city people had ever thought of such a wondrously simple idea as burning down a church to collect insurance money and void all its debts. (Leacock, 81)By telling us his own story and then presenting us with several tales that share similarities with the events of his own life, Leacock makes Sunshine Sketches seem more plausible by allowing us to compare it to a real small-town man’s life. Also, by using the same narrative tone to tell his story and the stories of his characters, Leacock creates a link between himself and the anonymous narrator of the story cycle, thus making us able to relate the real to the fictional. Each of these techniques makes us more open to believing the messages that lie within this collection of stories. While the preface of Sunshine Sketches adds realism to the stories by giving the fictional situations a factual counterpart, the final story in the collection does this by invoking sentiments within the reader. “ L’Envoi: The Train to Mariposa” is narrated by a person who has moved on from the small town and has become a resident of the city. One could easily imagine Leacock or any of the characters from the sketches narrating this tale while returning to their

hometown after having left it for many years. The tone is no longer ironic or satirical, but instead focuses on making readers feel nostalgic for the town life by reminding them of all the things that Mariposa, or any town like it, can provide that the city cannot. For example, as the traveller gets closer to his small-town destination, there is a glorification of the small things that he did not notice while still in the city. “ But wait a little, and you will see that when the city is well behind you, bit by bit the train changes its character”

(Leacock, 138). The narrator goes on to describe the plush, red cushions on the seats and the ancient wood engine that has replaced the electric engine now that he has boarded the train that will lead him to his final destination.

There is a certain comfort in these things, and they incite the old Mariposan attitude in the narrator as he begins to gush about the wonderful landscape and the greatness of all that exists in Mariposa. “ Ask your neighbour there at the next table whether the partridge that they sometimes serve to you here can be compared for a moment to the birds that he and you, or her and someone else, used to shoot as boys in the spruce thickets along the lake.

Ask him if he ever tasted duck that could for a moment be compared to the black ducks in the rice marsh along the Ossawippi” (Leacock, 137). In the

city, things such as the wood engine would be looked down upon for being out-of-date. However, in the town, they are revered for bringing back

memories of childhood and more simple times. Everything is romanticized once the narrator returns home; everything seems to taste, smell, or look

better in Mariposa because of the pride that the townspeople take in

everything that they have produced. “ L’Envoi” creates this same sense of

small-town pride and appreciation within the reader. This final tale forces the reader to distance themselves from the short stories that they have just

been immersed in. In doing so, the closing narrative reminds the reader that they are now leaving the fictional town and all of its quirky and endearing ways. The story is written in a manner that reminds the reader that the town was never actually ‘real’ in the regular sense of the word, but it does indeed manage to make them feel as though they have departed from this town and its simple way of life. By creating this distance and then bringing them back to the place once again at the very end of the story, Leacock creates a nostalgic feeling within the reader, thus making them feel more fond of the town that they once laughed at. Therefore, “L’Envoi” is successful in taking the stories to a more realistic level because it makes the reader feel as though he or she could have been a part of the town of Mariposa. It is clear that Leacock is successful in having created a tale that is both entertaining and relatable. However, Leacock uses two conflicting modes in his opening and closing narratives. A certain tension is created within the reader because Leacock has made a point about the downfalls of the small-town lifestyle through his use of irony and satire, yet he also makes the reader feel nostalgic for this life. Therefore, we are forced to reflect on the small town and what it means to us as Canadian citizens. Leacock’s entire set of stories, from the preface to the last story of *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*, brings our attention to the innocence and corruption of very small towns. It is only here that a town leader and successful businessman could get away with illiteracy. It is only in a small town that a court system could be so distorted as to allow a church to be burned down in order to collect insurance money to repay a debt. And it is only in a town so small and removed from the rest of the world that detectives could be so inexperienced that they could not solve an entirely explainable ‘bank

mystery'. However, despite all of these foolish and often unbelievable incidents, the town of Mariposa offers a certain security, comradeship, and familiarity that makes us want to return there and appreciate these marvellous sentiments. This is why the story opens with the lines that tell the reader that whether they know of Mariposa or not, "it is of no consequence, for if you know Canada at all, you are probably well acquainted with a dozen towns just like it" (Leacock, 7). The small town is a defining feature in Canadian identity because it is a place that feels good to us. Taken alone, these opening and closing tales leave us with very different sentiments about small-town societies. The preface makes us scoff at their way of life, while "L'Envoi" makes us yearn for its simplicity. However, together, Leacock ensures that we see that towns like Mariposa cannot offer us an accurate sense of what the 'real' world is like, but they do provide us with a way to escape that world and return to nature. The city gives us knowledge and advances in living, while the town offers us a sense of community and allows us to relax and have fun. The train to Mariposa connects the city and the town and allows us to travel between both ways of life, thus keeping us connected to the towns that define our Canadian heritage but also ensuring that we can return to the outside world whenever we please. Leacock's preface and his final piece of writing in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* both invoke different feelings in the reader, and the tension that is created by these conflicting sentiments sends an important message about the small town as a part of Canadian identity. The preface closes by ensuring us that the stories that we are about to read are purely fictional. However, with Leacock's assurance that each fictional character has several real counterparts somewhere out there, we can read *Sunshine Sketches* as more

than just a fictional set of stories. The final tale makes the reader feel as though he or she was a part of the story, and is successful in creating a sense of homesickness for small-town life. By using these techniques to make the story seem more realistic, Leacock's message is much more convincing, because readers can easily see how it relates to them in a very genuine sense. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* is more than just a collection of short stories; it is a well-written and thought-provoking piece of Canadian literature. Works Cited: Leacock, Stephen. *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006.