

assuming form of wit, by turns gay, naive, grim and pathetic, that you will never come across in a vain affected person." As defined by a vigorous American writer it is "a Proteus changing its shape and manner with the thousand diversities of individual character." It thus seems to be a word of various meanings, embracing within its scope that whole range of writings beginning on the level of those laughter-provoking absurdities and embodied in the pages of our comic papers of the present day, and rising to the most refined and tragic heights of Irving and Lowell.

Every nation that has attained to any respectable standing in the literary world has had its representatives in this special department. In the Greek classics we have the humorous writings of Aristophanes and Menander; in the Latin there are the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Spain has produced a Cervantes, the author of "*Don Quixote*." France has given us Rabelais a very humorous satirical writer of the Middle Ages, the comedian Moliere, Alphonse Daudet, whose hero "*Tartarin of Tarascon*" is well-known to all lovers of mirth, and Max O'Rell, whose witty reflection on England and America are two well known to the reading public to require any comment here. England has nurtured Ben Jonson, who wrote *Every Man in his own Humour*, Sterne the author of *Tristram Shandy*, Fielding, Tom Hood Dickens and a score of others. In America their name is legion. Washington Irving, James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Dudley Warner, Bret Hart, Artemus Ward, Bill Nye, and Mark Twain are household names among us.

Humour has always held a very prominent place in American literature, and is at the present day one of its most distinguishing features. Its birth seems to have been coincident with the earliest press work in New England. The first newspaper printed in Boston in the year 1675 had all the leading characteristics of the humorous sheet of the present day.

There has been a wonderful development along this particular line, so that to-day scores of printing-presses all over America are turning out their comic papers to be read and laughed over by the millions on both sides of the water. Indeed the country occupies a unique position in the vast amount of literature of this description that it puts upon the market.

The mind of the American writer seems to be peculiarly adapted to this species of composition. Keen, clear-sighted, ever on the alert to detect idiosyncrasies, he is further possessed of the happy faculty of vividly describing whatever has fallen under his observation. Unlike his English counterpart he does not dive deep down to search after the precious pearls lying on the bottom, but contents himself with collecting the drift-wood which he finds floating about on the surface and carving out of it figures which please the eye and tickle the senses only for the time being, but leave no lasting impression upon the mind. Sometimes his figures assume the most fantastic shapes, and their features are exaggerated out of all proportion to the disgust of the more cultured class of readers. Herein, I think, lies the great danger of the American humorous literature being degraded to the level of the mere farce which is contemptible, and soon becomes nauseating to the public taste. This resorting to the promiscuous use of puns, bad spelling and other eccentricities of art, in order to provoke a laugh (which is indulged in by some of the most refined writers) is another serious defect, and the contagion is fast spreading. It remains with the higher intellectual instincts of the nation to detect and arrest all tendency in this downward direction, and to guide the ship as it were along her proper channel.

Exaggeration, as I have said, forms an important element of American humour. In fact, it has been characterized by some one as the "humour of exaggeration." This, is the generally accepted opinion among English critics. I find, however, an American writer making the following statement. "The American humorist is