

Humor in a Microcosm: Isolation and The Young Idea

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Abstract

As a group of people become isolated, a microcosm is formed and the isolated group becomes their own subculture in comparison to everybody else from their original home. This study examines the idea that when isolated from the rest of England, the crewmembers of the HMS *Chesapeake*'s humor shifted to something that was completely their own. By looking at a 150-year-old shipboard periodical and focusing on the types of jokes made, the topics of these humor writings, who submitted these pieces of writing, and who responded and tried to solve these riddles and puns, one can see that the humor of *The Young Idea* is something completely unique to their journal. This study explores the humor executed in *The Young Idea*. I argue that because these men were isolated, their humor became something uniquely their own, and through analysis, I will explain how each joke works, how they relate back to the section they are found under, and what the main topics of their punch lines were.

As people are left alone to form bonds, they become interwoven and begin to share similar characteristics. This is not a recent occurrence. In the 1850s, a group of men worked together on the HMS *Chesapeake*, a naval flagship that traveled all over west Asia to aid the British soldiers during the Indian Revolution. These men eventually formed a shipboard newspaper known as *The Young Idea*. Besides stories of their everyday lives, sports games scores, and play reviews, *The Young Idea* has many puns, humorous stories, and other types of writing that expresses humor. When it came to riddles and jokes, crewmembers were invited to guess the answers and send in their own jokes to be put into this shipboard periodical. Most of these pieces of writing included jokes about the countries they have been to, stereotypes, and jokes in relation to naval knowledge. Through transcribing thirteen issues and noting what types of humor and riddles were used by the crewmembers, I noticed that a pattern unique to the HMS *Chesapeake* formed. Through analysis, I will be looking at the humor of *The Young Idea* and what it is technically composed of.

The discovery of data could not happen unless the actual text from *The Young Idea* was transcribed. Every page from the prologue to the end of the thirteenth issue was transcribed digitally out of the fifty-eight issues total. These thirteen issues were transcribed to create a digital edition of *The Young Idea* but also to track a

person's whereabouts, where ships have traveled to, and the daily life of a sailor during the nineteenth century. From there on, our group was able to individually look into certain topics that pertained to her interest. This project focuses specifically on humor. Each issue of *The Young Idea* is comprised of articles and tidbits in the style of play review, sports report, conundrum, letter, epitome, etcetera. After labeling each of these pieces of writings the obvious next step was to label the different types of jokes. The labels these humor writings fall under are: the conundrum, rebus, facetiae, and charade.

Throughout *The Young Idea*, there happens to be some patterns within the jokes that were published. Some of these jokes referenced exotic women while others did not.

What's the difference between a Spanish lady and the "Chesapeake?"

The dark haired maid of
Spain with native graces
Wields her light fan, to shield
her blushing face and thou,
dear Chesapeake, when
breezes fail shalt ply the
ponderous fan, that wriggle
in my tail.¹

As one can see, this joke about Spanish women

¹ Original question found in Facetiae, issue 2. Answer under Conundrum, issue 3.

overlaps in subject—in the instance of the Spanish woman joke, ship humor and women—and create a joke that is unique to the HMS *Chesapeake*. This joke compares the ship's tail that sways back and forth in the water and a Spanish woman. In Spain, a fan is a piece of beauty and used frequently to keep cool (Ideal Spain). The tail, similar to a fan, as the joke explains it, sways slightly in the wind. The writers of *The Young Idea* admire the beauty of the HMS *Chesapeake*, like one may admire a Spanish woman using a fan in a way to attract attention. The comparison shows that there is both beauty when seeing a Spanish woman and in seeing a ship. Imagery is used on both accounts of the Spanish woman and the fan to create a clearer image of what the joke writer is trying to create the parallel to.

Probably the most popular style of joke was the pun. Puns are seen all over *The Young Idea* and can be found under sections such as facetiae and the conundrum section. Several of the sections, such as the conundrum and the facetiae hold puns. Many of the puns looked like this:

What country in Africa is like fresh
breed malt liquor?

Nubia (New Beer)²

Here, we see the use of word play and reference to African geography. A part of a sailor's job is traveling all over the world, so it is necessary to know about the countries that this world has. Nubia, sounds similar to the phrase "new beer." The joke sets up the guesser to guess an African country by specifically stating "country in Africa" and then hints that the answer sounds something similar to an alcoholic drink. Stating that Nubia sound similar to "new beer" clarifies that this is most likely not the best joke if the punch line needs to be explained in parentheses. Between these jokes, one can see that these two examples are different in multiple ways, yet similar. The joke about the Spanish woman is a comparison while the joke about Nubia is a pun. Of course, the Nubia joke is also a comparison, but the main focus of the punch line is how the name Nubia sounds similar to the words "new beer." In the

Spanish woman joke, the focus is on a metaphor of the ship looking like a woman, while the Nubia joke focuses on phonetic similarity.

Many times, puns are not worth writing down and publishing (Ritchie 109), and are usually considered "spontaneous humor" (Ritchie 109) according to Graeme Ritchie (109). Depending on the situation, there are audiences that find certain types of jokes funnier, and in the case of *The Young Idea*, pun humor is extremely funny. Ritchie feels that since puns usually are accompanied by groans, it is usually not wise to publish puns, however, one sees that *The Young Idea* feels the opposite (109). Every piece of humor needs something unique about it and in many cases, puns are repetitive and use the same formula of ambiguity of subject, vagueness to set up punch-line, and paronymy (sounding phonetically similar but not identical) according to Salvatore Attardo (Attardo qtd. in Ritchie 112). Frequently, puns travel vocally and not through paper so a pattern to note within *The Young Idea* is that puns are published frequently.

Within *The Young Idea*, besides multiple types of humor, there are several headers humor can be found under. The facetiae section usually is made up of short stories humor bits such as:

Precious Child. Mama' do
eyes have feet? No my
dear, why do you ask?
Because, ma, Pa said, he
did not like the manner in
which W. Govern's eyes
followed you about the
room³

Usually, a facetiae is a witty or humorous saying (Merriam Webster). Some definitions also claim that a facetiae could be a pornographic writing (Google Public Data). Here, one sees that a child is asking an innocent question, while the male gaze is what is leading the joke. The mother is seen as appealing to another man, while her husband clearly is jealous. Obviously jealous, the father of the child felt the need to make the comment that the child overheard, causing him or her to ask their

² Original question found in Facetiae, issue 12.
Answer under Facetiae, issue 13.

³ Original piece found in Facetiae, issue 3.

mother if eyes had feet. In this situation, the idea of eyes following a person around in a physical sense gives a comedic image when in reality; the child just misunderstood the saying. This could be found humorous because the child's naivety could be considered cute or funny. Also, men who are reading this may find it relatable, because they feel the need to look after women that they love. Also within facetiae, one sees humorous riddles like the joke about the Spanish woman and the joke about Nubia. Frequently, answers are found in the conundrum section, like the Spanish woman joke. Sometimes, if a facetiae is a two-part question, their answer may be found in the conundrum section.

A conundrum, by definition is a riddle with a pun in the question or the answer (Merriam Webster). While facetiae focuses on an anecdote, the conundrum section asks literal riddles that focus some degree on puns. Conundrums like:

What article of confectionery
are we sure to find excellent
in Ceylon?

Capital Candy⁴

often were seen on *The Young Idea*. In Ceylon, there is a city called Kandy that is pronounced the same way as "candy." To put it simply, this conundrum is a pun and follows the classic definition of the term conundrum. Candy can be made out of confectionary sugar and since Kandy is a part of India, the answer takes some knowledge of the culture in India to figure out. Chances are, most British people would not know Kandy exists, so a sailor who know geography and is familiar with India and has traveled there, would easily understand this joke once they are given the punch line. Since conundrums are riddles, usually it is difficult to figure out

⁴ Original conundrum found in Conundrum, issue 5. Answer under Conundrum, issue 6.

the answer of the conundrum unless one does not know local knowledge. Since readers find riddles and puns fun, it is important to note this section. When it comes to answers, a conundrum answer is mostly found under the conundrum section, however section titles may combine so readers can just find all the answers together.

Usually, when somebody mentions the term "charade" it is implied that the person who said it meant a fun game played with people. Instead of in a group in person, the readers of *The Young Idea* are invited to figure out a charade. Instead of guessing through movements, only the clue concept is available for the guesser, but in a written format. In reality, a charade is a word represented in riddling verse (Merriam Webster). In the context of *The Young Idea*, charades are more representing of the definition instead of the modern interpretation.

In the antics of my 8.6.3 fun is
found,
Tho 'mischief as well in the
beast does abound.
When the butcher has come
with his sharp ready knife
And deprived all 4. 2. 3. 7. 6
go their life.⁵

Note the rhyme scheme. Throughout the whole charade, each sentence works in a couplet pattern. The words "found" and "abound" rhyme. The second sentence rhymes "knife" and "life" together. Numbers are used as a placeholder and to give a code that the reader can work with. The answer was available in the next issue and also followed a rhyming scheme.

When once a Jack Tar
Goes as far as a "bar"
Of a public, to weather the rain
I aver with much pain
That the Landlord must "gain"
And Jack be the loser by jar.
For oh! it is true

⁵ Original charade found in Charade, issue 3.

That when to a lew
 Jack sells half his clothes for a
 farthing
 He cooks rather blue
 And admits that he knew
 He hadn't the best of the "bargain"
 For this specimen rare
 A place in your valuable Journal
 Play drop me in Rhyme
 A line next time
 To your very affectionate Colonel

Each of the words in quotation marks is one of the solvable words that readers had to figure out through the number clues. These answers also have a rhyming scheme too and are considerably hard to solve. The charades were not published often in *The Young Idea*, but were incredibly popular. Frequently, readers of the periodical submitted the charades and were credited, which is rare for *The Young Idea*. From what is available from the thirteen issues, the charade is available only two or three times, which is incredibly rare in comparison to the conundrum and facetiae, which showed up in every issue.

Similar to the charade section, a rebus is usually a group of clues that the participant reads in order to figure out the answer. To the general population, a rebus is made up of a group of pictures in a certain order. From those pictures, one must figure out the answer. Perhaps on the HMS *Chesapeake* nobody could draw, because all of the available rebuses are text based.

The sheep & ox, in concert me
 To try their voices reckoned
 The sheep she bleated forth my first
 The ox lowed out the second

And as with bleating, lowing
 sound
 Their blending voices flustered
 A Hindoo squire turned him round.
 For he heard his tickle witered
 Ba boo⁶

In this rebus, the answer is a play on the title "babu" which is usually a title given to an Indian man to show respect or an Indian clerk that can

⁶ Original rebus found in Rebus, issue 11.
 Answer under Rebus, issue 12.

speaking English (Merriam-Webster.com). Note, the use of underline as to remind the participant in which order the sounds go to create the name. Also, babu is not in parentheses unlike the Nubia joke. This joke must have been more successful and easier to understand because, there is no help to understand the context of the joke. Connecting to something these sailors are familiar with once again shows that these jokes were made for people in the know of Indian culture. Most of the rebuses were short like the joke about the babu and were easier to figure out than the conundrums.

In *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes*, Ritchie writes, "there may be content or structure in a joke which is crucial to that text being a joke, but it is not obvious which factors define a unique 'identity' for that joke" (83). To some degree, each piece of humor holds its own identity and gives a clue of what the crewmembers of the HMS *Chesapeake* were interested in and what they talked and thought about in their personal time. These jokes not only gave an identity about the ship's humor but also gave an identity to the people who found these writings humorous as well as the people who wrote these jokes too. By looking at these jokes, we discover what members of the HMS *Chesapeake* thought about in their down time, talked about, and what made an impression on them. Events in their life clearly have made an impact on how they view certain situations, like the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Interest in ships are a given, since the main audience of *The Young Idea* are crewmembers of the ship and people who are interested in maritime newspapers.

When looking at the jokes, multiple themes are repeated within *The Young Idea's* humor. Seen in the capital candy joke, one sees the use of puns. Though a pun is a style of joke, it is still a reoccurring theme that is seen across the issues. Seen with the Spanish woman joke and the facetiae about wandering eyes, a lot of comparisons usually have to do with women. The women are also frequently essential to the punch line, specifically like one sees in the wandering eyes anecdote. Since *The Young Idea* is written by and for sailors, naval jokes are made frequently. The comparison in the Spanish woman joke is

comparing a ship and a woman. The joke even talks about the swaying of a ship when there is no wind to push the boat forward. There is also a theme of Indian knowledge throughout the whole periodical. Seen in the capital candy joke and the babu joke, in order to get the punch line, one must know about Indian culture. Since members of the HMS Chesapeake wrote these jokes, the themes of these humorous writings were always relatable to their personal lives.

When a microcosm is formed, the isolated group forms its own cultural norms that may not line up with the rest of cultures around them. In the case of the members of the HMS *Chesapeake*, their shipboard newspaper, *The Young Idea* expresses that the humor of the crewmembers slowly became something that is uniquely their own. Through example, *The Young Idea* showed that the crewmembers were interested in puns, puzzles, and short anecdotes. Many of these jokes related back to their personal lives and frequently revolved around topics like women, naval knowledge, and Indian culture. Overall, the humor of *The Young Idea* is uniquely personal to reflect their own microcosm.

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