Humor in America* 

WHEN America was young a traveler in the West could never tell what he might find over the next rise in the road or beyond another bend in the river. There might be Davy Crockett himself, astride an alligator or riding the lightning, grinning his fierce, hyena grin that curled the bark off trees; or the Devil-Jack Diamond-Fish, a bullet-proof creature ten feet in length, that Audubon the naturalist, solemn-faced but tongue-in-cheek, described to a visitor from France. One spring day in 1808, walking along the docks at Natchez, a New Yorker, Christian Schultz, Jr., came upon two drunken flatboatmen in an argument. ‘One said, “I am a man; I am a horse; I am a team. I can whip any man in all Kentucky, by G-d.” The other replied, “I am an alligator, half man, half horse; can whip any man on the Mississippi, by G-d.” The first one again, “I am a man; have the best horse, best dog, best gun, and the handsomest wife in all Kentucky, by G-d.” The other, “I am a Mississippi snapping turtle; have bear’s claws, alligator’s teeth, and the devil’s tail; can whip any man, by G-d.” This was too much for the first, and at it they went like two bulls...’ They were fighting, Schultz later learned, over a Choctaw woman. What Schultz encountered that April day along the Mississippi was almost the archetypal expression of humor in America. The battle of the riverboatmen contains nearly all the themes and elements that have gone into the most creative, most enduring forms of American humor — grotesque imagination, extravagant bragging, sexual competition, and the climatic eruption of violence.

From the beginning of the nation there were people who sensed that humor was different in America from humor in the old world, and they always singled out the extravagant and grotesque exaggerations like the Crockett tall tales, Audubon’s mythical fauna (he invented others besides the Devil-Jack Diamond-Fish), and the boasting of Mississippi boatmen, whom early newspapers took quite naturally to calling ‘half-horse, half-alligator creatures’. Even the English, who were usually most reluctant to give the culture of America any praise at all, were willing by the 1830s to place the mother country’s stamp of approval on a separate American style of humor, a ‘national American humour’, as one English reviewer

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wrote, expressing ‘the convictions, customs, and associations’ of the nation. Perhaps someone along the way may have considered this a backhanded accolade, and was discomfited by the idea that the grotesque and the extravagant represented the essential convictions, customs, and associations of the United States. But the most stimulating and influential students of humor in America — particularly Constance Rourke in her *American Humor: A Study of the National Character* (1931) and Walter Blair in his *Native American Humor (1800-1900)*, published in 1937 — have embraced the theory that American humor is an autonomous product of national character and national culture, and this view has strongly shaped the study of humor in America for a generation or more. We need now to subject this perspective on American humor to a thorough reconsideration, not only because our conceptions of character and culture have changed over the decades, but also because we live in a time when every such claim for the special nature of America ought to be held up for scrutiny.

The difficulties in defining a separate and distinct American humor stem, to begin with, from the larger problem of identifying a purely American cultural experience of any sort, except in the gross sense of one which takes place within the United States. Like other assertive, self-proclaimed revolutionary societies, the Americans have made vast claims for cultural originality and inventiveness. But our language, and many of our customs and institutions, derive from the English background of our colonial years, and our peoples have brought with them the cultures and traditions of Europe, Africa, and Asia, as well as absorbing much from the native Indian populations. Moreover, humor is far more universal a human trait than other aspects of culture, and we share many of our favorite jokes and stories with savage societies and monarchical kingdoms. All of these considerations were known to the writers of the 1930s who described a native American humor and a distinctive national character. Perhaps, in retrospect, we should look upon their formulations not as theories but as tropes, as creative metaphors which enabled them to take seriously and examine sympathetically many unexplored and previously deprecated areas of American popular culture. In this manner we may be grateful for their perceptive and enduring insights about culture and humor in America, without belaboring the inadequacies of their concept of national character, whether as psychology or as social history. In the untapped resources of American popular humor they thought they had found a mirror reflecting an undiscovered, unadorned, real American world; they did not realize that they had stepped through the looking-glass into an independent realm of humor in America, a world with values and boundaries all its own.
Young America was different, to be sure, from other nations. It represented not only the first effort to create a republican form of government over a large territory, it was also the first country in the modern world where an equality of condition among its (white) citizens seemed so much a living possibility, and even so much a fact — what Alexis de Tocqueville meant when he called his famous study Democracy in America. Democracy and equality worked together in a mutually enhancing relationship with the most competitive economic system the modern world had yet seen, and a developing ideology of philosophical and economic individualism. The United States was also the most literate country in the world, an achievement founded on the Protestant effort to make every person capable of reading God's Word for himself, but which contributed significantly to the development of equality as a condition and as a goal. And literacy provided the basis for the creation of national newspapers which, considering the dispersed population and the difficulties of travel, played an unusually effective role in the broad dissemination of culture.

The consequences of these unique American political, social, and cultural forms pervaded every aspect of national life, and the emerging American humor, which was attracting international attention in its own right, was bound to reflect them. But in what way? The themes of equality, individualism, and competition are as evident in early American humor as — and deeply intertwined with — the themes of exaggeration, boasting, and violence. But who devised such themes, and to what purpose? One basic problem is that we have only a written record to guide us. Some have argued that the fundamental American humor is a folk humor, arising out of the democratic mass, expressing the deepest instincts and values of the lost world of everyday popular life and culture. But that humor comes down to us only by its preservation in the books, magazines, and papers of the time. We need to know about the background and methods of the men and women who wrote and published humor, and performed it on the popular stage; the evidence we have presents the origins and purpose of American humor in an ambiguous light indeed.

For the American humorists in the formative pre-Civil War years of American humor were members, almost unanimously, of the conservative elite. Many were editors of conservative newspapers and reviews; some were conservative lawyers and politicians in the conservative Whig party; others were New England Brahmins or members of the Southern plantation gentry. They did not quarrel fundamentally with the broad democratic developments in American society, the ideologies glorifying individualism or the institutions fostering economic opportunity. But they abhorred the manner in which popular democracy was exercising its ego and its ambitions. They despised the people's President, Andrew Jackson, a man they
considered bellicose, unlettered, and dangerously irrational. They opposed the aggressive expansionist spirit that was driving the Indians beyond the forward lines of western settlement and grasping for territories held by Mexico. They deplored the bawdy energies of the uncouth, disorderly, disrespectful democratic rabble. The opinions of these conservative editors, lawyers, and politicians, needless to say, were by definition unpopular. Yet they found a way to express their hostility toward the behavior and opinions of popular democracy in a form that could be widely enjoyed and accepted, through laughter and subtle ridicule. Humor thus developed in the early years of the nineteenth century as a conservative device to deflate the pretensions and expose the follies of democracy in America.

The essential comic device of the early American humorists was the mask, the assumption of the democratic persona in order to ridicule, as it were, from within the camp of the enemy. Had their humor taken the form of a direct, unvarnished assault on the intended target — like the satirical shafts H. L. Mencken directed against the American 'booboisie' back in the 1920s — its purpose as an act of political and social aggression would have been apparent to all, and it would have failed in one of its primary aims, that of reaching the people whom it was directed against and reshaping their views and their behavior. A satirical story poking fun at the President might be very funny indeed, but a supporter of the President would likely be incensed by it, and renew his opposition to the President's enemies with redoubled vigor. But a story told by an ostensible friend of the President and apparently sympathizing with him, which yet made the President an object of laughter and ridicule, might succeed in disarming the President's supporter and convincing him that the President was after all a foolish and unworthy leader. The most popular and widely-copied conservative humorists succeeded by putting on the mask of common experience and common speech, posing as country farmers or backwoodsmen, writing in a vernacular dialect which was itself an object of laughter and ridicule to the educated, cultivated readers of humorous papers and books.

Nearly all the famous comic characters of the democratic era were masks created by conservative humorists — Simon Suggs, the invention of Johnson J. Hooper, a Whig newspaper editor in Chambers County, Alabama; Simon Suggs, Jr., the creation of Joseph G. Baldwin, a Whig politician who wrote The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi; Hosea Bigelow, Birdofredum Sawin, and other comic masks in The Bigelow Papers of the Boston Brahmin James Russell Lowell. Even the true life Davy Crockett began his career as a comic legend in biographies and stories invented by conservative writers to foster a popular western-frontier image for the Whig party, to which Crockett the Tennessee politician was persuaded to switch his allegiance. One of the most gentle and amusing comic masks created in the heyday of democratic ideology was Major Jack Downing, a character developed by Seba Smith, a Maine newspaper editor, and
later appropriated by other conservative writers. Smith made Downing a confidential advisor to President Jackson, and published letters from the Major which perfectly illustrate a successful form of using the comic mask to ridicule from the point of view of the ridiculed. On one occasion the Major described a Presidential reception in Philadelphia:

The President shook hands with all his might an hour or two, till he got so tired he couldn’t hardly stand it. I took hold and shook for him once in awhile to help him along, but at last he got so tired he had to lay down on a soft bench covered with cloth and shake as well as he could, and when he couldn’t shake he’d nod to ’em as they came along. And at last he got so beat out, he couldn’t only wrinkle his forward and wink. Then I kind of stood behind him and reached my arm round under his, and shook for him about a half an hour as tight as I could spring. Then we concluded it was best to adjourn for to-day.

The humorous stories of Southwestern writers, though more difficult to condense briefly here, were often considerably more violent. A. B. Longstreet, a patrician Georgia lawyer and newspaper editor, described in a tale, ‘Georgia Theatrics’, from his book *Georgia Scenes* (1835) how he overheard a fight in a thicket of undergrowth when he was out riding one day:

‘You kin, kin you?’

‘Yes, I kin, and am able to do it! Boo-oo-oo! Oh, wake snakes, and walk your chalks! Brimstone and — fire! Don’t hold me, Nick Stoval! The fight’s made up, and let’s go at it — My soul if I don’t jump down his throat, and gallop every chitterling out of him before you can say “quit”!’

‘Now, Nick, don’t hold him! Jist let the wild-cat come. and I’ll tame him. Ned’ll see me a fair fight! Won’t you, Ned?’

‘Oh yes; I’ll see you a fair fight, blast my old shoes if I don’t!’

‘That’s sufficient, as Tom Haynes said when he saw the elephant. Now let him come!’

Longstreet dismounted and hurried to the scene of the fight. ‘I had overcome about half the space which separated it from me, when I saw the combatants come to the ground, and, after a short struggle, I saw the uppermost one (for I could not see the other) make a heavy plunge with both his thumbs, and at the same instant I heard a cry in the accent of keenest torture, “Enough! My eye’s out!” . . . “Now, blast your corn-shucking soul!” said the victor (a youth about eighteen years old) as he rose from the ground — “come cutt’n’ your shines ’bout me agin, next time I come to the court-house, will you? Get your owl eye in agin if you can.”’ Filled with horror and loathing, Longstreet ran after the youth, calling him to account. The boy turned back, and said sarcastically, ‘‘You needn’t kick before you’re spurr’d. There a’n’t nobody there, nor ha’n’t been nother. I was jist seein’ how I could ’a’ fout.” So saying, he bounded to his plough,
which stood in the corner of the fence about fifty yards beyond the battle-ground.'

'I went to the ground from which he had risen', Longstreet ends the story, 'and there were the prints of his two thumbs, plunged up to the balls in the mellow earth, about the distance of a man's eyes apart; and the ground around was broken up as if two stags had been engaged upon it.' One smiles with relief as the grotesque and incongruous elements of Longstreet's tale are revealed, yet the horror and the terror of the story remain, as well as Longstreet's social message.

So the grotesque exaggerations and extravagant passions of American humorous writing, which the English thought so new and distinctive as to constitute a separate national American humor, were in fact conceived by conservatives to ridicule and rebuke the cruelty and violence they feared in the popular democracy. What possible connection, then, does a humorous tradition created and carried on by a conservative élite have to do with popular culture and the jokes and stories of the people? The relationship between conservative humorists and the democratic culture was of necessity complex and ambiguous. The humorists did not often invent their stories out of whole cloth. As lawyers and politicians they picked up stories told at courthouses and political gatherings, then embellished them with the particular character of their style and their comic mask. A funny story might begin its life in a local newspaper and reappear in other newspapers around the country with place names changed for local interest, until it reached definitive form in a national sporting and humorous magazine like William T. Porter's renowned *Spirit of the Times*. Then it would trickle back down to the local level, to be retold as if it had just happened last week over in the next village. The widespread literacy of the American people and the effective national communications network made it almost impossible to tell the difference between folk humor and commercial humor.

The professional humorists wrote primarily for their own conservative class, to reinforce their political and social power and confidence in an era when the tendencies of democratic rhetoric and politics threatened to erase all distinctions of birth, character, morals, and learning. An urban, educated class, in any case, would be the principal market for humorous books and periodicals. Yet commercial humor occasionally struck a deep vein of feeling in the people. The Crockett legend, for example, began as a calculated effort to create a favorable frontier image for a conservative Whig politician. The political aim was thwarted when Crockett was defeated for re-election to Congress in 1835. But after Crockett went west to fight and die at the Alamo in 1837, his heroic martyrdom transformed him into a popular hero, and scores of Crockett almanacs glorifying the frontiersman's extravagant feats appeared during the next two decades, establishing him as a perennial folk legend in American popular culture.

It is unlikely that anyone can ever distinguish for certain between those elements of early American humor created in the popular
imagination and those developed in the minds of conservative professional humorists; what is significant ultimately is the close and harmonious relationship which paradoxically existed between elite criticism and popular self-image. When the humorists described the grotesque imaginations, extravagant boasting, and explosive violence of the people they meant such behavior to appear ridiculous and socially harmful. Yet to many of the common people bragging, exaggeration, and violence were matters of fundamental pride and self-identity. Several possible psychological explanations may be offered, but one at least is firmly anchored in the realities of American ideology and social structure: the democratic era in American culture produced more than one version of an extreme theoretical individualism, but American society made it very difficult for individuals to express such independent self-reliance in their social, economic, and personal lives. For many lower class Americans the only way they could assert the validity of their theoretical individualism against the reality of severe social constraints was through bragging, tall tales, and violence.

There is one additional strand that ties the ridiculed popular culture to its conservative humorist critics. Whites of all social classes and cultural backgrounds had similar problems of social control and antipathy in relation to black slaves and free Negroes. The device of the comic mask which made it appear as if the ridiculed object were ridiculing himself proved even more effective as a white tactic against blacks than as a conservative tactic against popular democracy, for the whites were the powerful majority, where the conservatives had been only an influential minority. The minstrel show began to appear on the popular stage in the 1820s and within a decade or two the white performer in blackface had become a ubiquitous popular favorite in the American theater, creating an elaborate vernacular dialect and character type that pervaded American popular culture until the civil rights revolution of the 1960s.

III

Comic aggression is of course a two-way street, and if black slaves were forced to express their hostility to white oppressors in covert, hidden ways, what prevented the popular democracy from retaliating in kind against the conservative humorists who ridiculed them? Surely there were people with comic talent who believed in democratic values and hated the snobbery and gentility of the self-proclaimed elite. Surprisingly, however, there was very little prose or dramatic humor written from a democratic point of view. Perhaps the writers and intellectuals committed to democracy were able to express their hostilities in more concrete political and social form, or the fervor of their beliefs may have made humor too frivolous and indirect a vehicle. The popular stories and jokes of the people were left to the conservative humorists, to alter and reshape as they chose.
There was, however, one major exception to the general domination of humor by the elite. George Washington Harris, an East Tennessee Democrat, small factory manager, and railroad employee, began as a humorist by writing for the conservative *Spirit of the Times*, but in the 1850s he developed a biting, violent anti-genteel and anti-elite vernacular humor that was not welcome in those pages. His later stories, told through the mask of his comic character Sut Lovingood, were published in Southern newspapers and appeared in a book, *Sut Lovingood’s Yarns* (1867). Harris was not precisely a voice of the majority, for he belonged to the minority of secessionist Democrats in the part of Tennessee which favored the Union, and some of his angry humor was directed against the mountain hillbillies of East Tennessee as well as against Yankees, politicians, clergymen, teachers, parents, and other figures of authority. What was significant about Harris’ humor, as Kenneth Lynn points out in his admirable study, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, was that the comic mask truly expressed Harris’ views. Whereas Longstreet’s “Georgia Theatrics” ridicules the violent farm boy, Harris’ Sut Lovingood stories direct all their aggression outward. Harris often dropped the controlling adult voice from his stories, and let Sut’s clear-eyed youthful vernacular perceptions stand alone. Almost all the Sut Lovingood stories turn on a violent or humiliating act Sut perpetrates, witlingly or unwittingly, on self-important persons, but one may get the flavour of Harris’ comic genius from one of his least violent stories, ‘Rare Ripe Garden Seed’. Wat Mastin marries the widow McKildrin’s daughter Mary in April, buys some ‘rare ripe garden seed’ from a Yankee peddler, plants his crops, and goes off to Atlanta to work in the railroad yards for a spell. When he returns in late August he finds Mary with a new-born daughter. Slowly he counts the months, stops at four-and-a-half, and cries out angrily that it’s only half enough.

Missis McKildrin shuck her head sorter onsartin like, an’ sez she, ‘Take a drap more sperrits, Watty, my dear pet; dus yu mine buying that ar rar ripe seed, frum the peddler?’ Wat nodded his head, an’ looked ‘what ove hit,’ but didn’t say hit.

‘This is what cums ove hit, an’ four months an’ a half am rar ripe time fur babys, adzackly. Tu be sure, hit lacks a day ur two, but Margarit Jane wer allers a pow’ful interprizin gal, an’ a yearly rizer.’ Sez Wat,

‘How about the ’taters?’

‘Oh, we et ’taters es big es goose aigs, afore old Missis Collinze’s blossomed.’

‘How ’bout co’n?’

‘Oh, we shaved down roasin years afore hern tassel’d—’

‘An’ peas?’

‘Yes son, we hed gobs an’ lots in three weeks. Everything cums in adzackly half the time that hit takes the ole sort, an’ yu knows, my darlin son, yu planted hit waseful. I tho’ then you’d rar ripe everythin on the place. Yu planted often, too, didn’t yu luv? fur fear hit wudn’t cum up.’

‘Ye-ye-s-s he—he did,’ sed Mary a-cryin. Wat studied pow’ful deep a spell, an’ the widder jis’ waited. Widders allers wait, an’ allers win.
At the end of the story Wat's mother-in-law reassures him, 'Make yere mind easy, hit never works on married folks only the fust time.'

Harris was an original; though the social origins and professional careers of humorists changed over the years, the nature and form of American humor remained much as the conservative writers had shaped them. After the Civil War men of considerably lower social standing than the elite humorists began to dominate American comic writing. Many of them began as journeymen printers or journalists, demonstrated a comic flair, and shifted exclusively to humorous writing. A few became nationally renowned as platform storytellers. Humorists like Artemus Ward and Petroleum V. Nasby and a dozen others like them were immensely popular in their day, beloved public figures and household words, yet with the exception of Mark Twain the journalist-storytellers of post-Civil War America have been almost completely forgotten. One reason for their eclipse lies in the equivocal nature of their social position as humorists. As experienced journalists and men of the world they were capable of creating humor by satirizing the sentimental evasions of late nineteenth century American middle class life. But as men aspiring to higher social status, and as professionals, they knew that both economic success and social approval could only come through the genteel middle class audience of book-buyers and arbiters of manners. Their popularity depended on their use of the familiar comic mask of the ridiculous bumpkin or frontiersman, and though they obviously filled the desires of their middle class audience, their humor lacks the acute social observation and pungent rancor of the earlier conservative humorists. In a perceptive essay, 'How to Tell a Story', Mark Twain also suggested that what was really funny about American humor was not the story but the telling of it — the ability of the storyteller to assume the comic mask and vernacular dialect, and tell the story in a completely dead-pan manner, as if he really were the bewildered, ridiculous butt of the tale. The platform skills of the late nineteenth century American humorists have been lost to us forever.

Mark Twain, the greatest of the nineteenth century American humorists, was acutely aware of the equivocal social position of the humorist and its effect upon his humor. In many of his characteristic tales and episodes there are masks within masks, as when the storyteller (Mark Twain, himself the comic mask of Samuel L. Clemens) meets another storyteller, who tells (or botches) a vernacular tale; in Mark Twain's first important success, 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County', ridicule is directed inward, within the vernacular story, and also outward, against the genteel narrator who, in the old, conservative manner, was supposed to provide the superior framework for understanding the implications of the vernacular tale. The tensions between the vernacular roots of his creativity and the genteel constraints and values of his social aspirations dominated much of Mark Twain's career. He mastered the dilemma only once, in his great novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, begun in
1876 but completed only after much travail in 1884. In Huckleberry Finn Mark Twain succeeded, for the first time in the history of English and American literature, in writing a work of fiction entirely in the vernacular. The comic mask is brought to life as an autonomous, independent consciousness, and every judgment is made within the style and the language of the work of art. With Huckleberry Finn American humor transcended its character as a weapon of social division and class distinction, and encompassed for the first time within its framework a whole society.

The achievement of Huckleberry Finn marked the end of an era in American prose humor. The vernacular comic mask was used effectively by several later humorists, notably by Finley Peter Dunne with his Irish character Mr. Dooley, and the arrival of new immigrants added fresh dialects to the repertoire of vernacular prose humorists and popular stage comedians. But by the end of the nineteenth century the vernacular tradition no longer reflected the principal social conflicts and concerns of the predominantly educated, middle class audience for prose humor. To men and women who, lived in an increasingly urbanized, bureaucratized, technological culture the old beliefs that men struggled with each other to create themselves and their society, party against party, class against class, were reshaped by a new sense that man's great antagonists were large impersonal forces, society, the state, the machine, the system. The educated middle class citizen began to see himself as the underdog, as the slightly ridiculous human figure in a world of hostile forces and indifferent institutions. American prose humor in the twentieth century gave up some of its grotesque and extravagant features and became more witty, subtle, and urbane, as exemplified by humorists like Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, James Thurber, and S. J. Perelman. In a way they turned the everyday language and common experiences of the average man into a comic mask, and the aggressive force of their humor seems at times most pointed when it is directed inward, against the hapless struggles of their meek, civilized Casper Milque-toast anti-heroes.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the emergence of the motion picture as a new art and entertainment form created an extraordinary moment in the history of American humor — a medium of mass popular entertainment developed in its formative years free from the constraints of genteel middle class cultural control and economic power. During their first twenty years motion pictures were largely attended by and made for working class people, and creators of the movies were outsiders from middle class society, vaudeville performers and immigrant entrepreneurs for whom genteel aspirations were not yet a living reality. Thus they were free to create what may be the only authentically popular expression of commercial humor in American history — a humor embracing and revitalizing, through new visual forms, the nineteenth century humor of grotesque exaggeration, extravagance, and violence, and, more importantly,
directing its aggressions outward against authority and power, against the cops and the rich.

The silent comedy, of course, had no place for vernacular dialect, but its visual form created unique opportunities for the comic mask, and no movie comedian utilized them more cleverly than Charles Chaplin, the great artist of silent comedy as Mark Twain was the great artist of vernacular humor. It is instructive to know that Chaplin disliked the urbane prose humorists, for some commentators have tried to equate Chaplin's comic mask of the Tramp with the ineffectual comic figures of twentieth century prose humor. But Chaplin's Tramp possesses exactly what the middle class comic subjects lack: a strong, precise, freely expressed antipathy to social distinctions and class pretensions, and a willingness to exploit the grotesque and extravagant comic elements to gain his ends. Chaplin's Tramp was a brilliant creation of what may be called the visual vernacular, and no where was Chaplin more inventive with the vernacular tradition than in his reversal of the class uses for the mask. In the nineteenth century conservative and genteel humorists assumed the comic mask in order to ridicule the popular character as if from within. In several of Chaplin's greatest movies the Tramp, by accident or design, masquerades as a genteel figure — as a preacher in *The Pilgrim* (1923), as a rich man in *City Lights* (1931). Thus Chaplin ridiculed gentility as if from within.

With the coming of sound most of the silent movie comedians were swept into oblivion; Chaplin alone continued to make silent comedies as an independent producer. The aggressively anti-genteel humor of the early movies was extended in visual and verbal form for a time by the Marx Brothers and by Mae West. Both West and the Marxes came to Hollywood from the Broadway theater, and their styles of verbal humor shared many of the urbane and sophisticated qualities of the prose humorists (S. J. Perelman wrote several of the funniest Marx Brothers screenplays). But the motion picture medium broadened and coarsened their humor, turned their comic masks into natural personalities rather than stage personae, and they directed their aggressive humor against the outside world rather than against themselves. W. C. Fields, who was more ambiguously a figure of outward aggression and self-derision, managed to preserve his comic genius even longer. But as the movies extended their appeal into the middle class, becoming the mass cultural arbiter of taste and values that popular fiction had been in the nineteenth century, gentility eroded the class and social hostilities of movie comedy, taming some comics, like the Marx Brothers, and discarding others, like Mae West. The other mass entertainment media created by electronic technology, radio and television, never had the chance to develop outside the watchful care of genteel culture. In the heyday of radio the most popular program year-in and year-out was 'Amos 'n' Andy', a blackface comedy that represented a more sophisticated, urban form of the minstrel show tradition. Television comedians from the start, even
such creative comics as Sid Caesar, worked under strict genteel restrains.

After the Second World War critics and commentators bemoaned the decline and fall of American humor. The post-holocaust, post-Hiroshima generation could not laugh so easily as men and women once had done. The tame sophistication of prose humor and the bland conformity of radio and television comedians seemed to bear out the most dire prognosis for the survival of humor. Predicting the future of cultural forms, however, is a risky task. At the bleakest moment in the history of American humor, vital, creative comic energy began to express itself. The 1960s became one of the great eras for American humor. But cultural structures and moods change very rapidly in modern American society, and no one can say for certain what will happen to American humor in the years to come.

The sources and outlets for the resurgence of humor in the 1960s, however, may provide some clues to the most likely forms and values to be found in a living American humor. The comic revival began outside the professional institutions of humorous production, the newspaper and periodical press and the electronic mass media. The new humorists of the 1960s emerged from the hip bohemia, like Paul Krassner, founder of the underground magazine, *The Realist*, and Lenny Bruce, the night club comedian; they were artists experimenting with new forms, like Claes Oldenburg and Andy Warhol; perhaps most significantly and influentially, they were novelists working in a form that was no longer of central importance to genteel middle class cultural dominance. Many of the serious, memorable novels of the Sixties were comic novels — Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night* and *Cat’s Cradle*, Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49*, John Barth’s *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Norman Mailer’s *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, and more. Their success helped to loosen up the media, and paved the way for a revival of creative humor in the press and on television, in the work of Art Buchwald and Russell Baker and cartoonists like Conrad and Interlandi, in comedians like the Smothers Brothers and Rowan and Martin.

American humor of the 1960s was called ‘black humor’, but as we have seen, American humor was ‘black humor’ from the beginning — a humor of grotesque exaggeration, extravagance, sexuality, and violence. The blackness of American humor was at first an elitist device to ridicule the popular democracy, but the people embraced extravagance, boasting, violence, and the grotesque as genuine expressions of their own true nature. Gentility dominated American humor for much of the past century, and the pervasive sense of man’s helplessness against the forces of society and the state seemed for a time to doom American humor to the self-deprecating witticisms of the average middle class man, the secret dreams of Walter Mitty and the verbal quips of Bob Hope. Yet the deep social divisions and class distinctions of American society had only been hidden, not eliminated, in the first half of the twentieth century, and when they burst forth
again in the 1960s they found expression in the humor of the outsider and the tramp. The comic mask of vernacular crudity, created in derision, has been transformed — from Mark Twain through Charles Chaplin to the ‘black humorists’ of contemporary America — into a proud expression of cultural authenticity and liberation from genteel repression and liberal blandness. Whatever form American humor takes in the future, the comedy of violence, extravagance, and grotesque exaggeration will continue to express fundamental aspects of American culture and society — not a vague and undefinable American character, but the perpetual struggle over cultural control and creative expression, over the form and direction of social change.*

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* The following annotated list is presented for persons who want to read further on the subject of humor in America: Constance Rourke’s classic study, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (1931), remains evocative and stimulating. Walter Blair’s Native American Humor (1800-1900), published in 1937, is still the most comprehensive study of the subject, and reprints as well a wide selection from the nineteenth century humorous writers. Kenneth Lynn has published a briefer and more pointed collection of humorous writings, The Comic Tradition in America (1958). Lynn’s Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor (1959) is excellent both for its perspective on the values and techniques of the elite humorists, and in relating Mark Twain to the pre-Civil War humorous tradition. The best study of Mark Twain as an artist is Henry Nash Smith, Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer (1962). Norris W. Yates has written a valuable study of twentieth century writers of prose humor, The American Humorist: Conscience of the Twentieth Century (1964). For silent movie comedy, the best work is Donald W. McCaffrey, Four Great Comedians (1968), which covers Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon, and also deals with many other aspects of silent comedy. Richard Dorson’s American Folklore (1959) presents much valuable information on folk humor and folk traditions. A recent, wide-ranging study of American humor is Jesse Bier, The Rise and Fall of American Humor (1968).