Stephen Leacock
Staines, David

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Staines, David.
Stephen Leacock: A Reappraisal.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6592

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=148746
Untestable Inferences: Post-Structuralism and Leacock's Achievement in Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town

ED JEWINSKI

Numerous critics—Davies, Watt, Bowker, Dooley are just some that come to mind—agree that Leacock's Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town is riddled with inconsistencies and confusions. In fact, because flaws in the book continually mar the whole, Dooley speaks for these readers when he claims, "We are not sure what moral perspective we are being asked to adopt" to understand and judge the actions of the work. Regrettably, such readers assume that, despite the ironies they see, the narrative pattern should be straightforward reading. Ignoring that the brightest sunshine casts the darkest shadows (the death of Fizzlechip, for instance), such readers are puzzled not only when the work becomes dark, unclear, imprecise, brooding, but also when the narrative becomes unclear, cloudy, and inconsistent.

Although such readers grant that there is a drastic difference between what is said and what is shown in this book—in fact they may be credited with accurately describing the problem and its possible ramifications—they fail to accept that this difference is not an accidental characteristic, but a necessary feature of the book. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the very "difference" between showing and telling noted by these critics is the first indication of a significant "difference"—a deferral of meaning (as Derrida puts it), an impossibility of a resolution of a "text."

Jacques Derrida's concern with continual "deferral" of all meaning, whenever language is used, can be of great assistance when attempting to come to terms with Leacock's Sunshine Sketches. Derrida's methodical (although not methodological) approach may be used to refute the critical rubrics that a "text" must be determinable, that a narrator must be consistent, that the values and morals of a work must be—even can be—clear and straightforward.
The insistence that "ambiguities" in a "text" must forward and unify and integrate the various elements of a work rests upon the shibboleths of New Criticism. Post-modernist approaches to literature, however, do not accept such assumptions, preferring instead to question what constitutes a "reading." Such an approach seems particularly suited to a "text" whose very title, Sunshine Sketches, hints at a design and structure that requires whiteness, blank space, emptiness, to make its impression. That the reader cannot determine the right moral stance merely confirms, as the narrator of the "sketches" insists, that to the "eye of discernment" Mariposa is a "perfect jostle." In other words, unless the phrase "sunshine sketches" is seen as oxymoronic—possibly a kind of reversal of Milton's famous "visible darkness"—the "right" perspective may never be attained. As the narrator of the Sketches insists, without the proper perspective, "your standard of vision is all astray" (Sketches, p. 3, my emphasis).

To attain a better "view" of the "text," then, it might be best to consider the problem of language and how it affects a reader's response to the work. One might begin by noting that a single grammatical pattern (a sentence, for example) can generate any number of meanings; moreover, within this group of "meanings," there can exist two mutually exclusive ones. Paul de Man makes this point quite effectively in his Allegories of Reading:

... asked by his wife whether he wants to have his bowling shoes laced over or laced under, Archie Bunker answers with a question: "What's the difference?" Being a reader of sublime simplicity, his wife answers by patiently explaining the difference... but provokes only his ire. "What's the difference?" did not ask for difference but means instead "I don't give a damn what the difference is."

De Man's point is that the same statement can offer or produce mutually exclusive "meanings"; in the All in the Family episode, the literal meaning asks for an explanation of difference, while the figurative meaning asserts that any explanation of difference is irrelevant.

As long as we are discussing statements made by characters from the mass media, it is not especially difficult to distinguish between the obtuse literalness of an Edith and the unwitting metaphoricity of an Archie. In a work like Leacock's Sunshine Sketches, however, the distinction is not nearly so simple. Consider, for example, Leacock's narrator wrestling with the problem of how and why "one of the greatest minds in the hotel business" could ever commit the blunder of locking an important man like Judge Pepperleigh out of his bar:

How he had come to do so, it passed his imagination to recall. Crime always seems impossible in retrospect. By what sheer madness of the moment could he [Smith] have shut up the bar on the night in question, and shut Judge Pepperleigh... outside of it? (p. 7)

Certainly the vaudevillian response to the one-liner made by the Ediths of the world—"How could he do it? By locking the door, of course!"—does not do justice to Leacock's sophisticated satire. Yet is the
reader being invited to probe the “text” for an answer, or is he compelled immediately to concede that the “sheer madness” of a moment could never be probed, illuminated, or clarified? Is the reader to seek a subtle, but definite, cause/effect pattern that will throw light upon what seems merely arbitrary and accidental, or has the reader been told not to be an Edith-like ninny offering explanations where none is needed or desired?

The solution to this rhetorical problem rests in the understanding of Leacock's narrative method as a series of “untestable inferences” followed by a sequence of *non sequiturs*. Initially, the reader is offered a series of statements which lead him to be indecisive about whether X or Y is the answer. Immediately afterwards, the reader is given a sequence of events which relate to the main issue only tangentially. For example, whether Smith locks out the judge with or without reason is left for the reader to infer; the rest of the narrative merely emphasizes how rapidly and surely and confidently Smith can seem to act. Yet in being awed by Smith's seeming ability to act efficiently, does the reader become, like Edith Bunker, wholly absorbed by the literal level of the “text”? The fact that Smith ultimately retains his licence does not clarify what the character's method of action means in and to the community of the work, or to the morality of the work as a whole. Is the reader to approve or disapprove, admire or condemn, praise or ridicule Smith's method of retaining his privilege to run a bar? It is on this second level that Leacock's book particularly disrupts, disconcerts, even destroys, the reader's confidence that an appropriate framework of beliefs and morals can be constructed to make sense of the characters' actions. Why, in other words, Smith resorts to elaborate and expensive renovations to regain favour is never directly clarified. Without a larger context (a larger series of explanations), the individual inferences often lack a meaning which may be tested, weighed, judged.

This kind of problem recurs throughout the book, and understanding its presence often helps elucidate why *Sunshine Sketches* regularly eludes critical analysis while it consistently captivates its audience. Let me illustrate my argument, before concluding with a focus upon the narrative method and the problem of “perspective,” by analyzing three main inferences that control a large part, although not the whole, of the series of sketches. The first is the previously mentioned Josh Smith's “madness of the moment”; the second is Peter Pupkin's love affair with Zena Pepperleigh; and the third is Dean Drone's sanity (or should I say the lack thereof?). In each case, I plan to clarify the inferences a reader might make, reconsider them, and, finally, suggest why they should be abandoned altogether. By tracing the contradictory possibilities of readings, I intend to show how Jacques Derrida's notions of “difference” contribute to a reader's understanding of the enigmatic quality of Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches*. In other words, my argument forwards the notion that a single so-called “text” may be the interweaving of mutually exclusive “readings,” for no unified reading need be necessary to a work of literature.

The passage recording the temporary “madness” which drove Josh Smith to lock out the judge is an excellent example of necessary deferral,
for the reader is forced to consider what, if anything, might have motivated Smith to act so rashly. Initially, the reader might have been content with accepting how men like Smith can overcome the haphazard, whimsical, irrational persecution of the dishonest and the intemperate. By sheer contrast, Smith seems less the villain than Pepperleigh, even if only because Smith seems more thorough, exacting, rational, and methodical than the unpredictable judge. However, this very description reminds the reader that Smith is supposed to be far too methodical to be a mere victim of a moment’s “madness.” Another glance at the key passage reinforces that the act is increasingly unlikely in a man who never allowed “any hands but his own” to lock up. The extended and elaborately complex rhetoric of the passage, with its carefully balanced sentences, suggests neither haste nor clumsiness nor accident. Its repetitive and carefully structured quality insists that a reader’s opinion or view should be, somehow, suspended for some reason or alerted to some nuance. The short moment is drawn out, extended, elaborated. The subject matter and the method of telling seem at odds. Some cause/effect pattern seems more and more reasonable and rational because the narrator’s worrying word after word in the passage implies that a man like Smith, a man ordinarily so thorough, so exact, so deliberate, and so cautious simply does not err so clumsily:

Punctually every night at eleven o’clock Mr. Smith strolled from the desk of the “rotunda” to the door of the bar. If it seemed properly full of people and all was bright and cheerful, then he closed it. If not, he kept it open a few minutes longer till he had enough people inside to warrant closing. But never, never unless he was assured that Pepperleigh, the judge of the court, and Macartney, the prosecuting attorney, were both safely in the bar, or the bar parlour, did the proprietor venture to close up. Yet on this fatal night Pepperleigh and Macartney had been shut out—actually left on the street without a drink, and compelled to hammer and beat at the street door of the bar to gain admittance. (p. 7)

The reader obviously knows what happened, but he is at a loss to explain why it happened. Within this chapter, the reader can only wonder if Smith has merely retaliated for having been fined after donating one hundred dollars to the Liberal Party. Was Smith foolish enough to attempt, in a moment of sheer folly, to avenge himself upon those representatives of the “terrible engine of retributive justice”? Or, has this newcomer (for it must be remembered that Smith has only been in Mariposa for three years) simply blundered so badly because of ignorance? Within the entire context of the book, the reader can only speculate as to whether Smith’s decision to act is, somehow, based upon his determination to run for office later. But why he should do so by jeopardizing his liquor licence is even more incomprehensible than the possible desire for revenge. The reader, in other words, is thrust into what Derrida would call a gap in the “text,” a place from where the individual inferences lack meaning. The reader is offered insights which allow neither clear vision nor precise understanding.
Whatever the reader's "tentative" decision about Smith's motives, the results become increasingly unclear and vague, for the rest of the chapter concentrates on the actions, not the motives, of one of the "greatest minds in the hotel business" matching wits with the townspeople. At the end of the chapter, he ends up paying an inordinate amount to retain his licence. To get his way, Smith adds a "caff" and a "Rats' Cooler" to a building he does not even own. He hires a French Chef, rents all the accessories for a European atmosphere and, finally, arranges the prices so that he loses 75 cents for every 25 cents that he earns.

The "greatest mind" seems to have blundered into one of the most unprofitable forms of business imaginable, especially in a town the size of Mariposa, which boasts no fewer than three hotels. Even though Smith is determined to close up everything the moment he regains his licence, the cost seems tremendously out of proportion to the goal. Smith's ability with basic mathematics is made to seem as weak as Dean Drone's.

Has Smith really mastered and manipulated the townspeople, or have the townspeople forced the newcomer to reveal his own vain desire to belong? Is Smith guilty of attempting to buy acceptance and respectability, no matter what the cost? Have the townspeople, moreover, finally accepted his bribes, his alcohol, and his persistent effort to be on a first-name basis, only after making it clear that it will "cost him" to be part of the "inner life" of the town? It seems more than possible that Smith has fully understood the circumstances, for he never formally closes either the "caff" or the "Rats' Cooler" despite his original plan to do so immediately upon having his licence renewed. The first he retains, although he never uses its grills again, and the second he closes for "repairs" that never seem to get done—a tidy compromise for him, but an enigmatic conclusion for the reader.

Much of the agonizing over Smith's fate, of course, results because of the uncertainty and imprecision in a reader's mind when the language of the "text" appears to be denying the very thing it asserts. One must assume, for example, that Smith is an extremely capable and intelligent being; yet Leacock's prose so scrupulously compels the reader to make continual inferences that any such statement has to be held in abeyance. Smith, as the narrator puts it with such exquisite ambiguity, compels readers to recognize that the "ordinary human countenance" is "as superficial as a puddle in the sunlight" (p. 6) when compared to that of Mr. Smith. But does that mean Smith so perfectly reflects what a viewer wishes to see that the hotel keeper never reveals his motives, or does the statement mean that Smith is so absolutely transparent that he hides no motive whatever? Whether Smith is manipulating others or being manipulated by them depends, in part, on the reader's response to such potentially contradictory statements of seeming directness. But in attempts to come to a definite answer, the reader necessarily discovers only the "text," the language used, and that language remains so unswervingly referential that the reader can go only from one word to another, from one passage to another. There seems no way to get beyond the text.
Throughout the sketches, where readers expect the literal, they find the metaphorical; where they expect realism, they find literary convention; where they expect something to be made definite or conclusive, they find that it is perpetually put off or deferred. The difficulty, furthermore, is that the irony, paradox, and so on do not reconcile the variant readings, but rather encourage and multiply them. Where Smith may be seen, at times, as the master of his circumstances, he equally appears to be their slave. The “saving” of the Mariposa Belle, often cited as an instance of Smith’s ability to steer the social state of Mariposa on its proper course, is also the instance of Smith’s hubris and incompetence. Although Smith descends into the bowels of the boat “to plug the timber seams with mallet and marline” (p. 53), he is also the former captain who has “had a steamer ‘sink on him’ on Lake Nipissing and a still bigger one . . . sink on him in Lake Abbitibi” (p. 50). Is it any wonder, then, that the reader is confused when, with Smith’s hands at the steering wheel, the Mariposa Belle’s arrival at the dock sends people scurrying back and forth? “Hear them calling and shouting back and forward from the deck to the shore! Listen!” (p. 54). The national anthem will strike up again, but is it now a tune of triumph or failure? The Mariposa Belle initially sank as its passengers were singing “O Canada,” and the narrator haunts the reader with rhetorical questions that increase one’s insecurity about that “grip” on the “steering wheel of the Mariposa Belle”:

Can he take her in? Well, now! Ask a man who has had steamers sink on him in half the lakes from Temiscaming to the Bay, if he can take her in? (p. 54)

The sheer bravado and foolhardiness is underscored when the chapter ends: “—one—two—ready now— ‘O CAN-A-DA!’”

The reader’s inability to establish whether Smith crashed the Mariposa Belle in the harbour or docked it safely leaves the “text” open and indefinite. The reader is lured into believing that there is the possibility of some ultimate reference point for making final sense of the “text.” On the one hand, the narrator suggests that certain inferences are legitimate; on the other, then, he continually undermines the inferences by offering just enough information, description and summary, and just enough evidence, to subvert them. The difficulty is that the evidence rests on an “encyclopedia” of information that can never be fully traced. Each time the reader wishes to collect the “evidence,” he must defer the presentation of his reference points to another piece of evidence, and defer that piece of evidence to another piece of evidence. The shifting of this reference point exposes the purely fictive or purely arbitrary nature of lifting one fragment from the “text” to establish a conclusive argument. Ultimately, Leacock’s Sunshine Sketches is a commentary on its own inability to transcend the interpretive function, and this problem is passed on to the reader. What the work is really about, then, is its unreadability, which is to say the reader’s struggle to impose his own preferred fictions upon the events and episodes and incidents. The work’s achievement is that it
neither points to a "reality" nor completes itself as a "unified fiction"—rather it draws us back into its own infinite problematics.\(^5\)

Smith's comment about the kerosene used to burn down the church might illustrate this point best. Smith denies starting the fire by insisting that he "had not carried a can of kerosene up the street" on the night of the fire, "and anyway it was the rottenest kind of kerosene he had ever seen and no more use than so much molasses" (p. 86). The non sequitur, it appears, gives the game away—the reader infers that Smith did it. Yet, is the reader to examine the statement literally or metaphorically? Literally, Smith need not have carried the can of kerosene up the street, for he had Mr. Gingham's assistant with him, and this second man could have carried the liquid. But if Smith is literally accurate in the first half of the statement, why can he not be so in the second half? The kerosene may have been of little or no use in getting the building to burn. Although the reader is never told exactly how the fire was started, his instinctive recognition of Smith as the culprit makes him forget one thing: the mere fact that Smith did it establishes neither a clear motive nor an insight into the problem of Smith's role in the sketches. Starvation for facts, by this time in the book, blinds the reader to all other concerns.

Is Smith the manipulator or the manipulated? Is he now, unlike his portrayal in the earlier sections of the work, part of the ruling group of Mariposa? Since Mullins "belonged away down the lake" during the fishing season (p. 60), Smith, Mullins, and Niven could easily have conspired to rid the town of the expensive church. Furthermore, since Mullins continually convinces Drone to "change" (p. 60) the figures which itemize the expenses incurred for the building, they could easily have conspired to defraud the insurance company. Most importantly, they could easily have planned to create enough of a hullabaloo on the night of the fire to mislead the narrator into believing that their actions as firemen were to "save" the town:

They fought the fire, not to save the church, for that was doomed from the first outbreak of the flames, but to stop the spread of it and save the town. (p. 82)

Yet, as the narrator notices, even this is not quite right, for "most of all they fought to save the wooden driving shed behind the church, from which the fire could leap into the heart of Mariposa." Their method of saving it, of course, is to have Smith cut through the main beam so that they could destroy the shed by hauling it down.

The emphasis upon the actions makes the reader forget both the motives and the reasons for those actions. In part, Smith seems to have been right: the kerosene was "useless"; the men had to create the diversion of pulling down the shed to "save" the town only to ensure that the church would burn completely and that all the insurance could be collected. The need for time explains why Smith was made "the head and chief of the Mariposa fire brigade that night" (p. 83).

The skill and strategy employed by Smith and Mullins prepare the reader for Smith's final coup: his election to office through bribery and
deception. However, the reader is now left in the greatest dilemma of all. Either Smith is the supreme manipulator or he is the supreme victim. He can leave Mariposa to do as he will, but like the dishonest Bagshaw before him, he is fully at the mercy of the townpeople's whims, stupidities, and corruptions. In a sense, the reader has gone full circle. If Pepperleigh is one of the characters who initiates Smith's rise to power, Pepperleigh is also one of the characters who has a final comment upon Smith's "success":

Judge Pepperleigh spoke and said that there was no need to dwell on the victory that they had achieved, because it was history; there was no occasion to speak of what part he himself had played, within the limits of his official position, because what he had done was henceforth a matter of history. (p. 146)

Has Pepperleigh, the book's seeming prime representative of irrational justice, underscored the shenanigans of a "little" town determined to have a "yes-man" in office? If such a possibility exists, the ironies of the last sentence are too multiple to resolve:

Mr. Smith, of course, said nothing. He didn't have to—not for four years—and he knew it. (p. 147)

"He knew" could mean that he understood what was expected of him. He might see himself as free—the narrative method never allows for entrance into Smith's mind—or he might see himself as the spokesman for the town's wishes, for four years later he would have to speak, particularly when it came time to account for himself and his actions to a town determined to vote only at the last second, "not wanting to make any error in their vote" (p. 145).

The social "reality" of these sketches is far from solid and determinate; in fact, it is a kind of "text" that persistently eludes a single interpretation. Provisional, not final, readings are possible, but they are readings that a minute's thought will reverse. More interestingly, the readings are mutually exclusive, for Smith may be either the victim or the victimizer, depending on which particular items a reader selects from his "encyclopedia" of information concerning the actions of the work. The book, in other words, is built upon what one might call dialectical contradictions. Many of the narrator's comments offer a choice of readings based not on the ambiguities of descriptive terms alone, but on the evasive syntax of the sentences. As the choices thus generate proliferations of meanings, the possible number of "meanings" conveyed by them multiplies. By the end of the book, the result is a large number of incompatible affirmations, and the notion of assertion itself becomes problematic.

The strategically effective method of narration provided by Leacock works, in part, on the system of compelling the reader to temporarily accept a binary opposition, an opposition that is gradually shown to be an illusion. Initially, the reader must accept that Smith is dishonest, for he keeps the bar open after legal drinking hours. Since this is a minor "sin," cultural relativity may be invoked, for, after all, the people who drink in the bar include the lawyers, prosecutors, and
judges. The logic seems to be that if the representatives of justice break the law, one should not judge Smith too harshly. When Pepperleigh seems completely irrational for imposing the technically legal point of late hours to remove Smith’s licence, one sees Smith as a victim. The result is a “dishonest victim.” Pepperleigh is presented in the same manner. He represents both justice and the legal system, although he breaks the law and abuses it. In effect, he becomes a “legal criminal.” The opposites that clash here are not two characters but two readings. Such mutually exclusive qualities explode the very “binary difference” between one character and the other; it is not a quarrel between a man who breaks a law and one who upholds it, nor between a man who takes the law into his own hands and one who does not. The reader is forced into “difference,” for the “general notions” of justice and injustice collapse when the reader must stop to decide where justice begins and where it ends. Such questions, however, are not answered by the “text,” and the reader is caught in a web of incompatible strategies of comprehension. To respond to the “text,” he is lulled, initially, into believing that one character has more “right” than the other; only to have that notion subverted, for if the reader sides with Smith as the victim, “prudent” manipulation of others is the morality that must be accepted as “necessary,” all “human” action being in response to the hypocrisies of a society steeped in moral relativity. If one sides with Smith as the victimizer, then the reader must embrace the notion that society is nothing more than a morass of moral unpredictability. Both readings plunge the reader into the “gap” of the text; he is left only with the “trace” that justice exists somewhere and somehow, for how else could he have perceived the “unfairness” of Pepperleigh’s form of “retributive justice”? Some kind of Platonic notion must be invoked here: either the text is so mimetic that it reflects man’s inability to link adequately man’s nature and his actions, or the “text” is hopelessly incapable of resolution. Since the question of justice in the world is rhetorical, the reader is forced to contemplate the provisional and fictive constructs which link the various parts of his reading of the text.

Since this discussion has become “philosophical,” showing that links are made on constructs which precede a “text,” and since these constructs are often unverifiable notions that must be examined in themselves, it is important to stress that while New Criticism attempts to bring such ambiguities to a single point which unifies and integrates the various elements of a text, post-structuralist readings tend to remind readers of how a text remains a “collection of irresolvables.” Leacock’s book, in particular, is amazing in its impenetrability, for one is constantly barraged with incompatible strategies of reading. The ambiguities force readers to acknowledge that “texts” are, at best, seen as instances of “textuality.” Let me illustrate the point by turning to the role of Peter Pupkin in the Sketches.

Initially the reader is forced to conjecture, at least to some degree, upon the nature and intelligence and quality of mind of the lover Pupkin.
The reader, on this account, is told directly that this lover has been victimized by the education process: "Peter was kept out of the law by the fool system of examinations devised since his father's time" (p. 107). A close reader of the text might never get past this sentence, if he were ever foolish enough to give the statement full thought. A gap has opened here, for what is education, and how can it be measured, and is that "fool system" worth anything when it eliminates individuals like Pupkin? In part, of course, I am toying here with the notions I elaborated earlier: statements in this book simultaneously assert and deny.

The issue of "intelligence" is crucial in assessing what appears to happen to Pupkin. In part, for example, the narrator would have the reader believe that Pupkin is putting his full mind to the issue of keeping his rich family a secret. Yet if that is the case, why would he play the rich man's game, tennis, nearly every day and buy "a white waist-coat and a walking stick with a gold top, a lot of new neckties and a pair of patent leather boots" (p. 102)? Such ostentatious dress does little to suggest that he has accepted his role as a banker's clerk, despite his father's efforts (if one believes the narrator) to "tan [luxury] out of him" and to get it "thumped out of him" and to get it "knocked out of him" (p. 107).

Pupkin's attitudes puzzle the reader. Is Pupkin sensitive about his father's wealth, or does he reveal his own snobbishness and false glorification of wealth and privilege when he considers that it would be foolish to have his father come to Mariposa and meet Jim Eliot and treat him "like a druggist merely because he ran a drug store! or speaking to Jefferson Thorpe as if he were a barber simply because he shaved for money! Why, a man like that could ruin young Pupkin" (p. 105)? But the father, who finally does come to visit and returns home only after being sent "telegrams enough to fill a satchel," enjoys himself with both Eliot and Thorpe, "as if he had never lived any other life in all his days" (p. 123). Sympathy for Pupkin is either gradually eroded as the story continues (for he is revealed as cold, stupid, snobbish, spoiled, and egotistical), or arrested by the reader's inability to decide whether Pupkin is truly none of these, but rather a naive simpleton who neither understands the implications of his actions nor recognizes his own dimwittedness—he believes, for example, that his love was sealed the moment he recognized that, by "the strangest coincidence in the world" (p. 100), his handwriting was exactly like Zena's.

If one reads at the simplest levels of the two mutually exclusive "meanings" of the text, one's effort to reconcile the problems seems impossible. One level denies and subverts the other in Edith-like fashion. Even describing the mere details resembles the difference between lacing over and lacing under.

Pupkin's encounter in the bank with the so-called robber also becomes a self-evident sham of mutually exclusive readings. Money is not enough for Peter Pupkin, nor is social rank, social privilege, or social status. At the moment he senses the robber, he is simply a man, a man of duty, without any secondary motive. In fact, the narrator insists that
Pupkin has even “forgotten” heroism. Yet the following passage, with its reiteration of the same phrase, clarifies that the narrator either protests too much or has lost control of his own presentation of the character:

I think, as Peter Pupkin stood, revolver in hand, in the office of the bank, he had forgotten all about the maudlin purpose of his first coming. He had forgotten for the moment all about heroes and love affairs, and his whole mind was focused, sharp and alert, with the intensity of the nighttime, on the sounds that he heard in the vault and on the back-stairway of the bank.

Straight away, Pupkin knew what it meant as plainly as if it were written in print. He had forgotten, I say, about being a hero and he only knew that there was sixty thousand dollars in the vault of the bank below, and he was paid eight hundred dollars a year to look after it. (p. 115)

The repetend subverts any notion of forgetting; it impresses the same point on the mind, leaving it as a phrase that echoes and reverberates. Pupkin may now be seen as either staging the scene—pretending to the heroism that he thinks Zena dreams of—or acting on motives of duty and devotion to the bank. The “reading” that will “determine” the “text” depends upon what the reader accepts as Pupkin’s “intelligence.” The difficulty is, once again, the problem of which “reading” the reader will determine as he selects from the “encyclopedia” of information available. The selection, however, is dependent upon the socio-cultural values which form the particular blend of inferences determined by the reader. The ambiguities, in other words, do not forward a reading to a single unified reading; rather they thrust the reader into the gap between what is read and how that reading is determined. The values imposed, and the construct derived therefrom, indicate the fictions the reader will use to bridge the difference between what is said and what is implied. The “text” remains silent, and the reader is caught in the web of “textuality,” the various ideologies that may influence his “reading.”

In setting up any series of “legitimate” propositions, we, as readers, select those features which we consider compatible with the “context” and suppress those which are not—or, at least, those which we suppose are not. In this way, we write as much as read the fiction before us. Postmodernism can nevertheless help us feel comfortable with recognizing those textual elements which we continually suppress. By granting that our criterion for appropriacy in interpretation is often bound by what we consider culturally significant (more militant post-modernists would insist ideologically significant), we also limit, guide, control, and suppress the direction of our cultural discourse and self-reflection. To ignore the incompatible qualities of the character-istics of Pupkin is to ignore how literature subverts, rather than enhances, the notion of a “unified, consistent” individual. The theory of consistent characterization, in other words, is a cultural imposition upon fiction, a cultural value desired, but a cultural “value” denied by Leacock’s Sketches. At each stage where Pupkin’s character eludes analysis, the reader should be examining
which cultural values he has imposed in his efforts to bring the character "together."

A concluding consideration of Dean Drone's role in the Sketches might help us see what happens when a "text" is recognized as an enigmatic problem of "textuality." In the narrative, the presentation of Dean Drone's plight probably evokes the most powerful emotions in the reader, for in this section the narrator uses such powerfully equivocal statements that it is extremely difficult to simplify how they deny what they affirm. The statements assuring the reader that Drone did not go mad or insane after his church burned to the ground illustrate the point:

Dean Drone? Did he get well again? Why, what makes you ask that? You mean, was his head at all affected after the stroke? No, it was not. Absolutely not. It was not affected in the least, though how anybody who knows him now in Mariposa could have the faintest idea that his mind was in any way impaired by the stroke is more than I can tell. (p. 86)

The clause I have emphasized seems particularly irresolvable. Does it mean that the people of Mariposa are too insensitive to understand what happened? Does it simply mean the present generation never "knew" him, for most of those who knew him are now dead? Does it mean that, in fact, all the "people" are really characters in a story, and so could not know anyway? Why they cannot know is never made clear.

Yet are readers any more capable of knowing than the people of Mariposa itself?

To determine if Drone got "well," of course, the reader must, at some point, decide what "illness" and "health" are. In a literal sense, the narrator is right: Drone gets over the stroke, and the minister's body does recuperate. At the same time, however, his mind seems damaged, at least to us, because he now has visions:

So you will understand that the Dean's mind is, if anything, even keener, and his head even clearer than before . . . he has told me that he finds that he can read, with the greatest ease, works in the Greek that seemed difficult before, because his head is so clear now.

And sometimes—when his head is very clear—as he sits there reading beneath the plum blossoms he can hear them singing beyond, and his wife's voice. (p. 86)

The narrative asks us, in short, to consider the two stages of Drone. Before the stroke, he is wholly absorbed with worldly things—his church, his prestige, his vanity—no matter how excessive the burden on his congregation. He has, in effect, a vision of the glory of man that ignores all practical and "down-to-earth" problems. After the stroke, he is not particularly different: he is no nearer the "real world" of social activity than he ever was. From childish desires for material goods, he has moved into literal childishness and infantilism. The history of Dean Drone's life ranges from "ideal" materialism to "naive" spiritualism, a span achieved without any contact with the "human" world in between (assuming that
petty matters of bills and payments and parishioners interested in neither can be equated with the "real" world).

But to probe the problem of Drone's values, a reader tends to draw on an all-too-simple series of explanatory bifurcations: sickness and health, sanity and insanity, and so on. In my own account, I have based my division on an unstated "paradigm"—the interplay of wisdom and ignorance in the form of the wisdom of folly and the folly of wisdom. And I have imposed unstated ethical values onto the text which are based on a perception of oversimplified "readings" of the social and religious problems of the "text." In other words, I am literally not sure what Leacock ever had to say about Drone, but I do know that my effort to explain his role has forced me to examine the archaeology, my cultural and social presuppositions and assumptions, underlying my notion of what Drone is as a "religious" figure in relation to a "faith" satirized. The difficulty remains: can the "madness of a moment" (Smith) be related to what one might call the "madness of a lifetime" (Drone), so that the "text" has a unified, rather than fragmented, structure? One can only suggest that if no conclusive commentary can be made about the "values" to be invoked, the "text" is to be seen as jouissance—unending verbal play that promises closure but never grants it. The narrator of the work, in other words, must be read on the literal and the metaphorical levels simultaneously, for he is perfectly correct when he insists that Mariposa is a "perfect jostle." To the small-town person, Mariposa may be a "perfect hive of activity" and to the person from "New York," it may be a sleepy town. To the Mariposan, it may be a place of great events, and to the city-dweller it may be a place of no consequence. Such a bifurcation is possible only for those who ignore that the division between city and small town is, itself, an illusory binary opposition that only perpetuates the deception, as the closing chapter "L'Envoi. The Train to Mariposa" reveals. Just as a reader cannot determine exactly where the city ends and the town begins, except in some illusory sense of seeming "difference," so the conflicting forces of signification in a "text" cannot be resolved. The reader who accepts that "six months or a year" in Mariposa will cure his "standard of vision" has forgotten the power of human susceptibility to unacknowledged relativity, for "there never was such a place for changing its character with the season" (p. 4).

Creating a narrator who so consistently appeals to a reader's desire to find an encompassing framework for irresolvable details marks Leacock's greatest achievement. Unwilling to recognize that he has been repeatedly thrust into the gaps of the "text," the reader who desires the "unified vision" may fault the very artistry that defies the conventions. The desire to find the limits and "margins" of a text must not become so all-encompassing that it begins to deny and devalue as "marred" the very literature that opens the question of what is a reading. Man's impulse to "tidy up" his readings must be resisted if the interrelationship of human experience and the representation of that experience are to be kept vital,
interesting, alive, and vibrant. Leacock's narrative method—based on the use of a narrator blind to his own incompatible levels of literal and metaphorical speech—should not be condemned, but applauded. If the work fails to be an integrated work, it is only so because it is a supreme achievement of fragmentation, incompleteness, and inconclusiveness.