A Spoonful of Sugar: Why We Should Be Reading P.G. Wodehouse

Abigail Long

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation
https://mosaic.messiah.edu/honors/112

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah College is a Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.
A Spoonful of Sugar: Why We Should Be Reading P.G. Wodehouse

At the heart of any examination of literature there lies a germinating thought that grows into an extended research project, and I must confess right at the beginning that the thought that rooted me into this two-semester-long investigation of British author P.G. Wodehouse and humor was a selfish one. It came to me one day last fall while re-visiting Wodehouse’s novel The Code of the Woosters, when after laughing aloud at some remark of Bertie Wooster, I said to myself, “it’s too bad I couldn’t get credit for reading this. I would never procrastinate on homework if it was Wodehouse related.” However, this statement reveals an assumption that I later re-examined after participating in discussions about canon in my fall literature seminar class: that Wodehouse represents a type of writing that educators really can’t include in the canon of study in English literature. My readers may at this point anticipate the resulting question from this assumption, namely, “why is there an assumption that Wodehouse can’t be studied?” All readers that I’ve encountered that are familiar with Wodehouse gush about his writing style, and a quick perusal of the accolades on the back cover or inside pages of any Wodehouse novel will tell you that many critics consider him a masterful author. Thus the absence of Wodehouse from all English classes in my career as a student, save for one homeschool curriculum used for British Literature, seemed odd. If an author is generally considered to be excellent at what they do, why shouldn’t they join the ranks of other ‘proven’ authors common in the canon of study, like Shakespeare, Austen, Twain, or Wilde? This fundamental question was the starting point for my research.

I soon realized that there were deeper issues about genre connected to this question about Wodehouse. Not only had Wodehouse largely been non-existent in my studies, but humor itself also had had little representation in classes I had taken—especially the type of humor Wodehouse writes, which stays away from satire and has what Peter Berger calls a
“unaggressive, benign” feel, that “enhances rather than disrupts the flow of everyday life” (Berger 99). However, the possibility remained that perhaps the phenomenon of absent humor, and in particular Wodehouse, was something specific to my academic context. To discover whether academia in general had overlooked Wodehouse and more benign forms of humor, I turned to the English course listings of some of the most respected Ivy-league schools—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford and Dartmouth—to search for classes focusing on humor, or at least including humor as one aspect for examination during a semester-long study of a text or group of texts. What I found was rather surprising: most of these schools would only offer an English literature class devoted to humor or with humor included in the course description around once a year; instead, the majority of humor-related classes were found either in the theatre departments or the foreign language or cultural studies departments (such as classes on Yiddish, French or German humor). None of the humor classes offered, based on their course descriptions, featured Wodehouse in any capacity.

As I will soon discuss in detail, the exclusion of Wodehouse seems a great shame, because as a writer he exhibits a strong awareness of the literature canon and makes many allusions to it. Though Wodehouse’s writing shows him to be perfectly comfortable in the English literature “family,” how do we make him “at home” in the classroom? As we’ll explore, Wodehouse’s literary merits are vast, but that does not necessarily make him a good fit for classroom discussion. If we mean to find a place for this humorist in the study of literature, we need to establish his “teachability.” The “teachability” of a text may change of course, due to different instructional paradigms; one educator might find a text works very well when using a lecturing style of instruction on, but less well for a teaching style that that focuses on discussion. In order to get a better understanding of what Wodehouse might look like as a part of a literature
class’s syllabus, I was given the opportunity by my academic supervisor for this project to lead a
discussion on Wodehouse’s short story “Comrade Bingo” in his Modern British Literature
course. This experience revealed both some of the strengths Wodehouse has as an author for
study and some of the obstacles he may present to the classroom.

Coming soon after short stories by Virginia Woolf in the syllabus, “Comrade Bingo”
contrasted sharply with the rest of the Modern British literature the students had read thus far,
and for all of the students this was a first encounter with Wodehouse’s writing. Thus our
discussion represented a “maiden voyage” with this author, and how he might work in relation to
his contemporaries in a course study. Some of the obstacles stemmed from some of the unique
elements of humor, namely its extreme accessibility. Unlike some of the other modernist authors
in the class whose texts left much up for interpretation, the nature of Wodehouse and benign,
non-satiric humor in general means that there aren’t a lot of ‘mysteries’ in the text to explore.
When talking about “Comrade Bingo” the students did not bring up passages where they
wondered what exactly the author meant, or what message Wodehouse was trying to get across.
The principal “message” was humor, and none of the students had trouble accessing that part of
Wodehouse.

Because we had little need to “pick apart the text” so to speak, our discussion did not
focus as much on the text of “Comrade Bingo” in relation to Wodehouse’s treatment of themes
and social issues. Instead, we looked more at his craft—his use of language and
characterization—and gave a special focus to a discussion of genre and how to evaluate a piece
like Wodehouse. This, I believe, is the principle place where educators can take advantage of
Wodehouse’s literary merit. Opening a discussion with an examination of Wodehouse’s writing
technique gives students a chance to look at polished writing mechanics in a completely different
style than the other authors they’ve been reading. Wodehouse’s prose flows as well as Woolf’s but in a different manner, and this difference can lead, as it did in our experience, to fruitful conversation of why we hold some authors in high esteem as members of the canon, and why others that seems to have equal but differing skills as writers are left out. Wodehouse thus provides an excellent opportunity for examining the academic study of English itself and questioning why we evaluate texts in certain way—and how to approach texts like Wodehouse that don’t fit this mold. Every academic pursuit has its own constructed study approach to some extent, and through examining texts that don’t “discuss” in the same manner as established canon texts, we can understand better the assumptions and values that are imbedded in the methods of studying English. For instance, before taking on this project, I had never thought in depth about the preference academia (myself included) has for texts that address societal issues, and what that meant for the way I read authors and which ones I consider the “best” writers. While I have no disagreement at all with the opinion that texts that address society have great value, through reading texts that don’t have this goal as a focal point I began more seriously to consider other types of unique merits that they did have to offer, and what benefit those may have for the study of English.

For example, one of the unique merits of Wodehouse and humor that came up in our discussion of “Comrade Bingo” was the restorative nature of humor. Echoing the sentiments I began this paper with, that having Wodehouse as homework would cure my procrastination, the students remarked on how much they enjoyed having a bit of a “break” in their assigned work with a piece of writing that they could enjoy thoroughly on a first read through. This may sound like nonsense to an educator—any amateur book club discussing a steamy best-seller can talk about “enjoying a book on a first read through.” However, paired with our examination of
Wodehouse’s mastery of language and the delight that it gave, this appreciation led us into a conversation about importance of restoration as a part of life and the role that benign humor like Wodehouse’s plays in daily experience. Obviously every classroom discussion will follow a different pattern, but one way of incorporating Wodehouse into the classroom is to use him as an avenue into conversation about genre, about the canon, and about life, as well as an examination of excellently crafted prose. I am not suggesting in any way that an educator cannot have these types of conversations using non-humorous texts, but rather that authors like Wodehouse are just as capable of introducing these topics, and often in a way that can be refreshing and new to the reader. In order to take advantage of this, we need to understand some of the reasons why Wodehouse and his style of humor has been left out of English study, and then take a look at exactly what Wodehouse has to offer to readers in the areas of craft and ‘soul-shaping’ experiences. A close examination of Wodehouse’s work and his skill as a author will help shed light on the merits of his writing, giving readers a new appreciation for the work of this academically-overlooked British humorist.

In order to evaluate why humor, and in this particular case, Wodehouse, deserves attention from English scholars, we must examine the reasons behind the study of any text in English. Why has the English academic community deemed authors Shakespeare, Austen, Steinbeck, or Morrison worthy of study? Obviously, completely answering why we study these authors and others in the canon could potentially turn into a book-long response, so I will instead focus on what I believe are some of the key criteria for determining a “worthy book” in an attempt to get at the heart of why certain texts are chosen for study.

The first criterion may seem obvious, but in fact has a large part to play in what we study: evidence of craft. As scholars, we’re examining texts for proof that their authors are exemplary;
they should have command over the language they write in and do surprising things with it. We’re looking for writers that use language as a medium, as an artist uses paint, and not simply as a necessary vehicle for getting a plot line across. Even if a writer has an imaginative and engaging story to tell, if they do not tell the story in a well-crafted way, their work falls short of the standards scholars have for texts. Without sufficient craft, a piece of writing has nothing below its surface; what we perceive the first time through the story remains what we get from the text on subsequent re-readings.

This leads to the second criterion: re-readability. Books that have “made the canon,” so to speak, represent texts that reveal new insights and truth when re-read, whether it’s for the second, fifth, or twentieth time. These kinds of texts also lend themselves to readings from different angles and focuses; a text worthy of study offers things to study—whether commentary on gender relations, art, religion, social practices or any number of categories, it shows itself to have layers of thought within in its pages. That’s why a popular romance novelist like Nicholas Sparks may sell well to the general public, but scholars focus their attention on the romances of Austen or Gaskell. Sparks’ stories may have a sweet sentimental story that appeals to the reader’s emotions and daydreams, but outside of this small perk, this type of novel offers little for the reader to delve into.¹

Though perhaps the least specific, the third criterion in some ways tackles the most essential and fundamental issues about what makes a text worth studying. As critic Mark Edmundson discusses in *Why Read?*, we read literature for the purpose of “learning to live our lives well,” or, put more strongly, studying literature deals with the “crafting of souls”

¹ The exception might perhaps be works that can be approached with a historical focus, such as examining popular fiction of the 1700s to learn more about that particular era of time.
Edmundson speaks for many critics and scholars when he aligns literature with this almost sacred purpose. In his view, “every major work of intellect and imagination” presents an appeal to the reader to change their life in some way (Edmundson 7). These texts hold a mirror up to society and ask it to look at itself, or examine more closely something that it has previously ignored or overlooked. Edmundson also bemoans the recent trend he notes in higher academics to stray from a focus on this essential, challenging part of literature. He condemns the tendency of following the path of consumer culture, centering instruction on literature on the idea of helping students “enjoy” what they are reading (Edmundson 10). In Edmundson’s view, nowadays a class studying Shakespeare focuses more attention on finding the “spoonful of sugar” to help the medicine of a 16th century playwright go down and less about the remedies Shakespeare might be offering.

With these criteria of what makes a piece of literature worth studying in mind, where can we say humor falls? Beginning with Edmundson’s idea, we may encounter a problem. The purpose of humor of the variety that Wodehouse writes has a principle aim: to be funny and to make the reader laugh. In short, enjoyment stands out as humor’s most obvious and observable purpose—its medicine is a spoonful of sugar. Thus, do we relegate literature to an item to consume for pleasure if we study texts we “enjoy” and don’t immediately identify as possible candidates for “the crafting of souls”? If that becomes the case, then certainly our “studying” become little different from simply picking up any book we happen to enjoy and reading it—wouldn’t The Notebook and Nicholas Nickleby become equals in this light?

While some scholars may fear this apparent loss of standards, we must remember that the two other criteria exist, and the first one mentioned quells most misgivings. Craft still plays a vitally important role; I am not suggesting by any means that we should include any and all
humorous texts in our study. Just as scholars value Austen over Sparks because of Austen’s superior craft, so some humorists will show their excellence while others will not. Some humorous authors have already gained a place in the canon because of their level of craft. Take for instance Oscar Wilde or Mark Twain; academics consider both humorous authors and also regularly teach them in higher education. However, I would argue that often when these authors are studied it is not their humor that receives focus. Educators may examine the way Twain challenges the social constructions of his time, or have their students discuss Wilde’s views on art, but rarely does the skill of these authors in writing humor become a topic of focused study. They have other “serious” themes and topics to examine, which makes them easier to dissect and provides more questions to send us in search for answers. So what becomes of the authors like Wodehouse whose greatest merit lies in their ability to create humor? Scholars may pronounce them geniuses at what they do (Wodehouse himself has received accolades in this manner), but they do not treat them with the same kind of honor and appreciation in scholarship as they give to other authors who produce more “serious” work.

However, if we attend to Edmundson’s claim that studying literature is about learning to live better, leaving humor out of the study of English becomes a great oversight. Good literature reflects life, and humor is a very present reality in daily life, bringing delight and often restoration. Nothing eases a hard day like a good laugh. It should also be noted that the type of humor most common in daily life (in general) is of the benign variety. While satire, sarcasm and irony, the ‘humor with thorns,’ exist in our daily experiences, we laugh more often at witty puns and less at political cartoons. Thus at the very least, humor, particularly the benign type of humor that Wodehouse employs, should be included in the study of English for the task of pursuing as complete a study of life as possible through literature. In this way, humorous literature follows
the same pattern of canonical texts in drawing the reader’s attention to something they may not have considered as important: the funny side of life and the restorative nature of laughter. This may seem like an obvious assertion, but too often we ignore literature focused on this part of the human experience. The ability to laugh can keep a person away from despair; certainly humor plays a vital part in healthy human-ship.

We cannot forget the second criterion, however, and the problem of re-readability stands as one of the biggest culprits in the exclusion of humor from the study of literature. Does a humorous text have the same kind of “layers” that a book like Jane Eyre or Oliver Twist has? And perhaps more importantly, if it does, can scholars pick these layers apart while still preserving the text’s aim of humor? The latter seems to be the more troublesome of the two questions to answer. As Alexander Cockburn remarks in his introduction to Wodehouse’s The Code of the Woosters, “this question of tone is troubling for anyone writing about Wodehouse,” going on to compare writing with “high seriousness” about Wodehouse to a professor in 1902 who tried to scientifically describe a smile (Code v). The professor may have succeeded in accurately describing the “slight lifting of the corners of the mouth” and the “curving of the naso-labial furrows,” but he completely missed the purpose and underlying emotion accompanying a smile (Code v). Similarly, as Cockburn suggests, taking such a serious approach to Wodehouse does not cause any harm, but doesn’t really contribute anything either; we don’t get any closer to understanding the “mystery of Wodehouse’s genius” (Code v). Yet, in his introduction, Cockburn often cites scholar Richard Usborne’s work on Wodehouse, suggesting that some merit exists in looking closely at humor—Cockburn does not dismiss Usborne’s study, nor does he belittle it. The questions remains then of whether studying Wodehouse represents an important task or merely a waste of time. I believe the answer lies in Cockburn’s first sentiments,
the “question of tone.” Scholars writing academically about Wodehouse should take a tone that fits well with the content of his work—focusing on its main aim, the humor of the piece, and exercising restraint in digging for social commentary that most likely is absent from the text. While this may be a challenge, that is certainly not any reason for a scholar to ignore skilled writers like Wodehouse and other humorists.

Perhaps a more difficult query to answer lies in the nature of humorous texts themselves. While it is possible to study humorous texts, should we subject them to this process? As actor Stephen Fry, who portrayed Wodehouse’s Jeeves in the television series *Jeeves and Wooster*, said of Wodehouse’s work, “You don’t analyse such sunlit perfection, you just bask in its warmth and splendour” (*Inimitable* back cover). In this view, studying Wodehouse’s work ends up looking superfluous, an unnecessary exercise that contributes little to the novels’ merit and may inhibit true appreciation of their humor. The same may be said of many humorous authors: do humorous texts really need to be studied to be appreciated fully, or do their greatest achievements stand uncovered already, easily taken away during a first-time reading?

The answer, in proper post-modern form, is not either/or but both/and. Humor is easily accessible; Wodehouse can make us laugh the first, second or twentieth time through a Jeeves and Wooster novel. We don’t have to study the text to enjoy it; the humor lies out in the open for us to encounter. However, as I am arguing, through examining Wodehouse’s craft and the way he constructs humor, studying a humorist adds to our appreciation of their work and can even heighten its humorous affect while giving us a chance to examine a type of literature we don’t often encounter in a scholarly way. Thus, while Wodehouse is my focus, a similar approach could be taken to other humorous texts with comparable results. In reality, this approach differs little from the way scholars treat texts already considered a part of the canon. I would argue that
concentrated study on any text begins when a scholar reads the text and enjoys it or was intrigued or troubled by it. All books elicit emotional responses, and this emotional response often catalyzes a scholar to look deeper into a text beyond their initial reaction to it contents. Thus, just because humorous texts like Wodehouse’s Jeeves and Wooster novels elicit laughter and delight, an emotion more associated with fun than with work, this should not necessarily exclude them from the attention of English scholars.

Another problem authors like Wodehouse face in academia is the focus on (perhaps even a preference for) texts that address social issues of their time. As mentioned earlier, humorists like Twain get studied in part because they also address the practices and attitudes of the culture in which they lived; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes many hilarious scenes, such as the Duke and King’s Royal Nonesuch scam, but it also includes very pertinent commentary on racial relations in the American South of the mid-1850s. For the academic community, this type of commentary has great importance; educators hope that in teaching texts like *Huckleberry Finn* that seek to change culture, they will help shape their students into people who will try to do the same during their own lifetime. Literature as a catalyst for living better and helping others to do so is one of the nobler goals of studying texts in depth and one from which much good has come.\(^2\)

Thus a difficulty arises when scholars find themselves faced with an author like Wodehouse, who presents the image of an idyllic England largely free from any deep concerns to address. If any potentially serious issues surface throughout the course of his stories, he gives them a light dusting of benign humor that makes us laugh but does not particularly put them in a

\(^2\) Also consider Alan Jacob’s assertion in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* that the principle reason the people read (academic or not) is for pleasure. Whether this is true or not could be debated, but at the very least it is something to consider in light of the question of whether humor belongs in academia.
negative light the way a satirical approach would. Take for instance a famous passage about Adolf Hitler from the beginning of Wodehouse’s short story *Buried Treasure*:

The situation in Germany had come up for discussion in the bar parlour of the Angler’s Rest...Hitler was standing at the crossroads and would soon be compelled to do something definite. His present policy, said a Whisky and Splash, was mere shilly-shallying. “He’ll have to let it grow or shave it off,” said the Whisky and Splash. “He can’t go on sitting on the fence like this. Either a man has a moustache or he has not. There can be no middle course.” (*Lord Emsworth and Others (1937)* 71)

This quote illustrates the Wodehousian approach to problematic issues rather well. Wodehouse pokes fun at Hitler as a person and his facial hair arrangement, but says little about his political and ethical actions. Potentially serious issues enter a Wodehouse text not to be commented thoughtfully upon but to serve as vessels for humor. The question then still stands: are texts that don’t seem to actively seek to improve society (or at least say something insightful about it) worthy of study? I would argue that though Wodehouse may not fit into the category of texts that do this sort of thing, his writing still offers “soul shaping” experiences to the reader.

One of the strongest evidences of this is the permeation of an attitude of humility throughout his work. Part of this comes simply from the fact that Wodehouse write humorously; as a rule humor has a tendency to make low things high and high things low, humbling people, objects, or ideas. Satire works in this way as does sarcasm, perhaps the sharpest of all humor forms. However, using these types of humor does not necessitate humility in the “laugher,” the person employing the humor. In fact, the assumption behind both satire and sarcasm is that the laughor knows better than those they are laughing at. This is the opposite of the attitude of the
benign humor of Wodehouse, where laughter is caused by the world, and the laugh is included in it.

Perhaps the best example of this in Wodehouse is the master/servant relationship of Bertie and Jeeves. This reversed low/high relationship often surfaces when discussion of Wodehouse’s merits begins, so this may seem like an easy topic to focus on. As Cockburn says, “It is, of course, the work of a moment to knock together something about master-servant relationship as displayed by Wooster and Jeeves” (*Code* v). Jeeves, the manservant, is the one who ‘holds the reins’ in the household he shares with his employer Bertram Wilberforce Wooster, who, though an Oxford educated upperclassmen, can often be a bit of an idiot. The expected roles become reversed—a moment of literary clowning. These conclusions present themselves easily, for this “topsy-turvy” treatment of social relationships is something Wodehouse employs often.

Yet the most interesting thing about this relationship is the reaction of the party who is being “humiliated” through it. Bertie, with his many foibles, has a delightful humble streak that I would argue provides a positive experience for the reader: the freedom of acknowledging one’s inability and, like Bertie, not letting oneself be discouraged by it. Take for instance the short story “Jeeves Exerts the Old Cerebellum,” where Bertie has an exchange with his friend Bingo who asks him for advice, only to specify that Jeeves’ advice is what he’s really after: “At least, not your advice, because that wouldn't be much good to anybody. I mean, you're a pretty consummate old ass, aren't you? Not that I want to hurt your feelings, of course” (*Inimitable* 15). Not only does Bertie refrain from taking offense at this comment, but he actually agrees quite genially with Bingo, saying “No, no, I see that” and after hearing his friend’s problem later remarks,
I wasn't in the least surprised at Bingo wanting to lug Jeeves into his private affairs like this. It was the first thing I would have thought of doing myself if I had been in any hole of any description. As I have frequently had occasion to observe, he [Jeeves] is a bird of the ripest intellect, full of bright ideas. If anybody could fix things for poor old Bingo, he could. (Inimitable 16)

Bertie takes it as an obvious fact that his abilities to help his friends lie far below those of Jeeves, and makes sure the reader knows that this response from Bingo is not something he disagrees with.

Even before this conversation in the story, Bertie has already made clear what he thinks of Jeeves and even counters a possible objection to the way he lets his butler make most of his decisions. When Jeeves sends back an order of mauve shirts that Bertie has purchased because they “would not become him,” Bertie does not balk (Inimitable 10). He merely tells the reader,

I’d thought fairly highly of those shirtings, but I bowed to superior knowledge. Weak? I don’t know. Most fellows, no doubt, are all for having their valets confine their activities to creasing trousers and what not without trying to run the home; but it’s different with Jeeves. Right from the first day he came to me, I have looked on him as a sort of guide, philosopher, and friend. (Inimitable 10)

Bertie accepts the fact that his butler knows better than he does, and he freely admits it to both the characters in the novel and to the readers themselves.

Jeeves is his “right-hand man” and, as such, is elevated in Bertie’s mind. He even lets the reader know when he believes other characters have treated Jeeves with less respect than he deserves (Code 201). For instance, in The Code of the Woosters, Sir Watkyn Basset speaks to Jeeves, calling him with “Here, you!” (Code 215). Bertie immediately lets the reader know that
this “was a most improper way of addressing Jeeves” (*Code* 215). Notably, while Bertie protests to his butler’s being addressed in this way, he allows himself to be summoned by even less polite names without blinking; Aunt Dahlia, among many other titles, refers to Bertie as “ugly,” “my gay young tapeworm,” and “that young hound” and not once does he correct her for improper address (*Code* 10, 11, 26). Through this discrepancy Bertie (albeit most likely unintentionally) creates a kind of self-deprecating humor: he will allow people to call him a tapeworm, but addressing his philosopher butler as “You” goes too far.

In addition to these specific examples from Wodehouse’s texts, the format of the Jeeves and Wooster novels itself takes on a flavoring of humility. Through the novels and short stories, Bertie recounts for the reader his most embarrassing moments, the same stories that he worries about falling into the wrong hands (namely those of his Aunt Agatha) when he discovers Jeeves has documented them in his butler’s club’s book of employer secrets. Yet despite this apparent fear, Bertie has graciously granted us access to his most humbling experiences. In some ways, we become members with Jeeves at the Junior Ganymede club—the book of humiliation held open to us for the sake of humor. Thus the implication of Wodehouse’s stories in general is this: it doesn’t really matter if a situation embarrasses us; if it makes us laugh, it’s redeemed because laughter reflects upon and accepts our fault-filled humanity.

This serves as a direct antidote to the “culture of cool” that Edmundson denounces. This prideful culture that has become so prevalent in the classroom hampers learning, because students fear expressing “their deeper thoughts and fears, or...anything that might cause embarrassment. Embarrassment was the worst thing that could befall one; it must be avoided at whatever cost” (Edmundson 11). How different from Wodehouse’s world, where if one can be caught in the compromising situation of stealing a cow creamer, impersonating a newt-fancier, or
shooting butlers with pellet guns, one shall. The question does not exist whether a character will be embarrassed or not, it is rather how and when. A reader who immerses themselves in the world of Bertie Wooster therefore necessarily takes part in a world where humility is a given, and laughing at oneself a requirement. Everyone makes an ass of themselves at some point, so why not take full advantage of that fact?

I do not mean to argue that Wodehouse had this lesson in humility particularly in mind as he wrote as a message he hoped to communicate; humor remains first and foremost the aim of the Jeeves and Wooster stories. I also do not believe that Wodehouse saw himself in anyway as a writer trying to instill virtues in his readers, or inspire them to change society; he simply wanted to make them (and himself) laugh. This much can be gathered from his letters and autobiographies; he wrote humor because he liked it, not because he felt it had some deeper moral meaning that the reader might glean from his texts. However, this does not change the fact that humility manifests itself as a necessary part of life in his work. The mark of a good writer is one who is in touch with life, so that even if they create worlds that border on fantasy (as Wodehouse’s idyllic upper class England does), they still reflect some experience and themes of the real world. Even though Wodehouse does not mirror Twain in addressing social concerns of his time, as a humorist he does pinpoint a more timeless truth—life is better enjoyed with a dose of humility.

However, humility is not the only potential benefit of a literary diet that includes Wodehouse. His writing, and indeed all humor, relies on a basic element that can have lasting effects. As sociologist Peter Berger writes, “from its simplest to its most sophisticated expressions, the comic is experienced as incongruence” (x). Incongruity, or something out of harmony or out of character with normal experience is at the core of every humorous situation or
saying. For instance, we laugh at Mr. Bean because he approaches life in a way that completely disregards the usual ways of doing things; when he attempts to change into his swim trunks by taking his pants off from underneath them, we recognize “this is not how a normal person performs this task,” and so we laugh. This is why humor is something that exists in every culture but also changes from context to context; the underlying ‘congruities’ that humor plays with differ depending on the people group and their set of cultural assumptions. I don’t wish to try to “describe a smile scientifically,” but a type of mechanics does exist for humor. The nuts and bolts of anything funny lie in this fundamental ingredient: something is that shouldn’t be.

Because of this, I would argue that reading humor, beyond just having a laugh, is also an experience in training the mind to recognize incongruity more readily, just like reading other more “serious” texts do through their examination of the incongruities in societal issues. The value in building this skill should not escape the thoughtful reader; incongruities in humorous writing make us laugh, but they can also signal a situation or assumption that is hypocritical or unethical and needs amending. This is the type of goal satire often has. Satire, by exaggerating these incongruities, makes them stand out more clearly in our eyes. While the benign humor of Wodehouse certainly does not share satire’s goal of stirring readers to action, nor does it focus on revealing problems in society like authors like Twain, it still shares this basic focus on incongruity. Thus, readers of benign humor have the opportunity of becoming accustomed to looking for things that aren’t quite right, just as they have in reading “serious texts.” In a humorous text, these incongruities always lead to something funny, but in the real world they might lead to a situation where we can address a more serious issue.

As philosopher Marie Swabey notes, “perception of the ludicrous helps us to comprehend both ourselves and the world, making us, at least in the highest reaches of humor, feel more at
home in the universe by aiding in the discernment of values” (v). Swabey believes that in recognizing humor we experience a “logical moment of truth”, because when we laugh at something funny we “detect an incongruence as cancelled by an underlying congruence;” in other words, humor not only makes us laugh, but it is also subtly testing our knowledge of the world and ourselves (v). Humor asks us to notice the “shimmer” in reality, the comic departure from the expected. While arguing that reading humor makes us smarter and more aware is difficult to prove definitively without significant data, I believe that this type of self-betterment falls under the general benefits we can expect of literature. Most English educators would readily agree with the idea that one of goals from studying literature is to trains students in critical thinking skills, and learning to perceive incongruity most certainly is a part of thinking critically. Thus while a humorous text may not directly address any social issues, it may mirror texts that do by playing a role in fashioning in the reader the type of discerning mind and attitude that can address social issues.

However, the reality of any claim for literature, and especially humorous literature, is that it presents an opportunity for readers to learn these skills; I do not believe that simply reading humorous writers like Wodehouse will always result in a reader suddenly having their ‘eyes opened to the incongruities to the world.’ No text has the ability to engender anything in a reader without a certain willingness on their part to make a conscious effort to take what the book has to offer. The problem humor faces is that because it has not entered the English literature classroom very often, readers may not realize what exactly they can take away more from it than just a laugh; they have been taught many times to read texts looking for incongruity that provides insight of society, but may not realize that lighthearted incongruity is also worth examining for learning similar critical thinking skills. Readers expecting humor to speak about incongruity so
loudly that they cannot read in any fashion without learning something may end up missing some
its merit. Not only is this expectation a rather tall order for any kind of text to fill, but it is one
that especially expects much from a genre like humor that relies so much on subtlety and the
subjective knowledge of the reader.

Good, clever, humor is rarely heavy-handed; it relies on the reader to make the
connection between congruity and incongruity—that element of surprise for the reader in
discovering this connection themselves is another key part of humor. When someone has to
explain a joke, rarely does it have the same effect as when the humor is recognized right away by
the listener. This being said, because of the vital part understanding the underlying congruities
play in humor, our experience of a humorous text becomes richer once we expand our
knowledge of the world of humorous text. Once we immerse ourselves in the world of the
humorous novel, we can then make some judgments about the text. The evaluation of well-
thought out humor then becomes an exercise in tracing how the humorist has used this basic
element of incongruity to their advantage.

Wodehouse gives us an excellent example of this in the Jeeves and Wooster stories,
particularly through his constant allusion to other texts within his novels. Bertie and Jeeves
frequently make reference to biblical passages, Shakespeare, and sundry poets. In addition to
including texts outside the Jeeves and Wooster novels, Wodehouse also often includes references
within one Jeeves and Wooster novel to the stories of a previous saga within the Jeeves and
Wooster universe. Thus in order to ‘get’ every joke in Wodehouse, it’s beneficial for the reader
to have a basic knowledge of both the world of Bertie Wooster and English literature in general.
This is not to say that Wodehouse’s writing is not funny without this prior knowledge; his use of
humorous language plays just as big a part of the success of his novels in that department. While
Wodehouse does not fail to disappoint even if the reader does not catch all these literary allusions, when we understand where his allusions come from—the ‘congruities’ behind them—we can experience more fully his use of incongruity for humor’s sake.

However, if we set out to ‘learn’ these congruities, a potential problem arises. The possibility exists that an outcome similar to that of an ‘explained joke’ will result, and Wodehouse’s humor will fall flat. The element of surprise in suddenly recognizing incongruity disappears if we must ‘teach’ ourselves the jokes before reading them. Consider Bertie’s opening conversation with Jeeves in *Jeeves in the Morning* concerning a certain phrase to describe the crisis Bertie has just escaped:

‘There’s an expression on the tip of my tongue which seems to me to sum the whole thing up. Or rather, when I say an expression, I mean a saying. A wheeze. A gag. What I believe is called a saw. Something about Joy doing something.’

‘Joy cometh in the morning, sir?’

‘That’s the baby. Not one of your things, is it?’

‘No sir.’

‘Well, it’s dashed good,’ I said. (*Jeeves in the Morning* 5)

Readers who have a basic knowledge of the Bible understand this joke easily. Laughter comes through the incongruity of Bertie’s question with cultural assumptions about the sacred nature of scripture; the idea that Jeeves has authored a passage from the book of Proverbs that has been a part of the Jewish and Christian experience for hundreds of years is ridiculous. Without knowledge of the origins of the quote “Joy cometh in the morning,” the reader may still laugh at Bertie’s vocabulary (“A wheeze. A gag”) but not get the cleverest nugget of the humor.
Yet once we trace these missed jokes back to their originating sources, we have the opportunity to appreciate their cleverness. Although we may miss the surprise of catching the joke without learning background information, if we see thought behind the jokes, we can still delight in them—a considerably better outcome than missing them all together. This distinction is one that will become important in the study of humorous writers. While digging deeper into a humor text to find out how the humorist has used incongruity may seem a little like ‘explaining the joke,’ this does not void the text of its charm. Understanding the lengths to which an author has gone to construct humor in their text allows us to both appreciate the first goal of the text, its ability to make us laugh, and its merits as a well-crafted piece of writing. Thus this key element of incongruity creates an opportunity to develop critical thinking skills, to enjoy the humorous result of incongruity, and to understand the kind of effort and techniques it takes to produce a humorous text worth studying.

Not surprisingly, Wodehouse provides us with an especially good example of the latter. As Cockburn points out, “Wodehouse slaved at his plots...He would fill whole notebooks with preparatory plans for a new novel” (Code ix). For Wodehouse, nothing in his novel should seem like ‘filler,’ for “in a Jeeves story every line has to have entertainment value” (Code ix). He wrote and rewrote passages until everything in the novel fit together, claiming in his autobiography Over Seventy that he might write “every sentence 10 times. Or in many cases, 20 times” (Over Seventy 28). He even put his jokes to the test on family members. In many of his personal letters to his stepdaughter Leonora he copied down witty lines he planned to use in his novels, asking her opinion on them. As Wodehouse says, “Even if people find my writing a dud, they will be able to say at the very least, ‘but he did take trouble’” (Over Seventy 23).
So where exactly do we see the evidence of Wodehouse “taking trouble” in his novels? This attention to fashioning a well-crafted plot is evidenced by the simple fact that though Wodehouse reuses characters and puts them in similar situations in his stories, people continue to read his books. For instance, in any Jeeves and Wooster novel, the reader can expect Bertie to get into some kind of trouble, most likely through agreeing to do a favor for a family member or old school chum, or by accidently getting himself engaged to some woman. They can also expect that Jeeves will tidily get Bertie out of whatever scrape he happens to find himself in. It cannot be denied that the Jeeves and Wooster stories have somewhat of a formulaic nature and bear resemblance to many of his other works where characters end up “in the soup” and somehow manage to cleverly extricate themselves from it by the end of the novel. In addition, all his characters have a certain silliness about them, something that Wodehouse biographer Benny Green calls their tendency of “acting and reacting like the fifth-formers they would always remain” (Green 28). Wodehouse had a “schoolboy sensibility” for humor that came out in his work, coloring his characters (Green 28). Apparently at least one reader took issue with this noticeable pattern, for Wodehouse answers them in the introduction of his novel *Summer Lightning*:

A certain critic—for such men, I regret to say, do exist—made the nasty remark about my last novel that it contained “all the old Wodehouse characters under different names.” He has probably by now been eaten by bears, like the children who made mock of the prophet Elisha: but if he still survives he will not be able to make a similar charge against *Summer Lightning* (1929). With my superior intelligence, I have outgeneralled the man this time by putting in all the old Wodehouse characters under the same names. Pretty silly it will make him feel, I fancy. (*Summer Lightning* 7)
This response illustrates perfectly the reason why most readers do not take issue with the similarities between characters: Wodehouse’s skill as a writer continues to make characters interesting through sharp and witty dialogue and clever allusions. Thus, despite the ‘predictable’ direction many of Wodehouse’s stories take, he was still remarkably successful because his characters are so re-readable. With more than 100 novels and short stories in print, Wodehouse’s skill at creating the details of these plots evidently matters more to reader and publishers than whether he comes up with a new ‘type’ of story. It is not so much the “what” that matters in a Wodehouse plot, but the “how.” Though we know as soon as we begin reading a novel about Bertie and Jeeves that it will all be sorted out in the end, we still want to see the mind of Jeeves at work. In this way, Wodehouse novels share some similarities with mystery and detective fiction; we know that by the end the detective, be it Poirot or Sherlock (Wodehouse was very fond of Arthur Conan Doyle’s writing), will solve the crime, but we still hunger for the plot.

To discover what exactly makes a Wodehouse plot engaging, we must look at some concrete examples from his texts. While each novel’s plot will differ of course, examining particular elements of a few give us a general idea about what types of techniques Wodehouse uses in his novel construction. Taking as an example text any Wodehouse novel—*Jeeves in the Morning*, for instance, a text I mentioned earlier—we notice a few interesting features. The first noticeable thing about this particular plot is its chronology. *Jeeves in the Morning*, like many Jeeves and Wooster novels, meets the reader just after the events of the story have taken place. Bertie greets us with the expansive opening line:

> After the thing was all over, when peril has ceased to loom and happy endings had been distributed in heaping handfuls and we were driving home with our hats on the side of our heads, having shaken the dust of Steeple Bumpleigh from our tyres, I confessed to
Jeeves that there had been moments during the recent proceedings when Bertram Wooster, though no weakling, had come very near to despair. (Jeeves in the Morning 1)

In one sentence, Wodehouse has masterfully accomplished a whole list of literary tasks. First, he has established a timeline for the reader: Bertie will be recounting events that have just recently past. Second, they are actually in the car driving away from the “scene of the crime” so to speak, so this opening conversation between the two characters is almost like a debriefing of a successful mission, letting us know from the beginning how the story ends. But lest any reader decide to stop reading at this revelation, Wodehouse also puts in a teaser: though they have just completed a mission successfully, they nevertheless encountered dark moments, as Bertie admits to his butler. Third, Wodehouse introduces the setting in which the whole story takes place—Steeple Bumpleigh—which seasoned Wodehouse readers will recognize as the village in which Bertie’s dreaded Aunt Agatha resides. Thus Wodehouse gives us a mini synopsis of the whole novel: Bertie encounters a sticky situation at his Aunt Agatha’s home which eventually gets resolved, but at the time had him often wondering if there really was any hope of avoiding big trouble. All this we receive in a mere seventy words; in one sentence Wodehouse captures our attention with the promise of a happy ending, but expertly leaves out enough information to leave us wondering how such a neat finish came about, especially if the situation had so many near disasters as Bertie implies.

As well as presenting a short run down of the novel’s story, Wodehouse also introduces his cast of characters early on, just a few lines later. We discover that this story involves “Nobby Hopwood, Stilton Cheesewright, Florence Craye, my Uncle Percy, J. Chichester Clam, Edwin the Boy Scout and old Boko Fittleworth” (Jeeves in the Morning 5-6). In this way, Wodehouse seems to borrow a page from his experience in the theater world, presenting the reader with a
sort of ‘dramatis personae’ for this Jeeves and Wooster novel. Bertie even gives us a title of this ‘play,’ dubbing it the “Steeple Bumpleigh Horror” (6). Green also notes the evidence of a theatrical touch in Wodehouse’s work, pointing out that Wodehouse’s “musical career...had a profound effect on everything he wrote” (Green 125). As Green reveals, Wodehouse was often writing musicals and novels at the same time, and Green suggests that this close relationship between his two areas of expertise “affected his fiction in four ways. It shaped his construction, enriched his vocabulary, expedited the problems of characterization, and, on some spectacular occasions, provided him with the perfect theme” (Green 125). The connection between characterization and construction of plot is especially strong in Wodehouse’s novels, largely due to this theater mindset he took into writing (Green 125-126). Green quotes Wodehouse’s advice to his friend William Townend about how the plot of novel must in many ways be dictated by the characters within it. Viewing his characters as “living salaried actors” helps Wodehouse make careful choices about how they appear in the story:

The one thing actors, important actors, I mean, won’t stand is being brought on to play a scene which of no value to them in order that they may feed some less important character, and I believe this isn’t vanity but is based on an instinctive knowledge of stagecraft. They kick because they know the balance isn’t right. (Green 126)

Therefore, for Wodehouse a particular character might demand a change in the plot in order to be ‘brought back on stage’; as Wodehouse says, “How, therefore, can I twist the story so as to give him more to do, and keep him alive till the fall of the curtain?” (Green 125). Thus the physical closeness of Wodehouse’s mini-plot outline and his list of characters in *Jeeves in the Morning*, both within a hundred words or so of each other in the novel, seems fitting, serving as a reminder of the connection between the two.
A good example of the close connection between characters and plot in Wodehouse occurs in *The Code of the Wooster* with the character of Roderick Spode. *Code of the Woosters* is Spode’s first appearance in the world of Jeeves and Wooster, where Bertie describes his outward appearance with the statement that

> It was as if nature had intended to make a gorilla, and had changed its mind at the last moment...I don’t know if you have ever seen those pictures in the paper of Dictators with tilted chins and blazing eyes, inflaming the populace with fiery words on the occasion of the opening of a new skittle alley, but that was what he reminded me of. (*Code* 17)

We later find out that this resemblance to a dictator is not far-fetched, for Spode is the founder of a Fascist organization called the Black Shorts, because their uniform includes the wearing of such “perfectly foul” clothing articles (*Code* 52). According to Wodehouse’s own claim that characters that have a natural ‘major character’ personality have to be in the “big situation” of the story, it makes sense that a character with such a big presence like Spode does indeed end up being a key part of the plot (Green 126).

Striking quite the imposing figure, Spode serves as the main ‘villain’ (although no true specimens of that sort exist in Wodehouse’s work) in the novel, threatening Bertie and his friend Gussie with promises of bodily harm if they do anything to emotionally damage Gussie’s one-time fiancée Madeline Basset. Throughout the novel, Bertie and Gussie must narrowly avoid him while attempting to both find a defaming notebook that Gussie has lost and steal a cow creamer for Bertie’s Aunt Dahlia. As keeping themselves from being pummeled becomes increasingly difficult, Jeeves comes to the rescue with a word representing a tidbit about Spode gleaned from the book of employee secrets at the Junior Ganymede, the butler’s club of which Jeeves is a member. Though he does not reveal the background of the word, Jeeves instructs Bertie to
mention it to Spode if ever the situation gets tight, and all shall be well. Thus, just when the game seems up for Bertie, and Spode threatens to “break every bone in his body,” Bertie recalls the word and tells Spode: “Just one minute. Before you start getting above yourself, it may interest you to learn that I know all about Eulalie” (Code 117). The word “Eulalie” works like a magic charm on Spode, who simmers down quickly and docilely follows Bertie’s commands. This new ‘alliance’ with Spode not only allows Bertie to finally procure Gussie’s notebook (though it is soon out of Gussie’s hands again) but also to avoid the last imbroglio of the story: being wrongfully arrested for stealing a policeman’s helmet. After Jeeves uses the ‘magic word’ on him, Spode himself takes the blame for the crime, leaving Bertie to depart a free man from Totleigh Towers. Later, along with Bertie, we discover the story behind “Eulalie”: Spode is “the founder and proprietor” of Eulalie Soeurs, a lingerie shop (Code 221). While attempting to be the imposing leader of the Black Shorts, he also creates women’s underclothing. Thus Spode, the fascist fashion designer, becomes the instrument through which Jeeves ties up the situation; a memorable character leads to a memorable plot twist.

Another area where Wodehouse’s craftsmanship is especially evidenced is through his use of language. The vocabulary of Wodehouse’s characters, in particular Bertie Wooster, gives his prose a distinct color. In my own personal experience reading Wodehouse, the way his characters speak is one of the biggest reasons why I can never get enough of his writing. Imagine opening a Wodehouse novel for the first time and encountering one of Bertie Wooster’s delightful addresses to the reader:

But half a jiffy. I’m forgetting that you haven’t the foggiest what all this is about. It so often pans out that way when you begin a story. You whiz off the mark all pep and
ginger, like a mettlesome charger going into its routine, and the next thing you know the customers are up on their hind legs, yelling for footnotes. (*The Mating Season* 7).

In this small exhibition of Wodehouse’s skill at creating a character’s voice, we see a style that reveals the author’s deft command of the English language. The words Wodehouse uses in this passage are not foreign in their meanings; a reader can guess what “foggiest” means without having personally used the word before. The excellence of the writing lies in its surprise; Wodehouse in this ways mirrors a poet who looks for ways to make language sound (in both the audible sense and the sense of its mental sound) in new ways. Using word pairings the reader may not have encountered before, and ticklish metaphors like Bertie’s likening here of an overzealous author “whizzing” off like an excited racehorse, Wodehouse catches the reader’s attention with an unexpected expression. This ties directly into the core aim of humor in his work; here we see the element of surprise working again, only with expectations about how something normally would be said. An expected way of stating what Bertie tells the reader might resemble something like, “Wait a minute, you don’t know what’s going on here,” but in the Wodehousian dialect, we must wait “half a jiffy” because we “haven’t the foggiest what this is all about.”

This surprising manner in which he constructs a phrase and pairs words together also ties to the creation of his characters. Probably the biggest part of what brings Bertie to life for the reader is his distinct voice; we always recognize when he is speaking in a novel. However, Bertie isn’t the only character in Wodehouse’s novels that has a recognizable way of speaking. Jeeves’ intelligent, formal voice sometimes stands out even more than Bertie’s does, for since Bertie narrates the Jeeves and Wooster novels, it becomes the one we are the most familiar with. Thus when Jeeves speaks, his language’s extreme difference from Bertie’s voice is easily noticed.
Thus Wodehouse makes both voices stand out more prominently by pairing them in dialogue. Consider this exchange between Bertie and Jeeves in *Code of the Woosters*, where Bertie has just described the troublesome situation he has landed himself after agreeing to steal a cow creamer for his Aunt Dahlia: “‘Very well, then. You agree with me that the situation is a lulu?’ ‘Certainly a somewhat sharp crisis in your affairs would appear to have been precipitated, sir’” (*Code* 31-32). Jeeves’ ‘translation’ of Bertie’s language serves first to create humor; we see the incongruity of a butler speaking better than his Oxford-educate employer. But second, exchanges like this also help to define these characters in light of the other. When Bertie and Jeeves speak to each other, we see just how far apart they are in their thinking, and yet how close their relationship is. After all, Jeeves, though he personally doesn’t speak like Bertie, can understand him and provide the reader with a ‘formalized’ version of that his employer says. Likewise, Bertie can do the same for Jeeves; take for instance this passage from *Jeeves in the Morning* where Jeeves explains to Bertie the reasons for why Aunt Agatha wishes Bertie to deliver a gift in person to Florence Craye:

“I understand that the trinket is a present for Lady Florence, sir, who is celebrating her birthday to-day. Her ladyship wishes you to convey it to its destination personally, realizing that, should she entrust it to the ordinary channels, the gift will be delayed in its arrival beyond the essential date.’

‘You mean, if she posts it, it won’t get there in time?’

‘Precisely, sir.’” (*Jeeves in the Morning* 38).

Bertie essentially prunes all the superfluous formal expressions out of Jeeves’ speech and delivers it to the reader in the snappy style of his own ‘dialect.’ As Cockburn notes, Wodehouse “never tired of variations of this low/high joke about language” (Wodehouse vii). The butler
speaks better than the upper-class employer, and the employer has to ‘dumb down’ his butler’s speech to understand it. Thus Wodehouse moves easily between these two ‘languages’ in his novels, and these of course only represent a small portion of the many types of speakers in his work. Wodehouse can deftly move from the trumpeting, pushy voice of Aunt Dahlia declaring “isn’t that young hound awake yet, Jeeves?” to the countrified language of Constable Oates who reports that “the dorg leaped at me in a verlent manner. I was zurled from my bersicle—” (Code 26, 66). Wodehouse’s abilities as a writer become obvious in his ability to create, sustain, and transition between the distinct voices of his novels. These distinct voices in some ways are the characters themselves, since Wodehouse’s novel are primarily dialogue driven. When we encounter characters, we usually get a brief description of them by Bertie, but we primarily get to know them through their speech. Thus language is one of the roots of Wodehouse’s success as a humorous author, allowing him to create the “big characters” that shape his plots, as well as using the juxtaposition of voices to create a space for incongruity and thus humor to arrive.

The use of dialoguing voices for humor in Wodehouse does not lie simply in the character’s speech, for his novels include other types of ‘languages’ that engage in the text. Wodehouse also allows his novels to work in conversation with outside texts through copious use of allusions. Jeeves most often acts as the mouthpiece of these outside texts by often supplementing Bertie’s speech by supplying a particularly fitting quote or literary character that his employer can’t remember. I’ve already referenced the “Joy in the morning” exchange, which is a classic example of this, but the novels contain many others as well. Not surprisingly, Shakespeare makes an appearance, such as later in Jeeves in the Morning, when Bertie makes a reference to a passage from Hamlet that Jeeves must complete for him:
'I shall shortly be telling Uncle Percy things about himself which will do something to his knotted and combined locks which at the moment has slipped my memory.'

'Make his knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine.'

'Porpentine?'

'Yes sir.'

'That can’t be right. There isn’t such a thing. However, let that pass.' (Jeeves in the Morning 157-158).

This example also shows Wodehouse’s ability to comment using dialogue between texts to level hierarchies in literature as well. Shakespeare, one of the pillars of English literature becomes a object of criticism for Bertie, who returns to the allusion a few pages later: “You’re sure it’s porpentine?” ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Very odd. But I suppose half the time Shakespeare just shoved down anything that came into his head’” (Jeeves in the Morning 160). Thus in Wodehouse’s world where anything is game for humor, and high and low can switch places, Shakespeare becomes just another quirky author, not someone on a pedestal. When the ‘languages’ of other texts enter Wodehouse’s world, they leave whatever high status as ‘serious’ work they might have had and get the same treatment as the other elements in his novels—as fodder for humor. We see this same attitude in Wodehouse’s autobiography, where he benevolently offers the tongue-in-cheek remark that “Shakespeare’s stuff is different from mine, but that is not necessarily to say it is inferior” (Over Seventy 59). Literary hierarchies are leveled for the sake of humor. Thus in addition to carefully constructing well-planned plots and lively characters, Wodehouse’s craft extends to tying together voices of his novels with outside voices, showing his knowledge of and situation within the larger body of English literature.
The reverse of Wodehouse’s remark regarding his work compared to Shakespeare, actually succinctly expresses the heart of my argument: Wodehouse’s ‘stuff’ is different from Shakespeare’s but that is not necessarily to say it is inferior. Wodehouse clearly shows his mastery of the English language and his ability to create characters that are just as personable as those of more serious texts—we continue to come back for more of Bertie Wooster and his companions even though they may not have as many layers as Jane Eyre or Macbeth. While not addressing societal issues or using humor as a weapon to expose some kind of errant behavior, Wodehouse still offers opportunities for the type of soul-shaping experiences that Edmundson advocates for; through his willingness to use every situation as one for potential humor, Wodehouse invites his readers to put on the same humble spirit of fun his characters exhibit. Wodehouse may not be a Shakespeare, but he is still an exemplary author.

Shakespeare here serves as a pinnacle representative of “serious” texts already taught in classrooms; Wodehouse does not accomplish the aims of Shakespeare’s work as well as Shakespeare does, for he has different goals, but this difference shouldn’t be equivalent to inadequate craft and less useful material in our minds. Humor simply asks a different kind of thinking from us. I’m reminded of an analogy brought up by one of the students in the Modern British literature class during our discussion of “Comrade Bingo” about the problem humor faces in academia. She likened studying humor very appropriately to a classic joke involving Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. In the joke, Sherlock and Watson go camping, and several hours after falling asleep in their tent, Sherlock wakes up in the middle of the night, shakes Watson out of his slumber and tells him to look at the sky, asking “What do you see, Watson?” Watson replies that he sees thousands upon thousands of stars. “What does this tell you, Watson?” Sherlock presses his companion. Wanting to show his friend his keen observation skills, Watson begins
grandly: “Astronomically, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Theologically, it tells me that God is great and we are small and insignificant. Horologically, it tells me that it’s about 3 AM. Meteorologically, it tells me that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?” Sherlock looks at his friend in disbelief and answers, “ Watson, you idiot! Someone has stolen our tent!” The student went on to say that sometimes we approach texts like Watson did the question of the stars, applying all types of schools of thoughts and theoretical approaches, when the real answer lies in the punch line.

Humorous texts act fittingly like the punch line for literature, providing a surprising encounter with a type of writing that doesn’t quite fit into the molds of other canonical texts. Including Wodehouse in a course of study along with other texts not only give students a chance for restorative laughter, it also opens the door for new ways of thinking and appreciation for humorous craftsmanship. Wodehouse and other humorous authors provide us with the opportunity, like Watson, to look at literature from a different perspective. It’s a perspective that largely resists theoretical dissection and instead moves the reader toward an embodied response to the text. Humor, by producing laughter, a physical response, connects the mind and body together in the reader in their experience of the text. Thus in the experience of humor is both an exercise of the mind and a reminder of our physicality. Though it does it through a “spoonful of sugar” instead of pointing a finger, humorous writing, like serious texts, gives us the chance to be reminded of who we are as humans: creatures of both body and mind.

4 Many thanks to my classmate Elena Casey for her excellent analogy.
Bibliography


