

## ARTS &amp; LETTERS

American literature had their origins in the historical circumstances that fostered childishness in an entire civilization," Lynn argues.

Natty Bumppo's wanderings in James Fenimore Cooper's *Prairie* (1827) reflect the inclinations of an entire nation to rely upon isolation, rootlessness, and economic opportunism to provide painless solutions to social problems. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* (1850) offers an exception to this obsession with escapism. But the literary landscape is studded with childish themes, childish characters, and childish points of view depicted in books like Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876).

Publication of *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser in 1900 reflected the disillusioning events of the preceding decade—the disappearance of the frontier, the rise of the trusts, the outbreak of bloody industrial strikes—and represented the skeptical perspective of a novelist who saw modern society as "a trap from which no one, male or female, could possibly escape."

Still, the immaturity of American literature did not end there. Child heroes gave way to "the sad-faced adolescents of *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*." Historical events influenced the shifts between immaturity and adulthood. As depression gripped the nation in the 1930s, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck turned soberly to history and family life. Kurt Vonnegut became a cult figure in an age of unprecedented prosperity. Today, Norman Mailer and Jerry Rubin personify the adolescent urge; they are creatures of a society still reluctant to come of age.

### *Laughter In America*

"Nineteenth Century American Humor: Easygoing Males, Anxious Ladies, and Penelope Lapham" by Alfred Habegger, in *Publications of the Modern Language Association* (Oct. 1976), 62 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

Cultural historians have long viewed American humor as developing out of a struggle between differing visions of what American life should be—one earthy, ribald, vernacular, the other genteel and refined.

Habegger, a professor of English at the University of Kansas, proposes an additional dialectic: between male and female. "The social basis of American humor may have been the staggering difference in our ideal gender roles." There is a long-standing tradition in the United States that women have no sense of humor, Habegger notes. There are no women humorists to speak of, and during the classic period of American humor, the 1860s, humor, like politics, was a club for men only—a masculine world of saloons, smoking cars, and barbershops.

The prevalent 19th-century jokes were crude anecdotes of domestic strife recounted in the vernacular by wise fools like Artemus Ward (1834–67), a favorite of Abraham Lincoln. The personae of these tales

---

**ARTS & LETTERS**


---

were the ideal male types—unregenerate loafers who never took themselves seriously and who defied refined cultural norms perceived as feminine. The most savage expressions of misogyny—persisting to James Thurber's day—were sketches of humorless scatterbrains tyrannizing their husbands in stifling parlors. The male defense was frequently a resort to sarcasm that was lost on the wife, but not on the audience, a device perfected by comedian George Burns.

Habegger also documents an authentic vein of feminine wit, based on epigrams and swift repartee rather than the primitive devices of dialect and local color. The personae of the female satirists were superiors, not idiots. The first American fictional heroine with a thoroughgoing sense of humor is Penelope Lapham in William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Her humor is part of an easygoing nature; her refusal to be oppressed by decorum is in the mainstream of vernacular male humor. However, Penelope's fate (exile to Mexico) demonstrates that not even Howells could tolerate a high-spirited woman for long.

---

**PRESS & TELEVISION**


---

### *Priestifying Journalists*

"The Imperial Press" by Tom Bethell and Charles Peters, in *The Washington Monthly* (Nov. 1976), 1028 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

The rapid postwar transformation of journalists from craftsmen to "professionals" resembles the advancement in status achieved by doctors and lawyers in the 19th century. Most of the net effects are good, say Peters, editor-in-chief of *The Washington Monthly*, and Bethell, a contributing editor. But the professionalization process contains elements of "priestification"; it encourages claims of special privilege which may not always redound to the public interest.

Peters and Bethell, for example, are concerned over the self-righteousness which accompanied efforts by the American Newspaper Guild to build support for CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr in his confrontation last fall with the House Ethics Committee. Both Schorr and the "Fresno Four" (the *Fresno Bee* newsmen jailed briefly for disobeying a judge's order by printing secret grand jury testimony) equated the journalist's right to protect the confidentiality of his sources with the privileges of confidentiality that accrue to doctors, lawyers, and the clergy. But in the case of the latter, the privilege inhibits the broad dissemination of information, whereas with journalists, the reverse is true and the result is not always to the good.

The authors argue that the self-interest of the press (e.g., the competitive eagerness to be first and to sell its product) may also prevent