

American Studies 430
American Humor
M - Th: 3:30 - 4:50
GHH 108
Roger Williams University
Fall Semester, 2010

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Week of September 13, 2010

For Monday, September 13

Yankees Revisited

Read, in Baker,

[Benjamin Franklin] The Busy-Body, No. 4 135-138
[Benjamin Franklin] The Drinker's Dictionary 138 - 142

Read **ONLINE**

Seba Smith (Major Jack Downing)

Letter XII In which Mr Downing hits upon a new idea for making money out of the office-seekers that were swarming round the new Governor. 70 - 71

Letter XXIV In which Cousin Sarah compares the society of Portland with that of Downingville. 99 - 101

Letter XXX In which Mr Downing dreams some Poetry 121
Any TWO other Downing letters of your choice.

Benjamin Franklin as Silence Dogood,

Dogood Letter # 6 June 11, 1722 (on Pride)

Dogood Letter # 12, September 10, 1722 (Moderate Drinking)

One More Dogood Letter of your choice.

Thursday the 9th we read Roark on the Yankee as a comic character. On Monday we'll look at some examples from Colonial and early 19th century America. When I think that Benjamin Franklin created Silence Dogood at the age of seventeen, I'm amazed. At 17 I was playing basketball, working in a cemetery, and putting up with height jokes. We don't think of Ben as a Yankee, because he made his fortune in Philadelphia, but he served his apprenticeship in Boston, observed the Boston scene and commented on what he observed in ways which still amuse us, though the language is a bit tough going at times. What you're looking for in Franklin can be related to questions like these:

- How do Franklin's comments on human foibles (Pride, drunkenness, and the like) relate to observations about Yankee Character? (Think about what Rourke observes about the way the Yankee responds to criticisms of his clothes, or on what grounds the Yankee criticizes the dress of others).

- Looking at the relationship Franklin's ambiguous ideas about booze is worthwhile. What words or phrases could you add to the Drunkard's Dictionary?

While no doubt you've heard of Ben Franklin, I'd be a little surprised to learn you'd encountered. Seba Smith or his character, Major Jack Downing, before. What you're looking for is ways that Downing in his character, his actions, and his observations, provides illustrations of the character traits Rourke ascribes to the emerging Yankee Character. You'll see some that are pretty direct. You'll also see some things which raise eyebrows, perhaps. Why do both Franklin and Smith poke fun at old maids and old bachelors?

Write your observations and thoughts in your journal. I've asked you to pick out one additional letter by each author. Why did you choose the ones you chose? (Hopefully, not because it was the next one before or after one of the ones you were assigned).

For Thursday, September 16

Read, in Rourke

II. The Gamecock in the Wilderness.

37 - 69

Have you ever bragged about something? I mean really bragged? Have you ever bragged for comic effect? I pull the following bit of poetry out of my memory, where it's been lurking for more than 50 years:

Born on a mountain top in Tennessee
Greatest land in the Home of the Free
Raised in the Woods so he knew every tree,
Killed him a bar when he was only three.

If you don't recognize the character from the doggerel, you perhaps will from the video. [I got one word wrong. It's greenest, not greatest.] The frontiersman was another archetypal American Character, braver, stronger, nobler, rougher, tougher, smarter, bolder, and about a million other 'ers' than anyone else. The frontier is no longer a dominant image, though as recently as 1960 set the "New Frontier" as the theme of his Presidency.

Though the Frontier may be gone, the comic boast isn't. Fill in the blanks: He/She was so _____ that _____. We'll read Rourke's analysis of the frontier type and, who knows, maybe do some boasting of our own.