Comedic Relief in a Culture of Uncertainty: The Contribution of Life Magazine to 1920s America

Andy Ho
Boston University

Amidst the chaotic atmosphere of the 1920s, *Life* magazine was a common sight in the homes of middle-class Americans everywhere.¹ During this period of massive social and cultural change, many Americans experienced an unprecedented loss of certainty. As a humor and general interest publication existing during the time, *Life* capitalized on the vulnerability of Americans. *Life* worked on two distinct levels – while it fostered anxiety about modernity and the changing times, it also used humor to provide middle-class Americans with comedic relief from the very anxieties it fueled. In perpetuating the feeling of uncertainty, *Life* simultaneously offered itself as a salvation from the unsettling problems afflicting 1920s society.

It is essential to establish the parameters of this examination. As a publication that has existed for over 100 years, *Life* has undergone significant changes since its inception in 1883 to the contemporary era. Readers of *Life* from the late 20th and early 21st century would likely associate *Life* as a publication predominantly focused on photojournalism, producing some of the most iconic images in American culture since the 1940s. Yet in the late 19th and early 20th century, *Life* magazine existed as an entirely different type of publication. During this period, *Life* was a general interest magazine that relied heavily on articles and illustrations, using humor as a platform for social commentary. It is this style of *Life* magazine that must be envisioned when evaluating the purpose, function and effect of *Life* during the 1920s. The evidence used in this argument is derived from numerous *Life* issues belonging to the same year: 1922. In using *Life* source material from only one year, recurring themes and content can be traced more accurately, with a deeper analysis on the specific narratives evident within *Life* during the period. In addition, by limiting the body of source material to 1922, it can be determined whether or not certain sentiments or attitudes found within *Life* were simply anomalies and not characteristic of principal *Life* themes.

The 1920s were a period marked by massive transformation. Newly arriving immigrants combined with the rise of urbanization to alter the American demographic landscape. Technological developments and new management techniques in the industrial sphere led to substantial increases in production and a reimagining of the workplace environment. However, this emphasis came at a cost to workers. Workers were no longer needed for their specific skills, but rather for their ability to simply operate equipment and perform menial tasks. This led a number of workers to feel unsatisfied with their decreasing autonomy and increasingly regimented lives.² At the same time, scientific developments in the global arena permeated into American culture, casting doubt upon previously held assumptions regarding the nature of existence. For instance, physicist Albert Einstein’s theory of relativity implied that measurements of time and space were relative to the location and movement of the observer; there seemed to be no one definitive measurement of reality.³ Einstein’s theory along with others in the field of quantum physics eerily suggested that there were aspects of life that science may never be able to account for. A number of these change-inducing agencies were well in place prior to the 1920s – mechanization, urbanization and the redefinition of social norms were all factors that were evident in the early years of the century.⁴ Yet it was in the 1920’s that these forces culminated, sparking what historian Lynn Dumenil describes as an: “acute consciousness of social and cultural change that challenged tradition, religion, rational order and progress.”⁵ These forces, or the “acids of modernity” as termed by Dumenil, coalesced to create an atmosphere riddled with uncertainty, and left many Americans in search of something.⁶

Within the American cultural climate of the 1920s, *Life* augmented the feeling of uncertainty in a multitude of ways, one of which was through

---

⁴ Dumenil, 10.
⁵ Dumenil, 148.
⁶ Dumenil, 172.
advertising. *Life* featured a number of advertisements that instilled fear in its readers. These advertisements worked to promote products or services by disrupting the stability of readers, posing unsettling questions that created fear and concern. For example, in an advertisement titled “Who does your thinking for you?” (Fig. 1) it is implied that one is not in control of one’s own opinions, rather that others govern one’s thoughts and actions. It is expected that upon seeing this, readers would worry about whether or not their thoughts are manipulated by outside influences and begin to look for ways in which they could regain their independence. In a similar fashion, the advertisement titled “Will your marriage be a failure?” (Fig. 2) also features the same kind of scare tactic. Rather than thoughts, this advertisement focuses on the supposedly joyous institution of marriage, and frightens readers into wondering whether or not they will fail in having a successful and happy relationship. These advertisements generated anxieties regarding issues that were possibly nonexistent; they posed alarming questions designated to terrorize readers into imagining a variety of potential problems.

These types of ads of course were not unique to *Life*; rather they were simply characteristic of preexisting advertising styles during the time period. In the early 20th century, advertising deviated from its descriptive, utilitarian-based origins and shifted towards ads that manipulated consumer emotion. Advertisements that dealt with a broad range of consumer products contained rhetoric and illustrative depictions aimed at intimidating readers into purchasing consumer goods or services. Yet despite the fact that the majority of ads during the 1920s featured some form of fear mongering, the presence of these distress-inducing ads in *Life* undoubtedly contributed to the magazine’s promotion of uncertainty.

The references to the acids of modernity were not only evident in *Life*’s advertisements, but in its content as well. During the 1920s, *Life* predominately used illustration as its medium. *Life*’s illustrations were not simply light-hearted cartoons or meaningless depictions – they were images that dealt with contentious topics of the time. One of these topics featured in *Life*’s illustrations was industrialization, a prominent issue that played a substantial role in altering the landscape of 1920s society. To cite one example, the *Life* illustration titled “The Last Horse” (Fig. 3) portrayed an artist meticulously studying what is supposedly the last horse in existence. In the scene, an airplane, a symbol of machinery and technological innovation looms in the background, lingering over the horse. It is implied that the horse, a representation of pre-industrial activity and transportation is on the verge of extinction, while machines are preparing to take over. This illustration alludes to the changing tides taking place in America that were innovating previously established aspects of life. Other illustrations were more wary in their characterization of industrialization. One untitled cartoon (Fig. 4) depicted a scene where industrialization unnecessarily complicated things that did not need to be improved in the first place. In this illustration, a boy is shown asking his father for a simple toy ball after being unable to figure out how to play with a new mechanical toy. Although seemingly harmless in subject matter, the cartoon solemnly implies that the forces of industrialization may not necessarily be a good thing, or an improvement to American culture.

In addition to industrialization, *Life* also delved into issues related to scientific developments. Science, a controversial and highly debated issue in the 1920s, was frequently featured in *Life*’s illustrations. One science related cartoon (Fig. 5) depicted a man with an ape’s body wielding Charles Darwin’s *Descent of Man*, crying out: “it’s a lie!” Darwin’s work, identifying humankind within the framework of evolutionary theory, was indubitably a concerning matter for Americans in the early 20th century. Americans aware of Darwin’s work found themselves caught in between their longstanding theistic foundations and the mounting scientific evidence for an evolutionary perspective on humanity. The cartoon portrays the struggle of Americans to understand their origins in the midst of two conflicting forces. The cartoon also seems to support the notion of a biological explanation regarding the creation of humanity, depicting the contradiction of a man ignoring evolutionary theory despite his obvious physical appearance as a pre-evolved primate. Yet it can also be argued that the cartoon simply illustrated the

---

8 *Life*, December 14, 1922, 25.
9 *Life*, April 2, 1922, 22.
unsettling dilemma for Americans at the time – religion was the historically embraced ideology that provided mankind with purpose, however scientific theories offered tangible and testable explanations for the process by which humans came to be. Regardless of the interpretation, this illustration and others of a similar variety unquestionably intensified sentiments of uncertainty regarding the role of science.

Outside the realm of science and technology, *Life* also presented other change-inducing social forces in its illustrations, such as female gender roles. During the 1920s women looked to redefine not only their attitudes, but also their roles within American society. The constitutional ratification of the 19th amendment provided women not only with the undeniable right to vote, but also a sense of new independence. In response to this freedom, female characters like the loose and rebellious flapper emerged to cast doubt upon previous notions of what it meant to be a woman. *Life* perhaps best captured this aura of female transformation through Frank Xavier Leyendecker’s now well-known illustration titled “The Flapper” (Fig. 6). The illustration, featured on the cover of one 1922 *Life* issue, depicts a smiling woman with brightly colored and outstretched wings, equating the flapper with a butterfly, having undergone a considerable metamorphosis. In *Life*’s illustration, it was clear that the any notions of homogenized or rigid female roles were no longer applicable in the modern climate. Also notable is the placement of the illustration – rather than simply being used as a page in the magazine, “The Flapper” was the first and most prominent image seen by readers, a likely indication of the importance and significance of changing femininity during the time. Conceivably for the same reason, other illustrations of a similar subject matter were also featured on the cover pages of 1922 *Life* issues. The September 1922 cover titled “The Mirage” (Fig. 7) for instance, depicted the flapper looking into her reflection and seeing a more traditional, possibly Victorian woman. The cover is indicative of the fact that women were not of one opinion during the time – not all women strived to achieve the same purpose or forge the same identity and thus there was no one universally accepted notion of femininity. In this regard, *Life* illustrated both the diversity and ambiguity found within the changing concept of the woman. In addition to referencing modernizing forces, *Life* also offered critiques of the ways in which Americans responded to modernity.

For traditional Americans loyal to the cultural standards of the past, modernity was a threat. Modernity involved substantial societal changes that challenged and attempted to reinvent longstanding concepts of living. Americans who embraced the traditional way of life reacted defensively in the face of these changes. These Americans sought to combat change by creating a homogenous society “held together by shared values and assumptions.” One way these old-stock Americans attempted to achieve this goal was through restrictive measures such as Prohibition.

*Life* in the 1920s offered an incessant assault on Prohibition. *Life* regularly provided illustrations and articles aimed at exposing the absurdity and irrationality of the overly restrictive regulation. One article titled “Modernized” featured an exchange between two characters that clearly ridiculed the role of prohibition in society. In the article, one character poses the question, “How do you like living at Knapps Creek Junction, is it an up-to-date town?” In response, the other character replies: “you bet, the milkman will leave you with a pint of milk and a quart of liquor every morning.” The witty exchange points to the ineffectiveness of Prohibition – in light of the ban on alcohol, Americans who sought liquor simply resorted to other methods of obtaining it. A substantial number of Americans in 1920s disregarded the 18th amendment, turning towards alternatives of bootlegging, and speakeasies to consume alcohol. A similar, yet slightly different sentiment can be derived from the article “From the Journal of a Prohibitionist”. In the article, the protagonist visits several outlandish locations searching for alcohol in order to determine if Prohibition has been effective. Failing to find either alcohol or alcohol consumption in a public library, a gas tank of a vehicle and in an exhibit within the Museum of Natural History, the speaker concludes, “it is obvious that Prohibition has been a tremendous

---

12 Dumenil, 202.
13 *Life*, February 23, 1922.
American figures with stereotypical Asian qualities. The illustration portrays slant-eyed, buck-toothed Asians wearing traditional Japanese clothing and wielding samurai swords. In a similar fashion, a recurring cartoon (Fig. 9) found throughout several 1922 issues embodies Life’s use of exaggerated stereotypic features of African Americans. In these cartoons, excessively shaded, big-lipped African Americans are shown speaking to one another in poorly constructed English sentences. These illustrations and others of the same variety were indubitably insulting in nature, likely offending any readers who belonged to the ethnic groups at the center of Life’s racist caricatures. The presence of these derogatory illustrations indicates that Life was not a magazine intended for a diverse audience that included immigrant groups and African Americans. However, at the same time, it would be inaccurate to suggest that Life promoted an all-white agenda. More accurately, Life attacked both extremes of the 1920s racial conflict; Life criticized the actions of Anglo-Saxon Protestants who wished to homogenize the country, but also ridiculed the physical and mental attributes of immigrant and black groups as well. In this sense, Life’s target audience was people in the middle—white, middle-class Americans who were simply attempting to forge a meaningful existence in an atmosphere riddled with uncertainty.

Although Life regularly reminded readers of the problems that came with modernity, it ultimately did so for the purpose of comedy and satire, referencing the issues in humorous contexts in order to lighten the anxieties derived from the very issues it perpetuated. Life’s comical accounts were designed to light-heartedly poke fun at a broad spectrum of controversial topics. For example, the article titled “The New Bone-Dust Theory of Behavior” parodied the ridiculousness of scientific theories that promoted a biological basis for moral behavior. The article details an exaggerated hypothesis that the friction caused when extending one’s elbow results in the buildup of bone dust, a dangerous and potentially harmful compound. According to the satirical theory, the presence of excess bone dust predisposes one to commit various criminal acts, ranging from theft to murder. The article concludes by stating that this bone-dust theory will govern American society until the next

---

14 Life, March 30, 1922, 15.
16 “Greetings from Japan”, Life, November 9, 1922, 4.
17 Life, April 2, 1922, 9.
preposterous theory emerges to propose another seemingly harmful bodily or spiritual condition. Other articles directed satire towards the transformation of women. Titled “The law and the ladies”, one article presents a courtroom scene where a woman is on trial for divorcing her husband. Women in the scenario have risen up to erode the patriarchal structure of society, and have thus switched roles with men. The woman on trial is questioned as to why she did not properly care for her husband by sending him flowers and buying him silk hats. The woman is eventually cleared of all charges after the entirely female jury leaves to go shopping. In humorously reversing the longstanding cultural norms of male chivalry, the article depicts female transformation taken to an absurd, comical extreme. While Life provided frequent parodies of female life in the 1920s, Life perhaps directed the bulk of its comedy and satire towards practices of conformity, namely Prohibition.

As Prohibition was one of Life’s most commonly dealt with topics, comedic ridicule of Prohibition could be found within almost every Life issue in 1922. The illustration captioned “Bootlegging” encapsulates the quintessential image of Life’s attitude towards the ban on alcohol. In the illustration (Fig 10.), members of the United States Senate are depicted huddled around a bottle of brandy while snickering: “SCANDALOUS!” The image alludes to the fact that prohibition was a commonly violated regulation that not even members of the senate seriously respected. The article titled “The Also Rums” further joked about the failed attempt of Prohibition to eradicate alcohol consumption. In the article, it is fictitiously claimed that Prohibition has reduced the number of alcohol consumers from twenty million to two million. While the decrease in consumers seems to indicate that Prohibition has been successful, the conclusion of the article offers a counter explanation – these eighteen million consumers did not abstain from alcohol but simply found other ways to get it, and thus could not fall under the category of a recognized alcohol consumer. The article offers several alternative possibilities for how these Americans obtained alcohol despite Prohibition’s restriction – six million turned to bootlegging, three million made their own and two million idiotically drank wood alcohol and died. The final category is a clear indication that the article was in no way intended to be serious; the article presented comical possibilities for how the average American dealt with the absurdity that was Prohibition. The humor derived from these texts and other Life texts of a similar variety worked to turn concrete issues of the 1920s into markedly innocuous subjects that could be made fun of and laughed at.

Outside the issue of alcohol, Life also featured satirical commentary on government restriction as a whole. The piece titled “The Moral Life” for example, offered Life’s humorous depiction of a dystopian life of an American in the far future of 1989 after laws like Prohibition have completely regimented society. The regulatory measures described in the story were clearly outrageous – actions such as waking up, going to work and using the bathroom were all movements dictated by the government in order to standardize all aspects of American life. The article offers an exaggerated account of the potential extents to which government regulations could be taken. Yet again, content such “The Moral Life” and others relating to a multitude of other subjects were largely indicative of Life’s use of satire and humor in regarding issues related to modernity. Through these humorous articles and illustrations, Life acted to reduce the tensions associated with the issues of the 1920s and alleviate reader anxiety.

Some may dispute the findings of this conclusion and argue instead that Life’s humorous cartoons and satirical articles were not attempts to relieve public concern over modernity. Such an argument might follow that Life in the 1920s was just a lighthearted humor magazine that had no purpose besides attracting readers with meaningless, yet creative comedy. Following this line of reasoning, Life simply drew upon the issues of the time for inspiration and used them as subject material in its harmless content. While this argument may seem to make sense, it fails to contextualize and give value to the subject matter of Life’s content. Life commonly dealt with numerous controversial topics of the time; topics that were

---

important, contentious and frequently troubling for many Americans. When mentioning these issues, *Life* used humor and comedy to ridicule aspects within the very problems causing Americans distress. In doing so, *Life*’s material acted to ease the worries Americans had about the problems related modernity. To say that *Life* was simply an aimless humor magazine providing meaningless commentary is to ignore the incredibly significant fact that *Life*’s humor was based upon the significant historical forces of modernity permeating through the 1920s.

In an ever-changing environment dominated by the feeling of uncertainty, *Life* magazine was something that perpetuated this feeling. Yet *Life*’s ultimate purpose was not to cause readers distress, but rather to provide a basis for light-hearted comedy. *Life* applied its brand of humor and satire to modern issues in order to create a more atmosphere in which these issues could be laughed at and joked about. For many middle-class Americans, it was likely the case that *Life* was a necessary and relieving force that alleviated the tensions derived from the problems of the 1920s. In a culture of relentless uncertainty, *Life* magazine offered a release.

**APPENDIX**


**FIG. 2.** Advertisement, “Will Your Marriage Be a Failure?” 1922. From *Life*, No. 2045 (January 12, 1922).


**FIG. 4.** Illustration, Untitled, 1922. From *Life* (September 22, 1922): 25.


