

American Literature, Book 1

Lesson 13

Poor Richard's Almanack

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Lesson 13

Poor Richard's Almanack

Objectives

- To become acquainted with the purpose and content of *Poor Richard's Almanack*
- To identify the characteristics of home-spun humor
- To consider the timeliness of the values conveyed in Franklin's aphorisms

Notes to the Teacher

Father of American humor, Benjamin Franklin gave us the first American editorial cartoon (severed snake entitled "Join or Die" appearing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754 and widely anthologized in history and literature books) and our first continuing situation comedy. The latter could aptly be labeled *The Saunders*. Patterning his publication after *Poor Robin*, a London almanac, Franklin named it after the editor of the *English Apollo Anglicanses*. Appearing initially in 1732 and annually for the next twenty-five years, the almanac augmented Franklin's printing business in Philadelphia. Each year he sold 10,000 copies of the almanac, distributed under the pseudonym of Richard Saunder, who was depicted comically as a henpecked husband.

The contents of *Poor Richard's Almanack* varied little from our well-known *Farmer's Almanac* and referred to weather, crops, recipes, and important days. The humor is found in the prefaces, where Poor Richard pleads with customers to purchase the almanac so he will have money to "keep his wife off his back." The popularity of the almanac, some articles of which were translated in France, may be due to the buyers' sympathies for the underdog Saunders. Best known are the aphorisms, which were "fillers" to complete the layout of a page. *Reader's Digest* today incorporates his technique when copy runs short. True to his precept that writing should be "smooth, clear, and short", Franklin admittedly revised well-known witticisms and created a few original ones. Commenting on the universal annoyances of the common people, Franklin, nevertheless, rooted for them as he dealt with the everyday tribulations of life. Prefacing most

of the aphorisms with the phrase "As Poor Richard says," Franklin employed repetition, a technique often used by contemporary humorists.

Earlier in his life, Franklin had used the pen name Mrs. Silence Dogood, portrayed as a widow with three children. At the age of fifteen Franklin had written a series of "letters to the editor" of the *New England Courant*. His half-brother James was the publisher and printer of the newspaper. The "epistles" were expressions of concerns about education and social problems of the time. Disguising his handwriting and slipping the letters under the door of the printing house late at night, the young Franklin chuckled privately as his brother and associates pondered and eventually printed the Dogood Papers.

Procedure

1. Draw from the students the biographical facts about Franklin's life and contributions to society. (*Franklin stove, spectacles, public library, fire department, University of Pennsylvania*).
2. Focus attention on Franklin as a humorist (See Notes to the Teacher).
3. Define *almanac* (*an annual book with monthly designations of important days, conventions, and religious observations, as well as weather predictions, times of sunrise, sunset, tides, and household tips*).
4. Looking at current almanacs such as *Information Please Almanac* or the *World Almanac*, ask students to decide whether the definition still applies. (*Yes—important facts; no—much more factual information is currently included*.)
5. The *Farmer's Almanac* (available at some supermarkets and magazine stands) is similar to *Poor Richard's Almanack*. If possible, show the students a *Farmer's Almanac* and the book *Poor Richard: The Almanacks for the Years 1733–1758*, (New York: Heritage Press, 1964.)

6. Distribute **Handout 20** and have students respond to the questions.

Suggested Responses:

1.
 - appreciative of patrons
 - wife happier because she is able to purchase necessities
 - not part of a wealthy couple
 - henpecked husband
 - very human
2.
 - quantity
 - living conditions
 - a loose-fitting shirt-like undergarment worn by women
3. Saunders'—first person; "I"—context clue
4. He wants to emphasize them. At that time spelling was not standardized.
5. She lacks some basic necessities and prods her husband into working hard in order to have the money to purchase these items. She is often given to haranguing "Poor Richard."

7. *a concise statement making a wise or witty observation about life*

9. *Personal privacy is important. Don't keep or tell secrets. Hard work brings personal and monetary rewards. Be frugal with time and money.*

10. *Saunders is a common man to whom the purchasers of the almanack can relate. The aphorisms reveal everyday problems in life and foster a spirit of knowing oneself, being industrious, and maintaining a harmony in all aspects of life.*

7. Distribute **Handout 21**. Have students review the assignments. Since these assignments often prove very popular, you may want to bring to class several dozen magazines containing photographs and illustrations the students can use, as well as poster board, markers, scissors, tape, and other arts and craft materials.

Benjamin Franklin, Alias Richard Saunders

Directions: Read this excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

Courteous READERS,

Your kind and charitable Assistance last Year, in purchasing so large an Impression of my Almanacks, has made my Circumstances much more easy in the World, and requires my grateful Acknowledgment. My Wife has been enabled to get a Pot of her own, and is no longer oblig'd to borrow one from a Neighbour; nor have we ever since been without something of our own to put in it. She has also got a pair of Shoes, two new Shifts, and a new warm Petticoat; and for my part, I have bought a second-hand Coat, so good, that I am now not ahsam'd to go to town or be seen there. These Things have render'd her Temper so much more pacifick that it us'd to be, that I may say, I have slept more, and more quietly within this last Year, than in the three foregoing Years put together. Accept my hearty Thanks therefor, and my sincere Wishes for your Health and Prosperity.

Courteous and kind Reader,
Your poor Friend and Servant,

Octob. 30, 1733

R. SAUNDERS

1. Note three characteristics of Saunders.
 - a.
 - b.
 - c.
2. Substitute a more contemporary word for the following terms.
 - a. impression
 - b. circumstances
 - c. shift
3. From what point of view is the preface written? How can you tell?
4. Why do you think Saunders capitalized words we would not normally capitalize?
5. What are your impressions of Mrs. Saunders?

6. Can you visualize their lives being transformed for television into a situation comedy called *The Saunders*? Why or why not? Describe an episode of the show.

7. Examine the sayings of Poor Richard found in your anthology. These sayings are often called aphorisms. What is an aphorism?

8. Select one aphorism you particularly like and write it here.

9. What values are revealed in the aphorisms?

10. Keeping in mind the characteristics of homespun humor, tell how Franklin utilizes them in his preface and aphorisms.

11. Comedians often employ a gimmick known as *repetition* in which a word or phrase is purposely placed in a routine for continuity and transition from one idea to the next. Because the aphorisms have been taken out of context, we cannot see that “As Poor Richard says” is Franklin’s repetitive phrase. Imagine the device being used like this:

As Poor Richard says, “Tis easier to suppress the first desire, than to satisfy all that follow.”

Give examples of repetitive phrases used by contemporary comedians.

Entertaining with Aphorisms

Part A.

Directions: Choose one of the following assignments to complete.

1. Select an aphorism you like and write a brief narrative or anecdote illustrating the observation on life. Your story will act as the setup for a punch line that will be the aphorism itself "As *Poor Richard* says."

Sample Aphorisms

As Poor Richard says, "The eye of the master will do more work than both his hands."

As Poor Richard says, "Lost time is never found again."

As Poor Richard says, "Fools make feasts, and wise men eat them."

As Poor Richard says, "Silks and satins, scarlet and velvet, put out the kitchen fire."

As Poor Richard says, "Experience keeps a dear school, but fools will learn in no other, and scarce in that."

As Poor Richard says, "All would live long, but none would be old."

As Poor Richard says, "Blessed is he that expects nothing for he shall never be disappointed."

As Poor Richard says, "Tis great confidence in a friend to tell him your faults, greater to tell him his."

As Poor Richard says, "A mob's a monster; heads enough but no brains."

As Poor Richard says, "He that lives upon hope will die fasting."

As Poor Richard says, "The rotten apple spoils the barrel."

2. Aphorisms today include Murphy's Law (What can go wrong will) and "Variables don't; constants aren't." Select a contemporary or familiar aphorism and find a picture to illustrate the truth it contains. (*Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* is a rich source of commonly understood aphorisms.) Mount the picture with a copy of the aphorism, and share the finished product with the class.
3. Select an aphorism and create a colorful illustration depicting the application of the aphorism to everyday life. Write the aphorism on the drawing.
4. As a game, select one of Franklin's aphorisms to be acted out as a charade. Give audience members opportunities to guess the aphorism.