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## *The Two Faces of Mark Twain*

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### Abstract

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The genius and personality of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) were marked by contrary pulls, and that among other reasons made him one of the most controversial figures of his time. He was certainly not the vulgar funny man that Matthew Arnold made him out to be, but a very interesting and multi-faceted personality who, far from writing only for the uncultivated masses, addressed some very serious questions that are still central to American life: for instance, social responsibility versus personal and domestic irresponsibility, juvenile innocence versus adult criminality, racism as practiced by individuals and institutions versus liberal humanism, and slavery versus freedom and so on .

Mark Twain's life and works represent baffling contradictions an continuing conflicts that were largely unsuspected during his lifetime and for a considerable period afterwards; he was a humorist who combined the role of the comedian and the buffoon with that of the philosopher, cynic and satirist; an optimist who believed in all kinds of unheard-of inventions and eccentric modem gadgets, and landed in bankruptcy by pouring money into those gadgets in the certainty that one day they would make him fabulously rich; a pessimist who believed that life was basically a bad dream, that money ruled the world and that money was intrinsically evil; a savagely cynical realist as well as an idealist who had his own Utopia to project.

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### الملخص

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satirist; an optimist who believed in all kinds of unheard-of inventions and eccentric modern gadgets, and landed in bankruptcy by pouring money into those gadgets in the certainty that one day they would make him fabulously rich; a pessimist who believed that life was basically a bad dream, that money ruled the world and that money was intrinsically evil; a savagely cynical realist as well as an idealist who had his own Utopia to project.

Dixon Wecter(1952: 265) offers a psychological-biographical explanation for the essential conflict between sunshine and shadow in Mark Twain's imaginative world, which find expression in his writings, both fictional and non-fictional, when he says:

**[...] while one side of his creative nature lived and moved upon the level of his boyhood, in almost perfect control of his materials, the other battled with valor, upon the darkling plain of his maturity**

The present paper proposes to probe this embedded duality with particular reference to Mark Twain's humor, as well as the growing complexity and grimness of his humor with passage of time which becomes evident in his later works. With the passing years he was increasingly swamped by a growing pessimism and despair which was aggravated by personal disasters: bankruptcy was followed brief financial recovery, which was only to be superseded by successive catastrophes and bereavements. Correspondingly, we find a gradual progression in his writings from fun and humor towards a bleak pessimism, cynicism and humorless satire which is almost Swifitean in its harshness in fictional works like *The Mysterious Stranger* and non-fictional works like *What is Man?* which he wrote synchronically. At this period, as Wecter puts it, "Sam Clemens was simply turning

upon himself and the artist's ultimate inability to escape from this prison-house of memory" (62).

However, Mark Twain's humor has all along been enriched by an undercurrent of seriousness. McNaughton (1979: 11) has pointed out that "[...] Mark Twain possessed a serious side that had been too long neglected." This is more apparent in his novels than in his short stories and sketches that he wrote during the early phase of his literary career. His later short stories, novels and fragments of unfinished manuscripts are a piece with the philosophical writings which were written towards the end of his career. The humor is no longer boisterous and ebullient here as it was in the early short stories like 'The Jumping Frog of Calaveras', 'The Stolen White Elephant', 'The McWilliamses' Burglar Alarm', as well as in longer writings like *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* and early novels like *Tom Sawyer*. On the other hand, a bitter, cynical humor, the result of black depression and loss of faith in the very meaning of existence, becomes particularly explicit in later novels like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and short stories like 'The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg' and 'The Mysterious Stranger'.

## II

In *Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar* Twain writes: "Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow." He concludes that "There is no humor in heaven" (Following the Equator 119 Epigraph). This ambivalence is present – in varying degrees and proportions – in each of Twain's works, fictional and non-fictional. Even a sample of critical approaches helps to bring out the mixed impression Twain made on his readers and critics, with regard to his famous "humor". As James Cox (ed. Rubin, 1973: 144) puts it in "The Height of Humor":

The dynamic relation between the two aspects of his humorist, between philosopher and fool, between respectable adult and dreaming child, between experience and innocence – made Mark Twain more than an amiable humorist. There was always present in him the sensibility of the poet, the scorn of the satirist, and the outrage of the offended moralist (ed. Rubin 144).

Dreiser has called Samuel Clemens “Mark the double Twain” (Quoted in Wecter: 265), thus emphasizing the essential duality of his temperament. According to Dixon Wecter Mark Twain is a “human Philomena” (also quoted from Dreiser by Wecter: 265) because he “partook of both natures” (265): the humorous (or the comic) and the satirical (or the serious).

No major artist ever made more of his boyhood than did Samuel Clemens. He found himself better adapted to Hannibal than to any other environment he ever met. As adult life with its casuistries and introspections grew more complex, he worshiped his golden age all the more – achieving in Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn the universal Hannibal, the home town of boys everywhere. Then, in the still later years when this complexity neared the peak of disaster and

**the creative strength waned, [ ... ] in his despair he  
turned increasingly  
against a modern world he never made, in  
bitterness and disillusion**

(264-5).

Prafulla C. Kar (ed., 1992: 7) has identified Mark Twain as “at once a humorist and a tragic ironist”. The two trends in Mark Twain’s humor are emphasized by Maurice Le Breton in his essay “Mark Twain: An Appreciation”: “one pure fantasy, completely spontaneous; the other more thoughtful and tinged with seriousness” (in Smith, 1962: 37). According to Tony Tanner (1961: 299),

**[Twain’s] final mood of total despair [was] in a  
slow process of  
incubation from [his] earliest work, and [ ... ] it is  
finally hatched  
by the growing discords, conflicts, and problems of  
the page. It is  
not a despair of personal bereavement but of  
country – ultimately of man.**

In 1890 Mark Twain himself confused his contemporaries by accepting Matthew Arnold’s charge that he was the most conspicuous among the vulgar funny men, saying that he was writing solely for the uncultivated masses and had no interest in the cultivated minority. In deed Arnold represented a typical approach prevailing at the time which perceived Mark Twain as the typical Westerner – “a spokesman for the frontier in literature” (cited by Smith: 3).

Arnold’s point of view was echoed by Van Wyck Brooks who felt that repressive forces belonging to family and contemporary literary society (which was heavily influenced by “Eastern”

values) were responsible for turning Clemens into a mere “funny man”. He squarely blamed Clemens’s wife Olivia and Twain’s friend Howells as the chief means by which the pressures of Puritanism and Eastern literary values were brought to bear on him and the chief reason why his potential as a great artist was destroyed.

**His humorous writing he regarded as something external to himself, as something other than artistic self-expression and it was in consequence of pursuing it, we have divined, that he was arrested in his moral and aesthetic develop**

(Brooks, 1920: 242).

In his article “Mark Twain: an Appreciation” (1934) Maurice Le Breton has pointed out the realistic element in Twain’s work: not modern photographic realism but a subjective interpretation of the reality of the frontier as he saw it. However, Le Breton adds that Twain twists the truth for fun to put everyone in a good humor (in Smith: 29-30). His irresistible verve, his boisterous spirits and his superior handling of language, which is “still at heart the rough laughter of the West” (37), is complemented by a bitter kind of satire which is “almost sarcastic” (38) and grows more and more harsh towards the end of his life.

In 1936 Max Eastman wrote, “He did not [...] as an author ‘undertake’ to be humorous. He asks no similar undertaking of the reader. He *was* humorous. He could not see, in other terms” (cited by Robinson, [1995]: 6). On the other hand, James M. Cox comments in 1973 on the ‘ambivalence’ in Mark Twain’s attitude to his work in *The Height of Humor*:

[...] there was one joke which Mark Twain could never get out from under – the joke of being a humorist. Helpless before that fatality, he tries to be serious; he wishes he were serious; he earnestly seeks instruction in the art of being serious, and becomes such a master impersonator of seriousness that it is impossible to tell whether he is or is not serious

(in Rubin: 143).

In the thirties was also published *Mark Twain's America* (1932) in which Bernard De Voto echoed Frederick Jackson Turner's view (1893) that Mark Twain was a spokesman for the "frontier" in literature. The fresh energies of the West are symbolized in his work, according to De Voto. But his work *Twain at Work*, published in the forties places more emphasis the aging writer struggling with his frustrations and his subsequent loss of creativity; prolific as he is, his inability to bring his manuscripts to a satisfactory conclusion is poignantly documented: "His invention ran out, he could not solve the ordinary problems of structure and technique, he could not overcome the ordinary difficulties of his own intentions, he could not push the thing through to an end" (in Smith: 145).

De Voto turned out to be a Mark Twain apologist rather than an analyst. His 'compassionate identification with Clemens' (Smith *Introduction*: 8) and his careful documentation of evidence for what he acknowledged was merely a speculative analysis makes his essay "The Symbols of Despair" as absorbing as it is illuminating.



Tony Tanner (1961) and James M. Cox (1966) show that the connection made by Doto between biographical events and their functional impact in Twain's work is too simplistic to be tenable. The most important limitation of biographical interpretations of Mark Twain's fiction is that there is always a difference between Sam Clemens the man and the persona who is the hero of the novels. According to Cox ([1966]: 22):

**The "humor" of Mark Twain [...] is just this inevitably tendency to enlarge upon the facts – not to depreciate them so much as to be free with them [...]. Indeed, all the pathos, hostility, and tragedy which Samuel Clemens could possibly feel were to be converted under the sign of his genius into the form of humor.**

According to Cox, in the later novels of Mark Twain the humor is diluted and weakened. The bleak vision that man "would go on killing and maiming his fellow men, always with a serious face," that "Always man would be a slave to the ruthless Moral Sense", concealing from himself the truth that "cruelty is his deepest pleasure", haunts all his work from *Huckleberry Finn* onwards.

In his analysis of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, "As Free as Any Cretur ...", Leslie Fielder (in Smith:133) highlights what he considers an embedded contradiction in Twain's approach:

**The Civil War is the watershed in Twain's life between innocence and experience, childhood and manhood, joy**

joy and pain; but it is politically, of course, the  
dividing  
line between slavery and freedom. And Twain,  
who cannot  
deny either aspect, endures the contradiction of  
searching  
for a lost happiness he knows was sustained by an  
institution  
he is forced to recognize as his country's greatest  
shame. It  
was the best he could dream: to be free as a boy in  
a world of  
slavery!

In *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (1959) Kenneth S. Lynn placed Twain in the Southwestern tradition of American humor. Lynn highlights Twain's point of view: "[...] his comic spotlight was focused not so much on the violence and the dangers of the West as on his narrator's reaction to these things (in Smith: 44). Lynn points out that Southwestern humor was rather cruel because of the unsympathetic attitude of the perpetrator of the rough practical jokes (as well as the spectators and the narrator of the story) towards the "sufferer" or the butt of them. Twain struck a departure from its norm:

By substituting a victim's humor for a spectatorial  
humor,  
Twain transformed the comic treatment of the  
American  
frontier. Not only was his laughter more  
compassionate and  
humane, but the attitude of his narrator toward  
the West was  
psychologically more complex than that of the  
Self-controlled Gentleman  
(in Smith: 45).

In *Mark Twain and His World*, Justin Kaplan (1974: 11) commented that “Mark Twain brought to the occupation of humorist a greater profundity, power, and artistry than it had ever had in his country”, while Louis J. Budd (1995) calls him a “cracker-barrel philosopher – observant, seasoned, obliquely irreverent – [who] was allowed to be positive at heart” (in Robinson : 7).

Bruce Michelson (1995: 7-9), however, focuses on humor as the ‘essential’ quality of Twain’s writing:

**Granting that in some instances Mark Twain’s humor may be constructive and even solemn of purpose, or that respectable moral principles might be affirmed in some of his most outrageous-looking material, we need to keep open questions about when and how that happens [...]. It is the humor in its essence.**

On the other hand, Cox and Hill would draw the reader’s attention to the darkling vision of Twain’s later fiction, which they related to the general phenomenon of the ‘modern malaise’: “[...] along with Henry Adams, he was one of the first nineteenth-century Americans to feel and reflect in his last writings that sense of hopelessness, impotence, and rage which has been dubbed the ‘modern malaise’ (363).

## III

A necessarily intimate and intricate relationship between the comic and the serious has been noted by critics and thinkers across lands and ages – right from Socrates to Cicero, Ben Jonson to Fielding, and Freud to Bakhtin. According to Socrates comedy is “a blending of pain with pleasure” [c. 350 B.C.] (as reported by Plato in *Philebus*: 167). The duality inherent in laughter is brought out by Aristotle’s definition of the Ludicrous as “a defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive” so that though the comic mask is “ugly” or “distorted”. It does not cause pain (*Poetics*: 19). When Eric Bentley says in 1964 that the “comic dramatist’s starting point is misery; the joy at his destination is a superb and thrilling transcendence” (in Palmer, 1984: 140), he is echoing Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and later writers like Henry Fielding and Freud. Freud considers humor as a way of dealing with pain; a way of combating pain by denying its province; the rebellious assertion by the ego that it is invulnerable. We are prepared to respond with pity, but pity is found to be superfluous and the energy first called up for sympathy can be released in laughter. Socrates has called malice “the singular blending of pleasure with pain” because malice is “a kind of mental pain” and yet, “the man who feels it is pleased by his neighbor’s misfortune” (*Philebus*: 167-9). In Classical comedy malice is one of the elements of the comic, whether in drama or in fiction. In classical comedy malice is one of the primary sources of laughter and even now it is one of the elements of the comic, whether in drama or in fiction.

In Fielding’s comments on the burlesque in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) he describes the effect of laughter (or mirth) to be the purging away of “spleen, melancholy, and ill affections” (xxx-xxx1).

Now from affectation only, the misfortunes and calamities of life, or the imperfection of nature, may become the objects of ridicule [...] when ugliness aims at the applause of beauty, or lameness endeavours to display agility, it is then that these unfortunate circumstances, which at first moved our compassion, tend only to raise our mirth (xxxv-vi).

Thus comedy arises out serious conviction that a judgment passed on something as being inappropriate or disproportionate or wrong, is true. According to Descartes laughter consists of

[...] a kind of pleasure combined with disapproval, deriving from the fact that we perceive a certain minor imperfection in a person whom we consider to deserve such imperfection [...] and when this happens unexpectedly, the astonishment we feel makes us break out into laughter.  
(cited by Howarth 12)

According to Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (1973): "The essence of comedy is incongruity", the exposure of the ridiculous: the "contrast, the incongruity between ideal and the real [...]" (Introduction 4-5). The main impulse behind laughter is the restoration of order and equilibrium. In *An Apology for Poetry* Sir Philip Sidney writes, "[...] laughter almost ever cometh of things most disproportioned to ourselves and nature" (136). According to Cicero in *De Oratore*, the function of the comic is to throw up the vices and weaknesses of the individual as objects of ridicule and laughter:

[...] those blemishes noticeable in the conduct of people who are neither objects of general esteem nor yet full of misery, and no apparently merely fit to be hurried off to execution for their crimes; and these blemishes, if deftly handled, raise laughter

(375).

Ben Jonson takes a rather extreme view when he says that "the moving of laughter is [...] a kind of turpitude" and that whatever is "wry" and "depraved" provokes laughter (643). William Congreve differentiates between "Satirical Wit" and "Facetious Wit" in his *Letter to John Dennis*, concerning *Humor in Comedy* (10 July 1695). The former, according to him, is a "Splenetic and Peevish Humor" while the latter is a "Jolly and Sanguine Humor" (in Palmer 40). According to Congreve's definition, "facetious wit" belongs to the idealist and its aim is to correct the imperfections of society, which is supposed to be the classic aim of comedy, while "satirical wit" merely expresses the writer's dissatisfaction with society as he sees it (as in the works of Dean Swift and the later novels and short stories of Mark Twain). Eighteenth century writers like Steele looked down on laughter as an expression of the trivial and the superficial and regarded public tears as the hallmark of moral superiority.

Mikhail Bakhtin points that carnivalesque laughter is directed against all and everyone:

The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. [...] this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding

(in Palmer 101).

Laughter is a defense against the terrifying suggestion of death and the even more terrifying suggestion of aloneness. According to Bakhtin laughter "asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival" (in Palmer 101). In a society tending to ossify all human relationships and to make anonymity the common position, geniality, conviviality are the instruments through which the conservative and orderly are expelled and the free and generally uninhibited is reaffirmed. The entire world of rigid and isolated principle is rejected by carnival laughter for a world of flexible accommodation and humanity.

#### IV

Again, Mark Twain's humor has sometimes been related to his "American" heritage. In his introduction to *The Comic Imagination in American Literature* Louis D Rubin has found the contrast between vernacular language and homely diction on the one hand and the abstract ideas so presented, on the other, to be

[...] a central motif of American humor – the contrast, the incongruity between the ideal and the real, in which a common, vernacular metaphor is used to put a somewhat abstract statement involving values – self-definition, metaphysical – into a homely context.

(Rubin 5)

We find this contrast in Mark Twain's earlier novels like *Roughing It*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, and also in some of his short stories like 'The Jumping Frog of Calaveras

County and 'The Blue Jay Yarn' and 'Jim Blaine and his Grandfather's Ram'(both of which are part of a novel). Much humor is derived from the comic contrast between the genteel narrator of the 'framework' tale and the vernacular narrator of the actual story; especially since the former is often the dupe of the latter (in the story of Jim Blaine the genteel narrator, who is also the hero of *Roughing It*, is the 'innocent' who is made the comic dupe of the practical jokers who tell him about the story in the first place).

In his Introduction to *The Rise and Fall of American Humor* (a comprehensive chronological study of American humor from 1830s to cartoon strips and albums of jokes related in night-club auditorium performances) Jesse Bier says, "All of our comic expression may be placed along a continuum from irreverence to outright shock" (Bier 1). He characterizes American humor as

**[...] voracious, deflationary, skeptical, cynical, pessimistic, blasphemous, and black, not by turns or accident but in an inevitable sliding scale of function. [The devices it uses are] nonsense, confusionism, reversal, anticlimax, antiproverbialism, undercutting [...]**

(Bier 8).

Clarity and resilience of thinking, a lack of illusion and the ability to face reality unwaveringly is typical of American humor.

American humor criticizes cozy securities and beliefs and institutions that are considered to be above question with the "voice of hard fresh truth" (Bier 2). According to Bier it was the humorists who spearheaded the movement towards realism in American literature in the nineteenth century, as a kind of reaction against the artificiality and stiff conventionalism of the genteel library humor of earlier ages.



The social and physical term of existence are not merely reversed but annihilated, according to him. In their extraordinarily accurate realism, the American humorists of the nineteenth century contributed to a heightened perception of the ludicrous inappropriateness of the interaction between character and situation in certain contexts.

Between 1819 and 1827 a new fictional method gained popularity, in which localization of character and the direct language of untutored men found expression. The peddler and the Negro found a place in Cooper's *The Spy* (1821), which stock Yankees appeared in Irving's novels. The realistic portrayal of recognizable everyday folks and the representation of national peculiarities were admired in Miss Sedgewick's *New England Tale* (1822) and *Redwood* (1824). Thus the ground was prepared for Down-Eastern humor as well as Southwestern or frontier humor.

American humor of the 1830's was emphatically native: the characters were localized and political and social foibles were exposed. The character of the Yankee was developed from early sketches into a full-fledged comic portrait by popular humorists like Seba Smith (1792-1868), Thomas Chandler Haliburton (1796-1852), James Russell Lowell, Francis M. Witcher (1811-1852), and Benjamin P. Shillaber (1814-1890), all of whom wrote between 1830 and 1870. The illiterate vernacular style – through which George W. Arnold's *Joe Strickland* (1825) satirized the snobbery of genteel society – became a popular medium in the hands of succeeding writers. The exaltation of native shrewdness above academic accomplishments is found in Twain's representation of Huck Finn and in the portrayal of the Yankee in *CYKAC*.

Masquerade or the use of the *persona* is a comic device characteristic of Down East humor. Shrewdness, acute observation, sparkling wit, and humor, originality of thought and veracity of representation characterized Sam Slick's

writings. All these qualities can be found in Huck's narrative style, making him a perennial favorite, not only with children, but also with adults.

The tales of the old Southwest originated in the swapping of tales at the campfire or the tavern or during traveling, so the methods of the oral narrative are evidenced in them: mimicry of speech to aid characterization (which Huck uses again and again, especially during the discussion between farmers' wives), humorous depictions of men and beasts and the development of a story with a point, localization and authenticity of detail and the use of a racy vernacular with vivid phrases and striking figures of speech. What these frontier tales lack in psychological subtlety they make up for in exuberance and zest, in keeping with the rugged masculine audience they were meant for.

Southwestern humorists effectively characterize the storyteller through direct and indirect description and also through a long and highly dramatic monologue that reveals his character as well as the qualities of his mind and imagination. This method is effectively employed by Mark Twain in *The Innocent Abroad*, *Roughing It*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* to draw out the psychological as well as the moral subtleties of character.

Another element borrowed by Mark Twain from the frontier tales was the character of the American picaroon. Mark Twain's later works are typically marked by bitterness and contempt and they are degenerated into misanthropy and nihilism in its extreme forms. Multi-racialism is another element of the modern tall tale that dates back to Mark Twain's times (cf. his descriptions of the negro slaves and their antics in *Huck Finn* and in his *Autobiography* and the comically exaggerated description of the death of "Injun Joe" in *Tom Sawyer*). A condescending attitude towards rural whites and the naiveté or otherwise of ignoramus and rogues provide slapstick comedy.

Between 1855 and 1900 emerged a group of literary comedians who were more or less Mark Twain's contemporaries such as George Horatio Derby (1823-1861), John Phoenix – writer of *Phoenixiana* (1855), Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867), Finley P. Dunne (1868-1936), creator of Mr Dooley, and others. Carting little about characterization or localization, these authors depended upon the use of verbal comedy – anti-climax, juxtaposition of incongruous predicates, nouns and proper names; misquotations of the Scriptures or the classics; extraordinary and mixed figurative language; puns, malapropisms, coining new words and the euphemistic statement of unpleasant truths. These comic techniques were extensively used by Mark Twain, who fully explored the comic possibilities of dialect humor in *Huckleberry Finn* and, to come extent, in *Tom Sawyer*.

V

Mark Twain's humorous writings can indeed be placed within the American tradition. Down-to-earth realism, a vivid, homely, earth language – flexible and adaptable as the need arose – and laughable turns of Yankee speech as well as spelling were the legacy bequeathed by Down East humor to Mark Twain. Jack Dawning's naiveté was taken over by the heroes of *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It* and the reductionist manner in which they describe their surroundings (the hero of *The Innocents Abroad* finds Lake Tahoe to be more beautiful than Lake Como) is typical of these Down Eastern heroes. *Huckleberry Finn* too appears to be a direct descendant of these Yankees, plainly revealing himself by every word he utters and every line he speaks. He is naïve, simple and unsophisticated, though shrewd in his judgment of character and cunningly clever in the way he outwits the common enemy (in this case Southern society and also civilization at large) to escape down the

Mississippi with Jim on a mere log raft, while moving all the time *towards* slavery and not *away from* it. He also creates imaginary personalities for himself in the tall tales he tells to get out of the various scrapes he gets himself into.

The character of the shrewd, witty Yankee peddler appears in the person of Twain's Connecticut Yankee too, the innovative and resourceful man, with his eyes always on the main chance, outwitting Merlin by slick talking and even slicker doings. In *The Connecticut Yankee* Twain seems to go back to the picaresque mode though the novel is identifiably Down Eastern in its sweeping satire on European – and also incidentally American – structures and institutions in general and the human individuals in particular who make up the social fabric. We find the character of the American picaroon largely in the character and actions of Huckleberry Finn and, to a much smaller extent, in Tom Sawyer and the hero of *Roughing It*. The loosely linked anecdotal structure of *The Adventures of Simon Suggs* (1845) is to be found in *Roughing It*, which is neither a travelogue like *The Innocents Abroad* or *Life on the Mississippi* nor a novel with loosely integrated plot like *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper* or *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. In *Huckleberry Finn* we have a combination of both types – the anecdotes are still clearly separable but are also interlinked and lead on to the final climax. More than the more continuous presence of Huck and Jim throughout the novel holds it together.

The competitive nature of the tall tale led to greater and greater exaggerations in Southwestern humor, from which tales like *The Jumping Frog* and the *Blue Jay Yarn* are derived. In Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the comedy arising from Tom's pranks in pretending to free Jim from slavery is somewhat cruel in nature and characteristic of backwoods humor. Slaves were not included in the comic portrayals of Southwestern humorists because they were not considered fit literary subjects. This tendency to regard slaves as "not humans" was reversed by

Twain in his portrayals of the Negro Jim and the slave Roxy (who is not comic at all but a perfectly rounded being who is a mother first and a slave afterwards). Huck's struggles with his conscience over helping Jim to gain his freedom is symptomatic of the changing attitude towards slavery in general that was taking place in nineteenth century American writing and which resulted in novels like Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which portrayed the realities of a slave's life.

According to Jesse Bier, the technique of American humor is essentially that of controlled hostility or mockery. "Its prime function is antithetical, [...]. As a genre of deflation, its chief risk is extreme misanthropy and nihilism, [...]. It is more negative than corrective" (Bier 30). The Connecticut Yankee's negative, deflationary perspective of the world around him – whether Arthurian or nineteenth century American – typifies the American humorist tradition. Pudd'nhead Wilson's attitude towards the society of Dawson's Landing and its attitude towards him is also skeptical, derogatory, and intrinsically hostile.

Savagery and corrosive cynicism characterize post bellum humor. The geniality of the earlier kinds of humor is replaced by misanthropy, nihilism and negativism. This is also true of the later writings of Mark Twain – novels like *Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* or short stories like *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* and *The Mysterious Stranger* or the philosophical essay *What Is Man?*.

## VI

Mark Twain's humor is not one-dimensional; it is complex and evolving: that is the essential quality in his writings which differentiates them from the humorous writings of his well-known contemporaries like Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, Josh Billings and their like. While the topical flavor of the writings of his contemporaries is possibly due to the fact that

they confined themselves to portraying purely contemporary events – political or otherwise – there is a universal appeal in Twain's writings that is the hallmark of the classic.

Boisterous carnival laughter characterizes the early novels and also the early short stories of Mark Twain, and the same quality can be found, though in subdued form, in *A Connecticut Yankee*, which is the second last complete novel written by Mark Twain. Twain's humor was never meant to correct blemishes in the conduct of the individual people but rather to hold up the blemishes of society to ridicule which, though genial and sympathetic at first, tends gradually to become harsh and unforgiving as the writer seems to become increasingly aware of the corruption and evil in human society and fallibility of man (as we see in his short stories 'The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg' and 'The Mysterious Stranger' and his last complete novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*), as well as the impossibility of any real or absolute goodness in human nature. Humorists though he was, the essential seriousness of his nature was often at odds with his facetious expression and manner, as his daughter Susy notes in her childish biography of her father: "[...] it troubles [sic] me [...] to have so few people know papa, I mean really [sic] know him, they think of Mark Twain as a humorist joking at everything [...]" (Quoted by Twain in his *Autobiography* – Neider 212). Thus the duality inherent in the nature and purpose of comedy leads to a baffling ambivalence in the comic intention of the novelist.

However, I have tried to define the two aspects of Mark Twain's genius and relate the same to the broad universal concepts of comedy, and also to the distinctive tradition of American humor. Thus any researcher may follow this procedure to analyze any novel or the short stories written by Mark Twain.

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