American Literary Realism and Mark Twain’s Early Fiction

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Abstract
American literary realism grew in the late nineteenth century out of the new frontier experience of a life rich in desire and the community frame-within-a-frame story telling technique derived from the oral tradition. It represented American middle class aspirations and social reality distinct from old Europe which was predominantly working class and bound by literary traditions and conventions of the written form. Since American realism rejected romantic and working class notions of love and hero worship and the portrayal of dissolute living, it introduced regional humor in narratives presenting a more accurate picture of social reality without moralizing directly upon the actions and behavior of characters. American writers like Mark Twain depended more on style and humor than on philosophical reasoning. They were conscious of the rhythms of spoken language and shied away from the formal written structures of English, common with continental writers like Henry James. Mark Twain used short fiction to comment upon the condescending attitude of east American
urbanite when they encountered the garrulous rural westerners from
California. In doing so he created a dynamic public space that balanced the
growing class conflicts and mass culture in American society. Through his
stories he created an American folklore that energized the young nation
fighting a Civil War against British colonialism. Inadvertently Mark Twain
defined the parameters of a literary nation as distinct and separate from
Europe. Towards the end of his literary career his realism turned more
amoral and nihilistic but it is rather difficult to assess his unfinished and
posthumously published work in this short article. Even today American
literary realism remains quintessential to American folklore gauged by the
popularity of the frog-jumping contest in the Calaveras County.

William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was partially right when he said in Criticism
and Fiction that realism was a “truthful treatment of material.” By this statement
he meant a pragmatic and rational search for truth invariably found in the actions
and consequences of the individual subject and the effect such portrayal has on
the reader. He argued that realism was based on rational “principles” which
could help the writer to “distinguish what was good” before liking it (Howells,
1981 77; Crow, 2003 92). The notion of good involved moral thinking that
searched “statements for the truth of which no further reason can be given”
(MacIntyre, 1984 65). Howells attempted to follow life ‘as it is lived’ especially
in the writings of Jane Austen, but somewhat selectively. He made American
realists believe in the moral grounding of realism. Assuming the morality of a
realist perception many American writers began to use simple language and
unstructured plots to portray realist subjects and situations. Howells’ selective
realism defined the parameters of American literary theory and set the standard
for literary writing in America.

American realism was more of a novelistic genre that espoused a middle class
morality and a selective representation of environment, rather than a working
class ideology and pure realism. In fact fictional realism often shaped the
understanding of reality in America. It helped American writers like Bret Harte
(1836-1902), Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Mark Twain (1835-1910), Henry James
(1843-1916), Kate Chopin (1815-1904), Stephen Crane (1871-1900), Edward
Eggleston (1837-1902), Mary Noailles Murfree (1850-1922), Sarah Orne Jewett
(1849-1909), Mary E Wilkins (1852-1930), Harold Frederick (1856-1898) and
Hamlin Garland (1860-1940), to imagine a social order and a strong cohesive
nation with a moral purpose through fiction. These writers envisaged the
wilderness rich in tooth and claw but at the same time saw human society
imbued with a moral purpose.

The American novels of the late nineteenth century therefore reflected both the
Puritan inhibitions and middle class conservatism of writers in their penchant to
replace the scurrilous with practical country humor and muscular realism
(Berthoff, 1965 1-47; Benardete, 1972 414). Continental realism saw the literary
world less selectivity. Emile Zola (1840-1902) for example was taken in by the
squalor of the working class and their disdain for middle class morality. Though
he scientifically investigated his subject matter he was also conscious of the
writer’s subjectivity in presenting his material. Though some scholars are critical
of his ability to create plausible characters through naturalism he nevertheless
remains a writer par excellence in simulating crowd images (Lukacs, 1950 90-
95). In brief he was often seen as representing working class consciousness
through profligate themes that American realists shunned.

Though American realism was a new way to understand reality and man’s place
in it, it was often a revolt against the basic tenets of Romanticism. The romantics
were social rebels who conceptualized man as a god and painted him in vivid colors as an invincible hero. The realists rejected the conceptual immaturity of such a worldview and returned man to his humble origins. They saw him as a fundamental unit of society capable of ordinary things and limited in his choice and action. They felt that there were powerful forces in the universe to which man must submit in order to realize his goal. He had choices but those choices were invariably conditioned by character and environment. The realist often reduced the heroic to the actual and the mundane.

**American Realism**

Since most realists valued enlightenment ideas, they prized the psychological workings of the ethical subject. Realists attempted to portray the extraordinary through the humdrum and the mundane imbuing characters and situations with a moral purpose (Lathrop, 1874 313-24) Beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, the ideology of American realism emphasized an objective representation of reality and the actions of characters but also developed a deep-seated irrational belief that individuals possessed an intrinsic morality that governed their actions.

Though realism emphasized an objective comprehension of the world it imbued social reality and human behavior with a moral purpose. The growth of American realism was not without its contradictions. Amy Kaplan explains,

This realism that develops in American fiction in the 1880s and 1890s is not a seamless package of a triumphant bourgeois mythology but an anxious and contradictory mode which both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life. This unreal quality comes from two major sources for the novelists, in this study: intense and often violent class conflicts which produced fragmented and competing social realities, and the simultaneous development of a mass culture which dictated an equally threatening homogenous reality. Attempting to steer a precarious course between these two developments, realists contribute to the construction of a cohesive public sphere which they at once resist and participate in the domination of a mass market as the arbiter of America's national idiom (Kaplan, 1992 9).

Kaplan points out that American literary realism created a “cohesive public space” and carved out a “national idiom” between the opposing forces of class conflicts and mass culture.

American realism watched middle class transgression with hawk-eyed intensity and attacked it with relentless ferocity through satire and humor. A virgin and untamed America forced realist writers to name and idealize the land and create morally-rounded characters who could promote the principles of democracy. Western realism was a product of a Christian world view and carried with it the baggage of middle class uprightness in both thought and action. The entertaining aspect of literature had a covert didactic purpose to transform the reader and bring about reformed thinking. However in the writing of Mark Twain, Bret Harte and Mary Eleanor Freeman (1852-1930) the objective reporting of day-to-day reality with wit and humor was often based on the oral tradition of storytelling that shaped reality such as in the works of Mark Twain’s “Mississippi”, Jumping Frog; Bret Harte “Outcasts of Poker Flat” and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s “The Revolt of ‘Mother’”.

Many American novelists endorsed a meta-ethical view of reality called moral realism which believed that some propositions are ethically correct and represent
an objective view of the world. Though today most postmodern philosophers would reject moral realism some cognitive psychologists like Steven Pinker endorse ethical behavior in game theory as part of an objective reality (Pinker, 2003 260-285). The nineteenth century American novelist attempted to replicate the omnipotence in the lives of middle class characters without censure.

Moral realism also took some of the ideas connected to transcendentalism such as hard work and original thinking. Though American transcendentalism was a byproduct of romanticism, writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) campaigned for self-reliance and non-conformism. Emerson was deeply influenced by Neo-Kantian and Hindu ideas and believed that life yearned for progressive perfection and moved to higher forms whenever possible. He stated,

Every heroic act is also decent, and causes the place and the bystanders to shine. We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it. Every rational creature has all nature for his dowry and estate. It is his, if he will. He may divest himself of it; he may creep into a corner, and abdicate his kingdom, as most men do, but he is entitled to the works of his constitution (Emerson, 2003 45).

This view of the universe gave a moral purpose to life and the universe. The given nature of human virtues—“We are taught by great actions that the universe is the property of every individual in it”—imbue social reality with an objective purpose.

His notion of sifting values at any historical turning point and to claim only worthwhile values has often created confusion about his sophisticated moral relativism. However he does not reject virtues or their objectivity per se. In “Circles” he writes,

The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary picture is repeated without end” (Emerson, 1909-14 1).

Perceiving the connection between perception and celestial divinity together with a wise self-reliance stood against the constricting norms of conformity and helped to preserve a vibrant social system where each man was “entitled to the works of his constitution.”

Mark Twain’s World
Mark Twain’s writings not only defined the social transformation taking place during and after the Civil War in America but also the direction American fiction would take in the coming centuries. He remains central to American realism defining the moral world man inhabits and the telling impact of heredity and environment on individual choice.

Mark Twain’s literary world is at once dark and comic revealing fundamental flaws in human character that make individuals both loved and detested. Under his influence American literature began to explore the inner workings of human nature, the psychological motives of action and the influence of the Christian world on society. He presented trickery, temptation and gullibility within the day-to-day life of the American west and resisted passing moral judgment upon the actions of his characters. Everyday certain things happen in his world which belie the principles of a moral order and expose the fallibility of humankind. Understanding human intentions helps in developing power that can be used to control or transform individuals and their society.
Mark Twain’s Law of the Narrative

Mark Twain’s law of the narrative implies duplicating the rhythms of nature and the oral tradition of storytelling. A strong reliance on the world as it is without European literary artifice became the hallmark of American realism. In the hands of writers like Mark Twain realism became not just a technique to represent the self-realized individual and his environment but a way to represent middle class subjects operating within the norms of American society. Attempting to realistically document the innate wisdom of regional countryside, Mark Twain constructed the unique folklore of the American nation, its myths and traditions, against the constricting institutional practices of the British Empire. And this he did without adhering to form and structure. The “hodgepodge” nature of his stories, its “formlessness” was a conscious decision remarked Charles Neider in his introduction to *Mark Twain’s Complete Short Stories* (Neider, 1985 x).

For Mark Twain a narrative should flow like a brook and therefore he found difficulty in writing his autobiography. He confessed that,

> Within the last eight or ten years I have made several attempts to do the autobiography in one way or another with a pen, but the result was not satisfactory; it was too literary. With the pen in one’s hand, narrative is a difficult art; narrative should flow as flows the brook down through the hills and the leafy woodlands, its course changed by every boulder it comes across and by every green-clad gravelly spur that projects into its path; its surface broken, but its course not stayed by rocks and gravel on the bottom in the shoal places; a brook that never goes straight for a minute, but goes, and goes briskly, sometimes ungrammatically, and sometimes fetching a horseshoe three quarters of a mile around, and at the end of the circuit flowing within a yard of the path it traversed an hour before; but always going, and always following at least one law, always loyal to that law, the law of narrative, which has no law. Nothing to do but make the trip; the how of it is not important, so that the trip is made.

> When a pen in the hand the narrative stream is a canal; it moves slowly, smoothly, decorously, sleepily; it has no blemish except that it is all blemish. It is too literary, too prim, too nice; the gait and style and movement are not suited to narrative. The canal stream is always reflecting; it is its nature, it can’t help it. Its slick shiny surface is interested in everything it passes along the banks—cows, foliage, flowers, everything. And so it wastes a lot of time in reflections (Neider, 1985 x-xi).

The idea of a lively and flowing oral narrative like a bubbling brook was more appealing to Mark Twain than a well-thought written discourse moving slowly like a canal. He discovered only one law of the narrative—to tell the story the way it was. He felt that a narrative should include everything—“cows, foliage, flowers, everything” without wasting time on “reflections.” The above passage also reveals Mark Twain’s disregard for the “niceties of fiction” and formalism of old societies so deeply embedded in European writing such as of Henry James and his adoration for the authentic frontier spirit of new and formless America. The only thing important to him was the tone of fiction and how it “shapes reality” and “controls it” (Neider, 1985 xi).

He preferred the oral tradition, the humor and the dialogues of the frontier, and speech over writing. His biographer Albert Bigelow Paine wrote that Mark Twain’s “improptu utterances” were part of his “ineffable” speech, his “tribal incantation,” a fairy tale prognostication and “the culmination of his genius”
(Neider 1985, xv). His short stories were early attempts to spin a clever yarn in
the realistic mode and document the oral tradition within the written form. Mark
Twain was always embedding an underlying message within his representation of
class conflicts, regional humor and frontier life of the western countryside.

Tricking an American Jumping Frog
In Mark Twain’s short story, “The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” there are
no heroes but gentle satire and humor directed at the rather condescending
attitude of urban East Americans towards the rural West Americans. Covertly
the story also dismisses the grand and heroic narratives of James Fenimore
Cooper (1789-1851) and the romantic view of the world.

Being the earliest frame story written in this realist genre, it was published in
1865, the year of violent confrontations between the Confederate and the Union
Forces in America. Mark Twain was no stranger to the travails of war having
enlisted in the Confederate militia briefly and leaving it for an unsuccessful
attempt at gold mining. He wrote with deep anxiety about the Civil War and its
impact in *The Gilded Age* (1873) thus,

> The eight years in America from 1860 to 1868 uprooted institutions that
were centuries old, changed the politics of a people, transformed the social
life of half the country and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national
character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three
generations (Mark Twain, 2012 95).

He was aware of how the Civil War “uprooted institutions” and changed the
social fabric of the country and its “national character.”

In the midst of the American Civil War a story of this nature, replete with
regional humor, wit and implausibility, uplifted the spirit of the readers and gave
them confidence in the future. Perhaps Mark Twain chose Calaveras County in
California for both its early Native American antecedents and the discovery of
gold in the region. It was the name give by a Spanish army officer Gabriel
Moraga after Native American skulls were discovered in the region. It was also a
place where gold mineral Calaverite was found in 1861. Even to this day, every
year the county holds a frog jumping contest making both the California red-
legged frog and Mark Twain’s story famous. The unbelievable frame story is
placed within the context of war and greed. It is also set in the midst of
experience—hardy and trusting frontiersmen who are often fooled by strangers
who betray trust.

Mark Twain uses the ancient Indian technique of a frame-within-a-frame where
the main story of an East American narrator meeting Angel’s Camp denizen
Simon Wheeler inquiring after Reverend Leonidas W. Smiley is interfaced by
another story of a gambler Jim Smiley and his jumping frog Dan’l Webster. The
“good-natured, garrulous old” Wheeler takes the unwilling East narrator on an
adventurous tale of how Jim Smiley lost a bet with a stranger in a contest where
his Californian frog could not out-jump the stranger’s frog. Jim Smiley later
discovers that the stranger had loaded the frog, Dan’l Webster, with quail shots
weighing him down before the jump. The tale-within-a-tale praises the intrinsic
good-heartedness of the rural world despite it garrulity, cunning and deceit and
derides the domineering pride and condescension of the urban men.

This simple story shows how Wheeler frustrates the narrator with a tale the
narrator is reluctant to listen. However speaking within the realistic mode the
narrator presents his story without fear or favor with the phrase “I hereunto
append the result” (JF, p. 1). Wheeler uses local humor to show the trickery of the stranger in his attempt to win the frog jumping contest. The use of local humor by Mark Twain, both in telling the story and forcing the reluctant narrator to listen, underscores the way regional literature was used in early American writing to shape national discourse of the town and countryside.

The involvement of the narrator and Wheeler in telling the story is also marked by the shifting point of view. Mark Twain begins with the first person point of view where the narrator suspects that his friend has also tricked him by asking him to look for a Leonidas Smiley who perhaps did not exist. The theme of being duped is not lost on the reader. With Wheeler’s tale of gambler Jim Smiley duped by a stranger the third person point of view reinforces the first person perspective. Both the points of view talk about how the main characters are fooled by friend and stranger. The story returns to the first person point of view reminding the reader that if the narrator does not escape he would be forced to listen to yet another tale of Jim Smiley and the afflicted cow. The city-bred narrator does not value the “impressive earnestness and sincerity” of Wheeler’s story and finds it “exquisitely absurd” and “monotonous.”

Mark Twain had always been critical of the continental tradition and its emphasis on structure and form. In this story he reiterates the notion of the flowing brook narrative which the narrator fails to understand. Mark Twain writes,

Simon Wheeler backed me into a corner and blockaded me there with his chair, and then sat me down and reeled off the monotonous narrative which follows this paragraph. He never smiled, he never frowned, he never changed his voice from the gentle-flowing key to which he tuned his initial sentence, he never betrayed the slightest suspicion of enthusiasm; but all through the interminable narrative there ran a vein of impressive earnestness and sincerity, which showed me plainly that, so far from his imagining that there was anything ridiculous or funny about his story, he regarded it as a really important matter, and admired its two heroes as men of transcendent genius in finesse. To me, the spectacle of a man drifting serenely along through such a queer yarn without ever smiling was exquisitely absurd (JF, p. 1).

The narrator cannot appreciate the “gentle-flowing key” of Wheeler’s narrative and finds the story a “queer yarn.” Wheeler on the other hand has been quite objective and dispassionate in his narrative summing up Smiley as the “curiosest man” who betted “on anything that turned up.” Wheeler passes no judgment nor does he moralize about the tale. Only at one place when he describes the betting dog, Andrew Jackson, pitted against a dog with no legs he feels sorry for the dog:

It was a good pup, was that Andrew Jackson, and would have made a name for hisself if he’d lived, for the stuff was in him, and he had genius I know it, because he hadn’t had no opportunities to speak of, and it don’t stand to reason that a dog could make such a fight as he could under them circumstances, if he hadn’t no talent. It always makes me feel sorry when I think of that last fight of his’n, and the way it turned out (JF, p. 3).

But the narrator does not appreciate the qualities of the story nor can he understand that Wheeler is poking fun at the pretentious attitude of the narrator by pushing him a corner and blocking his way with a chair. Wheeler deliberately uses thick dialect, a preposterous story and long sentences to bore the narrator. He speaks thus,

Well, thish-yer Smiley had rat-tarriers, and chicken cocks, and tom- cats, and all of them kind of things, till you couldn’t rest, and you couldn’t fetch nothing for him to bet on but he’d match you. He ketched a frog one day, and
took him home, and said he cal’klated to edercate him; and so he never done
nothing for three months but set in his buck yard and learn that frog to jump.
And you bet you he did learn him, too. He’d give him a little punch behind,
and the next minute you’d see that frog whirling in the air like a doughnut
see him turn one summerset, or may be a couple, if he got a good start, and
come down flat-footed and all right, like a cat (JF, pp. 3-4).

The entire narrative is packed with humor and sharp perception that the narrator
fails to appreciate.

The trickster Jim Smiley lacks morals but his very trusting nature leads to his
defeat. He leaves the stranger with his celebrated frog and he goes out looking
for a frog for the stranger. Though Smiley represents “amorality, he does so in a
moral context” (Abrahams, 1980 194). Wheeler continues the story thus,

The feller took the box again, and took another long, particular look, and
give it back to Smiley, and says, very deliberate, ‘Well, I don’t see no p’ints
about that frog that’s any better’n any other frog.’

‘May be you don’t,’ Smiley says. ‘May be you understand frogs, and may be
you don’t understand’ em; maybe you’ve had experience, and may be you
an’t only a amateur, as it were. Anyways, I’ve got my opinion, and I’ll risk
forty dollars that he can outjump any frog in Calaveras County.’
And the feller studied a minute, and then says, kinder sad like, “Well, I’m
only a stranger here, and I an’t got no frog; but if I had a frog, I’d bet you.’
And then Smiley says, ‘That’s all right that’s all right if you’ll hold my box a
minute, I’ll go and get you a frog.’ And so the feller took the box, and put up
his forty dollars along with Smiley’s, and set down to wait.

So he set there a good while thinking and thinking to himself, and then he
got the frog out and prized his mouth open and took a tea-spoon and filled
him full of quail shot filled him pretty near up to his chin and set him on the
floor (JF, pp. 4-5).

Smiley asks the stranger to hold his frog box and goes out to “get a frog.” That
was his mistake. The stranger does not live up to the trust placed in him. He
cheats and wins and runs away.

The Corruptibility of Human Nature

Apart from the jumping frog story Mark Twain’s “The Man That Corrupted
Hadleyburg” (1899) also focuses on the corrupt moral world of the middle class
and the ethical paradigm of making a choice. The Baptist Christian and god-
fearing nature of the town of Hadleyburg is set into relief by the inherent evil in
human nature. From purity and goodness to hypocrisy and greed Mark Twain
weaves a great story in the realist tradition complete with ubiquitous Christian
symbols and reverberations. The middle class and the different desires the newly-
found sack of gold releases becomes the subject of this story. It is also a story of
revenge by a man called Howard L. Stephenson who carries a grudge against the
townspeople for having treated him badly and who wants to destroy the smug
moral world of the Hadleyburgians. He has found a chink in their moral armor—
their hypocrisy and greed. The Richards though understand human temptation
and its tragic consequences finally succumb to it. Mark Twain shows how man is
a victim of his environment and inherited history howsoever morally evolved he
might become.

The first paragraph shows the pure simplicity of the town thus,
It was many years ago. Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town in all the region round about. It had kept that reputation unsmirched during three generations, and was prouder of it than of any other of its possessions. It was so proud of it, and so anxious to insure its perpetuation, that it began to teach the principles of honest dealing to its babies in the cradle, and made the like teachings the staple of their culture thenceforward through all the years devoted to their education. Also, throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify, and become a part of their very bone. The neighboring towns were jealous of this honorable supremacy, and affected to sneer at Hadleyburg’s pride in it and call it vanity; but all the same they were obliged to acknowledge that Hadleyburg was in reality an incorruptible town; and if pressed they would also acknowledge that the mere fact that a young man hailed from Hadleyburg was all the recommendation he needed when he went forth from his natal town to seek for responsible employment.

But at last, in the drift of time, Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend a passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one’s case, for he was a bitter man, and revengeful. All through his wanderings during a whole year he kept his injury in mind, and gave all his leisure moments to trying to invent a compensating satisfaction for it. He contrived many plans, and all of them were good, but none of them was quite sweeping enough: the poorest of them would hurt a great many individuals, but what he wanted was a plan which would comprehend the entire town, and not let so much as one person escape unhurt. At last he had a fortunate idea, and when it fell into his brain it lit up his whole head with an evil joy. He began to form a plan at once, saying to himself ‘That is the thing to do—I will corrupt the town.’ (MTCH, 349-50).

The stranger wants to corrupt an incorruptible town and succeeds. He leaves behind a gambler’s money with Mrs. Richards to be returned to an unknown benefactor with the following message:

I am a foreigner, and am presently going back to my own country, to remain there permanently. I am grateful to America for what I have received at her hands during my long stay under her flag; and to one of her citizens—a citizen of Hadleyburg—I am especially grateful for a great kindness done me a year or two ago. Two great kindnesses in fact. I will explain. I was a gambler. I say I WAS. I was a ruined gambler. I arrived in this village at night, hungry and without a penny. I asked for help—in the dark; I was ashamed to beg in the light. I begged of the right man. He gave me twenty dollars—that is to say, he gave me life, as I considered it. He also gave me fortune; for out of that money I have made myself rich at the gaming-table. And finally, a remark which he made to me has remained with me to this day, and has at last conquered me; and in conquering has saved the remnant of my morals: I shall gamble no more. Now I have no idea who that man was, but I want him found, and I want him to have this money, to give away, throw away, or keep, as he pleases. It is merely my way of testifying my gratitude to him. If I could stay, I would find him myself; but no matter, he will be found. This is an honest town, an incorruptible town, and I know I can trust it without fear. This man can be identified by the remark which he made to me; I feel persuaded that he will remember it (MTCH p. 351).
The stranger plays on many themes—the notion of gratitude, ill-gotten wealth and an ‘incorruptible town.’ He loads a temptation with enough money which is hard to resist. Mrs. Richards is tempted.

Mrs. Richards sat down, gently quivering with excitement, and was soon lost in thoughts—after this pattern: ‘What a strange thing it is!... And what a fortune for that kind man who set his bread afloat upon the waters!... If it had only been my husband that did it!—for we are so poor, so old and poor!...' Then, with a sigh—‘But it was not my Edward; no, it was not he that gave a stranger twenty dollars. It is a pity too; I see it now. . . ‘Then, with a shudder—‘But it is gambler’s money! the wages of sin; we couldn’t take it; we couldn’t touch it. I don’t like to be near it; it seems a defilement.’ She moved to a farther chair. . . ‘I wish Edward would come, and take it to the bank; a burglar might come at any moment; it is dreadful to be here all alone with it’ (MTCH p. 352).

She cannot resist so much money but is unduly frightened of divine punishment—“the wages of sin, we couldn’t take it.” Slowly the canker of temptation and greed sets in making her and the town weak and ugly.

As the story ends everything about the town has changed including its name and motto.

The last of the sacred Nineteen had fallen a prey to the fiendish sack; the town was stripped of the last rag of its ancient glory. Its mourning was not showy, but it was deep.

By act of the Legislature—upon prayer and petition—Hadleyburg was allowed to change its name to (never mind what—I will not give it away), and leave one word out of the motto that for many generations had graced the town’s official seal.

It is an honest town once more, and the man will have to rise early that catches it napping again.

FORMER MOTTO: LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION REVISED

Both Mark Twain and the stranger understand that one hundred and sixty pounds of gold is a temptation big enough to corrupt the most influential and ‘incorruptible’ members of the Hadleyburg society and they are right. Mark Twain uses a realist setting of a small Christian town in the late nineteenth century protected by Christian beliefs and introduces Satan in the form of Stephenson to ravage its moral foundations. Mark Twain believes that under pressure human character buckles and the flaws appear where previously none were visible. Though it is always someone else who leads man into temptation, real temptation resides within each individual that overpowers and destroys him in the end. Finally Mark Twain proves the dictum that even though it may be gold, all that glitters is not gold.

The Mysterious Stranger
The satanic world that prowls at the margins of human existence is brought to the very center towards the end of Mark Twain’s life. He missed the humor and presented a rather objective view of the world especially in his story, “The Mysterious Stanger” posthumously published in 1916. The fiction is set in 1590 Eseldorf Austria when Europe was still in the “Age of Belief” and it tells the
story of Theodor who meets the angel boy Satan, the mysterious stranger who has mastered “human inventions” like “time and distance” (Twain, TMS 1985 661). Towards the end of the story as Satan leaves forever Theodor tells Satan that he will meet him in another life and Satan replies,

‘There is no other… Life itself is only a vision, a dream…. Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream, they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space— and you!’ ‘I!’ ‘And you are not you—you have no body, no blood, no —ones, you are but a thought. I myself have no existence; I am but a dream—your dream, creature of your imagination. In a moment you will have realized this, then you will banish me from your vision and I shall dissolve into the nothingness out of which you made me…’ (Mark Twain, TMS p. 675).

The nothingness of the world and its purposeless drift creates a nihilistic world stretching American realism to its very limits. It is hard to imagine a comic vision turning dark. Obviously there is a deep connection between the ways writers think and the limits of their thought. Mark Twain was deeply influenced with the ideas of his time and adopted a position that was familiar and commendable in the late nineteenth century. Pierre Bourdieu is right when he declares that,

The structures of thought of the philosopher, the writer, the artist or the scientist, and therefore the limits of what presents itself to them as thinkable or unthinkable, are always partly dependent on the structures of their field, and therefore on the history of the positions constituting the field and of the dispositions they favour (Bourdieu, 2000 99).

Though Mark Twain seemed more inclined towards objective reality he was rather critical of some of the fundamental ideas of human thought—man, God and the universe. Perhaps he was also playing with the juxtaposition of dream with reality.

Both American literary realism and Mark Twain’s narratives continue to remind us that all our conceptions possess a history. First we have a literary and philosophical scheme and then find a rational justification for it (MacIntyre, 1984 52). The way we conceptualize the world and determine our place in it shape our theories, ideologies, literatures, cultures and traditions. It also reminds us that American literary realism and Mark Twain’s contribution to it has become a part of an American national folklore.
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