Mark Twain: The Great American Humorist
An Overview of His Work

An Honors Thesis (ID 499)

by

Karen Marie Wininger

Thesis Director

William V. Miller

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To DJZ

Because she understands
What is underneath it all.
And because she has been there
When time has been too long.

Thanks.

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As I finish the first part of my college career, I find that among everything I am supposed to have learned, one of the most precious bits of knowledge I have used throughout my journey is the gift of humor.

To stop and smile at the hardships does not cure the pain, but it does somehow help things go down a little easier. Therefore, I felt it was fitting to choose for my topic a man who, in my opinion, was probably the greatest of the humorists. May all who read his works learn his valuable lesson.
"Humor is man's most precious defense, whether against the encroachments of a fearsome world, or against the inner horrors of guilt and despair."¹

This quote sums up what people have realized about humor for many centuries. Some people recognize the humor in life and enjoy seeing it, while others take this humor and put the humor down in print for all to see and hopefully from which to learn. Perhaps the greatest of these writers was one who is said to have "Americanized American humor" and to have brought it a little closer to the metaphysical facts of life that exist in our world. This man was Samuel Langhorn Clemens.²

Samuel Clemens lived from 1835-1910.³ In the early 1860's, he assumed the pseudonym "Mark Twain" and began to produce a collection that is still highly treasured and widely read by an audience of all ages. Much of the pleasure derived from Twain's work comes from his masterful use of humor. In the fall of 1865, some Eastern editors convinced Twain that he should stop trying to develop other forms of writing and concentrate on laughter.⁴ From this point to the end of his days, Twain accepted the role of a humorist and developed the use of humor to a fine art.⁵

When writing, Twain had certain assumptions, or rules, which he felt a good humorist should follow. A brief summary of these rules may be:

1. Humor must look impromptu.

2. A well-written story is much like a well-told story. The teller must seem unaware of the humor that is being created.
3. The writer must be the character represented—the point of view must be the writer's.\textsuperscript{6}

The story "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" and Twain's travel books follow these points. The humor is impromptu, the narrator does not seem to be aware of much of it, and, from what is known of Twain and his life, the reader can easily see how the narrator's point of view is Twain's.

Twain wrote so that his humor followed these lines fairly consistently. It is also stated that he wrote in a manner which insulated the reader from the character and the story. The reader does not develop any emotional involvement with the character or story.\textsuperscript{7} I do not agree. This may be somewhat true of Twain's short stories, but the reader does become involved with Tom, Becky, Huck, Jim, Hank, Pudd'nhead and the others. Much is seen through the eyes of these characters and only a very aloof reader could remain detached. One critic, Stephen Leacock, states that *Huck Finn* takes humor to that high point beyond the mere comic and accidental in which our human lot itself excites at once our tears and our smiles.\textsuperscript{8}

This helps to support the assertion that the reader does become involved in Twain's writing. A better statement of Twain's strategy might be that Twain tried to move his reader into a "position of comfortable self-approval—a position which insulates him from the naked aggressions of the original joke."\textsuperscript{9} So the reader is involved in the character and story, but he sees what could be called Twain's viewpoint. The reader is led to feel as if he would have been on the side of "right" had he been in the situation. The reader can see the joke, but he is buffered from it. The humor then does not depend so much on developing such a large distance between the reader and the work that the distance would allow the reader to look at the objects of the humor as nonhumans of no importance.
or on a sense of the ridiculous arising from affectation, as on developing a knowledge that human reason is often cruelly limited. The character--mankind in general--is often unable to distinguish between reality and nonreality. Laughter is created because the reader sees the discrepancy in what is reality, the presentation of which is one of the more important aspects of Twain's type of humor.

Another, and probably one of the most interesting, aspects of Twain's humor is its changing style or tone. It has been stated that Twain went from the "jovial humorist" of his early works to a "despairing determinist" in his later writings. There have been many studies done showing the correlations between his writing and his life. In studying his works this change is easy to see when the reader compares Twain's early works to the middle works and finally to the final writings.

In his early works, Twain's humor is a light humor. The stories amuse the reader in a manner which appeals to man's basic need for laughter as an emotional release. The adventures in the early stories are easy to remember, but a serious purpose is often hard to find. Some stories that support this assertion are "About Barbers" and "The Dangers of Lying in Bed."

The primary subject in Twain's early work is the vision of one person. This vision, or viewpoint, continually shifts throughout the story. This shifting reveals the ridiculous follies and the gullibility of mankind. By shifting the view of the character, the reader sees the situation in a different light and can see the character trying to resolve his dilemma in accordance with his view. The travel books are good examples of this technique. In these books, much of the humor arises from the viewpoints used. The traveler's view may change, but it always proves correct in the end. Also, through the traveler's view, the reader sees the follies of the other characters and their vulnerability.
The story "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is an example of a story which shows man's vulnerability. In this story we see Smiley duped by the stranger. The story is a lighthearted comedy told through the narrator's point of view and it is through this viewpoint that we see Smiley's gullibility. This was Twain's purpose. There is an assumption among men that a man of common sense can see truth from falsehood, reality from appearance, can know right from wrong, and can see clearly and dispassionately the world around him. The reader is encouraged to trust his own sense of reality just as the character trusts his. It is when this assumption fails that much of the humor arises. In essence, Twain has presented a standard--his standard--by which to judge reality. The reader, once he has assumed a familiarity with this standard, can use it to judge the deviations of the characters and events in the story. In the gap between the two lies the humor of the situation. The characters involved, Smiley for example, come out looking extremely foolish in a harmless way. This was Twain's purpose in his early works and one of the major patterns he used to create his humor. He would place a character in a spot where the character could do nothing other than "expose the pretensions of others or of himself looking foolish in the process." This story also follows what Twain felt should be the basic conception of the American humorist's story. The story is told as a type of dramatic monologue. Everything is from the narrator's mouth and point of view, even the dialogue between the stranger and Smiley. By writing in this manner, Twain felt that the comic writer could get away from "the sparse narrative method of the 'comic story'" which drives straight to the point of the story. Part of the humor arises from the narrator's ability to relate the happenings of the day with that which he remembers. This use of "memory" was another device which Twain often used. By allowing
a narrator to tell the story in a more colloquial, more relaxed manner from memory rather than the straight-forward presentation, the humorous story becomes the best it can be. It becomes a "work of art--high and delicate art--[which] only an artist can tell."

Twain developed the use of these techniques in his art with his early writings. It is in his middle writings that many feel Twain was at his finest. In these works, the light comedy of the early writings had a more serious underlying tone. They had ceased to be simply light comedy and had begun to deal with the despair and pessimism Twain found in life. Yet they were still not full of the dark humor yet to come from Twain. In these writings, Twain found his balance between the two extremes and this is why they are so often highly regarded.

Probably the finest of these works is, as many have stated, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. In Huck Finn, Mark Twain manages to preserve all the childlike, innocent illusions about life. This is done through the narrator, Huckleberry Finn. Huck tells the story as he remembers it. By using this method, the reader is able to see the harsh reality of life tempered by a child's eye. This produces much humor in a story which has underlying tones of heavy satire. The humorous, and often lyric, viewpoint of a young boy is an excellent vehicle for producing the discrepancies between what the character sees and what the reader sees. Huck is exceedingly naive and Twain continually uses this to create humor, while at the same time expressing his own feelings. Twain developed the comic narrator, Huck for example, to help suggest to his reader the differing attitudes toward events in a story. Huck's views, such as his views on slavery, often throw Twain's views into a type of relief, which brings to light the emotions underneath the differences in opinion. This step beyond the merely comic effect of his early stories shows Twain's in-
creasing concern with showing his readers the absurdities of human experience as Twain saw them. By this time in his life and work, more was important to Twain than simple fun and realism.23

Much of the humor in Huck Finn also comes from the difference between the absurd world and the hero's vision.24 The world of reality—or, as Twain would state, absurdity—is often not what Huck sees. Huck develops his own world and his own beliefs which are often in contrast to what is actually around him. His whole view of "sivilization" is slightly offbase. To Huck, Tom Sawyer is what every boy should be. But to many others, Tom Sawyer is simply a boy with a rather wild and often mischevious, dangerous imagination. The reader can often see a side to Tom's antics that Huck sometimes sees, but more often fails to actually realize. Underneath the humor of the prank that Huck and Tom play on Jim when they place his hat in the tree, the reader can see the possible harm that can be caused when dealing with something as frightening and emotion-laden as witchcraft was to slaves. Tom's actions in the final chapters of the novel are other examples where the reader can see the great amount of harm that can happen. When it becomes known that all of Tom's plans to free Jim were unnecessary and created only to fulfill Tom's sense of adventure, then the whole episode becomes highly absurd. Huck and Jim fail to see this realistic side to their adventures. They simply find them rather annoying at times.

This underlying realism was one of the main purposes, or impulses, of Twain's humor.25 Realism is found throughout Twain's work and Huck Finn is no exception. The river and its people have their good sides and bad sides. Some of the characters, such as the Duke and the King, may seem slightly blown out of proportion to readers today, but they are actually good examples of the time. At first their hoaxes are humorous as they expose man's gullibility. As stated, this was one of the purposes in Twain's
early humor. It is at this point that the reader can easily see the change in Twain's humor. As the Duke and the King progress down the river, their work becomes increasingly vicious, such as when they attempt to sell Jim and to steal the money from the Wilks. 26

The humor often results from Twain's characterization of the King and the Duke and the impression that the characters in the book have of the two. The two characters see themselves as "royalty", "artists", and not at all as the very base con-men that they really are. Huck sees them as interesting and amusing people. His view does change, but a lot of what occasions the change is that the hoaxes they play are no longer harmless for Huck. If Jim is sold, then Huck loses the only actual friend and father he has ever had. When the Duke and King try to dupe the Wilks, they are again affecting someone Huck has come to care about. Huck at this time can no longer stand back and see the humor in the pranks. The consequences are now affecting his world in a serious manner. He begins to see some of the realism behind the "humorous pranks." Huck comes a step closer to seeing the reality that the reader sees. 27 In this gap lies much of the humor.

Huck's motives are not so much based on this knowledge of reality or truth as they are on simple human principles of pleasure and pain, and on innocent democratic notions of justice. This causes the comic triumph that the reader finds as Huck works his way through situations such as "The Royal Nonesuch." 28 Huck continues to find alternatives to situations without being aware of the underlying morality of these alternatives. "The irony of his 'moral' training is that it has taught him to resist a truer morality." When Huck's own reasoning and observation do not help him to find some underlying morality or truth, then he accepts an absurdly created truth or creates one himself to fit in with his world. Huck--as
an example of all mankind— is unable to expand his vision enough to find a solution to his world, so he simply develops a solution that suits him.\textsuperscript{29} For example, in Huck's mind he and Jim "borrow" what supplies they need on their journey as opposed to simply stealing them. Even in this they try to keep their borrowing within some type of moral boundary. To them, this boundary excludes crabapples and p'simmons. In Huck and Jim's minds, borrowing in this manner is morally all right.

Twain's humor darkens because of the narrowness of Huck's view. Huck is in essence defeated because he cannot escape the restrictions that his view places on him.\textsuperscript{30} Huck undergoes a number of revelations during the course of events which help to alter his view, but never widen it enough to come face-to-face with reality. These revelations are a recurring form in Twain's humor. The sudden revelation of a difference between what seems to be and what is reality is a central part of Twain's work.\textsuperscript{31} The process which is the basis for these revelations which are to "delight and educate" the reader is called displacement. When using this process, Twain places a character, in this instance Huck, in a totally absurd situation such as floating down the river on a raft with a runaway slave through a ridiculous world. This allows the reader, and to an extent the character, to see the world in a slightly wider or different view. While the view is still too narrow, the displacement gives Twain the room needed to produce the revelations.\textsuperscript{32} And it is through these revelations that the reader sees the darker side of Twain's humor emerge.

One of the first such revelations Huck undergoes is that of deciding that Jim has feelings for his family. Huck, after listening to Jim talk about his wife and children, finds Jim quietly mourning on the raft for them. Huck is amazed when he decides that black people must care for their people as much as whites. The irony in this statement is obvious
when the reader remembers just how well Huck's father cared for him.  

Other instances in which Huck undergoes these revelations and in which Twain's dark humor occurs are the shooting of Boggs, the circus episode, and the Shepherdson-Grangerford feud.

The latter episode is probably the darkest in the novel and that which comes closest to Twain's later works. In this adventure Huck is taken in by people who appear to be a very "good" family. But, again, appearances are not to be trusted. The Grangerfords are good people, but as Huck soon learns, they carry an absurd grudge against an equally fine family simply because tradition demands that they do. Members of both families attend the same church service, but even in that situation all of the men carry guns. Twain's main meaning and satire here are very evident. Huck sees the horror and senselessness of the feud that ends the life of many people for absolutely no reason. Huck may not reach any profound moral decision, but he does, for the first time, come close to seeing reality as the reader sees it. The Grangerfords were to Huck, and the reader, fine, respectable, moral people in the beginning of the episode. This opinion drastically changes by the episode's finish.

This chapter does in a small section what all of Huck Finn eventually does for the reader. No one who reads Huck Finn carefully will ever be able to wholly accept without some question and irony the image "of the respectable morality by which he lives, nor will ever again be certain that what he considers the clear dictates of moral reason" are not simply engrained customs.  

Instances such as those mentioned above are why some critics state that the feelings of disgust that Twain had for the human race have their beginnings in Huck Finn. In Huck, we see naivety, wonder, excitement, admiration, and pity. The seriousness and solemnity arise from Huck's
The events that occur help to prepare Huck for his final decision which is much like Twain's final decision. Huck decides to reject civilization after all that he has gone through as Twain himself later rejected what he came to term "the damned human race."37

Twain's later writings are not the "innocent, happy, 'cheerful', specimens of frontier humor."

These works have a type of brooding humor, a melancholy, which creates a balance between the tragic and comic view allowing "serious comedy" to result.39

Twain's most effective method of humor in these later works is the use of satire. Satire is in essence the ridicule of human folly or vice, with the purpose of bringing about reform, or at least of keeping others from making the same mistake. Twain's satire can be divided into two parts. The first part is the viewpoint shifting technique already discussed, and the second part is the subject of relativism as it relates to the ambiguity of the vision, or viewpoint, of man. This ambiguity is the basic subject of Twain's later works. In this second part of Twain's satire there is a distinct awareness of the comic ambivalence which colors a character's view. It is this second aspect of Twain's satire that makes his humor serious.40

A good example of this type of Twain's work is "To the Person Sitting in Darkness." In this essay, the reader can see Twain's use of irony and satire. The story is an attack on the missionary programs in the Far East. The story makes use of heavy verbal satire and irony as Twain attacks the system. The "moral knowledge"—the revelations—that the missionaries so highly regard, and which dictates their duties, seems totally absurd as it is presented by Twain. The entire method by which the missionaries convert the "heathens" to Christianity, and supposedly to humanity, is completely ridiculous. The very methods by which society reaches its judgements and decisions in this area, and in fact all areas, are determined relativistic-

innocence betrayed.36
ly, as are the qualities the judgements test. And, as the reader soon realizes when reading Twain, reality is absurd. Other stories which further illustrate this point are "Reflections on Being the Delight of God" and "A Defense of General Funston."

The humor of these stories is no longer even the type found in *Huck Finn*. There is no laughter simply for laughter's sake. Twain has far too much to say to just write simple humor. The humor in these works is sharp, bitter, and biting. The reader finds very little hope for mankind when reading selections from *On the Damned Human Race* or *The Mysterious Stranger*. Twain still reveals to the reader man's follies as he had almost always done, but by this time the follies have become disgusting and man has failed completely. In his restricted view, there is no way that man can find any truth nor does he have the imagination and ability needed to create some type of meaning out of a meaningless world. Many of these later works were not published during Twain's lifetime, or for some time after, because of their heavy satirical mood.

It seems amazing that a man who held such bitter feelings toward the human race can maintain some type of humor. But Twain does just this. While his humor does changes drastically, he manages to keep it in the middle of all his anger. For Mark Twain, humor became a tool with which to express a variety of ends. All of these have in common the clarification of a reader's vision of himself and of the world around him. Twain's humor moved beyond simple exposure of man's follies and tried to expose the real root of all the absurdity in life. For Twain, this meant exposing the weaknesses and cruelties that come from the human heart itself.

It is hard to say whether Twain held any hope for humanity in his final days. But the humor he continued to create continues to amuse and unsettle his readers. Whether Twain is simply telling an amusing story
or is using dark satire to make a point, the humor is still present. Part of the beauty in Twain's art is that with it he can bring to light the awareness that behind morals and religion—behind the absurdity of reality—there is in essence nothing. He can then take this awareness and manage to still create laughter from it. Man is able to see himself in Twain's characters and still chuckle. Twain maintains a balance in his writing between moralist and humorist, philosopher and fool, adult and dreaming child, and experience and innocence. In this range of balances, any reader can generally find one that causes him to chuckle.44

One text continually referred to humor as low in the hierarchy of aesthetic values. Because of this, much of Twain's seriousness is lost because it is disturbed by the reader's laughter.45 I do not agree. Twain's satire creates laughter in many, but it also makes a direct point. Few people would be able to read "To a Person Sitting in Darkness" or "The War Prayer" and miss the seriousness behind the satire. Twain creates meaning out of the humor. Twain created meaning and laughter out of the awareness that everything was meaningless.46 To accomplish this was to create a fine art that is to be highly treasured. To state otherwise, to say that much of Twain's seriousness is lost because of the humor is absurd. Without the humor, then much of what Twain tells us about ourselves would be too bitter and biting for us to accept. The humor acts as the sugar-coating over the pill. It would make more sense to say that often some of the humor gets lost in the seriousness. The term "mark twain" itself means barely safe passage for a boat, and often it seems that Twain's humor is "barely safe" humor.47 It is often ambiguous—not absent—but a little hard to find. It is sometimes so clothed in bitter satire that it is hard to decide whether we are shedding tears of laughter or tears of sadness.
But this, for many, is why Twain is so highly regarded. He is the master in his art. The basis for what he wrote was to help people see life as it is. Few people can read Twain's work without learning something about themselves and the world around them. Twain's humor allows us to see our own weaknesses and mistakes, while at the same time shielding us from the harshness of this recognition. Humor, in this fashion, is one of man's most precious gifts and Twain's humor an example of the finest use of the art. Twain's humor is in essence the emotion that shows man how small and weak he really is, but also allows him to laugh at this weakness. As many have stated, without the ability to laugh at our own selves, then much of the wonder in our world would be lost. With this in mind, it is easy to see why the humor of Mark Twain is considered among the finest, if not the best, in the realm of literature.
NOTES

1Paul Covici, Jr., *Mark Twain's Humor* (Dallas, Texas: Southern University Press, 1962), p. viii.

2Covici, p. 13.


6Blair, pp. xv-xvi.


9Rubin, p. 139.


11McMichael, p. 331.


14 Hauck, p. 136.


16 Covici, *Mark Twain's Humor*, p. 143.


18 Blair, p. xv.


20 Blair, p. xv.


22 Walker, p. 84.

23 Covici, *Mark Twain's Humor*, p. 113.

24 Hauck, p. 147.


26 Hauck, p. 149.

27 Hauck, p. 149.

28 Hauck, p. 147.

29 Hauck, pp. 150, 157.

30 Hauck, p. 148.

31 Covici, *Mark Twain's Humor*, pp. 16, 183.

32 Hauck, pp. 134-35.

33 Covici, *Mark Twain's Humor*, p. 83.

34 Blair, p. 508.

35 Walker, pp. 80, 24.

36 Blair, p. 517.

37 Walker, p. 84.
38. Smith, p. v.


40. Hauck, pp. 135-36.


42. Hauck, p. 157.


44. Cox, pp. 143-44.

45. Cox, p. 143.


47. Hauck, p. 138.
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