



MARK TWAIN – THE HILARIOUS HUMOURIST OF AMERICA

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Abstract

Mark Twain (Samuel Longhorne Clemens) is considered to be one of the greatest humourists in the world. He is well known for his hilarious and reformative humouristic writing style. His humour is pure comic fun that is spun out of wild exaggeration, verbal witticism, which include slang vulgarity and fantastic ridicule. Humour in Mark Twain's opinion must have a purpose and it must both instruct and entertain. His sole aim of using humour in his works is to elevate his reading friends to the highest- pedestal both morally and socially. Thus the nature of Mark Twain's humour is reformatory, satiristic, moralistic and hilariously humane. In this present research article an earnest attempt has been made to have a birds eye view on the nature, features and the functions of Twain's humour in his works in general.

Keywords: Humour - Humanity - satire - slavery - fun -frontier life.

"Spirit of mirth, whose Chime of bells,
Shakes on his cap, and sweetly swells,
Across the Atlantic main.
Grant that Mark's Laughter never die,
That men, through many a century,
May Chuckle O'er Mark Twain."

Andrew Lang one of the Cronies of Mark Twain addressed this stanza to Twain on the eve of his fiftieth birthday in a small poem. It's a verdict that has proved that Mark Twain truly stands among the literary greats forever. He is one of the best loved writers of America. Immediately popular in his own days; he is luckier than the most popular writers who fall into oblivion immediately after their demise. But this great novelist's name came out of the American west, exuberating with wit and humour, with no reverence for conventions, and then introduced into Europe and elsewhere the relish of American humour.

Guru Grover Dayal describes Twain's humour as, "Mark Twain's humour is unique, and as such difficult to define. His comic vision includes irony, paradox, satire, parody, burlesque, hoax and so on."¹ Hence to define Mark Twain's humour is nothing but groping in the dark. "Humour" is a generic term for everything that excites laughter, frivolous or vulgar or of any other sort. Sometimes it is limited to gauntly and sympathetic laughter and contrasted with wit, which evolves intellectual and divisive laughter, it is rather difficult to answer the much discussed question of just what it is that makes us laugh. Scholars are still debating the sources and functions for humour. However in general terms humour has been defined by M.H. Abrahams as "the word "humour" may ascribed either to a comic utterance or to a comic appearance or made of behaviour."² So it is clear that humour in its broader sense describes comic appearances and comic

behavior. In other words it is all about comedy and jokes. Even Hornby opines in the same way when he defines humour as, "the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing" the abilities to laugh at things that are amusing"³ Thus the term is something that has varying connotations to different people. As John Palmer remarks in his book "Comedy", the curse of Babel came true actually, when mankind began to laugh. For something that strikes people of one country began to laugh may appear devoid of all fun for people of another country with changes of culture and taste. Therefore, Mark Twain's humour at least many portions of it will probably recede beyond general appreciation.

Mark Twain started his career as a humorist. After a chequered career he worked as a printer's devil, journeyman printer, steamboat pilot, and as a soldier. Later he went to the far west. It was there that Mark Twain finally got into journalism of the masculine humorous sort which flourished. It is true when Grover Gruru Dayal relates, "Twain belonged to gentlemanly South- Western humour which had continued through the era of the professional funny man, often a lecturer, in the figures of Armetz Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, John Phoenix, Dan de Quile, and many others."⁴ Van Wick Brooks also approves it in his book "The Ordeal of Mark Twain" that Mark Twain's humour came to the fore front when he was in Nevada and California. It was an evidence of his adolescent humour.

Mark Twain's humour though original to a great extent, owed something to the humorous tradition of the west. It descended from the western and the frontier humour with its incongruities and its peculiar brand of fiction known as the tall tale. Narrator of tall tale uses dialect in narration as well as in written versions of the stories. When it was written it was deliberately mis-spelt. The humorist in short posed as a plain educated man. He would make a short at a Latin tag, but mangle it. He would quote Shakespeare with equally disastrous result. Since the joke depended on reader's knowledge of the correct form of the quotation the humour best seen in Armetz Ward and Josh Billings who prepared the way for Mark Twain.

It is as clear as crystal to those who have studied American Literature, how insistent the note of humour is both in prose and verse, from Washington Irving onwards. No less obvious is the lack of humour before that time. The few exceptions were, before the arrival of Irving, modeled chiefly upon the satirist of the late seventeenth centuries, and fell considerably short of their models. But there is scarcely a writer of note-worthy in the nineteenth century, Margaret Fuller, the one exemption, whose humour is not an integral part of his work. Humour plays an important part in the works of scholarly writers such as Lowell and Holmes. It gives a pleasant tang to Thoreau's discursive wisdom and ripples delicately over the surface of Hawthorne's fantasies. It plays an even more important part in writers, more essentially popular like Bret Heart and Mark Twain.

Mark Twain's humour has the little tang of the Southwest humour. It was there in the deep west Mark Twain's humour blossomed. It's here in the west Twain stepped into the humours tradition of the old southwest. This is absolutely true when Leland Krauth writes "Twain owned personal copies of work by Augustan Baldwin Long street, Joseph M.Field, William Tappan Thompson. George Washington Harries, Johnson Jones Hooper and Joseph G.Baldwin."⁵ All the afore said writers are the humorists of south west tradition and their tradition was continued by Mark Twain too, but he has a different approach and he has his own style. That's why Bernard De Vottos called the Twain's humorous formula as," the matrix of Mark Twain's humour."⁶ The scholarly investigation of Twain's relationship to this tradition has thus established. Even the general influence of the southwest milieu can be well seen in his works; for Mark Twain was trained as a writer in the old south west during the days of the flowering of it's humour; his first recovered published sketch, appeared in a comic periodical published in Boston by a writer of Down East humour.

Instantly he rose to fame as a literary comedian, and his masterpieces were created in the same local colour. No one in the early days of Clemen's fame would have argued against the assertions what he emerged to prominence as a

literary comedian or as the phrase habit, "a funny man," the reviewer in the "Nation" found in **The Innocents Abroad** (1969) all the prominent characteristics of our peculiar school of humorists, their audacity, their extravagance and exaggeration. A few years later Howells was noting, The grotesque aggregation and broad irony of **Roughing It** (1872), which, as a scholar has recently asserted, was looked upon as a funny book, one of the journalistic sorts. Other books which followed did not change the opinion of a number of critics about his proper classification. Thus as a humorist Twain got his footing and was duly included into the 'funny man' group. Professor Beers of Yale University was of the same opinion when he thought, "it is proper to mention Twain as one of a group including Artemus Ward, Nasby, Billings, Kerr and Nye,"⁷ He may be called as the member of the 'funny man' club but he is superior to all of them. It is unfortunate that he is regarded as a humorist of the old fashioned two penny coloured order in other words a jolly hearted buffoon. But he is very much more than that. It is aptly opined by Arther Compton Rickets when he puts it, "Even in **The Innocents Abroad**, amid much cheap tomfoolery, there are touches of admirable observation and a graphic power of description,"⁸

Mark Twain gave a new dimension to south west humour with his funny remarks and with his own tricks of the trade. It doesn't mean that he had entirely devoided from his predecessors. He only moulded and modified it, according to the needs of his reading public. In fact Mark Twain learned a great deal of it from the humorous lectures of ward. He cited Ward as a great artist in the dropping of a studied remark apparently without knowing it and in the handling of the pause, and on at least one occasion suggested before a lecture: "Would you mind, now, just to please me, letting me introduce myself, as Artemus used to do?"⁹

Understandably, therefore, it became conventional to suggest that Mark Twain learned from Artemus Ward not only the way to speak but also the way to write humorously. According to Robert Ford, the limitation is discoverable both in joke and in peculiar form. Each writers of this genre begin their sentences or speeches in a serious or apparently serious mood and produces their comic

effects or the best of them by giving the most ludicrous and unexpected turns to their sentences or to speeches. The resemblances amongst, all these humorists is unmistakable. Despite all these similarities there is probably no literal indebtedness on Mark Twain's part to Artemus Ward, Twain owes much to the method of the literary comedians.

Mark Twain a child of Florida gave a better climax to the American humour in his fantastic and funny works. It is aright when Walter Blair aptly puts it "It is impossible, of course, to discover any other who furnishes a better climax to a consideration of American humour than Mark Twain."¹⁰ He amassed such an experience in this field, he doted his fellow Americans with his humourous sketches and articles. Even Abraham Lincoln was an addict of Mark Twain[s] humour. "The question who was indebted to whom doesn't arise in the context for the very atmosphere of the west was saturated with such remarks proceeding from a popular humour to which Abraham Lincoln was notoriously addicted."¹¹

Mark Twain as a humorist is less whimsical, less subtle than Bret Heart, but superior infertility of inspiration and fecundity of subject matter. As a story teller, he has greater variety and a steadier outlook on life; with a greater force and intensity at his best of less poignancy. Twain's appeal to the readers is based on various factors. Some see in his humour the explanation for his great popularity others feel that it is the latest of his attractive features. However Sigmund Freud felt, that "Mark Twain was a master humorist and used his art as an example par excellence of the humour he was defining."¹² So, Freud who defined humour as just 'the highest joke', seemed that he had understood the broad meaning of humour in the writing of Mark Twain. This would not be surprising to any reader of literature since Freud's psychoanalytic theory was itself a culmination of nineteenth century thought and sensibility, of which Mark Twain was so conspicuous. Indeed, if one sees the century in terms of evolution, as it often inclined to see itself, then Freud's finding is one of its highest developments. He fulfilled the innumerable impulses and struggles of nineteenth century writer and thinkers to develop a theory of repression

which would eventuate in the concept of 'super ego'. And when Freud cited Mark Twain's humour as a perfect example of the economy of expenditure of affection, he was not being merely Freudian but was reaching the heart of Mark Twain's humour, which has so impressive concepts like repression, creatorship, dreams, the conscience and self-approval.

Thus, the elements of Mark Twain's humour were all familiar to the American before he began to write. Sometimes Mark Twain's witticisms are surprisingly like that of others. He once said "Let us be thankful for the fools, but for them the rest of us couldn't succeed". Josh Billings has also said much the same remark "God save fools (sick) and don't let them run out, for it won't for them wise men couldn't get a living.¹³ Even in his lectures Mark Twain was irresistibly funny. Always at the centre of the stage, he knew how to modulate his voice, how to make use of eloquent pauses, how to work out certain suspense before he altered the joke that set the audience roaring with laughter. One of the lecture posters of Mark Twain read. "Doors open at 7.30. The trouble will begin at 8.00." Such is the fame of Mark Twain's humour which was ever revered by his beloved readers. That's why Mark Twain is considered to be one of the greatest hilarious humourists of America.

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