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 Research Article

MARK TWAIN IS A PROMINENT REPRESENTATIVE OF AMERICAN REALISM

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ABSTRACT

The following article discusses the main characteristics of American Realism and the great place ,contribution of Mark Twain to the development of that movement.

KEYWORDS

Realism, Mississippi, Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, Regional Realists, Howells.

INTRODUCTION

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) is without doubt the most prominent and popular American writer of the 19th century. His writing clearly belongs in what we would call American realism, and his books are great and cherished literature, but Clemens does not line up with the socio-critical generation of

European realists and naturalists. However, “there were some American novelists who focused on the social conditions for those who did not make it in the race for material success. These writers belong to what we call a critical realism, and the most famous names were William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Henry



James, Stephen Crane and feminist writer Kate Chopin”¹.

Mark Twain's life and writing are in more than one way symbolically intertwined with the dividing forces that were tormenting America in the late 19th century. Mark Twain is the first American writer to be born west of the Mississippi, the great river that runs clear across the continent, from Lake Superior in the north to the Mexican Gulf in the south. This river was Twain's source of inspiration for his most famous and memorable works.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens grew up in the town of Hannibal located on the western bank of the Mississippi in the state of Missouri. He loved the river and watched the big paddle steamers and other river boats go by, and he dreamed of one day becoming a river pilot. River navigation was intricate as the waters would change due to shifting sandbanks. So there would be a leadsman or a pilot with a long stick up at the prow calling out: “M-a-r-k three! Half twain! Quarter twain! M-a-r-k twain!” - meaning a two-fathom depth and safe water. In that way Mark Twain took a pseudonym that bears evidence of his love of the great river. His boyhood dream of becoming a pilot on the river was fulfilled, but after a couple of years of piloting, the river was closed because of the Civil War.

Like so many famous authors Mark Twain started his writing career as a journalist, doing humorous sketches for various papers in big cities both on the East and the West Coast. He gradually developed his writing talent and he was determined to become a writer on a

professional basis. His two most famous works are monumental in American literature and have become world classics. “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” appeared in 1867 and “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” in 1876. They both commemorate Mark Twain's happy childhood on the banks of the great Mississippi river. “Tell it like it is” was a slogan for artists during the period we refer to as Realism. This seems to be the drive and success formula behind Mark Twain's fiction because his characters are endowed with all the aspects of human nature. This is especially evident in Huck Finn who tries to come to terms with his moral dilemmas, but also Tom Sawyer possesses human qualities we can recognize. The language and style are also genuine. The following is an example from Huck Finn where Nigger Jim is talking about ghosts:

“Oh, it's de dad-blame' witches, sah, en dey do mos' kill me, dey sky'ers me so.”²

It takes intimate local knowledge and skill to render the language of this illiterate Negro so realistically.

In American literary tradition Mark Twain belongs to the so-called Regional Realists, writers who experienced and wrote about the great changes in regional America. Post-Civil War America was a turbulent time; industrial America was rising, a massive immigration formed the population, urbanization and new ways of transport marked the pattern of the nation. Literary realism started in 19th century France with Flaubert and Balzac. George

“Ellis brought the movement to England and Howells introduced realism to America”³.

¹ Chase, Richard. The American Novel and Its Tradition. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957. -P.17.

² Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York: Penguin Group, 1959.-P. 63.

³ Grove, James. Mark Twain and the Endangered Family.



A famous author, Howells treated realism as a call to action. He prevailed upon contemporary writers to let fiction cease to lie about life. *“To let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know the language of unaffected people everywhere”*⁴.

Howells was the father of American Realism, and he had a great influence on the work of Mark Twain. Literate society treated realism with scorn. It was seen as common, indecent, and vulgar. In his *Incorporation of America*, Trachtenberg summarizes the sentiment of Hamilton Wright Mabie, critic for the Christian Union, with art should protect itself from common life, should concern itself with . ideal. characters, pure thoughts, and noble emotions. The Boston Brahmins of the time viewed realism as an intrusion of the commonplace into the higher stations of society and a betrayal of the ideal of fine literature. Howells response to this sentiment is that the realist novel is made for the benefit of people who have no true use of their eyes.

*“Howells, like Twain, tried to make the wrongs of society obvious through writing rather than outright preach against them. His novel *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, regarded by some as the first realist novel published in America, criticized the moral effects of capitalism and cultural elitism on the masses.”*⁵.

Howells believed in the righteousness of the working class, and it was his mission to show how capitalism enslaved the many for the benefit of the few. Realism was a moral movement as well as a literary one. As

editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Howells used his position to promote the works of writers that agreed with his sensibilities.

Among them were Henry James, Brett Harte and Mark Twain. He prevailed upon contemporary writers to let fiction cease to lie about life. Howells would counsel other realist writers to temper their prose as well, but he did so reluctantly for he found the frank style of Mark Twain. Mark Twain penned his work in a realist style.

*“The Innocents Abroad, the story of a voyage to Europe and the Holy Lands with a group of Christians, was compiled from letters Twain was contracted to write by the *Alta California*. In those letters, Twain wrote a frank description of the hypocrites with whom he was traveling”*⁶.

As the book was a novelization of documentary letters, it contained a certain element of truth, but it was Twain’s description of commonplace events and biting criticism of polite society that made it realist. I have seen with impartial eyes, and I am sure I have written at least honestly, whether wisely or not. Twain says in the foreword. Twain’s urging that the work was impartial only allows him to sink his contempt a little deeper in the readers.

*“Unlike other travelogues of the time, Twain wrote mostly about his reaction to the hypocrisy of his fellow travelers and failed to describe some of the sites he was ostensibly being paid to document”*⁷.

American Literature, October 1985.- P.15.

⁴ William Dean Howells, Editor’s Study, Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, November 1889.-P.3.

⁵ Grove, James. Mark Twain and the Endangered Family. American Literature, October 1985.- P. 30.

⁶ Grove, James. Mark Twain and the Endangered Family. American Literature, October 1985.- P. 56.

⁷ Grove, James. Mark Twain and the Endangered Family. American Literature, October 1985.- P. 48.



His unflattering and sarcastic descriptions of the pilgrims and their behavior cast a realist moral judgment. After reading a Howell, Twain's positive review of *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain traveled to the offices of *The Atlantic Monthly* to express his gratitude. Howells recognized Twain as genius and became a mentor. He at times thought Twain was too real, and though he made extensive comments on the manuscript of *Tom Sawyer*, he did so only to increase the novel's salability. *"He secretly hoped Twain would not use them, as the original writing was much more real"*.⁸

Howells was concerned that such a coarse level of description would seem vulgar to the buying public, and hurt the novel's acceptance. Apparently, Howells' comments were effective for the novel sold well and still maintained its realist vernacular and depiction of life. At any rate, the success of *Tom Sawyer* opened the door for other realist writers, and imitation soon followed. Though Twain produced other well-read works in the intervening years, it was the emergence of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1885 that established him as a pillar of realism. Actually begun before *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, this first person narrative of an orphan boy and a runaway slave had a profound effect on the future of American literature. Twain showed the moral decrepitude of slavery and racism in vivid color. He did so not by preaching, but by portraying the world as it really was. Howells shows his influence here as well, suggesting that Twain write this sequel to *Tom Sawyer* in first person.

Through their decades long correspondence, we know that Howells and Twain were confidants and comrades

in arms. It is clear from Howells' writing that he regarded Twain in the highest terms. After Twain's death, Howells wrote: *"He was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of literature"*⁹.

Even in the 20th century, renowned writers credit Mark Twain for establishing the format of the modern novel. All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*, said Ernest Hemingway. William Faulkner called Mark Twain the father of American literature".

Some modern critics have a hard time putting Twain into any one category. His unique style employed techniques from many different schools including romanticism and certainly satire. *"One critic states that the term "realist" seems stretched to the breaking point when applied to writers so different as Mark Twain and Henry James"*. *"Another believes have been inclined to turn quickly to psychoanalysis; nothing else seems likely to penetrate his baffling artistry"*.¹⁰ Whatever else he may have been, Mark Twain brought the ideal of realist writing to fruition in America.

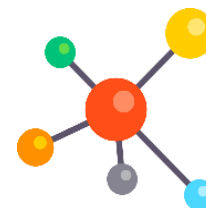
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