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MARK TWAIN – THE GREATEST NOVELIST OF AMERICA

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Abstract:

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain) is an American author of such classics as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Innocents Abroad* and so on. Although the great American novelist is remembered for his humorous and satirical aspects yet he is the most original and a remarkable writer in every manner. He was a moralist at heart. He was great writer of great thoughts. He all the time used to insist that his task was not creating buffoonery but instructing the people. For this purpose he chose burlesque, feeling that the public is to be coaxed and tickled into understanding. The present article peeps into the greatness of the this American literary legend by lightly touching upon all the literary techniques that he employed to put the American novel on the highest pedestal.

Key words: Humour – characterization – satire - Mark Twain's greatness - American novel.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens better known as Mark Twain is one of the best loved writers of America, immediately popular in his own days. In this regard he has been luckier than most popular writers who fell into obscurity immediately after their death, but Twain remains even today, years after his death as one of the greatest figures of American literature and his fame seems to be in no danger. Marks Twain's appeal to the readers is based on various factors. Some see his greatness in his humour which is definitely one of the reasons for his popularity. Others feel that it is the least of his attractive features when compared with the other grate features of his works. In this regard Joha Eskine and W.P. Trent feel, "Mark Twain is more certain of remembrance as a novelist that as a humorists".¹

The term humour is something that has varying connotation to different people. John Palmer remarks in his book, *Comedy the curse of Bible* came true actually when mankind began to laugh. An instance that strikes to people of one country as funny may appear devoid of all fun to people of another. Marks Twain's humour, at least many portions of it, will probably recede beyond general appreciation. But as a novelist he will always be loved by his readers and the other novelist. All his works are master pieces. Infact they become models for Twain's successors. This fact was well said by Bernard Shaw, when he puts it about Twain as, "I am persuaded that the future historian of America will find your works as indispensable to him as a French historian finds the political tracts of Voltaire".²

It is true that, Marks Twain started his career as a humorous writer. After a chequered career- he worked as a printer's devil, journeyman printer, steamboat pilot, and soldier and he went out to the Far West. It was there that Marks Twain finally got into journalism of the masculine humorous sort which flourished in the Far West. It was in Nevada and California that Marks Twain's humour of which we have evidence during the whole of his

adolescence came to the fore front and it is a notable fact that almost every man of a literary tendency who was brought into contact with those pioneer conditions became a humorist.

Mark Twain's first story, The Celebrated Jumping Frog won him recognition all over the country. He was sent abroad by the editorial staff of the newspaper for which he wrote his sketches. The idea was that he should report the trip humorously and the result was *The Innocents Abroad*, which firmly established his fame. The book is one of the finest example of the old extravagant American humour. In *The Adventures of Tom Swayyer* and *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain's delightful humour is seen in abundance. Even his trip around the world was delightful to his audience and none who heard him could forget his unique drollery. In spite of his prodigious appeal as a humorist, it must be borne in mind that Mark Twain was reluctant to adopt the humorist's career and that he was in revolt against a role which, as he vaguely felt, had been thrust upon him. Twain in fact wanted to become a remarkable writer in every manner and he did become. This fact was well balancedly said by Howells, the well known American critic and novelists as, "Mark Twain is not merely a great humourist, he is a remarkable fellow in a very different way".³

If it is Mark Twain's humour alone that made him known and loved as a writer, had he no other qualities, he might by now have been almost forgotten like the many American jokers who have gone out of fashion, like Joseph Billinges or Artemus Ward. There were occasions when Mark Twain's humour affects his work adversely. His masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn*, for instance particularly in the chapters concerning the rescue of Jim contained passages of broad humour and parody which frequently clashed in tone with the style of the long oral tale used throughout the volume. But this book like many others of Mark Twain's had qualities which triumphed over such minor faults. It is to these qualities that we should attribute Marks Twain's perennial fame as a novelist.

Mark Twain's personal traits have contributed to his becoming almost a legend. He was both a personality and a personage. The stories about him are endless. His liking for cats, his addiction to tobacco and whisky and billiards, his passion for dressing in white, his willingness to back inventions, his colourful profanity, his fondness for hoaxes his hatred of intolerance and cruelty and despotism, and his personal kindnesses are well known. In the writings of this beloved American author, his personality was an important element.

Gifted with a marvelous mimetic ability, Mark Twain was a superb story-teller. This enabled him to hold his readers enthralled, and to entertain audiences in his home and in public auditoriums with equal facility. Mark Twain as a literary artist was an adept at carefully leading his readers and audience through calculated effects and contrived suspense to effective climaxes. He was a consummate master of the tall tale tradition, as proved by his stories about the Jumping Frog and the Blue Jay. These along with, *The Man that Corrupted Handleyburg*, are imperishable narratives of American literatures. Beginning with *The Adventures of Tom Swayer*, Mark Twain showed himself to be a novelist of the first rank. The books that followed fulfilled the expectation created by this work. This truth has been immortalized in letters when Bernard Shaw the Irish playwright and critic puts about Twain's greatness as, "by far the greatest American writer".⁴

The greatest success of Mark Twain as a novelist is his genius for creating memorable characters and for breathing the life into them. Perhaps his portrait gallery is small, but it is memorable. Tom Swayer, *Huckleberry Finn* and the runaway nigger Jim, colonel Sellers and Roxy are unforgettable characters in the world of literature. Mark Twain is a remarkable analyzer of characters. Tom Swayer proves his phenomenal understanding of the American small boy, and of those aspects of human nature which expand in the small, wide-settled villages of inland America. The tramp, the loafer, the peddler all the local characters that might have significance in the eyes of the small boy, are represented with fascinating realism, as well as the more respectable but less interesting domestic characters, but of all them viewed at all times through the eyes of the boy. As for Huck Finn, this romantic young outcast with his secret wisdom and his much envied freedom is one of the most real figures of fiction. Aunt Polly, widow Douglas, Aunt Sally. Uncle Silas are all vividly drawn characters. Yet more interesting are the lowdown humbugs and frauds who get on board Huck's and Jim's canoe. Vonneget Jr. Kurt, the celebrated American novelist says that in the works of Mark Twain we can see more America and its immortalized characters. Here he says this phenomenon as, "Twain was good with crowds that he became in competition with singers and dancers and actors and acrobats, one of the most popular performers of his times. It is so unusual and so

psychologically unlikely for a great writer to be great performer too, that I can of only two similar cases - Homer's, perhaps and Moliere's." ⁵

As a painter of manners and customs, Mark Twain is unrivalled. He has observed everything, landscape, environments, physical characteristics of the inhabitants, ways of life, customs, beliefs and superstitions. Through him we know the little Missouri town, asleep on the banks of the river, with its houses rising in steps from the levee, surrounded by its circle of wooded hills terminating near the Mississippi in sheer cliffs pierced by caves. American landscape assumes for readers, native and foreign, a vividness and reality that is rarely seen in other writers. No other American writer has so faithfully described the Mississippi river with its rapids and its half-submerged logs faired by the navigators, the wooded isles and dismal cotton plantations of the south. The Arkansas farm introduced in Huckleberry Finn; is minutely described. The novelist does not omit the clean rooms, the floors covered with rugs, the heart framed in well scrubbed red brick, the naïve knick-knacks on the mantelpie and the popular prints on the wall. The entire West flies past the reader in a succession of precise, faithful images. In this context it is very pertinent to quote W.H. Vogel Bach when he says about this faithful and truthful depiction as, "There is more America in Mark Twain's books than in any others ... It is their immortality." ⁶

Mark Twain's realism in depiction does not stop at externals. In describing scenes that he knew he often relies on memory and hence he interprets reality and to a certain extent colours it his realism in the photographic realism of Theodore Dreiser. The American journalist of the naturalistic school. For this reason, of all Mark Twain's books those that posterity will best remember are Tom Sawyer, Life on the Mississippi and above all Huckleberry Finn.

Mark Twain did not stop with depicting social customs and manners. He went a step further and satirised them. Especially for depicting such an irksome and irritating things, which of course is a reality. His beautiful novel and one of the world's greatest novel, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has been banished and Mark Twain himself was branded as a ruffian and his novel was banished from the stands by District Court and the Court felt the novel was unfit for reading. The court also felt that too much freedom given to American Citizen is one of the reasons for such writings. The District Court feels, "An incarnation of the better side of the ruffians that is one result of the independence of Americans". ⁷

One of the great things that Mark Twain achieved in Huckleberry Finn and other novels is the creation of a prose style suited to the American ethos. Though many writers before Twain had tried to exploit the possibilities of the American idiom, it was only in his hands that we get a rich style with simplicity and informality of phrases, bold and incongruous simplicity and flavored colloquialisms. In his hands comic jargon and dialect became a finished literary weapon, unemphatic, visual, and deceptively simple, sounding like speech and yet not quite the same. His basic reliance on colloquial idiom encouraged many later writers who, but for his example would not have dared to deviate from this literary style of his contemporaries.

As a thinker, Mark Twain is rather disappointing. He was full of prejudices and in his likes and his dislikes he tended to be irrational. He had minor artistic lapses too, for he was seldom a disciplined writer, but these faults fade into insignificance when compared with the overwhelming greatness of Mark Twain, the buoyant story-teller, the delineator of character and the master of idiomatic prose. Optimist and pessimist, dupe of his own emotions, or coerced by his audience, Mark Twain does not appear to the American reader as a man of letters imprisoned by the demands of his vocation, but rather as a free spirit to whom one turns in order to breathe the virile, joyous, healthy atmosphere of an America which has disappeared. He survives as the evocator, the poet of a unique phase of American experience. There is an understanding between him and his public, just as it was there during his lifetime. He continues to have an almost seductive charm for his readers. The reasons for his success are sentimental, America sees him with real affection, as the first of her writers to draw from the American soil, the material for an original and lasting work. Twain is a God to them. They rever him like they innocently rever the God. Not only the Americans even great writers across the world rever and respect Twain, like a God. Rudyard Kipling, the British Nobel Laureate fondly remembers and respects Twain as, "I love to think of the great and godlike Clemens". ⁸ Such is the name and fame commanded across the world by Mark Twain. That is why, Mark Twain is considered the greatest novelist of America.

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