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## Understanding The First Classic Of Mark Twain: An Experiential Study Of *The Innocents Abroad*

Mr. Raju Kumar  
Research Scholar of English  
Jai Prakash University, Chapra

&  
Dr. Aiman Reyaz  
Assistant Professor of English  
Jai Prakash University, Chapra

### Introduction

*The Innocents Abroad* was Twain's first book, an account of his five-month sightseeing expedition to Europe and the holy land, as the Middle East was called in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To be accurate, the researchers should acknowledge that *The Innocents Abroad* was technically not the first Mark Twain's book in particular (Twain 1). In 1867, as Twain was himself in New York getting ready for the trip that was to take him to Europe and the holy land, a friend of his from the old frontier leaves, gather together for a collection towards his newspaper pieces and brought them out in an anthology called *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches* (1867). Partly because that book was so poorly printed and partly because it never really did very well with readers in later accounts of his career Mark Twain contend to forget the existence of that book. That is technically the first book of Mark Twain but even in Mark Twain's minds his career as a writer begins with *The Innocents Abroad* and this book was a very different story than that first book (Bridgman 29). It was published in 1869 and it was an immediate success with readers. It came to selling a hundred thousand copies in its first year. It was in fact during his lifetime the best-selling of all his books. Even if he wanted to, his contemporaries would not have let him forget *The Innocents Abroad*, it became a standard against which all the rest of his books were measured (Speake 30). So, if we think of him mainly as the author of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn*, for most of his career he was most immediately recognizable for the author of this travel book, *The Innocent Abroad or the New Pilgrims' Progress*.

The article will start by explicating about how in the book Mark Twain depicts the old world. By the end of the article, the researchers will try to explain how in the process he was helping his American readers locate themselves in the larger world. The researchers believe that it is the ultimate secret of the book's popularity; the cultural work that it did for Twain's contemporaries. The excursion itself had five-month sight-seeing trip (Scott 60). It was itself a significant moment in American cultural history, probably the earliest example that we have of the packaged tour group, a kind of way of seeing Europe that has become more and

more popular in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century. Twain had nothing to do with organizing it. It was organized out of a church in Brooklyn limit church led by the very charismatic preacher Reverend Henry Ward Beecher, brother and Henry and Beecher Stowe one of the most famous Americans of this time. It became known that Beecher was planning to write a life of Jesus and he thought that a good way to do research for that book would be to travel to the holy land and to see first-hand the sights on which Jesus' life had been enacted (Brooks 30). When his congregation found out about his plans, they thought it was a marvelous occasion for themselves to plan this kind of joint or large-scale pilgrimage to the shrines of the holy land but along the way to see the shrines of high European culture as well (Morris 36). It was a group of people in his congregation then who took the step of chartering a steamboat called the Quaker city and having it refurbish to accommodate this very select travel party and put together an itinerary for the whole tour, or the series of stops that the Quaker city would make. It may have been the first tour group but it already established the pattern of the typical American pace of sightseeing in Europe. They crammed as many stops as possible into those five months starting with the Azores and then Gibraltar and Africa and then France with sightseeing to the exposition. They worked their way down to Italy and had taken plenty of time to visit museums and cathedrals and places like Florence in the ruins in places like Rome, to look at sabias which was being dug up (Solomon 55).

To take in the Greek islands and the acropolis and keep going east towards Constantinople with the side trip up to Crimea where the Crimean war had recently been fought. The whole thing was intended to climax with the arrival in the holy land and plenty of time was left for the pilgrims to make their way to all those spots that had become sacred to them by their association with the stories in the Bible. Mark Twain did not have much in common with the other pilgrims on the trip (Ganzel 60). As you might expect from outing that was being organized out of a church, the average Quaker city pilgrims was a whole lot more respectable, a whole lot more genteel than Mark Twain. They were also considerably wealthier and older. They had to be the people who could afford to pay the fare for this sightseeing pleasure trip and that between the cost of the boat and the expenses on shore averaged over 2000 dollars per person. In 1867 that was more than the average American made in a year (Hutcheon 40). So, the fact that it was organized out of a church and the cost of the whole expedition pretty much determined the average passenger the kind of people who were going to be on the Quaker city (Wagenknecht 11). Mark twain called them the saints. They were tended to be quite a bit older than he was, he was just in his early 30s and a whole lot more genteel, a whole lot more fluent in the ways of high culture than Twain whose training has been out in the middle of America and on the western frontier. His way was being paid by a San Francisco newspaper The Ulta California which had engaged him to be a travelling correspondent sometime earlier (Spengemann 55). That is how he had come to New York in the first place and when they considered a possible return on their investment, the travel letters that Twain would send back for publication along the various stages of this tour, they decided to put up the money that made it possible for him to keep company with this well to do and very high-minded group of pilgrims who were going to mount this kind of cultural assault on the old world. In the end, Henry Ward Beecher decided not to go, that actually would up making Mark Twain probably the most famous of the passengers on the Quaker city although the tour and the book that came out of it was soon to make him a whole lot more famous than he already was.

The idea of this tour group may have been an innovation but the idea of travelling east, to go back to the old world that was not new in the years immediately after the civil war (Budd 39). It had already taken hold of the sensibility of America's upper middle classes as Mark Twain himself acknowledges in the early stages of the book as he is planning for the tour in New York. For the first time in his life he sees sailing with the tide and at one point he speculates that everybody seems to be going to Europe this year. Everybody of course is a typical Twain exaggeration but beginning in those years immediately after the civil war, thousands of Americans annually would make this pilgrimage that became the basis for the kind of way in which Americans would still think that in order to complete their cultural education in order to become full citizens of the world. It is not enough to graduate from school, but at some point or another you need to make a grand tour (Canby 20). You need to come face to face with the cultural monuments of the old world. Mark Twain was not the only writer at this moment who saw in this new trend the occasion for a kind of literature. He is not the kind of writer that we most associate with motifs of going east, although it played a surprisingly big role in his career in addition to *The Innocents Abroad* which was his most popular book. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is a version of of the same story, taken the American Yankee and transporting him back in time but also back in space, back east of the old world of King Arthur. But even though Twain wrote often about this motif the writer who is most clearly identified with it is of course Henry James, so identified with it that he seems to have made it his own signature. The kind of story that James himself call the international tale which he told a number of different times throughout his career. Beginning with the story of Daisy Miller, this young girl who is herself on that finishing tour of the grand scenes of Europe and then in full length novels like *The American* or *The Portrait of a Lady* or *The Ambassadors* later in his career. It is interesting to compare these two writers' versions of free, the idea of an American going east to affront his or her destiny as James put it. When you compare James to Twain you realize that in an American story, an American writer can tell this story in essentially one of two different ways. He could take these American figures eastward to confront an older culture and all that it stood for the past and the idea of tradition, all the things that you could symbolically identify with the European landscape (Clemens 11). You could tell it as tragedy or as comedy. James told it mainly as a tragedy, as the tragedy of American innocence meeting the challenges and finding its inadequacy to the challenges of a more complex, older traditional civilization.

## Telling the Tale

It can deciphered from the title of Twain's text *Innocence* was his starting point too. The title of the book is *The Innocence Abroad* but as he tells the story, it plays out as comic rather than tragic. His Americans are just as naïve but their misadventures in the old world prove not to be a fable but funny. The narrative pattern of *The Innocence Abroad* is typified early on by the first-person narrator's experiences in a Parisian barber shop. As he describes that event in chapter 12, he sets up the scene by saying that ever since he was a child it was his fantasy to be shaved in a Parisian barber shop. We know that is obviously hyperbolic because as a child he would have no reason to think about being shaved at all. So Mark Twain is working within the boundaries of the ridiculous, ludicrous from the beginning but as the scene plays itself out it is typical of what happens to his American innocence over and over again in the story:



Through this process American readers are allowed to laugh at two things as they read *The Innocents Abroad*. First, at the hapless, naïve, innocent himself so that his discomfiture becomes the basis for our own entertainment (Cooper 55). But at the same time American readers are being allowed to look down on and to laugh at the whole inflated idea of Europe. The idea that by going there you are going to find more spectacular, more beautiful, more wonderful forms of life in anything that the new world can offer. James' account, because he identifies symbolically Europe with the knowledge, the more complex truths James' account makes Americans feel inferior to the faiths that overtakes those American pilgrims of his. Twain's account, because of his delays and expectations that he might not be able to live up to the promises, Twain's account encourages American readers continuously to feel superior, that they already know more or better, that they already have as Americans more than anything the old world has to offer. That is the cultural world being performed by this kind of comedy, that over and over again as the pilgrims move through European cities they don't measure up to these lavish ideals. They are dirty, they are old, they are poverty stricken, the paintings by the old masters may have been fine once when they were new, the narrator writes but they are not now and no amount of his imagination can make them new. It is not quite that simple. Mark Twain knew that the people who pay their good money to buy *The Innocents Abroad* as a subscription book would have felt cheated if the show of Europe had failed to live up the expectation. A key feature of the book is that throughout the book there are narrative passages of fine writing in which the narrative point of view pauses before a particular European scene or landmark and allows it to fulfill his expectations. A good example of that is what he says about the Cathedral of Milan. When he gets there as part of the Italian leg of the journey. This is not the kind of writing that is identifiable with Mark Twain but it is important to his career. The descriptive works that he could provide eloquent moments like this:

“What a wonder it is! So grand, so solemn, so vast! And yet so delicate, so airy, so graceful! A very world of solid weight, and yet it seems in the soft moonlight only a fairy delusion of frost-work that might vanish with a breath! How sharply its pinnacled angles and its wilderness of spires were cut against the sky, and how richly their shadows fell upon its snowy roof! It was a vision! – a miracle! – an anthem sung in stone, a poem wrought in marble!” (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 28)

This passage actually goes on for a couple of more paragraphs, each one of these sentences ended with an exclamation point (Covici 60). There is surprisingly not the hint of humour in any of them. There are a number of such moments all the way through the book. They culminate in each scene when in front of the sphinx on the sands of Egypt and sees in its grandeur and in its antiquity something an experience that could only have been had in the old -world. Those moments were also very important to the people who first read *The Innocents Abroad* and Eliza Bliss publisher at the American publishing company was very careful when he put together the illustrations of the copious, the hundreds of illustrations for *The Innocents Abroad* to make sure that the artists included both kinds of moments. The comic misadventures in which the pretensions of Europe something like greatness is ludicrously exposed and the moments of a high Victorian American sightseeing in which you have spiritual or emotionally significant experiences in front of these old world, monuments. Both of those moments are in the book, both clearly account for the book's popularity among contemporary readers but that subscription audience was one that did not travel, did not even travel to the nearest stop, that they bought *The Innocents Abroad* and from that book agent, that subscription salesman who came to their door with a copy of it by

sail by reading *The Innocents Abroad* they could have the vicarious experience of travelling in Europe and through the eloquent passages and the texts, through the illustrations feel as if they had seen something to repay the cost of the book (Fishkin 69).

But at no point they even feel as if they have to kneel in front of these cultural shrines because the dominant motif in the book, the main tone is comic; it is a comic expose of Europe as older, dirtier, poverty stricken, ultimately not something that America needed to take seriously. That is what we can tell from reading the contemporary reviews that *The Innocents Abroad* got. How it distinguished itself from the other travel books that were being published at this time, in particular by its humour, by the kinds of fun that readers would have while keeping company with this innocent Mark Twain haplessly making his way through the cathedrals and across the monuments of Europe and the humour itself was a kind of swagger, a way of being in the world. The secret of the comedy was that it did more than make people laugh by giving readers the old world as an occasion for their complacent entertainment. The book gave 19<sup>th</sup> century Americans an empowering way of being American that is what is meant by the word cultural work that *The Innocents Abroad* did. It was a cultural work that needed doing in these years after the civil war. By the time Twain died in 1910 America had already achieved greatness. It was on the verge of becoming the definitive cultural power in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time the book was written on the other hand America was still under the spell of cultural insecurity or cultural inferiority that was all connected up to its history as a colonial dependent of a European power. That it declared political independence from England way back in 1776 but it was a long way when Mark Twain wrote *The Innocents Abroad* from achieving anything like cultural or intellectual independence from England. Some people would argue that it is still a long way from making that break but that was certainly especially true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that people felt that they only knew America, they did not know enough and that if they wanted to know the things that really mattered they had better take that grand tour, they had better put in time in cathedrals and museums mastering the aesthetic meanings and the cultural significance of high European culture by giving them the story in *The Innocents Abroad*. Mark Twain was giving them a means of resisting that sense of insecurity. It can become and it does in *The Innocents Abroad* at times a kind of ugly Americanness, the belief that simply by being American in the world one already has done enough that anything Europe might have to show them can be contemptuously dismissed. There are some great series of funny scenes with European guides that the boys from the Quaker cities always referred to as Ferguson and that they loved the teas that whatever the guides get out to show them they refused to be impressed by. At moments like that, Twain seems to be simply deriding all the history and culture could teach us, but that was all the part of book's power the deepest source of its popularity with 19<sup>th</sup> century American reader.

### **Intertextuality of Twain**

He never settles into one mode consistently but keeps moving back and forth from gently to expose another text to attacking it directly but much of the time his imagination is in play not simply against the world in front of those eyes, the world that he sees against the way that world has already been written about by other writers (Steinbrink 276-286). There are a lot of passages in *The Innocents Abroad* for example, of quotations taken directly from other writers. He will quote a passage and then proceed to contrast what they say is there with the reality that he is determined to describe (Dickinson 60). Let us look one example of that. It comes from the section of the book that deals with the holy land, it is in chapter 48 and the writer that he is quoting from he identifies by the name of William C Grime. There

was actually no such writer but the passage that Twain is quoting is a literal transcription of the passage from the work of the writer called William C Prime who in the mid-1850s published a book about the Holy Land called *Tent Life in the Holy Land*. That was widely read and many of the Quaker city pilgrims actually had with them as they were moving in caravan through the Middle East that Twain himself took with him. As an authority on the Middle East but by the time he comes to write *The Innocents Abroad* he becomes the target for allegiance of travel writers whom Twain refers to, all of whom create the reality that they are pretending to describe (Foner 70). To quote from Prime's *Tent Life in the Holy Land* who's excerpt Twain includes directly in *The Innocents Abroad*. Unlike Twain's writing it is not funny, so it won't be nearly as entertaining a passage as Twain's, but it is an accurate example, a well-chosen example of the kind of writing that Twain knew and most of his readers had already read the ways in which the Holy Land and reality were typically described at the time he began his career. It is supposed to be describing the sea of Galilee, a scene through crimes:

"...we had taken ship to go over to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Of the beauty of the scene, however I cannot say enough the first great characteristic of it is the deep basin in which it lies...Near Tiberias (the banks on the side of the lake) are rocky, and ancient sepulchres open in them, with their doors toward the water... Hermon looks down toward the sea...lifting his white crown to heaven with the pride of a hill that has seen the departing footsteps of a hundred generations. On the north-east shore of the sea was a single tree and this was the only tree of any size visible from the water of the lake." (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 48)

The whole picture, Prime concludes really giving away the kind of writing that he is engaged in, the kind of sentimental travelling that he is doing where he is projecting on to this landscape all of his own values as a Christian, as a student of the Bible, as a believer himself in the resurrection that awaits those people in those graves that he talks about

"...The whole appearance of the scene is precisely what we would expect and desire the scenery of Gennesaret to be grand beauty, but quiet calm. The very mountains are calm." (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 48)

That is William C Prime writing about the Holy Land as a pilgrim looking abroad at that landscape through the eyes of the conventions of landscaping description that were pretty well worn by the time he writes where mountains lift their heads to the heavens that you cannot see with your eyes but that you can project into this scene in the Holy Land and at the same time projecting all of his own faith, all of his own belief structure (Herzberg 90). Twain then takes that passage and in his own very straight-forward, very tough-minded pros, deconstructs it; or as Twain says strips it, pulls out of the descriptions the actual facts, the world that is there underneath all these emotions and projections to be seen with your eyes.

That is the project that Twain is using travel in *The Innocents Abroad* and through so much of his career to enact, to push forward; the project of unwriting, unwriting the expectations that people bring to reality and then in particular try to unwrite the earlier texts from which those assumptions and beliefs were built (Branch 34). The promise of that project, the faith that underlies the kind of realism that Mark Twain was writing is that readers will somehow be better off when they can be weaned from the illusion or the sentimentalizations, the idealizations that Twain associates with Romance or fantasy or fiction. But there is a danger



too, a danger involves in stripping the world of these stories that beautify it, that give it some kind of meaning that can't be seen with the eyes.

*The Innocents Abroad* does not address that issue directly. The danger involved in this sort of realist project is indirect but if you are reading carefully you can begin to feel how it starts to haunt the narrative. Twain had said if you strip this description of its superfluous and unrealistic elements you will see the skeletons beneath them. The skeleton, the idea of death, the idea of emptiness starts to haunt the narrator as it proceeds systematically as a kind of take apart these pseudo eloquent and unrealistic accounts (Bitzer 1-14). It begins to come into a kind of focus when Twain gets to Venice which he has been clearly looking forward to for a long time. It is one of the most storied and beautiful places in Europe. When he finally gets there, he discovers not this land of enchantment that he is always looking forward to seeing but some dirty canals and a much more scroungy and dirty gondolier, who every time bends over to pull the gondolier down the canal reveals his undoing. This is the way that Twain describes that

“This is the famed gondola, this the gorgeous gondolier, the one the inky rusty canoe with a sable horse-body clapped on to the middle of it and the other a mangy bare footed guttersnipe with a portion of the raiment on exhibition which should have been sacred from public scrutiny. Presently, as he turned a corner and shot his hearse into a dismal ditch between two long rows of towering, untenanted buildings, the gay gondolier began to sing, true to the traditions of his race.” (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 22)

That is that 19<sup>th</sup> century euphemistic way of talking about his underwear (*Woman's Exponent* 8). He goes on after that very anti-Romantic moment to say

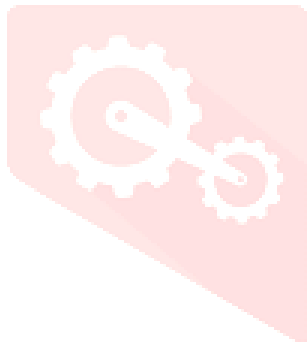
“It is enough that my cherished dreams of Venice have been blighted forever as to the romantic gondola and the gorgeous gondolier; this system of destruction shall go no farther. I will accept the hearse, under protest, and you may fly your glag of truce in peace, but here I register a dark and bloody oath that you shan't sing. Another yelp and overboard you go.” (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 22)

But what he has been describing and pushing forward himself is not just a system of correction, showing people what is actually there as opposed to these embroidered accounts of reality but can be called a system of destruction. That raises a question which becomes most urgent in the very last section of *The Innocents Abroad* when Mark Twain takes the narrative to the Holy Land to that spot that is supposed to be made sacred by all those spiritual associations and where among the books that he is entering into a kind of dialogue with is the Bible itself, the book for most of his readers (Emmett 39). The book that did not describe that they could see with their eyes but which was the ultimate guidebook for them to the realities that mattered most (Smith 90). You can feel how nervously Twain is treading that ground, not so much the ground of the Holy Land which in fact he hated. In one of the passages that he revised out of the manuscript of *The Innocents Abroad*, he said there was no chance that Christ would ever come back because he had been to Palestine once and that was enough. That was a little too dangerous to leave in, Twain hated a Holy Land but was being very careful in the way that let his unhappiness with it show because he knew that the same audience that was going to make *The Innocents Abroad* the best seller would have turned on it if he had turned to progressively against their most cherished beliefs (Beach 29). At the same time though, you read his account of the Holy Land you begin to realize it is not just their beliefs that he is anxious about. In some sense there are deep issues here that are at

stake for him too. They come into focus in a couple of places but the one passage that we can look at concerns when they get to the scene of Christ's birth and they go down into the sepulture of the holy family and where he looks at the place, where the angel is supposed to have appeared to Mary and announced to her the coming birth of Jesus.

“We entered the great Latin Convent which is built over the traditional dwelling-place of the Holy Family. We went down a flight of fifteen steps below the ground level, and stood in a small chapel tricked out with tapestry hangings, silver lamps, and oil paintings. A spot marked by a cross, in the marble floor, under the altar, was exhibited as the place made forever holy by the feet of the Virgin when she stoof up to receive the message of the angel .so simple, so unpretending a locality, to be the scene of so mighty an event! ...it was easy to think these thoughts. But it was not easy to bring myself up to the magnitude of the situation. I could sit off ...and imagine the angel appearing... I saw the little recess from which the angel stepped, but could not fill its void.” (Twain *The Innocents* Ch 50)

That there with nothing but reality in front of his eyes the place where God should have been becomes an empty void. That is not overtly disgusting in any length in *The Innocents Abroad* but it is an issue that not only begins to haunt this book but will occupy more and more of Twain's thanksgivings as his career goes on (Albrecht-Crane 46). It is one thing to strip away the lies that people have absorbed from books; that was Twain's projects as a realist writer and travel writing helped him to prosecute that project; but if you see reality without any illusion then reality itself will be made meaningful or will one only be left with what Twain calls that void or what T S Eliot writing a generation afterward refers to in *The Wasteland* as a *heap of broken images*. That is already an issue in Twain's first book and one that will haunt him for the rest of his career.





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