

MARK TWAIN A SOCIAL CHRONICLER 1835-1910

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Mark Twain is a Painter of manners, morals and customs of the American society of his time. He is a realist because of his local colour and characterization. He is a social chronicler of his time and he forcefully reacted against the sentimentality and idealism of his age. Maxwell Geismer stresses Twain's role as a social prophet and documents it with particular relevance for our time. He remarks:

“Mark Twain was the most notorious spy in the house of the American oligarchy. He more than any other writer, historian, scholar, politician or statesman surely deserved the fame and the honor of being the greatest traitor to his class.”

Mark Twain, through his novel gives us a graphic picture of social and economical life of America. His three great novels ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, (1876), Life on the Mississippi (1883) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885) expressively contributed to the growth of the American literature. Twain's works have the Universal appeal as his ‘Huckleberry Finn represents not only American life, men and woman and their ways of living in that country but the whole human world of honesty and corruption, of virtues and vices. It highlights certain indispensable and fundamental human motives, which are American as well as Universal. It is a novel about escape and freedom and it has social and cultural theme. It gives no realistic picture of the horrible conditions of slavery which the Negroes were suffering in the first half of the Nineteenth century, The theme of the novel is perfect equality between whites and black. In this novel the very American life in its variegated forms reflected graphically and truthfully. It is the only American novel whose dignity cannot be questioned. Mark Twain prefaced the book with what he called a Notice:

“Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.”

He again says,

“But they are there- the motive, the moral and the plot all woven together in a fine and fascinating fabric, all combined in what turns out to be a basic conflict between good and evil.”

It has been declared the greatest of his books and one of the two three acknowledged masterpieces of American literature. Hemingway even went to the extent of saying that all modern American literature comes from Huckleberry Finn. It is clearly a finer book and it is also a serious book out of the pranks and antics of childhood. It takes us to the world of adolescent experiences. It is a novel at odds with a dominant values of late nineteenth century American. The moral structure of the book teaches timeless wisdom to all humanity Huck, the hero of the novel is one of the most likeable characters in fiction. He is cheerful, friendly sensible and courageous also. He is a stoic who has suffered the hardships of life and understands its value. He does not like to be social and civilized. His increasing hatred of the corrupting influence of society culminates in his final break with it when he runs out for freedom. He changes one place for another only to enjoy the spiritual and mental freedom. He thinks that social taboos are detrimental to the growth of have-nots. The novel Huckleberry Finn is a vigorous criticism of fantastic notions and schemings. Brander Mathews, the great Twain scholar, observes:

“We have in Huckleberry Finn a broadly brushed painting of a vanished civilization, the south-west as it was before the civil war on his voyage down the river Huck meets many men and a few woman, some of them afloat but most of them ashore, and he describes them as they appear to him.”

Twain paints the horrible picture of the victims of society. For Twain, the robe of a humorist means a relaxation to the tight jackets, a symbol of freedom, when he distorts the truth, it is for sheer fun in order to put others in good humour but he never shuts his eyes to the shame of society. He describes all characters with decoration. Less obviously and vividly he also traced other inter lacings of backwardness and reaction in the Redeemed south.

“Twain sees the desert as dry and depressing. He describes men and woman of the soul without much Lightening or debasing them, with any affectations. He hates all snobbery, false sensibility and sentimental common places. He does not like conventional literature; he is scornful of popular fiction with its gentleman pirates, its

hidden treasure, its simple turns of plot, just as he laughs at the novels of Walter Scott and Jane Austen, He in short, is a rebel against imposed attitudes. He looks at the orient with the eyes of a westerner and tries to picture the life of Christ as it must have been in his poor and sad country without legends and myths. Mark Twain appealed to the countryman by virtue of his fantasy and idealism and his irresistible humour which is typically American.

Proud of his reputation as a liar, Twain was probably the most completely honest man of his time and was surely his own most severe critic, censor and punisher. A Self styled misanthrope, Mark Twain reneared tirelessly against the damned race of humanity. All his life he fought for the social and political freedom of man. He throughout his works, dealt with slavery of the blacks at home and subjection of the colonial people through the world. But when he come to the brass tack problem of life he felt that human freedom though attained through democratic revolutions is going to be foundered at the crude and cowardly nature of man. He felt that man will fail to evolve a civilization-based integrity and real brotherhood of Twain has a better and surer understanding of the complexities and contradictions in American life. He had picked up the truth that the common man in America was not to be wholly understood by a limited faithful study of the commonplace of his daily existence. He tried and succeeds to portray the ordinary and average American and Shares their hopes and fears, urges and inspirations. Robert E. Spiller describes:

“Responsive to every fact and mood of his time and place, Mark Twain was the artist of the folk, the teller of the tales that make a people unconscious of the larger meanings that his own best works convey, he gave to other the perspective that he could never quite define for himself. His art was natural, organic and wholly valid. Always it’s was the voice of a people, at its best it was epic.”

The originality of Mark Twain comes not from the selections of the incidents, but from his knowledge of human nature, which adds to those incidents, elements that either kindle the memory of boyhood or, in any event, charm the reader by their revelations of human weakness. In his one of the most famous plays Tom Sawyer he describes Tom’s cleverness in persuading his friends to white wash the fence for him. Very cleverly he makes Ben who was eating apple, to do his work. He pretends

before him that he was enjoying whitewashing the fence. But internally Tom's mouth was watering for Ben's apple. Ben said:

“Hello, ole chap, you got to work hey”

Tom wheeled suddenly and said:

“What do you call work?”

“Why ain't that work?”

Tom answered carelessly

“Well may be it is, and my be it ain't All i Know is, it suits Tom Sawyer”

“Oh come, now, you don't mean to let on that you like it?”

Tom answered moving the brush; “Like it? Well I don't see why I outhunt to like it Does a boy get to white wash a fence everyday” Ben stopped nibbling his apple.

Presently he said:

“Say, Tom let me whitewash a little”

“No... no...”

“... lemme just try”.

“Ben I'd like to ... but Aunt Polly-”

... “Oh, shucks i'll be just as careful... I'll give you the core of my apple.”

No, Ben, now don't I'm afraid”

I'll give you all of it!”

Tom gave up the brush with reluctance in his face but alacrity in his heart.

All this, what Twain describes, might be merely amusing, but it takes on a larger significance in revealing the methods by which, on a larger scale, competitors of many industries were making fortunes out their fellow countrymen during that period. Tom's purchase of a reputation for learning by his deft buttering of the sundry school tickets contains also, in epitome, a description of the methods by which railway systems were refinanced from solvency to insolvency.

We can find the same growth of Twain's art and mind in his most talked about play the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn which is a sequel to Tom Sawyer rather it is a better book than it. Better both artistically and morally and Huck is a highly moral character in it. Huck, like Twain, hates the vices of cruelty, brutality,

killings murders and slavery. He has been the upholder of human values and denounces injustice and inequality in society. Huck can't bear cheatings and frauds of the Duke and the King He can't see Jim's slavery. But again he is not an orthodox in his moral pursuits. In chapter 19 he says;

“It didn't take me long to make my mind that these liars warn't up no kings nor dukes, at all but just low-down humbugs and frauds. but I never said nothing... kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrel, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objection... I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way”.

Huck's heart overflows with the milk of human kindness. He feels compassion for Jim, a victim of society and its rotten rules. Through Jim, Twain has dwelt at some length on one of the burning society issues of the time that of slavery and place of slaves in the American society. Jim is full of longing for freedom. He over fears that Miss Watson will sell him to the new Orleans trader for Qoodollers. He, therefore run away to the Jackson's Island, where he suddenly meets Huck. Jim told him about Miss Watson When Huck Asks:

‘How do you come to be here, Jim, and bawd you get here?’

Jim hesitates:

“May be I better not tell.”

‘why, Jim?’

‘well, I b'lieve you, Huck I-I run off’ Jim!

well you see ... dat's Miss Watson-she pecks on me all de time, en treats me pooty rough, but she awluz said she wouldn't sell me down to Orleans. But I noticed ... she could get eight hund'd dollars for me, en it u2 such a big slack O money she couldn't resist.”

Jim is a type of Negro slaves in the Mississippi Valley. Illiterate and superstitious he is domesticated and become docile as he come in to the company of Huck. Being skilled and intelligent he command respect among his fellow-Negroes. He always believes that white men are superior to him. In spite of his physical occasions. He becomes a mouse in the presence of white man. He shows slavish mentality which deprives a man of conviction and confidence.

In chapter 14 the conversation between Huck and Jim has been described. They talk of Solo man's million wives and also about foreign language. Jim can't understand how a man can speak in a different language Huck also finds that educating Jim is too difficult for him, they have talk about foreign language:

“why, Huck doon’ de French People talk de same way we does?”

No Jim; you could not understand a word they said- not a single wod”.

“Looky here Jim; does a cat talk like we do?

‘No, a cat don’t.’

“Well, does a cow?”

‘No, a cow don’t nuthes’.

‘Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?’

‘No, dey don’t’

‘Its’ natural right for’ em to talk different from each other, ain’t it?’

“Course”

... Why ain’t it natural and right to for a Frenchman to talk different from us...

Is a cat a man Huck?;

‘No’

... Is a cow a man? – er is a cow a cat?

No she ain’t either of them.

well den ! Dad blame it why doan’ he talk like a man?

you answer me dot;”

I see warn’t rouse wasting words – you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I qiut.”

In chapter 16 Huck’s conscience begins to trouble him: Jim is so near freedom should Huck allow him to go free. The matter is settled when some men appear and say they are looking for runaway slaves. In the last chapter of the play, escape and liberation of Jim has been described in detail.

The final draft of Huckleberry Finn was intimately bound up with the writing of Twain’s third great Volume about his river day’s life on the Mississippi. It is social realism, yes, to the utmost, but undoubtedly it is also epic realism. It presents

all the lower depths of the river life with unflinching truth and yet through the worshipful eyes of its young apprentice, with a glowing and even heroic glamor.

In life on the Mississippi Clemens returned to one of his great sources of inspiration, the river he knew so well. He describes the river in the first chapter of the play 'The River and its History' –

“The Unquestionably the discovery of the Mississippi is a datable fact which considerably mellows and modifies the shiny newness of our country and gives her a most respectable outside aspect of rustiness and antiquity.”

Chapter IV-XVII were written for the Allantic. Fresh, vivid humourous, they, recall the great days of river traffic; the problems of navigation, the race, the pilots association, the resourcefulness and glory of the old-time pilot. Twain describes in chapter XIV 'Rank and Dignity of Piloting.'

“a pilot' in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived in the earth.”

Life on the Mississippi is ostensibly another of Mark Twain's travel books. Its unrivalled delight in experience, its picture of the human comedy and tragedy on the river lend its real durability. Geismer observes:

The young hero of the chronicle who in the autobiographical Clemens looking back on the early Clemens with such wistful and nostalgic humor- is severely an older brother of Huck Finn, and a more complex figure”

For autobiography Mark Twain had a special gift because he was always interested in himself and because he was frank in his liking to talk about himself. Even in his boy-books Twain has drawn upon himself time and again. But putting them aside for consideration later. We may say that Twain's travel books were combination of brief anecdotes with longer chronological accounts. We find the variegated river-world, throbbing with intense and free life, in Twain's works whether travel books, his novels, or a disillusioned treatment of history.

Mark Twain, the most representative figure of American letters has not been only the embodiment of the American dream, but also the projection of self-made man, living in the lap of Nature, enjoying the fresh environs of the Mississippi. His appeal to us, to a great extent, lies in the fact that he was a fascinating personality. He had a better and surer understanding of the complexities and contradictions in

American life. He showed in his writings a concern for the common man. Twain being a typical product of the Frontier, could never, in fact, disengage himself from its energy, charm, its humour forming the basis of his mind and the framework of his books. He had picked up the truth that the common man in America was not to be wholly understood by a limited faithful study of the commonplace to his daily existence.

As the late nineteenth century felt the stress and strain of major social and economic shifts, twain was more inclined to worryment than to humor as he tried to account for apparent cracks in the foundations of society. He found it hard to adjust himself to many changes which he abstractly cheered as progress, but which he often disliked or could not understand.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known by the most famous pen Name than an American ever bore, is a matchless annalist of his times. Mark Twain is stamped unforgettably with the National brand. If he hailed finally to reconcile reality and ideality he absorbed and gave expression to both. That failure was not his; it belonged to his generation. In his works we find a picture of west in all its Variety. He has observed everything; landscapes environments, physical characteristics of the inhabitants, ways of the life, beliefs, customs, superstitions. He has been called a social chronicler, a painter of the manners and customs of America of his day. He will ever remain in literary history as a prime example of the outgoing and life gathering spirit combined with the most acute sense of self-knowledge and self-vision. He was essentially an improviser, a raconteur. At the outset, his art was oral not written, a literature without letters, and it never wholly lost the qualities of its origin. Mark Twain's lecture work was no accident, not by blow; it was an essential expression of his art. Neither is it an accident that, though he wrote one of the greatest novels in American literature, we should always think of him first and his books afterwards. The only thing that could not have been safely prophesied was the vastness and grandeur of the soul he had to express. He portrays different social patterns and different environments. His depiction of the west has a remarkable variety and a great sincerity. No doubt, he fails to tell everything sometimes. But he is not conducting an investigation; he is only evoking memories. His purpose is not to say everything, not even objectively. He allows himself to peruse enquiries into

reality with varying intensity. He does not keep his model before his eyes while he is describing it. Because he draws from memory most of the details, he interprets reality; to some extent he colours it. But he does not hide the ugly aspect of his society, its stains and brutality. In life on the Mississippi and *Huckleberry Finn*, he evinces his keen penchant for social satire. He always seeks the deeper reality beneath appearance.

So finally we can say that Mark Twain trying to perceive the eternal truths about America could capture them and translate them into fiction, because he bore them within himself.

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