

Collision Between Virtue and Temptation in Mark Twain's the Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg

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Abstract

The man who corrupted the Hadleyburg is one of the short stories written by Mark Twain. It is famous for its successful humorous and sarcastic art which bases on the writer's insight into human nature-honesty and hypocrisy. The paper focuses on the collision and conflict between the virtue and the temptation of the people in the society in this work. By the sharp sarcasm the writer exposes the essence of the pretended goodness and kindness and the profit-grabbing of the bourgeoisie.

Keywords: collision between virtue and temptation; Mark Twain; The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg;

I. Introduction

Mark Twain, the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, is familiar to us as a great American literary artist. Mark Twain has always been remembered first and foremost as a humorist, but he was a great deal more—a public moralist, critic, popular entertainer, political philosopher, travel writer, and novelist. He published more than thirty books, hundreds of essays, speeches, articles, reviews, and short stories, many still in print today.

The theme of Mark Twain's works was laid on his attitudes towards the society and offered us a unique view of the life and human nature at a multi-dimension degree. Because he experienced the development process from the free capitalism to imperialism during his life, his ideas and creative works also changed from relaxing to sarcastic to pessimistic one. His concerns were mainly about the detriment of the religious instruction, the social unhealthy tendencies of mutual deception and rivalry, the true colors of American society covered by "democracy" and "freedom", the racial discrimination and pseudo-democratic reality, social ills and moral decay and so on.

Mark Twain is a master in crafting humorous verse with sardonic wit, and though with biting criticism at times he renders us the realistic presentation with the colloquial speech and unpretentious language. Humor and irony are two major characteristics combined in most of his works. Some humorous writings of Mark Twain in his early period provided the happy laughing-stock for the American readers and the readers all over the world. During his early

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period of his literary creation, Mark Twain shared the popular image of the American funny man and a great deal of his humor is characterized by puns, straight-faced exaggeration, repetition, and anti-climax, tricks of irony. However, his humor is not only of witty remarks mocking at small things or of farcical elements making people laugh, but a kind of artistic style used to criticize the social injustice and satirize the decayed romanticism. Although for some reasons or other, the great humorist seems to have overshadowed the social critic, the importance of his social criticism cannot be overlooked in his literary career. In the works of Mark Twain's middle and late period, we can observe the biting sarcasm and bitter irony in addition to humor as contained in his writings. So Mark Twain is far beyond a pure humorist.

II. The Theme of the Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg

The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg was written in 1900. This is one of his lesser known works but is still full of Twain magic. Works such as these from later in his life have a cynicism that is not so prevalent in his earlier writing. The story contains bitter attacks on the human race. In the later part of Mark Twain's life, he suffered many losses including the deaths of three of his children, and accumulated large debts which plagued him for many years. Due to the tragic events of his life and his family members, due to his hatred for the corrupt and dark American society, his last years have been described as his "bad mood" period that would increasingly occupy his thoughts for the remainder of his life. Mark Twain was greatly changed in his thoughts and his writing style. He changed from an optimist to an almost despairing determinist and could not burst into laughter any more. The development of the material civilization hadn't brought the moral improvement of people, on the contrary, the social democracy, freedom, justice, equality were seriously damaged. The bourgeois went to any lengths to grab the social wealth. Greed, sham, hypocrisy, cunning and money worship drew people into a bare money relation and hostility, as the theme in *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*.

In *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, Mark Twain told us a lively and vivid story. Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town locally well known for the unflinching honesty of its citizens and the aggregate virtue. It had the reputation of "an incorruptible town"² and had kept it for three generations. This reputation comes from its townspeople's strict moral upbringing. Babies learn "honest dealing" from birth, and teenagers are kept sheltered from anything that could potentially corrupt them. All the residents had the virtue of unshakable honesty. They are proud of this virtue and keep themselves veracity and fidelity by simply avoiding temptation. However, everything changed and the magnificent image of the townspeople as well as the incorruptibility collapsed overnight, when a passing stranger came

²See James Cochrane, *The Penguin Book of American Short Stories* (London, 1969), 125

and surfaced weaknesses of individuals and the community as a whole. The town began its ill luck since then. The stranger vowed to get his revenge by corrupting the town. He carried a heavy sack to the Mr. and Mrs. Richards' house (the old cashier of the bank) and left a paper which read that this sack of gold was for his benefactor who had saved his life and morals. But he had no idea about who that man was. If the remark mentioned by the candidate tallied with the one contained in his sealed envelope, he would be the right person. Actually, the sack was full of golden regulus lead instead of gold ingots. However, the chief nineteen citizens, including the Richards, all wrote the acquisition letter claiming that he himself was the benefactor of the stranger. They dreamed of possessing the money and would become a millionaire. They began to recklessly purchase things on credit in anticipation of their future wealth. Far from resisting the temptation of money, they wracked their brains to deceive others and staged various farces. So this town, with its reputation irreparably damaged, was stripped away the ancient glorious loincloth and Hadleyburg was allowed to change its name and leave one word out of the motto that for many generations had graced the town's official seal---from "LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION" to "LEAD US INTO TEMPTATION"(p.160). The change of this motto itself shows the dark humor and the bitter satire. As the price, all the greedy men were punished in the end. The great writer Mark Twain employs the ingenious, unexpected plot development and incomparable humor and portrays a sarcastic picture in front of us: on one hand, the upper class citizens in Hadleyburg pursued the money greedily, and on the other hand, they bragged about their hypocritical moral concepts; even the old couple of Richards who were deemed as the phantom of purity, honesty and uprightness came out in their true colors after being tempted by money. We may quote some remarks from this masterpiece to serve as an illustration:

...and now, under the very first big and real temptation, I---Edward, it is my belief that this town's honesty is as rotten as mine is; as rotten as yours is. It is a mean town, a hard, stingy town, and hasn't a virtue in the world but this honesty, it is so celebrated for and so conceited about; and so help me, I do believe that if ever the day comes that its honesty falls under great temptation; its grand reputation will go to ruin like a house of cards... (Cochrane 123)

These words show the real inner thought of Mr. Richards, which is a striking contrast to his reputation. He appeared outwardly honorable, but his soul was manipulated by money. Mr. Richards had problems deciding which secrets should be kept and which should be told. His first act of dishonesty happened before the actual time of the story, when he decided not to testify on Rev. Mr. Burgess's behalf in order to prove his innocence. Even though he warned him to leave town, possibly saving Mr. Burgess's life, he was still guilty of carrying this dishonest secret.

In this story, the mental world of the chief nineteen citizens who acted unscrupulously and shamelessly was described and revealed thoroughly. All the seemingly honesty was

merely a disguise and cheat actually. The writer exposed the essence of the pretended goodness and kindness and the profit-grabbing of the bourgeoisie. In this sarcastic picture of money worship of the capitalist society, there stand a crowd of the canting hypocrites rushing about to secure personal gain, who stink of money and put on sanctified airs in appearance. No doubt, Hadleyburg in the author's writing is the symbol of the whole United States and the chief nineteen citizens stand for the upper class of America. Of course, Mark Twain gave some protection to Mr. and Mrs. Richards, for they made a self-confession and showed their self-repentance before they died. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that Mark Twain had a last illusion for the moral concepts of the bourgeoisie. This story also proves that the upstart and unlawful wealth, which only brings us temporary joy, is a trap. This conclusion is just what Mark Twain wanted to admonish those citizens who dreamed of obtaining the windfall without hard work. What the author had exposed in the story---money worship poisoned the Americans' minds, and even their bodies and their lives---still afford us lessons that merit attention today.

III. The Collision Between Virtue and Temptation

The Man That corrupted Hadleyburg received mixed reviews, but many commentators detected a movement away from Twain's trademark humor and light-hearted satire toward a moralizing didactic tone. Whether Twain based Hadleyburg on an actual place or constructed it as a fictional symbol remains unclear, this fiction may be seen as a story about an already corrupt human nature. People merely reveal their lack of integrity just as soon as temptation is at hand or when countervailing forces are absent. In other words, the sanctimonious illusions of honesty and virtue collide with the opportunity and temptation in a small town.

Some readers have seen this story as a replay of the Garden of Eden story—recounting the Fall of Hadleyburg, the innocent or virtuous “city on a hill”—and see the source of its corruption—the “Man” —as the incarnation of Satan. The sack of gold is the temptation of “the forbidden apple”. Consider, in this regard, that the plot begins only after Barclay Goodson (“God’s son”) dies and that the sack of gold is placed in the hands of Edward Richards (“son of riches”). And Barclay Goodson, this meanest little guy, appeared magnanimous, plainspoken and accommodating, was the benefactor that the passing stranger looked for. Dishonesty, greed and falling into temptation which are the examples of human weakness might be regarded as the evils discharged out of the “Pandora’s box”. No matter which opinion and comments that the researchers and the readers have, there was no suggestion that Mark Twain’s primary aim was not to create a society but to criticize the existing one by mercilessly castigating the hideous features of people when tempted by money and profit.

Virtues and temptations are the topics paid more and more attention both in the past and in the present. A virtue is an excellent trait of character. It refers to a list of characters that represents or depicts virtue, for example, compassion, generosity, courage, honesty, dependable, and charity, etc. To possess such a disposition fully is to possess full or perfect virtue, which is rare, and there are a number of ways of falling short of this ideal (Athanasoulis 2000). Virtue cannot exist without the trial of temptations, otherwise it is the ostensible virtue. We may think that one doesn't count as virtuous unless one has to struggle to resist and subdue temptation. There are many temptations in the society, such as money, gambling, drinking, womanizing, corruption and otherwise. In this story, in face of the temptation of wealth, the citizens of Hadleyburg gave up their principles of virtue and were kept down, turned aside from that noble disposition by which they formerly were inclined to virtue. Such kind of money-seeking episode may happen every day. Everyone should make clear that what is the real and perfect virtue and how to resist various temptations and reach the destination.

IV. Conclusion

The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg is relentless social satire and it is also the most formally controlled piece Mark Twain ever wrote. He analyzed human mind in the gold coin society by employing the bitter irony in his writing ingeniously. His criticism was witty, biting and brilliant. He directed his attacks on the corruption and moral hypocrisy in the American society and the magic and evil money brings. However, Mark Twain considers the phenomenon of greed and selfishness of capitalist society as a common nature of all citizens. This made his writing covered with a layer of the pessimism and disappointment.

In the literary works in the nearly half a century, Mark Twain achieves the perfect combination of the American civil humor with the serious literature through his unique writing style of the humorous, bitter ironic language and imaginative ideas. He transformed the resources of the typically American humorous story into something serious and profoundly moving. William Faulkner said that Mark Twain is "the first real American writer, we are inheriting him". Through the authentic depiction of his times he caused much controversy and many of his works have been suppressed, censored or banned, but even into the Twenty-First Century his works are read the world over by young and old alike. He left us with a valuable cultural heritage since 19th century. It is only right that he should be remembered both as a great literary artist and a great social critic in the history of the United States.

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