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The Mechanisms of Corruption in Mark Twain's Novels:

A New Historicist Study

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List of Abbreviations

CY	*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*
HF	*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
IA	*The Innocents Abroad or The New Pilgrim's Progress*
LM	*Life on the Mississippi*
PW	*The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*
MOA	*The Making of America* (a digital archive of nineteenth-century American periodicals hosted by Cornell University)

Foreword

Using new historicism as a theoretical lens, the aim of this thesis is to critically analyze some of the mechanisms of corruption within late nineteenth-century American culture as represented in three novels by American author Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910), who is known to the world as Mark Twain. This study argues that these mechanisms of corruption were evident in the circulation of certain patterns of subversion and containment. The thesis seeks to address the following major question:

Are there mechanisms of corruption circulating in late nineteenth-century American culture?

From this question, other sub-questions emerge:

- What are the subversive forces at work within late nineteenth-century American culture, and how are they represented in the selected novels?
- What are the tools used by power to contain the subversion of the Other?
- How are these processes of subversion and containment a representation of the corruption embedded in late nineteenth-century American cultural discourses?
- What is it about the selected novels that makes them a true representation of the processes of subversion and containment within late nineteenth-century American culture?

Since the depiction of corruption in late nineteenth-century cultural discourses is the major aim of this study, a brief remark should be made on the meaning of the term for this thesis. Writing about corruption, critics generally agree that the term means the use of public office for private gain. In John Girling's *Corruption, Capitalism and Democracy* (1997), corruption takes a political aspect, while in J. Edgardo Campos' and Sanjay Pradhan's *The Many Faces of Corruption: Tracking Vulnerabilities at the Sector Level* (2007), it takes an economic aspect. Such definitions of corruption seem inadequate to the purpose and nature of this thesis as a new historicist study. In new historicism, there is nothing called political

corruption or economic corruption per se, but there is cultural corruption. That is, corruption is embedded in different cultural discourses. It is well known that the Founding Fathers of the United States and the Framers of the Constitution such as Thomas Jefferson (1743-1809) and Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) had agreed that the US was to be founded on the principles of equality, freedom, democracy, science, and rationality. Henry F. May's *The Divided Heart: Essays on Protestantism and the Enlightenment in America* (1991) is a good source for these principles as mentioned in the Constitution as well as by its framers. Therefore, *corruption*, as the term is used in this study, means the lack of one or all of these principles, the misuse of them, or the application of them on some parts of the population rather than others. In light of this, superstition is one form of corruption because it violates the principle of science and rationality. Equally, treating African Americans as inferior to whites, segregating them, and disfranchising them are all forms of corruption because they are the opposite of equality, freedom, and democracy.

As for its scope, the thesis analyzes Twain's novels *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). The study places Twain within the period in which he wrote by relating his texts to a variety of contemporary non-fictional sources and anecdotal material drawn from the 1880s and 1890s newspaper, magazine, and journal archives, advertisements, testimonials, and other historical data, in order to delineate the dimensions of the cultural web of corruption and to clarify the issues at stake in the discussion.

There are several reasons for conducting the current study. Reviewing the Mark Twain scholarship throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is clear that there are some intrinsic points which have not yet received critical evaluation commensurate with their deep-down values and insights. One line of criticism within the Mark Twain scholarship focuses on locating Twain within the historical era in which his novels are set. For example,

the majority of critics relate *HF* and *PW* to the time and place of their setting, namely the pre-Civil War South. This attitude is clear, for instance, in Peter Messent's *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain* (2007), Stephen Railton's *Mark Twain: A Short Introduction* (2004), Michael Egan's *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: Race, Class and Society* (1977) and several articles published in 1992 in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* which is edited by James Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis. Those critics see *HF* and *PW* as a representation of the issue of slavery in America during the first half of the nineteenth century. For those critics, therefore, Twain is a mere historian and his are historical novels which depict everyday life in pre-Civil War American South. Such views reduce Twain to a mere detached commentator on a past era. A new historicist study, however, locates Twain within the post-Civil War context, the time when he grew up and wrote his novels. The present study considers Twain part and parcel of his writings which represent the time of their production, namely the last two decades of the nineteenth century.

Similarly, relying on its setting in sixth-century England, critics consider *CY* an attack on Arthurian England and a manifestation of the superiority of the nineteenth century in America. This line of criticism is reflected in Marcus Cunliffe's *In Search of America: Transatlantic Essays, 1951-1990* (1991), Thomas D. Zlatic's "Language Technologies in *A Connecticut Yankee*" (1991), Roger B. Salomon's *Twain and the Image of History* (1961), E. Long Hudson's *Mark Twain Handbook* (1957), Lesley C. Kordecki's "Twain's Critique of Malory's Romance: Forma Tractandi and *A Connecticut Yankee*" (1986), John B. Hoben's "Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee:* A Genetic Study" (l940), and James D. Williams' two articles "The Use of History in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*" (1965) and "Revision and Intention in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee*" (1964), and Henry Nash Smith's *Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1963). Those critics assume that in writing historical novels Twain sought to celebrate American democracy in the nineteenth century. By

claiming that Twain's aim in *CY* is to attack the Middle Ages, those critics may also de-historicize Twain and his writings by reducing him to a mere detached observer or historian whose writings have no relevance to his own time and environment. The present research, depending on the new historicist approach, sees the novel as a representation of its time and place of production, namely late nineteenth-century America. The novel is not intended as a contrast of English backwardness and American progress; rather, the patterns of subversion and containment in it are a representation of the forces at work within the American culture of the late nineteenth century.

Nadia Khouri may be the only critic who comes near the present argument when she states in "From Eden to the Dark Ages: Images of History in the Work of Mark Twain" (1980) that the superstitions and violence in sixth- century England recalls the pre-Civil War South. Khouri, however, relates Twain's novel to the pre-Civil War, not the post-Civil War era, as the present study suggests.

Although several critics recently start seeing Twain's novels in light of their time of production, regardless of their setting, their efforts are still very few and limited to scattered references. With the emergence of new historicism in the 1980s, few studies have begun to focus on situating Twain in the socio-cultural context that produced him. In *Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn: Re-Imagining the American Dream* (2000), Elaine Mensh and Harry Mensh, for instance, vaguely refer to a single incident in *HF* in which Huck's father objects to giving an educated African American the right to vote as an allegory for the era in which Twain wrote his novel, when African Americans were being disfranchised. However, Mensh and Mensh themselves refuse to rely on such implications which they consider ambiguous. This indicates that these two critics, like many others, prefer to relate Twain's novel to its historical setting, namely the pre-Civil War period. This is the same attitude of C. Johnson, Chadwick-Joshua, Messent, and Railton who discuss Twain's novels in relation to their

historical settings, but also briefly hint at the possibility that the novels have some significance to the post-civil War racial atmosphere.

Charles H. Nilon's "The Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*: 'Freeing the Free Negro'" (1992) is one of the few articles which give some length to the analysis of *HF* within the post-Reconstruction race problems in America. He, like Messent, explicitly refers to the ending of the novel as a metaphor for the plight of African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Contrary to their intention, however, Messent's and Nilon's interpretation of certain episodes threaten to de-historicize the novel altogether. Both critics, for instance, refer to the raft episode as a utopia in which Huck and Jim deal with one another on equal terms and consider Huck's decision to tear off the letter and 'go to hell' a sign of moral development. This view is also supported by C. Johnson who suggests that during the Mississippi journey Huck and Jim form a team that is able to transcend race and cultural difference. The problem with those critics is that they assume a utopian dimension to the relationship between Huck and Jim, a dimension which did not exist in reality in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In so doing, they unconsciously ignore the representational function of the novel as a metaphor for the wide cleavage between whites and African Americans at that time. Such an interpretation of the raft episode does not take into account Huck's racial views which remain unchanged until the end of the novel.

In the last few decades, few promising studies have paid some, but not full, attention to Twain's novels as a representation of their time and place of production. For example, in *Dangerous Intimacy: The Untold Story of Mark Twain's Final Years* (2004), and *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1994), Karen Lystra and Shelley Fisher Fishkin respectively refer to the re-enslavement of Jim at the end of *HF* as an indictment of the failure of Reconstruction and the debasement of African Americans in post-Reconstruction America. In "Hank Morgan as an American Individualist" (1982), Deborah

Berger Turnbull also hints at the possibility that Twain wrote *CY* to attack the post-Civil War era in America. However, Turnbull does not go further to explain those aspects of the post-Civil War era that Twain intended to attack. In "New Manifest Destiny in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*" (1983), Nancy S. Oliver does not rule out the possibility that the political ideologies of the 1870s and 1880s would have influenced Twain while writing *CY*. In his book *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993), Eric J. Sundquist dedicates a chapter to the analysis of Twain's *PW*, relating the novel to the post-Civil War legal dilemma of African Americans in general and mulattos in particular. He coins the term 'second slavery' to refer to the anomalous legal status of African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Susan Gillman's and Forrest G. Robinson's collection of essays *Mark Twain's Pudd'nhead Wilson: Race, Conflict, and Culture* (1990) also contains two essays which relate *PW* to late nineteenth-century newfangled technology of fingerprinting in which Twain was interested.

The present study adds some fresh insights to these recent efforts. Still, this study is a bit different from most of these recent critical efforts in that it draws heavily on the critical ideas of Michel Foucault (1926-1984), the anthropology of Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), and their new historicist followers, relating Twain's novels to contemporary non-literary material. In accordance with new historicist methods, this thesis pays much attention to anecdotes, minor characters, and the seemingly trivial details that have been generally ignored by critics. Employing the new historicist concepts of subversion and containment as well as Foucault's views on power technologies, the thesis gives what the researcher believes to be a new interpretation of certain problematic points in the selected novels which have long been the center of hot debate among critics.

The second reason for conducting this research is that critics used to divide Twain's writings into historical, travel, and American works and, in most cases, study these works as

separate units. For example, in *Mark Twain: Introduction and Interpretation* (1961), Frank Baldanza treats Twain's American, travel, and historical writings as units in themselves without a link that might connect them. As far as the researcher knows, there are no critical attempts to relate *HF*, for instance, to *CY*. Critics have not yet investigated the dynamic relations among the sociopolitical, legal, economic, and scientific issues within the cultural discourse of the late nineteenth century as represented in Twain's novels. The present study attempts to fill this gap by proposing that all cultural discourses within a given culture are connected and suggest that a literary text is the product of its time and place of production, regardless of its setting. Relying on the new historicist concepts of subversion and containment, this thesis suggests that racism, superstitions, and sentimentality in Twain's novels are all a representation of the subversive energies circulating in late nineteenth-century American culture. Hence, using the new historicist critical perspective, the current study may contribute to the Mark Twain study in that it attempts to connect these writings and find a thematic thread that binds Twain's historical novels and those about America, arguing that Twain's novel about England should not be studied in isolation from his American writings, since they all seem to constitute his sociopolitical vision of nineteenth-century America.

Another important reason that motivated this study is that even the few critics who place Twain's novels in their time of production have ignored a very important issue that is dealt with in this thesis, namely that of superstitions as a subversive force within late nineteenth-century American culture. It is noted that the post-Civil War era is well known for the spread of prosperity, a revolution in science, technology, invention, and the dominance of reason and rationality. Apart from scattered references, books about post-Civil War America do not tackle the circulation of omens, ghost lore, and magic charms as subversive forces in that historical era. Resorting to the new historicist and anthropologist method of thick

description and the employment of authentic anecdotes, however, prove the hypothesis that superstitions circulated widely in the discursive practices of American culture.

Strangely enough, these counterhistories which have been ignored by most historians are also mostly ignored by Twain's critics. Although superstitions are traced clearly in Twain's novels, few references have been made to these subversive energies by his critics. When made, these references have dealt mainly with this issue in relation to African Americans alone. This is the attitude of David E. E. Sloane's *Student Companion to Mark Twain* (2001), Bernard De Voto's *Mark Twain's America* (1932), Hudson's *Mark Twain Handbook*, and Fishkin's *Was Huck Black?* By celebrating Jim's superstitions and avoiding any discussion of the issue in relation to white people, those critics unconsciously contribute to perpetuating the image of African Americans as stereotypes. Daniel G. Hoffman's article "Black Magic-and White-in *Huckleberry Finn*" (1961) is practically the only critical attempt to draw some – though dim – light on white superstitions in Twain's *HF*. Although the article focuses mainly on Jim's superstitious acts, it nevertheless directs the reader's attention that African American folklore is not the mere source of superstitions in the novel. For him, however, it is only poor and illiterate whites who believed in superstitions like African Americans, an argument that is refuted in the first chapter of this thesis. It should also be indicated that Twain's critics have kept silent about the issue of superstitions as a cultural aspect in both *PW* and *CY*. The current study contributes to the Mark Twain studies by highlighting this issue of superstitions as a subversive force in late nineteenth-century America, arguing that superstition in Twain's novels is a cultural rather than racial aspect, thus finding a unifying element that binds these novels together.

The above account indicates that some intrinsic points in Twain's literary works have not been adequately recognized by Twain's critics. Therefore, the researcher sets out in the present study to highlight these missing points.

This thesis is divided into four chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion.

The aim of the introduction is to outline the theoretical underpinnings of the study and to present the critical framework in light of which Twain's novels are to be analyzed. It gives an account of new historicism as a critical approach, its concepts, tenets, assumptions, interests, and methods of analysis, as reflected in the writings of new historicists. The introduction also discusses the influence of both Foucault and Geertz on new historicist views and critical methods.

Chapter one, "Modes of Subversion: The Case of Superstitions in Late Nineteenth-Century America," relies mainly on anecdotal material drawn from late nineteenth-century periodical archives, advertisements, and testimonials, in order to examine the case of superstitions as subversive energies in Twain's novels *HF*, *CY*, and *PW*. The chapter attempts to prove that superstitions such as omens, ghost lore, and magic charms circulated widely among both whites and African Americans at that time.

The title of chapter two is "Negotiating a 'Second Slavery': The Representation of Intellectual Racism in the Discursive Practices of Late Nineteenth-Century American Culture." Following the new historicist perspective, the aim of this chapter is to thickly analyze the negotiation and exchange of racial views about the mental and moral inferiority of African Americans and to examine how Twain's texts are a vehicle for representing these processes in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The present chapter ties together some threads from the previous discussion on superstitions with some aspects of the racial discourse of the era, arguing that the racist views which resonated in the cultural discourses were as baseless as the circulating superstitions at that time.

Chapter three is entitled "Co-Option or Destruction? Technologies of Power and Containment in *A Connecticut Yankee*." It suggests that the American forces of power

adopted a paradigm of containment in an attempt either to co-opt or destroy the forms of subversion discussed in the first chapter. The chapter discusses the first axis of this paradigm, namely scientific containment, which handles the problem of superstitions through the employment of technological inventions and scientific knowledge to fashion national identity, co-opt the Other, and generally reflect American cultural power. The chapter suggests that although the successful containment of the problem of superstitions reflects the triumph of American science and technology, this paradigm of containment reflects certain aspects of corruption such as the employment of improvisations, keeping people ignorant, giving voice to and encouraging certain forms of subversion, and the use of violence to destroy the Other.

Chapter Four, "The Mechanisms of Co-option and the Futility of Subversion in *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and *Huckleberry Finn*," explores the attempt of power to contain the subversion resulting from the issue of racism. The first part of the chapter shows how *PW* employs the newfangled technology of fingerprinting as a mechanism of containing African American subversion, relating the racial themes in the novel to legal and socio-political racial dilemma of the late nineteenth century. The second part of the chapter shows how power uses a meticulous plan of containment which involves the deliberate creation of subversion, improvisations, and co-option in order to contain the Other's subversion in *HF* and assert racial hierarchies. The chapter suggests that the treatment of the race problem reveals the corruption embedded in the American socio-political, economic, scientific, and legal system.

Conclusion

The conclusion sums up the preceding chapters, introduces the findings, and crystallizes the argument of the thesis. It also offers some recommendations for further studies based on the current research.

Introduction

Coined in 1982 by American professor Stephen J. Greenblatt (1943-), the term *new historicism* refers to a postmodern attempt to return to history, almost half a century after the decline of old historicism.[1] Although it was named in 1982, new historicism was heralded in 1980 by Greenblatt's book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* and by Louis Montrose's essay "'Eliza, Queene of Shepheardes' and the Pastoral Power." New historicism is a reaction to formalist criticism which dominated critical scholarship from the 1940s to 1970s and came to consider the text an autonomous entity. According to Elizabeth Dillon, Formalism "tends to turn literature into precisely the kind of artifact that means little in relation to the world and tends to obscure the worldly relations that inform the text and its production" (46). Jan R. Veenstra also explains that formalist critics "attempted to be objective in that [they] aimed at articulating the meaning and the literariness of a text in terms of its intrinsic language-system. Their scrupulous principles of analysis carefully warded off all links with the exterior environment" (176). In the 1960s and 1970s, the affinities of Formalism with Structuralism and American New Criticism became clear. These schools of literary criticism give priority to the form and language of a literary text at the expense of its socio-historical context. John Brannigan argues that New Criticism "insisted that the study of a literary text should not be concerned with history, biography, sociology or politics, that a piece of literature should be read as a linguistic structure, the proper practice of which was 'Close Reading.'" (92)

In reaction to these critical challenges, new historicism emerged in the early 1980s and became pervasive in the 1990s. As a historical approach, new historicism is an enemy of all forms of formalist criticism. According to Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, the emergence of new historicism "signified impatience with American New Criticism" which separated the text from its socio-historical context (Intro. 2). In "Resonance and Wonder,"