

Mark Twain, the Dialogic Imagination, and the American Classroom

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Abstract

Mark Twain is often read as a provincial realist or naturalist whose works are disseminated in simplified versions as children's stories or seen as humorous social criticism of the southern United States and its dialects. This article focuses on two of Twain's novels—*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger* (published posthumously with various titles)—in order to focus on the more modern, less provincial, *novelistic* aspects of Twain's writing. The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin provide the background for a characterization of the *novelistic* nature of these works in an effort to re-focus Twain criticism away from realist or naturalist analysis and toward semiotic and structural considerations. This essay functions as an introductory-level presentation of Bakhtinian analysis and Twain criticism, as well as a reimagining of the role of Twain's writings in the classroom, especially in light of recent controversies surrounding the language used in works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Of paramount importance to this argument are the temporal, spatial, formal and thematic coordinates of the two books, and the assertion that they conform to Bakhtin's conception of the novel and how it radically differs from other forms.

Keywords

Mark Twain, Mikhail Bakhtin, semiotics, novelism, American literature, literary theory, pedagogy, literary criticism, modernism, realism, structuralism

Novels like *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* raise problematic questions for Twain scholars because they directly approach more philosophical human concerns while, at times, casting off the sarcastically humorous facade that characterizes Twain's work in general. This is not to say they lack humor; in fact, the humor of these books forms part of their engagement with philosophy which constitutes the focus of this essay. It merely suggests that the manner in which Twain approaches themes like the construction of the "self," the subjectivity of reality and time, class issues, religion, is more specifically *novelistic* in these two books than in some of Twain's more provincially humorous work (*The Prince and the Pauper*, *The American Claimant*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, etc.). The concept of *novelism* finds provenance in the writings of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, the Russian semiotician. Employing his dialogic perspective when analyzing these two works helps one grasp why they don't fit the canonical image of Mark Twain, and why many scholars and readers consider them salient examples of the uncertain nature of Twain's prose. It also opens the door to a re-imagining of Twain's place in the American canon as an author of more serious weight; this in turn helps lay the foundation for a discussion of why we teach Twain in public schools and how we can contextualize and understand the complicated nature of the heroes of more famous works like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a staple of public education and the subject of much recent controversy in that realm (Davis).

Mikhail Bakhtin and his theory of the novel sets forth a new group of theoretical guidelines by which to analyze modern literature in contrast with formerly dominant styles, namely epic and romance literature. In his essay *Epic and Novel*, Bakhtin tackles the problem of defining the novel generically. He essentially argues that as a genre it represents a dramatic break from older traditions in form and content: where works in the epic tradition had as heroes closed, finished products that represented a static cultural tradition and origin, *novelistic* heroes may no longer be heroic in this sense. The epic hero—typified by characters like El Cid, Odysseus, Roland or Beowulf—

transformed with the advent of the novel into the modern, novelistic hero: Hemmingway's Robert Jordan, Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen or—the perfect antihero—Dostoevsky's unnamed protagonist and narrator of *Notes from Underground*. Such a hero must combine the entire spectrum of human characteristics, positive and negative; they should be dynamic, and thus representative of our experience of an ever-changing reality. Stylistically, a novel is three-dimensional, meaning it engages and is in perpetual dialogue (hence the term “dialogic”) with other texts, directly and indirectly through thematic connections or overt reference. Its characters represent variegated, nonlinear narratives that participate in constant conversation with one another on a philosophical plane, as opposed to the characters of Greek epics: types of the same cast adhering to a single set of cultural values. Bakhtin calls this multi-linguaged consciousness *polyglossia* (12), and it forms a principal aspect of his definition of the novel as a dialogue.

Temporally, as well, the novel serves a completely different function than epic and romance poems, or the classical dramatic works. Bakhtin makes much of this point, devoting a decent portion of the essay to it. He writes that works from “the world of high literature in the classical era” dealt with an immutable, closed past based on tradition and mythology (19). Writers used this past as a vehicle for exploring non-malleable moral issues that constituted—for that culture in which a given work appeared—a transcription of the heroic beginnings of a nation. Virgil's *Aeneid* would be a prime example of this type of work. All images, metaphors, characters and plots in the epic tradition were based on this set of closed ideas, making of the genre, as a whole, a *closed system* that references only itself, as opposed to the open, polyglossic system of the novel that is in constant dialogue with other narratives. Put simply, the ethics of classical literature are unquestionable; they leave no room for dialogue, protest, or subversion.

The novel, conversely, employs as its temporal coordinate the present—by definition transitory and ever-changing. It engages with the quotidian, with the Everyman and his concerns, considered “reality of a lower order” in works of high literature, and the subject of ambivalent laughter (19). Out of the ashes of this ancient, epic laughter rose the novel, a genre not of royalty but of the people, one that openly embraces that “low reality” and laughs along with the reader at the absurdity of existence. Indeed, a concern with these subjects in literature has its roots, Bakhtin insists, in the common, every day laughter of folkloric parables and songs, forms rejected entirely by ancient wordsmiths. Thus humor becomes an integral part of what defines a novel as such. The images and themes of the novel are constructed in this zone of contact with an ever-changing present; therefore, the novel itself is in a constant state of fluctuation, echoing the vicissitudes of life in the modern world. As Bakhtin states it, “The novel, after all, has no canon of its own. It is, by its very nature, not canonic. It is plasticity itself” (39).

This leaves the reader with a very particular picture of ‘the novel’: as plastic or fluid, giving way and thus lending form to cultural occurrences, values, humor, etc.; as polyglot, or able to communicate across barriers, between and within temporal and spatial moments; and, more importantly, as seditious, or as a field of play on which mores and ethics—and by extension, cultural reality—become relative and humorous. The reader enters Bakhtin's world of carnival, where everything is reversed and turned on its head. Within the novel one can suggest heretical notions to wide audiences because that is its nature; this is its defining characteristic. It uses laughter, common concerns, fluid metaphors and relativity to subvert cultural hegemony, whatever form it may take. What Bakhtin means when he describes the novel as “a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review” (39) is that it serves the same function for society, regardless of culture, regardless of time, and is thus a subversive, or potentially subversive, form of literature. The real beauty of Bakhtin's theory is its sort of circular inclusiveness: temporal blurring and polyglossia are elements of the fluidity and subversiveness of novels, and vice versa. These aspects are more complementary than mutually exclusive or determinative.

In his novels, Twain uses the literary subversion of cultural norms as a source for most of his humor. More precisely, one could say that—just as Bakhtin noticed in Gogol’s *Dead Souls*—Twain uses his at times ribald humor in order to subvert institutionalized belief (Bakhtin 28). All institutions and beliefs are fair game: organized religion, racial prejudices, public ignorance or lack of intellectual robustness. Shelly Fisher Fishkin, a notable Twain scholar, writes in her book *Lighting Out for the Territory* that Twain taught her “how powerful irony and satire could be in the service of truth” (6). Through humor, Twain exposes one perspective on the truth to his readers, calls society out for its faults. This is something that nearly all of his books impart upon us; but in particular, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* can be shown to reflect the Bakhtinian conception of the novel more directly than Twain’s other works.

Elements of the overall structure of *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court* are very obviously functioning in precisely the way Bakhtin insisted novels should. The story is one of direct contact between the 6th and 19th centuries, personifying in a very real way the sort of dialectic between those era’s literatures outlined in *Epic and Novel*. Much of the book’s humor is derived from the juxtaposition of the two—for example, the scenes in which Hank Morgan’s page-boy tries out 19th century jargon, or the exasperation of Hank with the medieval (and thus, in his view, inferior and nonsensical) narratives of Sandy (47, 136). This is a sort of reprise of the goals of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, considered by many the first novel and a constant source of reference for Bakhtin. Both novels satirize the characteristics of old literature or stories in anachronistic settings to point out the inherent fallacies of the chivalric ethos, but also to look reflexively at the ethos of their own age (Howe 118). Another great example from *Connecticut Yankee* is the “rescue” plotted by Sandy as Hank’s first bout of knight-errantry—a rescue supposedly of a score of princesses from a horrible ogre, but in reality of a herd of pigs from a farmhouse (177). While each instance elicits laughter at the sheer inanity of Hank’s situation, these moments help set up an argument of serious weight. They touch on the anthropology of technology, ideas of superiority based on cultural evolution and the gravity of transforming from classical to post-industrialist society, which is really an argument—one quite characteristic of Twain—about American imperialism, of which he was a vehement opponent (Zwick 242).

The two previously cited examples also illustrate another Bakhtinian element of *A Connecticut Yankee*: interaction between different languages, or types of discourse. I qualify “languages” with that latter phrase because Bakhtin meant more by *polyglossia* than simply the presence of multiple categorical languages. He implied interaction between narratives, personal and literary; discourse between social and ethnic groups with varying life experiences; and intellectual conflict between ethoses, as in the previous examples. In this sense, literature achieves polyglossia when kings mix with commoners, or when suppressed narratives—those of slaves, females, or any oppressed group—are brought to the surface. It is also achieved when two dialectal variations of the same language share conversation in literature, something that occurs with dizzying frequency in Twain’s literature.

Connecticut Yankee exhibits this type of multi-vocal interaction in all of the aforementioned ways. In the most literal sense, Hank’s dialect is so foreign to the villagers and royals of King Arthur’s court as to be nearly unintelligible. However, interaction between languages in the other senses implied by Bakhtin occurs as well. The chapter where Hank and the king travel incognito as peasants to explore the societal differences between the aristocratic and serf classes provides a perfect example. From the proximity of and interaction between these two world views and socioeconomic statuses—or languages, essentially—Twain derives humor, sympathy, and the type of moral lesson one infers from the work as a whole. Contact with poverty and distress causes the king to challenge all of his previously held justifications for the status quo: “It is the spirit that stoopeth the shoulders, I ween, and not the weight; for armour is heavy, yet it is a proud burden...” (263).

Twain surely meant more by the irony of this utterance's particular context than merely that cultural contact produces empathy, but it is an important element of the dialogue nevertheless.

In this novel Twain employs temporal subjectivity (e.g., Hank's time travel, the abutment of two eras) and polyglossia (e.g., interaction between the eras, between classes in one era, between sexes, dialects) to subvert cultural institutions held in his day and still present in ours. The fact that Twain's work affects us even in the essentially different world we inhabit today speaks, on a completely different level, to the polyglossia that one text is capable of achieving: speaking to two different eras by itself, crossing linguistic and historical borders to impart upon enthusiasts the intellectual messages it contains. In both ages, we are made to question institutions taken for granted: the positivist doctrine that modern science holds the best answers and will inherently yield more, and that old ways are obsolete; the infallibility of the industrial revolution and the class systems it set in place; the existence of an omnipotent, benevolent god that created and controls the entire universe.

Turning to the second novel comprising this essay's focus, one notes that the novelistic fluidity of which Bakhtin spoke—its engagement with the present, which is transient by definition, making of a novel's meaning many subjective variations—manifests itself in *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger* more saliently than in others of Twain's works. This novel, while being set in 1490, approaches the reality of the text from the point of view of a very non-heroic hero. His concerns are those of a worker, or commoner; the illustration of his present (temporally) is not highly stylized and heroic, an attempt to glorify cultural values, uphold and recount tradition. We see him bringing these exact values into question after the appearance of No. 44 (or Satan, depending on the version one reads) (Ensor 100). Already we see the formation of a novelistic hero; a non-heroic hero.

At the outset of the novel, Twain represents the small village of Eseldorf as one of unquestioning faith in God, or more specifically, in the Virgin (445). This institution is the unquestionable authority of Eseldorf, and the mythology surrounding her justifies it. The narrator sets out in the first two chapters to outline what the reader may consider as the "epic" creation myth and history of the town, full of lore and tradition: its theological orientation and the reasons for it, famous encounters with the supernatural, etc. His ironic description adds to the criticism inherent in Twain's portrayal of the town and its problems. The narrator himself lives in a sort of enclave outside the village, where he is employed in what he describes as the semi-blasphemous, not entirely legal profession of printing—a *new* profession, one with which the lay public is unfamiliar (451). It is this externally situated, somewhat isolated and not clearly defined setting that allows, after the appearance of the boy simply known as 44, for the type of dynamic character development and questioning of tradition and belief which Bakhtin insists is an inherent characteristic of the novel.

One way the characters begin to question the status quo involves the in-house magician hired by the head printer's second wife. All of the inhabitants and printers had been mostly scared and in mild awe of the magician before the appearance of 44; his job was to hunt for some long-lost treasure hidden deep within the castle, and he seems to have gone mostly unnoticed and unmolested (452). He is a metaphor for the search for meaning using ancient and obsolete superstition as a guiding force, part of a religious critique interwoven throughout the novel. Then 44's indescribable feats of strength cause the castle's inhabitants to lay blame on the magician as the only likely source for such magical occurrences (462). Suddenly he becomes a central character, the scapegoat of everybody's kneejerk reactions to the unknown, to the introduction of change. His ancient powers have turned on him and revealed the imminent change facing the castle. All of their deeply inculcated religious superstitions rise to the surface in both violent and reverent ways: they threaten to repeatedly imprison or kill the magician by turning him over to the church or burning him alive; at the same time, they become dreadfully afraid of him, stupefied and awe-struck by his professed

abilities, and Frau Stein renews her private cult surrounding him. 44 acts as a catalyst, rapidly shifting attitudes about religion and magic among the workers.

Another illustration of dynamism and novelistic fluidity in *The Mysterious Stranger* involves the hierarchy of the print shop before and after 44's appearance, to which we can consider the magician's misfortunes tangential. Before his arrival there existed clearly defined boundaries between all of the castle's lodgers: Stein had complete seniority, but his wife held considerable sway over him, and the workers had developed an age-based hierarchy among themselves. All feared, but did not revere, the magician. Doangivadam factored in only peripherally, a vagrant oddity that didn't necessarily hold sway, but respect nonetheless. After all of the upsets caused by 44's arrival and everything surrounding it—his seemingly supernatural ability with printmaking, his extra-human strength, his indifference and quietude and the raging, jealous reactions they bring out in everybody—the hierarchy becomes irrevocably altered. Doangivadam becomes a sort-of ad-hoc rebel leader, protecting 44 from harm and ensuring that justice (his brand at least) is served within the castle. The workers gain a certain degree of power over Stein through their striking and their perfidious behavior involving the shipment of a large order of prints. The castle becomes divided into camps, with the narrator caught in the middle.

This could be taken as a model for any type of radical cultural change introduced into a partially stable, or perhaps stagnant, society. The types of stresses produced by 44's arrival are those that can only occur in a realistic, fluid present—not an immutable, closed-off, mythological past. This is the crux of what Bakhtin argues is the difference between epic and novel: that only when writers begin to look at their own, true surroundings and depict concerns of the everyday do we have what can truly be considered a novel. Eventually, this mechanism of changing reality causes the narrator of *No. 44* to question his entire perception of reality and morality, to question the pertinence of the gods. "Life itself is only a vision, a dream," insists no. 44. "Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world...nothing exists save empty space—and you!" (620). These types of philosophical explorations can only be had in novelistic writings; that is its defining characteristic as a genre, and that allows it to subvert authority, to exist on a peculiar cultural plain never before inhabited by literature.

The effect this all has is of reflection on the similarities between Twain's scene and the world surrounding us. It is a reaction that has little regard for temporal moments or spatial separations, and is integral to defining a novel. Furthermore, it is essential to explaining why the novel has superseded older literary forms almost entirely, and why it occupies such an irrepressible part of modern literature. The novel is the essence of free thought, of attempting direct engagement with the semiotic structures that govern our perception of existence, of subversion of cultural norms, expansion of cognitive capacities and an outcry for humanity. This, Bakhtin argues, is how we define the novel, and its canon is comprised not of specific works, but of the dialogue that is formed by all novels, each adding its unique voice to the symphony of philosophy that is tackled anew with each manuscript. It is primarily in its ability to provoke human action over idol worship, not its literary characteristics or qualities (whatever those may be), that the novel finds its definition. *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* and *No. 44, the Mysterious Stranger* stand out among Twain's work as particularly characteristic of this definition.

Not only does considering these works in light of Bakhtinian theory help augment the already long list of novels whose interpretations are aided by such a consideration, but it helps channel the critical discourse surrounding the writings of Mark Twain away from the type of controversy that led to the (in)famous 2011 "edited for schools" version of *Huckleberry Finn* and towards a possible exploration of why this man and his words have come to be so closely associated with what it is to be an American writer, or an American in general (setting aside the imprecision of that term and its connotations). For many, Twain's entire catalogue is stained by its seemingly

outdated racial perspective and provinciality. His works are taught less and less in public schools and his words are changed in order to fit a more modern narrative. The prevalence of an especially horrifying racial epithet in *Huckleberry Finn*, for example, is indeed an often difficult reality to stomach when it comes to digesting his work or teaching it in the classroom. Some scholars and public educators have embraced edited versions of *Huck Finn*, arguing that despite the absence of the word in question on the pages of the book, the reality of its former presence and intentional omission nonetheless help guide classroom discussions towards matters of race, appropriation, language and culture, and help stimulate interest on behalf of teachers by removing the stigma surrounding teaching Twain in the classroom (Davis). Others argue, however, that by redacting the dehumanizing term and replacing it with the often contextually incorrect term *slave*, one does effectively remove the soul of Twain's social critique and offer readers an "out" in those uncomfortable moments where they are forced to examine the facts of their country's history and the unimaginable horrors that have been committed in the name of progress and capital (Smith).

If readers and educators consider what it is that makes Twain an important novelist and what it is that makes the novel important in the mind of Bakhtin and in modern society, it becomes obvious that the complicatedness of his heroes—be it Huck Finn, Jim, Hank Morgan, or No. 44—is merely the novelistic mechanism through which Twain forces his readers to question their own beliefs and the stated beliefs of those in power at any given time. This questioning of hegemony is perhaps the most important aspect of Twain's works and a huge part of why they are taught in schools and universities. Critically considering *No. 44* and *Connecticut Yankee* in a Bakhtinian light provides examples of how the novel functions, why it does so, why the heroes it produces are sometimes so hard to accept, and why we must nevertheless continue to dissect them and the implicit themes they personify.

These complications have, however, led to a fairly understandable critical ambiguity toward these two Mark Twain novels specifically, and indeed the works of Twain in general (Howe 96). There exist, of course, the problematic endings, but this has always been characteristic of Twain's writings; many would insist that he simply had difficulty wrapping up all of his thoughts on a particular work. The existence of multiple versions of *No. 44*, and the emergence of what is considered the authoritative version many years after scholarship had already had its way with others, further complicates the message of that novel. Both are also less funny, in the slapstick, folksy manner that most have come to associate with Twain (wrongly, one could argue). However, one could also argue that in these works he had merely begun delving into literary themes and novelistic concerns more seriously and more decisively than before. Twain was no longer content to let the river sweep him and his characters into its current, giving fate the reigns and asking the more provincial questions. He had turned his eye and pen on the universal, and on the overtly subversive and problematic. He had become, in the Bakhtinian sense, a novelist, a man with a dialogic imagination. This is why we teach Twain in schools, and why educators and critics alike must continue to explore complicated American literature, regardless of how uncomfortable the language and ideas contained therein may be.

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