

The Art of Humor and Irony in Mark Twain's *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*: From the Perspective of the Construction of the Plot

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Abstract: Mark Twain, a prominent critical realist, is also known as an extraordinary master of humor in the 19th century. Pungent but exquisite ironies and a sense of humor are ubiquitous in his works, the hypocritical nature of American capitalism is revealed profoundly, especially in his most important one *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, whose plot was quite ingenious, full of quick-witted ironies exhibited by the fascinating beginning, thrilling climax, and the dramatic ending incisively and vividly. Thus, the thesis mainly analyses the art of humor and irony from the perspective of the construction of the plot.

Keywords: Mark Twain; *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*; Plot; Humor; Irony

Online publication: July 12, 2024

Mark Twain is one of the representatives of realists in the 19th century, also known as Dickens in American and the father of American literature. He was the first writer to “Americanize” literary creation and nationalize literary language. His literary works ridicule, satirize, and attack the power of money which rules the American capitalist society, hypocritical morality, corrupt politics, hypocritical religion, greed, the desire to enslave the world, and so on ^[1].

The writer’s creative style is closely related to the social background in which he lived at that time. In Mark Twain’s works, it is not difficult to find that his focus was on the American society he lived in at that time, which was an inflated American society under a capitalist society. During this period, the United States experienced a flood of material resources, a large wealth gap, and serious social contradictions. At this time, American society was in a period of great transformation, and people were panic-stricken, and their ideas and concepts had also undergone great changes compared to before. His works are filled with Mark Twain-style humor, and he captures the ugly side of society with a sharp eye for satire and criticism. The span of America from free capitalism to imperialism he witnessed echoes the tone of his work from a witty and humorous one to a depressed and ironic one ^[2].

Humor is an important creative feature in Mark Twain’s novels, and the use of irony in the expression of

humor is even more intriguing. In his works, there are many reflections on human nature. His satire on social status and social figures seems invisible but powerful, not only exposing reality but also striking readers' hearts. He often uses humorous expressions and exaggerated language to satirize the ugly, greedy, shameless, and unscrupulous sides of human nature, and presents this reality in a bloody way, provoking readers to think. The most distinguished feature of his work is the employ of the technique of humor and irony, under which the hypocrisy of American capitalism is graphically displayed. *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, one of his best and most popular works in his later years, gives us a depiction of a monetary relationship in capitalist society and the deep-down selfish and greedy desire of people ^[3].

The story revolves around a sack of gold and the setting of this story is a fictional town which is the most honest in all the region, thus its reputation spreads far and has been kept unstained for many generations, of which townspeople, mainly the sacred Nineteen, are quite proud. It is an acknowledged incorruptible town. But at last, unfortunately, for a certain reason, they may not figure out they offended a passing stranger who then contrives a subtle plan that emplacing a hoax by using a sack of gold as his lure to revenge himself on them all, the entire town, not letting any of them escaped unhurt. That is corrupting the good reputation of Hadleyburg. Under the temptation of the gold, all the sacred Nineteen fell into the trap and exposed to the avaricious side of their deep heart without exception. Thus, the whole town's reputation is corrupted completely and it is proved that the honesty of the townspeople is fake. The most vulnerable thing is the virtue that hasn't been thought of in the trial of gold. In this case, the ugliness of the bourgeoisie is revealed ^[4].

At first sight of the title, *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg*, readers may have the thought that it is certainly there's a man who did something directly or indirectly to cause the corruption of town Hadleyburg and may also concern who is this man that corrupted Hadleyburg. However, as the story progresses, the contrary turns out to be the townspeople themselves, every single of them that makes the good reputation of their town that they are proud of every time be corrupted ^[5] totally. What an incisive irony it is here ^[5]!

It is quite simple at the beginning of the story, a town is famous for its people's honesty and integrity and makes its neighboring town jealous. "A young man hailed from Hadleyburg was all the recommendation he needed when he went forth from his natal town to seek responsible employment." If allured by a large sack of gold, what would the townspeople do, readers may think? There is no doubt that a truly righteous man will not have any thought of keeping it for his own, however, a hypocrite will be the opposite ^[6]. The first portrayed townspeople are Mr. and Mrs. Richards. When Mr. Richards found the gold in his own house and read the note that the stranger left about finding his benefactor. "Why, we're rich, Mary, rich; all we've got to do is to bury the money and burn the papers. If the gambler ever comes to inquire, we'll merely look coldly upon him and say: 'What is this nonsense you are talking! We have ever heard of you and your sack of gold before'; and then he would look foolish..." So it appears that the instinct of greed hidden in Mr. Richards' mask of good begins to awake at that time. However, being honest is the tenet etched in their mind and fulfilling this commission is the thing they are used to, so Mr. Richards has to slaughter the deepest desire unwillingly and publishes the letter in a local newspaper to make sure everyone is announced fairly. Most importantly, he thinks what he decides to do is a kind of honor. But not before long, both of them regret to send the letter away for they are aware of the foolishness of themselves because they could possess the sack of gold. That's this ambivalent thought that pushes them to carry out clumsy responses. Against their own will but do righteous things to keep the fame of the town, they fall into infinite depression. Catching and depicting the delicateness and complication of the character's psychological changes is quite Mark Twain's thing. It usually makes readers want to laugh out and then may heave a sigh, it is very hard to be a good man. A poignant irony is expressed here easily. An image of a hypocritical man of virtue unfolds before readers' eyes ^[7].

Then the story works up to a climax, as the entire town puzzles themselves over the maxim the passing stranger was told by his benefactor, which is worth 40 000 dollars, they receive a letter that indicates that they could be the owner of the sack of gold for they have done. Barclay Goodson, a kind citizen of Hadleyburg, thrills them all and the next day with so great excitement, the men's wives plan how to spend such a large sum of money while the men work themselves into a frenzy to plot what great thing they have done. Here readers may have great interest in witnessing the scene they meet one another. The next day town hall verifies the remark in the envelope, and Goodson finds that he has 19 envelopes delivered by the 19 gentlemen. This is the most climactic part, since the remark: "You are far from being a bad man. Go, and reform." What they write in the envelopes is identical, thus it proves that the honesty is just a masquerade, betrayed by their money-worship mind ^[8]. The announcement of the signature from the chairman's lips is just like a sentence of death for their morals, making everyone so embarrassed and humiliated. And all of them are ashamed of their greed and selfishness and full of chagrins. At this time, another dramatic scene comes, the chairman reads another letter from the passing stranger, saying: "There is no test mark. Nobody made one. There wasn't any pauper stranger, twenty-dollar contribution, nor any accompanying benediction and compliment. These are all made-up..." All the townspeople are shocked, but what's more dramatic is that they then learn that the gold is not the real gold but being gilded, feeling insulted yet cannot get angry but disgraced. They have a very high reputation for honesty and are proud of it, but now it proves to be so vulnerable. Fell in the trap set by the passing stranger, they corrupt their reputation, the treasure of treasures, the very apple of their eyes. At this moment, Hadleyburg has been corrupted in their own hands ^[9].

However, the story is far from the end. Another climax appears here. Mr. Burgess keeps Mr. Richards's letter and does not speak out his name because he once helped him. To his big surprise, compared with the other gentlemen, he is honored as the only nobleman in Hadleyburg, who never has the idea to pocket the gold sack and gets others' applause and respect. As a fraud to be regarded as a superhero, his feelings can't be described by any words, amazed but amused. Mark Twain here uses the technique to highly praise the character however, as a matter of fact, the denouncement goes beneath the words ^[10]. On the one hand, Mr. and Mrs. Richards enjoy the honors brought by the vanity. On the other hand, they suffer the innermost torments as they received the compliment and glorification so that when the stranger sends the check Mr. Richards is afraid that it would be another trap to test him. "Put them in the fire! Quick! We mustn't be tempted. It is a trick to make the world laugh at us..." But the moment he takes the check from his wife and is ready to put it in the fire, his hand holds back quickly unconsciously and the reaching and shrinking of his hands express the complexion of his mind vividly. He is such a hypocritical man and always cares for nothing but money. How can he not be tempted by money? It is his ugly trait that is expressed under the pen of the writer ^[11].

As for the end of the story, Mark Twain exerts his skills to a very high degree. Having a guilty conscience, Mr. And Mrs. Richards feel the sermon at the church seems to bristle with accusations, suspecting that Mr. Burgess holds their testify-remark back on purpose and then divulges it to make them notorious. Anxious, frightened, and ashamed, the old couple has been suddenly taken ill and in a state of mental disorder, not long before they die one after another. "The last of the sacred Nineteen had fallen prey to the fiendish sack. The town was stripped of the last rag of its ancient glory. Its mourning was not showy, but it was deep." The motto which has graced the town's official seal for a few generations is removed. The former motto is "Lead us not into temptation" and the revised one is "Lead us into temptation." This is where the story ends. Not only the dishonesty of the townspeople but their odious image of being so greedy for money is sarcastically exposed under the pen of the writer ^[12].

The weakest of all weak things is a virtue that has not been tested in the fire. Mr. Richards is the epitome of

the bourgeoisie thus in this manner, it is the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie that the writer satirizes. The setting, a famed town for its good reputation of honesty and uprightness, is an irony of the capitalist society which seems to be quite bright and promising. The passing stranger who contrives an “evil plan” to stain it seems like to be the man that corrupted Hadleyburg but on the contrary, it is the townspeople themselves who are deprived of the town’s glory step by step and their deformed souls are disclosed as readers laugh out loud. The construction of the plot is so crafty, where Mark Twain exerts the art of humor and irony incisively and vividly, and a hint of sarcasm to the bourgeoisie at his time is revealed profoundly ^[13].

The Man that Corrupted Hadleberg is a novella by American realist novelist Mark Twain. Hadleyburg, known for its honesty and nobility, enjoys the reputation of being an indestructible municipality. But once, it offended a stranger who was passing by, and he decided to retaliate by ruining the town. The work is adept at structural layout, inspired by a bag of gold coins from a stranger, and then driven by mysterious informant letters to develop the plot, reaching the climax of a gathering of townspeople, which is naturally compact and dramatic. The lingering sound of the ending of the evil is also very intriguing. It depicts a group ugly picture of capitalist society, exposing the hypocritical and greedy nature of the bourgeoisie hidden under the moral veil. One day, a stranger left a bag of gold coins at the home of the cashier Richards and left a note saying: “I lost all my gambling back then, but luckily, thanks to the help and advice of an unknown person in the town, I am today. To thank my benefactor, he put a sealed letter in the money bag with the words of advice written on it. Whoever seals that sentence and hands it over to the notary public. Pastor Bergers, has it opened and verified in public, to find out who is the owner of the gold coins.” After the news was announced, 19 of the town’s top citizens and their wives regarded this matter as an honor for the town, and everyone speculated that the benefactor might be the late Goodson. Dig out hollow thoughts one by one and guess that sentence. A person who claimed to be involved in the gambling industry sent the same letter containing that sentence to 19 households, so they all quietly applied to the pastor. When the meeting was opened and verified, it was discovered that there was no such thing at all, and the gold coins were all gold-plated lead blocks. 18 companies made a fool of themselves in public, but only Richards’s name was suppressed by the pastor because he thought he had been kind to him. So, Richards was hailed as the “cleanest person in the whole town.” The public decided to reward the Richards couple, but they were ashamed and worried every day. Soon after, they fell ill and confessed on their deathbed, admitting that they had also applied for a money bag and revealed the truth. The reputation of Hadleyburg has been completely tarnished. It effectively reveals the ugly nature of the big bourgeoisie and the truth of bourgeois politics, deepening the theme of the work ^[14].

Mark Twain’s clever plot arrangement in *The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg* brings his biting satire and hilarious humor to the forefront. On the one hand, it is hilarious, and on the other hand, it is thought-provoking. He criticizes the hypocritical and greedy mentality of the people in the small town in the face of the temptation of money, and also reveals the ugly essence of materialism in society, mocking the bourgeoisie’s greed for money and shameless behavior ^[15]. The work uses seemingly exaggerated and skillful artistic strokes to depict a group ugly picture of capitalist society, exposing the hypocritical and greedy nature of the bourgeoisie hidden under the moral veil. At the end of the article, Richards’s deep reflection on honesty also reflects a glimmer of optimism in Mark Twain’s biting satire and humor art. In the face of various temptations of money, power, and status, people must bravely admit it before they can bravely resist it.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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