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Mark twain's Solutions to the Ills of Mankind: A Humanistic Assessment

Abstract

This paper is aimed at comprehending the shady character of a man with sin microbes and

Mark Twain's possible solution to the perennial ills of mankind. Mark Twain in his inimitable style tries to reform man from his perversions and hypocrisy while exploring the ways and means for ensuring freedom, dignity and happiness. He urges man to follow conscience that ensures a sound heart. He also advises man to tread the path of spirituality for moral regeneration. Besides this, Mark also recommends laughter as the most potent and effective medicine that cures physical as well as mental illness. He advocates the greater role for a woman in politics in order to build corrupt free society founded on morals and ethics.

Mark Twain thought like a lion and wrote like a lion. As an insatiable moral lion he makes mincemeat of kings, nobles, Congressmen, the clergy, the greedy, the dishonest, the cruel, the fraudulent, the morally timid, the mean and the hypocritical. The moral flaws and the immoral actions of man prompted Mark Twain to assume a strategic pose of misanthropy and pessimism so as to rebuke man, and reform him of his evil proclivities and blatant perversions even while exploring ways and means of securing him freedom, dignity and happiness by ushering in an ideal society sustained by secular, moral and humanistic values.

Having identified man's inhumanity to man as the basic flaw in the character of man, Mark Twain offers suggestions for his moral regeneration. "Morals are of inestimable value, for every man is born crammed with sin microbes, and the only thing that can extirpate these sin microbes is morals."¹ He wants every man to be guided by his conscience or inner voice that ensures a sound heart. A sound heart in turn expresses itself in compassion which according to Mark Twain is religion in its true sense.

This religion of compassion can best be seen in the character of Joan of Arc as portrayed by Mark Twain. He claims that being morally incorruptible; women can help bring about the moral regeneration of man. He avers that the influence of women in politics will reduce corruption and improve the calibre of elected representatives since women vote on the side of morality. He avers: "She (woman) is the source of morals; states are founded on morals not on intellect."²

However, Mark Twain knows that human life is full of suffering and tragedy. He conceives a philosophical solution to this perennial ailment of man. Mark Twain seems to be asking man through Philip Traum to look at life philosophically and unsentimentally. He would like every man to take stock of the course of his life and reorganize his activities to the advantage of all concerned. What Mark Twain seems to suggest is that one must be conscious of one's actions and be alive to their consequences. He is evidently trying to view and the world as

anthropocentric rather than as theo-centric in the fond hope that man and his lot would improve in that contingency. Mark Twain seems to have an optimistic belief in the collective power of the human mind to create a new world. In fact, he expects every man to be an optimistic so as to be able to solve some of the problems of life successfully. But the pessimism, which some critics find in Mark Twain, is located in his lofty and perfectionist ideals and humanity.

Mark Twain advocates the right type of training or education for realizing his lofty and perfectionist ideals and humanity. By effecting a qualitative change or improvement in man's conduct, training or education is supposed to benefit not only the individual concerned but also the entire society as the Old man indicates to the Young man in "What is Man?".³ In fact, Mark Twain claims that training or education can change cabbage into cauliflower. His concept of training or education means preparing ideal beings capable of meeting the challenges of life. As conscious voluntary exercise training gets the better of heredity and nature, and helps man live a pure, high and blameless life. Without proper training in the right direction, elevation is not possible. It lifts man to angel ship. Mark Twain notes: "Let us endeavour so to live that when we come to die even the undertaker will be sorry."⁴

Mark Twain projects travel as a means of education. He makes Prince Edward and King Arthur undertake travels, understands the problems of their subjects at firsthand and acquire a fullness. Mark Twain finds that the world is divided into mutually hostile and narrow compartments on the basis of colour, caste, race or nationality, and advocates travel for universal peace, understanding and enlightenment since travel develops in man a perspective and breadth of vision by removing prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness. Mark Twain himself undertook thirty-four long journeys and crossed the Atlantic twenty-seven times to gather "materials" for his books. He read much, and observed men and situations, and understood them to a large extent. All these things enlarged his outlook and

made his patriotism embrace all humanity. Contact with vast spaces and distances and towering masses expanded his soul. He seems to be speaking through Aubrey when the latter observes in Joan of Arc: "God gives us minds to think just and charitable and honourable thoughts".⁵

Besides the moral regeneration of man, Mark Twain advocates an ideal commonwealth in which man is emancipated from a backward abyss of barbarism to a utopian future of happiness and justice for all. Real progress lies in this historical process. In the "preface" to the 'The Glided Age', Mark Twain with his collaborator, Charles Dudley Warner, speaks of a state "where there is no fever of speculation, no inflamed desire for sudden wealth, where the poor are all simple minded and contented, and the rich are all honest and generous, where society is in a condition of primitive purity and politics is the occupation of only the capable and the patriotic." We may find an echo of Mark Twain's republic in Tagore's heaven of freedom.

Besides denouncing the inhuman civilization of the Gilded Age, Mark Twain advocates revolution as the only panacea for the liberation of man from the inhuman institutions that foster oppression and enslavement of man. While Helen Keler sees in Mark Twain a burning soul, C. E. Carpentred finds in him a lion and a fighter. Mark Twain himself wants every oppressed man to be a revolutionary and a fighter like himself. In fact, he advocated rebellion, a bloody rebellion, as the last resort, for the total destruction of the inhuman political and religious institutions which have perpetrated countless crimes against mankind. His concern for the toiling masses is supreme. However, Mark Twain seems to have left the experiment of making a peaceful revolution succeed to another being, the exponent of Satyagraha, namely, Mahatma Gandhi. Successful rebellions can be organized only when the people are vigilant and united as in the story 'The Great Revolution in Pitcairn.' He wants the people to unite and assert themselves and find their own popular

leaders who can look after their interests, leaders like Martin Luther and Joan of Arc whose temperaments are not made of butter but of asbestos.

We have seen that Mark Twain advocates bloody revolutions as a last resort for the greater good of the masses, but he is essentially a pacifist. He wants a transformation of the human through education and peaceful means eschewing all force and violence since they are destructive and counterproductive. He calls for peaceful settlement of disputes between nations. In “The War prayer” he has show that war is atrocious, inhuman and senseless. Being fully aware of the brutalities committed by colonial powers in foreign lands, he proposes gradual reduction in the military strength of the great powers first and other nations next so as to tame the human race. Mark Twain’s views on war, disarmament and relations between nations as between different communities, expressed much before the two world wars and other regional wars of the twentieth century, seem to have found currency in the present day world. For instance, Mark Twain’s concern over war and human destiny is voiced by Jean E. Charon when he advocates love as the new language of humanity⁶. Similarly, man’s propensity to put science to destructive uses is highlighted by Geddes MacGregor when he expressed his apprehension that man may use the atom to annihilate himself⁷. The concern voiced by both Charon and MacGregor shows relevance of Mark Twain’s ideas. Although Mark Twain speaks against the destructive use of science, he knows its importance in bringing about a new civilisation and a better order of things. He gives a glimpse of the benefits of science in *A Connecticut Yankee*. He regards Gutenberg, Watt, Arkwright, Whitney, Morse, Stephenson and Bell as the creators of a new world after God. Mark Twain’s faith in science is so much that he wants religion to be replaced by science in the field of education – his antipathy towards religion is so much for all the atrocities it has committed against innocent people.

Consistent with his antipathy towards the institutions that oppress and enslave man, is

Mark Twain's advocacy of man's freedom and dignity. He lays more trust in the powers of man than in special providence and preference. He suggests that there is no substitute for work. Man's prosperity, progress and fate depend upon the amount of work he does and its quality. Therefore, Mark Twain advocates self-help for the emancipation of man. Captain Stormfield finds a very effective work ethic in heaven. One gets the work one wants and wages depend upon work. Mark Twain implies that if this work ideal were adopted on earth, this earth itself would become a heaven. This underscores the importance of work in human life and the encouragement it deserves.

A firm believer in the work ethic, Mark Twain naturally has a soft corner for the working classes. He asserts that a worker like a horse is stronger than the master, so a time has come when he should become the master himself. He also feels that to achieve their rights the working classes must unite and impress the capitalists with their numbers. He advocates class conflict as a means of securing some rights for the proletariat as in *The Connecticut Yankee*. As appeals will only fall on deaf ears and soft words cannot penetrate hard hearts, Mark Twain believes in organized labour as the only effective weapon in the hands of working classes. Hank Morgan seems to voice his opinion when he observes that a man must be his own property and so must be associated with the fixing his own pay. Mark Twain believes that workers are the real builders of empires and civilizations, creators of wealth and the instruments of revolutions and democracies.

However, Mark Twain's sympathy and compassion are not reserved merely for the toiling masses but for the entire human race. His works demonstrate how with all his infirmities and inferiorities, man is unequal to the complex challenges of life. Therefore, he recommends the most potent and effective medicine to the sore body and spirit of mankind, namely, laughter. The function of laughter is two-fold to provide a healing touch to the bruised body and spirit of man and to serve as a weapon to destroy his pretension and

juvenilities. Through these two functions laughter insures man against the adverse forces of the world. One must learn to laugh when one is hurt the most like Roxie and Aunt Rachel. If one leans not to take the world too seriously and if one can laugh at it, then one is said to be free. Mark Twain's theory of laughter is one of his major contributions to man's philosophy of life. It may be construed as his answer to the critics who see in him a prophet of doom. In fact, his views on laughter mark his heroic and resounding victory over life's miseries.

Maxwell Geismar observes: "The famous 'black despair' of Mark Twain's final period has undergone the purgation of his own irrepressible humour". Laughter, as conceived by Mark Twain creates a distance between man and his world, and enables him to see the world philosophically with a sense of objective detachment and equanimity. Mark Twain's final wisdom makes the world worth loving and life worth living. It rescues man from despair and renews his interest in life. This is optimism of the highest degree and it shows that life is meant to be lived.

Thus, Mark Twain suggests his own solutions to the perennial ills of mankind. Of course, some solutions such as those pertaining to laughter sound too philosophical: some referring to revolution look too radical: while a few such as those advocating a greater role for women seem too naïve, and the others such as those advocating replacement of religion by science are too simplistic and impracticable. But all the solutions convey a sense of urgency and a concern for the moral standards, freedom, dignity, welfare and happiness of man. This seems to be the purport of Mark Twain's message and the basis of his utopia founded on the fulcrum of humanism of the anthropocentric variety.

Since, there seems to be very little difference between the late nineteenth century and the late twentieth century in the moral, political, social and economic conditions of man, the solutions offered by Mark Twain assume greater and greater significance and relevance.

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