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GREAT ANNIVERSARY OF A *TALL TALE* BY THE FIRST THOROUGHLY AMERICAN WRITER

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to remind the readership that these days mark the 150th anniversary of publication of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County", Mark Twain's short story that in 1867 gave its title to his own first book. To be remembered is also the fact that Mark Twain was the first thoroughly American writer, who, unlike his literary predecessors and contemporaries, by conscious choice turned his back upon Europe. He held no reverence for ancient institutions and customs of the Old World and refused to celebrate its art, history, and cultural tradition. Accordingly, he also rejected the established patterns and conventions of English literature that shaped American writing up to the Civil War. He turned to his native land seeking to explore its resources in the realm of subject matter and language, as American reality of his days offered him rich material for story telling. His American types, localities, problems and situations are presented with vividness and familiarity of the first-hand experience, joined by his resolute experiment in language – he was the first to investigate the possibilities that American idiom offered for serious writing. He found the colloquial speech of common Americans a flexible, colourful, although sometimes

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vulgar, medium of expression, more stimulating than the intricate examples of educated and polite British English.

Key words: humour, *tall tales*, story telling, plain American vernacular, autobiographical elements.

Introduction

Any discussion of Mark Twain's fiction should begin with an assertion that he is more than a humorist or an author for children. Although true, neither term defines his title to greatness; the fact that he is both adds largely to the esteem and popularity he enjoys, especially as a severe critic of the Gilded Age[1] in which he lived. However, the social criticism in his widely read works did not detract from the human interest, and this is perhaps what really makes him great and unique. And as for the vein of humour, it is true that '... there was something in his disposition which prevented him from putting his life on paper until it had been transmitted by humor, imagination, or (as it developed later) indignation' (Bode *et al*., 1971: 454).

Twain's fiction derives from several sources of which the South-Western humour (Lynn, 1959) was, perhaps, the most fruitful. These camp or bar-room stories constituted the most striking and colourful element of the frontier folklore. The contrast between the custom of the frontier and that of the settled areas offered numerous possibilities of fun-making with a naive newcomer as the favorite butt of practical jokes and tricks. The most popular *tall tales*, i.e. stories of boasting, bragging and exaggeration, were elaborate exercises in wit and imagination in which the ability to outdo the opponent and maintain listeners' attention counted as high as the skill of

[1] According to the entry offered by Hurwitz (1974: 291): The period of American life that extended roughly from the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the 1880's gained its name from the novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner. As in the book, which satirizes corruption in politics and the coarse manners of the *nouveau riche*, the age was characterized by an emphasis on get-rich-quick methods of doing business. Despite its unflattering cognomen, the period was marked by great national growth and impressive cultural achievements.

Charles Dudley Warner (1829–1900) was an American essayist, novelist, and friend of Mark Twain's. Born of Puritan descent in Plainfield, Massachusetts, graduated from Hamilton College, Clinton, NY. Warner travelled widely, lectured frequently, and was actively interested in prison reform, city park supervision, and other movements for the public good. He was the first president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and, at the time of his death, was president of the American Social Science Association.

ending them with a completely unexpected twist or punch line. Unembarrassed by their vulgarity, violence, or brutality, these narratives mixed comically with nonsense, zest for life with bustling energy, physical as well as verbal. This odd combination of their characteristics gained them first attention, then popularity among the reading public until they came to be recognized by general and literary magazines of national importance as a separate subclass of short stories.

The jumping frog that made all the difference

The post-Civil War literary scene was dominated by magazines which offered beginners a chance of reaching the reading public, establishing reputation, and gaining a regular, although perhaps modest, income. These practical reasons were of prime importance, first of all because few American publishers were willing to take the risk of publishing a novel by an unknown writer when reprinting a famous English novelist meant an assured financial success. In addition, there was also the financial logic of selling the same piece twice – first to a magazine, and later to a publishing house. Like most of his contemporaries, Mark Twain wrote largely for the magazines, for all these reasons.

"The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" is Twain's famous first *tall tale*, his first great success as a writer, the short story that brought him national attention. It was originally published under the title "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog", appearing also as "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County". In it, the narrator retells a story he heard from a bartender, Simon Wheeler, at the Angels Hotel in Angels Camp, California, about the gambler Jim Smiley, described as "the curiousest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see", with many other words and depictions by the narrator (Twain, 1865; Bode *et al*. 1971: 460):

> … If there was a horse-race, you'd find him flush, or you'd find him busted at the end of it; if there was a dog-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a cat-fight, he'd bet on it; if there was a chicken-fight, he'd bet on it; why, if there was two birds sitting on a fence, he would bet you which one would fly first; or if there was a camp-meeting, he would be there reg'lar, to bet on Parson Walker, which he judged to be the best exorter about here, and so he was, too, and a good man.

In the story, the narrator is asked by a friend to interview the old man, Simon Wheeler, who might know the whereabouts of an old acquaintance named Leonidas W. Smiley. The narrator manages to find Simon at the "decayed mining camp of Angel's", and now asks the fat, bald-headed man about Leonidas. Simon's answer is that he doesn't know a Leonidas Smiley, but he knows a Jim Smiley, and his story about Jim

starts immediately – Jim Smiley loves to bet, he bets on anything, from the death of Parson Walker's wife to fights between his bulldog pup (named Andrew Jackson[2] [!]) and other dogs…

Once, Jim caught a frog and named it Dan'l Webster[3] [!]. For three months, he trained the frog to jump, and at the end of those three months the frog could jump over more ground than any other. Jim carried the frog around in a box all the time. Inevitably, one day a stranger to the town asks Jim what is in his box, and Jim, of course, says that it is a frog that can outjump any other frog in Calaveras County. The stranger responds that the frog doesn't look any different from the other frogs of Calaveras, so he cannot be the best. If he had a frog, the stranger tells Jim, he would bet 40 dollars that his frog could beat Jim's. Jim impatiently naively agrees to the bet and gives the box to the stranger to hold, while he hunts for another frog for the stranger. While he is catching the new frog, the stranger pours lead shot into the mouth of Jim's frog [!].

When Jim returns, he and the stranger arrange the frogs for the contest; they align the frogs evenly, and on the count of three they let them loose. The freshly-caught frog jumps away, but Dan'l Webster doesn't move [!]. Quite naturally, Jim is surprised and disgusted. He gives the money to the stranger, who happily leaves. Of course, Jim wonders why Dan'l looks so heavy. He takes the frog and tips him upside down; the frog coughs up handfuls of shot [!]. Jim sets the frog down and chases after the stranger. The stranger is long gone, however, and Jim never catches him…

The point in his story comes now when Simon is called away by someone on the front porch, and he tells the narrator to remain seated. The narrator realizes Jim Smiley is not at all related to Leonidas W. Smiley, and prepares to leave. However, Simon catches the narrator at the door and starts telling him another story – this time about Jim's one-eyed cow. The narrator excuses himself and leaves, flees.

This story is also the title story of the 1867 collection *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*, Twain's first book, that collected 27

[2] Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) was the seventh President of the United States (1829–1837).

[3] Daniel Webster (1782–1852) was a leading senator and statesman, the outstanding spokesman for American nationalism with powerful oratory. He spoke for conservatives, and led the opposition to Andrew Jackson and his Democratic Party. He was a spokesman for modernization, banking, and industry, but not for the common people who composed the base of his opponents in Jacksonian Democracy.

short stories previously published in magazines and newspapers. Twain first wrote the title short story at the request of his friend Artemus Ward[4], for inclusion in an upcoming book. He worked on two versions, but he was simply not satisfied – neither got around to describing the jumping frog contest. Twain was pressed by the friend again, but by the time he invented a version he was ready to submit, that book was already nearing publication, so Ward sent it instead to *The Saturday Press*, where it appeared as "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog". Twain's colourful story was unexpectedly enormously popular, and was soon printed in many different magazines and newspapers. Twain developed the idea further, and published this new version (with Smiley's name changed to Greeley) in *The Californian* only a month later, this time titled "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County".

The new and strengthened popularity of the tale initiated Twain to use the story to anchor his own first book, which appeared in 1867 with a first issue run of one thousand copies. The first edition was issued in seven colours (blue, brown, green, lavender, plum, red, and terra-cotta), and has been sought by book collectors ever since, as it brings to its holders thousands of dollars at auctions. In the book version, Twain changed Greeley back to Smiley.

When Twain discovered a French translation of this story, he back-translated it into English, word for word, retaining the French grammatical structure and syntax. He then published all three versions under the title "The Jumping Frog: in English, then in French, and then Clawed Back into a Civilized Language Once More by Patient, Unremunerated Toil". The title itself, as well as the very idea behind it, serve to prove the author's extraordinary talent for the use of language, for the play of words, and for further exploiting such throughout his career as "the tongue of the American writer", as put by Ziff (2004: 4):

> In the latter half of the [nineteenth] century Twain, who entered enthusiastically into the values of a culture marked by aggressive commercial practice and hungering social aspiration, wrote,

[4] Artemus Ward is the *nom de plume* (pen name, literary double) of Charles Farrar Browne (1834-1867), a United States humor writer, born in Waterford, Maine. He began life as a compositor and occasional contributor to the daily and weekly journals. In 1858, he published his first story of the "Artemus Ward" series, which, in a collected form, achieved great popularity in both America and England. Artemus Ward was the favorite author of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln, and is also known to have inspired Mark Twain. In 1866, Ward visited England, where he became popular both as a lecturer and as a contributor to *Punch*. In the spring of 1867, his health gave way and he died at Southampton.

correspondingly, in the vernacular of those immersed in the hurly-burly; that is, in the speech of Americans. His success in making that speech achieve subtle moral effects through humor revolutionized American literary expression, and in the wake of his achievement colloquial language shed the quotation marks it had previously worn to quarantine it from contaminating the literary language of the text and became the tongue of the American writer.

Excitements offered by travel accounts

Twain's narrative method developed out of, or was marked by, his early exercise in travel sketches. Immensely popular, these personal accounts combined thorough descriptions of foreign places, scenery, monuments, and curiosities with detailed practical advice about how to profit by and enjoy travelling while avoiding its hazards. The sketches served the increasing numbers of American travellers as first guidebooks to Europe. To those who could not afford a European tour, they offered excitements of donated experience. Their informative character made them acceptable to the strict moralists and pragmatists who held fiction in contempt. Travel books contained facts, while the personal touch of sentiment or humor rendered them entertaining at the same time. In many ways *Innocents Abroad* (1869) is a typical travel book of the day, although with humorous incidents and observations not found in the usual guidebook, as put by Hurwitz (1974: 117). It grew out of Twain's letters for the San Francisco *Alta California* and the New York *Tribune*, written during his cruise to Europe, Egypt, and the Holy Land in 1867. In them Twain assumes a mask of total ignorance to ridicule his fellow travellers as much as their European guides. He stubbornly refuses to worship the Old World just because it is ancient. His mocking irony blends with genuine horror at poverty and abuses he perceives there. Yet his continuous praise of everything American sounds almost defensive. Twain must have found the narrative structure of a travel book congenial, for he used the same temporal and spatial arrangement of episodes in his later fiction. In a way, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is but a record of another innocent's travel abroad, some fifteen years later, when the author's personal experience from his trips '... permitted him to recapture the peculiar flavor of a boy's attitude toward life ...' (Bode *et al*., 1971: 454).

Nostalgic about the past, local in colour

The novels and stories authored by Mark Twain[5] retell much of his personal experience as if his own memory was the richest and most reliable store of lifelike situations, characters, and incidents, which is what makes his writing largely autobiographical (Kaplan, 1966). The proportions between factual and fictional parts vary considerably from a condensed but fairly straightforward account of his apprenticeship as a cub-pilot in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), to a consciously composed and elaborate tale of his ideal boyhood in *The Advetures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). Somehow he can be faithful to minute details of setting, behaviour, or speech and idealistic or nostalgic about the past. This peculiar combination of realism and idealization brings him close to what is referred to as "local color" fiction which, for all the differences of mood and purpose, was a spontaneous response to the main current of events that carried the post-Civil War America away from rural, provincial sectionalism toward national politics and economy.

Like Twain, colorists described places and people they knew at first hand and loved, the world which was rapidly disappearing under the pressures of expanding industry and urbanization. Whether written for pure entertainment or criticism, they record the fondly remembered peculiarities before these fade away. This desire to preserve gave incentive to minutely accurate descriptions of the life of the region and an earnest effort to note down oddities of local speech. These two elements bring the entire movement, and Mark Twain, within the mainstream of American realism.

Twain's personal dream about good old days in Hannibal, Missouri, or on the Mississippi did not blind him to the cruelties, violence, and injustice of the ante-bellum South. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) is perhaps the most perceptive accusation of the inequities of slavery. In the story of Tom Driscoll and Chambers, Twain does more than depict a slave's ordinary trials and miseries. He tries to assess psychological damage done permanently to both the Black and his white master. The novel is also memorable for the excellent portrait of Roxana, a slave, because she is one-sixteenth black. Roxana

[5] As explained by Hurwitz (1974: 426–427), the very name of MARK TWAIN is in fact an important element of such store: The chant, by the men on Mississippi River steamboats who called the soundings, indicated the sounding at two fathoms, or twelve feet. The term was made famous by the novelist, Samuel Clemens, who took it as his pen name.

is fully alive in all shades of human emotions: cunning and passionate, she is as convincing in her tenderness, blind devotion, and self-sacrifice as she is in fear, anger, or mischief.

A comparable exploration of the essential humanity of a slave lies at the core of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). After many days spent on the raft, and many a misadventure, Huck becomes convinced that "Jim is white inside". This concise phrase sums up his recognition of Jim's humanity which leads him to risk his own salvation in helping Jim escape. Writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Twain was keenly aware of the prevailing convention which presented the old South as a pastoral country of beautiful women, well-mannered gentlemen, eternal yet benign sunshine amidst rose and magnolia blossoms. In short it was the land of high breeding, tender sentiment, and chivalry – all of which Twain exposed as superficial if not directly false. In sleepy Dawson's Landing (*Pudd'nhead Wilson*) fear and greed errupt in crime, while St. Petersburg (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*) seems almost edenic, except for violence, murder, and robbery lurking on its verge.

Wit – weapon against abuse

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn contains a terrifying picture of the South made up of rogues and their victims, of the kind but stupid, and smart but unscrupulously wicked. Huck relates his story of cruelty, violence, greed, duplicity, and vice with a calm detachment of a child so used to wickedness that it fails to shock or frighten him. His experience of the South contradicts the sentimental approach of popular fiction. Hence, by the end of his journey down the river, Huck identifies the "civilized" society with falsehood and corruption which leave no room for the values of the raft – friendship, freedom, honesty, peace. His final decision "to light out for the Territory" is an act of affirmation as much as of renunciation. The idyll of the raft could not continue forever – the further South they drifted the fewer their chances for a positive solution to their adventure. Twain was also too well aware that the American society he knew and described could not accommodate the ideal relation such as the one between Huck and Jim, nor could it accept Huck's new self-consciousness. The only way out was to send Huck to the wilderness "ahead of the rest". Thus Huck joins the long line of American *innocents* who, having suffered trials and tribulations in established society, leave it for a more primitive but sane and moral world of nature.

Huck, who is twelve or thirteen, is big enough to survive more or less on his own but he is still a child, still in need to be protected and guided. Confronted with evil or malice he is as helpless as Jim, wit being his only weapon against abuse. It is significant that in every new confrontation Huck invents a new name for himself and a

new, larger family story in which he is the only survivor. His quick imagination and inventiveness in piling up family disasters supply plenty of humor, yet it would be a mistake to overlook their seriousness. One is tempted to argue that Huck's adventures which begin ritual-like with an elaborate staging of his own death are, in fact, a subconscious quest for a father, for a family, i.e. for a network of human relationships binding one to society.

What contains the possibility of communicating the hero's immediate impressions is the first person narrative. Huck sees the world as if for the first time – with fresh, innocent eyes uninfluenced by social conventions or preconceived ideas. He seems to see everything, notes facts as well as impressions with utmost accuracy. He may comment on the events he witnesses or participates in, but seldom speaks out in judgement. Noting down his thoughts and emotions he always stresses that his point of view is strictly personal: "I thought…", "I says…", etc. He seems to believe he is too young or too ignorant to condemn his elders and presumably his betters. His humility keeps him entrapped in false notions of morality. Huck accepts the prevailing social standards as valid and true, therefore condemning his own wickedness of helping a runaway slave. He fails to realize that his heart is sounder than his head or that his intuitive sense of what is right and moral is truer than man-made laws. The conflict between his heart and his head, i.e. between what is inborn or spontaneous and what is taught by or absorbed from his social milieu, adds vivacity and color to his account. It becomes a source of additional suspense as important, in fact, as the reader's concern about the outcome of his adventures, and that adds to the fact that this novel '… manages better than any other American novel up to the time to provoke that "willing suspension of disbelief" that Coleridge considered the essential effect of imaginative literature.' (Bode *et al*., 1971: 455).

Playing with the language

Master of both situational and character humor, Twain is at his best when playing with language. A good, although somewhat "neutral", example of his mastery at play of words and using the language to shape his style and initially attract his reader is offered by his Preface to *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882):

> I will set down a tale as it was told to me by one who had it of his father, which latter had it of *his* father, this last having in like manner had it of *his* father, and so on, back and still back, three hundred years and more, the fathers transmitting it to the sons and so preserving it. It may be history, it may be only a legend, a tradition. It may have happened, it may not have happened; but it *could* have happened. It may be that the wise

> and the learned believed it in the old days; it may be that only the unlearned and the simple loved it and credited it.

As for the use of language in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's mispronunciations and misuse of more sophisticated words are hilarious, yet they constitute but a small part of Twain's linguistic ingenuity. The novel is the first great one written not in standard, educated English but in plain American vernacular: given his choice of the narrator he could not do otherwise if he wanted his tale to sound "realistic". Twain uses colloquial speech consistently, yet Huck's peculiar variety of English is further enriched by dialectal forms used by other characters in the novel.

The novel begins with a Notice from someone named G. G., who is identified as the Chief of Ordnance. The Notice demands that no one try to find a motive, moral, or plot in the novel, on pain of various and sundry punishments. The Notice is followed by an Explanatory note from the Author, which states that the attention to dialects in the book has been painstaking and is extremely true-to-life in mimicking the peculiar verbal tendencies of individuals along the Mississippi. It assures the reader that if he or she feels that the characters in the book are "trying to talk alike but failing", then the reader is mistaken. The Notice and Explanatory set the tone for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through their mixing of humor and seriousness. In its declaration that anyone looking for motive, plot, or moral will be prosecuted, banished, or shot, the Notice establishes a sense of blustery comedy that pervades the rest of the novel. The Explanatory takes on a slightly different tone, still full of a general good-naturedness but also brimming with authority. In the final paragraph, Twain essentially dares the reader to believe that he might know or understand more about the dialects of the South, and, by extension, the South itself. Twain's good nature stems in part from his sense of assurance that, should anyone dare to challenge him, he would certainly prove victorious.

As a true master of the language, Twain distinguishes and transcribes minor differences between Negro speech and white colloquialisms as well as between Missouri and Arkansas dialects. His greatest achievement, however, lies in flexibility and power of expression. Although "uncivilized", Huck never becomes vulgar, his profanities are mild indeed. Attuned to nature, Huck responds wholeheartedly to every natural phenomenon before his eyes. He is sensitive to changing scenery as much as to light and shadows playing on water. Using his personal idiom he, or rather the author, is able to describe accurately and poetically what he sees. Furthermore, he can articulate his personal response to it in full richness of his emotions, moods, and ideas, in doing so remaining simple but never simplistic. Praising Twain's linguistic virtuosity Ernest Hemingway (1935: 22) wrote:

> All Modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. ... it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

However, all this does not mean that the book's greatness was immediately recognized. Of the three novels that constitute a kind of trilogy, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), the last was least enthusiastically received. While the book is not without flaws (its end being the most conspicuous of them), the real reason was probably the undercurrent of gloom that began to be so visible in Twain's writings (Burt, 2004).

His later years strengthened this tendency even further, which relates to the piece of short fiction "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg", written in Europe in 1898 while the author was on a lecture tour, but in the first place to the novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), concentrating on the dark side of human personality (Bode *et al*., 1971). The novel's hero is named Hank Morgan, and it is not just a coincidence that, just like Huck Finn, he comes into a desperate conflict with reality, but while Huck can at least try to go West, Hank has no such recourse and has to die.

Instead of a conclusion: the only century worth living in

Twain's last work, *A Mysterious Stranger* (1897–1900), started several times, but never finished, testified to both his vanishing writing power and increasing pessimism: the author was already too bitter about mankind to be able to describe its problems. In 1909, he said (electronic source):

> I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.'

Mark Twain did die in 1910, on April 21, just a single day after the passing of Comet Halley! He was famous, but full of hatred towards others. He was a real genius, but his gravest paradox, which ultimately destroyed him as a writer, was that the people he portrayed so well were also the same people he came to despise. To be remembered, however, is the fact that he used to be a true lover of the century he lived in (Ziff, 2004: 3-4):

> Intoxicated with what he called "the drive and push and rush and struggle of the living, tearing, looming nineteenth, the mightiest of all the centuries!", it was, he said "the only century worth living in since time itself was invented." He recklessly participated in its excesses even as he exposed them to ridicule in his writings.

A good example remains of his excessive and somewhat bitter humour from the time when Mark Twain still stood new for Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who commented on the big success of his *Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* by maintaining that it was the frog that was celebrated, not its author. And there is a good example of a brief suggestion of how to define and remember him, found in Bode *et al*. (1971: 451):

> Born in the tradition of American humor, sustained by the contemporary interest in local color, and invigorated during his maturity by the rebellious spirit of the times, Samuel Langhorne Clemens was in many respects the climactic figure of American literature during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

These days mark the 150th anniversary of the publication of a *tall tale* that subsequently proved to be practically the starting point of the rise of this genius of both American language and literature.

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Слободан Д. Јовановић

ВЕЛИКА ГОДИШЊИЦА ЈЕДНЕ *ВИСОКЕ ПРИЧЕ* ПРВОГ ПОТПУНО АМЕРИЧКОГ ПИСЦА

Резиме: Овај рад је намерен да подсети читалаштво да се навршио век и по од настанка и објављивања кратке приче Марка Твена под насловом „Славна Жаба Скочица из Калавераса“ – “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County“, која је 1867. године дала и наслов његовој првој књизи – збирци од 27 прича претходно објављиваних у магазинима и новинама, под насловом *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches.* Непрестано, међутим, треба имати на уму и чињеницу да је Марк Твен први у потпуности амерички писац, стваралац који је, за разлику од својих књижевних претходника али и савременика, свесно и одлучно начинио корак удаљавања од Европе, окрећући леђа европској традицији. Он није слепо уважавао и следио давно укорењене институције и обичаје Старог света, и одбијао је да слави европску уметност, историју и културну традицију. У складу с тим, одбацивао је и успостављене обрасце и конвенције енглеске књижевности који су обликовали књижевно стваралаштво америчких писаца све до времена Грађанског рата. Он се обраћао својој родној земљи настојећи да истражи и изнесе све што она нуди и по питању тема за обраду и на терену језика, при чему му је америчка стварност његовог времена нудила обиље материјала за приповедање. Његови амерички карактери и ликови, одређена места и амбијенти, проблеми и ситуације изводе се из свакодневице и доброг увида на основу непосредног личног искуства, којима је прикључено и његово одважно експериментисање и поигравање језиком – био је први који је истраживао могућности типично америчког израза примењеног у озбиљном списатељству. Сматрао је да је колоквијални говор обичних Американаца елестичан, живописан, мада понекад и вулгаран медијум изражавања, у сваком случају живљи и стимулативнији од сложених калупа образованог и префињеног британског енглеског језика. Када се о његовом стваралаштву говори данас, више од века после смрти, сваку дискусију би требало почети инсистирањем на чињеници да је био нешто далеко више од хумористе и писца за децу и омладину. Истина је да је био и једно и друго, али мора да се зна да је био и много преко тога, онако потпуно обузет заносом и погоном узаврелог и незаустављивог деветнаестог века, у чијим је необузданостима и сам нехајно учествовао чак и онда када их је исмевао и изврgавао руглу у свом писању. У последњим деценијама живота огорчен догађајима и људима и у својим кратким

причама и у политичким и филозофским есејима нудио је мисао испуњену песимизмом и заједљивом сатиром, али је и то умногоме допринело да само десет година после смрти буде укључен у Кућу славних коју је Њујоршки универзитет покренуо 1900. године.

Кључне речи: хумор, *високе приче*, приповедање, обичан амерички говор, аутобиографски елементи.

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