

A Study on the Construction of Americanism in Mark Twain's Works

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Abstract

American Writer Mark Twain in his works vividly records social changes caused by the industrialization in the 19th century. His writing could be regarded as a kind of construction of Americanism. He insists on advocating of Puritanism, using the American dialect to tell American stories, displaying the culture in American West and South. He employs humor and irony to combine American history with reality, getting rid of influences of the British literature to illustrate Americanism and the historical process of America.

Keywords: Mark Twain, Americanism, Puritanism, history, reality

1. Introduction

As a necessary part of national culture, literature plays a very important role in the process of constructing national culture and national spirit. In America which is a multicultural country, the definition of Americanism also changes with the historical process. The openness of American culture has become an important factor in the construction of American culture. Americanism is not a personal concept, but a consensus under the action of many factors.

To be specific, these factors involve the social development, religion, culture, value and so on. It is believed that the construction of Americanism is a complex and diverse process. Americanism can be different in different individual American writer's works. In face of great social changes, writers have to decide whether to adhere to the original value concept or not. They all focus on Americanism in their works and Mark Twain is a representative of these writers.

The Victorian historian Henry Thomas Barker regards civilization as a long chain which begins in Egypt, extended to Greece, Rome and Modern times. Human beings' civilization has formed a contrast with Barbarianism. The British scholar Clive Bell think civilization is a method to achieve happiness. But Robert Rovio believes that civilization can not only be measured by wealth and culture. It also involves moral values. Civilization should be on behalf of order, virtue and self-cultivation. The linear concept illustrate a binary opposition: civilization and barbarianism, reason and impulse, order and chaos.

Mark Twain has a keen observation of his era. He points out in the 19th century, the industrial development boosts the economy, but wealth can not stand for the real civilization. He breaks the historical linear understanding of civilization and believes that Americanism is a kind of construction of civilization. Americanism should be a result of both moral and cultural construction. Americanism can be a panorama of the whole historical process and deeper exploration of connotation of civilization.

Mark Twain is good at exposing social reality with spicy and ironic strokes, forming a unique American silence. He always insists on describing the local customs in the West and south of the United States in American colloquial and local language. He wants to express a strong local consciousness. The moral concept based on Puritanism runs through Twain's creation. Twain promotes a positive ideal, and shows his concern about people's spiritual reality. Twain's writing reveals that Americanism, as a cultural construction, is closely related to the struggle for discourse power, race, class and other ideologies, and reinterprets the standard of literary canonization.

Mark Twain was once known as "Lincoln in American Literature". In his novels *The Gilded Age*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and other works, Twain focuses on the contradiction between personal ideal and social changes by describing his fate and complex social values, to express his desire for truth,

goodness and beauty. He criticizes the moral degradation which causes human alienation to show his anxiety and worry about social problems. Twain's insistence on the American dream in the face of the complex historical process is also a cultural construction of Americanism.

2. Literature Review

Samuel Huntington once pointed out that "the foundation of Americanism is equality, freedom and the right to pursue happiness advocated in *The Declaration of Independence*." (Huntington, 2005, 68) According to rules of the Pulitzer Prize, Shi penglu claims that the construction of Americanism involves the following factors: American Puritanism, the integration of history and reality, ethnic literary writing and female writers' consciousness. (Shi Penglu, 2016, 109)

Some scholars in China point that after the victory of the War of Independence, especially since the 19th century, Americanism has become a major issue. Many American writers participated in the construction of American national characteristics, such as J. Cooper, W. Whitman, N. Hawthorne, R. Emerson, Mark Twain and so on. Zhu Gang claims that "Professor Su Hui in his works *Black Humor and the Tradition of Humor in American Fiction* tries to provide an elaborate redefinition of humor in American fiction." (Zhu Gang, 2013, 146)

However, it is controversial about what role Mark Twain has played in constructing Americanism. The characteristics of Americanism in Mark Twain's works still need systematic studies. This paper tries to analyze Twain's construction of Americanism from two perspectives: his advocating of Puritanism and reflection on history and reality, to point out that Twain's writing is the process of constructing Americanism.

3. The Construction of Americanism in Mark Twain's Works

3.1 The Advocating of Puritanism

Americanism is often illustrated by some kind of value and Puritanism is considered as the cornerstone of American value. In Twain's works, he advocates Puritanism to criticize the distortion of value caused by social changes.

Olga Tokarczuk, a famous Polish writer, once points out that for a writer, it is of the great significance to create a literary world where readers are allowed to enter to forget the reality. This world is closely related to emotion and language. The key for readers to explode the literary world is to figure out who they are. Through reading, readers can recognize themselves and understand other's lives. Olga actually emphasizes the educational function of literary works. The original standard set by the Pulitzer Prize also shows that "once a year, it is awarded to the American novel published that year. The novel should best reflect the healthy style of American life and the highest standard of American cultivation and personality." (Hohensberg, 1974, 18) This also shows that literary works should have the function of moral education.

American writers have always attach importance to moral education. From Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, these writers focus on human nature, the social value and other social problems. They tried to solve the confusion in life, finding the truth to advocate truth, goodness and beauty. The cultural heritage carried by this literary tradition is Puritanism, which is regarded as the foundation of American value. Marx Weber, a famous German sociologist, in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* claims that "Protestants' values such as steady moderation, honesty and credibility are a main motivation to help them to devote themselves to their career, a kind of clean and thrifty life which promotes the development of capitalism." (Shi Penglu, 2016, 110) Mark Twain keenly observes the great changes in history and society, but to insist on using Puritanism as a weapon to fight back against moral degradation and advocate a healthy, positive, optimistic, honest and credible attitude towards life.

From the 19th century to the 20th century, American industry has made great progress. The country has changed from an agricultural country to an industrial country, and free capitalism has been replaced by monopoly capitalism. Various problems arising from urbanization and industrialization are shocking. For example, industrial oligarchs monopolize industries and misappropriate wealth. The past rural time is gone, and materialism and pragmatism are full of society. Mark Twain's novel *The Gilded Age* truly reproduces that history. Everyone is mercenary and carries out all kinds of speculation for profit, such as building railways, running schools, mining minerals and real estate. The illusory dream makes people dizzy. "The philosophical ideas that used to establish a stable order, guide people's actions and give vitality to the American system are now being impacted. Under the impact all over the world, the past economic, social and moral concepts are falling apart." (Degler, 1977, 7)

In the age of material desires, Mark Twain still advocates the glory of human nature, praising the Puritan spirit such as hard work and thrift. He creates the characters of Ruth and Philip, college students who are not consistent with times in the novel. Ruth was born noble and lived a rich life, but she decides to pursue her own ideal, she wants to become a doctor and rely on herself. She thinks she “is unwilling to be lonely and wants to achieve something...”(Twain, 2002, 124) Unlike other women, Ruth doesn't intend to rely on men. She realizes that her father might go bankrupt and chose to control her fate by herself to achieve her economic independence. Ruth adheres to the original intention of “the American Dream. Everyone can succeed through honesty, credibility and hard work.

Philip, a college student, is also confused by his material life. He is once told that for a young American, there are countless ways to get rich, whether here or elsewhere; There is an attractive smell of money in the air, and all people desire for hope and success. He believes that as long as he sticks to his plans and work hard for decades, wealth will roll in. After graduating from Yale University, he can sing, understand English and speak. He is still a simple and naive student who knows nothing about the cruelty of social competition. When he first enters the society, he confronts difficulties everywhere. when he is an editor, he feels that his work is boring. As an engineer, he can't distinguish between locomotive and coal truck, but he always adheres to his kind and honest nature. He has courage to disclose the fraud of the railway company and accuse them of corruption, but he finds that the world is not what he imagines to be . Philip repents and devotes himself to mining. When everyone gives up, he choose to insist and returns to success with his honest labor. Although he once hesitates, he is able to suddenly realize and adhere to his good nature. Ruth and Philip seem to contradict with the “Gilded Age” and are regarded as outsiders”. But they reflect Mark Twain's idea which is to face up to the temptation of money, adhere to their own values. His works highlights the beautiful side of human nature.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain once again shapes Tom and Huck as outsiders who are incompatible with society, and explains the connotation of Puritanism from the children's eyes. Tom is lively, sincere, adventurous, being dissatisfied with the social reality and wants to escape the boring life. In adults' eyes, Tom and Finn are “bad children” who do not abide by social rules. They are always out of discipline. Their minds are full of unrealistic ideas. They hate learning and are fond of pranks. However, Mark Twain discovers the value in their human nature. That means that in face of difficulties, two children can always act bravely, fighting against evil and insisting on what is right. The standard adopted by adults represented by Aunt Polly to measure children's behavior is often the common social value. It is believed that children should follow the rules and obey what they say, which stifles children's nature. Faced with the material temptation, Tom has never been moved. He thinks that only nerds would try their best to learn the boring knowledge. In fact,

When the priest preaches, nearly everyone is asleep. Nobody would like to listen to those cliché carefully. Compared with those people in the church, Tom chooses to stay away from the crowd and live on a deserted island. He can have a picnic freely in such a primeval forest. He finds his fun in nature and is reluctant to go back to the earthly world. “The bonfire lit up their faces and reddened the tall and straight trunks in their forest temple... Because no one forced them to kneel down and recite prayers.”(Twain, 2009, 82) In the forest, children release their nature. Meanwhile, nature gives them a spiritual baptism and let them find the purity in their hearts.

Like Tom, Huck is also an unrestrained “bad boy”. He not only opposes the rigid social rules and longs for freedom, but also rebels against racism and advocates a complete equality between people. Hemingway once points out that “all modern American literature comes from *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*... This is the best of all our books.”(Hemingway, 1935, 22) Huck's river trip can be regarded as an escape from social civilization and a condemnation of social darkness. It is a spiritual baptism for Huck, from vulgarness to nobility. Huck's trip does not involve any economic purpose. It is the reason why Huck is disgusted with social reality and intends to return to pure nature. Compared with the lying “Duke” and “King”, Huck is just a simple child. But it is his innocence that reflects the darkness of society. Huck also hesitates, but his encounter with the black slave Jim completely changes his attitude towards life. From discrimination, teasing, to becoming friends, Huck's is always tangled. He wants to report Jim, but kindness defeats evil thoughts and he chooses to protect Jim. Huck's nature of equality, freedom, not moved by the secular world. Sincerity and kindness is not only the moral quality cherished by Mark Twain, but also the ideal value that the writer yearns for. The diligent, optimistic and positive Puritanism and social reality are intertwined and opposed in the novel. The traditional culture and lifestyle have been changed and replaced by materialism. Everyone is obsessed with power and money, and spiritual alienation has become quite common. Through describing Tom's and Huck's experiences, Mark Twain warns people that everyone has the right to pursue freedom, create happiness and wealth with their own efforts. Anyone can break free from the shackles of society, to win personal liberation and obtain freedom. This is not only Twain's ideal life, but also the inheritance and development of Puritan values.

3.2 The Reflection on History and Reality

When it comes to the construction of Americanism, historical novels and realistic novels have played an important role. This genre of literary works tell the founding history of the United States, reflecting its unique and complex ethnic relations and showing American pluralistic collision. It also records and the hidden meaning and crisis in ordinary people's daily life. In fact, these historical and social factors could be found in most of Mark Twain's works. Twain's works truly reflect the major historical changes that have taken place in the western United States since the 19th century. The Westward Movement, the Gold Rush, racial issues, slavery and other social focuses are all illustrated in his works. He is good at satirizing social reality with the unique humor of the west, and telling American stories in American colloquial and localized language. Mark Twain takes historical facts as materials, to reproduce history through literary creation, and add his personal aesthetic and emotional judgment to realize the reconstruction of history. Through his personalized historical description, he artistically transforms history and expresses his own moral value and sense of responsibility.

Mark Twain first pays attention to the issue of race and slavery in the United States. After the American Civil War, the agricultural economy of American southern plantations was against the northern industrial economy, and the old slavery system gradually collapsed. The rapid economic development has led to the social contradictions. Mark Twain realizes that slavery obliterates black humanity and the American ideal of human equality and freedom. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* tells the story of the white child Huck's helping the black slave Jim to escape, which is unacceptable at that time. So this book was banned by the American authorities after its publication. Huck is set by Mark Twain as a great attempt to achieve racial equality. Huck is a growing figure who crosses racial boundaries and pursues equality. Huck's understanding of slavery does not go smooth. At first, Huck, like others, thinks that Jim is inferior and Huck often despises and teases him. When he finds that Jim wants to escape, he once wants to report him. But as they withstand the hardship together during the journey, Huck changes his mind. His kind nature overcomes racial discrimination, and he conceals the truth. He once believes that his behavior was against the law, and he feels sorry for Miss Watson. He wants to write a secret letter to inform Jim of his trend. But Jim is no longer a black slave, but a friend in his eyes. Huck tears the secret letter to pieces. He claims, "this is a terrible idea and a terrible word, but I have said it... I put it all aside; I've made up my mind to go astray again. Anyway, I'm the best at going astray." (Twain, 2014, 233) Mark Twain also leaves a foreshadowing for Huck's transformation, which shows that slavery is deeply rooted, even a child suffers from it. The author reminds readers that racism can not be eliminated easily, and the road of human rights equality still has a long way to go. When he describes black slaves, Mark Twain often uses words such as "pitiful" and "simple and honest" to express his sympathy. The black slaves represented by Jim are not only kind-hearted, but also not a low creature in. They are a group of people who are with rich life experience and knowledge. Jim not only knows nature well and surviving skills in the wild, but also can protect Huck in the face of crisis. The author uses this fact to satirize and condemn the misunderstanding and slander brought by the slavery.

Twain's second concern is that under the influence of industrialization and urbanization, in the 19th century, the social morality is declining day by day, and everyone has a dream of making a fortune by unrealistically investing in speculation. Few people choose to work hard and honestly. The supremacy of money and interests became synonymous with that era. The novel *The Gilded Age* perfectly interprets changes of times. It reflects that driven by interests, everyone, whether politicians or businessmen, will do anything. Corruption, fraudulent trading and morality can also become commodities. Squire Hawkins's speculation fails, and each inch of his barren land turns into nothing. Colonel Sellers is another speculator. He dreams of becoming rich through gambling investment. In fact, his family is poor and there is not nearly any furniture in his house. He lives in illusion and poverty. Senator Dilworthy only cares about money and power. He uses the young and beautiful Laura as a tool to get close to the upper class society. He defrauds funds from the Congress and the government in the name of building a University. After the scandal is disclosed, Dilworthy refuses to take his responsibility and made a trade for freedom. For a young American, The West means countless ways to get rich, whether here or elsewhere. All eyes are full of hope for success. However, the truth is that the rich control capital, and the poor can not succeed easily. Mark Twain seems to have created a fairy tale, but in fact it is used to satirize the unpractical social atmosphere.

4. Conclusion

Mark Twain is regarded as a literary writer in the romantic period, but he has a keen insight into the historical changes in the western America in the 19th century, and his works shows a strong realism. He expresses his dissatisfaction with slavery and racial discrimination, and his doubts about capital expansion. The vivid descriptions

in Twain's works reveal that the construction of Americanism is complex and diverse in essence. Americanism should be the result of the joint action of various factors. Twain's Americanism is just to advocate virtues conserved in Puritanism and call for people to cultivate their correct value. It is Mark Twain's spirit that lead his works to remain a literary classic in the world literature.

When Twain criticizes the social injustice, he also shows his sympathy to the common people. Being faced with so many social problems, he tries to find solutions. Meanwhile, he feels helpless and has no choice but to accept the reality. Therefore, his Americanism is a real reflection of the dilemma in the 19th century. Twain's writings is combined with his commission which is to advocate his ideal moral value such as honesty, bravery, ambition and so on. His Americanism can be seen a symbol of humannism to fight against his confusion and hesitation about his era.

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