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***Roughing It*: Twain's Response to Pop Western Culture**

Amanda Evans

Mark Twain's *Roughing It* is an interesting conglomeration of fact and fiction, memory and invention—an effort to both please and incite. There is no doubt that it is heavily influenced by the Western literature of the time, including magazines, newspapers, dime novels, pamphlets and other popular works. As Twain did not begin work on the travel narrative until 1870, almost ten years after he left with his brother Orion for the Nevada territory, many of the works he responds to both directly and indirectly in *Roughing It* were written after the time span covered in the book. In dealing with desperadoes and Mormons, Twain draws upon the popular views expressed in contemporary fiction, in the process revealing how those views are not accurate portrayals of the West.

The American West has meant a multitude of things over the past three hundred years. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, it meant not only the land west of the Mississippi, but adventure, opportunity, freedom, danger, and riches. It was regarded as a Garden of Eden—a dramatic landscape of endless skies, jagged mountains, wild rivers, and fertile valleys. Eastern publishing houses in the late 1800s began to capitalize on this romantic vision, making the West come alive in magazines, newspapers, and dime novels. Heroes like Billy the Kid, Wild Bill Hickok, Buffalo Bill, and Geronimo loomed large for public audiences. The West gripped and held the imagination of the nation. It was in this climate that Samuel Langhorne Clemens, along with

his brother Orion, climbed into a westward-bound stagecoach. The years he spent in the West would change his life: he would encounter disappointment and hardship, but he would also find fame. He left for the West as Sam Clemens; he returned as Mark Twain. Twain wrote about his experiences in the West in his popular travel narrative, *Roughing It* (1872), which is heavily influenced by popular literature of the time. Magazines, newspapers, and dime novels were an integral part of Twain's narrative.

The dime novel did not enter the American publishing scene until 1860, only a year before Sam Clemens left for Nevada, but Western fiction did have roots in much earlier literature. Aspects of colonial writing spilled over into popular Western fiction. Stories about Indians, captives, wild animals, and frontiersmen were already popular in the late eighteenth, early nineteenth, centuries (Aquila 4). Later writers expanded upon these themes, and writers like James Fennimore Cooper created the frontier hero construct which would last for generations. Journals, newspapers, and magazines entered the scene in the early 1800s and would saturate the country by the late 1840s (Powers 46). Publications such as *The National Police Gazette*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated*, were gaining popularity during this period. The Newspaper Age was dawning on America, and nearly from the beginning young Sam Clemens would have his hands—often literally—in the mix. In 1848, when Sam was only twelve, he began an apprenticeship at the *Hannibal Gazette*. He would do everything from sweeping floors, to type-setting, to publishing some of his very first articles and illustrations in the next few years (46, 53). Sam was in the middle of the newspaper world and was certainly not ignorant of the greater newspaper and journal publications outside of Hannibal. These newspapers, magazines, and journals would help shape the mind of Sam Clemens and the writing of Mark Twain. Twain would borrow, ridicule, and answer back to many aspects of these publications. When Sam was sixteen, he responded to an article written about his brother Orion by J.T. Hinton of Hannibal. When Orion left Sam in charge of the newspaper, the fiery sixteen year old finally had his chance to repay Hinton: "Sam's pen (and knife) treated Hinton to a roasting the likes of which had not been seen in the brief annals of Hannibal journalism. Here were the early glowings of a pen warmed up in Hell" (Powers 53). Sam Clemens was not afraid to ridicule other publications or people then, and Mark Twain was certainly not afraid to do it later, as we can see in writings like *Roughing It*.

The pop culture image of the West was built upon violence—violence which may or may not have been an actual part of the western

scene. Some historians argue that, contrary to the popular view of the Wild West, it was not a particularly violent or lawless place. They blame the literature of the era for the confusion between fact and fiction, and Twain is not spared their criticism. Some critics claim that *Roughing It*,

probably provided the most influential elaboration on this theme of ubiquitous, casual murder in the West. In [the] frontier Virginia City, Twain mythologized, recreational homicide was commonplace. A person was not respected until he had “killed his man.” Local layabouts named Sugarfoot Mike, Pock-Marked Jake, and Six-Fingered Pete “each kept his private graveyard,” were always “on the shoot” (ready to fight), and cheerfully expected to “die with their boots on.” (Udall 279)

What the authors of this article either failed to point out or failed to realize, was that Twain was probably not attempting to give an accurate view of the West but was instead satirizing the popular or common view. Udall and his fellow writers refer to *Roughing It* as “Mark Twain’s classic memoir” (279). However, while *Roughing It* is based on Twain’s actual experience, much of it cannot be taken literally. Twain’s writings can be problematic because he does not always mean what he says. There are clues in *Roughing It* that point to the fact that Twain is responding to and satirizing other literature and not simply recounting events as they happened. One of the most obvious examples is Twain’s description of his encounter with the bloodthirsty Slade, a “real life” desperado. The naïve young narrator of *Roughing It*, who is only partly a recreation of Twain himself, describes Slade in the language of a dime novel. The desperado was a highly romantic figure in popular western literature. The Western super-hero is the “gunslinger, the man who can draw the fastest and shoot straightest; in brief, the killer . . . But when he wore the star—so runs the argument—he tamed the Wild, Wild West, he brought and enforced law and order” (Lyon 25). Twain would portray Slade in exactly these terms. Twain writes of Slade,

He began a raid on the outlaws, and in a singularly short space of time he had completely stopped their depredations on the stage stock, recovered a large number of stolen horses, killed several of the worst desperadoes of the district, and gained such a dread ascendancy over the rest that they respected him, admired him, feared him, obeyed him! (63)

Twain describes Slade as an unforgiving man, an expert marksman, a remorseless killer, and a force of justice—in other words, a typical western hero, but not necessarily a realistic hero, as Twain also reveals in the narrative. Most of Twain's history about Slade comes from a book by Thomas J. Dimsdale called *The Vigilantes of Montana*. Twain even quotes extensively from Dimsdale's text in *Roughing It*. While the meeting with Slade occurs in 1861 in Twain's narrative, *The Vigilantes of Montana* was not even published until 1866. The truth is, while Orion and Sam Clemens did indeed meet Alfred Slade on their journey westward, neither knew of his reputation until after the encounter (Powers 103). Twain uses this meeting in order to respond directly to Dimsdale's novel which claims to be "a correct and impartial narrative of the chase, trial, capture, and execution of Henry Plummer's Road Agent Band together with accounts of the lives and crimes of many of the robbers and desperadoes ... forming the only reliable work in the subject ever offered to the public" (Front material). Twain quotes from this history to build up Slade's reputation. He wants readers to first see Slade as a character right out of the dime novels. The naïve young narrator even says when he meets Slade, "Here was romance, and I sitting face to face with it!—looking upon it—touching it—hobnobbing with it, as it were! Here, right by my side, was the actual ogre who, in fights and brawls and various ways, *had taken the lives of twenty-six human beings*, or all men lied about him" (67). The narrator believes everything he hears about Slade, and is thrilled and frightened to have this larger than life character sitting at the breakfast table with him. As soon as the narrator can examine this vigilante hero, however, he finds him to be extremely friendly and gentlemanly, "with nothing remarkable about [him] except that his face was rather broad across the cheek bones" (67). While the narrator first sees Slade as a highly romantic figure, as most desperadoes were portrayed in popular literature, he turns out to be a fairly regular person.

In the chapter following this meeting with Slade, Twain once again quotes extensively from Dimsdale's text. Twain italicizes some of the more descriptive passages, emphasizing Dimsdale's picture of Slade as "the master of the situation and the conqueror and ruler of the courts, law and law-makers" (71). Twain emphasizes these passages and then pits them against Dimsdale's description of how Slade, while under the noose, pleaded and cried and begged for his life. Twain writes, "The true desperado is gifted with splendid courage . . . he will stand up before a host and fight until he is shot all to pieces, and yet when he is under the gallows and helpless he will cry and plead like a child ... I think it is a conundrum worth investigating" (74, 75). This seems to be a jab

at Dimsdale for his “correct and impartial narrative,” which is the only “reliable source” available to the public.

In the chapters following the encounter with Slade, Twain deals with the Mormons and his experience in Salt Lake City. Once again, what Twain has written seems to be more of a reaction to the literature of the time than a reaction to actual events. The Salt Lake Valley, the Mormons, and the “peculiar institution” of polygamy were not new subjects in literature. There were articles, political cartoons, and monthly sagas published in magazines such as *Harper's Weekly*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* about the Mormons and the Salt Lake area. A short description found in *Harper's Weekly* on March 6, 1869 reads,

Women regard polygamy as a religious sacrifice. It is to them the will of God. Accepting it, they glorify him and secure their own salvation. I venture to say that there is not one really happy woman in Utah, if united to a man with more than one woman. Polygamy is against nature. You see nature's protest in the sad and care-worn countenance of every woman you meet. (151)

A political cartoon in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in October of that same year shows Brigham Young marching at the head of an army of women. The caption below the cartoon reads, “Female Suffrage. Wouldn't it put just a little too much power into the hands of Brigham Young, and his tribe?” (56). The Mormons, and particularly the institution of polygamy, provided rich fodder for magazines, newspapers, and dime novels seeking for sensational material, and many of them drew as heavily upon the subject as they could.

The portrayal of polygamy and the Mormons in much of this kind of literature was far from favorable. The men were depicted as evil and consumed with lust, while the women were shown to be little more than unhappy slaves, resigned to their terrible lot in life. In a publication in *All the Year Round* in 1863, there is an article titled, “Among the Mormons.” The author of this article traveled to Salt Lake City and wrote extensively about the Mormons and about the practice of polygamy. He describes a crowd that has come to meet the train: “Many of these apparently disinterested saints had other objects in view; if they discovered prepossessing females unencumbered, they would immediately proffer homes to them, and thus enrich or enlarge their harems to any extent, with the cream of the market” (249). The author goes on to describe his stay at a hotel where the proprietor was himself a polygamist. The proprietor is described as saying, “The ‘system’ my young friend, is exactly suited to

the wants of man, and works to a charm, as you'll see if you stay in Utah long ... I have no servants—my wives do all that, and everything goes on smoothly and easily like wheels in a clock” (250). The author ends his article by informing readers that the Mormons “embraced a system which advocated worldly advancement and unlimited sexual intercourse. ... The system is a monstrous one—volumes could be written regarding its workings, past and present” (251).

Other publications used Mormons and polygamy as their source for sensational fiction. “Saved from the Mormons,” a story published in two parts in the November and December issues of *The Galaxy*, is a typical example of this kind of fiction. The story is about a young girl from England whose father joins the LDS church and moves to Salt Lake. The young girl, Madge, is the narrator of the story. According to Madge, “a Mormon demon invaded ... He watched my father with lynx-eyes; saw him trembling, hesitating; seized his opportunity, and bound him over body and soul to sell all he possessed and hasten at once to the paradise of saints” (677). Madge continues her story: “Years came, years passed—dark, sad, cruel years—until the harem of a civilized Christian gentleman—as I once believed my father to be—numbered five inmates” (683). Soon Madge’s father decides to trade her to an old polygamist in exchange for one of his lovely daughters and Madge laments, “My father had sold me, not because love for another had blinded his conscience, but from a base, sensual desire to increase the inmates of his harem” (685). After many pages of description about Madge’s daring escape from the Mormons with her little sister, and their dangerous journey to California, the text reads, “At last our journey was accomplished! We were saved from the Mormons” (837).

Accounts and stories like the ones above were prevalent in literature of the day, and Mark Twain takes these themes and turns them upside down in *Roughing It*. In Twain’s narrative he builds the readers expectation, much like he does in his account of Slade. He writes of Salt Lake City,

This was a fairy-land to us, to all intents and purposes—a land of enchantment, and goblins, and awful mystery. We felt a curiosity to ask every child how many mothers it had, and if it could tell them apart, and we experienced a thrill every time a dwelling-house door opened and shut as we passed ... for we so longed to have a good satisfying look at a Mormon family in all its comprehensive ampleness. (88)

Twain's narrator feels like he is in the middle of a romantic and awful story, just like he did when he first met Slade, and once again he finds his own experience to be quite different from that in the literature. Instead of a den of iniquity, Twain describes a clean peaceful city, "with no loafers perceptible in it; and no visible drunkards or noisy people; a limpid stream rippling and dancing through every street in place of a filthy gutter ... and a grand general air of neatness, repair, thrift and comfort" (89, 90).

Furthermore, instead of describing the beautiful young women who were snatched up by evil men and who were forced to submit to their every lustful whim, Twain writes how sorry he is for the men—a view that was certainly not common in popular literature. Twain recognizes this fact when he says, "We had no time to make the customary inquisition into the workings of polygamy and get up the usual statistics and deductions preparatory to calling the attention of the nation at large once more to the matter" (97). He says that while he wanted to create a great reform he could not after seeing the Mormon women.

My heart was wiser than my head. It warmed toward these poor, ungainly and pathetically "homely" creatures, and as I turned to hide the generous moisture in my eyes, I said, "No—the man who marries one of them has done an act of Christian charity which entitles him to the kindly applause of mankind, not their harsh censure—and the man that marries sixty of them has done a deed of open-handed generosity so sublime that the nations should stand uncovered in his presence and worship in silence." (97, 98)

While Twain is clearly poking fun at the Mormons, he also seems to be pointedly refusing to portray them in the same light as most popular Western literature. He admits that he did not gather the "usual statistics and deductions" about polygamy. In fact his tone seems more derisive when talking about what others have written than when talking about the Mormons themselves. Twain is known for his biting and often ruthless humor, but he takes a surprisingly light hand with the Mormons. Twain does make use of some far-fetched and humorous stories that resemble the more popular literature on polygamy—about Brigham Young's thirty wives and his scores and scores of children. These stories are a little more lighthearted than those often found in popular fiction, but most importantly, these stories are accredited to a man by the name of Johnson, and are not witnessed by the narrator himself. In fact, at the

end of the chapter Twain writes, “Some instinct or other made me set this Johnson down as being unreliable” (106). Johnson cannot be trusted, and to an extent, Twain may be saying that literature cannot always be trusted either.

Twain’s treatment of desperadoes and Mormons are only two of many examples in *Roughing It* that reveal Twain’s knowledge of, and reaction to, the popular literature of the day. While Twain made certain that his narrative would be appealing to audiences used to sensational newspapers and dime novels about the West, he did not simply copy the formula used by the hacks working in New York for companies like Adam and Beadle. Twain had much more to say about the West—what it was like, and what most readers *thought* it was like—than many give him credit for. In his preface to *Roughing It*, Twain writes, “There is interesting information in the volume; information concerning an interesting episode in the history of the Far West, about which no books have been written by persons who were on the ground in person, and saw the happenings of the time with their own eyes” (Front material). This preface seems to be both a mock of many of the notes at the beginning of books like *The Vigilantes of Montana*, which always claimed to be true and factual accounts of events, and a dig at the formulaic dime novels that were turned out en masse by “authors whose nearest acquaintance with the Great Plains was in White Plains, New York” (Dinan 10).

With *Roughing It*, Twain has produced a highly entertaining narrative that is still able to maintain its integrity. This does not mean that everything Twain writes in *Roughing It* is accurate—much of it is exaggerated and even bordering on the ridiculous—but Twain is respectful of his readers in that he does not try to trick them into believing everything he says. *Roughing It* is an intriguing piece of writing because it cannot be classified as one thing. It is some parts travel narrative, some parts satire, and other parts fiction and memoir. Notwithstanding, much of his narrative can be seen as a reaction to popular literature. He uses parody and satire in order to reveal to readers how the West might not be what the dime novels and illustrated newspapers make it out to be. Twain was in the business of making money, but unlike many of the pop Western writers, he was also in the business of truth.

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