

The Prince and the Pauper as a historical novel: An analysis

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The paper is an attempt to analyse the ideas of Mark Twain and his concept of social realism in his works especially the novel, *The Prince and the Pauper*. It is a study of the English history where social conventions are satirized. It would investigate how Twain applied his nineteenth century realist's view through the characters and their experiences.

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The ideas of Mark Twain and his concept of social realism is analysed in all his fictions. *The Prince and the Pauper* is a representative of Twain's typical historical novels where he applied his nineteenth century realist's eye to the 1500s and the Middle Ages. Twain deviated from the traditional concept of historical novels while writing his own version of fiction. As a realist, he studied the contemporary society against the backdrop of a historical period i.e. the Middle Ages where he was dealing with the medieval and renaissance life of Britain. Thus, English history has been brought in a realistic fiction of the nineteenth-century America. This amalgamation of legends, myths and historical epochs of Britain with the social realities of the growing civilization of the nineteenth century America across the Atlantic is the characteristic feature of the realistic fiction of Mark Twain in this novel. In literature, realism

is a kind of –

*'tacit assumption' which the reader is supposed to share with the writer that "a human life is most truthfully presented in terms of the individual's milieu, of particularity of social situation and historical circumstance."*¹

There is a vast difference between American and European realism. About this difference, Alfred Kazin comments:

*Realism in Europe found its philosophy in mechanism, its cosmogony in Newtonian conception of the universe, its authority in Comte, Darwin, Taine...Realism in America, whatever it owed to contemporary scepticism and the influence of Darwinism, poured sullenly out of agrarian bitterness, the class hatred of the eighties and nineties, the bleakness of small-town life, the mockery of his **nouveaux riches**, and the bitterness of the great new proletarian cities.*²

Twain explores his realistic ideas in the field of novel-writing. In his writing, he tries to focus mainly on the problems of suffering humanity which is the basic feature of American realism. Inclination to give up the field of assured success, and seek distinction in untried paths, has shown itself a controlling impulse in many an artistic mind. The publication of Mark Twain's new story, *The Prince and the Pauper* gives a striking example in point or supplies material for illustration of the tendency of writers whose position is fixed and prosperous to give their faculties a new range and strive for a totally different order of production from any previously accomplished. Twain has written a book which no reader or critical expert would think of attributing to him if his name was withheld from the title page. There is nothing in its purpose, its method or its style of treatment

which corresponds with any of the numerous works by the same author. The book is not only “a novelty of Mark Twain’s handiwork; it is in some respects a novelty in romance.”³

Mark Twain dedicated this novel in a strange way, “To those good mannered and agreeable children Susie and Clara Clemens” and he wrote that this book is “affectionately inscribed by their father.”⁴ Mark Twain further wrote in the dedication:

*I will set down a tale as it was told to me by one who had it of his father, which later 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 father’s transmitting it to the sons and so preserving it. It may be history, it may be only a legend, 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.*⁵

The exchange of King Edward, the Sixth of England and a Pauper who is gem of fiction forms the core of the novel. There is no stretch upon credulity, for the characters come and go, live and breathe, suffer and rejoice, in an atmosphere of perfect reality, and with an intense identity rarely to be found in fictions set in medieval days. The sharply contrasting adventures of the pair (the prince and the pauper) constitute the whole tale. Mark Twain started the novel with the birth of (The Prince and the Pauper):

*In the ancient city of London, on a certain autumn day in the second quarter of the sixteenth century, a boy was born to a poor family of the name of Canty, who did not want him. On the same day, another English child was born to a rich family of the name of Tudor, who did want him. All England wanted him too. England had so longed for him and hoped for him, and prayed God for him, that, now that he was really come to people went nearly mad for joy. Mere acquaintances hugged and kissed each other and cried. Everybody took a holiday, and high and low, rich and poor, feasted and danced and sang, and got very mellow; and they kept this up for days and nights together. By day, London was sight to see, with gay banners waving from every balcony and housetop, and splendid pageants marching along. By night, it was again a sight to see, with its great bonfires at every corner, and its troops of revellers making merry around them. There was no talk in all England but of the new baby, Edward Tudor, Prince of Wales, who lay lapped in silks and satins, unconscious of all this fuss, and not knowing that great lords and ladies were tending him and watching over him and not caring either. But there was no talk about the other baby. Tom Canty, lapped in his poor rags, except among the family of paupers whom he had just come to trouble with his presence.*⁶

The Prince and the Pauper is more light hearted – capitalizing on the change resemblance of Tom Canty, a slum child and Edward Tudor, the Prince of Wales in the mid 1500s. Twain satirizes Merrie Olde England, pointing out the barbarisms and injustices of the time. His historical novels are largely concerned with medieval and renaissance life and they are all set in foreign countries. English history in particular, is the subject of his historical novels. One of the major aims of ***The Prince and the Pauper*** is the demonstration of the hypocrisy, greed, insensitivity and barbarism that had become institutionalized in the laws, customs, churches and governments of sixteenth century England and fifteenth century France.

The Prince and the Pauper is a mixture of fact and fancy. As a work of art, it is open to criticism. In many respects, it is a remarkable book; it is certainly effective as a story, though it is turned rapidly almost to tediousness. The quiet satire, the ingenuity of the plot and the clever development of the thoughts and motives of the Prince and the Pauper, in their changed circumstances, form the main interest of the story. Frederick Anderson says:

Both Tom Sawyer and The Prince and the Pauper are fascinating as mere narratives, and I can think of no writer living who has in higher degree the art of interesting his reader from the first word. This is a far rarer gift than we imagine, and I shall not call it a subordinate charm in Mark Twain's books, rich as they otherwise are. I have already had my say about Tom Sawyer, whose only fault is an excess of reality in portraying the character and conditions of south western boyhood as it was forty year ago, and which is full of that poetic sympathy with nature and human nature which I always find in Mark Twain. The Prince and the Pauper has particularly interested me for some qualities which, in a study of the past, we call romantic, but which alone can realize the past for us. Occasionally the archaic diction gives way and lets us down hard upon the American parlance of the nineteenth century; but mainly the illusion is admirably sustained, and the tale is to be valued not only in itself, but as an earnest of what Mr. Clemens might do in fiction when he has fairly done with autobiography in its various forms.⁷

Tom Canty, son of a thief and grandson of a beggar, wanders from the squalor of Offal Court to Westminster, where he happened to see Edward, Prince of Wales. They exchanged themselves and they were separated accidentally each out of his sphere. From there onwards, the tale alternates between the royal court and the filth of the world. In this respect, Frank Baldanza says:

This is perhaps Clemens' best organized book, because the multiple ironies in the situation are well marshalled. Each boy is arraigned by his supposed father and though to be mad; each is befriended by the two sisters of his "twin"; each awakes from sleep thinking the mistake Has been a dream and so on.⁸

As the story goes on, in the meantime, Edward's father, Henry VIII dies and Tom is declared king. Edward, after being momentarily befriended by Miles Hendon, the previously exiled son of a noble, is taken by a wandering gang of beggars and thieves who unwittingly give him a firsthand view of vice of poverty, and the economic conditions and laws that foster this development. At the same time, Tom saves a man, woman and child from execution, repealing the law that calls for boiling alive as a penalty for murder by poisoning. The rightful king is tricked away from Miles by John Canty who assumes that this is his son and that he has a right to treat him (Edward) according to his wishes. On escaping John's band of ruffians, Edward rests a day with a peasant woman before his encounter with a mad hermit who attempts to murder him in revenge for Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries. In regard to this, Frank Baldanza says:

In this particular scene, in which Miles comes Breathlessly close to rescuing Edward, who Nevertheless falls back into the outlaws' hands, Clemens attempts the classic melodramatic Situation, evoking fear, anguish and suspense. But The scene could hardly be anything but riotously Ridiculous to a modern reader.⁹

When the hermit tries to kill the boy, the struggling boy began to shiver from fear. After nearly being sentenced to death for stealing a pig, the mistaken king is reunited with Miles Hendon. They return to the latter's father's estate only to be disowned by his cruel brother who has married Miles' fiancé during his exile. While Miles and Edward are in prison, Edward sees two Baptist women burned at the stake. He said:

*That which I have seen, in that one little moment,
will never go out from my memory, but will abide
there; and I shall see it all the days, and dream of it
all the nights, till I die. Would God I had been blind.¹⁰*

And he resolves that:

*the laws that have dishonoured thee, and shamed
the English name, shall be swept from the statute
books. The world is made wrong, king should go to
school to their own laws, at times, and so learn
mercy.¹¹*

Finally the pair escape to London, just in time to stop the coronation of Tom at its very climax. With Edward restored to his rights and having learned compassion through suffering, the justice is being done:

*Tom Canty lived to be a very old man, a handsome,
White-haired old fellow, of gave and benignant
aspect. As long as he lasted he was honoured; and he
Was also revered, for his striking and peculiar
costume kept the people reminded that "in his time
he had been royal", so, whenever he appeared the
crowd fell apart, making way for him, and
whispering, one to another, "Doff they hat, it is the
king's ward!"? and so they saluted, and got his kindly
smile in return and they valued it, too, for his was
an honourable history. Yes, king Edward VI lived only
a few years, por boy, but he lived them worthily,
More than once when some great dignitary, some
gilded vassal of the crown, made argument against
his leniency, and urged that some law which he was
bent upon amending was gentle enough for its
purpose, and wrought no suffering of oppression
which any on need mightily mind, the young king
turned the mournful eloquence of his great
compassionate eyes upon him and answered: "What
dost thou know of suffering and oppression? I and
my people know, but not thou," The reign of Edward
VI was a singularly merciful one for those harsh
times.¹²*

As several critics observe, the switching of roles shows that the prince becomes a humanitarian through directly experiencing the suffering of the common people, whereas the pauper becomes inured to the luxuries and idleness of the court to the extent that he ignores his own mother during one of his public appearances.¹³ Thus, we see the switching of roles in the novel that Tom's adaptation to the duties and privileges of royalty is understandably easier than Edward's to the insults and deprivations of pauperdom. Edward's adjustment to poverty and insolence is much harder but finally, more spiritually ennobling unlike Tom, who comes to deny his his own past, Edward never forgets that he is the Prince and on the death of his father, the king of England, he screams at the guard who has thrown him, dressed in Tom's rags, out of the palace grounds: "I am the Prince of Wales, my person is sacred; and thou shalt hang for laying thy hand upon me."¹⁴ The plot of this novel had deep personal meaning for Clemens. A distant Lampton relative on his mother's side of the family wrote Clemens with some regularity, trying to enlist his help in establishing the Lampton right to the Earldom of

Durham. This amused Clemens and during his stay in London in 1873, he was fascinated by the classic lawsuit of the “Tichbourne claimant,” requesting his secretary to keep voluminous scrapbooks of clippings on the trial. Psychologically, this concern with mistaken identity and claimants to noble rights can be seen as part of the general preoccupation with identity that we noted in the novel. Even more importantly, this novel is the first of an elaborate series of demonstrations, on Clemens’s part, of the pervasive effect of environmental determinism over the rival claims of heredity.¹⁵ Beginning as he did with a clear plot outline instructed as he was in a historian’s technique for recovering the past, and delighted as he was with his theory about the formative power of environment, Mark Twain did not in the process of filling in his outline, have much room for adventuring:

*Finally, the novel is less than convincing because (as he would in general come to understand) it was About a foreign land and not his own; it was the product of research rather than of a lifetime of unconscious absorption. But in the larger picture, the novel is important because it introduces the theme that continued to preoccupy him in **Huckleberry Finn, A Connecticut Yankee and Pudd’n Head Wilson**- that of the power of training.¹⁶*

The Prince and the Pauper is a prelude to a more fully developed criticism of the feudal world. Like ***A Connecticut Yankee***, it dramatizes the evils of the British monarchy in the sixteenth century. The plot of the novel where the beggar Tom Canty becomes king and Prince Edward, son of Henry VIII, a beggar, gets rid of the flimsy assumption of royal divinity. The pauper boy and the young prince change places, and the courtiers see no difference. ***The Prince and the Pauper*** is a magnificent satire on the fuss and flummery of royalty and contains some of the most dramatic strokes in literature. It portrays an interchange between the high and low, bringing to the fore a sense of a natural aristocracy based on humanistic qualities rather than the greed and unearned status of the institutional model. Albert Bigelow Paine, Twain’s first and official biographer considered this book as having an “‘imperishable charm’ and the two heroes, twins in spirit, ranking ‘with the purest and loveliest creations of child life in the realm of fiction’”¹⁷

The enormous gulf between the life of royal privilege and that of beggarly poverty is the central display of the novel. The crossing of that gulf by pauper, Tom Canty and Prince Edward, who are forced to lead each other’s lives, activates the plot of the novel. And the prince’s becoming a better ruler through the awakening of his sympathetic imagination is the moral of the book. The novel concerns the development and function of conscience. In the Darwinian view, conscience is a fact, but moral values are neither absolute nor transcendent. They are evolved out of the interaction between individual impulses and the demands of society. Thus, ***The Prince and the Pauper*** reflects both the techniques and the principles of science-based realism – both care for detailing significant aspects of environment and the recognition that people are formed by their environments. H. Wayne Morgan recollects Howells’ praise of Twain’s work:

*Twain’s humor and universal appeal captivated Howells, who also judged him with a shrewd eye. “It is such a book as I would expect from you, knowing what a bottom of fury there is to your fun”, ...He wrote of ***The Prince and the Pauper***.¹⁸*

The Prince and the Pauper may be an unfortunate victim of a change in taste; its sentimentality and melodrama are repellent to the modern palate, although it was probably a real enough achievement in its day. The shallowness of moral judgements and the simplicity with which reality is represented are, however, inalienable components of that contemporary prevailing vogue in art.¹⁹ Thus, ***The Prince and the Pauper*** has given a clear picture of medieval times. It tries to disfigure the moral and literary currency by bruising and soiling the image of king Arthur. The novel teaches us that one should not be judged based on the external appearance but rather on the character and values.

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