MARK TWAIN: A REALISTIC HUMORIST IN AMERICA
Mark Twain: Penulis Humoris Realistis di Amerika
Tri Sedjati dan A. Wirono
Program Studi Pengkajian Amerika
Program Fisika Universitas Gadjah Mada

ABSTRACT

This study is an analysis of Twain’s humorous works which finally turns to be satirical based on the crisis of political and social reaction in the nineteenth century America.

The coming of industrialization, however, immediately alters the condition of social life. One of the effects of the industrial era is about the class-determination - the institution of slavery. It is, actually, of the beginning of the Progressive Movement where all Americans were absorbed in the channel of money making. They become greedy and trust themselves with dirty conspiracy to gain their ambition. Competition to get the votes leads them to practice bribery and collusion by buying the congress and the judges.

Apart from being humorous his writings turn out to become satires as means of protest and disagreement towards the working system in America.

Key words: Progressive Movement - institution of slavery - dirty conspiracy - humor and satire.

INTRODUCTION

Bruce McElvery states in The Realistic Movement in American Writings that Samuel Langhorne Clemens whose pen-name is Mark Twain begins his career by writing humorous newspaper sketches, takes a chance of being a reporter in Virginia before he becomes a great writer. (14).

In Mark Twain & The South, Pettit also explains that the various experience he has as a native southerner, his eccentricity and genius, his
involvement in the historical events of his time are of the qualification which lead him to be a country's mouthpiece. It is he who talks much about black race and slavery, who expresses the condition of the blacks though he himself was born to a white family. Twain portrays attractively - based on lots of his experiences - the condition of slaveholding's child and his dissatisfaction and doubtfulness with the realities of American life. (3-4). Twain's talent to be a humorous writer is first noted by Blair (1980 : 161) saying that he "recognized and developed the comedy of hilarious situation".

After the Civil War America is, actually, on the way to gain something new in the influence of industrial development which, in effect, cause an alteration also in literature which later is known as The Age of Realism. As Mark Twain lives in this period of time, he insists to respond the new condition caused by the Civil War to leave aside the old thinking and to make attempts to get the new one in the hope of revealing the truth, in using realism as an instinct to pursue originality. He thinks that the nineteenth century is a time of progress and believes that this period will bring freedom and happiness in the future. "He thinks too that the nineteenth century, especially as Progress in the United States, was the happiest estate of man" (De Voto, 1977 :15).

As one of the nineteenth-century realists in America, Mark Twain intends to show the real condition of American society at that time including the institution of slavery as seen clearly in one of his books Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885). Indeed, it describes metaphorically the way the whites treat the negroes as reflection of the condition of society in the nineteenth century America with its slavery and racism. It also shows the fact that Mark Twain has seen more of the United States, experienced more of the condition of Americans and cleverly expresses all realities he faces in the form of humor which, according to William Randolph Hearst, leads him to be "The World's Most Famous Humorist" (Davis and Beidler, 1984 : 63).

Another critic, Scott (1986 : 116) further noted that apart from being a popular writer he is also a great humorist who expresses the "real America".

Since Twain is widely known as a realist, humorist and also a satirist (Pettit, 1974 : 179), it is, thus, interesting to expose the reality he experiences in his life and to analyse his works whether it can qualify as such.

Two other works namely The Gilded Age (1879), and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889) have been chosen for discussion the purpose of which is to learn about Mark Twain's humorous works, how
he uses his humor and to whom his humor is allocated. As Mark Twain is one of the nineteenth-century realists, it is interesting to see why his humorous works turn into satires. The study will use an interdisciplinary approach as suggested by Edward and Horton who state "study of literature needs an understanding of the relationship existing between that literature and the social milieu in which it was produced" (1974: 1). In other words the historical approach will also be used.

Using the library research method this study is focused on the analysis of social life during the nineteenth century America in which Mark Twain uses a play of humor over realistic subject to explore and to criticize the condition of society.

ANALYSIS

In line with the new condition caused by the industrial development in America, it is of possible implication for writers to increase their minds to produce some creative works based on the real fact happened in that period.

As it is acknowledged that man's reactions are largely conditioned by the society in which he lives, "one of the chief problems in the study of any literature is to understand the relationship existing between that literature and the social milieu in which it was produced. In general, however, literature tends to reflect the dominant tendencies of its era" (Horton and Edward, 1974: 1).

Furthermore, industrialism and urbanization as Abram says, are factors that change the American sense from Romantic into Realistic period. The convulsion of the bloody Civil War and of the Reconstruction, followed by a burgeoning industrialism and urbanization in the North, profoundly altered the American sense itself, as well as American literary modes. 1865 - 1900 is often known as the Realistic Period, in accord with the works by the major novelists Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James (1981: 13-133).

Actually the problem of social changes cannot be separated from those of the social classes. Writers have opportunity to respond the new condition and use realism to explain the actual life objectively. They intend to reveal the condition of American society during the nineteenth century and they use this realism to confirm the fact of spreading power and giant factories and the gap between the rich and the poor.

Realism in literature, thus, was a natural reflection of life. The general readjustment on a national scale was, in fact, imperative. Teww
(1984: 234-235) says that the development of realism is, then, also influenced by the socio-political development of the nineteenth century which emphasize the significance of common people and their condition.

Coinciding with the subject matters the realists have, Twain illuminates his novel with sociological attitudes. Realism to him is to achieve accurate detail of human nature and experience (Pitzer, 1984: 4). "He preferred to reflect society through portrait of places and by local peculiarities of speech and dress and habits of thought" (Clark, 1975: 431).

Basically, realism and humor are exactly wedded as the vernacular expression itself is purged of all affectation. (Bier, 1968: 138). Thus being one of the realists in that period, Twain's idea is to portray lots of the real facts he experiences during his life in most of his humorous works.

Twain was, then, influenced by the epoch and the society with the beginning of Progressive Movement in the midst of the Civil War. It was the epoch of industrial when presidents were business men, generals and preachers were business men. All American people were absorbed in the exploitation of the material resources and business enterprise was the only scope of action. The fact was that all people ran into the channel of money-making. "The people had desired money, now they fall down and worship it. The new gospel was 'Get money. Get it quickly. Get it in abundance. Get it prodigious abundance!'" (Cardwell, 1963: 56).

He is also familiar with various social forces at work where society shows a tendency to organize itself into rigid classes, spirits are blunted, the inhabitants submit to a dull conformity, religion grows narrow, public opinion is stern and restrictive" (Smith, 1963: 29).

In any case, Mark Twain is able to apprehend the truth about America and to translate the real fact into humorous fictions. The objective of such humor is a frank critique of society which represented through the use of characters "In the voice of hard, fresh truth" (Bier, 1968: 2).

Captivated by the development of big business and the spread of industry, Twain tends to emphasize his writing on social and economic criticism to protest the condition of society. This protest, thereupon, is seen as the literary reaction to these influences which took the form of critical or satirical attacks on business and politics.

The first book is of The Gilded Age which was published in 1873. It reflects the American society which is not clean as it seemed. It talks about the period of time during which the inhabitants are obsessed with making money. The competition they make become fierce enough and the vote is a commodity for sale to the crooked congressman.
It is obviously delineated that Twain's humorous sentences refer to the attitude of Colonel Beriah Sellers in chapter IX when he asked Washing tone to dine with him. In his bankruptcy, he explains that the food he serves has been ordered by the doctor for the family diet. (Twain and Warner, 1964: 64). And in chapter XI Washington is very surprised knowing that the dinner, indeed, merely consists of fresh water and raw turnips. (77).

Those facts are on the contrary with the condition of how rich and successful Colonel Seller is in the eyes of the Hawkins. He is unwilling to show everybody that he has failed, that he is actually not a rich and a successful colonel, and it is what E.L. Godkin, a critic, says that yet American society in the Gilded Age was not all that it seemed on the surface (William, 1963: 67). Twain's satirical attack is that people are blind and that they pretend to be what they are not.

Twain exposes the evil reput in political matters marked by the corruption as his disgust. He finds the fact that the wages of the congressmen is added twenty percent for their fun (Twain and Warner, 1964: 169).

The author of this book, in his despair, also tries to depict his mockery about the fact of bribery. The real politics in the Gilded Age between 1869 and 1889 is, in fact, full of great evil conspiracy. The humor he uses is that they surely are able to buy the votes by counting the noses of other congressmen. (298)

The bribery which Twain tries to put forward happened in the meeting of the State Legislature. It is of Dilworthy's attempts to give a package containing $ 7,000 to Mr. Noble to secure him as Senator. (368).

Another example of bribery which is exposed as Twain's satir is that of Colonel Selby's murder case. The trial proves that Laura, the wardeness is finally not found guilty. This is also Twain's disagreement towards the working system of trials. He learns that lawyers can be bought to postpone any case. (361).

Indeed, from this statement above, the point of Twain's humor is, undoubtedly, proposed to dig out a hypocritical creature as Dilworthy. He always appears in Church, gives a sermon of how to be a good man, or hold prayer meetings while he himself is a briber.

From the above discussion the humorous statements may turn into a satire to reflect critical attitudes towards the character's personality.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which was published in 1884, tells about the adventure of a boy which is unintentionally flung into
adulthood. As a boy he experiences various events which make him aware of the real facts of life. This book demonstrates sharply the social limitations that American civilization imposes on individual freedom.

As "novels often seem bound up with particular moments in the history of society" (Elizabeth, Burns 1973 : 39), this book reflects Mark Twain's attack in the nature of American racism. Almost similar to the first novel, the society proves a civilization upon repression, hypocrisy, terror and murder.

Written during one of the darkest periods of America race relation - while supremacy and black inferiority - Twain intends to protest against such social condition. Huck, the white, and Jim, the black live in a period when whites in the United States largely control the blacks by means of slavery. Twain's humor can be found in the attitude of a negro character, Jim. He is portrayed as a compassionate, keen, thoughtful, self-sacrificing and wise man. It is meant to be funny to find such a good negro character at a time when negroes are object of ridicule. Jim is willing to leave over his sleep for Huck and it deliberately discourages the whites' wrong judgement about the blacks (Twain, 1977 : 104).

Twain comments about the case of superstition as well because it cannot be separated from the life of the negroes. He dramatizes Jim's bondage by the quality of his beliefs. Jim is very proud of his magical thought that in his defenselessness he unreasoningly believes the power of a 'witchcraft. The sign of bad luck as 'you mustn't count the things you are going to cook'. Don't shake the tablecloth after sundown' or about 'a spider crawling up one's shoulder' are kinds of unbelievable for Huck. It is obvious that Twain's purpose in putting forward the supernatural belief, as his humor, is indeed to differentiate blacks from white people who have no belief in superstition but in logical thought. It is in line with Hofman's statement, a critic, that "there is a manly contrast to the optimism and the evasion of reality" (Smith, 1963 : 103).

The journey along the river makes Huck and Jim get acquainted with the Duke of Bilgewater. Twain's humorous object is about the Duke who seems to be very proud of himself (Twain, 1977 : 102). It symbolizes the fact of human's pride of status and position that everybody has to bow to speak to him and say 'My Lord' or 'Your Highness'. The way one should do such an act is indeed a satiric mode to expose the whites' superiority upon the blacks which the author tries to go against.

Twain's humor goes to satirize the attitude of hypocrisy and the manner of aristocratic people portrayed by Miss Watson and Widow Douglas. In all their 'sermon' they teach Huck to be good to other people.
while they still defend slavery and treat the slaves badly. (15) However, as respectable and religious persons they are forceful towards those who are weaker and do not really behave as aristocratic family.

In the third book, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* which was published in 1889, Twain tells about a man who penetrates his dreams into the old times of the sixth century. In his dream he acts himself as a man of a new world trying to present new devices from modern times into the circumstance of old Kingdom. At a glance, it is the story of chivalry in King Arthur’s Court in England.

In spite of this seeming chivalrous story Twain inserts the humorous aspect to make the story look interesting. His humour is, therefore, seen in one of the episodes in which Morgan, the hero, has a fantastic idea of establishing schools in that Kingdom. Readers will find something ridiculous and it is meant to satirize the present era which, in his mind, is going to bring great changes to the society. Indeed, the novelist realizes that the new era of industrialization will soon alter all aspects of people’s life.

Starting a patent office in King Arthur’s court and having the title of ‘boss’ found in chapter VIII is, indeed, a reflection of the late nineteenth-century American life of business which tends to pursue nothing but money. (Cardwell, 1963 : 18). Twain cleverly reflects his humor in the advertisement of soap and toothbrush for the lords and ladies at court (Twain, 1981 : 77-78).

As a satire on society this book presents social injustice where there are some members of corporation get all profits without sharing it with others. (65). It is what william Dean Howells says that “one of many passages in the story where our civilization of to-day sees itself mirrored” (Cardwell, 1963 : 65).

The humorous statement dealt with renewals is seen in introducing the telephone, the telegraph, the sewing machine and the railway in the old kingdom (Twain, 1981 : 241). Here, Twain intends to depict the coming of the machine age in America by making it ridiculous to put such age on the old kingdom. It is what the other writer says “to be funny in symbolizing the era of developing machines that brings progress to Arthurian England” (Inge, 1984 : 9). This book may furthermore be categorized as a withdrawal from feudalistic system to industrialization with satirical modes which Brashier says that it is recognized as an allegory of the collapse of feudalism and of the industrial revolution. It is classed as a satirical allegory representing what came of the Industrial Revolution (1960 : 303 - 304).
CONCLUSION

The three novels reflect Mark Twain’s perception towards the events of the era. Being a realist, the thought of expressing all his experience is fully digested in his mind and he attempts to say the truth as he witnesses. The existence of big industries in the late nineteenth century America indicated by materialism and corruption are the condition to encourage Twain’s satire, which is written in humorous statements, to those ambitious money-makers. The portrait of inhumanity and white supremacy emerges that blacks become the second class society and their existence as slaves is merely the object of cruelty though as human beings they should not have color rights both from the owner and the government. The typical aristocratic virtues in again Twain’s satire of the hypocritical manners of those aristocrats. His humorous story which eventually turns to be satirical is of his despair, anger, and his disgust against the savage reality. To some extent, this satire is presented as his protest, disappointment and shameful feeling of American democracy. Thus, it is interested to find that the humorous element he uses in his writing is, at the same time, really meant as a satirical expression. He can be aptly called a realistic satirist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Bradshaw, Minnie M and Robert M Rodkey, The Art, Humor and Humanity of Mark Twain, Oklahoma; University of


