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The other side of American exceptionalism: thematic and stylistic affinities in the paintings of the Ashcan School and in Mark Twain's Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven

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The other side of American Exceptionalism: Thematic and stylistic
affinities in the paintings of the Ashcan School and in Mark Twain’s
Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven

by

Ng Lee Chua

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Literature)
Major Professor: Constance J. Post

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1999
This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Ng Lee Chua

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

For the Graduate College
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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to analyze Mark Twain’s story Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven as well as selected paintings from the Ashcan School in terms of American exceptionalism. In the process, I also explore the stylistic affinities that reflect the times in which the works were executed, and evaluate how the styles in turn help to enhance the themes.

Like Twain’s Stormfield, until recent years, works by the Ashcan artists were rarely discussed: they apparently did not fit the common perception of America as a City on a Hill, an exceptional country with exceptional people. The works of the Ashcan artists and Mark Twain’s Stormfield seem to contradict or at least show that there is another side to the myth of American exceptionalism.

In my attempt to see how far thematic affinities and differences between Stormfield and the paintings of the Ashcan School impinge on the idea of American exceptionalism, I first explain my eclectic approach towards the works in question. Then I discuss some aspects of American exceptionalism, after which I narrate the theory on the relationship between painting and literature. Next I explore Mark Twain’s Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven in terms of American exceptionalism and use the ideas gathered to compare with the themes found in selected paintings from the Ashcan School. Finally, I analyze how the times in which the works were executed influenced the styles, besides showing how the styles enhanced the content. I hope this attempt in investigating the thematic and stylistic affinities and differences between the Sister Arts will serve to illuminate further the ongoing controversy of American exceptionalism.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an attempt to analyze Mark Twain’s story *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* as well as selected paintings from the Ashcan School in terms of American exceptionalism. In the process, I also explore the stylistic affinities that reflect the times in which the works were executed, and evaluate how the styles in turn help to enhance the themes.

Mark Twain (1935–1910) was about three decades older than the oldest of the Ashcan group of artists. The Ashcan artists were Robert Henri (1865–1928), John Sloan (1871–1951), William J. Glackens (1870), George Luks (1866–1933), Everett Shinn (1873–1958), Ernest Lawson (1873–1979), Arthur B. Davis (1962–1928), and Maurice B. Prendergast (1859–1924). They were members of The Eight, the group of eight artists who held their first joint exhibition at New York’s Macbeth Galleries in 1908. However, as Edward Lucie-Smith points out, only five of The Eight can be said to be Realists and as such were true representatives of the Ashcan School (*American Realism* 61). Robert Henri was the leader, and it was he who persuaded the Philadelphia Four, Sloan, Glackens, Luks, and Shinn to become artists. Later, the group was joined by George Bellows (1882–1925). Before the Four met Henri, they were all newspaper illustrators. After meeting Henri, the Four joined their mentor to paint the often unseen side of America—the America of slums, garbage dumps, places where drunks frequent and where skinny kids tried to survive their formative years. Like Twain’s *Stormfield*, until recent years works by the Ashcan artists
were rarely discussed: they apparently did not fit the common perception of America as a City on a Hill, an exceptional country with exceptional people. The works of the Ashcan artists and Mark Twain’s *Starmfield* seem to contradict or at least show that there is another side to the myth of American exceptionalism.

In my attempt to see how far thematic affinities and differences between *Starmfield* and the paintings of the Ashcan School impinge on the idea of American exceptionalism, I will first explain my eclectic approach towards the works in question. Then I will discuss some aspects of American exceptionalism, after which I will narrate the theory on the relationship between painting and literature. I will next explore Mark Twain’s *Captain Starmfield’s Visit to Heaven* in terms of American exceptionalism and use the ideas gathered to compare with the themes found in selected paintings from the Ashcan School. Finally, I will analyze how the times in which the works were executed influenced the styles, besides showing how the styles enhanced the content. I hope this attempt in investigating the thematic and stylistic affinities and differences between the Sister Arts will serve to illuminate further the ongoing controversy of American exceptionalism.
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Literary Theory

Modern literary theory, as an analogy of Roman Jacobson’s linguistic communication triad of addresser, message, and addressee, has its own trio of author, text, and reader. For over a century, focus was on the author and understanding of the author’s life and mind took priority over text and reader. Later, as industrialization created new readers among the middle class and even the working class, the idea of authorial genius began to wane: the New Critics claimed that the author’s intentions play little or no part in the understanding of the text. As Terry Eagleton puts it, “New Criticism was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality” (Literary Theory 47).

Focus was transferred from author to text: the text came to be seen as an autonomous object, free from author’s intentions and reader involvement. Yet an umbilical cord remained with the author, for the object of reading continued to be to access the minds of the great men (and they were mostly men) who produced the texts. However, as Eagleton points out, there were problems with such a position, for it was difficult to know what the author’s intention was when he wrote the play, or to know whether his intention corresponded with the actual text that was produced (Literary Theory 48).

Another problem with New Criticism was that it left out the reader. It seems a strange position to take, for as Eagleton points out, “without him or her [the reader] there
would be no literary texts at all "(Literary Theory 74). As a result, the reader was seen as a passive entity whose duty was merely to figure out the meaning or meanings inherent in the text. By treating the text as a self-contained unit, an objective creation that was totally free of subjective feelings, whether the feelings were those of the author or reader, New Criticism managed to largely divorce itself from both social and historical concerns.

Dissatisfied with the limitations of New Criticism, later literary theorists appropriated works from semiotics, linguistics, and anthropology to come up with a theory that demystified both the text and the author. Known as "structuralism," the new theory studied the shared systems of signification in human societies that arose out of language. As Ellen Seiter notes, "structuralist analysis proposes binary oppositions such as individual/community, male/female, nature/culture, or mind/matter and argues that every element within the system derives its meaning from its relationship to these categories" ("Semiotics" 50).

One problem with structuralism is that, while it places literary theory within a social and historical context, its "scientific" form of inquiry did not include the individual. As Eagleton points out, "there was no question of relating the work to the actual readers who studied it, since the founding gesture of structuralism had been to bracket off such realities" (Literary Theory 109). It took poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva to notice the slippage between the signifier and the signified. According to Seiter, there are "gaps and fissures" and "structural incoherences" in structuralism ("Semiotics" 61). Still, as Terry Eagleton points out, while structuralism "flees from history to language," it also
exposes the “unnaturalness” of signs and thus encourages a new look at social relationships besides fostering “a radical awareness” of “historical mutability.” In contrast, poststructuralism was concerned with “the very concept of structure itself” (Literary Theory 141). From Barthes to de Man and J. Hillis Miller, the emphasis has been largely on how language constantly undermines its own meaning.

In recent years, desire to connect the text with the individual has given rise to reader reception or reader response theory. The new focus on interactions between the reader and the text has arisen partly because of the recognition that pure objectivity in reading texts is largely a myth: the reader, consciously or unconsciously, always involves his or her personal experiences in any understanding and interpretation of a text. As Richard Beach puts it, “the text cannot be understood or analyzed as an isolated entity” (A Teachers Introduction to Response Theories 1).

In his book Subjective Criticism, David Bleich points out that every system of human thought is necessarily subjective. The so-called “objectivity” often accorded to science or scientific activity is misleading. Using T.S. Kuhn’s concept of a “paradigm” Bleich says that “it [the paradigm] is a model that describes the cognitive state of mind of those systematically observing something in human experience.” Bleich concludes that “in a literal sense a paradigm governs scientific activity only and directly by the consent of the governed. It is a shared mental structure, a set of beliefs about the nature of reality subscribed to by a group of thinkers large enough to exercise leadership for those similarly wishing to observe and understand human experience” (10).
Bleich’s argument reflects modern developments in philosophy and particle physics.

As Henry D. Aiken claims, from Kant onwards philosophers had begun to question the idea of separateness between the mind and its object. Writing about reality and its supposedly non-distorting “correspondence” with thinking, Aiken states:

If the reason in things is the same as the reason which we acknowledge as the standard of valid thinking about any object, this is only because we ourselves have ordained what conditions any object must meet if it is to be counted by us as “real.” In short, it is the thinking subject himself who establishes the standard of objectivity. . . . The element of subjectivity, however subtly disguised, can never be wholly eliminated from any philosophical system. (The Age of Ideology 15)

In quantum mechanics, it has been found that the object of observation (the subatomic particle) is changed by the very act of observation. As David Bleich explains, even “objective” scientific criteria such as universality, repeatability, and predictability have their subjective roots (Subjective Criticism 38). Subjectivity in literary criticism can thus be practised without seeming to be “unscientific”—a quite substantial achievement in this science-oriented world and is, perhaps, one reason why reader response criticism has been embraced by literary critics in areas ranging from feminist criticism to forms that include the psychoanalytic, textualist, social, historical, and so on.

Reader response criticism need not necessarily exclude the text. The goal is, rather, to encourage the reader to draw from their own experiences in order to comprehend and interpret the text. There is a recognition that the meaning of a text need not reside totally within the text itself: in other words, texts are modified by readers as they read. Such modifications can be conscious or unconscious. The reader, like the author, cannot create
texts in isolation as he or she is also a social creature in a historical period and hence cannot avoid subjectivity.

This thesis adopts an eclectic approach in analyzing the works of Mark Twain and the Ashcan School and their relationship with the myth of American exceptionalism. My analysis depends mainly on the texts under examination, but I will also refer to related texts, especially those that touch on the social, economic, and historical situation during the period from after the Civil War to 1914. Furthermore, as in reader response criticism, I cannot avoid the subjectivity that my personal experiences bring along. This includes the fact that I have taught art to high school students for decades and have remained a professional artist, that I was heavily influenced by a capitalist father who was paradoxically pro-socialist all his life, that being born in Malaysia immediately after the Second World War meant that I had experienced and seen a lot of poverty around me, or that I had spent most of my formative years studying in a school founded by the Methodist Church. Also self-evidently, I have been influenced especially by social historians who wrote about the myth of American exceptionalism.

Indeed, my choice of texts for this thesis can be said to be an indication of my own subjectivity. Nevertheless, I am convinced that Mark Twain was the first major American writer to have consistently attacked themes associated with the myth of American exceptionalism. Twain looked at American society and he was not very happy with it. Unlike William D. Howells or Hamlin Garland, Twain never wavered from what critics might call his “pessimistic” position. Barely a year before his death in 1910, Twain
published *Extract from Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* in which he attacked all his favorite targets such as religion, society, and Shakespeare. Furthermore, unlike the other great writer Henry James, Twain’s distaste for utopianism is evident in the way he constructs his stories: artistic perfection was not for Twain as it was for the author of *The Art of Fiction*. As David Bleich views it, the striving for perfection and perfect story book characters is a form of utopianism, which he links with millenialism, an idea inherent in the American exceptionalism concept. Bleich says that with the advent of Christianity, the Golden Age [in the West] was transformed into the Garden of Eden: “the promise of Heaven on Earth” was to be achieved “by the returning Savior and his millenarian kingdom (*Utopia: The Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy* 14). Bleich thinks that though utopianism usually brings about chaos and destruction in the real world, in the literary world it becomes art. The reverse is equally true: the more artistic a piece of work is, the more utopian it becomes (57).

I also believe that the Ashcan artists were the first Realists who managed, in some of their paintings, to depict the other (darker) side of American exceptionalism. Their kind of realism was, unlike that of Courbet or Millet, largely non-utopian in the sense that the painted scenes or figures were seldom refined or made to represent some universal ideals.

In examining the works of Twain and the Ashcan group, I take the position of David Lubin as stated in his book *Picturing A Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America*. Like Lubin, I wish to avoid the Barthean and other postmodernist extremes of the “death of author” and “death of subject” approach (xii). I also try to avoid seeing the world from an individualist viewpoint and, again like Lubin, I strive not to fall into the anti-
individualism trap: both Twain and the Ashcan artists would be recognized for their complex individual identities that resulted from interactions with the social and historical forces of their times.

I must confess that my analysis rests largely upon a conviction that I can generate meanings from texts that might have escaped or overlooked by social historians. In so doing, I realize that I am but presenting another point of view regarding the texts under examination. I am also aware that textual meanings might have changed over the years. Furthermore, due to limitations of the three-color printing process, textbook prints of artworks are notoriously different from their originals, a fact that I try to minimize by viewing various books of the same works. However, I console myself that the authors themselves might not have been able to control their own texts, whether in literature or art. Furthermore, original artworks might have changed their colors or forms: oil paintings in particular are known for their tendency to yellow and darken over time.

**The Myth of American Exceptionalism**

The theme of exceptionalism has been debated or referred to since the earliest beginnings of American nationhood. The Puritans followed a providential history in which America was seen as God’s New Israel and Britain or Europe as decadent ancient Egypt. It was the duty of the early settlers to build a “City on a Hill,” a new Jerusalem that would serve as a beacon for other peoples and nations around the world. In his sermon aboard the Puritan’s flagship *Arabella* John Winthrop said:
The God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when he shall make us a prayer and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations: the lord make it like that of New England: for wee must consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill. (Early American Writing 112)

The idea of being a “chosen people” implies a covenantal relationship with God. Thus many early preachers issued warnings or “jeremiads” to prevent the populace from backslidings in behavior that might damage such a relationship. Samuel Danforth’s Errand into the Wilderness (1670) is an example of how social catastrophe and natural disasters were linked with sins against God. As Conrad Cherry puts it, “since the Puritan was quite capable of discerning the hand of God in most any natural or historical event, the jeremiads warned that New England’s crop failures, Indian wars, droughts, and epidemics were the judgement of a thoroughly provoked God on his wayward people” (God’s New Israel 27).

Two concepts from Danforth’s sermon were to emerge very often through the centuries—”errand” and “wilderness.” “Errand” during Danforth’s time referred to the practice and intentions of the original settlers. Later, during America’s western expansion, “errand” appears to have evolved into “mission,” a word that could be used in two different ways. One is related to the idea of America as a redeemer nation, a nation that adopts for itself the millenialist role of saving the world for God. Wars are fought to end all wars: hence, as Ernest Tuveson points out, the apocalyptic note in the song “mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord” (Redeemer Nation 197). However, “mission” is also a word that could be used to justify empire-building and in this case it is related to another well-known American exceptionalist concept, that of Manifest Destiny. As for “wilderness,”
during Danforth’s time the word referred to New England migration, a place which, according to Plumstead, was full “of darkness, of wild beasts . . . uncontrolled lusts, of disorder and disharmony” (*The Wall and the Garden* 50). In other words, the wilderness was seen as a place to be tamed and controlled.

A century later, French expatriate Hector St. John de Crevecoeur would see the wilderness as a training ground for molding self-reliant individuals. In *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Crevecoeur’s “most perfect society” was at least partly agrarian (*Early American Writing* 474). Later, pushing back the wilderness and thereby extending the frontier would form the basis of Federick Jackson Turner’s thesis that the process actually helped to mold the American character. In *The Closed Frontier*, David M. Wrobel quotes Turner as saying that the frontier had “prompted the formation of a composite nationality” and developed “the stalwart and rugged qualities of the frontiersman” which not only makes people more individualistic, but also more anti-authoritarian, thus enhancing democracy (36).

The idea of democracy, American style, is important to Daniel Bell who credits America’s successes not to its religion or its vast empty lands but to its civil society. According to Bell, the government’s contract with its people is unique in that it stresses “rights, inalienable rights, and naturally endowed” to each human being (“The Hegelian Secret” 47). Unlike other countries created by European immigration, such as Canada and Australia, America’s greater emphasis on basic civil rights allowed people to remake themselves: Americans were individuals who could move about freely and change their occupations whenever they like.
In his book *Marx and America*, Marxist Earl Browder sees American exceptionalism in the high wages for workers which in turn prompted capitalists to use new labor-saving machinery. This was because, says Browder, that whereas in countries like England Marx’s “absolute laws” such as “the value of labor is determined by subsistence” had some substance, in the United States the laws did not apply because of the vast amount of free land and numerous independent farmers (20).

Other Americans hold quite different views. Robert Bellah, for example, sees American society as “a cruel and bitter one, very far, in fact, from its own highest aspirations” (*The Broken Covenant* viii). Bellah laments the rise of selfish utilitarianism in modern day America, a development that he thinks deviates from the original “religious and moral conception of life that took account of a much broader range of social, aesthetic, and religious needs” (xiv).

However much Bellah might decry the current state of affairs, he, like many others, still bases his views on the assumption that America is a covenanted and thus exceptional nation. This is not the case with some modern intellectuals who point out how a country that once practiced slavery and until recently supported the brutal regimes of El Salvador and Guatemala can claim to be exceptional. Noam Chomsky says that if America is exceptional at all, it is that “intellectuals tend to be so eager to promulgate the state religion and explain whatever happens as ‘tragic error’.” Chomsky complains that in the midst of the Vietnam War “there was a Sidney Hook to dismiss ‘the unfortunate accidental loss of life’ or the ‘unintended consequences of military action’ ” (“Foreign Policy and the Intelligentsia” 16).
It is interesting that Chomsky mentions about the “state religion”: an admission, I think, that the myth of American exceptionalism is very much alive. Furthermore, the very passion with which Chomsky denounces his own country seems to indicate the sense of mission Americans have when it comes to justice and human rights. It was not too long ago when another American, Harriet Beecher Stowe, warned of a Jesus that shall appear and “break in pieces the oppressor” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 451).

In this thesis, I will compare Twain’s *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* with selected paintings from the Ashcan artists in terms of American exceptionalism. I will attempt to show how Twain was uncompromising in his rejection of exceptionalist themes, perhaps much more so than members of the Ashcan group. I hope this analysis will provide further illumination to the ongoing controversy about American exceptionalism, besides showing that long before writers such as Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and other naturalists arrived, Twain was already there.

**The Sister Arts: Literature and Painting**

According to William Vaughan, it was eighteenth-century art critic Johann Joachim Winckelmann who thought that art could “express the full range of human passions and thoughts” (*Romanticism and Art* 13). Winckelmann cited the famous Greek sculpture *Laocoon* in order to justify his point. However, Gottfried Ephraim Lessing and a few other people thought otherwise. In his retort to Winckelmann, Lessing wrote his treatise *Laocoon* to prove that the visual arts’ preoccupation with beauty could only serve to inhibit the expression of emotions. In other words, Horace’s *ut picture poesis* must be taken with
circumspection. Lessing points out that the Ancients “did not forget to inculcate that, notwithstanding the perfect similarity of this effect [the feelings produced by painting and poetry], these Arts differed, as well in the object as in their manner of representations” (Laocoon 3). In other words, there are natural differences between the visual and the verbal which, in the scrutiny for parallels, have been ignored or overlooked by art critics.

A simple example pointed out in Laocoon is that while the effects of art can be taken in all at once, this is not the case with poetry. In the latter case, the reader gets to feel the effects line by line. If the poem is long, the reader has to turn the page or pages as well before the final effect of the poem is accomplished. Because of the inherent differences between painting and literature, some Western poets have borrowed a page from oriental artists by writing their poetry on paintings or, in the case of Cummings, manipulated words and sentences in spatial arrangements on the page.

Yet similarities between the sister arts do remain, especially in terms of ideals or aesthetic goals. The pictorial qualities of Walt Whitman’s poems are well-known. One example is Whitman’s statement, quoted by F. O. Matthiessen, that “every rod of land or sea affords me, as long as I live, inimitable pictures.” On another occasion, Whitman writes that “the Leaves are really only Millet in another form” (American Renaissance 600).

Conversely, there are also innumerable artists who have tried to express the poetic in a visual way. For example, Robert Hughes mentions that one of Thomas Moran’s earliest works, Among the Ruins—There He Lingered (1865), was based on Shelley’s Alabaster or The Spirit of Solitude (American Visions 198). As David C. Miller points out, there is
already a “high degree of visual–verbal interaction throughout the American literary and artistic tradition” (*American Iconology* 2). My analysis of thematic and stylistic similarities in the works of Mark Twain and members of the Ashcan School of painters is just an addition to the work already accomplished in this area.

**The Rise of Realism in Post-Civil War America**

It is generally accepted that realism in literature and art arose some time after the Civil War. From mid-nineteenth century to the First World War, the country’s industry had roared away at breakneck speed. Robert Hughes said that “American culture after 1860 was dominated by two vast images. . . . One was the Civil War. The other was the Machine (*American Visions* 271). According to Myron and Sundell, 180 new factories were built and equipped between the years 1862 and 1864 in Philadelphedia alone. New machines such as the Howe sewing machine, the McKay shoe machine and the farm reaper were invented. With the discovery of petroleum in 1859, kerosene began to replace candles and whale oil and commercially produced glass lamps were sold by the millions. Immigration added 800,000 people to a population that had increased, between 1860 and 1870, by more than 8 million. The 1862 Homestead Act had encouraged a new wave of westward migration: food production almost tripled (*Art in America* 125). Land-grant universities were created and a new working class began to take interest in their own environment which quite often reflected the harsh realities of pure capitalism. The rich, however, became very rich and did not hesitate to indulge in conspicuous consumption. Historian Rebecca Brooks Gruver notes the ruthless exploitation by big industry, whose leaders came to be called “robber barons”
Authors Horton and Edwards note that while business shrewdness was a Calvinist virtue and regarded since Puritan times as a sign of possible Election, what took place in the Eighties was “a philosophy of driving ambition, lust for power, animal cunning, and the sort of perverted self-reliance that leads one to trample his neighbors” (Backgrounds of American Literary Thought 155).

Rebecca Brooks Gruver points out that supporters of laissez-faire capitalism were not adverse to using the works of Charles Darwin to justify their dog-eat-dog mentality. She also notes how the English social philosopher Herbert Spencer appropriated Darwin’s idea of “the survival of the fittest” to argue against government in business and social reform. Likewise, Yale Professor William Graham Sumner drew from the works of both Darwin and Spencer to condemn all efforts at social reform. Spouting what was known as Social Darwinism, Sumner said that “millionaires were the product of natural selection, and trusts were the outgrowth of the competitive evolution of business enterprise. If these institutions were not interfered with, society would move rapidly into perfection” (An American History 479).

Not all concepts that ran through post-Civil War America were pessimistic. Gruver narrates the popular rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger which suggested that “any boy could rise from humble origins by hard work, thrift, honesty, and a generous measure of luck” (480). Alger, says Gruver, did not consider social welfare a state or federal responsibility, an idea that appeared to coincide with the “traditional belief that the less fortunate . . . were the responsibility of their families or of private charity” (480).
It was during this time of rapid social, economic, and political changes that the first crop of American Realists emerged. In literature, writers such as William Dean Howells and Bret Harte began to attack the Romantic idealism of earlier writers such as Emerson and Longfellow. Mark Twain’s famous though perhaps not totally justified attacks on Cooper is well-known to any student of American literature. Unlike the Romantics, the Realists attempted to depict life as they thought they saw it (whatever that might be). A few, such as Howells and Henry James, tried to go further and probed deeper into the minds of their characters. Leon Howard notes that Howells “was looking for a deeper reality and . . . looked for it first in the traditional American belief in an innate moral sense” (Literature and the American Tradition 194). In so doing, however, Howells and others like him were reaching in the direction of what David Bleich might term as utopian fantasy: in short, the search for some innate goodness in people can be seen as “wish allowed into conscious” that is typical of the utopia (Utopia: The Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy 60). Only Mark Twain appears to be free of any sort of idealism, at least much more so than the later crop of naturalist writers such as Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane whose works tend to suggest that a different social system might result in a better society.

As in literature, art could not remain untouched by the times. The Civil War was the first American war to be recorded by photography and it was thought that the camera could not lie. Thus, Robert Hughes notes, some writers and artists and “much of their audience” were compelled to face unpleasant facts (American Visions 272). Artists like Thomas Eakins were interested in rendering almost photographic images onto their canvases. Others
preferred to see reality not so much in terms of visual correspondence with nature as in choice of subject matter. The Ashcan School of artists, led by Robert Henri, were convinced that the artist "must connect with the harsh facts of society" (325). Through their subject matter and the way they paint, this group of artists were to show, like Mark Twain, that there was another side to American exceptionalism.
MARK TWAIN AND THEMES OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Mark Twain (1835) is famous for his novels such as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* as well as travel pieces and short humorous stories such as *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. What is less popularly known are works such as *What is Man?* (1906), *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), and *Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven* (1907). The reason for their low profiles seems rather obvious: they do not fit with the prevailing worldview of the privileged class in America. According to literary editor Robert M. Rodney, even during the twentieth century *Stormfield* appeared in only two American editions. In contrast, the story found an appreciative audience in countries such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, and Russia. The work was translated in eleven languages, published in ten countries and in twenty-seven editions (*Mark Twain International* xxxiv, xlviii). It is because *Stormfield* is probably Twain’s least well-known work in the United States that makes it the best candidate to look for evidences of his disenchantment with themes connected with American exceptionalism.

The *Stormfield* story reviewed below was published in 1952 by New York publishers Harper and Brothers. It was released as the first of two parts under the title *Report from Paradise*. The second part was entitled *Letter from the recording Angel*.

In his introduction for the book, Dixon Wector, late literary editor of the Mark Twain Estate, says that *Stormfield* was published six months before Twain’s death. However, it was in conception one of his earliest books: the idea first germinated some forty-three years
before (x). This suggests that Twain did not write the story because he was, in his old age, saddened or embittered by the death of family members or by personal financial misfortunes. He had always looked askance at exceptionalist themes such as Americans being a chosen people, Manifest Destiny, and other socio-cultural beliefs. Indeed, *Stormfield* is a good example of the many anti-exceptionalist themes evident in most of Twain’s works.

*Stormfield* is about a sea captain’s journey to heaven and how he found that all the things he learned about heaven turned out to be false, misleading, or misunderstood. In the process, the reader also learns about the writer’s views on race and empire as well as class differences.

**Mark Twain on Race and Empire**

Perhaps nothing exemplifies the exceptionalist idea more than the concept of being a chosen people. Being chosen means others are not, and this viewing of the world in binary opposites tends to result in hierarchical relationships. In biblical stories, non-chosen peoples had to serve the chosen people. The very concept of chosen people, therefore, entails possibilities for slavery as well as conquest of other people’s lands. As Edward McNall Burns opines, ideas of racial superiority can be used to justify the conquest and subjugation of other peoples. “A conviction of racial superiority,” says Burns, may be both a cause and a consequence of a nation’s consciousness of a mission (*The American Idea of a Mission* 187).

Moreover, the Western habit of dualistic thinking tends to make slavery more comprehensible and socially acceptable. George M. Federickson points out that “the
association of black with evil was of course deeply rooted in Western and Christian
mythology; it was natural to think of Satan as the Prince of Darkness and of withcraft as
black magic. . . . the Negro became for European whites a symbol of the unconscious itself”
(The Arrogance of Race 191). Even after emancipation, writes Seymour Martin Lipset,
blacks “served largely as a lower-caste group working under explicit or implicit Jim Crow
policies, with little opportunity to gain educational or financial resources” (American
Exceptionalism 115). In other words, the chosen people concept can result in racist thinking.

In America, racist thinking appears to dominate not only white attitudes towards the
black race, but other races as well. This is apparent in books such as Dee Brown’s Bury My
Heart at Wounded knee which give detailed accounts of how the culture and civilization of
Native Americans were systematically destroyed in the “opening” of the American West (xi).
In Following the Equator, Twain thought that America was far from being exceptional in its
imperialist ventures. Feeling that the West, including America, was clothing its landgrabbing
habit with hypocritical Enlightenment virtues, he wrote that “all the territorial possessions . . .
consist of pilferings from other people’s wash” (298–9).

During the last quarter of the nineteenth century and up to the early decades of the
twentieth century, there were movements to restrict immigration by peoples of “inferior
racial stock.” According to Richard Slotkin, John R. Commons, a so-called liberal who was
asked to help in the U.S. Immigration Commission, wrote in the report Races and
Immigrants in America that “democracy needs the basic qualities of intelligence, manliness,
and cooperation. . . . Here is the problem of races, the fundamental division of mankind.
Race differences are established in the very blood and physical constitution” (*Gunfighter Nation* 190).

To be fair, such kind of race thinking had been rather popular during the nineteenth century and even before Theodore Roosevelt became president. Stephen J. Gould points out that Georges Cuvier, the famous nineteenth-century naturalist known in France as the Aristotle of his age, was moved to say that native Africans were “the most degraded of human races, whose form approaches that of the beast and whose intelligence is nowhere great enough to arrive at regular government” (*The Mismeasure of Man* 69).

Given the popularity of such views, Twain must have indeed been a very exceptional person to feel different. In *Stormfield* Twain shows his inclusive attitude in a number of ways. For example, when on his journey to heaven Stormfield picks up a negro “straggler” named Sam, the old sea captain states that Sam was “full of thinkings about his people at home and their grief over losing him” (14). Through such descriptions about Sam, Twain is trying to show that the negro has the same needs and worries as any white man.

On another occasion, Sam shows his concern for the Captain who was, the negro thought, also going to hell. Says the Captain, “He [Sam] was as grieved as about it as my best friend could be . . . and hoped and believed I would get used to it after a while, and not mind it.” Sam also gives the Captain pipe and tobacco. “He was a good chap,” says the Captain, “I have seen but few niggers that had’nt their hearts in the right place” (16).

In showing Sam to be as human as anyone can be, Twain is taking a different tack from the ironic scene showing Huck Finn and Aunt Sally about an imaginary steamboat
accident. Aunt Sally asks: “Good Gracious! anybody hurt?” Huck answers. “No’m. Killed a nigger.” Aunt Sally replies that “it’s lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt” (Huckleberry Finn 208).

Twain is showing the link between prejudice and racism when he describes how Stormfield had mistakenly assumed that another fellow passenger, a Jew, was crying because he (the Jew) had sold a coat to a customer for four dollars instead of five. “They haven’t a heart,” thought the Captain,” that race . . . nor any principles” (8, 9). A few moments later, the Captain found out the real cause: the Jew, Solomon Goldstein, was crying over his daughter who had passed away six months ago.

Twain’s comment on the ubiquitous presence of Native Americans in heaven makes up one of the story’s funniest episodes. When the Captain tells his friend Sandy that he could “hardly ever see a white angel,” Sandy explains that not enough white folks have died to make the United States part of heaven a white place. The Indians have too great a headstart, and the implication is that the more they are killed, the more they outnumber the whites in heaven. Twain also casts a sly remark at white racism with a reference to white skin. Referring to “learned men from other planets” visiting the U.S. part of heaven, Sandy tells the Captain that “they [the learned men] say this wilderness is populated with a scattering few thousands of red angels, with now and then a curiously complected diseased one. . . . they think we whites and the occasional nigger are Injuns that have been bleached out or blackened by some leprous disease or other . . . for some peculiarly rascally sin” (76, 77).
Besides taking a bite at racism, the idea of an Indian-populated heaven is also Twain’s way of sniping at proponents of Manifest Destiny, especially those who would wipe out natives all over the world in search of Empire. Benjamin M. Palmer’s suggestion that “enlargement was promised to Japhet” would not have been acceptable to Twain (“National Responsibility Before God” 170). In “Glances at History” Twain writes: “Only when a republic’s life is in danger should a man uphold his government when it is in the wrong. There is no other time. . . . An inglorious peace is better than a dishonorable war” (A Pen Warmed-Up in Hell 34).

Admittedly, there are those who, like Reinhold Niebuhr, see America’s chosenness not as a chance to flaunt its power, but as an opportunity to pursue peace and justice. In “Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility” Niebuhr seems to propose a kinder and gentler America when he says that the “right to rule because of our superior virtue is of a higher order than the amoral idea that we have a right to rule because of our power” (God’s New Israel 305). Even then, for Mark Twain the “superior virtue” that Niebuhr talks about is often just clothing for naked imperialist power.

Twain’s ideas on race and racism in Stormfield indicates his skepticism of the “chosen people” myth. His idea of a great society or nation is one of inclusion, not exclusion. Crow and Turnbull note that the high point of the Lincoln-Douglas debates was Lincoln’s belief that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” (American History: A Problems Approach 347). Similarly, the “half-a-dog” story in Puddinghead Wilson (6) is more than just about mixed-race blacks: it also a satire about a divided nation and perhaps a
divided world. As Sandy says to the Captain: “Think of the dull sameness of a society made up of people all of one age and one set of looks, habits, tastes, and feelings. Think how superior to it earth would be, with its variety of types and faces and ages” (Stormfield 49).

In modern terms, it is a call for diversity.

Mark Twain on Class

In the United States, anyone suggesting the existence of class conflict risks being branded as a communist or at least as being unAmerican. A City on a Hill presupposes a just social system where each person can achieve, as Maslow might say, self-actualization. This was not the case in the years leading to the First World War (nor is it now). As Conrad Cherry points out, rural depressions, the rapid industrialization and influx of new immigrants, together with a highly exploitative capitalist system, all served to create city blight and urban ghettos (God’s New Israel 211). Life for the poor, whether in the cities or in the rural areas, was wretched. The poverty that existed surely contradicts Earl Browder’s optimistic view of America as having an exceptional economic system. Granted, compared with Europe the poor in America were comparatively well-off, but tell that to the 1886 railroad worker who had his head bashed in for striking and he would not have been very appreciative of the fact. Yet, even clergyman Henry Ward Beecher was unsympathetic to the railroad strike (God’s New Israel 215). As for the possibility of a benign corporate America, Richard Slotkin notes that it was the President of the National Association of Manufacturers, David M. Perry, who wrote that “organized labor know but one law, and that is the law of physical force . . . the law of the Huns and Vandals, the law of the savage” (Gunfighter Nation 91).
Living at a time when the economic gap between rich and poor was enormous, money was often an important topic for Twain. In *The Notorious Jumping of Calaveras County*, even a dog understands the value of money. The pup Andrew Jackson would pretend to lose to another dog until after bets were “doubled and doubled, after which it would seize its opponent “by the jint of its hind leg and freeze to it” until the other dog “throw up the sponge” (*The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories 3*).

To poor people, the availability of money could be a matter of life and death. In *The One Million Pound Banknote* money means food and shelter for the mining broker’s clerk, and in *The Mysterious Stranger* Marget and her uncle discover that money is important to prevent “the very end” (*The Mysterious stranger and Other Stories* 5, 58).

Even though Twain was relatively well off for most of his life, he had known poverty during his childhood. Thus, as biographer Edward Wagenknecht reveals, though Twain considered money to be dangerous if wrongly used, it is, for the author of *Stormfield*, “a good and strong friend” (*Mark Twain: The Man and His Work* 136).

Twain’s recognition of the importance of money might have been a factor in his empathy for the lower class. Twain also appreciates the fact that Solomon Goldstein, though a businessman, is crying because of the death of a daughter and not because of some business deal gone bad. Though Twain spends much of his life in high society, the writer tends to despise it. As Wagenknecht says, Mark Twain “considered Jay Gould one of the worst calamities that had ever befallen the Republic” (*Mark Twain: The Man and His Work* 136).
Likewise, Goldstein would rather go to hell with Stormfield than be part of New York ‘s elite set (8).

For Twain, there is very little opportunity for poor people to succeed in anything until they get to heaven. In heaven, the tables are turned and poor but bright and good hardworking people are recognized for their true qualities. Thus Caesar and Alexander and Napoleon and Hannibal all have to “take a back seat” to people who are of the shoemaker, horse-doctor, and knifegrinder kind (80). In the literary arena, Shakespeare and Homer have to walk behind “a common tailor from Tennessee” and “a horse-doctor named Sakka” from Afghanistan. “That tailor Billings,” says Sandy, “wrote poetry that Homer and Shakespeare couldn’t begin to come up to; but nobody would print it. . . . Whenever the village had a drunken frolic and a dance, they would drag him in and crown him with cabbage leaves . . . and one night when he was sick and nearly starved to death, they had him out and crowned him. . . . he died in the morning” (67–68).

Another poor person who receives just rewards only in heaven is Richard Duffer. Duffer was the owner of a sausage-shop “and never saved a cent in his life because he used to give all his spare meat to the poor, in a quiet way.” Duffer would track home honest hardworking but hungry men and women and children and “feed them and find them work.” When he died, he was known as a mean man because nobody knew of his generosity, but the minute he landed in heaven he was knighted as “Sir Richard Duffer” (73).

Twain’s skepticism about the poor succeeding in the world shows that he is not an Horatio Alger fan. For Twain, hard work gets a person nowhere if that person is not given a
level playing field. The American dream remains only a dream for the poor. For Twain, environment is all: only by changing the environment can there be any amelioration of poverty conditions. For example, if the poor were given education, their life would change, just as the life of a baby who died and then went to heaven changed when she had, in heaven, twenty-seven years of education. As a result of her heavenly learning, she can discuss “gigantic problems with people like herself.” Her poor mother on earth, however, knows only about cranberries and how to tend, pick, and market them. Thus, “her and her daughter can’t be any more company for each other now than mud turtle and bird o’ paradise” (50–53). As Joe B. Fulton notes, Twain’s contention that environment makes people is illustrated in his novel *The Prince and the Pauper* in which Tom Canty and Edward Tudor were forced to act out each other’s role in society (*Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism* 23). It appears that, for the working class poor, nothing beneficial can happen to them unless they receive help or they die and go to heaven, whichever comes first. For Twain, American exceptionalism does not automatically extend to the working poor.
THE ASHCAN SCHOOL AND THEMES OF AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

When the Ashcan School of painters had their famous exhibition at Macbeth in 1908, Mark Twain had gone to live at his “Stormfield” home at Redding, Connecticut. The humorist was about three decades older than any of the Ashcan artists. However, since he lived till 1910, Twain had, like the artists, experienced the tumultuous years that David Bleich called the Transition Period (1870–1914). It was a period, according to Bleich, when utopianism reared its head, when the promise of progress blazed by science was supposed to usher the world into the new millenia. One might have thought that, during a time of industrial strikes and urban poverty, utopianism was the least likely form of “ism” to emerge. However, Bleich contends that utopianism was able to emerge precisely because of massive social problems. When societies break down, people are always attracted by leaders who promise to solve problems with a magic wand. Thus, both Marxism and promoters of strong government were popular during the Transition Period (Utopia: The Psychology of a Cultural Fantasy 37–54).

Utopia, then, is linked to millenialism because both concepts promise the creation of perfect societies. For Americans, it was again the City on a Hill concept, except that this time Eden was to be realized by scientific advances. What Mark Twain saw, however, was a society where Social Darwinism was carried out, where lions eat lambs instead of peacefully coexisting together. As for the Ashcan painters, America was neither wholly City nor
Wilderness: it was a mixture of the two. For the poor, mostly immigrant populations in the slums, the wilderness could be found right in the City. Neither the bright shiny buildings of the American impressionist Childe Hassam nor the gleaming well-fed bodies of Thomas Eakins’ bathers at arcadian-like *The Swimming Hole* were to be found in the paintings of the Ashcan School. Instead, the city was often a grimy place, as indicated in Sloan’s *Dust Storm, Fifth Avenue*, 1906 and *Hairdresser’s Window*, 1907. Likewise, George Bellows’ version of a swimming hole was a dark, stagnant pool for *Forty-Two Kids*, 1907. Like Mark Twain, the Ashcan artists saw that there was another side to American exceptionalism.

Though Robert Henri was the leader and teacher of the Ashcan School, he was, as Edward Lucie-Smith notes, wealthier, better educated, and had more craftsmanship than his young followers (*American Realism* 61, 62). Nevertheless, Henri tended to place more emphasis on spontaneity than on technique. Art historian Bernnard B. Perlman comments that Henri’s “stimulating doctrines provided an exciting relief from the prevailing restrained and polished procedure” (*Painters of the Ashcan School* 87). The focus of art for Henri was life, and its frank depiction was more important than technical virtuosity.

The deemphasis of craftsmanship was of course antithetical to the ideals of classicists such as Kenyon Cox. Cox and his group of conservative painters who made up the National Academy of Design could not accept the rough-hewn work of the Ashcan painters. The Academy recognized only paintings which had as its motif the abstract idea of beauty. Art was not supposed to reflect reality, especially the reality of the teeming streets. However, as Sam Hunter and John Jacobus note, the early part of the twentieth century saw “writers and
artists . . . take up the cause of the common man against corporate power and abuses of
privilege" (*American Art of the Twentieth Century* 49). The Academy, as part of the
establishment, declined to accept most of the paintings that belonged to “the apostles of
ugliness,” “the revolutionary gang,” “the black gang,” and “the ash-can school” (63).

The Ashcan School artists were not the first Realists to be rejected in art history. At
the Universal Exposition of 1855 the French painter Courbet was rejected by the director of
the imperial museums. Like The Eight’s exhibition at Macbeth Galleries in 1908, the French
Realists too held their own Salon des Refuses (in 1863). Federick Hartt comments that
because Daumier and Courbet participated in social movements, they “were actually forced
to serve prison sentences” (*Art* 822).

Despite Henri’s leadership of The Eight, his paintings were generally regarded by
some critics as a little too polished to reflect consistently the rough-and-tumble life of the
proletariat. Henri came from a middleclass background, and, as mentioned earlier, he was
wealthier and better educated than his Ashcan disciples. Perhaps because of this, Lucie-
Smith is moved to say that, “Henri for the most part saw reality indirectly, through the mirror
held up to it by art. . . . His work, unlike that of the earlier artist [Eakins], is seldom a direct
confrontation with the facts. . . . Any realistic element in his work is heavily qualified,
because it is largely second-hand” (*American Realism* 62).

It is, of course, arguable that Eakins’ paintings are a “direct confrontation with the
facts.” For example, his most famous painting, *The Gross Clinic*, is a carefully composed
painting, taking in only what the artist thought would help to enhance his message and
leaving out details that might detract from it. Eakins’ realism is “real” largely in the illusionist sense: like William M. Harnett, he strives to achieve photographic likeness in his work. Furthermore, his paintings show at best only one aspect of society (the elitist progressivist aspect) and at worst may be said to have avoided the problems generated by America’s rapid industrial development.

Unlike Eakins, Henri’s choice of subject matter and the way he executes his paintings puts him in a different category. Henri’s “go to the people” attitude differentiates him from proponents of the Genteel Tradition which focussed on out-of-date themes derived from European traditions, and from the purely scientific purveyors of Impressionistic art. It was not for nothing that the Ashcan canvases were described having been painted in “darkest Henri” (Hunter, American Art of the Twentieth Century 63). Henri had a feel for the other side of American exceptionalism: Eakins, despite his problems with the art establishment, shared with them the prevailing positivist worldview.

City on a Hill: Class and the Ashcan School

When Mark Twain published The Gilded Age in 1973, painting, book illustration, and engraving were still popular crafts. By the end of the century, however, photograving had managed to push all kinds of crafts, including portrait painting, into near oblivion. The rise of industry, it seemed, could take place only at the expense of the traditional arts.

Such a consequence is not totally unexpected. As the century came to a close and a new century began, America was beginning to flex internationally its military and economic strength. “I have always,” said Theodore Roosevelt, “been fond of the West African proverb,
‘Speak softly and carry a big stick [and] you will go far’ *(An American History* *592)*. This then, was the age of Roosevelt, a supposedly masculine age, and the arts were, supposedly, a feminine occupation. The Genteel Tradition, after all, lives on in the National Academy of Design. Many Americans, despite calls for patriotism, thought poorly of their own nation’s art and, sadly, they were mostly right. According to Perlman, the “American Ten,” a group of artists who later called for an American art form, had in 1893 “experienced firsthand the public’s expression of favor for foreign art” *(Painters of the Ashcan School* *113)*. The lure of Europe, especially Paris, proved irresistible even for Henri. It was not until Henri had a change of heart and the Ashcan School emerged that Americans discovered the beginnings of a truly autonomous art form. This was because Henri and his group of artists were brave enough to reject escapist art and began instead to look to the common people for artistic consideration.

Unlike Mark Twain, the Ashcan School were more interested in their immediate surroundings. Except for Henri, most of them had worked as newspaper or magazine illustrators: painting was for them, at least at the beginning, a part time affair. This allowed the artists some measure of freedom, since they did not have to depend on their works for bread and butter. Secondly, towards the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, art galleries began to replace the system of personal patrons. Further, as a new middle class began to acquire a taste for art, artists were able to defy the aesthetic guidelines set by established organizations such as the National Academy of Design.
Since the Ashcan artists turned to their environment for inspiration, most of their works were paintings of life in the city. John Sloan, for example, loved the streets of New York and, as E. P. Richardson notes, “the warm, rich flavors of human life in its great masses of people” (*A Short History of Painting in America* 252). Everett Shinn, George Luks, William J. Glackens, and George Bellows were all concerned with city life. To these artists, then, the dichotomous idea of city versus wilderness does not arise. If anything, the wilderness is in the city: the “darkness” and “uncontrolled lusts,” “disorder and disharmony” of Plumstead are all to be found in the slums of America, together with the brightness of city lights, dance halls, naked flesh and laughter and other raw forms of physicality. Their works of urban life, therefore, tend to relate to a lifestyle normally unassociated with themes of American exceptionalism.

Sloan, however, did paint a most intriguing picture that tells more than just about city life. Entitled *The Wake of the Ferry II*, 1907 (Figure 1), the painting appears to have a subtext that depicts the American ship of state’s lack of direction both domestically and internationally. This painting shows only one person, and that person is merged with the shadows that helps frame the scene. Robert Hughes describes the painting as follows:

Black stanchions and a tilted line of roof frame the cold blue evening sea from the stern of Staten Island Ferry, as the blue in Whistler’s Thames was framed by the Battersea Bridge (and both have the same roof in Hiroshige). Daringly, Sloan counterposed the dark mass of the lonely woman gazing astern against an open, swifly brushed diamond pattern of the safety rail running out to the left, giving both balance and a sense of exposure; you see the wet light on the steel deck and feel the cold. (*American Visions* 328)
Figure 1. The Wake of the Ferry II, John Sloan, 1907 (Hughes, 328)
The description does not include some smaller artistic devices employed by Sloan, such as having the left boat tilt towards the painting’s edge in order to balance the slightly rightwards tilt of the nearby stanchion. The diamond pattern safety rail also serves the purpose, together with the smoke of the boat and the stripes of whitish waves, of uniting the left side of the picture with the rest of the painting. The placement of the left stanchion roughly follows the Golden Mean principle, which accounts for the sense of “rightness” of the composition. The left safety rail by itself could not have balanced the “dark mass of the lone woman,” especially when the woman’s skirt is colored red, if it were not for the highlighted wave below the left boat and the interest provided by that same boat. Finally, unity is strengthened by the harmonies of grays which dominated the entire painting.

On the other hand, it is more than the formal elements that makes the painting so intriguing. Hughes is right about the “countercurrent of melancholy” which he says run through some of Sloan’s paintings. The cold grays and the distant boats seem to increase the loneliness of the woman, and iconographically speaking this painting can be a good example of humankind’s loneliness in the infinite universe. In Sartrean terms, one can say that the woman has to make a choice of waiting for a boat to arrive or go somewhere else, and that she was condemned to make that choice. The existentialist mood is the result of the alienation posed by rapid industrialization of the country, as signified by the general sootiness of the picture and the hidden machines that propelled the boats, not to mention the attendant polluting smoke.
This was a time when the constant displacement of unskilled or semiskilled workers were to be met without much resistance, for large corporations always had the government, police or troops on their side. This was the time, says biographer John Loughery, when Eugene Debs was quoted as saying that “Christianity was impossible under capitalism” (John Sloan: Painter and Rebel, 146). This was the time when Sloan became involved with the Socialist Party. According to Loughery, Sloan had earlier been shocked at the army “trooping into the City of Brotherly Love . . . and the nightmare of the Pullman strike of the same period. . . . What he [Sloan] perceived as the idiocy of the Spanish-American War . . . filled him with scorn” (144). Is it too far-fetched then, to see the boats as the ship of state, and the hazy atmosphere as representing the uncertainty for the viewers (both for the woman in the painting and the viewer of the painting) as to the direction the boats are going, as signifying the lack of direction the United States was moving at the turn of the century?

Sloan, like Mark Twain, had no use for the millenialist drive towards world conquest. The artist was more interested in the well-being of the common lowly-paid American worker. Twain makes fun of world conquest with the Injuns-running-all-over-heaven joke: Sloan pushes his point against Empire powerfully by showing a woman wondering the direction the boats were going. In the early years of the twentieth century, many in the country agreed with Sloan and Twain: it was not until 1914 when America ended its isolationist policy.

Most of Sloan’s paintings, however, tend to dwell solely on city life. For example, Hairdresser’s Window (1907) shows a female hairdresser at work behind a window. From outside the street several people are staring through the window. According to Manhonri
Sharp Young, “Mme. Malcomb was glad to get the publicity for her hair-bleaching, and the client does’nt seem to mind” (The Eight 48). Since the client’s face is not visible, it is difficult to ascertain how anyone knows whether the client minded or not. Be that as it may, the painting shows not only the old, ramshackle shop, but also the utter lack of privacy for its inhabitants.

The place is obviously very crowded. From the size of the people, one can deduce that the shops are very small: the heads of the onlookers are almost as high as the floor of Mme. Malcomb’s shop, and just below that shop on the left side of the painting is another shop, the “Ong Low Chop Suey” restaurant.

It is apparent that Sloan’s New York is not the “garden” of the City on a Hill fame. Certainly, it is a far cry from what Richard Slotkin describes in Gunfighter Nation about the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in which a “White City” was supposed to represent “the pinnacle of Euro-American civilization, the original ‘alabaster city . . . undimmed by human tears’,” (63). The “White City” was supposed to represent hope, triumph of Enlightenment rationality and belief in science as the cornerstone of progress. The ideology of positivism has by this time more or less subsumed the old Puritan creed and reborn as civil religion. In the new civil religion, millenialism “could mean the coming of the kingdom of God or a golden age of peace and prosperity” (Albanese America: Religions and Religion 446).

It was not such a golden age for the inhabitants of New York’s Lower East Side, as painted by George Bellows (1882-1925). Marianne Doezema points out the “urban poverty,
crime, and disease” that prompted the artist to paint *Cliff Dwellers*, 1913 (Figure 2). Bellows was not an original member of The Eight, but he was influenced by Henri to go to the people in order to create relevant art. Indeed, at the time of the painting, Bellows had been involved with the socialist periodical *The Masses*. Before the oil painting was executed, a lithograph entitled *Why Don’t They Go to the Country for a Vacation?* had been printed by Bellows for the magazine. The question was related to the fact that while wealthy New Yorkers had the means to go to the seaside or the country for vacations, the poor must remain huddled in the dirty East Side tenements (“The Real New York” 115).

According to Doezema, the inhabitants are mostly immigrants from working-class families. There were schoolchildren who had to take care of younger children. Other children would play unruly games at the street, and some of the women would behave in “unseemly” ways (118). The painting is executed in warm browns and purples and shows little of the dark colors associated with the Ashcan School. However, it is not the dark colors that makes the Ashcan group distinctive but the subject matter. For example, Everett Shinn’s *The Docks, New York City, 1901*, has an impact on the viewer not so much because of the color than the way the lower classes wear their clothing, lean against some boxes, or simply standing to make conversation. Likewise, what is successful about *Cliff Dwellers* is that Bellows is revealing that there was poverty and that for many poor people escape from the East Side area was a near impossibility. It is not surprising that Henry McBride, critic for the *New York Sun*, “lamented its brutal frankness” (“The Real New York” 118). Paintings such as *Cliff Dwellers* tend to disrupt claims of exceptionalism.
Figure 2. Cliff Dwellers, George Bellows, 1913 (Doezema, 117)
Part of the problem of overcrowded cities, at least according to Frederick Jackson Turner, was the closing of the frontier at the end of the nineteenth century. That meant for many people, the safety valve provided by new lands in the West was over. For new immigrants, increasing discrimination against them made their struggles in the new country even more challenging. According to Richard Slotkin, an ideology of violence and racial mythology “prepared for the public mind for the acceptance of a greater license for the use of force and violence against ‘dangerous’ social elements” (Gunfighter Nation 191). Most of these elements were recent immigrants.

Nevertheless, unlike Sloan, Bellows and other Ashcan painters such as Shinn, Luks, and of course Henri do not necessarily see poverty as a permanent condition. Furthermore, though known as the “black gang,” most of the Ashcan painters are able to see laughter in misery. Bellows’ East Side kids have smiles that spread all over their faces. Luks’ children seem to like spontaneous dancing. Glackens’ people always seem able to enjoy their own society. Even Sloan is not always gloomy: his cities might be grimy, but his people often seem to possess energy. By honestly depicting poverty in America, the ruling class could not but take notice and try to live up to the promise expected of a chosen nation.

As for Twain, he is a different cup of tea: the humorist never thought much of his own countrymen. But then, he has apparently little faith in the entire human race as well. For Twain was reluctant to trust anything which he could not hold with his hands, smoke in his mouth, or count with his fingers—in short, anything that is intangible or nonmaterial, such as positivism or the essential goodness of humankind.
MARK TWAIN, THE ASHCAN SCHOOL,
AND AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM

Mark Twain is known as a Realist, and the Ashcan School painters are also known as
the New York Realists. Given the fact that concepts about exceptionalism are basically
Utopian ideals, it should not be surprising that Realism should be in some way antithetical to
all forms of utopianism. In other words, traditional ideas about the perfect painting or
literary works do not impress Twain or the Ashcan artists. Unlike French Realists such as
Daumier and Courbet, the New York Realists could not care less about finesse either in form
or color. Bellows’ boxing spectators, for example, look like caricatures reminiscent of
newspaper cartoons. Though critics have commented on the influence of his job as a
newspaper illustrator, it is hard to imagine that Bellows could not have painted in a more
polished manner if he had so wanted.

In short, what seems like distortions and caricatures are strategies with which the
Ashcan painters used to dramatize working class life. That is why the harsh green blouse of
one of the slum girls in George Luks’ The Spielers looks almost discordant despite the
overall browns in the painting. Even Henri is content to dispense with the kind of polish and
artistry found in a Courbet or a Jean Francois Millet and instead opt for roughly painted faces
and dark, black, streets. In the American painter’s New York Street in Winter, 1902, the
brushwork is wild and almost undisciplined: Henri’s daubs are as loose as those of any
French Impressionist without, however, the luminosity that often makes the world prettier than it really is.

In the same way, Twain’s *Stormfield* is written without much regard for polished structure: the dictum that a short story should gather speed and rush towards its end is flippantly ignored by the humorist. Unlike traditional realist works such as Tolstoy’s *Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, Twain’s story is more anecdotal than cohesive: the last two chapters especially are not much more than a rambling dialogue between Stormfield and Sandy. For example, Sandy takes nearly two pages to describe the reception given to some newcomers in heaven. A long explicatory conversation about the way heaven ranks personalities exceeds another two pages. Like color harmony for George Luks, cohesiveness in a story or in a chapter is not high on the agenda for Mark Twain.

Traditional realist works often emphasize clear delineation of form. In art, the probity of line is evident in the works of Courbet and Millet and the Russian Ilya Repin. In literature, form is given in concrete, specific details. Twain in this respect is largely true to the tradition. For example, in introducing the Captain, Twain writes:

> He was a rugged, weather-tanned sailor, with a picked-up education, a sterling good heart, an iron will, abundant pluck, unshakable beliefs and convictions, and a confidence in himself. . . . He was frank, open, communicative, affectionate, and as honest, simple and genuine as a dog. He was deeply religious. . . . He was sixty years old and his glossy black hair and whiskers were beginning to show threads of gray. He had imagination. (1, 2)

However, the case is different for some paintings of the Ashcan school. For example, in Henri’s *New York Street in Winter*, 1902 (Figure 3) line has taken a holiday: The forms near the buildings tend to merge into the shadows, much like a Romantic painting.
Figure 3. New York Street in Winter, Robert Henri, 1902 (Young, 25)
The same situation occurs in Sloan’s *The Wake of the Ferry II, 1907*, when the lone figure is almost lost among the shadowy foreground.

In other words, for the Ashcan painters, there is an attempt to defy not only the conventions of society, but of art itself. In doing so, the group not only seeks to subvert established institutions such as the National Academy, but also tries to cut off at least some of the centuries-old traditions that bind American art to Europe.

However, both Twain and the Ashcan School could not escape totally the spirit of their age. As Robert Hughes says, the Machine is a powerful image after 1860 (*American Visions* 271). Whether Mark Twain likes it or not, he has always been influenced by science. For instance, Sherwood Cummings points out that Twain’s *What is Man?* is a deterministic piece of work that emphasizes on environment and heredity, a “clinical analysis of human behavior, and its equation of men with animals” (*Mark Twain and Science* 209). The Ashcan School of painters, living in a city and at a time of widespread inventions could not escape the influence of the Machine either. The most obvious effects on the painters themselves were the new colors available on the market. For George Bellows, new “scientific” color theories tended to attract him. Henri himself was interested in the so-called “Maratta palette” (Perlman, *Robert Henri: His Life and Art* 92).

Some examples of the influence of science are George Bellows’s *Both Members of This Club* and *Stag at Sharkey’s*. As Michael Quick points out:

Their [the paintings’] basic structure is similar: from a firm base, the diagonal of an outstretched leg thrusts upward toward the top of a vertical line descending through the other fighter’s body. While embodying the essential action, this geometry also serves as a firm armature, around which the action
can swirl without dissipating its energy. In *Both members of This Club*, the vertical line representing the rebatement of the right edge of the painting passes through the body of the white boxer, and the diagonal of that square, from the lower right corner to the top of the line, passes through the leg and body of the black fighter. ("Technique and Theory" 21–22)

The influence of science is also indicated by Twain’s obsession for measurements in *Stormfield*. Twain writes that it takes thirty years for Stormfield to go through space, that a young woman’s age is twenty-four years old, that Sandy is about seventy-two years old and that he has been in heaven for twenty-seven years. Newly-arrived couples might want to change their age, but after two hours they would change their mind. A Goobra snob would “throw it into your face that their age is three hundred and twenty-two of our years” (70).

Speed and space are measured in a concrete, exact, manner. After the Captain got his halo and wings, he flew “a mile” up in the clouds “inside of fifteen minutes” (34). The Captain talks about traveling at the speed of light and making his journey in “ninety-three million miles in eight minutes” (7). There are “eighteen hundred thousand billion quintillions of kazarks” and a district is “millions of leagues” away (22, 33).

Twain is not tired of counting numbers of people either. The number of stragglers amounted to thirty-six at the end of the first year. The officer of the brimstone ship asks for “two hundred thousand million men” (20). There are millions of people on earth who want to kiss the and weep on Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Sixty thousand old people want to meet the prophets (60–61).

In heaven, for every white angel there are “a hundred million copper ones” (75). Twain also gives exact figures for America and all the British possessions, such as six or
seven million people “at the beginning of our century” and finally adds up to a hundred million (76).

The stress on materiality during the latter half of the nineteenth-century is also evident in the works of Twain and the Ashcan school. For some artists, it is manifested in the way thick paint and broad brushstrokes are seen in works such as George Luks’ *The Spielers*, 1905, and Sloan’s *New York Street in Winter*, 1902. For others, such as Bellows and Luks, materiality takes the form of raw and sweaty muscles and the rough texture of rocks, trees, and even buildings. The slashing brushworks and wide use of the palette knife, not to mention the occasional juxtaposed complementary colors, made their work seemed coarse and objectionable to classicists like Kenyon Cox.

For Twain, materiality is shown in the physicality of his text: all questions of faith and culture must be seen in tangible or concrete terms. Heaven for Mark Twain is a physical place. The hall in heaven is built on the basis of some heavenly plan: the reader is not encouraged to think of the building as a wishy washy structure. Other physical things include wings, harp, a hymn book, the pulpit, and palm branch. Even the halo for Twain is a solid dish, a physical thing that can be held in Stormfield’s hands.

Twain assumes that the mind is made up of finite space and therefore the knowledge it can absorb is necessarily finite. Thus he says that the Captain’s head ached when thinking about the customs of the universe, implying that the information that goes to head is a physical thing that can overstretch the mind. Furthermore, Twain’s assumption of souls as physical entities necessitates that they be “crammed” into “a monstrous craft” (20).
In certain places, Twain does try to address problems of physicality. For example, he realizes that it is impossible to fly through the heavens with wings, so he borrowed the Arabian idea of the wishing carpet (which however is still a physical thing!). Twain’s tendency to see things in a physical way makes it difficult for him to accept anything spiritual. His insistence on physicality can sometimes go too far: when Stormfield is told that his tobacco, like his clothes, are spiritualized and thus not for consumption, the Captain says he would keep it “just the same—”

“It will burn in hell, anyway” (16).

The physicality found in *Stormfield* and the works of the Ashcan School exudes a reality that is unlike any previous works of art or literature. As mentioned earlier, Eakins’ paintings might consist of real subjects and real people, but they were reorganized with the intention of creating a new reality that focuses largely on photographic likeness. The Ashcan painters, on the other hand, thought that no reality is more important than social reality. Not even Henri, the more polished one, would allow personal emotion or intellectual theorizing or clever skills to detract the harsh realities of city life. In his article “The Ashcan School,” Milton W. Brown puts it this way:

> In its fight against the academic style the Ashcan school stood for “truth” as against “beauty,” or “life” as against art,” for the “real” as against the “artificial.” They accepted Henri’s advice: “Be willing to paint a picture that does not look like a picture.” The realists defended crudity and ugliness because such things were true. (*American Quarterly* 131)

In literature, works by Realists such as Hamlin Garland tend to be infused with some kind of poetry, a sentimentalism that is simply absent from *Stormfield*. Twain prevents the
reader from getting sentimental over Solomon’s crying with the use of rather coarse or inappropriate or “masculine” figures of speech to show the Captain’s regret, such as not feeling so mean or so grieved for “a fleet of ships” and “damming myself for a hound.” It took a later group of writers such as Theodore Drieser and Stephen Crane to exhibit such uncompromising attitude towards reality.

The realism in Stormfield and the paintings of the Ashcan School were meant to fill a void: in their separate ways, both Twain and the New York Realists were reacting to the monologic discourse promoted by believers of American exceptionalism. Stormfield was ostensibly a satire on the Christian religion, yet Twain says nothing derogatory about Christ. In other words, his attacks are aimed not at religion, but at those who used religion for their own purposes. “I was trained to a prejudice against Jews—Christians always are, you know, “ says the Captain (7–8). Evidently, Twain is against people who used the Bible to justify the massacre of Filipinos, the grabbing of Mexican lands, and indeed the exploitation or benign neglect of the ordinary disenfranchised American who has to go to heaven before his or her true qualities are recognized. Thus, in Part II of Return to Paradise, Twain focuses on a certain industrialist called Andrew Langdon who prayed for diseases and other illnesses to befall on a competitor. Heaven, writes Twain, is blessing Langdon for giving his impoverished cousin fifteen dollars to help her get to a school to teach. The catch is that the cousin needed fifty dollars. However, for this Andrew Langdon who is earning a possible fifty thousand dollars “for the current month” to give as much as fifteen dollars is a big surprise. All in heaven said “what is the giving up of life to a noble soul, or to ten thousand
noble souls, compared with the giving up of fifteen dollars out of the greedy grip of the meanest white man that ever lived on the surface of the earth?” (93–94). For Mark Twain, the chosen people concept is more often than not a joke.

Yet, Twain’s attacks on American society can take place only on the presupposition that a virtuous society can exist: if it is truly natural for people to be immoral or amoral, why should he bother? Could it be that, behind all the bitterness against everything sacred, Twain is hoping that things could be different, that America can be exceptional?

Or, is Twain’s heaven the author’s metaphor for the United States? If so, then it makes sense in terms of American exceptionalism that Billings, the “common tailor from Tennessee,” and Sakka, the horse-doctor from Afghanistan, would be renewed or reborn as outstanding individuals in the New Israel. Such an interpretation, however, seems to ignore the bitterness that Twain exhibits in many of his works.

As for the Ashcan painters, their realism is never bitter. What the artists tried to show is that there is another society out there in the slums, and that that society is as worthy of artistic consideration as anything depicted by the Genteel Tradition. For Henri and his followers, the other side of American exceptionalism should not only be accepted, but even respected.
CONCLUSION

Both Mark Twain and the Ashcan School deal with themes of American exceptionalism. Both are basically anti-elitist: the carnivalesque atmosphere is apparent in their works. As in a carnival, both rich and poor, weak and powerful, educated and uneducated, mix together and it is not easy to differentiate between the various opposing groups. Indeed, in *Stormfield* the tables are turned as the poor and unrecognized become heroes while the powerful and haughty have to take a back seat. For the Ashcan artists, the poor hairdressers, manual workers, and even drunks and prostitutes are no less human than the richest person in America. The artists see life even in conditions of misery. Twain, who had known poverty but had lived much of his life among the elite crowd, is however critical of the entire setup: thus he often describes human society through cynical smiles and an occasional laughter. Both Twain and the Ashcan School note the class differences in American society. For the artists, exposing the reality of working class conditions is socially responsible and artistically worthwhile. For Twain, the purpose is unclear: he could have written his satire to improve society or the whole enterprise could have been a way of expurgating his bitterness at what he thought was humankind’s infidelity to God’s design, assuming that he believed in a God.

Stylistically, both Twain and the Ashcan School were influenced by the Machine and the physicality of a materialistic age. Such influences, however, served only to enhance the themes evident in the works. For Twain, the constant use of measurements supports his
arguments against common biblical notions, and the physicality of his descriptions is an antidote to ephemeral ideas such as angels in heaven. For the Ashcan School, the broad brushworks, together with the “brown sauce” colors, serve to project the harshness of slum life. Even the coarse craftsmanship is helpful towards depicting the other side of American exceptionalism.

The works of Twain and the Ashcan artists are about human existence. They were all Realists and thus are involved in depicting the “truth.” If there is a purpose in their works, it is probably based on the premise that the truth will set us free: in this case, free from the social, economic, and political conditions that the poor found themselves in during the period between the end of the Civil War and the first World War. According to Twain, however, such freedom can neither be found in technological progress nor in a belief in God. For much of America’s history, technological progress often benefited the rich rather than the poor. The invention of expensive farm machines, for example, had not resulted in an easier life for poor migrant workers: instead, it often meant that only rich people could become farmers and at the end of the century many farm workers had to drift to the cities to find work.

Belief in God is hardly an option either. In much of the history of capitalism, the poor always had to bear the brunt of any economic slowdown, and thus one can hardly blame Twain for his cynicism towards religion. The poor know that God only helps those who help themselves.
For the Ashcan artists, the idea of “truth” appears to be associated with enlightenment. In other words, their job was to let the people know that slum dwellers do exist, and that the poor are a part of American society. In a country that often practised monologic discourse, a discordant voice can help to propel social change. If nothing else, by the early twentieth century, the poor was no longer silenced or marginalized: not only the newspapers of the day, but the paintings in the art galleries that had sprouted in New York and other cities were beginning to raise questions about the poor and disenfranchised. Knowing that they were no longer silenced often meant empowerment, at least psychologically, and empowerment is a necessary step towards freedom. In a sense, by highlighting in their works the other side of American exceptionalism, Mark Twain and the Ashcan School can be said to have materially affected the lives of the American working class. Even if they had not, their attempts were memorable. As King Arthur once sang:

Ask ev’ry person if he’s heard the story;  
And tell it strong and clear if he has not:  
That once there was a fleeting wisp of glory  
Called Camelot. (Lerner and Lowe, Camelot 113–114)
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