

## ANALYSIS

*Roughing It* (1872)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

“*Roughing It*...is a buoyant chronicle of the West of...Wild Bill Hickok, the West of the Pony Express, the Comstock lode, the bad man and the lynch law, a land of young men in red flannel shirts, heavy boots, and six-shooters, who feared neither God nor the devil.... He had seen the grub stake prospector succeeded by the wild-cat speculator, and him in turn followed by the eastern capitalist. He had seen the mining frontier become a thing of the past in a single decade, with the Comstock lode in the hands of competent exploiters and the pick-and-shovel miners plunging deeper into the mountains to pursue their feverish hopes.”

Vernon L. Parrington  
*Main Currents in American Thought III*  
(Harcourt 1927) 92-93

“Having taken down the Old World as measured by the New, he now set up the New in a rollicking, bragging picture of the Great West where he had acquired his standards of landscape and excitement. His account, shaped to look like autobiography, takes him from St. Louis across the plains to the Rockies and on to California and Hawaii.... *Roughing It* is uneven in tone and in excellence; the exposition falls below the description, which is often florid, and neither can equal the narration, particularly when it runs lustily across the plains with the rocking stage-coach or when it carries the narrator through his tenderfoot adventures in the mining camps. Although he frequently falls into the burlesquing habits which still clung to him from his days of Nevada and California journalism, he also rises decisively above them, and above all his predecessors in popular humor, with chapters of genuine poetry, of an epic breadth and largeness, commemorating free, masculine, heroic days.”

Carl Van Doren  
*The American Novel 1789-1939*, 23<sup>rd</sup> edition  
(Macmillan 1940-68) 143

“Autobiographical narrative by Clemens, published in 1872 under his pseudonym Mark Twain. He records a journey from St. Louis across the plains to Nevada, a visit to the Mormons, and life and adventures in Virginia City, San Francisco, and the Sandwich Islands. The book is based on Clemens's own experiences during the 1860s, but facts are left far behind in his creation of a picture of the frontier spirit and its lusty humor. The entire work is unified by the character of the author and the ways in which his experiences changed him into a representative of the Far West, but seemingly little attempt is made to integrate the tall tales, vivid descriptions, narratives of adventure, and character sketches, except in so far as all of them constitute a vigorous many-sided portrait of the Western frontier.”

James D. Hart  
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition  
(Oxford 1941-83)

“The outlines of the story *Roughing It* are true enough: the nineteen-day trip across the plains and Rockies to Carson City; an attack of mining fever that left Sam none the richer; his acceptance of a job on the Virginia City *Enterprise*; a journalist's view of San Francisco in flush times; and a newspaper-sponsored voyage to the Sandwich Islands. His dream of becoming a millionaire by a stroke of fortune never forsook him; lingering in his blood, the bonanza fever made him a lifelong victim of gold bricks, quick-profit schemes, and dazzling inventions... The notion that women exercised a gentle tyranny over their men folk, for the latter's good, always appealed to Mark Twain, schooled in Western theories that man was coarser clay and woman a rare and special being (as among the Washoe miners in *Roughing It*, who chipped in \$2,500 in gold as a gift at the miraculous sight of a live woman). All his life he encouraged women to reform him, improve his taste and manners.”

Dixon Wecter  
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition  
(Macmillan 1946-63) 919-20, 924

“Before the end of 1861 he had left for Nevada with Orion, whom President Lincoln had just appointed governor of the territory. The journey is described in *Roughing It* (1872). Now Mark Twain enters upon various mining activities, coming into contact with many different aspects of Western life. He had drifted to Aurora, Nevada, and was poor indeed in this world’s goods, when the opportunity came, in 1862, to take a place on the staff of the *Virginia City Enterprise*. Here he first used the name ‘Mark Twain,’ and here he began to build up his West Coast reputation. In those days the journalistic hoax was still his favorite type of humor, and the consequences were not always enjoyable. The results of one affair involved a precipitate retreat to San Francisco, where he found a somewhat uncongenial berth on the *Morning Call*. From San Francisco, too, he found it prudent, in the course of time, to retreat, but this time the circumstances were all to his credit: he had been too outspoken in his criticism of a corrupt police department.”

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel*  
(Holt 1952) 110-11

“In this famous book Twain relates how he and his brother Orion made their way to Nevada in the early 1860’s and worked in the mining camps there. He then tells about his trip to San Francisco and the Sandwich Islands. He met numerous entertaining characters, among them western desperadoes and vigilantes, newspapermen, and Brigham Young. He gives a marvelously vivid and fundamentally veracious picture of the Far West in the early days. He fictionalized himself and some of his companions, anticipating the techniques he later used in his novels. In particular...the dramatic personality of Mark Twain as distinct from Sam Clemens was for the first time defined in print; he made himself the butt of his story, ‘one of the prize asses of the asinine human race.’”

Max J. Herzberg & staff  
*The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature*  
(Crowell 1962)

“In *Roughing It*, at least in the first half of the book, Mark Twain uses the narrator more effectively. He is a tenderfoot being initiated into the community of men who have ‘seen the elephant’ by undergoing the hardships of prospecting in Nevada. The pronoun ‘I’ as used by the narrator refers simultaneously to this tenderfoot and to the seasoned Old Timer looking back on his own callowness as he tells the story. The subject matter of the narrative--the initiation of the tenderfoot--is thus assimilated into the narrative point of view.

The crisis in the narrator’s initiation comes in the snowstorm episode; the account of the Buncombe trial reveals him as an accepted member of the community. These chapters show how humorous anecdotes of the sort that had traditionally stood alone could take on new meaning when they were incorporated into a larger narrative pattern. The anecdote of the coyote illustrates the same phenomenon. Here the ‘town-bred’ tenderfoot dog is exposed to the firmer and more durable values of the Far West. At the hands of the Old Timer coyote of unpretentious appearance but hidden power, the tenderfoot gains a fresh (and in this environment, indispensable) humility--although the educational process is painful and the tenderfoot must be humiliated before he can learn his lesson.”

Henry Nash Smith  
*Major American Writers of America* Vol. II  
(Harcourt 1962) 53

“If the Eastern Eden was closed--by corruption [in *Innocents Abroad*]--perhaps the Western Eden, as the regionalists were saying, was all the more open.... Although in the book Twain draws upon his Nevada experiences, *Roughing It* is far from a nostalgic memory of his life ten years earlier. He does not so much realistically recreate as literally remake his sense of the West, by sifting fact through his imagination. Certainly *Roughing It* should be read not as a report on the West, but as a report on Twain’s state of mind and art ten years later. Indeed, when he began planning the book he wrote in query to his brother Orion:

'Have you a memorandum of the route we took, or the names of any of the stations we stopped at? Do you remember any of the scenes, incidents, or adventures of the coach trip?--for I remember next to nothing about the matter....'

*Roughing It* is clearly experience not only ordered but made by a conscious craftsman. And yet Twain had known enough of the West not to fall into the conventions of Western myth-making. He casts a cold eye on all of the expectations implicit in the myth of the Virgin Land. The Eden of the West stands ever before his hero--Twain himself as an Innocent--as the New Jerusalem glittered before the Pilgrims. And it is equally elusive. From the very first, Twain reacted against the assumptions of the Western agrarian myth. A sense of the importance of civilization and culture; an awareness of the limitations of man and human life; and a suspicion of Utopian speculation and social panaceas were part of his conservative heritage. His father, true to his given name, John Marshall Clemens, was an austere Whig, emotionally attached to the East.

Mark Twain himself was born only three decades after the disintegration of Marshall's Federalism, and he was clearly influenced by his father's beliefs (via Marshall) in restricted suffrage, in the Constitution and courts as bulwarks against majority tyranny, and in the rights of property. Twain was never touched, as Easterners like Hawthorne were, by Jacksonianism. He was early delighted in Federalist Philadelphia and disgusted with Jacksonian Hannibal, thus symbolizing his heritage of attachment to Federalist rather than Jeffersonian institutions and assumptions. He would spend his life not in nature, but in cities, in America and Europe....

His repeated exposures to the moral rot beneath an apparently idyllic Jeffersonian village life (as in 'The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg') suggest the way his opinions directly entered his art. In *Roughing It*, then, the narrator, deliberately obscuring the time-sequence, sets two 'poor innocents,' Orion and the narrator's own younger self, on the journey to Nevada. Although Twain was twenty-six-years old when he made the actual trip, here he makes his persona an innocent who 'had never been away from home,' and was going to explore 'the curious new world.' The incidents of Western travel are not analogues, for the narrator, of his trip to the Holy Land; and his trip to the West continually reminds him of his trip to the East, for he comes to learn that both are the same, both Edens are closed. Seeking an Eden of ease, he is repeatedly confronted with the necessity for labor and the actuality of pain.

In his experience of the difficulties of overland travel, the frustration of mining, the boredom of newspaper work, the violent dangers of half-civilized life, his expectations dwindle. Driven by the dream of Eden ever westward, from Nevada to California, he sails the historic American journey to the Pacific and still further west, to the Sandwich Islands. There, for a moment, he seems to have reached his blessed isle.... But the 'perfumed air' immediately becomes filled with mosquitoes; and the narrator discovers that American missionaries, with their gospel of the Fall, have invaded the Garden. Eden dissolves again, and he is driven restlessly back to San Francisco, then to New York, whence, still an innocent, he will take the Quaker City excursion and continue his eastward pursuit of the Promised Land. He comes, inconclusively, full circle. At the end of the book, the narrator speaks in his own person to point out the realistic 'Moral' which he appends: 'If you are of any account, stay at home and make your way by faithful diligence.' East and West, Eden is closed."

Jay Martin  
*Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914*  
(Prentice-Hall 1967) 171-73

Michael Hollister (2015)