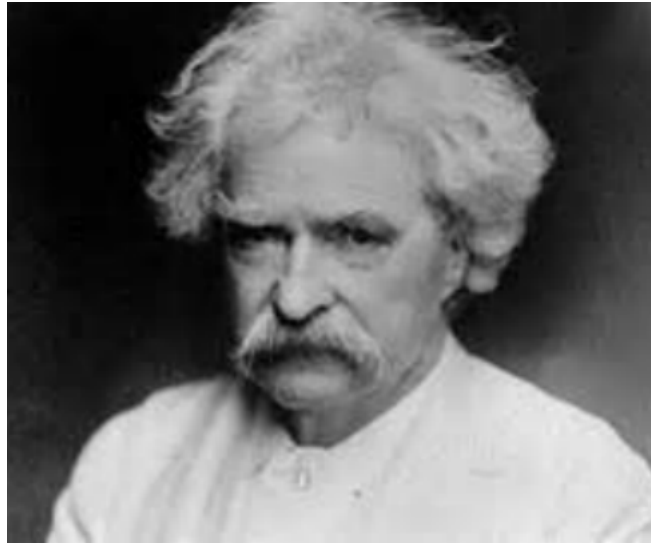


## ANALYSIS

### “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899)



Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

“The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” is an allegory of signs that is significant because it (1) is Twain’s best short story; (2) expresses the dark pessimism of his later years; (3) displays the lifelong influence upon him of Calvinism; (4) makes obvious his disposition to allegory, overlooked by critics of *Huckleberry Finn*; (5) has a very entertaining plot that is devilishly clever, full of surprises and hilarious efforts to rationalize fraud; and (6) is the major example of black humor in American literature after Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846), which is comparable in viewing human nature as perverse and in mocking Christians.

The man “That,” not the man who, because the stranger, like “The Mysterious Stranger” (1916), is much more than a mere mortal--he is said explicitly to be a “devil” and “Satan.” Hadleyburg is no Hannibal. Gone is the idyllic pastoralism of the earlier Twain. The satirical tone is distant from the characters. The poor old couple, the Richards, are rendered with enough attention to their suffering that the reader sympathizes with them. Yet when they die in the end, Twain has predetermined their fates with his plot and treats them without mercy like a Calvinist God. Even though with the best intentions Edward Richards tries to do good and redeem his soul by confession—“so that I may die a man, and not a dog”--it is the fault of Twain’s plot that the old man only does more wrong. Ironically, as usual in Twain, an animal--dog or hog--is morally superior to any man.

The vain people of Hadleyburg take pride in their reputation for honesty, but they have never been tempted before, and all it takes is an opportunity to acquire a lot of money by fraud to corrupt them all. Satan tempts the town with a “romance” and they all fall for it. The “money” they lust after is to be delivered by the minister Burgess, implying that money is the salvation people want, above their professed religion. The Christ-evoking figure in the story, now dead and gone, is Goodson, or Good-son: “the best-hated man among us, except the Reverend Burgess.” Goodson was hated because he was the only honest and truly generous person in Hadleyburg. “He was neither born nor reared in Hadleyburg... Heaven took Goodson.”

The plot turns on who could possibly have done a service to Goodson. Ironically, old Edward Richards once tried to convert him and save his soul! “Goodson remained a bachelor, and by and by he became a soured one and a frank despiser of the human species.” He is not like the gentle loving Christ, but Twain’s version of a redeemer, a bitter moralist like himself, and like Sherburn in *Huckleberry Finn*, denouncing rather than turning the other cheek. When the citizens of Hadleyburg falsely accuse him of something, trying to crucify him, he tells them to go to Hell, equating Hadleyburg--or this world--with Hell. Twain inserts his own name into the all-important message from Goodson to Hadleyburg: “Go and reform--or, *mark my words...*” (italics added)

Jack Halliday, a friend of stray dogs, stands out among the citizens as like a grown-up and wiser Huck Finn: “The loafing, good-natured, no-account, irreverent fisherman.” He is all that remains of Twain’s pastoralism and good humor, as he laughs at Satan’s devastating prank and pretends to photograph the town hypocrites with a cigar box: “Now look pleasant, please.” Mary Richards, whose first name identifies her with Christianity, insists that everything has been “ordered” by God, using the Calvinist doctrine of predestination to rationalize her wrongdoing, as did Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* and Ahab in *Moby-Dick*. Twain himself almost agrees with the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, but allows the virtuous minister Burgess to be an exception, making this story pessimistic rather than nihilistic like “What Is Man?” (1906) and “The Mysterious Stranger” (1916), both written in 1898--at almost the same time as “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”--both deterministic and both even more severe than Calvinism, since there is no possibility of salvation for anyone.

Michael Hollister (2015)