

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 5

Article 2

2013

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Carole Burkett
Denison University

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Recommended Citation

Burkett, Carole (2013) "Twain's Mythic West," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 5 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol5/iss1/2>

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Twain's Mythic West
by Carole Burkett

Mark Twain's *Roughing It* is much more than a travel narrative. It is also a scathing satirical unveiling of the truth behind the cultural stereotypes abundant in the American West. Twain peels back each layer of falsehood as he travels farther into the West, recording his experiences with guns and horses, outlaws, and the mining culture. Each of these concepts had been glamorized by earlier writers, who, in true Romantic style, had simplified and gilded the dirty realities of Western frontier life. In an effort to disenchant his audience from the Romantics' spell, Twain exaggerates in the other direction, writing about absurd characters and extremely uncomfortable traveling conditions.

This technique starts at the very beginning of the story, when Twain spells out the physical discomfort of each form of travel. Twain finds steamboat travel "dull, sleepy, and eventless" (50). The stagecoach is better, until they come into a stream-ridden country, which naturally has many valleys and hills. These throw the travelers around in the coach, mixing them in with the bags of mail and other luggage (Twain 66). Twain then measures the stagecoach against the railroad in efficiency, showing empirically how inferior stage travel was (73). With these details, he shows how the real experiences of a traveler going west are often made uncomfortable by weather,

fellow passengers, and the very vehicles they take. This is opposite the usual descriptions in travel writing, which make the journey sound pleasant or at least imply that it is bearable.

Next, Twain takes on the Romantic idea of the fearless outlaw. He counters this notion with the larger-than-life character of Slade, who is presented as the very picture of a "Rocky Mountain desperado" (104). His life of crime began at twenty-six, when he killed a man and fled. Twain recounts how Slade went on to fight Indians and become division-agent for the coach company, "ma[king] short work of all" who attempted to slow down his coaches (Twain 105). More incidents, each feeling more like a tall tale than the last, list Slade's criminal accomplishments. But when Twain's narrator finally meets this infamous character, he finds him a "most gentlemanly-appearing, quiet and affable officer," who was "friendly and so gentle-spoken" as to win the young traveler's favor (Twain 110). When Slade was finally captured, he was hanged only after bitterly and pathetically begging for mercy, asking to see his wife, and "exhaust[ing] himself by tears, prayers, and lamentations" (Twain 117). This ruthless killer that Twain so carefully established fails to meet the outlaw stereotype not only in his manners of life but also in his manner of death.

Twain also deals with the stereotype of the Western pioneer. He specifically mocks equipage, ridiculing both the gun and the horse thought to be necessary on the

frontier. The gun Twain brings is “a pitiful little Smith & Wesson’s seven-shooter,” which shoots pill-sized bullets incapable of hitting the broadest of targets (Twain 53). The “Allen” revolver which a fellow passenger carries is similarly inaccurate, but effective. It would always hit *something*, even if that required all six barrels to fire at once (Twain 53). Twain’s narrator also experiences the pains of buying a horse as an uneducated Easterner. He accidentally buys an intractable Genuine Mexican Plug, a horse which likes bucking more than carrying passengers. He attempts to ride the beast, which goes about as well as anything else the misled narrator tries. Finding this quite impossible, he lends the horse to his friends whenever possible, and eventually sells it to another unwary traveler (Twain 202). After this misadventure, the narrator proceeds throughout the West without either a functional gun or a horse of any kind, and does not suffer for it. Perhaps Twain is suggesting that the legends and exaggeration of life in the West are just as irrelevant to actual travel as the gun and the horse were on his trip. Though travel narratives usually add to the glamour of the destination by detail, Twain uses these specific accessories to demystify the West.

Twain’s best and most sweeping satire mocks the mining culture in the West, particularly the get-rich-quick mentality. As soon as Twain arrives in the West, he is “smitten with the silver fever” (Twain 210). But all of his

attempts to make money from mining are failures, and usually spectacular failures or near misses. A piece of exaggerated journalism plays a leading role in the deception: a glowing article about a newly discovered mine first spurs Twain and his companions to travel immediately to the Humboldt. After a difficult journey, they reach the town of Unionville, where they build a crude cabin and live in poor conditions. Twain’s expectations are instantly dashed. He expected to see “masses of silver lying all about the ground... glittering in the sun on the mountain summits” (Twain 221). He finds a shiny rock that same day, but it proves to be nothing but mica. He and his companions do find a slender deposit of gold and stake their claim, but the actual work of removing the metal proves to be far more than they bargained for. They learn then that the true profit of mining is not in the metal itself, but in selling their property “to the dull slaves of toil and let them do the mining!” (Twain 231). Even with this knowledge, they fail to make a profit.

They travel on to another mine, the Esmeralda, only to find their claims worthless (Twain 259). Twain is even forced to get a job at one point, working as one of the very “dull slaves” he had before so condemned (261). But he never holds a steady job, and he is soon off on another risky adventure seeking a man by the name of Whiteman who is rumored to have an extremely profitable cement mine. This turns out to be a wild goose chase across Mono

Lake and more wild Nevada countryside. Finally, after all this, he and his companions do find a lead and stake their claim. They plan out all the fine houses and European tours they shall buy with their new fortune. But both men are called away by other prospecting opportunities, and in a comedy of errors they both leave notes which the other never reads. Their claim expires, and Twain misses reclaiming it by mere moments. Though he had been “absolutely and unquestionably worth a million dollars, once, for ten days,” he finds his easily gained wealth easily lost, like many miners before him (Twain 287-99). Twain also dedicates long passages to detailed descriptions of the mining process and how it could be used to scheme or deceive unwary buyers.

These all show how the whole culture was built on a scam, and perpetuated a careless attitude with money. Twain recounted stories of the instantly wealthy, like a pocket miner who made three thousand dollars in the morning, then proceeded to “enter on a dazzling spree that finished the last of his treasure before the night was gone” (433). He also tells the comically absurd story of the Sanitary Flour Sack, which was auctioned again and again for charity in these mining towns, and brought in over \$150,000 of mining profits before being made into high-priced cakes (Twain 326). This demonstrates how little money was truly valued in the mining towns; it was quickly gained and quickly lost. But this did have an equalizing

effect on the surrounding area: “the community at large was as much benifited [sic] by [the] riches as they were themselves- possibly more, in some cases” (Twain 327). Through Twain’s own steady decline of wealth and the quickly fluctuating money of those around him, he demonstrates that the get-rich-quick mentality never ended with lasting wealth.

In a rare serious moment, Twain describes this in a case study by telling the fate of one of the mining settlements:

When the mines gave out the town fell into decay, and in a few years wholly disappeared—streets, dwellings, shops, everything—and left no sign... The mere handful of miners still remaining, had seen the town spring up, spread, grow and flourish in its pride; and they had seen it sicken and die, and pass away like a dream. With it their hopes had died, and their zest of life. (432)

This is a bit of Twain’s own style of prophecy, his description of the inevitable decline of any town or life built on such a shaking foundation as the gold mining industry.

Perhaps Twain himself was deeply disappointed when he traveled West. In the words of the narrator, he had hoped to travel “hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West... see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures... by

and by become very rich..." (Twain 49). And though he completed his physical travels to the West, and saw all the marvels, perhaps he did not have "all kinds of adventures," and he certainly did not "become very rich." Author and scholar of Western literature Lee Clark Mitchell has suggested that the premise of *Roughing It* is the West's existence "as a direction of thought in far more remarkable ways than... as a geographical place or historical episode" (69). This is thoroughly supported by Twain's satirical destruction of the Western legends, as fictionalization and exaggeration of the reality.

In *Roughing It*, Twain bares the truth of the West for his readers through the melancholy tale of his own disenchantment. He shows the more sobering capabilities of travel narratives, using his own story to prevent others from suffering his disappointment. This gently moralizing tone and brutally honest perspective are not common in travel writing, which often seeks to replace negative stereotypes with positive truth. Twain shallowly buries his personal hopelessness and realism throughout the narrative, but it is more easily discovered than a pocket of gold in a Humboldt mine.

Works Cited

- Mitchell, Lee Clark. "Verbally Roughing It: The West of Words." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44.1 (1989): 67-92. JSTOR. Web. 16 October 2012.
- Twain, Mark. *Roughing It*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.

Carole Burkett's Twain's Mythic West exemplifies how much can be accomplished in a short 4-5 paper. These are typical assignments at Denison and as such, Burkett's paper correctly handles the succinctness and concision that these demand. Twain's Mythic West begins with a clear-cut and reasonable thesis which isn't overbearing for a paper of this length and the thesis both structures and guides the rest of the essay. Once this is done, Burkett is able to appropriately execute her arguments through insightful quotations and connecting various segments of Mark Twain's work. The complexity of Burkett's essay lies in the risk she takes in suggesting not only is Twain's book satirical but it may in fact be a direct result of his own failures and the failures of so many others in the days of Manifest Destiny. In our workshop together, Carole and I worked on building a conclusion which puts Twain and her thesis in a larger context and asks the question what the relevance and significance of her thesis is to big picture ideas.

-Joshua Rager, Writing Center Consultant