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How to Tell a Story: Mark Twain and the Short Story Genre

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HOW TO TELL A STORY: MARK TWAIN AND THE SHORT STORY GENRE

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# HOW TO TELL A STORY: MARK TWAIN AND THE SHORT STORY GENRE

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This study examines the short fiction of Mark Twain in relation to major theories concerning the short story genre. Despite his popularity as a novelist and historical figure, Twain has not been recognized as a major figure in the development of the short story genre. This study attempts to show that the short fiction produced by Twain deserves greater regard within studies specific to the short story, and calls for a reconsideration of Twain as a dynamic figure in the development of the genre.

The introductory chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how the short story genre has developed since its inception as an actual literary genre, and outlines the existing Twain scholarship concerning his short fiction. Differences between the traditional and modern forms of the short story are defined, and Twain’s chronological position in the evolution of the genre is briefly explained.

Chapter one examines two of Twain’s short stories—“The $30,000 Bequest” and “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg”—in relation to the compositional theories of the first major short story theorist: Edgar Allan Poe. This chapter shows how these two Twain stories abide by Poe’s rules concerning unity of effect. Chapter two explores Twain’s “Journalism in Tennessee” and “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” in relation to the modern short story, and examines these two stories through the
lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of genre. This chapter closely examines Twain's use of various dialects to show that these two stories contain an unrealized complexity and are very closely related to the ostensibly "plotless" short fiction that developed in the twentieth century.

The final chapter takes Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger" and examines it with respect to both old and new theories of the short story genre. This chapter shows how "The Mysterious Stranger" fuses both traditional and modern forms of the short story genre. The conclusion to this chapter reiterates the argument for a greater appreciation of Twain as a short story artist.
Introduction

As Charles Neider writes in the introduction to his collection of Mark Twain’s short fiction, “it has been said that [Twain’s] stories are an important part of our literary heritage. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to dispute this statement successfully, presuming one cared to try” (xii). However, Neider does not explicitly address why Twain’s stories are important. Although Twain’s short fiction has not been completely ignored by critics, neither has he been recognized as an important figure in the evolution of the genre. Evaluating his position with respect to the genre will involve looking past Twain’s collection of memorable characters, his humor, and his occasional comic absurdity, and looking instead at how his short fiction is formulated. While many readers are familiar with at least a sampling of Twain’s short fiction, as Graham Good writes, “the tendency is to give up the business of formal genre definition for short fiction as hopeless or fruitless, and to deal with individual texts as parts of the author’s whole oeuvre, within a general perspective on fiction dominated by the novel” (147). As a byproduct of ignoring generic boundaries, an author’s significance in contributing to genres other than the novel can be overlooked. Such is the case with Twain and the short story. Chronologically, Twain is positioned in a transitional period in the development of the short story, and his body of work in the genre reflects that transition. And therein lies the importance of Twain’s short fiction; when his short stories are examined within the major theories of the genre, the writer takes on a dynamic role as a short story artist who has largely been overlooked.

Before discussing in depth either Twain or the short story, an important question to be answered on a broader scale is why study genre at all? As Austin M. Wright points
out in “On Defining the Short Story: The Genre Question,” when making the judgment as to whether a specific work is or is not a short story, “[i]t tends to throw the whole concept of genre into disrepute, since when the answer is a clear yes or no, the question seems pointless, and when the answer is uncertain, the question distracts attention from the real interests of the work” (48). Indeed, Wright is not the only critic—who has admitted that such generic considerations on occasion seem irrelevant; yet theories of genre persist. Understanding why genres should be studied seems as important as actually studying them. Genre theorist John Reichert reminds the reader that “the very act of reading—of coming to know a novel, poem, or play firsthand—invokes generic conceptions and expectations” (58). By extension, the quality of any piece of writing is fundamentally based on its relation to other works. In other words, without context, a novel, poem, or short story has no real value. Placing a work within a generic category does not limit the work; instead it opens the possibilities for understanding the work by giving it a context, and consequently enriches its appreciation.

The short story itself is largely recognized as a literary form that has yet to fully emerge from the shadow cast by the novel. Theories surrounding the short story genre are a developing area of interest, but even as short story theories have gained currency, Twain’s contribution to the genre has not been fully realized. Aside from his place in literary history as one of the greatest novelists, perhaps a reason for Twain’s exclusion as a short story artist stems from the fact that there is no overarching characteristic that informs all of his short fiction. His body of work in the genre is as various as it is intriguing. The only real consistency seems to be his humor, and therein lies another
possible explanation. When a piece of fiction is so blatantly humorous, many times it is
difficult to move past that humor and into a more critical examination. However,
providing reasons for a lack of scholarship on Twain in relation to the short story genre is
not the purpose here, nor are Twain's own philosophies on writing of any great concern.
Instead, the focus is on placing Twain's works within the context of short story theories
in order to show that, even if short story theorists are not explicitly talking about Twain,
their theories can easily be applied to his short fiction. However, the first step is to set
parameters and provide working definitions of terms.

The Short Story

In the opening chapter of *Coming to Terms with the Short Story*, Susan Lohafer
bluntly states that “whatever the reason, the short story has always eluded any but the
most tautological definition; a short story is a story that is short” (7). Instead of
composing a comprehensive definition of the short story, Lohafer aims to lay out the
methods used in understanding the genre. Certainly there have been plenty of proposed
approaches, although no one has offered an overarching or a universally accepted
definition of what constitutes a short story beyond the obvious element of “shortness”—
which involves its own level of subjectivity. In attempting to understand the short story
genre, a more fruitful place to begin is with an understanding of genre itself. In his essay
“The Literary Fact,” Russian Formalist Yury Tynyanov provides an essential caveat to
the study of genre:

> Theory of literature stubbornly competes with mathematics with its extremely condensed and confident static definitions: it forgets that mathematics is built on definitions, whereas in theory of literature definitions are not the foundation, but only an after-effect which is, moreover, constantly being altered by the evolving literary fact. And definitions get ever more difficult to make. (30)
Tynyanov’s point here is that the descriptions given to genres, excluding such exact forms as the sonnet, are spawned in reaction to the individual works that constitute the genre—not vice versa. A difficulty, then, arises in the study of generic definitions stemming from the inevitability of genre evolution. As Tynyanov concludes, “every definition evolves just as the literary fact itself evolves” (46). And although Lohafer describes the short story as a “relatively young art form” (8), there has certainly been a great deal of evolution within the genre. However, a distinction needs to be made concerning the age of the short story. Short story critic Mary Rohrberger points out that in some sense “short narrative fiction is as old as the history of literature” (Theories 80).

How can a genre be both “young” and “as old as the history of literature”? To answer that question, an initial demarcation needs to be made in the history of the short story. Although there were certainly short—that is, brief—stories before him, Edgar Allan Poe is widely recognized as being responsible for creating a change in how short fiction was viewed. In addition to authoring what have become some of the most memorable pieces of short fiction in American literature, Poe produced the first real theoretical writings concerning the genre. As Charles E. May remarks in his study of Poe’s short fiction,

No one questions the fact that short fiction genres existed before Edgar Allan Poe began writing. Short narratives in the form of folktales, legends, parables, and myths actually predate long narratives in the history of human expression, constituting the original fictional form. But most students of literature agree that during the nineteenth century in Russia, France, Germany, and especially in America, something new happened to short fiction that changed it forever. It is commonplace of American literary history that this something “new” was largely attributable to Edgar Allan Poe. (3)

Thus, when Lohafer and other critics describe the short story as “young,” they are
referring to its development since Poe. After acknowledging its ancient ancestry, Rohrberger is quick to note that, “the short story, as we know it today, is the newest of literary genres” (80). Before any type of academic study concerning the short story can be approached, there must be some general understanding of what is meant by *short story*. For the purposes of this study, the term *short story* will refer to the type of short narrative prose produced since Poe began writing in the 1830’s.

**The Modern Short Story**

In the twentieth century, a recognizable shift occurred in the form of the short story. Unlike the unified, highly plotted stories that dominated the nineteenth century, short fiction started to take on a more fragmented, open-ended quality. And it is at this point in the development of the short story that the term “modern” enters the discussion. As Lohafer comments,

> [t]he history of the short story, whether it began with Petronius, Boccacio, or Poe, changed in the early decades of the twentieth century. Textbooks call it “the rise of the open-ended story.” After 1914, to write a story that tied up experience, summed things up, or gave clear answers was to reveal a simplicity, a banality—not to mention an innocence—that just wasn’t “modern.” (*Crossroads* 109)

As a corollary, it is common to refer to the modern short story as completely lacking in plot. However, critic A.L. Bader does not see the modern short story as necessarily being plotless; instead, differences in the modern short story are attributed to changes in technique:

Chief among these changes are the stricter limitation of subject and the method of indirection. The modern writer’s desire for realism causes him to focus upon a limited moment of time or limited area of action in order that it may be more fully explored and understood. One result is that he frequently finds a story in material which would yield nothing to an earlier writer. Naturally he makes little use of plot complication, because he regards plot complication as artificial, and doubly so if the subject is
limited. More important than this limitation of subject, however, is the marked emphasis upon indirection, which seemingly stems as much from the pervasive modern desire for subtlety as from the realistic ideal. (110)

As a result, Bader contends that "the reader must supply the missing parts of the traditional plot in many modern stories" (110). However, this element of missing parts is not exclusive to the modern short story. Just as Bader sees both the old and new short story forms containing a plot—albeit in different capacities—both forms also require the reader to supply missing portions. May points out that the short story has always been such that it "conceals more than it reveals and leaves much unsaid" (New Theories 214). However, one of the basic means by which the modern short story developed was by "radically limiting its selection of the presented event" (May 214). In other words, the modern short story leaves much more unsaid. And in much the same manner that Poe is the seminal writer with respect to the old short story, May sees Russian author Anton Chekhov, with his "ability to dispense with a striking incident, his impressionism, and his freedom from the literary conventions of the highly plotted and formalized story" (May New Theories 199), as the first major writer of the modern short story.

It is important to point out that to categorize all short fiction since Poe as belonging either to the new (that is modern) or old classification would be a gross oversimplification. It would not take a distinguished critic to find anthologized short stories that have little or nothing in common with Poe or Chekhov. In the introduction to the first section of Short Story Theory at a Crossroads, Lohafer gives a thorough overview of the development of the genre, pointing to many changes that have occurred just within the past half-century. However, within short story studies, the Poe-informed and Chekhov-informed stories are the two dominant types of short fiction. Thus, for the
purposes of this study, just as the term short story will refer to short fiction since Poe, the term modern short story will refer to the type of ostensibly plotless short fiction generally recognized as beginning in the twentieth-century. Furthermore, designations of old and new will refer to plot-driven and "plotless" stories respectively.

Neider explains in his introduction that the motivation for pulling together Twain’s short fiction in one collection stemmed from discovering, in addition to Twain’s “habit of inserting yarns of pure fiction in a non-fictional work,” that “[Twain’s] stories had never been put together apart from essays, anecdotes, and the like” (ix). Concerning his decision to exclude “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed,” Neider tells his reader that it “is a piece of reminiscence which comes close to being autobiography and again is clearly something other than a short story” (iix). However, Neider never explains in detail his rationale for determining whether or not a specific text qualifies as a short story. Fortunately, Neider seems to have been rather liberal with his selections for inclusion, which is important given the wide variety of short fiction produced by Twain. A more conservative view of what constitutes a short story could very well have excluded several of Neider’s choices, thus limiting readers’ perception of Twain’s diversity of talent.

Examining Twain’s short fiction can become a rather difficult task for several reasons; among them is the issue of genre-consciousness. When considering the wide-ranging variety of short fiction produced by Twain, it seems rather obvious that Twain was not molding his short fiction so that it would fit into any type of literary category, and his frequent use of humor complicates the issue. As Neider warns, “Twain is a dangerous man to write about. Unless you approach him with a sense of humor you are
lost. You cannot dissect a humorist upon a table. Your first stroke will kill him and make him a tragedian” (xii). Nevertheless, to dismiss all of Twain’s short fiction as being exempt from critical analysis would be a mistake. Just as May points out that Chekhov’s work was at first seen as something other than short stories (*New Theories* 199), much of Twain’s short fiction contains an unrealized complexity. As for Twain’s own genre-consciousness—or “authorial intent”—it is important not to forget Tynyanov’s explanation of generic definitions. Twain might very well not have set out to write a short story per se, but that does not necessarily mean a later understanding of the short story genre would not apply.

To appreciate Twain as a short story artist and to recognize his place in the history of the short story, one must take into account the theoretical stances surrounding the genre that preceded Twain’s career and those that followed. Historically, Twain is positioned neatly between the two major types of short stories discussed above—those similar to Poe and those similar to Chekhov. Not surprisingly, Twain’s short fiction canon includes certain pieces that are more reminiscent of the older type of story and those that can be seen as a precursor to the newer, or modern, type of story that was to follow. However, a kink arises in what would seem to be a logical chain of events that must be accounted for—Twain’s short story corpus does not progress from the older type story toward the newer. Instead, some of Twain’s earliest short fiction is more closely related to the modern short story, and those pieces that most closely resemble the older type of story generally come toward the end of his writing career. However, such a sequential inconsistency does not detract from Twain’s place in the history of the short story. To return to the issue of genre-consciousness, it is important to remember that
many of Twain's pieces of short fiction were written without a strict intent to adhere to any specific generic guidelines. Twain was a writer of tall tales, jokes, speeches, sketches, and yarns in addition to short stories. However, it is also key to keep in mind that generic definitions are malleable. So, although at the time of publication, certain Twain pieces may not have fit a contemporary understanding of the short story genre, that same piece may be seen anew through the lens of later theoretical stances.

The following three chapters look at various Twain short stories in light of older and newer theories on the short story. The first chapter focuses on the structural similarities between two of Twain's short stories—"The $30,000 Bequest" and "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg"—and the older type of story. Specifically, this section uses Poe's compositional theories to gauge the two stories. Both "Bequest" and "Hadleyburg" resemble the more traditional idea of the short story. In other words, they have an obvious plot. But while the two stories are generally examined with respect to their didactic nature, the analysis here focuses instead on the manner in which Twain structured the stories and how there is a strong, although perhaps not immediately obvious, unity in the pieces.

The second chapter places Twain's "Journalism in Tennessee" and "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" within the context of the modern short story. As stated above, the major difference between the older and newer type of story is that there is much more left unsaid in the modern short story. The difference in reading the two types of stories then relies largely on how that unstated information is inferred. As Lohafer comments, critics "began to see the modern story as an exercise in sensibility and inference, rather than a gift of revelation. Readers had to figure things out for
themselves” (*Crossroads* 109). In this chapter, the method used to “figure things out,” and consequently show how the stories are analogous to the modern short story, relies on genre theories from Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin argues that works of literature should be examined with respect to their different *speech genres* — a term clarified within the chapter. By applying those ideas to the two Twain stories, the less obvious elements of the work are revealed, and consequently, so is the story’s somewhat elusive plot.

In the final chapter, Twain’s “The Mysterious Stranger” is examined with regard to both the old and new ideas of the story. “The Mysterious Stranger” has long been referred to as one of Twain’s most enigmatic works, but the difficulty involved with reading the text has generally centered on the philosophical issues at hand and how they relate to Twain’s personal life. Placing the story within a generic designation, though, is met with resistance. This chapter first seeks to place “The Mysterious Stranger” within the short story family and then argues that the story blends together elements of both the old and new stories to form a highly complex work with respect to genre.

The overarching argument threaded through each chapter calls for a reexamination of Twain as a short story artist. Twain’s presence as a literary and historical figure firmly ensconces him in the literary canon, but with criticism and theories concerning the short story genre expanding, Twain’s short fiction offers more now than ever before. Unlike Poe, Twain did not have a strict theoretical stance on composition. In his autobiography, Twain expressed a carefree attitude towards writing:

> With the pen in one’s hand, narrative is a difficult art; narrative should flow as flows the brook down through the hills and the leafy woodlands, its course changed by every bowlder it comes across and by every grass-clad gravelly spur that projects into its path; its surface broken, but its course not stayed by rocks and gravel on the bottom in the shoal places; a brook that never goes straight for a minute, but goes, and goes briskly,
sometimes ungrammatically, and sometimes fetching a horseshoe three-quarters of a mile around, and at the end of the circuit flowing with a yard of the path it traversed an hour before; but always going and always following at least one law, always loyal to that law, the law of narrative, which has no law. Nothing to do but make the trip; the how of it is not important so that the trip is made. (qtd. in Neider x)

Obviously, Twain’s brook metaphor stands in stark contrast to Poe’s theoretical stance. For Poe, a story’s plot does not consist of merely a “simple complexity”; instead, he views the function of plot as “that [from] which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole” (May 120). As a metaphor for this function, Poe likens plot to a building whose overall formation would necessarily be disrupted and the entire structure changed if the position of one brick were changed (May 120).

However, the two authors differed in another, perhaps more important way. Whereas Poe, by and large, abided by his own rules, Twain did not. As Sydney Krause writes in Mark Twain as Critic, “the reader who wishes to understand Twain’s ‘aesthetic’ of literature must contend with desultory, occasionally ironic statements on artistic method” (1). Although Twain’s attitude towards narrative quoted above would seem to lean more toward a modern expression of the short story, there are instances in his short fiction corpus that do not necessarily reflect that particular statement. However, Twain’s compositional theories are not the focus here; nor do the following chapters attempt to explain Twain’s intentions when writing certain stories. As short story writer Eudora Welty explains,

Criticism, or more strictly, analysis, is an impossible way to learn how the story was written. Analysis is a one-way process, and is only good after the event. In the newsreel pictures when the dive is shown in reverse, a swimmer can come back out of the water; the splash is swallowed up, he rises in the air and is safe and dry back on the diving board. But in truth you can’t come by way of analysis back to the starting point of inspiration; that’s against some law of the universe, it might almost seem. (Theories
Instead of attempting to explicate Twain’s writing process, the purpose of this study is to look at Twain’s short fiction oeuvre within the context of theories of the genre as articulated by others because although Neider believes “that as a story writer [Twain] is among our best” (ix), it is unclear, perhaps even doubtful, that the same sentiment is universally held in the twenty-first century.

Lack of regard is a common theme across short story studies. In his essay “The Short Story: An Underrated Art,” Thomas Gullason, writing in the 1960’s, speaks to the subordinate position which he sees the short story occupying in relation to the novel:

> The novel has become a status symbol of intellectual curiosity. The short story—even in collections—is treated as though it were trivia, small talk, a potpourri of abrupt, scattered episodes, which leaves the reader impatient with something that ends before it really begins. The many short stories in literary quarterlies, sponsored usually by universities, and the annual prize collections—like the O. Henry and Martha Foley’s—do not have a large following. They do not seem to have stimulated the general reader, or the critic and others to appreciate the worth of stories, whether individually or collectively. (19)

Certainly, similar remarks have been made by other theorists interested in the short story. It seems somewhat ironic then to talk of a writer such as Twain not receiving proper esteem within a genre that has historically been relegated to a position as a second-tier literary form. However, whereas short story theorists rightly rhapsodize about the likes of Hawthorne, Hemingway, Welty, and of course Poe, Twain seems to be perpetually absent. Twain’s position as a cultural figure always seems to trump the importance of his shorter works, perhaps in part due to the acclaim—both popular and critical—of his longer works in conjunction with the novel’s dominant position over the short story.

Furthermore, the scant amount of criticism, proportionately speaking, that treats Twain’s
short fiction usually focuses on the author's personal history or the shorter works' place within his entire canon rather than centering on aesthetic or structural complexities.

In *Mark Twain: a Study of the Short Fiction*, Tom Quirk reviews a wide variety of Twain's short stories; however, his commentary is always with an eye toward history or toward summary. Rarely do these summaries extend beyond the most basic of explanations. One gets the impression that the bulk of Twain's short fiction is good for a laugh or two, but not much else. Moreover, short story critics who illustrate their theories by pointing to specific works rarely, if ever, make reference to Twain. Valerie Shaw briefly touches on Twain in *The Short Story: A Critical Introduction*, pointing to him as key in America's "heightened version of the of the development of humorous short fiction" (87). Again, the importance of Twain's short fiction seems to end with his humor. The following three chapters use Twain's humor instead as a starting point, and attempt to move past the obvious comedic nature of the works.

It must be admitted that on their own, many of Twain's short stories seem to be somehow lacking. When sized up next to the short fiction of other major literary figures, a number of Twain's stories appear rather ordinary and simple. It is because of this ostensible simplicity that Neider's collection is so important. When Twain's entire short fiction oeuvre is appraised, the ordinariness seems to dissipate, leaving instead a varied, but consistently unique and rich collection of short fiction that ultimately deserves consideration as an important contribution to the genre. It is not necessary to invent criteria by which to judge short fiction in order to show that Twain belongs among this elite canonical grouping. Rather, Twain's short fiction is being viewed in conjunction with already established theories to illustrate both the quality and the variety of his short
fiction.
When discussing the short fiction of any American author, it seems only logical to begin with a comparison to Poe—perhaps the most venerable name in the history of the short story. As May writes in his study of Poe’s short fiction, “a literary genre does not really exist so long as it is merely practiced. Because a genre concept is just that—a concept—it truly comes into being only when the rules and conventions that constitute it are articulated within the larger conceptual context of literature as a whole” (11). And when the genre in question is the short story, no one did more to articulate its rules and conventions than Poe. Obviously, those formalities have changed over the century and a half since his death, but Poe still remains a seminal figure in short story theory. Generic conventions may be malleable, but an understanding of the dominant short story theories is crucial in situating Twain within the development of the genre. It is quite clear, then, that the starting point is with Poe’s compositional theories. Poe’s relationship to Twain, however, is not as clear cut. Concerning the connection between the two writers, critic Alan Gribben explains that there is some difficulty in directly linking the two authors, “because the record of Twain’s contact with Poe’s writings is one of the odd vacuums in our detailed knowledge about Twain’s private library and reading tastes” (17). Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to show correlations in their works. As Gribben concludes, “it is less essential to know whether Twain was imitating a particular Poe work […] than it is to grasp the more significant fact that two American authors with vastly divergent literary reputations and public images actually have many curious intersections of situation, mood, theme, symbol, and phrase” (20). Although it is not the
case with all, or even most, of Twain’s short fiction, there are also structural similarities in the Poe-Twain relationship. One of Twain’s greatest qualities as a short story writer is undoubtedly his wide-ranging variety of short stories—including those that echoed Poe’s theoretical stance. However, the similarities are not immediately obvious. There is a certain intricacy that pervades Twain’s short story canon, and in those pieces akin to the older type story, that complexity is seen in the way Twain achieves a structural unity. Among those pieces are “The $30,000 Bequest” (1904) and “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg” (1899).

May notes that one of the primary ways Poe is able to give his short fiction a tight aesthetic unity derives from his use of psychological obsession, which, of course, is one of Poe’s characteristic themes (69). Although the obsession found in Twain’s short stories may not be as destructive as it is in Poe’s fiction, it still serves as a prominent factor driving certain stories toward unity. As May writes, “a story that is unified around a single impression calculated to create a single effect is indeed the artistic equivalent of a psychological obsession” (69). Twain puts the element of obsession to use in both “Bequest” and “Hadleyburg.” However, it is in “Bequest” that Twain’s use of obsession as a unifying factor is most pronounced.

“Bequest” centers on the psychological meanderings of Saladin and Electra Foster and their eventual downfall. The couple is informed one day by letter that a distant relative—Tilbury Foster—has decided to leave the couple $30,000 in his will and that he fears his death will come soon. The only stipulation is that the couple must be able to prove to the executors that they were completely unaware of the gift and did not inquire about his declining health or attend his funeral (499). In his letter, Tilbury Foster informs
the couple that they will receive the money "not for love, but because money had given him most of his troubles and exasperations, and he wished to place it where there was good hope that it would continue its malignant work" (499). In the end, this promised money is a hoax; however, even before they have been made the target of a cruel joke, the Fosters are prone to being swept away by daydreams. In the evenings, the couple is found "reading romances to each other, dreaming dreams, comrading with kings and princes and stately lords and ladies in the flash and stir and splendor of noble palaces and grim and ancient castles" (499). However, when this particular element—the couple's propensity to daydream—is combined with the prospect of a large sum of money, what was at first a simple game takes on the form of obsession.

Thinking that they will someday inherit $30,000, the Fosters proceed to fictitiously invest the money and continually increase their imaginary wealth, property and social status. What begins as little more than a game eventually consumes the couple so that they spend more time tending to their dream-based lives than they do their actual lives. The obsession even causes the couple to eventually break the Sabbath—a terrible crime considering that their hometown of Lakeside was a "pleasant little town of five or six thousand inhabitants" that "had church accommodations of thirty-five thousand" (497). As the Fosters become increasingly absorbed by their continual dreaming, the original letter takes on a greater significance. The wording of Tilbury Foster's desire to place the money where it would do the most damage is extremely important because that place is not in the hands of the Fosters, but rather in their minds. By inserting the prospect of wealth into the collective minds of the Fosters, he encourages their daydreaming.
Twain punctuates their dreams of transformation with their nicknames: “Saladin’s was a curious and unsexing one—Sally; and so was Electra’s—Aleck” (499). Within their fabricated lifestyle of wealth, the two display a reversal of traditional roles in which Aleck, not Sally, takes charge of financial decisions. It is not until a misstep in her fictitious investing that Aleck relinquishes her dominant role:

The very next day came the historic crash, the record crash, the devastating crash, when the bottom fell out of Wall Street, and the whole body of gilt-edged stocks dropped ninety-five points in five hours, and the multimillionaire was seen begging his bread in the Bowery. Aleck sternly held her grip and “put up” as long as she could, but at last there came a call which she was powerless to meet, and her imaginary brokers sold her out. Then, and not till then, the man in her was vanished, and the woman in her resumed sway. (520)

On the heels of their fabricated financial downfall, the Fosters discover that not only had Tilbury Foster passed away five years earlier, but that his promise of $30,000 was a lie. He had died so poor that “he hadn’t anything to leave but a wheelbarrow” (521). This pronouncement of his destitution serves an extremely important function in the story’s overall unity because at this point, his plan has come to fruition and his prophetic pronouncement to place the money where it will do the most harm has served its purpose.

Just before his death, Sally mutters,

Money had brought him misery, and he took his revenge upon us, who had done him no harm. He has his desire: with base and cunning calculation he left us but thirty thousand, knowing we would try to increase it, and ruin our life and break our hearts. Without added expense, he could have left us far above desire of increase, far above the temptation to speculate, and a kinder soul would have done it; but in him was no generous spirit, no pity, no—. (522)

The effect produced by this ending is heightened because of the manner in which Twain masks the true conclusion. Once the stock market crashes and the couple are jolted out of their fictional world, they can be relieved that their investments were only things of
fancy. Their obsessive, mental exertion however, was very much real. When the couple discovers that even the possibility of wealth had only been a dream, the effect extends far past mere disappointment largely because Twain uses the element of obsession to such an extent and structures the story so that everything that preceded Sally' dying words has a direct correlation to his final moments of life.

Twain also uses this obsessive element in “The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg.” However, whereas obsession is the most prominent unifying element in “Bequest,” in “Hadleyburg,” it is only one of several factors that helps structure the story. The two stories share a host of attributes including similar settings, an overpowering concern with wealth, and an outsider who acts as a catalyst for the conflict. These corresponding antagonistic characters are even described similarly. The stranger in “Hadleyburg” is “a bitter man and revengeful” (350) and Tilbury Foster in “Bequest” is “reputed well off and correspondingly sour and crusty” (499). However, “Hadleyburg” is much more intricately plotted than is “Bequest.” As a result, there are several elements beyond a pervasive obsession that work together to unify the entire work.

“Hadleyburg” is the story of a self-righteous town, its inhabitants, and their eventual downfall. The citizens of Hadleyburg consider themselves morally incorruptible, and their extreme vanity isolates them from surrounding communities. Their pride offends a passing stranger because of some unspecified event, which leads the stranger to vow to corrupt the town and its people. From there, Twain introduces a wide range of characters and elements which ostensibly complicate the narrative. However, this disorder is really only an illusion. Although Twain introduces many different characters, they are not developed to the point of autonomy. While the story contains a
motley collection of individuals with personal agendas, those characters work together and actually help unify the story. To understand the dynamic between these characters, the reader must first realize that there are essentially only three character factions that contribute to the story’s structural unity. Those three groups and their corresponding functions are as follows: the stranger, who serves as the catalyst for the story’s action; the nineteen principal families of the community, who are acted upon by the stranger; and those outside of the nineteen principal families, who observe the action. This more simplified view of the story helps illustrate how “Hadleyburg” achieves the type of unity of effect Poe advocates. Grasping the structural unity in “Hadleyburg” involves understanding the three character factions, beginning with the stranger.

The stranger, later assuming the name Howard L. Stephenson, serves as a type of internal author for the story because his actions—mostly in written form—are the catalyst for much of the turmoil that occurs in Hadleyburg. At some point before that action began to develop, “Hadleyburg had the ill luck to offend [that] passing stranger—possibly without knowing it, certainly without caring, for Hadleyburg was sufficient unto itself, and cared not a rap for strangers or their opinions. Still, it would have been well to make an exception in this one's case, for he was a bitter man, and revengeful” (350). As a result, the stranger sets out to make an example of the self-righteous town. The reader learns of the stranger:

All through his wanderings during a whole year he kept his injury in mind, and gave all his leisure moments to trying to invent a compensating satisfaction for it. He contrived many plans, and all of them were good, but none of them quite sweeping enough; the poorest of them would hurt a great many individuals, but what he wanted was a plan which would comprehend the entire town, and not let so much as one person escape unhurt. At last he had a fortunate idea, and when it fell into his brain in lit up his whole head with an evil joy. He began to plan at once, saying to
himself, "That is the thing to do—I will corrupt the town." (350)

This planning stage on the part of the stranger strongly reinforces his role as an internal author and parallels one of Poe’s most famous declarations on the art of composing fiction. In his 1842 review of Hawthorne’s “Twice-Told Tales” Poe writes:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (692)

While this “single effect” is significant to the individual story, it is Poe’s consideration—the intentionality of this effect—that is central to his theory concerning the short story genre. Poe articulates similar sentiments in “The Philosophy of Composition.” There he states that when writing he prefers “commencing with the consideration of an effect” (676). Poe fleshes out this idea of considering a single effect by asking, in a self-reflexive quotation, “Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?” (676). This internal questioning concerning conclusions implies, rather obviously, that the artist is aware of the ending before the story has begun. To achieve that effect, obviously the author needs a preconceived notion of the entire work. Essentially, the stranger has also “commenced with the consideration of an effect”—the corruption of Hadleyburg.

The stranger’s vow to corrupt Hadleyburg, in a manner of speaking, also acts as a prophecy. Although his statement is not prophetic in the traditional sense, it serves the same function with regard to the story’s structure and contributes to the story’s overall
unity. Poe used the same device in his first published short story, “Metzengerstein.” As May notes,

the most obvious characteristic of [“Metzengerstein”] is the unifying force demanded by the prophecy that opens the work, for once a prophecy has been announced there is nowhere else for a story to go except toward its fulfillment [...] To begin a story with a prophecy is to embed the story’s ending in its beginning, as in *Oedipus*, for the prophecy story begins with the language of promise and then moves inevitably toward the fulfillment of that promise in narrative. The prophecy is the sole motivation for “Metzengerstein”—that which propels it forward. (17)

Likewise, the stranger’s vow to corrupt Hadleyburg drives the story and unifies the work by pointing toward the ending. One could make the argument that simply declaring an intention to corrupt the town does not necessarily qualify as prophetic since that plan could either fail or succeed. However, the outcome of the stranger’s plan is implied in the work’s title. Before the first word of the narrative is encountered, the reader is already aware there will be a man who will corrupt Hadleyburg. It takes no great leap of faith, then, to accept that the stranger’s vow to corrupt the town will come to fruition. Therefore, just as is the case with the prophecy story, “Hadleyburg” includes a warning as to what will follow. Yet, this prophetic element should be seen as merely a sidebar to the story’s appeal to unity. The correlation between the story’s conception and conclusion ties the story’s ends, but the story’s complex, yet unified, structure is most pronounced with regard to the material in between, specifically, the stranger’s use of written correspondence to the community.

In addition to being a unifying factor, the letters sent to the community again situate the stranger as the story’s internal author — he is essentially producing a plot via his writing. However, the manner in which these letters help structure the entire work is of greater importance. As D.S. Bertolotti points out, “the letters are the links which bring
the episodes together” (19). The first letter is accompanied by a sack of gold, which the stranger leaves at the home of Edward and Mary Richards. The letter reads:

I am a foreigner, and am presently going back to my own country, to remain there permanently. I am grateful to America for what I have received at her hands during my long stay under her flag; and to one of her citizens—a citizen of Hadleyburg—I am especially grateful for a great kindness done me a year or two ago. Two great kindnesses in fact. I will explain. I was a gambler. I say I WAS. I was a ruined gambler. I arrived in this village at night, hungry and without a penny. I asked for help—in the dark; I was ashamed to beg in the light. I begged of the right man. He gave me twenty dollars—that is to say, he gave me life, as I considered it. He also gave me fortune; for out of that money I have made myself rich at the gaming-table. And finally, a remark which he made to me has remained with me to this day, and has at last conquered me; and in conquering has saved the remnant of my morals: I shall gamble no more. Now I have no idea who that man was, but I want him found, and I want him to have this money, to give away, throw away, or keep, as he pleases. It is merely my way of testifying my gratitude to him. If I could stay, I would find him myself; but no matter, he will be found. This is an honest town, an incorruptible town, and I know I can trust it without fear. This man can be identified by the remark which he made to me; I feel persuaded that he will remember it. (351)

The stranger goes on to explain that his letter should be published in the local paper so that whoever made the remark can claim the sack of gold. In a month’s time, Hadleyburg is to hold a town meeting so that the rightful owner can claim the gold. As Bertolotti writes, the stranger’s correspondence is “somewhat like a variable interjected into an experimental situation called Hadleyburg” (20) And certainly this initial letter sparks a series of events that are by and large carried out by the citizens of Hadleyburg. However, it is the stranger’s letter that is the driving force behind these actions. To deem the stranger’s actions as simply an experiment would be incorrect. Instead, he has a very specific plan at work. His actions are less experimental than they are compositional.

The stranger’s second piece of correspondence comes in the form of nineteen nearly identical letters—one to each of the nineteen principal citizens of Hadleyburg.
Each of the letters informs its recipient that the person who made the remark is Goodson, a former Hadleyburg resident. Furthermore, the stranger, posing as a friend of Goodson, writes, “I remember his saying he did not actually LIKE any person in the town—not one; but that you—I THINK he said you—am almost sure—had done him a very great service once, possibly without knowing the full value of it, and he wished he had a fortune, he would leave it to you when he died, and a curse apiece for the rest of the citizens” (362). The stranger then concludes the letter by revealing the remark which each citizen could use to claim the sack of gold. The hesitant language in the letters toys with the Hadleyburgians by planting the seed of possible wealth in their imaginations, but also implies a certain amount of uncertainty as to the rightful heir. In addition to affecting the community psychologically, this second set of letters also illustrates how the stranger is controlling the events in an attempt to set up his culminating effect.

The second character faction consists of the nineteen chief families in Hadleyburg who are, just like the stranger’s second set of letters, nearly identical. The town of Hadleyburg is not simply a location. Instead, Hadleyburg is synonymous with the individuals who comprise the community. In other words, referring to the town of Hadleyburg is essentially a reference to the nineteen chief families. Instead of being completely autonomous, each member of the Hadleyburg inner circle is merely a piece to the entire town’s dynamic. As Briden argues, one of the stronger themes of the story “is the individual’s delusions about his moral identity […] the story charts the gradual, wholesale collapse of these delusions, however, what is ironically revealed is a society not of distinct individuals but rather of people who are essentially duplicates, in psychology and action, of one another and who thus participate in a collective identity”
Twain seems to have quite a bit of fun with the names of the townspeople. Hadleyburg is a “town of Billsons, Wilsons, Wilcoxes, and Coxes, i.e., of people whose like-sounding names underscore their collective identity” (Briden 383). Furthermore, the town of Hadleyburg is a self-contained entity. The town had formed a community so tightly preserved that, exactly because of its self-containment, any outside action able to infiltrate the town would necessarily have a permeating effect. In essence, it would be like one of Poe’s bricks which, if removed, would change the entire structure. As the narrator describes the town,

Hadleyburg was the most honest and upright town in all the region around about. It had kept that reputation unsmirched during three generations, and was prouder of it than of any other of its possessions. It was so proud of it, and so anxious to insure its perpetuation, that it began to teach the principles of honest dealing to its babies in the cradle, and made the like teachings the staple of their culture thenceforward through all the years devoted to their education. Also, throughout the formative years temptations were kept out of the way of the young people, so that their honesty could have every chance to harden and solidify, and become a part of their very bone. (350)

This morally homogenous race of people is capable of falling victim to an overarching plan because the group is so similar and therefore predictable. Furthermore, it sets up the story itself as a piece that can also abide by the author’s plan to have every element or “brick” of the narrative serve its purpose in achieving the overall effect.

As the story develops, Twain places more of those bricks in place. Ironically, as the town unravels, the story itself becomes more unified. Those bricks of narrative information that could be removed without disrupting the structure of the story are already missing. For example, although he is innocent, the Reverend Burgess has obviously been accused by the town of committing some crime great enough to have him excommunicated by the rest of the community. However, the nature of that crime is
never revealed, nor does it need to be for the sake of unity. As Quirk notes, “[w]hat is remarkable about these gaps in the narrative is not that they go unanswered but that the narrator so manages events and drives his tale relentlessly forward that we are not particularly curious about them” (104). Furthermore, these gaps are so easily dismissible because the lack of autonomy seen in the Hadleyburg citizens. Instead of personal histories, the manner in which each character functions within a larger context is more vital to the narrative. And because the townspeople are so disturbingly similar, so are their reactions to the prospect of a fortune. Thus, when a new element is introduced into the town, a community of similarly conditioned people become mirror images of one another in their reactions.

When the sack is first delivered to the Richarndses, the wife is quick to fear burglars will be on the prowl with a fortune in her home:

 Mrs. Richards flew to [the door] all in a tremble and locked it, then pulled down the window-shades and stood frightened, worried, and wondering if there was anything else she could do toward making herself and the money more safe. She listened awhile for burglars, then surrendered to curiosity and went back to the lamp and finished reading the paper. (351)

Mrs. Richards’ sudden fear that someone may be lurking simply because there is something of great value in her home seems rather unreasonable. However, her locking the door and pulling the shades is essentially a reaction to the communal training she has received. Her own personal attempt to defend herself from the outside world is a microcosm of the town’s own protective sphere.

After having decided to send the information concerning the sack of gold to the local newspaper, Edward Richards realizes, at this point, that he, Cox, and their wives are the only citizens aware of the current situation. Richards and Cox simultaneously realize
that they have passed on a golden opportunity and go in search of one another: "And now Richards and Cox were hurrying through the deserted streets, from opposite directions. They met, panting, at the foot of the printing-office stairs; by the night light there they read each other's face" (357). This mirror image of the two men unknowingly racing toward one another in the night serves as a metaphor for the entire community. Just as Richards and Cox are seemingly drawn to a common center—here in terms of physical location—the entire community is drawn to a common moral center. As Earl F. Briden and Mary Prescott have pointed out, the Hadleyburgians' "selfishness manifests itself in behavior that is machine-like — repetitive, automatic, duplicated by citizen after citizen — and attests to the uniformity of the Master Passion in Hadleyburg" (385). And when so many people are behaving with a machine-like uniformity, they combine to form an entity that transcends the town itself: this community of nineteen chief families is greater than the sum of its individual constituents.

Although the citizens of Hadleyburg pride themselves on their supposed incorruptibility, they all still have the propensity to succumb to temptation. The initial instinct is to preserve the town's façade of incorruptibility, as Mrs. Richards metaphorically does by locking the door. That urge is soon overpowered by the temptation of wealth and a similar surrendering to temptation seen throughout the community. So at the point when news of the stranger's letter has been spread, and the initial pride the town felt has subsided, the narrator explains: "At this stage—or at about this stage—a saying like this was dropped at bedtime—with a sigh, usually—by the head of each of the nineteen principal households: 'Ah, what could have been the remark that Goodson made?"' (361). Just as Richards and Cox had moved in unison physically, here
the core community is moving in unison mentally, forming the second major character faction. It is important to note that, although Twain focuses on them individually more than any of the other Hadleyburgians, the Richardses are still very much a part of the core group of families. Essentially, Twain uses the couple as a cross-section of the entire group, to show psychological developments common to all of the nineteen families.

Finally, the third character faction is comprised of those, other than the stranger, who are outside the core group of nineteen. Just as the stranger serves as an internal author — writing the story through his actions — this final faction serves as an internal reader. In other words, they are neither creating the action or being acting upon. Instead, they are viewing the action as it unfolds. Although there are very few characters mentioned by name that fit into this sect, they still serve a rather important function. Nowhere is this act of internal reading seen more clearly than with the character of Jack Halliday.

Halliday, the "loafing, good-natured, no-account, irreverent fisherman, hungry boys' friend, stray-dogs' friend, typical 'Sam Lawson' of the town" (360) first notices the all-encompassing change in mood as the entire community ponders the remark that could lead them to the fortune. Because he is simultaneously inside the Hadleyburg sphere and outside of the tribe of the nineteen chief citizens—and also due to the fact that his station in life warrants considerable time for inspecting the social climate of Hadleyburg and her inhabitants—Halliday perceives the synchronization of emotions. After the report of the sack of gold is released into the media, "Hadleyburg village woke up world-celebrated" (360). Not surprisingly, the recognition only helped augment the town's vanity. However, following the initial jubilation of the town being hailed as incorruptible, a shift
occurred in the local mood: “It was a gradual change: so gradual that its beginnings were hardly noticed; maybe were not noticed at all, except by Jack Halliday, who always noticed everything; and always made fun of it, too, no matter what it was” (360). After the stranger’s set of identical letters is sent, a similar change occurs:

Next day there was a surprise for Jack Halliday. He noticed that the faces of the nineteen chief citizens and their wives bore that expression of peaceful and holy happiness again. He could not understand it, neither was he able to invent any remarks about it that could damage it or disturb it. [...] His private guesses at the reasons for the happiness failed in all instances, upon examination. (366)

Just as the stranger has written the Hadleyburg story, Halliday is reading the same story via his constant observations and interpretations. He is also the most prevalent of those characters situated within the third character faction. However, a bulk of those people who are also essentially reading the Hadleyburg story do not appear until the town meeting. However, because of the stranger’s second batch of correspondence, each of the nineteen chief families believes it will leave with the gold. And because the town’s story has been spread throughout the country there is also a large group of onlookers present. Additionally, the stranger is in attendance so that, for the first time, all three character factions appear together.

Viewing the story through the lens of Bahktin’s critical discourse concerning carnival, critic Peter Messent sees the town meeting as a breaking down of social norms. He writes:

In the town meeting, the established social order is turned upside down. The discredited and “best-hated” man in the community, Rev. Mr. Burgess, is given authority as chairman, and the chief citizens of the community are made fun of, as their greed and hypocrisy is exposed. [...] As the town-hall becomes the meeting place for the variety of social types that make up the community, as the exchange of gifts — fist the gold sack, then the large checks — occurs, and as the “nineteen principal citizens and
their wives” are reduced from beaming self-congratulation to public humiliation while indecorous folk energies find expressive release, all the conditions of carnival literature appear successfully complete. (227)

This inverted social dynamic would seem to affect the story’s unified structure. However, it is important to keep in mind the stranger’s ultimate goal — the corruption of Hadleyburg. In actuality, even before the stranger acts, the town is corrupt. Its vanity has saturated the town, and although the community prides itself on being upright and honest, the extreme pride inherent in Hadleyburg runs counter to those positive qualities upon which the community is supposedly built. What does it mean, then, to corrupt a town already corrupted?

The town’s fatal flaw is its vanity. From as early as the first paragraph of the story, the town’s vanity is referenced: “The neighboring towns were jealous of this honorable supremacy, and affected to sneer at Hadleyburg’s pride in it and call it vanity; but all the same they were obliged to acknowledge that Hadleyburg was in reality an incorruptible town” (350). And as the stranger admits in the postscript of his final letter, “I wanted to damage every man in the place, and every woman—and not in their bodies or in their estate, but in their vanity—the places where feeble and foolish people are most vulnerable” (380). It is the town’s perception, then, that is of greater import than any true qualities. Thus, for the stranger to corrupt an already dishonest town is to reveal the true nature of the town and expose the vanity of the citizens. To do so requires an audience. Therefore, to corrupt Hadleyburg—to reach that preconceived effect—that third character faction must exist because merely revealing the vanity to the town itself is fruitless. Although the town meeting is dominated by disorder or “pandemonium” (375), the eruption of voices is in essence the stranger’s plan coming to fruition as those reading the
story realize Hadleyburg’s vanity.

At first it seems as though one portion of the community has been spared the humiliation. As a favor, Rev. Burgess does not implicate Richards with the rest of the Nineteeners, which not only saves him from being humiliated, but also prompts the stranger to reward him. As the stranger remarks, “when I make a mistake in Hadleyburg nature the man that puts that error upon me is entitled to a high honorarium” (382). The stranger then poses as a “speculator in rarities” (383) who promises the town that he can make a large sum of money by stamping on the coins (which, instead of gold turn out to be made of lead) the names of the eighteen men indicted by the crowd. The stranger then privately sells the lead disks to “Dr.” Harkness, who is happy to purchase them so as to ensure an election victory. The stranger then sends those proceeds to Richards; and herein lies another connection to the prophetic nature of the stranger’s original vow.¹

As May describes, “the prophecy must be expressed too ambiguously for normal human beings to understand” (17). Certainly, there is no real ambiguity in the stranger’s statement; he bluntly states that he plans to corrupt Hadleyburg. But if Hadleyburg is synonymous with the nineteen principal families that comprise it, and one of those nineteen (Richards) seemingly escapes corruption, then the question is, does the stranger actually succeed? If not, then obviously the prophetic nature of the stranger’s utterance is negated. However, the stranger never realizes the extent of his actions. There is no question that he has succeeded in corrupting a majority of the Nineteeners — the stranger witnesses that himself. But the corruptive nature of his actions extends beyond the town

¹ Before delving much deeper into the analogy between prophecy and the stranger’s promise of corruption, it is necessary to clarify that, as briefly mentioned above, the term “prophecy” is being used with some looseness. Just as the term “author” has been used to describe the function of the stranger and “reader” has been used to describe the function of Jack Halliday, the term “prophecy” is used to describe the function of the stranger’s statement as it relates to the story’s appeal to unity.
meeting. Edward and Mary Richards arguably suffer the worst fate by not having their
vanity identified at the town meeting. Unable to realize they have actually been spared,
the Richardses destroy the checks sent to them by the stranger and literally worry
themselves to death thinking their own vanity will eventually be uncovered. Both
husband and wife pass away on the same day, and at that point, “[t]he last of the sacred
Nineteen had fallen prey to the fiendish sack; the town was stripped of the last rag of its
ancient glory” (390). Ultimately, the stranger has indeed corrupted all of Hadleyburg
because at the narrative’s end, the Richardses have been removed from Hadleyburg’s
inner circle.

This also points to the difference between the stranger as internal author and
Twain as external author. The stranger’s power to consciously manipulate the action
does not extend holistically through “Hadleyburg,” as he is unaware of the effect he has
on the Richardses (which speaks to the prophetic nature of his promise to corrupt the
town). Twain, on the other hand, has consciously situated the three character factions so
that the entire narrative maintains a highly unified structure, which includes a
culminating effect. To refer back to Twain’s own words on the craft of writing quoted in
the introduction, it seems obvious that “Hadleyburg” was not composed in the same
carefree manner as a flowing brook. Instead, just as the stranger does inside of the story,
Twain sets out to reach a preconceived effect in a highly structured manner.

Although critics have pointed to possible influences between specific Poe and
Twain short stories, no reader will ever confuse one for the other. Even with those works
that in whatever way mirror one another thematically, the two authors’ voices are so
distinct from one another that at times a comparison seems misguided. As Quirk
describes Twain’s characters, “[t]he incantations of [Twain’s] imagination called forth wild, almost cartoon like images of human and animal behavior, but always tinged with realistic detail” (6). Indeed, the term “cartoonlike” seems a very good fit in describing Twain’s characters and stands in stark contrast to those found in Poe. Yet, when the issue at hand concerns genre rather than voice, Poe inevitably enters the fray. Twain’s entire body of work may not echo Poe, but those stories that are built on a unified structure are done so with a complexity many times unnoticed. As I will discuss in the next chapter, Twain also wrote short stories with a more twentieth century appeal that have their own unrealized complexity; however, that does not detract from the quality of those short stories — “Bequest” and “Hadleyburg” among them — that not only lean structurally towards the older type of story, but that do so exceedingly well.
Chapter 2

Beyond the Humor: Hidden Structure and the Modern Short Story

There is no doubt that, for a large number of readers, Twain is remembered first and foremost as a humorist. Comedy is that common thread weaving through his novels, short stories, essays, and even anecdotes. As Paul C. Rodgers Jr. comments concerning Twain’s short story “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” (1865) its “comic appeal was as transparent as it was potent” (276). The same can be said about nearly all of Twain’s short fiction, and when the comedic value is so blatant and effective, it is often difficult to move beyond the humor and into a more critical examination of the story. Two other elements common to much of Twain’s short fiction are brevity and an apparent lack of plot. As a result, many of his pieces are labeled as sketches, yarns, jokes, tall tales—something other than a short story. However, if the reader moves past the humor inherent in his writing, much of Twain’s short fiction reveals an intricacy analogous to the “modern” short stories of the twentieth century.

Frequently, the catalyst for Twain’s humor is his keen ear for dialect and his deliberate use of the vernacular. In his book Mark Twain’s Languages, David R. Sewell writes, “by the late nineteenth century a looser doctrine of independent but mutually tolerant varieties of speech ha[d] become an American ideal” (6). Perhaps no author took advantage of the varieties of speech more than Twain, as much has been said about his use of dialect in his novels and across largely divergent social classes. However, there are more subtle examples of Twain’s vast knowledge of the way language differs from person to person, especially in his short fiction. Dialect is not only a source of humor, but also a significant element when taking a more critical approach to his short fiction.
Among those works that have not received a great deal of critical attention stands
"Journalism in Tennessee" (1869). However, when "Journalism" is read through the lens
of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories on genre, the reader achieves a deeper understanding of the
story's events. Although "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" has in no
way been ignored critically, applying the same type of Bakhtinian reading also yields a
richer understanding of that text.

In his study of Twain's short fiction, Tom Quirk glosses over "Journalism in
Tennessee," pointing to it as an example of Twain using one of his varied technical
vocabularies. The action in "Journalism in Tennessee" is dominated by a fusillade of
absurd encounters with newspaper men, and the story seems to warrant very little critical
inquiry, given what appears to be a strictly comic intent. As Quirk comments, the story is
"exquisite example of physical comedy" (45). The piece obviously eschews any
traditional idea of plot, and many readers would define it as a droll sketch that, at the very
most, pokes fun at journalism or Tennessee or both. Yet there is a certain delicacy
hidden in the language of the piece. That delicacy, along with Twain's knowledge of
journalism and his use of the dialect of people involved in the business, lends an added
depth to the story.

In the sphere of genre studies, one of the more applicable veins of inquiry comes
from Bakhtin and his ideas on "speech genres." In his essay, "The Problem of Speech
Genres," Bakhtin writes:

Language is realized in the form of individual concrete utterances (oral
and written) by participants in the various areas of human activity. These
utterances reflect the specific conditions and goals of each such area not
only through their content (thematic) and linguistic style, that is, the
selection of the lexical, phraseological, and grammatical resources of the
language, but above all through their compositional structure. All three of
these aspects—thematic content, style, and compositional structure—are inseparably linked to the whole of the utterance and are equally determined by the specific nature of the particular sphere of communication. Each separate utterance is individual, of course, but each sphere in which language is used develops its own relatively stable types of these utterances. These we may call *speech genres.* (83)

Bakhtin goes on to differentiate between primary and secondary speech genres. Primary, or simple, speech genres, Bakhtin writes, are such things as daily dialogue, everyday narration, written correspondence, even the “fairly variegated repertoire of business documents” (84). Works of literature are classified instead as secondary, or complex, speech genres, which are themselves composed of primary speech genres. That is, “during the process of their formation, [secondary speech genres] absorb and digest various primary (simple) genres that have taken form in unmediated speech communion” (85). For Bakhtin, the analysis of a piece of literature should then include an adequate examination of both types of speech genres, because “only then can the definition be adequate to the complex and profound nature of the utterance” (85).

“Journalism in Tennessee” is essentially composed of three of these speech genres: the narration itself, dialogue between the narrator and the editor, and two versions of the editorial—the first drafted by the narrator and the second revised by the editor. Keeping Bakhtin’s speech genres in mind, the key to recognizing the “profound nature” of the story lies in the narrator’s initial portrayal of the *Morning Glory and Johnson County War-Whoop*’s office and its editor.

After briefly explaining why he had decided to take this particular job (his doctor thought the Southern climate would improve his health), the narrator gives this description:

When I went on duty I found the chief editor sitting tilted back in a three-
legged chair with his feet on a pine table. There was another pine table in
the room and another afflicted chair, and both were half buried under
newspapers and scraps and sheets of manuscript. There was a wooden
box of sand, sprinkled with cigar stubs and “old soldiers,” and a stove with
a door hanging by its upper hinge. The chief editor had a long-tailed black
cloth frock-coat on, and white linen pants. His boots were small and
neatly blacked. He wore a ruffled shirt, a large seal-ring, a standing collar
of obsolete pattern, and a checkered neckerchief with the ends hanging
down. Date of costume about 1848. (27)

The passage is descriptive, but straightforward and without any superfluities. The
language is borderline monotonous, and considering the inclusion of the grammatically
incorrect sentence, “Date of costume about 1848,” the entire opening paragraph takes on
the unmistakable tone of a reporter taking notes. Ostensibly, the narrator is playing the
role of a story-teller, but essentially he is giving a journalistic report. If the reader
recognizes this opening to Twain’s story as not only being narrated by a journalist, but
also in a speech genre specific to journalism, then the entire story itself moves beyond a
simple, absurd sketch.

In general, the story is dominated by a series of preposterous encounters with rival
newspaper men. During each meeting, the narrator survives seemingly crippling or even
fatal injuries. For example, the narrator loses a finger, has two teeth knocked out because
of a grenade thrown down the stove-pipe, and is peppered with gunfire all before he is
given any real responsibilities at the paper (28). The editor then leaves the narrator on his
own with a list of punishments to dole out to his expected visitors. Instead, the narrator’s
own calamities pile up in the editor’s absence:

He was gone. I shuddered. At the end of the next three hours I had been
through perils so awful that all peace of mind and all cheerfulness were
gone from me. Gillespie had called and thrown *me* out of the window.
Jones arrived promptly, and when I got ready to do the cowhiding he took
he job off my hands. In an encounter with a stranger, not in the bill of
fare, I had lost my scalp. Another stranger, by the name of Thompson, left
me a mere wreck and ruin of chaotic rags. And at last, at bay in the corner, and beset by an infuriated mob of editors, blacklegs, politicians, and desperadoes, who raved and swore and flourished their weapons about my head till the air shimmered with glancing flashes of steel, I was in the act of resigning my berth on the paper when the chief arrived, and with him a rabble of charmed and enthusiastic friends. (31)

On the surface, the narrator’s short stint at the *Morning Glory and Johnson County War-Whoop* is a humorous recounting of a day’s events or perhaps, at the very most, a brief metaphorical commentary on the nature of journalism. However, a consideration of the narrator’s opening description in conjunction with Bakhtin’s theories on speech genres yields a different interpretation of this story.

Bakhtin explains that speech genres “organize our speech in almost the same way as grammatical (syntactical) forms do” and that with a recognition of a speech genre “we foresee the end; that is, from the very beginning we have a sense of the speech whole, which is only later differentiated during the speech process” (90). If the reader recognizes the opening of “Journalism in Tennessee” as belonging to a specific speech genre—that of journalism—then, Bakhtin would argue, a reader familiar with the speech genre would already have some idea of the narration as a whole. What makes this specific piece of short fiction so conducive to this type of Bakhtinian reading is that Twain has inserted within the story a primer for understanding the journalism speech genre in the form of the two versions of the “Spirit of the Tennessee Press” article—the first of which is drafted by the narrator. The second version, which the editor writes, is an exaggerated and caustic revision of the first. For example, the editor replaces the phrase “*The editors of the Semi-Weekly Earthquake*” with “*The inveterate liars of the Semi-Weekly Earthquake.*” The editor also replaces the narrator’s second paragraph—“John W. Blossom, Esq., the able editor of the Higginsville Thunderbolt and Battle Cry
of Freedom, arrived in the city yesterday. He is stopping at the Van Buren House”—with an equally offensive rewrite—“That ass, Blossom, of the Higginsville Thunderbolt and Battle Cry of Freedom, is down here again sponging at the Van Buren.” Perhaps most telling about the editor’s revision is his sanctimonious addition concerning the purpose of journalism: “The heaven-born mission of journalism is to disseminate truth; to eradicate error; to educate, refine, and elevate the tone of the public morals and manners, and make all men more gentle, more virtuous, more charitable, and in all ways better, and holier, and happier” (29). Obviously, judging from both the encounters with rival newspaper men and the editor’s revision, there is very little elevation of public morals and manners that occurs in Tennessee journalism. Adding to the irony is the article’s title—“Spirit of the Tennessee Press.” That spirit is plainly seen as anything other than the virtuous description given by the editor.

But, beyond being humorous, what does this revision to the article say about the story as a whole or about speech genres? At the time the story takes place, the narrator, although he had presumably already worked in the newspaper field, has yet to be initiated into Tennessee journalism. This lack of experience extends beyond being familiar with the host of occupational hazards he must endure; it also includes a familiarity with the particular language, or speech genre, of Tennessee journalism. After the editor assures his new associate editor that he will learn to enjoy his position, the narrator replies, “I’ll have to get you to excuse me; I think maybe I might write to suit you after a while; as soon as I had had some practice and learned the language I am confident I could” (31). And if the editor’s revision of “Spirit of the Tennessee Press” is an example of that language the narrator has yet to learn, it is quite clear that the speech genre at hand—that
of Tennessee journalism—is marked by a thinly veiled exaggeration.

When the reader recognizes the narrator’s opening description as belonging to a journalism speech genre and, from the editor’s revisions, recognizes the nature of journalism’s tone (at least within the story), the story begins to reveal itself in new ways that extend far beyond simply verbal and physical comedy. Again, this interpretation rests largely on recognizing the tone of the opening paragraph. If the narrator is an active participant in journalism’s speech genre, then since his leaving the Morning Glory and Johnson County War-Whoop, he has indeed learned the language. And if he is making use of that language in the telling of this tale, then the story itself is filled with extreme exaggerations. Those exaggerations are, of course, the series of injuries that the narrator somehow survives. “Journalism in Tennessee” is not simply an absurd or comedic sketch. It is the story of the narrator who, through the telling of his story, illustrates that he too has become complicit in the type of sanctimonious exaggeration the editor is guilty of in his revision of the article. Just as the editor elevates the virtues of journalism by referring to journalism as a “heaven-born mission” (29), the narrator elevates the story of his berth on a newspaper by grossly exaggerating his series of encounters and consequent survival. Where verisimilitude is concerned, the story comments very little on the actual day that the narrator served on the newspaper. Instead, the reader comes away knowing much more about what occurred between the narrator’s day on the job and the point at which he shares his story—most notably that he has learned the language.

This same type of speech genre-based reading can be applied to Twain’s “Jumping Frog” tale, which is representative of the bulk of Twain’s short fiction—humorous and ostensibly simple. Yet unlike most of Twain’s short fiction, “The
Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" has received ample critical attention since its publication in 1865—although much of that interest did not come until well into the twentieth century (Rodgers 273). The advances made in studying the story have dealt with examining the core story of Jim Smiley and his frog and progressing outward through the garrulous Simon Wheeler and finally to Twain himself as the outermost speaker in a story structured as a set of centrifugal narrative circles. As Rodgers points out, what first was seen as only a Southwestern tale in print form began to receive more critical attention around the 1940's, and as "the purview broadened, wheels within wheels came to light: unsuspected structural complexity, 'unreliable' narration, rhetorical finesse of the first order, paradox and irony, the possibility of parabolic authorial self-scrutiny" (273). Evidence from manuscripts shows that Twain balked at least twice when crafting the tale before settling on the frame tale—a common narrative form at the time (Quirk 24). However, two artistic deviations from convention allow the "Jumping Frog" story to refuse the automatization of the familiar frame tale. First, Twain defamiliarizes the typical easterner-meets-frontiersman encounter by not explicitly portraying Wheeler as a fool, as so many other humorists had done before him (Quirk 24). Secondly, the narrator does not interrupt Wheeler in his original telling—"I let him go on in his own way, and never interrupted him once" (2)—nor does he, the narrator, interject any observations during the retelling of his encounter, which also defies convention, "for it was more customary to comment upon the coarseness of the backwoods character or sometimes to extenuate his vulgarity or stupidity" (Quirk 25). These changes are not simply aberrations in the history of frame tales. These literary adjustments are in large part responsible for the advances made in studying the story, and they also make examining
the story through the lens of Bahktin’s speech genre theories much more fruitful.

The story begins with the narrator explaining that at the request of a friend of his from the East, he has sought out “garrulous old Simon Wheeler” (1) to inquire about another man, Leonidas W. Smiley. However, that request instead leads Wheeler to commence with his thoughts on one Jim Smiley. Wheeler recounts a series of Jim Smiley-related tales with no interruption from his listener. The focus then shifts to whether Wheeler is simply a rambler and unaware of the humor in his story or if he is instead duping his listener as a practical joke. Assuming that Wheeler is aware and simply toying with his listener, it is uncertain whether the narrator has been completely tricked or, having later realized he was fooled, is passing the trick on to the reader. Certainly, these questions are ultimately answered by the individual reader, and this ambiguity is a large part of the genius of the tale. But there are pieces of evidence—both historical and textual—to support the “double-deadpan school of thought” (Rodgers 277). That is to say, both the narrator and Wheeler are toying with their respective audiences. Viewed in this manner, the speech genre at work is that of a deadpan storyteller, which adds another convolution to understanding the tale because the deadpan style is one essentially designed not to be recognized as such.

Historically, it has been noted that Wheeler’s real life counterpart, Ben Coon, was “a master of the deadpan style who convinced his listeners that he lacked a sense of humor” (Branch 122). However, recognizing Wheeler’s speech as that of a deadpan storyteller from a strictly textual standpoint is somewhat problematic because he is so adept at this specific art. His series of brief Jim Smiley-related stories consistently resides on the cusp of exaggeration without tumbling completely into the realm of
absurdity. For example, the mare Smiley raced had “the asthma, or the distemper, or the consumption” (2), yet as her races ended, she would “always fetch up at the stand just about a neck ahead, as near as you could cipher it down” (3). This sketch is built upon shaky ground, but not to the point of being completely unbelievable. As Wheeler points out, “the boys called her the fifteen-minute nag, but that was only in fun, you know, because of course she was faster than that” (2). If Wheeler is truly toying with his listener just so he can continually lead him on, then of course “the fifteen-minute nag” is only a moniker because the exaggeration would have stretched too far. Wheeler has given clues that his tale is not worth listening to, but not to the point that his listener would initially refuse hearing it. Likewise, before recounting Wheeler’s ramblings, he tells the reader,

I have a lurking suspicion that Leonidas W. Smiley is a myth; that my friend never knew such a personage; and that he only conjectured that if I asked old Wheeler about him, it would remind him of his infamous Jim Smiley, and he would go to work and bore me to death with some exasperating reminiscence of him as long and as tedious as it should be useless to me. If that was the design, it succeeded. (1)

The narrator has essentially informed the reader that the tale to follow of little consequence. But just as the narrator continues to listen to Wheeler, the reader also expects a conclusion of some importance—in both instances, the audiences are denied any type of closure.

Unlike most primary speech genres, the utterance of the deadpan story-teller is designed so that an understanding of the entire utterance is not anticipated from the onset. The listener/reader foresees a conclusion to the speech act, but that conclusion is continually deferred until the listener/reader realizes the true nature of the utterance. As Rodgers interprets the story, Wheeler’s intentions are those of a comedian: “As a
consummate practitioner of the art of sober-faced, tall-tale narration, he is playing upon Twain's seeming credulity, leading his victim through thickets of increasingly absurd circumstantial detail to the point where truth must dawn and Twain discover himself the butt of an undeniably excellent joke" (277). Just as with the second version of the editorial in "Journalism in Tennessee," Twain has inserted a primer for understanding the speech genre at work in the tale—Wheeler's deadpan tale.

The two stories are also similar in that the narrator of the "Jumping Frog" story has learned the language himself; subsequent to realizing that the narrator has been tricked, readers should realize they too have been fooled. Just as in "Journalism in Tennessee," the manner in which the narrator tells his story illustrates that his encounter with Wheeler was an initiation and that he is now a practitioner of the dead-pan story. If the narrators of each story have learned the language, then both have also made a change. That change occurs in the unseen space between the actual events and the narrator's telling of those events and it is this change that constitutes the story's plot.

As discussed in the introduction, there have been numerous attempts to define the fundamental elements of the modern short story. While no one definition is exhaustive, A.L. Bader attempts to flesh out the actual structure of the modern short story (as opposed to pointing out thematic attributes), especially concerning the charge that the modern short story is "plotless." Bader sees the modern short story as containing a plot, although not in the traditional sense that the plot is the dominant device within the story. Plot is still a vital element in the short story, but the manner in which plot is executed has changed:

Chief among these changes are the stricter limitation of subject and the method of indirection. The modern writer's desire for realism causes him
to focus upon a limited moment of time or a limited area of action in order that it may be more fully explored and understood. One result is that he frequently finds a story in material which would yield nothing to an earlier writer. Naturally he makes little use of plot complication, because he regards plot complication as artificial, and doubly so if the subject is limited. More important than this limitation of subject, however, is the marked emphasis upon indirection, which seemingly stems as much from the pervasive modern desire for subtlety as from the realistic ideal. (110)

Bader concludes his essay by clarifying his position that the modern short story does indeed have a plot and narrative structure: "Thus, it seems to me, the modern short story demonstrates its claim to the possession of narrative structure derived from plot. Basically, its structure is not very different from that of the older and more conventional type of story, but its technique is different, and it is this difference in technique that is frequently mistaken for lack of structure by readers and critics" (115). In the two Twain stories discussed, there is obviously very little plot complication in the traditional sense, as the action in both concludes with abrupt exits by the narrators. However, the real dynamic in the story occurs in that space after the action has ceased and before the telling of the story begins. There is a plot in these two Twain short stories; however, while both stories seem to end before there is any real change from this conflict, much of the "action" resides in the unstated portion of the story. Readers cannot recognize that action unless they examine not only what is said, but also how the dialogue is used in its various forms.

Not all of Twain's short fiction necessitates a close critical analysis. In fact, many of his short pieces can be read and appreciated for the simple fact that they are humorous—especially for the hoards of extremely short pieces that, unlike "Hadleyburg," make no strong appeal to the traditional idea of plot. But to deny that many of those works offer more complexity would be a mistake. In the same manner that early in
Chekhov’s career his pieces “were characterized as ‘sketches,’ ‘slices of life,’ ‘cross-sections of Russian life,’ and were often said to be lacking every element which constitutes a really good short story” (May 199), many of Twain’s extremely brief short pieces contain an unrealized complexity. It is his almost instinctive knowledge of the different ways that speech manifests itself that not only separates Twain from so many other writers, but also allows for a more critical reading in these short stories. He did not just recognize these variations of speech; he knew them intimately. Twain was “a chameleon—too multi-faceted for even the best generalization about duplicity and too changeable to stay with one voice, or one color, for very long” (Pinsker 16). The way he incorporated those voices—or speech genres—is a hallmark of his short fiction. As critic William H. Gass has commented, “[w]hat writers know is language and how to fiddle with it” (qtd. in Lohafer 24). The way Twain fiddled with language produced short fiction with latent structural elements extending far beyond his humor.
Chapter 3
The Mysterious Structure: Fusing Old and New

In addition to being his final published work, "The Mysterious Stranger" is one of Twain's most enigmatic texts. Twain's later stages, generally recognized as a pessimistic time in his life, spawned philosophical pieces such as "The Mysterious Stranger," which have often proved difficult to interpret. As John S. Tuckey writes, "although the last period of [Twain's] literary work has been regarded as one of despair, there has recently been an increasing recognition of complexities in the later writings" (532). However, the complexity found in "The Mysterious Stranger" and other late writings generally centers on existential concerns in the text and their relationship to Twain's personal disasters.

The issue of genre has not been entertained to any great degree. Furthermore, although "The Mysterious Stranger" is included in Neider's collection of Twain's short fiction, in most criticism, the work is referred to as a novel. In most cases, the distinction is not entirely important, since so much of the criticism has viewed "The Mysterious Stranger" as a vehicle through which to understand Twain's often ambivalent philosophical thought. However, appreciation of the work as a piece of literature is predicated on placing it under some generic heading. In other words, how can readers understand the quality of "The Mysterious Stranger" if they do not know what "The Mysterious Stranger" really is? Just as "The Mysterious Stranger" is a complex piece with regard to philosophical and ontological issues, understanding its generic placement is also rather convoluted. The first hurdle involves recognizing that "The Mysterious Stranger" is more akin to the short story than the novel—a distinction not entirely clear, largely because of its length. Yet, once the work is placed within the short story classification,
an even greater generic complexity arises. "The Mysterious Stranger" consists of a structural fusion of both the old and new types of stories, and ultimately speaks to Twain's role as a short story writer perhaps more than any of his other pieces of short fiction.

The first issue surrounding "The Mysterious Stranger" and genre is that of length, which must be addressed in order to properly place the work within the short story genre. For Poe, length was determined by the amount of time required to read the work; he allows up to two hours for the reader to digest the text (May 125). The logic here dictates that, within that two-hour time frame, the reader can finish the work in one sitting so that the piece's unity is kept intact. However, as an insistence on unity among short story critics and writers began to fade, so, too, did this two hour time frame. Among more contemporary discussions of the short story concerning themes, motifs, characters, or some other intangible quality, many times the actual length of a piece is an overlooked attribute. In the previous chapters, the issue of length has not been a consideration largely because the works discussed have not offered any resistance to being categorized as a short story by virtue of their respective lengths. However, with Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger," that is not the case.

In his essay "What Makes a Short Story Short?" Norman Friedman skirts around the issue of physical length when defining the short story:

it is not a question merely of defining "shortness," of fixing the upper and lower limits in terms of the number of words a work of fiction should have in order to be called a short story. Common sense tells us that, although

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2 "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" is the only work already discussed in which the issue of length could be addressed, as it is examined in conjunction with Poe's compositional theories. The two hour time frame is obviously somewhat subjective as individual readers will undoubtedly read at different speeds. However, "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg" spans 42 pages in Nedider's collection—a length that most readers complete within two hours.
the exact dividing lines cannot—and need not—be determined, we can pretty well distinguish, apart from marginal cases, between long, short, and medium fiction. We will not argue, then, about length in strictly quantitative terms, for most of us know what a short story is and can pull down from our shelves at a moment’s notice a dozen anthologies containing stories of varying lengths—all called “short.” To haggle over the borderlines is almost always fruitless, and that is one very good reason for not trying. (131-32)

Of particular interest in relation to "The Mysterious Stranger" is Friedman’s contention that haggling over the borderlines is “almost always fruitless.” Here Friedman is speaking in general terms. But concerning the specific example of "The Mysterious Stranger"—a borderline itself—the haggling is rather important. Determining genre in no small way affects how the work is received and valued, and that is one very good reason for trying.

The short story has always been placed in relation to the novel, with the latter term, of course, occupying a dominant position. That is not to say that the distinction is always, or even usually, clear. As critic Graham Good writes, “Short fiction is thus bedeviled for theorists by its adjacency to the longer form. Other genres can be opposed to each other more easily by basic plot-form (comedy versus tragedy) or medium of presentation (drama versus novel), where novel and short fiction are always in some awkward way next to each other, overlapping and interpenetrating” (147). The awkwardness Good describes becomes even more pronounced when the narrative resides in that unspecified space where it could easily be classified as either a long short story or a short novel. However, placing "The Mysterious Stranger" toward the upper limits of proper short story length or perhaps fully into novel territory presupposes a range of acceptable novel lengths. And as Mary Rohrberger points out, “[a]lthough it is true that people have been theorizing concerning the structure of the novel for a longer period of
time than people have been concerned with the definition of the short story, it is not necessarily true that novel theory is much farther along. If ‘we’ do not know how short is short, neither do ‘they’ know how long is long” (“Between Shadow and Act” 37). The ‘we’ and ‘they’ Rohrberger refers to are, of course, short story theorists and novel theorists respectively, and certainly her logic seems sound. But to borrow from another Rohrberger quotation, it is perhaps more important to study the short story “as we know it.” In other words, the definitions that somehow come to be associated with genres are the product of those involved in the discussion. To refer back to Tynyanov’s comments found in the introduction, generic definitions are not the same as static mathematical rules. Instead, definitions of genre evolve so that yesterday’s brief novel may become tomorrow’s lengthy short story. Thus, placing “The Mysterious Stranger” under any generic heading based on its length would be in some way short-sighted. While any designation can be disputed, there is at least one other work of similar length that has been identified by some as belonging to the short story family.

In his essay “On Defining the Short Story,” Austin Wright uses Joseph Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness”—roughly the same length as ”The Mysterious Stranger”—to mark the upper limit of length of a short story. Wright comments:

For outer limits […], probably we will find no traits more specific than those in Friedman’s definition of the short story, “a short fictional narrative in prose,” which I will restate here as a prose narrative dealing with a fictional world, never much longer than “Heart of Darkness.” Narrative (not drama), fictional world (making no claim to historical or factual truth), and a maximum length do seem, in this superficial view, to be absolute minima that, if ignored, would exclude a work from the genre. I include no lower limit to length since extremely short pieces have been called short stories often enough to suggest that any specific lower limit is a tendency rather than an absolute. The length of “Heart of Darkness” for the upper limit appears arbitrary; I would like to say “not more than a certain length,” but what is “certain”? Maybe the upper limit should also
be a tendency rather than an absolute; however, we might then lose the
length test altogether [...] "Heart of Darkness" approaches the upper limit
of any work I have ever heard called a short story and will do until a better
measure of maximum length can be found. (50)

Obviously, Wright is not dogmatically asserting that "Heart of Darkness" represents the
maximum short story length. Instead, he is giving what he sees as a suitable example by
essentially reviewing the way in which theorists know the genre. Certainly, if "Heart of
Darkness" can be deemed a short story, then "The Mysterious Stranger" cannot be
excluded simply by virtue of its length.3

Here it is also important to briefly discuss the term "novella" in relation to the
short story and the novel. This middle term would not be a suitable designation, because
the term seems to say nothing about the nature of a work other than a length. In his essay
"Notes on the Novella," Good explores how the term has been used in the past, but
eventually advocates using the term novella to define works of fiction both of short and
medium length (150). Conversely, in his The Philosophy of the Short-Story, critic
Brander Matthews (using the term novelet instead of novella) groups this middle term
with novel: "The difference between a Novel and a Novelet is one of length only: a
Novelet is a brief Novel. But the difference between a Novel and a Short-story is a
difference of kind" (15). Although Good explores the issue much more thoroughly, both
critics essentially promote two classifications. So, while referring to "The Mysterious
Stranger" as a novella, opposed to both the short story and the novel, would ostensibly fit,
especially it would be ignoring the fact that genres differ in ways beyond length.
However, working past the issue of length only enters "The Mysterious Stranger" into the

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3 To be clear, I am not contending that "Heart of Darkness" is, without question, a short story. Instead, I
am illustrating that its generic classification is not necessarily set in stone, and that at least some critics
view the work as a short story.
short story conversation. What truly qualifies "The Mysterious Stranger" as a short story is the nature of the work. And an examination of "The Mysterious Stranger" as a short story reveals a deeper complexity as it exhibits hallmarks of both the old and new forms of the genre.

To briefly summarize, "The Mysterious Stranger" is narrated by Theodor Fisher as he recalls his boyhood in the Austrian town of Eseldorf. Theodor and his two companions, Nikolas Bauman and Seppi Wohlmeyer, are one day confronted by a mysterious youth, who they soon discover is literally the nephew of Satan. Although surprised to find out about his lineage, the boys are quick to befriend Satan, who goes by the pseudonym “Philip Traum” (his surname is later revealed to be German for “dream”). Through their interaction, Traum continually denigrates the human race and points out its flaws. The boys—Theodor especially—are enchanted by their new friend although they are appalled by his complete disregard for morality. For example, Traum playfully molds tiny men and women from clay before literally bringing them to life. However, when the entire miniature village is destroyed and the tiny men and women killed, Traum shows no remorse. As the narrator recounts,

"It was no use to try to move him; evidently he was wholly without feeling, and could not understand. He was full of bubbling spirits, and as gay as if this were a wedding instead of a fiendish massacre. And he was bent on making us feel as he did, and of course his magic accomplished his desire. It was no trouble to him; he did whatever he pleased with us. In a little while we were dancing on that grave, and he was playing to us on a strange, sweet instrument which he took out of his pocket."

And such is the case with every encounter with Traum. The boys are simultaneously appalled and enchanted by their friend, and despite their efforts to reason with him, Traum is at all times in control. Just as with “Hadleyburg,” the stranger/Satan character
is acting as the story's internal author. And throughout most of "The Mysterious Stranger," such is the case—Traum involves himself with some situation in the community, and unbeknownst to most of the villagers, controls the situation. At this point, "The Mysterious Stranger" is structurally taking the shape of the older, highly plotted type of short story.

As noted in the introduction, Poe likens a story's plot to a structure in which every "brick" of narrative information serves a purpose. If part of the structure is removed, then the design of the entire work is necessarily changed. Traum espouses a similar attitude toward the events of human life, telling Theodor:

The man's circumstances and environment order it. His first act determines the second and all that follow after. But suppose, for argument's sake, that the man should skip one of these acts; an apparently trifling one, for instance; suppose that it had been appointed that on a certain day, at a certain hour and minute and second and fraction of a second he should go to the well, and he didn't go. That man's career would change utterly, from that moment; thence to the grave it would be wholly different from the career which his first act as a child had arranged for him. (643)

Certainly, this type of outlook would act in accordance to a more deterministic view not only of life, but also of story-telling. However, it is important to recognize that in addition to Traum discussing this cause-and-effect dynamic, it is also an active element within the narrative.

As Traum demonstrates, he has the capability to manipulate individual actions so that the events to follow are necessarily changed. Traum informs Theodor:

Two minutes and a quarter from now Nikolaus will wake out of his sleep and find the rain blowing in. It was appointed that he should turn over and go to sleep again. But I have appointed that he shall get up and close the window first. That trifle will change his career entirely. He will rise in the morning two minutes later than the chain of his life had appointed him to rise. By consequence, thenceforth nothing will ever happen to him in
accordance with the details of the old chain. (644)

This change in events results in the death of Nikolaus, but more importantly, it demonstrates how each individual action in the story necessarily has a cause-and-effect relationship with the whole. By inserting an omnipotent character into the story, Twain has given himself the freedom to take the narrative wherever he chooses. According to Chad Rohman, "Twain is an author who can baffle readers and confound their expectations" (77), and where he finally leads the reader in "The Mysterious Stranger" is an example of his ability to sidestep expectations. However, before discussing his conclusion, it is important to examine the nature of the story up until that point.

Although the cause-and-effect nature of the narrative situates it in close relation to the older type of story, "The Mysterious Stranger" consists of several smaller lines of action. Although Traum is a common denominator of each of these episodes, as the story progresses these incidents become increasingly less coherent. Because Traum has the ability to move through time and space, nothing hinders the story’s characters from moving effortlessly around the globe. As the narrator states, he and Traum "flitted from place to place around the world as we had done before, Satan showing me a hundred wonders, most of them reflecting in some way the weakness and triviality of our race" (674). Despite a thematic link, the episodes ultimately produce a disjointed quality for the narrative as a whole. This roughly correlates to a problem Poe found in epic poetry. In his essay "The Poetic Principle," Poe goes so far as to deny the existence of a long poem: "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase, 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms" (qtd. in May 130). In particular, Poe references Milton’s masterpiece as a work for which the reader has admiration, yet cannot sustain
that admiration because of its length. Poe writes: “This great work, in fact, is to be regarded as poetical, only when, losing sight of that vital requisite in all works of Art, Unity, we view it merely as a series of minor poems” (130). Likewise, if “The Mysterious Stranger” is evaluated with respect to unity, at best, the work as a whole seems to be comprised of a series of smaller tales. Yet, viewing the narrative in that manner would seem to place it generically more toward the novel rather than the short story—which leaves the current project of discussing the work in light of short story theories pointless. However, it is the conclusion of “The Mysterious Stranger” that pulls it back into the short story arena.

During Traum’s final visit with Theodor, the entire narrative is dramatically rerouted as Traum informs Theodor that, “Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars—a dream, all a dream; they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space—and you!” (675). Critic Chad Rohman contends that “attentive readers will have already reached that epistemological conclusion long before from the novel’s internal evidence” (79), but it is difficult to assume that the reader could forecast such an abrupt solipsistic ending. The ending not only forces the reader to reevaluate all that had led up to this final section, but it also drastically changes the story’s entire structure. At this point, the entire work shifts away from the highly structured form that had thus far been so ingrained in the text. Instead, the work is now transformed into an open-ended piece highlighting the dream motif, and as Bruce Mickelson writes, “[a]s readers, we are left […] in a kind of vertigo, with every structural and thematic rug pulled out from under us” (121). By supplanting the cause-and-effect structure with the much more uncertain nature of a dream, the story shifts from the old to
new type of story. Furthermore, prior allusions to dreams, such as the translation of
"Traum," take on a greater significance.

From the onset, "The Mysterious Stranger" is inundated with subtle references to
dreaming. The story takes place in Austria in the year 1590, and as the narrator
describes,

Austria was far from the world, and asleep, and our village was in the
middle of that sleep, being in the middle of Austria. It drowsed in peace
in the deep privacy of a hilly and woodsy solitude where news from the
world hardly ever came to disturb its dreams, and was infinitely content.
At its front flowed the tranquil river, its surface painted with cloud-forms
and the reflections of drifting arks and stone-boats; behind it rose the
woody steeps to the base of the lofty precipice; from the top of the
precipice frowned a vast castle, its long stretch of towers and bastions
mailed in vines. (599)

Beyond the obvious references to dreaming, Twain has placed his reader in a setting that
is unfamiliar with respect to location, date, and sheer possibility. In fact, at this point in
the narrative, the term "fairy tale" would seem to be the most appropriate genre.

However, it is important not to overlook the fact that the story is first presented as the
narrator remembering his childhood. As he says, "I remember it well, although I was
only a boy" (599). But after Satan explains that the narrator’s existence is "all a dream—
a grotesque and foolish dream," and the narrator admits "that all he had said was true"
(676), the reader is then left questioning the nature of the story. Was the story a dream or
a memory? The answer may be that it was an amalgamation of both. As John H. Davis
asserts, "The dream, for Mark Twain, was something more than a mental exercise of the
sleeper. A dream is real because, for its duration, the dreamer is there, and he, the events,
and the objects in the dream are in existence somewhere in the universe" (407). While
this explanation perhaps sheds some light onto the ambivalent nature of "The Mysterious
Stranger," it also acts as a curious transition into more contemporary theories of the short story genre.

In the introduction to his Short Story Theories, May references a brief note by Joyce Carol Oates concerning the nature of the short story. Oates writes:

The short story is a dream verbalized, arranged in space and presented to the world, imagined as a sympathetic audience (and not, as the world really is, a busy and indifferent crowd): the dream is said to be some kind of manifestation of desire, so the short story must also represent a desire perhaps only partly expressed, but the most interesting thing about it is its mystery. (214)

May concludes that although such descriptions "are much too impressionistic to be of any real help in understanding the short story, they seem [...] to be the best place to begin if one wished to develop a theory of the genre" (12). More than anything else, this passage from May underscores the fact that understanding the short story is very much a work in progress. However, Oates's description corresponds well with "The Mysterious Stranger" and she is not alone in correlating the short story with a dreamlike state. To return to "Heart of Darkness," an exasperated Marlowe makes a similar attempt to describe story-telling:

Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream — making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams. (42)

Certainly, Conrad's story-teller expresses a frustration similar to that which surrounds so much of short story criticism—a frustration that is compounded further when trying to apply this impressionistic understanding of the short story to "The Mysterious Stranger." That is, not only does "The Mysterious Stranger" exhibit a dreamlike quality, which might better be described as an ontological uncertainty, but the story also consciously
uses dreaming as a major theme. In other words, "The Mysterious Stranger" is both metaphorically and literally a "dream verbalized."

Lohafer explains in "Preclosure and Story Processing" that, when teaching a story, she will sometimes ask her students to assume that the story ended at some point before the final word. "It's a common strategy," Lohafer explains. "The false ending highlights the true ending, isolating what we mean by resolution, by fulfillment of design, by the achievement of a vantage point from which the whole story reveals its contour and point" (249). Creating a false ending is exactly the type of exercise to apply to "The Mysterious Stranger" to understand the profound nature of the story's structure. If the story were to end at any point before the final section, the piece would seem to be solely the remembrance of the narrator, and the reader would be apt to conclude that the story is of a fantastic nature. However, including the story's true ending entails justifying all that preceded the final realization, and recognizing that only the narrator truly existed, and thus, any appeal to overall unity is sacrificed.

The blending of the two major forms of the short story roughly parallels what Tuckey sees as Twain's dual psychological nature, which manifests itself in the text. As Tuckey writes:

[Twain] had not one but two philosophies; or one might say more particularly, two psychologies—the somewhat older positivistic one, already in vogue when he had been maturing, which viewed human beings as mechanisms, entirely the products of their environment, and the newer one, emphasizing the forces of the unconscious and the significance of dreams. (522-23)

Whereas the philosophical complexities of "The Mysterious Stranger" stem from contrasting psychologies present in the text, the generic complexities stem from a similar duality concerning the nature of short stories. What makes "The Mysterious Stranger"
such a marvel within the realm of short stories is that Twain has fused together the two major modes of story-telling in one piece. On the one hand, much of story is structured so that each individual element serves a decided function in the whole. On the other, that unified whole dissolves with a sudden realization. It may seem a drastic oversimplification to discuss short stories as belonging to one of two designations—the old or new type. However, within studies of the short story, these are the two major modes of story-telling. To understand Twain’s dynamic position in the history of the short story and recognize the diverse nature of his short story oeuvre involves taking into account not only his “older” stories, but also his “modern” stories, and most certainly “The Mysterious Stranger,” which blends the two major modes.

“The Mysterious Stranger” mirrors Twain’s position as a short story artist, perhaps more than any other work. “The Mysterious Stranger” is not generally recognized as a short story, but when the text is examined through the lens of short story theories, it begins to occupy a dynamic position by blending the two major forms. Twain is also in some ways a mysterious stranger among short story writers. Perhaps a testament to his own unique voice, Twain’s short fiction seems to reside merely on the cusp of any real importance in the history of the genre. Yet, when Twain’s works are examined within the context of the dominant short story theories that have emerged since the advent of the short story as a literary form, it seems increasingly clear that Twain occupies an important position in the history of the genre.

Although May sees the unclear language of dreams as the place to begin when theorizing about the short story, it also seems an appropriate place to conclude a discussion of Twain’s short fiction. There is a certain dream-like quality that not only
pervades the atmosphere of his short stories, but also seems to manifest itself as an active ingredient in the stories themselves. This dual nature is true not only for “The Mysterious Stranger,” but, to some degree, much of Twain’s short fiction. The men and women of Hadleyburg are essentially dreamers, whether they be dreaming of possible wealth or, like the Richardses as they crept toward death, dreaming their own downfall into existence.

The dreaming is even more pronounced in “Bequest” where the protagonists are consumed with their habitual flights of fancy. It should come as no surprise that a man and wife so well-versed in the art of the daydream should be found in a short story. Likewise, it only seems fitting that in “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County”—essentially a story about story-telling—the narrator should first encounter “Simon Wheeler dozing comfortably by the bar-room stove” (1). At the same time, these dream references are almost too blatant. Oates’s description of the short story as a “dream verbalized” or critic Nadine Gordimer’s explanation of the short story as a “fragmented and restless form [...] which seems best expressed as flashes of fearful insight alternating with near-hypnotic states of indifference” (181) or even the Marlowe’s previously quoted passage from “Heart of Darkness” all seem barely comprehensible. Yet, in Twain’s short fiction, the reader is directly told that all is a dream; at times, Twain’s shorter works seem to fit almost too neatly into these descriptions. Although there is a distinct texture to his short fiction, Twain’s works are rarely if ever identified as “literary.” Neider postulates that “Twain wrote primarily to satisfy an audience rather than the requirements of a genre. Whatever came to mind that aided his cause was grist for his mill [...] He rarely bothered about the niceties of fiction. Fiction has a tone all its
own, which the literary artist reveres. For him it is in a special sense greater than reality; it shapes reality, controls it” (xi). Indeed, Twain’s short fiction, if nothing else, is distinct. However, just as the case with genre, the term “literary” seems to be defined not by a static set of requirements. Twain may have never set out to write a literary short story. In many cases he may not have even set out to write a short story, per se. Instead, it is easy to imagine him just setting out to write and letting others worry about things such as literary value or generic designation. But when the others do begin to worry about these things, and when Twain’s short fiction is looked at in relation to the theories of the genre, the need for a greater appreciation of his varied structural complexities becomes evident. When that occurs, not only are Twain’s individual stories reevaluated, but so is his place as a major short story artist.
Works Cited


