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Mark Twain's A Dog's Tale—A Critical Analysis

Abstract:

Mark Twain, the American literary icon, is a great humourist, humanist and a moralist. The short narrative A Dog's Tale is written in strong opposition to vivisection. The story reveals various perspectives like humanism, moralism, irony, faithfulness and sympathy towards animals. The short narrative explores enslavement and relationships and also contains autobiographical elements. Mark Twain has gradually dwelt deep into the inner plane of Aileen's mother and he elevated her from an initial "frivolous character" to a dog of high virtues. The mother dog imparts moral values to her daughter. The readers are gradually and gently led to peep into the mind of the humble and the faithful dog Aileen.

Key Words: moral precepts, upstanding qualities, faithfulness, ignorance, slavery.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the sixth child of John Marshall Clemens and Jane Lampton Clemens, was born in Florida, Missouri on November 30, 1835. Twain inherited compassion and sympathy towards animals from his mother. Mark Twain and his youngest daughter Jean were against to vivisection. Twain was active in the anti-vivisection

movement. Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Twain's scholar suggests in her book *Mark Twain's* of Animals that Twain's works played a pivotal role in raising American's concern cruelty to animals.

Mark Twain's short story *A Dog's Tale* has first appeared in *Harper's Magazine* December 1903. Twain writes so invectively against the Vivisection that in January Britain's National Anti-Vivisection Society issued the story as a "stand-alone" pamphlet. In the following September (1904) Harper & Brothers published it as a book. The story was adapted for the film *Science* in 1911.

This short narrative is told from the point of view of Aileen Mavourneen, the name of the dog. Aileen introduced her father as St. Bernard, mother a Collie and herself as a Presbytery as told by her mother. She is least interested in the "fine large words" and in the interesting new phrases whereas her mother has a special liking for them. The neighbourhood dogs are envious of her mother's knowledge and education. Aileen boldly asserts that in actuality it was not real education" but a mere show of what it has acquired through the drawing room dining room conversations of her master's household and also from the Sunday school lessons along with her master's children.

Mark Twain is of opinion that repeated actions would be formed into habits. In the story *The \$30,000 Bequest* the couple, Aleck and Sally repeatedly broke the Sabbath time. It became a habit for them for the rest of the period and in that time they had indulged in daydreaming and in creating amassing imaginary wealth, consequently led to their destruction. In *A Dog's Tale*, the dog has learnt fine words and phrases by her habit of repetition. In the neighbourhood Aileen's mother is like a "dictionary speaking" and she is admired as the most cultivated dog. She has more presence of mind. She is compared to "a daisy!"

Mark Twain is acerbically sarcastic about the human attitude when he asserted that Aileen's mother "had such confidence in the ignorance of those creatures" as they would never champion her changed, new explanation every time for a given word. Twain ridiculed at the ignorance of most of the people and satirized their deliberate ignorance of wrongs done to them, for instance, a Whiteman's confidence of the ignorance of his African slaves in the southern states of America. Twain writes "But no harm was done; the others rolled and barked too, privately ashamed of themselves for not seeing the point, and never suspecting that the fault was not with them and there wasn't any to see" (Twain, 432).

Twain explained the same incapability, ignorance and meekness of Chinaman for bearing all the wrongs of the Whiteman. Mark Twain in his famous travelogue *Roughing It* explored that the China man is a silent sufferer and would not raise his voice towards the brutality against him. The narrator of the *Roughing It* quoted that he had heard, San Francisco boys stoned a Chinaman to death yet "they seldom think of resenting the vilest insults or the cruellest injuries" (624). They never tried to realise that it is not their fault yet they are forced to suffer for the faults not done by them. Even the lowest class of white men exercised domination on the Asian and African race which depicted the racism and colour discrimination. Twain indirectly appealed to people to fight against the problems encountered by them.

Twain represented Aileen's mother as typically American in attitude. She is confident that "those dogs hadn't wit enough to catch her anyway" and she does not allow them to outwit her. Twain's razor-edged criticism could be further observed when he boldly asserted that "May be it is because we won't let other people testify" (624). Twain tried to awake the society and wanted to bring reform in the mind-set of the people and inspired them to stand up for the injustices meted out to them. Twain voiced through the character In Was It Heaven? Or Hell? when the doctor asked the old aunts to "Reform!" Twain advocated reformation of the

society from various social evils of the mid-nineteenth century through his classics like Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Gilded Age, The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson etc.

Aileen praises her mother for she has instilled the moral and humanistic qualities in children such as kindness and brevity. The mother advised brevity in time of danger rather to run away from the situation. This upstanding quality is found in Samuel Clemens and his father John Clemens. Twain went on a lecture tour to pay off his debts worth \$100,000. Twain character exhibits his brevity. The invincible spirit of Twain and the moralist in him never allowed declaring personal insolvency. Twain acquired the quality from his father, John Clemens who was "austere and singularly upright man." John Clemens did not yield to moral degradation even though he had gone bankrupt and left no legacy for his family except barren Tennessee Land. Twain proved that nurture would always impact the individual's growth and personality.

Aileen is forcibly separated from her mother, sold and taken away when she is well grown. This is an indication of the condition of African slaves as they were also forcibly separated from their families and were treated as less than beasts. The mother dog consoles her daughter Aileen and advises her to follow the destiny of life as it would unfurl, also teaches her to lead the life "for the best good of others" but without expecting a reward which would give "worthiness and dignity" to their lives. The mother dog imparts moral values to her daughter.

The mother dog has learnt the moral precepts carefully from the Sunday-school teacher and always tried to put them in practice. Aileen regarded her mother more for her moral firmness than for her getting an appreciation for worldly wisdom. Mark Twain has gradually dwelt into the inner plane of Aileen's mother and he elevated her from an initial "frivolous character" to a dog of high virtues. The character of Aileen's mother was gradually elevated and explored.

Aileen's mother's last words before the separation are "In memory of me when there is a time of danger to another do not think of yourself, think of your mother, and do as she would do" (433) and these parting words by her mother have formed the very rubric of Aileen's character for which she has tried to live upon throughout her life.

At the age of seventeen when Mark Twain wanted to leave the house in search of better opportunities then his mother took an oath from him to behave in good conduct. In both, the cases sentiments are attached. John H. Davis writes in the Critical Companion to Mark Twain as "A Dog's Tale" is a surprisingly sentimental polemic by an author who was a longtime opponent of sentimentalism" (storyoftheweek.loa.org). Readers can observe many autobiographical elements in this short narrative.

Aileen gives a vivid description of her present situation—her new house, its richness, grandeur and of her new masters Mrs.Gray and Mr.Gray, their ten-year-old daughter Sadie and their little baby. Aileen has a happy life in her new household and her "happiness was perfect" when she has her puppy. Aileen says that Mrs.Gray and Sadie are lovely human beings with a compassionate heart. Mr.Gray's outward appearance is "handsome, a little bald in front, alert, quick in his movements, business like, prompt, decided" (433) and twain hints at his characteristic feature of "unsentimental."

On one winter day, Aileen is alone with the master's baby sleeping in its crib. The nurse is out. A spark from the fireplace shot up and "The nursery is on fire." She saved the baby by dragging it from the cloud of smoke and flames risking her own life. By doing so Aileen tried to stand up to her mother's moral ideology. Unfortunately, Aileen is misjudged, the master canned the dog and her left foreleg is broken due to a strong blow. She managed to hide in the dark garret of the house.

asleep and is relieved of pain and she helped the man to dig a hole as he is going to plant the puppy.

I saw he was going to plant the puppy, and I was glad, because it would grow and would come up a fine handsome dog, like Robin Adair . . . when the footman had finished and covered little Robin up, he patted my head, and there were tears in his eyes, and he said: poor little doggie, you saved his child.(437)

Aileen watches two whole weeks for her little Robin to come up and in the third week, it suspects of something terrible even though it could not understand exactly, stops eating and waits at the place for her little son. She becomes so weak and one day with the sinking Aileen also sank and the servants comment that: "The humble little friend is gone where beasts that perish go" (437).

The readers are gradually and gently led to peep into the mind of the humble and faithful dog Aileen. They are emotionally attached to—its inability to express its agony when it is separated from her mother, for her brevity and faithfulness, for her excitement to watch sapling come out and finally at a later stage a heart breaking separation from Robin Adair.

Mark Twain is a moralist in the guise of a humourist. Twain the moralist says that mother dog advises Aileen as to discharge its duty honestly and perfectly but should not seek the accolades. One should discharge one's duty with utmost sincerity. The dog a faithful being could stand up to her duty whereas the human being with intelligence lost his humanity.

Mark Twain is a moralist in the guise of a humourist. Twain the moralist says that mother dog advises Aileen as to discharge its duty honestly and perfectly but should not seek the accolades. One should discharge one's duty with utmost sincerity. The dog a faithful being could stand up to her duty whereas the human being with intelligence lost his humanity.

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he said men who did like this would have a
world, and although we animals would not go
on our brief lives a worthiness and dignity

ony. Shelly Fish kin agrees that "He also
in the service of truth" (Fish kin, 6). Irony
and the writer's sense and sensibility and

master's child and the puppy sacrificed
master has treated them cruelly—broke
n. The selfless and faithful dog, Aileen
l master killed her puppy. Mark Twain
ion or a living being's life?

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