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Literary Theory

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Illusion and the Panoptic Prison in Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*

Humans can be defined by their undying faith in free will and their ability to control their own lives. They take comfort in this belief and shy away from the terror of the alternative that control might be an illusion that humans invented for themselves to ease their minds from the daunting reality that they are slaves to circumstance. They reject the possibility of predestination so that they can live in blissful ignorance and ignore the horrifying thought that no one has control over their lives. This theory of solipsism is exactly what Mark Twain entertains in his novel *The Mysterious Stranger*. The elements of sight, power, and illusion that he uses can be examined through a Foucauldian lens to understand the dynamics of control and conformity in modern society. In Mark Twain's novel *The Mysterious Stranger* the present elements of surveillance, power of knowledge and authority, and illusion trap the community in a panoptic prison that instigates their conformity and obedience. The structure of society enforces conformity by entrapping the people in its own fabricated illusion which is part of an even greater illusion of reality that everything is predetermined and all existence is but a dream.

Foucault's theory largely revolves around the metaphorical panopticon to illustrate how institutions exert their control and authority over the common people through surveillance and fear. This can be examined in *The Mysterious Stranger* whose fictional community is stuck in a state of subjection that they cannot break free of. Fear is the foundation of their obedience,

enforced by the awareness that they are constantly being watched. After Marget was shunned by everyone in her community due to a family scandal, the main character Theodore reveals, “We boys wanted to go and see Marget and show friendliness for her, but our parents were afraid of offending the community and wouldn’t let us” (Twain, 63). The pressure of being watched is enough to control the behaviors of people in the community; the main character’s parents were concerned about what other people would think if their child were to act against the crowd’s example, therefore they disallowed him to do what he wanted. After publicly stoning and executing a woman as a heretic, the angel Satan explains to Theodore, “ ‘Yes, I was laughing at you, because, in fear of what others might report about you, you stoned the woman when your heart revolted at the act-- but I was laughing at the others, too... there were sixty-eight people there, and sixty-two had no more desire to throw a stone than you had’ ” (Twain, 195). Although the majority of the people secretly disapproved of stoning the woman, none of them spoke up or took action against the crowd because they were all frightened into silence and obedience. The people deeply distrust their neighbors, therefore they follow what’s expected of them in fear of being watched. However, what they do not realize is that the core of their fear is based off the illusion that everyone faithfully believes in the structure and practices of their society, when in reality the majority of people feel differently.

The last scene is also an example of the effectiveness of making a spectacle of an execution. Earlier in the novel, the entire community gathered around to witness the burning of eleven girls condemned as witches, who stand to represent anyone in society that are rebels of conventional norms. The authority figures of the community made an example of the girls’ defiance by sentencing them to death and inflicting fear in the witnesses in order to control their

behaviors. Upon first discovery, the accused witches were captured and kept in a prison to which the narrator describes, “Then they were shut up, each by herself, in the dark, and put on black bread and water for ten days and nights; and by that time they were haggard and wild, and their eyes were dry and they did not cry any more, but only sat and mumbled, and would not take the food” (Twain, 96). Being resistant to society’s ways of life, the community shut them up alone and alienated them from their cohort until they confessed, which is very similar and parallel to the panoptic prison.

Throughout the novel, it becomes evident that knowledge is power and the common people aren’t allowed to have either, being subjected to ignorance so that they remain compliant. In the beginning of the novel the main character, Theodore, explains to the reader, “Mainly we were **trained** to be good Christians; to revere the Virgin, the Church, and the saints above everything. Beyond these matters we were not required to know much; and, in fact, **not allowed to**. Knowledge was not good for the common people, and could make them discontented with the lot which God had appointed for them, and God would not endure discontent with His plans” (Twain, 5). The community’s knowledge is limited and regulated by authority figures to ensure that they can be easily controlled. If the people were to escape their prison of ignorance, they would have the power to make their own decisions regardless of what the authorities want and have true free will. This can be seen when examining the change in Theodore’s behavior after meeting Satan and gaining truth and knowledge from him. Before meeting Satan, Theodore never considered lying about anything. However, after acquainting himself with Satan, he begins to change and describes an instance of him lying: “He asked us how the lesson was getting along, and we told him it was about done. And maybe it was so; we didn’t know anything about it, but

we judged it would please him, and it did, and didn't cost us anything" (Twain, 56). This is interesting, we see the main character slowly evolving away from the rules that govern the lives of everyone. In the beginning of the story, Theodore would never consider lying or being dishonest because he was taught that it was a sin and wrong in every sense. However, after meeting Satan and being imparted on his knowledge, he begins to veer away from their accustomed behavior and deliver simple lies without thinking anything of it. He begins to indulge in the illusion that he has the freedom to make his own choices and direct his life in the direction he wants.

During the Age of Enlightenment, people thrived on the possibilities and potential of learning everything knowable and having the freedom to do so. However, Foucault's enlightenment differs from this; it centers around a metaphorical confinement of knowledge and freedom of choice. An important part of institutional control is influencing people's thoughts to eventually deceive themselves on their own and believe in the fabricated reality designed for them (similar to the psychological functions of the panoptic prison). Satan, representing one of the only enlightened characters in the novel, explains to Theodore the truth about the human race, to which Theodore reflects, "Satan was accustomed to say that our race lived a life of continuous and uninterrupted self deception. It duped itself from cradle to grave with shams and delusions which it mistook for realities, and this made its entire life a sham " (Twain, 218). Satan has the power of persuasion just like institutions in society, because unlike the common people, he has the power of knowledge. Another profound truth that Satan expresses to Theodore is the concept of "the chain of life" which ascertains that no one can control their fate, everything is predetermined by their first act. Satan explains this to Theodore and says, " 'For nothing can

change the order of its life after the first event has determined it. That is, nothing will change it, because each act unfailingly begets an act,' ” (Twain, 134). Satan works to liberate Theodore by imparting his knowledge on him, henceforth giving him the tools he needs to break free of the constructed illusion that makes him a slave to societal norms. Satan represents what social authorities fear, escaping from the illusion of the panopticon and breaking free of their control. He is exempt from the rules and belief that no one can view the world outside of disciplinary discourse because he is not of this world but is instead a divine being.

One of the truths that Satan reveals to Theodore is that only the mad and insane can find true happiness in the world through their delusions and belief in their own false reality. Satan explains the power of the mind to Theodore, “ ‘Are you so unobservant as not to have found out that sanity and happiness are an impossible combination? No sane man can be happy, for him life is real, and he sees what a fearful thing it is. Only the mad can be happy... I have taken from this man that trumpery thing which the race regards as a Mind’ ” (Twain, 217). According to Satan’s knowledge, only those who are mentally insane can be truly content in the world they live in because they have escaped conformity and are beyond the control of society having surrendered completely to a new prison: the prison of their own mind. Sane people are incapable of being happy because a part of them is aware of the reality that is imposed on them by higher authorities. Deep down is the realization that they are subjected to social order. The community is content with living in ignorance and ignoring signs of truth and reason, for if they were to gain knowledge of their reality, then fear and chaos would become them. They are protecting themselves from the truth to make life as a slave bearable which falls in accordance to society’s plan for self deception.

The concept of a dream is a recurring trope throughout the novel, displayed when many characters struggle with deciphering dream from reality. Some of the fantastical miracles the community encounters at the hands of Satan appears so unrealistic to them in terms of what they know, that leads them to question if it is real or not. Satan is the conduit of knowledge and truth, revealing how reality is an illusion and enlightening the main character by unveiling to him how everyone is being controlled by the rules of society, which in itself is part of a bigger illusion. Satan's character is symbolic of a dream, emphasized by his disguise name, Traum, which is German for "dream". At the conclusion of the novel, Satan reveals the ultimate truth to Theodore and explains, " 'You perceive, now, that these things are all impossible except in a dream... It is true, that which I have revealed to you; there is no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, no heaven, no hell. It is all a dream-- a grotesque and foolish dream. And you are but a thought, ' " (Twain, 234). This is the moment when Theodore finally breaks free of the vision and understands that everything he believed to be real was just another deception. Not only does he realize how he was trapped in the community's order of behavior, but he also has come to realize that by escaping one prison, he has fallen prisoner to another: his mind. If he is the only thing that truly exists, then it falls to reason that it was his own mind that created the life he knew, including the social prison that ruled over everyone. Satan is a projection of Theodore's own mind, therefore Theodore ultimately liberated himself from his own illusion.

Those who have the power and authority of running society, exert their influence to create a distorted sense of reality and give the common people an illusion to believe in. Members of the community live abiding by these laws of social behavior out of fear, for if they deviated from the crowd they would be discovered and socially condemned by those amongst

them that are always watching and waiting for someone to step out of line to make an example of them. All of this is part of an even bigger illusion of existence, where nothing is real save for the self and thought. According to Mark Twain, while one panoptic prison derives from institutional control, there will always be the prison of the mind. One might try to escape it and become real but will come to find that it can not be done. Life will always be a dream.

Citations:

Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today*. Routledge, 2015.

Twain, Mark. *The Mysterious Stranger, and Other Stories*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1922.