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MARK STOREY
University of Nottingham

Huck and Hank go to the circus: Mark Twain under Barnum's big top

ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Mark Twain's acquaintance with P. T. Barnum, and more especially Twain's fascination with the world of popular entertainment that Barnum epitomized, provided inspiration and material for some of Twain's most enduring works. In particular, the essay argues that two of Twain's most revered novels – The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) and A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court (1889) – are invested both thematically and generically in the complex cultural associations of the postbellum circus. Embodying the commercial capitalism of industrialized America whilst also offering a romantic liberation from everyday life, the circus becomes a condensation of many of the competing impulses of Twain's life and work: between irreverent humour and sober social critique and between the desire for imaginative freedom and a recognition of financial imperatives.

KEYWORDS

Twain
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'Of all the amazing shows that ever were conceived of, I think this of yours must surely take the lead!' This exuberant testimony for P. T. Barnum's latest spectacular show is not from one of the many pieces of promotional material that the great showman produced, but from a private letter sent to him in February 1875 by the only man who challenged Barnum's position as the leading celebrity of Gilded Age America: Mark Twain. The effusiveness continues: 'I hardly know which to wonder at most – its stupendousness, or the pluck of the man who has dared to venture upon so vast an enterprise' (Clemens [1875] 2010). Twain's exaggerated wonder was hardly an unusual response to one of Barnum's epic entertainments: the reference here is to Barnum's 'Hippodrome', a show that had opened in New York in April 1874 that had included a menagerie of hundreds of animals and a parade of costumed performers that numbered in their thousands. The connection between the two men was something more than professional admiration, however. Having met at a dinner at Horace Greeley's house in 1872 (Powers 2005: 368), they became friendly (if occasional) correspondents, paid several visits to each others' family homes, and talked at some length about publishing a book together that would include the more bizarre begging letters that Barnum frequently received.

Taking the two men's acquaintance and mutual respect as its departure point, this essay explores how Barnum both directly and indirectly provided Twain with inspiration and material for some of his most celebrated works. It therefore proceeds along two lines of argument. Firstly, that the late nineteenth-century growth in ever more spectacular mass entertainment, led in no small part by Barnum himself, influences and helps to form Twain's early work in illuminating ways. Secondly (in more abstract terms), it argues that the narrative employment of those forms of entertainment in his two great novels of the 1880s – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884 and *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* (1889) – serves to literalize, in a recognizable material form, some of the aesthetic and social entanglements bound up in Twain's work: the play of conflicting generic idioms operating within the fiction and his own ambivalent oscillation between artistic freedom and commercial imperatives.

References to the Barnum-esque entertainment industry of post-Civil War America – an industry that took many forms, but that found its most vivid expression in the circus – start to appear in Twain's fiction before he actually met the man himself. In his first major book, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), he recounts his travels in Europe and the Middle East in a narrative voice seeped in American popular culture, nowhere illustrated more starkly than when he is describing the ornate aristocratic palaces of Genoa: 'Some of these painted walls reminded me somewhat of the tall van, plastered with fanciful bills and posters, that follows the bandwagon of a circus about a country village' (Twain 1869: 167). Twain seems to enjoy the gentle irreverence of this analogy, as he uses it again later in the book when describing the Mosque of St Sophia in Constantinople: 'The inside of the dome is figured all over with a monstrous inscription in Turkish characters, wrought in gold mosaic, that looks as glaring as a circus bill' (1869: 363). The familiar Twain persona – that faux-innocence and knowing, ironic Yankee vulgarity – is already taking shape, and pertinently he turns to the circus to serve as a deft symbol of crass New World commercialism.

In another of Twain's early travel books, *Roughing It* (1872), Barnum's spectre appears not just in the passing narrative allusions to the circus but in the development of that celebrated persona itself. Andrew Hoffman has suggested that when Samuel Clemens came to write about his experiences in the West, experiences that had often been unhappy and difficult, he transformed the material into the burlesque humour we are now familiar with by 'applying P. T. Barnum's philosophy of self-promotion' (Hoffman 1997: 182). Translating the often hard realities of western life into the playful, exaggerated tales of *Roughing It* involved a kind of self-myth-making that Twain had already admired in Barnum's own autobiography, *Struggles and Triumphs* (1869). It was, in fact, a favourite book of Twain's, one he read with his young wife Olivia after their marriage in 1870, and one he would return to again in the final weeks of his life (Hoffman 1997: 171, 496). That *Roughing It* should now be seen as a seminal work in Twain's pursuit of a distinctive narrative voice – the retelling of his own past as vernacular comedy – might owe more than a little to the example set for him by Barnum's own literary creation of a public image.

If nothing else, the book certainly returns to the comic potential of circus analogies. When discussing the various ethnic people he encounters, Twain calls upon his readers' experience of circus-going in order to describe the exotic spectacle that confronts him: 'I had never seen such wild, free, magnificent horsemanship outside of a circus as these picturesquely-clad Mexicans' ([1872] 1981: 197), or later on, describing the court costumes of Hawaiian dignitaries as 'so "stunning" [. . .] [in] nature that it would make the clown in a circus look tame and commonplace by comparison' ([1872] 1981: 483). In turning ethnic people and customs into a circus-like spectacle, Twain both references and to some extent pre-empts the kind of shows that Barnum began putting on, most notably in his 1874 'Congress of Nations' at the Hippodrome in New York.[1] It was to be, in Barnum's own words, 'an assemblage of representations of all nations that could be reached by land or sea,' displaying an example of 'every accessible people, civilized or barbarous, on the face of the globe' (Adams 1996: 36). A late nineteenth-century fascination with exotic cultures and traditions, fuelled by the rise of institutionalized anthropology and facilitated by advances in transportation that enabled such cultures to be packaged and displayed by showmen like Barnum, is already seeping into Twain's literary consciousness at the beginning of the 1870s.[2]

Reading Twain's early fiction with this connection in mind, one begins to see how much he relished the absurdities and humorous potential of Barnum and the mass entertainment industry. In 'Some Learned Fables for Good Old Boys and Girls', written in 1874 but turned down by William Dean Howells in his capacity as editor of *Atlantic Monthly*, a group of forest animals go out in search of evidence of human civilization. Coming upon the 'Waterside Museum', 'Open at all Hours – Admission 50 Cents', they discover not just a room of waxworks (which they take to be real bodies) but a note to an employee signed by the manager 'Varnum' (Twain [1874] 1981: 115, 117). Barnum's American Museum had risen to national fame during the middle of the nineteenth century, the prime site of public entertainment in New York which, amongst its many exhibits, included a room of waxworks. There is even an echo of Barnum in another of Twain's stories published two years after 'Some Learned Fables', 'The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut' (1876). The geographical location might be the clue: the strange dwarf that Twain's story centres on could not have failed to put contemporary readers in mind of transatlantic celebrity Charles Stratton – better known as General Tom Thumb, a dwarf, originally from Connecticut, whom Barnum had toured around American and Europe in the 1840s. The fiction that Twain was producing in the early 1870s not only proved to be where his characteristic narrative voice came to maturity but highlights the degree to which Barnum and the industry he personified had become part of Twain's imaginative and satirical tool box.

Twain's most direct literary nod to Barnum would come sometime later, and it is in 'The Stolen White Elephant' ([1882] 1981) that he takes another genial swipe at the opportunism of circus advertising. He borrows from real life – Jumbo the elephant, whom Barnum had brought to America in 1882 – but reality and fiction part in Twain's comical account of Jumbo's escape and the

[1] Barnum would develop the idea in his later 'Ethnological Congress', which was essentially the same thing on a bigger scale but with a far more scientific, empirical tone. See Adams.

[2] In a similar vein, Twain would mischievously suggest in his travel essay of 1873, 'The Sandwich Islands', that if and when the United States annex Hawaii Barnum should 'run' Kilauea, the island's volatile volcano (Twain 1873: 27).

bungled national search that ensues. The detective agency employed to track down the missing elephant receives a telegram from one of their detectives out in the field: ‘Barnum offers rate of $4000 a year for exclusive privilege of using elephant as travelling advertising medium from now till detectives find him. Wants to paste circus posters on him’ (Twain [1882] 1981: 210). Twain affectionately lampoons Barnum’s famous talent for self-promotion and satirically comments on the opportunism of magnates like Barnum who seized on any and every commercial opening.[3]

The point of this brief survey is not to suggest that Barnum (or postbellum forms of mass entertainment in general) became a sustained thematic interest of Twain’s in the earlier part of his career. What they do illustrate, however, is how he was already well aware of the potential narrative riches that the conflicting cultural and social connotations of Barnum’s world offered before he came to write *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s Court*. Before I move onto a more detailed discussion of those texts, then, I want to stake out the nature of those cultural and social connotations in more detail. Through a closer exploration of how forms of mass entertainment are employed in two of Twain’s most critically revered novels, this essay will therefore start to reach somewhere beyond Barnum’s direct influence on Twain and examine how the complexities of the industry Barnum came to represent became a fitting metaphor for the complexities of Twain’s own work. I want to focus particularly on the large-scale circuses that Barnum, working with circus owners Dan Castello and W. C. Coup, pioneered during the 1870s and 1880s. The various and often contradictory ways in which this spectacular cultural and commercial force was understood and described points to just what a suggestive event it must have appeared to Twain’s imagination.[4]

On the one hand, there is the striking prevalence – both in nineteenth-century journalism and in subsequent scholarly works – of urban and industrial metaphors. The circus ‘was widely received as a model of industrial discipline’ (Adams 1996: 35) at the time, and typical contemporary accounts certainly bear this view out in their choice of language. The *Boston Daily Globe*’s admiring piece on Barnum’s circus in June 1887, for instance, reports that ‘Every man has his particular piece of work to do, just the same as in a great factory’ (Adams 1996: 50), while the London *Times*’ 1889 report of Barnum’s ‘Greatest Show on Earth’ similarly describes the scene as ‘some vast factory, with its endless spindles and revolving shafts and pulleys’. Later still, American journalist Cleveland Moffett, writing in *McClure’s Magazine* in 1895, called the circus a ‘kingdom on wheels, a city that folds itself up like an umbrella’ (Harris 1973: 240, 275).

Even modern critics seem compelled to borrow urban metaphors. The prominent circus historian Janet Davis describes the circus as a ‘nomadic city’, a ‘magical, movable city’, or a ‘canvas city’ (2002: 39, 46). Similarly, Gregory Renoff, in a chapter called ‘The Canvas City’, reveals how the huge crowds that gathered in towns on circus day were sometimes understood in explicitly urban terms, citing a newspaper report from 1875 describing circus day in Rome, Georgia: ‘Broad Street, Rome, had the appearance of Broadway, New York,’ the reporter grandly states. Renoff goes on to comment that, faced with the crowded spaces of circus day, ‘only the throngs that filled the streets of northern cities seemed apt in comparison’ (2008: 91). These metaphors can be partly ascribed to hyperbole, of course, but in fact the complexity and size of the travelling circus – something which grew to astounding proportions after the Civil War – might well be considered in the theoretical terms normally assigned to urban-industrial modernity. It can certainly be identified, as a prime form

[3] Unsurprisingly, the direct way in which Twain alludes to Barnum in this story has elicited the most sustained critical explication of the Twain–Barnum connection. See especially Lustig, T. J. (2000), ‘ “Seeing the Elephant”: Constructing culture in Britain and the United States after Jumbo’, *Symbiosis*, 4: 2, pp. 111–32.

[4] Eric Lott has convincingly traced how another major form of nineteenth-century entertainment – the blackface minstrel show – had a similar impact on Twain’s work. See Lott, Eric (1995), ‘Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow: Twain, Race, and Blackface’, in Forrest G. Robinson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mark Twain*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 129–52.

of that process which Max Weber saw operating at the heart of modernity, rationalization. The circus was, after all, a precisely calculated undertaking, a necessarily efficient and goal-oriented process that could unpack and erect Barnum and Bailey's 1894 circus (consisting of over a dozen tents, the biggest more than 400 feet in length) in just half an hour (Davis 2003: 47). As Neil Harris points out, 'the circus became a symbol of administrative coordination in an age that venerated [. . .] executive skills' (Harris 1973: 240). Its utilization of efficient means of transportation, its commitment to commercialization and its need to remain in touch with technological advances meant the circus was 'wholeheartedly wedded to what would emerge as the spirit of modernity' (Stoddart 2000: 36).

As a symbol of modern efficiency, the circus invited comparisons to the larger industrial systems that typified the age: the factory and the city. Yet these comparisons feel at odds with what the circus presented itself as, and what it represented in the popular imagination – the site of exotic, carnivalesque excesses and performative spontaneity. Its organization and implementation might have required all the strictly organized time-keeping of a rational age, but the experience of the audience and the actual spectacle of the performance was a strange, jarring mix of temporal and spatial dislocation. Janet Davis points out that circus day 'was all about the suspension of time, when daily routines came grinding to a halt. The colorful panoply of foreign animals and human performers seemingly compressed time and space when the entire world appeared on Main Street' (2002: 52). The circus presents a curious mixture of mythical, stereotypical, romantic and fantastic scenes, ranging across the world and across history. The historian Lewis Atherton recognizes what a potentially radical challenge, both politically and morally, such spectacle may have posed: '[Circuses] overwhelmed the imagination of townsmen with their glitter and pageantry. Knights rode on Main Streets in a land committed to the ideal of a classless society. Roman chariots raced within view of Protestant church steeples' ([1954] 1984: 132).

It is perhaps no great leap to imagine how Twain would have relished such paradoxes. The kind of huge commercial circuses that Barnum instigated offered an example of rationalized modernity and commercialism at the same time as representing an oddly regressive and romanticized challenge to foundational American values, a site of industrial rationalization that is simultaneously an escapist festivity. In this sense, it is worth invoking Bakhtin's now-familiar notions of the 'carnival' and its conceptual opposite the 'official feast'. 'Carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order,' Bakhtin writes, 'it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions' (1968: 10). The carnival (a broadly conceived event, a time and a place that is also a general sensibility) is a disruption of normality that becomes a site apart from social expectations. But as is clear from its resolutely commercial operations, the postbellum circus is not simply an escape into some utopian realm; as a successful money-making product, it also operates much like the carnival's antithesis, the official feast. Here, 'the existing pattern of things [is] reinforced' and it serves to emphasize 'the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms and prohibitions' (Bakhtin 1968: 9). Both of these apparently incommensurable strands appear to be combined in the postbellum American circus. While it offers a place and a time apart from the normal daily life of modern America, its presence is also indicative of the incursions of urban-capitalist modernity into that life.[5]

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[5] I cite Bakhtin here only to show that his notion of the carnival, frequently invoked across literary and cultural criticism, is (as Terry Eagleton, amongst others, has already pointed out) limited in its application when transposed to the commercially sanctioned forms of carnival found in urban-industrial society.

Against this historical and theoretical background, the circus can be conceived of as a site where a ludic irrationality comes under the auspices of modern rational business. From a specifically literary point of view, however, it also offers a fitting narratological device that manifests – and so to some extent unravels – the aesthetic entanglements of Twain's fiction. Bill Brown has written about the role that entertainments and amusements play in postbellum literature, arguing that it is 'as though American realism deploys recreational space to retrieve something of the liberty and intensity of the romance', suffusing it 'with something of the liminality that traditionally characterizes the forest, the frontier, the sea' (1996: 20). In Twain's case, as I will demonstrate, 'recreational space' acts as the particularized site of the competing aesthetic modes that his work so often straddles: a romantic impulse imaginatively connected to an agrarian Southern childhood, and the darker inflections of social realism deployed to satirize contemporary America. Following Brown's translation of romantic symbols (the forest and the frontier) into their modern rationalized forms (sites of recreation and entertainment), I will argue that Twain's fiction also deploys sites of mass entertainment metonymically, so that whilst they provide realist writing with a potent symbol of romantic potential they also distil and embody some of the more historically specific issues inherent in Twain's thematic concerns.

It is ultimately this Janus-faced semantic capability that makes the circus such a resonant occasion in Twain's fiction, becoming a historically recognizable narrative event that in its own distinctive way is also capable of encapsulating the wider ideological and aesthetic intricacies of the age. Furthermore, we might see that capability as standing not just for the social and cultural context that Twain strove to explore and very often lampoon but from the biographical viewpoint that such intricacies reverberate with the divided personal and public image of the man himself. This last point is one I want to return to at the end, but now I will turn to the role of the circus (and mass entertainment more generally) in two of Twain's major novels as a way to flesh out the claims made so far, and to explore how two of Twain's most enduringly popular and analysed texts seem to recognize and employ the various narrative implications of Barnum's spectacular entertainments.

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Twain's most sustained fictional inclusion of a circus comes, in fact, in that most revered of all canonical American texts, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Even before we get inside the big top, Huck skirts his characteristic line between canny pragmatism and moral innocence: 'I went to the circus', he announces, 'and loafed around the back side till the watchmen went by, and then dived in under the tent' (Twain [1884] 2003: 210). He defies the commercial enterprise of the circus – designed, after all, to make money for the owners – by literally slipping underneath it, and justifies his minor ethical transgression on the sympathy-inducing grounds that he may need the money as he is 'away from home and amongst strangers'. His refusal to conform to the economics of the circus effectively distances him further from the structures of a 'civilization' he seeks so hard to evade, yet such potentially subversive behaviour is explained in the practical terms that deflate any such pretensions: 'I ain't opposed to spending money on circuses, when there ain't no other way, but there ain't no use in *wasting* it on them' (Twain [1884] 2003: 210). Twain refuses to turn Huck into a figure radically free of capitalist logic by still implicating him in a monetary economy, but that spirit of dissention lingers on in the fact that, in the end, Huck gets in for free.

Once inside the tent, however, Huck fully submits to the orchestrated spectacle of the performance. The acrobatic performers who ride into the ring on horses are 'a powerful fine sight', Huck apparently mesmerized by the athletic men and 'perfectly beautiful' (Twain [1884] 2003: 210) women. He is drawn in, as well, by the ongoing banter between the clown and the ringmaster, seemingly unaware that the performance is a well-rehearsed script. In openly stating his naive appreciation of the scene, Huck reminds us that his vision is still only a child's:

> The ring-master couldn't ever say a word to him but he was back at him quick as a wink with the funniest things a body ever said; and how he ever *could* think of so many of them, and so sudden and so pat, was what I couldn't noway understand.
>
> (Twain [1884] 2003: 211)

Huck's mischievous entry into the circus tent signals his boyish disobedience towards socially compliant behaviour, but once inside he surrenders, wide-eyed, to the commercially managed spectacle.

The theory-addled notion of 'spectacle' is worth expanding on here, if only because Huck's experience of the postbellum circus puts one in mind of Guy Debord's well-known use of the term. Debord, discussing the mature phase of capitalism that arguably began in the late nineteenth century, states that spectacle implies the 'spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object', as something always external to the 'acting subject' (Debord [1967] 1994: 23). Such notions should be kept in mind when examining the kind of transformation in circus performance that Barnum pioneered, and that became widespread during the period in which Twain is writing. Indeed, Neil Harris's discussion of Barnum's circuses echoes those Debordian terms: postbellum circuses were on such a scale that 'slapstick and pantomime replaced verbal sallies. Intimacy was lost, along with certain kinds of interactions between performers and spectators' (1973: 241). The audience became 'prisoners' as Barnum's later productions 'permitted more passive spectatorship. This was artifice caught up in its own splendor and profusion; onlookers had nothing more to do than sit back and enjoy' (1973: 244–45).

Huck is, in this light, the quintessential Barnum-ized spectator. His submission to the performance continues when an apparently drunk man tries to get into the ring to ride a horse, Huck gazing in growing wonder as the man rides around the ring with unexpected ease: 'He just stood up there, a-sailing around as easy and comfortable as if he warn't ever drunk in his life' ([1884] 2003: 211). The whole thing is staged, of course, but Huck remains in a state of enraptured ignorance.[6] This peculiar distance between Huck and the reality around him is maintained by the telling distinction Twain secures between Huck's narrative 'I' and the circus audience itself. Huck repeatedly refers to them using the collective noun 'people', so, for example, the 'clown carried on so it most killed the people', 'Then the people began to holler', 'stirred up the people', and finally the 'whole crowd of people standing up shouting and laughing till the tears rolled down' ([1884] 2003: 212). The discrepancy between Huck's view of things and the view of everyone else (after all, Huck is presumably physically as much part of the crowd as the people he describes in this peculiarly unempathic tone) suggests Huck's inability – or perhaps it is refusal – to align himself with a shared social vision. While he personally experiences

[6] The circus episode in *Huckleberry Finn* bears a remarkable similarity to a passage in William Dean Howells' childhood memoir, *A Boy's Town* (1890). Howells recalls that boys in his home town would often try to pull the same trick that Huck does by getting into the circus for free; not only that, but it was considered an admirable achievement: 'The boys held it to be a high and creditable thing to hook into a show of any kind, but hooking into a circus was something that a fellow ought to be held in special honor for doing' (Howells ([1890] 1950), 'A Boy's Town', in Henry Steele Commager (ed.) *Selected Writings of William Dean Howells*, New York: Random House, p. 778). Apart from sneaking into the circus without paying, the young Howells was particularly captivated by the same drunken horse rider act that Huck watches, only with a more knowing eye: 'The big boys have known all along that he was not a real country-jake' (780).

the as a spectacle in the way that Barnum's postbellum productions instigated, the audience around him seem more grounded in the antebellum world of the novel's setting, retaining some intimacy and pantomimic interaction with the performance.

The sight of the 'drunk' man precariously hanging from a galloping horse confirms this divided sense of spectatorship: 'round and round the ring, with that sot laying down on him [the horse] and hanging to his neck [. . .] and the people just crazy. It warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger' ([1884] 2003: 211). Huck's moral standpoint is still contrary to the nameless Southern mass he shares the grandstands with; he feels sympathy where others merely laugh. Twain turns Huck into a figure who is at once antagonistic to and at home in the modern world of mass entertainment, defying its commercial objectives yet swept up in its artifice. The transformed experience of circus-going that characterizes the period in which Twain is writing seeps into the representation of a time before that transformation, so that Huck exists simultaneously in both in a way that highlights his distance from either.

This peculiar stance, implicating the circus-goer in a carnivalesque defiance whilst simultaneously securing them as a passive Debordian spectator, is one that Jonathan Crary sees as indicative of the wider field of late nineteenth-century popular entertainment. Appropriately, it is Seurat's painting *Parade de Cirque* (1888) that Crary examines in precisely these terms, arguing that it occupies a 'social' and 'imaginary position that coincides neither with dreams of subjective freedom nor effects of power' (1999: 152). Huck's complex relation to the pursuit of that subjective freedom, tempered as it is by the 'effects of power' that operate in the social milieu he inhabits, resonates deeply in his exclamation at finally realizing that the drunk man is all part of the act: 'Well, I felt sheepish enough, to be took in so, but I wouldn't a been in that ringmaster's place, not for a thousand dollars' ([1884] 2003: 211). Realizing the performer is not actually drunk, Huck still assumes that the ringmaster has been duped as well. Echoing here, in comic form, is not only Huck's growing consciousness of the deep injustices encoded into prevailing social norms but the vacillating relationship he has with those social norms. The illusion is revealed, and yet not quite revealed; Huck is wiser, yet it is a wisdom still laced with a naivety that resists ideological annexation.

The circus, immersed in deception and spectatorship, provides Twain with a ready-made site where the intricacies of Huck's relation to 'civilization' can play out. Even the context of this scene, as Peter Messent points out, has crucial implications. It comes straight after the lynching party has gone in pursuit of Colonel Sherburn, so that in effect Twain 'takes us from an entirely "serious" incident, and one that harshly, if implicitly, critiques the inhumanity and violence at the heart of the Southern social system [. . .], to the enjoyable entertainment of the circus, with whatever gaudy misrepresentations of reality [. . .] it contains' (2005: 198). While that striking shift in tone and deliberate deflation of narrative drama might well stand, as Messent goes on to suggest, as a condensation of so much of Twain's work – carrying as it does implications of aesthetic uncertainties between romance and realism whilst relating such uncertainties to the sociopolitical world it comments upon – buried in the deceptively humorous circus episode itself is some of that same seriousness.

Whatever narrative opportunities the circus may have offered Twain, he would never include a more sustained description of it than he does in *Huckleberry Finn*. In his 1889 novel *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur's Court* the circus makes a far subtler, understated appearance, but nevertheless has a crucial role to play in the narrative. When the hero Hank Morgan awakes in sixth-century England at the start of the novel he is greeted by the sight of a knight fully clad in armour, and makes an instant assumption that in the context of this argument is noteworthy: 'Get along back to your circus, or I'll report you' Hanks says to him (Twain [1889] 1986: 37), immediately betraying a late nineteenth-century mindset immersed in everyday cultural references. The knight takes him captive, and as they walk on it dawns on Hank that the knight may not be what he assumed: 'we did not come to any circus or sign of a circus' ([1889] 1986: 37) he says, somewhat bewildered. Maybe Hank was a fan of the circus back in the 1880s, as he is still calling the knight a 'circus man' when he is taken to Camelot ([1889] 1986: 41), and on seeing King Arthur's round table remarks that it 'was as large as a circus ring' ([1889] 1986: 52). Hank even aligns himself with the circus at one point, referring to his tendency for elaborate displays of emotion as the 'circus side' of his nature ([1889] 1986: 129). There are, in fact, eight direct references to the circus throughout the story. These narrative allusions operate, on one level, in similar ways to the ironic analogies that Twain had used in his early travel writing, puncturing the grand pomposity of feudal England at the same time as marking our historical distance from it.

The rich metaphoric capacity of the circus returns in a more oblique sense towards the end of Hank's narrative. Great anticipation builds before a jousting tournament at Camelot, stirred not least by Clarence's very modern approach to media hype. So, despite the mangled typesetting (Clarence is new to the printing-press technology that Hank has introduced), the newspaper advertisement for the upcoming attraction prickles with an ironic and anachronistic knowingness towards the commercialism of circuses: 'Pie for sale on the grounds, and rocks to crack it with; oals ciRcus-lemonade – three drops of lime juice to a barrel of water [sic]' ([1889] 1986: 354). Twain's cynicism towards profit-pinching commerce finds a natural target in the circus, and in transposing such modern scepticism to Arthurian England he can heighten the comic – and ever more destructive – effect of Hank's influence.

Casting the jousting tournament in such terms also colours our view of Hank's description of the scene come the day itself: 'Vast as the show-grounds were, there were no vacant spaces in them [....] The mammoth grand stand was clothed in flags, streamers, rich tapestries [....] The huge camp of beflagged and gay-coloured tents [. . .] was another fine sight' ([1889] 1986: 355–56). Read in the light of my argument here such a scene feels strangely familiar, a feeling then confirmed by the performance Hank puts on at the tournament. Here the world of Barnum's circuses is replaced by an allusion to another of the great showmen of postbellum America, Buffalo Bill. 'I slipped my lasso from the horn of my saddle', Hank narrates, 'and grasped the coil in my right hand [....] I was sitting my horse at ease, and swinging the great loop of my lasso in wide circles about my head [....] These people had never seen anything of that cow-boy business before' ([1889] 1986: 358). Contemporary readers of Twain's novel would surely have recognized the figure before them: 'Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show' was a transatlantic phenomenon in the late nineteenth century, a touring spectacular that, although not one of Barnum's shows, owed much to his enterprise and spirit.[7] The vast industry it created (merchandise, spin-offs and a colossal number of dime novels) speaks to a distinctly modern sense of commercial popular entertainment, and underlines the argument that Twain imported such allusions also to import their seemingly incompatible associations of romanticized mythology and commercialized modernity.

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[7] Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) is still a good account of Buffalo Bill's literary incarnations, and for a broader historical/cultural approach, see Louis S. Warren (2005), *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Hamlin Hill is one critic who has previously noted the presence of the circus in *A Connecticut Yankee*, but to suggest that Hank Morgan may be modelled on Barnum himself. Hill points out that when Hank first sees Camelot at the start of the novel and assumes, somewhat oddly, that he is in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that it may be Twain making a sly reference to Barnum's own house. Inspired by a trip to the Brighton Pavilion when Barnum was in England, the house – named 'Iranistan' – was built in 1848 and instantly became a famous local landmark. Constance Rourke's description goes some way to doing it justice when she lists the 'balconies, wide wings, shining domes, spires [and] minarets', and grounds including a 'huge fountain [. . .] bronze deer [. . .] and the fair semblance of an English park' (Hill 1964: 615). Sadly the house would only stand for eight years before it burned to the ground in 1857, but a woodcut of it appeared in that favourite book of Twain's, Barnum's autobiography *Struggles and Triumphs*. Both Hill and David Sloane have suggested that when Twain came to write *A Connecticut Yankee* 'P. T. Barnum was [. . .] very much in [his] consciousness' (Sloane 1979: 147). After all, Hank Morgan is an entrepreneurial, straight-talking Connecticut man in the Barnum mould, a character who spends the novel creating ever more elaborate displays of showmanship and illusion. But while Hill and Sloane are keen to find the figure of Barnum-as-celebrity or even just Barnum-as-businessman in Twain's work, I am suggesting something less neatly symmetrical. It is the expanded metaphoric capacity of the circus that Barnum indirectly instigates that seems to speak most deeply to Twain's concerns, so that in *Huckleberry Finn* Barnum's presence is only tangential, and in *A Connecticut Yankee* he is transfigured into a metonym for a vulgarized popular culture. The parallels are there, both in the men's own lives and in Twain's subtle fictional nods, but ultimately Barnum exists offstage in Twain's fiction, referring readers to a shared cultural experience of popular entertainment that was replete with a host of seemingly contradictory associations.

As I suggested earlier on, the connotative register that Barnum's entertainments seem to furnish Twain with – romantically escapist and yet irreverently satirical – might be read as a fitting cipher for the man himself. By way of a conclusion that offers only a suggestion of such a point, it is worth recalling Van Wyck Brooks's classic study *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. As James Vitelli states in his introduction to the book, Brooks arraigns Twain for 'the way his humor verges towards blackness or veers into burlesque or settles for literary puerilities' ([1920] 1970: xii). The sense that Twain was a man not quite in control of his comic talents, and that as a result his work could sometimes appear to offer nothing more than populist trivialities, leads Brooks to summarize Twain's divided persona with this telling analogy:

> At the circus, no doubt, you have watched some trained lion going through the sad motions of a career to which the tyrannical curiosity of men has constrained him. At times he seems to be playing his part with a certain zest; [....] It is only thanks [. . .] to the circus-paraphernalia that he continues to enact this parody of his true life [....] Look at him at the moment when the trainer ceases to crack his whip and turns his back. In a flash another self has possessed him: [. . .] you perceive the king of beasts once more.
>
> So it was with Mark Twain.
>
> ([1920] 1970: 219)

Between the glitter and pageantry of the circus performance and the commercialized efficiency of the circus business, we find the same play of fantasy and reality that stands, finally, for much of Twain's life and work. Enacting a 'parody of his true life' is in many senses precisely the literary performance to which he so often returned, and the subject matter that accounts for so much of his prodigious success. The continuing popular and academic fascination with Twain owes much to the ambiguities of his public and personal lives, and in this sense it is tempting to think that, like Hank Morgan, it is the 'circus side' of his nature that goes some way to explaining not just the work, but the man behind it. Twain's own uncertainties and competing literary impulses find an appropriate counterpart in the fantastic, baffling, illusory world of Barnum's circuses.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Mark Storey is an Associate Lecturer and Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Nottingham. Contact: School of American and Canadian Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

E-mail: Mark.Storey@nottingham.ac.uk

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