

The demythologizing of the american west in twain's roughing it



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In many of Whitman's Civil War poems, he focuses on dead or wounded soldiers and draws particular attention to grotesque, often disturbing images. In "A March in the Ranks Hard-Prest," he writes, "Surgeons operating, attendants holding lights, the smell of ether, the odor of blood / The crowd, O the crowd of the bloody forms" Whitman's motivation for writing these Civil War poems, which are derived from the notes he took while working as a nurse, was to ensure that the horrors of war would not be lost and forgotten among stories of heroism and glory. By drawing attention to the corporeal and tactile aspects of the war heaps of wounded soldiers and the smell of army hospitals he goes against the human tendency to mythologize. In a similar fashion, Twain uses animals in *Roughing It* in order to demythologize the idea of the Great American West. Hidden beneath a series of humorous anecdotes lies a serious undertone of disappointment and a loss of innocence. As the narrator encounters animals, he is brought down to a progressively baser level, symbolizing the failure of his expectations and Twain's deflation of the mythic ideal of the West. At the very beginning of the book, Twain sets forth the myth of the West in the narrator's naïve speculations about his future journey. He writes: Pretty soon he would be hundreds and hundreds of miles away on the great plains and deserts, and among the mountains of the Far West, and would see buffaloes and Indians, and prairie dogs, and antelopes, and have all kinds of adventures, and maybe get hanged or scalped, and have ever such a fine time, and write home and tell us all about it, and be a hero. (29) The successive compound clauses demonstrate the narrator's childish optimism and unflinching belief in the myth of the West. Here, the act of seeing buffaloes, prairie dogs and antelopes is equated with other mythic

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adventures, showing how animals, too, have become an integral part of the idea of the West. With this inflated conception of animals in mind, Twain constructs the story so that each encounter with an animal results in the experience falling well short of the narrator's expectations. The narrator's first encounter with an animal is his sighting of the "jackass rabbit." The ridiculousness of this animal is heightened by the way in which the narrator builds him up, saying, "we saw the first specimen of an animal known familiarly over two thousand miles of mountain and desert from Kansas clear to the Pacific Ocean" (37). The introduction sounds as though what he is about to mention is a species that is revered across the country; in other words, it sounds as though the animal is of the same mythic status as the "buffaloes, prairie dogs and antelopes." Instead, what he describes is an animal with "preposterous ears" that is scared nearly to death by the breaking of a twig. While this marks the beginning of Twain's demythologizing of the West, it is important to note that the narrator is not yet disappointed here, but rather asserts his superiority over the animal, shooting at it and making him "hump himself" (38). It is not until slightly later that the narrator himself is compromised, and his fall from innocence is more pronounced. Early on in his journey, at the Station House, the narrator says, "Right here we suffered the first diminution of our princely state. We left our six fine horses and took six mules in their place." Relocating to a baser animal the mule marks the beginning of both his literal and figurative fall from innocence. The reader knows that the narrator equates the mule with the ridiculous jackass rabbit, since he says, "Nothing can abide the taste of [sagebrush] but the jackass and its illegitimate child the mule. But their testimony to its nutritiousness is worth noting, for they will eat pine

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knots, or anthracite coal, or brass fillings, or lead pipe" (39). However, whereas the narrator formerly could shoot at the ridiculous jackass rabbit from his superior position riding in the coach, he must now degrade himself to ride on a mule, thereby lowering himself to its status and continuing to deflate the myth of the West. The narrator continues this trend in his description of the coyote. He prefaces his account of the coyote by hearkening back to his idealized conception of the West on the first page of the book, saying, " Along about an hour after breakfast we saw the first prairie dog villages, the first antelope, and the first wolf" (49). In contrast to these animals to which he has ascribed mythic ideas, he describes the coyote as " a long, slim, sick and sorry-looking skeleton, with a gray wolfskin stretched over it, a tolerably bushy tail that forever sags down with a despairing expression of forsakenness and misery, a furtive and evil eye, and a long sharp face" Furthermore, he describes it as a " living breathing allegory of Want" and as being " always hungry." The first description of the animal follows convention by failing to meet the narrator's expectations. The second, however, involving want and hunger, foreshadows the narrator's encounter with the physical scarcity of the Western landscape (e. g. the desert), and the greediness of its inhabitants (e. g. the pocket miners). In crossing the alkali desert, the narrator's experiences continue to fall short of his expectations, and he descends physically to an even lower level. Not surprisingly, he precedes his account by announcing his glorious ideas of crossing the desert, saying, " This was fine novel romantic dramatically adventurous this, indeed, was worth living for, worth traveling for! We would write home all about it" (115). However, he quickly admits that his

enthusiasm " wilted under the sultry August sun and did not last above one
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hour.” Fairly soon after, he describes the coach as “ creeping like a bug” This particular simile is particularly important because it emphasizes the narrator’s reduction in status. Not long before, the narrator rode luxuriously in a horse-pulled coach; then he traded his horses for mules, and now he crosses the desert, “ creeping like a bug.” Just as Whitman evokes images of the body to demythologize the war, Twain reduces the narrator from a noble status to one where he is equated with a bug that creeps on the ground. His physical descent as well as the movement downward in the “ social hierarchy” of animals emphasizes the fall from innocence and his failure to realize the myth of the West. The narrator continues his “ fall” at Carson City in Mrs. O’Flannigan’s house when a bunch of tarantulas get loose among the boarders. When the blowing “ zephyr” knocks off the roof and shatters into their side of the ranch, the freed tarantulas send the boarders scurrying about like the eight-legged beasts themselves. Twain writes: The landscape presented when the lantern flashed into the room was picturesque, and might have been funny to some people, but was not to us. Although we were perched so strangely upon boxes, trunks and beds, and so strangely attired, too, we were too earnestly distressed and too genuinely miserable to see any fun about it, and there was not the semblance of a smile anywhere visible. I know I am not capable of suffering more than I did during those few minutes of suspense in the dark, surrounded by those creeping, bloody-minded tarantulas. (132). Here, the narrator and his fellow boarders are brought even farther down the hierarchy of animals to the level of the hairy, “ creeping, bloody-minded tarantulas.” The narrator continues to recount instances involving animals in which his experiences fall progressively farther from his initial lofty expectations. For instance, when crossing the <https://assignbuster.com/the-demythologizing-of-the-american-west-in-twains-roughing-it/>

snow-covered desert with Ballou and Ollendorff, the narrator and his companions endure what they believe to be a near death experience, but end up only suffering substantial losses of dignity. They trudge wearily through the snow until they are hopelessly lost in the middle of nowhere (their horses have abandoned them) and they lie down presuming to take their last breaths of life. The dark humor of the episode rests in the narrator's realization in the morning: "I rose up, and there in the gray dawn, not fifteen steps from us, were the frame buildings of a stage station, and under a shed stood our still saddled and bridled horses!" (182). Continuing the trend of downward motion, the travelers find themselves laying down in the snow, willingly yielding to death, with their horses standing above them. Their physical proximity to the ground and the superior positioning of the horses underscores both the idea of the "fall," as well as the use of animals to demythologize the West. In another instance, in the Sandwich Islands, he describes a landscape that is "as tranquil as dawn in the Garden of Eden," and rejoices in the luxury of forgetting that there is "any world but these enchanted islands" (341). His Edenic bliss is soon interrupted, however, when he says, "It was such ecstasy to dream, and dream till you got a bite. A scorpion bite." The scorpion, which he describes as a "hairy tarantula on stilts," is not only grotesque, but more importantly, a nasty creature that scuttles along the surface of the earth. Its physical proximity to the ground continues the narrator's literal as well as figurative fall from innocence, while Twain's grotesque language startles the reader out of the narrator's mythic descriptions and into a stark reality. Twain brilliantly develops the notion of distance as being symbolic of the collapse of the American Dream. Amidst his success as a journalist in Virginia City, the narrator stops to comment on <https://assignbuster.com/the-demythologizing-of-the-american-west-in-twains-roughing-it/>

the landscape of California, saying, " I will remark here, in passing, that all scenery in California requires distance to give it its highest charm" (304). The implication of this statement, which he develops at length, is that the appeal of the landscape, as well as the entire West, is appreciated only from a distant perspective. More specifically, inhabitants of the East Coast tend to mythologize about the beauty and exotic allure of the West, but this only because they are not physically close enough to see its imperfections. What Twain is getting at here is the notion of the frontier as seen from an Eastern perspective. The somewhat hardened narrator dispels the tendency of easterners to view the West in mythic terms, and instead reverses the perspective. As he says: One of the queerest things I know of is to hear tourists from ' the States' go into ecstasies over the loveliness of ' ever-blooming California.' And they always do go into that sort of ecstasies. But perhaps they would modify them if they knew how old Californians stand astonished, and filled with worshiping admiration, in the presence of the lavish richness, the brilliant green, the infinite freshness and foliage that make an Eastern landscape a vision of Paradise itself. (305) In dispelling the mythic ideal of the West, Twain employs vertical distance as well as horizontal distance. At the end of the chapter he writes: some of us six thousand feet above the sea, and looked down as the birds do, upon the deathless summer of the Sacramento Valley, with its fruitful fields, its feathery foliage, its silver streams, all slumbering in the mellow haze of its enchanted atmosphere, and all infinitely softened and spiritualized by distance (308) Therefore, not only does the West appear more appealing than it deserves from considerable horizontal distance (represented by the Eastern perspective), but also from a vertical distance. The latter is <https://assignbuster.com/the-demythologizing-of-the-american-west-in-twains-roughing-it/>

represented in Twain's depiction of animals and how the narrator encounters them. As he descends from the position in the horse-driven coach, to being carried by mules, to resembling a creeping tarantula, the narrator approaches the "eye-level" of an animal, thereby becoming more aware of the imperfections of the landscape and of the West in general. By doing so, he exposes the myth of the West and enacts a physical representation of his fall from innocence and naivety at the beginning of the narrative. The notion of vertical distance from the earth extends even beyond the idea of reaching the ground; Twain's narrator literally continues descending as he blasts mine shafts in search of valuable ore. And not surprisingly, there is an animal involved in one instance, a cat named Tom Quartz. The narrator overhears a pocket-miner named Baker tell a story of how Tom Quartz was accidentally left sleeping in a shaft when they decided to "put in a blast" (328). When the cat returns to the ground after being shot "about a mile and a half into the air," according to Baker, "he looked at us as if he had said 'Gents, maybe you think it's smart to take advantage of a cat that 'ain't had no experience of quartz minin', but I think different'" (329). As usual, there is more to the episode than a clever, humorous anecdote. Tom Quartz's snobbish "attitude" suggests that the animal is somehow superior to the humans. Here, the pocket miner's attempts to blast deeper into the earth represent a greater generalization that Twain is making about people during the period of the gold rush. By establishing a parallel between physical descent and a loss of innocence in the narrative, Twain plainly criticizes those who rushed to the West to dig up the earth and strike it rich. In the beginning of the narrative, along with seeing "buffaloes and prairie dogs, and antelopes," the narrator imagines that his brother will "pick up two or

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three pailfuls of shining slugs, and nuggets of gold and silver and by and by become very rich" (29). In the episode of Tom Quartz, as well as in many other failed attempts at mining in the narrative, Twain dispels the myth of striking it rich in the West; following the episode, the narrator says, " At the end of two months we had never struck a ' pocket'"(330). By the same token, he dispels the myth of the hero who blasts the earth for gold, portraying Baker, the representative figure, as inferior to his cat. While Twain's use of humor to demythologize the West seems quite different from Whitman's use of the grotesque to demythologize the war, the two strategies are more alike than they appear. In Hamlin Hill's essay on *Roughing It*, he cites the American writer William Dean Howells as saying, " The grotesque exaggeration and broad irony with which the life is described are conjecturably the truest colors that could have been used, for all existence there must have looked like an extravagant joke, the humor of which was only deepened by its nether-side of tragedy" (6). Furthermore, Hill adds that " a serious undertone echoes beneath the rollicking humor" of the narrative. Howells is quite right in his observation that Twain's humor has a " nether-side of tragedy," for it is impossible to overlook the seriousness of the narrator's fall from innocence, though his experiences are disguised in witty humor. In this respect, the narrator's disappointing episodes are indeed similar to Whitman's corporeal images; what Whitman accomplishes with bodies and gore, Twain achieves with animals, his narrator's " fall" reaching and even going below the point of a beast's eye-level. The result is that the narrator's experiences fall short of his naive expectations, and Twain succeeds in demythologizing the West and the idea of the American Dream.