



# **Mark Twain as a Literary Comedian**

David E. E. Sloane

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## Contents

	Acknowledgments	xi
<b>ONE</b>	Backgrounds	1
<b>TWO</b>	Literary Comedy	13
<b>THREE</b>	Artemus Ward as Pioneer Funnyman	29
<b>FOUR</b>	The Social Ethics of a Comedian	45
<b>FIVE</b>	Mark Twain The Development of a Literary Comedian	58
<b>SIX</b>	Toward the Novel	84
<b>SEVEN</b>	Humor and Social Criticism <i>The Gilded Age</i> and <i>The Prince and the Pauper</i>	104
<b>EIGHT</b>	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> The Literary Comedian Within the Novel	128
<b>NINE</b>	<i>A Connecticut Yankee</i> A Culmination of American Literary Comedy	146
<b>TEN</b>	<i>The American Claimant</i> and <i>Pudd'nhead Wilson</i>	168
<b>ELEVEN</b>	Conclusion	189
	Bibliography	201
	Index	217

## Backgrounds

**T**HE SOUTHWESTERN HUMORISTS have traditionally been identified as the major impulse behind Mark Twain's humor. However, [the hallmark of his comedy lies in his egalitarian vision,] projected not through the local color elements that characterize the humor of the old southwestern United States as much as through the jokes, ironic inversions, and burlesques of another school of American humor—the literary comedians of the 1850s and the Civil War era. The southwesterners are not respecters of persons as much as they are (respecters of social “quality,”) and a major point of distinction between them and the emerging American middle class can be found in this point. Twain's explosive sarcasm and verbal gags infuse his rambling plots with a thoroughly different and substantially [more humane spirit.]

Most of the southwestern authors—for example Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, author of *Georgia Scenes*; Johnson J. Hooper, author of *The Adventures of Simon Suggs*; George W. Harris, author of *Sut Lovingood's Yarns*; and Joseph G. Baldwin, author of *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi*—belonged to emerging professions in their region, such as law, medicine, or printing. They conceived of themselves not as writing for a general public, but rather as historical reporters describing their unique region at the same time that they scourged vulgar vices. Their humor has consistently been described

## 2 MARK TWAIN AS A LITERARY COMEDIAN

as undemocratic and unsympathetic to the common man in his ir-regulated Jacksonian state.<sup>1</sup>

The South itself was a region that remained agrarian while the Northeast industrialized. As W. J. Cash analyzes the southern mind, the simple southern environment produced a lack of complexity. Horses, guns, and dogs remained the preoccupations of even the Tidewater aristocrats. A static literature was called for, and respect for the classics, such as Shakespeare, was superstitious rather than culturally sustained. Urban centers did not compare to those of the North; nor did southern publishers or authors match the achievements of northern counterparts. Conditions were homogeneous, and slavery as a social phenomenon was understood as a constitutional right that safeguarded every social class.<sup>2</sup>

Southwestern humor reflected its environment. Substantial yeomen like the hero of William T. Thompson's *Major Jones' Courtship* are relatively rare, as is a medical man like Madison Tensas, the swamp doctor. Hunters, lubbers, and petty aristocracy are common figures, and they fit easily into William Trotter Porter's *Spirit of the Times*, a sporting magazine that was a center for this genre. The mythical big bear of Arkansas, described by Thomas Bangs Thorpe as both the "creation" bear and the greenhorn who hunts him, is typical in his comic immediacy, vulgarity, and "masculinity" identified with natural backwoods experience. An aristocratic "Native Georgian," like Longstreet's Ned Brace, jibes middle-class travelers and city types, even when his pranks are less comfortable for himself than for the butts of the jokes.

Corporate society is little in evidence in southwestern writings, and its ethical complexities are seldom in view. Business is represented by the horse swap, law by the figure of the sheriff, and religion by the camp meeting and the parson. Harris' Sut Lovingood and Hooper's Simon Suggs are the archetypal figures in the tradition, the former a natural "durn fool," the latter a Jacksonian office-

1 The foremost proponent of this view is Kenneth S. Lynn in *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959).

2 W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Random House, 1969), 90-102; Ulrich B. Phillips, "The Central Theme of Southern History," reprinted in Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Causes of the Civil War* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1959), 171-72.

seeker whose motto is "It's good to be shifty in a new country." Sut pins lizards to corpses to make them seem alive, feeds people alum, ties woodchucks in a drunkard's pantaloons, and tears his own hide off with an overly starched shirt; his comedy is violent and insensitive. Twain's fiction occasionally shows such traits as verbalized humor but seldom as dramatic incident, with the exception of the "bulls and bees" episode from "Cecily Burns' Wedding," which was purged from at least one manuscript before it was sneaked into *Joan of Arc*.<sup>3</sup> Trapping yokels at camp meetings is merely the "opposition line" to Captain Simon Suggs. Davy Crockett cheats a storekeeper with raffish openness, but Suggs's view of humanity is curdled by his own rapacity. In short narrative after short narrative, violent climax succeeds selfish motive. The tone of the narrator, in contrast, is kept distinct from the vernacular of the corrupted local figure; values are asserted negatively.

There are crucial points in Twain's works that are not explained by reference to southwestern humor. His most significant humor occurs when his pose is most united with his material, contrary to the traits noted here. His response to consciously inflicted pain varies between complicity, as in the Southwest anecdotes, to moral outrage. Perhaps most important, even in humorous episodes, his ironic deadpan commentary builds a democratic social vision opposed to corporate power and social mores. His attitude toward human beings is, at its best, egalitarian, and at his zenith, he finds natural symbols in which he can transmute these values into sustained fiction; his humor asserts positive values.

Walter Blair, in *Native American Humor*, opens the field of American humor to inspection but asserts that Twain was preeminently a product of the Southwest, dependent on its narrative forms. Bernard DeVoto, in *Mark Twain's America*, contends that Twain borrowed no more than a handful of jokes from Artemus Ward and that those were of little significance. More recently Henry Nash Smith has

3 Hennig Cohen, "Mark Twain's Sut Lovingood," in B. H. McClary (ed.) *The Lovingood Papers* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1962), 19-24; E. N. Long, "Sut Lovingood and Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc*," *Modern Language Notes*, LXIV (January, 1949), 37-39; D. M. McKeithan, "Mark Twain's Story of the Bulls and the Bees," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, XI (September, 1952), 246-53.



#### 4 MARK TWAIN AS A LITERARY COMEDIAN

asserted that the "vernacular" values of the frontier shaped Twain's consciousness.<sup>4</sup> In distinction to these views, an understanding of Twain's sources actually indicates that he borrowed extensively from the tradition of literary humor. Irony, burlesque, and overt borrowings of pose and diction infuse his writings with the social viewpoints of the 1850–1870 era and help him to emphasize the conflict between individuals and corporate power. Literary comedy may not have helped Twain shape his novels, but neither does southwestern humor offer a reliable precedent in this area; but literary comedy does provide a sense of the origin of his ethics and the centrality of his jokes in developing his ethical viewpoints.

Aside from the southwestern school, the British and Irish humorous tradition was a literary force in America in the 1830–1860 period. Dickens and Thackeray are prominent but by no means alone. Virtually every device employed by the literary comedians was first tried out by Laurence Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*, sometimes in a political context close to the American one. Substantial documentation has been offered to suggest that Dickens' early style was widely copied and figured heavily in the offerings of William T. Porter's *The Spirit of the Times* (1831–1861), a magazine that actively fostered American humorous writing in the pre–Civil War period.<sup>5</sup> Sam Weller in *The Pickwick Papers* speaks in a Cockney dialect and acts in the affairs of the Pickwickians with a democratically unsentimental pragmatism that is representative of the lower-class figure seen in America in figures like Seba Smith's Jack Downing. Portions of Dickens' *American Notes*, which Porter's *Spirit of the Times* reprinted, were weighted to show comic American characters, encouraging reader interest, of course, but also helping to develop a literary perception of American materials.

Thackeray, like Dickens, was received with deference by Americans, and, like Dickens, he treated American subjects in his writings.

4 Walter Blair, *Native American Humor* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1960 [1937]) 157; Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain's America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967 [1932]), 165. "But of Ward's manner, his approach, and the content of his humor nothing of Mark's possesses anything at all." Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

5 Richard Hauck, "The Dickens Controversy in the *Spirit of the Times*," *PMLA*, LXXXV (March, 1970), 278–83.

James Fenimore Cooper was caricatured as the author of "The Last of the Mulligans" in *Novels by Eminent Hands* (1847). Cooper's Americans in "The Stars and Stripes," Thackeray's burlesque of his style, are uniformly boorish and vulgar; the chief of the Nose-ring Indians, separated from his companion Leatherlegs, stalks through the royal gardens of France in search of firewater while Dr. Franklin converses with the king in an early version of Pike County dialect. The ranking of Cooper among popular British authors is clearly complimentary. *The Book of Snobs* (1846–1847), with its sophisticated burlesques of fashion, influenced American writers like G. W. Curtis. English reviewers compared Twain's glove-buying episode in Paris, in *The Innocents Abroad*, to Thackeray's book, later. *Lyra Hibernica* and *The Ballads of Policeman X*, in verse, made sarcastic comments in low Irish and Cockney dialects on contemporary events in Great Britain and the continent in 1848. All of this material is consciously literary and addressed to an audience conversant with the belletristic tradition. The author's focus is on social and political currents rather than on local episodes.

Alternative popular sources to the British authors are also important, such as Edward M. Whitty's *The Bohemians of London* and the anonymous *Father Tom and the Pope*. Whitty's wry comments on "smelling salts and Christian consolation" continue the sentimental burlesque mode of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. *Father Tom and the Pope*, however, showed a vulgar Irish priest disputing with a burlesque old man (the pope) in the dialect common to such figures as Hugh Henry Brackenridge's Teague O'Regan in *Modern Chivalry*. Published originally in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1838, it was reprinted in American editions through 1868, probably for its willful confusion of Roman Catholic scholasticism with the drunkenness of low-class characters. The raciness of Father Tom's confrontation with the pope is a product of the low dialect and the depiction of habits clearly at variance with genteel modes of behavior, as the following passage suggests:

The Pope—and indeed it ill becomes a good Catholic to say anything agin him—no more would I, only that his Riv'rence was in it—but you see the fact ov it is, that the Pope was as envious as ever he could be, at seeing him-

## 6 MARK TWAIN AS A LITERARY COMEDIAN

self sacked right and left by Father Tom, and bate out o' the face, the way he was, on every science and subjec' that was started. So, not to be outdone altogether, he says to his Riv'rence, "You're a man that's fond ov the brute crayation, I hear Misther Maguire?"

"I don't deny it," says his Riv'rence, "I've dogs that I'm willing to run agin any man's, ay, or to match them agin any other dogs in the world for genteel edication and polite manners," say he.

"I'll hould you a pound," says the Pope, "that I've a quadhruped in my possession that's a wiser baste nor any dog in your kennel."

"Done," says his Riv'rence, and they staked the money.

"What can this larned quadhruped o' your do?" says his Riv'rence.

"It's my mule," says the Pope.<sup>6</sup>

The dialect could belong to the narrator, or to the characters. The literary effect, however, is to vulgarize the characters' minds without identifying them as vicious in actions. Since their materialism is inconsequential yet inappropriate to their offices, the technique is intellectual. The obviousness of the burlesque diverges from the Dickensian mode, which seldom confuses classes in one voice. For Dickens and Thackeray, the interactions of the classes were comic, but, as here, idealistic values could easily be identified with the lower-class figure. The British humorous tradition thus offered a considerable range of character, dialect, and narrative structure. The English humorists, professional authors, closely identified themselves with the desires of the audience they sought.

Political and social humor characterized still other British humorists in the range of awareness of American writers. Albert Smith, a leading comic lecturer in London in the 1840s, developed the humorous travel narrative as a stage narrative. Several P. T. Barnum experiences appeared in his material, in fact, showing American influence on the British mind. Tom Hood's writings were widely known and admired, and Mark Lemon's *Punch* was ready to lampoon American as well as English subjects—a tendency that grew as the United States became increasingly embroiled in sectional conflict over slav-

6 Michael Heffernan [Samuel Ferguson], *Father Tom and the Pope: Or a Night at the Vatican* (New York: Moorhead, Simpson & Bond, 1868), 56–67, with an "Anti-Preface" by Frederick S. Cozzens.

ery. Sydney Smith, who was not related to Albert and was of greater literary stature, established in his writings a tone that seems to have had transatlantic impact. His question "Who reads an American book?" in the *Edinburgh Review* caused Americans to assert a cultural identity in the 1820s and 1830s and was a focal point of concern about a national literature. His political irony, his antagonism toward puns, and his belief that humor was based on incongruity that gave way to higher feelings of tenderness, respect, and compassion seem to have been influential in legitimizing later English and American humorists.<sup>7</sup>

The literary humor of the Northeast consequently had a variety of modes in which to appear. George William Curtis' humorous essays in the 1850s were modeled directly after Thackeray's "Snob" papers. *Potiphar Papers* (1854) and a novel, *Prue and I* (1856), were both published as books after appearing in *Putnam's Magazine*. Potiphar wishes that guilt could be turned into gold, and sugar candy into common sense in his American Vanity Fair society. Religious hypocrisy and national chauvinism are burlesqued. When, after discoursing eloquently on the blood of martyrs as the seed of the church, the Reverend Cream Cheese asks Mrs. Potiphar for a little more breast of chicken, Potiphar has to race, nauseated, from the table. Social snobbery is modified to the American scene as Potiphar resents the "unpatriotic" label attached to anyone who does not follow the "spirit of the time"—to Thackeray "Fashion"—in building large homes in the suburbs.<sup>8</sup> English social burlesque, in other words, proved adaptable to the American experience.

The northeastern humorists benefited from the English in several ways. Washington Irving, although heavily influenced by German romanticism, found ready acceptance by the English for his urbane local tales. Closer to the yankee tradition, Sam Slick, T. C. Haliburton's Down-East clockmaker, was an amalgam of folk heroes of the North and West. Although Jack Downing and Davy Crockett, both

7 See [Sydney Smith], *The Wit and Wisdom of Sydney Smith* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, n.d.), 303–307.

8 Edward Cary, *George William Curtis* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1894), 95. [George W. Curtis], *The Potiphar Papers* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1854), 1–10, 52, 97–134.

extremely popular in the 1830s, may both have contributed elements to Haliburton's creation, *The Attaché; Or Sam Slick in England* (1843–1844) extended his yankee adventures across the Atlantic. Nova Scotian Haliburton was thus writing a species of North American humor, cosmopolitan in nature and pointed toward an international as well as a regional framework.

The outstanding political humorists of the pre-Civil War era were almost exclusively northern—Seba Smith and James Russell Lowell being the most evident. Major Jack Downing was invented by Smith in 1830 to criticize the doings of the Maine legislature. Elements in the Downing letters are burlesques of the Crockett type prominent since 1827. In addition, overt comment on the irrational behavior of the legislators could be voiced through the yankee backwoodsman, and Downing also applies his yankee pragmatism to the social mores of Portland. Newspapers, like rum, are accused of making folks see double. Parvenu merchants adopt expensive social habits and fail. Although the cases seem much alike in Smith's Portland, Maine, and Longstreet's Charleston, Smith's satire is abstracted from the local scene-painting of regionalism; instead, general ethics are applied to politics. Social customs rather than local color receive the most attention. Lowell combined literary and political elements with New England traits more expansively than Smith, and he saw himself as more responsible toward national policy. Features of Lowell's letters appear literary; the press notices prefixed to the first edition of *The Biglow Papers* burlesque current publishing practices; the introduction to the second series discusses yankee dialect and "old" versus "new" language, making a case for plain speaking. Sut Lovin-good's dialect is close to Lowell's Yankee Speech, but when Lowell names a successor, he is the Reverend Petroleum V. Nasby, and he is named so that political satire will have full justice done it, according to Lowell. In fact, Lowell is interested in yankee vernacular as a tool for criticizing slavery and the Mexican-American war. Even the apolitical "The Courtin'" was connected to this purpose by its inclusion in the introduction to the second series of *The Biglow Papers*. Lowell insisted that "high and even refined sentiment may coexist with the shrewder and more comic elements of the yankee charac-

ter;"<sup>9</sup> it is the opposite tendency from the southwestern humorists. Vernacular speech and comic material can directly express ethical and moral positions, even when framing devices parallel to those found in southwestern fiction are employed.

The northeastern experience was diverging rapidly from the southern experience of the 1830–1860 period. In the North, as late as the 1850s, humorous hunting adventures were as popular as J. P. Kennedy's southern sketches were in his own region. Henry William Herbert's *The Warwick Woodlands*, hunting stories by "Frank Forrester" set in Orange County, New Jersey, twenty years earlier, had at least two editions in 1845 and 1851. Two gentlemen, their Yorkshire servant, and a local hostler named Tom Draw, the latter characters speaking in their own dialects, hunt through the Warwick vales for game, indulging in comic repartee at the same time. As a northern writer, Herbert seems to regard his "homeland" with feelings as intense as any southerner's, but he identifies changes unknown in the old Southwest:

It is almost a painful task to read over and revise this chapter. The "twenty years ago" is too keenly visible to the mind's eye in every line. Of the persons mentioned in its pages, more than one have passed away from the world forever; and even the natural features of rock, wood, and river, in other countries so vastly more enduring than their perishable owners, have been so much altered by the march of improvement. Heaven save the mark! That the traveller up the Erie railroad, will certainly not recognize in the description of the vale of Ramapo, the hill-sides all denuded of their leafy honors, the bright streams denuded by unsightly mounds and changed into foul stagnant pools, the snug country tavern deserted for a huge barnlike depot, and all the lovely sights and sweet harmonies of nature defaced and drowned by the deformities consequent on a railroad, by the disgusting roar and screech of the steam-engine.

One word to the wise! Let no man be deluded by the following pages, into the setting forth for Warwick *now* in search of sporting. These things are strictly as they were *twenty years ago*! Mr. Seward, in his zeal for the improvement of Chataugue and Cattaraugus, has certainly destroyed the cock-shooting of Orange county. A sportman's benison to him therefore!<sup>10</sup>

9 James Russell Lowell, "Introduction [to *The Biglow Papers, Second Series*]" in *The Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1882), 227, 228.

10 [Henry William Herbert,] *The Warwick Woodlands* (Philadelphia: T. B. Peterson, 1850) 16–17.

## 10 MARK TWAIN AS A LITERARY COMEDIAN

Although a footnote to Herbert's book, the changes outlined here were the reality for later northern humorists. Their consciousness had to be directed away from the countryside and its local figures, and towards a more generalized urban and literary milieu consistent with the industrial expansion of the North and corresponding political involvements, here identified with Mr. Seward. Violent action and hunting experiences ceased to be major subject matters. Expanding population made social ethics a more pressing matter. Herbert's anger toward the railroad as an agent of geographical change was transferred by later comedians to the railroad as a corporate phenomenon in the social setting.

Social patterns in the North changed rapidly. Ferment was caused by urbanization, industrialization, and changing economic relationships. The middle class, expanding more rapidly than in the South, was keenly interested in labor organizations, public schools, libraries, and a variety of topics relating to the quality of life and social manners. Transportation facilities were expanding. Political parties with ward organizations were increasingly evident in the cities. George P. Morris' "'The Monopoly' and 'The People's Line'" (1839) is an example of the sort of comic story that treats northern subject matter.<sup>11</sup> A yankee and a Dutchman compete for a Long Island stagecoach line. One figure is a Jacksonian upstart; the other represents tradition, loyalty, and quality, however unprogressive. Both cut fares until they finally pay passengers to ride with their respective lines—and go out of business: the railroad replaces them. The story is as comic as any in the southwestern tradition, but differs from that tradition markedly. No joy is taken in conflict, which is mutually destructive. Commercial battle replaces violence. Rather than focusing on a single episode, the story follows a process in time and draws a social point from it, not by inference, but in the literal outcome of the story.

Northern humorists, unlike the southerners, had already discovered a complex urban experience before the Civil War. As early as 1838 Joseph C. Neal's *Charcoal Sketches*, owing a debt to Geoffrey Crayon's Knickerbocker humor, provided a sort of *Georgia Scenes* of

<sup>11</sup> The story is reprinted in William E. Burton (ed.); *The Cyclopaedia of Wit and Humor* (New York: Appleton, 1875 [1858]), 154–56.

the northern city. The character of a rough urban type, much less polished than Longstreet's "Native Georgian" and much less ram-bunctious than the bull-roaring flatboatman, appears in "Orson Dabbs, the Hittite": "Instead of stumping an antagonist by launching out his cash (making a bet), Dabbs shakes a portentous fist under his nose, and the affair is settled; the recusant must either knock under or be knocked down, which, according to our hero, is all the same in Dutch."<sup>12</sup> "Rocky Smalt; or, the Dangers of Imitation" is a sort of urban "Georgia Theatrics," and the spoils-seeking political worker makes his appearance in "Peter Brush, the Great Used Up." These Philadelphia "Hard Cases" belong to the city world of politics and political rhetoric. Such concerns emerge even more markedly after the Civil War, but Neal's Peter Brush, sitting on a curb, laments his experiences along lines that anticipate later literary comedians:

A long time ago, my ma used to put on her specks and say "Peter, my son, put not your trust in princes;" and from that day to this I have n't done any thing of the kind, because none on 'em ever wanted to borry nothing of me: and I naver see a prince or a king—but one or two, and they have been rotated out of office—to borry nothing of them. Princes! pooh!—Put not your trust in politicianers—they's my sentiments. You might just as well try to hold an eel by the tail. I do n't care which side they're on, for I've tried both, and I know. Put not your trust in Politicianers, or you'll get a hyst.<sup>13</sup>

Peter's ambivalence about democratic rhetoric, attributed to the unlikely source of his maternal training, is both a burlesque of Peter for his naïveté and a satire on politics, for Peter admits that he changes parties himself for spoils. It shows, however, a much broader milieu than Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The sketch is literary not only in the nonregionalized vulgar dialect but also in the level of thought. It is concerned not with local politics as such but rather with social precept, personal naïveté, and the generalized worldly corruption that dominates the venality of the speaker. Although the forms of the sketches vary, there is enough consistency to cause the "Editor's Table" of the New York *Knickerbocker Magazine* to reprint most of the "Peter Brush" episode, cited here, as an example of Neal's best

12 Joseph C. Neal, *Charcoal Sketches* (Philadelphia: Carey and A. Hart, 1838), 33–34.

13 Quoted from the New York *Knickerbocker Magazine*, L (August, 1857), 197.



## 12 MARK TWAIN AS A LITERARY COMEDIAN

humor—significant “American” humor—in an 1857 article.<sup>14</sup> The ethical themes of the “Peter Brush” piece, in fact, are the major themes of American literary comedy for the next forty or fifty years.

The various humorous traditions before the Civil War era offered a variety of modes and themes. The southwestern emphasized local color and characterization and employed short framed anecdotes. It was philosophically conservative. English humor treated character more broadly, creating unreal situations using realistic diction in characterization. The status of the English writers suggested the possibility of serious literary pretensions for this comic mode. Northeastern humor could be overtly political; political satire was directed at regional and national policies; the local’s yankee pragmatism was granted dignity. Appealing to the middle class, authors made subject matter increasingly urban and, especially with the advent of the literary comedians, increasingly egalitarian.

Mark Twain as a literary comedian developed elements from each of these traditions into his own voice. Seeking commercial success and social acceptance in the Northeast, he developed his own egalitarian humor along compatible lines. Southwestern local color and English fancifulness expanded the comic moments of characterization into narrative episodes. Twain’s novels mixed these elements in burlesque, in local color, and in melodrama in various proportions. His humor combined with Populist morality to achieve a personalized fictional form, and the form made him famous. The American popular audience bought Twain’s novels; the British awarded him academic honors; and American critics came to find him uniquely representative of the American heartland—after they outdistanced the myopia caused by his origins in the popular form. Until now, only the literary comedy that helped express his ethical vision has been denied proper recognition as a vital part of his writing.

14 “Editor’s Table,” *Knickerbocker Magazine*, L (August, 1857), 194–95, relates Neal tangentially to Mrs. Partington, whose English forerunner is identified, in turn, as Mrs. Ramsbottom from the London newspaper *John Bull*.