The Five Boons of Life

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My initial thoughts at the beginning of my reading this piece was that of, “I know where this is going. You are presented a choice and all of them but one lead to a learning experience, for those that are not enlightened, which leads to the artists’ perceived answer of the correct choice.” I played along while I read the story and selected “Love” because of my life experiences. Logically thinking though, Death is the obvious answer to the fairy’s cryptic riddle. Death is finite, sought after in time of great distress and malady. I have always wondered about what in the human condition drives us to look towards Death for comfort in our time of greatest need of release from pain. Learning of the negative side effects of losing “Love” from the perspective of Mark Twain during his time was quite chilling and eye opening. I know that the ultimate sleep is the freedom from all pain that we all seek in the end, but to think of the loss of a love in such dire terms never crossed my mind. After completing this short story, I question what events could have shaped Twain’s views of the loss of loved ones for him to have such a pessimistic view of Love.

The Historical context of this work occurred in the Realist period from the latter half of the 19th Century into the early part of the 20th Century. The Industrial Revolution, at this time, has given way to the Progressive Movement and both the Civil War and Franco-Prussian Wars were long ended, with all the returning troops making babies and returning to work. This brought rise to new social realities to those that did not come from wealth. Throughout this period, the gap between the poor and the rich grew exponentially which brought rise to social uprising and call for economic reform. (Introduction to Humanities, n.d.)

Reviewing the time period that Clemens was raised in, his rise and fall emotionally, financially, and socially provides some light on the story as a whole. Clemens was born shortly before the Age of Realism but grew up to become a man just at the height of the industrial revolution. During this time, people were seeking out truth by way of science instead of spiritual beliefs. Ironically, the fairy in the story, seems to represent said spiritual beliefs. Each chapter of the Five Boons of Life appears to highlight a moment in Clemens life and the realist theme of the period. For example, Clemens found himself quite wealthy with his writings and ended up losing most of his wealth to poor investments and his publishing house “Charles L. Webster and Company”. He was able to recover financially with the success of several of his later writings. He also had love, from his children and his wife, but tragically losing them all before his death. (Wikipedia - Mark Twain, n.d.)

After further reading of his past, Clemens seemed to be stalked by death since his birth and well into his late adulthood. He grew up being one of the four children in his family nine that would survive their childhood to grow up to be adults. Mark would later blame himself for the death of his younger brother Henry who he convinced to join him as a crew member on his ship. Henry ended up dying from injuries he sustained from a boiler explosion aboard Mark’s ship that was piloting. In 1870, Mark married Olivia Langdon Clemens, who birthed 4 children of his to him. Over the course of the 34 years of their marriage, both Mark and Olivia struggled with the joys of the births and later passing of each of their children except one. Langdon, their first baby boy, passed at the age of 1 ½ from diphtheria. Susy Clemens, the youngest of the Clemens sisters, passed at age 24 in 1896 of spinal meningitis. Mark lost his Olivia in 1904 to heart failure which he took really hard. Jean Clemens, the eldest of the sisters, died at age 29 in 1909, tragically drowned because of a seizure she had while bathing, leaving the second eldest daughter Clara to live till the age of 88 years old. (Wikipedia - Mark Twain, n.d.) With so much loss in Mark Twain’s life from his early age to his last moments on earth it is easy to see how his view of the loss of his loved ones shaped his pessimistic view towards life.

I have only known Mark Twain for his bright and insight stories of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer. Taking this time to delve into Clemens past and the period of time he was raised and grew up in have given me a greater appreciation for the man. As for his work “The Five Boons of Life” its message is relevant in modern times as it was back in his time. Fame, Love, Riches, and Pleasure are all fleeting and irrelevant in the short span of our lives. Placing too much energy, time and worth on them can be wasteful and belittle the entirety of our lives. The lesson that can be inferred from this story is mostly not in practice in todays society. Many of us chase after the four boons that the antagonist of the story does. I myself have had to rethink my immediate goals, chasing after Love. It’s only been recently that I have started after this one boon of life only because all of my kids have grown up and have no need for me like they did when they were younger. Finding myself alone in the empty house without the hustle and bustle that I am used to made me re-evaluate my situation, realize that I really will not have anyone in my life on a daily basis when my youngest one moves out. As I look back on the last couple of years I see the opportunities and people I have walked passed in my pursuit of something that I most likely will never find or obtain. I now have re-allocated that energy and time to focus on improving my health and ensuring that I am around for my children when they may need me.

Knowing that a short story like The Five Boons of Life had an impact on my behavior and outlook on my life moving forward, reinforces my belief that if we take time to really understand the meaning of a work of art and reflect on how it affects your life, your perception, and moral compass, we will all learn a little something new about ourselves, our neighbors and humanity as a whole.