Universidad Francisco Marroquín

Kant vs. Twain Essay

Marcela Richardson

September 26, 2012

Comparison Essay

This essay pretends to make a comparison between Mark Twain’s essay “Corn-Pone Opinions” and Kant’s essay “Freedom to Reason”. Both authors are writing about the importance of ones own personal understanding and the use of our personal knowledge having society influence all of us in the decision making. Kant starts his essay by giving his description of enlightening which is “Man quitting the nonage occasioned by himself”, according to Kant it is when a man decides to stop being lazy and coward and he has the courage to understand for himself without the guidance of others. This goes in hand with Twain’s idea of individuals not being able to understand things on their own but rather go with what society believes is right to do.

Mark Twain at first explains the black philosopher’s idea that a man can never be independent and think on his own because that’s the way society has thought him because if not his bread and butter (food or survival) would be affected. So we many times prefer to enter to this comfort zone of waiting others to tell us what to do rather than thinking or having our own opinions not caring what society has to answer to that. As well as Kant opinion is that our guardians has been affecting our decision making and how we understand the world because those guardians are the ones who are giving us a “safe” environment where we don’t make mistakes and just follow what is already established without altering the results. .

Society plays an important role in our daily decisions; from what clothes are in and which are not, what philosophies to follow, how to behave if you are from a certain economic class or just what to respond when you are asked a random question according to your customs and traditions. Many times we are instructed to listen and obey but to never question why, or even to try to understand it by our own. It all comes down to following an authority or someone else that supposedly knows the answers instead of one making it’s own judgment. Besides the human being is often following what society is currently doing at the moment so people will imitate that but will not make a reason of his own or try to make something on his own.

What I understand from Kant’s essay is that if we are given the environment or the space to use our own understanding we will be able to live in an enlightening age. Somehow I guess that it depends on the person to quit nonage and stop having an authority influence on his ideas, and the person has to have the courage to speak for his own understandings and be able to create its own judgment without the guidance of another. As Twain explains that there are no such things as first hand opinions, because it’s an idea where the person has constructed on his own by researching and be fully committed to it but somehow this person has been influenced by society. In my opinion I think those ideas have been influenced the person’s new idea and somehow is not fully original, it might have some authentic ideas but it also has an influence from society. It is something that it cannot be avoided and probably will not be controlled over the next years.

Both authors agree on that the main problem of not thinking by our own is due to conformity and society. Twain at the end of his essay believes it might be in our instinct to have some kind of guidance and we tend to follow without questioning ourselves but rather copying our neighbor. According to Kant, it is very hard that people start using their own understandings because they have never had the chance to try because there is no space for people to give it a try. Now a days we are not living a enlightened age but in the process of one, occasionally in a determined period according to Kant people will get rid of the nonage and start understanding by themselves without the influence of society.

Kant is persuading the reader to quit nonage, rather than staying in a comfortable zone having told what to do and just follow orders, which is a very easy way to live by but it’s not authentic. He talks about the guardians also, which are the ones who supposedly has more knowledge and for that they will take care of the “not enlightened” to create a safe environment in order to continue what is already been established and will not be altered. These guardians who think that are enlightened and have all the power to make other person follow are not enlightened because they are not allowing people to think for themselves, they are creating an environment where everyone is the same and they’re no differences in thoughts and opinions.

We also need to point out that Twain is using a sarcastic tone, because he since the beginning starts telling the story when he was a child he heard an opinion of a slave, and he later on says that we are all influenced by other people’s opinion in order to be approved. He is saying it indirectly that himself also does not have a personal or own opinion because he is just repeating or giving arguments for the slave’s thoughts not his own. Twain writes, “If he would prosper, he would train with the majority”, this implies that to be accepted into society one has to be like everyone else and if someone has an opinion different as everyone then it will not be successful because it will intervene with his bread and butter.

According to Mark Twain, there exists this little something that tells you what to wear and how to behave and according to Twain is the “Voice of God”. He capitalized the words: “Public Opinion” and “Voice of God”, which I interpret it in the way that it’s something they must listen and follow to be accepted into society. He introduces the idea someone once had of the hoopskirt into fashion and at first it was looked down but afterwards it was very successful and almost every women was using it to be accepted into society.

Twain and Kant might differ in the sense that Twain thinks that this public opinion about people behaving themselves as such is due to acceptance and will never end and it’s just part of our human nature to be judged and judge others so everyone feels safe. Kant suggests that when we stop being lazy and have courage we will understand for ourselves not letting the guardians guide us or tell us which path is safer to take.