The Invalid's Story Study Guide

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Summary

Summary

At the beginning of Twain's "The Invalid's Story," the narrator explains that he looks and feels older than he is and that he used to be much healthier than he is now. He attributes his decline in health to the strange events of one winter night, in which he traveled with a box of guns for two hundred miles.

The narrator recalls how, two years before, he had arrived at his home in Cleveland, Ohio and learned of the recent death of his friend, John B. Hackett. Following Hackett' s last wishes, the narrator leaves for the train station to take Hackett's body back to his parents in Bethlehem, Wisconsin.

The narrator finds a white-pine box at the train station that matches the description of the coffin. He attaches the address card from Hackett's father, Deacon Levi Hackett, to the white-pine box, and has it loaded into the train on the express car—a method for transporting packages by train that was safer and faster, but more expensive, than normal freight cars.

The narrator leaves to get food and cigars, and when he comes back to the area where he had first found the white-pine box, a young man is tacking an address card onto an identical box.

The narrator checks to make sure his white-pine box is still in the express car, which it is. At this point, the narrator lets the reader know that the boxes are labeled wrong. The first box, the one in the express car, which the narrator assumes is the corpse of his friend, is actually a box of guns that is meant to go to Peoria, Illinois. Conversely, the second box, which the young man assumes contains the guns, actually contains John Hackett's corpse.

However, the narrator is not aware of this fact at the time that he is taking the train trip. He settles into the express car, where he and the expressman— the man hired by the express company to look after the express packages—settle in for the long, two-hundred-mile journey. Right before the train takes off, a stranger comes into the express car for a moment and places a package of ripe Limburger cheese on top of the white-pine box. Just as neither the narrator nor expressman, a man named Thompson, are aware that the coffin box contains guns, they also don't realize that the package on top of the box contains ripe cheese. Once again, the narrator tells the reader this fact, but he does not know it at the time of the train trip.

As Thompson starts to seal the car against the winter storm that rages outside so that he and the narrator can keep warm, the ripe cheese also starts to get warm, and begins to smell. The narrator notices it first, and mistakes it for Hackett' s corpse, which he believes is starting to rot. Thompson starts a fire to help the two keep warm, which only makes the cheese stink even more. Although he is cheerful at the beginning of the trip, singing happy songs, Thompson eventually becomes aware of the cheese stench, and he stops his singing.

Thompson also assumes that the stench is from a rotting corpse, and he and the narrator begin to talk about it. Thompson notes the smell of the corpse and says that he has transported people who were not really dead, only in a trance, but that he can tell by the stench that the narrator's friend is not one of these.

In an effort to get away from the smell, Thompson breaks one of the express car's window panes and sticks his nose outside to get some fresh air. He and the narrator take turns sniffing at the window, and Thompson asks how long the narrator's friend has been dead. Thompson does not believe the narrator's assertion that Hackett died recently, because a corpse could not rot and produce such a pronounced smell in a few days. Thompson admonishes the narrator, saying that Hackett's body should have been laid to rest long ago. Meanwhile, the

smell of the cheese has gotten so bad that the narrator suggests smoking cigars to try to mask the odor.

The cigars are the first of many failed attempts to try to tame the smell of the cheese. After the cigars fail, Thompson suggests that they move the box to the other end of the express car. This does not work and the two run outside onto the express car's platform to get some fresh air, where they discuss their predicament. They can not stay outside or they will freeze to death in the stormy winter weather, but they can not handle the smell either. They end up going back inside the car, once again taking turns getting air at the window.

When the train pulls away from the next train station, Thompson comes back into the express car with carbolic acid, a caustic, poisonous chemical commonly used as a disinfectant. He douses the box and cheese with the acid, but it is no use; the acid only adds a new odor, while magnifying the first one. After they leave the next train station, Thompson tries again, this time by starting a bonfire of chicken feathers, dried apples, sulphur, and other items.

The resulting smell is so bad that Thompson and the narrator resolve to spend the rest of the trip out on the platform, even though it will probably mean their death from typhoid fever. An hour later at the next train station, the frozen expressman and narrator are removed, and the narrator is violently ill for three weeks. It is at this point that he finds out about the box of guns and the ripe cheese. At the end of the story, the narrator, once again in the present, explains that the fateful trip sapped his health, and that he is going home to die.

Themes

Themes

Mortality
From the very beginning of the story, the narrator draws attention to human mortality when he refers to his health, saying that he is ‘‘now but a shadow,’’ although he "was a hale, hearty man two short years ago.’’ The rest of the story is filled with references to sickness and death. In fact, the story's plot is centered around the failed attempt to transport the corpse of the narrator's friend, John B. Hackett, from Ohio to Wisconsin, where Hackett is to be buried.

In the process, the narrator has many conversations with Thompson, the expressman on the train, who ruminates about the inevitability of death itself, saying twice that '"we' ve all got to go, they ain' t no getting around it."’ Later, after Thompson and the narrator fail to move the box of guns with Limburger cheese on top—which they mistake for Hackett's corpse—Thompson gets a particularly potent whiff of the cheese. His resulting nausea makes him feel ill, and he proclaims, ‘‘I'm a-dying; gimme the road!” as he runs outside to the train's platform to get some air.

Although he does not, in fact, die from the exposure to the cheese, the prolonged exposure to the winter weather on the platform—as a result of the two men's attempts to get away from the smell— does eventually kill the narrator two years later. "This is my last trip; I am on my way home to die." Although Thompson's fate is never clearly stated by the narrator, Thompson's own words while they are freezing on the platform imply that he and the narrator share similar fates. '‘‘It's our last trip, you can make up your mind to it. Typhoid fever is what's going to come of this.'"

Imagination
In the story, Twain explores the power of the human imagination to overcome reason, and the disastrous consequences that can happen as a result. At the beginning of the tale, the narrator notes how Thompson ‘‘closed his window down tight, and then went bustling around, here and there and yonder, setting things to rights.’’ Thompson is concerned only with weatherproofing the train car, and goes to great lengths to make the express car warm for himself and the narrator.

However, after they start to smell the cheese, which their imaginations tell them is the corpse, Thompson "scrambled to his feet and broke a pane and stretched his nose out at it a moment or two.’’ Not only is this undoing all of his hard work, it also does not make sense. Since Twain says that Thompson shut the window, the expressman could simply open it to get a breath of fresh air. However, in the panic created from the idea that the stench is that of a rotting corpse, he breaks the window. The narrator's imagination is even more powerful, since he knows for a fact that his friend has only been dead for one day. Still, he does not find it odd when the smell becomes increasingly bad. "By this time the fragrance—if you may call it a fragrance—was just about suffocating, as near as you can come at it.’’

Imagination continues to work against both men. Neither one of them questions the package of cheese on the top of the white-pine box, even though the narrator noted earlier that somebody had placed it there. Even when Thompson slips and falls "with his nose on the cheese,’’ where the smell is noticeably stronger, he does not think to check inside the package. The narrator notes at the end, after he had found out that the smelly corpse was really a gunbox with cheese on top, that"the news was too late to save me; imagination had done its work, and my health was permanently shattered.’’

Proper Burials

Another concept that Twain explores in the story is the proper way to bury a person. When Thompson asks the narrator how long his friend has been dead, the narrator lies, saying '"Two or three days"'—in an attempt to explain the stench. Thompson, however, thinks the narrator is lying, and says, ‘‘"Two or three years, you mean.’’' At this point, the narrator notes how Thompson "gave his views at considerable length upon the unwisdom of putting off burials too long,’’ finally stating that ‘‘"Twould 'a' ben a dum sight better, all around, if they'd started him along last summer."’’

Characters

Character Analysis: Narrator

The narrator of the story, called Cap'n by the expressman, is one of two ill-fated victims of a case of mistaken identities, which involves a coffin containing his dead friend—John B. Hackett—and a box of guns with Limburger cheese on top. The narrator is only forty-one years old when he begins his tale, but he says that he has aged prematurely as the result of his misadventures two years ago. It is at this point that the narrator begins his tale.

Motivated by Hackett's last wishes, the narrator attempts to transport Hackett's body from Cleveland, Ohio to the fictional town of Bethlehem, Wisconsin. At the train station the narrator labels the box of guns, thinking it is his friend's coffin, and loads the box of guns on his train. He notices a stranger placing a package on top of the "coffin," but thinks nothing of it at the time.

The package contains some ripe Limburger cheese, which both the narrator and the train's expressman, Thompson, mistake for the smell of Hackett's corpse. The narrator notices the smell first, although Thompson is the first one to take action by breaking one of the express car's window panes to get fresh air. Although Hackett has only been dead for one day, the narrator lies and says he has been dead for two or three, in an attempt to explain the smells.

The narrator and Thompson attempt to move the box of guns, but it is too heavy. Through a series of misguided attempts by Thompson to mask the smell with various chemicals and other items, the smell gets so bad that the narrator and Thompson decide to spend the rest of the trip outside the train on the express car's platform. As a result, the narrator becomes sick with typhoid fever, which proves fatal two years later when he is telling the tale. A similar fate is assumed for Thompson, although it is never discussed.

Throughout the story, the narrator gives his audience information that he did not possess during his adventures on the train, such as the fact that the coffin is actually a box of guns and the package on top of the gun box contains the smelly cheese.

Character Analysis: Thompson

Thompson is the ill-fated expressman who, along with the narrator, mistakes the box of guns with ripe Limburger cheese on top for a rotting corpse. At the beginning of the train ride, Thompson, a fifty-year old, sings while he works on insulating the express car from the cold winter weather. His cheery demeanor soon diminishes, however, when he starts to smell the rotting cheese.

At first, he tries to make light of the situation by talking about the other experiences he has had transporting dead bodies that were not really dead, but he soon abandons his light conversation in favor of finding ways to cope with or hide the smell. He breaks one of the express car's window panes to get some fresh air, but it is not enough. He and the narrator try to move the box but it is too heavy; since they still do not realize it is a box of guns, Thompson attributes their inability to move the box to the corpse's will to stay where he is.

At the next two train stations, Thompson picks up various materials to try to mask the smell. First, he tries carbolic acid, a potent, toxic chemical that was used as a disinfectant. When this only makes the smell worse, Thompson tries a wild, smelly mix of chicken feathers, dried apples, leaf tobacco, rags, old shoes, sulphur, and asafetida—an odiferous type of gum. The resulting smell is so bad that Thompson and the narrator resolve to spend the night outside on the express car's platform. Although Thompson's fate is never discussed, the

narrator contracts typhoid fever from the night outside, and is dying when he tells the story two years later.

During the train trip Thompson speaks in a rustic American dialect, and refers to the corpse in various titles of increasing military and civil rank— Colonel, Gen'rul (an abbreviation of "General," Commodore, and Governor. He also refers to the narrator informally as Cap, an abbreviated version of "Captain," another military title.

Character Analysis: Other Characters

The Commodore
See John B. Hackett

The Expressman
See Thompson

The Gen'rul
See John B. Hackett

The Governor
See John B. Hackett

John B. Hackett
John B. Hackett is the narrator's deceased friend, whose body the narrator attempts to transport from Cleveland, Ohio, to Hackett's parents in the fictional town of Bethlehem, Wisconsin as part of Hackett's last wishes. Although the narrator and his train's expressman think that Hackett's body is in a box in their car, through a case of mistaken identities, Hackett's body ends up in transit to Peoria, Illinois while the narrator and the expressman are actually transporting a box of guns. The lack of this knowledge eventually leads to the ill-fated death of the narrator and, one assumes, the expressman. The expressman refers to Hackett's body by several military and civil titles: Colonel, Gen'rul (an abbreviated form of "General''), Commodore, and Governor.

Deacon Levi Hackett
Deacon Levi Hackett is the father of the narrator' s deceased friend—John B. Hackett—who sends a message to the narrator, informing him of his son's last wishes. Deacon Hackett also sends a card with his address, which the narrator tacks to a box of guns, thinking it is John Hackett's coffin.

Stranger
The stranger referred to in the beginning of the story places a piece of ripe Limburger cheese on top of the white-pine box full of guns in the express car, setting off a chain of events that eventually leads to the death of the narrator.

Young Fellow
The young fellow referred to in the beginning of the story intends to ship a box of guns to a rifle company in Peoria, Illinois; instead, when his box is accidentally swapped with the narrator's box, the young fellow ships John Hackett's corpse to Illinois.

Critical Essays

Critical Essays: Critical Overview

The publication history of ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ gives an indication of the general negative critical opinion of the story. Although the story is believed to have been written in 1877 for inclusion in "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion’’—a work that was released in four parts in the Atlantic Monthly in the same year—‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ was passed over for publication both here and in A Tramp Abroad (1880), until the tale was finally included five years later in 1882's The Stolen White Elephant, Etc....

In his 1966 article in *Midcontinent American Studies Journal*, critic Floyd R. Horowitz notes the reason why the story was removed from its initial publication, saying that it had been withheld, perhaps, "for fear of piercing the reader's sensibility." This is mild compared to some critics' negative assessments of the story and its dark humor. In his *The Authentic Mark Twain: A Literary Biography of Samuel L. Clemens*, Everett Emerson refers to "The Invalid's Story’’ as one of the "disasters" that Twain has created in his short fiction, and calls the story's humor "unspeakable."

Some critics note, as Bernard DeVoto did in his *Mark Twain's America*, that the story was ‘‘grotesquely awful in its insistence on smells.’’ In her book, *Mark Twain as a Literary Artist*, Gladys Carmen Bellamy surmises that Twain's story has more than humorous intentions, and that "by emphasizing the stench of corpses Mark Twain seems also to emphasize the indignity of human life.’’

Horowitz notes the story ‘‘appears to contain, or at least give evidence of a rather closely worked Christian symbolic level,’’ which he believes is ‘‘quite in keeping with Twain's later feeling about institutionalized religion.’’ Looked at this way, Horowitz says, many aspects become symbols, such as the corpse, which ‘‘is very suggestive of Christ,’’ and the express car, which ‘‘is like the Church.’’

Steven E. Kemper, in his article "Poe, Twain, and Limburger Cheese,’’ notes the parallels in structure between the story and the Gothic fiction of Twain's predecessor Edgar Allan Poe and suggests that the story is a parody: ‘‘By burlesquing many of Poe's techniques, themes, and character types, Twain punctures the pretensions of Gothicism.’’

Still, some positive notes have been made about the story. For example, DeVoto says that while "the sketch is not describable as lovely ... it is immensely true to one kind of humor of the frontier and of Mark Twain." And Kemper notes that while the tale is "preposterous" and "outrageous," it is, ‘‘of course, hilarious.’’

The relative lack of critical studies on ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’—compared to Twain's other works—points to the fact that most Twain critics have simply ignored the story. Of course, even though many critics have found it distasteful, Horowitz notes that ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ has survived the test of time, while "Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion’’—the larger work that originally contained it—has not. "Contemporary editors tend to agree with this abridgment, perhaps because the literary merit of the formal story has triumphed over the anecdotal narrative of a ramble.’’

Essays and Criticism: Magnified Humor in "The Invalid's Story"

Mark Twain was a master when it came to employing various writing techniques for humorous effects. This is definitely true in ‘‘The Invalid's Story,’’ a tale that while funny, was almost universally panned by Twain's

contemporary critics for its in-depth treatment of death smells—which was considered an exercise in poor taste. However, as E. Hudson Long suggests in his *Mark Twain Handbook*, Twain had gotten used to writing such "bawdy" tales, which "had been too enthusiastically greeted by his readers" in the Western United States, so the author probably did not "realize entirely that such things might give offense.''

Long further notes that Twain was adept at knowing not to cross the line, and that he "realized the impropriety of bringing smoking-room humor into the drawing room.'' Since this is the case, ''The Invalid's Story'' can be taken as an intentional exercise that was meant to amuse, not offend. By employing a first-person narrator who periodically draws attention to the reality of the situation, and by describing smells in progressively more expressive language, Twain pushes the boundaries of humor in ''The Invalid's Story.''

When the narrator of ''The Invalid's Story'' is introducing his tale, he builds up to it, making it seem like it will be a grand story by insisting that"it is the actual truth.'' Steven E. Kemper notes in his article "Poe, Twain, and Limburger Cheese" that this style of opening mimics the stories of Edgar Allan Poe which in turn adds additional humor for those readers who notice the parody. In this first paragraph, Twain's narrator briefly mentions ''a box of guns" as the cause of his weak condition, something that he then explains in the second paragraph of his story, where Twain mimics "another of Poe's techniques,'' clarifying ''the factual mystery for the reader by flatly explaining it."

It is this explanation of the narrator's "prodigious mistake,'' the fact that he is ''carrying off a box of guns'' instead of his friend's corpse, that gives the reader inside knowledge that the narrator did not have when he was taking his fateful train trip two years ago. This inside knowledge is increased a few lines later, when the narrator notes how a stranger ''set a package of peculiarly mature and capable Limburger cheese" on the coffin-box. After he says this, the narrator backtracks, drawing the reader's attention to the fact that he did not know about the cheese at the time. He says that, "I know now that it was Limburger cheese, but at that time I never had heard of the article in my life, and of course was wholly ignorant of its character."

Throughout the story the narrator repeats this trend of giving inside information, through the use of a specific viewpoint. The majority of the story is told in a first person, limited viewpoint, where the narrator says only what he knew at the time of the fateful events. He tells his story as if he is there, and has no knowledge of the future that he has already lived. However at certain points, the narrator uses a first person, omniscient, viewpoint, letting his hindsight influence the narrative and giving the reader knowledge that the narrator himself did not have during the train ride.

After these first references to the gunbox and cheese, Twain's narrator resumes his tale in the first person limited viewpoint, and waxes on about his sadness over his friend's death, which increases when he smells the cheese and thinks it is his friend's corpse: ''There was something infinitely saddening about his calling himself to my remembrance in this dumb, pathetic way.'' However, Twain periodically brings the reader's attention back to the reality of the situation—the corpse is really a box of guns with smelly cheese on top—so that he can be sure that his audience does not start thinking there is a real corpse in the train, as the narrator and Thompson do. If this were to happen, the humorous comedy of errors that exists with the gunbox and cheese would change to a morbid drama about a poor corpse that torments two men.

The next instance where Twain has his narrator refer to the guns and cheese takes place after Thompson first notices the smell. ''He gasped once or twice, then moved toward the cof—gunbox, stood over that Limburger cheese part of a moment, then came back.'' At this point, the narrator catches himself before he says "coffin," noting that it is in fact a"gunbox" with a piece of"Limburger cheese" on top. Twain needs this reference here to break up the long stretch of narrative where the narrator refers to the "corpse." The next reference takes place when the two men are getting ready to attempt to move the box of guns: "We went there and bent over that deadly cheese and took a grip on the box." During this moving attempt, Thompson slips, falling ''down with his nose on the cheese.'' The reader, now once again assured that the smell is from the cheese, can

continue to enjoy the story.

The final reference to the gunbox and cheese on the train trip occurs when Thompson attempts to mask the smell with carbolic acid. As the narrator notes, ‘‘He sprinkled it all around everywhere; in fact he drenched everything with it, riflebox, cheese and all.’’ With this last reference, the narrator names everything as they are in real life, without slipping and almost referring to the two items as the corpse, as he did before.

Twain's strategic system of references to the gunbox and cheese serves a purpose; it allows the reader to get involved in the story enough to be amused by it, while pulling them back out into reality every once in a while so they are still aware of the joke. By taking the reader to the edge of propriety and then back several times, Twain reaches a greater intensity of humor, and a potentially depressing tale becomes laughable to the reader. With this elaborate system in place, Twain then employs progressively more expressive descriptions of the stench in the train, which magnify the humorous quality of the smells even more.

Like the references to the gunbox and cheese, the descriptions of the odor start out relatively tame when the narrator notices, "a most evil and searching odor stealing about on the frozen air.’’ The narrator's next description of the smell is a little more graphic, saying that the "odor thickened up," and that it"got to be more and more gamy and hard to stand.’’ By describing the odor as being "thick" and "gamy," it sets up an image in the reader's mind of something palpable, something that could be touched and felt, a particularly unpleasant thought. Also, although the smell is ‘‘hard to stand,’’ for the time being the two men are coping.

As the smell increases, so does the narrator's use of more expressive language. After Thompson has noted that the corpse should have been buried the past summer, the narrator describes the increased potency of the stench in semi-ironic terms: ‘‘By this time the fragrance—if you may call it fragrance—was just about suffocating.’’ By calling the smell a "fragrance," the narrator is being ironic, because he is saying something that is the opposite of what he means. However, like the second reference to the gun box, where the narrator almost slips and says "coffin," he qualifies his ironic statement by saying, ‘‘if you may call it a fragrance.’’ The effect of the smell can be seen in the two men's facial color, ‘‘Thompson's face was turning gray,’’ and actions, ‘‘Thompson rested his forehead in his left hand.’’

The next reference to the smell also uses ironic language. After the carbolic acid only serves to increase the potency of the smell, the narrator notes that ‘‘the two perfumes began to mix,’’ and that "pretty soon we made a break for the door." Twain is slowly but surely increasing the potency of the smell both in the story and as an image in the reader's mind. A reader can only imagine how bad something must smell to refer to it ironically as a "perfume," and to be strong enough to make two men run outside.

The narrator's final reference to the stench pulls out all of the stops, using ironic language that places the stench on a new scale of potency. After the final bonfire of smelly items is lit in a desperate attempt to mask the cheese smell with other smells, the narrator notes that"all that went before was just simply poetry to that smell.’’ Poetry is one of the highest forms of artistic expression, so by using it in an ironic sense to denote the smell, the stench transcends all previous boundaries, setting up an almost unfathomable image in the reader's mind. The poetic language continues, as the narrator notes that ‘‘the original smell stood up out of it just as sublime as ever.’’ The word "sublime" is used by poets to denote something that is larger than man, and which should be held in awe. It is usually reserved for mountains, forests, and other large forms of nature that make man feel small. When Twain applies the word "sublime" to the smell, he is attempting to express that the smell is larger than anything ever before experienced. Like nature, which often overpowers man in literature, the stench overpowers the two men who almost suffocate from it as they run outside onto the train's platform.

Although ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ was received badly by critics such as Everett Emerson, who calls the story's humor "unspeakable," and Gladys Carmen Bellamy, who notes that Twain's emphasis on the stench of corpses

seems to ‘‘emphasize the indignity of human life,’’ it does not appear that Twain meant to offend with his story. In fact, Twain structures the story so that the reader is free from any moral obligation to feel sorry for the "corpse," which is really a box of guns with a piece of cheese on top. This knowledge, which is repeated at various points throughout the tale, helps to increase the level of humor associated with the smells. Likewise, through his use of increasingly more potent descriptions of the "corpse" odor, Twain magnifies the humor even more, as readers get an increasingly more palpable mental image. And even though many critics do not like these images, the story has stood the test of time with popular audiences. Long notes that ‘‘many present-day readers find pleasure" in these improper writings, and that ‘‘we frankly delight in much that offended past sensibilities.’’

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "The Invalid's Story," in *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Essays and Criticism: Twain and "The Invalid's Story"

Publication History
‘‘The Invalid's Story,’’ sometimes referred to as ‘‘The Limburger Cheese Story,’’ was first published as a three-thousand-word addition to ‘‘Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion’’ in the 1882 *Stolen White Elephant* volume (Brownell 2). It remained part of the excursion narrative in *Merry Tales* (1892). In its 1896 collected edition of Mark Twain's works, however, Harper and Brothers separated the two, printing ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ and ‘‘Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion’’ in different volumes. Subsequent editions sustained this separation, reprinting ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ without indication of its original context. The Neider edition of *The Complete Short Stories* is based on the thirty-seven volume Stormfield edition.

Circumstances of Composition, Sources, and Influences
" Some Rambling Notes of an Idle Excursion," a fictionalized account of Mark Twain's travel to Bermuda with Joe Twichell in May 1877, was originally published as a four-part serial in the *Atlantic Monthly* beginning October 1877, and in book form*, An Idle Excursion and Other Papers*, by London publishers Chatto and Windus in 1878. A study of the manuscript paper and ink suggests that "The Invalid's Story" was written in the late 1870s, probably 1877; Emerson contends that Mark Twain heard the story from Twichell during their Bermuda travels. The scholarly assumption, supported by Mark Twain-Howells correspondence, is that it was intended to be part of "An Idle Excursion" but was excised because William Dean Howells thought the piece to be indelicate. Manuscript evidence further indicates that Mark Twain had requested the story be inserted "at page 90" of *Punch, Brothers, Punch!* (1878), and later intended to include it as a separate chapter in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880); in both instances, however, the story was deleted prior to publication, again probably as a result of Howells's objections. Evidently Mark Twain liked the story and was anxious to have it published; at the same time, it is equally evident that he valued highly the critical judgment of his good friend Howells, whose achievements as editor and author had made him for Mark Twain a representative of the genteel literary tastes and standards the western author believed he must satisfy.

DeVoto and Blair report that ‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ may have been based on an antebellum sketch by the southwestern humorist J. M. Field,"A Resurrectionist and His Freight.’’ Field's sketch appeared in the Saint Louis Reveille (9 March 1846), was reprinted in *The Spirit of the Times* (21 March 1846), and appeared in books of 1847 and 1858. A similar story is printed in the 13 July 1865 issue of the Carson, Nevada, *Daily Appeal*. A more likely source is Artemus Ward, who included a variant of the story as part of his lecture program sometime between 1862 and 1864. Austin conjectures that Mark Twain heard Ward tell it during the ‘‘Babes in the Wood’’ lectures Mark Twain attended in Virginia City, Nevada, in December 1863, and that Ward's oral rendition was ‘‘evidently the 'germ' of Twain's’’ story written some fourteen years later.

Austin compares "The Invalid's Story" with a printed reconstruction of Ward's oral anecdote published by James F. Ryder in *Voigtlander* and I (1902). Such comparison reveals not only the generic differences between Yankee and southwestern humor but also Mark Twain's method of developing a story from scant source materials. Ward's anecdote, genteel in comparison to Mark Twain's lurid story, is a brief straightforward narrative with no dialogue until the climax; everything moves rapidly to a punch line that becomes justification for the whole tale. The prominent punch line of Ward's joke becomes merely a minor detail in Mark Twain's story, which is built on comic exaggeration. "The Invalid's Story'' is much more substantially developed fiction than is the Ward source: additional plot details, extensive characterizing dialogue, and lurid, explicit description of odors push the story to over twenty-six hundred words; moreover, first-person point of view and substantial development of both the railway passenger, who serves as narrator, and Thompson the baggageman provide aesthetic interest and complexity to a story that makes a shambles of genteel sentimentality about death.

The Gothic fiction of Edgar Allan Poe specifically ‘‘A Descent into the Maelstrom,'' is offered by Kemper as an influence on "The Invalid's Story." An ‘‘elaborate spoof'' of Poe's fictional themes and characteristic techniques, Mark Twain's story takes ‘‘the Gothic tuck out of his predecessor'' in its parody ‘‘of Poe's tone, character, and situation.'' The opening paragraphs of the two stories follow parallel paths as Mark Twain spoofs the overheated imagination of Poe' s neurotic narrator: each refers rather vaguely to some traumatic, mysterious past event that the story will proceed to explain; moreover, the first-person engaged narrator—who has aged prematurely as a direct result of what he is about to rehearse—assures the reader that the fantastic tale to follow is true and hence, of course, all the more horrifying. The Poe protagonist characteristically narrates retrospectively, Kemper points out, informing us at the outset of the story's conclusion and thereby sacrificing suspense to heighten a psychological effect, usually terror. In ‘‘The Invalid's Story" Mark Twain employs this same technique, but he does so to generate a comic effect; indeed, if the reader were to believe that the obnoxious odors so vividly rendered actually emanated from a decaying corpse rather than from limburger cheese, he would be less amused than disgusted. The language and structure of Mark Twain's story, Kemper concludes, ‘‘undermines and mocks the gothic subject it describes.''

Relationship to Other Mark Twain Works

"The Invalid's Story" is among Mark Twain's "scatological" pieces,"immensely true," De Voto writes, "to one kind of humor of the frontier and of Mark Twain.'' Gibson links it to "1601," though he claims that more notorious piece is ‘‘formless and even mild'' when read juxtaposed to ‘‘The Invalid's Story." Additional parallels might be drawn to ‘‘Cannibalism in the Cars'' (1868) and ‘‘The Great Prize Fight" (1863), sketches that depend for their effect on what Bellamy calls ‘‘the primitive humor of cruelty.'' Horowitz sees in the story a preview of the cynicism characteristic of Mark Twain's later writings on institutionalized religion. The indelicate—some would say offensive—subject and tone of the story, written in 1877, should give pause to those who emphasize Mark Twain's overzealous desire to placate his wife's genteel tastes or his surrender to her heavy editorial hand in the decade following their marriage.

The most secure link to other Mark Twain writings, in fact, lies in the story's assault on genteel sensitivities, particularly as they govern our attitudes toward death. Its grotesque humor is reminiscent of ‘‘Cannibalism in the Cars," "Aurelia's Unfortunate Young Man''—the 1864 ‘‘condensed novel'' that chronicles a young lady's wavering devotion to a lover who seems to disintegrate before her eyes—and ‘‘Lucretia Smith's Soldier'' (1864), which exposes the sentimental excesses of a young woman who discovers she has "fooled away three mortal weeks here, snuffling and slobbering over the wrong soldier.'' In all four instances, reality intrudes to shatter genteel illusions and expectations that are comically inappropriate to the situation at hand. The story also provides an interesting counterpart to the Emmeline Grangerford section of *Huckleberry Finn* (1885); although the tone and language of the two differ, their satiric intentions are essentially the same; each employs irony to carry an extended joke at the expense of conventional attitudes toward death.

Critical Studies
Although Baldanza claims that in "The Invalid's Story" Mark Twain "rises to the heights of comic invention,'' scholars generally condemn the story. Bellamy recoils from the "repulsive humor," arguing that by giving undue attention to the stench of corpses Mark Twain emphasizes "the indignity of human life.'' Emerson flatly labels it a "disaster," its humor "unspeakable." Most other Mark Twain scholars simply ignore the story that Howells thought would ''challenge all literature for its like.''

Yet Mark Twain carefully structures the story to minimize the offense to his readers' sensibilities and to maximize comic effect. The dying narrator informs us at the outset that his fate is the result of a "prodigious mistake": planning to accompany the remains of his "dearest boyhood friend and schoolmate, John B. Hackett'' by train from Cleveland, Ohio, to "his poor old father and mother in Wisconsin," the narrator in fact sits in a heated baggage car with a crate of rifles on which a stranger has placed ''a packaged of peculiarly mature and capable limburger cheese.'' The narrator tells of the obnoxious odors that emanated from what he thought was the apparently rotting corpse of Mr. Hackett; however, because the story is told retrospectively, we know the true contents of the box and that the actual source of the vile stench is the cheese. Part of the humor thus arises from dramatic irony: steps taken to defuse the smell of a corpse—pouring carbolic acid over it, making a fire of"chicken feathers, and dried apples, and leaf tobacco, and rags, and old shoes, and sulphur, and asafetida''—serve only to intensify the peculiar fragrance of the cheese.

The narrator is accompanied on his journey by the baggageman Thompson, whose ''vernacular understatement'' in describing the unmodifiable smell, Gibson argues, contributes largely to the story's comic effect. It is Thompson who first broaches the indelicate subject of the corpse's smell: "He's pretty ripe, ain't he!" Trying to be as understanding as possible under the circumstances, Thompson attempts to comfort the narrator over the loss of his friend with the observation that ''sometimes it's uncertain whether they're really gone or not''; yet before long he asserts, ''But he ain't in no trance!'' After spouting a few homiletic sentiments—''We've all got to go, they ain't no getting around it. Man that is born of woman is of few days and far between, as Scriptur' says''—Thompson succumbs to his overwhelming discomfort, disputing the narrator's claim that his friend had been dead only ''two or three days'' giving ''his views at considerable length upon the unwisdom of putting off burials too long.'' When the smell of shared cigar smoke fails to ''modify him worth a cent,'' serving only ''to stir up his ambition,'' Thompson decides to take more forceful action. But his attempt to overpower the smell with carbolic acid proves futile: ''It ain't no use. We can't buck agin him. He just utilizes everything we put up to modify him with, and gives it his own flavor and plays it back on us.'' In utter desperation, Thompson builds the bonfire; its own odor proves so powerful that the narrator wonders ''how even the corpse could stand it,'' yet ''the original smell stood up out of it just as sublime as ever.'' Thompson dejectedly surrenders: ''we got to stay out here... The Governor wants to travel alone, and he's fixed so he can outvote us.'' Ultimately death has triumphed over the living, leaving the two men "prisoned": "Yes, sir, we're elected, just as sure as you're born.''

Horowitz provides the most extensive and ingenious analysis of ''TheInvalid's Story,'' arguing that it is "a particularized symbolic commentary on the Church, a broad farce ... of what has generally happened as the body of Christ ... progresses through time." Germane to Horowitz's argument is the story's original context: it was positioned at the end of the Bermuda travel narratives that collectively develop an Easter motif introduced as the visitors arrive on Sunday, the third day of their voyage, at"the resurrection hour" when "the berths gave up their dead.'' Horowitz identifies the corpse in the story—on its way to reunion with its parents in the fictional city of "Bethlehem," Wisconsin— with Christ; as a result of the "prodigious mistake," of course, the corpse goes instead to the very real city of Peoria, Illinois, its place of honor usurped by a crate of rifles and packet of limburger cheese. Thompson, the baggageman who hums ''Sweet By and By'' while tending to the assumed coffin, is Saint Thomas Aquinas—the emissary of the church who tends to the bedrock of Christian faith. The railway car, "embodying a Christ, ministered by a Tom's son,'' symbolizes the church as the tale ''takes on the form of an unorthodox trope.'' The Calvinistic language of the story's conclusion— ''we're elected,'' the discovery of the truth about the cheese coming ''too late to save me''—testifies to the

pernicious, deadly hold of Mark Twain's early training in the Presbyterian church. The discovery of the fraudulent basis of church belief has come ‘‘too late to save’’ Mark Twain; hence the secular Bermuda experience, ‘‘with all its heavenly aspects,’’ Horowitz concludes, ‘‘has proved insufficient balm.’’

Source: James D. Wilson, '‘‘The Invalid's Story,'’’ in *A Reader's Guide to the Short Stories of Mark Twain*, G. K. Hall and Co., 1987, pp. 147-52.

Essays and Criticism: ‘‘Poe, Twain, and Limburger Cheese’’

Twain was a superb and deadly parodist of various literary figures and genres that he found pretentious or absurd. Cooper takes a severe drubbing more than once. Romantic poetry and fiction come in for some licks, too, most notably in *Huck Finn*. Detective fiction was another favorite target. Edgar Allan Poe should be added to the list of victims, too. Jack Scherting suggests that Poe's ' 'The Cask of Amontillado’’ may be a source for ‘‘The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg,’’ and that *Pudd'nhead* Wilson resembles ‘‘William Wilson’’ in some ways. But this note concerns an elaborate spoof of Poe, not an emulation of him.

A comparison of Twain's ‘‘the Invalid's Story’’ with some of Poe's fictional themes and techniques, and particularly with his story, ' 'A Descent Into the Maelstrom,’’ shows Twain purposefully taking the Gothic tuck out of his predecessor.

‘‘The Invalid's Story’’ (1882), you will remember, involves a fellow who narrates a story about his attempt to transport a dead friend to relatives in Wisconsin via train. At the beginning of the trip, the coffin gets switched with a box of guns, and a shady character puts a bag of ripe Limburger cheese atop the "coffin." The narrator does not realize these facts until later. The major portion of the story details the narrator's and expressman's growing olfactory unease, and their frantic but unsuccessful attempts to "modify" the "corpse's" seemingly conscious assault on their noses. At the end of the story, the narrator says that the cheese proved to be a fatal opponent because, by forcing them to ride outside the car on a bitter night, it has ruined their healths. In the last line of the story the narrator moans, ‘‘this is my last trip; I am on my way home to die.’’

The story is preposterous, outrageous, and of course hilarious. For the most part, its humor, like Limburger cheese, is robust and difficult to miss. But Twain's parody of Poe adds a subtle flavor for those who recognize it.

' 'The Descent Into the Maelstrom," like ' 'The Invalid's Story,’’ is a tale told by an old man to a younger listener. The man had been caught in a deadly maelstrom while out fishing but had managed to survive its terrors by applying common sense, scientific observation, and imagination. Unfortunately, the price of survival is steep; the man is shattered physically and perhaps psychologically. The story begins,
We had now reached the summit of the loftiest crag. For some minutes the old man seemed too much exhausted to speak.

> ' 'Not long ago,’’ said he at length,' 'and I could have guided you on this route as well as the youngest of my sons; but, about three years past, there happened to me an event such as never happened before to mortal man—or at least such as no man ever survived to tell of—and the six hours of deadly terror which I the endured have broken me up body and soul. You suppose me a very old man—but I am not. It took less than a single day to change these hairs from a jetty black to white, to weaken my limbs, and to unstring my nerves so that I tremble at the least exertion, and am frightened at a shadow ...’’
>
> Twain's story begins,

> I seem sixty and married, but these effects are due to my condition and sufferings, for am a bachelor and only forty-one. It will be hard for you to believe that I, who am now but a shadow, was a hale, hearty man two short years ago—a man of iron, a very athlete!—yet such is the simple truth. But stranger still than this fact is the way in which I lost my health. I lost it through helping to take care of a box of guns on a two-hundred mile railway journey one winter's night. It is the actual truth, and I will tell you about it.

Besides the obvious parodies of Poe's tone, character, and situation, Twain adopts one of Poe's favorite opening-paragraph techniques in order to spoof it: he gives a vague description of a mysterious event that the rest of the story will explain, and the protagonist insists that everything about to be related, though beyond belief, is actually adorned truth.

Parrotting another of Poe's techniques, in the next paragraph Twain's narrator quickly clarifies the factual mystery for the reader by flatly explaining it:

> The fact is that without my suspecting it a prodigious mistake had been made. I was carrying off a box of guns which that young fellow had come to the station to ship to a rifle company in Peoria, Illinois, and he had got my corpse! ... As the train moved off a stranger skipped into the car and set a package of peculiarly mature and capable Limburger cheese on one end of my coffin-box—I mean my box of guns. That is to say, I know now that it was Limburger cheese...

Poe's narrators often speak retrospectively and tell the reader straight off how the story will end and what events constitute the factual' 'mystery" in the story. Poe virtually eliminates plot suspense in order to make psychological suspense primary. He reveals the story's climactic event at the outset in order to force the reader to experience his characters' psychological responses more acutely. Twain uses the same technique for comic purposes: people in the know find ignorance more amusing than do other ignoramuses. If we suspected that the odiferous antagonist was really a rotting corpse rather than Limburger cheese, we would scarcely laugh as much.

The plot itself suggests Poe: Twain's narrator and his companion Thompson are confined in a small boxcar with a rotting corpse on a wild, stormy night. Thompson expresses familiarity with an event common in Poe's stories; sometimes, he remarks, seeming corpses will rise and confront their watchers. But Ligeia and Madeline Usher were never described in this way:

> Sometimes it's uncertain whether they're really gone or not—seem gone, you know—body warm, joints limber—and so, although you think they're gone, you don't really know. I've had cases in my car. It's perfectly awful, becuz you don't know what minute they'll rise up and look at you! ... But he ain't in no trance! No sir, I go bail for him!

The language undermines and mocks the Gothic subject it describes.

The two living characters are soon locked in a terrific struggle with the corpse—with death—which seems to attack them and refuses to grant them peace and comfort. "Ligiea" and ‘‘The House of Usher" again come to mind, as do ' 'The Masque of theRedDeath," "TheTell-TaleHeart,’’ and ‘‘The Black Cat.’’ But for Twain, to animate a corpse in one's imagination and then struggle against it is ludicrous. Poe's supernatural premise, Twain suggests here, cannot be taken seriously (though Twain does sometimes give credence to folk superstitions, as in *Huckleberry Finn*). Like many of Poe's characters, Thompson and the narrator show more respect for the dead than is healthy. Twain's treatment of Emmeline Grangerford and the boy in ‘‘The Good Little Boy’’ make plain his opinion about such morbidity.

Finally, Twain parodies the typical Poe character's perverse over-exercise of imagination. Scores of Poe's characters accept as reality the distortion created by their excessive imaginations. In this way, Twain insists, absurdity defeats simple common sense. Thompson sticks his nose right in the cheese but does not even realize it. The narrator knows his friend is freshly dead and could not be decaying already, but his imagination betrays his common sense. To paraphrase an adage, they can't smell the Limburger for the cheese. As in Poe, unregulated imagination does them in, but Twain emphasizes the absurdity and humor of such excess, not its pathos and troubled genius.

By burlesquing many of Poe's techniques, themes, and character types, Twain punctures the pretensions of Gothicism, throwing his sharp darts at America's most capable and sophisticated practitioner in the genre. Twain is no more fair to Poe than he is to Cooper. But though he does tell some stretchers in order to make his point more vivid and humorous, well, he also tells the truth, mainly.

Source: Steven E. Kemper, ‘‘Poe, Twain, and Limburger Cheese,’’ in *Mark Twain Journal*, Vol. XXI, No. 1, Winter 1981-1982, pp. 13-14.

Analysis

Analysis: Historical Context

In the 1860s, a number of railroad developments came into being. In 1869, four years after the Civil War ended, the Union Pacific railroad line was connected to the Central Pacific line and the world's longest railroad—1,776 miles of steel track—was completed. The transcontinental railroad line, which was subsidized by government funds from the 1862 Pacific Railroad Act, had taken years to finish. The project involved an extensive amount of tearing down forests, tunneling through earth, and constructing bridges to complete, but once it was done, it changed the face of transportation.

Eight years later, in 1877 when Twain wrote ‘‘The Invalid's Story,’’ railroads in the United States were in their Golden Age and trains were the dominant mode of transportation for both people and goods. Originally, this included only nonperishable items. In the early 1870s, however, Gustavus Franklin Swift, founder of the meat-packing firm, Swift & Company, began work on a refrigerated train car. He believed it would be a more cost-effective way to ship fresh meat than the current method, which entailed shipping live cattle to other areas of the country, to be slaughtered at their destination. In 1877, however, Swift made the first successful shipment of a carload of fresh meat from Chicago to the Eastern United States, and more people began to ship perishable items to other areas of the country.

With the ability to ship fresh food, people were less likely to catch a food-related illness. However, the nineteenth century was still a time of little medical progress. Doctors in the nineteenth century were not regulated in their education, so a person's survival chances often depended upon the luck or guesswork of their individual doctor, or upon the strength of their body to defend itself. In the story, the narrator is taken with a fever for three weeks, but it does not mention that the doctors are able to do anything. In the end, the narrator's immune system fends off his ailment for two years, but the disease— which is caused from being outside in the cold for about an hour—takes his life. It was a common tale in the nineteenth century.

In addition to transporting cargo by train, the mid-to-late nineteenth century also saw the development of rapid means to send messages across country. In the story, the narrator receives word that his friend has died the day before. Since the message travels from Wisconsin to Ohio in less than a day, one assumes that it has been sent by telegraph, one of the major inventions of the nineteenth century. The first telegraph message was sent in 1843 but it wasn't until the completion of the transcontinental telegraph system that the telegraph came into widespread use in the United States.

From 1860 to 1861, before this transcontinental telegraph system was completed, people relied briefly on the Pony Express to transmit messages along a route from the Eastern United States (Missouri) to the Western United States (California). Although it was short-lived, the Pony Express is famous for some of its famous riders, including William "Buffalo Bill’’ Cody. Along with his colleagues, Cody would transport mail by horse, very quickly, between one of the more than 150 stations along the route. As each rider reached a station, a new rider and refreshed horse would take the mail and ride very fast to the next station. In this way, mail could travel continuously, at a much more rapid pace than by using one rider, who would have to rest himself and his horse at some point.

Analysis: Literary Style

Humor
The humor in "The Invalid's Story" manifests itself in two forms, contradictory language and actions, both of which are made ludicrous by the reader's knowledge of the gunbox and cheese. With this knowledge, the

reader witnesses two men who fight valiantly against a dairy product—a funny, odd situation. Without this knowledge the reader would believe that the two men are really dealing with a corpse, and the story would not be funny; instead, it would be sad or morbid.

The story's use of language is structured so that it will amuse the reader. For example, after Thompson first begins to notice the smell in the train car, he notes about dead people that '‘‘Sometimes it's uncertain whether they're really gone or not.''’ He then goes on to explain how he has had a number of cases where people were not really dead, they just seemed dead. This generally makes him nervous because these days he keeps expecting them to ‘‘'rise up and look at you!''’ However, after a pause, Thompson notes, '‘‘But he ain't in no trance!'’ By having Thompson illustrate a possibility, then negate it, Twain tries to elicit a laugh from the reader by using contradictory language. Thompson is saying that Hackett's corpse is so rotted and smells so bad that there is no way Hackett could be alive. This becomes dark humor once the reader can take comfort in the fact that Thompson is talking about a piece of cheese.

Thompson's contradictory language is also funny when it is combined with actions. The two men's first attempt to mask the smell in the train car consists of smoking cigars, which Thompson feels will be a good idea: ‘‘Likely it'll modify him some.''’ However, although the two men ‘‘puffed gingerly along for a while," it is no use. Pretty soon, ‘‘both cigars were quietly dropped,’’ and Thompson notes that they didn't ‘‘'modify him worth a cent. Fact is, it makes him worse, becuz it appears to stir up his ambition.'" By using a piece of dialogue to set up the expectation that the cigars will mask the smell, the silent actions of dropping the cigars becomes a funny act. The humor is increased with Thompson's admission that the cigars didn't help mask the smell, but instead helped to make it more potent.

Personification

In the story, the two men refer to two inanimate objects—the gunbox and the cheese—as if they exhibit human qualities, a technique called personification. In this case, the personification is a little different than in other literature, since the narrator and Thompson think they are talking about a corpse— which can be seen as one kind of inanimate object— when they are really describing two other inanimate objects.

As with other cases of personification, the gunbox and cheese take on a life of their own. Says the narrator, when he first begins to notice the odor of the cheese and mistakes it for his friend: "There was something infinitely saddening about his calling himself to my remembrance in this dumb, pathetic way, so it was hard to keep the tears back." The narrator makes it seem that Hackett is willingly producing this smell in a nostalgic way, something that a corpse—or a gunbox and cheese for that matter—can not do.

Throughout the story, both the narrator and Thompson attribute other human qualities to the guns and cheese, most notably stubbornness. Thompson notes the futility of their attempts to mask the smell after the carbolic acid only makes it worse. '"He just utilizes everything we put up to modify him with, and gives it his own flavor and plays it back on us.''’ Ultimately, the "corpse"—which Thompson calls by a number of civil and military ranks, another human aspect—wins out, and Thompson notes that they can not beat him, and that they will have to stay outside the train all night. '"The Governor wants to travel alone, and he's fixed so he can out-vote us.''’

Foreshadowing

Twain uses foreshadowing to drastically change the tone of the story. As noted above, if the reader didn't know that the "corpse" was really a gunbox with some smelly cheese on top, the story would be sad, not funny. However, when he is telling his story, Twain's narrator gives away both causes of the conflict, the guns and the cheese. When referring to the gunbox, he says ‘‘that without my suspecting it a prodigious mistake had been made," and that he ended up "carrying off a box of guns," while the ‘‘young fellow’’ got the corpse. The narrator also gives away the cheese in the beginning of the story: "That is to say, I know now that it was Limburger cheese.’’ This admission is revealed to the reader before the two men engage in their increasingly

humorous and desperate attempts to fight the stench of the cheese, allowing the reader to focus on the humorous acts.

Twain also employs foreshadowing in more subtle ways. Although the narrator reveals in the beginning that he is not healthy, and that he lost his health from the ‘‘box of guns,’’ he does not say that he is dying until the end of the story. However, he gives clues throughout the narrative that hint at the narrator's demise. For example, when the narrator and Thompson are trying to move the box of guns, the narrator notes that Thompson "bent over that deadly cheese.’’ By calling the cheese "deadly," the narrator is referring to the fact that it eventually kills him.

On a similar note, after this moving attempt fails, the two men go outside on the train's platform to get away from the smell. The narrator notes that ‘‘we couldn't stay out there in that mad storm; we should have frozen to death.’’ Once again, this language helps to foreshadow the actual events at the end of the story, when the two men do stay outside in the storm. Later on, the narrator—and one assumes Thompson—die from their exposure to this freezing weather.

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Further Reading

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In his book, Ambrose, a noted historian, examines the political and social efforts that helped to build the transcontinental railroad, including Abraham Lincoln's driving desire to see it built, the government members and brilliant entrepreneurs who invested in it, the Irish and Chinese laborers who did most of the construction work, and the Army soldiers who stood guard, protecting the rail crews from attacks.

Bondeson, Jan, *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear*, W. W. Norton & Co., 2001.
This fascinating study gives a thorough exploration of the factual history of, and urban legends about, premature burial, including the increase of associated tales in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also discusses the development of many safeguards such as waiting mortuaries, where corpses were kept until they either started to rot or came back to life. Twain visited one of these in the 1880s.

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Although Taylor's book is primarily intended as a guide for businesses, detailing what to look for when buying a new computerized shipping system, it also serves as a primer for anyone interested in learning how modern shipping works. Written in a consumer-friendly style, the book notes the many advantages of a computerized shipping system, including massive savings.

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This biography is a companion to the PBS series that aired in January, 2002. Complete with humorous Twain quotations, selections from his correspondence that reveal his more realistic side, and literary selections from Twain admirers and critics, the book also gives a cohesive overview of current Twain scholarship. The companion film—directed by Burns—is also available on DVD from PBS.

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Ziporyn's thoroughly researched study analyzes how three diseases—typhoid fever, diphtheria, and syphilis—were treated in the United States mass media from the late nineteenth century until the early twentieth century. The author finds that typhoid fever was covered in the press more than the other two diseases, which she attributes to the social values associated with each disease.

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1870s: Several people are killed in the United States' first national railroad strike, which threatens to damage the nation's trade. The strike is caused by a 10 percent wage cut in railroad employees' pay, the second such cut in four years.

Today: After terrorists use three commercial airplanes to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, nationwide travel comes to a halt. Although people slowly begin to travel again a few months after the attacks, the tragic events help to plunge the nation into an economic recession. The transportation sector is one of the hardest hit.

1870s: Medicine is largely undeveloped and shortsighted, and medical education is not yet regulated. As a result, people must take precautions against getting sick. This includes staying out of the cold as much as possible, for even an hour out in the elements is enough to contract an illness that may eventually prove fatal.

Today: Modern medicine is interdisciplinary,and doctors can prolong patients' lives for long periods of time, even patients with life-threatening illnesses. As a result, the average life span continues to increase.

1870s: Gustavus Franklin Swift makes his first successful shipment of fresh meat in a refrigerated railroad car that his company has developed. The refrigerated car—which works by circulating air over ice to cool it—revolutionizes the food industry, which can now ship perishable items across the country, where they arrive fresh for the consumer.

Today: Fresh meat, dairy, and produce is shipped from meat-packing companies and farms across the country using various forms of refrigeration and air conditioning, most of which rely on liquid chemicals to cool the air. Many local grocery stores throughout the nation carry these products, which are sometimes stamped with an expiration date to let consumers know how long the product will be fresh.

Teaching Guide

Teaching Guide: Topics for Further Study

During Twain's lifetime, the fastest way to send a package was to ship it by an express car on a train. Research the ways that express shipping companies during this time period identified and shipped their customers' packages, and compare this to the methods used by modern express shipping companies. Then, using a map, plot out the steps a package would take when being shipped from Ohio to Wisconsin in both the 1870s and 2000s.

In the nineteenth century, many people were buried in plain crates, a fact that leads to the case of mistaken identities in the story. Trace the development of coffins as far back as you can. Write a one-page report about the history of coffins, and create a timeline that includes at least five significant events in coffin development.

In the story, a box of guns is supposed to be shipped to Peoria, Illinois. Research the history of gunmaking, and propose a theory as to why you think Twain chose to put guns in the box, instead of something else. Using your theory and research, write a sample Peoria newspaper article about the misplaced guns and their intended purpose.

The expressman in the story refers to the narrator' s deceased friend by a number of titles denoting military or civil rank. Research the meaning of these ranks and give a one-paragraph description for each one. For each rank, find a person from the Civil War era who held this rank, and write a short biography about him.

Making cheese is a huge industry both in the United States and abroad. Research the history of five different cheeses. Write a short paper discussing how, when, and where these cheeses were introduced to the world.

The narrator in the story catches a debilitating disease—which the expressman assumes is typhoid—while on his train trip. Research the history and symptoms of typhoid fever, and write a two-page report on when and where the spread of typhoid fever reached epidemic status.

Teaching Guide: What Do I Read Next?

In *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, published in 2000, neurobiologist Robert R. Provine examines humor as a function of social relationships. Using research from various social field experiments and exploring past ideas from such noted psychoanalysts as Sigmund Freud Provine presents laughter in all its forms and even distinguishes between laughter and smiles. It also includes a section on neural disorders that are associated with laughter and the types of laughter therapy used by some psychologists today.

Twain was one of the most noted American humorists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many of his writings were published in magazines like the *Atlantic Monthly*. In 1925, ten years after Twain's death, Harold Ross founded *The New Yorker*, a magazine that would help to define humor in the modern era. In *Fierce Pajamas: An Anthology of Humor Writing from "The New Yorker,"* editors David Remnick and Henry Finder collect the writings of more than seventy New Yorker contributors, including such noted humorists as Woody Allen James Thurber Dorothy Parker and Steve Martin.

Although Jon Scieszka' s *The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales* (1993) is technically a children's book, its brand of unique and irreverent humor has delighted people of all ages. The book parodies well-known fairy tales and themes, such as the ugly duckling, through the use of a mischievous narrator who even parodies the book itself.

The Bible according to Mark Twain: Irreverent Writings on Eden, Heaven, and the Flood by America's Master Satirist, published in 1996, collects a number of Twain's irreverent views on institutionalized religion. However, even though they are staged in a humorous context, Twain's parodies of religion pose some serious, thought-provoking questions, and reveal Twain's intimate knowledge of the Bible.

Although Twain's dark side normally manifested itself through his biting humor, sometimes the author was just plain dark. In *The Devil's Racetrack: Mark Twain's Great Dark Writings*, published in 1981, the author explores the less pleasant aspects of humanity, such as disease and death, in a realistic fashion—without the humor that normally made these topics palatable to his readers.

Some of Twain's short stories were not well-received by the critics because of their raucous and bawdy content, which sometimes broke social taboos. In fact, Twain was noted for misbehaving in real life, a fact that showed up in his writings. *Mark Twain's Book for Bad Boys and Girls*, published in 1995, collects many of Twain's essays, sketches, and stories that exalt misbehaving.

Mark Twain's Roughing It, published in 1872, is one of his many semi-autobiographical accounts that he wrote about his travels. In this case, Twain writes about his journey to and daily life in the developing American West. The book displays the rustic, Western style of humor that would characterize many of Twain's later stories.