“Corn-Pone Opinions” by Mark Twain

Fifty years ago, when I was a boy of fifteen and helping to inhabit a Missourian village on the banks of the Mississippi, I had a friend whose society was very dear to me because I was forbidden by my mother to partake of it. He was a gay and **impudent** and satirical and delightful young black man--a slave--who daily preached sermons from the top of his master's woodpile, with me for sole audience. He imitated the **pulpit** style of the several clergymen of the village, and did it well, and 5 with fine passion and energy. To me he was a wonder. I believed he was the greatest **orator** in the United States and would someday be heard from. But it did not happen; in the distribution of rewards he was over-looked. It is the way, in this world. [ . . . ]

One of his texts was this:

"You tell me [where] a man gits his corn-pone\*, en I'll tell you what his 'pinions is."

10 I can never forget it. It was deeply impressed upon me. By my mother. Not upon my memory, but elsewhere. She had slipped in upon me while I was absorbed and not watching. The black **philosopher**'s idea was that a man is not independent, and cannot afford views which might interfere with his bread and butter. If he would prosper, he must train with the majority; in matters of large moment, like politics and religion, he must think and feel with the bulk of his neighbors, or suffer damage in his social standing and in his business [income]. He must restrict himself to corn-pone 15 opinions-at least on the surface. He must get his opinions from other people; he must reason out none for himself; he must have no first-hand views.

I think Jerry was right, in the main, but I think he did not go far enough.

1. It was his idea that a man conforms to the majority view of his locality by calculation and intention. This happens, but I think it is not the rule.

20 2. It was his idea that there is such a thing as a first-hand opinion; an original opinion; an opinion which is coldly reasoned out in a man's head, by a searching analysis of the facts involved, with the heart **unconsulted**, and the jury room closed against outside influences. It may be that such an opinion has been born somewhere, at some time or other, but I suppose it got away before they could catch it and stuff it and put it in the museum.

I am persuaded that a coldly-thought-out and independent verdict upon a fashion in clothes, or manners, or literature, or 25 politics, or religion, or any other matter that is projected into the field of our notice and interest, is a most rare thing- if it has indeed ever existed.

A new thing in costume appears--the flaring hoop skirt, for example--and the passersby are shocked, and the **irreverent** laugh. Six months later everybody is **reconciled**; the fashion has established itself; it is admired, now, and no one laughs. Public opinion resented it before, public opinion accepts it now, and is happy in it Why? Was the resentment reasoned out? 30 Was the acceptance work? It is our nature to conform; it is a force which not many can successfully resist. [ . . . ]

The hoopskirt\* runs its course and disappears. Nobody reasons about it. One woman abandons the fashions; her neighbor notices this and follows her lead; this influences the next woman; and so on and so on, and presently the skirt has vanished out of the world, no one knows how nor why; or cares for that matter. It will come again, by and by, and in due course will go again. [ . . . ]

35 Our [customs and fashions] change from time to time, but the changes are not reasoned out; we merely notice and conform. We are not reasoned out; we merely notice and conform. We are creatures of outside influences, as a rule we do not think, we only imitate. We cannot invent standards that will stick; what we mistake for standards are only fashions, and **perishable**. We may continue to admire them, but we drop the use of them. [ . . . ]

The outside influences are always pouring in upon us, and we are always obeying their orders and accepting their verdicts. 40 [ . . . ] Morals, religions, politics, get their following from surrounding influences and atmospheres, almost entirely; not from study, not from thinking. [ . . . ] Mohammedans\* are Mohammedans because they are born and reared among that **sect**, not because they have thought it out and can furnish sound reasons for being Mohammedans; we know why Catholics are Catholics; why Presbyterians are Presbyterians; why Baptists are Baptists; why Mormons are Mormons\*; why thieves are thieves; why monarchists are monarchists; why Republicans are Republicans and Democrats, Democrats. We know it is a 45 matter of association and sympathy, not reasoning and examination; that hardly a man in the world has an opinion upon morals, politics, or religion which he got otherwise than through his associations and sympathies. Broadly speaking, there are none but corn-pone opinions. [ . . . ]

I think that in the majority of cases it is **unconscious** and not **calculated**; that it is born of the human being's natural **yearning** to stand well with his fellows and have their inspiring approval and praise--a yearning which is commonly so 50 strong and so insistent that it cannot be resisted, and must have its way. [ . . . ]

Men think they think upon great political questions. [ . . . ] [B]ut they are drawn from a partial view of the matter in hand and are of no particular value. They swarm with their party\*, they feel with their party, they are happy in their party’s approval; and where the party leads they will follow, whether for right and honor, or through blood and dirt and a mush of **mutilated** morals. [ . . . ]

55 Half of our people passionately believe in high tariff\*, the other half believe otherwise. Does this mean study and examination, or only feeling? The latter\*, I think. I have deeply studied that question, too--and didn't arrive. We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking. And out of it we get an **aggregation** which we consider a **boon**. Its name is public opinion. It is held in reverence. It settles everything. Some think it the voice of God.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| corn-pone (9): A savory type of cornbread that was a cheap staple in the diet of many poor Southerners during Twain’s time. As an adjective, it has come to mean “simple” or “downhome” or even “country” (derogatory). | hoopskirt (31): You know. Like one of those old-fashioned skirts women wore in the 19th century. Like this: Image result for hoop skirt 19th century | Mohammedans (41): People of the Muslim faith. NOTE: This is not used derogatorily. |
| Catholics . . . Mormoms (42-44): Twain lists several different divisions of Christianity here | party (52): i.e., a political party  tariff (55): A form of tax. Twain references here a political debate that occurred during the writing of this essay. | latter (56): In a set, “latter” refers to the last thing listed. So here Twain means that people believe in the tariff because of feeling and not because of careful examination. |