

# Literary criticism for *The £1,000,000 Bank-Note*

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## 1 The Summary of Story

This humorous and satirical short story, written by *Mark Twain* (1835–1910), explores the themes of wealth, class, and human nature. Its classic fame led to its selection as a learning text in English textbooks in China. The first time I read a fragment of this story was in my high school class.

The narrative point of view in this story is first person. The story follows the journey of Henry Adams, a young man who is given a one million pound banknote as part of a bet between two wealthy brothers. Despite his lack of money, Adams skillfully navigates London's upper-class society, using the banknote as collateral for various loans and transactions. The storyline is somewhat similar to the currently viral feel-good short drama videos online, depicting a journey from having nothing at all to ultimately marrying a beautiful woman and achieving a financial turnaround.

## 2 Symbolism of Banknote

Symbolism is the idea that things can represent other things, a loosely organized literary and artistic movement that originated with a group of French poets in the late 19th century. The movement later expanded to painting and theater, significantly influencing European and American literature throughout the 20th century to varying degrees.

One of the most prominent themes in Mark Twain's *The £1,000,000 Bank-Note* is the idea of wealth and its impact on society. Throughout the story, the protagonist, Henry Adams, is thrust into a world of luxury and extravagance, where money appears to be the only thing that matters. However, as the story progresses, Twain uses symbolism to suggest that life encompasses more than mere material wealth.

### 2.1 Wealth and power

A powerful symbol that runs throughout the entire piece is the million-pound bank note. It should be fairly obvious that the bank note is symbolic of wealth and power. It certainly works that way for Henry Adams: he is able to buy everything on credit because everyone assumes that his million-pound banknote is actually backed by an actual bank account. It doesn't matter that, in reality, Henry is completely broke. The banknote per se opens doors for him. He manages to use the banknote for good, but it should be noted that the banknote could also symbolically represent corruption. Just as the English gentlemen and the landlord of eating-house said:

The original

.....*Brother A said he would starve to death; Brother B said he wouldn't. Brother A said he couldn't offer it at a bank or anywhere else, because he would be arrested on the spot. So they went on disputing till Brother B said he would bet twenty thousand pounds that the man would live thirty days, any way, on that million, and keep out of jail, too.*

.....*but he said it was of no consequence, he could wait, and, moreover, I could have anything I wanted, any time I chose, and let the account run as long as I pleased. He said he hoped he wasn't afraid to trust as rich a gentleman as I was, merely because I was of a merry disposition,*

*and chose to play larks on the public in the matter of dress.....*

When Adams is given the million-dollar note, he suddenly becomes the center of attention and is treated with the utmost respect and admiration. This contrast symbolizes how society values wealth above all else, even if it is just a piece of paper.

## 2.2 Luck and chance

Another important symbolism of banknote in the story is the idea of luck and chance. Henry's sudden acquisition of the million-dollar note is a stroke of luck that changes his life completely. And this luck is almost like a highly secure opportunity— as long as Adam tries to hold onto this banknote continuously for a month, he will definitely receive its corresponding value. Everyone will be very convinced by this millionaire from the United States without any doubt.

### The original

*.....I have got to carry this immense burden around until those men come back, whether I want to or not. It is useless to me, as useless as a handful of ashes, and yet I must take care of it, and watch over it, while I beg my living. I couldn't give it away, if I should try, for neither honest citizen nor highwayman would accept it or meddle with it for anything. Those brothers are safe. Even if I lose their bill, or burn it, they are still safe, because they can stop payment, and the Bank will make them whole; but meantime, I've got to do a month's suffering without wages or profit—unless I help win that bet, whatever it may be, and get that situation that I am promised. I should like to get that; men of their sort have situations in their gift that are worth having. ....*

However, Twain suggests that luck is not always what it seems, and that there may be more at play than just chance. This is seen in the way that Henry is able to use his wit and intelligence to navigate the world of the wealthy, suggesting that success depends on more than just luck. The £1,000,000 Bank-Note explores themes of wealth, luck, and the nature of success. Mark Twain challenges us to think about the role that money plays in our lives and the true meaning of success.

## 3 Irony and Critique of Society

Irony, as a literary device to create a humorous effect, is often used to highlight the absurdity of the society in Mark Twain's stories. The enduring humor and irony in Mark Twain's novels are fundamentally connected to the social phenomena, customs, and character of the people during the period he lived. He grew up in a frontier town, encountering a wide variety of people and stories, while also being influenced by American folk culture.

The theoretical foundation of his style includes three key aspects. First, he firmly believed that humor is a moral force capable of exposing human weaknesses and social injustices through laughter, thereby educating people and improving society. Second, he was deeply influenced by American pragmatist philosophy, which emphasizes "*the useful one is the true one*" a concept reflected in his humorous works. Finally, Mark Twain's humor was shaped by folk literature, especially drawing on African American jokes and Western cowboy stories, giving his works a distinctive national character.

In this story, the irony lies in the fact that despite Henry Adams's lack of money, he is able to navigate the upper echelons of society with ease, simply because of the value of his bank-note. This highlights the superficiality of the society in which he finds himself, where wealth is valued above all else. The use of irony in The £1,000,000 Bank-Note serves to critique the societal norms of the time and to highlight the absurdity of valuing wealth over character. Twain's critique of society is a timeless one, as the pursuit of wealth and status continues to be a driving force in modern society. The £1,000,000 Bank-Note serves as a reminder that true wealth lies not in material possessions, but in the content of one's character.

### The original

*.....At first, in these mentions, I was at the bottom of the personal gossip column; next, I was listed above the knights, next above the baronets, next above the barons, and so on, and so on, climbing steadily, as my notoriety augmented, until I reached the highest altitude possible, and there I remained, taking precedence of all dukes not royal, and of all ecclesiastics except the Primate of all England.....About the tenth day of my fame I went to fulfill my duty to my flag by paying my respects to the American minister. He received me with the enthusiasm proper in my case, upbraided me for being so tardy in my duty, and said that there was only one way to get his forgiveness, and that was to take the seat at his dinner-party that night made vacant by the illness of one of his guests. I said I would, and we got to talking. It turned out that he and my father had been schoolmates in boyhood, Yale students together later, and always warm friends up to my father's death. So then he required me to put in at his house all the odd time I might have to spare, and I was very willing, of course.....*

## 4 Reflection and Inspiration for us

Money plays a significant role in the story, which prompts us to rethink the role of that. Throughout the story, Twain highlights the importance of money in society and how it can influence people's behavior. Henry's newfound wealth changes the way people perceive him, and he is suddenly welcomed into high society. He is able to purchase expensive clothes, dine at fancy restaurants, and attend exclusive events.

However, Twain also shows the negative effects of money on people's character. Henry's friend, Portia, who was once kind and caring, becomes greedy and selfish when she learns of his wealth. She tries to manipulate him into giving her money and becomes jealous of his newfound success.

Twain's commentary on the subject is still relevant today, as money continues to play a significant role in our lives and society. Currently, we live in a world dominated by digital currencies and virtual assets, where stories of creating wealth and status seemingly out of nothing continually unfold. Twain's fictional social experiment from the late 19th century still challenges us to think about the issues: Are we truly worshiping value itself or merely its representation (like just the number of how much wealth someone holds)? In my view, we may be addicted to the illusion full of the symbols of socioeconomic status.