A Summary of “Corn Pone Opinions”

In the essay “Corn Pone Opinions,” Mark Twain (1923), the Father of American Literature, suggests that individual thought is a rare, even non-existent thing, and instead there are merely “corn pone opinions.” A woman sees her neighbor wearing a hoop skirt; at first she thinks it odd, but soon goes out and buys one herself. Why? Public opinion declares hoop skirts a brilliant idea and consequently the opinion becomes hers. Twain asserts that “it is our nature to conform; it is a force which not many can successfully resist” (p. 2). Conformity begins with a desire for self approval, and self approval begins with the approval of others. Essentially, everyone conforms because everyone wants to be well liked. Twain alleges that a person’s opinions are based entirely on a need to obey the public’s opinion and not, rather, “in a searching personal examination of the matter,” which leads to the ultimate point: people do not think for themselves (p. 3). “Morals, religions, politics, get their following from surrounding influences…almost entirely; not from study, not from thinking,” says Twain (p. 3). Take literature: it was once popular to write the most elaborate sentences as possible, but now public opinion demands short and to the point. No one thought about the change and no one asked why. Humanity delves into not thinking so deeply, that a man will instantly abandon all his life’s values for one moment of public admiration. It is of this Twain says, “changes are not reasoned out; we merely notice and conform… As a rule we do not think, we only imitate” (p. 2).
Reference

“We all do no end of feeling, and we mistake it for thinking… Its name is public opinion… some think it the voice of God.”