America’s Original Superstar

Mark Twain skewered the powerful, mocked the pious and helped change a nation

BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

What, if anything, about this benighted moment of American life will anyone in the future look back on with nostalgia? Well, those of us who have cable are experiencing a golden age of sarcasm (from the Greek σακαζέω, “to chew the lips in rage”). Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Bill Maher and Keith Olbermann are digging into our direst forebodings so adroitly and intensely that we may want to cry, “Stop tickling!” Forget earnest punditry. In a world of hollow White House pronouncements, evaporating mainstream media and metastasizing bloggery, it’s the mocking heads who make something like sense.

Let not those heads swell, however. News in the form of edgy drollery may seem a brave new thing, but it can all be traced back to one source, the man Ernest Hemingway said all of modern American literature could be traced back to: Mark Twain. Oh, that old cracker-barrel guy, you may say. White suit, cigar, reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated—but he died back in 1910, no? White, male, and didn’t he write in dialect? What does he have to do with the issues of our day?

As it happens, many of these were also the issues of his day, and he addressed them as eloquently as anyone has since. The idea that America is a Christian nation? Andrew Carnegie brought that up to him once. “Why, Carnegie,” Twain answered, “so is Hell.”

What about those Abu Ghraib photographs? In “King Leopold’s Soliloquy,” a fulminating essay he published in 1905, when he was a very cantankerous 70, Twain imagines the ruler of Belgium pitying himself for the inconvenience of photos show-
ing natives of the Congo whose hands have been cut off by Belgian exploiters. In the good old days, Leopold complains, he could deny atrocities and be believed. "Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible Kodak—and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe."

Waterboarding? In 1902, American soldiers were involved in a war to suppress rebels in the Philippines, which the U.S. had taken from Spain in the Spanish-American War, then decided to keep for itself instead of granting the Filipinos the independence they thought they had been promised. That outcome enraged Twain. So did "the torturing of Filipinos by the awful 'water-cure."

"To make them confess—what?" Twain asked. "Truth? Or lies? How can one know which is it they are telling? For under unendurable pain a man confesses anything that is required of him, true or false, and his evidence is worthless."

Whether Twain was talking about racism at home, the foreign misconceptions about the Western powers or the excesses of the era of greed, he initially flourished in after the Civil War, his target was always human folly and hypocrisy, which turn out to be perennial topics for further study.

Here he is in Letters from the Earth, speaking in the voice of Satan, commenting on the strangeness of man's ways: "He has imagined a heaven, and has left out of it the supreme of all his delights... sexual intercourse! It is as if a lost and perishing person in a roasting desert should be told by a rescuer he might choose and have all longed-for things but one, and he should elect to leave out water!"

Strong stuff, especially when it's funny. Sometimes unsettling too. But the man who said those things came from America's heart. Mark Twain, who was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in 1835, grew up on the nation's literal main stream, the Mississippi River, in Hannibal, Mo. Having failed to find a ship that would take him to South America and the fortune he proposed make from cocoa, by the age of 21 he had become a Mississippi-steamboat pilot. It was a job he held just briefly, but the memory of the river, its enchantments and dangers, found its way years later into his most powerful book, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
also found its way into his pen name. Mark Twain, the name he began to write under in 1863, was a river man's term meaning a depth of two fathoms, or 12 ft. (3.7 m).

When the Civil War broke out, Twain may have briefly entertained pro-Union sentiments but at length decided to serve with a ragtag bunch of Confederate irregulars. After a couple of weeks, "hunted like a rat the whole time," he thought better of that commitment and, as Huck Finn did, lit out for the territory. This territory was Nevada and California, where he prospected for silver with luck and practiced scurrilous journalism and general drunkardry with zest.

Twain first came to national attention in 1866, when he published a comical short story in dialect, which was eventually titled *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. ("You never see a frog so modest and straightforward as he was, for all he was so gifted.") It appeared in newspapers all across the country, was received as a whole new kind of hilariousness and made him famous. "At the close of the Civil War, Americans were ready for a good cleansing laugh, unthethered to bitter political argument," writes Twain's recent, so far definitive biographer, Ron Powers. And at least in this first moment of his fame, that's what Twain gave them.

In the career as an audience-convulsing lecturer that grew out of that first small triumph, Twain would become, as Powers puts it, "the nation's first rock star." We know his voice only from written descriptions of it. It was resonant enough to hold a large lecture-hall audience rapt. He spoke in a slow, backwoods drawl, with many strategic pauses. In 1891 he experimented with an Edison dictating machine but concluded that "you can't write literature with it." (He liked to have a human secretary taking notes and laughing in the right places.) But he wasn't the sort of funny man who laughs at his own jokes. In performance and in life, Twain's facial expression—except, presumably, when he was furious, which was often—was deadpan. After Twain's death, the editor of the *North American Review* recalled that he had known him for 30 years and never seen him laugh.

In the first flush of success, Twain began work on a travel book, *The Innocents Abroad*, that would bring him sizable amounts of money. In that book he simultaneously took on the pretensions of Europe and the spectacle of a bunch of comical American tourists, including himself, making a sustained encounter with an Old World that was never quite as impressive as it was supposed to be.

Travel writing was lucrative, but novels were what serious literary men were expected to produce, and from the start Twain longed to be taken seriously, to be regarded as more than "merely" a humorist. So by 1873 he had rolled out his first novel, *The Gilded Age*, which he co-wrote with a Connecticut journalist, Charles Dudley Warner. With that book's title, Twain gave the post-Civil War era, a time of boundless greed and opportunism, the name it still has and that it shares, in some quarters, with the era we seem to be willy-nilly emerging from.

Once Twain found his calling as a writer and lecturer, success came quickly and abundantly. He may have been a critic of the Gilded Age, but he wasn't shy about taking on the trappings of a successful man. When the publishing royalties came pouring in, he built in Hartford, Conn., a big, ornate, financially burdensome house in a style that's been called "steamboat Gothic." It has been fully open to the public since 1894, but recently it has run into serious financial difficulties. A few years ago the group that maintains the house added an expensive visitors' center. Now it can't afford the upkeep, and there's a danger that the house will have to close.

**He may have been a critic of the Gilded Age, but Twain wasn't shy about taking on the trappings of a successful man**

To be honest, it's a spooky place—his favorite daughter died there, ranting and raving—and all the more worth preserving for that. I played billiards there once, on Mark Twain's table, with Garrison Keillor on his radio show. (Radio is a good medium for billiards because you can lie about how many balls you are sinking.) This is not the first time the house has been threatened by debt. That happened in 1894. Back then it was due to Twain's irrational exuberance. He had set up his own publishing company, which flourished for a while but eventually went under. Even before it failed, the Clemenses were compelled to leave the house and go traveling. (In those days, believe it or not, Americans could live less expensively in Europe than at home.) Then their finances got even worse. A marvelous new kind of typesetting machine that Twain had pumped a fortune into had ultimately proved unworkable. Eventually he owed creditors about $100,000, or roughly 2 million of today's poor excuses for dollars.

But Twain declined to let his admirers organize a relief fund. He resolved to make enough money himself, writing and lecturing, to pay back every cent. "Honor is a hardier master than the law," he said, sounding considerably more righteous than usual.

But it was actually his wife, supported by Henry H. Rogers, an otherwise ruthless Standard Oil exec who had volunteered to manage Twain's money, who insisted he not take an easier way out.

Twain mostly stayed abroad for the rest of the 1890s, establishing his celebrity in Europe and touring the world, making speeches and gathering material for his final, largely acerbic travel book, *Following the Equator*. When he returned to the U.S. in 1900, the Gilded Age was fading, but America was throwing its weight around internationally. Now Twain was not only solvent again but much in vogue—"the most conspicuous person on the planet," if he did say so himself. The renewed snap in the old boy's garters resounded around the world, as he took stands on American politics that, as his biographer Powers puts it, "beggar[ed] the Democrats' timidity and the Republicans' bombast."

The Spanish-American War of 1898 had met with Twain's initial approval because he believed that the U.S. was indeed selflessly bringing freedom to Cuba by helping it throw off the yoke of Spain. But the Eagle had also taken the Philippines as a possession, and by 1899 was waging war against Filipinos who were trying to establish a republic. "Why, we have got into a mess," Twain told the Chicago *Tribune*, "a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater." The contemporary ring of that assessment is heightened by statistics. By 1902, when Philippine independence had been pretty much squelched, more than 200,000 Filipino civilians had been killed, along with 4,200 Americans.

As Twain got older and was beset by personal tragedies like the death of his beloved daughter Susy, his view of mankind grew darker. He once told his friend William Dean Howells that "the remorseless truth" in his work was generally to be found "between the lines, where the author-cat is raking dust upon it which hides from the disinterested spectator neither it nor its smell." But in 1909, when he could no longer stomach the foreign adventures of the Western powers, he came right out and called a pile of it a pile of it. In the previous year or two, Germany and Britain had seized portions of China, the British had also pursued their increasingly nasty war against the Boers in South Africa, and the U.S. had been suppressing that rebellion in the Philippines. In response, Twain published in the *New York Herald* a brief, bitter
“Salutation-Speech from the Nineteenth Century to the Twentieth.”

“I bring you the stately matron named Christendom,” he wrote, “returning be-draggled, besmirched and dishonored from pirate-raids in Kia-Chow, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of doodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass.”

Later that year he published a long essay in the North American Review. It was called “To the Person Sitting in Darkness.” The title was a biblical reference. The people in darkness were the unconverted, who had yet to see the blessed light. In fact, Twain pointed out, the problem was that they were seeing too things too clearly. After years of exposure to Western colonialism, “the People Who Sit in Darkness . . . have become suspicious of the Blessings of Civilization. More—they have begun to examine them. This is not well. The Blessings of Civilization are all right, and a good commercial property; there could not be a better, in a dim light . . . and at a proper distance, with the goods a little out of focus.”

The new century did nothing to improve his disposition. In 1901, U.S. President William McKinley was assassinated. His successor was Theodore Roosevelt, McKinley’s 42-year-old Vice President, a blustering hero of the Spanish-American War whom Twain regarded as heedlessly adventurous in his foreign policy. “The Tom Sawyer of the political world of the 20th century,” he called Roosevelt. Of course, Twain had been a great deal like Tom himself—as a boy, and as a man for that matter—but that was before becoming the conscience of a nation, “the representative, and prophetic, voice of principled American dissent,” as his biographer Powser puts it.

Shortly after becoming President, Roosevelt made news by declaring, out of the blue, that “In God We Trust” should be removed from U.S. coins because they “carried the name of God into improper places.” Twain responded, in conversation with Carnegie, that “In God We Trust” was a fine motto, “simple, direct, gracefully phrased; it always sounds well—In God We Trust. I don’t believe it would sound any better if it were true.”

Religiosity prevailed in Twain’s era but not in his heart. Though one of his closest friends, Joseph Twichell, was a minister, Twain derided religions—Christianity, in particular—and the notion of a benevolent deity. His strongest written sacrileges were not published, however, until well after his death. He was a more interesting disbeliever in some ways than today’s Bill Maher or Sam Harris or Christopher Hitchens.
Hitchens, who readily dismiss religion as inflammatory nonsense. Twain, who was full of inflammatory nonsense, could appreciate the indigenous blessedness he encountered around the world. Stopping in Benares, India, “the sacred city of sacred cities,” Twain discovered that “Hindu” stone carvings and garlands of phallic stones with enormous movement, which led him to muse on the durability of the impulse to believe. “As much as the life of religion is in the heart, not the head,” he observed, religions are hard. “Many a time we have gotten all ready for the funeral of one faith or another, and found it postponed again, on account of the weather or something.”

What put Twain off about religion was its bossiness and its alignment with corrupt community values that people—those standing to profit—insisted on calling a higher power. The very expression “moral sense” made him curl his lip. He denounced his own conscience, which frowned upon his anarchic instincts, his love of enjoyment, and made him feel guilty and rebellious.

The pivotal moment in Huckleberry Finn is when Huck decides not to do what his conscience tells him is right, to turn in “Miss Watson’s Jim” as a runaway slave. Instead, he decides to abide by his personal affection for Jim, although the upshot will be, according to all he has been taught, eternal damnation for violating the norms of society and its view that a slave is the rightful property of its owner.

As Twain became increasingly angry over the years, less the jester and more the Jeremiah, there was grumbling in some quarters that he had been better when he was funnier. (You could call this the Woody Allen problem.) The New York Times accused him of “tumbling in among us from the clouds of exile and discarding the grin of the funny man for the sour visage of the austere moralist.”

The Times had a point. As a social critic, Twain was most enjoyable when he followed his natural humorous tendency to decry folly and iniquity in all directions. This is what he was doing in Falling the Equator when he wrote, “All the territorial possessions of all the political establishments in the earth—including America, of course—consist of pilferings from other people’s wash. No tribe, however insignificant, and no nation, however mighty, occupies a foot of land that was not stolen. When the English, the French, and the Spaniards reached America, the Indian tribes had been raiding each other’s territorial clothes-lines for ages, and every acre of ground in the continent had been stolen and restolen 500 times.”

Try rallying a cause with that. Then there’s the long essay Twain produced in 1907, “The United States of Lancherdom.” This is not a single-minded polemic. It registers the horror of lynchings but also undertakes to empathize with people who attended them. Their motivation, Twain argued, is not inhuman viciousness but “man’s commonest weakness, his aversion to being unpleasantly conspicuous, pointed at, shunned, as being on the unpopular side. Its other name is Moral Cowardice, and is the commanding feature of the make-up of 9,999 men in the 10,000...”

As a remedy, Twain proposed, tongue in cheek, that sheriffs might be dispatched to communities where a lynching was about to take place. If they could rally enough citizens to oppose the hideous deed, that would make the anti-lynching position the new conventional wisdom that everyone would flock to conform to. But a problem—where to find enough sheriffs? Why not draft them from among the Christian missionaries spreading the malady of Western civilization in China? (Missionaries were a favorite target for Twain.) In China, he told his readers, “almost every convert runs a risk of catching our civilization... We ought to think twice before we encourage a risk like that; for, once civilized, China can never be uncivilized again... O compassionate missionary, leave China come home and convert these Christians!”

There is something upsetting, off-balancing, about “The United States of Lancherdom” that has kept it alive all these years. It’s against lynching, all right, but it seems to take more of an interest in being against righteousness. It makes you wonder whether you yourself, possibly, or let’s say your grandmother, might have appeared, smiling, in a photograph of a lynching mob. And just as you’re about to block out that quasiness, Twain slams in a snippet of what a particularly despicable lynching (in Texas, as it happened) was like. Oh, God. (The man was slow-roasted to death over a coal-oil fire.) And then, when he starts talking off on the missionaries? I don’t know that I want to express this opinion. But there’s no getting around it: it’s funny.

Not only was “The United States of Lancherdom” politically incorrect, it still is. It blames one of the most shameful aspects of American history on moral correctness, the herd mentality that prevailed among Americans who regarded themselves as right thinking. Twain decided that the country, or at least his readership, was not ready for that essay. It wasn’t published until 1923, when Twain’s literary executor slipped it, hedgedly edited, into a posthumous collection. Not until 2000 did it appear in its original form, and then in an obscure, scholarly publication. It takes a genius to strike the funny bone in a way that can still smart nearly 100 years later. The nation’s highest official accolade for comedy is the Kennedy Center’s Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, which will be awarded this November to the late George Carlin—another man whose commentary grew bleaker and more biting in his last years. But old Mark, unvarnished, might be too hot for cable, even today.

Blount has written introductions for six editions of Twain’s work. His next book, Alphabet Juice, will be published in October by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.