

Mark Twain

(1835–1910)

Mark Twain is the most celebrated humorist in American history. His ability to make us laugh has contributed to the singular popularity of his books, not just in Twain's own time but in following generations. It is even more surprising to find that Twain's appeal has traveled throughout the world.

The great humorist is also, ironically, our great realist. Behind the backwoods humor—especially in his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—is a revelation of the illusions that exist in American life. Huck's journey on a raft with the escaped slave Jim is not a "hymn to boyhood." It is a dramatization of the grim realities of a slaveholding society.

Although Twain became remarkably successful, his later life was shadowed by disappointment and tragedy, and as he grew older, he turned into a bitter man. He once told his friend William Dean Howells, the influential novelist and editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, "Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody."

"Mark Twain!"

Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in the backwoods of Missouri. His father, John Clemens, a bright, ambitious, but impractical Virginian, had married Jane Lampton, a witty, dynamic woman who was also a great beauty. When John's store failed in 1839, he moved his hopes and his family to Hannibal, Missouri—the Mississippi River town that Sam, writing as Mark Twain, would later fashion into the setting of the most renowned boyhood in American literature, that of Tom Sawyer.

Sam's own carefree boyhood ended at twelve when his father died. To help support his mother and sister, he went to work setting type and editing copy for the newspaper started by his older brother Orion. At



Mark Twain (1935) by Frank Edwin Larson.
Oil on canvas (48" × 36").

eighteen, Sam set out on his own. Over the next fifteen years, he worked as a printer in various towns from Missouri to the East Coast. Smitten by a love for the magical steamboats that plied the Mississippi, he apprenticed himself to the great steamboat pilot Horace Bixby. From Bixby, Sam Clemens learned the bends and shallows of the great river. It was the leadsman's cry of "Mark twain!"—announcing a water depth of two fathoms (twelve feet)—that provided Clemens with his celebrated pen name.

A Gold Mine of Humor

For a short time during the Civil War, Twain was a soldier with a company of Confederate irregulars, but he soon abandoned the military life for that of a gold prospector in Nevada. While he found little gold there, he did discover the rich mine of storytelling within himself. With his Missouri drawl and relaxed manner, Twain captivated audiences. In pretending not to recognize the coarseness or absurdity of his material, Twain maintained a deadpan attitude that added to his material's hilarity.

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Twain soon turned his comic voice to prose, working as a journalist between 1862 and 1871. In 1865, he achieved wide recognition as a humorist with the publication of his version of an old tall tale, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Four years later, Twain's dispatches from a Mediterranean tour were published as a book titled *The Innocents Abroad*. This satirical travelogue poked fun at the traditional American pilgrimage to the monuments of European civilization. It sold well, and Twain had launched a prosperous literary career.

An American Masterpiece

At thirty-five, with a raffish, barroom air about him, Twain was a dubious candidate for marriage, but he courted Olivia Langdon, the daughter of an affluent family from Elmira, New York. She was a delicate, proper woman, but Twain overcame all resistance, and in 1870, Livy's father gave the couple his consent and a lavish wedding. Twain embarked on a marriage of unceasing devotion.

In 1871, Twain moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he built an enormous home that is visited today by thousands of tourists. The next year he published *Roughing It*, which drew on his experiences as a tenderfoot in the West. Then William Dean Howells invited Twain to do a series for *The Atlantic Monthly* about his days as a riverboat pilot. Those reminiscences were eventually expanded into the book *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).

By the mid-1870s, Twain was also at work on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876). This celebration of boyhood absorbed him but presented difficulties of voice and point of view. Twain could not decide whether he was writing a book for children or for adults. Nevertheless, in writing the book he made an imaginative return to the Hannibal of his childhood and succeeded in transforming it into a compelling myth.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), Twain found the voice he had been seeking. Through Huck's natural, slangy first-person

narration, Twain caused a revolution in American literature. As Ernest Hemingway (page 682), speaking through a fictional character, later put it, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." T. S. Eliot (page 655), a fellow Missourian, added that Twain's was "a new way of writing . . . a literary language based on American colloquial speech."

Loss and Legacy

Twain was never able to duplicate the success of *Huckleberry Finn*, but he continued to produce popular books, including *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). Twain's later years were marked by financial and professional disappointment as well as personal tragedy. His fascination with business and getting ahead financially, so typical of the new middle class, led him to invest, disastrously, in the Paige typesetting machine. The economic panic of 1893 bankrupted him.

Then illness overtook the close-knit Clemens family. Susy, Twain's eldest daughter, died of meningitis in 1896. His wife, who was chronically ill during her last years, died in 1904. In a final blow, Jean, his youngest daughter, died in an epileptic seizure in 1909. "Possibly," said Twain after Jean's death, "I know now what the soldier feels when a bullet crashes through his heart." Four months later he too was dead.

As loss followed loss and as the whole country seemed to lose its vitality and become more complex, Twain turned into an obsessive, embittered old man. In his final years the subject matter of his work was his own disillusionment on a grand scale; the great comic writer appeared to be at war with the entire human race.

For Independent Reading

We recommend these books by Twain:

- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (novel)
- *Life on the Mississippi* (memoir)
- *Roughing It* (travel sketches)