

THE MAKING OF AMERICA

The Seriously Funny Man

Mark Twain was our first great political wit and a dogged defender of racial equality. Jon Stewart, Barack Obama and the rest of America are in his debt

BY RICHARD LACAYO

IN THE 1880S THE BRITISH POET AND CULTURE CRITIC Matthew Arnold paid two visits to the U.S. to observe the native customs. Eventually he set down his impressions in a book, *Civilization in the United States*. On the whole, he didn't think there was much. For one thing, he was troubled by the way Americans appeared to lack any capacity for reverence toward superior men. "If there be a discipline in which the Americans are wanting," he pronounced, "it is the discipline of awe and respect." And in that connection, one institution of American life struck him as an especially bad idea. That was what he called "the addiction to 'the funny man,' who is a national misfortune there."

Arnold didn't mention any funnyman in particular. He didn't have to. In an essay six years earlier, he had already attacked by name the most famous American funnyman of all, Mark Twain. His humor, Arnold sniffed, was "so attractive to the Philistine." It would be truer to say it was attractive to anyone who valued plain speaking and the kind of deadly wit that could cut through the cant and hypocrisy surrounding any topic, no matter how sensitive: war, sex, religion, even race. Twain was righteous without being pious, angry for all the right reasons and funny in all the right ways. You might say he gave virtue a good name.

All the same, Twain was stung by Arnold's words and prepared a reply that he never published. That's a shame, because it includes the single best one-line defense not just of himself but also of how a democratic society works in the first place. "A discriminating irreverence," he wrote, "is the creator and protector of human liberty." This would be the polite way of saying "Go stuff your awe."

Actually, it wasn't like Twain to choose the polite way to say anything. In a career that lasted more than 50 years, he was the authentic voice of American contrarianism, a man born to gore sacred cows and make rude noises in public, somebody whose idea of humanist piety was to say, "All I care to know

is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse."

And thanks to that "discriminating irreverence," by the 1880s Twain was one of the best-known living Americans, the first writer to enjoy the kind of fame reserved until then for Presidents, generals and barn-burning preachers. Not quite a century after his death, in 1910, we get a lot of our news from people like him—funnymen (and -women) who talk about things that are not otherwise funny at all. This is an election year in which some of the most closely followed commentators are comedians like Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert and the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. All of them are descended from that man in the white suit.

It could even be said that Barack Obama owes a debt to Twain. In post-Civil War America, a nation struggling to fit together the pieces of its racial puzzle, Twain spoke loud and clear about race. And in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel that qualifies as a classic by every definition but his own—"something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read"—he produced one of the wisest meditations on race in all of American literature.

So in one sense, Arnold was right: the funnyman was a national phenomenon. And still is. But it was no misfortune. Reverence and awe aren't democratic virtues. The last thing you need in a free society is people who know their place. Twain knew that. It's one reason we know *his* place—and it's up there very high. ■

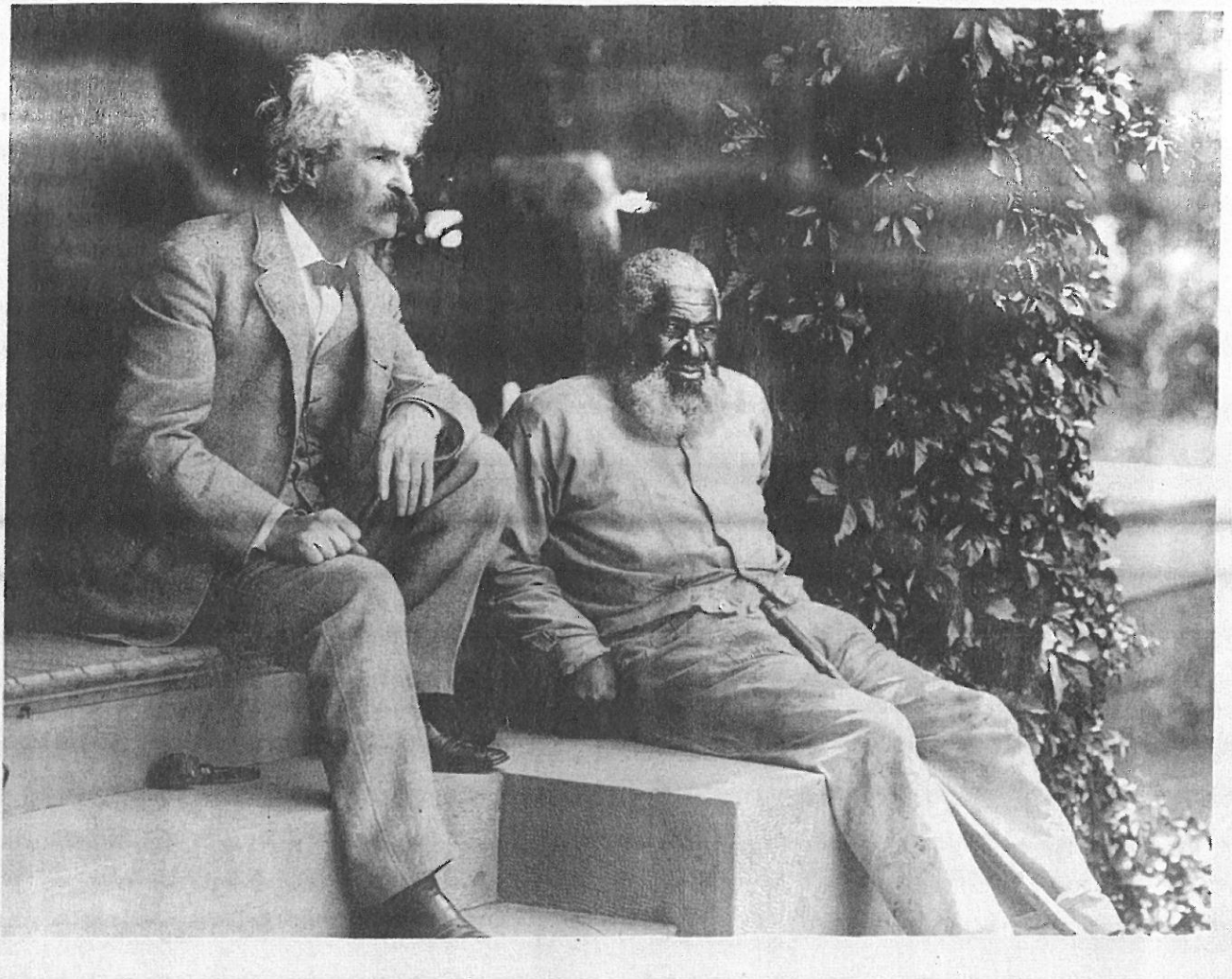
American idol Twain, pictured here in December 1908, was the first U.S. writer to achieve the kind of fame normally reserved for Presidents and generals

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Getting Past Black and White

It took a writer as deft and daring as Twain to teach Americans some useful lessons about race

BY STEPHEN L. CARTER

MARK TWAIN HAS BEEN CALLED THE inventor of the American novel. It might even be fair to call him the inventor of the American short story. And he surely deserves an additional encomium: the man who popularized the sophisticated literary attack on racism.

I say *sophisticated* because antislavery fiction—some of it by former slaves—had been a staple of the years before the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's*

Cabin is only the most famous example. These early stories dealt directly with slavery. With minor exceptions, Twain melded his attacks on slavery and prejudice into tales that were on the surface about something else entirely. He drew his readers into the argument by drawing them into the story.

Twain was born in Missouri, a slave state, and fought in the Civil War, however briefly, on the Confederate side. His

father occasionally owned a slave, and some members of his family owned many more. But Twain emerged as a man whose racial attitudes were not what one might expect from someone of his background. Again and again, in the postwar years, he seemed compelled to tackle the challenge of race.

Consider the most controversial, at least today, of Twain's novels, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Only a few books, according to the American Library Association, have been kicked off the shelves as often as *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's most widely read tale. Once upon a time, people hated the book because it struck them as coarse. Twain himself wrote that the book's banners considered the novel "trash and suitable only for the slums." More recently the book has been attacked because of the character Jim, the escaped slave whose adventures twine with Huck's, and its frequent use of the word *nigger*. (The term *Nigger Jim*, for which the novel is often excoriated, never appears in it.)

But the attacks were and are silly—and miss the point. The novel is profoundly

Old friends Twain with John Lewis, who may have partly inspired the character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*; right, an illustration from the book

antislavery. Jim's search through the slave states for the family from whom he has been forcibly parted is heroic. As the Twain scholar Jocelyn Chadwick has pointed out, the character of Jim was a first in American fiction—a recognition that the slave had two personalities, “the voice of survival within a white slave culture and the voice of the individual: Jim, the father and the man.”

There is much more. Twain's mystery novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*—aside from being one of the earliest stories to hinge on the evidence of fingerprints—stood as a challenge to the racial convictions of even many of the liberals of his day. Written at a time when the accepted wisdom held Negroes to be inferior to whites, especially in intellect, Twain's tale revolved in part around two babies switched at birth. A slave gave birth to her master's baby and, concerned lest the child be sold South, switched him in the crib for the master's baby by his wife. The slave's light-skinned child was taken to be white and grew up with both the attitudes and the education of the slaveholding class. The master's wife's baby was taken for black and grew up with the attitudes and intonations of the slave.

The thrust was difficult to miss: nurture, not nature, was the key to social status. The features of the black man that provided the stuff of prejudice—manner of speech, for example—were, to Twain, indicative of nothing other than the conditioning that slavery imposed on its victims. At the same time, he was well aware of the possibility that the oppressed might eke out moments of joy amid their sorrows. This was the subject matter of a sprightly little tale titled *A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It*, published in the 1870s. The narrator asks his 60-ish black servant, Aunt Rachel—who spent most of her life as a slave—why she is so happy all the time. The story is her answer, and I will not spoil it other than to suggest that Twain manages, in just a few pages, to lead us through the complexities of seeking happiness when your life is literally not your own.

If slavery was wrong, was it worth fighting a war to destroy it? Twain seems to have thought so. Indeed, his underappreciated short story *A Trial* may be viewed as a justification for the Civil War. *A Trial* tells of a ship's captain who dotes on his first mate, a black man. The ship docks at an



ON THE RAFT.

island, where Bill Noakes, the self-proclaimed toughest man on the island, charges on board and demands to fight the captain, who promptly dumps him into the water. The next night, the same thing occurs. A week later, evidently enraged by his humiliation, Noakes murders the captain's beloved

mate. The captain storms ashore and tells all the other captains that he means to hang Noakes for murder. They insist on a trial. The captain argues that none is necessary, since everyone agrees that Noakes is guilty, and then proposes to do the hanging before the trial. But in the end, the trial is held, Noakes is convicted, and the captain hangs him.

The analogy to the Civil War is clear. At first Noakes is merely an irritant whom the captain is satisfied merely to fight and hold at bay. Only after Noakes murders the Negro mate does the captain suddenly gird for battle, demanding an end to the man's life despite the objections of the

Twain melded his attacks on slavery and prejudice into tales that were, on the surface, about something else entirely

other captains, who seem to want him to be treated more gently. It is by the captain's single-minded will that Noakes is brought to justice—much like Lincoln's single-minded will in fighting a war that began as a struggle over union and was transformed into a holy war against slavery.

Twain himself, of course, joined up on the Southern side. In his justifiably famous 1885 essay *The Private History of a Campaign That Failed*, he describes how he knocked about from one position on the war to another, evidently following in the footsteps of his buddies. One striking aspect of his tale is the groping inability of any of the several members of his ragtag militia to assign a reason for their struggle. The essay is in that sense better understood as a part of Twain's significant antiwar oeuvre, a category in which, for example, his essay *The War Prayer* also belongs. So does *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, in which we discover exactly where great generals rank.

Twain plainly thought war a foolish thing, and when, in *Private History*, he pulls his gun and kills a man riding through the

woods, thinking him an enemy, we can feel for Twain and his young companions, standing there trembling in the darkness, wishing they could bring their victim back to life. After only two weeks' service, he resigned his commission. In his autobiography, Twain explains that he was “incapacitated by fatigue” through persistent retreating.”

Relations between blacks and whites were hardly the limits of Twain's concern over race. His essay *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy* discusses a young man arrested in San Francisco for “stoning Chinamen.” After laying out the many ways in which Chinese immigrants were persecuted in California, Twain expresses little surprise that the young man might have learned to say to himself, “Ah, there goes a Chinaman! God will not love me if I do not stone him.” Twain's essay *About Smells* notes that in Heaven, one will meet people of all races—he lists a few—but not, alas, the “good Christian friend” who spends all his time complaining.

Twain's racial pitch was not perfect. One is left uneasy, for example, by the lengthy passage in his autobiography about how much he loved what were called “nigger shows” in his youth—these were minstrel shows, mostly with white men performing in blackface—and his delight in getting his prim mother to laugh at them. Yet there is no reason to think Twain saw the shows as representing reality. His frequent assaults on slavery and prejudice suggest his keen awareness that they did not. The shows were simply a form of entertainment popular all over the country in the 19th century, a part of the background against which he grew into his firm adult convictions.

Was Twain a racist? Asking the question in the 21st century is as sensible as asking the same of Lincoln. If we read the words and attitudes of the past through the pompous “wisdom” of the considered moral judgments of the present, we will find nothing but error. Lincoln, who believed the black man the inferior of the white, prosecuted and won a war to free him nevertheless. And Twain, raised in a slave state, briefly a member of a Confederate militia, and inventor of Jim, may have done more to rile the nation over racial injustice and rouse its collective conscience than any other novelist in the past century who has lifted a pen.

Or typed on a computer. ■



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Notes: Twain Time articles

The Seriously Funny Man:

1. Explain/describe Matthew Arnold's criticism of Twain and America:

2. Twain's response to the criticism: "A discriminating irreverence is the creator and protector of human liberty." What does that mean?

3. Twain quote: "All I care to know is that a man is a human being – that is enough for me; he can't be any worse." What does he mean / what does that show about Twain?

4. What does the article say is Twain's connection to today?

Getting Past Black and White

1. What is the main point of this article? What argument is the writer trying to make about Twain?

2. Describe what you know about Twain's experience as a Confederate soldier:

3. Why are these texts considered important in terms of race?

A. Huckleberry Finn

B. Pudd'nhead Wilson

C. A Trial

4. In what ways does the author show Twain had flaws in terms of his racial views?

5. In your own words, how does the writer connect Lincoln and Twain?