



MARK TWAIN AS “THE TRUE FATHER OF OUR NATIONAL LITERATURE AND A WRITER OF SUBSTANCE”

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Abstract

This article is attempt to projects Mark Twain as the true father of our National Literature and a Writer of Substance and Twain matured into the role of the seemingly naïve wise fool whose caustic sense of humor forced his audience to recognize humanity’s foolishness and society’s myriad injustices. At the same time, he was deeply pessimistic about the future. His longing for an idealized past as a haven from an increasingly hostile present is evident in most of his major works of fiction. His importance to World Literature lies not in the power of his ideas, but in the universality of his characters’ dilemmas and the accessibility of his works to readers of all ages.

Keywords: Universality, Humanity, Spiritual Rejuvenation, Perception of existence, and Adventures.

Mark Twain (1835-1910) was an American novelist, short story and novella writer, journalist, essayist, memoirist, autobiographer and dramatist. He was born in Florida, Missouri. During 1848-69, he worked as a printer, reporter and even as a steam boat pilot. He was a typical son of the westward migration. His thoughts expressed themselves in the patterns he had learned in Missouri and on the River before the Civil War. The river left an indelible imprint on his imagination. He wrote several novels, anecdotes, speculations, recollections, diatribes and later on autobiography. Considered as the Father of modern American literature, Mark Twain is said to have broken with the genteel traditions of the nineteenth century by endowing his characters and narratives with the natural speech patterns of the common man, scholars recognized in Twain a man divided in outlook between comic and tragic perceptions of existence.

Mark Twain is often regarded as a humorist and children’s writer, though very serious subjects are treated in such perennially popular books as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Initially, a clowning humorist, Twain matured into the role of the seemingly naïve wise fool whose caustic sense of humor forced his audience to recognize humanity’s foolishness and society’s myriad injustices. Later, crushed by personal tragedy, economic hardship and ill-health, Twain turned on “the damned human race, “portraying it as the totally corrupt plaything of a cruel God. Twain grew up in the Mississippi river town of Hannibad, Missouri, whose land marks and people later secured as models for the settings and characters of many of his novels, particularly the adventures of Tom Sawyer. The popular Children’s book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the first of four novels set in Twain’s native Mississippi Valley appeared in 1876. Immediately afterwards, he began to work on Tom Sawyer’s sequel, a novel concerning burst of inspiration during the next eight years. Though critically misunderstood and banned from public libraries upon its appearance in 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* came to be recognized by later critics as a masterpiece. The meaning of the book which details a young boy’s encounters with the barbarities of civilization has been debated for nearly a century, most notably by Lionel Trilling, T. S. Eliot and Henry Nash Smith.



Throughout his career, Mark Twain looked back yearningly to his happy youthful days on the Mississippi, finding in his memories spiritual rejuvenation and inspiration. At the same time, he was deeply pessimistic about the future. His longing for an idealized past as a haven from an increasingly hostile present is evident in most of his major works of fiction. As De Voto and other critics have noted, Twain can be found on both sides of every issue: immortality, war and the social problems of the South. His importance to World Literature lies not in the power of his ideas, but in the universality of his characters' dilemmas and the accessibility of his works to readers of all ages. While Mark Twain's literary merits were very much of the uproarious and topsy-turvy kind, his personal merits were very much of the stoical or even puritanical kind. While irresponsibility was the energy in his writings, an almost excessive responsibility was the energy in his character. The artistic European might feel that he was perhaps too comic when he was comic. But such a European would also feel that he was too serious when he was serious. The wit of Mark Twain was avowedly and utterly of the extravagant order. It had that quality of mad logic carried further and further into the void, a quality in which many strange civilizations are at one. It is a system of extremes and all extremes meet in it. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* took Mark Twain from epic to comedy. To a delicate taste, indeed, the book seems occasionally overloaded with matters brought in at moments when no necessity in the narrative calls for them. The boyish superstitions, delectable as they are in themselves, tend to lug Tom Sawyer to the documentary side of the line which divides documents from works of art. Nor can the murder about which the story is built up be said to dominate it very thoroughly.

Mark Twain drives with careless seagging reins, but he holds the general direction. Most of his readers remember certain episodes particularly the whitewashing of the fence and the appearance of the boys at their own funeral, rather than the story as a whole. Twain was so generous to the boys in "Tom Sawyer" that he let them do more than merely play at being pirates. He gave them adventures that all boys, in their longing dreams, may believe to have. He made extravagant, dramatic things happen to them, they were pitted against murderers, won their lady lovers and discovered hidden gold. He made them so real that their very reality is the stimulus of the adult readers' laughter, but he embedded this reality in the romance of a plot as true to the conventional rules of mid nineteenth century romantic novel writing as it was to the day-dreams of the boy Mark Twain himself had been. If one would lay his finger upon the secret of Mark Twain's world wide popularity as a humorist, he must find that secret primarily in the universality and humanity of his humor. His hold upon the world is due to qualities, not of the head but of the heart. He has always written with utter individuality untrammelled by the limitation of any particular sect of art. H.Z. Mencken rightly states, "In such a work as Huckleberry Finn, there is something that vastly transcends the merit of all ordinary books. It has a merit that is special and extraordinary; it lifts itself above all hollow standards and criteria; it seems greater every time I read it" (48).

"Tom Sawyer" seems to be a boy's book and a very good one. The River and the Boy make their appearance in it; the narrative is good and there is a very good picture of society in a small mid-western river town a hundred years ago. But the point of view of the narrator is that of an adult observing a boy. And Tom is the ordinary boy though of quicker wits, and livelier imagination. Tom is very much the boy that Mark Twain had been. He is remembered and described as he seemed to his elders rather than created. Huck Finn, on the other hand, is the boy that Mark Twain still was, at the time of writing his adventures. We look at Tom as the smiling adult does; Huck we do not look at. We see the world through his eyes. The two boys are not merely different types; they were brought into existence by different processes. Hence in the second book their roles are altered. In the first book, Huck is merely



the humble friend – almost a variant of the traditional valet of comedy; and we see him as he is seen by the conventional respectable society to which Tom belongs and of which, we feel sure, Tom will one day become an eminently respectable and conventional member. In the second book, their nominal relationship remains the same; but here it is Tom who has the secondary role. The author was probably not conscious of this, when he wrote the first two chapters: Huckleberry Finn is not the kind of story in which the author knows, from the beginning, ‘what is going to happen’. Tom then disappears from our view; and when he returns, he has only two functions. The first is to provide a foil for Huck. Huck’s persisting admiration for Tom only exhibits more clearly to our eyes the unique qualities of the former and the commonplaceness of the latter. Tom has the imagination of a lively boy who has read a good deal of romantic fiction; he might, of course, become a writer – he might become Mark Twain or rather, he might become the more commonplace aspect of Mark Twain. Huck has not imagination, in the sense in which Tom has it; he has instead vision. He sees the real world and does not judge it he allows to judge itself.

Both ‘Tom Sawyer’ and ‘Huckleberry Finn’ appeal to all ages and every age. The young and the old read them with great delight over and over again and find something new in their pages in every reading. Both belong to the nineteenth century, before the Civil War in America. The institution of slavery was flourishing in the Southern States of America, against all the efforts of Abolitionists. It is an authentic picture of the life in the Southern States during Twain’s period. The following extract underlines the importance of these great novels and its author Mark Twain as the father of American literature, “Twentieth century critics have been more appreciative of Twain as a writer of substance, H. Z. Mencken called Twain “the true father of our National literature. In confirmation of this judgment, Ernest Hemingway, in *‘The Green Hills of Africa’* (1935) declared, “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn”. William Faulkner said of Twain, “All of us...are his heirs” and T.S. Eliot has summed up the debt of these modern writers when he said Twain discovered a new way of writing....a “language based on American Colloquial Speech”.

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