

# Mark Twain

“THE FIRST TRULY AMERICAN WRITER”

William Faulkner called Mark Twain “the first truly American writer;” Eugene O’Neill dubbed him “the true father of American literature.” Charles Darwin kept *Innocents Abroad* on his bedside table, within easy reach when he wanted to clear his mind and relax at bedtime. *The Gilded Age* gave an entire era its name. Joseph Conrad often thought of *Life on the Mississippi* when he commanded a steamer on the Congo. Friedrich Nietzsche admired *Tom Sawyer*. Lu Xun was so entranced by *Eve’s Diary* that he had it translated into Chinese. Ernest Hemingway claimed that “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*,” while his fellow Nobel Laureate Kenzaburō Ōe cited *Huck* as the book that spoke so powerfully to his condition in war-torn Japan that it inspired him to write his first novel.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the phrase “New Deal” from *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, a book which led science fiction giant Isaac Asimov to credit Twain (along with Jules Verne) with having invented time travel. When José Martí read *Yankee*, he was so moved by Twain’s depiction of “the vileness of those who would climb atop their fellow man, feed upon his misery, and drink from his misfortune” that he wanted to “set off for Hartford [Connecticut] to shake his hand.”

Twain has been called the American Cervantes, our Homer, our Tolstoy, our Shakespeare, our Rabelais. From the breezy slang and deadpan humor that peppered his earliest comic sketches to the unmistakably American characters who populated his fiction, Twain’s writings introduced readers around the world to American personalities speaking in distinctively American cadences. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was America’s literary Declaration of Independence, a book no Englishman could have written—a book that expanded the democratic possibilities of what a modern novel could do and what it could be.

Twain helped define the rhythms of our prose and the contours of our moral map. He saw our best and our worst, our extravagant promise and our stunning failures, our comic foibles and our tragic flaws. He understood better than we did ourselves American dreams and aspirations, our potential for greatness and our potential for disaster. His fictions brilliantly illuminated the world in which he lived and the world we inherited, changing it—and us—in the process. He knew that our feet often danced to tunes that had somehow remained beyond our hearing; with perfect pitch he played them back to us.

His unerring sense of the right word and not its second cousin taught people to pay attention when he spoke, in person or in print (“The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter—it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”).

Twain’s quirky, ambitious, strikingly original fiction and nonfiction engaged some of the perennially thorny, messy, challenges we are still grappling with today—such as the challenge of making sense of a nation founded on freedom by men who held slaves; or the puzzle of our continuing faith in technology in the face of our awareness of its destructive powers; or the problem of imperialism and the difficulties involved in getting rid of it. Indeed, it would be difficult to find an issue on the horizon today that Twain did not touch on somewhere in his work. Heredity vs. environment? Animal rights? The boundaries of gender? The place of black voices in the cultural heritage of the United States? Twain was there. Satirist Dick Gregory once said that Twain “was so far ahead of his time that he shouldn’t even be talked about on the same day as other people.”

At the beginning of his career Twain was lauded as a talented humorist. But the comic surface turned out to mask unexpected depths. (“Yes, you are right,” Twain wrote a friend in 1902, “I am a moralist in disguise.”) Time and time again Twain defied readers’ expectations, forging unforgettable narratives from materials that had previously not been the stuff of literature. As William Dean Howells once put it, “He saunters out into the trim world of letters, and lounges across its neatly kept paths, and walks about on the grass at will, in spite of all the signs that have been put up from the beginning of literature, warning people of dangers and penalties for the slightest trespass.”

Humane, sardonic, compassionate, impatient, hilarious, appalling, keenly observant and complex, Twain inspired great writers in the 20th century to become the writers they became—not just in the U.S., but around the world. Writers marveled at the art Twain wrought from the speech of ordinary people—speech whose previous appearance in literature had most often been treated with ridicule. Jorge Luis Borges observed that in *Huckleberry Finn* “for the first time an American writer used the language of America without affectation.” Twain taught American authors from Arthur Miller to David Bradley, Ralph Ellison, Ursula LeGuin, Toni Morrison, and countless others important lessons about the craft of fiction. Some key figures in the visual arts, as well, found reading Mark Twain transformative. Cartoonist Chuck Jones, for example, who played a key role in developing such icons of American popular culture as Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, and Bugs Bunny tracks these characters back to his early reading of Mark Twain’s *Roughing It*.

Born in 1835 in the village of Florida, Missouri, Sam Clemens (who would take the name of “Mark Twain” in 1863) spent his boyhood in the town of Hannibal, Missouri. In 1847, when his father died, eleven-year-old Sam ended his formal schooling and became a printer’s apprentice in a local newspaper office, later working as a journeyman printer in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. He spent two years learning the river and becoming a riverboat pilot, but his career on the river was ended by the Civil War. After spending two weeks in a ragtag unit of the Missouri State Guard that was sympathetic to the Confederacy, he set out for the Nevada Territory with his brother and tried to strike it rich mining silver. Although he failed as a prospector, he succeeded as a journalist. He got his first taste of national fame when his “Jumping Frog” story appeared in 1865. He courted Olivia Langdon of Elmira, New York and published *Innocents Abroad* in 1869, to great popular acclaim. He married, started a family, and began writing the books for which he is best known today while living in the family mansion he

built in Hartford, Connecticut. Financial problems forced him to close the house and relocate the family to Europe in the early 1890s. Later in that decade he would pull himself out of bankruptcy by embarking on a lecture tour that took him to Africa and Asia. As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, he condemned his country—and several European powers—for the imperialist adventures they had pursued around the world and became vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League. The accolades and honors bestowed upon him in his later years—honorary degrees, birthday celebrations—failed to fill the hole in his heart created by the death of his wife and two of his daughters. He died in 1910.

In 1899, *The London Times* dubbed Twain “Ambassador at Large of the U.S.A.” He had seen more of the world than any major American writer had before him, and his books would be translated into over seventy languages. Cartoonists made him as recognizable an icon worldwide as “Uncle Sam.” Twain was one of the country’s first genuinely cosmopolitan citizens, someone who felt as at home in the world as in his native land.

“What is the most rigorous law of our being?” Twain asked in a paper he delivered the year *Huckleberry Finn* was published. His answer? “Growth. No smallest atom of

our moral, mental or physical structure can stand still a year.... In other words, we change—and must change, constantly, and keep on changing as long as we live.” This child of slaveholders who grew up to write a book that many view as the most profoundly anti-racist novel by an American clearly spoke from his own experience. Troubled by his own failure to question the unjust status quo during his Hannibal childhood, Twain became a compelling critic of people’s ready acceptance of what he called “the lie of silent assertion”—the “silent assertion that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men are aware of and are engaged by their duty to try to stop.” Experience also taught him not to underestimate the transformative power of humor. The greatest satirist America has produced wrote that the human “race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter. Power, Money, Persuasion, Supplication, Persecution—these can lift at a colossal humbug,—push it a little—crowd it a little—weaken it a little, century by century: but only Laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand.”

Dr. Shelley F. Fishkin  
Stanford University, 2010

## SELECTED WORKS BY

# Mark Twain

### *Innocents Abroad* ★ 1869

Mark Twain was a 32-year-old newspaperman when he wrote *Innocents Abroad*, a collection of reports to newspapers on a voyage he took to Europe and the Holy Land with a group of American tourists. It was Twain’s first major book and also his best-selling book in his own lifetime. Much of his trademark humor focuses here on his stance as a disillusioned innocent, a no-nonsense traveler who discovers that the inflated accounts of famous sights in previous travel books are often far from reality. As William Dean Howells wrote in a review, Twain’s gift is that he writes “always good-humored humor,” which is “even in its impudence charming.”

#### “Eating in France”

In this passage, as in all of his travel books, Mark Twain satirizes both European customs and those of his fellow Americans.

“We have learned to go through the lingering routine of the table d’hote with patience, with serenity, with satisfaction. We take soup, then wait

a few minutes for the fish; a few minutes more and the plates are changed, and the roast beef comes; another change and we take peas; change again and take lentils; change and take snail patties (I prefer grasshoppers); change and take roast chicken and salad; then strawberry pie and ice cream; then green figs, pears, oranges, green almonds, etc.; finally coffee. Wine with every course, of course, being in France. With such a

cargo on board, digestion is a slow process, and we must sit long in the cool chambers and smoke—and read French newspapers, which have a strange fashion of telling a perfectly straight story till you get to the “nub” of it, and then a word drops in that no man can translate, and that story is ruined. An embankment fell on some Frenchmen yesterday, and the papers are full of it today—but whether those sufferers were killed, or crippled, or bruised, or only scared is more than I can possibly make out, and yet I would just give anything to know.

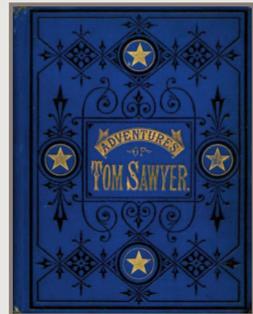
We were troubled a little at dinner today by the conduct of an American, who talked very loudly and coarsely and laughed boisterously where all others were so quiet and well behaved. He ordered wine with a royal flourish and said: “I never dine without wine, sir” (which was a pitiful falsehood), and looked around upon the company to bask in the admiration he expected to find in their faces. All these airs in a land where they would as soon expect to leave the soup out of the bill of fare as the wine!—in a land where wine is nearly as common among all ranks as water! This fellow said: “I am a free-born sovereign, sir, an American, sir, and I want everybody to know it!” He did not mention that he was a lineal descendant of Balaam’s ass, but everybody knew that without his telling it.”



*Innocents Abroad* ★ 1869, Frontispiece illustration by True Williams from first edition.

### *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* ★ 1876

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) had disappointing sales when it appeared, but in time it has become one of Twain’s most popular works. Twain started out to write a parody of earlier American children’s novels that had popularized model good boys. The prank-playing Tom is a good-bad boy, the kind of 13-year-old who dreams of escaping school and playing pirates or Robin Hood. Tom is “mischievous but not vicious,” one reviewer said. But a source of the book’s enduring attraction



*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* ★ 1876, Sales prospectus cover.

is that it is an enchanting idyll of American small town life, a “hymn to boyhood,” as Twain later recognized.

#### “Tom Sawyer and his pals attend their own funeral service”

Tom and his pals Joe Harper and Huck Finn have run away for several days. The town mistakenly thinks the boys have drowned in the Mississippi River and holds a funeral service for them.

As the service proceeded, the clergyman drew such pictures of the graces, the winning ways, and the rare promise of the lost lads that every soul there, thinking he recognized these pictures, felt a pang in remembering that he had persistently blinded himself to them always before, and had as persistently seen only faults and flaws in the poor boys. The minister related many a touching incident in the lives of the departed, too, which illustrated their sweet, generous natures, and the people could easily see, now, how noble and beautiful those were, and remembered with grief that at the time they occurred they had seemed rank rascalities, well deserving of the cowhide. The congregation became more and more moved, as the pathetic tale went on, till at last the whole company broke down and joined the weeping mourners in a chorus of anguished sobs, the preacher himself giving way to his feelings, and crying in the pulpit.

There was a rustle in the gallery, which nobody noticed; a moment later the church door creaked; the minister raised his streaming eyes above his handkerchief, and stood transfixed! First one and then another pair of eyes followed the minister’s, and then almost with one impulse the congregation rose and stared while the three dead boys came marching up the aisle, Tom in the lead, Joe next, and Huck, a ruin of drooping rags, sneaking sheepishly in the rear! They had been hid in the unused gallery listening to their own funeral sermon!

Aunt Polly, Mary, and the Harpers threw themselves upon their restored ones, smothered them with kisses and poured out thanksgivings, while poor Huck stood abashed and uncomfortable, not knowing exactly what to do or where to hide from so many unwelcoming eyes. He wavered, and started to slink away, but Tom seized him and said:

“Aunt Polly, it ain’t fair. Somebody’s got to be glad to see Huck.”

“And so they shall. I’m glad to see him, poor motherless thing!” And the loving attentions Aunt Polly lavished upon him were the one thing capable of making him more uncomfortable than he was before.

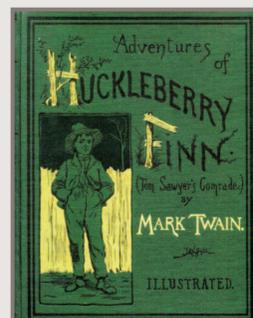
Suddenly the minister shouted at the top of his voice: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow—SING!—and put your hearts in it!”

And they did. Old Hundred swelled up with a triumphant burst, and while it shook the rafters Tom Sawyer the Pirate looked around upon the envying juveniles about him and confessed in his heart that this was the proudest moment of his life.

As the “sold” congregation trooped out they said they would almost be willing to be made ridiculous again to hear Old Hundred sung like that once more.

### *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ★ 1876

On its face *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the great boys’ adventure stories. Two run-aways—Huck, an outcast escaping a brutal father, and Jim, a slave in the pre-Civil War South seeking freedom in the North—float down the vast Mississippi River on a raft and encounter a gallery of rascals, con men, and backwoods yokels. On a deeper



*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ★ 1876, First edition cover.

level the novel builds to one of the great moral choices in all of literature—the moment when Huck, remembering his friendship with Jim, goes against all that his upbringing has taught him as right and Huck decides to help Jim to freedom. When he says,

“All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” it’s a triumph of existential emotion over the false abstractions of society and its moral codes. Twain wrote of this novel in his notebook: “A book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat.”

#### “It’s lovely to live on a raft”

This novel is told from the point of view of an uneducated boy, Huckleberry Finn, living in the backwoods of America in the mid-1800s. His vernacular voice liberates Twain’s descriptive gifts.

“Sometimes we’d have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It’s lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could a laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn’t say nothing against it, because I’ve seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done.”

### *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* ★ 1889

Many of Mark Twain’s obsessions come together in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889), a time-travel fantasy novel. A deeply practical American of the 19th century—the factory superintendent Hank Morgan—finds himself in King Arthur’s Camelot in the sixth century. In a series of contests, he outwits Merlin, the royal wizard; becomes the king’s chief minister; and tries to turn Camelot into a modern democracy. Twain satirizes chivalry and pokes much fun at European aristocracy and religious superstition. By the apocalyptic ending, however, the novel’s mood has darkened, and it prefigures the bleak, bitter humor that will come to the fore in many of Twain’s last works.



*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* ★ 1889, Frontispiece illustration from first edition.

#### “A Humorist in the Sixth Century”

This excerpt is Hank Morgan’s account of King Arthur’s court humorist.

Sir Dinadan the Humorist was the first to awake, and he soon roused the rest with a practical joke of a sufficiently poor quality. He tied some metal mugs to a dog’s tail and turned him loose, and he tore around and around the place in a frenzy of fright, with all the other dogs bellowing after him and battering and crashing against everything that came in their way and making altogether a chaos of confusion and a most deafening din and turmoil; at which every man and woman of the multitude laughed till the tears flowed, and some fell out of their chairs and wallowed on the floor in ecstasy. It was just like so many children. Sir Dinadan was so proud of his exploit that he could not keep from telling over and over again, to weariness, how the immortal idea happened to occur to him; and as is the way with humorists of his breed, he was still laughing at it after everybody else had got through. He was so set up that he concluded to make a speech—of course a humorous speech. I think I never heard so many old played-out jokes strung together in my life. He was worse than the minstrels, worse than the clown in the circus. It seemed peculiarly sad to sit here, thirteen hundred years before I was born, and listen again to poor, flat, worm-eaten jokes that had given me the dry gripes when I was a boy thirteen hundred years afterwards. It about convinced me that there isn’t any such thing as a new joke possible. Everybody laughed at these antiquities—but then they always do; I had noticed that, centuries later. However, of course the scoffer didn’t laugh—I mean the boy. No, he scoffed; there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t scoff at. He said the most of Sir Dinadan’s jokes were rotten and the rest were petrified. I said “petrified” was good; as I believed, myself, that the only right way to classify the majestic ages of some of those jokes was by geologic periods. But that neat idea hit the boy in a blank place, for geology hadn’t been invented yet. However, I made a note of the remark, and calculated to educate the commonwealth up to it if I pulled through. It is no use to throw a good thing away merely because the market isn’t ripe yet.