

Mark Twain

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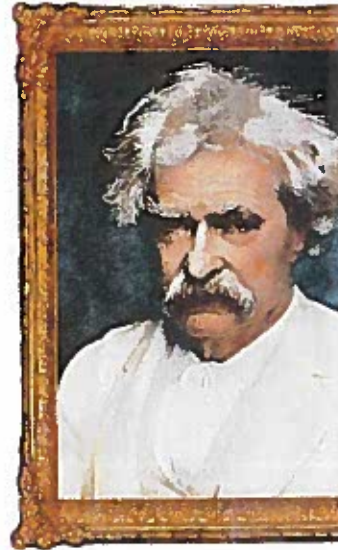
The human race has one really effective weapon, and that is laughter."

-Mark Twain



An American Legend

For generations of readers, Mark Twain has embodied the spirit of America. A poor boy who worked his way to international fame, Twain used his comic genius to comment on human nature and the pretensions of his day. Read more about this American spokesman who made people laugh even as he made them think about themselves and their society.



1835-1910

“THE FASCINATION OF RIVER LIFE”

On November 30, 1835, Mark Twain was born as Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri. When Clemens was four years old, his family moved some 30 miles to the Mississippi River town of Hannibal, a bustling port of about 500 people. When he was 11, his father died of pneumonia. To help support the family, Clemens took jobs as a grocery clerk and delivery boy. When he was 13, a local print shop hired him as an apprentice, and a few years

1835
Is born Nov. 30 as Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri

1839
Moves with family to Hannibal, Missouri

1846
Clemens's father dies

1830

1840



1835
Halley's comet appears.

1836
Martin Van Buren is elected president.

1838
Native Americans walk the Trail of Tears.

1848
Gold is discovered in California.

LITERARY Contributions

Many writers and critics hail Mark Twain as an author whose work has had a lasting effect on 20th-century fiction. One of them, Ernest Hemingway, remarked that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain, called *Huckleberry Finn*." Twain's ability to bring ordinary American voices into the realm of art is demonstrated in these major works:

Novels

- The Gilded Age* (1873)
- The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)
- The Prince and the Pauper* (1881)
- The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

Tales and Sketches

- The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches* (1867)
- Mark Twain's Sketches, New and Old* (1875)
- The Stolen White Elephant and Other Stories* (1882)

Travel Sketches

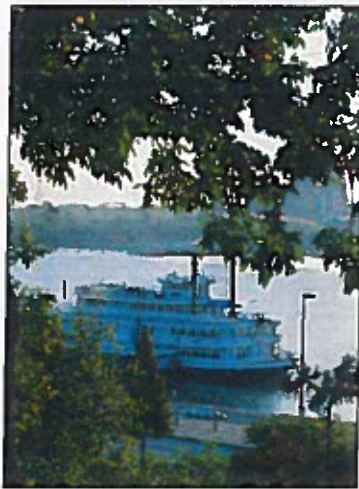
- The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

Other Works

- Roughing It* (1872)
- Life on the Mississippi* (1883)
- How to Tell a Story and Other Essays* (1897)
- Mark Twain's Autobiography* (incomplete at his death; published posthumously in 1924)

later, he became a pressman at his brother Orion's newspaper. Before long, he was writing comic sketches for the newspaper and itching to travel.

Clemens left Hannibal at the age of 18. Four years later, he decided to seek his fortune in South America. He boarded a Mississippi River steamboat for New Orleans, but along the way, he made a life-changing decision. Horace Bixby, a veteran steamboat pilot whom Clemens met on the voyage, taught him "how to steer the boat and thus made the fascination of river life more potent than ever" for Clemens. Under Bixby's stern guidance, Clemens became a licensed riverboat pilot. He reveled in a job that suited his love of freedom. And he got an education. Clemens wrote later, "When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before—met him on the river."



The steamboat caught the imagination of young Sam Clemens.

1851
Takes job at his brother Orion's newspaper

Clemens as a young man



1859
Becomes Mississippi riverboat pilot

1863
Starts using the pen name Mark Twain

1865
Earns national fame with "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"

1869
Publishes *The Innocents Abroad*, based on his travels

1850

1852
Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

1860

1860
Abraham Lincoln is elected president.

1861
The Civil War begins.

1863
Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation.

1865
The Confederacy surrenders at Appomattox; Lincoln is assassinated.

1868
President Johnson is impeached; Grant is elected president.

Author Study: Mark Twain

“A PICNIC ON A GRAND SCALE” In 1861, when the Civil War halted shipping on the Mississippi, 26-year-old Clemens traveled west to Nevada with his brother. At first, he tried mining and prospecting for gold and silver—a dismal failure that turned him back to writing. In 1862, he took a \$25-a-week job as a journalist for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*. In 1863, he published his first article under the pen name “Mark Twain,” riverboat jargon for water two fathoms, or 12 feet, deep—water just deep enough to keep a steamboat safely afloat. By the time Twain left the West three years later, his star was rising. He debuted as a stage performer, riveting audiences with his entertaining stories. Even more important, he had won national fame with his humorous tale “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”

Twain sailed to Europe and the Middle East in 1867, enjoying “a picnic on a grand scale,” as he put it. Along the way, he supplied irreverent newspaper articles about his fellow travelers and foreign manners to papers in California and New York City. Later, Twain expanded the articles into his first and highly

successful book, *The Innocents Abroad*. But the trip had another important consequence, too. Aboard ship, Twain met Charley Langdon, the 18-year-old son of a wealthy New York coal merchant. One day Charley showed Twain a picture of his handsome older sister, Olivia, and from that moment, Twain was charmed.

Twain and Olivia Langdon were married in 1870, and the couple settled in Hartford, Connecticut. Over the next two decades, Twain focused his talents and energies on serious writing, producing his greatest works. Among the most important were *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and his masterpiece, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). It was also during these years that Twain matured into America’s first celebrity author.

As America developed a national identity, people looked to writers like Twain to create true-to-life images of Americans. Twain’s characters reflected the reality of a new nation that was growing rapidly. His realism, his truthful imitation of real life, won him national favor. All over the country, people felt they knew this shaggy-haired, drawling

1870
Marries
Olivia
Langdon



1876
Publishes
*The Adventures
of Tom Sawyer*



1884
Launches a
publishing
company

1885
Publishes
*The Adventures of
Huckleberry Finn*

1870

1880

1876
George Custer
is killed at
Little Bighorn.

1879
F. W. Woolworth
opens his five-and-
ten-cent store.

1880
John D. Rockefeller's
Standard Oil
Company of Ohio
controls U.S.
refining business.

1886
Statue of
Liberty is
dedicated.



character who made a splash in his trademark white suit.

“A VAST EMPTINESS” In the last decades of his life, Twain suffered one painful loss after another. A publishing business he began in the 1880s failed in 1894, forcing him to declare bankruptcy. For several years, Twain wrote and lectured abroad at a grueling pace in order to repay his debts and rebuild his fortune. Between 1896 and 1910, the loss of his cherished Hartford mansion and the death of his wife and two of his daughters plunged him into despair. Twain wrote intensely during this painful period, but his humor grew more biting. After the death of his daughter Jean on Christmas Eve, 1909, Twain fell ill. Feeling lost in “a vast emptiness,” he died a few months later, on April 21.

The Gilded Age

The last three decades of the 19th century were characterized by an explosive growth in technology, which was accompanied by a growth in corruption in politics, business, and society. Between 1870 and 1890, the gap between the rich and the poor grew wider than ever before.



For example, on one side of New York City, elegant and ornate hotels and mansions flourished, yet many people in the city were living in shanty towns or tenements. Mark Twain dubbed this period “the Gilded Age”—a satirical commentary on the extravagant displays of the wealthy.

Mrs. Jay Gould, 1908



More Online: Author Link
www.mcdougallittell.com

1894 Publishing company goes bankrupt
1895 Begins overseas lecture tour to raise money

1901 Death of Olivia on June 5

1910 Dies April 21 at Redding, Connecticut

1890

1890 Immigration to America by Europeans soars.

1900

1903 W. E. B. Du Bois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.
1904 Theodore Roosevelt is elected president.

1910

1909 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People forms.
1910 Halley's comet returns.