

Is Mark Twain the greatest writer America has yet produced? Many people would answer that question in the affirmative, but perhaps such a question should not be asked in the first place. Leaving aside the matter of whether it is even possible to answer such a question, it should be enough to say that Twain *is* a great writer. Proof in support of this assertion lies in the fact that fully a century after his death people continue to read his books avidly—even when they are not assigned in school—and scholars continue to offer new and often exciting interpretations of his life and work.

In 1906, four years before Twain died, he observed that over the course of the preceding century, 220,000 books had been published in the United States, but “not a bathtub-full of them are still alive and marketable.” That statement may contain some exaggeration, but Twain’s essential point is as true now as it was then: few books outlive their authors. Indeed, this may have been especially true for nineteenth-century American novelists, most of whom are utterly forgotten today. There are exceptions, of course, and of these, Twain is clearly the most outstanding example. In the year 2010—a full century after Twain died—not only were most of his books still in print, some had never gone out of print, even briefly, since they were first published during the nineteenth century. There may not be another American author from his time for whom the same can be said. This fact raises questions about what accounts for Twain’s enduring popularity and whether his popularity says anything about his greatness as a writer.

A simple but incomplete answer to the question of why Twain’s popularity has endured is that at least three of his books have entered the realm of acknowledged classics. The title characters and basic story lines of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881) have become so deeply ingrained in American culture that many people

aware of these titles may not even know that Twain wrote them. Indeed, when the Disney Company used “The Prince and the Pauper” as the title for an animated Mickey Mouse film in 1990, it did not even bother to include Twain’s name in the film’s credits—an omission that seems to suggest that Twain’s story has passed beyond the realm of a mere classic to become a timeless and anonymously created fairy tale. However, this sort of popularity does not account for why a book such as *Huckleberry Finn* is assigned reading in thousands of high school and college classes every year and is the subject of a seemingly endless outpouring of scholarly theses, articles, and books.

Among scholars, the difference between literary works worthy of study and those that are not lies in the matter of their “interpretability”—or, in simpler terms, how much can be read into them. Whereas a book such as Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851) lends itself to nearly endless interpretations of its themes, symbols, and multiple levels, an intelligent, witty, beautifully crafted, and immensely entertaining modern novel may reveal all that it has to say on its first reading, with nothing remaining to be interpreted. I submit that Mark Twain is a great writer because many of his books can be read both as high entertainment and as hefty literary works of almost endless interpretability.

Twain’s writings are repeatedly read, analyzed, deconstructed, and reinterpreted because they continue to have something fresh to say to each new generation. In his essay on Twain and Ambrose Bierce written for this volume, Lawrence I. Berkove states that Twain “remains an unaccountable literary genius, a giant for the ages.” Berkove’s phrase “unaccountable literary genius” is an apt one, as it reflects the growing view that Twain has depths that can never fully be plumbed, that we can go on forever reading and studying him and never fully explain him. This is a view with which I concur. Throughout the nearly twenty years I have studied and written about Twain, I have never come close to growing bored with the man. Every time I reread one of his books, I notice things I do not recall having noticed before. Every time I am sat-

isfied I have answered one of my questions about him, I find one or two new questions emerging to take its place. Every year sees the publication of at least a half dozen new books about him, and each time I read one of them, I feel like I am finally beginning to understand him fully for the first time—until, that is, the next new book comes along.

If all this makes studying Twain sound like it should be wearing, it is not. In fact, it is exactly the opposite. Every person I have met who has spent years reading and studying Twain—both scholars and “buffs”—relishes sharing in the thrill of making new discoveries, and I do not recall ever meeting anyone who has lost interest in Twain because reading his works and studying him had become boring. Indeed, I wonder how it would even be possible to find Twain boring.

Some years ago, when Shelley Fisher Fishkin and I were conducting almost daily e-mail conversations about our work on Twain, we asked each other why we never get bored with him. I have not forgotten the little epiphany that Shelley shared with me on one occasion: we do not get bored with Twain because he connects with *everything*. Like Twain’s bathtub anecdote, this remark may be a bit of an exaggeration, but it also expresses an important truth. Mark Twain really does connect with almost everything. During his nearly seventy-five years on our planet, he lived through one of the greatest periods of social, political, and technological change in human history.

As Stephen Railton discusses in “Mark Twain and His Times” within this volume, when Twain was born in 1835, fewer than thirteen million Americans were living in the nation’s twenty-four states. By the time he died, in 1910, more than ninety-two million Americans were living in forty-six states, and the percentage of them living in cities had more than doubled. Moreover, at the time of Twain’s birth, slavery was flourishing, steam-powered trains and vessels were still in rudimentary stages of development, medical practices had scarcely advanced since the Middle Ages, and inventions such as photography, telegraphy, and even typewriters still lay in the future. By the time of his death, tens of thousands of miles of railroad tracks were moving high-

speed trains around the country, iron-hulled steamships were plying the world's oceans, gas-powered automobiles were on the roads, and airplanes were taking to the skies. Photography had advanced to color pictures and motion pictures, telegraphy was already giving way to telephones and wireless radio, medicine was on the threshold of its modern era, and slavery had long since been abolished.

Mark Twain was not the only American to live through all these and other changes, but he was unusual in closely observing and commenting on them. Moreover, he was also exceptionally well traveled; he lived for at least a few months in every region of the United States. He also spent nearly twelve years abroad and visited every inhabited continent. During his widespread travels, he met many of the world's leading cultural, political, and scientific figures and had close relationships with more than a few of them. The essays in this volume are concerned primarily with Twain as a writer, but all aspects of his life are so fascinating that he has attracted almost as much attention from biographers as he has from literary scholars.

Twain's interests were so broad and diverse that it is difficult to find a subject on which his writings do not touch, at least briefly. He also had a rich imagination and incredibly inventive mind that allowed him to project into the future technologies and political and social developments that had not yet occurred. As David Ketterer discusses in "Mark Twain as a Science-Fiction Writer" in this volume, Twain even wrote about a device similar to television decades before it was invented. For all these reasons and more, saying that Twain connects with everything may not be as great an exaggeration as one might suspect.

There are, of course, other important dimensions to Mark Twain that keep readers and scholars coming back to him. One of the most important of these is his remarkable ability to make readers laugh. Whatever else one thinks about his writing, he is frequently very funny and often in unexpected ways. A major part of his "unaccountable genius" is his knack for investing his writing with an unforced humor. His writing style grew out of the American Southwest's tradition of frontier humor,

which was built on such devices as eccentric characters, outrageous exaggeration, and colorful dialects. Like many nineteenth-century humorists, Twain used these devices and others; however, he quickly distanced himself from his contemporaries by investing in his work qualities other writers could not match. One of the chief among these was the naturalness of his dialogue. He was always an excellent observer, and he had a particularly good ear for language. Whereas many of the humorists of his time strove for laughs by inventing fractured idioms and using cacography—the deliberate misspelling of words—to exaggerate the ignorance of their characters, Twain strove to emulate natural human speech and looked for humor in other devices. One of the most popular American humorists of the mid-nineteenth century, and an important influence on Twain himself, was Artemus Ward. This passage from Ward’s sketch titled “Women’s Rights” is an extreme example of cacography:

I pitch my tent in a small town in Injianny one day last seeson, & while I was standing at the dore takin money, a deppytashun of ladies came up & sed they wos members of the Bunkumville Female Reformin & Wimin’s Rite’s Associashun, and thay axed me if thay cood go in without payin.

Can there be any doubt about why few people still read this sort of thing? Passages such as these reek of artificiality; no living human could ever have spoken such words. Compare Ward’s passage with the opening lines of Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*:

You don’t know about me, without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary.

Expressed in the narrative voice of the youthful and largely unschooled Huck, this passage resembles Ward's in that it is permeated with grammatical errors, but at the same time it feels authentic. When we read it, we can believe we are hearing the unaffected voice of an ignorant backwoods boy, not an artificial creation. Almost amazingly, Twain was able to sustain that voice throughout the entire novel.

One of the reasons *Huckleberry Finn* is considered a great novel is the contribution it made to American literature by helping to liberate it from the shackles of stiffly formal narrative techniques. Twain's use of the ignorant Huck as his novel's narrator was a bold experiment. Some contemporary critics damned the book as coarse because of Huck's grammatical errors and occasional vulgarities, but this same voice would influence many great twentieth-century American writers, and it is now considered one of *Huckleberry Finn*'s primary strengths.

A large part of the academic and scholarly attention given to Mark Twain has long been lavished on *Huckleberry Finn*, which is arguably his greatest book. At the Sixth International Conference on the State of Mark Twain Studies in Elmira, New York, in August 2009, Louis J. Budd, the dean of Twain studies, exhorted fellow scholars not to focus so much on one Twain work that they neglect his many other writings. Not every book that Twain wrote is great, or even important, certainly, but almost everything he wrote is of interest for one reason or another. A good example is *Tom Sawyer*, which is the subject of an essay by Cynthia Griffin Wolff in this volume. Although *Huckleberry Finn* is clearly the superior book and the one that garners the most serious attention, *Tom Sawyer* has probably been read by more people, and Tom may be an even more familiar American icon than Huck. Nevertheless, as Alan Gribben points out in "Mark Twain's Critical Reception" in this volume, *Tom Sawyer* has yet to receive a book-length scholarly analysis. This oversight seems remarkable in view of the book's enduring popularity. However, it can probably be at least partly accounted for by the long-standing perception of the novel as a simple "boy book"—a juvenile work not worthy of serious adult attention.

I was mesmerized by *Tom Sawyer* the first time I read it at the age of nine, and most children who read it like it as much as I did as a child. However, Twain wrote the novel not merely for children but also for adults. As he explains in the book's preface, "Part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in." Because he was thinking of his adult readers when he composed the book, much of what happens in *Tom Sawyer* goes over the heads of its younger readers, as it conveys what Wolff calls a "nightmare vision of boyhood." Although *Tom Sawyer* does not deal with themes as weighty as slavery and social degradation, as *Huckleberry Finn* does, it presents a dark and often frightening depiction of life in a frontier village during the mid-nineteenth century that is in sharp contrast to the pleasantly nostalgic vision the novel is generally perceived as conveying. *Tom Sawyer* is clearly a novel that requires careful reading.

Another popular book by Twain that merits a more careful reading is *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). In this novel, a late-nineteenth-century American suddenly finds himself in sixth-century England, which he tries to transform into a modern democratic republic. One of the first novels to use time travel as a plot device, this sprawling story has long delighted readers with its many humorous scenes pitting the past against the nineteenth-century present, such as armored knights playing baseball and wearing sandwich boards to advertise soap, the modern Yankee using a lasso to best the finest knights in a jousting tournament, and the meek surrender of six belligerent knights at the sight of ersatz tobacco smoke shooting through the bars of the Yankee's metal helmet. However, the novel's playful humor eventually gives way to almost unimaginable violence and destruction, turning the Yankee's dream of creating an egalitarian republic into another kind of nightmare vision. As they do with the flaws in other Twain stories, many readers are inclined to dismiss this jarring shift in the novel's tone as mere carelessness on Twain's part. However, as

Lawrence Berkove argues in his essay on *Connecticut Yankee* reprinted in this volume, the problem lies more in our misreading of the novel than in Twain's design. While explaining how the novel should be read, Berkove argues that Twain may be an even greater writer than is generally acknowledged—another example of how Twain's works are constantly being reinterpreted.

A buzzword that arose on American high school and college campuses during the late twentieth century was “relevance.” Increasingly dissatisfied with traditional academic course work, students began demanding that what they studied have more relevance to their real lives and the challenges they would face as working adults. They were also reacting against what they perceived as overly narrow perspectives on history and culture and demanded broader representation of nonwhite and feminist points of view. If relevance is what readers are looking for in literature, they are likely to find more of it in Mark Twain's writings than in the works of other American writers of his time. The kinds of issues that Twain addresses and the style in which he writes have a kind of timelessness that make his works as relevant today as their were in his own time.