

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-15380-5 - Mark Twain: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Louis J. Budd

Excerpt

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Introduction

I

Anybody who opens such a thick archive as this has to wonder if it will be worth the effort it demands. As late as the 1950s a confident approach—labeled reception theory or, more reassuringly for old-line scholars, *Rezeptionsforschung*—could override these doubts. But few literary historians today believe that assembling the reviews and essays an author’s contemporaries published about his or her work produces congruent proof of how, explicitly or tacitly, it was understood, was absorbed by its readers, who in turn reflected the ideals, prejudices, tastes, failures of awareness, and underlying worldview of their times. Even with the tedious searching of magazines, this was sociohistorical insight made too easy. Mark Twain himself liked to dismiss faith this transparent with, “I wish I could be that young again.” Nevertheless, “the concept of the ‘passive audience’” was “astonishingly long-lived.”¹ Perhaps because it had some cogency after all.

However, growing primarily out of projects to reconstruct the lived culture or, more ambitiously still, the multilevel “mind” of a past era, that is, its actual rather than its official ideology, close analysis punched through all easy diagrams, even before it began asserting the importance not just of female authors but of female readers. Nowadays no self-critical scholar extrapolates an encompassing era from its reception of books or authors. “The profession has few procedures for recovering—fewer still for analyzing—what audiences made of given texts; we hardly know who comprised the audiences for particular texts. Current theories of popular culture invite us to suppose, however, that these audiences, whoever they were, approached texts diversely, creatively, unpredictably.”² Although the theories behind procedure have exfoliated lately, nobody who has explored those audiences expects that they will fit into any neatly exhaustive pattern.

Reader-response theorists focus on the dialectic between a personality (abstracted somehow, whether as the “implied” or “informed” or “ideal” reader) and a text determined in various ways, sometimes as the product of the reader’s more than the author’s mind. Although the abstracted reader actually responds within a web of social and cultural values—some subconscious or internalized,

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such theorists tend to stick to minute, even word-to-word engagement with a text. More relevantly to this archive, they tend to assume that a contemporary review says nothing worthwhile. Most forebodingly, muckrakers of “ideology” contend that reviewers as well as their readers were locked so totally into the dominant ideology that their judgments can serve only to demonstrate how captive they were when the most perceptive of authors themselves understood at best dimly what they were, in effect, saying.

Although the reviews reprinted here will not shake postmodernist absoluteness, they hold, if confronted on their own terms, surprises that can stimulate an interaction of present and past readings, perhaps even a rethinking of some current articles of faith. And when intention is reinstated as an author’s polestar, some of the reviews will prove directional or at least suggestive. Or more practically yet, for the eclectic critic willing to learn from any source, old or new, some of the reviews may prove brilliant still. “A reception history focused on good readings, good in the opinion of their time, is directly valuable to our own reading.”³

To get the most out of this archive its user should stay alert to the history of reviewing itself, just as its keenest practitioners were alert to both the professional and economic ambience in which they worked. As soon as the reviewing of current books began, so did controversy about its standards and influence. That contentious interplay—lively and steady after the middle of the eighteenth century—grew loud early in the next century along with the widening impact of several British quarterlies, which was made possible in turn by new technology, prosperity, and spreading literacy. Of course, most authors resent any commentary except high praise. On the other hand, many of the early reviewers felt called to educate authors on points of morality or aesthetics; increasingly, they felt called also to elevate public taste, to guide it toward authors who deserved popularity. Such reviewers were vigilant to reprimand those fellow critics too easily pleased and therefore complicit in lowering standards. Thomas Babington Macaulay’s demasking of a then-acclaimed poet stood long after 1830 as the model of corrective candor. In the United States, Edgar Allan Poe soon made puffery look just as contemptible while also glaringly provincial.

As newspapers came to depend always more on income from advertising, they strained always harder to build a huge readership. A difference in tone or focus developed between the columns of a sober-toned magazine and those of a daily paper, between a critic and a reviewer, particularly in the United States. Except for comic relief, the newspaper’s public were less interested in seeing authors reprimanded for falling short of high-culture standards than in finding out which book they could benefit from, through either cultural upgrading or just enjoyment. Furthermore, such readers were eager to know whether a book favored egalitarian values. While quick with irreverence toward elitists, workaday reviewers heaped superlatives on the books with whom their constituency felt the most comfortable. Authors, however, certainly including Mark Twain,

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prized approval from the solemn magazines far above newspaper flattery, which nevertheless paid off best for books sold by subscription. This archive exhibits the conflicting signals that reviewers gave Twain, who of course had notoriously conflicted goals.

As academics finally developed a “field” of current literature, the importance of reviews, whether in a daily, weekly, or monthly “department” (of print), was doomed to erode. Meanwhile, a legion of professional reviewers tried to sort out the always growing number of books but started to look like drudges skimming the continuous batches.⁴ Their point of no return to prestige came after World War II, when the academics who had moved on to contemporary writers promoted the judging of literary values into an intricate, meticulous specialty. “Practical” criticism, that is, commentary treating a book as a humanistic experience for the “general reader,” now gets no respect or even notice on campuses. Recently a dissenting observer highlighted the imbalance in John Updike’s reputation.⁵ Although Updike’s fiction has attracted much analysis, his brilliant reviews are essentially ignored; the metacritics are puzzled that he should waste his genius that way. There is no outcry for another Macaulay to raise the extramural, public standards of taste or integrity; instead, relative to the output of books, far less reviewing gets done today. Moreover, with a few admirable exceptions, its outlets aim at brisk entertainment (tonight!) that continually “discovers” a new talent or trend.⁶ For this archive the crucial point is that disdain for reviewing as now either marginal or hyped seeps backward to cloud the lively and educative picture of how it functioned during Mark Twain’s career.

That career as a review-worthy author lasted more than forty years without any sizable wanings. Twain’s prominence, his unique gifts, and his high-wire balancing between profits and prestige make him the chief exhibit for two crucial processes. First, he exemplifies the sharpening interplay between the ideal of belles lettres as not only aesthetic but also moral tutelage and the economic needs of both author and publisher. Whereas hindsight perceives tensions of gender, class, and ethnicity,⁷ the guardians of formal culture—grouped too dismissively under the “genteel tradition”—worried primarily that the standards of “great” literature were toppling under a flood of aggressively marketed trash. A prominent librarian proposed a “Central Bureau” that would distribute ratings of quality for current novels, ratings that might actually be displayed on each copy.⁸ Although the subscription book trade, to which Twain had committed himself, suffered the demonstrable brunt of such worryment, its practical damage is hard to measure. For most magazines or newspapers that refused even to mention books sold door to door through a “prospectus,” we can merely guess whether they acted out of sociocultural duty or to pay back publishers and bookstores that bought regular advertising. In 1896 Twain himself finally shifted to a mainline firm (Harper Brothers). After that a researcher can count on finding reviews of his books in any likely source.

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During the 1890s the influence of advertising grew too strong to ignore loftily. An American periodical reprinted this British requiem for fading integrity:

It is a thousand pities the habit of reviewing so many new books in the literary papers has become general. It is a trade thing. Were a literary paper to have no advertising columns, do you suppose it would review half the new books it does? Certainly not. It gets the books, and it gets the advertisements, and then it does the best it can for itself and its readers by distributing the former among its contributors with the request that they will make as lively “copy” as they can out of the materials thus provided them.⁹

No realistic reader of the *New York American* would wonder that Edwin Markham’s “Bookland” page had to leave the entire right-hand column for a regular ad from Harper Brothers. (We need not smirk today; we march in the same procession: “Reviewers are key links in a commercial chain which connects the modern producers of culture with its potential consumers.”¹⁰)

In short, we cannot measure the comparative impact of Twain’s books by the number of reviews. Honing the problem down further to honesty of judgment, another British man of letters mourned: “‘If,’ said an editor to me once, ‘I were to tell the truth, as forcibly as I could wish to do, about the books sent to me for review, in six months my proprietors would be in the bankruptcy court.’ It is in the power of the publisher to ruin any literary journal. There is probably not a single review in London which would survive the withdrawal of the publishers’ advertisements.”¹¹ The economic pressure or just lure grew as more publishers aimed for the best-seller, preferably guaranteed by the author’s name. But since public taste stays gloriously unpredictable, they showily launched more and more books, hoping for a direct hit with at least one. By the 1890s the review columns brimmed with accolades for novels that a literary historian in the 1990s—to borrow a putdown from Twain—“had not suspected of being in the world at all.” For us the challenge is to separate the coerced from the sincere and insight-sharing praises showered on Twain’s later books.

The second process that Twain’s career as review-worthy author brings into focus is the rise of the newspaper as competitor with the magazine as a bulletin board for cultural affairs. Actually, the process was intricate, fitting Charles Darwin’s wonderment as to how some form of life pushes into every niche. The magisterial British quarterlies were soon challenged by monthlies, then by weeklies along with a few bimonthlies. Especially in Great Britain, gradations stayed fairly stable within each category, with the *Spectator* and *Saturday Review* emerging as the most respected of the periodicals that covered “all the new books.” After the Civil War the United States experienced—Frank Luther Mott finds—a “mania for starting magazines” that only got worse as time went on. Searchers for reviews can neither feel sure of having found all sources nor get at all those that once existed. Aside from transatlantic differences in quality,

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coverage, and later availability, analysts have to allow for reciprocal jealousies as well as clashes of national pride over, for instance, *Following the Equator* (not just *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*). Of course magazine editors, anxious about the surging newspapers, had steadily moved toward greater vivacity and up-to-dateness. But every weekly newspaper turned into a daily as soon as its circulation could support one. There was even a level above that, viable enough to attract fearless entrepreneurs: the daily with reputation and sales beyond its home city.

The strongest metropolitan dailies drove fiercely for top circulation by widening their lens. "Cultural journalism," that is, "information about books, performances, exhibitions, and similar matters, became as standard as the front-page news or editorial page."¹² If, on such matters, newspapers aimed at a socially and economically lower public than did the magazines, they also groped for an individual niche. The *London Telegraph* kept claiming and scrambling for the "largest circulation in the world," while the *London Morning Leader* catered to political conservatives and the well-to-do; *The Queen*; *The Lady's Newspaper and Court Chronicle* already gendered and classed itself through its title. In the United States the *New York Evening Post* austere embodied Manchester Liberalism, while the post-Greeley *Tribune* played to the self-image of the Republican Party. Raising the stakes Joseph Pulitzer let no loyalties or pieties slow down growth, and William Randolph Hearst turned urban populism into a mine shaft rather than a cross of gold, but the *Boston Evening Transcript* had long preferred to puff itself as the "most literary newspaper" in the United States. In short, we must consider the source of every review, remembering especially the differences between the magazines and the newspapers but also remembering that although we can cross-examine either sector financially, each had its believers in a mission to educate and, finer still, elevate its readers. Better than most of his peers, Twain understood and accepted these complexities.

The magazines naturally kept claiming the elevated ground. Or, instead, E. L. Godkin, founding editor of the *Nation*, called on the keepers of belletristic culture to return to it. In 1865 his first issue derided the "age of promiscuous and often silly admiration," the "usual and popular course of panegyric."¹³ In fact, the *Nation* did raise the level of reviewers in the United States by picking them for demonstrated competence. But newspapers worked harder and harder at marketing literary culture. In 1892 an essayist confronted the live question, "Does a book-review department pay a newspaper from a business standpoint?" The hopeful answer advised that the only kind "worth considering is a good [one,] calculated to bring a literary circulation and thence literary advertisements." Restated, however, the advice tilted revealingly: "Remember . . . that you are acting for publisher and public, and that, when you can benefit the former without violating your obligation to the latter, you should do so."¹⁴ Long acquainted with the *Atlanta Constitution* from the

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inside, Joel Chandler Harris found that real-life practice depressed quality another way:

A very deplorable fact is that the great body of literary criticism is mainly perfunctory. This is not due to a lack of ability or to a lack of knowledge. It is due to the fact that most of it is from the pens of newspaper writers who have no time to elaborate their ideas. They are in a hurry, and what they write is hurried. Under these circumstances, it is not unnatural that they should take their cues from inadequate sources and give to the public opinions that are either conventional or that have no reasonable basis.¹⁵

As early as 1873 the preface for *The Gilded Age* jeered that the authors did “not expect that the critic will read the book before writing a notice of it.”

During the 1880s, reviewing, swelled by the “realism war” that W. D. Howells stirred up, had itself become an intensified subject of debate, and in 1899 John Burroughs would decide that the “criticism of criticism is one of the marked literary characteristics of the last ten or fifteen years.”¹⁶ Given comprehensive indexes, the magazinists’ side is now far easier to retrieve; furthermore, they argued louder because they were losing out, as H. H. Boyesen, then on the faculty of Columbia University, warned.¹⁷ The intelligentsia settled into a tone of rueful loftiness that distinguished between critics who crafted essays and drudges who churned out “the hasty reviews that fill the daily and weekly papers.” Henry James derided reviewing—“a practice that in general has nothing in common with the art of criticism”—for “its roaring routine,” its “periodicity of platitude and irrelevance,” and its “rough-and-ready” pacing; always diplomatic, Brander Matthews, after genuflecting to Sainte-Beuve, James Russell Lowell, and Matthew Arnold, did allow reviewing a “far humbler function . . . defined as the art of informing readers just what the latest volume is in kind, in character and in quality.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the eminent British author Walter Besant blamed not the “ignorant and prejudiced” drudge but the editor who “expects his reviewer to pronounce a judgment upon a dozen novels, every week”; another, retrospective judgment of the “hack review”—“dull, vapid, commonplace, and timidly cordial”—held that it had “crept over a new book very much as an inky spider creeps over a piece of paper.”¹⁹ Frank Norris, who felt unfairly bruised as a novelist, worked several angles—by professing sympathy for hacks who started in “with a brain already jaded, an interest so low as to be almost negligible, and with—as often as not—a mind besieged by a thousand other cares, responsibilities and projects [to cover] twenty books in sixty minutes”; by granting “exceptions” for the “great papers which devote whole supplements to the consideration of literary matters”; and by syndicating his essay.²⁰ The operative point here is that the scholarly essays on the “reception” of some novel that have merely balanced one review against another deserve their oblivion.

A true disbeliever has dismissed reviews as the farce of an inferior mind

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passing judgment on its superior. More cheerfully, a German skeptic had diagnosed them as a “kind of infant malady, to which new-born books are more or less subject.” In response to my opening doubts, however, benefits can be claimed for this archive, which exhumes reviews between eighty and a hundred and thirty years old. First, it situates its users in a culture war that, while not unique to Twain, emerged starkly during his career as the business of publishing boomed within a quickly evolving, distinct era between the Civil War and World War I. Second, when the user considers the private as well as the socio-economic factors, the reviews become humanized into the opinions of fallible individuals who judged not under the cold light of eternity but in the heat of interplay with contemporaries like Twain, whom many of them had met or had heard perform. Third, users can experience these reviews personally. Even vengefully if they choose to make them “data for testing the acumen and catholicity of many individual critics; the book, *en revanche*, takes the measure of the critic.”²¹ More humanistically, we can take revenge on ourselves by acknowledging some dead critic as our superior or, less competitively, by learning from him (few female reviewers figure here). More happily still, we can enjoy the rapport of finding our responses anticipated long ago; Twain himself enjoyed trying to reach back and interact with his forebears. Finally, those users who want to proceed impersonally can practice what René Wellek urged as “Perspectivism,” or the principle that “we must be able to refer a work of art to the values of its own time and of all the periods subsequent to its own.”²² If the changing readings of a book accrete into its ongoing significance, then the contemporary reviews obviously make the starting point. At least several of Twain’s books have reached the status of a classic—which, moreover, people *do* read—and will long hold their still accreting significance.

II

More narrowly, users must wonder how well this archive helps to comprehend the reception of each of Twain’s books. Like many an artist, he could feel misunderstood and mistreated. Even when established as overwhelmingly popular, he could fume with cross-grained humor: “I believe that the trade of critic . . . is the most degraded of all trades. . . . It is the will of God that we must have critics, and missionaries, and Congressmen, and humorists, and we must bear the burden. . . . At the worst, criticism is nothing more than a crime.”²³ But he praised certain critics—Howells, above all—and certain judgments, declaring, perhaps most notably, that the *San Francisco Chronicle* “understands” the intention of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As all of his usable letters come into print, we will get more of his responses to interweave with this volume; his letters also give his ranking of specific magazines and newspapers. When intentionality recovers its salience for critics, they will learn also from a reviewer’s

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presumptions about it for particular books. Twain's angry disagreement with those presumptions can likewise help.

Biographers will now have richer grounds for intuiting how Twain's inner reactions to the reviews played upon his decisions about what kind of book to produce next and how to shape it. Probably such reactions followed most strongly the most heavily reviewed books—*The Innocents Abroad*, *The Gilded Age*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, *Following the Equator*, and some of the late collections. (For reasons already given, the number of reviews does not always correlate with popularity, especially for *Roughing It*.) The more reviews we find, the more dependable is the cross-section of opinion and, furthermore, the better is the chance of recovering a valuable analysis; surely some of our forebears had shrewder insight than the ever brash modernist can allow. A high correlation among which passages were quoted as outstandingly humorous will encourage theorists who keep hoping to codify criteria for humor. Partly because of merit, *The Innocents Abroad* ended up with the most reviews. Immersion in them helps one reexperience the freshness, spontaneity, irreverence (not always welcomed), and colloquiality that it radiated in 1869–70. Also, their diversity of praises already leads to recognizing that Twain captivated a spectrum of audiences through his dazzling range of personae.²⁴

Many a review underlines the contemporary relevances. Comparisons with other biographies reveal that his *Joan of Arc* is riding a wave of current interest; reviewers of the travel books keep remarking that Twain is at times swimming with some tide of attitudes. Reviews of *The Gilded Age* name the real-life models for secondary characters. (Incidentally, the *Hartford Courant* establishes a still unused point for determining the first state of the first impression.) For *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the *Hartford Post* shows that a presumably backwoods touch—the undertaker whispering loudly that the dog had cornered a rat—had a recent local origin. No explicator or deconstructor of a Twain text should go on record without checking the reviews.

Two warnings apply more generally. First, the British and the American reviews should neither be intermingled casually nor considered apart. If Anglo-American interactions during the nineteenth century grew too complex to diagram, some attitudes emerge distinctly. British critics approached Twain as a New World personality—however differently that image affected each book after *The Innocents Abroad*. British critics as well as readers felt surprisingly positive about *A Tramp Abroad*, perhaps believing that it gored their European rivals rather than an Old World culture that included themselves. Although *A Connecticut Yankee* mostly aroused hostility, a few years later their reviews of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* “were in general more spacious, more thoughtful, and greater in number than the American,” in part because it was stocked in bookstores there rather than hawked by subscription.²⁵ By the time of *Following the*

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Equator (published there as *More Tramps Abroad*) imperialist tensions and concern for the Commonwealth dominated the British reviews.

Often, in America, opinion was swayed by the cachet of Twain's popularity abroad. Favorable reviews were excerpted, even reprinted. As early as *The Jumping Frog* miscellany, the *Californian*, after quoting the *Saturday Review*—"that most critical of the London Reviews"—gloated that one of its own contributors had been "endorsed by such high authority." Filler paragraphs saluted Twain's triumphs in Britain as lecturer and after-dinner speaker, not just author. The *Springfield (Mass.) Republican* echoed the exulting in a Hartford newspaper that *The Prince and the Pauper*, which British reviewers did treat with surprising tolerance, had reached, along with Twain's other "recent writings," a "popularity that would a few years ago have been considered impossible for any American writer to attain in England."²⁶ Curiously, a Chicago newspaper declared before any reviews had appeared that "the best English critics had pronounced" that *Life on the Mississippi* was Twain's "best book."²⁷ When the Anglo-American alliance in global politics firmed up during the last phase of his career, British critics clearly disliked doing worse, when necessary, than damning with faint praise—an approach which was selectively magnified in the United States.

A second warning about perspective is that—contrary to the sweeping hostility or indifference sensed by the *Springfield Republican*—in the later 1860s the British, while accepting Longfellow or James Russell Lowell as their talented clones, grew eager to admire American humorists—"men from the wilds of the Far West," brimming with crude exoticism, nonconformity, and tangy dialects.²⁸ Twain shot ahead of Artemus Ward, who died in 1867; and now dim figures like Joaquin Miller and Bret Harte, who lived until 1902, gradually fell behind too. As Twain's image acquired dignity for Americans, however, they began to resent any condescension. Eventually, a leading Baptist minister and journalist objected that "our English cousins" were too quick to praise the "wild and gamy" as a "new sensation"; their taste for American humor was not "always as discriminating as it is hearty." For instance, they flattened Twain's quintessence into a flair for "exaggeration." "His broad humanity, his gift for seeing far below the surface of life, his subtle comprehension of human nature, and his realistic method, are but dimly apprehended by those Britons who go off in convulsions of laughter the moment his name is mentioned."²⁹ Actually, his image in Britain would deepen in solemnity soon, beginning with his lecture tour to pay off his debts as heroically as Sir Walter Scott.

Even so, a minority of British critics would always deprecate Twain as a Yankee corrupting their language, flouting their manners, and glorifying social irreverence. Adapting the same anxieties, a few American critics regularly agreed, starting with *The Innocents Abroad* and making their last brave stand with *Huckleberry Finn*—banned by the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library. Soon after the Civil War, a Southerner had mourned a second defeat, this

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time for belles lettres: “Mark Twain and Josh Billings and their publishers luxuriate in public patronage, and have representatives in every library while . . . you will not find a dozen copies of Bryant and Hawthorne in a day’s journey.” At risk was the entire Western heritage: “Make a quotation from Homer, Plato, Charron or Bacon the next time you are in a friend’s parlor, and see if you will not have a blank stare for your answer.” But “tell the story of how Bemis ran from the buffalo, or Scotty wanted his friend’s funeral preached, and a face lighted with interest greets you.”³⁰ Intriguingly for us today, this critic does not list any women among Twain’s lowbrow cohort or else as a finer standard for humor though “Fanny Fern” had steadily increased her readership over the past twenty years and “Samantha Allen,” ready to move up from the magazines to Twain’s own publisher, would soon sell hundreds of thousands of volumes. In the mainline discourse American humor was male. If Twain did attract many female readers this volume cannot be used to demonstrate that.

III

Because Twain had charged into fame so loudly and colorfully, even the reviews for *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches* were influenced by previous commentary. Eastern newspapers had led the rush to reprint its title story in 1865. Likewise, Twain’s paid “letters” about the *Quaker City* excursion that were reworked for *The Innocents Abroad* had attracted wide interest. Although Twain rather soon hoped that *Mark Twain’s (Burlesque) Autobiography and First Romance* could sink into oblivion, he had stirred up prepublication hoopla among his cronies in the press. He would gladly cooperate with reporters, then with magazinists; after all, he had also a career as a comic lecturer to promote. Concurrently, for every subsequent book, his publisher emphasized that its author was a best-seller and, just as the role was finding a name, a celebrity to boot. Between these peaks, the filler paragraphs in the newspapers and the longer items in magazines kept surveying his reputation, making it an always more resonant topic until his death. Cumulatively, each group of reviewers, therefore, was swayed not only by the success or relative failure of his preceding books but by the intervening commentary, or just news, sometimes distinctly visible in the latest criticism.³¹

That drumbeat of commentary between the reviews went beyond the human-interest journalism that swelled during the later nineteenth century. Among the newspaper wits, Twain served as both a source of anecdotes and a target of friendly attempts to compete with the master. Furthermore, he generated interesting controversies, whether through his skit at the dinner for John Greenleaf Whittier, the banning of *Huckleberry Finn*, or the complaint about nude drawings for *Eve’s Diary*. Three underlying motifs were distinctive. First, all sides in the culture war confronted the issue of paying serious attention to a humorist,