

## I

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## Mark Twain as an American Icon

That Mark Twain parades on as a prominent American icon is obvious – visually, audibly, and palpably. The fact is validated by the most dynamic force in the United States – the profit-driven economy. To reassure customers who worry that “this country is running out of natural gas,” a corporation prints a full-page ad depicting a bushy-haired, white-suited, cigar-smoking Twain under the heading “The reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated.”<sup>1</sup> To highlight the case against reregulation, the Association of American Railroads disseminates a photograph of a solemn Twain, holding a book rather than a cigar but again in basic whites, under his maxim “Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul.” In a newspaper ad, a bank (“We frown on get-rich-quick schemes, but we are not opposed to helping people make money”) features his “I’m opposed to millionaires, but it would be dangerous to offer me the position”; the experts in subliminalism at its ad agency reinforced this with a Huck Finnish boy fishing. But a cemetery, selling “dignity and simplicity in a setting of great natural beauty” through a full-page spread in the *Los Angeles Times*, understandably prefers a close-up of a solemn, elderly Twain along with his epitaph for Susy Clemens.

Of course, he also serves in more hedonistic venues. Stretching a thin link, a bureau of tourism croons, “Experience Mark Twain’s Hawaii.” Elliott’s Amazing Fruit Drinks prints his maxims inside the bottle caps. (In 1991 “The Popular and the Private: 100 Years since Twain [Moved out of Hartford],” mounted at the Mark Twain House, displayed an extreme variety of such knickknacks.) Yet since even Twainians doubt that many people will buy those fruit drinks for the maxims, they suspect a fellow enthusiast in the bottler and other local entrepreneurs. Surely the Tom Sawyer Painters of Durham, North Carolina, were pleasing themselves as much as they were hoping to attract business. Some enthusiasts grow emulative. The Asheville, North Carolina, Cleaners and Dyers’ ad depicts a Twain frowning and holding a turkey drumstick, his white suit soiled; its headings, “Grime

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Marches On” and “Gravy Twain,” lead into “Though Mark Twain was fond of fowl, he liked his suits snow-white. We’d have drycleaned those foul stains.” Twain surpassed most professional humorists in patience with amateurs. He would, as they assume, have felt no offense to his dignity.

Fully committed to the rising sun of publicity, he tolerated – for decades, gratis – commercial uses of his face and either of his names. However, though a futurologist before that craft was organized, he would boggle today at the weedlike spread – thicker in relevant locales but liable to spring up anywhere – of banks, hotels, golf courses, and other enterprises that billboard him or his most famous characters. A motel in Oregon that keys its rooms to specific authors has a Mark Twain suite; the luxurious *Delta Queen*, which stops at Hannibal, often promises a Twain expert for its excursionists. Clearly, the go-getters believe that he triggers a positive response; while riverboats like Marietta, Ohio’s *Becky Thatcher*, with H. B. Finn’s Restaurant & Temperance Tavern aboard, are inevitable, *Mark Twain’s Sure-Fire Programmed Guide to Backgrounds in American Literature* (1977), with a comic drawing of its mentor on practically every page, cuts a barely plausible path. By now no Twainian is surprised when turning a corner or page to find still another marker of his popularity.

Or apparent popularity. It is snatched up as a weapon in the always hotter battle for a piece of the public’s attention and so gets reinforced. Television commentators doing “color” segments for the National League playoffs in 1990 noticed the *Huckleberry Finn*, a riverboat at Cincinnati; one result was a *Newsday* story, “Twist of Twain Spices Series,” that featured his interest in baseball. The author of a book on self-publishing gets reporters to repeat his grabber: “What do Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Edgar Allan Poe, and [his own name] have in common?” Regularly, the detective-story pulps dangle such titles as *Huckleberry Fiend* (Mysterious Press, 1975) and *The Mark Twain Murders* (Dell, 1989). No niche is too small now, but neither is any too large, too commercially valuable for its experts to bet on his appeal. An inquisitive Mark Twain complicated the final segment of the 1991–2 season of *Star Trek*; indeed, he was made a bridging character who would figure in the first segment in the fall.

In strictly terrestrial culture, Twain functions as commonly shared knowledge. Characters in the “Pogo” comic strip quarrel about attributing a quotation (“Well, ever’body talks ’bout the weather but nob’dy does nothin’ ’bout it – as the feller says”) to Mister Twain as against Mister Clemens; when Mole hears that friends thought him dead, he chuckles, “As another great humorist once remarked: That remark is a great exasperation,” and starts another squabble. Twain and his books enter into not just “Peanuts,”

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“Calvin and Hobbes,” and “Shoe” but into nonwhimsical strips. Apparently, anybody feeding the mass media serves him up whenever possible; cartoonists, whether for the *New Yorker* or the debased *New York Evening Post*, eke out any Twain-related idea that’s salable.

He also gets conscripted for serious campaigns. For its “Earth Day ’90” issue *Newsweek*’s cover announced, over a Grant Wood–Thomas Hart Benton–like tableau with Tom and Huck rafting: “Life on the Mississippi: Huck’s River Faces All of the Nation’s Environmental Problems.” The dean of the Duke University School of Law, engaging in the debate over the sociopolitical rationale of his profession, drew a parallel between the self-discipline it both needs and inculcates and Twain’s training to pilot a steamboat.<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in several venues, the speech stirred hot responses that boiled over into the newspapers. While the basic issue is important, Twain enhanced its color and verve. Beyond his utility for merchandising and gimmickry, he has become a profitable subject for news himself, just as he did in his lifetime. Though the local press likes controversies about censorship, the moves to strike *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the reading assigned in a secondary school get registered nationally.<sup>3</sup> Actually, it is the best-publicized rather than the most frequent target. When the long-missing two-fifths of the holograph manuscript turned up in 1991, that rated print, radio, and television coverage. Academics who have written about Twain learn to expect telephone calls from journalists.

Such viability more than three-quarters of a century after Twain’s death can result only from a multimedia process, so insistent that he occasionally graces a television commercial without an identity check. The first film biography (1944) still gets rerun, though the inventory of glossier versions, mostly shaped for the PBS market, has outclassed – authenticity aside – *The Adventures of Mark Twain* starring Frederic March.<sup>4</sup> More gratefully yet, PBS welcomes versions of Twain’s works. Beyond the expected Tom and Huck classics, a diverse anthology of other books and short pieces has accumulated. Meanwhile, Hollywood keeps trying to encapsulate the magic of *Huckleberry Finn* while doing better with *The Prince and the Pauper*, though not with *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Twainians regularly hear, because the mainline media care, that another filmed biography or dramatization is projected. For those able (or forced) to settle for audio, a lineup of cassettes continues to expand. For those with deluxe taste and income, the Broadway musical “Big River” (1985) adapted *Huckleberry Finn* lavishly.

When the comic book was flourishing, Tom Sawyer dominated his first one in 1942. Before then, a daily strip, “Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry

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Finn,” had lasted, with pauses, almost twenty years since 1918.<sup>5</sup> Once the Classic Comics series started, Twain’s books – five, eventually – were predestined choices, and they have marched into competing series. As long as print forms survive, Twain will get more space than any other American author – in weekly and monthly magazines, in Sunday supplements, and indeed in the dailies if a reporter or columnist sees a topical angle. Editors of specialized or in-house journals also hook on to him whenever possible; for instance, in *Aramco World* magazine (May–June 1986), “Never the Twain . . .” retraced his (and Herman Melville’s) travels in the Middle East. He would have conceded resignedly that another chance for punning on his pen name was too handy to pass up.

In that article’s full-page illustration, two barefoot boys on a raft are dwarfed by a bust of the white-color-coded Twain – another drop in the stream of his likenesses that makes him instantly recognizable. He himself started it up early and helped to keep it thickening. Around 1851 – at the age of sixteen – he posed for a daguerreotype and two years later for a tintype. A conservative estimate puts the eventual reservoir of photographs at 650.<sup>6</sup> Their emotional ambience varies so richly that any enterprise can find an appropriate print and, because Twain obligingly posed in any town or country he visited, a relatively fresh one. Furthermore, in 1859 he sat for a journeyman painter; by the 1890s top portraitists were courting him. In 1884 his first bust was cast in bronze, and posthumous ones still follow, as do other sculptures, meant usually for public spaces. In 1985 President Ronald Reagan welcomed him into the White House collection. For ephemeral but widely seen images, newspaper and magazine editors commission drawings that stylize, ordinarily, an elderly Twain.

All of these images encourage the demand for Twain impersonators, who were quick to join the rise of one-person acts during the 1950s. Hal Holbrook soared into the lead so capably that most of the other living Twains actually imitate him, insisting on the white suit, long cigar, and pitched drawl. They have multiplied locally until no census is feasible and no estimate firm. The crucial point is that they draw audiences. Holbrook can dictate stiff terms because the buyers of his records and cassettes and the fans of his television special want to experience him directly. Since Twain’s platform magic included an effect of spontaneity, his impersonators need not fear obsolescence through robots that hawk some message or else co-anchor, with Benjamin Franklin, the panorama of U.S. history at EPCOT Center of Walt Disney World.<sup>7</sup> No other author or politician – and no entertainer except, currently, Elvis Presley – comes near to matching the swarm of Twain clones.

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Though Disney spun his empires out of a genius for gauging salability, the markers were obvious here. Ever since the American tourist developed a gusto for bric-a-brac beyond postcards, Twain items have proliferated. T-shirts and coffee mugs so abound as to bore some collectors, who stick to pricey ceramics like the Royal Doulton “original” or elaborate dolls of his child characters. Solemn scholars feel no sacrilege in buying Mark Twain napkins (with or without a maxim) or a necktie or a tote bag or cookbooks or even the Tom Sawyer videogame. After all, he invented and promoted Mark Twain’s Self-Pasting Scrapbook (in several models at a range of prices) and, during his years of finest artistic creativity, put much effort into a board game, guiding it through manufacture.

Eponymous bookstores and good-reading festivals at a public library can count on devotees of the sequenced sentence. Besides mainline works, his varied sketches or parts of books, once past copyright, get produced in showily illustrated pamphlets; booklets of his epigrams and wittiest passages float about. Every few years a new coffee-table volume challenges the six or so out there. The dogged general reader buys remodelings of his career such as Nigey Lennon’s *The Sagebrush Bohemian: Mark Twain in California* (1990). More and more, Twain strolls into fiction, as in Darryl Brock’s *If I Never Get Back* (1990), and he dominated David Carkeet’s *I Been There Before* (1985). Satisfyingly, all three of these books stand on much correct, even arcane, detail – proving both that Twain scholarship has an impact beyond the campus and that journalists feel compelled to explore beyond the clichés retailed about most authors. The several biographies for juveniles also honor reasonable accuracy, and the May 1984 issue – “The World of Mark Twain” – of *Cobblestone, the History Magazine for Young People* depends on solid research. Garlanded with photographs throughout, its cover favors the post-1907 Twain with an Oxford University gown over that stereotyping suit and therefore foreshadows the future shape of his image.

The paradigmatic photograph or drawing of an aged Twain has many dimensions, however; its props vary and it carries a penumbra of knowledge, usually, about his career. He is more complicated than the modern celebrity who becomes famous mostly for being famous; yet structuring him into the kind of hero that Joseph Campbell extols also becomes reductive. The Twain icon is a gallery itself of not only images but personalities; intricacy is the simple key here. To a unique degree Twain enshrines different, even differing, values for a span – now a cable-spread – of audiences, eluding the critic’s unitary rationale and the scholar’s certainty. Elderly movie fans remember the *frisson* raised by “the man of a thousand faces”; but Twain raises pleasant awe for his shape shifting.

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Many admirers prefer, maybe react to, just one face. Which is the most popular cannot be established by computer-boosted statistics; fervency of choice counts too. But Twain charms millions as the magic flutist of nostalgia for childhood in a simpler, nicer time. Most full-page displays of his snowy head devote a corner to two boys on a raft; surely he is still reminiscing about them. The *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* grants an entry only to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* among his books.<sup>8</sup> Its two sentences on the author slot him as “famous for his settings along the Mississippi River.” This alerts us to recognize that illustrators take care to suggest an obviously wide, long river, which adds depth to the rafting and appeals to the American passion for movement and, subliminally, evokes the mythic qualities of water, cool running water. Dan Hoffman’s poem “Mark Twain, 1909,” which sketches Twain’s sitting for still another photograph (“his hair an aureole” above the “Palm Beach white” suit), comes itself to focus on “always rivers” and the raft that “bears us onward, onward, back to our threatened paradise.”<sup>9</sup> John Barth elevates that raft into one of the four greatest images created by world literature.

The haze of nostalgia is thinned by humor. Having typed Tom as a “wily and adventurous boy,” the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* rounds off: “In one famous episode” he “tricks his friends into whitewashing a fence for him by pretending it is a great privilege and making them pay to take over the job.” That is *the* most famous episode, easily outclassing the scenes in the schoolroom, graveyard, or cave. Though the novel glosses it pompously, illustrators spread on the humor very broadly; adult readers also enjoy its implicit cynicism about what fools we mortals be. Only academic rigorists can discuss Twain for long without breaking into a smile – as he would have done himself at any detailed proof that humor weaves inseparably through his writings, character, and body language. For Max Eastman, “He did not [at his best] as an author ‘undertake’ to be humorous. He asks no similar undertaking of the reader. He *was* humorous. He could not see, or think, or argue, or remember, or exist, for very long, in other terms.”<sup>10</sup> The public likewise thinks of him as doing what came naturally.

A specialized genre of Twain’s humor, the pithy sayings that he started highlighting in the 1890s, pops up in every medium from Holbrook’s monologue to paperweights. Vice-president Dan Quayle tried to finesse a blunder by appealing to his “I don’t give a damn for a man that can spell a word only one way” – redacted also as “You should never trust a man who has only one way to spell a word.” Researchers who couldn’t find the ur-text were not surprised since Twain’s image benefits from the magnet or flypaper effect: the retailer/reteller of a witticism may attribute it to him for greater

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panache. He gets authorship for grousing that “a banker is a fellow who lends you his umbrella when the sun is shining and wants it back the minute it begins to rain.” That bit wins him an international smile,<sup>11</sup> though it baffles scholars who expect both to get requests for pinpointing a source and to fail half of the time. To the regret solely of the purist, because Twain wrote and spoke prodigally for about fifty years they can seldom demagnetize absolutely.

In fact (or despite it), the public likes to improve its favorite maxims. In 1897, busy working in bed, Twain scrawled a reassuring note to a reporter: rumor had confused him with a cousin named Clemens and “the report of my illness grew out of his illness, the report of my death was an exaggeration.” That note quickly evolved into “the report of my death is greatly exaggerated” – or close variants – available today in every medium including posters. A British edition of his short bits is entitled *Greatly Exaggerated* (1988). Familiarity has brought careless or self-conscious changes. Early in 1992 the “ABC Evening News” had Boris Yeltsin declaring, “The reports of my demise are somewhat exaggerated.” In the strip “Steve Roper” (January 16, 1993) an awesome tough gloats, “Let me misquote Mark Twain, old boy! Reports of my demise are *highly* exaggerated.” With little effect, purists have disclaimed for him the well-known “Everybody talks (or complains) about the weather but nobody does anything about it.” (Justin Kaplan hedges with “Attributed” for the latest edition of Bartlett’s *Familiar Quotations*.) Unfortunately, the staged Twains, stringing together quotable sentences, can stretch toward preachiness.

Maxims typically involve some degree of amusement at not just their pithiness but also their wry universalizing. Though Twain’s darkest side (“Pity is for the living, envy is for the dead”) appeals mostly to pessimists, a large audience appreciates him not so much for funny one-liners (“... cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education”) but for word-bytes of wisdom from an elderly sage who, solemn toward the point of melancholy in posed photographs, suffered an overdose of late tragedies. It enjoys better yet his cynicisms that are not dangerously corrosive: “Be good and you will be lonesome” has earned many a chuckle since Twain put it to work on the frontispiece of *Following the Equator* (1897). With proper credit it has entered *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (1992). Still, the cracker-barrel philosopher – observant, seasoned, obliquely irreverent – was allowed to be positive at heart. Librarians know that Twain gets laughs for “‘Classic.’ A book which people praise and don’t read,” but their guild has absorbed enough faith in him and his appeal to produce a large poster harrumphing, “The man who does not read good

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books has no advantage over the man who can't read them" – another "attributed" maxim.<sup>12</sup>

A cross section of Twain's public would show an attitudinal tower of Babel. One layer, which can't find the nearest library, relishes the off-color maxims ("Chastity – it can be carried too far") or the once-bannable guffawings such as "[Date, 1601.] Conversation as It Was by the Social Fireside, in the Time of the Tudors." For men more than women he is the raunchy individualist, incorrigible from childhood to the grave, a Tom-Huck who never gave in fully to anybody's discipline. In spite of the documented facts, they need to believe that young Sam ran away from home – as the narrator yarns in *Life on the Mississippi*. They would agree with a review of *Roughing It* declaring that his humor is "evidently the natural outgrowth of the unsettled, adventurous, wild life he has led." That the old Clemens smoked heavily, poured his bourbon often, and shone at stag festivities they remember approvingly. American males like, furthermore, to make individualism central to the national character. *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), the book most firmly identified with Twain until his death, had already added the chord of cocky, surging Americanism that other cohorts have also chosen to hear always more distinctly. Crucially, though he could parade as "God's Fool" to get out of a self-inflicted bind, its narrator is New World shrewd, not Henry Jamesian innocent. Likewise, without the coaching of critics, admirers sense Twain's reassurance that behind his blunders as a tenderfoot out West looms a real-life person who has learned skepticism without petrifying into cautiousness.

A more accepting Twain continues to dazzle as a globe-trotter who lived our Tom Sawyerish fantasies, who followed the river out into all the seas, as bold as Ulysses; the sights and experiences of *Following the Equator* still impress most Westerners as exotic. Yet he warms other or even the same hearts as a husband and father who never strayed emotionally from his Penelope and three daughters. Their house in Hartford, Connecticut, attracts feature writers and – gorgeous visually – photographers for tableaux of a family Thanksgiving or Christmas. Luckily, as recent biographers analyze Olivia Langdon Clemens they find intelligence and toughness beneath the quiet warmth. Without undermining the domestic idyll, her personality adds counterpoint and resonance.

Tirelessly concerned and often livid about politics, Twain has narrower publics who prize images as diverse as those of the rambunctious traveler and the devoted husband. Soviet critics praised him as a worthy pre-Marxist because his commitment to romantic democracy burned so fiercely. The New Left could find material for mimeographed handouts, include him in

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*Revolutionary Quotations from the Thoughts of Uncle Sam* (1969), and support “The War Prayer” as a protest against U.S. actions in Vietnam. His anti-imperialism rated a national reprise on the April 1992 cover of the *Atlantic Monthly*. But shape shifter on the hustings also, Twain passes as an exemplar of attitudes the rank-and-file Republican cherishes: faith in technology, entrepreneurship, and risk taking that will lead the self-made individual to riches. Curiously, the Left and the Right honor some of the same maxims, finding, for instance, either a cold-eyed rejection of the power structure or a playful attempt to make it function still better. (“Fleas can be taught nearly everything that a congressman can”; “It could probably be shown by facts and figures that there is no distinctly native criminal class except Congress.”) Both Left and Right, along with the middle, probably like *The Political Tales and Truth of Mark Twain* (from the Classic Wisdom Collection, New World Library, 1992).

Lately, another image of Twain has grown vivid, and his outings on *Star Trek* will intensify it; enthusiasts of science fiction proclaim him a founding father. The accumulating praise for the time warp of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* rose into a critical mass. While Philip José Farmer’s *The Fabulous Riverboat* (1971) still honored Twain just as a kindred personality, by 1992 the editor of *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, after puffing the longest story in its July number for centering on him as a character, elaborated on his innovative novel and added: “Much of Twain’s short fiction are tall tales with fantastic elements, and some use ghosts, angels, and other supernatural beings to make a point. He wrote mysteries and stories which, if written today, would be considered science fiction.” In *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, Norman Spinrad, well known in that field, enthusiastically revisited Twain’s success in manipulating time travel “for such thoroughly modern science fictional purposes.”<sup>13</sup> Cynics could suspect here a borrowing of his prestige to make the passage to literary respectability that he once navigated, but Twain himself suggests an indestructible sci-fi substance that acquires, with a rapidity that would have baffled Charles Darwin, the most contemporary shapes.

The torrent of images evokes Twain’s anecdote about the drunk who, having staggered up his stairs, sighs, “God help the poor sailors out at sea on such a night as this.” Nevertheless, several centers give it firm channels as well as intellectual depth. The Mark Twain Home Foundation presents a meticulously restored building; though no superhighway as yet feeds Hannibal, well over a hundred thousand visitors pay up annually besides those who merely want to photograph the white fence, the river with its big island, or the cave. National candidates – Jimmy Carter, George Wallace,

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the Clinton–Gore buscapade – target Hannibal for an appropriately pointed speech; writers for the Sunday supplements come steadily, as do latter-day authors of travel books. Michael Pearson’s *Imagined Places: Journeys into Literary America* (1991) made it one of his six main stops in order to revisit “our Homer of boyhood.” (He mentions that a restaurant in Manchester, Vermont, serves up a Huck Finn Mississippi Mud Drink – a mixture of Southern Comfort, Kahlua, and ice cream.) The flow of visitors will increase because fresh energy is pouring into the Mark Twain Birthplace Museum at nearby Florida and into the associated Research Foundation, which has restarted the *Twainian* newsletter. The Hannibal cadre’s *Fence Painter* reached Volume 14 in 1994.

The house administered by the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford is unforgettably arresting both inside and out. Most of its more than fifty thousand annual visitors feel awed by its luxuries and its relics of a closely knit domesticity, though journalists tend to follow a jocular vein that reaches back to the mid-1870s, when Twain often still posed as a “phunny phellow.” The spread in the October 1992 *Yankee* is flagged with, “Huck Finn Wouldn’t Have Come Near It: Mark Twain’s ‘cuckoo clock’ of a house . . . is chock-full of what you don’t expect to find”; a critic from the *New York Times* (July 20, 1993) less gapingly interpreted the house as a mirror of Twain’s quirkiness. Such a slant obviously comes from, plays to, deeply held impressions that will soften as the Mark Twain House continues its program of lectures, symposia, local outreach, and institutes for teachers. While the Becky Thatcher Book & Gift Shop fills the need of many tourists to buy proof-of-visit to Hannibal, the House’s own shop carries a tonier quality of items. Just beyond, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s house adds contrast, anecdotes, and mainstream history to the neighborhood.

A latecomer, the Elmira College Center for Mark Twain Studies at Quarry Farm, controls the house, grounds, and “study” where Twain did much of his writing as his family relaxed during the summers. While the Center obliges the ten thousand annual visitors to that study, it moves toward an academic spin with a mounting archive, resident scholars, publications, and visiting lecturers; it arranged three-day conferences in 1989 and 1993. Of course, it encourages the biographical “musical drama” in a dome seating three thousand that started in the summer of 1987. All in all, Elmira, first home of his wife, conjures up a more normally paced Twain, climbing “damp from the breakfast table” to his study or inventing lawn games for his daughters. Inevitably, through the private enterprise of bars and gift shops, Virginia City, Nevada, markets him at his wildest and wooliest.<sup>14</sup> The rebuilt cabin on Jackass Hill in California gets listed in tourist guides,