

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67075-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain

Peter Messent

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*The Cambridge Introduction to  
Mark Twain*

Mark Twain is a central figure in nineteenth-century American literature, and his novels are among the best-known and most often studied texts in the field. This clear and incisive introduction provides a biography of the author and situates his works in the historical and cultural context of his times. Peter Messent gives accessible but penetrating readings of the best-known writings including *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. He pays particular attention to the way Twain's humour works and how it underpins his prose style. The final chapter provides up-to-date analysis of the recent critical reception of Twain's writing, and summarises the contentious and important debates about his literary and cultural position. The guide to further reading will help those who wish to extend their research and critical work on the author. This book will be of outstanding value to anyone coming to Twain for the first time.

PETER MESSENT is Professor of Modern American Literature at the University of Nottingham.

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*his generosity and encouragement over the years.*

*To Lou Budd, the best of Twain scholars, with thanks for*

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## Preface

Mark Twain is the most famous American writer of his period. He is known for his iconic appearance: as an elderly man in a white suit, with a mane of white hair, beetling eyebrows and a straggly moustache, with either cigar or billiard cue in hand. He is also remembered for his genius with the comic quip: ‘We ought never to do wrong when people are looking’, ‘Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.’ But his writings are primarily responsible for his fame. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* stands at the foundations of an American vernacular literary tradition and his other best-known novels and travel-writings continue to be popular today.

The field of Twain biography and criticism is crowded, and his work and place in American literature continue to provoke argument and debate. *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain* has been written to provide a starting guide to the author, his life, and some of his best works, and to reassess his reputation. Its intention is to present a clear and informative introduction that gives the reader a helpful entry point to the ongoing discussions his writings have provoked – many of them crucial to the field of American culture as a whole. The organisation of the book is straightforward. It starts with a brief outline of Twain’s life and an overview of the historical and cultural context in which his writings can be placed. It then focuses on his main works – on Twain’s humour, on his successful and influential early travel writings, and on his most successful and enduring novels: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and *Pudd’nhead Wilson*. These sections contain detailed analysis of the themes and narrative techniques of each text and key interpretative approaches to them. Other works are also briefly discussed in this section of the book. The final chapter provides analysis of the recent critical reception of Twain’s work, with its contentious and important debates about his literary and cultural position. Reference is made, within this context, to his late texts. A final guide to further reading is aimed at those who wish to extend their research and critical work on the author.

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This study comes from my own previous work on Twain and from the extensive critical heritage on which I draw. After a decade working primarily on Twain, I still thoroughly enjoy reading him and find him a fascinating figure in the way that his life and works provide a lens for the larger study of American life and culture in his own times and in our own. I will count this work successful if my own enthusiasm and interest stimulate the same response in my readers.



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## Note on referencing

Reference is made throughout this collection to the *Oxford Mark Twain*, the widely-available set of facsimiles of the first American editions of Mark Twain's works, edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin and published by Oxford University Press in 1996. Where these editions are used, page referencing immediately follows the quotation given. In Chapter 2 (though not elsewhere), references to the stories published in *Mark Twain's Sketches, New and Old* (1875) are also to the Oxford edition. Similarly in Chapter 3, with *The Stolen White Elephant, Etc.* (1882). All other references to Twain's sketches, essays and short stories are to the two-volume edition of Twain's *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, & Essays 1852–1890* (New York: Library of America, 1992). All such references are preceded in the text by the code *TSSE1* or *TSSE2* depending on the volume. A list of other primary texts follows. The letter codes that follow quotations are given in the final brackets.

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Twain, Mark, and Howells, William Dean (1960). *Mark Twain-Howells Letters: The Correspondence of Samuel L. Clemens and William Dean Howells, 1872–1910*, 2 vols., ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap. (*THL*)

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Twain, Mark (1997). *Mark Twain's Letters. Volume 5. 1872–1873*, ed. Lin Salamo and Harriet Elinor Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press. (L5)