

Shaun Pestell

Kaufman and Murdock

Humanities

8 January 2005

### The Unaccountable Mark Twain

“I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: ‘Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.’”(Paine). Mark Twain, arrogant, too witty for his own time, and unexplainably knowledgeable on every issue, from the invention of croquet to the irony of war, was just what he called himself, according to A.B. Paine in 1909, an “unaccountable freak.” Yet so many have tried to account for him. With over fifty biographies written on this one man, he is probably one of the most accounted for human beings to ever live. Known for his one-liners, critique of every thing under the sun, and speeches in cities across the whole United States, Mark Twain was one of the most, if not the most, influential man in American literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

“Humor is the good natured side of any truth.”(Read). The key to unlocking the literary prodigy, Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) is found in his humor, and his idea of how it works with human nature to create what we know as society. Twain believed that humor is the world's greatest blessing (Paine), because it can cause dramatic truths of life, such as death, able to bear. It can cause the dull, dramatic patterns of life to be endurable. There is truth wrapped up in humor—that's what makes life funny—it relates to actual events that go otherwise unnoticed.(Twain). “He has been likened to Cervantes and to Shakespeare for his uncanny

ability to turn despair into comedy, evil into parody, fury into laughter.”(Hodge xv). “But the truth is, that when a Library expels a book of mine and leaves an unexpurgated Bible lying around where unprotected youth and age can get hold of it, the deep unconscious irony of it delights me and doesn’t anger me.” (Paine). The truth is, he was the type of man who could take criticism and turn it back around toward the critic with completely classy, witty humor. With this idea of truth and humor Twain wrote and preformed hundreds of speeches all throughout the country. He became the first remembered American stand-up comedian of sorts. There were many American humorists, as he points out in one of his letters called “Humorists,” but unlike the others his one-liners are still quoted today. “Why have they perished? Because they were merely humorists. Humorists of the “mere” sort cannot survive...Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.” (DeVoto 202). He said it, he claimed it, and he was most definitely a political preacher full of parody, spitting out every bit of controversy a modern day comedian would about how corrupt the president and the Republic was and is.

“Yes, you are right—I am a moralist in disguise; it gets me into heaps of trouble when I go thrashing around in political questions.”(Twain). The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of political frustration and controversy, and though Twain’s writings were considered controversial themselves, he held a mirror up to America, showing its nature, his nature, for what it was. He showed that it was a breeding of unnecessary wars, a president succeeding in creating a Monarchial Republic, and that “Christians” created the corrupted government America had become. (Hodge xvi). “Our Congressmen consist of Christians. In their private life they are true to every obligation of honor; yet in every session they violate them all, and do it without shame;

because honor to party is above honor to themselves.”(Paine). He once commented that the only true Christian was Jesus Christ himself and we, being humans killed him off quickly.(Twain). He obviously believed this based on observing our “religious” government in action and the mistakes they were making everyday. Controversial to the man in government claiming to be a follower of Christ, but so true and necessary to the times, he wrote *The War Prayer*:

O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle—be Thou near them! With them—in spirit—we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved firesides to smite the foe. O Lord our God, help us to tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rages and hunger and thirst...(Twain).

The passage goes on and on with what is the horrific wars that humans conceive and give life to year after year, decade after decade, asking a deity to help them when the other side is doing the exact same. He raises the question, “Why should God help America kill weaker countries; why wouldn’t he help the other countries praying to him?” Most of his stories and letters are intended to be political, social, as well as emotional. One of his most popular works, The Prince and the Pauper is a satire on how a common man could do the job of a king or president just as well, just by looking like him, but it is also hope for the common man struggling to get by. Twain’s writings on politics are timeless, as history repeats itself, his discussion of such topics never

becomes irrelevant. He was a man ahead of his time and in his own time. "Such is life, and the tail of the serpent is over us all. Let us draw the curtain over this melancholy history -- for melancholy it must still remain, during a season at least..." (Twain).

Some of Twain's greatest pieces were written in his later years, when he had become pessimistic and cynical to an extreme. Most of his writing in this period addressed the "disease of human nature" and though gloomy, it could be argued as the wisest times of Clemens' life. (LucidCafe.com). His career was not washed up, he wasn't at his wit's end; it was simply that the realism and depression of society struck his mind and heart, and came out his mouth and pen in his later works such as, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, *Five Boons of Life*, *Does the Race of Man Love a Lord?*, *Eve's Diary*(which was banned), and *Was it Heaven? Or Hell?*.

...we are all alike, we human beings; and in our blood and bone, and ineradicably, we carry the seeds out of which monarchies and aristocracies are grown: worship of gauds, titles, distinctions, power. We have to worship these things and their possessors, we are all born so and we cannot help it. ...we have to have somebody to worship and envy or we cannot be content...In public we scoff at titles and hereditary privilege but privately we hanker after them, and when we get a chance we buy them for cash and a daughter. (Twain).

He often addressed the fact that one single man holds all of the mistakes and depravity of the human race. In other words, if there was only one human, he would be the same as the human race, stupid, corrupt, ready to start a war with himself, and act on all his feelings rather than have some common sense. (DeVoto 25). His work, shedding a light on a corrupt government, was the essence of American. It was free-thinking, saying almost anything and almost everything, anti-

conformist, and captured the liberty Americans have in words. Almost anything and almost everything, because he often stated that humans always have a private agenda, a different view on everything than what they actually say. People say the view that will best help themselves and make heads nod in approval, not the view that will help the rest of the human race think for themselves. (DeVoto). It does not matter if an author is right or wrong, all that matters is that he says as he sees the world he lives in. But for an author to be noticed in such a high degree, as Mark Twain, his work must either offend all or bless all with witty humor. "My books are water; those of the great geniuses is wine. Everybody drinks water"(Twain).

We drink the water of Twain and enjoy the humor, the politics, and have thoughts of what true human nature is. The only man who was arrogant enough to step on a stage and make fun of the human race and all its funny qualities, is so very relevant to any day and age. The man who affected the common people, the upper-class, the working man, the hereditarily rich man, and any one who belongs to the human race, in such a way that he became the American literary genius of his day. He did not get assassinated or die saving an innocent old woman from falling off a cliff or become the next Carnegie, he died in 1910, a literary hero.

## Works Cited

- DeVoto, Bernard. *Mark Twain in Eruption*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968. Print.
- Hodge, David and Stacey Freeman. *Political Tales and Truths of Mark Twain*. New York: MJF Books, 1992. Print.
- Paine, Albert Bigelow. "Mark Twain: A Biography." *The Mark Twain Papers & Project*. The Bancroft Library, U.C. Berkeley, Apr. 2003. Web. 4 Dec. 2005.
- Read, Opie. "Mark Twain and I." *The Official Web Site of Mark Twain*. Estate of Mark Twain, 26 Nov. 2004. Web. 12 Dec. 2005.
- Twain, Mark. *Eve's Diary*. New York: Harper, 1906. Print.
- . *Christian Science*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907. Print.
- . *Mark Twain's Notebook*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935. Print.
- . *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*. New York: C.H. Webb, 1867. Print.
- . *Europe and Elsewhere*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923. Print.
- . *The War Prayer*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971. Print.