Mark Twain Essay, Research Paper

Cohen 1

Jeffrey Cohen

Mrs. Schroeder-Blumke

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Mark Twain

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, is perhaps the most

distinguished author of American Literature. Next to William Shakespeare, Clemens is

arguably the most prominent writer the world has ever seen.

In 1818, Jane Lampton found interest in a serious young lawyer named John

Clemens. With the Lampton family in heavy debt and Jane only 15 years of age, she soon

married John. The family moved to Gainesboro, Tennessee where Jane gave birth to

Orion Clemens. In the summer of 1827 the Clemenses relocated to Virginia where John

purchased thousands of acres of land and opened a legal advice store. The lack of

success of the store led John to drink heavily. Scared by his addiction, John

vowed never to drink again. Even though John now resisted alcohol, he faced other

addictions. His concoction of aloe, rhubarb, and a narcotic cost him most of his savings

and money soon became tight (Paine 34-35).

The family soon grew with the birth of Pamela late in 1827. Their third child,

Pleasant Hannibal, did not live past three months, due to illness. In 1830 Margaret was

born and the family moved to Pall Mall, a rural county in Tennessee. After Henry?s birth

in 1832, the value of their farmland greatly depreciated and sent the Clemenses on the

road again. Now they would stay with Jane?s sister in Florida, Missouri where she ran a

successful business with her husband. Clemens was born on November 30, 1835, in the

small remote town of Florida, Missouri. Samuel?s parents, John Marshall and Jane

Cohen 2

Lampton Clemens never gave up on their child, who was two months premature with little

hope of survival.

This was coincidentally the same night as the return of Halley?s Comet. The

Clemenses were a superstitious family and believed that Halley?s Comet was a portent of

good fortune. Writing as Mark Twain, Samuel L. Clemens would claim that Florida,

Missouri ?contained 100 people and I increased the population by one percent. It is more

than the best man in history ever did for any other town? (Hoffman 15).

1847 proved to be a horrific year for John Clemens. He ventured to Palmyra in

order to find work on the county seat. On his voyage home he found himself in a

devastating snowstorm which left him ill with pneumonia. He stayed at his friend Dr.

Grant?s house, ill and jaded, where he rested and grew weak. He died on March 24, 1847

at the age of 48 (Kaplan 112-125).

Samuel was eleven years old when his father passed away. He was of ambiguous

emotions. He had dreaded his father, yet at the same time respected him. The onus of

taking care of the family was now on Samuel and Orion?s shoulders. He attended school

and for additional cash delivered newspapers and aided storekeepers. His expertise was

with Joseph Ament, editor of the Missouri Courier, where he was an apprentice.

In the fall of 1850, Samuel?s brother Orion purchased a printing press and

expected Samuel to work on his newspaper. They began work on the Hannibal Western

Union where Orion printed all of Samuel?s essays and articles. Although the newspaper

was unprofitable, and deemed a failure by most, Orion and Samuel saw themselves as a

success. They soon changed the name to the Journal and now had the largest circulation

of any newspaper in the region. It was filled with works both original and copied from

other sources. This was acceptable in a society without copyrights. When the Journal

gained success, Orion refused to print some of Samuel?s works. He, however took his

writing elsewhere. He wrote for the Carpet-Bag and the Philadelphia American

Cohen 3

Courier, berating his old town and the Hannibal natives. He signed each work with the

initials ?S.L.C.?

Orion left town for awhile and gave the duty of editor to Samuel. He

quickly took advantage of Orion?s absence. He wrote articles of town news and prose

poetry that revealed characteristics of the boy who would eventually transform into Mark

Twain. In these articles he would use his first of many pseudonyms, W. Epaminondas

Adrastus Blab. Orion?s return ended both Samuel?s developing humor and burning satire.

Orion decided to publish the Journal daily and it gave Samuel an opportunity to write

more material, but at the same time overworked him. When Orion deleted local news

from the newspaper, interest was lost and the rival Messenger began outselling the

Journal. This prompted Samuel to leave Orion and the Journal behind at the age of

eighteen. He had bigger aspirations and vowed never to let a place trap him again. His

journeys would take him to St. Louis, New York City, and then Philadelphia (Hoffman

32-36).

The best position he found involved night work as a substitute typesetter at the

Philadelphia Inquirer. Clemens wrote about the sights of Philadelphia which he copied

from a guidebook, but altered the descriptions into a style much more mature than in

previous writings. Clemens? well-known writing style had a loose rhythm of speech and he

wrote as if he were telling an unbelievable story which he expected his listeners and

readers to believe. He was a master of the ?tall story? of the frontier and delighted his

audience with his storytelling abilities (Lyttle 65). One can see this unique style in his

description of the nation?s capital:

The public buildings of Washington are all fine specimens of architecture, and

would add greatly to the embellishment of such a city as New York- but here they

are sadly out of place looking like so many palaces in a Hottentot village. . . .The

[other] buildings, almost invariably, are very poor–two and three story brick

Cohen 4

houses, and strewed about in clusters; you seldom see a compact square off

Pennsylvania Avenue. They look as though they might have been emptied out of a

sack by some Brobdignagian gentleman, and when falling, been scattered abroad

by the winds (qtd. in Paine 27).

In his time, most novels were a form of enriching entertainment. Light reading that would

do no harm and might even do the reader some good. They were written with an

intelligent, well-behaved audience in mind, an audience that expected to read about people

like themselves. They were most comfortable reading the language they used in public.

William Gibson belies that, ?Twain developed one of the great styles in the English

language because he had a firm grasp of the American vernacular?(qtd. in Long 205).

His letters to the Keokuk Papers in St. Louis proved to be most successful for

Clemens. He signed these letters with the pseudonym Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass. His

narrations made the western readers feel more intelligent by laughing at the character?s

idiocy. ?Snodgrass? would continue to write letters until the editor refused to pay him.

He then decided to leave the city and travel along the Mississippi River in a steamboat.

By the middle of 1857, Clemens had made five runs up and down the river, and this is

where he first used the name, Mark Twain.

On river boats, one member of the crew always stood near the forward railing

measuring the depth of the water with a long cord which had flags spaced a fathom apart.

When the crewman saw the flags disappear he would call out “Mark One!” for one fathom

and for two fathoms he called out “Mark Twain!” Two fathoms meant safe clearance for

river boats, so Clemens chose a name which not only recalled his life on the river but

which also had a motivating meaning (Robinson).

One horrific afternoon, while his brother Henry was traveling the Mississippi River

on the Pennsylvania eight of this ship?s boilers exploded while Twain was on the nearby

Cohen 5

Memphis-bound A.T. Lacy. When the boilers exploded, Henry died from breathing in the

scalding steam.Grief was overwhelming Twain and he seemed to be losing his mind. He

returned to St. Louis where his mother tried to comfort him. Gradually his depression

began to lift, and he returned to the river (Cox 44).

Many writers of the time used pen names, especially authors of humor and satire.

The first article signed with ?Mark Twain? appeared in the Enterprise on February 3,

1863, entitled The Unreliable. ?[W]ithin a period of weeks he was no longer ?Sam? or

?Clemens? or ?that bright chap on the Enterprise,? but ?Mark?- ?Mark Twain.? No nom de

plume was ever so quickly and generally accepted as that? wrote friend and biographer,

Albert Bigelow Paine (45-46).

Twain moved to San Francisco, California, in 1864, where he met writers

Artemus Ward and Bret Harte, who encouraged him in his work. In 1865, Twain

reworked a tale he had heard in the California gold fields, and within months the author

and the story, The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, had become national

sensations.

While on a trip in Europe, one of the most important moments of Twain?s life

occurred off the coast of Turkey. He set his gaze on Olivia Langdon, and he would never

forget the moment. Almost forty years later, Twain recalled, ?…[s]he was slender and

beautiful and girlish – and she was both girl and woman.? He asked for her hand in

marriage several times but to no avail. His persistence paid off in late November 1869,

when she agreed to marry him if her parents approved. Twain needed money to support

his new wife so he spent several weeks writing his second book, The Innocents Abroad.

Young novelist and editor William Deam Howells said the book contained an abundance

of ?pure human nature, such as rarely gets into literature…?(qtd. in Lyttle 110).

Cohen 6

Following the birth of their first child, Langdon Clemens in 1870, Twain set out to write

Roughing It, a story recounting his early adventures as a miner and journalist; and The

Gilded Age. The Gilded Age was an immediate hit with the public and sold out three

printings in the first month. Twain soon wrote perhaps the two most famous and

influential stories in American Literature: The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885). Howells would call Tom Sawyer ?the best story I

ever read. It will be an immense success…? (Lyttle 137). Though some people

complained that Tom and Huck were bad examples for children, most readers were

fascinated by the story of their adventures in the town of St. Petersburg. Barrett Wendel

of Harvard labeled Adventures of Huckleberry Finn ?a book which in certain moods one is

disposed for all its eccentricity to call the most admirable work of literacy as yet produced

on this continent? (Long 199). Twain would write many more essays, novels, plays, and

poetry but none would reach the status that Adventures of Huckleberry Finn acclaimed.

At the turn of the century, Olivia Clemens was stricken with what seemed to be a

violent heart attack. Twain wrote, ?She could not breathe – was likely to stifle. Also she

had severe palpitation. She believed she was dying. I also believed it? (qtd. in Kaplan 220).

They moved to Florence, Italy in October 1903. After recuperating from her heart attack,

she was stricken with another. Twain never left Olivia?s side and was with her until her

death. That night Twain stayed by her side caressing her hand. The next day he wrote, ?I

am tired and old; I wish I were with Livy? (qtd. in Kaplan 236).

Twain went into a state of depression and it seemed nothing was going right. One

of his daughters suffered a nervous breakdown and entered a sanitarium, and his other was

nearly killed in a horse and trolley accident. As several years passed, he gradually began

accepting invitations to banquets and parties, but still felt lonely without Olivia. ?Don?t

part with your illusions,? he had written. ?When they are gone you may still exist but you

Cohen 7

have ceased to live.? Now his illusions were gone and was deeply a lonely man (qtd. in

Cox 208).

In the spring of 1907, Twain learned that Oxford University in England wanted to

give him an honorary degree and quickly took a ship to London. Four weeks of nonstop

activity followed before returning to the United States. He suffered severe heart pains on

the voyage back.

Aware throughout his life that he was born when Halley?s Comet was visible,

Mark Twain predicted in 1909 that he would die when it returned. ?I came in with

Halley?s Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year and I expect to go out with it…The

Almighty has saved me no doubt: ?Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they

came in together, they must go out together.? Oh! I am looking forward to that?(qtd. in

Kaplan 355)

He sailed to Bermuda in the spring of 1910, planning to stay all winter in the

warmth and sunshine, but unhappiness would bring him back to Hannibal. ?I don?t want

to die there. I am growing more and more particular about the place? (qtd. in Long

421).Twain?s prediction came true. On the night of April 21 he set his gaze on Halley?s

Comet, sank into a coma and died (Cox 218).

Essentially no one any longer ponders the place of Mark Twain in American

literature, or in international literature. A pioneer in writing, William Dean Howells best

sums Mark Twain up with, ?There was never anybody like him; there never will be?

(Hoffman 497).

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