

It is in vain that I try to give a notion of the intensity with which he pierced to the heart of life, and the breadth of vision with which he compassed the whole world, and tried for the reason of things and then left trying. Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes -- I know them all and all the rest of our sages, poets, seers, critics, humorists; they were like one another and like other literary men; but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature. -- From "My Mark Twain," by William Dean Howells.



## CHAPTER I      INTRODUCTION

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known by his pen name Mark Twain, was born in the village of Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. He was the third son and the fifth child of John Marshall and Jane (Lampton) Clemens. The father was a lawyer of Virginian birth and the mother was a Kentuckian. In 1839, the family moved to Hannibal on the Mississippi. Here Clemens grew up and spent his childhood. John Clemens died in 1847, leaving his family ill provided for. Thus Clemens, at the age of twelve, was forced to leave school to earn a small amount of money to help support the family. Orion, the eldest son, was a journeyman printer in St. Louis. Sam was apprenticed to the same trade in Joseph P. Ament's shop in Hannibal. He later joined his brother in efforts to edit newspapers, first in Hannibal, then in Muscatine and Keokuk, Iowa. He became an expert printer. Between 1853 and 1857, he visited St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia and Washington, supporting himself by his trade. In 1856, he made plans to go to

South America to seek his fortune but got only as far as Cincinnati. The next year, on the way to New Orleans, Clemens apprenticed himself to Horace Bixby as a river pilot. He was licensed two years later and continued in that profession until the Civil War closed the river. Clemens was obliged to look for another occupation. In 1861, he served briefly in the Marion Rangers, a militia company which disbanded before being sworn into the Confederate Army. Then Clemens went West with his brother Orion, who had been appointed Territorial Secretary of Nevada. During that year he contributed some humorous skits to the "Territorial Enterprise" of Virginia City, and in August 1862, was invited to join the staff. Seeking <sup>for</sup> a good pen name, he chose a river term "mark twain" (meaning two fathoms deep).

In May 1864, a quarrel with a rival journalist, whom he challenged to a duel, forced Clemens to flee to San Francisco. For the next two years he worked for various California papers. Early in 1866, Clemens was sent by the Sacramento "Union" to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) on a roving commission to write a series of letters about whatever interested him. Their popularity encouraged him to try a humorous lecture on his experiences. First delivered in San Francisco with huge success, the lecture was repeated on a three-month tour. His achievement brought a commission from the "Alta California" of San Francisco to do a similar series about a trip to New York via Nicaragua -- a commission extended later to include a Mediterranean tour. Besides supplying the material for The Innocents Abroad, the tour brought him the friendship of young Charles Langdon

of Elmira, New York, whose sister Olivia he married on February 2, 1870. With help from Jervis Langdon, his prosperous father-in-law, Clemens bought an interest in the Buffalo "Express," intending to make journalism his career.

The venture was unhappy, emotionally and financially. In 1871, after the death of Jervis Langdon, the family moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where Elisha Bliss of the American Publishing Company, a subscription firm, had his office. There the Nook Farm group, which included Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Dudley Warner, and Theodore Hooker, furnished congenial company. In the big house built on Farmington Avenue, Clemens spent the happiest and most productive years of his life. Olivia bore him three daughters: Susy, Clara and Jean.

In 1884, Clemens founded his own publishing house, and made a spectacular success with U. S. Grant's Personal Memoirs, about the same time he began investing heavily in a type-setting machine invented by James W. Paige. The machine was a costly failure. The over-expanded publishing house went down in the depression of the 1890's, and Clemens was bankrupt. Announcing that he would pay all debts in full, he undertook a lecture tour around the world. The tour was a triumph; within four years all debts were paid. In 1900, Clemens came home to public honors and private griefs. During his tour, Susy had died on August 18, 1896. Olivia, his wife, died June 5, 1904, after a long invalidism, and Jean died in 1909. This caused him great grief; he gradually let go of the world. What he most valued was perhaps the degree of Doctor of Literature conferred upon

him by Oxford in 1907. At his house "Stormfield", in Redding, Connecticut, Twain died quietly on April 21, 1910.<sup>1</sup>

Clemens was a professional writer for more than four decades, but his literary eminence depends mainly on the work done between 1874 and 1884. He began his career as a comic journalist and gradually strove to take a place among the serious writers of fiction. Clemens was unique among his contemporaries, the post-Civil War generation, since he presented the paradox of a humorist seeking recognition as a serious writer. Of that generation of American writers, his literary achievement is the highest among the authors who can be said to represent a broad cross-section of the American nation. But exactly why have we chosen to study Clemens rather than the other most important novelists of that day? A brief sketch of the other major writers of Twain's generation is in order.

William Dean Howells was distinguished in American history and literature as the central figure and leader of American letters for the quarter century ending in 1900. In addition he was the most influential critic of his day. In 1871 he became the editor-in-chief of the "Atlantic Monthly". He had a remarkable influence on literary men and women of his day by recognizing and encouraging many writers including Twain, Henry James, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Stephen Crane. These authors attributed a large part of their success to Howells. Later, he took over the "Editor's Study" for "Harper's". Through the "Study", he introduced to the American reading public such writers as Tolstoy, Giovanni Verga, Palacio Valdés and Perez Galdos.

During the late 80's and 90's he became increasingly concerned with social problems -- the meaning of socialism, the relations of labor and capital, and more broadly, the mystery of poverty and of human suffering. His novels, however, are pale and second-rate in conception and have dated badly. Although he was one of the pioneers of American literary realism, he left out strong emotions from his writing and showed only the "smiling aspect of life". Howells is mainly remembered as a social critic, a realist, and the purveyor and the upholder of truth in fiction. He is neither the best nor the most typical American writer of his generation.<sup>2</sup>

Henry James was a brilliant novelist and critic who lived most of his adult life in Europe. After 1872 he maintained virtually permanent residence there, settling in England in 1876 and becoming a British subject in 1915. He produced novels, stories and literary criticism which have won ever-increasing critical acclaim. Although his first tales are placed in the American scene, they show a careful study of his principal models, Balzac, Merimée, George Eliot and George Sand. His later works show also the influence of other English and continental writers, notably Dickens, Flaubert, Maupassant, and Turgenev.

His fiction deals almost exclusively with the wealthy and well-born in English and expatriate American society. He was an outsider who detached himself from America and wrote about it objectively. Most of his stories are "international" in theme. They present the contrast of American and European manners. He usually gave his American protagonists a moral victory over the more

cultivated, but also more corrupt, Europeans. His being so detached and cosmopolitan make him uncharacteristic of American writers. Because he understood America too well, the artistic gropings and tencions that lend an extra degree of fascination to the critic are lacking.<sup>3</sup>

George Washington Cable was a brilliant social analyst and miscellaneous writer. He used essays and public lectures to urge the cause of Negro rights and of prison reform. The chief interest of Cable's novels lies in their excellent descriptions of Creole life, a subject which he may be said to have introduced into literature. His pictures of Negro life are equally effective, and he handles dialect in a masterly manner. Novels set mainly in the South came from his pen until he was past 70. But though better constructed, they lacked the freshness and charm and also the force of moral conviction of his early work. He never found a fictional form to embody his ideas successfully and in the last analysis his work, ambitious as it was, is of a regional nature.<sup>4</sup> Consequently we have also passed over Cable in selecting the topic of this thesis.

During the post-Civil War period, the United States was a country of two mentalities. The East with New England as its center stood for established culture and refinement, having for its focus the notion of ideality, and of elevated and rhetorical diction. The West, often untamed frontier, represented barbarism, crudity, vulgarity and unrefined impulses originating in everyday experience, at any rate as imagined in the popular mind, and wrote its books in colloquial speech with common-place images. It was the vulgar

world of the natural man. The writers from the East were accepted by the reading public as established writers, whereas the Westerners were looked down on as being comic, crude, unrefined and vulgar. However, after the Civil War for the first time important writers sprang up from all parts of the country. Among them was Mark Twain, whose eventual recognition by the literary world marked the beginning of a new era in literature.

Mark Twain was the new voice coming out of the West, its most important spokesman. He was proud of himself as a practical, hopeful, vital, coarse man from the real heart of America. His speech delivered at a dinner given by the publishers of the "Atlantic Monthly" to commemorate Whittier's seventieth birthday marked symbolically the advent of the new era in American literature and the passing of the old order. It caused a great sensation and hostile criticism. Twain made a cruel attack, whether or not knowingly, on three representative literary giants of New England, men who were almost public institutions: Longfellow, Emerson and Holmes. The speech was considered entirely out-of-place since it was in bad taste and lacked reverence for these old, venerable, established figures. Twain's perhaps innocent desire to enliven the party by anecdotally bringing these poets who were used to mixing in a refined society into relations with whisky, cards and bowie-knives, including his misquotations from the writing of the poets, certainly could be understood as savoring of disrespect and insult. Twain's description of three tramps posing as the illustrious gentlemen made the writers seem ridiculous:

Mr. Emerson was a soedy little bit of a chap, red-headed. Mr. Holmes was as flat as a balloon; he weighed as much as three hundred, and had double chins all the way down to his stomach. Mr. Longfellow was built like a prize-fighter. His head was cropped and bristly, like as if he had a wig made of hair-brushes.



The Whittier Day address was a challenge of the new literary generation to the old. Twain's voice here is the voice of the West, proud to be speaking in rough, colloquial accents, scornful of the older writers whom he felt were slavishly imitating English writers and sacrificing a true depiction of life in the process. However, Twain sometimes felt embarrassed by his own status. He was torn between the two mentalities, pride in his western background and a strong desire to be considered a serious writer and to be respectable and accepted in the more refined society of the East. His life as well as his works show his ambiguous feelings and the many-sidedness of his own personality. In spite of his disdain for the East, he moved to Hartford, an eastern literary center, and tried to mix into the society there during his most productive years. He was always a popular entertainer and his original literary purpose was simply to create laughter; yet, he longed to be accepted as a serious writer. He was a humorist with a tragic sense of life. As he was growing old, he became more pessimistic. His latest works which are the products of emotions become embittered and humor turned black. His very complexity, then, marks him out for special interest.



Twain was in the mainstream of the American tradition. He became one of America's most important voices during the Gilded Age (1865 -- 1900) -- a phrase of his own invention. It was an age of rapid expansion of industry with much splendor and shininess accompanied by much dishonesty and corruption. America was busy building the country. Consequently there was little time for art. Mark Twain was so much a part of the America of his day that, in spite of his hundreds of pages of social criticism, he could not see it as clearly as we can see it today. Twain, for example, makes fun of the provincial taste of people, yet his own taste was not better than theirs.

Twain himself represents America, and in himself are contained all the ambiguities of the culture. For example, America's attitude toward Europe has always been a complicated one. As the Americans proudly marched forward, developing their country, a nervous glance was cast over their shoulder to see how their performance was being judged in Europe. Twain as well as his fellow-countrymen had a deep psychological awareness of cultural inferiority to Europe. In order to ease this feeling, he debunked European culture and art. Ambiguous feelings about scientific and material progress can also be seen in his works. Twain heartily assented to the improvements they brought, but he felt uncomfortable and reluctant to glorify industry since it deprived him of the past which he loved. His comment on freedom is remarkable and is but a further example of the contradictions he found in his society which he had to attempt to resolve in his art.

America was the great land of freedom and liberty. And America had been the land of slavery.

Since Twain was this complicated figure, his insights into and attitudes toward America are especially valuable. Wholly a part of the culture and yet yearning for worlds that were lost or unattainable: This very complexity singles him out for the special attention of the student of literature.

The purpose of the thesis is a careful reading and critical analysis of Twain's major works, treated in chronological order. The expected result is an ability to sharpen and refine the general image of Mark Twain, including a better understanding of his works and his development as a literary man.

The main attention will be focused on the development of certain basic characteristics and certain basic themes. The stylistic characteristics will include the following:

- A. What is the relation in Twain's works between colloquial speech and the literary tradition?
- B. What devices does Twain use to tell his story?
- C. What are the different varieties of humor in Twain and what are its different functions?

The themes will include the following:

- A. What is his view of man and how does it affect his works?
- B. Why do childhood and innocence play an important part in his work?

C. In what ways is Twain a "realist"? Is this realism qualified by sentimentalism?

To a lesser extent, we will be concerned with special problems in Twain scholarship:

A. What are his uses and innovations of the Southwestern "tall-tale"?

B. What is his vision of America?

After a chapter tracing Twain's literary sources -- very important to a study of his development -- and a chapter dealing with his first important prose writings, each chapter will be devoted to a discussion of one of the major works. The concluding chapter will summarize the findings in the thesis. To the thesis will be appended notes and a bibliography.