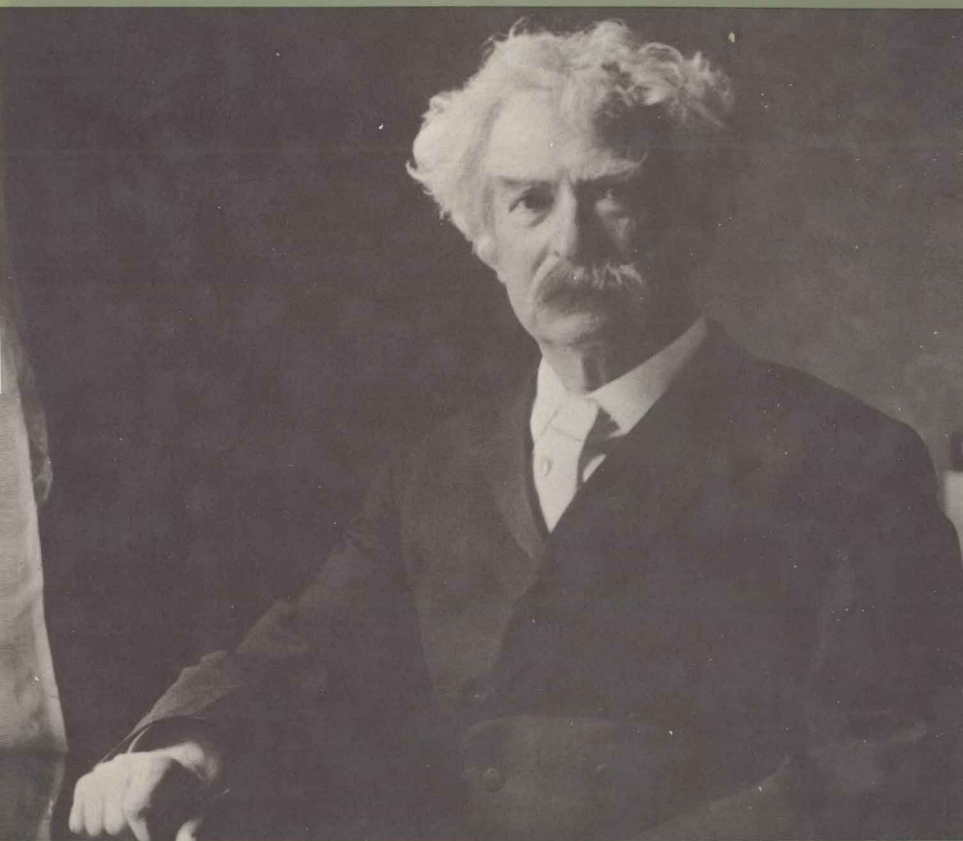


# MARK TWAIN

## A SUMPTUOUS VARIETY



*edited by*

**ROBERT GIDDINGS**

*ritical Studies Series*

**MARK TWAIN:  
A Sumptuous Variety**



# MARK TWAIN: A Sumptuous Variety

edited by

Robert Giddings

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# Introduction

by ROBERT GIDDINGS

He had the Southwestern, the Lincolnian, the Elizabethan breadth of parlance, and I was often hiding away . . . the letters in which he had loosed his bold fancy to stoop on rank suggestion; I could not bear to burn them, and I could not, after the first reading, quite bear to look at them.

—William Dean Howells (1837–1920) on Mark Twain's letters

## 1

Mark Twain is a resounding genius whose brilliant light has been hidden behind the bushel of his own reputation. The *Missouri Vacation Guide*, published by the Missouri Division of tourism, in Jefferson City, the capital of the state which proudly claims Twain as its native son, devotes several highly colourful pages to the 'Mark Twain Region'. And what a jolly legacy the old fellow seems to have left us:

From a famous whitewashed fence, a scenic skylift and the homes of distinguished soldiers to fine hunting, caves, beaches and covered bridges, the Mark Twain region of Northwest Missouri offers fun for the whole family. The author and humourist who gave the region its name was a native of the Hannibal area. Born in Florida, Missouri, where his birthplace is preserved, Samuel Clemens moved to nearby Hannibal and spent his boyhood years in this Mississippi River town. His boyhood home is now a free museum honouring the youngster who grew up to become Mark Twain, one of the best loved writers of all time. At Twain's boyhood home is the famous board fence that Tom Sawyer got his friends to whitewash and across the street is the home of Becky Thatcher. Just down the Mississippi is Mark Twain Cave, open to visitors, where Twain went exploring as a youth. . . .<sup>1</sup>



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The association of Twain with the past, with boyhood, innocence and wholesome fun is altogether characteristic. In some ways it is relevant, in ways unsuspected by those who wish to promote tourism in the state of Missouri. There is an important element of the child in Mark Twain. Elinor Glyn met him in New York in 1907 and recorded:

He is a dear old man with a halo of white silky hair and a fresh face, and the eyes of a child which look out on life with that infinite air of wisdom one sees peeping sometimes from a young pure soul. To find such eyes in an aged face proves many things as to the hidden beauties of his character. . . .<sup>2</sup>

But there are serious qualifications to be made. Bearing in mind Dumas's famous comment—'Why is it that children are so intelligent and adults so stupid? It must be education that does it . . .'<sup>3</sup>—we need to focus attention on certain aspects of Twain child-like qualities.<sup>3</sup>

To be sure there is the sense of fun. The fun is frequently to be located in Twain's way of looking at things, in his recognition of the essential daftness of life. His work is rich in such examples. This is bound to be the case, as it seems basic to his perceptions. From the myriad possible passages, take any one of those seemingly casual pieces of jokey narrative in *Tom Sawyer*. You can open this masterpiece anywhere and find them. There is his description of the system which allows Tom—of all boys—to win a prize Bible. This is possible because the prize is awarded on the basis of accumulating tickets of varying colours for learning verses by heart.

This is silly enough, but a genius like Twain does not have it in him to leave it at that:

. . . each got his reward in small blue tickets, each with a passage of scripture on it; each blue ticket was pay for two verses of the recitation. Ten blue tickets equalled a red one, and could be exchanged for it; ten red tickets equalled a yellow one; for ten yellow tickets the Superintendent gave a very plainly bound Bible (worth forty cents in those easy times) to the pupil. How many of my readers would have the industry and the application to memorize two thousand verses, even for a Doré Bible? And yet Mary had acquired two Bibles in this way; it was the patient work of two years; and a boy of German parentage had won four or five. He once recited three thousand

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verses without stopping; but the strain upon his mental faculties was too great, and he was little better than an idiot from that day forth—a grievous misfortune for the school, for on great occasions before company the Superintendent (as Tom expressed it) had always made this boy come out and ‘spread himself’. Only the older pupils managed to keep their tickets and stick to their tedious work long enough to get a Bible, and so the delivery of one of these prizes was a rare and noteworthy circumstance; the successful pupil was so great and conspicuous for that day that on the spot every scholar’s breast was fired with a fresh ambition that often lasted a couple of weeks. . . .<sup>4</sup>

Here we have the viewpoint of one who clearly refuses to take the world on its own terms. The very system which supports the functioning of the community—albeit in this case only a provincial school—is perceived as utterly unreasonable. The prize offered is worth only forty cents in real money, but the ceremonies and rituals in which the whole matter has been dressed up ensures that many strive to achieve it. Not only that, but the very means of earning the prize—learning scripture by rote—successfully devalues the true worth of the prize, as it renders the scriptures merely stored data in the striver’s retrieval system which is transformed into meaningless mumbo-jumbo in the very act of memorizing. In spite of this, the silly system has been so successfully socially constructed that many compete and several by their determined efforts win several of these worthless prizes. Given this treatment, far from providing divine light and guidance, the scriptures have driven beings mad. This is a shame because the school (that is to say, the system) liked to show off its more successful contestants.

Twain’s very way of telling you these things makes you wilfully a partner of his particular perspective. It is assumed that neither Mark Twain nor the reader in whom he is confiding would be able to manage these feats of memory, or would even bother to manage them, though the prize might be a ‘Doré Bible’. There is a wholly characteristic ‘knowingness’ which Twain communicates to you as you read the words on the page. This turns you into a sharer of Twain’s worldview without your realizing it.

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The viewpoint crystallizes a particular way of looking at the world, not accepting the world's self-estimate, and answering 'Oh yeah?' to each and every one of the world's basic assumptions. Comedy, in the hands of Mark Twain, becomes chief amongst the weaponry by which to resist received opinion and the seeming permanence of the social order. Much of Twain's humour may easily be seen as part of a long and respectable tradition. As Eric Mottram wrote:

His world-wide reputation was based on a gift for mixing boyish rascality and innocence in a naïve, vernacular vision, one complicated, however, by his darkening, bitter view of man as hypocrite, victim and self-deceiver.<sup>5</sup>

It is a fact that much of Twain's humour seemingly belongs in the context of a tradition which proudly includes among its ornaments such geniuses as W. C. Fields and Groucho Marx.<sup>6</sup> Max Sennett once said revealingly of a brilliant sketch by Fields: 'I had the notion that he had settled several old scores known only to himself.'<sup>7</sup> There is an element of getting-your-own-back which is basic to all humour. It is often quite strongly to be sensed in Twain, but its obviousness is masked by artistry.

In Twain the technique is infallible. Here is his reaction when granted a sight of a manuscript by the greatest epic poet of Augustan Rome, annotated in the handwriting of one of Italy's most celebrated poets:

We saw a manuscript of Vergil, with annotations in the handwriting of Petrarch, the gentleman who loved another man's Laura and lavished upon her all through life a love which was a clear waste of the raw material. It was sound sentiment, but bad judgement. It brought both parties fame and created a fountain of commiseration for them in sentimental breasts that is running yet. But who says a word in behalf of poor Mr. Laura? (I do not know his other name.) Who glorifies him? Who bedews him with tears? Who writes poetry about him? Nobody. How do you suppose *he* liked the state of things that has given the world so much pleasure? How did he enjoy having another man following his wife everywhere and making her name a familiar word in every garlic-exterminating mouth in Italy with his sonnets to her preempted eyebrows? They got fame and sympathy—he got neither. This is a peculiarly

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felicitous instance of what is called poetical justice. It is all very one-sided—too ungenerous. Let the world go on fretting about Laura and Petrarch if it will; but as for me, my tears and my lamentations shall be lavished upon the defendant.<sup>8</sup>

The essence of the humour lies in Twain's eccentric rejection of received opinion. He comes at us as a completely honest man, directly reacting to what he sees. His opinions are wholly uncluttered by the débris of academic fustian or classical learning. He is speaking as a man among men, and as a man directly to the reader. This was a manner which he took great pains to achieve. Twain once told William Dean Howells: 'I amend dialect stuff by talking and talking it till it sounds right.' Obviously connected with this tendency in his art is his notorious detestation of Sir Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper. Twain's was the art which hides art. This apparently easeful vernacular delivery was not created by anything less than the most harsh apprenticeship, involving much toil. He advised an amateur in 1884: 'You write as a man *talks* and very few can reach that height of excellence.'<sup>9</sup> His handling of language was a quality singled out for praise by H. L. Mencken:

Mark was not only a great artist; he was pre-eminently a great American artist. No other writer that we have produced has ever been more extravagantly national. Whitman dreamed of an America that never was and never will be; Poe was a foreigner in every line he wrote; even Emerson was no more than an American spigot for European, and especially German, ideas. But Mark was wholly of the soil. His humour was American. His incurable philistinism was American. His very English was American. . . .<sup>10</sup>

In a later essay, *American Language* published in 1930, Mencken claimed that Twain had deliberately engrafted the American West's 'greater liberty and more fluent idiom upon the stem of English, and so lent the dignity of his high achievement to a dialect that was as unmistakably American as the point of view underlying it'.<sup>11</sup> To which we might in all fairness add the plea that the great American humourist and author had also assimilated the influence of a fair amount of European literature and the English classics in particular, and

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that he was well steeped in our eighteenth-century masters, especially Swift, Goldsmith and Smollett, and that the mark of Thomas Paine should also be acknowledged as formative and beneficial.<sup>12</sup>

Twain's years of experience as a popular lecturer obviously aided the shaping of his truly oral use of American English. But it is not just a matter of vocabulary and syntax which is of importance here. It is also the relationship between Twain and his reader, and Twain and his listening audience. That typically American institution, the oral tale, in which not only the story but the way of telling it is so vital, is central in Twain's art. He must have cultivated the poker face, the deadpan delivery, during his career as a public speaker. One reviewer describes him performing:

The aggrieved way in which he gazes with tilted chin over the convulsed faces of his audience, as much as to say—"Why are you laughing?"—is irresistible in the extreme. . . . His face is immovable while his hearers laugh, and as he waits for the merriment to subside, his right hand plays with his chin. . . . These characteristics agree so well with his description of himself in his books—Innocence victimized by the world, flesh and Devil—that one cannot fail to establish the resemblance and laugh at the grotesque image.<sup>13</sup>

In his own words:

I do not claim that I can tell a story as it ought to be told. I only claim to know how a story ought to be told, for I have been almost daily in the company of the most expert story tellers for many years.

There are several kinds of stories, but only one difficult kind—the humorous. . . . The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the matter. . . .<sup>14</sup>

According to Twain, a humorous story may be spun out and wander about at will, whereas comic and witty stories have to be brief. Humorous stories simply bubble along, the others burst. He recognizes the high art involved in humorous storytelling. Comic and witty stories can be told by anyone: 'The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to

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conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it. . . .'<sup>15</sup>

The humorous story, according to Twain, was created in America, and has remained at home. This may well be true. But as far as Mark Twain was concerned, it was America at a particular stage of its development.

## 2

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, on 30 November 1835. Halley's Comet appeared at the time. In 1910, as he lay dying, the Comet was again seen in the sky. His lifespan was appropriately outlined in heavenly brilliance.

Samuel's father was a carefree lawyer and storekeeper who originally came from Tennessee. He was locally known as 'Judge' Clemens. When the boy was 4 years old the family moved to Hannibal, Missouri. He died when Samuel was 12. The family was left on the breadline and young Samuel had precious little formal education, but was to enjoy the benefit—of which he made overwhelming use—of two significant influences. One was the life and lore of the Mississippi river town, frontier life and the vast oral traditions he absorbed almost as the air he breathed. The other was his early acquaintance with publishing, the world of print and journalism. Twain's art is a dazzling example of the fusion of the creative imagination with the technology of the means of production and distribution.<sup>16</sup>

Sam became a printer's apprentice and a few years later was a printer for his elder brother, Orion, on the *Hannibal Journal*. He was later to say, with reference to his qualifications as a novelist: 'I surely have the equipment, a wide culture and all of it real, none of it artificial, for I don't know anything about books.'

His childhood made a lasting impression on him, and provided a reservoir of experience he was able to draw on all his life as a writer. He was to find developments in America which he saw all around him far less congenial, and this creates a marked tension in his world, between the present and the past, a tension between idyll and nightmare, which becomes a characteristic of his cast of mind. In some

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significant respects Samuel was a child of his time. He was growing to maturity in the West where there was unquestionably the feeling that a new society was in the making, and it was the Civil War (in which Twain was to play so curious a part) which gave the U.S.A. the imprimatur of nationhood. In 1845 a company of 160 emigrants set out from Independence, Missouri, for Oregon and California. Lansford W. Hastings, who went with them, recorded on 16 May 1845:

Now, all was high glee, jocular hilarity, and happy anticipation, as we thus darted forward into the wild expanse, of the untrodden regions of the 'western world'. The harmony of feeling, the sameness of purpose, and the identity of interest, which here existed, seemed to indicate nothing but continued order, harmony and peace, amid all the trying scenes incident to our long and toilsome journey. But we had proceeded only a few days travel, from our native land of order and security, when the 'American character' was fully exhibited. All appeared to be determined to govern, but not to be governed. Here we were, without law, without order, and without restraint; in a state of nature, amid the confused, revolving, fragments of elementary society! Some were sad, while others were merry; and while the brave doubted, the timid trembled! Amid this confusion, it was suggested by our captain, that we 'call a halt', and pitch our tents, for the purpose of enacting a code of laws, for the future government of the company. The suggestion was promptly complied with, when all were required to appear in the legislative capacities.<sup>17</sup>

As Daniel J. Boorstin comments on this passage, the point is that the nation was actually forming itself before men's eyes, and the very formation of its nationhood was in the air:

The nation was beginning not at one time or place, but again and again, under men's very eyes. Americans were forming new communities all over the wild expanse of the western world. Within less than a century after the American Revolution—even before the Civil War—the fringe of colonial settlements, ocean-bound to their mother countries, would become a continent-nation.<sup>18</sup>

The Civil War and the railways, forces which were foremost in the creation of America's nationhood, were the very forces which destroyed the river-town and river-traffic idyll which

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Twain's imagination was so happy to haunt. The past was the price sacrificed to make the present and urge the construction of the future. Charles Francis Adams, Jr. commented on the impact of the transcontinental railroad in 1868:

Here is an enormous, an incalculable force . . . let loose suddenly upon mankind; exercising all sorts of influences, social, moral, and political; precipitating upon us novel problems which demand immediate solution; banishing the old, before the new is half matured to replace it; bringing the nations into close contact before yet the antipathies of race have begun to be eradicated; giving us a history full of changing fortunes and rich in dramatic episodes. Yet, with the curious hardness of a material age, we rarely regard this new power otherwise than as a money-getting and time-saving machine. . . . not many of those . . . who fondly believe they control it, ever stop to think of it as . . . the most tremendous and far-reaching engine of social change which has ever either blessed or cursed mankind. . . . Perhaps if the existing community would take now and then the trouble to pass in review the changes it has already witnessed it would be less astounded at the revolutions which continually do and continually must flash before it; perhaps also it might with more grace accept the inevitable, and cease from useless attempts at making a wholly new world conform itself to the rules and theories of a bygone civilization.<sup>19</sup>

Powerful social and economic forces were at work long before the Civil War. The extension of the western frontier was an essential ingredient in the fulfilment of the Jeffersonian dream of a land-owning democratic society. Strong support was articulated by the *New York Tribune*, edited by Horace Greeley, by the Free Soil Party, by the Democratic Party and finally by the Republican Party.<sup>20</sup> The result was the Homestead Act, which was approved on 20 May 1862: 'An Act to secure Homesteads to actual Settlers on the Public Domain'. Technically the land was free, any citizen who settled on a vacant lot and made improvements on it within five years got a grant of 160 acres, paying only the slight fees required to record applications. Before the end of the Civil War 26,552 entries were made. There was a rush for claims after the War. In 1866 the number of recorded settlements was 15,355 but in 1871 it was 39,768 and by 1902 there were 98,829



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entries. The extension westward was further encouraged by the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and the Desert Land Act of 1877.<sup>21</sup>

In 1883 Mark Twain looked back on his formative years in the little river town, and this is what he saw clearly through the intervening years:

Once a day a cheap, gaudy packet arrived upward from St. Louis, and another downward from Koekuck. Before these events, the day was glorious with expectancy; after them, the day was a dead and empty thing. . . . After all these years I can picture that old time to myself now . . . the white town drowsing in the sunshine of a summer's morning; the streets empty, or pretty nearly so; one, or two clerks sitting in front of the Water Street stores, with their splint-bottomed chairs tilted back against the wall, chins on breasts, hats slouched over their faces, asleep—with shingle shavings enough around to show what broke them down; a sow and a litter of pigs loafing along the sidewalk, doing a good business in watermelon rinds and seeds; two or three lonely little freight piles scattered about the 'levee'; a pile of 'skids' on the slope of the stone-paved wharf, and the fragrant town drunkard asleep in the shadow of them; two or three wood flats at the head of the wharf, but nobody to listen to the peaceful lapping of the wavelets against them; the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun; the dense forest away on the other side. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Here Twain seems to have finalized a powerful graphic American image, a logo of the national soul which recurs in American culture in so many of its manifestations both élitist and popular, epitomized in the river steam-boat, which he exploits for all it is worth:

. . . a film of dark smoke appears. . . . instantly a Negro drayman, famous for his quick eye and prodigious voice, lifts up the cry, 'S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'!' and the scene changes! The town drunkard stirs, the clerks wake up, a furious clatter of drays follows, every house and store pours out a human contribution, and all in a twinkling the dead town is alive and moving. Drays, carts, men, boys, all go hurrying from many quarters to a common center, the wharf. Assembled there, the people fasten their eyes upon the coming boat as upon a wonder they are seeing for the first time. And the boat is rather a