

“The Most Rigorous Law of Our Being”: Mark Twain, Growth, and Change

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I congratulate The Japan Mark Twain Society on its decision to launch the journal *Mark Twain Studies*. It is a pleasure and a privilege to contribute to your first issue, and offer some informal responses to the intriguing questions that you raise.

What impresses me most about Mark Twain? His literary genius aside, I would have to say that it is his remarkable capacity for growth and change — his willingness to expand his awareness, reject his previous limitations, and push himself (and us) to new plateaus of understanding. In a paper he read in Hartford in 1887, he asked, “What is the most rigorous law of our being? Growth. . . . We change — and must change, constantly, and keep on changing as long as we live.” A child of slave-holders who went on to become a profound critic of racism, and an early fan of imperialism who later became a leader of the Anti-Imperialist League and an outspoken foe of United States and other Western powers’ arrogance, Mark Twain was not afraid to admit he had been wrong, or to reject values he had once accepted. Twain thought long and hard about how these transformations happened — or failed to happen — and shared his insights with us in a rich body of fiction and nonfiction as thought-provoking today as it was when he wrote it.

He was his own harshest critic, confessing to more failings than his worst enemies would dare ascribe to him. He once called himself “...a callow fool, a self-sufficient ass, a mere human tumble-bug, stern in air, heaving at his bit of dung and imagining that he is re-modeling the world and is entirely capable of doing it right. Ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chuckle-headedness — and an almost

pathetic unconsciousness of it all. That is what I was at 20.”

But by the time he came into his own as an author, Mark Twain was as aware of what he aspired to achieve as a mature writer as he had been about what he had failed to achieve as a human being when he was twenty. Thanking President Timothy Dwight of Yale when that university awarded him an honorary degree in 1888, Twain called the humorist’s trade (one he embraced as his own) “a worthy calling” — asserting that “with all its lightness and frivolity it has one serious purpose... the deriding of shams, the exposure of pretentious falsities, the laughter of stupid superstitions out of existence.” Whoever is “by instinct engaged in this sort of warfare is the natural enemy of royalties, nobilities, privileges and all kindred swindles, and the natural friend of human rights and human liberties.”

Perhaps it is because the planet is still rife with “shams,” “pretentious falsities,” and “kindred swindles” that Twain’s humor and satire seem so current and sharp, so much a part of our world today, rather than antiquarian relics of his. I often think of the corrosively beneficent effect of a concept Twain coined in an essay that starts off funny but soon reels into an acidic critique of duplicity and bad faith in both the highest reaches of power and in the most banal stretches of the ordinary everyday. I refer to his concept of “the lie of silent assertion” that he limns in his brilliant 1899 essay, “My First Lie and How I Got Out of It.” It is a piece about the hierarchy of lies in this world. At the bottom is a baby who cries as if he’s being stuck by a diaper pin when he isn’t being stuck at all — simply because he wants the attention. At the top is a society that pretends that there is nothing going on that intelligent men need concern themselves about — that the status quo is fine, nothing wrong there — when, in fact, something is very wrong (such as the racism that allowed slavery to endure, or the anti-Semitism that made the Dreyfus trial in France possible). The essay is a portrait of the complacency with which people paper over their society’s moral failings.

Twain often strikes us as more a creature of our own time than of his. An uncanny intuition led him to recognize the potential of technology to transform our lives in the twentieth century in ways that could be both exhilarating and terrifying. It led him to recognize racism as an intractable problem in American life, and to ponder the underside of the materialism that fueled the American Dream. It allowed him to understand the nostalgia for a “simpler” past that increased as that past receded — and it allowed him to see through that nostalgia to a past that was just as conflicted and complex as the present.

A satirist so subtle his meanings were often missed, and a polemicist so direct his messages were sometimes pointedly ignored, Twain didn’t have all the answers, not by a long shot. But he earnestly struggled with the right questions — and they are questions we are still struggling with today.

Twain challenges us, as scholars, to engage him on his own terms — to appreciate the humor and the wit, but to never lose sight of the serious purpose behind it. On the surface, he may appear to be the most lucid and simple of writers, an author whose prose never obfuscates, who speaks directly, who delights and enthralls. But as every Twain scholar knows, surfaces deceive. Reefs and sand bars lurk below the seemingly limpid surface of his prose. We can float like the passenger taking in the pretty pictures, or we can navigate the river’s depths with the pilot’s attention to the parts that make up the whole.

There is no “right” way to approach him. There are many routes to insight and understanding as long as we avoid the kind of rigidity and smug complacency that Twain himself was so good at criticizing. Why not let what Twain called “the most rigorous law of our being” guide our scholarship? For as scholars, too, we grow and change, “and keep on changing as long as we live.” Let’s learn from the subject of our study and embrace that change and growth, stalking serendipity in the archive, and following where it leads us.