

My Samuel Clemens

Michael J. KISKIS
Elmira College

Over the past six months I have been invited to talk about Samuel Clemens to very different audiences: from my own class of third and fourth-year students here at Elmira College to a general audience of Twain enthusiasts for a formal lecture at Quarry Farm; from a talk on behalf of Elmira's Women's Studies program to a community group affiliated with the American Association of University Women; from a radio audience on a National Public Radio program out of Chicago, Illinois, to a local television audience requesting a brief comment on Mark Twain and race as part of a series marking Black History Month. That diversity of audiences and their eagerness to hear about Mark Twain speaks to the abiding interest in the writings and life of Samuel Clemens. For those of us familiar with Clemens, such disparate audiences are not surprising. There is a deep interest still in all things Twain. At least half a dozen books each year focus on him; scores of articles dig more deeply into his life and times; conference papers continue to offer new approaches. All of this argues that there is more at work here than simple academic interest.

But why?

We are drawn to thinkers who confess they are perplexed by the range and the variety of human accomplishment and human failure, by the wide spectrum of human courage and human cowardice. Clemens was, and is, one of those thinkers. His works are filled always not with the certainty of fact but with the anxiety that comes from an awareness of frailty and fear. He writes, in short, to try to make his way out of the myriad darknesses that shade human experience. And he takes us along for boon companions as he interrogates what it means to be alive.

Obviously, this approach is a bit different from the conventional notion of Clemens as an unchanging beacon of sense in a world of hurt and injustice. It has taken me some years to learn to appreciate Clemens not for any answers he

might offer (answers that are by their nature tentative, contingent, and mutable) but for the quality of the questions he asks and the process of inquiry that he so honestly pursues. Case in point: I first read Clemens in a course when I was just beginning my doctoral studies. The course was organized around the question of whether Clemens was, in fact, a failed artist (there is a clear line back to the work of Van Wyck Brooks in that question, something that I learned later and have since found rather suspicious). We read the major novels and a considerable batch of short writings. The agenda was also to reinforce the place of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* within Clemens' canon and to examine that book as exceptional within the span of nineteenth-century American fiction. More than twenty years later, I still return to *Huck Finn*, though my reading of it has changed markedly and my patience with those who hold the book as a kind of secular scripture is quickly disappearing.

Clemens' books lend themselves to reinterpretation because he is so deft at asking questions about human relationships. Nineteenth-century readers saw *Huck Finn* as a tale awash in the worries of the times and the child narrator as an unspoiled commentator on the vicissitudes of the social contract. Mid-twentieth century readers saw the book as a clear endorsement of American exceptionalism and praised the novel for its clearly captured idea of American self-reliance. Late twentieth-century readers were drawn to the issue of race and the challenges of using the story of the white child and black runaway slave as common ground from which it might be possible to address a legacy of inequality and ornery prejudice. In short, Clemens' genius has allowed generations of readers and critics to use the book as a benchmark against which to judge the success or failure of their own humanity.

Clemens' voice is now being heard in a slightly different pitch and within a more diverse choir. Contemporary readers can hear Clemens' bass among his literary sisters as *Huck Finn* is linked to the nineteenth-century tradition of domesticity. Issues of family and the need to belong, in contrast to the rather smug male claim of the need to escape from female

“sivilization,” have become more resonant. And the sufferings and the needs of the abused child take these days a greater share of our attention. Huck attracts new attention because we have become more attuned to the trauma of the street child, to the hopelessness sparked by the legacy of growing up without affection and stability and comfort. That we have shifted our sights is evidence that Clemens was not out to find answers but rather out to make readers think. His is a very modern approach to the reading process: It is an approach that requires readers not to mine his works for some deeply hidden meaning but instead to probe the role of compassion and human affection in our lives and, by extension, in our social understandings and policies. In the end, Clemens is our contemporary because he challenges us to think and be aware, and because he pushes us to think about a world on the brink of losing its possibilities for such compassion and affection.

If we treat Clemens as an icon, we set ourselves up for simplistic assumptions about the way we should use his writings to understand or affect our world. We then treat him as a savior for racial tolerance, ignoring that he was as profoundly conflicted as we are. We treat him as the giver of answers, imposing our demand for clear answers on fictions deliberately weighted with ambivalence and ambiguity. We treat him and his work as monothematic, though they were plagued by contrast and afflicted with opposition and variety in thoughts and actions. If instead we were to consider his humanity, a humanity marked by worry about the frail world in which he and, more importantly, his children lived, he comes alive for us. He was not Saint Mark. Clemens still speaks to us personally about the trauma and the humor of human life. We know his voice — it is as familiar as an old friend’s on the other end of the telephone. It is Sam. And we are pleased to hear from him again.