

The Influence of Mark Twain

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The impact of Mark Twain was hardly limited to his own time. Although he was very well known in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the author of such classics as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, his influence since his death in 1910 has in fact been greater than it was during his lifetime. Ernest Hemingway is famous for his statement that (and I paraphrase) all modern American literature begins with a single book, *Huckleberry Finn*, and that statement was based largely on Hemingway's estimate of Twain's use of the American language. Mark Twain indeed led the democratic movement in American literature of the nineteenth century. He broke with the idea that literature had to be written in "literary English," a concept to which earlier writers, even bold ones such as Herman Melville, had largely adhered. But Twain, in *Huck Finn*, dared to tell his story in what might be called the speech of the people, the common people — specifically, the voice of an uneducated poor white boy in the American hinterlands — and that meant that his narrator used anything but the King's English. Huck's speech was as colloquial, ungrammatical, and colorful as only American frontier speech could be.

Twain, indeed, simplified American literary English, and this is largely what Hemingway had in mind in his famous remark. Hemingway himself wanted to simplify American speech, to make it as tangible and concrete as possible, to break with the high Victorian prose of English novelists as well as Anglo-Americans such as Henry James. But Twain's influence is seen in other ways as well. Not only did later American writers admire — and follow — what Mark Twain did with language, but so many of those writers had Twain's

central character Huck Finn in mind (whether consciously or not) when they created their own memorable characters. One thinks of the coming-of-age young men in Hemingway's own fiction, among them Nick Adams of the *In Our Time* stories and Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises*; of several of the boys in Sherwood Anderson's short stories; of Saul Bellow's Augie March; and especially of J. D. Salinger's notable mid-century protagonist Holden Caulfield, who, like Huck, protests against "phoniness" and conventional morality. Or one thinks of figures — many of them, in fact, female rather than male — in late twentieth-century southern fiction, and one finds Huck exerts his influence as well in contemporary southern autobiography. Rick Bragg's portrait of himself in *All Over But the Shoutin'* — complete with the Pap Finn prototypical abusive, alcoholic father — is but one such figure.

Many of these twentieth-century protagonists — one thinks of Hemingway's, in particular — are older than the twelve or thirteen-year-old Huck, and they may have more knowledge of the world, but they approach the world with the same basic decency and the same scorn for false gods without. They are *realists* in the same manner Huck is, and they often have the same trouble with conventional religion Huck had. One thinks of Hemingway's Jake in *The Sun Also Rises* entering the cathedral and trying to pray: "I went inside. It was dim and dark and the pillars went high up, and there were people praying, and it smelt of incense, and there were some wonderful big windows. I knelt and started to pray and prayed for everybody I thought of . . . separately for the ones I liked, and lumping all the rest, then I prayed for myself again, and while I was praying for myself I found I was getting sleepy, so I prayed that the bull-fights would be good, and that it would be a fine fiesta, and that we would get some good fishing." And so forth: the kind of prayer Huck would have prayed, and nearly in Huck's childlike words.

I think finally of one other twentieth-century American writer, H. L. Mencken, who was profoundly influenced by Mark Twain. Mencken was not a fiction writer but was rather the most prominent and influential social critic in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Mencken saw himself, in numerous ways, as a latter-day Mark Twain. *Huck Finn* was not only the book that had most profoundly moved him as a boy, but it remained his favorite book for most of the rest of his life: he returned to it nearly every year. And Mencken saw his role in twentieth-century American life as being identical to Mark Twain's in nineteenth-century America: exposing sham, seeing through hypocrites, embracing *realism*. He himself was fascinated with the American language — and worked over several decades to compile a multi-volume work on the subject. And when Mencken came to write his own childhood memoir, *Happy Days*, Mark Twain was his model. It was as if he were writing *Huck Finn* — or, more nearly, *Tom Sawyer* — though set not in the American hinterlands but in the streets of his native Baltimore. He was writing a book of boyhood that was more than a book of boyhood, which is exactly what Mark Twain had done in his childhood classics.

Twain's memorable characters — Huck, Tom, Pap Finn, the slave Jim, the King, the Duke, and one could go on and on — are as real to us as any real-life Americans of their time. His Mississippi River is the mythic center of the United States. His greatest fictions anticipated the central American problem of the twentieth century: racial injustice. He was the most representatively *American* writer we have had. No wonder he reigns, in the words of William Dean Howells, as “the Lincoln of our Literature.”