

Mark Twain

A Short Introduction

Stephen Railton



Mark Twain

Blackwell Introductions to Literature

This series sets out to provide concise and stimulating introductions to literary subjects. It offers books on major authors (from John Milton to James Joyce), as well as key periods and movements (from Anglo-Saxon literature to the contemporary). Coverage is also afforded to such specific topics as “Arthurian Romance”. While some of the volumes are classed as “short” introductions (under 200 pages), others are slightly longer books (around 250 pages). All are written by outstanding scholars as texts to inspire newcomers and others: non-specialists wishing to revisit a topic, or general readers. The prospective overall aim is to ground and prepare students and readers of whatever kind in their pursuit of wider reading.

Published

1 John Milton	Roy Flannagan
2 James Joyce	Michael Seidel
3 Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales	John Hirsh
4 Arthurian Romance	Derek Pearsall
5 Mark Twain	Stephen Railton
6 The Modern Novel	Jesse Matz
7 Old Norse-Icelandic Literature	Heather O'Donoghue
8 Old English Literature	Daniel Donoghue

Forthcoming

Modernism	David Ayers
English Renaissance Literature	Michael Hattaway
American Literature and Culture 1900–1960	Gail McDonald
Middle English	Thorlac Turville-Petre
Medieval Literature	David Wallace

Mark Twain

A Short Introduction

Stephen Railton



Copyright © 2004 by Stephen Railton

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

The right of Stephen Railton to be identified as the Author of this Work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

First published 2004 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Railton, Stephen, 1948–
Mark Twain, a short introduction / Stephen Railton.
p. cm. – (Blackwell introductions to literature)

Includes index.

ISBN 0-631-23473-X (hardcover: alk. paper) –
ISBN 0-631-23474-8
(pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Twain, Mark, 1835-1910—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Humorous stores, American—History and criticism. I. Title. II. Series.

PS1338.R35 2003
818'.409—dc21
2003004957

A catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Meridian
by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in the United Kingdom
by T.J. International, Padstow, Cornwall

For further information on
Blackwell Publishing, visit our website:
<http://www.blackwellpublishing.com>

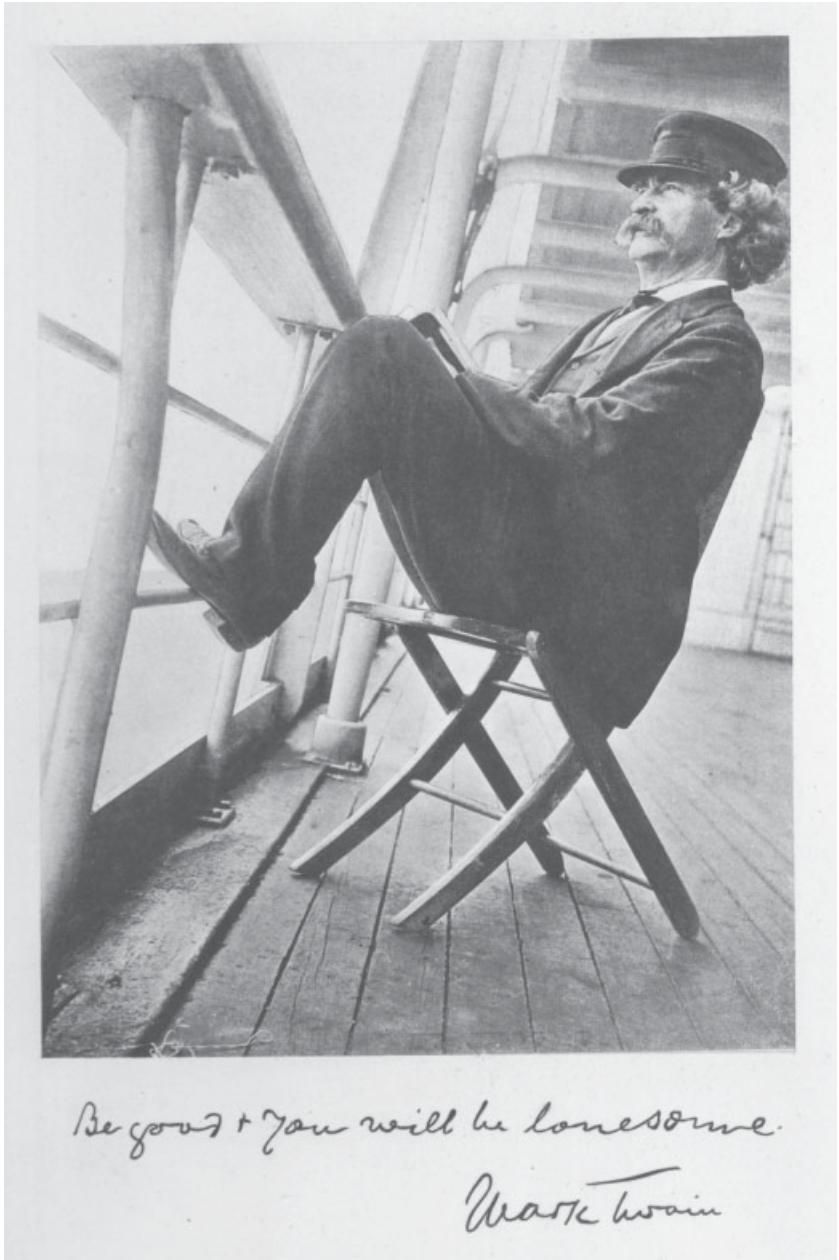
To the memory of my mother, Marjorie Elizabeth Marks Railton,
whose childhood was spent alongside the river in LaGrange, Missouri

Contents

List of Figures	viii
Preface	ix
1 Going East: <i>Innocents Abroad</i>	1
2 Going West: <i>Roughing It</i>	18
3 Going Home: <i>Tom Sawyer</i>	32
4 Running Away: <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	50
5 Lost in Time: <i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>	75
6 Looking for Refuge: <i>Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> and "Hadleyburg"	96
Appendix: "Mark Twain in His Times": An Electronic Archive	116
Notes	120
Index	128

Preface

Keeping an introduction to Mark Twain short means having to make a lot of tough choices. I've chosen to emphasize his ambitions and achievements as a writer: each of the following six chapters is focused on one of his major works, from *Innocents Abroad* to *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. While looking closely at these texts, though, I also try to locate them in the contexts defined by Samuel Clemens' life, his career as Mark Twain, and the larger American environment of his times. Two of the questions I keep coming back to are: what did Twain's books mean to his contemporaries? And what did being "Mark Twain" mean to Sam Clemens? By trying to answer them, however briefly and partially, we can explore what the United States has been as a nation and what each of us is trying to be as a person. Twain's words made it easier for Americans in his day to move toward their future as a world power; they still confront us with the challenge of the nation's history as a democratic work in progress. And as the country's first great literary celebrity, he can illuminate a great deal about the ways in which we become somebody by performing our selves for others.



Frontispiece photograph for *Following the Equator* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1897)

Figures

Frontispiece	Frontispiece photograph for <i>Following the Equator</i> (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1897)	x
1	Poster from the sales prospectus for <i>The Innocents Abroad</i> (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869)	8
2	Illustration by True Williams for page 180, <i>Roughing It</i> (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1872)	23
3	Drawing by Mark Twain for page 70, <i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i> (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1875)	33
4	Illustration by E. W. Kemble for page 163, <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885)	68
5	Illustration by E. W. Kemble for page 345, <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885)	69
6	Illustration by Dan Beard for page 499, <i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i> (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1889)	83
7	Frontispiece illustration by E. W. Kemble for <i>Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins</i> (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899)	106

All images courtesy the Clifton Waller Barrett Library,
Department of Special Collections, University of Virginia.

Going East

Innocents Abroad

In June, 1867, Samuel Clemens was 31 years old, and the United States was 90. After years of uncertainty and struggle, the future was looking bright for both of them. America had come through the war between North and South that threatened its existence as a nation. It was finishing the railroad that would span the continent from east to west. It probably was already beginning to feel the summons to the central place on the international stage that it would claim by the end of the century.

America's rise to its role as world power occurred during the same years as Clemens' rise to the status of world celebrity. Clemens' struggle toward that place dated back to his childhood. The family he had been born into, like many on the country's southwestern frontier, was always rich in social pretensions and chronically strapped for cash. Before his death in 1847, John Clemens, Sam's father, store-keeper, sometime lawyer, land speculator, kept restlessly searching for success, which explains why in 1839, four years after Sam had been born in a cabin in Florida, Missouri, the family moved to the economically more promising river town of Hannibal. Unlike Tom Sawyer, however, John Clemens found no treasure in the village. When he died, Sam was 12; the loss forced him to work to help his mother make ends meet. He stayed in school long enough to complete nine years of education in a series of one-room schoolhouses, but by the time he was 15 he was working fulltime. For the next 15 years his employment history suggests he inherited both his father's restlessness and his economic bad luck. Sam's first association with words and writing came through a series of jobs in printing offices, first in Hannibal,

then in St Louis; at seventeen he ran off to see the World's Fair in New York, and worked in print shops there and in Philadelphia for about half a year before coming back to the Mississippi. In 1857 he apprenticed himself to Horace Bixby to become a riverboat pilot, gaining his license two years later. Piloting was a well-paying, prestigious job, but in 1861 the Civil War halted commerce on the river. After two weeks in an irregular Confederate militia unit, Sam ran off again: he lit out for the Territory of Nevada in company with his brother Orion, who had just been appointed territorial secretary. Safe from the War, he vowed to himself not to go home again until he had made a fortune. There were fortunes to be made on this frontier – in timber, in silver, in mining speculations – but Sam found no treasure either.

Intermittently during these years he had written and published a number of short pieces in various newspapers. In keeping with the journalistic conventions of the day, he signed these pieces with pseudonyms, including “W. Epaminondas Adrastus Perkins” and “Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass.” While looking for precious metals in the deserts of Nevada, he submitted several letters to the Virginia City (Nevada) *Territorial Enterprise* under the pen name “Josh,” and their popularity resulted in the offer of a position on the paper. With no prospects as a prospector, Clemens became a professional writer in September, 1862. As a frontier newspaperman, he wrote mostly news stories, though he first began to acquire a name for himself with some hoaxes published as news. In February, 1863, that name became “Mark Twain,” when for reasons that remain unknown he decided to sign three political reports from the territorial capital of Carson City with those two words.

“Mark Twain” was no overnight sensation, and the next several years display the same pattern of restlessness. By 1864 he was working as a reporter in San Francisco, and in 1866 became a traveling correspondent for two different California papers, traveling first westward to Hawaii (then called the Sandwich Islands) and next eastward, to New York. But he had found his calling: as he put it in a letter to Orion in the fall of 1865: “I *have* had a ‘call’ to literature, of a low order – *i.e.* humorous.”¹ His ambivalence about (to quote another phrase from that letter) “seriously scribbling to excite the laughter of God’s creatures” was real – “Poor, pitiful business!” is how the letter winds up – and would persist throughout his career. But by the time