

THE HUMOR OF MARK TWAIN

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(Music plays the beginning of the overture from the 1985 Broadway musical “Big River”, by Roger Miller and William Hauptman)

Good afternoon, Ladies and Gentlemen! That bit of music is from the 1985 Broadway musical “Big River” by Roger Miller and William Hauptman. The story told in “Big River” is based on the book “Huckleberry Finn” written by Mark Twain. I hope the music put you in a jovial mood, because, simply put, rubbing elbows with Mark Twain is intended to do just that.

Mark Twain is often referred to as America’s Original Superstar. He skewered the powerful, mocked the pious and helped change a nation. Ernest Hemingway declared that all modern literature comes from “Huckleberry Finn” and that there was nothing before and there has been nothing as good since. Twain is often referred to as the first stand-up comedian.

Before we look at the humor of Mark Twain, let’s look at his life story, because everything he later became and wrote about grew out of his young life. I tried to separate the two and discuss his humor without a prolonged look at his life, but found it was simply impossible.

He was born with the given name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, in 1835, in a small prairie hamlet comprised of 50 houses called Florida, Missouri. Halley’s Comet streaked across the sky that year. He was born two months premature and was sickly, largely bedridden until his fourth year and frail for the next three. In 1839, friends opened a 230 acre farm next to Florida and owned several slaves. These slaves became his tutors. He knew their voices: There was Aunt Hannah, a woman who told stories about witches, and Uncle Dan’l, a middle aged slave, who later became the voice of Jim, in Huckleberry Finn. Dan’l told ghost stories that Twain would

repeat in public and private all of his life and was the inspiration for the black dialect later used.

Young Samuel spent many beloved hours fascinated by the stories Hannah and Dan'l told.

One of Twain's biographers, Ron Powers, stated, "He heard his first slave voices on the prairie before he turned four, and sought them out through the rest of his childhood and beyond. In Mark Twain's manuscript pages half a century later, these voices challenged the genteel paradigm that had sonorously governed the first epoch of indigenous American literature. They ushered in a replacement: gutbucket truth rooted in the solo riffs of the dispossessed – the advent of an American voice derived not from European aesthetics but entirely from local sources, black and white."

His mother Jane, and his father, Marshall, who was a self educated judge, both appeared disguised in many of Samuel's later books. They had 7 children, Twain was 6th in line. One died in infancy and another died at age 9 of bilious fever. It is important to note that Samuel's father engaged in many fruitless, bad business investments; and in 1839, he moved his family of 5 remaining children plus, Jenny, a beloved slave whom they treated as one of the family, to Hannibal, Missouri, a bustling town 120 miles down the river from St. Louis.

To young Samuel, Hannibal was a miracle! A booming place! A quote from his biography: "The hungry Mississippi astonished the children beyond measure..... Deep coughing of ship engines, whistle blasts, the immensity of the three-tiered superstructures of the boats, the smokestacks pumping soot into the air, the sounds, the smells, a civilization of red velvet carpets, gilded saloons, floor length silk dresses, petticoats and corsets; immigrants newly arrived from Europe, French merchants, high-hatted British speculators, gamblers, actors, whores, circus troupes and politicians." What a new world the impressionable Clemens had stepped into.

In Hannibal, Samuel found a circle of boys his own age and became its animating force, appointing himself scriptwriter and director of all make-believe escapades. Easing himself out of windows at night, he would join his gang of friends and had legendary explorations of Hannibal. This period influenced most of Twain's literature. He made lifelong friends in Hannibal, and based his later writings mostly on the young boys and friends he made there. He was a restless child, hated school, spent a lot of his class time daydreaming, and finished his formal education at age twelve. Clemens never became a scholar of literature, but he became a passionate amateur scholar of language, his native language.

The changes Clemens saw in life time are amazing: Samuel Morse invented the telegraph, the first steamship was built for North Atlantic ocean travel, the Mexican-American War occurred, the California gold rush happened, the Civil War was fought, the transcontinental railroad was completed, the telephone was patented, Edison invented the phonograph and the light bulb, George Eastman perfected the camera, the first motion picture was shown, the Spanish-American war was fought, and the Model T was introduced.

His father's failed ventures soon ate up any capital they had and they finally had to part with Jennie, their beloved slave; but even selling Jenny could not save them. His father hit rock bottom and they lost their home. His father died in 1846 at the age of 49. His mother, Jane, age 44 at that time, became Samuel's rock. Throughout his lifetime, he continued to write letters to his mother as long as she lived, totaling over 50,000 letters.

By 1842, two more Clemens children had died, and his mother began to take the other children regularly to church. This was another big influence in Twain's writing and humor. In church at that time, Samuel was preached at by the Presbyterian faith, which was no cheery vision of

liberating faith built on divinity. He felt sinners were doomed to hell and the abrasions of what he heard at church never really healed. There in church he heard the Bible's defense of slavery. In his later autobiography, God comes across like an avenging hit man, and Twain often behaved toward God less like a coldhearted nonbeliever than like a jilted lover.

Because of his father's death, Samuel learned a useful trade that would stead him well throughout most of his life, setting type in a printing shop. The newspaper age was dawning, born on the tide of mass literacy. Eventually Twain's brother, Orion, bought a newspaper, and this is where Samuel's writing career began. He became familiar with the type of stories that made it into newspapers ... topical essays, poetry and sketches ... and he wrote ridiculing articles, using his screwball wit.

In 1853, he jumped on a steamboat and left St. Louis and covered 2,000 miles of American terrain. He was 18. He journeyed to Illinois, New York, took a stagecoach, a steamer, a railroad, and began to shed his backcountry bias. He attended a performance of Uncle Tom's Cabin, took a job in Philadelphia as a typesetter and still wrote letters which Orion printed. He perfected the use of dialect as a serious literary device.

The period of 1857 – 1858 is known as the language of water in Twain's life. He got a job as an apprentice on a steamboat, and embarked on 120 professional trips up and down the Mississippi in almost 4 years, and received his pilot's license in 1859.

The Mississippi was not deep. Most big boats drew at least nine feet of water, so they needed 12 feet to float safely. In the language of the river, 12 feet, two fathoms, was called "mark twain" and of course, you know, that is from where his pen name originated. The helmsman would call the depth of the water... and two fathoms (mark twain) would float them safely.

Around 1861, river traffic was brought to a halt by the Civil War, and Clemens began to travel again, this time to Nevada where he once again joined his brother Orion. The brothers went westward to Carson City, Nevada, where tall tales and wild characters were part of the West's atmosphere. He briefly became a silver miner in Nevada and a gold miner in California. He saw his first western gunfight, he wrote to his mother often, couching observations in comic-epic imagery. Amusing tall tales: claim jumpers, murderers, Christians, Indians, Chinamen, Spaniards, gamblers, coyotes, preachers, and jackass rabbits. He started out writing conventional news items, but soon graduated from exaggerations to outright hoaxes. He wrote deadpan and humorous letters of what was happening in the Wild West. The west was the only place this could happen, because out west there were no rules, no Calvinistic pieties, only energy and freedom! When he traveled, he sent letters back to the Enterprise Newspaper. The seeds of his humor were germinating, exaggeration and indifference to the boundary between fact and fantasy. He showed his knack for knowing exactly when to depart from truth in the service of morally charged literature.

The first letter to the Enterprise from Carson City included his first use of the pen name, Mark Twain, and most scholars agree that he took the name from the lads-men's calls on the river. This pen name gave him a crucial distance between Clemens and his literary alter ego. Clemens couldn't be held responsible for what Twain wrote.

About 1865, Twain came to national attention when he published a comical short story in dialect, eventually titled *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, a story about a man and his jumping frog. It ran in newspapers all across the country and made him famous. In 1866, the prestigious Sacramento Union hired him to write travel letters from the Sandwich Islands, now known as Hawaii, and when he returned to San Francisco, Twain decided to repackage the fruits

of his trip to Hawaii in a new format, taking his observations to the public lecture stage. Along with plays, revues, recitals, minstrel shows, sermons and gospel revivals, lectures constituted the primary entertainment for most Americans at the time.

Twain gave his first professional lecture in 1866 at Maguire's Opera House in San Francisco, and his topic was "Our Fellow Savages on the Sandwich Islands." An ad for this lecture gives you a look at his humor: The ad said, "The doors open at 7 o'clock. The trouble begins at 8." He was 30 years old. Twain played to a packed house, this beginning was akin to stand up comedy today. It was a resounding success, and he soon played to packed houses in New York.

He refused to give any lectures in a church, and he combined elements of both lectures and readings. From 1866 to 1895, he delivered nearly 1,000 lectures and speeches and embarked on 7 major tours in 30 years.

In 1867, a new assignment from a San Francisco paper was to take a trip and send letters back to the paper about what was to be the first trans-Atlantic cruise, a trip to the Holy Land. His observations formed the basis for his first published book, "Innocents Abroad." The book became a smash hit and made him wealthy for the first time. Rather than painting his accounts of European wonders in purple prose, he dared to dismiss the famed sites he saw, laughed at the multiple versions of the same "unique" religious relics he was shown in Catholic churches, pronounced the tour guides greedy, and dismissed the holy city of Rome as squalid. He lampooned both the pretensions of Europe and the spectacle of a bunch of comical American tourists encountering an Old World that was never quite as impressive as it was supposed to be.

Quotes from Innocents Abroad:

“As far as I can see, Italy, for 1500 years, has turned all her energies, all her finances, and all her industry to the building of a vast array of wonderful church edifices, and starving her citizens to accomplish it.”

“To reproduce a Jerusalem street, it would only be necessary to upend a chicken coop and hang it before each window in an alley of American houses.”

His personal life blossomed along with his professional life. He married Olivia Langdon in 1870, a member of a very wealthy family. During the next years, they built a gorgeous home in Hartford, had three daughters, and Clemens wrote successfully. He started a publishing company and his most successful books were written during this period.

He seems to have inherited his father's chronic inability to make good business decisions. He put big money in many new inventions, the most costly being an investment of \$300,000 into a large machine which as supposed to replace human typesetting. He lost most of Olivia's inheritance and his publishing company went into bankruptcy after bad decisions on what to publish. The last 20 years of his life found him fighting off tragedy and debt. He needed money so he wrote feverishly, finishing 24 books and countless articles. A wealthy friend helped him avoid bankruptcy, and Twain faced up to his mistakes, and at age 60, went on a long lecture tour to recap the money he owed to people. Thru hard work, he made good on all of his debts.

In his later years, he developed many eccentricities and one of them was that he would show up all times of the year in a white suit, whatever the occasion. He said he preferred wearing white because at his age, dark clothing was depressing. It became his costume.

His daughter Suzy died in 1896, his beloved wife Olivia died in 1904, and in 1907, Mark Twain, received an honorary doctorate of laws degree from Oxford University. His daughter Jeanne

died in 1909, and the man born Samuel Langhorne Clemens died peacefully on April 21, 1910. Later that year, Halley's Comet streaked across the sky, just as it had during the year he was born. A monument which is two fathoms high (mark twain..two fathoms) marks his grave in Elmira New York.

Twain's carefully calibrated public persona was so memorable that in 1954 the American actor, Hal Holbrook built a career of his one man show "Mark Twain Tonight" in which he portrayed a typical Twain appearance on the lecture stage. Holbrook toured the world to packed houses and took the show to Broadway for three separate runs, most recently in 2005, by which time Holbrook himself was 80. In 1998, the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor was established at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, honoring our superstars of comedy.

As I turned my attention from his life to his humor, it led me back to his childhood since most of humor is based on experiences of his childhood. Before Sam Clemens began writing, much American fiction was still written in a language close to a more formal British English. Twain opened up a new way of telling stories that could only be told by Americans who grew up on this continent.

I had never read "Huckleberry Finn" so that was my first task. I totally loved the book and began to see Twain's skewering of humanity. Since its publication, "Huckleberry Finn" has sold more than 20 million copies, was banned in Massachusetts because of the wide use of slang, and it is banned in some schools today because of the use of the "n" word which is used 200 times. The basics of the story are that Huck Finn, an adolescent on the run from a drunken father, and Jim, an escaped black slave, are both fleeing bondage, innocents adrift in a corrupt society. They

take to a raft on the Mississippi and are carried downstream, where, thru a series of encounters with the society on shore, they hold up a humorous mirror to humanity, discover each other's humanity, reject the racial prejudice at the heart of American slavery, and form an unlikely father-son relationship. Giving voice to a child to narrate an entire novel was something new and created humor with Huckleberry's naïve view of adult behavior. Clemens was able to translate the vernacular to the page.

I would like to share this scene from the book where Huck spends time with a family, the Grangerfords, he met on shore. When Huck had knocked on their door, he was met with guns pointing at him. They were afraid he might be a member of the hated Shepherdson family with whom they were feuding. Huck had never heard of a feud, so later that night, he asks a boy in the family about a feud.

“What's a feud?”

“Why, where was you raised? Don't you know what a feud is?”

“Never heard of it before – tell me about it.”

“Well, a feud is this way. A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in – and by and by, everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud. But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time.”

“Has this been going on long, Buck?”

“Well, I should reckon! It started thirty year ago, or som'ers along there. There was trouble 'bout something and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and so he

up and shot the man that won the suit – which he would naturally do, of course. Anybody would.”

“What was the trouble about, Buck? Land?”

“I reckon maybe – I don’t know.”

“Well, who done the shooting? Was it Grangerford or a Shepherdson?”

“Laws, how do I know? It was so long ago.”

“Don’t anybody know?”

“Oh, yes, pa knows, I reckon, and some of the other old folks; but they don’t know, now, what the row was about in the first place.”

Here is another paragraph which is a marvelous example of Twain’s ability to look into our humanness as we sometimes face a decision as to whether or not to tell the truth. “So, I went to studying it out. I says to myself, I reckon a body that ups and tells the truth when he is in a tight place, is taking considerable many resks, though I ain’t had no experience, and can’t say for certain; but it looks so to me, anyway; and yet here’s a case where I’m blest if it don’t look to me like the truth is better, and actuly safer, than a lie.”

Another section which I thought illustrated Twain’s wacky sense of humor was Huck and his slave companion Jim discussing kings aboard the raft. Jim admitted he didn’t know much about kings, he had only heard about wise King Solomon in the Bible, but Jim’s take on it was that any man who lives with a hoard of women is not wise. Jim makes this observation: “Don’t you know about de harem? Solomon had one; he had about a million wives ...why would a wise

man want to live in de mids' er sich a blimblamming all of de time?" Through Jim, Twain was remarking how unbearable a whole harem of women would be!

Huckleberry's father hated the government and often railed against it. In the musical, "Big River", Roger Miller wrote this song: (I sing) "Dad gum gov'ment, those ugly so and so's. They got their dam hands in every pocket of my clothes, dad gum gov'ment."

Andrew Carnegie brought it up to Twain once that America is a Christian nation to which Twain replied, "Why, Carnegie, so is Hell." In another conversation with Carnegie, they were discussing Presidents Roosevelt's statement that "In God We Trust" should be removed from U.S. coins because they carried the name of God into improper places. Twain responded, "In God We Trust' is a fine motto, simple, direct, gracefully phrased; it always sounds well – In God We Trust. I don't believe it would sound any better if it were true."

There are thousands of quotes from Twain, and it was difficult for me to just choose a few, because almost all of them which he applied to mankind then, still apply today. Listen to Twain commenting on just about everything:

"Man was made at the end of the week's work, when God was tired.

"She was not quite what you would call refined. She was not quite what you would call unrefined. She was the kind of person that keeps a parrot."

"When angry, count four. When very angry, swear."

"A man should not be without morals; it is better to have bad morals than none at all."

"We have a criminal jury system which is superior to any in the world; and its efficiency is only marred by the difficulty of finding 12 men every day who don't know anything and can't read."

“Fleas can be taught nearly anything that a Congressman can.”

“The preacher never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too.”

“We are called the nation of inventors. We could still claim that title and wear its loftiest honors if we had stopped with the first thing we ever invented – which was human liberty.”

(Here I will don the Mark Twain wig and take a cigar)

“Familiarity breeds contempt – and children.”

“Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.”

“Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of congress. But I repeat myself.”

“I used to tell lies, but I gave it up. The field is overrun by amateurs.”

Well, there is no way to encapsulate all of his humor in one paper, so I will conclude with the words that Twain had inscribed over his daughter’s grave, written by poet Robert Richardson:

“Warm summer sun, shine kindly here. Warm southern winds, blow softly here; Green sod above, lie light, lie light; Good night, dear heart, good night.”

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