

## Mark Twain's Comic Voice

Mark Twain began his literary career as a writer of comic essays and sketches. He continued to write short humorous pieces throughout his life, although in his last years the humor frequently took on a dark and bitter tone. It is his novels—especially *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—that are his greatest claim to fame and his greatest contribution to our literature. But even these works, as grim and shocking as they can sometimes be, are enlivened throughout by his sense of the ridiculous, and by a comic voice unmistakably his own.

When Twain began writing in the 1860s, America's most popular humorists were Charles Farrar Browne, who wrote under the name of Artemus Ward, and David Ross Locke, whose pseudonym was Petroleum V. (for Vesuvius) Nasby. Both used dialect, with comic misspellings, poor grammar, and exaggerated wordplay and turns of phrase, often for satirical purposes. When Ward gave a public performance in Virginia City, Nevada, in December 1863, Twain, who had already taken him as a literary model, met and befriended him. Twain's earliest literary success was a comic piece called "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Published in November 1865 and widely reprinted in newspapers across the country, it earned him a national reputation.

Thirty years later, in the essay "How to Tell a Story," he discussed the essence of his comic technique. One component of that technique is "[t]o string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities."

Here is a delightful example: "The first time I ever saw St. Louis, I could have bought it for six million dollars and it was the mistake of my life that I did not do it." Another occurs in Chapter IV of *Tom Sawyer*, in the reference to the "boy of German parentage" who "once recited three thousand [Bible] verses without stopping; but the strain upon his mental faculties was too great, and he was little better than an idiot from that day forth" (p. 34). In this instance, readers will have no trouble finding the satirical point beneath the surface absurdity.

The actor Hal Holbrook, who has brilliantly portrayed Mark Twain in his one-man show *Mark Twain Tonight!*, once told an interviewer that the targets of Twain's humor were "[h]ypocrisy, pomposity, the narrow mind, the prejudiced mind, stupidity, brutality—all those things. You know that quote of his, 'Against the power of laughter nothing can stand'? How you can push at an injustice, move it a little, century by century. But only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast."

With his realistic descriptions and settings, his vivid and often coarse characters, and his rich, colorful language, Mark Twain did more than anyone else to move American literature past the suffocating refinement and sentimentality of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet he was also a deeply insecure man who longed to be taken seriously by the literary establishment of his time. Misunderstanding his own genius, he at times considered his long and lifeless biography of Joan of Arc to be his best work. But his readers have always known that his best and most serious writing is often his funniest.