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Mark Twain's Relevance Today

From the earliest stage of his writing career, Mark Twain was more than a literary comedian. From the first, his humor had a satirical and sometimes even a bitter edge, and throughout his life he repeatedly ridiculed the foolishness and foibles of the “damned human race.” His humor was in fact the basis of his appeal across classes, races, and nationalities. His social satire is the basis of his relevance today. The secret of his success as a humorist, he insisted, was that everything he wrote “had a serious philosophy or truth as its basis. I would not write a humorous work merely to be funny.” If Twain was an American icon, he was also an iconoclast.

Nowhere is his iconoclasm more apparent than in his indictment of religious hypocrisy, especially in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As the novel opens, for example, pious old Miss Watson tries to teach Huck his catechism even while planning to sell the slave Jim down the river. Later, after Huck is adopted by the Grangerfords, he attends church with the family. The Grangerfords have been feuding with their neighbors the Shepherdsons for years—so long no one in either family remembers what started the quarrel. But they continue to attend the same church. On the Sunday Huck is present, all of the men in both families lean their rifles against the wall while they listen to a sermon on brotherly love. Still later, the scoundrel who impersonates the King of France delivers a revival sermon to an audience of gullible believers and collects some eighty-seven dollars, which he claims he will use to travel to the South Pacific to convert the pirates there. As Huck explains, the king “said it warn’t no use talking, heathens don’t amount to shucks alongside of pirates to work a camp-meeting with.” Twain elsewhere criticized prominent American ministers who refused to permit people from the working class to attend their fashionable churches because they supposedly smelled or who refused to conduct funerals for actors because they were supposedly immoral. His essay “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” links his indictment of religious hypocrisy with his condemnation of military and cultural imperialism. In his short sketch “The War Prayer,” written in 1905 but not published until 1923, he again satirized the hypocrisy of Christians

who ask God to protect their sons, husbands, and brothers, failing to understand that by their prayers they also expressed the wish that others' sons, husbands, and brothers would die.

Twain was no less an iconoclast on the subject of political opportunism or civic corruption. As the San Francisco correspondent of the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, he was a self-appointed vigilante, waging a one-man crusade against police corruption. In retaliation, he was once jailed overnight on a charge of public drunkenness. As early as 1865, in "The Story of a Bad Little Boy," he recounted the tale of a misbehaving child who grew up, murdered his family with an axe, got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and is universally respected, and belongs to the legislature." Years later, he joked that there was no permanent criminal class in the U.S. except Congress. He endorsed civil service reform in his novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* in 1889—the idea that civil servants should be hired on the basis of merit, not appointed to office by corrupt politicians who win elections. He was outspoken in his criticism of Tammany Hall, the Democratic political machine in New York City, and he routinely campaigned for reform candidates after his return to the U.S. in 1900. "I'll vote for anything that opposes Tammany Hall," he insisted. He even went so far as to sue a taxi driver who charged his maid a dollar and a half rather than half a dollar for a trip from Grand Central Station in New York to his home a couple of miles away. "Every good citizen is an unclassified policeman," he insisted. "It is his duty to make complaint when he sees a violation of the law. He should give his time to the enforcement of the law."

Mark Twain was also an advocate of free speech, one of the rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. He exercised this right more than most, and he defended it more than he would have preferred. He defended Walt Whitman's poetry against repeated efforts to censor it. Several of his own books were banned from libraries during his life, including both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *Eve's Diary*. "When a Library expels a book of mine and leaves an unexpurgated Bible lying around where people can get hold of it," he once said, "the unconscious irony delights me." After the library committee in Concord, Massachusetts, condemned *Huck Finn*, he noted, sales of the novel doubled. Rather than one library book borrowed by a hundred readers, he figured that a hundred readers would each buy one book. Moreover, he argued, everyone who bought the book would read it "out of curiosity, instead of merely intending to do so, and then they will discover, to my great advantage and their own indignant

disappointment, that there is nothing objectionable in the book after all.” Or as he wrote his publisher, the “rattling, tiptop puff” the novel received in Concord “will sell 25,000 copies for us sure.” He claimed he had modeled the character of Huck Finn on the editors of two newspapers that had reviewed the novel unfavorably. As late as 1902, Twain bragged, “Huck’s morals have stood the strain in every English, German, and French-speaking community in the world for seventeen years.”

At the end of the nineteenth century Mark Twain also attacked racism much as Henry Thoreau before him had attacked slavery. According to his biographer Justin Kaplan, he “may have been the least racist of all the major writers of his time.” Nevertheless, Twain certainly harbored racial blind spots, especially in his attitude toward Indians and Asians. In other words, he expressed views on the subject of race consistent with those of a nineteenth-century racial progressive—but not of a twentieth- or twentieth-first century racial progressive. He was indisputably a creature of his own time.

When I refer to Mark Twain as a nineteenth-century racial progressive, of course, I mostly allude to his respect and admiration for African Americans. To his credit, he supported Warner McGuinn, a black student, through Yale Law School from 1885 to 1887. In 1917, McGuinn won a court case that would have permitted even more extreme racial segregation in Baltimore. He also founded a law firm that hired Thurgood Marshall, who successfully argued the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* racial desegregation case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954, and who became the first African American to sit on the Supreme Court, serving from 1967 until 1991. That is, Mark Twain aided, if only indirectly, the twentieth century civil rights movement. He even made the argument in a letter to the dean of the Yale Law School a few months after the publication of *Huck Finn* that white folks owed retribution to former slaves and to their sons and daughters: “We {that is, white folks} have ground the manhood out of them, and the shame is ours, not theirs, and we should pay for it.”

For better or worse, the controversy over Twain’s use of the racial epithet in *Huck Finn* continues to rage in the U.S. Ironically, when the novel was first published it was banned for its vulgarity, its supposed sensationalism. It was regarded as “trash more suited to the slums than to respectable, intelligent people.” Only in the twentieth century, beginning during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, was it banned for its alleged racism. The offensive word appears over two hundred times in the novel.

When I teach *Huck Finn*, I emphasize the extent to which Twain uses the racial epitaph ironically, and I cite two examples in particular. In chapter thirty-two, Huck appears at the Phelps farm and Aunt Sally Phelps mistakes him for Tom Sawyer. She asks why he has been so late in arriving, and Huck as Tom explains that a boiler on the steamboat had exploded and delayed him. She asks, ““Good gracious! anybody hurt?” He replies, “No’m. Killed a nigger.” To which he then replies, “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.” I don’t know if Huck is ironic in his reply—how do we determine the sincerity of fictional characters?—but I do know that Mark Twain was ironic. He wrote this bit of dialogue to illustrate how unconsciously racist even so sweet a woman as Aunt Sally could be.

There’s an even more obvious example of Twain’s ironic use of the racial epithet in chapter six of the novel. Pap Finn in a drunken tirade complains about the U.S. government. Now Pap is what is called “poor white trash.” He is the laziest man on earth. He lives on the charity of others, and if he is forced to earn a dollar he catches a fish on a trot-line—the laziest form of fishing—and trades it for whiskey. (A trot-line consists of a fishing line stretched across a stream with several baited hooks dangling into the water. It is a form of passive fishing. The “fisherman” simply “runs” the trotline every morning by unhooking the catch overnight.) Huck describes Pap’s skin as “fish belly white” because, like a carp or a catfish, he is also a scavenger or bottom-feeder. After he steals Huck and they flee to a cabin across the Mississippi River, he forces Huck to “run” the trotline—the laziest man on earth doesn’t even go to the trouble to unhook the fish. In his tirade, however, he expresses the views of a white supremacist:

“Oh, yes, this is a wonderful govment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there from Ohio—a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain’t a man in that town that’s got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and chain, and a silver-headed cane—the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the State. And what do you think? They said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could *vote* when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ’lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn’t too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote agin. Them’s the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all me—I’ll never vote agin as long as

I live. And to see the cool way of that nigger—why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way."

There is no way to read this speech except ironically—the ignorant and racist rant of a white supremacist. Certainly it cannot be read as the unvarnished opinion of the author.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, imperialism. Twain was remarkably advanced on the issue. In fact, he was critical of imperialism across the board—of Germany and England in South Africa, of Russia in Japan, of Belgium in the Congo, of Christian missionary organizations in China, and especially of the U.S. in the Philippines. In fact, he became an outspoken critic of imperialism, a vice-president of the American Anti-Imperialist League. In his view, "All the territorial possessions of all countries in the earth—including America, of course—consist of pilferings from other people's wash." On New Year's Eve 1899, he wrote a "Greeting from the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century": "I bring you the stately nation named Christendom, returning, bedraggled, besmirched, and dishonored, from pirate raids on Manchuria, South Africa, and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle, and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies."

When Twain returned to America in October 1900 after a five-year absence, he was met by a swarm of reporters who interviewed him on the gangplank. When he left on his round-the-world lecture tour in 1895 to pay off his creditors, he told them, he had been a "red hot imperialist." Upon his return, he announced, "I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land." I believe his change of heart was triggered by three events while he was abroad.

First, he approved of the withdrawal from China by British and American missionaries in the wake of the Boxer Rebellion. As he said, "We have no more business in China than in any other country that is not ours." Second, he was alarmed by the so-called "Jameson raid" in South Africa. A bit of background: A group of about six hundred British mercenaries under the command of Leander Jameson tried and failed to spark a rebellion against the Boer government in the Transvaal or the South African Republic in late December 1895. This aborted revolution would be a dress rehearsal for the Boer War. It was funded by Cecil Rhodes, who, we should remember, gave his name to the neighboring country of Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The so-called "Jameson raid" was a fiasco, or perhaps a political farce. The raiders were arrested, jailed, and eventually released upon payment of an indemnity

by the British government. In his final travel book, *Following the Equator*, based upon his world tour, Twain recounts the story of the Jameson raiders and offers this comment about Cecil Rhodes: "I admire him, and when his time comes, I shall buy a piece of the rope for a keepsake." That is, he thought Rhodes should be hung.

Third, and most importantly, Twain was outraged by American military adventurism in the Philippines. When the war first started, he had acquiesced to the stated goal of the U.S. government to "spread democracy through the region. I said to myself, Here are a people who have suffered for three centuries. We can make them as free as ourselves, give them a government and country of their own, put a miniature of the American Constitution afloat in the Pacific, start a brand-new republic to take its place among the free nations of the world. It seemed a great task to which we addressed ourselves."

His views changed dramatically, however, particularly while he was abroad. After his return to the U.S. in 1900 Twain deployed his own "weapons of satire" in order to ridicule the imperialists. Twain had concluded that the Treaty of Paris that formally ended the Spanish-American War did nothing to limit the authority of the friars, most of them Spanish, who governed the country through a kind of clerical colonialism. He realized that "we do not intend to free but to subjugate the people of the Philippines. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem. It should, it seems to me, be our pleasure and duty to let them deal with their own domestic questions in their own way." After the American fleet under the command of Admiral George Dewey defeated the Spanish navy at Manila Bay, according to Twain, Dewey should simply have sailed away. "He should have gone about his affairs elsewhere, and left the competent Filipino army to starve out the little Spanish garrison and send it home, and the Filipino citizens to set up the form of government they might prefer, and deal with the friars according to Filipino ideas of fairness and justice—ideas which have since been tested and found to be of as high an order as any that prevail in Europe or America." Twain disputed the claim that Filipinos could not govern themselves. That is, given the civic corruption in New York and the "church-going negro burners" in the South—religious hypocrites on a grand scale—he argued that the Filipinos could govern themselves at least as well as Americans. Moreover, he thought that the atrocities the U.S. performed during the war proved that the Filipinos were more civilized than the Americans. He condemned the water torture

of Filipino insurgents—forcing water down their throats— by U.S. soldiers. Those who did it were, he said, “Christian butchers.”

Then, in the most explicit condemnation of military imperialism he ever voiced, transcribed in some version by eighteen reporters and printed the next day in dozens of newspapers around the country, he said:

I have tried hard, and yet I cannot for the life of me comprehend how we got into that mess. Perhaps we could not have avoided it—perhaps it was inevitable that we should come to be fighting the natives—but I cannot understand it, and have never been able to get at the bottom of the origin of our antagonism to the natives. I thought we should act as their protector—not try to get them under our heel. We were to relieve them from tyranny to enable them to set up a government of their own, and we were to stand by and see that it got a fair trial. It was not to be a government according to our ideas, but a government that represented the feeling of the majority of the Filipinos, a government according to Filipino ideas. That would have been a worthy mission for the United States. But now—why, we have got into a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extrication immensely greater. I’m sure I wish I could see what we were getting out of it, and all it means to us as a nation.

By all accounts, Twain became the most prominent opponent of the Philippine-American War. Twain even proposed a special flag for “the Philippine Province,” as he called it: “we can have just our usual flag, with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and crossbones.” The flag he proposed the U.S. fly over the Philippines was, of course, a pirate flag.

Invited to address the City Club of New York, a pro-civic reform, anti-Tammany Hall organization, a few weeks after his return, Twain was expected to criticize local political corruption, but in an impromptu aside he criticized American foreign policy in the Philippines. Most of the ten or so daily newspapers in New York covered the event, and most had reported his comments. Toward the close of his speech Twain remarked on the recent presidential campaign and allowed that he had voted for neither candidate. “If we’d had an “Anti-Doughnut Party,” he joked, “neither would have been elected.” He abstained from voting because he supported neither William Jennings Bryan’s “wildcat financial theories” nor William McKinley, the man who sent “our bright boys as volunteers out to the Philippines to fight with a disgraced musket under a polluted flag.” Most of the New York dailies quoted

this line in their columns the next day—but only one paper, the pro-war *New York Sun*, included in its report its full context in an obvious attempt to embarrass Twain. According to the *Sun*, “The statement about the President, his Philippines policy and the polluted flag was not received with enthusiasm” and the applause when Mark Twain sat down was “in marked contrast to that which he received when he got up.” The next speaker chided Twain for his remarks. “I cannot agree with him in his estimate of the able and dignified President of the United States and I cannot agree with him that our soldiers are fighting behind a dishonored musket and under a disgraced flag on the other side of the seas.” This comment “was received with great applause” by the audience while Twain on the dais in full sight of the hostile crowd “simply puffed away at a stub of his cigar.”

Later, General Frederick Funston, an American military hero, was cheered when he called for opponents of the war to be hanged for treason. “I would rather see any one of these men hanged for giving aid and comfort to the enemy,” he said, “than see the humblest soldier in the United States army lying dead on the field of battle.” As Twain sarcastically replied, “I am quite willing to be called a traitor—quite willing to wear that honorable badge—and not willing to be affronted with the title of patriot.”

In his essay “To the Person Sitting in Darkness,” first published in February 1901 and his most explicit condemnation of military and cultural imperialism, Twain bitterly denounced missionary efforts in China, the prosecution of the Boer war by the British, and American policy in the Philippines. Twain never collected the essay in a book, though it was distributed in pamphlet form by the American Anti-Imperialist League. The elementary question Twain asked in the essay was “Shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give those poor things a rest? Shall we bang right ahead in our old-time, loud, pious way, or shall we sober up and sit down and think it over first?” He ironically contrasted the *claims* of civilized nations with their *acts* in colonized countries.

The phrase “cultural imperialism” had not yet been coined, so in the essay he invented his own terms to describe the phenomenon. He explained how “the Blessings-of-Civilization trust,” as he called it, had packaged “civilization” for consumption abroad. “In the right kind of a light, and at a proper distance, with the goods a little out of focus,” “the Blessings-of-Civilization trust” “furnishes this desirable exhibit to the Gentlemen who Sit in Darkness: love, justice, gentleness, Christianity, protection to the weak, temperance, law and order, liberty, equality, mercy, education, and so on.” But in

truth those goods are “merely an outside cover, gay and pretty and attractive, displaying the special patterns of our Civilization which we reserve for Home Consumption, while *inside* is the Actual Thing that the Customer Sitting in Darkness buys with his blood and tears and land and liberty.” The Actual Thing with the cover left off included confiscation of property, extortion, “Glass Beads and Theology, guns, hymn books, and gin.” The American president, the British colonial secretary, the Kaiser, and the Czar had been “exporting the Actual Thing *with the outside cover left off*.” This was bad for business. “Is it possible,” Twain asked, “that there are two kinds of Civilization—one for home consumption and one for the heathen market?”

As late as 1907, Twain reiterated his belief that the American military role in the Philippines was “a stain upon our flag what can never be effaced.” He was even more blunt in criticizing the way American students were conditioned to honor their country. “Today in the public schools we teach our children to salute the flag, and this is our idea of instilling in them patriotism.” According to Samuel Johnson, he added, patriotism “was the last refuge of scoundrels—and I believe he was right.”

No one these days dares to impugn Mark Twain’s patriotism. On the contrary, I believe he set an example of patriotic dissent in his condemnation of military imperialism, a reminder that, despite the protests of spin doctors, political dissent is one of the highest forms of service to the nation. The “true citizenship,” the true patriotism, he insisted, “is to protect the flag from dishonor—to make it the emblem of a nation that is known to all nations as true and honest and honorable.”

In short, in the life and writings of Mark Twain we may discern some lessons for our own time: we should ridicule greed and hypocrisy, resist racial stereotypes, decry imperialism or interference in the affairs of other nations with every available tool, including humor. As Twain once wrote, “Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.”

About the Author

Dr. Gary Scharnhorst has been teaching American literature at the University of New Mexico since 1987. A Fulbright lecturer in 1978–1979, 1985–1986, and 1993, he is the author or editor of eighteen books. He co-edits the journal *American Literary Realism* and edits in alternating years the research annual *American Literary Scholarship*. His most recent publications are *Mark Twain: The Complete Interviews* (University of Alabama Press, 2006) and *Mainly the Truth: Interviews with Mark Twain* (University of Alabama Press, 2009).