

Ken Burns' Mark Twain: a not quite unflinching portrait

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I looked a moment at the face I knew so well; and it was patient with the patience I had so often seen in it: something of puzzle, a great silent dignity, an assent to what must be from the depths of a nature whose tragical seriousness broke in the laughter which the unwise took for the whole of him. Emerson, Longfellow, Lowell, Holmes—I knew them all and all the rest of our sages, poets, seers, critics, humorists; they were like one another and like other literary men; but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.—William Dean Howells on Samuel Clemens' funeral

Anyone who knows much about American author Mark Twain knows that he was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, and that he grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, alongside the Mississippi River. Ken Burns' two-part series for the Public Broadcasting System in the US takes it from there. The documentary, which first aired January 14 and 15, is an engaging and informative presentation of his life. It is to Burns' and his production teams' credit that they chose to do a film on one of the world's greatest literary iconoclasts. In the process they give us a glimpse of the powerful educational potential of the medium.

The production is peppered with quotes from Mark Twain, employing the talents of character actor Kevin Conway to perform the readings. The viewer gets the sense that he or she is actually listening to Twain himself. Skillful editing gives the presentation an internal cohesion which is Ken Burns' hallmark.

The task of distilling the essence of a man like Samuel Clemens down to a few short hours is not an easy one, if it is indeed possible at all. Burns interviews a small army of Twain scholars, authors, including Arthur Miller, Russell Banks and William Styron, as well as well-known personalities like Hal Holbrook and Dick Gregory, all of whom add their own, sometimes contradictory, views on the subject.

The series proceeds chronologically for the most part, employing narration, interviews and footage, mostly of the Mississippi River, shot by Burns' film crew, as well as hundreds of historical photographs. The photographs are not only of Clemens and his family and friends, which exist in surprising abundance, but of conditions which he observed, experienced and fought against. Burns' familiar technique of panning across, and zooming out of and into the images adds a dimension of movement which helps bring the subject matter to life.

Mark Twain, born Samuel Clemens, the fourth child of a slave owning merchant who died before Sam was 12, was thrust into the world of work at an early age. He started out at 14, working at a newspaper managed by his older brother. At 17 he traveled extensively up and down the Mississippi working as a journalist, then served as an apprentice riverboat pilot until he became a certified steamboat pilot in his own right. When the Civil War broke out he joined a ragtag Southern militia band that never saw real action, and then, rather than join the Confederate Army, went west to seek his fortune mining gold, at which he was a dismal failure, like so many others. He fell back on his skills as a journalist, first in Virginia City, then in San Francisco. From there he traveled to Hawaii,

then known as the Sandwich Islands, to write his observations for a California newspaper.

These experiences form the basis for much of the first part of Burns' documentary, providing viewers with a broad sense of Mark Twain's beginnings. His first book, published in 1867 when he was just 22, was a series of sketches entitled *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches*. Then in 1869 came *Innocents Abroad*, the account of a globe-trotting pleasure cruise with a boatload of American travelers. This book was published as a subscription book sold door-to-door, and made Mark Twain the best-selling author in America.

His popularity continued to rise with the publication in 1872 of *Roughing It*, an account of his own sojourn out west 10 years earlier. He later collaborated with Charles Dudley Warner on his first novel, *The Gilded Age*, a stinging portrait of an era of rampant corruption in politics and commerce. Before its publication, Twain began a series of sketches which would eventually be used in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, finally published in 1876. The work was inspired by characters from his boyhood home of Hannibal. That same year he started writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

He was initially unsatisfied with the work and set it aside for what would be years. He wrote his friend William Dean Howells in August of that year:

I have written 400 pages on it—therefore it is very nearly half done. It is Huck Finn's Autobiography. I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have got, and may possibly pigeonhole or burn the MS when it is done.

Years later, in 1883, Twain resumed work on *Huckleberry Finn*. Significantly, this was after taking his first trip on the Mississippi in 20 years and revisiting his boyhood hometown of Hannibal. Hal Holbrook made the point: "What do you think he was looking at? He was looking at the horrible failure of the freeing of the slave!"

Twenty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the conditions facing blacks had not changed much since the days of slavery. It is this brutal reality that Twain courageously exposed in *Huckleberry Finn*. Jocelyn Chadwick, a Twain scholar, cites Langston Hughes' declaration that "nigger Jim" represented the first time that the black man was given a voice in literature. The narrator notes that Hemingway claimed that *Huckleberry Finn* represented the beginning of American literature.

The novel emerged out of the great conflict between North and South, bourgeois democracy and slavery, out of the ashes of the bloody and bitterly fought war fought on the North American continent. It drew the lines of future struggle and, in so doing, defined a new role for American literature.

A weakness of many of Ken Burns' productions is the director's apparent attraction to certain bold assertions by well-known commentators and a tendency to present them without explanation or context. Russell Banks, the author of *Cloudsplitter*, a novel about the fanatical abolitionist John Brown, declares, "We [Americans] are, as a people, radically different, despite our common history with Europeans. The elements that

make us different are essentially two: race and space.” The statement reflects a dangerous approach. *Huckleberry Finn* is not simply about race. It is an argument against slavery and the outlook that justified it: racism.

While the Civil War was necessary to abolish the institution, racist ideology has not disappeared. *Huckleberry Finn* was not simply an attack on the institution, which was by the time of its publication two decades gone, but more fundamentally on the ideology, which was still widespread.

One has to agree with the statement made by William Styron, author of *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, about Twain’s masterpiece: “All a man ever had to do to achieve immortality was to write a book like *Huckleberry Finn*, which in the end is sort of a hymn without sentimentality to the solidarity of the human race and it has its significance in that, period.”

Ron Powers, a writer who was raised in Clemens’ hometown of Hannibal, Missouri, is Burns’ most often quoted source. He is the author of *Tom and Huck Don’t Live Here Anymore: Childhood and Murder in the Heart of America*, as well as a biography of Twain. He makes reference to the enigma of Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain. He makes an interesting comment on the origin of the name, “Mark Twain.” Mississippi Riverboat pilots required constant soundings of the depth of the water in order to navigate. One fathom, or six feet, was “half twain,” and a depth of two fathoms was regarded as safe water, known as “mark twain.” Powers notes that “mark twain” is the point at which the safe and the dangerous meet. According to Powers, this is where Mark Twain’s writing is situated: on the “edge of safety and danger.”

Powers later argues for a split between the personalities of Samuel Clemens and Mark Twain. He calls Twain an “untamable rogue, a barely restrainable id that Sam could let out of the bottle ... but sometimes he came out when Sam least expected it.” At best this is a bit overstated. At worst it becomes one in a series of psychologically-oriented schemas which serve to cast doubt on the validity of Twain’s later, more critical writings. This emerges in the second installment of the series.

Of course there is an enormous contradiction in Mark Twain’s life and career. The literary and financial success Twain enjoyed allowed him to live the life of the socially elite. He married into wealth and even though his wife was in many ways enlightened, she was conventional in other ways and religious. At the same time it can’t be denied that Olivia—“Livy”—did everything she could to create the conditions in which Twain could write his masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn*.

When *Huckleberry Finn* was released it was a huge success. Twain’s popularity grew even more. Of his situation, he later said, “I am out of the woods. It seems like everything I touch turns to gold. I’m frightened at the proportions of my prosperity.” This leads into the portentous introduction to the second part of the series, as the narrator ominously declaims that Clemens could not have imagined “in his wildest nightmares” the extent of the personal tragedies he would face.

Huckleberry Finn is at the center of Mark Twain’s creative life. Its place in the American literary pantheon was, and still is, beyond dispute. Its publication was the high point both of Clemens’ literary career and his personal life. His family’s wealth and health seemed assured. He was never happier. Burns’ documentary makes the point that this period marked a watershed for Mark Twain. First, he seemed to become infected with the same “get-rich-quick fever” that he lampooned in *The Gilded Age*. He invested recklessly and injudiciously in schemes that became an ever-increasing drain on his family’s savings. He had to seek bankruptcy protection in 1894.

In this same period, his and his wife’s health began to deteriorate. They spent substantial time in Europe to recuperate. Also during this period a number of his now less well-regarded works were written; they didn’t achieve nearly the popularity of his earlier writings and the revenues they generated could not offset his huge debts.

In 1895, when he was almost 60, Clemens made a decision to embark on his most ambitious lecture tour yet, to earn enough money to pay off all his creditors, even though the terms of his bankruptcy did not require that he do so. He would travel across the United States and then around the world, with 150 engagements on five continents. The lecturing seemed beneficial to both his and his wife’s constitutions. At the same time his experiences along the way seemed to reignite his social passions. Of his visit through Africa, Twain commented:

In many countries, we have chained the savage and starved him to death. In more than one country, we have hunted the savage and his little children and their mother with dogs and guns, through the woods and swamps for an afternoon’s sport. In many countries we have taken the savage’s land from him and made him our slave and lashed him every day and broken his pride and made death his only friend and worked him till he’d drop in his tracks. There are many humorous things in the world, among them is the white man’s notion that he is less savage than the other savages.

In 1896, Clemens, his wife and daughter Clara arrived in England to be greeted by the news that his daughter Suzy was very ill. Olivia and Clara left immediately for the US to be with her, while Samuel stayed in England. During his wife’s voyage, he received word that Suzy had died of spinal meningitis. He was devastated.

Ken Burns seems to regard Clemens/Twain as a man who, despite great literary success, endured a personal life full of such tragedy that it exacted an enormous toll on him, and eventually turned him into a bitter cynic. He makes much of the conflict between his life as a writer and his family life, particularly after the deaths of his daughter Suzy, then his wife and finally Jean, his youngest daughter. The implication was that he didn’t really believe the criticisms he leveled at the establishment, particularly in his later writings.

Hal Holbrook takes a less maudlin approach than other commentators. “He refused to lie down.... He was a life force, a forward moving life force, a powerful life force.... He wasn’t a quitter.”

As Mark Twain’s later writings became increasingly irreverent and critical, to the extent that Burns deals with them, he does so almost apologetically. The on-screen declaration of Ron Powers illustrates this: “I think he was very disappointed in the Christian god. I think his anger at the Christian god was the anger of a man who really wanted to believe.” This assertion has perhaps more to do with Powers’ own religious inclinations than with anything that Twain ever wrote or believed.

Some of Twain’s more critical writings are obviously upsetting to Burns. He quotes Twain on the Bible, apparently as an example of his excesses: “It is perhaps the most damnatory biography that exists in print anywhere.”

It is also significant that the series makes only fleeting reference to the social changes that occurred between the time of the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* and Clemens’ death in 1910, even though they were the subject of much of his writing. It was the age of the consolidation of the “Robber Barons” in the US and the growth of great industrial cartels in all the advanced capitalist countries. The stage was being set for the emergence of imperialism (and later world war), which Clemens strenuously opposed. He served as the vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League from 1901 until his death; a fact that also goes unmentioned.

The period following post-Civil War Reconstruction in the US witnessed a rise in anti-black brutality and lynching, deliberately encouraged by the powers that be in particular as a means of dividing white and black poor. Clemens was incensed by this and passionately condemned any and all concessions to the racist organizations that carried out these attacks. It is in this context that Twain’s biting works on religion, such as *The Diary of Eve* and *Letters From the Earth* were written. The hypocrisy of Christian doctrine and practice was particularly

odious and he attacked it mercilessly.

Twain's essays of that period included *The United States of Lyncherdom*, an impassioned response to the news of another Southern lynching, and *A Defence of General Funston*, his biting exposé of the tactics and morals of the US military in the Philippines. Also, *The Czar's Soliloquy*, *To the Person Sitting in Darkness*, *To My Missionary Critics* and the passionate attack on both imperialist war and the religious establishment which attempted to provide it justification, *The War Prayer*. The omission of any reference to any of these later essays only serves to water down the incisive and insightful intellect of Clemens/Twain.

Any examination of the life of Mark Twain would be incomplete without particular reference to the censorship of his writings, a phenomenon which Twain's works still endure today. The series mentions the censorship of *Huckleberry Finn* when it was first published. After its banning by several institutions, including the Concord, Connecticut Public Library, Twain responded, "That will sell us twenty-five thousand books for sure."

The suppression of his work was and still remains a much broader phenomenon, however, than Burns acknowledges. As a matter of fact, just over a year ago there was a nationally publicized debate over the banning of *Huck Finn* in an Oklahoma school district. During Clemens' lifetime, other works were banned outright, such as *The Diary of Eve*, while still others were subjected to editorial expurgation and outright bowdlerization by publishers.

His writings were deemed offensive on various grounds, including personal, religious and political. Publishers made editorial decisions that were essentially marketing and ideological decisions, some with Twain's consent, some without, but which denied the public access to critical portions of his work. For example, in *Life on the Mississippi*, the chapter originally designated as Chapter 48 was completely removed. [http://www.boondocksnet.com/twaintexts/twain_lom48s.html] Its first paragraph:

I missed one thing in the South—African slavery. That horror is gone, and permanently. Therefore, half the South is at last emancipated, half the South is free. But the white half is apparently as far from emancipation as ever.

Mark Twain's impact was not simply an American phenomenon. In this context, it is necessary to draw attention to a misquote which is featured prominently and used in the advertisement for Burns' documentary. Twain is cited as saying "I am not *an* American. I am *the* American." He did write those words, but he was actually referring to someone else and satirizing the very tendency for Americans to act brashly and ignorantly in their relations with others.

The series documents that Mark Twain was quite aware of how Americans were seen by the world community. Twain is quoted from *Innocents Abroad*, one of his earliest books, published in 1869:

The gentle reader will never, never know what a consummate ass he can become, until he goes abroad. I speak now, of course, in the supposition that the gentle reader has not been abroad, and therefore is not already a consummate ass.

The point is that Mark Twain was in no way an American provincial. He was very critical of United States foreign policy and the growing arrogance of many Americans toward the rest of the world. He was a well-traveled and informed commentator whose writing deserves to be taken at its face without apology. He left behind as complete a record of his life and views as any man in history ever did, but Burns overlooks some significant later works, particularly those published posthumously.

Burns' documentary is a valuable contribution to an appreciation one of America's greatest authors, despite its shortcomings. At the same time it invites the enlightened viewer to make his or her independent study of Twain.

Burns seems to be in awe of Twain's power as a writer and speaker, but

he appears to hold an ambiguous attitude toward a number of Twain's themes and deeply held convictions. While showcasing some of Twain's more powerful writings, he presents the life of Samuel Clemens in a very personal and sentimental way, sometimes losing sight of the author's internal consistency. That is, his consistent and unflinching exposure of hypocrisy. A critical viewer has to ask him or herself the obvious question: "If Mark Twain were alive today, where would he stand on the unfolding political situation?" The surest way to answer that accurately is to let him speak for himself.

Citizenship? We have none! In place of it we teach patriotism which Samuel Johnson said a hundred and forty or a hundred and fifty years ago was the last refuge of the scoundrel—and I believe that he was right. I remember when I was a boy and I heard repeated time and time again the phrase, 'My country, right or wrong, my country!' How absolutely absurd is such an idea. How absolutely absurd to teach this idea to the youth of the country.—Mark Twain, 1907



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