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Amelia Tatum Grabowski  
*Gettysburg College*

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# My Mark Twain: Old Man River

## **Abstract**

Flowing across his pages, the Mississippi River inextricably winds itself through Mark Twain's canon. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that my image of Clemens, my Mark Twain, is as a personification of his beloved river. Twain draws his readers to the water's edge, seduces readers to stare into his depths, and reflects the achievements and failings of humanity. Furthermore, like the Mississippi River, Twain embeds himself in the American psyche.

## **Keywords**

Mark Twain, Old Man River, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mississippi River, Personal Reflection, My Mark Twain, Samuel Clemens, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Roughin' It, Adam's Soliloquy, Ken Burns' documentary, Sandy Bottom

## **Disciplines**

American Literature | Literature in English, North America

My Mark Twain: Old Man River

Amelia Grabowski

Flowing across his pages, the Mississippi River inextricably winds itself through Mark Twain's canon. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that my image of Clemens, my Mark Twain, is as a personification of his beloved river. Billy Crystal, in his acceptance speech for the Mark Twain Prize in American Humor, while imitating Twain, compared his relationship with his wife to the Mississippi River, deep, beautiful, ever-flowing "with [his] sandy bottom" (Prize). While Crystal made his comment in jest, little could better describe my Mark Twain himself. In both his writing and his personal life, Twain was the river. Mirroring the beauty of the river, Twain creates an idyllic image of life, brimming with adventures we (his readers) long to partake in, and stories we yearn to witness. However, mirroring the murk of the river, Twain also includes awareness of the darkness of life in his work and his personal actions. Even his lightest of stories contained a probing reflection into human nature while others highlight human flaws with heart-wrenching poignancy. These are not merely reflections on Mark Twain's river surface, but are the "sandy bottom," inseparably part of Twain's work as its floor is part of the river. Constantly illuminating human flaws, Mark Twain embraces them within himself, stating "The human race is a race of cowards, and I'm not only marching in that procession- I'm carrying the banner" (Burns). Just as the Mississippi River flows across the country and throughout Twain's canon, so too has Twain become omnipresent in the American psyche.

Like the Mississippi, Twain's body of work and his consciousness were immense and ever-changing. Growing out of a "crick" in Saint Paul, Minnesota, the Mississippi spread to cover a massive swath of land, also assuming a prominent place in the American psyche. Mark Twain grew out of humble beginnings, first in Florida, Missouri, a village which Twain described "contained a hundred people and I increased the population by one percent," then later in Hannibal, another small Missouri town (Neider 1). With time, Twain's consciousness swelled

just like the river, to encompass an understanding of America and much of the world. From his early days of relentless tomfoolery, Twain's experiences introduced him to a plethora of people, beliefs, and injustices. Travelling abroad on the *Quaker City*, Twain grew to understand cultures across the world, remarking "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness" (Gramm). Furthermore, Twain's travels allowed him to understand human presumptuousness, quipping "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." (Gramm). Despite living a relatively comfortable adult life, Twain's experiences led him to understand the wealth of suffering in the world; for instance, in 1916's *The Mysterious Stranger* denouncing:

A God who could make good children as easily as bad, yet preferred to make bad ones; who could have made every one of them happy, yet never made a single happy one; who made them prize their bitter life, yet stingily cut it short; who gave his angels eternal happiness unearned, yet required his other children to earn it; who gave his angels painless lives, yet cursed his other children with biting miseries and maladies of mind and body; who mouths justice, and invented hell--mouths mercy, and invented hell--mouths Golden Rules and forgiveness multiplied by seventy times seven, and invented hell; who mouths morals to other people, and has none himself; who frowns upon crimes, yet commits them all; who created man without invitation, then tries to shuffle the responsibility for man's acts upon man, instead of honorably placing it where it belongs, upon himself; and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites his poor abused slave to worship him! (Blair 388).

The magnitude of Twain's understanding, born out of humble beginnings, matches the exponential development of the Mississippi as little else can.

Further embodying the river, Twain's literary works also depict life's "sandy bottom," the dark undercurrent of human failings and struggles. Unlike other authors, Twain does not preach from on high, but embraces his shortcomings with shortcomings of mankind. Even the lightest of Twain's work entertains while commenting on humanity. For instance, although a

humorous depiction of the relentless infants that kept retired troops marching, “The Babies” contained the stirring undercurrent that “we have all been babies” and grew from the same humble roots, so much so that even the great Ulysses S. Grant once gave “his whole strategic mind...to trying to find out some way to get his big toe into his mouth” as did countless others (Blair 167).

Twain’s stirring writing, earnest and lacking elitism, allows his message to resound with audiences in a variety of eras, at a myriad of ages, across the globe. For evidence of this one needs to look no further than *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Huck’s notorious pronouncement: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (*Huckleberry* 223). Almost a hundred and fifty years after its publication, these seven words echo in the consciousness of all readers and continue to spark debate. As one Twain scholar remarked, “That sentence...it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up today, when I think of that sentence” (Burns). It’s not only Huck’s resolution that causes this reaction, but the implied social and religious critique, the scholar declares declaring it “the great moral awakening for white Americans” (Burns).

While this reflective nature is ever-present in Twain’s work, it is not the entirety of it, just as the “sandy bottom” is not the entirety of the Mississippi. William Dean Howells spoke of the Twain’s “laughter which the unwise took for the whole of him” (Burns). This laughter, emerging from Twain’s wit and *joie de vivre*, permeates Twain’s work— holding our interest as readers, charming us, and reminding us of the sunny side of life. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain paints the ideal childhood and captivates us with Tom’s boyhood adventures that we yearn to replicate. In *Roughing It*, Twain brings us to far away and well-imagined places, satisfying the audiences desire to see the wonders of the West, while subtly de-mystifying it. Outside of the idealized sun-soaked worlds Twain creates, he never fails to include wit and

humor in his works. Even in his later, darker works, Twain still employs his trademark humor. For instance, in “Adam’s Soliloquy,” published in 1905, Twain criticizes modern society by having Adam and Eve visit New York City and the Museum of Natural History, a humorous situation in and of itself. However, Twain augments the humor with pithy jokes such as Adam remarking, “To think—this multitude is but a wee little fraction of the earth’s population! And all blood kin to me, every one!” (*Complete* 858). Twain, like the river in *Life on the Mississippi*, functions on two levels: an entertaining level akin to “the passenger who could not read this book [the book of the river and] saw nothing but all manner of pretty pictures in it, painted by the sun and shaded by the clouds,” and secondly, a the darker level with his commentary on society, where “to the trained eye these were not pictures at all, but the grimmest and most dead-earnest of reading-matter” (Blair 92).

Not only does Twain reflect the physicality of the river, but he also reflects its entrenchment in American hearts and minds. Just as all Americans know of and assign personal and collective meaning to the Mississippi River, individuals also take collective ownership of Twain, but have deeply personal ownership of him as well- their own Mark Twain. Twain serves as common ground for Americans and people around the world. His words seep into song, such as Jimmy Buffet’s *Fruitcakes* which rephrases Twain’s maxim that “The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightening and the lightening bug,” to say “But the right word at the right time/ May get me a little hug/ That’s the difference between lightening/ And a harmless lightening’ bug” (Burns)(Buffett). Furthermore, movies and television shows utilize Twain’s storylines and visual imagery. Everyone from Leonardo DiCaprio to Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen to animated aardvarks have depicted Twain’s plotlines. While everyone may not know the complexities of Twain’s writing, most Americans, especially

those who've attended high school where at least one Twain book was sure to be on the curriculum, understand that Twain represents America and an unbiased image for its future.

However, Mark Twain's legacy does not merely consist of his collective place in the American psyche. Everyone has their own personal understanding of Twain. For instance, upon thinking of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the first thing that comes to my mind, before Twain's literary craftsmanship, before the disparity between Tom in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and in Twain's subsequent works, is the slightly embarrassing memory of twelve year old me mooning over Ben Mallare, the George Clooney of Severna Park Middle School, as he sang a musical rendition of Tom's biblical prowess (or lack thereof) in our school's production of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: The Musical*. However, when I attempted to tell my aunt about young Mr. Mallare's theatrical genius later that year, no sooner had I gotten the words "Tom Sawyer" out of my mouth than she interrupted me to recount how upon reading *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a girl she was so petrified of meeting the same fate in Sunday school as Tom had, that she immediately went to her grandmother to seek guidance (and learn a few handy verses). Her grandmother, my great-grandmother, who had also read Twain as a girl, had faced a similar fear in her youth and responded with her always on-hand bible verse, "Jesus wept." My sisters, Lizzie and Kate, who were then eight and five, respectively, were also in the room and eager to add their two-cents to impress our visiting aunt. Lizzie exclaimed that she knew of another of Twain's works, *The Prince and Pauper*, which she proceeded to explain, although calling Tom Canty "Wishbone," the name of a popular television pooch who re-enacted famous works of literature— hinting at her source of information. Kate, although five, was not to be outdone and boasted that she looked like Mark Twain in the morning— her hair completely disarranged by an active night's sleep. Eight years later, Mark Twain still holds these

associations for us all, but also serves as a benchmark of time. Reflecting on Twain, we're able to look back and mark a simpler time in our lives, prompting coos of nostalgia, such as "Ah, for the days when Kate was proud to look like Mark Twain, rather than spend an hour preening before breakfast." My family is hardly unique in this respect; in homes across the world Twain is as familiar and as laden with connotations as the thatch marks in the door jamb marking the ever-elevating heights of family members

Twain truly is America's "Ol' Man River," mirroring the physicality and familiarity of the Mississippi in his work and personal life. Unlike the "Ol' Man River" in the acclaimed Rodgers and Hammerstein song, Twain is anything but apathetic. While Hammerstein's "Ol' Man River...just keeps rolling along;" Twain draws his readers to the water's edge, seduces readers to stare into his depths, and reflects the achievements and failings of humanity (Rodgers). Furthermore, like the Mississippi River, Twain embeds himself in the American (if not international) psyche and gives us something to dream of. As Twain once dreamed of life on the river, we now dream of life's in Twain's world.

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