

Mark Twain's Literary Influence

Mark Twain has entered permanently into American popular culture. Almost everyone is familiar with the image of the man—the unruly mane of white hair with matching moustache and eyebrows, the white suit, the ever-present cigar. And most people quote his sayings, including many who don't know it's Mark Twain they're quoting: “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to”; “To cease smoking is the easiest thing I ever did; I ought to know because I've done it a thousand times”; and, of course, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

However, it may surprise some people to learn how highly Twain is regarded by serious literary critics. He is the subject of many biographies and countless works of literary analysis. Even more tellingly, he is held in extremely high esteem by other writers. One of the earliest tributes—and still perhaps the best-known—appears in Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935): “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . [I]t's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.”

Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* (1952) is considered one of the greatest American novels since World War II, explained in an essay what Twain had meant to him and to American literature: “Mark Twain . . . transformed elements of regional vernacular speech into a medium of uniquely American literary expression and thus taught us how to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners. For indeed the vernacular process is a way of establishing and discovering our national identity.”

Twain's influence as a master of the vernacular was also demonstrated by Ellison's friend and fellow novelist Saul Bellow. Bellow's first two novels were small-scale “literary” works. But his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), whose very title is a kind of tribute to Twain, was a major breakthrough in his career. It is a large, sprawling book, narrated in the lively, slangy, very American voice of Augie himself, and filled with vivid characters and both grotesque and hilarious incidents.

Another demonstration of Twain's influence came in 1996 with the publication of the Oxford Mark Twain, a twenty-nine volume set of all the books Twain published in his lifetime. Each volume contains an introduction by a leading contemporary author, some of whom describe Twain's importance in their discovery of literature and their own development as writers. These authors include Arthur Miller (“Death of a Salesman”), Cynthia Ozick (*The Shawl*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five*), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*).

William Faulkner is sometimes regarded as the greatest American novelist since Mark Twain. Like Hemingway, Bellow, and Morrison, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the world's most prestigious literary honor. Faulkner's debt to Mark Twain is clear in some of his best work, such as the stories “Barn Burning” and “The Bear,” which show boys coming of age as they are exposed to the cruelty and violence around them. It was a debt that Faulkner was happy to acknowledge. At a literary conference in Japan in 1955, he called Twain “the father of American literature . . . the first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs.”