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## Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens: A Review

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Andrew Hoffman. *Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*. New York: William Morrow and Co. Inc, 1997.

## Review

*The unreality of Mark Twain is the primary reason this book cannot be a biography of him. —Hoffman*

This epigraph reveals paradoxes and contradictions that striate what is an illuminating and rewarding page turner of a book. Andrew Hoffman breaks with conventional biographical strategies, such as detailed outlines of lineage, minute descriptions of place of birth, or ponderous adumbration of events in the subject's evolving life. Instead, Hoffman does something significant for readers of Mark Twain: he writes of Sam Clemens, whom Hoffman calls a "brooding and uncertain man."

His suspense-rich technique is layered, in that while he does follow Clemens' life in chronological terms, at the same time, he examines in depth and exuberant detail Clemens' "need—to lead his life in disguise" which results in the invention of an alter ego—first, Mark Twain, then, S. L. Clemens, and others. The biography reveals Clemens' terrible insecurities. Often, Hoffman simply gives Sam's pained description, of "a conscience that tears me like a wild beast." The energy infusing this careful inspection of relations in and between Sam and Twain make reading this book mysterious, exciting, and thoughtprovoking, particularly in three areas: 1) the modernity of contradictory psychological issues, 2) its effects on the literature and 3) struggles between insecure Sam and boisterous showman Twain.

First, Hoffman emphasizes Sam's abiding "doubt about himself." Hoffman persuasively shows that "this layering of invented selves—Mark Twain, S. L. Clemens, and Mortimer Mc Williams—almost completely obscured the original Sam Clemens." In other words, Clemens' act of inventing selves echoes a now familiar insecurity about the security of self. Hoffman explains that once Sam accepted that there is no single identity, he saw that he was "trapped in a false

identity he has made for himself." In this theory-inflected time, it is revealing to see that Clemens' writing was under erasure, marked by a deliberate, haunting doubleness: "When he really wanted to obscure something he marked it through with a spiral and then added the loops of false letters above and below the line." What Hoffman considers incontrovertible evidence of "Sam's unquenchable uncertainty toward his essential self" sometimes took the form of signing his plural names 'oddly," a double signature that looked like a simple cancellation. The initial premise of this biography scrutinizes the very modern doubts about self which had led Sam in 1862 to invent another self and sign his name as Mark Twain.

Secondly, according to Hoffman, these divisions greatly influenced the fiction, specifically *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Hoffman carefully explains how insecure, troubled Sam writing as Mark Twain became confident and definite. To emphasize this point, Hoffman posits a distance between Huckleberry Finn's ambivalent moral system and Mark Twain's habitual role as public moralist. In this controversial classic, a book over which Clemens "had pawed at for seven years," Hoffman concludes that a failure to recognize tension between Huck and Twain has clouded readings of a novel which sinuously, yet resolutely, explores "the indetermanancy of self." Interestingly, in an apparently missing manuscript, Clemens had created a "sequel" in which Huck and Tom, now old men, "die in each other's arms." Hoffman astutely concludes that "like Tom, Sam Clemens hides behind the scenes of Huck Finn pulling the narrative strings, and he does not mind weakening Mark Twain's authority in the process."

The dichotomy between Twain and Clemens also shapes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Clemens animatedly suggests, "the very title of the book requires fun and it must be furnished." The subject of this layered adventure, however, further intensified divisions between

Sam and Twain by accenting class divisions and philosophical positions. Ultimately, this book in its apocalyptic conclusion dramatizes that just like the Yankee, Sam too "was walled in by his own successes," and painfully counted its high costs. Hoffman suggests a possible literary resolution to the divisions between Sam and Twain, which he finds may commence in *Joan of Arc* in which Sam writes over and out the authoritative voice of Mark Twain, by using elaborate layers and a highly visible, authoritative translator and annotator.

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One final area of extended treatment concerns the contrast and muted battle between Sam and Twain. Hoffman presents Twain as progressive politically, somewhat dogmatic, optimistic socially, charming, acute and winning. In contrast, Sam becomes increasingly haunted by pain, convinced of the absence of free will, vulnerable, monetarily ambitious and boyishly effusive. Of himself, Sam observes, "my private character is hacked, & dissected, & mixed up with my public one, & both suffer the more in consequence." His writing is sometimes called that of "the boy man." Apparently, toward the end of his life, through a variety of methods, Clemens tried to lessen the polarity between himself and Twain. Overall, the book recognizes the sometimes unseen importance of writing for Sam who in a letter to William Dean

Howells wrote, "What I have been wanting was a chance to write a book without reserve—a book which should take account of no one's feelings, no one's prejudices, opinions, beliefs, hopes, illusions, delusions; a book which should say my say, right out of my heart, in the plainest language & without a limitation of any sort.

As biographer highly committed to and involved with his subject, Hoffman is fully aware of Twain's cultural importance as creator and reflector of the changing times in which he lived. Stylistically, the book balances intimate examination with thoughtful critical overviews. From the start, it is apparent that Hoffman is well aware that his subject is complex and important to readers today. Accordingly, he develops high levels of suspense, luminous moments of description and appropriately thorough levels of analysis—both of character and of text. The following final comments aptly signal the intensity of his biography of Sam Clemens, "I revere Mark Twain, as I have since I first began reading him seriously, but I love Sam Clemens. If he is gazing down on us from a comet somewhere (Twain was born and later died during an appearance of Halley's Comet), I hope he can see the love in this book." Hoffman's splendid biography intelligently and compellingly invite us to reconsider the writer universally known only as Mark Twain. As Hoffman observes, "It is my hope that by understanding how Clemens lived his lives, we might better understand how we live our own." 