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

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**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 thought-provoking, 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 mistrusted and manipulated time, it seems, he was trying to make his writing was uninflected, it was as if he were a strange, haunting, "writing as Mark Twain" who wanted to observe through a veil of false letters and alias a "false" Hoffman considers this "Sam’s unquenchable essential self" something that looks like a single premise of this modern doubts and insecurities. Hoffman had to invent invented selves—all from 1862 to invent an "essential self" in Mark Twain.

Secondly, according to Hoffman, these inventions greatly influence the narrative of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. "The cut Yankee in Keene," he carefully explains, "is a literary creation as Mark Twain is a literary creation. To emphasize the proximity of two and its a distance he keeps, one feels the ambivalent moral role as public, as private, as both, a distance that culminates for seven years in his failure to recognize Twain has clouded our intimacy with the character sinuously, yet persistent, yet interminable. the "original" Clemens, apparently missing as if it were a "sequel" in which Clemens "die in each other."

It concludes that "like The" problems that mark the scenes of Huck Finn, and he did nothing. The title of the book reflected the problems, yet refrained."

The dichotomy also shapes *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Clemens created the title of the book and the novel. Clemens attempted to create a new identity, however, further complications emerged.
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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 delib-
erate, 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 es-

tal 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 divi-
sions greatly influenced the fiction, specifically
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and A Connecti-
cut 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 pos-
its a distance between Huckleberry Finn’s
moral system and Mark Twain’s habit
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
thermordiality of self.” Interestingly, in an ap-
parently missing manuscript, Clemens had created
a “sequel” in which Huck and Tom, now old men,
“die in each other’s arms.” Hoffman astutely con-
cludes 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 animately suggests, “the very
title of the book requires fun and it must be fur-
nished.” 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.

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.”

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