Spunkwater, Spunkwater!: A Life of Mark Twain Short Guide

Spunkwater, Spunkwater!: A Life of Mark Twain by James Playsted Wood

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn (1884) is considered by many to be one of the greatest American novels, a humorous, moving tale of American boyhood that has been interpreted as reflecting the development of a U.S. national identity.

A knowledge of the life of Huckleberry Finn's author is of great importance in understanding this classic book and its impact, for in Mark Twain, Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Twain's real name) created his most flamboyant character.

In Spunkwater, Spunkwater! Wood presents the essential Mark Twain, and he does so with a verve that both shows his own appreciation of the man and makes this biography a satisfying and informative reading experience.

About the Author

James Playsted Wood was born on December 11, 1905, in Brooklyn, New York. He earned two degrees from Columbia University—a bachelor's in 1927 and a master's in 1933. Wood taught English for seven years at DuPont Manual Training High School in Louisville, Kentucky, where he also contributed book reviews for the Louisville Courier-Journal. From 1937 until 1946 he was a member of the English department at Amherst College in Massachusetts. A member of the U.S. Army Air Forces during World War II, he served in the Pentagon office of the chief of staff, General George C. Marshall. He became a major and earned the army commendation medal. During the war, on August 14, 1943, he married Elizabeth Craig, a teacher of Latin, French, and Greek.

In 1946 Wood left both the military and Amherst College to work as assistant to the director of research at the Curtis Publishing Company in Philadelphia. He stayed with the Curtis Company until 1962. During this period Wood became associated with the children's magazine Jack and Jill first as a contributor of stories, articles, and poems, and later as managing editor (1954-1955) and contributing editor (1959-1964). A full-time writer since 1966, Wood has written extensively about magazines, advertising, and the stock market. Wood targets much of his writing for young people. For very young readers he has produced several fantasy books and for young adults he has written both historical fiction and literary biographies.

Setting

Because Mark Twain roamed the world, this biography is set across continents, spanning rivers and oceans as it follows Twain on his travels. Born in 1835, Twain spent most of his boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri, on the Mississippi River, the same river that is the setting for much of his best fiction. He began working as a printer's assistant in Hannibal at the age of twelve; six years later, he left home to become a roving printer, working in Saint Louis, New York, Philadelphia, and Keokuk, Iowa. In 1857 he began an apprenticeship as riverboat pilot, a career that ended when the Civil War broke out in 1861. After a few weeks as a Confederate soldier, he followed his brother, Orion Clemens, west to Nevada. Twain's energetic nature and curiosity made him a rambler; he worked first as a silver miner in Carson City, Nevada, and later as a reporter in Virginia City and San Francisco. In 1866 he made his first excursion out of the United States, visiting the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands.

The next year he spent several months touring Palestine and the Mediterranean. Even after marrying in 1870 and settling in Buffalo, New York, and later in Hartford, Connecticut, Twain was often away from home on lecture tours. He lived in Europe for most of the period between 1891 and 1900. As authentically American as he was, Twain was also a citizen of the world.

The changing landscapes of his life are delightfully reflected in Wood's biography.

Social Sensitivity

Although Mark Twain's outbursts and writings often created a sensation because of Twain's colorful language and impetuous style, Wood's treatment of Twain's life is generally inoffensive.

Wood neglects to develop the significant female characters in the story, and he does not explore in any depth Twain's attitudes about social issues. But in portaying Twain's relationships with the people he loved, Wood's biography reveals a caring, if bitter, individual.

Literary Qualities

Wood says that he learned to read from listening to the works of nineteenth-century American authors Horatio Alger, Jr., and Winston Churchill. His grandfather often read aloud to him from Alger's famous rags-toriches stories, and his father read him Churchill's novels at night. To Wood, writing a biography of Mark Twain must have seemed like telling a true-life Horatio Alger story. But whereas Alger's heroes are rather simple, Twain was a very complex man. Indeed, biographers are still trying to reconstruct the true events of Twain's life and finding that to do so they must often treat his own accounts of it with distrust. Wood's brief biography does not pretend to be a definitive work, but it remains adequate, entertaining, and especially accessible for younger readers.

Wood, aware that Twain preferred lively tales to the literal truth, creates a biography of the storyteller that is far from dull. Twain created a new idiom for literary English by adapting the patterns and rhythms of American speech to his narrative style, and Wood's style appears to be a reflection of Twain's. The quick-paced biography is marked by short declarative sentences and a clipped, repetitive style. Wood's first chapter, for example, opens with two paragraphs detailing the things Twain loved: "Mark Twain loved cats. He loved his wife almost beyond his ability to express the depth...of his adoration. He loved his three daughters. He loved money." He proceeds in the next para graph to juxtapose the things Twain loved with the things Twain hated.

Wood thus establishes from the onset the biography's affectionate, informal tone. He recounts the events of Twain's life in great detail, but his straightforward, humorous style —punctuated by occasional authorial intrusion—creates an easy-to-read, enthusiastic account of a great American personality.

Themes and Characters

As a mature man, Mark Twain would always look to the past as a happier and more innocent time than the present.

He cherished and often wrote about his boyhood in Hannibal and his brief career as a Mississippi riverboat pilot.

In his writings he gave these earlier periods of his life an almost mythical coloring.

Over the years, Twain would also wrap himself in the trappings of mythology.

As Wood makes clear, Twain was never deeply concerned with the literal truth about his own life, especially if his imagination could improve upon its events. Humor was also part of these exaggerations—a humor that Twain learned on the fringe of the frontier in his Missouri days, and later on the frontier itself in the far West. Wood details Twain's development as an unsurpassed humorist, revealing that the passionate Twain was capable of making both love and hatred appear equally funny.

After a poor but happy childhood in Missouri, Twain worked as a printer, a riverboat pilot, a reporter, and finally, a writer and lecturer. He married Olivia Langdon, a New York heiress, in 1870, in Elmira, New York. The couple had four children: Langdon, who died in infancy, Clara, Susan, and Jean. At the age of forty, Twain was afraid that he had exhausted himself as a writer, but he was most productive during his middle age, when he published Life on the Mississippi (1883), Tom Sawyer (1876), and The Prince and the Pauper (1882).

Huckleberry Finn, generally recognized as Twain's best novel, was published in 1884. Twain suffered severe financial losses in the late 1800s, and in the early 1900s endured personal tragedy as well with the death of his wife and two of his daughters. Twain died on April 21, 1910, in Redding, Connecticut.

Wood portrays Twain as lovable but self-centered and cantankerous. He believes that the pessimism of Twain's later works, as seen in The Mysterious Stranger (written in 1898 but published posthumously) and What Is Man?

(1904)—both indictments of what Twain called "the damned human race" in his final years—has been taken too seriously by critics. While pessimism also darkened the tone of Twain's last great full-length novel, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889), Wood believes that this darkened outlook Spunkwater, Spunkwater!: A Lifeof Mark Twain simply reflects the rage of a man who suddenly ran out of what once had seemed inexhaustible luck.

Wood's biography focuses on Twain's rambunctious, tempestuous character to the near-exclusion of other characters who figure prominently in Twain's life. Wood states, for example, that Twain's wife, Livy (Olivia), was the object of Twain's undying devotion,

yet Wood's characterization of her is so thin that it becomes difficult to determine exactly what traits in Livy inspire Twain's adoration. Livy, from a wealthy, cultured family, was a quiet, sickly young woman whom Twain "looked on with awe and wonder as an ethereal being."

Wood notes that Livy "adored" Twain, though she "could not always keep her unpredictable husband in order."

Twain, did, however, trust Livy's editorial judgment and had her review all of his work before publication.

Another figure close to Twain was the writer and editor William Dean Howells, whom Wood describes as "almost as necessary to Twain as Livy herself."

Howells's character is only superficially revealed, but he is portrayed as Twain's warm, generous, and loyal friend. Wood emphasizes the bond these men shared, noting that "Mark Twain was extravagantly, almost fiercely attached to Howells, and Howells was unreservedly convinced of the genius of Mark Twain."

Quotations from the correspondence between these famous writers further illustrate the intimate nature of their relationship, as do Wood's descriptions of their friendly interaction with one another.

Other friends, family members, and historical figures are mentioned throughout the biography, but Wood concentrates on the development of Twain's character and the American qualities Twain embodied. Wood holds Twain up as an example of originality, vigor, and boldness; he sees in Twain "the voluble symbol of the kind of practical wisdom most Americans admired."

Topics for Discussion

1. Humor is very difficult to analyze, but nearly everybody agrees that Twain was a very funny man. What made him a great American humorist?

2. Wood correctly observes that Mark Twain was both Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. Of the two, Twain seemed to prefer Tom. Why was this?

3. What is a persona? How did Samuel Clemens choose certain elements of his personality to become Mark Twain?

4. Mark Twain was very image conscious and wanted to be certain that future readers of his books got the right impression of him. Has this happened?

5. Twain, a professed atheist, had several ministers as friends, such as the Reverend Joseph Twichell. How were these unlikely relationships possible?

6. According to Wood, why did Mark Twain believe that Halley's comet had personal significance for him? Was this a joke or superstition?

7. Given his attitudes about the progress of "the damned human race," do you think Twain would have been surprised by Hitler's Germany or Stalin's Russia?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Compare the writings of Mark Twain with those of Kurt Vonnegut, who has been called a modern-day Mark Twain.

What do these writers have in common in terms of viewpoint, subject matter, and style?

2. Compare the accounts of the Mississippi River in Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Is the river simply part of the background in these books or is it sometimes a character in its own right?

3. William Faulkner's novel The Old Man describes the Mississippi during the flood of 1927. Compare the struggles of Faulkner's unnamed convict as he battles the currents of the river with those of Jim and Huck in Huckleberry Finn. Are Huck and the convict at all similar?

4. Roughing It describes Mark Twain's travels by stagecoach to Nevada in 1861.

It has been said that Twain and Charles Dickens have provided the best descriptions of this type of travel in the nineteenth century. Compare Dickens's novel The Pickwick Papers (1837) to Twain's Roughing It 5. The Mysterious Stranger is considered a minor masterpiece and possibly the best expression of Mark Twain's pessimistic final phase. What ideas does Twain express in this work? How do you think he arrived at such a bleak outlook on humanity?

For Further Reference

Brooks, Van Wyck. The Ordeal of Mark Twain. New York: E. P. Dutton, 1920.

Brooks's work is dated but still interesting, especially as an example of early Twain biographies.

Commire, Anne, ed. Something about the Author. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Research, 1971. Contains a biographical entry on Wood.

Etheridge, James M., ed. Contemporary Authors. Vols. 9-10. Detroit: Gale Research, 1964. Includes a biographical entry on Wood.

Geismar, Maxwell. Mark Twain: An American Prophet. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970. Geismar believes that the works of Twain's final period have not had the recognition they deserve.

Lauber, John. The Making of Mark Twain. New York: American Heritage, 1985. This biography deals with Twain's apprenticeship as a writer.

Leary, Lewis. Mark Twain. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960.

This is a good, brief introduction to Twain's writings.

Related Titles

Wood's other biographies for young adults have also been praised by critics as interesting and intelligent studies of some of America's best writers. Many of Wood's subjects are eighteenth-century writers, and when read as a group these biographies provide an insightful portrait of the social and literary life of that century. Wood enthusiastically endorses the individualism of Henry David Thoreau in A Hound, a Bay Horse, and a Turtle-Dove, as he does that of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Trust Thyself. He is equally effective in his study of the enigmatic poet Emily Dickinson. These books, along with his studies of Jonathan Edwards, Cotton Mather, and Washington Irving, also provide good supplementary reading for adults.

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