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response to it.

THE MAKING OF AMERICA

The Seriously Funny Man

Mark Twain was our first great political wit and a dogged defender of racial equality. Jon Stewart, Barack Obama and the rest of America are in his debt

BY RICHARD LACAYO

IN THE 1880S THE BRITISH POET AND CULTURE CRITIC Matthew Arnold paid two visits to the U.S. to observe the native customs. Eventually he set down his impressions in a book, *Civilization in the United States*. On the whole, he didn't think there was much. For one thing, he was troubled by the way Americans appeared to lack any capacity for reverence toward superior men. "If there be a discipline in which the Americans are wanting," he pronounced, "it is the discipline of awe and respect." And in that connection, one institution of American life struck him as an especially bad idea. That was what he called "the addiction to 'the funny man,' who is a national misfortune there."

Arnold didn't mention any funnyman in particular. He didn't have to. In an essay six years earlier, he had already attacked by name the most famous American funnyman of all, Mark Twain. His humor, Arnold sniffed, was "so attractive to the Philistine." It would be truer to say it was attractive to anyone who valued plain speaking and the kind of deadly wit that could cut through the cant and hypocrisy surrounding any topic, no matter how sensitive: war, sex, religion, even race. Twain was righteous without being pious, angry for all the right reasons and funny in all the right ways. You might say he gave virtue a good name.

All the same, Twain was stung by Arnold's words and prepared a reply that he never published. That's a shame, because it includes the single best one-line defense not just of himself but also of how a democratic society works in the first place. "A discriminating irreverence," he wrote, "is the creator and protector of human liberty." This would be the polite way of saying "Go stuff your awe."

Actually, it wasn't like Twain to choose the polite way to say anything. In a career that lasted more than 50 years, he was the authentic voice of American contrarianism, a man born to gore sacred cows and make rude noises in public, somebody whose idea of humanist piety was to say, "All I care to know

is that a man is a human being—that is enough for me; he can't be any worse."

And thanks to that "discriminating irreverence," by the 1880s Twain was one of the best-known living Americans, the first writer to enjoy the kind of fame reserved until then for Presidents, generals and barn-burning preachers. Not quite a century after his death, in 1910, we get a lot of our news from people like him—funnymen (and -women) who talk about things that are not otherwise funny at all. This is an election year in which some of the most closely followed commentators are comedians like Jon Stewart, Bill Maher, Stephen Colbert and the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. All of them are descended from that man in the white suit.

It could even be said that Barack Obama owes a debt to Twain. In post-Civil War America, a nation struggling to fit together the pieces of its racial puzzle, Twain spoke loud and clear about race. And in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel that qualifies as a classic by every definition but his own—"something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read"—he produced one of the wisest meditations on race in all of American literature.

So in one sense, Arnold was right: the funnyman was a national phenomenon. And still is. But it was no misfortune. Reverence and awe aren't democratic virtues. The last thing you need in a free society is people who know their place. Twain knew that. It's one reason we know *his* place—and it's up there very high. ■

American idol Twain, pictured here in December 1908, was the first U.S. writer to achieve the kind of fame normally reserved for Presidents and generals

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