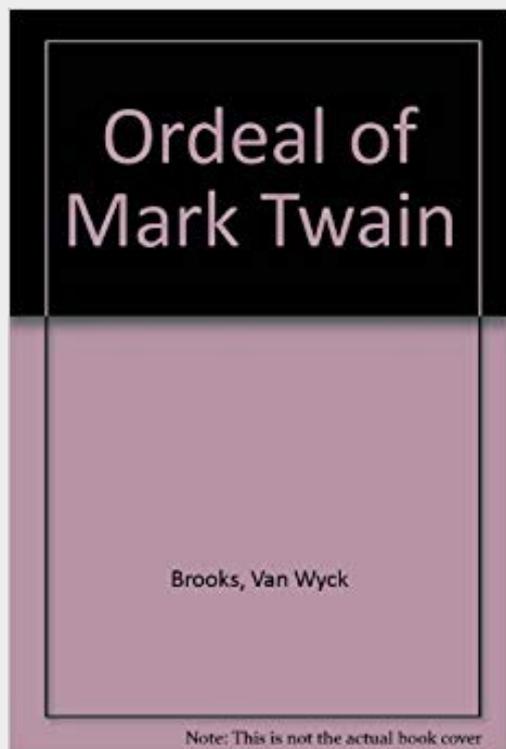


## Ordeal of Mark Twain *by* Van Wyck Brooks



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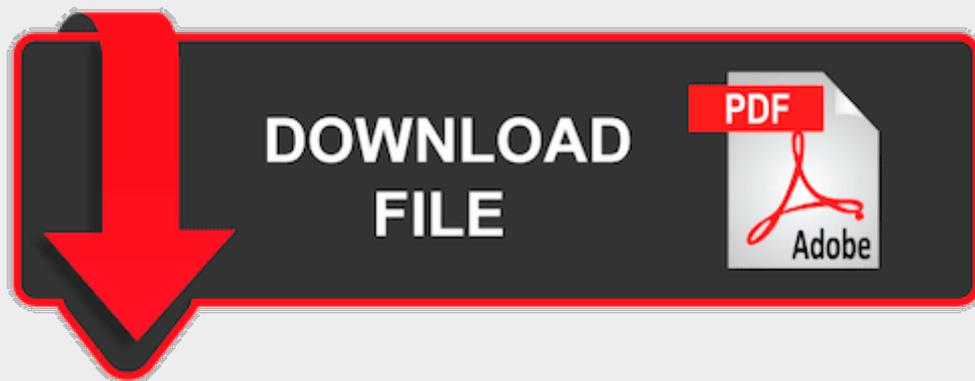
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## Reviews of the *Ordeal of Mark Twain* *by* Van Wyck Brooks

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Mark Twain lived from Halley's Comet to Halley's Comet. Literally. He was born in 1835, a year the comet appeared, and he died in 1910, 75 years later and the year for the comet's return. His biographers haven't often noted this, directly suggesting a prediction of his fame and that the prediction came true.

Cultural historian Van Wyck Brooks noted this as well, in both his "The Ordeal of Mark Twain," published in 1920, 10 years after Twain's death, and "The Times of Melville and Whitman," published in 1947. In between the two works, however, Brooks' understanding of Twain had changed.

In 1920, Brooks saw Twain as an ultimately failed artist. In 1947, he saw Twain as one of the three American writers - Herman Melville and Walt Whitman being the other two - who had essentially created a national American literature.

In a way, both assessments were, oddly enough, correct. (A review of the book in *The New York Times* in 1920 faulted Brooks for overstating his case, and for drawing his conclusion first and then finding the evidence to support it.)

In "The Ordeal of Mark Twain," Brooks starts with the phenomenon about Twain's last years that everyone was well aware of. The great American humorist, the man with comic insights into almost all things American, had become a pessimist. His last works were fairly bleak. His letters to friends suggested much the same. And no one who knew Twain was particularly surprised, given the series of family tragedies he endured (the death of his son, two daughters, and his wife), the bankruptcies he experienced, and the changing times themselves.

Twain had lived during a period when America was transformed from an agrarian society, experienced a great Civil War, and became an industrial power (with its wealth and abuses) and an imperialist power. The America he knew as a teen and young man had disappeared, and what had replaced it wasn't exactly inspiring.

Brooks, however, had an argument about Twain to make in 1920. He didn't discount Twain's family and personal experiences, but he saw a tension in Twain from the very beginning, a tension that led directly to Twain's pessimism in his later years. The soul of the artist competed with the need for approval. The writer competed with the capitalist. Tracing this tension back to Twain's earliest days, Brooks called it the pioneer competing with the poet, the "splendid genius which had never found

itself.”

Twain the writer, already famous because of “Innocents Abroad,” became Samuel Clemens the capitalist, to please his father-in-law. Twain the champion of the slave Jim competed against Twain the friend of some of the biggest names in industrial history. Twain the author was also Twain the publisher.

The tension between the two sides of Twain, Brooks argues, can be found in his marriage, his books, his humor, his letters, and even in his autobiography. He determined that his autobiography would not be published for 100 years after his death. Yet some 26 installments were actually published while he was still alive, and even when the University of California Press began to publish it (in three volumes) in 2010, it seemed rather already familiar.

Brooks further argues that Twain knew very well that there was something decidedly different between himself and a great writer. And yet, in 1947, Brooks’ judgment has shifted, and he says little about the Twain of his 1920 book. The Mark Twain of “The Ordeal of Mark Twain” is not the Mark Twain found in the pages of “The Times of Melville and Whitman.”

And yet there is something recognizable in the picture of Twain that Brooks draws in the earlier work, something that is familiar to all authors, and this may be the point that Brooks missed. The need for approval (the “pioneer”) and the creation of art (the “poet”) are perhaps less in tension with each other and more two sides of the same essence.

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