In November 1835, Halley’s Comet streaked through the sky in a flash of light that delighted crowds around the world. Two weeks later, on November 30, 1835, in the small town of Florida, Missouri, John and Jane Lampton Clemens welcomed their sixth child into the world. They named him Samuel Langhorne Clemens (and twenty-odd years later young Sam would rename himself Mark Twain). Three years after Samuel came into the world, his parents’ seventh and last child was born, a son named Henry. A year after that, the family moved to Hannibal, Missouri.

Fans of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn would recognize Hannibal as the inspiration for the boys’ fictional hometown of St. Petersburg. Like his boy heroes, Samuel spent his days running around with a group of other local boys, engaging in all sorts of hijinks, mischief, and tomfoolery. Thanks to its place right on the bank of the Mississippi River, the small town was a frequent stop for steamship pilots and their passengers traveling up and down the river. From the time he was old enough to think about it, Samuel Clemens was enamored with the steamboat pilots and hoped to grow up to be one of them.

In 1847, when Samuel was 12, his father died. Jane Clemens was left alone to support the family’s four surviving children. As soon as they were old enough, the Clemens children had to work. By the age of 16, Twain had left school for a job as an apprentice to a printer in Hannibal. Within a few years, he was traveling up and down the East Coast as a freelance printer. The river, however, was always in his heart. Samuel returned to Missouri in 1855 to begin a two-year apprenticeship to become a steamboat pilot. He loved the work, as well as the intriguing characters he met along the river. “When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before—met him on the river,” he wrote later in Life on the Mississippi, his account of the period. The people he met were only happy to feed his appetite for a good yarn, and their stories influenced his writing. He also took from the river the name that would make him famous: “Mark twain” is what a steamboat pilot calls out when the river’s two fathoms deep, making it safe to navigate.

A steamboat pilot’s salary was great—as a licensed pilot Twain earned $250 per month, the equivalent of about $155,000 per year in today’s dollars. It was such a great deal that he convinced his younger brother Henry to become a pilot, too. Henry began training, and in June 1858 Twain confronted the first major tragedy of his life. The boat on which Henry was training exploded, blasting the 20-year-old into the water. He sustained mortal injuries. Upon hearing of the accident, a grief-stricken Samuel rushed to the scene. “He hurried to the Exchange to see his brother,” wrote a newspaper reporter who witnessed Samuel’s arrival, “and on approaching
the bedside of the wounded man, his feelings so much overcame him, at the scalded and emaciated form before
him, that he sunk to the floor overpowered. There was scarcely a dry eye in the house; the poor sufferers shed
 tears at the sight."8 Henry lingered on in the hospital for several days before succumbing to his injuries. Twain
was devastated and blamed himself for his brother's death. "The horrors of three days have swept over
me—they have blasted my youth and left me an old man before my time," Twain wrote to his sister-in-law.
"Mollie, there are gray hairs in my head to-night. Men take me by the hand and congratulate me, and call me
' lucky' because I was not on the Pennsylvania when she blew up! May God forgive them, for they know not what
they say."9 Twain was right—the incident truly made him old before his time. Even though he was only in his
twenties, his hair started to turn gray. For the rest of his life, Twain always looked older than he really was.

Despite the tragedy, Twain continued to work as a riverboat pilot until 1861. When the Civil War broke out, all traffic along the river was halted, putting
Twain out of a job. It was time to find a new adventure.

Mark Twain: San Francisco & Roughing It

Mark Twain's Civil War was a rather short one; he trained for two weeks with a
Confederate militia which then disbanded, ending his military career. In 1862, his
older brother Orion was offered a job as the personal secretary to the
territorial governor of Nevada. He asked Twain if he would like to come along as
his assistant, and Twain jumped at the chance. "I had never been away from
home, and that word ' travel' had a seductive charm for me,"10 Twain wrote in his
memoir Roughing It. The brothers journeyed together to Nevada in a stagecoach,
enduring several long, uncomfortable weeks on rough roads. After some hilariously unsuccessful attempts to
cash in on Nevada's silver boom, Twain realized that mining might not be the job for him. He instead took a job
as city editor for the Virginia City (Nev.) Daily Territorial Enterprise. As a cub reporter, Twain later recalled,
h "let fancy get the upper hand of fact too often."11 When the news was slow, he often just made stories up.

After circumstances forced him to leave Nevada—some messy business involving the state's dueling laws—he
moved west, traveling through northern California and settling in San Francisco. His travels inspired the short
story "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" (later known as "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County")
which was published in 1865 in the New York Saturday Press. The story was a tall tale about a man listening to a
tall tale, and it was a huge success. Twain was honing his skills as a storyteller, and in doing so he helped to define
the American sense of humor. "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes
purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art," he
later said.

Twain later traveled to Hawaii as a reporter for the Alta California and then to Europe. On the journey abroad,
he noticed a framed photograph of a fellow passenger's sister, a woman named Olivia "Livy" Langdon, and insisted
on meeting her when they returned to the U.S. He did, and was instantly smitten. In 1870 he married her. Twain
had rather progressive views of women and marriage for his time, believing that a woman should be an equal
partner to her husband, instead of subservient ("I don't want to sleep with a threefold being who is a cook,
chambermaid, and washer woman all in one,"13 he said.) Twain was devoted to his wife, who became an importanteditor of his work. "I never wrote a serious word until after I married Mrs. Clemens," he later said. "She is
solely responsible—to her should go the credit—for any influence my subsequent work should exert. After my
marriage, she edited everything I wrote."14 He even tried going to church to please his religious wife, but that
didn't last very long.
Twain gave his first public lecture after he got back from Hawaii in 1866. With no television, no radio, no internet, and no telephones, the only real way to get entertainment back in those days was to go see it live. Lectures were, believe it or not, a popular pastime. Twain’s comedic delivery was a hit with live audiences, and he kicked off a lecturing career that would span the next few decades. Along with his books, Twain’s lecture series made him a celebrity. Twain was famous for his voice—a nasally twang that was jarring at first, but then added to the humor of his speech. He spoke famously slowly. "I have seen slower people than I am—and more deliberate... and even quieter, and more listless, and lazier people than I am," Twain once said. "But they were dead."

In 1869 Twain published his first book. The Innocents Abroad, a nonfiction account of his travels to Europe, introduced readers to Twain’s trademark brand of wit and observation. "The gentle reader will never, never know what a consummate a-- he can become until he goes abroad. I speak now, of course, in the supposition that the gentle reader has not been abroad, and therefore is not already a consummate a--," he wrote. "If the case be otherwise, I beg his pardon and extend to him the cordial hand of fellowship and call him brother." The book was a bestseller. In 1870 the Clemenses’ first son Langdon was born. The Clemens family (remember, Sam Clemens was Mark Twain’s real name) moved to Hartford, Connecticut. In 1872 Twain published Roughing It, a memoir of his time in the West that was peppered with exaggerations and tall tales. The couple’s second child, a girl named Susy, was born that year. But sadly, in that same year their son Langdon died of diphtheria. It was the first of many such heartaches for Twain and his wife. Of his four children—following Langdon and Susy, younger daughters Clara and Jean were born in 1874 and 1880—only one, Clara, would survive him.
Twain wrote short stories and a few more books. Then in 1876, he published a novel called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The book starred Tom, a mischievous prankster modeled after a young Twain himself and several of his boyhood friends. The novel's humorous portrayal of an idyllic American town where children ran unapologetically amok struck a nerve with readers, and the book proved a success with children and adults alike. Not everyone in the literary establishment was impressed with the frankness of Twain's language, however. "In the books to be placed into children's hands for purposes of recreation, we have a preference for those of a milder type than Tom Sawyer," the New York Times sniffed in a review. "Excitements derived from reading should be administered with a certain degree of circumspection. .... less, then, of Injun Joe and 'revenge,' and 'slitting women's ears.'"

Twain followed that up with *Life on the Mississippi*, his memoir of the steamboat years, and then founded his own publishing company with a nephew. Then in 1885, he published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a semi-sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted," Twain wrote in the preface; "persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." Narrated by rascal Huck Finn (who was based on Twain's childhood friend Tom Blankenship), the book was one of the first written entirely in regional American dialect. Though set in pre-Civil War South, Huck's adventures also indirectly tackled serious antebellum issues such as racism and bigotry. Without ever coming close to preaching or moralizing, the book argued against racism and for equality—something that Twain believed in passionately.

The book was immediately popular. "The book is Mark Twain at his best," one reviewer declared. In the century since it was published, *Huckleberry Finn* has been referred to by many as the Great American Novel, the single book that best represents American literature. Not everyone was sold at the beginning, however, and not everyone is sold today. The Concord Library banned the book when it was published. Huck Finn is still one of the most banned books in America, thanks to its repeated use of the n-word. (In Twain's defense, the slur is used in the overtly anti-racist novel as it was in real life at the time.) Twain never let criticisms bother him too much. "The truth is, when a Library expels a book of mine and leaves an unexpurgated Bible lying around where unprotected youth and age can get hold of it, the deep unconscious irony of it delights me and doesn't anger me," he wrote.

Twain's next book, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, did not get as positive a critical reception as Huck. It made its own mark as one of the first novels to explore time travel, and has been called one of the earliest science fiction novels (Twain was a big science fan). Twain's real-life time as a Connecticut Yankee was limited. After several bad business investments, his finances were a mess. The Clemenses sold their house in Connecticut and moved to Europe, where the living was cheaper.
In 1894, the publishing company that Twain had founded with his nephew Charles L. Webster finally went belly-up after ten difficult years of constant financial strain. Twain was nearly bankrupt. "The calamity that comes is never the one we had prepared ourselves for," he wrote to his wife. A close friend, the businessman Henry Huttleston Rogers, stepped in and took over his finances. Under the plan that Rogers created, Twain was not legally obligated to pay back his creditors. He decided to do so anyway, and took up a two-year lecture tour to pay off his debt.

In 1896, while the author was still away on tour, Twain's 24-year-old daughter Susy Clemens died of meningitis. Twain had been especially close to Susy, an outspoken girl who often critiqued his lectures and work. He was utterly devastated by her death, which marked the end of his most successful period as a writer. Though he continued to lecture, write, and travel for most of his life, he never again had the kind of success he enjoyed with his travelogues and Huckleberry Finn. Then in 1904, things got even worse when Twain's beloved wife Livy died after a two-year illness. "I cannot reproduce Livy's face in my mind's eye," he wrote in his diary on 1 July 1904, just a few weeks after her death. "I was never in my life able to reproduce a face. It is a curious infirmity—and now at last I realize it is a calamity."

He had two children left now, Clara and Jean; the latter suffered from severe epilepsy. Following his wife's death, Twain moved to New York City and began working on his memoirs. In 1905 he celebrated his 70th birthday with a huge party thrown for him in the city, attended by friends and dignitaries. He also visited the White House that year as a guest of President Theodore Roosevelt. He was one of the most famous men in America, and his public appearances still attracted a great deal of interest. Those who knew him best, however, knew that he was terribly lonely. Twain missed his wife and daughters, and mourned the fact that he had no grandchildren.

Then on Christmas Eve 1909, his 19-year-old daughter Jean drowned after suffering a seizure in her bathtub. Twain grieved again, but not as intensely this time. Jean had long been sick and he felt that her death relieved her suffering. In this, as in all his hard times, he looked ahead to the future. "Shall I ever be cheerful again, happy again? Yes. And soon," he wrote in his diary on 27 December 1909. "For I know my temperament. And I know that the temperament is master of the man, and that he is its fettered and helpless slave and must in all things do as it commands. A man’s temperament is born in him, and no circumstances can ever change it."
"I came in with Halley’s Comet in 1835," Twain said in 1909. "It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don’t go out with Halley’s Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.'"

On 9 April 1910, Halley’s Comet made its closest approach to Earth. And the very next day, Mark Twain died of heart failure at the age of 74. He had outlived his wife, all of his siblings, and all but one of his children. "The people of Redding, Bethel, and Danbury listened when they were told that the doctors said Mark Twain was dying of angina pectoris," his obituary read. "But they say among themselves that he died of a broken heart."

"For all the difficulties in his life, however, Twain steadfastly refused to take himself too seriously, or to wallow in self-pity. And he always held on to that American ideal, the one that says you should be yourself and nobody else. "I have achieved my seventy years in the usual way: by sticking strictly to a scheme of life which would kill anybody else," he had told the crowd that gathered to celebrate his 70th birthday. "It sounds like an exaggeration, but that is really the common rule for attaining to old age. ... I will offer here, as a sound maxim, this: That we can’t reach old age by another man’s road." What a road it was, huh?