In many respects the time between 1865 and 1910 was Mark Twain’s. Mark Twain was “born” in 1863, when Samuel L. Clemens first used that pseudonym as a byline on newspaper articles in Nevada. However, it was in 1865 that his story about the jumping frog of Calaveras County, which was published in New York and reprinted in papers around the United States, started to make him celebrated too. *The Innocents Abroad*, his first book, appeared four years later and immediately became one of the period’s best sellers. By the time his novels about Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn came out, his lecture tours and other live performances had made the “Mark Twain” persona as famous as any of his fictional characters. One of the earliest and most enduring American idols, Twain was also among the first to achieve international fame, as he proved in 1895-1896 during his successful around-the-world lecture tour. Compared to our modern Internet age, mass communication in Twain’s time looks primitive; however, Mark Twain was always a media favorite. It has been suggested that, after Queen Victoria, he was the most frequently photographed person of the nineteenth century. Often when he made a joke—as when he told a reporter in London in 1897 that “the report of my death was an exaggeration”1—hundreds of newspapers picked it up from the wire services, and millions of readers all over the world laughed. When he really died in 1910, reports of that event made headlines on several continents.

In his first novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), co-authored with Charles Dudley Warner, Twain gave his era the name by which historians still refer to it. Although he missed the Civil War, probably his generation’s most decisive experience, his life otherwise seems dramatically to embody his cultural time and place. Born into poverty in the middle of the country, he went west to look for silver in frontier mining camps and later traveled east to find status in the man-
sions of old cities. He loved the latest inventions, such as the telephone and the typewriter. He could not resist speculative investments. He made a fortune, lost it, made another. However, while he plunged exuberantly into his contemporary world, one of the many paradoxes that define his career is that his most successful books carry American readers away from the Gilded Age to other times and places.

**Travel Writing**

During his life, Twain was more successful as a travel writer than as a novelist, and the least successful of his travel books, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), was the one that spent the most time telling about “today.” Travel is a central motif in his fiction too, whether Huck and Jim’s journey down the Mississippi or Hank Morgan’s journey through time. In two of his travel books, Twain takes American readers to modern Europe (*The Innocents Abroad*, 1869, and *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880). In novels he takes them to Tudor England (*The Prince and the Pauper*, 1881), to Arthurian England (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 1889) and to medieval France (*Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, 1896). His life and work seem centered on the river that flows through the middle of America, but apart from the second half of *Life on the Mississippi*, his stories about the river—from “Old Times on the Mississippi” (1875) to *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1894)—also travel through time, back to an antebellum America that was gone before “Mark Twain” came into existence. With few exceptions, notably *Joan of Arc*, contemporary readers were glad to go with Twain’s imagination wherever it went. This prompts a question: How did his tales meet the needs of the times he and his American audience shared?

Mark Twain’s America was itself on the move. The country into which Sam Clemens was born in 1835 contained fewer than thirteen million people living in twenty-four states, and his native Missouri was then the only state west of the Mississippi. When he died nearly seventy-five years later, more than ninety-two million people lived in