There is little doubt that in the popular mind, as, to some extent, in the critical tradition too, the humorist in Mark Twain — the witty and untiring creator of amusing character and scene, the inexhaustible purveyor of quotable quotes — has irretrievably overshadowed the serious thinker whose unfortunate destiny it was to end up in the isolation and loneliness of almost cynical pessimism. Remembering him as a writer of children’s books or, at best, as the author who challengingly took up the theme of negro slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*, his best-known book, the common reader tends to ignore the important fact that Twain was a serious thinker who grew up with his century and, at least in the domain of religious faith where issues of the ultimate significance of human life are involved, he came to experience the crisis which in the beginning of our century led to the rejection of humanism as a viable philosophy of life. The present study is based on the conviction that Twain, the serious critic of thought and society deserves as much attention as the amused commentator on life’s patent absurdities.
Since as a reformer and thinker Twain owed a great deal to his milieu and as his serious thought must be provided with, and did have, a historical context, a whole chapter has been devoted to a discussion of his social and historical background. Some consideration of Twain's artistic method, specially his assumption of masks and adoption of point of view, was necessitated by the fact that ideas and intellectual formulations have been -- as always in significant art -- transmuted into art-forms in Twain's writings. The remaining chapters -- the main bulk of the thesis -- present an analytical discussion of Twain's thought in various fields. I have departed from the main critical tradition in giving salience to Twain's non-fictional works and in shifting the focus away from Huckleberry Finn, an acknowledged masterpiece, to lesser-known and little-read works the study of which has helped me in discovering more coherent patterns of thought in Twain than ordinarily perceived. Originality may be claimed for this as also for the recognition -- stated above -- that Twain's growing isolation and cynicism as well as his rejection of Christianity and the popular versions of humanism relate him centrally to the main intellectual tradition of the late nineteenth century.
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