



Mark Twain Tonight **Teaching resource #1**

In *Mark Twain Tonight*, we hear an oft-quoted section from Twain's *Autobiography*:

"In my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it . . . local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing, and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind—and then the texts were read aloud to us to make the matter sure."

This passage, which Twain wrote thirty years after the end of slavery in the United States, is part of a longer discussion about slavery in his autobiography.

- *What was Twain trying to communicate with this framing of his childhood experience?*
- *What does it tell us about the sources of authority he looked to as a child?*
- *Do you buy his argument?*

The real Hannibal was a bit more complex than Twain's later musings, however. Far from being of one mind on the subject, the townspeople were riven with conflict over the issue of slavery. Twain's own family enslaved people and rented enslaved people at various times. His father served on a jury that convicted local abolitionists and sent them to prison, escaping a gallows the townspeople had constructed for them outside. His mother attended a church in town that had been founded by an abolitionist—who had then been run out of town—but continued to rent enslaved people, including children, after her husband's death. During his childhood, though, his home state hardened its pro-slavery positions. The year Twain turned 11, Missouri made it illegal to educate enslaved people and banned free black people from entering the state.

For Twain, slavery was not merely a social or political issue to be debated. It was something his family, including people he loved, had actively participated in. To that end, it is worth reading a bit further in his autobiography, including the sentences that follow immediately after the passage quoted in *Mark Twain Tonight*.

"If the slaves themselves had an aversion to slavery they were wise and said nothing. In Hannibal we seldom saw a slave misused; on the farm, never."

- *Given that this was written decades after the end of slavery in the US, what do we make of Twain's framing of enslaved opinions on the matter?*
- *When Twain says he seldom saw a slave "misused," what does he imply he was seeing instead?*
- *Why might Twain still insist that he never saw the people his family enslaved "misused?"*