

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 5: Mark Twain (1835-1910)

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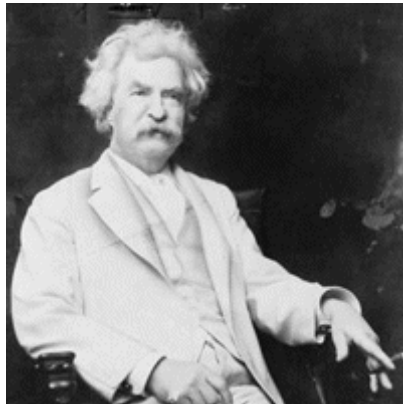
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"Criticism is a queer thing. If I print 'She was stark naked' - & then proceeded to describe her person in detail, what critic would not howl? - who would venture to leave the book on a parlor table, - but the artist does this & all ages gather around & look & talk & point. I can't say, 'They cut his head off, or stabbed him, ' & describe the blood & the agony in his face."

Mark Twain - *Notebook #18*, Feb. - Sept. 1879

"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. if you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that.

There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." - Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, 1935

One of the great writers of American literature, Twain is admired for capturing typical American experiences in a language which is realistic and charming. Howells was one of Twain's early admirers, and he wrote the following on Twain's style: "So far as I know, Mr. Clemens is the first writer to use in extended writing the fashion we all use in thinking, and to set down the thing that comes into his mind without fear or favor of the thing that went before or the thing that may be about to follow." Most of the critical attention has been given to *Huck Finn*, Clemens' greatest achievement. This book concerns itself with a number of themes, among them the quest for freedom, the transition from adolescence into adulthood, alienation and initiation, criticism of pre-Civil War southern life. A remarkable achievement of the book is Clemens' use of American humor, folklore, slang, and dialects. There is critical debate, however, concerning the ending of the book - some call it weak and ineffective, others feel it is appropriate and effective.

Primary Works

The Innocents Abroad, 1869; *Roughing It*, 1872; *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, 1876; *A Tramp Abroad*, 1880; *The Prince and the Pauper*, 1882; *Life on the Mississippi*, 1883; *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1885; *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, 1889; *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson and the Comedy of Those Extraordinary Twins*, 1894; *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, 1896; *Following the Equator*, 1897; *Autobiography*, 1924; *The Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts*, 1969; *What is Man? and Other Philosophical Writings*, 1973.

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| [Top](#) | Mark Twain (1835-1910): A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Heather Erwin

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens on November 30, 1835, the fifth child of John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens. Shortly before Samuel's birth, the Clemenses had relocated from Tennessee to the unimpressive village of Florida, Missouri. The Clemenses would remain in Florida until 1839, when they once again relocated. Although the family's move to Hannibal, Missouri was prompted by economic instability, the repercussions would have a profound effect both on young Samuel and his future literary career. It was there that he sought the unbridled freedom and adventure so admired by himself and his peers, and the nearby Mississippi provided the boys with a wealth of opportunities (Bellamy 4).

Despite this seemingly idyllic upbringing, Clemens was not immune to the financial difficulties caused by his father's untimely death in 1847. That same year he began his career in journalism as an apprentice, and in 1850 became employed by his brother Orion, a struggling entrepreneur who owned the *Western Union* newspaper in Hannibal (Miller 5). It was also during this time that the budding journalist produced his first humorous story, "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter," which was published in the *Carpet Bag* in 1852 (12: 74). The following year Clemens sought emancipation, as he discarded his job at the *Western Union* in favor of sporadic employment in various cities along the East Coast. Although Clemens's quest for independence did not abate over the next two years, he found that his wanderings did not produce the financial rewards he had anticipated. Following this revelation, he returned to his former employment with Orion, who had recently acquired a newspaper in Keokuk, Iowa (Miller 6). However, Clemens would not remain on land for long, due to his apprenticeship as a steamboat pilot. Clemens's roaming tendencies were indulged in this new career, but the advent of the Civil War ended riverboat travel on the Mississippi (12: 74). After a brief stint as a Confederate soldier, the unemployed Clemens joined Orion in an excursion to Nevada. Although the young journalist did not much success as a prospector, he did gain employment at a local newspaper, the *Virginia City Territorial Enterprise*, in 1862 (Miller 8). Clemens had displayed a unique gift for writing material which was both witty and derisive. His brand of Far-West humor complemented the rambunctious nature of many of Virginia City's residents.

In 1863 Clemens assumed the pseudonym Mark Twain, a Mississippi phrase which meant two fathoms deep. The following year Twain left Nevada a good deal faster than he had entered it, which may be attributed to an invitation to a duel by an opposing journalist. It seems that Twain had published an inflammatory article concerning the journalist, and while the duel never took place, Twain found himself displaced (12: 76). Nevertheless, he was able to obtain

employment as a journalist in San Francisco, and it was there that his contributions to various newspapers and magazines increased dramatically. Twain's literary success culminated in 1865, when the *New York Saturday Press* published, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Twain had revealed his propensity for dry humor, and readers consumed it greedily.

Twain continued to travel frequently, and these excursions included a visit to the Sandwich Islands in 1866, followed by a lecture circuit throughout California and Nevada. In 1867, Twain took his lectures across the Atlantic Ocean, and his visits to France, Italy, and the Holy Land would provide him with ample opportunity to satirize European culture. His visits were translated into travel letters, which would contribute to the format of *The Innocents Abroad* in 1869. Following his return to the United States, Twain married Olivia Langdon, and shortly thereafter he produced *Roughing It*. The 1872 publication of this novel was not as eagerly received by the public as the earlier *The Innocents Abroad*, but Twain had established himself as a literary force to be reckoned with (12: 79). If nothing else, he had paved the way for the influx of books to follow.

The newlyweds moved to Hartford, Connecticut; a town which boasted an impressive pedigree of writers. Twain was prolific during the years extending from 1869 until 1889. It was during this period of time that he produced such classics as, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *A Tramp Abroad*, *Life on the Mississippi*, and the pivotal *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which was published in 1884. Despite Twain's continuing success as a writer, his financial affairs were not as stable. His experience with bankruptcy forced him to conduct lectures as a means of income, and this reversal in fortune seemed to affect his personal philosophy as well. He repeatedly emphasized the deterministic nature of man, which necessarily conflicted with the idea of choice in moral situations. In a letter sent to a friend, Twain referred to this limitations, and this makes it my duty...to be fair to it" (Bellamy 306). The book that exemplifies this brooding uncertainty evident during Twain's later years is, *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which was published in 1894.

Twain died in 1910 at Stormfield, the family's home located near Redding, Connecticut. His autobiography was published posthumously, and he left behind several unpublished works as well. While Twain's material was characteristic of the period in which he wrote, it becomes necessary to examine the individual themes in order to gain a sense of his motives and convictions. As a Realist, he was strongly attracted to the mundane elements of American life. His portrayal of the commonplace was both vivid and detailed, and it is often the characters, as opposed to the plot, which capture the reader. Much of his material was based on personal experiences, both as a child growing up in the South, and later as a seasoned traveler. Critics of Twain often refer to an underlying purpose lurking beneath the cloak of satire, but many readers are content to accept the improbable plots and complex interrelationships at mere face value. Nevertheless, Twain did address certain components of American culture in a manner which undermined these sacred institutions. In so doing, he assumed the role of social critic. Twain may have realized that in order to make his brand of brazen independence and pessimistic outlook palatable, he must assume a position of familiarity and humor. Twain's dedication to his personal beliefs was given precedence over established social norms, as evidenced by his position on slavery following the Civil War. According to William Dean Howell, who was a contemporary of Twain, "No man more perfectly sensed and more entirely abhorred slavery" (Foner 198). Mark Twain's commitment to his convictions is exemplary, and modern readers will discover that his works remain relevant and insightful. For that we are indebted to him.

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Study Questions

1. Many readers of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* consider the ending flawed—Hemingway, for example, said that Twain "cheated"—while others have praised it. Write an essay in which you either defend or criticize the novel's ending, focusing on Huck's treatment of Jim.
2. The theme of pretending is one that unifies *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, although the word pretending takes on several different meanings and levels of significance as the novel unfolds. Describe three of these, and illustrate each by analyzing a specific character, scene, or incident from the novel.
3. If one were constructing a list of "classic" American books, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would almost certainly

appear on the list. Explore in detail why this is the case. In what ways does Clemens take American experience as his subject? What are the elements of Clemens's language and form that readers might consider particularly "American"?

4. Explore the relationship between the symbolism of the river and Clemens's narrative design or structure in the novel.
5. Analyze Clemens's portrait of Jim in light of your reading of Frederick Douglass. Is *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a slave narrative, or does Clemens use the discussion of slavery as a pretext to write about some other issue?
6. Consider Huckleberry Finn as an abused child. Explore the novel as a reflection of late-nineteenth-century attitudes toward child rearing.
7. Analyze Clemens's use of humor, focusing on "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" or "Letter IV" and one incident from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
8. Analyze Huck Finn's language in the opening passages of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Identify specific features of his syntax and discuss how Clemens uses Huck's style as a way to construct his character.
9. Analyze evidence of dialect in Huck Finn's speech and compare it with dialects spoken by several other characters in the novel. Compare Clemens's depiction of dialect in general with that of Bret Harte, Joel Chandler Harris, or Sarah Orne Jewett.
10. Identify and discuss features of the picaresque novel that Clemens uses in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
11. Analyze Clemens's portrait of Tom Sawyer. Is he model, rival, alter ego, or mirror for Huck? Does he develop in the novel?
12. Analyze Clemens's portrait of Jim. Does he have an independent existence in the novel or does he merely reflect the way others see him? Compare his portrait with portraits of black characters in the Joel Chandler Harris tales or in Charles Chesnutt's *The Goophered Grapevine*.
13. Study the female characters in the novel. What stereotypes does Clemens use? Do any of his female characters transcend stereotype?
14. Death is a frequent motif in the novel. Comment on its various thematic and symbolic uses, and analyze in particular Huck's symbolic death in Chapter VI.
15. Write an essay on elements of theater in Clemens's work commenting on the relationship between the art and act of oral storytelling and the narrative form Clemens devises for written stories.
16. What is the role of Tom Sawyer in *Huckleberry Finn*? If you have read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, what is the difference between Tom in the earlier book and in *Huckleberry Finn*?
17. What aspects of *Huckleberry Finn* are as vital today as they were one hundred years ago? What in the book helps you understand an earlier era in American history, different from our own?

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