

Mark Twain

Sketches from Life

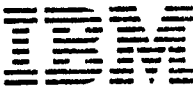


MICHAEL MAULDIN *in An Evening With Mark Twain*

*Study Guide
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A Biographical Sketch

Almost everyone knows that Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens) was born and died when Haley's Comet came in 1835 and 1910. His death usually is the date given as the beginning of twentieth century literature, but his material is really timeless.

He grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, a red-head whose father died when Clemens was eleven years old. Lincoln once said that a print shop was a "poor boy's college," and certainly it was for Clemens (as for Ben Franklin). He was first published when he was just seventeen years old. Although he had little formal schooling (just until his father died), he read voraciously all of his life. He worked on newspapers throughout the Eastern part of the United States.

In his early twenties he was a Mississippi riverboat pilot. When the Civil War began, he enlisted and served for two weeks. Then he went to Nevada with his brother Orion (who had campaigned for Lincoln and was appointed secretary of the Nevada Territory). He did a bit of silver prospecting and some gold digging, too, later in California.

He first signed his dispatches "Josh" but adopted Mark Twain in 1862. People in the East loved to hear Western tales, and "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" propelled Twain into fame when it was published in 1865. He knew Bret Harte and Artemus Ward in California.

Twain wrote sketches from Hawaii, Europe, and the Holy Land. (These travelogues were popular — like Melville's.) **The Innocents Abroad** came out in 1869.

When Twain was thirty-five, he married Olivia Langdon, who later inherited a quarter of a million dollars. He was set up as editor of **The Buffalo Express** in New York, but moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he built a mansion of some twenty rooms and employed six servants regularly. The house cost \$120,000. Here he wrote **The Adventures of Tom Sawyer** (1876), **A Tramp Abroad** (1880), **The Prince and the Pauper** (1881), **Life on the Mississippi** (1883), **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** (1885), and **A Connecticut Yankee in King**



Arthur's Court (1889) (from whence came the phrase "New Deal" used by FDR's speechwriters), and **The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson** (1894).

He was an international celebrity who was inclined to spend his money recklessly. He invested heavily in his own printing company and in a brother-in-law's typesetting machine. Both ventures plunged him into near-bankruptcy. Henry Rogers, the Standard Oil magnate, helped Twain during his financial crisis. From 1893-98, Twain lectured and continued writing until he had paid off all his debts.

His life was saddened by the deaths of his son, who died in infancy, two of his daughters, and his wife, who died in Italy where they had gone in the hope her health would improve. One daughter survived him, Clara Clemens Gabrilowitsch, married to a famous pianist-conductor.

Twain received several honorary degrees, including some from foreign institutions. Many famous people counted themselves his friends, including Helen Keller. In fact, it was Mark Twain who introduced Winston Churchill to America during Churchill's first visit to this country.

Twain died April 21, 1910, after suffering an angina attack.

Some Questions For Classroom Discussion

1. Give as many examples as you can of humor gained from these methods:
 - a. the surprise twist
 - b. self-denigration
 - c. exaggeration, the "tall tale"
 - d. "sick" humor or "black" humor
 - e. slapstick
 - f. visual humor
 - g. topping a joke with another, etc.
 - h. saying the opposite of what's expected
2. What truths do you find in Clemens's humor? Consider the remark about whiskey in the opening. Didn't nomadic tribes have to stay put long enough for grain to be harvested and fermented? Consider other examples: insurance companies, Teddy Roosevelt lying, firearms, travelling, experience, religion, etc.
3. What are some of the professions and institutions Clemens ridicules?
4. What is the one instance in the script where he is totally serious? What does this tell you about him?
5. As he grew older, Clemens became somewhat bitter in his attitudes. Do you see any evidence of this?
6. What are some of the true autobiographical elements in the selections?
7. When he chose his pseudonym of Mark Twain (two fathoms, safe water), why do you suppose he used the term "nom de guerre" instead of "nom de plume"?
8. In the midst of the jokes, are there any wise guidelines or bits of advice for young people?
9. What beliefs or ideals does Clemens espouse?
10. One definition of a classic is that it appeals to people in different times. Do you notice any attitudes more like our contemporary ones than like those in Clemens' time?

Suggestions For Writing and Research

1. Give synonyms for these underlined words:
 - a. It's not always easy to be eccentric, you know.
 - b. There is an old familiar maxim that . . .
 - c. . . and cuts his throat if his theology isn't straight.
 - d. . . worn with travail . . .
 - e. . . with humble and contrite spirits.
 - f. . . spectral little wreaths of white mist . . .
 - g. A pilot on the river . . . was the only unfettered . . . human being . . .
 - h. . . a joyful riot of music.
2. Explicate (explain) the "War Prayer."
3. Paraphrase (put into your own words) the "War Prayer."
4. Look up reviews of Hal Holbrook's interpretation of *Mark Twain Tonight*, 3/25, 29 *New York Times*. Compare these with your opinion of Michael Mauldin's presentation.
5. If you have read both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: which part of the latter is most like *Tom Sawyer*? Why do you think *Huck Finn* is called an adult's book and *Tom Sawyer* a boy's?
6. If you have read *Huck Finn*, tell how Clemens ridicules greed, gullibility, chicanery, and superstition in that novel.

7. If you have read "*The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*," tell how Clemens achieves his humor in that story.
8. Discuss the imagery (appeals to the senses) in the selection on the profession of riverboat pilot.
9. If you have read (or seen on TV) "*The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*," explain what Clemens is ridiculing here.
10. Write about Clemens's use of satire (ridiculing something in hopes of reforming it) or irony (saying the opposite of what one really means) or understatement or paradox (apparent contradictions).

A Critical Evaluation

There is no doubt that Clemens is our greatest humorist. He was popular during his own lifetime, but he was never completely happy because he aspired to be a philosopher and a literary figure like the Boston group of Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes.

His best literary friend and booster was the realist editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells. Howells interpreted Clemens for the general public — telling them that, for instance, *The Innocents Abroad* defined us as Americans, and that Clemens used his humor to satirize the accumulation of wealth, religion, politics, provincialism, war, and especially hypocrisy.

Since Darwin, Marx, and Freud were espousing their causes during Clemens's lifetime, their influence on his thinking cannot be diminished. This and his own reading and experience led him to become an example of twentieth century disillusionment adopted later by such writers as Hemingway and Fitzgerald.

Sources

References used in compiling this study guide include:

Major Writers of America, ed. Perry Miller, 1966.

The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Bradley, Beatty, Long, 1967.

The U.S. in Literature, ed. Miller, Hayden, O'Neal, 1973.

A Literary History of the U.S., ed. Spiller, Thorp, Johnson, Canby, Ludwig, 1968.

Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Smith, Twentieth Century Views, 1963.

Clemens's writing speaks to all peoples, not just to Americans. The editions of *Huck Finn* printed abroad have him in native costume on regional rivers.

Hemingway, Faulkner, and Eliot each praised Clemens's use of "American colloquialisms" and dialect, his dialogue's naturalness. Mencken called him "the true father of our national literature."

One of the best books about Clemens is Justin Kaplan's *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*. Kaplan writes about the constant conflict between the sensitive, perceptive part of the man versus the ribald humorist in him. The book is well researched and full of anecdotes.



A Special Thanks

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