

A Writer's Inspiration



January 14 and 15
on PBS

“Whatever you have **lived**, you can write—& by hard work & a genuine apprenticeship, you can learn to **write well**; but what you have not lived you cannot write, you can only pretend to write it...”

—Mark Twain

Samuel Clemens, who came to be known as Mark Twain, was a natural-born storyteller who was the first writer to recognize that art could be created out of the American language. Through his use of carefully chosen words and his sharply honed humor, he dealt head-on with controversial issues that others were afraid to confront.



The Mark Twain House, Hartford

Mark Twain vacationing in Bermuda with Woodrow Wilson and other friends. 1908

Part A. In the film *Mark Twain*, Samuel Clemens is described as “an enormous noticer.” Much of what he noticed as a boy growing up in the small Mississippi River town of Hannibal, Missouri, found its way into his writings in books such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He was always noticing whether people had their hands in their pockets or not, how they dressed, walked, spoke or presented themselves to others. Consider this passage from the first chapter of *Tom Sawyer*, for example:

A stranger was before him—a boy a shade larger than himself... This boy was well-dressed, too—well-dressed on a week-day. This was simply astounding. His cap was a dainty thing, his close-buttoned blue cloth roundabout was new and natty, and so were his pantaloons. He had shoes on—and it was only Friday. He even wore a necktie, a bright bit of ribbon. He had a citified air about him that ate into Tom’s vitals.

★ Let’s find out how much you notice on a typical day. Today, pay special attention to all the details, large and small, of your route home from school, of places, buildings and people. Then make a list of what you saw. Try to recall as much detail as you can.

All good humorists are “enormous noticers.” Jerry Seinfeld, Jay Leno and David Letterman take current events and personalities and, through keen observation and wit, help us discover truths about ourselves and our society. Like Twain, they find the inspiration for humor in the little details of real-life situations that aren’t necessarily intended to be funny.

First, on a separate sheet of paper, write a short passage that changes some of the details of what you noticed on your route home into something humorous. Now, think about a monologue or episode of your favorite comedy show that relies on the “noticing” of details and the sparing use of facts. Describe it to your classmates.

Part B. Under the pen name of Mark Twain, Clemens found the inspiration for humor in the everyday and in real-life situations that weren’t intended to be humorous:

When he was a young reporter in Virginia City, Nevada, Twain encountered a stranger at a billiard parlor who proposed a game for half a dollar—even offered to play left-handed after watching Twain warm up. “I determined,” Twain wrote later, “to teach him a lesson.” But the stranger won the first shot, cleared the table, took Twain’s money, “and all I got was the opportunity to chalk my cue.”

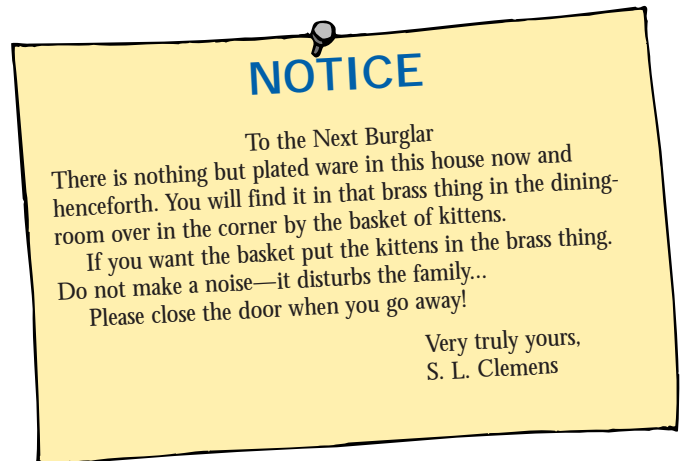
“If you can play like that with your left hand,” Twain said, “I’d like to see you play with your right.”

“I can’t,” the stranger answered. “I’m left-handed.”

“**Humor must not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.**”

—Mark Twain

One time, after burglars had broken into his house and stolen the silverware, Clemens scribbled out—and illustrated—the following notice and tacked it to the front door:



NOTICE

To the Next Burglar

There is nothing but plated ware in this house now and henceforth. You will find it in that brass thing in the dining-room over in the corner by the basket of kittens.

If you want the basket put the kittens in the brass thing. Do not make a noise—it disturbs the family... Please close the door when you go away!

Very truly yours,
S. L. Clemens

★ Find some current examples of articles or columns in newspapers or magazines or from the Internet that contain humor that appeals to you. Bring your examples to class and explain what it is about them that appeals to you—the topic, the writing style, the use of language, etc. Analyze the type of humor you find. Here are some types to consider:

Farce—an exaggerated, broadly improbable scenario using characters for humorous effect

Parody—an imitation of someone else’s style for comic effect

Satire—the use of ridicule or sarcasm to expose or attack vices or follies

Irony—a play on words in which the intended meaning of the words used is directly opposite their usual sense (i.e., calling a stupid plan “clever”)

Then choose a passage from Twain’s writing and analyze the type of humor he used. How different or similar are the types of humor?



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activity 2

A Report from 21st-Century America



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“The old saw says, ‘Let a sleeping dog lie.’ Right. Still, when there is much at stake it is better to get a newspaper to do it.”

—Mark Twain

At fourteen, Samuel Clemens got a job at the *Hannibal Journal* newspaper working for his older brother Orion. The experience lured young Sam into the world of words and ideas. He even began to write humorous sketches to make the paper more lively:

Hannibal Journal, May 6, 1853
TERRIBLE ACCIDENT!

500 MEN KILLED AND MISSING!!

We had set the above head up, expecting (of course) to use it, but as the accident hasn't happened, yet, we'll say — To be Continued.



The Mark Twain House, Hartford

Mark Twain c. 1884

Clemens loved living the life of a newspaper reporter, a life populated by “a bunch of talented, wild men improvising a whole new newspaper art form with tall tales and lies and hoaxes and great writing,” according to Twain biographer Ron Powers. Clemens himself wrote: “To find a petrified man...or cave an imaginary mine, or discover some dead Indians in a Gold

Hill tunnel...were feats and calamities that we never hesitated about devising when the public needed matters of thrilling interest for breakfast.”

Part A. Mark Twain’s fame as a humorist—and a master of vernacular dialogue or common, everyday language—began one day during the winter of 1864-65 when he listened to a story about a gambler who would bet on anything, even his jumping frog. Twain embellished it into a much more elaborate and funny story. Published in November 1865, it was quickly reprinted in papers around the country and later republished in Twain’s first book as “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”

Later, Twain became an overseas correspondent, writing from Hawaii, the Middle East, and Europe. Twain poked fun at everything. In Paris he reported that he went to see young women dance the can-can: “I placed my hands before my face for very shame,” he told his readers, “but I looked through my fingers.” The book about his travels, *The Innocents Abroad*, sold 100,000 copies by 1871; only *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had sold more in the same two years’ time. Twain’s publisher began promoting him as “The People’s Author.”

★ Choose an experience you have had and write your own “report from 21st-century America” on the back of this sheet. Exaggerate and embellish your story using the kind of attention

to detail and comic twists Twain was noted for—but be sure you make it “believable” enough that your reader *might* think it is true.

Now write a second version as if you had posted it on an Internet message board. Share both versions of your story with your classmates and discuss the differences between them. Some people think the Internet offers the same opportunities for exaggeration and falsehood that Twain took advantage of at the *Hannibal Journal*. Decide on your views and debate them with your classmates. Can truth be found reliably on the Internet? What about “reality” TV?

Part B. Twain often included a shortened version of the jumping frog story in his lectures and readings, his deadpan delivery making it even funnier. He understood that an audience was much more likely to laugh at his stories if he gave no indication that he understood the underlying meaning or humor. Twain was also the master of the pause. One night he walked out on stage, stared at the audience and said nothing. As the silence continued, tension built until someone in the crowd snickered. Soon the whole audience was convulsed in laughter and America’s favorite storyteller knew the audience was his.

MARK TWAIN

(Honolulu Correspondent of the Sacramento Union)

Will Deliver A Lecture on the Sandwich Islands. . .

A SPLENDID ORCHESTRA

is in town, but has not been engaged;

also

A DEN OF FEROCIOUS WILD BEASTS

will be on exhibition in the next block.

MAGNIFICENT FIREWORKS

were in contemplation for this occasion, but the idea has been abandoned.

A GRAND TORCHLIGHT PROCESSION

may be expected; in fact, the public are privileged to expect whatever they please.

Doors open at 7 o'clock

The Trouble to begin at 8



★ What similar techniques do today’s stand-up comics such as Jon Stewart, Chris Rock or Margaret Cho use? Choose a favorite comedian and look at his or her technique. Would their material be as funny if they changed their style?

Now, imagine that you are a writer for *Saturday Night Live*, where sketches are often based on real events or personalities in the news. On the back of this sheet, describe your idea for a comedy sketch for next week’s show. Be prepared to “pitch” your idea—explain how the sketch will unfold and convince the other writers (your classmates) that your idea is funny.



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Young Sam Clemens around age 14 as a printer's apprentice.

activity 3 Tall Tales and Dark Sides

“Do not tell fish stories where the people know you; but particularly, don't tell them where they know the fish.”

—Mark Twain

A fish story is a story that exaggerates the truth—the way the fish he caught gets bigger every time the fisherman tells his story about it. What's the best “fish” story that you've ever heard? Share it with your classmates.



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Part B. As well as having two names, Samuel Clemens was a man with two distinct identities—Clemens, the wealthy New Englander who thought nothing of spending \$30,000 a year—a huge amount of money back in the 1880s—on household expenses, and Mark Twain, champion of the downtrodden. Like the nation he would come to embody, Clemens was always reinventing himself, always restless, always full of contradictions. He lived in the barren sage-brush deserts of Nevada but he also loved attending private parties in prosperous cities wearing full evening dress.

★ On February 2, 1863, at the end of a dispatch for the *Territorial Enterprise*, Samuel Clemens first used his new pen name or pseudonym—Mark Twain. It was a term he remembered from his riverboat days—the point at which safe water becomes dangerous water. It was a good description of a man who lived his life on the edge between safety and danger. If you were to take a pen name, what would it be? Explain why you chose that name and what it says about you.

Name: _____

As he became more successful, Clemens found himself increasingly torn between the two identities he inhabited and the two worlds those identities represented. In his later years, having lost nearly everything that meant anything to him, he was forced to go back on the lecture circuit that he detested to make money. He wrote a best seller titled *Following the Equator* that was filled with both biting social criticism and hilarious observations. As he wrote, he questioned his own ability to be funny in the midst of so much personal tragedy and loss. Yet, while he struggled with doubt, his popularity grew as people turned to him for humor to enrich their ordinary lives.

★ Twain had an enormous hunger for success—but he also struggled with constant fears of failure. He once wrote, “Every one is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” Do you agree with Twain's statement? Do you think everyone has a hidden dark side? Why or why not?

Part A. Mark Twain was a master at creating tall tales. He would begin with an ordinary and very believable situation and gradually embellish it until it had grown into something extraordinarily funny. For example, in the film *Mark Twain*, we hear his hilarious story about the camel that ate his overcoat:

In Syria, at the headwaters of the Jordan, a camel took charge of my overcoat while the tents were being pitched, and examined it with a critical eye, all over, with as much interest as if he had an idea of getting one made like it; and then, after he was done figuring on it as an article of apparel, he began to contemplate it as an article of diet.

He put his foot on it, and lifted one of the sleeves out with his teeth, and chewed and chewed at it, gradually taking it in, and all the while opening and closing his eyes in a kind of religious ecstasy, as if he had never tasted anything as good as an overcoat before, in his life.

Then my newspaper correspondence dropped out, and he took a chance in that.... But he was treading on dangerous ground now. He began to come across solid wisdom in those documents that was rather weighty on his stomach; and occasionally he would take a joke that would shake him up till it loosened his teeth; it was getting to be perilous times with him, but he held his grip with good courage...., till at last he began to stumble on statements that not even a camel would swallow with impunity.

He began to gag and gasp, and his eyes to stand out, and his forelegs to spread, and in about a quarter of a minute he fell over as stiff as a carpenter's workbench, and died a death of indescribable agony. I went and pulled the manuscript out of his mouth, and found that the sensitive creature had choked to death on one of the mildest and gentlest statements of fact I ever laid before a trusting public.



★ Twain's daughters put his tall-tale storytelling to the test when they asked him to make up new bedtime stories, incorporating each of the items on the mantelpiece, from one end to the other. Polish your storytelling skills by taking six items found in your own classroom—a shoe, a chair, a window, a button, a pencil, and a paper clip. Weave them into your own tall tale. Remember that a tall tale takes what's real and believable and “grows” it into something funny. How will you “grow” your story? On the back of this paper, plot the development of your story and then write a first draft. Now, work with your team of “comedy writers” to make it even funnier.

“It is not in the least likely that any life has ever been lived which was not a failure, in the secret judgment of the person who lived it.”

—Mark Twain



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activity
4

Powerful Memories, Powerful Words



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"... I have **no race prejudices**, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. Indeed I know it.... All that I care to know is that a **man is a human being**—that is enough for me..."

—Mark Twain

Black people and black voices were part of Sam Clemens' life from the beginning. Every summer as a child Sam spent several weeks on his uncle's farm, where an old slave called "Uncle Daniel" thrilled the youngsters with ghost stories. One of his most lasting childhood memories was not so pleasant, however. It was of a dozen men and women, chained together, waiting to be shipped down-river to the slave market. "They had," he said, "the saddest faces I ever saw."

Part A. While Twain grew more successful and prosperous, he never forgot those childhood memories. He understood slavery to be cruel and unjust—a picture he wanted to portray in his most controversial book, *Huckleberry Finn*.

In the film *Mark Twain*, we meet Mary Ann Cord, the former slave whose story so moved Twain that, changing her name to "Aunt Rachel," he committed her words to paper in *The Atlantic Monthly* in "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It."

"Aunt Rachel"...was our servant, and colored.... She was sixty years old ... a cheerful, hearty soul, and it was no more trouble for her to laugh than for a bird to sing.... [I asked her:] "Aunt Rachel, how is that you have lived sixty years without trouble?"

[She said,] ... "Misto Clemens, is you in 'arnest?... Has I had any trouble? Misto Clemens, I's gwyne to tell you, den I leave it to you. I was bawn down amongst de slaves...."

Born a slave in Virginia, Mary Ann Cord married and had seven children. In 1852, her heart was broken when her family was sold away from her at auction. She lost touch with all of them. Years later, during the Civil War, she was living in North Carolina when Union officers occupied her owner's plantation. A black regiment arrived to guard the house. Cord continued her story:

I was a stooping down by de stove ... an' I'd jist got de pan 'o hot biscuits in my han' an was 'bout to raise up when I see a black face comin' aroun' under mine an de eyes a-lookin' up into mine ... an I jist stopped *right dah* an' never budged! Jist gazed and gazed, ... an de pan begin to tremble, an' all of a sudden I *knowed!*... "Boy!" I says, "if you ain't my Henry, what is you doin' wid dis welt on yo wris' an' dat sky-ar on yo' forehead? De Lord God ob be



Mark Twain and his friend
John Lewis. 1903

Library of Congress

praise, I got my own ag'in!"

Oh, no, Mister Clemens, *I* hain't had no trouble. An' no *joy!*

Hearing the old woman talk reminded Twain not only of the horrors of slavery, but also of the power of vernacular storytelling. Twain channeled that power in *Huckleberry Finn* as he had Jim, the runaway slave, tell his story in his own words.

★ Ask someone whose background and life have been quite different from yours—perhaps a World War II veteran, a person from a different part of the country, or a recent immigrant—to describe a significant experience in his or her life. Tape-record their story and then

put in writing their words exactly as they used them—including inflections, pauses and special phrases. Don't "correct" their language. Now weave this into a short story to share with your classmates.

Part B. *Tom Sawyer* was the best loved of all of Mark Twain's books—"a celebration of small-town boyhood in which the hero solves a murder mystery, manages to eavesdrop on his own funeral, and tricks his friends into painting his fences." *Tom Sawyer* gives us a very "whitewashed" version of childhood. *Huckleberry Finn*—which has been debated, attacked and censored ever since its publication in 1885—was something else entirely.

Written in dialect like the story of Mary Ann Cord, *Huckleberry Finn's* power lies in the characters' own "voices." As the story begins, Huck says:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly....

Set before the Civil War, it is the story of two runaways—a white boy, Tom's friend Huckleberry Finn—who is fleeing civilization—and a black man, Jim, who is running away from slavery. Huck's experiences with Jim make him question everything he has been taught about black people and slavery, about right and wrong, good and evil.

When Huck awakens to hear Jim crying for his lost children, he realizes for the first time that "I guess Jim misses his

family the way white folk'd do their'n." Later, Huck feels he has been wrong to help Jim escape and writes a letter to Jim's owner telling him where his fleeing property can be found. But before mailing it he hesitates, remembering Jim's kindness on their trip on the river and how Jim had said that Huck was the best friend he'd ever had in the world, "and the only one he's got now..."

Huck continues:

...and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right then, I'll go to hell"—and tore it up.

★ Do you think conditions have changed for the better? Conduct a week-long media watch to find TV news stories and newspaper articles about current race relations. Pick one issue, research how relevant it was in Twain's day and, if it was, how it was treated in the media and literature then. Write your findings on a separate sheet of paper.



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