

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: Mark Twain
Grades 6-12

Objectives:

- Students will learn how Mark Twain's books reflected and commented on 19th century society.
- The lesson will be completed with the aid of the PBO database and includes extended learning activities.

*Depending on the instructor's activity preferences, this lesson may take two class periods.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) **For grades 6-8 only:** A copy of Twain's story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" for each student. (Full text available at <http://etext.virginia.edu/railton/projects/price/frog.htm>.)
- 3) **For grades 6-8 only (OPTIONAL):** Enough paper and writing implements OR computers with printing capabilities for each student. *Alternatively, students may complete their activity as a homework assignment.*
- 4) **For grades 9-12 only:** Copies of *Guidelines for Book Report* handout for each student.

Lesson

Introduction

Although Samuel Langhorne Clemens wrote as Mark Twain, he could hardly separate himself from the tales he told. Most of the books and articles he published were drawn from his life. Many of them were nonfiction accounts of his exploits, several were fictional stories based on his experiences, and others—both fact and fantasy—incorporated commentary or criticism on broader events of the time in which he lived.

Born in 1835 in a Missouri frontier town, Clemens grew up around slavery. In fact, he spent much of his youth playing in the slave quarters on his uncle's farm. Clemens was in his 30s when the Civil War took place and slaves were emancipated, and he lived through the racial injustice of the Reconstruction period and early 20th century. Slavery, oppression, and injustice, among other topics of the day, found their way into Mark Twain's books.

Mark Twain's stories

[Teacher's Note: You will locate various book covers for by going to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, selecting the "Search by Keyword" link, and clicking on "Guided Search" at the top of the page. For the first book, type pbw01019 in the first search

box, and then click “Search.” Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

Mark Twain published his first book, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Stories*, in 1867. During the next five years he published a number of books, including collections of sketches he had written for newspapers and magazines and accounts of his travels in the Wild West and abroad. By 1873, Twain had become famous for his writing and traveling lecture series. He used his newfound notoriety to make a political statement, pairing with *Hartford Courant* publisher Charles Dudley Warner to write *The Gilded Age*.

Like most of Twain’s works, *The Gilded Age* was written in a humorous way. However, it made some serious points about the time period in which the book was written. In fact, the late 19th century often is called “The Gilded Age,” thanks to the title of this book.

Full of unscrupulous politicians, *The Gilded Age* is considered the first major novel to satirize corruption in Washington politics. It also deals with the speculation schemes of the post Civil War, counting among its main characters a group of “blindly optimistic speculators caught up in the frenzy of romance, murder, and surefire deals gone wrong.”

Let’s look at the cover for this edition, which was published in 1874. *What does it tell you about the story and the time period in which it was written?* (Allow students to answer before discussing the cover.) The name of the book is encircled in an ornate diamond ring. This symbolizes the obsession with riches that characterized the day, in Twain’s eyes.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. Type pba02270 in the first search box and click “Search.” Click on the thumbnail.]

Three years later, Twain published one of the books for which he is best known. On the surface *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* details the escapades of two boys from frontier Missouri, Tom Sawyer and his friend Huckleberry Finn, who were loosely based on lads Twain knew as a child. This also was a humorous essay, but like *The Gilded Age*, it uses satire to comment on society. He subtly touches on the issues of slavery, racism, and the fear of outsiders, but he does not blatantly attack these controversial subjects. He reserved such scathing criticism for the sequel.

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In 1885, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follows a teenaged Huck’s adventures with an escaped slave named Jim. This humorous book also has a serious message, this one much less subtle than in *Tom Sawyer*. Although written after the Civil War, it deals with the cruelty and injustice of slavery prior to the war. Twain intended the book to illustrate the failure of Reconstruction in the post-Civil War south. Because of this dark theme, the book frequently has been banned or censored.

[Click on “Guided Search” at the top of the page. Type pbw00978 in the first search box and click “Search.” Click on the thumbnail.]

The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson, published in 1884, also comments on the failure of Reconstruction, although it too is set in the years before the Civil War. However, critics have pointed out that whereas *Huckleberry Finn* offers an idyllic picture of what could have been had society behaved differently, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* suggests that the Reconstruction mess could not have been avoided. The story features three intertwining plot lines, which center around the main point that a white-looking slave woman switched her slave baby with a free child.

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Around the same time, Twain wrote a book called *The Prince and the Pauper*. First published in 1881, this book was about a prince and a poor child who look so much alike, they decide to switch places as a joke. Then when they want to switch back, no one believes they are who they say they are. The humorous events that follow teach the poor boy that life in the royal court is not as great as he expected, while the young prince learns what it is like to survive in the lower depths of 16th century England. Twain uses the story to attack social hypocrisy and injustice.

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Another humorous story set in England was *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, published in 1889. It is about a man from Twain's time who ends up in England in the year 528 and has many adventures. He also introduces new inventions from his time, such as the typewriter and electricity, into a time when those things were unknown. The British took offense to the story, because they believed it made their history and culture look bad. Part of Twain's aim was to reveal that social injustice has existed for centuries. The story also points out that technology and progress do not always benefit society.

Activities

Activity #1 (Grades 6-8)

As we talk about some of Mark Twain's stories, two things are clear. One is that many of the things he wrote commented on society through fiction. The other is that even his writings that had serious themes were meant to be funny. Now we are going to read one of his humorous essays and find out what people in the 19th century found amusing.

[Distribute copies of “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.”]

I mentioned before that the first book Mark Twain had published was *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Stories*. The main story came from California Gold Rush folklore. Let's read it together. [Have students take turns reading the story.]

[OPTIONAL CREATIVE LEARNING ASSIGNMENT: Have students write their own humorous essay. They may start the essay in class and finish it as homework. Students then should be given the opportunity to read their stories aloud to the class in the next class session.]

Activity #2 (Grades 9-12)

[Distribute book report handout.]

For this activity, students will select Mark Twain books that have not been discussed in class and write a book report on their selections.

Consult the bibliography on PBO's Mark Twain gallery at <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/gallery/twain.html#bib> for suggestions. Hyperlinked titles are available full-text online. Students also may check books out of the school or local public library.

Students should be given one week to read their books and write their reports. The instructor may choose to set aside a class period for students to discuss what they reported.

For additional teaching resources on Mark Twain, see:

Huck Finn Teacher's Guide

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/essay.html>

Mark Twain and American Humor

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?ID=327

Mark Twain @ Web English teacher

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/twain.html>

SCORE Cyberguide to "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County"

<http://www.sdcoe.k12.ca.us/score/jump/jumptg.html>

Teacher Resources, American Writers

http://www.americanwriters.org/classroom/resources/tr_twain.asp