

A Pen Warmed Up in Hell: Mark Twain's Social Criticism

April 1-May 6

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Most Americans are familiar with Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. While the novel offers a searing indictment of slavery and the antebellum South, many contemporary readers have been put off by the racist language of the text and some of the author's depictions of African Americans, which border on minstrelsy in their "comic" effects. Samuel Clemens (the author who used the pen name Mark Twain) is a complex figure, the son of slave-holding southerners who married into an abolitionist family. His representations of antebellum Southern culture in *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* were composed decades after the Civil War from the safe distance of New York and Connecticut. But evidence shows that he began to understand the inhumanity of slavery already as a boy, and the older he grew, the more acerbic and pointed his criticism became. Ultimately, he connected the injustice of slaveholding to racism more generally (see his journalistic pieces on the treatment of Chinese in San Francisco), colonialism (see his essays on the Belgian Congo), anti-Semitism (see his work from his stay in Vienna), religion (see his satiric essays on piousness), and imperialism (see his damning critique of the war in the Philippines). And he lashed out mercilessly against Jim Crow legislation and the wave of lynching of the late 1890s and early 1900s. He used the phrase "a pen warmed up in hell" to describe his mode of no-holds-barred social justice writing, and it is this writing – essays, articles, and some fiction – that we will explore in class. Much of it may be unfamiliar. Satire can be a dangerous weapon when misunderstood or expressed with comic intent; sometimes it does not land as intended. But Samuel Clemens' authorship provides us with a model for our own time: what is it that creates a conscience in a person raised in an unjust society, and how can that conscience find a convincing voice?

Students should read the assigned texts before the class for which they are assigned. Please come with any questions or observations you have about the texts. I will lecture for the first thirty minutes or so of the first hour, then open the floor for questions and discussion. We will take a break at the hour, then I will lecture for thirty minutes or so in the second hour, and we will have a discussion for the remainder of class. Students following on-line may participate via chat.

Please keep in mind that the issues treated by Clemens in his texts are controversial, even today. In addition, his takes on these issues may be offensive to some, or his satire may come off as offensive. It will be important to listen to each other and respond with respect.

April 1 Satire, Social Criticism, and Samuel Clemens

Introduction to Course

April 8 Racism and Hypocrisy

"The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson"

Available on-line at [Project Gutenberg](http://www.gutenberg.org) (you can download it to a Kindle or download to print); also available on bookshop.org, a collective of independent bookstores (as an alternative to Amazon)

April 15 Anti-Chinese Prejudice and Anti-Semitism

"Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy" (1870, critique of anti-Chinese racism)

“Goldsmith’s Friend Abroad Again” (fictional correspondence between Chinese immigrants)

“Concerning the Jews” (1899)

April 22 Violence in America

From *Huckleberry Finn*, excerpts from Chapters 21-22

“The United States of Lyncherdom”

April 29 Racism and Imperialism

“King Leopold’s Soliloquy”

“To the Person Sitting in Darkness”

Excerpts from *Following the Equator*

May 6 War and Religion

“The War Prayer”

“Comments on the Moro Massacre”

“Battle Hymn of the Republic, brought down to date”

Letters from the Earth, excerpts

Other Works of Interest:

Samuel Clemens was a voluminous writer and correspondent, and The Twain Papers at UC Berkeley has edited and published much of his work. You should visit their [website](#) if you are interested in learning more. If you would like to become a scholar of Clemens’ work, you can even ask to visit the Papers to do research.

Much has been written about Mark Twain! Recently Ron Chernow published a big informative biography (*Mark Twain*) based on numerous sources. Though I find I don’t always agree with him, he is a reliable historian. I’m fond of an old biography by Justin Kaplan called *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain*. There was an edited anthology published in 1972 by respected Twain scholar Frederick Anderson entitled *A Pen Warmed-up in Hell: Mark Twain in Protest* – you can find more of his social criticism there. Shelly Fisher Fishkin’s *Was Huck Black?* (1994) takes a close look at Clemens’ use of voices and idioms in his writing. Percival Everett’s Pulitzer Prize winning novel *James* (2024) is told from the point of view of the enslaved man who is Huck’s companion on the raft and is well worth reading in tandem with *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.