

A Student's Guide to
MARK TWAIN
Mary Ann L. Diorio, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER 1

SAFE WATER

An Introduction to the Life and Works of Mark Twain

What is in a name? For Samuel Clemens, the answer to that question marked a pivotal point in not only his writing career, but also in the annals of American literature. As a young man, Clemens trained and served as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River. Because of the dangerous nature of the river, pilots needed continually to measure the depth of the water in order to ensure that their boats would not go aground.

The river channel was narrow and did not follow a straight path. Using a sounding line, riverboat pilots would measure the depth of the water to ascertain its safety. As long as the water was two fathoms deep (approximately 12 feet), the river was considered safe for navigating the boat. The term used to indicate this safe depth was mark twain, meaning mark two fathoms or, by extension, safe water.

Clemens chose to use this nautical term as his pseudonym. The name stuck and garnered him much attention not only as a writer, but also as an exceptionally witty humorist and speaker. Today, the name Mark Twain has become synonymous with the sounding of the American heart, whose depth, in Twain's literature, has not been found wanting. A sounding line (also called a lead line) is a length of thin rope with a lead weight on its end. A sounding line is used to measure the depth of a river or lake, especially while navigating a boat.

PSEUDONYM—A fictitious name used by an author when, for various reasons, he or she does not wish to use his or her real name.

HUMORIST—A writer who specializes in writing humor.

Mark Twain was born on November 30, 1835, in the rural town of Florida, Missouri. Born Samuel Clemens, the sixth child of John and Jane Clemens spent the first four years of his life in this small Missouri town. In 1839, the family moved to the nearby town of Hannibal, located along the Mississippi River. Hannibal set the stage for Twain's literary career, which reached its apex with the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

COMMON THEMES

Twain's works abound with themes that reflect the era and the culture in which he lived. Among the most common of these themes are:

- Freedom vs. Confinement
- Racism and Slavery
- Intellectual and Moral Education

- The Hypocrisy of Civilized Society
- Superstition in an Uncertain World

HYPOCRISY—The act of pretending to be someone that one is not.

PATHOS—A quality that arouses sympathy or pity.

Twain's characters reflect these themes with both humor and pathos. Huck Finn, for example, reflects the recurring theme of freedom vs. confinement. The son of an alcoholic father and a widowed guardian, Huck gets involved in numerous adventures that symbolize his search and struggle for freedom.

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