

Mark Twain's Take on the Romance of the Old West

8-10 Days

English: High School

DESIRED RESULTS

What are the “big ideas” that drive this lesson?

- ❖ Students will recognize the Romanticized vision of the American West and how it can be understood through the lens of mythology.
- ❖ Students will recognize how Twain's use of humor and satire in *Roughing It (RI)* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (CYKAC)* alternately lampoon and promote a mythological interpretation of the Romantic vision of the West.

What are the “essential questions” that students must answer in order to understand the “big ideas?”

- ❖ What misconceptions concerning the heyday of the American West (c. 1849-1900) exist in literature and in popular culture, and how does Twain highlight these misconceptions?
- ❖ What is a mythological “hero”?
- ❖ What are the characteristics of the Arthurian hero?
- ❖ How does Twain use Hank Morgan in *CYKAC* to satirize the Arthurian hero?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS

Identify what students will know and/or be able to do.

- ❖ Students will know key historical events of the American West (1849-1900).
- ❖ Students will recognize how Twain uses humor to explode the myth of the American West.
- ❖ Students will define the characteristic elements of a “tall tale” or Western hoax.
- ❖ Students will explain how passages taken from *RI* either support or undermine the myths of the American West.
- ❖ Students will use original humor to poke fun at some element of the Romantic Western myth.
- ❖ Students will know the heroic ideals presented in the *Arthuriad*.
- ❖ Students will use Joseph Campbell’s framework for defining the “hero’s journey” and analyze the steps Hank Morgan takes in *CYKAC* that illustrate the concept.

LIST SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT(S)

- ❖ Students will write an essay that explains how a specific element of the myth of the American Wild West is affirmed or undermined by Mark in *Roughing It*. Mythical elements of the American West can be any of the following vignettes from *RI*:
 1. The excitement of stagecoach travel (ch. 2, 3, 4)
 2. Extreme weather (ch. 3, 12, 18, 22, 23, 27, 30, 31, 32, 34, 38, 56, 58)
 3. Dangerous, exotic fauna (ch. 3, 5, 7)
 4. The stoic, tough Westerner i.e. the stagecoach driver (ch. 4)
 5. Violence as a way of life (ch. 6, 47, 48, 49)
 6. The Easterner as a greenhorn/tenderfoot (ch. 6, 24)
 7. The Pony Express as efficient, enduring method of communication (ch. 8)
 8. Native Americans as hostile or degenerate (ch. 9, 19, 39)

9. Lawlessness, injustice and desperados (ch. 10, 11, 48)
10. Crude, rough towns (ch. 21, 43)
11. The bucking bronco as noble steed (ch. 24)
12. Miners striking it rich (ch. 26, 28, 29, 36, 40, 42, 52, 60)
13. Western swindlers (ch. 30, 44)
14. Saloon brawls (ch. 31)
15. Cowboy as “Superman” (ch. 35)
16. Claim jumpers (ch. 37)
17. Boom and bust economies (ch. 41, 44, 45, 46, 52, 57, 59)
18. The garrulous drunk (ch. 53)

- ❖ Students will orally present an original “tall tale” or humorous anecdote concerning some element of the Western or Arthurian myths.
- ❖ Students will participate in class discussions.
- ❖ Students will pass short-answer quizzes.
- ❖ Students will complete worksheets on the heroic journey elements to *CYKAC*.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

What are the specific activities and sequence of instruction that will be used to engage students in this lesson?

1. Students will begin by brainstorming a list of all the stereotypical elements present in the Western as the teacher writes each on the board. Students might first read Bret Harte’s “The Outcasts of Poker Flats” and/or view John Ford’s feature film *The Searchers* (1956) to add expand their list of what elements belong in a typical “Western.”
2. Students will then be put into groups of 2-4 and assigned one of the above topics and corresponding chapters from *RI* to read and then verify with a historical source to determine how much Twain’s treatment of the topic accurately reflects the truth or mythology of the Old West.

Useful resources for this research include: “6 Ridiculous History Myths (You Probably Think Are True)” (www.cracked.com/article_18487), Geoffrey Ward’s *The West: The Complete Text of the Illustrated Companion Volume to the Acclaimed PBS Television Series*, “Myths of the Old West” in www.unpopulartruth.com/2009/04/myths-of-the-old-west.html, Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, etc.

3. Each student will present their findings and take notes on their classmates’ presentations. They will then write a 2-3 page essay on the degree to which Twain reinforced or dispelled the Western myth. An assessment rubric will accompany this assignment.
4. Students will study the Arthuriad. Possible resources include selections from Peter Stillman’s *Introduction to Mythology* and the movie *Excaliber* (1981). Students will be responsible for taking notes on each and will take a quiz on the basic facts of the Arthuriad based on their work.
5. Students will then read and answer the study guide questions on Mark Twain’s *CYKAC*. Two quizzes should be planned to assess students’ comprehension of their reading. Students will be introduced to of the stages of the hero’s journey (based on Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, i.e. a call to adventure or “quest,” a road of trials, the goal or “boon,” and the return to the ordinary world) and then complete a handout asking them to identify these stages as depicted in *CYKAC*.
6. In a discussion of their responses on the handout, students will share their insights on Twain’s reversal of the myths associated with the Arthuriad.
7. The students should then be given the assessment list (attached) and asked to write an original tall-tall/hoax based on some aspect of the Western or King Arthur myths.

“COMMON CORE” CONNECTIONS:

- ❖ [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

- ❖ [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3](#) Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).
- ❖ [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.6](#) Analyze a case in which grasping a point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant (e.g., satire, sarcasm, irony, or understatement).

MATERIALS AND/OR ATTACHMENTS

- ❖ “6 Ridiculous History Myths” in www.cracked.com/article_18487
- ❖ Geoffrey Ward’s *The West: The Complete Text of the Illustrated Companion Volume to the Acclaimed PBS Television Series*
- ❖ Patricia Nelson Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*
- ❖ “Myths of the Old West” in www.unpopulartruth.com/2009/04/myths-of-the-old-west.html
- ❖ Bret Harte’s “The Outcasts of Poker Flats”
- ❖ John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956)

SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

- ❖ Students could research another time period or particular myths of the time period while also looking at the portrayed truths. With this information the students could then create their own presentation of showing these facts vs. myths to the other students.