

Mark Twain's "The Mysterious Stranger"

10 Days

English: High School

DESIRED RESULTS

What are the "big ideas" that drive this lesson?

- ❖ This novella explores weighty "meaning-of-life" issues in an accessible and appealing way. "The Mysterious Stranger" provides a vehicle to examine the thinking of Twain as an elderly man, who expressed his unrestrained philosophical and religious views as he reflected on the multiple tragedies of his life and confronted the imminence of his own mortality.

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

- ❖ What does American culture tell us about our views on life, death and the afterlife?
- ❖ What does American culture tell us about the nature of illusion vs. reality?
- ❖ What does Twain think about these questions, and how does his treatment of them compare with the core beliefs of mainstream American culture?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS

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

- ❖ Students will understand and compare Twain's views on life, death, and the afterlife with those of mainstream American culture.
- ❖ Students will implement writing strategies reflecting their own views on these subjects.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT(S)

- ❖ Close and thoughtful reading of the story and accompanying materials
- ❖ Completion of double entry journal assignment
- ❖ Completion of Tweets activity
- ❖ Completion of online review or essay
- ❖ Active participation in class and group discussions and activities
- ❖ Participation in the process of editing work
- ❖ Oral presentation

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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

Introductory discussion on first day of class:

- Students' previous exposure to and reaction to works of Mark Twain
 - What students know or think they know about Twain's life
- Teacher fills in missing biographical highlights, focusing on Twain's later years and writings.

Discuss Twain's recently released autobiography and his belief he couldn't say what he really thought while still alive.

Touch on the idea that writers may peak at different times in their lives and their total output may vary greatly. Elicit and provide examples (Harper Lee, J.D. Salinger, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, etc.)

- Discuss where Twain falls on those two spectrums
- Discuss what factors influence when an author may be in his/her prime, how personal and social issues may impact this, when an author may feel most free to express him/herself, etc.

Hand out H.L. Mencken's review of "The Mysterious Stranger," and have students read highlighted excerpts. Discuss reactions, observations, and comments.

Assign Ch. I-IV for the next day. In their reading, students should focus on, take notes on, and discuss the basic elements of exposition like setting, characters, and narrator, as well as the complications that begin in Eseldorf with the arrival of Satan. The concept of Moral Sense and how Twain plays with our common notions of it should also be discussed. During the second class period, discuss setting – Eseldorf (Ass-ville) as idyllic environment – how it enlarges from a quiet century and the world expands to France, China, etc., reflecting contemporary expansion – ultimately representative of the cosmos – social setting as backdrop for the characters.

Discuss characters – comparisons to boys of Hannibal – two priests as representatives of established religion and their differences.

Discuss initial appearance, identity, and role of Satan – narrator Theodor's "educational journey" with Satan – meaning of name Philip Traum. Discuss how Satan charms and fascinates the boys at first – To what degree readers are also drawn to his attractions – contextual evidence of that attraction.

Discuss initial disturbing incidents, reactions – When do we begin to have some darkened thoughts and feelings about Satan?

Review plot developments and progression – Father Peter and Marget, 1107 gold ducats and their origin, reversals of fortune (fortune's instability vs. preordained nature) as a theme.

Discuss Satan's concept of Moral Sense as a foolishness of man – tactic of overturning common beliefs and forcing us to view them in a new way – observations and comments on this.

Satan's concept of what constitutes a "good" act as opposed to the narrator's (our) views - Is he good or evil?

Assign reading of Ch. V-VII for day #4. Students should prepare double entry journal notes on two significant passages from each of the three chapters for day #4 discussion of Ch. V-VII.

On day #3, teacher should provide background information on the story's origin – three, possibly four manuscripts pieced together by biographer Albert Bigelow Paine in 1916, published without acknowledging their nature as sewn-together by an editor.

Discuss Twain's writing style of many projects at one time, set aside Discuss ethical issues raised by this origin.

Provide summaries of each version – discuss similarities to and differences from Bigelow's version, weakness and strengths, advantages and disadvantages to varying settings, characters, plot elements. Discuss final chapter as grafted-on ending.

Discuss how or whether this affects the validity of a text.

Limitations on interpretation? Does it matter?

How does this change/affect (if at all) what we take away from the story? On day #4, review and clarify plot progression.

Discuss introduction of the astrologer character and his role.

Use issues raised in students' double entry journals as basis for discussion with partners, groups, whole class, or a mixture.

During whole class discussion, teacher elicits and lists on board examples of:

- Moral Sense/man's foolishness and how Satan reveals these as problematical
- Concept and textual examples of destiny vs. free will, unintended consequences of changing one act
- Red spider – elephant analogy and its ramifications
- End with cliff hanger of whether Nikolaus will really die in 12 days

Assign reading of remainder of novella (Ch. VIII-XI) for day #6. On day #5, do "Twain's Tweets" activity.

Assign students to complete task 2 and bring the handout to day #7 for sharing. These discussion topics could be started by assigning small groups different topics. Students then explain their interpretations and comments as starting points for whole class discussion:

1. Significance of the witch hunting/mob mentality episodes.
2. Further examples of consequences of changed acts.
3. Satan's portrayal of the history of the human race as a solid progression of increasingly destructive violence.
4. Close reading of the climactic passage on "And what does it amount to? ... The first man was a hypocrite and a coward, qualities which have not yet failed in his line; it is the foundation upon which all civilizations have been built."
5. Concept of laughter as the "one really effective weapon."
6. Role(s) of humor in this work and comparison to the level and nature of humor in other Twain works.

7. Satan's assertion that "sanity and happiness are an impossible combination."
8. The "parable" of the fruit tree Satan created in India.
9. The final chapter – Is all truth revealed at this point? Concept of life as a dream, nothing exists other than thought, Satan was actually a creation of the narrator, not a reality.
10. The passage "Strange! That you should not have suspected years ago... and finally, with altogether divine obtuseness, invites this poor, abused slave to worship him!"
11. Discuss what students find to be the worst criticism of man or religion.
12. Ask who is more immoral/violent – the villagers (man) or Satan?
13. Is "What is the meaning of life?" a ridiculous question, and is Twain laughing at us/himself for asking it?

On the following day, transition to a lighter note in contrast to the previous day's discussion. Students share and discuss their Twain's Tweet choices from "The Mysterious Stranger."

Provide an overview of the two responsive writing choices – first draft due in two days:

1. An online published review

Teacher shows examples of online reader/user/community reviews of books on websites like Amazon and Goodread.com. Teacher overview of the purpose and standards for a reader review. Students write and post an online review of "The Mysterious Stranger."

2. An essay

Students choose one passage from the work to examine closely – agree or reject - defend with both contextual evidence and also personal belief systems and personal experience/observations.

Allow for one day of computer lab work time/teacher assistance with writing assignment.

On the following day have students peer editing using teacher-provided guidelines/checklist for the two assignments.

Continued work on drafts – Final copy due next day.

Use last day for oral presentations on writing assignment:

- Online reviews are projected and summarized.
- Essay writers read their chosen passage and summarize their argument.

Discussion of points raised in student work.

"COMMON CORE" CONNECTIONS:

<http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12/7/> ❖ [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7](#) Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded

novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

❖ [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).

❖ [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.W.11-12.2d](#) Use **precise** language, domain-specific vocabulary, and techniques such as metaphor, simile, and analogy to manage the complexity of the topic.

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS

- ❖ Teaching resources:
- ❖ Hard or online copies of “The Mysterious Stranger,”
- ❖ H.L. Mencken review
- ❖ Double entry journal templates
- ❖ Twain’s Tweets activity: <http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Twitter-Template-6025935/>

SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

- ❖ Have students review others oral presentations and create a written response to at least two of the other students responses in regard or connection to their own thoughts through their essay and presentation.