

Storytelling the Mark Twain Way

1-3 days

English, 7-12 grade

DESIRED RESULTS

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

- ❖ Mark Twain is a major figure in the tall tale tradition of creative writing. Twain’s methods and structure, as well as historical photographs and objects, can be used to help students develop and write their own Tall Tales.

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

- ❖ How have tall tales affected American forms of writing?
- ❖ What are the techniques for story telling?
- ❖ What were Twain’s techniques in creating his tall tales?
- ❖ Why are tall tales an important aspect of writing?
- ❖ How are tall tales different from other forms of written word?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS

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

- ❖ Students will be able to interpret occurrences and objects to develop a creative form of writing.
- ❖ Students will understand the oral tradition and tall tale formats of story telling
- ❖ Students will develop an understanding of the manner and structure of tall tales through using Mark Twain’s techniques.

LIST SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT(S)

- ❖ Classroom Discussion
- ❖ Have students use a photograph of the Clemens mantle to then create a tale using the objects they observe on the mantle. This can either be a written tale or verbal.
- ❖ Create a mantle in your classroom, then have students create a tale based off of these objects.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES

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

1. Introduce students to the art of storytelling, especially tall tales, the genre Mark Twain learned and perfected from his experience in the West.

Websites:

<http://www.clickinks.com/Literature-Lesson-Plans.html>

<http://www.answers.com/topic/mark-twain> (This is a great website that has a section about the influence of fairy tales on Twain.)

2. Share some stories (fairy tales, myths, children's stories, etc.) with the students. (Might be a good time to sneak in a couple of Twain's children's stories—not his tall tales though.) Some methods for sharing:

Read them aloud to the class.

Have small groups read the stories to each other.

Have students pick from a large selection of books or copies of stories to read on their own.

3. Be sure to have a full group discussion on what characteristics they found in the stories that you introduced and discussed in #1.

4. Introduce the characteristics of a tall tale:

First person narrative

Exaggerated language

Exaggerated claims

Colloquialism/dialect

Reliability of narrator (reveals through exaggeration not someone to be trusted)

Structure: framed tale with “gentleman” narrator on the outside

Websites to consider:

<http://cfbstaff.cfbisd.edu/librarpolk/Webquests/Folklore/documents/FLTallTaleCharacteristics.pdf>http://42_explore.com/talltale.htm

5. Share some examples of tall tales, including some of Twain's such as “Jim Smiley and the Jumping Frog,” “Luck,” and “Petrified Man;” websites-

<http://www.pittsfordschools.org/webpages/rzogby/files/Twain%20and%20Frog.ppt.p>;

<http://www.suite101.com/content/the-notorious-jumping-frog-a29264>;

http://www.pbs.org/marktwain/learnmore/writings_jim.html;

<http://www.mtwain.com/Luck/0.html>;

<http://www.readbookonline.net/readOnline/1523/>

6. Introduce students to the history of Sam Clemens' storytelling as entertainment for his daughters by using the items on their fireplace mantle.

To entertain his daughters—Susy, Clara, and Jean—Sam Clemens would make up stories “on the cuff” by using the objects on the mantle of the fireplace in their Hartford home. According to the girls' rules, Clemens had to start on the right-hand side of the mantle with a painting of a cat in an Elizabethan ruff, entitled *Cat in the*

Ruff, and work his way left to the end of the mantle to a portrait of a woman they Clemens girls dubbed “Emmeline.” Clemens also couldn’t use the same ideas, characters, scenes, etc., that he had previously used.

Websites:

http://www.marktwainhouse.org/students/faqs_thehouse.php;
http://books.google.com/books?id=Yt_qQ31wSVQC&pg=PA67&lpg=PA67&dq=mark+twain+fireplace+mantel+cat+in+the+ruff&source=bl&ots=r16LIOCwc7&sig=ThNvXbEKyCKei1vLxdqRcF3L0&hl=en&ei=9UUwTumaK9DpgQfxzIF2&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2e&ved=0CEgQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q&f=false

7. Display one or both photos of the Clemens’ fireplace and mantle. Discuss the items on the mantle and the pictures above it. Have students (pairs, groups of 3-4, or individually) compose a story using the items on the mantle of one of the photos. This can be done orally or in writing. Criteria includes the following:

Elements of a tall tale

Begins at right with the *Cat in the Ruff* painting and works way down left, including all the items, ending with “Emmeline”

8. Create a fireplace mantle in the classroom and put various objects on it. Students must now create a story using these items by following the guidelines in Step 4. If you had students do Step 4 in small groups, then have them do Step 5 with one partner or on their own. Don't forget a sharing time!
9. Going solo—this last step is for students to do independently. Students are to go home and do one of the following:
 - If students have a fireplace mantle, they are to create a story in the same fashion as they did in Steps 4 and/or 5, using the items on the mantle. Students should include a photo or hand-drawn picture of the mantle for their story.
 10. If students do not have a fireplace mantle, they should create one, just like what was done in the classroom for Step 5.
 11. Students then should create a story in the same fashion as they did in Steps 4 and/or 5, using the items on their made-up mantle.
 12. Students should include a photo or hand-drawn picture of the mantle for their story. (For more objectivity, tell students to have a family member choose the objects for their mantle.)
 13. Option: Have students use the dialect/vernacular language of their family in telling the story. They could also use bits and pieces about their family in the story, depending on the objects on their fireplace mantle. Of course the stories and photos/pictures should be shared in class!

Suggested Common Core Connections:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.8.2b](#) Develop the topic with relevant, well-chosen facts, definitions, concrete details, quotations, or other information and examples.

Writing: 9th-10th grade

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2a](#) Introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS

- ❖ Pencil, pen, paper
- ❖ Materials handout (attachment)
- ❖ Internet connection
- ❖ Objects: to develop your own mantle

SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSIONS TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING

Homework Assignment:

- ❖ Have students go home and complete one of the following:
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 2. If students do not have a fireplace mantle, they should create one, just like what was done in the classroom for Step 5. Students then should create a story in the same fashion as they did in Steps 4 and/or 5, using the items on their made-up mantle. Students should include a photo or hand-drawn picture of the mantle for their story. (For more objectivity, tell students to have a family member choose the objects for their mantle.)

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