

Mark Twain's Subtle Sword of Satire

3-5 class days
High School English

DESIRED RESULTS:

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

Students will be able to identify satire and its intended point and target as it was employed by Mark Twain. They then should be able to employ the same technique of writing to satirize an aspect of modern society.

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

What is satire and why is it used?

What is a humorist, and how does Mark Twain exemplify a humorist?

What is an aphorism, and how can it be used as satire?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

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

Students will be able to define “satire” and recognize it in Mark Twain’s literature.

Students will be able to differentiate between blatant and more subtle forms of humorous satire.

Students will be able to write their own satirical work on a foible of modern society to emulate the style of Mark Twain.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENTS:

In small groups, students examine the more dark satire that is present in chapter XXI and XXII (the description of the town in Arkansas and Col. Sherburn’s speech). Each group determines Twain’s purpose in the satire, the target he is focused on, and the devices he uses to both bring in comedy/humor while also pointing out a serious message.

Following chapter XXII, individually, students find an example of dark/subtle satire and write a multi-paragraph response that determines Twain’s purpose in the satire, the target he is focused on, and the devices he uses to both bring in comedy/humor while also pointing out a serious message. Students are required to use concrete details from the text to support their analysis.

Students then write their own piece of satire, modeled off the fictional presentation in *Huck Finn* or an expository approach as in “Corn-Pone Opinions” and “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy.” Following the creative writing of their own satire, students analyze what they have written by identifying the purpose, target and devices used.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

Students discuss the purpose of humor in our society, and read Clemens’ letter to get a sense for the definition and role of a “humorist” during Twain’s time.

Placed around the room on large posters is a selection of Twain’s aphorisms (see below). Walking around the room, students begin by reading those in which the target and subsequent humor are obvious. They then continue to look at those that are more subtle, and as a result, more biting in their attack on human foibles.

Following the walk-around, students discuss the aphorisms, what they noticed, what is targeted, and what the author’s motivation might be in writing the statements.

Students then examine the definition of satire, and determine how it fits with the aphorisms they just read, particularly focusing on the exposure of “foolishness” that is inherent in the statements.

The class then moves on to the essays of Twain, primarily “Corn-Pone Opinions” and “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy.” They identify the following for each:

1. Twain’s thesis
 2. Twain’s purpose & intended effect on his audience
 3. Twain’s target
 4. The rhetorical and language devices he uses to achieve this effect
- Students then move to the reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and in the beginning of their reading, focus in on blatant aspects of satire in the text (see list above in “Resources”). Again, students examine these sections based on Twain’s thesis, purpose, intended effect and language devices.
 - The class then discusses these blatant examples of satire, determining why they are presented in this manner, and what Twain is saying about people through the satire. The discussion also focuses on the problems related to pointing out the “foibles” and foolishness of society, and why an author might use satire to achieve this purpose.

“COMMON CORE” CONNECTIONS:

1. CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL. 11-12. Analyze a case(s) in which grasping point of view requires distinguishing what is directly stated in a text from what is really meant i.e. satire, criticism, irony, or understatement.
2. CCSS-Literacy LS. 11-12. 5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meaning (a. interpret figures of speech i.e. hyperbole, paradox in context and analyze their role in the text.
3. CCSS-Literacy WS. 11-12. 3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences (in this case to achieve a satirical result).

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS:

- “Definition of Satire” from David Brancaccio’s “Who’s Laughing Now?” found at: www.pbs.org/now/politics/satire.html -
 “Satire has long been a tool of political criticism... its characteristics are... it employs comedy or humor; has a target and an ideal to compare it to; and describes folly or vice in detail.” According to The Columbia Encyclopedia, “From ancient times satirists have shared a common aim: to expose foolishness in all its guises — vanity, hypocrisy, pedantry, idolatry, bigotry, sentimentality — and to effect reform through such exposure. The many diverse forms their statements have taken reflect the origin of the word satire, which is derived from the Latin *satura*, meaning "dish of mixed fruits," hence a medley.”
- S. L. Clemens’ letter to Orion and Mary E.(Mollie) Clemens from October 19-20, 1865, found by searching the Mark Twain Papers and Project database provided by the Bancroft Library at the University of California-
<http://bancroft.berkeley.edu/MTP>
- “Corn-Pone Opinions” by Mark Twain (public domain online)
- “Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy” by Mark Twain (public domain online)
- Selections from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: chapter I (Widow Douglass’s hypocrisy regarding tobacco), chapter VI (Pap’s “govment” speech) and chapter XVIII (description of Col. Grangerford), (public domain online)
- Aphorisms taken from *The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain*, published by Dover (see below):

“When in doubt tell the truth.” – *Following the Equator*

“‘Classic.’ A book which people praise and don’t read.” – *Following the Equator*

“One never ceases to make a hero of one’s self (in private).” – *The Gilded Age*

“Heroine: girl who is perfectly charming to live with, in a book.”
– *More Maxims of Mark*, Merle Johnson, ed.

“Always do right. This will gratify some people, and astonish the rest.”
– *Note to Young People’s Society*

“Do not put off till tomorrow what can be put off till the day-after-tomorrow just as well.”
– *More Maxims of Mark*, Merle Johnson, ed.

“Few things are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example.”
– *Pudd’nhead Wilson*

“It is often the case that man who can’t tell a lie thinks he is the best judge of one.”
– *Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar*

“...man never does a single thing which has any first and foremost object except one—to secure peace of mind, spiritual comfort, for himself.” – *“What Is Man?”*

“Thanksgiving Day originated in New England when the Puritans realized they had succeeded in exterminating their neighbors, the Indians, instead of getting exterminated by their neighbors, the Indians.” – *Mark Twain’s Autobiography*, Albert Bigelow Paine, ed.

“The very ink with which all history is written is merely fluid prejudice.” – *Following the Equator*

“This nation is like all the others that have been spewed upon the earth—ready to shout for any cause that will tickle its vanity or fill its pocket. What a hell of a heaven it will be when they get all these hypocrites assembled there.” – *Letter*

“Of all the animals, man is the only one that is cruel. He is the only one that inflicts pain for the pleasure of doing it.” – *“The Lowest Animal”*

Identifying Satire

Description of Event: _____

Thesis	
Target	
Society's Ideal <i>How would the society describe itself in this area?</i>	
Purpose & Intended Effect <i>Be more specific than saying he wants to reform society.</i>	
Comedic Elements	
Rhetorical & Language Devices <i>Focus on what reveals the satire to the trained eye. What allows the reader to see Twain's true purpose through the comedy?</i>	