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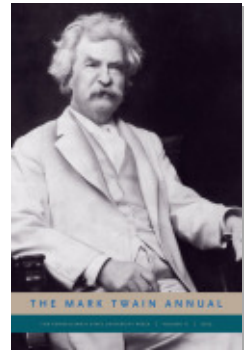
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## Rediscovering Twain: Beyond Huck Finn and the Tall Tale

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Jennifer Gaye

I was not a “Twainiac,” as many of my cohorts came to call themselves, during the summer of 2011. Yet I understood and valued Twain’s contribution to the American literary canon and had looked forward to attending the NEH Summer Institute “Twain and the Culture of Progress” with the hope that I would gain a fresh perspective. Facilitated by Kerry Driscoll and the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut, the institute was a three-week-long intensive study of Twain’s formative experiences in Virginia City, Nevada, as well as in Hartford, Connecticut. We spent time in Virginia City tracing Clemens’s emergence as a writer capable of rendering the nuances of regionalism and humor during westward expansion, and then we studied at the Twain House in Hartford where Samuel Clemens lived the life of Mark Twain.

I began my career as a public high school English teacher, so my experiences with Mark Twain had been limited to the requisite teaching of the canonical titles and tales, and in many ways, I had grown tired of it. It had become harder for me to make the text relevant for my students—I had read and taught it so many times that I could anticipate almost all of my students’ questions and responses. I was tired of reading (and trying to explain to sixteen-year-olds) the “duke and the dauphin” chapters and I just needed a break. When I began teaching at the Community School of Naples a few years ago, I vowed, “Never again.” I said to anyone who would listen that I would no longer teach *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in my classroom. Ever. For the last several years, I have adhered to this admonition. However, after spending those few weeks participating in the institute I was ready to invite Sam (I became more intrigued with the man than the myth) and some of his lesser-known characters into my classroom. And while I don’t know if I will ever invite Huck back, I have shifted into using Twain primarily to teach the technicalities of style, satire, and humor in my classes. Certainly *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has a place in the American literary tradition because it is a rich text full of all of the literary devices and tropes of American realism. Yet, too often, teachers are limited—either by their departments or districts or by themselves—in their teaching of this text. They gloss over the moral wrangling that Huck goes through and often work to make everything “come out alright” in the end, but in doing so I think they ultimately do a disservice to their students and the text. Huck’s pivotal decision to face damnation for the man who has now become his friend is complex, and many

teachers are unwilling to address these sensitive but necessary issues. Notions of race, class, and “otherness” remain a part of national and global conversations that students must learn to navigate. Huck and Jim’s relationship can serve as a way to invite students into these conversations and address the nuances of human relationships beyond Twain’s historical rendering of American slavery. Although it remains a novel anchored in a particular place and time, its themes need not be.

Alternately, teachers force Twain into students’ lives with overly anthologized pieces such as “The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” or “Corn Pone Opinions.” Now, these are funny pieces to be sure, but much of Twain’s humor has lost its context and, therefore, relevance. And while adults might be able to grasp the humor despite the anachronistic references, contemporary students will struggle. However, with proper framing and thoughtful selection of shorter pieces, teachers can use Twain to teach students the *craft* of writing humor rather than insisting that students find meaning in humor for which they have little interest. Teachers should also remember that he is a master of the art of satire. This kind of humor surrounds our students in the digital landscape that is increasingly their natural habitat, yet they often have a difficult time recognizing and writing satire. Twain’s use of figurative language is quite effective, and using a few of his satirical essays is a way to incorporate varied and new selections into your curriculum. Essays such as “On the Decay of the Art of Lying” or “A Presidential Candidate” are particularly useful in teaching the structure and technical intricacies of satire.

Much of Twain’s later work reveals a darker side of his persona. He is more pessimistic in his outlook for humanity’s soul after he experiences a period of heartbreak and disappointment, and these texts more boldly express his disdain for “civilized” society and show a soul grappling with universal questions and moral dilemmas. Teenagers certainly can relate to some of these themes as they contend with self-awareness, teenage angst, and loss of innocence. For example, *The Diaries of Adam and Eve* can provide an opportunity for a variety of conversations around identity, spirituality, and the environment. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, while complex, problematic, and a bit unwieldy, provides the perfect opportunity to explore the nuances of technology and its impact on man’s spiritual progress. Like Twain, contemporary students are faced with a world of unparalleled technological advancement, and the implications of these changes are profound and not yet fully understood. Works such as these allows teachers to frame some of the most relevant issues of the day through the works of an iconic American literary figure. Even though some of

the content, themes, and ideas from these later works may run counter to many teachers' understanding of and experience with him, I think that these texts are among his best work and can provide teachers with good opportunities for curriculum development.

In the same way that Sam Clemens invented, but then became somewhat trapped in the persona of Mark Twain, I think that many English teachers have become trapped in the *idea* of Twain primarily as creator of Huck and Tom or as "the great American humorist." By moving beyond this idealized notion of Twain, teachers can find a more rewarding and engaging experience for themselves and their students.