

Master of American History and Government
Ashland University

AHG 510:
Great American Texts: Mark Twain
July 8 - 13, 2007

Instructor: David Foster

Course Description: This course is an intensive reading of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, both by Mark Twain. In each case, we will try to understand the novel as a whole and the way in which it presents and comments upon political principles. Special attention will be given to the character of the protagonists named in the titles, and to the themes of equality and freedom.

Required Texts

Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published by the Mark Twain Library and the University of California Press, 2001. ISBN: 978-0-520-22838-3

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published by the Mark Twain Library and the University of California Press, 2002. ISBN: 978-0-520-23575-5

Mark Twain, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us," and "A Little Note to M. Paul Bourget." These short essays can be found at:
<http://users.telerama.com/~joseph/cooper/cooper.html> and
[http://www.mtwain.com/What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us/0.html](http://www.mtwain.com/What_Paul_Bourget_Thinks_of_Us/0.html).

Recommended Texts

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, published by the Mark Twain Library and the University of California Press, 1984. ISBN: 978-0-520-23576-2

Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*. Edited by Sidney E. Berger. W.W. Norton and Company, 1981. ISBN: 0-393-95027-1

Learning Objectives:

This course has three main objectives: to engage in the serious reading of an important text in American history and government; to understand how novels, more specifically, these two novels, comment upon political principles; to deepen our understanding of the American character and of the meaning of freedom, equality, and other political ideas in the American

context. More specifically, the course intends to increase students' familiarity with and understanding of:

- How to study a book thoroughly and comprehensively.
- The structure of plot and theme in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*.
- How Mark Twain uses narrative voice, plot episodes, dialogue, and allusions to depict character and to comment upon political ideas.
- The following characters: Huck, Tom, Jim, the Widow Douglas, The King and the Duke, Aunt Polly, Judge Thatcher, Injun Joe, Becky, the Grangerfords, the Wilks girls, the Phelps family.
- Twain's view of American "civilization," its basic character and its main strengths and defects.
- Twain's analysis of human nature, freedom, equality, compassion, aristocracy, lying, nature vs. convention, racial slavery, the family, the love of money, the love of adventure and books, Christianity.
- The character of Twain's humor and how he used humor to defend and criticize ideas.

Course Requirements

A short seminar paper and a final examination. Grades will be assigned in the following way:

- Contribution to in-class discussions: 25%
- Seminar paper: 25%. This will be due during the week; instructions for it will be given in the first meeting of the course.
- Final examination: 50%

Students should read both novels at least once, twice if possible, before the course begins.

Students auditing the course as a part of a Teaching American History Grant program must complete the readings and fully participate in the seminars during the week.

Course Schedule

(Subject to change according to the pace of our reading and conversation)

Sunday, July 8

4:30 – 6:00 pm: Introduction & Session 1

Topic: Democratic politics and the novel; Mark Twain as a reader and on the function of a writer.

Focus: What is the political function of novels in a democratic polity? Does the humorous or comic novel have a special function? What does Twain's response to Paul Bourget suggest about his view of his own task as a novelist? What can we learn from the criticism of Fenimore Cooper about how to read Twain's own novels?

Readings:

- "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," (CP 5)
- "What Paul Bourget Thinks of Us," and "A Little Note to M. Paul Bourget" (CP 13)

7:00 – 8:30 pm Institute Lecture

Monday, July 9

9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 3

Topic: Introduction to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: Tom's place in St. Petersburg, his character, and the principles of his actions.

Focus: What is Tom's situation in St. Petersburg and how does he conduct himself in relations with his Aunt and her family? What is Tom's perspective on Aunt Polly's Christianity? How precisely does he transform fence-painting from a chore into a worthwhile enterprise? What general political and economic principles are suggested by this episode? Why, precisely, is Tom offended by the new boy? What do these episodes reveal about Tom's capacity as a leader or about his political potential?

Readings: Tom Sawyer, Title, Chapters 1-3

10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 4

Topic: Tom in Church and School

Focus: How do Tom's activities in Sunday school and Church and the biblical stories that are mentioned or alluded to in these chapters help us understand Tom's view of piety, faith, war, and glory? Why is Tom so ignorant of the Bible (or at least parts of it) and why doesn't his humiliation for this ignorance seem to do lasting damage to his

reputation? What are the steps through which Tom goes in falling in love with Becky, courting her, and then almost immediately blundering? What is at the root of Tom's love for Becky? How does that love change him and his relation to society?

Readings: Tom Sawyer, Chapters 3-8

4:30 - 6:00 pm: Session 5

Topic: The murder of Doc Robinson and Tom's appearance at his own funeral

Focus: What do the scientist (Doc Robinson), the criminal (Injun Joe), the harmless drunk (Muff Potter), and the two boys (Tom and Huck) have in common that brings them all together in the graveyard at midnight? How do these characters differ in their views on killing and on what it means to be dead? How is the boys' attraction to the life of piracy similar to and different from their attraction to Robin Hood? What does the appeal of these two alternatives say about their view of "civilization?" Why are the boys not satisfied with the pirate's life on Jackson's Island? What is the root of Tom's self pitying and what does he gain by appearing at his own funeral?

Readings: Tom Sawyer, Chapters 9-17

Tuesday, July 10

9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 6

Topic: Tom as successful lover and defender of justice

Focus: Why exactly does Tom save Becky from humiliation, and does she understand his act in the same way he does? How are Tom and his position in society changed by his winning of Becky? Why does Tom break his solemn oath to Huck and save Muff Potter? How is his position in society changed by this act? Do these two things (the conquest of Becky and the defense of Muff Potter) signify a change in Tom or are they only the development or outcome of principles we have already seen?

Readings: Tom Sawyer, Chapters 18-24

10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 7

Topic: Treasure and Vengeance

Focus: What place does treasure or great wealth have in Tom's imagination and in solidifying his place in St. Petersburg society? What is the ultimate source of the wealth Tom is pursuing (and finally obtains)? Could Tom still be Tom if he earned his wealth in the usual way (or even in the fence-painting way)? In what ways are Injun Joe and Tom similar and dissimilar? Why is vengeance (i.e., the thirst for vengeance) such a dark quality? How ought the offenses for which Joe seeks vengeance be handled? Compare

the way in which Tom and Becky respond to being lost in the cave: what does the difference tell us about Tom's (Twain's?) view of man's place in the universe? Why does Twain have Injun Joe hide his treasure beneath a cross? Why does Tom's greatest test occur in the depths of a dank, dark cave?

Readings: TS, Chapters 24-35

4:30 - 6:00 pm: Session 8

Topic: Overview and general discussion of the political teaching of Tom Sawyer

Focus: The Judge determines to send Tom to the country's top military academy or to law school, or to both. And earlier, some citizens had thought Tom might be president if he didn't hang first. Can we interpret Tom's adventures in the light of these intimations of a distinguished political future? Is Tom the model of a sort of democratic political leader? If so, why did Twain depict this in a story of "adventures" about a boy rather than about a mature man?

Wednesday, July 11

9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 9

Topic: Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Huckleberry Finn's character and his dissatisfaction with St. Petersburg.

Focus: 1. What are we to make of the punishments with which the author threatens certain readers in his "Notice?" Why of all the things in the novel does the author call special attention to the various dialects used in it? Huck, the narrator, begins his "Adventures" by informing us that almost everyone must lie. Who doesn't need lies? Might Huck sometimes lie to his reader? 2. What is Huck's position in St. Petersburg society? What is Huck's understanding and criticism of Christianity? What alternative to the Widow is offered by Tom and why is Huck tempted by this only to reject it? Why does Huck prefer life with the brutal pap to life with the civilized (and civilizing) Widow Douglas? What convinces him that he must get away from pap and, more generally, from St. Petersburg? What does he think he will gain by running away?

Readings: *Huckleberry Finn*, Title, prefatory material, Chapters 1-7

10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 10

Topic: Huck and Jim on Jackson's Island.

Focus: What is life like for Huck when he first arrives on the island (i.e., before he discovers Jim)? Is this life a viable alternative to "civilization"? How do things change once Jim is found? Is it significant that Huck discovers the presence of another human being while trying

to kill a large snake? What view of man's place in the world and of relations between men is suggested by the "signs" and stories that Jim tells? How is this view different from that suggested by Christianity or by "civilization"? Does Huck believe everything Jim tells him? What is the significance of Huck's rattlesnake trick on Jim? How does Huck deceive Jim and Jim Huck? In general, how would you describe the situation of and initial relation between the two fugitives?

Reading: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 7-11

4:30 - 6:00 pm: Session 11

Topic: Life on the River 1: Huck and Jim alone

Focus: What view of property, theft, and justice is suggested by Huck and Jim's deliberation about what food to steal? What are the implications, if any, for Jim, who is himself a form of property? Why does Huck want to explore the wrecked "Walter Scott," and what does his handling of the robbers tell us about his view of justice? The fundamental theme of the conversation about King Solomon's wisdom, his harem, kingship, and the French language is the relation between nature and convention. How do Huck and Jim differ on this and how does each go wrong? What are the implications for slavery and for society?

Reading: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 12-14

Thursday, July 12

9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 12

Topic: Life on the River 2: Huck and Jim, continued; the aristocracy of honor and courage.

Focus: 1. An important crux in the book is Huck's trick on Jim in Chapter 15. Why does Huck play this trick? What exactly does Huck mean by "conscience" and what does it say about him and his relation to Jim that he "humbles" himself to Jim? 2. What was the origin of the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons and what principles keep it going? How does Twain present and judge of the family life of the Grangerfords? Try to account for all the domestic details provided, for example, for their books, the picture called "Signing the Declaration," Emmeline's poetry and art, and their family customs. How does love figure in the Grangerfords' life? Does his experience at the Grangerfords change Huck? 3. The three or four days immediately after the Grangerford episode show Huck at his happiest (beginning of Ch. 19). What makes him so contented? What part does leisure, contemplation, and conversation play in Huck's happiness? Do Huck and Jim agree on the character of the natural universe? How does this interlude compare with life on Jackson's Island? Is there anything in this interlude that could provide the basis for a better society than we saw at the Grangerfords?

Reading: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 15-19 (beginning)

10:50 am - 12:20 pm: Session 13

Topic: Life on the River 3: the aristocracy of fraud.

Topic: How do the king and the duke take over on the raft? Both of these “aristocrats” are frauds, but why is one of them a (Shakespearean) actor while the other is a specialist in “missionarying?” What is suggested about the basis of aristocracy and about the people in the three main episodes that involve the king and the duke – that is, in the Camp meeting, the performance of Shakespeare, and the Royal Nonesuch? Similarly, what do we learn about the differences between the people (the ordinary people, including Huck) and their leaders or rulers in the stories of the murder of Boggs and the circus? Does the circus suggest a way of organizing society that would be more acceptable than that suggested in the other episodes? How would you compare Twain’s humorous presentation of the aristocrats with the kind of humor Huck enjoys at the circus?

Readings: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 19-23

4:30 - 6:00 pm: Session 14

Topic: Defrauding the Wilks Girls: Huck tells the truth and begins to take action

Focus Questions: The king steps ashore trusting in “Providence to lead him the profitable way.” What thing or things that we haven’t seen before are operating in the Wilks episode to give the king and duke high hopes of success? What is the essential difference between those townspeople who are fooled by them and those who are not? What ultimately causes their failure? Consider Huck’s role in the unfolding fraud: what causes him to abandon his passivity and to help the girls and even to risk telling the truth? Looking back over all the episodes on the river, does Twain suggest any reason for thinking that social order and exploitation based on violence and fraud could be replaced by something better or more just? Is there anything in what we have seen so far of the relation between Huck and Jim that would provide the basis for a better social order?

Readings: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 24-30

Friday, July 13

9:00 am - 10:30 am: Session 15

Topic: Huck’s decision to steal Jim and the “evasion” adventure

Focus: Why, precisely, does Huck decide to steal Jim out of slavery, and what does he mean when he says “All right, then, I’ll go to hell”? What are the implications of this decision for Huck’s view of slavery? What does it mean that Huck feels “born again” to find out that he is Tom Sawyer and that he pretends to be Tom while freeing Jim? What principles guide (the real) Tom in the “evasion”? Why does Jim decide to sacrifice his freedom to help the

wounded Tom? More generally, what are we to make of Tom's management of the escape of Jim and of Huck's acquiescence in his plan? In what way is the "evasion" an appropriate sequel to Huck's decision to free Jim; indeed, in what way is it an appropriate ending to the novel as a whole? Or did Twain's art fail him here?

Readings: *Huckleberry Finn*, Chapters 31-40

10:50 am – 12:20 pm: Session 16

Session Review and Questions

1:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Session 17

Final Examination