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Literature, American Literature



Lily Lopez 6/1/2012 Period 6 The Life of the Riverboat Man that Changed the World: Mark Twain Transitioning from his humble beginnings as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, to the great American literary icon we know as Mark Twain, this man's writing reshaped everything from the way Americans thought, to the way history progressed as a whole. His young life and childhood, along with the many difficulties that faced him growing up, helped mold him into the person he was and even gave inspiration to his writing. Along with his coming of age, Mark Twain's experiences during his steamboat days along the Mississippi River lead to one of the greatest and most controversial books in history. His novels not only served as a catalyst for change, but also served as a record of it. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, most commonly known as " Mark Twain," was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. Something very unique about his birth was that Halley's Comet streaked across the sky the day he was born. He was born into a humble family from Kentuckian and Virginian descent. His father, John Marshall Clemens and his mother Jane Clemens were very supportive parents and people he looked up to. He had six brothers and sisters that he was very attached to and built strong relations with. Sadly, Mark Twain was the sick child of the bunch. His health made it difficult for him to do anything. After he regained a bit of his health, he and his family relocated and situated themselves in Hannibal, Missouri. At the time of his birth, slavery was still around and he grew up around it, especially since he was from the heart of the South. He would even live to fight in the war later on. This allowed him to have a certain amount of extra perspective into the issue of slavery since he lived in both the pre-Civil War period and the post-Civil War period. On

account of his sickly nature, Clemens could not attend much school, which is ironic considering that he is thought to be one of the most intellectual men in history. And the little bit of school he did attend, did not give him the best education ever. His schooling came to an abrupt halt in 1847 when his father died. Little Samuel Clemens, only around fourteen years old, lost his father and had to move down to live with his brother, Orion. However, this took a turn for the best. The year right after his father's death, he became a printer's apprentice. His brother was the new owner of "Western Union" newspaper and hired Samuel to help him grow the business. During this time, Clemens began to develop his satirical and humoristic thinking and learned all the tricks in the trade that would help him gain experience in the field of writing. After learning a bit about writing and discovering his knack for it, Samuel Clemens went on to do something else that would impact his life forever. Henry Clemens, his youngest brother, was killed by injuries he received on a steamboat. Clemens had always dreamt of driving steamboats, so he then took it upon himself to become a fully licensed riverboat pilot. His time floating on the Mississippi River would later give him the inspiration to write several of his most famous works like "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," and "Life on the Mississippi." Just to show you how much his days in the Mississippi inspired him, he devised his famous penname, "Mark Twain" from steamboat piloting. "Mark Twain" was what the leadsman on a riverboat called when the water was 12 feet, which was deep enough to be considered safe for most boats of the era. After a while of piloting steamboats in this misty dream life on the Mississippi, Mark Twain entered the battlefield of the Civil War. As previously

stated, the controversial issue of slavery was still lurking around during Mark Twain's time. The argument of slavery was devouring the Union and America almost seemed like it would break apart. Mark Twain enlisted in the Confederate army, and even became a second lieutenant, which would also serve as inspiration for some of his future novels. He only participated in the war for a short period in which he said, "" I was a soldier two weeks once in the beginning of the war, and was hunted like a rat the whole time... " Mark Twain looked down on the war in an almost condescending way. His views on the issue of slavery and war were summed up in one sentence he wrote in his notebook, " The skin of every human being contains a slave. " He believed man was a slave regardless of skin color and showed his acceptance of the humanity in everyone in " The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. " One of the most controversial novels written at the time (and still considered likewise today) was that of our favorite red headed, freckle nosed Huck Finn and his friend Jim, the slave. In this novel, Mark Twain really lets his views set in. Taking experiences from his time on the Mississippi and from his time in service, Mark Twain incorporated both into it. The novel is about the coming of age of Huck and also the nation, as both learn to change their olden views and conform to modern ones. In the book, Huck Finn sees the humanity in Jim, but also in himself, for being able to accept someone without prejudice. This reflects Mark Twain's view of man being a slave to mankind itself because they can either choose to enslave themselves in one belief or another. From this novel, we can also see through his sarcastic writing and way of words that Mark Twain is highly critical of religion and the idea of an organized religion. Twain quotes, " If Christ were here now there is

one thing he would not be — a Christian." Mark Twain contradicted himself many times on what he actually believed in regards to a faith or religion. His ideology was a mixture of some faith and some logic, which is very much like him to believe that. Furthermore, Mark Twain's works bore some influence on politics and the ways people viewed different dilemmas occurring at the time. Although Mark Twain never directly entered the fray that is the world of politics, his sarcastic criticisms and witty observations influenced people into adapting to his ideas and somewhat acting around them. One of the more influential criticisms in the politics department was issued during the Spanish-American war period at the time of American Imperialism. Mark Twain strongly opposed the American control of the Philippines and the government's refusal to allow them to live independently. His opposition caused even more opposition in others and the words he wrote struck a chord in many people. He was especially against torturing of the Filipinos by the "water cure." He quotes "To make them confess- what?" Twain asked. "Truth? Or lies? How can anyone know which it is they are telling?" This led to more people wondering if what America was doing in the Philippines was the right thing. Not to mention Mark Twain's prevailing influence back in the post-Civil War period with his novels that helped people move on into the new political and social mindset of the century. Aside from influencing history and politics, Mark Twain also greatly influenced American culture (even modern American culture) and also literary culture. Mark Twain has influenced writers from all over America and even some from across the globe. Ernest Hemingway, another great American literary giant, was influenced greatly by Mark Twain and even makes him appear in his tribute,

"Green Hills of Africa" (1935). Mark Twain has entered permanently into American popular culture. His books are being taught in schools to this very day, and students still learn a lesson from it each time. Mark Twain's novels are still selling in large numbers and quantities, but not just in America. His books have been translated into several languages and have been read by many people internationally. Mark Twain's popularity and wisdom seems almost like a plague sweeping the universe from this perspective. On April 21st 1910, a great light of the world went out. Mark Twain died of heart disease at the age of seventy four and was buried in Elmira, New York. That same day, Halley's Comet swooped by. The great literary icon came into the world with the comet, and went out with it as well. However, Mark Twain did not die completely. He remains alive through his writings, and his

perspective will always be available to everyone who seeks it. Works Cited: Mtwain. com. "Mark Twain Biography." - A Complete Biography on Mark Twain. 2008. Web. 02 May 2012. . Contemporary Authors Online. The Gale Group. "Mark Twain Biography." Mark Twain Biography. Contemporary Authors, 1999. Web. 02 May 2012. . About. com. "Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)." About. com Classic Literature. About. com, 2012. Web. 02 May 2012. . Reuben, Paul P. "Chapter 5: Late Nineteenth Century - Mark Twain." PAL: Perspectives in American Literature- A Research and Reference Guide. URL: <http://web.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap5/twain.html>

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