

Tall Tales and Dark Sides

Student Activity



Sam and Livy Clemens on the porch of their house in Hartford, 1885. Courtesy The Mark Twain House, Hartford

“Do not tell fish stories where the people know you; but particularly, don’t tell them where they know the fish.”

– **Mark Twain**

A fish story is a story that exaggerates the truth – the way the fish he caught gets bigger every time the fisherman tells his story about it. What’s the best “fish” story that you’ve ever heard? Share it with your classmates.

Part A. Mark Twain was a master at creating tall tales. He would begin with an ordinary and very believable situation and gradually embellish it until it had grown into something extraordinarily funny. For example, in the film *Mark Twain*, we hear his hilarious story about the camel that ate his overcoat:

In Syria, at the headwaters of the Jordan, a camel took charge of my overcoat while the tents were being pitched, and examined it with a critical eye, all over, with as much interest as if he had an idea of getting one made like it; and then, after he was done figuring on it as an article of apparel, he began to contemplate it as an article of diet.

He put his foot on it, and lifted one of the sleeves out with his teeth, and chewed and chewed at it, gradually taking it in, and all the while opening and closing his eyes in a kind of religious ecstasy, as if he had never tasted anything as good as an overcoat before, in his life.

Then my newspaper correspondence dropped out, and he took a chance in that... But he was treading on dangerous ground now. He began to come across solid wisdom in those documents that was rather weighty on his stomach; and occasionally he would take a joke that would shake him up till it loosened his teeth; it was getting to be perilous times with him, but he held his grip with good courage..., till at last he began to stumble on statements that not even a camel would swallow with impunity.

He began to gag and gasp, and his eyes to stand out, and his forelegs to spread, and in about a quarter of a minute he fell over as stiff as a carpenter’s workbench, and died a death of indescribable agony. I went and pulled the manuscript out of his mouth, and found that the sensitive creature had choked to death on one of the mildest and gentlest statements of fact I ever laid before a trusting public.

Twain’s daughters put his tall-tale storytelling to the test when they asked him to make up new bedtime stories, incorporating each of the items on the mantlepiece, from one end to the other. Polish your storytelling skills by taking six items found in your own classroom – a shoe, a chair, a window, a button, a pencil, and a paper clip. Weave them into your own tall tale. Remember that a tall tale takes what’s real and believable and “grows” it into something funny. How will you “grow” your story? On the back of this paper, plot the development of your story and then write a first draft. Now, work with your team of “comedy writers” to make it even funnier.

“It is not in the least likely that any life has ever been lived which was not a failure, in the secret judgment of the person who lived it.”

– **Mark Twain**

Part B. As well as having two names, Samuel Clemens was a man with two distinct identities – Clemens, the wealthy New Englander who thought nothing of spending \$30,000 a year – a huge amount of money back in the 1880s – on household expenses, and Mark Twain, champion of the downtrodden. Like the nation he would come to

embody, Clemens was always reinventing himself, always restless, always full of contradictions. He lived in the barren sage-brush deserts of Nevada but he also loved attending private parties in prosperous cities wearing full evening dress.

On February 2, 1863, at the end of a dispatch for the *Territorial Enterprise*, Samuel Clemens first used his new pen name or pseudonym – Mark Twain. It was a term he remembered from his riverboat days – the point at which safe water becomes dangerous water. It was a good description of a man who lived his life on the edge between safety and danger. If you were to take a pen name, what would it be? Explain why you chose that name and what it says about you.

NAME: _____

As he became more successful, Clemens found himself increasingly torn between the two identities he inhabited and the two worlds those identities represented. In his later years, having lost nearly everything that meant anything to him, he was forced to go back on the lecture circuit that he detested to make money. He wrote a best seller titled *Following the Equator* that was filled with both biting social criticism and hilarious observations. As he wrote, he questioned his own ability to be funny in the midst of so much personal tragedy and loss. Yet, while he struggled with doubt, his popularity grew as people turned to him for humor to enrich their ordinary lives.

Twain had an enormous hunger for success – but he also struggled with constant fears of failure. He once wrote, “Every one is a moon, and has a dark side which he never shows to anybody.” Do you agree with Twain’s statement? Do you think everyone has a hidden dark side? Why or why not?