

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Life on the Mississippi

by
Mark Twain

Book Information

Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi

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This American classic tells Mark Twain's autobiographical account of river life.

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); Classics, Classics (All); History, Misc./Other; Humor/Funny, Funny; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Romance, Romance (All); Transportation/Vehicles, Trains

Main Characters

George Ealer a veteran pilot on the Mississippi

Henry Clemens Mark Twain's younger brother who dies a heroic but painful death

Karl Ritter the dying man who sends Twain to Napoleon, Arkansas, to mend a great injustice

Mr. Brown the abusive pilot with whom Twain continues his training as a pilot

Mr. Horace Bixby the stern but fair and skillful pilot with whom Twain begins his training as a pilot

Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) the satiric but nostalgic narrator who tells of his own experiences with the Mississippi River

Uncle Mumford the old mate on the "Gold Dust" who shares stories and wisdom with Twain

Vocabulary

amidships the middle of a boat between the bow and the stern

bluff a steep cliff on the bank of a river

chute a channel where a river descends rapidly

forecastle the front half of a ship's upper deck

shoal a shallow spot in the water

snag a tree or branch submerged in the water that poses a threat to passing boats

Synopsis

Life on the Mississippi begins with Mark Twain's account of the history of the European exploration of the Mississippi River and then moves on to a series of anecdotes about the author's career as a steamboat pilot on the river.

Twain's pilot career begins when he runs away from his home in Hannibal, Missouri, and convinces a veteran pilot by the name of Horace Bixby to teach him to be a steamboat pilot. Twain describes in great detail how Bixby demands that he learn every inch of the river by memory so he can steer the boat safely. When Bixby goes North for a more lucrative position, Twain's training is turned over to Mr. Brown on the steamer "Pennsylvania."

Mr. Brown is an abusive egomaniac who finally pushes Twain to his breaking point when he accuses Twain's brother Henry of not delivering a message and sets out to beat him. Twain intervenes and transgresses the sacred code of the river: a pilot is always right and must never be questioned. Not only does Twain fight Brown, he also causes the boat to travel unguided down the river. Despite these two breaches of river conduct, the steamboat captain is quite pleased to finally see Brown get what he deserves.

Soon afterward, Twain signs on with another boat. His brother Henry dies after the boilers on the "Pennsylvania" explode and Henry sacrifices his life to save several other people.

Twain also describes the creation of the pilots' association, a powerful union formed to stop wages from being driven down. However, the association's power quickly dwindles when the steamboat trade is stunted by the Civil War, the building of railroads, and the invention of a new system of shipping involving tugboats and barges. Twain is forced to give up the piloting business and to go west to become a silver miner. The narrator briefly summarizes the next twenty-one years and transitions to his return to the Mississippi River as a famous author intent on recapturing the spirit of the

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Mississippi of his boyhood.

The following section of the book is a collection of travel anecdotes, local legends, analysis of river culture, various scraps of scientific data and history, and occasional flashbacks into the author's childhood. Some of the more memorable examples include the author's detailing of the government regulations for the river, excerpts of foreign travelers' reactions to the river, a story of revenge about a man who killed the wrong man for the murder of his wife, a tale about a cattle businessman who turns out to be a professional gambler in disguise, a flashback to Twain's childhood in which he remembers a series of drownings and fears God's punishment, and a handful of Indian legends.

Interspersed throughout these narratives are numerous descriptions of the towns that Twain visits, among them St. Louis, in which Twain notes the growth of the town and the absence of river men in the local saloons. He discusses how the improved sewer system in Memphis has diminished yellow fever outbreaks, tells how the river has washed away Napoleon, Arkansas, and, thus, cheats Twain out of ten thousand dollars, and relates an account of the war survivors in Vicksburg.

When he reaches the mouth of the Mississippi, Twain spends an extensive amount of time in New Orleans. Among the many things he takes time to comment on are the unusual measures that must be taken to bury the dead above ground in a city that is below sea level and the avaricious nature of an undertaker he meets in the city. A mule race sparks a diatribe from Twain on the flowery language of Southern literature, which Twain blames on Sir Walter Scott. Twain also mentions meeting two writers of regional literature, Mr. Cable and Mr. Joel Chandler Harris.

After leaving New Orleans, Twain travels up the Mississippi to St. Paul, with a lengthy stop in Hannibal. Here Twain asks a resident about the fate of people he knew as a child. He has assumed a false identity so that he can hear the resident's honest opinions and is a bit shocked when the

resident describes him as a fool who nonetheless managed to become a success.

As he continues up the river, Twain notes the progress of many cities. His journey proceeds to St. Paul, where he is amazed at the tremendous growth of the twin cities, and he describes the energy and ambition of these thriving towns.

Twain ends his book a bit abruptly with a quick assessment of Chicago as he heads to New York.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does the young stranger who gave Twain a phony tour of the boat refuse to look at Twain after he discovers Twain in the pilothouse steering the boat?

He is probably embarrassed that he made a fool of himself by telling invented stories about the boat to a veteran pilot. He is also annoyed that Twain played along with the farce and did not stop him. Part of his discomfort can be attributed to the fact that the joy of playing a practical joke on an outsider was destroyed when he realized the tables had been turned.

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Literary Analysis

While *Life on the Mississippi* is considered an autobiographical work about his life, there are surprisingly few pieces of information about his personal life besides a brief mention of his father's occupation and a short section about his brother Henry. Twain had a rich and colorful family life which could have provided much more material. What might be his reasons for leaving this information out of the book?

One possible reason that Twain does not mention his family is that Life on the Mississippi is the story of Twain's personal relationship with the river. Twain does not include information about his family life except when it is pertinent to this relationship. For instance, Henry enters the picture mainly because he is the catalyst that causes Twain to confront Brown and leave the "Pennsylvania." Another reason is that Twain, as writer, tends to either avoid subjects that are painful to him or convert painful moments into humorous incidents. Thus, Twain only briefly discusses the death of Henry and does not mention his father's premature death at all. Later in the book Twain recalls what most people would consider a traumatic childhood experience; he must dive into water to discover whether a classmate of his has drowned. Twain focuses on the comedic elements of this tale instead of describing it as a tragedy.

Inferential Comprehension

When Mrs. Trollope is writing a travel guide to the Mississippi, she is given several bits of misinformation by people along the river, including a story about an alligator that ate a woman and her five children. Twain also frequently has the experience of being misdirected by people who assume he is an outsider who does not know any better. Why do people on the river make up stories when travelers they believe to be newcomers to the area ask them questions?

There are several factors which contribute to this phenomenon. One is the tradition of the tall tale, in which the storyteller considers it a sign of talent and skill if he can get his listener to believe a story full of incredible details. Another favorite of the river people is the practical joke. The more elaborate the joke, the more skilled the joker. Hence, a man who can get a travel writer to spread fabrications all around the world based on a story he has told, can consider himself a master joker. The last element which contributes to this tendency is the sense that an outsider must earn the right to be given the knowledge of the community. For example, the crew members of the steamboats mock the curiosity of passengers by inventing functions for the boat's machinery when asked how the boat works. Since the passengers are not members of the steamboat community, the steamboat crews are affronted by the assumption that they will educate anyone who cares to ask how the boat runs.

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Constructing Meaning

Life on the Mississippi covers many topics, but it still has an underlying main idea. What do you think is the main idea of the book? What examples in the story support this idea?

While Twain touches on several different ideas, he is consistent in how he shows that the river has a dual nature. Many of his stories can be connected to the concept that the river has both the power to nurture and the power to destroy, and does so indiscriminately. From St. Paul and Quincy, which seem to enjoy nothing but the fruits of their location on the river, to Napoleon and Vicksburg, which are stunted or destroyed by changes in the river, to New Orleans, which benefits greatly from the river but engages in a constant battle to keep the river at bay, the towns along the Mississippi must contend with the fact that the river is an uncontrollable and intimidating force. Twain seems to find it particularly funny that the government thinks it can tame this force with snag boats and lamps.

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting Mark Twain describes the Mississippi in such detail that it virtually becomes the main character in this book. He portrays the river as being a paradox of nourishing and destructive forces. Have the students choose a town mentioned in this book and research how it has fared in the hands of the Mississippi since Mark Twain described it over a hundred years ago. Have the students write an analysis of the town's relationship with the river, determining whether the town has benefited or suffered because of its proximity to the Mississippi.

Understanding the Author's Craft One flaw which critics frequently notice in Mark Twain's writing is the loosely connected structure of his plots. Events are often strung together without a necessarily logical order or smooth transitions. Have the students chose a chapter in *Life on the Mississippi* and determine whether the events in the chapter show clear connections to one another or seem to be a collection of observations or anecdotes which could easily be

moved to another section of the book without disturbing the reader's understanding of events. Some chapters to consider are XVII and XLVIII. Have the students support their opinions with details from the book.

Describing Actions or Events This book is full of many minute details which make it difficult to summarize into a tidy plotline. In order to help the students visualize the many events in this book, have them watch a film version of *Life on the Mississippi*. Have them discuss whether the filmmaker was accurate in his portrayal of the book, whether there were important events left out of the movie that should have been included, or whether the filmmaker included or invented events that should have been left out of the movie.

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning Mark Twain transforms the tall tale into an art form in this novel. In order for students to get a better feeling of how language is used in these tales, have the students write their own tall tales about either the past or the present. Have them pay particular attention to the use of detail and hyperbole.