

**English/History 288**  
**Mark Twain and the Mississippi River in American Culture**

**Rationale**

This course supports the University's commitment to offer academic experiences to our students that will enable them to explore America through a combination of classroom study and travel opportunities.

*3 credit hours*

**Extended Course Description and Objectives**

Mark Twain is one of the most popular authors in American history, but his influence on American culture transcends the literary realm. Franklin Delano Roosevelt took the name of the New Deal from Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*. Twain's novel *The Gilded Age* provided the name for an entire era. The persona Samuel Clemens created and named Mark Twain remains instantly recognizable to many Americans; in fact, Twain impersonators continue to flourish nearly a century after his death. Elements of that persona continue to resonate both in the United States and abroad as quintessentially American, and in this course we will investigate the construction of that persona through Twain's texts and his life, as well as the reasons for its lasting influence.

Of course, much of the Twain image is intertwined with the Mississippi River. Samuel Clemens grew up on the banks of the river, and he took the name Mark Twain from the call river drivers make when sounding shallows. The river plays a central role in each of the three Twain texts we will read this semester, perhaps most notably in his masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Thus we will also examine the roles the river played in shaping both Clemens and his character Twain as well as how Twain's depictions of the Mississippi River influenced our understanding of its place in American society. Twain was certainly not the first American to write about the river and its importance, but his books have popularized, satirized, and romanticized the nineteenth-century river and the cultures on its banks for generations of readers. Issues we will address in this class include the extent to which Twain's enduring popularity is tied to the river and whether the river itself continues to retain its power as a symbol of American society. We hope that debates over these questions will compel students to consider what elements of our culture have traditionally served to shape popular conceptions of American identity both in the United States and abroad and how those conceptions may have changed in recent generations.

This class will culminate in a trip to the Upper Mississippi River Basin the week after graduation in May. Details on the trip will follow shortly, but participation in the trip is required in order to gain academic credit for this class.

**Readings/Texts:**

The assigned texts for this course will consist of both “primary” and “secondary” sources. Primary sources are documents – letters, diaries, novels, treaties, newspaper accounts, and films among others – that date to a particular event or moment in America’s past. Secondary sources offer a historian’s or literary scholar’s interpretation of past events. You will be expected to complete all the assigned texts and be prepared to discuss them in class.

The following books are recommended for purchase. All are available in the University bookstore and on reserve at Smith Library.

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*

Thomas Ruys, Smith, *River of Dreams: Imagining the Mississippi Before Mark Twain*

Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*

Ron Powers, *Dangerous Water: A Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain*

Thomas C. Buchanan, *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*

Shelley Fisher Fishkin, *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*

The following films will also be required viewing. They will be on reserve at Smith Library.

*Show Boat*

*Meet Me in St. Louis*

### **Course Requirements**

**1. Participation and Reading:** In a seminar class such as this one, all students are expected to be active participants. This means you must attend class regularly and on time (students will not be allowed into class if they arrive more than five minutes late), complete all reading assignments in a timely fashion, and come to class prepared to engage your fellow classmates in a lively discussion. In addition, once a semester each student will be required to post three questions on the readings on the class website and assist us in leading discussions of those questions. Your performance in the classroom will serve as the primary basis for your class participation grade.

**2. Attendance and Classroom Behavior:** In order to succeed in this class, you must be present at nearly all of the class sessions. Habitual absenteeism negatively impacts both you and your classmates. Since we will only meet once a week, we have adopted an unusually strict attendance policy for this class. You are allowed one absence over the course of the semester. We make no distinction between excused and unexcused absences, and leaving class early counts as an absence. After this absence, you will receive a 1/3 of a grade penalty on your class participation grade for every additional

absence. If this attendance policy will be a problem for you, come see us **IN ADVANCE**. We will not consider explanations or requests for leniency after the fact.

In addition to attending class, you must also behave in a mature and respectful manner in the classroom. This means all cell phones must be turned off throughout the class period. Text messaging, IMing, and web browsing are rude and distracting behaviors in class and we will not tolerate them. Holding private conversations during the class is also unacceptable. Students who violate these standards of behavior will receive a significant penalty in their class participation grade.

**3. Writing Assignments:** There will be one primary writing assignment in this class that will consist of three separate assignments. Each of you will write an 8-10 page independent research paper on some aspect of Mark Twain's texts or life or on some other component of Mississippi River culture. We encourage you to be creative, but we must approve the topic for the paper. You will hand in a **prospectus and annotated bibliography** (each of which should be approximately one page) on February 9<sup>th</sup>, a **complete** rough draft on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the final version of the paper on April 20<sup>th</sup>. All assignments are due at 5 pm and may be submitted in either electronic or hard copies.

**4. Exams:** There will be 90-minute in-class exams on March 4<sup>th</sup> and April 29<sup>th</sup>.

**5. In-Class Presentations:** Each student will make a 15-minute presentation on his or her paper. These presentations will take place during our final exam period, which is Friday, May 8<sup>th</sup> at 1:30.

**6. Trip Attendance:** As mentioned above, attendance on the trip will be required to gain academic credit for this class. Engagement in trip activities will be incorporated into the class participation grade.

### **Grading and Assessment:**

The final grade will be computed from a weighted average of the individual grades you earn for your class participation, written assignments, and final exam. The course requirements will be weighted as follows in determining your final grade for the course:

Prospectus/Bibliography	10%
1 <sup>st</sup> Exam	10%
Rough Draft of Paper	10%
Final Draft of Paper	20%
2 <sup>nd</sup> Exam	20%
In-Class Presentation	10%
Class Participation	20%

### **The Fine Print**

1. This syllabus is a road map for this class but it is not set in stone. We reserve the right to make changes in the syllabus with proper advance notice given to you.

2. You must complete all assignments (including all components of the research paper) in a timely fashion to receive a passing grade.
3. Make-up examinations are possible only when you have presented me with a legitimate excuse before the scheduled exam time. Failure to do so will result in an automatic “F” for the exam. Arranging travel plans to leave campus before the midterm or final is not an acceptable excuse, so please make your arrangements with the exam schedule in mind. If you schedule a make-up examination, you must take the test at that time, as there will be no second chance to do so. Ultimately, the decision as to whether to accept an excuse will be at the instructors’ discretion.
4. All papers are due at the times stated in this syllabus. You may e-mail us papers if you wish, but all responsibility for technical problems such as e-mails not received by us lies with you. Late papers will automatically be marked down 1/3 of a grade for each day they are late (beginning at 5 pm on the day they are due) unless you have written documentation from your advisor, an academic Dean, or from University medical services. Computer problems are **never** an acceptable excuse for late work.
5. If you have a question about a grade you receive on a paper, test, or for the course, please come to our office hours or make an appointment. We will not discuss grades over the phone or e-mail. However, we are happy to discuss questions about the course material via e-mail.
6. Academic Honesty: The work you submit for this course should be completely and solely your own. This means that any and all quotations from the words and thoughts of others must be appropriately acknowledged in your assignments. To do anything less is stealing. Any evidence that you have failed to follow these rules will be immediately and thoroughly investigated and penalized according to official university procedures. Be forewarned: We consider cheating to be a very serious and utterly avoidable offense. Expect no leniency from us in cases of suspected cheating/plagiarism.
7. Special Needs: Students with diagnosed disabilities should contact Irene Ingersoll, the Coordinator for Disability Services, at 841-9037 or [iingerso@highpoint.edu](mailto:iingerso@highpoint.edu). Accommodation arrangements should be made at the beginning of the semester. Accommodations are not retroactive.

## CLASS SCHEDULE

1/14 Introduction

1/21 *River of Dreams*, Intro & Chapters 1-3; Part I of handout of pre-Twain primary sources

1/28 *River of Dreams*, Chapters 4-5 & Epilogue; Part II of handout of pre-Twain primary sources

2/4 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Chaps. 1 through 17; *Dangerous Waters*, Chapters 2-5

**2/9 Prospectus/Annotated Bibliography due at 5 pm**

2/11 *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Chaps 18-34; *Dangerous Waters*, Chapters 6-9

2/18 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Chaps.1-18; *Dangerous Waters*, Chapters 10-13

2/25 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Chaps. 19-31; *Dangerous Waters* Chapters 14-17

3/4 Exam #1

3/11 Spring Break- NO CLASS

3/18 *Life on the Mississippi* , Chaps. IV-XXX; *Black Life on the Mississippi*, Intro & Chapters 1-3

**3/23 Rough Draft of Paper Due at 5 pm**

3/25 *Life on the Mississippi* , Chaps. XXXI-LX; *Black Life on the Mississippi*, Chapters 4-6 & Epilogue

4/1 1904 World's Fair at <http://washingtonmo.com/1904/index.htm>; *Meet Me In St. Louis*

4/8 *Lighting Out for the Territory*, Prologue and Chapters 1 & 2; *Show Boat*

4/15 *Lighting Out for the territory*, Chapter 3 & Epilogue; Article on Disneyfication of Twain and Tom Sawyer

**4/20 Final Draft of Paper Due at 5 pm**

4/22 Honors Day- NO CLASS

4/29 Exam #2

**5/8 In-Class Presentations at 1:30 pm**

5/10-5/20 TRIP TO MISSISSIPPI RIVER!!!