Samuel Langhorne Clemens (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910), better known by his pen name Mark Twain, was a famous and popular American humorist, novelist, writer, and lecturer. At his peak, he was probably the most popular American celebrity of his time. William Faulkner wrote he was the “first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs.” Clemens maintained that the name “Mark Twain” came from his years on the riverboat, where two fathoms (12 ft or 3.7 m), or “safe water,” was marked by calling “mark twain.” In addition to Mark Twain, Clemens used the pseudonym “Sieur Louis de Conte” for his fictionalized biography of Joan of Arc (1866).

Early life
Sam Clemens was born November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, the third of four surviving children of John and Jane Clemens. While he was still a baby, the family moved to the river town of Hannibal, Missouri, hoping their fortunes would improve there. It was this town and its inhabitants that the author, Mark Twain, later put to such imaginative use in his most famous works, especially The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876).

Clemens’ father died in 1847, leaving many debts. The eldest son, Orion, soon began publishing a newspaper and Sam began contributing to it as a journeyman printer and occasional writer. Some of the liveliest and most controversial stories in Orion’s paper came from the pen of his younger brother—usually when Orion was out of town. Clemens also traveled to St. Louis and New York City to earn a living as a printer.

The lure of the Mississippi eventually drew Clemens to a career as a steamboat pilot, a profession he later claimed would have held him to the end of his days, recounting his experiences in his book Life on the Mississippi (1883). But the Civil War put an end to commercial steamboat traffic in 1861, and Clemens had to look for a new job. After a brief stint with a local militia (an experience he recounted in his short story, “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed” (1885)), he escaped further contact with the war by going west in July of 1861 with Orion, who had been appointed secretary to the territorial governor of Nevada. The two traveled for two weeks across the Plains by stagecoach to the silver-mining town of Virginia City, Nevada.

Roughing it Out West
Twain’s experiences out West formed him as a writer and became the basis of his second book, Roughing It. In Nevada, Sam Clemens became a miner, hoping to strike it rich digging up silver in the Comstock Lode and staying for long periods in camp with his fellow prospectors—another mode of living that he later put to literary use. Failing as a miner, he fell into newspaper work in Virginia City for the Territorial Enterprise, where he adopted the pen name “Mark Twain” for the first time. In 1864, he moved down to San Francisco and wrote for several papers there.

In 1865, Twain had his first literary success. At the behest of humorist Artemus Ward (whom he had met and befriended in Virginia City during Ward’s lecture tour of 1863), he submitted a humorous short story for a collection Ward was publishing. The story arrived too late for that book, but the publisher passed it to the Saturday Press. That story, originally entitled “Jim Smiley and his Jumping Frog” but now better known as “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” was reprinted nationwide, and called by Atlantic Monthly editor James Russell Lowell “the finest piece of humorous literature yet produced in America.”

In the spring of 1866, he was commissioned by the Sacramento Union newspaper to travel to the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii) to write a series of letters reporting on his journey there. On his return to San Francisco, the success of the letters and the personal encouragement of Colonel John McComb (publisher of San Francisco’s Alta California newspaper) led him to try his hand at the lecture circuit, renting the Academy of Music and charging a dollar a head admission. “Doors open at 7 o’clock,” Twain wrote on the advertising poster. “The trouble to begin at 8 o’clock.” The first lecture was a wild success, and soon Twain was travelling up and down the state, lecturing and entertaining packed houses.

First book
It was another trip that established his fame as an author. Twain convinced Col. McComb of the Alta California to pay for his passage aboard the steam packet Quaker City on an American excursion to Europe and the Middle East. The resulting letters Twain produced for the newspaper reporting on the trip formed the basis of his first book, The Innocents Abroad, a large and humorous travelogue that pointedly failed to worship Old World arts and conventions. Sold by subscription, the book became hugely popular and put its author in a spotlight he

Career overview
Twain’s greatest contribution to American literature is generally considered to be the novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. As Ernest Hemingway himself said: “All modern American literature comes from one book, by Mark Twain, called Huckleberry Finn...all American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.” Also popular are The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Prince and the Pauper, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, and the non-fictional Life on the Mississippi.

In 1883, he married Olivia Langdon, and in 1870 moved to Buffalo, New York, then to Hartford, Connecticut. During this period, he lectured often in the United States and England. Later he wrote as an avid critic of American society. He wrote about politics with his Life on the Mississippi.

Twain’s fortunes began to decline in his later life. He was a very depressed man, but still capable. Following the erroneous publication of a premature obituary in the New York Journal, Twain famously responded: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated” (June 2nd 1897).

He lost 3 out of 4 of his children, and his beloved wife, Olivia Langdon, before his death in 1910. He also had some very bad times with his businesses. His publishing company ended up going bankrupt. He also lost a great deal of revenue on royalties from his books being plagiarized before he even had a chance to publish them himself.

He wrote in 1909, “I came in with Halley’s Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it.” And so he did. Halley’s comet can be seen in the Earth’s skies once every 75-76 years. It was visible in November 1835, when Mark Twain was born and was also visible in April 1910, when he died.