

# Studies in Major Authors: Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain

ENGL 720 | Section A | Eisenhower Hall 218 | MWF 9:30 | Spring 2005

Course Website: [www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/engl720/](http://www.ksu.edu/english/eiselei/engl720/)

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Office Hours: MW 10:30-11:20, Thu 1:30-2:20, plus many more by appointment

## General Course Description

Mark Twain defined a "Classic" as "A book which people praise and don't read." This semester, however, we are going to be reading some classics, classics written by Twain himself and his contemporary, Louisa May Alcott. We will read them, study them, and discuss their status as "classics," wondering if they deserve all the praise—and reproach—heaped on them. This course will also be a chance to think about, define, and scrutinize designations such as "classic," "popular," "best selling," "canonical" and "non-canonical," "literary," "artistic," "trashy," "great" (as in "great books"), and "masterful" (as in "masterpiece").



Mark Twain

Focusing on two of the funniest, most beloved, and widely read American authors, this course examines the late-nineteenth-century careers of Alcott and Twain from their early travel sketch writing to their autobiographical writings and most famous classic works. We will also read and explore each authors' darker and lesser-known writings, such as Alcott's early thrillers and Twain's scathing late essays and short fiction. Gender, ethnicity, and race in literature, styles of American humor, the emergence of children's literature as a genre, the cultural work of their writing, and their continuing presence in American literature and culture will all be important topics of study.

The reading for the course includes *Innocents Abroad*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Eight Cousins*, several shorter works by both authors, and contemporary criticism on the work of both authors. The semester's work will include two short papers, a research paper, and a final examination.

## Preparation for This Course

To enroll in this course, you should either be (1) a graduate student or (2) an advanced undergraduate in English or Education who has completed the following course work: ENGL 310, plus at least one of these three courses (ENGL 355, ENGL 381, or ENGL 382). If you don't fall into either of the above categories, please let me know so that we can

talk about whether you should stay in this class or move to some other English course better suited to your preparation.

## Course Goals

When you finish ENGL 720, you should be able to do the following:

- Demonstrate a broad and deep understanding of the careers and writings of Louisa May Alcott and Mark Twain.
- Generate thoughtful, critical interpretations of texts by Alcott and Twain, paying attention to the formal, aesthetic, historical, and cultural features that have distinguished their texts within the history of American literature.
- Discuss Alcott, Twain, and their works in an intelligent, informed, and persuasive manner.
- Explain to others the meaning, significance, and value of Alcott's and Twain's works.
- Demonstrate a familiarity with literary criticism on Twain and Alcott.
- Research and write a persuasive critical essay on Twain or Alcott, an essay that is carefully researched and aware of its relationship to previous scholarship on these authors.

This course also aims to intensify students' proficiency in the skills at the heart of a liberal education: the ability to reason, think critically, communicate effectively, and appreciate excellent writing and thinking.

## Course Requirements

***In-Class Work.*** Because one of our course goals is learning how to discuss these texts critically, attendance and class participation are vital to the work in this course. Most of you will also lead a class discussion at some point during the semester. I will not assign letter grades to any of this in-class work, but I will factor your attendance, class participation, class facilitation, and homework into your final grade.

***Written Work.*** The writing in our course will consist of: 1) a reflection paper or an annotated bibliography; 2) a summary of and response to a critical article; and 3) a longer, researched critical essay. During the semester, I will distribute handouts describing these three assignments in detail.

***Final Examination.*** There will be an in-class comprehensive final examination for this course on Monday, May 9, from 11:50 to 1:40.

**Grades.** In determining final grades, each course requirement carries the following relative weight:

- In-Class Work 20%
- Written Work 60%
  - Reflection Paper/Annotated Bibliography (10%)
  - Summary and Response Paper (10%)
  - Research Paper (40%)
- Final Examination 20%

## Course Policies and Resources

**Late Papers.** I do not typically accept late papers, but in certain, limited circumstances I will accept papers after the due date. Assignments will lose a letter grade for every class period that they are late. I collect papers at the beginning of class on the due date.

**The Honor Code.** Kansas State University has an Honor Code, which stipulates that you should do all your academic work at the university individually. Do not collaborate on any academic work unless specifically approved by your instructor. On all of your assignments, exams, and other course work, the following pledge is implied, whether or not it is explicitly stated: "On my honor, as a student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this academic work."



Louisa May Alcott

Perhaps the most serious violation of the Honor Code in an English course is plagiarism—taking or copying someone else's words or ideas as if they were your own. Plagiarism and cheating are serious offenses and may be punished by failure on the exam, paper, or project; the truly gnarly XF grade for the course; and/or expulsion from the university

Complete copies of the academic dishonesty policy are available in the Office of Student Activities and Services in the Union, or you may visit the Honor System web page at [www.ksu.edu/honor](http://www.ksu.edu/honor).

**Students with Disabilities.** If you need special accommodation in this course for a learning or physical disability, please contact Disabled Student Services in Holton Hall, Room 202 (532-6441), so that they may assist us in making arrangements.

**Course Listserv.** You have all been subscribed to a course listserv, and we can all post our comments, information, and queries by sending our messages to [alcotttwain@listserv.ksu.edu](mailto:alcotttwain@listserv.ksu.edu). The purpose of this listserv is to try out ideas, to continue discussions and problem solving begun in class, and to facilitate communication among class participants outside of class. Posting to this listserv is not

required; it is here strictly for our convenience. The only rule is this: all postings to the list should be related to our class in some way or another.

If you have your K-State e-mail forwarded to another address, the University will subscribe you to that address also so that you can send messages to this list from either address.

## Texts

The following texts are available for purchase at The Dusty Bookshelf (700 N. Manhattan Ave, in Aggieville across the street from Varney's). The required reading for this course also includes several recent critical articles in an electronic coursepack. Information about this electronic coursepack will follow in a separate handout.

### Louisa May Alcott

*Little Women* (Norton)

*Little Men* (Signet)

*Eight Cousins* (Puffin)

*Alternative Alcott* (Rutgers UP)

### Mark Twain

*Innocents Abroad* (Penguin)

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (U of California P)

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Norton)

*Pudd'nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (Norton)

*Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain* (Houghton Mifflin)

## Introductory Reading Schedule

Jan 12 W Introductions

Jan 14 F Alcott, "My Contraband," in *Alternative Alcott*, 74-93  
Stern, Madeleine B. "Louisa May Alcott." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 223: The American Renaissance in New England, Second Series*. Ed. Wesley T. Mott. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. 29-45. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale Databases. Kansas State University Lib., Manhattan, KS. 10 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>>.

Jan 17 M NO CLASS. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY

Jan 19 W Twain, *Selected Shorter Writings of Mark Twain*, 1-37  
Hill, Hamlin. "Samuel Langhorne Clemens." *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 12: American Realists and Naturalists*. Ed. Donald Pizer. Detroit: Gale Group, 1982. 71-94. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale Databases. Kansas State University Lib., Manhattan, KS. 10 Jan. 2005 <<http://www.infotrac.galegroup.com>>.