



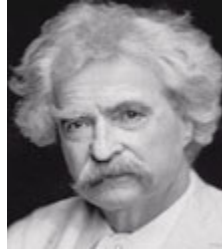
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# On the Decay of the Art of Lying. Mark Twain.



## About the author

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (November 30, 1835–April 21, 1910), better known by his pen name Mark Twain, was a famous and popular American humorist, writer and lecturer.



He was also a steamboat pilot, gold prospector, and journalist. 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.” His name was derived from the shout used to mark how deep the water was in steamships–“Mark Twain!” in other words, mark two fathoms.

Twain’s greatest contribution to American literature is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ernest Hemingway 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*.

Twain began as a writer of light humorous verse; he ended as a grim, almost profane chronicler of the vanities, hypocrisies and acts of killing committed by mankind. At mid-career, with *Huckleberry Finn*, he combined rich humor, sturdy narrative and social criticism in a way almost unrivaled in world literature.

Twain was a master at rendering colloquial speech, and helped to create and popularize a distinctive American literature, built on American themes and language.

Twain had a fascination with science and scientific inquiry. Twain developed a close and lasting friendship with Nikola Tesla. They spent quite a bit of time together from time to time (in Tesla’s laboratory, among other places). *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* featured a time traveller from the America of Twain’s day who used his knowledge of science to introduce modern technology to Arthurian England.

Twain was a major figure in the Anti-Imperialist League which opposed the annexation of the Philippines by the United States. He wrote “Incident in the Philippines”, posthumously published in 1924, in response to the Moro Crater Massacre, in which six hundred Moros were killed.

The name “Mark Twain” is a pun reference to a riverboat depth measurement indicating two fathoms (12 ft or 3.7 m), or “safe water.” Some believe that the name “Mark Twain” was brought on by his bad drinking habits, and not by his time as a riverboat pilot. He also used the pseudonym “Sieur Louis de Conte” for his fictional autobiography of Joan of Arc.

In recent years, there have been occasional attempts to ban *Huckleberry Finn* from various libraries, because Twain’s use of local color offends some people. Although Twain was against racism and imperialism far in front of public sentiment of his time, some with only superficial familiarity of his work have condemned it as racist for its accurate depiction of the language in common use in the United States in the 19th century. Expressions that were used casually and unselfconsciously then are often perceived today as racism (in present times, such racial epithets are far more visible and condemned). Twain himself would probably be amused by these attempts; in 1885, when a library in Massachusetts banned the book, he wrote to his publisher, “They have expelled Huck from their library as ‘trash suitable only for the slums’. That will sell 25,000 copies for us for sure.”

Many of Mark Twain’s works have been suppressed at times for one reason or another. 1880 saw the publication of an anonymous slim volume entitled *1601: Conversation, as it was by the Social Fireside, in*

*the Time of the Tudors.* Twain was among those rumored to be the author, but the issue was not settled until 1906, when Twain acknowledged his literary paternity of this scatological masterpiece.

Twain at least saw *1601* published during his lifetime. Twain wrote an anti-war article entitled *The War Prayer* during the Spanish-American War. It was submitted for publication, but on March 22, 1905, Harper's Bazaar rejected it as "not quite suited to a woman's magazine." Eight days later, Twain wrote to his friend Dan Beard, to whom he had read the story, "I don't think the prayer will be published in my time. None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth." Because he had an exclusive contract with Harper & Brothers, Mark Twain could not publish "The War Prayer" elsewhere and it remained unpublished until 1923.

In his later life Twain's family suppressed some of his work which was especially irreverent towards conventional religion, notably *Letters from the Earth*, which was not published until 1942.

Perhaps most controversial of all was Mark Twain's 1879 humorous talk at the Stomach Club in Paris entitled *Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism* (masturbation), which concluded with the thought "If you must gamble your lives sexually, don't play a lone hand too much." This talk was not published until 1943, and then only in a limited edition of fifty copies.

Twain's fortunes then began to decline; in his later life, Twain was a very depressed man, but still capable. Twain was able to respond "The report of my death is an exaggeration" in the *New York Journal*, 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, and he lost thousands of dollars on one typesetting machine that was never finished. 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.

Twain's Hartford, Connecticut home is a museum and National Historic Landmark, known as The Mark Twain House. Twain also

lived in the latter part of the 19th century in Elmira, New York where he had met his wife, and had many close ties.

The small town of Hannibal, Missouri is another town that features many Mark Twain attractions including a boyhood house of his and the caves he used to explore that feature in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

# *On the Decay of the Art of Lying.*

*Essay, for discussion, read at a meeting of the Historical and Antiquarian Club of Hartford, and offered for the thirty-dollar prize.[\*]*

[\*] Did not take the prize.

Observe, I do not mean to suggest that the *custom* of lying has suffered any decay or interruption—no, for the Lie, as a Virtue, A Principle, is eternal; the Lie, as a recreation, a solace, a refuge in time of need, the fourth Grace, the tenth Muse, man’s best and surest friend, is immortal, and cannot perish from the earth while this club remains. My complaint simply concerns the decay of the *art* of lying. No high-minded man, no man of right feeling, can contemplate the lumbering and slovenly lying of the present day without grieving to see a noble art so prostituted. In this veteran presence I naturally enter upon this theme with diffidence; it is like an old maid trying to teach nursery matters to the mothers in Israel. It would not become to me to criticise you, gentlemen—who are nearly all my elders—and my superiors, in this thing—if I should here and there *seem* to do it, I trust it will in most cases be more in a spirit of admiration than fault-finding; indeed if this finest of the fine arts had everywhere received the attention, the encouragement, and conscientious practice and development which this club has devoted to it, I should not need to utter this lament, or shred a single tear. I do not

say this to flatter: I say it in a spirit of just and appreciative recognition. [It had been my intention, at this point, to mention names and to give illustrative specimens, but indications observable about me admonished me to beware of the particulars and confine myself to generalities.]

No fact is more firmly established than that lying is a necessity of our circumstances—the deduction that it is then a Virtue goes without saying. No virtue can reach its highest usefulness without careful and diligent cultivation—therefore, it goes without saying that this one ought to be taught in the public schools—even in the newspapers. What chance has the ignorant uncultivated liar against the educated expert? What chance have I against Mr. Per—against a lawyer? *Judicious* lying is what the world needs. I sometimes think it were even better and safer not to lie at all than to lie injudiciously. An awkward, unscientific lie is often as ineffectual as the truth.

Now let us see what the philosophers say. Note that venerable proverb: Children and fools *always* speak the truth. The deduction is plain—adults and wise persons *never* speak it. Parkman, the historian, says, “The principle of truth may itself be carried into an absurdity.” In another place in the same chapters he says, “The saying is old that truth should not be spoken at all times; and those whom a sick conscience worries into habitual violation of the maxim are imbeciles and nuisances.” It is strong language, but true. None of us

could *live* with an habitual truth-teller; but thank goodness none of us has to. An habitual truth-teller is simply an impossible creature; he does not exist; he never has existed. Of course there are people who *think* they never lie, but it is not so—and this ignorance is one of the very things that shame our so-called civilization. Everybody lies—every day; every hour; awake; asleep; in his dreams; in his joy; in his mourning; if he keeps his tongue still, his hands, his feet, his eyes, his attitude, will convey deception—and purposely. Even in sermons—but that is a platitude.

In a far country where I once lived the ladies used to go around paying calls, under the humane and kindly pretence of wanting to see each other; and when they returned home, they would cry out with a glad voice, saying, “We made sixteen calls and found fourteen of them out”—not meaning that they found out anything important against the fourteen—no, that was only a colloquial phrase to signify that they were not at home—and their manner of saying it expressed their lively satisfaction in that fact. Now their pretence of wanting to see the fourteen—and the other two whom they had been less lucky with—was that commonest and mildest form of lying which is sufficiently described as a deflection from the truth. Is it justifiable? Most certainly. It is beautiful, it is noble; for its object is, *not* to reap profit, but to convey a pleasure to the sixteen. The iron-souled truth-monger would plainly manifest, or even utter the fact that he didn’t

want to see those people—and he would be an ass, and inflict totally unnecessary pain. And next, those ladies in that far country—but never mind, they had a thousand pleasant ways of lying, that grew out of gentle impulses, and were a credit to their intelligence and an honor to their hearts. Let the particulars go.

The men in that far country were liars, every one. Their mere howdy-do was a lie, because *they* didn't care how you did, except they were undertakers. To the ordinary inquirer you lied in return; for you made no conscientious diagnostic of your case, but answered at random, and usually missed it considerably. You lied to the undertaker, and said your health was failing—a wholly commendable lie, since it cost you nothing and pleased the other man. If a stranger called and interrupted you, you said with your hearty tongue, "I'm glad to see you," and said with your heartier soul, "I wish you were with the cannibals and it was dinner-time." When he went, you said regretfully, "*Must* you go?" and followed it with a "Call again;" but you did no harm, for you did not deceive anybody nor inflict any hurt, whereas the truth would have made you both unhappy.

I think that all this courteous lying is a sweet and loving art, and should be cultivated. The highest perfection of politeness is only a beautiful edifice, built, from the base to the dome, of graceful and gilded forms of charitable and unselfish lying.

What I bemoan is the growing prevalence of the brutal truth. Let us do what we can to eradicate it. An injurious truth has no merit over an injurious lie. Neither should ever be uttered. The man who speaks an injurious truth lest his soul be not saved if he do otherwise, should reflect that that sort of a soul is not strictly worth saving. The man who tells a lie to help a poor devil out of trouble, is one of whom the angels doubtless say, "Lo, here is an heroic soul who casts his own welfare in jeopardy to succor his neighbor's; let us exalt this magnanimous liar."

An injurious lie is an uncommendable thing; and so, also, and in the same degree, is an injurious truth—a fact that is recognized by the law of libel.

Among other common lies, we have the *silent* lie—the deception which one conveys by simply keeping still and concealing the truth. Many obstinate truth-mongers indulge in this dissipation, imagining that if they *speak* no lie, they lie not at all. In that far country where I once lived, there was a lovely spirit, a lady whose impulses were always high and pure, and whose character answered to them. One day I was there at dinner, and remarked, in a general way, that we are all liars. She was amazed, and said, "Not *all*?" It was before "Pinafore's" time. so I did not make the response which would naturally follow in our day, but frankly said, "Yes, *all*—we are all liars. There are no exceptions." She looked almost offended, "Why, do you include *me*?" "Certainly," I said. "I think you even rank

as an expert.” She said “Sh-’sh! the children!” So the subject was changed in deference to the children’s presence, and we went on talking about other things. But as soon as the young people were out of the way, the lady came warmly back to the matter and said, “I have made a rule of my life to never tell a lie; and I have never departed from it in a single instance.” I said, “I don’t mean the least harm or disrespect, but really you have been lying like smoke ever since I’ve been sitting here. It has caused me a good deal of pain, because I’m not used to it.” She required of me an instance—just a single instance. So I said—

“Well, here is the unfilled duplicate of the blank, which the Oakland hospital people sent to you by the hand of the sick-nurse when she came here to nurse your little nephew through his dangerous illness. This blank asks all manners of questions as to the conduct of that sick-nurse: ‘Did she ever sleep on her watch? Did she ever forget to give the medicine?’ and so forth and so on. You are warned to be very careful and explicit in your answers, for the welfare of the service requires that the nurses be promptly fined or otherwise punished for derelictions. You told me you were perfectly delighted with this nurse—that she had a thousand perfections and only one fault: you found you never could depend on her wrapping Johnny up half sufficiently while he waited in a chilly chair for her to rearrange the warm bed. You filled up the duplicate of this paper, and sent it back to the hospital by the hand of

the nurse. How did you answer this question—‘Was the nurse at any time guilty of a negligence which was likely to result in the patient’s taking cold?’ Come—everything is decided by a bet here in California: ten dollars to ten cents you lied when you answered that question.” She said, “I didn’t; *I left it blank.*” “Just so—you have told a *silent* lie; you have left it to be inferred that you had no fault to find in that matter.” She said, “Oh, was that a lie? And *how* could I mention her one single fault, and she is so good?—It would have been cruel.” I said, “One ought always to lie, when one can do good by it; your impulse was right, but your judgment was crude; this comes of unintelligent practice. Now observe the results of this inexperienced deflection of yours. You know Mr. Jones’s Willie is lying very low with scarlet-fever; well, your recommendation was so enthusiastic that that girl is there nursing him, and the worn-out family have all been trustingly sound asleep for the last fourteen hours, leaving their darling with full confidence in those fatal hands, because you, like young George Washington, have a reputa— However, if you are not going to have anything to do, I will come around to-morrow and we’ll attend the funeral together, for, of course, you’ll naturally feel a peculiar interest in Willie’s case—as personal a one, in fact, as the undertaker.”

But that was not all lost. Before I was half-way through she was in a carriage and making thirty miles an hour toward the Jones mansion to save what was left of Willie and tell all

she knew about the deadly nurse. All of which was unnecessary, as Willie wasn't sick; I had been lying myself. But that same day, all the same, she sent a line to the hospital which filled up the neglected blank, and stated the *facts*, too, in the squarest possible manner.

Now, you see, this lady's fault was *not* in lying, but in lying injudiciously. She should have told the truth, *there*, and made it up to the nurse with a fraudulent compliment further along in the paper. She could have said, "In one respect this sick-nurse is perfection—when she is on the watch, she never snores." Almost any little pleasant lie would have taken the sting out of that troublesome but necessary expression of the truth.

Lying is universal—we *all* do it. Therefore, the wise thing is for us diligently to train ourselves to lie thoughtfully, judiciously; to lie with a good object, and not an evil one; to lie for others' advantage, and not our own; to lie healingly, charitably, humanely, not cruelly, hurtfully, maliciously; to lie gracefully and graciously, not awkwardly and clumsily; to lie firmly, frankly, squarely, with head erect, not haltingly, tortuously, with pusillanimous mien, as being ashamed of our high calling. Then shall we be rid of the rank and pestilent truth that is rotting the land; then shall we be great and good and beautiful, and worthy dwellers in a world where even benign Nature habitually lies, except when she promises execrable weather. Then—But am I but a new and feeble student in

this gracious art; I cannot instruct *this* club.

Joking aside, I think there is much need of wise examination into what sorts of lies are best and wholesomest to be indulged, seeing we *must* all lie and we *do* all lie, and what sorts it may be best to avoid—and this is a thing which I feel I can confidently put into the hands of this experienced Club—a ripe body, who may be termed, in this regard, and without undue flattery, Old Masters.



































