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On the Decay of the Art of Lying

Mark Twain (1835 - 1910)

Read by: Douglas Harvey

Length: 17 minutes and 50 seconds

Language: English

Style: Solo

Genre (s): Non-Fiction, Essays

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In “On the Decay of the Art of Lying” (1880), Mark Twain offers a witty, satirical defense of lying as a necessary and even noble human art. He begins by observing that lying is a universal trait, present in everyone, but laments that it is no longer done skillfully or for virtuous reasons. Twain argues that lying, when done with good intentions—such as to protect others’ feelings or preserve harmony—is far preferable to harsh truth-telling that causes harm. He criticizes hypocritical moralists who lie while pretending to be virtuous, and instead advocates for honest acknowledgment of the role lies play in everyday life.

Twain calls for a revival of lying as a thoughtful, considerate act rather than a selfish or malicious one. He suggests that lying should be taught and refined, much like any other art form, so that it can serve beneficial ends. Satirizing society’s pretensions and moral contradictions, Twain uses humor and irony to challenge conventional views on honesty. Ultimately, his essay is not a blanket endorsement of deceit, but a call to recognize the complexity of truth and to use lies, when necessary, with kindness and responsibility.

Through this piece, Twain cleverly blurs the line between truth and fiction.

Mark Twain is the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (November 30, 1835 – April 21, 1910), an American novelist, essayist, and lecturer noted for his humor and biting satire. Born in Florida, Missouri to a poor family, his father failed in business repeatedly and died of pneumonia when Sam was eleven. He went to work as an apprentice typesetter and then for brother Orion’s Hannibal Journal. He worked as a journeyman printer in the east and started writing humorous articles and sketches to fill space. He returned to Missouri and worked as riverboat pilot until the Civil War broke out in 1861. He avoided service in the Confederate Army by journeying to Nevada with his brother Orion, then secretary to the territorial governor. After a failed attempt to strike it rich as a miner he wrote for the paper in Virginia City, where he adopted the pen name Mark Twain. He began developed a specialty as a traveling correspondent, posting pieces from Hawaii for the Sacramento Union and then a journal from a six month excursion to Europe and the Holy Land that formed his first book in 1869, *The Innocents Abroad*, considered the most popular travel book ever written. He followed with *Roughing It* in 1872, a portrait of life on the American frontier, and *The Gilded Age* in that same year, a satirical treatise on the follies and foibles of the emerging elite in American culture.

Twain was happily married Olivia Langdon in 1870 and settled first in Buffalo and then Hartford. In spite of his success with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), he experienced substantial financial losses as an entrepreneur with the Paige typesetting machine and then a venture established to publish the memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant. He closed shop in Connecticut and embarked on a long tour of lecturing and writing abroad, which enabled him to retire his debts and return a conquering hero in 1900. Twain was born after a visit by Halley’s Comet in 1835 and predicted he would “go out with it, too”. True to his word, he died the day after its return in 1910.