

Town of Elmira Historians note: It is a little known fact that the borders of the Town of Elmira do, in fact, include Quarry Farm, which was Samuel Clemens summer residence for some 20 years. Therefore, Mark Twain does fall under Town Historian jurisdiction.

Additionally, the majority of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer would have been written up on the east hill, so this writing further makes sense that it is a product from the Town of Elmira Historian

Mark Twain vs ChatGPT

A competition staged by Town of Elmira Historian J.D. Iles

Samuel Clemens was well known for embracing new technology and rapidly incorporating it into his personal and professional life. He purchased a Remington typewriter in the 1870's, was one of the first people in Hartford to have a telephone installed in his residence, experimented with dictation machines to augment his writing output, and when he originally built his home in CT, he made sure it was equipped with electric lights. Clemens was certainly interested and inspired by technological innovation, both in day-to-day life, and specifically for his writing.

We are currently at the dawning of a new chapter in the Information Age, one that is rapidly becoming dominated by the tremendous leaps that Artificial Intelligence is making. I have no doubt, if ChatGPT would have co-existed with Samuel Clemens, he would have experimented with it, and possibly, would have used it within his writing in some fashion.

In August of 2023, I was part of an art project at Quarry Farm called "Clemens and the Pen" where a variety of artists created something in the space of two hours at the farm "in Mark Twain's shadow", so to speak.

My project was to attempt to rewrite the first chapter of the classic novel "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" using ChatGPT prompts. By doing so, I hoped to give a fresh and modern take on this beloved tale, while staying true to its original essence, and perhaps reveal new insights to the process of writing with AI that Clemens would have encountered.

The result of this experiment was initially unexpected as I found the writing in no way remarkable. However, in preparing this final paper, I ran the same “prompt” through the AI large language model, and was surprised at how much it has advanced in the span of just 6 months.

the original text “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer” by Mark Twain

Chapter 1

‘TOM!’

No answer.

‘TOM!’

No answer.

‘What’s gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!’

No answer.

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked THROUGH them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for ‘style,’ not service — she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well. She looked perplexed for a moment, and then said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear:

‘Well, I lay if I get hold of you I’ll —‘

She did not finish, for by this time she was bending down and punching under the bed with the broom, and so she needed breath to punctuate the punches with. She resurrected nothing but the cat.

the prompt to ChatGPT from J.D. Iles

scene 1 - Aunt Polly is searching for Tom throughout the house and calling out his name -

ChatGPT writing the passage in August 2023

The sun rose over the sleepy town of St. Petersburg, casting its warm rays upon the small white house where Aunt Polly resided. Inside, the morning bustle had begun, but there was one person missing – Tom Sawyer. Aunt Polly, a determined woman with a sharp eye for mischief, called out for him, her voice echoing through the halls.

"Tom! Tom Sawyer, where are you, you rascal?" Aunt Polly's voice carried through the house as she searched high and low, peering behind doors and checking every nook and cranny. Yet, there was no sign of the elusive boy.

ChatGPT writing the passage in February 2024 (6 months later)

Aunt Polly, in a fit of vexation that could rival the stormiest of weathers on the Mississippi, set about the house with a determination that was both admirable and slightly terrifying. Her voice, calling out "Tom!" with a mixture of annoyance and worry, echoed through the empty rooms like a bellowing call to arms. It was a sound that could make even the bravest of souls think twice before crossing its path.

Now, Tom, being of a clever sort that could outwit the sharpest of foxes, was nowhere to be seen. His name, bouncing off the walls and slipping through the cracks, found no purchase.

the original text

She went to the open door and stood in it and looked out among the tomato vines and 'jimpson' weeds that constituted the garden. No Tom. So she lifted up her voice at an angle calculated for distance and shouted:

'Y-o-u-u TOM!'

There was a slight noise behind her and she turned just in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight.

'There! I might 'a' thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing! Look at your hands. And look at your mouth. What IS that truck?'

'I don't know, aunt.'

'Well, I know. It's jam — that's what it is. Forty times I've said if you didn't let that jam alone I'd skin you. Hand me that switch.'

The switch hovered in the air — the peril was desperate

—

'My! Look behind you, aunt!'

The old lady whirled round, and snatched her skirts out of danger. The lad fled on the instant, scrambled up the high board-fence, and disappeared over it.

His aunt Polly stood surprised a moment, and then broke into a gentle laugh.

'Hang the boy, can't I never learn anything? Ain't he played me tricks enough like that for me to be look- ing out for him by this time? But old fools is the big- gest fools there is. Can't learn an old dog new tricks, as the saying is. But my goodness, he never plays them alike, two days, and how is a body to know what's coming? He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I

get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again and I can't hit him a lick. I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth, goodness knows. Spare the rod and spile the child, as the Good Book says. I'm a laying up sin and suffering for us both, I know. He's full of the Old Scratch, but laws-a-me! he's my own dead sister's boy, poor thing, and I ain't got the heart to lash him, some-how. Every time I let him off, my conscience does hurt me so, and every time I hit him my old heart most breaks. Well-a-well, man that is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble, as the Scripture says, and I reckon it's so. He'll play hookey this evening, * and [* Southwestern for 'afternoon"] I'll just be obleeged to make him work, to-morrow, to punish him. It's mighty hard to make him work Saturdays, when all the boys is having holiday, but he hates work more than he hates anything else, and I've GOT to do some of my duty by him, or I'll be the ruination of the child.'

the prompt to ChatGPT from J.D. Iles

scene 2 - Aunt Polly then finds him in the back garden - he is eating Jam that he was not allowed - she is about to use a switch on him, but he uses a cunning ruse fools her and escapes. Aunt Polly then contemplates Tom's nature as a trouble maker and incorporates biblical philosophy into his nature

ChatGPT writing the passage in August 2023

Just as Aunt Polly began to grow exasperated, she spotted a trail of crumbs leading out the back door and into the garden. Following the telltale signs, she found Tom sitting under the apple tree, a sly grin on his face, indulging in a jar of jam – a forbidden treat before breakfast.

"Thomas Sawyer! What do you think you're doing, eating that jam before breakfast?" Aunt Polly scolded, her hands firmly on her hips.

Tom's mischievous eyes met Aunt Polly's stern gaze. "Oh, Aunt Polly, I couldn't help myself. The jam looked too tempting, and I just wanted a taste," he said with feigned innocence.

Aunt Polly's frustration grew, but before she could reach for the switch she kept tucked in her apron, Tom had an idea. "Aunt Polly, look behind you! There's a strange creature in the garden!"

Aunt Polly turned her head, half-expecting to see some imaginary creature, and in that moment, Tom made his escape. He darted past her, laughing mischievously as he ran off.

Alone in the garden, Aunt Polly's frustration gave way to a moment of reflection. She shook her head, contemplating the boy's character and the challenges he presented. "That Tom Sawyer, he's a rascal through and through," she muttered to herself. "His ways never change, and he's forever testing my patience."

Aunt Polly's thoughts drifted back to the day she took Tom in after the passing of her sister and brother-in-law. She had assumed the burden of caring for him, and though she loved him dearly, she couldn't help but worry about his reckless nature.

"I try my best to guide him right, but he always seems to find trouble," she continued, a touch of sadness in her voice. "He avoids his chores like the plague, and it seems he'll never learn his lessons!"

With a determined glint in her eyes, Aunt Polly decided that Tom's mischief would not go unpunished. "He may have escaped today, but tomorrow he'll be working extra hard," she resolved.

ChatGPT writing the passage in February 2024 (6 months later)

In the tangled wilderness of the back garden, a place where the flowers and weeds conspired together in wild harmony, Aunt Polly's search came to a sudden, startling halt. There, amidst the greenery, was Tom Sawyer, as brazen as a pirate king on his ship, engaged in the most heinous of acts: pilfering jam from a jar he had been expressly forbidden to touch. The sight of him, jam smeared across his face in a badge of defiance, would have been comical if not for the severity of his crime.

Aunt Polly, her initial shock giving way to a resolve as firm as the laws of Moses, reached for a switch. The air, thick with the scent of imminent retribution, seemed to pause in anticipation. But Tom, ever the master of escapades, wore an expression of such innocent bewilderment that one might think he had stumbled upon the jam by divine intervention rather than by his own cunning.

With the artfulness of a seasoned diplomat, Tom spun a tale so convoluted and pitiable that Aunt Polly, despite the ironclad evidence before her, found herself hesitating. It was a performance worthy of a standing ovation, complete with heartfelt sighs and strategic tears. And in that moment of hesitation, Tom seized his chance. With a burst of youthful agility, he darted away, leaving Aunt Polly clutching at the air, the switch rendered useless in her hand.

Aunt Polly, left alone with the jar of jam and the echoes of Tom's laughter, found herself reflecting on the enigmatic nature of her charge. Tom Sawyer was, without a doubt, a troublemaker of the highest order, a boy whose spirit seemed as untamable as the Mississippi River itself. Yet, within his mischief lay a charm, a vivaciousness that could not be quelled or contained.

As she pondered, Aunt Polly's thoughts drifted towards the biblical philosophies she held dear. She couldn't deny that, much like the

prodigal son, Tom's wayward paths might one day lead him to redemption. In his defiance, she saw the raw material of greatness, a spirit that, if guided with a gentle hand and a firm resolve, could blossom into something truly admirable.

In the quiet of the garden, with the sun casting long shadows and the jar of jam standing as a testament to the day's escapades, Aunt Polly whispered a prayer for guidance. She knew the path ahead would be fraught with trials, but she also knew that love, patience, and a touch of divine wisdom might yet steer Tom Sawyer towards a destiny worthy of his boundless energy and imagination.

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Back in August of 2023, sitting on the porch at Quarry Farm and attempting this challenge for the first time, I was disappointed with the limit of what the AI was capable of. The writing was stilted, cold, uninspired and bare-bones. To be honest, I was expecting more.

The second attempt occurred in February 2024 when it came time to package up this project in a usable form to be submitted to the "Clemens and the Pen" review committee. On a whim, I put the same prompt into ChatGPT and this time, under a higher level of the program (4.0) and a higher level of output was rendered (both the old writing via ChatGPT and the new were provided above). On this attempt, the writing was much more sophisticated, and while clearly not up to the level of Samuael Clemens writing style, it is a distant echo of it.

While this project failed in its initial attempt to create a new, first chapter of the Adventures of Tom Sawyer with some sort of "robo-Twain", instead we have received a harbinger of things to come. In a short 6 months, the program has gone from a "Twain-toddler" to a "Twain-teen".

So how long until AI is able to create new novels, in a voice with the same depth and intelligence as Samuel Clemens?

I decided to put the question to the entity itself.



**You**

how many more years of development will chatGPT need before being able to create writing that is indistinguishable from that of Samuel Clemens?



**ChatGPT**

Predicting the exact timeline for AI development, especially to the point where it can consistently create writing indistinguishable from a specific author like Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), involves significant uncertainty. The challenge lies not only in replicating Clemens's unique style, humor, and depth of insight but also in capturing the historical context, linguistic nuances, and the creative genius that characterized his work.

As of my last update in April 2023, AI models like GPT-4 have shown remarkable capabilities in generating text that can mimic various writing styles to a certain degree. However, there are still discernible differences when it comes to replicating the full depth, creativity, and subtleties of specific authors, especially those with as distinctive a voice as Mark Twain.



**You**

please guess at a timeline



**ChatGPT**

Given the current pace of advancements in artificial intelligence, particularly in natural language processing and generation, a speculative timeline can be outlined with cautious optimism. However, it's important to stress that this timeline is highly speculative and subject to numerous variables, including technological breakthroughs, ethical considerations, and the allocation of resources for research and development.

**Short Term (Next 1-5 Years):** AI will continue to improve in mimicking specific writing styles and content generation. We'll likely see enhanced models capable of producing texts that resemble Samuel Clemens's style with increasing accuracy. These models will better capture linguistic nuances, humor, and narrative structures, but may still struggle with deeper contextual insights and the unique creative essence that characterizes Clemens's work.

**Medium Term (5-10 Years):** With significant advancements in AI, including better understanding and processing of context, subtleties of human emotions, and historical settings, AI-generated texts could become increasingly indistinguishable from those of less stylistically distinct authors. For authors with a very distinctive voice and style like Clemens, AI might come close to replicating their writing for shorter texts or in contexts with well-defined parameters.

**Long Term (10+ Years):** In this period, we might witness breakthroughs in AI's creative and contextual understanding, potentially enabling the creation of long-form texts that closely mimic the writing of Samuel Clemens. This would include not just the stylistic and linguistic aspects but also the depth of insight, humor, and the ability to critique society in ways Clemens is renowned for. However, even at this stage, distinguishing AI-generated texts from human creativity could still be possible, especially by experts familiar with Clemens's work and the subtleties of his creative genius.

So what do these advancements mean for us, in 10 years time? This would be a boon, for example, to a reader who wished for a complete series of “Tom Sawyer Detective” stories. ChatGPT could simply render as many as the reader wished, with a variety of hand-picked themes.

More powerfully, if AI eventually gains the ability to imitate, in style and substance, the writing of a certain author, how close do we actually get to recreating that mind? Now, the easy answer, that will certainly be given by many, will be “not close at all”, but I find myself not entirely satisfied with that answer. If we ask ChatGPT to write Samuel Clemens’ opinion of our current political landscape and his opinion of candidates running for President in 2024, we will certainly gain some insight into what he may have said, with of course, no way to prove anything one way or another.

But, for me, the most compelling question is, “will future classrooms and academic papers choose to study the comparison and flaws in a ChatGPT created Mark Twain novel or lecture? Comparing the AI written text to what Twain may or may not have written?”. I see that as highly probable, and that, of course, is the springing of the elegant trap that we have set for ourselves.

