



The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc. or its Licensors. Please see [copyright information](#) at the end of this document.

Samuel Clemens' courtship of Olivia Langdon began shortly after their initial meeting in 1868. It was largely carried on through letters and culminated in their wedding in 1870. Clemens was a rough, self-educated, humorist—a Southerner of scant economic means; Langdon a frail, genteel Easterner, whose family was moderately wealthy. They had, as author Susan K. Harris notes, little in common. That they managed to work their way around their differences, through means such as literature and religion, is the story of THE COURTSHIP OF OLIVIA LANGDON AND MARK TWAIN. Harris' work seems somewhat incomplete, however, as she assigns almost no role to love as the bridge to unity. This, of course, is the obvious answer, but not as politically appealing as the cultural one. Harris extends her scope into the first three years of their marriage, when beset by so many woes, the Clemenses began to fashion the modus vivendi that would sustain them through thirty-four years of marriage.

Mark Twain's biographers have consigned Olivia Langdon Clemens to the shadows of his creative life, natural enough given his celebrity. In his own joking testimony, "Livy" was his harshest critic, censuring out of his drafts indelicacies and oversharpe satiric strokes. Thus she has been either ignored by critics or seen as a Victorian prude. Harris justly seeks to redraw this unfair portrait, but her attempt to rehabilitate Olivia by claiming for her a kind of Emersonian self-reliance and a disciplined positivist's view of nature will not wash. To excerpt one or two quotations from a young girl's commonplace book or note a Twain letter which humorously deplores Livy's chemical experiments as instances of a self-generating intellect is, as Huck Finn might have it, a bit of a "stretcher."

Harris' depiction of a young girl's cultural life in post-Civil War Elmira, New York, has merit insofar as it reflects the kind of life Samuel Clemens wanted in on; the foregrounding of Olivia Langdon is reasonable. However, the claims made for her as Mark Twain's intellectual equal simply push wish too far.

Copyright Notice

©2009 eNotes.com, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

No part of this work covered by the copyright hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping, Web distribution or information storage retrieval systems without the written permission of the publisher.

For complete copyright information, please see the online version of this work:
<http://www.enotes.com/courtship-olivia-langdon-mark-twain-salem>