

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Concept Analysis

Literary Text: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (Dodd, Mead, & Company)

Summary ♦ continuing in the vein of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck Finn has run into a large sum of money which he holds in a bank trust. Adopted and under the tutelage of the strict widow, Miss Watson, Huck grudgingly learns a new life of manners, church, and school. Things go south when his drunken father, Pap comes into town, kidnapping Huck and demanding his money. Huck escapes, faking his own death. While all the townspeople search the river for his body, Huck runs into Jim, a slave who escaped Miss Watson due to threats of selling him to a plantation. In their adventures together, Huck and Jim come to know about right and wrong, slavery and oppression, friendship, and loyalty. After many close encounters of being caught and sold back into their respective slaveries, they are faced with a final test. In an effort to help Jim remain free, Huck and Tom, with whom they meet up, attempt to escape; however, Tom is shot in the leg, and Jim gives up his freedom in order to nurse him. In the end, it is discovered that Jim has been declared free in Miss Watson's will; also, Huck, who is terrified of his father returning, finds out that his father has died. Huck is able to set out on his own, escaping all of the "sivilizing" that he dreads.

Organizational Patterns ♦ *Huckleberry Finn* is organized into forty three chapters, ranging from eight to twelve pages. This edition contains a total of 312 pages. This edition also contains a few pictures throughout that contain biographical information about the author and historical and setting pictures.

The Central Question ♦ LIBERTY, RIGHT & WRONG

Liberty for all? Many know *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be one of the great classic American novels, according to the Library of Congress' website, America's Story (<http://www.americaslibrary.gov>). Part of what makes this a great American novel is the central question of Liberty and freedom for all. There are two types of slavery in this story. Not only is Jim a victim of racial slavery, Huck is also a victim of a type of slavery. Huck is in bondage to his alcoholic father, whom he is seeking to flee from throughout the book. *Huckleberry Finn* is more than a story of fun and adventure; it is a story of seeking after liberty. A passage from chapter fourteen illustrates this central question: "he [Jim] said he didn't want no more adventures . . . for if he didn't get saved he would get drowned; and if he did get saved, whoever saved him would send him back home so as to get the reward, and then Miss Watson would sell him South, sure." Towards the end of the story, Huck is afraid that his father will return to oppress him. Both of their fears are put to rest at the end as Jim is granted his freedom through Miss Watson's will. Huck is granted his release and freedom through the death of his father. Huck is able to head west to live the American dream of liberty.

What is Right and Wrong? In chapter six, we see that Huck isn't particularly the best model

for right and wrong: "I didn't see how I'd ever got to like it so well at the widow's, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular, and be forever bothering over a book, and have old Miss Watson pecking at you all the time;" however, many questions arise throughout Huck's adventures as his character develops and his situations grow more complicated. Right and wrong is a central question throughout Jim and Huck's friendship. Huck feels bound to turn in Jim, according to the law; however, bound to his friendship, Huck doesn't know what to do. In chapter 16, after aiding Jim in escape, Huck almost turns Jim in. But, his plan goes awry, and Jim says, "Huck, you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de *only* fren' ole Jim's got now." To this, in Huck's mind he replies, "I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me." Although Huck thinks he knows what is right, he finds himself questioning and reasoning with his morals throughout the book. Huck does this in chapter twelve when trying to decide if it would be ok to "borrow" some fruit from another person's trees. He uses his own reasoning that is a mix between the two ways he was raised: "Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things if you was meaning to pay them back some time; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing." Huck's reasoning of right and wrong is a mixture of what he has been taught by his Dad on one extreme and what he has been taught by Miss Watson on the other extreme.

Issues Related to this Study of Literature

Themes ♦

Liberty/Slavery

This theme is the central issue, because it presents the main conflict through which the boys' loyalty, morals, and all other underlying themes develop. The plight for liberty is what unites the two boys and unites the plot.

Loyalty and Friendship

The friendship that Huck and Jim create slowly over time is quite a beautiful portrait of the loyalty that can exist between two individuals. We definitely see a gradual progression of their friendship throughout the conflict. There are times when Huck considers turning Jim, the runaway slave into the authorities. But, as their journey and experiences unite them, their friendship grows into a deep and loyal commitment to protect each other. A wonderful example of this can be seen in chapter 31, in which, Huck tries to figure out if he should complete his legal obligation and turn in Jim or if he should be a friend and help him escape.

Morals

Some might have a problem with the moral reasoning in this book. Huck and Tom create a gang of robbers with the intention of stealing and killing to leave their mark: "Stuff! stealing cattle and such things ain't robbery; it's burglary," says Tom Sawyer. "We ain't burglars. That ain't no sort of style. We are highwaymen. We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money." However, when actually faced with things like death, Huck is mortified. He won't even look at the body of the dead man that he and Jim encounter for fear of bad luck. Furthermore, in chapter twelve, Huck and Jim encounter a band of murderers which they say "we can put *all* of 'em in a bad fix—for the sheriff 'll get 'em." The boys are all talk when it comes to their lavish plans, but they

never turn to murder—they are terrified by it. Throughout the book, the reader gets to walk through Huck's inner moral reasoning as he tries to make decisions. Huck's moral reasoning is the product of his being raised by his father, Mrs. Watson, and his own desire for independence.

Race

This book has received some flak for its repeated use of the word “nigger.” However, if teachers can talk about this issue with students and think about the context of the time and setting, readers will see that it is not a racist book; it simply doesn't ignore that race issues existed back then. This book is very anti-slavery and pro-liberty if readers can look at the parallelism between Huck and Jim's plights. They are both in search of freedom and both get it in the end. The book in no way condones the use of the word or of the poor treatment of slaves; that's why Jim was running—to escape the evils of slavery.

Unit on Race

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/index.html>

Setting ♦ Huckleberry Finn takes place in the Pre-Civil War south. The novel takes place in the Mississippi River town of St. Petersburg, Missouri. As Huck and Jim travel, they make their way through different locations along the river through Arkansas

Point-of-View ♦ One of the things that makes this novel unique is that it is told with very distinct voices. It is written in the perspective of Huck, but Twain uses dialogues that make the speakers sound believable, distinct, and interesting. Jim is not constrained to speak proper English; rather, Twain made him have a tongue common for the setting, time, and character. Huck wasn't confined to speaking only with proper phrases and tenses; instead, Huck speaks in a more colloquial manner which fits the time and place. This can be seen throughout the book. One instance of this colloquialism is: “And ain't you had nothing but that kind of rubbage to eat? No-sah—nuffn else.” While today, particularly in writing, we would rarely make use of things like double negatives, phonetically spelled words, or made up words, Twain artfully crafts these grammar inconsistencies into a believable and identifiable feeling for his dialogue.

Literary elements ♦

Imagery—Twain uses vivid imagery to describe the scenes and setting. For a great example of his imagery see the passage about the storm featured in chapter nine.

Characterization—Twain makes use of dialogue to individualize the voice of the characters. This literary device makes each of the characters unique in their personalities and reactions throughout the book.

Conflict—the conflict is made up of the plot and all of the complications that raise the central question and the other various themes. Huck and Jim's entire adventure is filled with conflict as they run into people who attempt to rob them of their freedom. Huck's dad, Pap presents

a conflict for Huck's adventure, while Miss Watson and others who are pro-slavery present a conflict for Jim.

Setting—It's incredibly important to outline the setting of this book, because it is constantly changing. One minute Huck and Jim are on the raft, while the next, they are on dry land. This would be a great time to talk about the significance and impact of setting.

Point-of-View—how would this book be different if it were written in Jim's point-of-view? How about if it were written in Pap's, Miss Watson's, or even Tom's point-of-view. Talk about how this leads to stronger characterization of Huckleberry.

Affective Issues Related to the Work ♦ There are so many rich elements that students will be able to identify with. This section merely serves as a summary, because the central question and themes truly serve as affective issues. Students will personally relate to this work because of the theme and central question of liberty. As students in America, they will be able to identify with the desire for independence and freedom. Black students may also be able to relate to Jim, because his dialogue is colloquial and not highfalutin.

Students may also identify with Huck's inner moral reasoning. Many students live in homes where their parents do not hold the same values and therefore may understand the nuances of Huck's thought. Huck is not extremely grounded in morals, because he has received such a variety of differences in his upbringing as well as lack of direction that his reasoning is laden with justifications and relativity.

Students will also be able to relate with Tom's and Huck's sense of adventure. Since the two of them have so much independence from their families, they have the freedom to set out on their own journeys. They are able to form gangs, make fortunes, and come up with elaborate plans and schemes. They both think outside-of-the-box and take care of their own "civilizing."

Vocabulary Issues ♦ Even though the book is a classic, the vocabulary is not particularly difficult. Despite its length, the book is a fairly manageable read. There are not too many words that would present a problem for high school students. The only difficulty that I can foresee is the dialect that Jim and Huck speak. It may be slightly confusing, in parts, to understand exactly what the characters were saying, because they speak so differently than we do. However, I think reading the passages that are in the characters' voices aloud to students will help them get a feel for the phonetic way and dialectical way in which the characters' speech is written. When read aloud, the dialogue made much more sense, because I am used to hearing that type of Southern and Black speech, but I don't often see it written. The novel is fairly engaging once students enter into the realm of the story.

Background Knowledge ♦ A background knowledge of the prequel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* would be helpful; although, in the words of Huck, "YOU don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter" This passage seems to suggest that the book would provide a richer understanding of Huck's character and nature but is unnecessary to enjoy this book. It may

be helpful to at least refer to excerpts, synopses, and major elements in Tom's book prior to a study of Huck's book.

Implications for Students of Diversity ♦ The book contains a lot of diversity. First, the book has Huck—an independent, free-thinking adolescent boy. Second, the book has Jim—an escaped adolescent slave who also has a mind of his own. The, the book also has the contrast between the adults: Pap—a drunken man with low morals and Miss Watson—a woman very grounded in morals, religion, and manners. All express their unique personalities and views throughout the conflict.

The dialogue is a chief example of diversity. Featuring Black and Southern dialects, Mark Twain shows the capabilities and broad scope that a novel is able to create. I think students of diversity will be able to connect with the informal way in which this novel draws the reader into the characters. Directly related, the Southern setting lends itself to this type of diversity.

Gender Issues ♦ This book doesn't really have too many gender issues. The book is obviously more geared towards adolescent boys, but the book in no way demeans women. Chapter eleven presents a humorous scene where Huck disguises himself as a girl in order to get some information. The woman with whom he converses plays along with the idea until the very end. She then reveals how she knew from the very start that Huck was indeed not a girl. Her description of how Huck acted versus how a woman would have done things is hysterical.

Research Question Ideas ♦

- Why is this considered the Great American Novel?

"Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot."

-Mark Twain, Introductory Note to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

- If this is what Mark Twain believed about his book, why do we read so deeply into it?
- Should *Huckleberry Finn* be Banned or Praised?
- Spark Notes contains suggested study questions and essay topics for this novel that would be really great for discussions/assignments on the novel.

Enrichment Resources ♦

<http://historyofideas.org/railton/huckfinn/huchompg.html>

This site offers a lot of historical information concerning the novel and its themes. It seeks to capture the spirit of respectability and controversiality. It features different depictions of characters in various editions. The site also offers the full text and a search option for all of Twain's works.

<http://www.pbs.org/wqbh/cultureshock/teachers/huck/index.html>

This is a great guide that offers many ideas and resources and explores the controversy of

the book. The guide may have a bit of a slant towards the controversial nature of the book, but individuals will have to decide for themselves. Tons of teaching methods are up for grabs

<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/lessonplans/programs/greatbooks-huckfinn/>

This site offers a wealth of lesson plans that can be used in relation to the text.

<http://www.loudlit.org/works/hfinn.htm>

This site offers the full text and also a full-audio version of the book.

Movie Interpretations – There are many movie versions of the book that can be used to increase comprehension, view variety of interpretation and perspective, to see a portrait of the time, and to teach some chapters when under a time constraint or to vary instruction.

PBS Culture Shock movie series

Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Shock of the Nude: Manet's *Olympia*

Hollywood Censored: Movies, Morality & the Production Code

The Devil's Music: 1920s Jazz

Adaptations of the book

- Sommers, Stephen. *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, 1993.
- Thompson, J. Lee. *Huckleberry Finn*, 1974.
- Hill, Dick. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 2007. (The book read aloud with illustrations)
- Hewitt, Peter. *Tom and Huck*, 1995.
- Curtiz, Michael. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 1960.

Other: to teach the theme / elements of the book

- Apted, Michael. *Amazing Grace*, 2006.
- Griffith, D.W. *Birth of a Nation*, 1915.
 - Large compilation of videos that may be helpful for the teaching of the book: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/imagesafam.html>

Books / Articles about The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Henry, Peaches. "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in *Huckleberry Finn*" *Satire and Evasion: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, 1992.

Webb, Allen. "Racism and *Huckleberry Finn*: Censorship, Dialogue, and Change" *English Journal*, Nov. 1993. Reprinted with revision in *Literature and Lives*, NCTE Press, 2001.

Understanding the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents. Claudia Dust Johnson, Greenwood Press, 1996

Hit List: Frequently Challenged Books for Young Adults
The Intellectual Freedom Committee of the Young Adult Library Services Association,
United States American Library Association,

Huckleberry Finn on Film: Film and Television Adaptations of Mark Twain's Novel, 1920-1993

Clyde V. Haupt, McFarland, 1994

"De Ole True Huck." Dudley Barlow, Education Digest, May 1996

"Say It Ain't So, Huck." Jane Smiley, Harper's, January 1996

"In Praise of Huckleberry Finn." Lance Morrow, Current, May 1995

"Jim and the Dead Man." Mark Twain, The New Yorker, June 26, 1995

"Alice, Huck, Pinocchio, and the Blue Fairy: Bodies Real and Imagined." M.L. Rosenthal, Southern Review, Summer 1993

"Mark Twain and Huck Finn Still Stirring Up Trouble" All Things Considered—National Public Radio, July 31, 1995, Program n1925

Books to teach about Slavery

- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.*
- *The Life of Olaudah Equiano.*
- *Confessions of Nat Turner.*
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Linda Brent.
- *Our Nig*, 1859 by Harriet Wilson.
- *Clotel: or, The President's Daughter* by William Wells Brown.
- *The Marrow of Tradition* by Charles Chestnut.
- *Roots* by Alex Haley.
- *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes.
- "Tribal Scars" by Ousmane Sembene.
- *Jubilee* by Margaret Walker.
- *People's History of the United States*, by Howard Zinn, (1980)
- *The Slave Community* by John W. Blassingame, 1979.
- *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene Geneovese (1976)

Picture books

Abiyoyo by Pete Seeger

Narration and animated video of the book from *Between the Lions*

<http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/bt107.rla.early.aloud.abiyoyo/>

Focus Activity interwoven with Discussion:

- What bothered the townspeople about the boy and his dad?
- How do you think being kicked out made the boy and his father feel?
- How did that change after they defeated the giant, Abiyoyo?
- Have you ever experienced a time when something you do is unappreciated?
Have you ever felt undervalued?

- How did it make you feel?

(show passage from chapter 31 about Huck and the note)

- How do the differences between Jim and Huck make Huck uncomfortable?
- ?differences how does Huck react to those ,In previous chapter
- As the story goes on, what is it that changes Huck's mind about Jim?