

#10614
THE ADVENTURES
OF HUCK FINN

DISNEY EDUCATIONAL PRODUCTIONS, 1993

GRADE LEVEL: 5-12

108 MINUTES

DESCRIPTION

Features the unforgettable adventures of a mischievous boy and a runaway slave traveling down the Mississippi River. Huck and Jim encounter thieves, feuding families, con men, and always the danger of discovery in this version of Mark Twain's classic novel. Stars Elijah Wood, Courtney Vance, Robbie Coltrane, and Jason Robards in this 1993 production.

ACADEMIC STANDARDS

Subject Area: Language Art

- Standard: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
 - ◆ Benchmark: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand a variety of literary texts (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, myths, poems, biographies, autobiographies, science fiction, supernatural tales, satires, parodies, plays, American literature, British literature, world and ancient literature).
 - ◆ Benchmark: Analyzes the use of complex elements of plot in specific literary works (e.g., time frame, cause-and-effect relationships, conflicts, resolution).
 - ◆ Benchmark: Understands how themes are used across literary works and genres (e.g., universal themes in literature of different cultures, such as death and rebirth, initiation, love and duty; major themes in American literature; authors associated with major themes of specific eras).
 - ◆ Benchmark: Understands the effects of author's style and complex literary devices and techniques on the overall quality of a work (e.g., tone; irony; mood; figurative language; allusion; diction; dialogue; symbolism; point of view; voice; understatement and overstatement; time and sequence; narrator; poetic elements, such as sound, imagery, personification).

Subject Area: History

- Standard: Understands the historical perspective.

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- ◆ Benchmark: Analyzes the influences specific ideas and beliefs had on a period of history and specifies how events might have been different in the absence of those ideas and beliefs.

Subject Area: Behavioral Studies

- Standard: Understands conflict, cooperation, and interdependence among individuals, groups, and institutions.
 - ◆ Benchmark: Understands that conflict between people or groups may arise from competition over ideas, resources, power, and/or status.
 - ◆ Benchmark: Understands that social change, or the prospect of it, promotes conflict because social, economic, and political changes usually benefit some groups more than others (which is also true of the status quo).

Subject Area: Civics

- Standard: Understands the role of diversity in American life and the importance of shared values, political beliefs, and civic beliefs in an increasingly diverse American society.
 - ◆ Benchmark: Knows different viewpoints regarding the role and value of diversity in American life.

VOCABULARY

1. absurdity	9. literal
2. brutality	10. prejudice
3. civilize	11. rebirth
4. freedom	12. shrewdness
5. human nature	13. slavery
6. humanity	14. superstition
7. imaginative	15. vernacular
8. ingenuity	

BEFORE SHOWING

Read the book by Mark Twain.

AFTER SHOWING

Discussion Items and Questions

1. Select five characters that Twain does not admire in Huck Finn. Give the specific traits that each possess that make him or her not an admirable person. What does Twain admire in a man, and what is he contemptuous of?
2. Select five characters that Twain does admire. Give the specific traits that each possess that make him or her admirable. What does Twain admire in a man, and what is he contemptuous of?

C a p t i o n e d M e d i a P r o g r a m

3. Select two of the social institutions that Twain pokes fun at. Use specific references to show how he accomplishes this.
4. Violence and greed are motivations of much of the action in this book. Discuss, giving at least three examples of each.
5. This novel is also a satire on human weaknesses. What human traits does he satirize? Give examples for each.
6. Mark Twain was able to find humor in situations that most people would regard as serious. Discuss and give specifics.
7. A major unifying element in the novel is illusion (pretense) vs. reality. Find examples. Explain their significance to Twain's overall themes.
8. Discuss the qualities Huck possesses which are necessary for survival on the frontier. Give specific examples from the novel.
9. Discuss the role of superstition in the novel. Explain how Twain criticizes superstitious beliefs, and give specific examples.
10. How is Huck's trip down the river actually a passage into manhood?
11. Death is everywhere in the book, from Huck's make-believe murder of himself, to his father's corpse in the floating house, the feud, Emmeline Grangerford's art, and the Wilks' funeral. Does this make the book morbid? How does Huck handle his fear and understanding of death?
12. What would someone reading Twain's work understand about race? How does Huckleberry Finn succeed in teaching something about race? How does Huckleberry Finn fail?
13. What is satire? What is irony? Give an example of each from Mark Twain's work.
14. Why did he choose to write satire? What impact does satire have on readers?
15. Who were his models for his writing style? How did he employ humor in other aspects of his life? Describe Huck's feelings about living with the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. Which one of the ladies does he like more? Why? What does he feel about their attempts to "civilize" him?
16. Is Mark Twain's style still successful today? Why or why not?
17. Where was Mark Twain born? Describe his early life and jobs.
18. Identify some of the places Mark Twain lived during his life. How did he imagine each?
19. To what degree did he draw on the people and places in his life in his writing?
20. What did Twain value in his personal life? Who were important people in his life?
21. How did the fact that Twain moved away from Hannibal influence his ability to write about it?
22. What causes racism? What beliefs do people invoke to try to justify racism? In what kinds of situations do we see or find racism?
23. When did you first recognize your own racial, ethnic, religious (or other) identity? What does it mean to you to identify yourself in this way? What do you like most and least about being a member of your group?
24. How has racism affected you or people you know?
25. Why do you think the author chose Huck--an illiterate young boy--as the voice through which to tell this story?

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26. Huck begins and ends the novel by revealing his discomfort with being "civilized." Why do you think he feels this way? What do you think Twain's message is?

Applications and Activities

1. Bring in or ask students to bring in something from popular culture that employs satire to make its point (an episode of *The Simpsons*, for instance). What is the writer's point of view about the society he or she portrays? How can you tell? How is he or she using satire? Now ask students to answer those same questions about Huck Finn. You might then have students form small groups and find as many similarities as they can between the two works, such as similar targets of the authors' satires, methods of satirizing, or even reactions from the public when the piece was first presented. In reporting back to the class, each group might also identify the scene in each work they find to be the most effective use of satire.
2. Stage a challenge for students: Have them work in small groups and give them twenty minutes to list as many examples of irony or satire in the novel as they can find. As each group shares some of their selections, let the rest of the class discuss whether the instances cited are, in fact, satirical or ironic.
3. Direct students to Chapter 6, in which the drunken Pap Finn uses the word "nigger" multiple times. Why might Twain have used the word here with such intensity and frequency? Ask students to rewrite the speech without using the word, or by changing it to "slave" or "African American." Have the class discuss how changing this word changed the meaning or impact of the section. How does this scene support or refute the charge that the book is racist? Students can also use a section from John Wallace's version, *The Adventures of Huck Finn Adapted* (Falls Church, VA, John H. Wallace and Sons Co., 1983), in which he rewrites Huck Finn without using "nigger."
4. As Huck and Jim journey down the Mississippi, readers may begin to notice that their experiences alone on the raft, or in nature in general, are very different from their experiences whenever they are on the shore in "civilization." What is Twain saying by creating this division? Have each student construct his or her own map of the journey. Each map should show what they believe are the most important events in the novel, and should include a significant quote at each map point. Overall, their maps should visually express the symbolic differences between the river and "civilization."
5. Some people feel that race relations in America today are still influenced by the legacy of slavery. What is that legacy? How does it relate to reading Huck Finn? Throughout the unit, have students individually or in small groups collect newspaper and magazine articles, music lyrics, poems, excerpts from books, artwork, and so forth, that they believe in some way expresses how America is still affected by slavery today. At the end of the unit students can either do a short oral or multimedia presentation on their findings, or they can create a "book" in which these findings are collected and annotated.
6. Is or isn't Huck Finn racist? Does reading Huck Finn help or harm race relations? Have students stage a mock trial with the book or Mark Twain as the defendant.

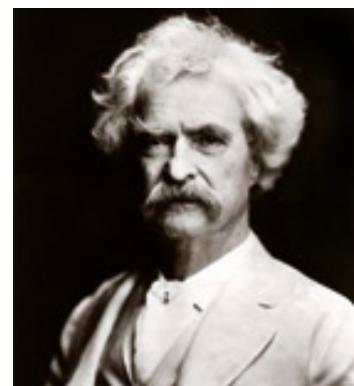
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(You may want to visit [this site](#) which contains a detailed lesson plan on staging a trial, developed by teacher Diane Walker.) Have students present the evidence they have been gathering. Students could also explore this question in a talk show format featuring Huck, Jim, Twain, and anyone else--real or imagined, living or dead--they believe might add to the conversation. Before doing this activity, it may be helpful to have students first revisit the class definition of racism.

7. Writer David Bradley notes that many have criticized the ending of *Huck Finn* but "none of them has been able to suggest--much less write--a better ending . . . They failed for the same reason that Twain wrote the ending as he did: America has never been able to write a better ending. America has never been able to write any ending at all." What do you think he means? Ask students to imagine they were Mark Twain's editor and to write Twain a letter explaining why and how he should change the ending. (To extend this activity, have students actually rewrite the ending, and compare their versions to the original.)
8. Gerry Brenner, in his essay "More Than a Reader's Response: A Letter to 'De Ole True Huck'" (in *A Case Study in Critical Controversy: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Gerald Graff and James Phelan, Boston, Bedford Books, 1995), pretends Jim has read *Huck Finn* and written a response in which he sets the record straight. Ask students to do the same, or pretend to be Jim writing a short review of the book. How would Jim's version differ from Huck's? Have students compare and contrast their ideas with Brenner's article.
9. Have students write a scene or a "treatment" for a new movie or novel, set in contemporary times, in which Huck and Jim meet and become friends. Who would they be today? What would their issues be? Where would their journey take place?
10. Ask students to write Huck's diary entry if he were to visit their high school in the present day. What would he think of what he sees?
11. Have students review the case of Kathy Monteiro and her complaint to the Tempe, Arizona, school board, as shown in the *Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* film. Do they agree or disagree with her? Let groups or individual students prepare a presentation to a Board of Education in which they argue either for or against teaching the novel in the school curriculum. Remind students to anticipate the objections that might come from different members of the community, including parents, teachers, religious leaders, students, and administrators.

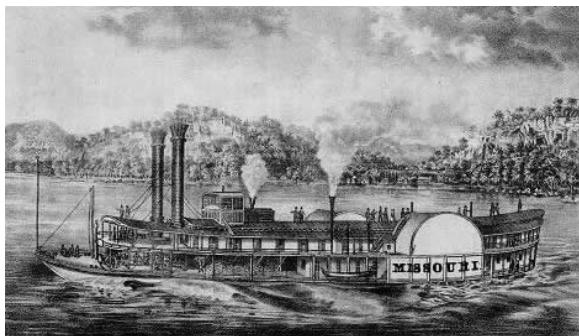
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in the town of Florida, Missouri, in 1835. When he was four years old, his family moved to Hannibal, a town on the Mississippi River, much like the towns depicted in his two most famous novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).



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Clemens spent his young life in a fairly affluent family that owned a number of household slaves. The death of Clemens's father in 1847, however, left the family in hardship. Clemens left school, worked for a printer and, in 1851, having finished his apprenticeship, began to set type for his brother Orion's newspaper, the *Hannibal Journal*. But Hannibal proved too small to hold Clemens, who soon became a sort of itinerant printer and found work in a number of American cities, including New York and Philadelphia.



While still in his early twenties, Clemens gave up his printing career in order to work on riverboats on the Mississippi. Clemens eventually became a riverboat pilot, and his life on the river influenced him a great deal. Perhaps most important, the riverboat life provided him with the pen name Mark Twain, derived from the riverboat leadsmen's signal—"By the mark, twain"—that the water was deep enough

for safe passage. Life on the river also gave Twain material for several of his books, including the raft scenes of *Huckleberry Finn* and the material for his autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).

Clemens continued to work on the river until 1861, when the Civil War exploded across America and shut down the Mississippi for travel and shipping. Although Clemens joined a Confederate cavalry division, he was no ardent Confederate, and when his division deserted en masse, he did too. He then made his way west with his brother Orion, working first as a silver miner in Nevada and then stumbling into his true calling: journalism. In 1863, Clemens began to sign articles with the name Mark Twain.

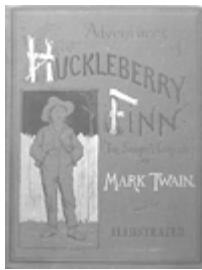
Throughout the late 1860s and 1870s, Twain's articles, stories, memoirs, and novels, characterized by an irrepressible wit and a deft ear for language and dialect, garnered him immense celebrity. His novel *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) was an instant bestseller, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) received even greater national acclaim and cemented Twain's position as a giant in American literary circles. As the nation prospered economically in the post-Civil War period—an era that came to be known as the Gilded Age, an epithet that Twain coined—so too did Twain. His books were sold door-to-door, and he became wealthy enough to build a large house in Hartford, Connecticut, for himself and his wife, Olivia, whom he had married in 1870.



Twain began work on *Huckleberry Finn*, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, in an effort to capitalize on the popularity of the earlier novel. This new novel took on a more

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serious character, however, as Twain focused increasingly on the institution of slavery and the South. Twain soon set *Huckleberry Finn* aside, perhaps because its darker tone did not fit the optimistic sentiments of the Gilded Age. In the early 1880s, however, the hopefulness of the post-Civil War years began to fade. Reconstruction, the political program designed to reintegrate the defeated South into the Union as a slavery-free region, began to fail. The harsh measures the victorious North imposed only embittered the South. Concerned about maintaining power, many Southern politicians began an effort to control and oppress the African-American men and women whom the war had freed.



The story of *Huckleberry Finn* continued long after the author's death in 1910. Through the twentieth century, the novel became famous not merely as the crown jewel in the work of one of America's preeminent writers, but also as a subject of intense controversy. The novel occasionally has been banned in both Northern and Southern states and others have dismissed *Huckleberry Finn* as vulgar or racist because it uses the word "nigger," a term whose connotations obscure the novel's deeper themes—which are unequivocally antislavery—and even prevent some from reading and enjoying it altogether. The fact that the historical context in which Twain wrote made his use of the word insignificant—and, indeed, part of the realism he wanted to create—offers little solace to some modern readers. Ultimately, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has proved significant not only as a novel that explores the racial and moral world of its time but also, through the controversies that continue to surround it, as an artifact of those same moral and racial tensions as they have evolved to the present day.

ANALYSIS OF MAJOR CHARACTERS

Huck Finn

From the beginning of the novel, Twain makes it clear that Huck is a boy who comes from the lowest levels of white society. His father is a drunk and a ruffian who disappears for months on end. Huck himself is dirty and frequently homeless. Although the Widow Douglas attempts to "reform" Huck, he resists her attempts and maintains his independent ways. The community has failed to protect him from his father, and though the Widow finally gives Huck some of the schooling and religious training that he had missed, he has not been indoctrinated with social values in the same way a middle-class boy like Tom Sawyer has been. Huck's distance from mainstream society makes him skeptical of the world around him and the ideas it passes on to him.

Huck's instinctual distrust and his experiences as he travels down the river force him to question the things society has taught him. According to the law, Jim is Miss Watson's property, but according to Huck's sense of logic and fairness, it seems "right" to help Jim. Huck's natural intelligence and his willingness to think through a situation on its own merits lead him to some conclusions that are correct in their

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context but that would shock white society. For example, Huck discovers, when he and Jim meet a group of slave-hunters, that telling a lie is sometimes the right course of action. Because Huck is a child, the world seems new to him. Everything he encounters is an occasion for thought. Because of his background, however, he does more than just apply the rules that he has been taught—he creates his own rules. Yet Huck is not some kind of independent moral genius. He must still struggle with some of the preconceptions about African Americans that society has ingrained in him, and at the end of the novel, he shows himself all too willing to follow Tom Sawyer's lead. But even these failures are part of what makes Huck appealing and sympathetic. He is only a boy, after all, and therefore fallible. Imperfect as he is, Huck represents what anyone is capable of becoming: a thinking, feeling human being rather than a mere cog in the machine of society.

Jim

Jim, Huck's companion as he travels down the river, is a man of remarkable intelligence and compassion. At first glance, Jim seems to be superstitious to the point of idiocy, but a careful reading of the time that Huck and Jim spend on Jackson's Island reveals that Jim's superstitions conceal a deep knowledge of the natural world and represent an alternate form of "truth" or intelligence. Moreover, Jim has one of the few healthy, functioning families in the novel. Although he has been separated from his wife and children, he misses them terribly, and it is only the thought of a permanent separation from them that motivates his criminal act of running away from Miss Watson. On the river, Jim becomes a surrogate father, as well as a friend, to Huck, taking care of him without being intrusive or smothering. He cooks for the boy and shelters him from some of the worst horrors that they encounter, including the sight of Pap's corpse and, for a time, the news of his father's passing.

Some readers have criticized Jim as being too passive, but it is important to remember that he remains at the mercy of every other character in this novel, including even the poor, thirteen-year-old Huck, as the letter that Huck nearly sends to Miss Watson demonstrates. Like Huck, Jim is realistic about his situation and must find ways of accomplishing his goals without incurring the wrath of those who could turn him in. In this position, he is seldom able to act boldly or speak his mind. Nonetheless, despite these restrictions and constant fear, Jim consistently acts as a noble human being and a loyal friend. In fact, Jim could be described as the only real adult in the novel, and the only one who provides a positive, respectable example for Huck to follow.

Tom Sawyer

Tom is the same age as Huck and his best friend. Whereas Huck's birth and upbringing have left him in poverty and on the margins of society, Tom has been raised in relative comfort. As a result, his beliefs are an unfortunate combination of what he has learned from the adults around him and the fanciful notions he has gleaned from reading romance and adventure novels. Tom believes in sticking

strictly to “rules,” most of which have more to do with style than with morality or anyone’s welfare. Tom is thus the perfect foil for Huck: his rigid adherence to rules and precepts contrasts with Huck’s tendency to question authority and think for himself.

Although Tom’s escapades are often funny, they also show just how disturbingly and unthinkingly cruel society can be. Tom knows all along that Miss Watson has died and that Jim is now a free man, yet he is willing to allow Jim to remain a captive while he entertains himself with fantastic escape plans. Tom’s plotting tortures not only Jim, but Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas as well. In the end, although he is just a boy like Huck and is appealing in his zest for adventure and his unconscious wittiness, Tom embodies what a young, well-to-do white man is raised to become in the society of his time: self-centered with dominion over all.

THEMES, MOTIFS & SYMBOLS

Themes

Themes are “the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.”

Racism and Slavery

Although Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, America—and especially the South—was still struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. By the early 1880s, Reconstruction, the plan to put the United States back together after the war and integrate freed slaves into society, had hit shaky ground, although it had not yet failed outright. As Twain worked on his novel, race relations, which seemed to be on a positive path in the years following the Civil War, once again became strained. The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of African Americans in the South in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress. A new racismimmerged, less institutionalized and monolithic, and also more difficult to combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when racist laws and policies were enacted, far fewer people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it.

Although Twain wrote the novel after slavery was abolished, he set it several decades earlier, when slavery was still a fact of life. But even by Twain’s time, things had not necessarily gotten much better for African Americans in the South. In this light, we might read Twain’s depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of the condition of African Americans in the United States even *after* the abolition of slavery. Just as slavery places the noble and moral Jim under the control of white society, no matter how degraded that white society may be, so too did the insidious racism that arose near the end of Reconstruction oppress African-American men and women for illogical and hypocritical reasons. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain, by exposing the hypocrisy of slavery, demonstrates how racism distorts the oppressors as much as it does those who are oppressed. The result is a world of moral confusion, in which seemingly “good” white people such as Miss

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Watson and Sally Phelps express no concern about the injustice of slavery or the cruelty of separating Jim from his family.

Intellectual and Moral Education

By focusing on Huck's education, *Huckleberry Finn* fits into the tradition of the *bildungsroman*: a novel depicting an individual's maturation and development. As a poor, uneducated boy, for all intents and purposes an orphan, Huck distrusts the morals and precepts of the society that treats him as an outcast and fails to protect him from abuse. This apprehension about society, and his growing relationship with Jim, leads Huck to question many of the teachings that he has received, especially regarding race and slavery. More than once, we see Huck choose to "go to hell" rather than go along with the rules and follow what he has been taught. Huck bases these decisions on his experiences, his own sense of logic, and what his developing conscience tells him. On the raft, away from civilization, Huck is especially free from society's rules, able to make his own decisions without restriction. Through deep introspection, he comes to his own conclusions, unaffected by the accepted—and often hypocritical—rules and values of Southern culture. By the novel's end, Huck has learned to "read" the world around him, to distinguish good, bad, right, wrong, menace, friend, and so on. His moral development is sharply contrasted to the character of Tom Sawyer, who is influenced by a bizarre mix of adventure novels and Sunday-school teachings, which he combines to justify his outrageous and potentially harmful escapades.

The Hypocrisy of "Civilized" Society

When Huck plans to head west at the end of the novel in order to escape further "civilizing," he is trying to avoid more than regular baths and mandatory school attendance. Throughout the novel, Twain depicts the society that surrounds Huck as little more than a collection of degraded rules and precepts that defy logic. This faulty logic appears early in the novel, when the new judge in town allows Pap to keep custody of Huck. The judge privileges Pap's "rights" to his son as his natural father over Huck's welfare. At the same time, this decision comments on a system that puts a white man's rights to his "property"—his slaves—over the welfare and freedom of an African-American man. In implicitly comparing the plight of slaves to the plight of Huck at the hands of Pap, Twain implies that it is impossible for a society that owns slaves to be just, no matter how "civilized" that society believes and proclaims itself to be. Again and again, Huck encounters individuals who seem good—Sally Phelps, for example—but who Twain takes care to show are prejudiced slave-owners. This shaky sense of justice that Huck repeatedly encounters lies at the heart of society's problems: terrible acts go unpunished, yet frivolous crimes, such as drunkenly shouting insults, lead to executions. Sherburn's speech to the mob that has come to lynch him accurately summarizes the view of society Twain gives in *Huckleberry Finn*: rather than maintain collective welfare, society instead is marked by cowardice, a lack of logic, and profound selfishness.

Friendship

Huck never had a true meaningful friendship. He found this completely, devoted, caring, generous individual in Jim as they traveled together. Although Jim was

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African American, Huck learned that race didn't matter, and that Jim really loved him and would protect him from harm. Huck at first battled with the issue of supremacy by teasing Jim and playing jokes on him which made him feel ignorant. When Huck realized Jim had feelings and could be hurt, and that he missed his family, it became easy for Huck and Jim to remain friends because he realized that aside from skin color, they had similarities.

Freedom

Huck seeks to free himself of his father's neglect and abuse. He wants to live alone and be able to survive by himself. He struggles to reach freedom by running away, living barbarically, and refusing to be civilized by those who attempt to fix his crude manners. Jim seeks freedom from slavery. He wants to find his lost family and free them. He runs away when he hears Miss Watson talking of selling him "down the river."

Motifs

Motifs are "recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes."

Childhood

Huck's youth is an important factor in his moral education over the course of the novel, for we sense that only a child is open-minded enough to undergo the kind of development that Huck does. Since Huck and Tom are young, their age lends a sense of play to their actions, which excuses them in certain ways and also deepens the novel's commentary on slavery and society. Ironically, Huck often knows better than the adults around him, even though he has lacked the guidance that a proper family and community should have offered him. Twain also frequently draws links between Huck's youth and Jim's status as a black man: both are vulnerable, yet Huck, because he is white, has power over Jim. And on a different level, the silliness, pure joy, and naiveté of childhood give *Huckleberry Finn* a sense of fun and humor. Though its themes are quite weighty, the novel itself feels light in tone and is an enjoyable read because of this rambunctious childhood excitement that enlivens the story.

Lies and Cons

Huckleberry Finn is full of malicious lies and scams, many of them coming from the duke and the dauphin. It is clear that these con men's lies are bad, for they hurt a number of innocent people. Yet Huck himself tells a number of lies and even cons a few people, most notably the slave-hunters, to whom he makes up a story about a smallpox outbreak in order to protect Jim. As Huck realizes, it seems that telling a lie can actually be a good thing, depending on its purpose. This insight is part of Huck's learning process, as he finds that some of the rules he has been taught contradict what seems to be "right." At other points, the lines between a con, legitimate entertainment, and approved social structures like religion are fine indeed. In this light, lies and cons provide an effective way for Twain to highlight the moral ambiguity that runs through the novel.

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Superstitions and Folk Beliefs

From the time Huck meets him on Jackson's Island until the end of the novel, Jim spouts a wide range of superstitions and folktales. Whereas Jim initially appears foolish to believe so unwaveringly in these kinds of signs and omens, it turns out, curiously, that many of his beliefs do indeed have some basis in reality or presage events to come. Much as we do, Huck at first dismisses most of Jim's superstitions as silly, but ultimately he comes to appreciate Jim's deep knowledge of the world. In this sense, Jim's superstition serves as an alternative to accepted social teachings and assumptions and provides a reminder that mainstream conventions are not always right.

Parodies of Popular Romance Novels

Huckleberry Finn is full of people who base their lives on romantic literary models and stereotypes of various kinds. Tom Sawyer, the most obvious example, bases his life and actions on adventure novels. The deceased Emmeline Grangerford painted weepy maidens and wrote poems about dead children in the romantic style. The Shepherdson and Grangerford families kill one another out of a bizarre, overexcited conception of family honor. These characters' proclivities toward the romantic allow Twain a few opportunities to indulge in some fun, and indeed, the episodes that deal with this subject are among the funniest in the novel. However, there is a more substantive message beneath: that popular literature is highly stylized and therefore rarely reflects the reality of a society. Twain shows how a strict adherence to these romantic ideals is ultimately dangerous: Tom is shot, Emmeline dies, and the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords end up in a deadly clash.

Symbols

Symbols are "objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts."

The Mississippi River

For Huck and Jim, the Mississippi River is the ultimate symbol of freedom. Alone on their raft, they do not have to answer to anyone. The river carries them toward freedom: for Jim, toward the Free States; for Huck, away from his abusive father and the restrictive "civilizing" of St. Petersburg. Much like the river itself, Huck and Jim are in flux, willing to change their attitudes about each other with little prompting. Despite their freedom, however, they soon find that they are not completely free from the evils and influences of the towns on the river's banks. Even early on, the real world intrudes on the paradise of the raft: the river floods, bringing Huck and Jim into contact with criminals, wrecks, and stolen goods. Then, a thick fog causes them to miss the mouth of the Ohio River, which was to be their route to freedom.

As the novel progresses, then, the river becomes something other than the inherently benevolent place Huck originally thought it was. As Huck and Jim move further south, the duke and the dauphin invade the raft, and Huck and Jim must spend more time ashore. Though the river continues to offer a refuge from trouble, it often merely affects the exchange of one bad situation for another. Each escape

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exists in the larger context of a continual drift southward, toward the Deep South and entrenched slavery. In this transition from idyllic retreat to source of peril, the river mirrors the complicated state of the South. As Huck and Jim's journey progresses, the river, which once seemed a paradise and a source of freedom, becomes merely a short-term means of escape that nonetheless pushes Huck and Jim ever further toward danger and destruction.

LESSONS/MORALS/APPLICATIONS

Huck learns that although society has taught him to regard African Americans as inferior, he should listen to his own opinion, even if it means sacrificing his reputation and being labeled. He realized this when he befriended Jim and went out of his way to secure Jim's freedom, by risking his own safety and name.

Huck also learned that although people in his life may have hurt him, he is able to be loved and to love back. He learns this when his friendship with Jim evolves, and they become like family. Huck is able to love Jim back and is willing to help him escape slavery if it will attain happiness.

Huck realizes that Tom's intricate plans for solving problems sometimes are fun, but are not usually the best answers. Huck is a more realistic character and understands that effort and efficiency are better than confusion and complication. He depicts this when Tom's plan to free Jim becomes too involved and eventually backfires. Huck's plan at the beginning was more reasonable, but he used Tom's plan instead.

RELATED RESOURCES

Captioned Media Program

- [*Mark Twain: His Amazing Adventure* #8318](#)

World Wide Web



The following Web sites complement the contents of this guide; they were selected by professionals who have experience in teaching deaf and hard of hearing students. Every effort was made to select accurate, educationally relevant, and "kid safe" sites. However, teachers should preview them before use. The U.S. Department of Education, the National Association of the Deaf, and the Captioned Media Program do not endorse the sites and are not responsible for their content.

- [Huck Finn Homepage](#)
Background, e-text, sources, ads, illustrations, reviews of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Don't miss the Interactive Gallery: Illustrating Race, Class & Gender.
- [Huck Finn in Context: A Teaching Guide](#)
Designed to be used with the PBS Culture Shock video, but this site contains some powerful teaching suggestions even if the video is not available.
- [Is Huck Finn a Racist Book?](#)
Peter Salwen's pro-Twain analysis of the novel.
- [Mark Twain, Huck Finn WebQuest](#)
Students investigate Mark Twain's life, films based upon Huck Finn, and the role of satire in the novel.
- ["The Pulse of America"](#)
A teacher reflects on teaching the novel. Includes a map of Huck and Jim's trip.
- [Study Guide for Huckleberry Finn](#)
Biography, background, prereading, chapter-by-chapter analysis/response questions. The last few pages have questions for related readings. Requires Adobe Acrobat Reader.
- [Tom, Huck, and Suzy: Three Views of Childhood](#)
This lesson focuses on analyzing tone. Students read three excerpts written by Twain, analyze each for tone, then write two pieces describing the same topic but using different tones. Includes standards and rubric, requires Adobe Acrobat Reader or compatible software for access.
- [Vocabulary from Huckleberry Finn](#)
Two sets of vocabulary words drawn from the novel.



C a p t i o n e d M e d i a P r o g r a m

REFERENCES

Martin, Melissa and Stephanie. SparkNotes on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 12 Sept. 2005 <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/huckfinn/>.

J. N. Smith, author of "ClassicNote." Completed on June 01, 2000, copyright held by GradeSaver <http://www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/huckfinn/questions.html>.