

HUCKLEBERRY FINN TEACHER'S GUIDE

NOTE TO TEACHERS

"The Mississippi is well worth reading about. It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable."

The first two sentences of Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*--written concurrently with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*--are a fitting introduction to Huck's book. They apply not only to the river that flows through Twain's great novel, shaping its form and action, but to the book itself and its main character. Both Huck and his wonderful book are "in all ways remarkable."

This Comprehensive Edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes passages, episodes, and variations present in Twain's first handwritten manuscript--the first half of which was long lost but rediscovered in 1990. The chronology of Twain's composition of the book is, briefly, as follows. In 1876, while reading proofs of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he began work on "another boy's book" and completed a first draft through Chapter XVI. He wrote five more chapters in 1879 and 1880, through the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud and the Sherburn-Boggs incident. Stymied once more, he laid the manuscript aside. In 1882, a long summer trip on the Mississippi resulted in renewed inspiration, and he completed the book over the next eighteen months.

Included in this edition are thirty facsimile pages of Twain's rediscovered manuscript, as well as a 31-page "Textual Addendum," which discusses "some of the more exciting, amusing, significant, and thought-provoking variations now available..." Each item in the "Textual Addendum" is keyed to the appropriate facsimile manuscript page(s) for convenient reference.

Today, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* stands as a central document--some would say the central document--of American literature and as an acclaimed classic of world literature. Its impact on American writers who came after Twain has been enormous. In his "Introduction," Justin Kaplan articulates the essential point: "By writing in Huck's voice and from Huck's point-of-view and raising the boy's first-person, semiliterate regional vernacular to an astonishing level of naturalness, descriptive power, and lyricism, Mark Twain not only revolutionized the art of American storytelling but also enlarged its social range." Perhaps V. S. Pritchett, the eminent British short-story writer and critic has put it most succinctly: "Huckleberry Finn takes the breath away."

Ideally, your students will have completed some preparation before reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That is to say, they will have acquired some understanding of the history and consequences of slavery in the United States, of the tradition of humor in American literature and journalism, and of the social realities of life on the American frontier. Such study and discussion are not necessary, but will facilitate a fuller understanding of this American classic.

The most frequently attacked aspect of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is its wholesale use of the word, nigger. As Justin Kaplan points out, the word appears 215 times in the book. Its use in any but the most formal and serious of contexts is as objectionable today as it was unremarkable in the nineteenth century. The best approach here, we believe, is one of honesty and historical accuracy. In Huck's and Jim's society, the word was used by blacks and whites alike to identify anyone of African heritage (and frequently of any nonwhite heritage). As used by whites, it was a term of disparagement and degradation. As used by blacks, it was a term sometimes of identification, sometimes of contempt; as either, it carried the burden of degradation imposed by the white masters and rulers. The fact is, the word was used by everyone, white or black. Mark Twain would most likely scoff at today's politically correct euphemism ("the 'N' word") and prefer to confront head on the word itself, its accumulated meanings, and the social, economic, and personal realities from which it sprang and which it continues to reflect.

As does every great novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* opens itself to a variety of approaches. Designed to guide your students through the richness of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the questions and topics that follow, organized in critical categories, are designed for a combination of approaches, including in-class discussion, individual study, and written or oral assignments. Suggested activities and research projects are included. Key themes in the novel--including the benefits and costs of individual freedom, the need for stable and nurturing family and social life, the values of caring and mutually respectful relationships, the charge to discern the truth behind surface appearances, the perception of the beauties, powers, and treasures of the natural world--will engage students in terms of their own lives and aspirations.

DISCUSSION AND WRITING

Comprehension & Discussion Questions

1. Why did Twain include the "Notice" on the opening page?
2. Can the book's 43 chapters be grouped according to distinct action sequences? Are there correspondences among chapters or groups of chapters?
3. Each stage of Huck's moral growth culminates in a crisis of conscience and a decision to assist Jim (as when Huck tells the two slave hunters that there is "only one" man on the raft and that "He's white"); and each decision is more consequential than the previous. What are these stages and decisions; when do they occur; and what are their consequences?
4. What are the consequences of Huck's and Jim's going past the mouth of the Ohio River in the fog? (Chapter XV)

5. Among the novel's great ironies is that Huck's and Jim's quest for freedom takes them farther and farther into the deep South, the heart of slavery. How and why does this happen? What are the implications?

6. The primary movement of Huck's and Jim's journey and of the novel is linear, from north to south. A back-and-forth pattern of movement between river and shore also occurs. How is this pattern important in terms of plot? How is it related to the north-to-south movement? Does it reflect any other kind of movement experienced by Huck or Jim?

7. How do the king and the duke impact Huck's and Jim's life on the raft, their quest for freedom, and the novel's movement?

8. What are the parallels between the king's and duke's treatment of Jim in Chapter XXIV and Tom Sawyer's treatment of him in the final chapters?

9. The cemetery passage in Chapter XXIX is one of the few times when Huck is in immediate danger of actual harm or death. What are some similar incidents? What threatens his safety and well-being in each instance--other people or forces of nature? How does he escape in each instance?

10. Do the final chapters, beginning with Huck's arrival at the Phelps farm, rely too much on coincidence? Do Tom Sawyer's elaborate escape stratagems indicate that Jim's and Huck's goals are unobtainable?

Is there any justice in the fact that only Tom is wounded in the final chase through the swamp?

The story is told by a fourteen-year-old Huck, who admits to elaborate lies and fabrications. Can we trust him? Can we accept his version of things, or must we read between his lines?