

## MARK TWAIN: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

**Study Guide (1992)** for *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

Written by Jack Siemsen, Assistant Professor of English, Albertson College, Caldwell, Idaho

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a great American novel. It manifests this greatness on several levels -- in its extraordinary cast of fully realized characters, in its precise rendering of a child's perspective on the world, in its careful attention to the different rhythms and cadences of our regional dialects, and in its extraordinary capacity to find humor (and perhaps even hope) in a world largely populated by hypocrites, frauds, criminals, fools, preachers, judges, parents, and other sometimes well-intentioned but misguided types. But even more significant, the greatness of this novel lies in its honest attempt to survey the American landscape and to identify the salient features of our national character, both as it existed before the war, the time of Twain's story, and as it appears from the sober perspective of post-war America, when Twain actually wrote his masterpiece. *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) tells the story (during the 1840s) of our nation's struggle to reconcile the high ideals articulated by our founding fathers (tolerance, justice, opportunity, and freedom), with the actual behavior Twain so consistently encountered in the people of this country -- or what Twain eventually came to describe as "the damned human race."

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens on November 30, 1835 in Missouri, Mark Twain received most of his early education wandering the banks of the Mississippi River. The central meeting point for travelers moving across the continent, the river supplied the young Clemens with an endless parade of representative American characters and scenes. Migrants, revivalists, circus troupes, gamblers, con men, prostitutes, frontiersmen, missionaries, and river men regularly passed before the young boy's eyes. It is here he first formed his appreciation for the American characters who would eventually appear in his newspaper stories and later in his fiction; it was along the river and in the town of Hannibal that he heard the stories and encountered the mannerisms that shaped his imagination and awakened his desire to see the world. Years later, referring to his short time as a river boat pilot, Twain acknowledged his deep debt to the river when he remarked, "In that brief, sharp schooling, I got personally and familiarly acquainted with about all the different types of human nature....When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before -- met him on the river."

Trained as a printer, Clemens began in Hannibal working on his brother's paper (1851–53), made his way eastward working on newspapers in St. Louis, New York City, and Philadelphia, and eventually joined his brother again in the Nevada Territory. It was in Nevada; while writing sketches for local papers, that Clemens began signing his pieces Mark Twain (a riverboat term signifying two fathoms deep). Twain's first national success, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" (1865), launched his career and led to a long series of pieces collected during extensive travels through the West, Hawaii, France, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and the Holy Land. Twain eventually returned to New York, met and married his wife Olivia, and moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he produced most of his better known work, including *The Gilded Age* (1873), *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1880), *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894). His later years were marked by a series of financial setbacks and the deaths of a daughter, his brother, his sister Pamela, and finally his wife. Mark Twain died April 21, 1910.

In writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain returned to the banks of the Mississippi River and the world of his childhood. There, through the character of Huck, Twain told the story of a young boy's adventures as he sought to escape the terror of his mad father and the confinements of a "proper" upbringing. Trapped between these two extremes -- the savage and the civilized -- Huck feigns his own death and is figuratively reborn during his journey with Jim down the river in search of freedom. Huck's quest for a better place, a kind of promised land free from the cruelty and oppression of St. Petersburg, forms the backdrop against which Twain dramatizes Huck's painful but hilarious initiation into the hard realities of the supposedly civilized adult world. Each time Huck leaves the natural world of the river, which functions as a kind of sanctuary for Huck and Jim, and goes ashore he is reintroduced into that adult world, as characterized by the fraud of the King and the Duke, the stupid brutality of local justice in the senseless murder of Boggs and the subsequent cowardice of the town, and the thin veneer of aristocratic culture used to mask the mindless savagery of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons.

Huck's initiation from boy into man, from naive idealist in search of a just and humane world to a young man on the verge of despair over the cruel nature of human society, reenacts one of the quintessential American experiences. That pattern is woven into the fabric of this nation's history. It is the experience of our Pilgrim ancestors who fled the oppression of a decadent, civilized Europe in search of a new world, a better place founded upon high ideals, a "City upon a Hill," only to discover the hard realities of a

New England winter and their own limitations. This experience is repeated in Henry David Thoreau's decision to move to Walden Pond in search of a new kind of life, one free from the corrosive influences of the traditional, the conventional, the socially acceptable ways of established society. But unlike Thoreau, who returns to society to tell his story, Twain's Huck rejects the civilized world of adulthood and, like so many Americans before and since, lights out for the territories in search of yet another place. That Huck will find a place commensurate with his dream of freedom and natural goodness is unlikely, for the America he is searching for is not a place but rather an idea, or an ideal, which cannot be realized on the concrete plane of human experience. Huck's willingness to continue his quest, however, is more important than its inevitable failure. For it is in the search itself that American experience is most fully embodied; it is in the expectation, not in the fulfillment, that we locate our hope and discover the will to continue.

### **For Further Reading**

If publication information is not given, texts are available in several editions. Dates are original publication date.

*Roughing It* (1872)

*The Innocents Abroad* (1869)

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889)

*The Mysterious Stranger* (1916)

Letters (several editions available)

### **About Mark Twain**

Andrews, Kenneth R. *Nook Farm: Mark Twain's Hartford Circle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950.

Branch, Edgar Marquess, et al. *Mark Twain's Letters*. 2 vols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Hill, Hamlin. *Mark Twain: God's Fool* (Harper & Row, 1973)

Kaplan, Justin. *Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain* (Simon & Schuster, 1966)

Tanner, Tony. *The Reign of Wonder*. (ch. 10). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Wagenknecht, Edward. *Mark Twain: The Man and His Work*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. (Oklahoma, 1971)

## Discussion questions for *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

1. Twain begins his novel with two short statements, a "Notice" threatening death to anyone who would treat his story as serious literature and an "Explanatory" note describing the care he has taken with the various dialects in the novel. What seems to be the purpose of these two, almost contradictory, signals to the reader? What conditions do they impose on the reader?
2. At the end of the novel, Jim reveals to Huck that the dead man found in the floating house was Huck's father. What possible reasons might Jim have for not revealing this fact to Huck at the time it was discovered?
3. Although the setting for the novel is just prior to the Civil War, Twain actually wrote the book after the war. How does the novel describe the various social and historical forces leading to the war?
4. Some readers regard Huck's apology to Jim in Chapter 15 as the turning point in the novel. What does Huck come to understand at this point, and how does it shape his attitude throughout the rest of the book?
5. The sunken riverboat in chapters 12 and 13 is named the *Walter Scott*. Why do you think Twain gave the boat that name?
6. Does Colonel Sherburn's denunciation of the mob represent Twain's opinion of people in general? If so, does this justify Sherburn's killing of Boggs?
7. The central symbol of the novel is the river. Discuss how the river functions as a structuring principle for the novel, what the river represents, and how it both facilitates and frustrates Huck's escape to freedom.
8. What are we to make of the fact that, at the end of the novel, Tom gives Jim forty dollars for the inconvenience he endured while in prison? What further is to be made of the fact that Jim "was pleased most to death" by Tom's generosity?
9. What, if anything, has Huck learned from his adventures?
10. At various points in recent history, Twain's novel has been banned. The reasons for this vary, ranging from Huck's poor manners and unsanitary habits to the portrayal

of racist language and attitudes. Discuss how and why this book makes some people uncomfortable and whether or not there is any justification for withholding it from young people.

11. List the various names and identities that Huck takes on during the course of the novel. Why do you suppose he has so many?