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Study Guide

for

**The Adventures
of Huckleberry
Finn**

by Mark Twain



New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Mark Twain



I was born the 30th of November, 1835, in the almost invisible village of Florida, Monroe County, Missouri. . . . The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 percent. It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town.

—*The Autobiography of Mark Twain*

Mark Twain, whose real name was Samuel Clemens, was in many ways a self-made man. Clemens was born on the Missouri frontier, learned several trades, traveled widely, and transformed himself into Mark Twain, the larger-than-life writer, lecturer, and symbol of America.

Four years after Clemens was born, his father moved the family to Hannibal, Missouri, on the Mississippi River. There, the young boy lived an idyllic life. Some of his happiest days were spent on the riverbanks watching the parade of boats that passed by. In his memoir *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), he recalls the excitement people felt when the lazy summer air was pierced by the cry of “S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin!” “All in a twinkling,” he wrote, “the dead town is alive and moving.” Hannibal was also home to relatives, friends, and townspeople who served as the inspiration for characters in his fiction.

But before Clemens could turn his childhood memories into literature, he needed to see something of the world. At the age of seventeen, he left

Hannibal to work as a printer’s assistant. He held printing jobs in New York, Pennsylvania, and Iowa. Then, when he was twenty-one, he returned to the Mississippi River to train for the job he wanted above all others: steamboat pilot. A few years later, he became a licensed pilot, but his time as a pilot was cut short by the start of the Civil War, in 1861.

After a two-week stint in the Confederate army, Clemens joined his brother in Carson City, Nevada. There, Clemens began to write humorous sketches and tall tales for the local newspaper. In February 1863, he first used the pseudonym, or pen name, that would later be known by readers throughout the world. It was a riverboating term for water two fathoms, or twelve feet, deep: “Mark Twain.”

Clemens next worked as a miner near San Francisco. In 1865 he published in a national magazine a tall tale he had heard in the mine-fields—“The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” It was an instant success. Later, he traveled to Hawaii, Europe, and the Middle East. The humorous book he wrote about his travels, *The Innocents Abroad*, made him famous.

In 1870 Clemens married Olivia Langdon. A year later they moved to Hartford, Connecticut. At the same time, he began a successful career as a lecturer, telling humorous stories and reading from his books.

More books followed, including *Roughing It*, a travel memoir about the West; *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; *Life on the Mississippi*; and *The Prince and the Pauper*. Thanks to his lecture tours and books, Mark Twain became familiar around the world. His death in 1910 was met with great sorrow.

Introducing the 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.

—author’s note from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

These humorous warnings were the first words that readers of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* saw when they opened Mark Twain’s new novel in 1885. At the time, Twain was already well known as a humorist and the author of the nostalgic “boy’s book” *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Therefore, Twain’s readers probably did not expect that Twain would have serious motives for writing *Huckleberry Finn* or that the novel would teach serious moral lessons.

In some ways, *Huckleberry Finn* is a sequel to, or a continuation of, *Tom Sawyer*. Huck was an important member of Tom Sawyer’s group of friends in the earlier novel, and Jim appeared as well. The fictional setting of both books is St. Petersburg, a small Mississippi River port that Twain modeled on his hometown of Hannibal, Missouri. The earlier book tells of the rollicking good times had by all and is recognized as one of American literature’s finest portrayals of a happy childhood. Readers therefore had reason to expect more lighthearted escapades and harmless hijinks in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Readers soon found out, however, that *Huckleberry Finn* is very different from *Tom Sawyer*. The odd notice at the beginning of the novel is the first warning that things may not be exactly as they seem. The warning is ironic because the novel definitely has a motive, a moral, and a plot; and Twain wanted his readers to be aware of each of them.

The structure of the book, which centers around a journey, allows Huck and Jim to meet many different kinds of people. The society of the small towns and villages along the great river mirrors American society as a whole, with all its

variety. The cast of characters includes many personalities with whom Twain was familiar: liars, cheaters, and hypocrites. The author examines these representative types, mercilessly exposing their weaknesses and displaying their terrible, senseless cruelty to others. Twain is especially bitter about the way slavery degraded the moral fabric of life along the river. His bitterness was, perhaps, rooted in the knowledge that he himself grew up thinking there was nothing wrong with a system that enslaved human beings.

But Twain also holds up a few shining examples of human decency as models. In fact, *Huckleberry Finn* can be seen as hopeful. The novel shows that people can make the right decisions and defy injustice, that an individual’s moral beliefs can lead him or her to reject what is wrong in society, and that sound personal values can overcome evil. Twain himself explained that the novel revolves around conflict between “a sound heart and a deformed conscience.”

Huck Finn is a child of his time, like the author who created him. Both character and author struggled to recognize and correct some of the wrongs of their society. Both learned to listen to the teachings of their sound hearts.

Even though *Huckleberry Finn* is a serious book addressing important themes, it is also humorous. The novel is filled with hilarious incidents, oddball characters, and goofy misadventures, and the language the characters use is often laugh-out-loud funny.

Like many authors, Twain based his characters on the people he knew. In his *Autobiography*, Twain disclosed the model for his most famous character, a boy he knew growing up in Hannibal:

Huckleberry Finn was Tom Blankenship. . . . In Huckleberry Finn I have drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as any boy ever had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person . . . in the community.

Many of the first readers of *Huckleberry Finn* were critical of the book. Some found its honest and unflinching portrayal of life to be coarse, while other readers found its dark view of society distasteful. Critics complained, and some libraries banned the book as unsuitable for children. Today, however, *Huckleberry Finn* is generally viewed as a masterpiece of American literature.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is set in the Mississippi River Valley, around 1840. During the course of the novel, Huck and Jim float down the Mississippi River. They travel from

their hometown of St. Petersburg, Missouri, north of St. Louis, hundreds of miles into the Deep South.

Some of the places they visit are real, while others are products of Twain's imagination. So important to the novel is the great Mississippi River that many readers consider it as much a character as a place. T. S. Eliot, the great twentieth-century poet who grew up in St. Louis, said, "The River makes the book a great book." It fired the imagination of the young Twain, served as the setting for his beloved riverboats, and became the only real home Huckleberry Finn and Jim were to know.

Did You Know?

In the years before the Civil War, which started in 1861, Missouri and other southern states allowed slavery. Mark Twain's father was a slaveholder, and enslaved Africans were a common sight in Twain's boyhood home of Hannibal. However, even though many people

in Missouri were immigrants from southern states and supporters of slavery, many others opposed it. Missourians' mixed feelings about slavery prevented the state from ever joining other slaveholding states in the Confederacy and made it a battleground during the Civil War.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 1–15

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Freedom means different things to different people. What does it mean to you?

List Ideas

With a partner, examine what the concept of freedom means to you. Brainstorm a list of statements that describe the idea of freedom.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what freedom means to a boy and a man living during the 1800s.

BACKGROUND

Point of View

Point of view is the relationship of the narrator, or storyteller, to the events of the story. *Huckleberry Finn* is told by the character Huck, using words like *I* and *we*. Therefore, it is told from the **first-person** point of view. The reader sees everything through Huck's eyes and is given his perspective on events.

When examining a narrative point of view, it is important to distinguish the narrator from the author. Huck is an uneducated fourteen-year-old boy living in a village in the 1840s. He has the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of such a boy. Twain, on the other hand, was a well-traveled writer and experienced lecturer. He was well aware of how to use narrative techniques, adopt different points of view, and speak in the role of different characters, and he used that knowledge to create a narrator who is very different from himself.

Unreliable Narrator

Huckleberry Finn is also an example of an **unreliable narrator**—one who does not understand the full significance of the events he describes and comments on. Huck is not intentionally unreliable; his lack of education and experience makes him so. Much of the humor in the first chapters comes from Huck's incomplete understanding of the adults around him and their “sivilized” ways.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

dismal [diz' məl] *adj.* gloomy; depressing

notion [nō' shən] *n.* theory; belief

raspy [ras' pē] *adj.* harsh; grating

seedy [sē' dē] *adj.* shabby; run-down

skiff [skif] *n.* small boat; flat-bottomed rowboat

thrash [thrash] *v.* to strike; to beat

victuals [vit' əlz] *n.* food

Active Reading

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 1–15

The first chapters of a novel introduce readers to the conflicts, or struggles, that the characters will face throughout the course of the story. **External conflicts** are struggles between characters who have different goals or between a character and forces of nature. **Internal conflicts** are psychological struggles that characters experience when they are unhappy or face difficult decisions. External conflicts often trigger internal conflicts.

As you read the first fifteen chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, use the chart below to keep track of the conflicts that the characters experience. Add boxes on a separate sheet of paper if you need to. Recognizing major conflicts will help you understand the major themes, or ideas about life, that are developed in the novel.

_____ Huck	vs.	_____ Miss Watson and the Widow
Explanation of conflict: the sisters want to "civilize" Huck; he wants to be free		

_____	vs.	_____
Explanation of conflict:		

_____	vs.	_____
Explanation of conflict:		

_____	vs.	_____
Explanation of conflict:		

_____	vs.	_____
Explanation of conflict:		

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 1–15

Personal Response

What is your first impression of Huck? Why?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. At the beginning of the novel, with whom is Huck living? In what ways do they try to change Huck? Do you think they succeed? Explain.

2. Briefly describe Pap. What is his ultimate goal in harassing Huck?

3. How does Huck escape from the cabin in Illinois? What does his ability to escape suggest about him?

4. Where is Huck reunited with Jim? In what significant ways are Jim and Huck alike? In what significant ways are they different?

5. Why does Huck put a dead snake on Jim's blanket? What harm comes to Jim as a result of the incident? In your opinion, is Huck sorry for the harm he caused? Explain.

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 1–15

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

6. How successful do you feel Mark Twain is in creating the character of Jim? Does Jim seem like a real person to you? Explain why or why not.

7. Huck takes to the river to find freedom and escape from people and situations that restrict his liberty. What are some ways that people today can find personal freedom? Is Huck's way still possible? Explain your answer.

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Relationships

Review Chapters 2 through 15, paying special attention to Huck's relationship with Jim. Note how Huck treats Jim as well as how Huck feels about him. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, write a brief analysis of their relationship. What changes does it undergo? What do you think causes these changes? Support your opinions with quotations and other evidence from the novel.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Nature plays an important part in Huck's life. In your group, find passages in Chapters 1 through 15 in which Huck describes nature and natural elements. Then discuss what meanings these elements seem to have for Huck. Pay particular attention to what Huck finds in nature that is lacking in his relationships with people. Present your examples to the rest of the class.

Geography Connection

Draw or photocopy a map of the Mississippi River Valley. Then track Huck and Jim's journey on the Mississippi River. Put a star or other symbol next to towns that they visit.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 16–31

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How do you go about making important decisions? Do you tend to follow your heart or your head?

Journal

In your journal, write about a time when you had to make an important decision. Briefly describe how you decided what to do.

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what important decisions Huck faces and how he goes about making them.

BACKGROUND

Satire and Irony

Satire is a kind of literature that tries to open people's eyes to the need for change by exposing the flaws of a person or society. Satirists' main weapon is humor, which is created through techniques such as irony.

Irony is the contrast between what appears to be true and is actually true, or between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. Twain created an ironic character in Pap. We expect a father to be proud of his son and provide for him, but Pap is angry that Huck is learning to read and "getting religion," and Pap wants to spend Huck's money on himself. Though we may laugh at Pap, we should also be aware of the messages behind the humor: Judge Thatcher is too easily tricked by Pap's "reformation," and there is something wrong with a system that would let Pap take Huck.

Through the use of irony, Twain develops some of the most important themes of *Huckleberry Finn*. As you read Chapters 16 through 31, look for examples of irony, and think about the flaws that Twain is attempting to expose.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

blackguard [blag'ärd / -erd] v. to insult

crockery [krok'ər ē] n. china

draft [draft] n. check or money order

flapdoodle [flap'dōōd əl] n. nonsense

mesmerism [mez'mə riz'əm] n. hypnotism

Active Reading

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 16–31

In *Huckleberry Finn*, people and things are not always what they appear to be. As you read Chapters 16 through 31, make note of times when people or things appear to be one way but are actually very different underneath. In the left-hand column of the chart below, note what the character or thing seems to be. In the right-hand column, note what the character or thing actually is. Add rows to the chart if necessary.

Appearance	Reality
Huck pretends he is a boy whose family has smallpox.	Huck is actually lying to protect Jim.

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 16–31

Personal Response

What were your feelings when Huck thought about sending the letter to Miss Watson so that Jim could be recaptured?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What does Jim plan to do when he becomes a free man? What is Huck's reaction to the plan?

2. Briefly describe the duke and the king. What might Twain be satirizing through the use of these characters?

3. What does Buck say when Huck asks him how the feud between the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords got started? What is ironic about Buck's response?

4. Who is Colonel Sherburn? Briefly sum up the speech he makes to the mob. What aspect of human nature does Sherburn criticize?

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 16–31

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

5. Mark Twain makes heavy use of dialect in *Huckleberry Finn*. How successful do you feel he is? What are some advantages for an author in deciding to render speech in dialect, as Twain does? What are some possible disadvantages?

6. How might Huck answer the **Focus Activity** question that you answered in your journal? How does this answer compare with yours?

Literature and Writing

Isn't It Ironic?

Throughout the novel, Huck is taught that “sivilized society” is right and he is wrong. As a result, he believes he will “go to hell” for rescuing Jim. On a separate sheet of paper, write a brief analysis of the irony in Huck’s situation. What evil does the irony expose?

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

In this section of the novel, Mark Twain contrasts life on the raft with life on shore. In your group, discuss the differences between what the raft represents to Huck and what life on shore is like. Cite lines from the text that describe raft life and shore life to support your argument. Then present your conclusions to others in your class.

Learning for Life

The Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords are unable to settle their differences, and so they resort to violence. Imagine that you have been called into help them resolve their conflict through peaceful means. What would you say to them? What would you have them do? In a small group, role-play a conflict resolution meeting between the two families.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Before You Read

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 32–43

FOCUS ACTIVITY

In many popular adventure stories, the hero is held captive by evil enemies or forces yet manages to escape.

Sharing Ideas

As a class, discuss books and movies in which a hero overcomes seemingly impossible odds to find freedom. Who or what holds the hero captive? What miseries does the hero endure while being held? How does the hero escape? Do friends help?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out how Huck and a friend plan to help Jim escape.

BACKGROUND

The Antihero

Traditional heroes are often superhuman. We look up to them because they are braver, stronger, more clever, or more unwilling to sacrifice their principles than we. **Antiheroes**, on the other hand, are very human. Like us, they have faults, make mistakes, and puzzle over difficult decisions. In the end, however, antiheroes usually do the “right thing”—what we, ourselves, hope we would do in similar circumstances. As you read the final chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, think about the heroes of the novel. Are they traditional heroes or antiheroes? What makes them so?

The Controversial Conclusion

As Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, he pondered over the plot. He thought especially long and hard about how to end the novel and effectively resolve the conflicts that he had presented. Though some critics feel that the conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn* is logical and effective, other critics have severely criticized it. As you read the last chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, think about the events that came before and the way that the characters in the novel usually behave. Then judge the conclusion for yourself. Is it consistent with the characters we have come to know? Does it resolve the major conflicts in the novel in a satisfactory way?

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

eaves [ēvz] *n.* lower part of a roof

flighty [flī' tē] *adj.* easily excited

garret [gar' it] *n.* attic

hew [hū] *v.* to cut

impudent [im' pyə dənt] *adj.* sassy; impolite

row [rou] *n.* fuss; argument

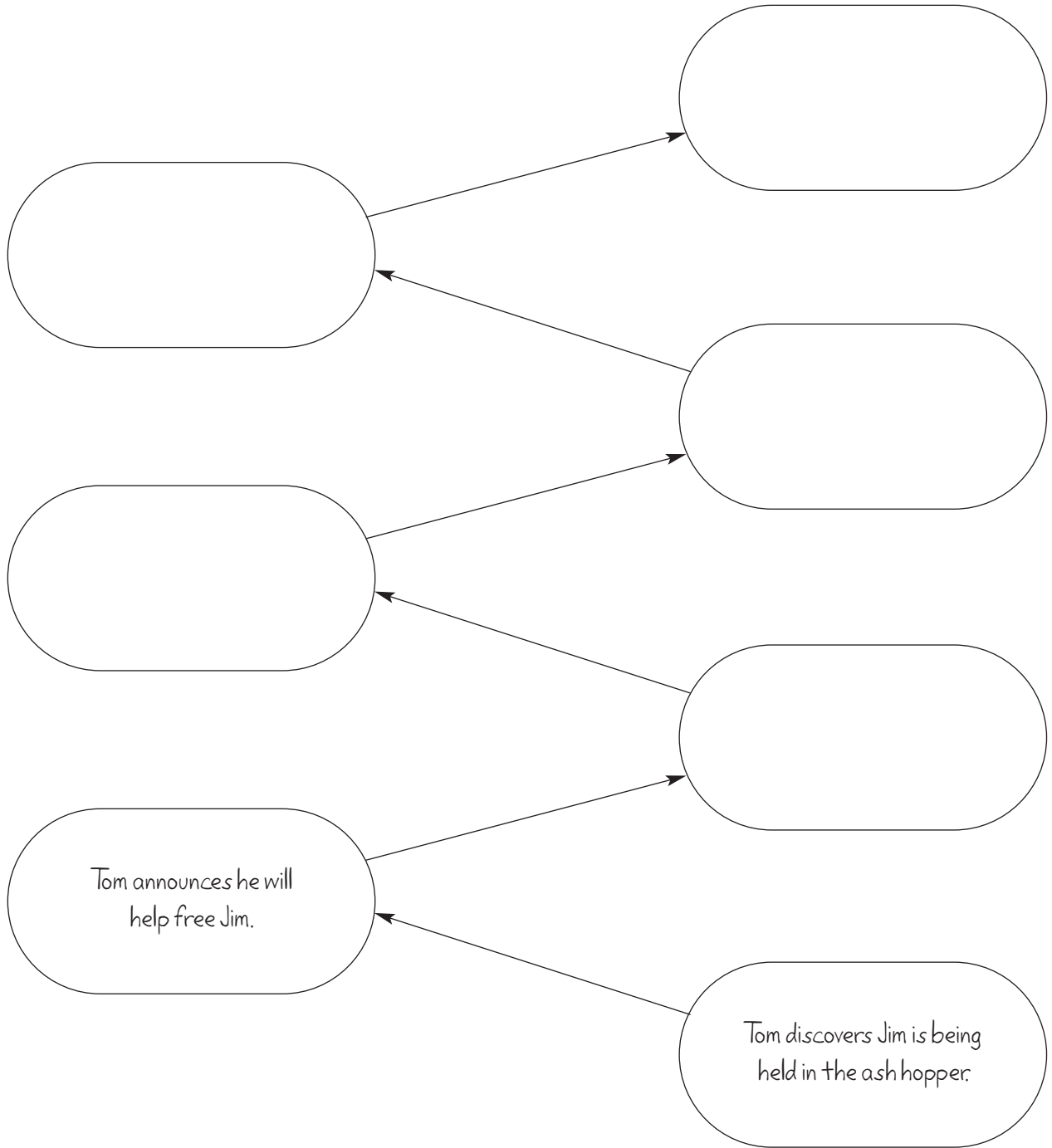
singular [sing' gyə lər] *adj.* unusual; curious

sultry [səl' trē] *adj.* exceedingly hot

Active Reading

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 32–43

As you saw at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom Sawyer is fond of romantic adventure stories and enjoys pretending that he is taking part in one. Use the diagram below to chart the major events in Tom's adventurous "rescue" of Jim. You may extend the diagram if necessary.



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Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 32–43

Personal Response

What did you think of the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*? Would you have ended the novel the same way? Why or why not?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. How are the duke and the king punished? What is Huck's reaction to their punishment?

2. How does Huck expect Tom to react when he explains the plan to free Jim? Why does Tom's response surprise Huck?

3. What does Tom's elaborate plan to free Jim tell you about Tom? What does it tell you about his attitude toward Jim?

4. What does Huck decide to do at the end of the novel? Why doesn't he stay with Aunt Sally?

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn Chapters 32–43

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

5. Many critics of *Huckleberry Finn* have pointed out that the Phelps' farm episode differs in tone and seriousness from the first two-thirds of the novel. Do you agree? Explain your answer, supporting it with evidence from the text.

6. Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* “a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat.” What influences have “deformed” Huck’s conscience? Are such influences still at work in the world today? What forces are available to try to change “deformed consciences”?

Literature and Writing

You Have Mail

Imagine a friend in another city has learned that you have just finished reading *Huckleberry Finn*. Your curious friend sends you an E-mail that says, “All I know is that that book is about a journey down the Mississippi River—what does this journey mean?” Write a short E-mail response to your friend, explaining the meaning of the journey.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Flat characters remain the same from the beginning of a novel to the end. **Round characters** undergo psychological changes as a result of the conflicts they face and try to resolve. In your group, discuss the characters of Huck and Jim. Are they flat or round? Use evidence from the novel to support your opinions, and present your conclusions to the rest of the class.

Psychology Connection

Psychologists often evaluate the mental health and personalities of their patients by observing their behavior or listening to their answers to questions. Play the role of a psychologist and prepare short personality evaluations of Huck and Tom, based on their actions and words in Chapters 32 through 43. Compare their two personalities, citing differences and similarities. Offer evidence from the text to support your evaluation.



Save your work for your portfolio.

Responding

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Personal Response

The novel ends with Huck feeling unsure about what his future holds. What do you predict will happen to Huck? What sort of life do you think he will have? Why?

Writing About the Novel

A **symbol** is a person, place, or thing that represents something beyond itself. On a separate sheet of paper, analyze the Mississippi River as a symbol. Suggest what it means in the novel, and explain why the river is such an appropriate symbol for the meanings the author assigns it. Give examples from the text to support your views.

*from Understanding Adventures
of Huckleberry Finn* Claudia Durst Johnson

Before You Read

Focus Question

Why, do you think, are books sometimes banned?

Background

Claudia Durst Johnson, an author and professor of English, takes a closer look at Twain’s classic novel and the controversy it has raised through the years.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* considered to be “not a proper boy’s book”? Do you think it could still be considered not a proper young person’s book? Explain.

2. **Making Connections** According to Durst, what makes *Huckleberry Finn* “the first truly American novel”?

Creative Writing

Imagine that Huck is a fourteen-year-old living today. “Update” Huck’s dialect by translating it into today’s slang. On a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the first few paragraphs of the novel (or another passage of your choice).

from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet Jacobs

Before You Read

Focus Question

What dangers did enslaved people face in order to escape slavery?

Background

Like Jim, Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery. Unlike Jim, Jacobs was a real person. In her autobiography, published in 1861, she gives an account of her experiences as a slave and of her journey to freedom.

Responding to the Reading

1. What are your first impressions of Jacobs's account? Why do you think you responded this way?

2. What ultimately happens to Jacobs's children? How does it make her feel? Why?

3. **Making Connections** How does this reading help you understand the character of Jim?

Literature Groups

Imagine that Jim, Huck, and Harriet Jacobs could have a conversation about relations between African Americans and whites during the time they lived. Work together to write a dialogue, and share it with other groups.

Before the Fire Canoe Frank Donovan

Before You Read

Focus Question

What makes a good description?

Background

Donovan's historical nonfiction describes the boats and the people who worked on America's rivers. This reading looks at life on the Mississippi River.

Responding to the Reading

1. From Donovan's description, do you think you would have liked to work on a riverboat? Explain.

2. Donovan writes, "Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain] was . . . being magnanimous" in his description of the rivermen. What does Donovan mean? What does he think of the rivermen?

3. **Making Connections** Donovan and Twain write about the "natural hazards" of boat travel on the river. Compare and contrast their writing styles—including point of view and word choice.

Creative Writing

Donovan and Twain recorded many observations about river life. Think of a busy place you know well, and write a paragraph describing the place in detail. Ask other students how well they are able to form a mental image of the place you have described. Use their suggestions to revise your description.

The Late Benjamin Franklin and My First Lie, and How I Got Out of It

Mark Twain

Before You Read

Focus Question

When is using humor a good way to convey a message?

Background

Mark Twain was a master of satire. As you will see in the following two essays, he was a keen observer of society and used wit and sarcasm to ridicule human weaknesses.

Responding to the Reading

1. Give three or four examples of people or things Twain satirizes in these essays.

2. In “The Late Benjamin Franklin” Twain writes, “His maxims were full of animosity toward boys.” What does he mean by this statement?

3. **Making Connections** What is the “lie of silent assertion” that Twain refers to in “My First Lie, and How I Got Out of It”? When does Huck tell this type of lie? From the novel, give an example.

Creative Writing

Write a paragraph that uses humor to criticize some aspect of high school life that you would like to see changed.

from *Stride Toward Freedom*

Martin Luther King Jr.

Before You Read

Focus Question

In your opinion, is it ever right to break a rule? Explain.

Background

Martin Luther King Jr. received more than forty awards for his work in the civil rights movement. Here, in his own words, he recounts his observations of Montgomery's African American community and his own struggle to find methods to deal with injustice.

Responding to the Reading

1. How did King answer the Montgomery man who asked, "Why have you and your associates come in to destroy [our] long tradition [of peaceful race relations]?" Do you find King's reply to be persuasive? Explain.

2. What was King's ethical dilemma regarding the bus boycott? How did he resolve the dilemma?

3. **Making Connections** If the character of Jim were able to see into the future, do you think he would have approved of Martin Luther King Jr. and his actions? Explain.

Literature Groups

In your group, discuss the techniques Dr. King uses to persuade readers to see Rosa Park's situation as he sees it. Did he succeed in persuading you? Explain why or why not.