

“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources,
and Historical Documents

《哈克贝利·费恩历险记》解读

[美] 克劳迪娅·德斯特·约翰逊 著
(Claudia Durst Johnson)

Understanding Narratives of Blackberry Pies

A Student Textbook in Social Sciences
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**UNDERSTANDING
NARRATIVES**

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The "Literature in Context" Series

UNDERSTANDING
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Huckleberry Finn*

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Claudia Durst Johnson

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Introduction

The Concord (Mass.) Public Library committee has decided to exclude Mark Twain's latest book from the library. One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people. (Boston *Transcript*, March 17, 1885)

The Concord Public Library was not the only group to condemn Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This novel about the adventures of a fourteen-year-old boy has generated controversy in every year since it was published in 1884. "What!" the newcomer to the novel might exclaim—"this popular boy's book about a happy and wholesome young life in rural America?" Yet, ironically, it is true. Even by the standards of the late twentieth century, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most radical and darkly bitter books in the American canon. What does it present as good and worthy? For one thing, it represents the breaking of a federal law as moral. It recommends disobedience and defi-

ance on the part of young people. It portrays churchgoers as hypocritical and their religion as silly; it shows respected community leaders to be cruel and immoral. The most admirable characters in the book habitually lie and steal and loaf. One is illiterate, and the other is a barely literate truant from school.

Yet Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most recognized classics of literature in the world. Ernest Hemingway, a renowned writer of twentieth-century America, wrote that all modern American literature proceeded from one book, *Huckleberry Finn*. One would be hard pressed to find many Americans who have never heard of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, even though many may not have read it. At the same time, it is one of those classics whose popular image has little to do with its realities. Direct a question about *Huckleberry Finn* to the man or woman on the street, most of whom have encountered Huck's story in a movie or an adaptation of the story for young children, and you will likely be told that Twain's novel is a boy's book about the happy, innocent times long ago of a barefoot boy in a straw hat and coveralls on the Mississippi River. While there is a grain of truth in such a characterization, the complete story of Mark Twain's novel is a far cry from this popular idea of it. In the first place, to classify *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a boy's book is misleading. Although it contains some of the high jinks that made a true boy's book, *Tom Sawyer*, popular, and although Mark Twain might have first conceived of *Huckleberry Finn* as a boy's book, it evolved into a treatment of adult themes and profound intellectual questions which have made it the subject of university classrooms and scholarly conferences. Furthermore, when *Huckleberry Finn* first appeared, it was seen as anything but a *proper* boy's book: reviewers almost universally condemned it as so immoral and graphic in ugly detail that it should be kept away from boys as if it were poison. After all, Huck's grammar is atrocious; he smokes; he lies repeatedly; he steals like a pro; he doesn't go to church and isn't inclined to make up for the religious education he has never had; he inadvertently makes prayer, heaven and hell, churchgoers, temperance, revivals, and Bible stories appear ridiculous; he skips school; he describes drunkenness; he lies around the raft naked; he describes a pornographic stage show he witnesses; and he starts off his story with an account of joining a gang to terrorize the town.

No, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not exactly the typical young boy's book. Nor can it accurately be characterized as a happy, innocent tale. While many scenes on the river *are* idyllic, Huck and Jim's world is actually a brutal one by any standards. For instance, the story includes the description of a drowned person mistakenly believed to be Huck's father; Huck's faking of his own murder and the dragging of the river for a dead body; the cruelty of vicious child beatings; the discovery of the body of a naked man, shot in the back, in a shack once used by thieves and prostitutes; thieves threatening one of their gang with a pistol on another river boat—the *Walter Scott*—which eventually sinks and drowns them all; the murder before Huck's eyes of his good friend and others in a senseless feud; animal torture; the shooting down of a harmless, unarmed drunk in broad daylight; the digging up of a corpse to look for money; and the tarring and feathering of two con men. If a Hollywood studio made a movie of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that visualized the violence that Huck relates, no child would ever be allowed to see it.

Even though the traditions about Twain's novel as an innocent boy's book are inaccurate, one tradition about it seems valid: that it is the first truly American novel. This is a puzzling statement at first glance because, of course, appearing as it did in 1884, it was neither the first novel written by an American nor the first novel with an American setting. Other American writers—Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Herman Melville, Louisa May Alcott, and dozens of others—had been writing novels with nineteenth-century American settings since the first American fiction appeared. For what reason, we may ask, is *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* regarded as the first truly American novel?

The critical issue, as Twain specialist Bernard De Voto observed, is the novel's language. De Voto argued that with the first sentence—"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"—great literature was written in the language of Americans (*Mark Twain at Work* [Cambridge, Mass., 1942]). First, Twain uses the vernacular rather than a "literary" language descending from the English masters. One need only compare it with a page from Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, or Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." The

language found in Twain's novel was spoken by many Americans in the nineteenth century and nowhere else in the world. Second, its language is representative of a great variety of dialects from different regions, races, and classes. He used not only an African-American dialect, as Harriet Beecher Stowe had done in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852. According to the explanatory note that prefaced the first edition of the novel, he used at least seven different middle-American dialects, which students of language have subsequently identified.

While the message of the novel is universal, the particular subjects of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are as uniquely American as its language. Central to the novel, set sometime between 1835 and 1845, are life on the Mississippi River, frontier society, and slavery. It is also about such American subjects as feuding in Tennessee, western-style gamblers, outlaws, and confidence men, small-town frontier entertainments like the circus, and frontier justice, that is, lynching.

The novel takes place in a thoroughly American landscape in the heart of the nation rather than in an East Coast town that looks back to Europe. In the heartland of America, on the Mississippi River, the characters seem to owe very little to European and English tradition. The exception is Tom Sawyer's obsession with Old World romantic fiction, which in this setting is made to appear ridiculous. The Mississippi culture, with its own distinct currents, characters, and vegetation, seems, by and large, free of the Old World which pervaded Massachusetts, Virginia, and South Carolina.

The present study begins in Chapter 1 with a literary analysis of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, focusing on its point of view, major themes, and images. Chapter 2 is an exploration of the controversy over the novel's censorship, based largely on the use of racial epithets and racial characterizations. Here the student is asked to explore a variety of questions related to the issue before moving to arguments by African-American educators and journalists on both sides of the question of censorship and racial characterizations in the novel. Chapter 3 begins to place the novel in historical context, that is, the Mississippi Valley from 1830 to 1865. The context is established by people who lived in the period and wrote about life then. Included are reports of travelers and the childhood memories of an upstanding citizen, a professional gam-

bler, and two men considered to be outlaws. Chapter 4 continues to explore the historical context of the novel in terms of one of its basic themes, the history of slavery in nineteenth-century America. The documents on slavery are divided into three main categories: (1) arguments in support of the perpetuation of slavery, and narratives of slaves themselves; (2) the text of two important legal documents in the history of slavery; and (3) public sentiment on whether laws should be obeyed, even if they are perceived to be immoral. Chapter 5 examines the nineteenth-century code of honor that shaped southern society, an important theme in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The code of the streets observed by youthful gangs in the 1990s is related to attitudes in the nineteenth century. Elements of the novel's satire, with particular reference to productions of Shakespearean plays, home decoration, and sentimental verse, are the subject of the final chapter. Each chapter contains projects and suggestions for oral or written exploration and a list of materials for reading further on various subjects.

NOTE

Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Signet Classic Edition of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, originally published in 1959.

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Literary Analysis: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Forms of Enslavement

THE FLUID STRUCTURE

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, in the way it is put together and in the various stories it tells, a repudiation of traditional forms of plot structure, the rules and manners of genteel society, and the restraints civilization places upon the free spirit. In looking at the way the novel is constructed, one can see that Mark Twain has dispensed with a tightly constructed plot in favor of an episodic narrative that takes its form from nature, in this case, the mighty Mississippi River flowing through the heart of America. A single, thoroughly American geographic feature not only contributes to the novel's endorsement of freedom and nature, it is also a key to and a reflection of the book's structure. The action of the novel is comprised of numerous episodes which are held together, not by the usual kind of plot, but by the river itself. Episodes occur on the river or close by the river, and there is always a return to the river. Because of its episodic nature, the novel's form can best be described as *picaresque*, meaning "a novel of the road," in this case, a journey on the river. The unifying elements in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are the character of Huck, who relates the story and is always in the middle of the action, and the Mississippi River, in whose waters and on whose

banks the episodes occur. The novel begins in a Missouri town located on the river and moves on down the river with Huck through Missouri, to Cairo, Illinois, then to Tennessee, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana; along the way Huck encounters other people traveling on the river itself and stops at towns on the river's banks.

Huckleberry Finn lacks what are called the "unities" of setting, character, and plot of the conventional narrative: there are many settings with many subplots involving many different sets of characters, instead of one plot, one setting, and a single set of characters. Most novels have what is called a dramatic structure. That is, they consist of (1) an exposition in which the characters and the situation are introduced (as an illustration, imagine this is a weekend party attended by a detective); (2) an initiating circumstance or action which introduces a complication (perhaps a murder at the party); (3) a single rising action during which each complication leads to another (for example, a detective investigating the murder discovers one thing and then another); (4) a climax, which is the turning point (when it is inevitably known who the murderer is); and, finally, (5) the denouement (as when the detective, in a conversation with the other houseguests after the arrest has been made, explains how he arrived at the identity of the murderer). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* does not have this kind of narrative form. It is not built on rising action with a single cast of characters in a single setting. A given action does not arise out of the one that precedes it or lead to the one that follows. Instead, the action is randomly episodic. The separate episodes, held together by the narrator, Huckleberry Finn, and by the river itself, include the following:

- The Tom Sawyer gang and Miss Watson
- Pap's imprisonment of Huck
- Huck's escape to Jackson's Island
- The meeting of Huck and Jim
- The dead man in the floating house
- The Sarah Williams/George Peters incident
- The *Walter Scott*
- The conversation about the Bible and royalty

- Huck getting lost in the fog and his apology
- Huck changing his mind about turning Jim in
- The Shepherdsons and Grangerfords
- The arrival of the king and the duke
- The revival scam
- The Boggs-Sherburn incident
- The circus
- The Shakespearean burlesque and the Royal Nonesuch
- The Wilks episode
- Huck's decision to go to hell
- The Phelps farm

The absence of traditional plot can be seen in that the characters and occurrences in one episode usually don't have a direct bearing on the action in other episodes. Note that the characters in the Grangerford feud, for example, do not appear again after that specific episode, as might be expected in a conventional narrative. Similarly, the settings of the various episodes change, from Missouri to Arkansas to Louisiana, while a conventional dramatic narrative would be expected to remain largely in the location where the initial action took place.

Despite its episodic structure, students of the novel have found elements that unify it. There is, for example, a central plot that does emerge throughout the story—the developing theme of Huck's growing up, his initiation into and attempt to survive the harsh realities of society. This is supported by the interplay of contrasting images (freedom on the raft as opposed to bondage in Pap's shack and on the Phelps farm, for example) and the repetition of various themes such as role-playing, which, as we shall see, also contribute to the coherence of the novel.

One of the most striking innovations in the novel is also an important unifying element: the point of view from which the story is told. Told by a young, uneducated boy, using language as it is spoken rather than read, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was unique for its time and pointed the way for similarly told American masterpieces like *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye*. Huck doesn't have the book learning or sophistication of the reader, so he is what is called an unreliable narrator in that his