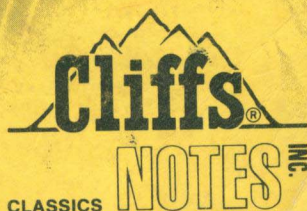


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TWAIN'S

HUCKLEBERRY FINN



YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

NOTES

including

- *Life and Background*
- *General Plot Summary*
- *List of Characters*
- *Note on Chapter Titles*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Character Analyses*
- *Review Questions*
- *Selected Bibliography*

by

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Huckleberry Finn Notes

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

As one of America's first and foremost realists and humorists, Mark Twain, the pen name of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, usually wrote about his own personal experiences and things he knew about from firsthand experience. The various characters in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are based on types which Twain encountered both in his home town and while working as a riverboat pilot on the Mississippi River.

Twain was born in the little town of Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835, shortly after his family had moved there from Tennessee. When he was about four, the family moved again, this time to Hannibal, Missouri, a small town of about five hundred people, situated on the Mississippi River about eighty miles from St. Louis. Hannibal was dusty and quiet with large forests nearby which Twain knew as a child and which he uses in *Huck Finn* when Pap kidnaps Huck and hides out in the great forest. The steamboats which passed daily were the fascination of the town and became the subject matter of Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*. The town of Hannibal is immortalized as St. Petersburg in Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

Twain's father was a lawyer by profession, but was only mildly successful. He was, however, a highly intelligent man who was a stern disciplinarian. Twain's mother, a southern belle in her youth, had a natural sense of humor, was emotional, and was known to be particularly fond of animals and unfortunate human beings. Although the family was not wealthy, Twain apparently had a happy childhood. Twain's father died when Twain was twelve years old and, for the next ten years, Twain was an apprentice printer and then a printer both in Hannibal and in New York City. Hoping to find his fortune, he conceived a wild scheme of making a fortune in South America. On a riverboat to

New Orleans, he met a famous riverboat pilot who promised to teach him the trade for five hundred dollars. After completing his training, Twain was a riverboat pilot for four years and, during this time, he became familiar with all of the towns along the Mississippi River which play such an important part in *Huck Finn*, and he also became acquainted with every type of character which inhabits his various novels, especially *Huck Finn*.

When the Civil War began, Twain's allegiance tended to be somewhat southern due to his southern heritage, but his brother Orion convinced him to go west on an expedition, a trip which became the subject matter of a later work, *Roughing It*. Even though some of his letters and accounts of traveling had been published, Twain actually launched his literary career with the short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County," published in 1865. This story brought him national attention, and he devoted the major portion of the rest of his life to literary endeavors. He died in 1910.

GENERAL PLOT SUMMARY

Huck Finn decides to tell his own story since the reader has already heard about him through a novel called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. As the son of the town drunkard, Huck has had difficulty living with the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson, since both want to civilize him. He prefers the easy and free manner of living wild. When his father discovers that Huck has some money, Huck is kidnapped and held prisoner in a shack across the river. His father beats him so brutally that Huck decides that he must escape or else his father will kill him some day. He creates a plan whereby it will appear that he has been murdered and then he goes to Jackson's Island to hide.

On the island he discovers Jim, Miss Watson's runaway slave, and Huck promises to keep Jim's secret. Huck discovers that some men are coming to the island to search for Jim, and the two escape by floating down the Mississippi River on a raft they

had earlier discovered. They plan to go to the Ohio River and travel north into free states. On the river, they feel free and easy as they travel during the night and hide during the day. One night, in a storm, they float past Cairo and, since the raft can't go upstream, they search for a canoe. Before they find one, a steamship runs into the raft.

Huck climbs ashore and finds himself being challenged by the Grangerford men who are having a feud with the Shepherdsons. Huck tells them that he is George Jackson and that he fell overboard off a steamboat. He stays with them until he witnesses the deaths of many people in an outbreak of the feud. In the meantime, Jim has been discovered and they return to the raft and escape from the feuding.

Down the river, two scoundrels make their way to the raft and call themselves a duke and a king. At one town along the river, the king and the duke put on a trumped-up show and gull the townspeople out of a large sum of money. Continuing down the river, the king and the duke discover that a Peter Wilks has just died and left a large sum of money to two brothers in England who are expected any day. The king and the duke imitate the brothers in order to rob the Wilks family of its inheritance. Huck, however, is sympathetic to one of the nieces and foils their plan. As they escape and head down the river, the king and the duke are desperate for money, so they sell Jim to Silas Phelps for ransom money.

Huck hides the raft and goes to the Phelps farm where he is immediately mistaken for Tom Sawyer, who is supposed to arrive the same day. Huck goes out to meet Tom and they decide that Huck will remain Tom, and Tom will pretend to be his brother Sid. After many fantastic and ridiculous plans are put into effect to free Jim, at the moment of escape Tom is shot in the leg and Jim has to give up his chance for freedom to help nurse Tom. After the episode, however, it is discovered that Jim was already freed by his owner, Miss Watson, just before she died. Huck decides to head out for new territory because he does not like civilized society.

LIST OF CHARACTERS

Huckleberry Finn

Son of the town drunkard and narrator of the novel.

Tom Sawyer

Huck's respectable friend who delights in fantastic schemes.

Widow Douglas

Huck's unofficial guardian who wants to civilize him.

Miss Watson

The widow's hypocritical sister who pretends to be very pious.

Jim

Miss Watson's slave whom she plans to sell down the river.

Aunt Polly

Tom's aunt who is also his guardian.

Jo Harper, Ben Rogers, and Tommy Barnes

Members of Tom Sawyer's gang.

Pap

Huck's brutal, drunken father.

Judge Thatcher

The kindly judge who invests money for Huck.

Mrs. Loftus

A town lady whom Huck visits dressed as a girl.

Jake Packard, Bill, and Jim Turner

Cutthroats whom Huck discovers on a ship that is sinking.

The Grangerfords

The family who adopts Huck for a while and who are feuding with the Shepherdsons.

The duke and the king

The two scoundrels who take over the raft for a while.

Boggs

An offensive drunkard in a small Arkansas town who is shot down in cold blood.

Colonel Sherburn

The man who shoots Boggs and who later turns away the mob by ridiculing them.

Buck Harkness

The man who tries to lead the mob against Colonel Sherburn.

Peter Wilks

A well-to-do businessman with relatives in England. He has recently died and the family is waiting for the arrival of his two brothers from England.

William and Harvey Wilks

The two brothers who arrive after the duke and king pretend to be them.

Mary Jane, Susan, and Joanna

Peter Wilks' nieces.

Dr. Robinson and Levi Bell

Two townspeople who see through the guise of the duke and the king.

Silas Phelps

The man who buys Jim for the ransom money.

Aunt Sally Phelps

Silas' wife, also Tom Sawyer's aunt.

NOTE ON CHAPTER TITLES

In the original edition of the novel, Twain did not give titles to the individual chapters. In later editions, however, he did include titles to the various chapters. The following list presents the title he assigned to each chapter:

Chapter I	I DISCOVER MOSES AND THE BULRUSHERS
Chapter II	OUR GANG'S DARK OATH
Chapter III	WE AMBUSCADE THE A-RABS
Chapter IV	THE HAIR-BALL ORACLE
Chapter V	PAP STARTS IN ON A NEW LIFE
Chapter VI	PAP STRUGGLES WITH THE DEATH ANGEL
Chapter VII	I FOOL PAP AND GET AWAY
Chapter VIII	I SPARE MISS WATSON'S JIM

Chapter IX	THE HOUSE OF DEATH FLOATS BY
Chapter X	WHAT COMES OF HANDLIN' SNAKESKIN
Chapter XI	THEY'RE AFTER US!
Chapter XII	"BETTER LET BLAME WELL ALONE"
Chapter XIII	HONEST LOOT FROM THE "WALTER SCOTT"
Chapter XIV	WAS SOLOMON WISE?
Chapter XV	FOOLING POOR OLD JIM
Chapter XVI	THE RATTLESNAKE-SKIN DOES ITS WORK
Chapter XVII	THE GRANGERFORDS TAKE ME IN
Chapter XVIII	WHY HARNEY RODE AWAY FOR HIS HAT
Chapter XIX	THE DUKE AND THE DAUPHIN COME ABOARD
Chapter XX	WHAT ROYALTY DID TO PARKVILLE
Chapter XXI	AN ARKANSAW DIFFICULTY
Chapter XXII	WHY THE LYNCHING FAILED
Chapter XXIII	THE ORNERINESS OF KINGS
Chapter XXIV	THE KING TURNS PARSON
Chapter XXV	ALL FULL OF TEARS AND FLAPDOODLE
Chapter XXVI	I STEAL THE KING'S PLUNDER
Chapter XXVII	DEAD PETER HAS HIS GOLD
Chapter XXVIII	OVERREACHING DON'T PAY
Chapter XXIX	I LIGHT OUT IN THE STORM
Chapter XXX	THE GOLD SAVES THE THIEVES
Chapter XXXI	YOU CAN'T PRAY A LIE
Chapter XXXII	I HAVE A NEW NAME
Chapter XXXIII	THE PITIFUL ENDING OF ROYALTY
Chapter XXXIV	WE CHEER UP JIM
Chapter XXXV	DARK, DEEP-LAID PLANS
Chapter XXXVI	TRYING TO HELP JIM
Chapter XXXVII	JIM GETS HIS WITCH-PIE
Chapter XXXVIII	"HERE A CAPTIVE HEART BUSTED"
Chapter XXXIX	TOM WRITES NONNAMOUS LETTERS
Chapter XL	A MIXED-UP AND SPLENDID RESCUE
Chapter XLI	"MUST A' BEEN SPERITS"
Chapter XLII	WHY THEY DIDN'T HANG JIM
Chapter The Last	NOTHING MORE TO WRITE

SUMMARIES AND COMMENTARIES

“TWAIN’S INTRODUCTORY NOTE”

Although Twain wrote this novel from 1876 through 1883, he set the time back in the era of slavery about “forty to fifty years” earlier. In between the actual time of the novel and the composition, the Civil War had theoretically freed the slaves, but the status of the Negro had not been improved and they were still kept in a subservient position.

Twain warns his readers that they will be persecuted if they attempt “to find a motive . . . or a moral” in the novel. This ironic statement, then, calls attention to the fact that there is definitely a serious intent to this novel which was missing in the earlier *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. While both books deal with the escapades of youths, and while both books capture something of the lost world of the young adolescent, the latter book can be read on a much deeper level.

Even though *Huck Finn* can profitably be read by younger persons, the greatness and the depth of the novel can only be fully appreciated and understood by the perceptive adult. Only the mature reader can completely recognize the complexity of this work of art, the profound social message, the verisimilitude of characterization, the psychological depths, and the moral values found individually throughout the various chapters.

In these introductory remarks, Twain makes it clear that he is imitating several different types of dialect—even though to an unfamiliar ear, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between them. However, one has only to read the dialect found in other “local color” writers to recognize the greatness of Twain’s use of dialect. The dialect used by Johnson Jones Hooper or Joel Chandler Harris, for example, has become almost impossible to read. Yet Twain was so careful and yet so accurate that his dialect lends piquancy to the novel and does not interfere with reading.

Twain's use of dialect has also contributed to the reputation of the novel, helping to evoke comments such as Ernest Hemingway's that this novel is the beginning of American literature. The novel, with its precise location, its subject matter of slavery and freedom, its rather definite time, and its unique array of frontier people place it as a uniquely American work of art.

CHAPTER I

Summary

Huck Finn reminds the readers that he has already appeared in a book about Tom Sawyer called *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. This book was "made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth." He reminds us that at the end of that book, he and Tom had found six thousand dollars apiece. Since then, the Widow Douglas has been trying to civilize Huck, and Judge Thatcher has invested the money for him, bringing a dollar a day in interest.

The widow's sister, Miss Watson, also lives in the house, and she is forever picking at Huck, trying to make him do things her way. Unlike the Widow Douglas, who is kind and patient with Huck, Miss Watson is sharp and nagging. Her insistent interference makes Huck resent home life and its restraints. They won't even let him smoke.

Huck is so disgusted with home life that he accidentally kills a spider, and he knows that this act is bound to bring bad luck to him. However, as he sits and smokes, he hears Tom Sawyer's secret call. Huck puts out the light, slides to the ground, and finds Tom waiting for him among the trees.

Commentary

The opening sentence of the novel connects Huck with his appearance in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. But as Huck says, "it ain't no matter" if the reader has not read the earlier work. In

other words, Twain is letting us know that this is not a serial continuation — this novel is a complete work of art in its own right, is self-contained, and is not dependent upon other works.

Furthermore, Huck himself is going to be the narrator of this book and, thus, the reader will see all the events as Huck reports them. This choice of a narrator will provide the reader with much of the basic humor. That is, Huck, as narrator, reports things directly and never comments much on them. He is not aware of many of the incongruous items which he reports, and his failure to see the incongruity contributes to our reading pleasure. For example, in this chapter he runs away, but Tom Sawyer tells him that if he will “go back to the widow and be respectable,” then he can become one of Tom’s gang of robbers. The contradiction between the terms “respectable” and “robber” is beyond Huck’s comprehension, but is immediately funny to the reader. This type of straightforward reporting, and failure to see the incongruous elements while reporting factually, is the basis of much of Twain’s humor.

Of the many themes which run throughout the novel, several are introduced in this first chapter. First, Huck mentions that the Widow Douglas wanted to “sivilize” him. In contrast, Huck wants to escape and be “free and satisfied.” The conflict between society and the individual becomes a controlling theme as the novel develops, and is investigated on several different levels. Furthermore, the novel ends with Huck planning “to light out” for a different territory because Aunt Sally plans to “sivilize” him. In between these opening and closing remarks, Huck encounters varying aspects, attitudes, and restrictions of society and learns to prefer his own individual freedom. This idea will receive its dramatic climax when Huck decides to oppose the dictates of society and “go to hell” for the sake of his friendship with Jim.

The restriction of living with the Widow Douglas also introduces the idea of Huck’s quest for freedom which will later be correlated with Jim’s quest of freedom from slavery. This theme will also function on many levels as Huck and Jim begin their trip down the river in search of freedom.

In conjunction with the restrictive effects of civilization is Twain's subtle satire on the traditional concepts of religion. Huck sees Miss Watson's traditional view of "a pearly gate" concept of heaven as being essentially boring and restrictive. The Widow Douglas' view is somewhat more appealing, but Huck would prefer to go to a more exciting place. The concept of religion, in general, throughout the novel is attacked by Twain in various guises. Basically, a society which required its property (its slaves) to become practicing Christians is a contradiction of the tenets of Christianity. Slaves were sometimes referred to, ironically, as "baptized property." For Twain, the concept of slavery and the pious religious concepts of the southerners were the height of contradictory absurdity.

Another theme introduced in this first chapter is that of Huck's birth and rebirth. When he feels stifled or deadened by society, he escapes to become reborn again. And throughout the novel, Huck loses his identity, assumes different names (even Tom Sawyer's), arranges his own murder, and then, in turn, is reborn with new or different values.

Furthermore, each time that Huck escapes from some situation, the theme of his loneliness and isolation is often touched upon. In this first chapter, he says that "I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead." Man's feeling of loneliness and isolation is a recurrent theme in the total works of Twain. In this novel, it is expressed by Huck's encounter with the vastness of the frontier, with the magnitude of the Mississippi River and with the formidable forests which surrounded the settlements.

This feeling of loneliness is also correlated with the superstitions which permeate the novel. Confronted with the vastness of their isolation, Huck, Jim, and other characters put great reliance on superstitions of one sort or another. These superstitions develop into an important motif as the novel develops. In this first chapter, Huck is horrified by the implications inherent in accidentally flipping a spider into a candle and immediately makes the proper signs to ward off any bad luck.

Finally, Twain's careful craftsmanship is fully illustrated in the seemingly casual manner in which he introduces most of his major themes in his first chapter. In the hands of a lesser author, the introduction of such a variety of thematic material could possibly become contrived or artificial, yet Twain presents each theme as an integral part of the narrative structure of this short, first chapter.

CHAPTERS II AND III

Summary

As Huck joins Tom Sawyer in the garden, he accidentally trips over a root and alerts Miss Watson's slave, Jim, to the fact that something unusual is happening. Jim sits down on the ground between Tom and Huck, and he would have discovered them if he had not gone to sleep. Tom then plays a trick on Jim—a trick which multiplies in size as Jim tells the story after he awakes. With each telling, the story becomes more fanciful until Jim becomes the most envied Negro in the village.

Tom and Huck meet some other boys, and Tom wants to organize a band of robbers. From the various "pirate-books and robber-books" that Tom has read, he binds the members of his gang together with a beautiful oath and then makes plans to "stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money." Tom also wants to kidnap people and then hold them for ransom, but nobody knows what a ransom is. It is almost daylight before Huck creeps back through his window with his new clothes "all greased up and clayey. . . ."

After receiving a scolding from Miss Watson, Huck is also instructed in religion by the old maid, but he can't make any sense out of her type of sermonizing. About this time, a drowned body has been found and many people think it is Huck's pap. but Huck knows that he couldn't be that lucky. Unfortunately, he knows that his father would show up again some day even though he hasn't been around for over a year.