

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain: Questions and Topics for Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Arguably Mark Twain's most famous novel—indeed, one of the greatest works of American literature—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* brings together two people from the lower rungs of society, an ill-educated boy escaping an abusive father and a kind, strong man escaping slavery, and puts them on a raft going down the Mississippi River. The raft gives us the quintessential image of Huck Finn, but in fact much of the novel takes place on land, where the protagonists repeatedly find themselves having to escape from one bind or another. What began for Mark Twain as a sequel to his novel of American boyhood, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, became over the years of its composition a much more complex work. Set in the late 1840s, *Huck Finn* is a post-Civil War realist novel that reads like a picaresque romantic adventure with colorful gothic trimmings and—despite the author's "Notice" at the front of the book—a strong moral core. At its heart is the complicated, evolving relationship between Huck and Jim, a white boy and a black man, both of whom yearn for freedom from society's strictures. By the time the novel appeared, slavery was in the past, but racism was not. It is impossible to know how his first readers understood his portrayals of his characters and especially of Huck's dawning conscience, but readers today continue to ponder and debate Mark Twain's "motive" and "moral."

ABOUT MARK TWAIN

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, in 1835, and died at Redding, Connecticut in 1910. In his person and in his pursuits he was a man of extraordinary contrasts. Although he left school at twelve when his father died, he was eventually awarded honorary degrees from Yale University, the University of Missouri, and Oxford University. His career encompassed such varied occupations as printer, Mississippi riverboat pilot, journalist, travel writer, and publisher. He made fortunes from his writing but toward the end of his life he had to resort to lecture tours to pay his debts. He was hot-tempered, profane, and sentimental—and also pessimistic, cynical, and tortured by self-doubt. His nostalgia helped produce some of his best books. He lives in American letters as a great artist, the writer whom William Dean Howells called "the Lincoln of our literature."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In the introduction, John Seelye notes that the premise of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is highly unrealistic (p. xiii). Is it? If so, how might that affect one's reading of the novel? Does it matter?

Can Huck—who chafes at being “sivilized” and indeed questions any rule or orthodoxy from church to good manners—be said to have a belief system? How do his beliefs, and his understanding of them, evolve over the course of his adventures?

Tom accuses Huck of being “ignorant,” and Huck clearly feels his own “wickedness” and lack of education, especially compared to his friend, who is “well brung up.” What does Huck have that Tom does not?

Why does the practical-minded Huck admire Tom's way of doing things? How is Tom's influence felt even when he is not present? Why does Huck see through the duke and the king immediately but still trust Tom? What might he have learned from his time with the two “frauds” about jokes and tricks?

When Huck and Tom plot to help Jim escape from the Phelpses, they have not only different ideas of how to bring about the release but also different motives. How are they different and what do they tell us about each boy?

How can we characterize the relationship between Huck and Jim? Does Huck ever view Jim as an equal, and vice versa?

Why does Jim not tell Huck about his father? Is this comparable to Tom's withholding the information that Jim has been freed?

What is the point of the “Notice” at the beginning of the book? Is it a challenge to the reader? Despite its warning, can we say that the novel indeed has a “plot,” a “motive,” and a “moral”?