
Booknotes for Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Authorial Background

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born on November 30, 1835. At 4 years old, he was brought to Hannibal, Missouri, where he spent thirteen and a half years in a setting that would later be integrated into his most famous books: Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. When his father died in 1847, Sam Clemens went to work as an apprentice painter; in 1853 he wandered the West, becoming a riverboat pilot, gaining his pseudonym Mark Twain. In 1867 he moved to New York, and from this time, he made the East Coast and Europe his home. His first book, The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches, appeared in 1867, selling poorly. His second, Innocents Abroad (1869) was a great success. His other books were Roughing It (1872), his first novel The Gilded Age (a collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner, 1873), Tom Sawyer (1876), A Tramp Abroad (1880), The Prince and the Pauper (1882), Life on the Mississippi (1883), Huckleberry Finn (1884), and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889). After raising a large family and buying a house that proved to be a financial burden, Twain grows demoralized due to the death of one of his favorite daughters and becomes grievously lonely and bitter. Having become the most popular author in the world during that period, Mark Twain died on April 21, 1910.

Literary Period/Country

Modern/Realism, 19th century America.

Setting

There are multiple settings that come into view as Huck and Jim move up and down the Mississippi River; there is no one continuous setting. First, Huck arrives at Jackson Island, where he encounters Jim, and then most of the setting after this encounter is on a raft. Occasionally, Huck and Jim will tie up their raft and come to town.

Characters

1. Huckleberry Finn: a country boy, social outcast, liar, thief, child of nature, and natural rebel, he is the main character and narrator of the story. He wears cast-off, ill-fitting clothing, is somewhat messy, very dirty, and walks barefoot. He is quite passive and lives a dull life, which is his motive to follow his friend Tom Sawyer on his quests for adventure. But, Huck is a realist and knows how to make decisions for himself, however influenced they may be. He believes it is better to accept change than to fight it. At the end, though, Huck regresses to Tom Sawyer's side and must reundergo the process of social refinement instead of holding his resistance against the prejudices and moral inhibitions of society.
2. Tom Sawyer: he is neat and good-looking, with bright eyes and a slightly smug, sly expression on his face. He is always on the lookout for adventure, always living for the moment, but is Huck's best friend. Tom is overconfident and overly imaginative, and when he gets into

trouble with his family for trying to save Jim, he does not seem to mind and does not change his mischievous attitude.

3. Jim: he is a runaway black slave, superstitious, and wary. He is an independent, serious character, well-rounded and sympathetic despite his crazy superstitions. Though he has accepted the morality of the society which enslaved him, he still runs away because he feels love for his family. Though he is a runaway slave, he is the feist man in the story because his conscience is clean and unclouded; his loyalties are strong and based on honest emotion and personal devotion. At the end, after having been a target for reward money and lynchings, he becomes rich and proud.

Theme

A major theme that may encompass all others found in the story is slavery. Different forms of slavery are prevalent: political, institutional, religious, biological, psychological, and moral, and the worst thing about these types of slavery is that men and women actually volunteer for them. Huck and Jim experience all six types of slavery throughout the story, and their encounters with people who attempt to block their progress raise questions. Can a person free himself from these forms of social and personal slavery? Can a person be completely a part of society and not be corrupted by it?

The nature of human innocence and human corruption is explained through Huck and Jim's struggle with the elements of their society. Huck, although he continuously does things that society disapproves of, is not a bad boy; he tries to be good and doesn't want to do things to offend society. His passive attitude reflects upon his innocence. Jim, too, is innocent; he runs away not solely because he wants his freedom, but because he cares for his family. Human corruption is explained in the meetings between Tom and Huck, as when Tom tries to change Huck's character because Huck is not as adventurous and risky as he is.

An important theme and moral of the story is that it is dangerous to play with reality. Throughout the book, various characters foolishly test reality with disastrous results. Huck, trying to poke fun at Jim for his superstition over snake-skins, nearly causes Jim's death. Tom, by trying to create an imaginary adventure instead of immediately freeing Jim, gets himself shot.

Plot Summary

Though written in 1884, the story is set in the years before slavery is abolished--before 1835. Huck Finn, a young, wild, carefree boy, is in the process of being taught the finer arts of a civilization that makes no sense to him. He becomes slightly literate and has been taught about the Bible, but when his pernicious Pap comes home, Huck is drawn back into the wild country life he loves without any fight. Huck is essentially passive, but he is a realist, often making profound decisions that change the direction of the story. The first decision he makes is to escape from his drunk and rude Pap, who locks him inside a shed. Huck arranges the surrounding property to make others believe the place was robbed and he was killed; that way, he would be free. Huck travels the Mississippi River and lands on an island, living a wonderful life until he discovers that a runaway slave, Jim, is also living on the same island. At once, Huck is faced with another dilemma: to turn Jim in to his owners, or to help him get free. This is his second major decision, and he cannot do anything else but help his friend get free; they paddle upstream hoping to reach a small township called Cairo that would lead into the Free States. Due to fog, they miss the turn, causing Huck and Jim to run into many different people and

places, including Tom Sawyer. After Jim is caught and placed in jail to await the arrival of fictitious owners, Tom Sawyer devises an absurd, unreasonable, tentative plan to free Jim-- somehow the plan works. Leading up to this point, the reader clearly sees the contrasting personalities of Tom and Huck, and the gradual development of Jim's enigmatic character; though Jim is a runaway slave, using coarse dialogue and highly superstitious, he bears Tom's foolishness with great dignity as he is freed from jail and shows a degree of caring and sensitivity not seen in the other characters. Tom's plan later backfires as he exposes the secret of how Jim escaped from jail, Jim is free, and Huck suffers a deep, unrecognizable loss--he is forced to abandon his moral freedom and become a little dull boy again.

Author's Unique Style

The narrator of the story is Huck Finn, from a first-person point of view. The first person is used so the reader can develop an intimacy with Huck's personality and see the problems he must face. The main rhetorical device used to create a realistic tone is diction; Twain employs a number of different dialects to represent the various groups of people. He uses the Missouri Negro dialect, spoken by Jim, the extremest form of the backwoods Southwestern dialect, the ordinary "Pike County" dialect, and four modified varieties of the Pike County.

There is also a hint of foreshadowing present. While carrying on a random conversation, Jim states that men with hair on their chests are destined to be rich and prosperous. At the end of the story, despite being locked up in jail and nearly getting lynched, Jim becomes forty dollars richer. Almost all of Jim's superstitious suppositions signal the reader that something will soon come to pass. "Now you think it's bad luck; but what did you say when I fetched in the snake-skin that I found on the top of that ridge day before yesterday? . . . Well, here's your bad luck! We've raked in all his truck and eight dollars besides. . .," Huck states, but Jim tells him, "Never you mind, honey, never you mind. . . It's a comin'. Mind I tell you, it's a comin'." Shortly afterwards, Jim gets bitten by a snake and nearly dies.

Quotes

1. "Now I want to ast you: what's de use er dat half a bill?--can't buy noth'n wid it. En what use is a half a chile? I wouldn' give a dern for a million un um" (78). Misunderstanding the purpose of King Solomon's action, Jim's innocence and practicality is revealed, not an absentminded stupidity.
2. "There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight--unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death" (141). This quote outlines the general boredom and indifference of country people.
3. "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (214). Here, Huck Finn is at the epitome of his defiance of society, defying even God by saying he will not conform, he would rather be sent to hell.
4. "Ransomed? What's that?" "I don't know. But that's what they do. I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do" (8-9). This quote shows the tremendous gap between Huck and Tom; while Huck is able to make his own decisions and accept the aftermath, Tom cannot make his own decisions--he relies on what he has read in books for most of his adventures.
5. "Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy

against the wall” (109). This is a great example of hypocrisy--people bringing guns into a church.

Glossary

1. Syntax: the arrangement of punctuation, words, and language in order to elicit a desired tone or meaning. In “All of a sudden, bang! bang! bang! goes three or four guns--,” the succession of bangs create a loud, choppy, resonant tone characteristic of gunfire (115).
2. Vernacular: the use of language that resembles the way people speak in a certain region; the native language or spoken language mostly used. Like the vernacular but different are colloquialisms, informal (spoken) language, and slang, as are the words of Jim: “Bekase why: would a wise man want to live in de mids’ er sich a blim-blammin’ all de time? No--’deed he wouldn’t. A wise man ‘ud take en buil’ a biler-factory. . .” (77).
3. Dialogue: the designation of a conversation between two or more characters. This is used often to highlight the characters’ emotions and dispositions. “Did you want to kill him, Buck? . . . What did he do to you?” “Him? He never done nothing to me.” “Well, then, what did you want to kill him for?” “Why, nothing--only it’s on account of the feud” (107).
4. Imagery: vividly described pictures used to appeal to the five senses. In the quote “On the table in the middle of the room was a kind of a lovely crockery basket that had apples and oranges and peaches and grapes piled up in it, which was much redder and yellower and prettier than real ones is. . .,” the colors and spatial cues are used to place the reader within the scene, thereby making the scene more realistic and exact (100).
5. Simile: a comparison between two unlike things using like, as, than, seems, or appears: “One was a woman in a slim black dress, belted small under the armpits, with bulges like a cabbage in the middle of the sleeves. . .” (101), or, “Miss Charlotte she held her head up like a queen. . .” (107).

Completed on May 16, 1997.