

SAMPLE NOTES for The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Note: These are just excerpts from the book summary. The complete summary is much more detailed and complete. The purpose of this sample is to provide you with an overview of what the complete title will look like.



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by
Mark Twain

1884
by Joseph Claro

SERIES EDITOR

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THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES

In the final paragraph of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says, "...so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd 'a' knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't 'a' tackled it, and ain't a-going to no more."

As you'll see when you've read the novel, the sentiment is very much in character for Huck; but you can also read it as an expression of Mark Twain's relief at finishing the most difficult writing task he ever tackled.

The book had taken him more than seven years to complete. At one point he was so frustrated with it that he considered burning what he'd written. Instead, he put it aside and worked on three other books that were published before Huck Finn.

Twain finished the book in the summer of 1883, just before his 48th birthday. At the time.....

THE NOVEL

THE PLOT

Huck introduces himself as someone who appeared in an earlier book by Mark Twain, reminding us of what happened at the end of that story. Though he won't mention it until Chapter 3, his irresponsible father has left him on his own. Huck has been living with Widow Douglas, a kind woman who wants to teach him all the things his father has neglected, the things all normal kids learn.

He tells us about Miss Watson, the widow's sister, who is bent on teaching him manners and religion, and about Tom Sawyer, a boy Huck looks up to because of his wide reading and vivid imagination. He's also friendly with Jim, Miss Watson's black slave.

Huck's father returns and takes him away from the widow. When his father begins beating him too often, Huck runs away and makes it look as though he's been murdered. He hides out on a nearby island, intending to take off after his neighbors stop searching for his body.

Jim is also hiding on the island, since he has run away from Miss Watson, who was about to sell him and separate him from his wife and children. They decide to escape together, and when they find a large raft, their journey along the Mississippi River begins.

After a couple of adventures on the river, their raft is hit by a steamboat, and Huck and Jim are separated. Huck goes ashore and finds himself at the home of the Grangerfords, who allow him to come and live with them. At first he admires these people for what he thinks is their class and good taste. But when he learns about the deaths caused by a feud with another family, he becomes.....

THE CHARACTERS

Huck tells us about several people who live in his town, and he meets many more on his river voyage. You'll find comments on these characters as Huck introduces them. For an idea in advance of who the main characters are, the following sketches will be helpful. -

• HUCKLEBERRY FINN

Huck is the son of the town drunkard, a man who goes away for long stretches and beats his son when he's home. Huck cares for himself most of the time, though he's living with a charitable woman when the novel begins. He prefers living in the woods to being in a home, and he doesn't think much of school, religious training, or being "sivilized" in general.

When he's in trouble, Huck can be a first-class liar, but generally he's honest, sensitive about other people's feelings, and kind. He sometimes has feelings of guilt over troubles he hasn't caused, and he has a very active and intrusive conscience.

Huck has an ambivalent attitude toward himself. On the one hand, he keeps telling us that he knows he's "low-down" and "ornery," that he's lacking in all the things that make other people respectable. On the other hand, he almost always goes his own way, makes up his own mind, and lives by his own standards.

His negative feelings about himself stem from his belief that certain qualities make people good- such things as education, religious training, and a willingness to follow rules. He's been taught to equate these things with virtue, and the part of his mind that believes in the equation tells him he doesn't measure up.

What he doesn't realize, even at the end of the book, is that goodness is an inner quality, and that it may have no connection to the kind of upbringing someone has had, or even to outward behavior. If Huck understood this point, he'd be more interested in changing society than in running away from it. But because he accepts what he's been taught, he sees himself as an outsider and he would rather run away.

- **JIM**

Jim is a slave owned by Miss Watson, the sister of the woman who's caring for Huck. He has a wife and small children, and the threat of being separated from them frightens him enough to make him run away from his owner before she can sell him. Jim is illiterate,.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

SETTING

The setting of *Huckleberry Finn*- a relatively short southern stretch of the Mississippi River- is an area that Mark Twain knew as well as anyplace on earth. It includes not only his home town of Hannibal, Missouri, fictionalized as St. Petersburg, but the river he loved as a boy and came to revere during his days as a riverboat pilot.

Many people have said that the river is a character in the novel, a living, powerful, even godlike force that has as much to do with what happens to Huck as any of the human characters he meets during the story. Huck himself encourages this kind of comment, since he reserves his most touching language for his descriptions of the river. Even after a flood, even

THEMES

"What is the book about?" can be a tricky question. The plot of almost any novel can be summarized in a few sentences, but those sentences might tell very little about what goes on in the book.

Most good books are about dozens of things- plot, several characters, general setting, specific scenes, dialogue, symbols, description, implication, and on and on. And when you get to talking about a book that has been read and loved for more than a century, it's almost..... impossible to nail down exactly what it's about. Still, there are some general statements that can be made about the book, each of them at least partially true.

It's possible to read *Huckleberry Finn* with only one of these statements in mind and still get a lot out of it. But your reading will be more satisfying if you can keep them all in mind. After you've read the novel, you can decide for yourself which of them come closest to saying what *Huck Finn* is really about.

Here are some general statements about Huck Finn:

1. Huck Finn is an adventure book about the escapades of a boy who has run away from home. The main character is candid, trustworthy, and funny,

STYLE AND POINT OF VIEW

When novelist Ernest Hemingway said that all modern American literature stems from *Huckleberry Finn*, among the things he had in mind were Mark Twain's writing style and the point of view of the novel. If you were to read some of the books published in and around 1882, you'd see that Twain's novel could be classified as revolutionary.

In his time, most novels were a form of uplifting entertainment, light reading that would do no harm and might even do their readers some good. They were written with a prim, well-behaved audience in mind, an audience that expected to read about people.....

FORM AND STRUCTURE

As with any published work, *Huckleberry Finn* has had its critics. Some people have said, for example, that Twain has Huck say certain things that no uneducated kid could ever have thought of. Others have said that some of the comic scenes in the novel are badly placed, coming immediately after tragic events.

But it's on the subject of structure that most criticisms of the book are made. Even among readers who like the book, a large portion will admit that they were disappointed with the last quarter- the section in which Tom Sawyer puts Jim and Huck through his meaningless "adventure" rituals.

Up until that point, the book has a pretty tight structure; and then, some people say, it wanders off into another story that has little to do with

THE STORY

CHAPTER 1

In the opening paragraph, Huck introduces himself to us as the narrator of the story. He talks to us in a relaxed, matter-of-fact tone that makes him sound friendly, honest, and maybe a little less respectful than he should be. He does, after all, come close to calling Mark Twain a liar.

Try to imagine Twain writing that paragraph, in which he has a fictional character accuse him of "stretching the truth" in an earlier book. Twain seems to be sharing a joke with you, the reader, but Huck isn't in on the joke. Huck doesn't say it to be funny. He says it innocently, not realizing that it could be taken as an insult.

Keep this trick of Twain's in mind as you read the book, because you'll find him doing it dozens of times. He'll be expecting you to understand things better than Huck, who's just a simple, almost illiterate kid. Twain will often be winking at you over Huck's head, the way two grownups might be quietly amused at the naive things said by a young child.

Huck tells us that he's been living with the Widow Douglas, a woman he seems to like even though she has set out to "civilize" him. His friend, Tom Sawyer, has persuaded him to go along with her, and Huck finds himself living in a house, wearing clean clothes, and eating meals on schedule- activities that seem very unnatural to him.

Although he's able to put up with the widow, her sister, Miss Watson, is another story. He describes her as a "slim old maid, with goggles on," and he complains about her trying to teach him spelling and manners. When she tells him about heaven and hell, he figures hell must be a better place, since Miss Watson assures him that she is going to heaven.

After an unpleasant session with Miss Watson, Huck goes up to his room and stares out the window. The night sounds of the woods make him sad, until one sound begins to stand out- he recognizes it as a signal from Tom Sawyer. Huck sneaks out of the house, feeling better now that he and his friend are off on an adventure.

CHAPTER 2

As Huck and Tom begin sneaking past the house in the dark, they make enough noise to attract the attention of Jim, Miss Watson's black slave. He comes out of the kitchen to see what caused the noise, sits down in the dark to wait for it to happen again, and falls asleep.

Tom slips into the kitchen to steal some candles for their adventure, and when he comes back, Huck is anxious to get going. But Tom insists on playing a prank on Jim before they leave. Huck knows this is a dumb idea, because if Jim wakes up, they'll be in deep trouble for sneaking out of the house after dark.

But dumb or not, Tom gets to do what he wants. As the self-appointed leader of the gang, Tom manages to get his own way just about all the time. So he lifts Jim's hat from his head and hangs it on a nearby limb. Huck tells us that Jim later turned this incident into an elaborate tale of being visited by witches while he slept.

Huck and Tom get together with the rest of the gang, and they all travel downriver to a cave Tom has picked out as a meeting place. Huck reports what happens at the meeting, making no comment on it.

At the meeting, Tom outlines his plan for forming a gang of bloodthirsty robbers. He talks of the blood oath they'll take together. He says that anyone who reveals the gang's secrets will be killed, along with his whole family. He describes what will be done with the body of such a traitor.

Where does Tom get such ideas? He gets them from the adventure books he reads. Unfortunately, he doesn't always understand what he's reading, as you'll be able to tell later from his explanation of what it means to "ransom" someone.

Read this whole scene very carefully, and you'll get a good picture of what Tom is- a kid who's smarter than most of the others, but not nearly as smart as he thinks he is. Tom does read more than the others, he does have a quick mind and a lively imagination. But he's the leader of this group more because of his forceful personality than any real difference between him and the others. If you wanted to be very critical of Tom, you could call him two things- a phony and a bully.

But Huck doesn't say anything along these lines. He doesn't see how ridiculous Tom's statements are. He works from the assumption that Tom is much smarter than he is and he takes Tom's statements at face value. As was true in the first chapter, Twain doesn't expect you to be that naive. He expects you to see the truth about Tom, even if the young narrator misses it.

A STEP BEYOND

TESTS AND ANSWERS

TEST 1

_____ 1. Huck was living with the Widow Douglas because -

- A. she was taking care of his money
- B. she wanted to civilize him
- C. he wanted to belong to a family
- D. he was jealous of Tom Sawyer

_____ 2. The hair-ball oracle incident shows us that -

- A. Huck is not superstitious
- B. Jim is not superstitious
- C. both of them are superstitious
- D. Jim is superstitious, but Huck isn't

TEST 2

_____ 1. After shooting Boggs, Colonel Sherburn -

- A. stands up to the lynch mob
- B. leaves town
- C. forms a posse to fight the mob
- D. apologizes to the dead man's daughter

_____ 2. In talking to Jim about kings, Huck says that kings -

- A. aren't very interesting
- B. are admirable men
- C. cause trouble everywhere they go
- D. are usually unhappy

ANSWERS

TEST 1

1. B

2. C

TEST 2

1. A
2. C

TERM PAPER IDEAS

1. What is Huck's attitude toward religion as it is practiced (and taught) by people like Miss Watson?
2. What is Huck's attitude toward his father? Explain how this attitude is or is not reflected in the way he deals with other people in the novel.

REFERENCE

THE CRITICS

Because Huck tells his story himself, the stylistic richness is immeasurably deepened by the rhythms, intonations, and choice of words of this magnificent child.

Frank Baldanza, Mark Twain, 1961

His fresh handling of the materials and techniques of backwoods story-tellers is the clearest example in our history of the adaptation of a folk art to serious literary uses.

AUTHOR'S OTHER WORKS (SELECTED)

The Celebrated Jumping Frog and Other Sketches (1867)

This is a collection of stories drawn from Twain's experiences while he was a reporter in the West. It includes retellings of "tall tales" and brief anecdotes centered on eccentric frontier characters.

The Innocents Abroad (1869)

This is Twain's first travel book, and the early basis of his reputation as a writer. It's a collection of humorous commentaries on his trip to Europe and Jerusalem in 1867.

Roughing It (1872)

This is an account of Twain's westward journey in the early 1860s from St. Louis, through Nevada, on to San Francisco, and to the Sandwich Islands. Like *The Innocents Abroad*, the book has Twain's sharp humor running through it.

The Gilded Age (1873)

Twain's first novel, coauthored with Charles Dudley Warner, it's about the shakeup in American values and traditions that followed the Civil War. Its title has been used by historians to label that period in American history.