The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

You are encouraged to purchase your own copy of the textbook for this class, as I also encourage you to annotate as you read. Writing directly in the text is more convenient than using sticky notes or separate pieces of paper in a borrowed copy. However, if you choose not to purchase the novel you may check it out from the SCHS library.

While you do not have a writing assignment due the first day of school, you will be tested on the novel on the first few days of school. To prepare for these tests, think about the focus questions as you read the novel thoughtfully.

Introduction to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was first published in 1884 and on a very superficial level, tells the story of a boy’s adventure down the Mississippi River with an escaped slave. However, Twain clearly uses the story as vehicle to satirize not only his contemporary society, but the decades of racism and injustice that preceded it and would follow.

It would be remiss not to mention that this novel – perhaps more than any other – frequents banned books lists. This is mainly due to its use of the term “nigger.” It is imperative for students and parents to know where we as educators, as humans, stand regarding racial slurs or other unacceptable language. That is, such terms, while used by authors to reflect attitudes and beliefs in our society (both past and present) are in fact offensive, degrading, and inappropriate. The author is not using such terms to perpetuate their use, but rather to reflect the historical setting and attitudes surrounding the novel, giving an accurate picture of life in the South as Twain would have experienced it.

Students and parents may feel that identifying and discussing stereotypes only serve to reinforce them. However, the goal in reading this novel (and of the class, really) is to recognize the historical roots as well as contemporary manifestations of certain stereotypes and patterns that have emerged not only in American literature, but the fabric of our culture as well.

Huck Finn is considered a picaresque novel (Spanish: “picaresca” from “picaro” for “rogue” or “rascal”). This is a subgenre of prose fiction which is usually satirical and depicts in realistic and often humorous detail the adventures of a roguish hero of low social class who lives by his or her wits in a corrupt society. Twain was quite groundbreaking for his time in that he trusted the narration of his story to a young, teenage boy. Huck’s voice retains an innocence and pragmatism that an adult narrator could not plausibly embody. His perspective is naive while simultaneously profound, his observations simple and seemingly common sense, yet completely controversial. It is in such qualities that the complexity of Huck Finn lies and that which has captivated audiences for roughly the last 150 years.

As you read, consider the following focus questions:

1. Huck Finn is an archetypal figure in American Literature. In other words, many American authors and screenwriters have patterned personalities of their characters after Mark Twain’s lead. Focus on what you consider to be three of Huck’s most important character traits in the novel. You should be able to explain how each is either consistent throughout the book, or develops as Huck learns from his experiences.
2. As a satirist, Mark Twain is considered a fine observer of human behavior. Although he often makes fun of them (and himself), Twain locates general tendencies in human beings that are hateful, sad, funny, and even commendable. Identify and evaluate three tendencies of human nature that Twain explores in *Huck Finn*.

3. Slavery is one of the key social issues explored by Mark Twain in the novel. Comparing and contrasting the changing relationship between Huck and Jim with the unchanging attitude of society, Twain demonstrates the inhumanity of the institution and the humanity of the individual. Identify several instances in which society or “civilization” dictates what Huck should do and what Huck actually does. Comment on his behavior and what it says about his development as a member of Southern society.

4. Education is a prevalent theme in the novel. Rather than debating difficult situations in his mind, Huck eventually decides, “to do what comes handiest.” How has his education prepared him for his adventures? Trace Huck’s adventure and make a case for whether his formal edification (academic, moral/religious) or his informal (“street smarts”) educational experiences have most greatly contributed to the decisions he makes and his development into a young adult.

*Introduction and questions adapted form McDougall Littell, Jane Schaffer, and The Center for Learning*