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The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn & 19th-Century America

Introduction

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn in Illustration and Art

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is considered by many to be the great American novel. This is remarkable, considering that it is also so accessible to young readers, millions of whom, over the decades, have loved it dearly. On one level, it is a simple tale of adventure and friendship. But of course, this simplicity is highly deceptive. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is in fact about some of the most profound questions we ever face—questions having to do with moral integrity, conscience, independence, loyalty, and duty. It is these questions that make the novel an ideal one to include in the MindSparks Great Literature in Illustration and Art series.

As with each of the teacher's guides in this series, this one uses twelve illustrations to focus on a number of major themes in one great novel. The illustrations help provide historical or social context and a dramatic focus for activities exploring the novel in greater depth. That focus, however, is not solely on historical setting. The activities and discussion points that accompany each image relate that image both to the historical context and to key themes in the novel itself. Our goal is a unique fusion of art, literature, and historical background information.

The twelve illustrations are grouped into four lessons (three illustrations per lesson). Each of these lessons explores one broad topic in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

The Mississippi: Symbol and Reality

For Huck and Jim, the Mississippi is their means of escape to freedom, but it flows south, into the heart of a society corrupted by the institution of slavery. The illustrations in this lesson focus on the Mississippi's many symbolic meanings in the novel.

Old South/New South

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is, in part, about the U.S. South in the years before the Civil War. And it offers the reader a bitterly ironic view of slavery and the racial bigotry that sustained it. The illustrations here provide meaning and context for better understanding the novel's ironic condemnation of the South's "Peculiar Institution."

Growing Up in Nineteenth-Century America

The novel is also about a boy growing up in rural America in the 1800s. The life of boys like Huck was very much on people's minds in the late 1800s. The illustrations in this lesson call attention to various aspects of this concern and to the way in which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects that concern.

Mark Twain, Huck, and the Gilded Age

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is set in rural pre-Civil-War America. But it was written in the late 1800s, Twain's "Gilded Age," and it clearly reflects the realities and concerns of Americans in those decades. That's what the illustrations in this lesson help to make clear.

The MindSparks Program

Using Visual Images in the Classroom

Many textbooks today contain colorful visuals, but, all too often, these images function primarily to fill space or offer little educational value. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable, often doing little more than providing simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, school materials pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help the students master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as social or historical documents. The lessons in MindSparks booklets focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, and their emotional power and ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general and their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

After using the booklet, you may wish to look at some of the many other MindSparks products using editorial cartoons, photographs, posters, and other visual images. To order MindSparks products, or for more information, just call toll-free: 1-800-421-4246.

How to Use This Booklet

This booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND-INFORMATION SHEET

This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY PAGES FOR EACH VISUAL DISPLAY

Each page includes one image, and a sequence of questions is provided to help you plan an all-classroom discussion while examining the image. The questions take students step-by-step through an analysis of the visual. For students who require more support to answer the questions, you may hand them an entire discussion-activity page, reproducible in order to provide more visual support. For students who need less support to answer questions, keep the page yourself, and ask the questions of the class as a whole in order to provide a listening and response-writing activity. In addition to these questions, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. The instructions for these activities are directed to the student. Some are individual assignments while others work best as small-group or all-class activities. You may reproduce any of these pages for classroom use. Answers to factual questions are also provided on the inside back cover of the booklet.

ILLUSTRATIONS AND OTHER VISUAL ART

Images are printed alongside discussion questions and follow-up activities on reproducible pages, making them readily available to students. Stand-alone versions of all images, also reproducible, can be found in the appendix. Using images without the text may prove useful for testing or to encourage students to formulate their own analyses before consulting the text.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn & 19th-Century America

OBJECTIVE

1. Students will discuss the role of the Mississippi River as both a setting for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and a central symbol for many themes developed in the novel.
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The Mississippi: Symbol and Reality

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Illustration 1

To some, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is simply a humorous story about a high-spirited boy. To others, it expresses the mood of a young nation pushing west in the years before the Civil War. Most importantly, it is a novel about the challenge of trying to act with moral courage in an imperfect world. No matter which view you take, the Mississippi River is central to understanding the novel. Obviously, it is a real river, the route for Huck and Jim in a great adventure story. But the river is also a symbol. That is, it stands for many other key ideas. Above all, it is a symbol for the vast natural frontier to which Americans could escape to carve out a freer and more independent life. This painting, called “The Jolly Flat Boat Men,” captures that spirit of freedom on the river. It is to the river that Huck flees when he decides to escape Pap, the Widow Douglas, and “sivilization.”

Illustration 2

The Mississippi is a realm of freedom for Huck. It is where he escapes all the rules of adult society that he finds so hard to bear. But Huck also finds life on the river lonesome. So the Mississippi is also a symbol for the lonely isolation of the “free” individual and the need we all have for human contact. The great river, after all, does not wind its way through empty frontier spaces. It passes through settled society, as these two illustrations suggest. In spite of his longing for freedom, Huck is always drawn to the towns and plantations along the river’s banks for the social contact that can overcome his strong sense of separateness.

Illustration 3

Not only is the Mississippi surrounded by civilization, it flows south, not west. That means it takes Huck and Jim deeper and deeper into the land of slavery itself. For Twain, the U.S. South was a land of romantic myths that often hid harsh realities—above all, the realities of slavery and racism. Many of the South’s myths had to do with stories of feudal knights and ladies—or, later, with the Civil War. Here, a steamboat named for Civil War hero Robert E. Lee burns on the great river. Twain loved these boats. But as the drawing suggests, they were machines of a modern age. Neither the new industrial era nor the effects of past history could be evaded by escaping down the mighty Mississippi.