

Adventures of  
**Huckleberry Finn**  
Novel Study

Grades 7-8

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Illustrated by S&S Learning Materials

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Huckleberry Finn has long been taught in secondary schools, but it has come increasingly under attack because of its content. In the novel, Mark Twain tackles the problem of racism head-on. Not only does he show his readers what the conditions were like during the time when the novel is set, but he also exposes us to one of the greatest injustices in the history of American society.

Huckleberry Finn deals directly with the problems of slavery and the dignity of human beings, whether they be black or white. And the novel is very disturbing because of this confrontation. But Twain will not bury his head in the sand like an ostrich and pretend that the problems never existed.

Students need background material to understand the novel's place in history and its significance today. This unit attempts to provide some of that background material in addition to activities which encourage students to think, discuss, read and write about the problems of racism. Also included are quizzes and suggestions for further reading and writing.

## BIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN

The appearance of a comet in the heavens has stimulated the imaginations of people for more than four thousand years. Superstitious people have often associated comets with calamity and danger or with important events. The British astronomer, Edmund Halley, proved that the comet which was seen in the sky in 1682 was the same comet which had been sighted in 1607 and 1531, and predicted it would reappear in 1759. This, the most famous of all the comets, is now known as Halley's Comet. The comet did indeed reappear in 1759 and again in 1835, 1910 and 1986, thus confirming that its orbit around the sun took approximately 75 or 76 years.

Mark Twain was always proud of the fact that he was born in the Year of the Comet, 1835, and often expressed that he would leave this earth when Halley's Comet returned 75 or 76 years later. If the Comet does signify an important event, it certainly did this in 1835.

Mark Twain was born Samuel Langhorn Clemens in 1835 in Florida, Missouri. When he was four years old, his family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, a busy port on the Mississippi River. Thus began Twain's love affair with the river which would figure so prominently in his most famous works. The mighty Mississippi became the symbol of a sense of adventure which lasted throughout his life and is seen so prominently in novels such as Tom Sawyer and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Twain attended public school in Hannibal until he was twelve years old, at which time his father died. Twain left school to become an apprentice to a printer, but soon began to write for the *Hannibal Journal*, then owned by his older brother, Orion. He worked as a journeyman printer in cities such as New York and Philadelphia, but his love for the river continued to call him. He worked as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi until the start of the American Civil War. In 1861, he served for a short time in the Confederate Army, but his love for adventure soon took him to the Nevada Territory where he worked in the silver mines.

By 1862, Twain was working as a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada. At that time, Virginia City was a boom town, filled with saloons, brothels and casinos. Twain's sense of humor often got him into trouble in his newspaper articles, which at first were signed with his real name, Samuel Langhorn Clemens. During this time, he began to sign his articles, *Mark Twain*.

## BIOGRAPHY OF MARK TWAIN (Continued)

Twain continued to travel extensively, to New York, San Francisco and Washington and to the Hawaiian Islands. It was his trip to Hawaii—and the accounts he wrote for the newspapers back home—which began to bring him fame. Soon he was off to the Holy Land, a trip he chronicled in Innocents Abroad. On this journey he met Charles Langdon, the son of a wealthy and powerful family who lived in Elmira, New York. It is said that Charles showed Twain a picture of his sister, Olivia, and Twain fell in love with the woman in the picture. In 1870, Twain married Olivia Langdon in Elmira, New York.

Samuel Clemens and Olivia Langdon seemed to come from two different worlds. He was adventurous, rough and unpolished; she was delicate, refined and wealthy. But Twain won over the Langdon family and won the heart of his dear “Livvy”. The young family moved to Hartford, Connecticut, in 1871, and lived there for twenty years, reputedly the happiest years of his life. But they spent their summers at the family farm in Elmira, and it is here that Twain created some of his most famous works, including Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn and The Prince and the Pauper. The study in which Twain wrote is now part of the Elmira College campus and can be visited.

Between 1873 and 1889, Twain wrote seven novels. But in 1891, poor investment strategy caused Twain to sell his property in Hartford and move to Europe. In 1894, he was forced to declare bankruptcy. In order to raise money to survive, he embarked on a world lecture tour which was apparently very successful. Just as his financial situation began to improve, tragedy struck: His daughter, Susan, died in 1896 and his wife in 1904. Twain never really recovered from these two deaths and his writing became increasingly more pessimistic.

Mark Twain said of his writings: “My books are water. Those of great geniuses are wine. Everybody drinks water.” His works were certainly read and admired by many people during his lifetime and later.

In 1909, Twain said: “I came in with Halley’s Comet in 1835. It is coming next year, and I expect to go out with it. The Almighty has said, no doubt, ‘Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.’” Mark Twain died as a result of numerous heart problems on April 21, 1910.

## THE MAJOR WORKS OF MARK TWAIN

The major works of Mark Twain are noted in the chart below. Note that this chart does not contain all of his works. *The Mysterious Stranger*, the last work cited, was published posthumously in 1916.

DATE	TITLE OF WORK
1867	<i>The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County</i>
1869	<i>Innocents Abroad</i>
1872	<i>Roughing It</i>
1876	<i>Tom Sawyer</i>
1880	<i>A Tramp Abroad</i>
1882	<i>The Prince and the Pauper</i>
1883	<i>Life on the Mississippi</i>
1884	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>
1889	<i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>
1894	<i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i>
1896	<i>The Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc</i>
1906	<i>What Is Man?</i>
1916	<i>The Mysterious Stranger</i>