

Name \_\_\_\_\_

## ***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Background Notes**

### **Literary Points**

**American Realism:** Literary period in which writers focused on the faithful representation of reality [1865 – 1910].

- Characters are more important than action or plot. They have an important ethical decision to make
- Characters appear in real complexity of temperament and motive. We see them in relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, and to their own past
- Class is important - Usually middle class or poor
- Characters spoke in regional dialect and/or diction

**Point of view** is the relationship of the narrator, or storyteller, to the events of the story. *Huckleberry Finn* is told by the character Huck, using words like *I* and *We*. Therefore, it is told from the first-person point of view. The reader sees everything through Huck's eyes and is given his perspective on events. When examining a narrative point of view, it is important to distinguish the narrator from the author. Huck is an uneducated fourteen-year-old boy living in a village in the 1840s. He has the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences of such a boy. Twain, on the other hand, was a well-traveled writer and experienced lecturer. He was well aware of how to use narrative techniques, adopt different point of view, and speak in the role of different characters, and he used that knowledge to create a narrator who is very different from himself.

**Unreliable Narrator** – *Huckleberry Finn* is also an example of an unreliable narrator – one who does not understand the full significance of the events he describes and comments on. Huck is not intentionally unreliable; his lack of education and experience makes him so. Much of the humor in the first chapters comes from Huck's incomplete understanding of the adults around him and their "civilized" ways.

**Noble Savage:** [in literature] an idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization. The glorification of the noble savage is a dominant theme in the Romantic writings of the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

**Satire** is a kind of literature that tries to open people's eyes to the need for change by exposing the flaws of a person or society. Satirists' main weapon is humor, with is created through techniques such as irony.

**Irony** is the contrast between what appears to be true and is actually true, or between what we expect to happen and what actually happens. Twain created an ironic character in Pap, Huck's father. We expect a father to be proud of his son and provide for him, but Pap is angry that Huck is learning to read and "getting religion," and Pap want to spend Huck's money on himself. Through irony, Twain develops some of the most important themes of *Huckleberry Finn*. As you read, look for examples of irony, and think about the flaws that Twain is attempting to expose.

**The Antihero:** Traditional heroes are often superhuman. We look up to them because they are braver, stronger, more clever or more unwilling to sacrifice their principles than we. Antiheroes, on the other hand, are very human. Like us, they have faults, make mistakes, and puzzle over difficult decisions. In the end, however, antiheroes usually do the "right thing". As you read, think about if Huck fits this category?

**Flat characters** remain the same from the beginning of a novel to the end. **Round characters** undergo psychological changes as a result of the conflicts they face and try to resolve. As you read think about the characters of Huck and Jim. Are they flat or round?

**Other terms to define and know:** *bildungsroman*, apocryphal, picaresque, farce, folklore, colloquial, vernacular, dialect. antebellum, abolitionist, foreshadowing, dramatic irony, epiphany, epithet, American Realism.

## Huckleberry Finn Geography

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in the Mississippi River Valley, around 1840. During the course of the novel, Huck and Jim float down the Mississippi River. They travel from their hometown of St. Petersburg, Missouri, north of St. Louis, hundreds of miles into the Deep South. Some of the places they visit are real, while others are products of Twain's imagination. So important to the novel is the great Mississippi River that many readers consider it as much a character as a place. T. S. Eliot, the great twentieth-century poet who grew up in St. Louis, said, "The River makes the book a great book." It fired the imagination of the young Twain, served as the setting for his beloved riverboats, and became the only real home Huckleberry Finn and Jim were to know.

As Huck and Jim journey down the Mississippi, readers may begin to notice that their experiences alone on the raft, or in nature in general, are very different from their experiences whenever they are on the shore in "sivilization." What is Twain saying by creating this division? As you read, use this map or one of your choosing to identify the most important events in the novel.





