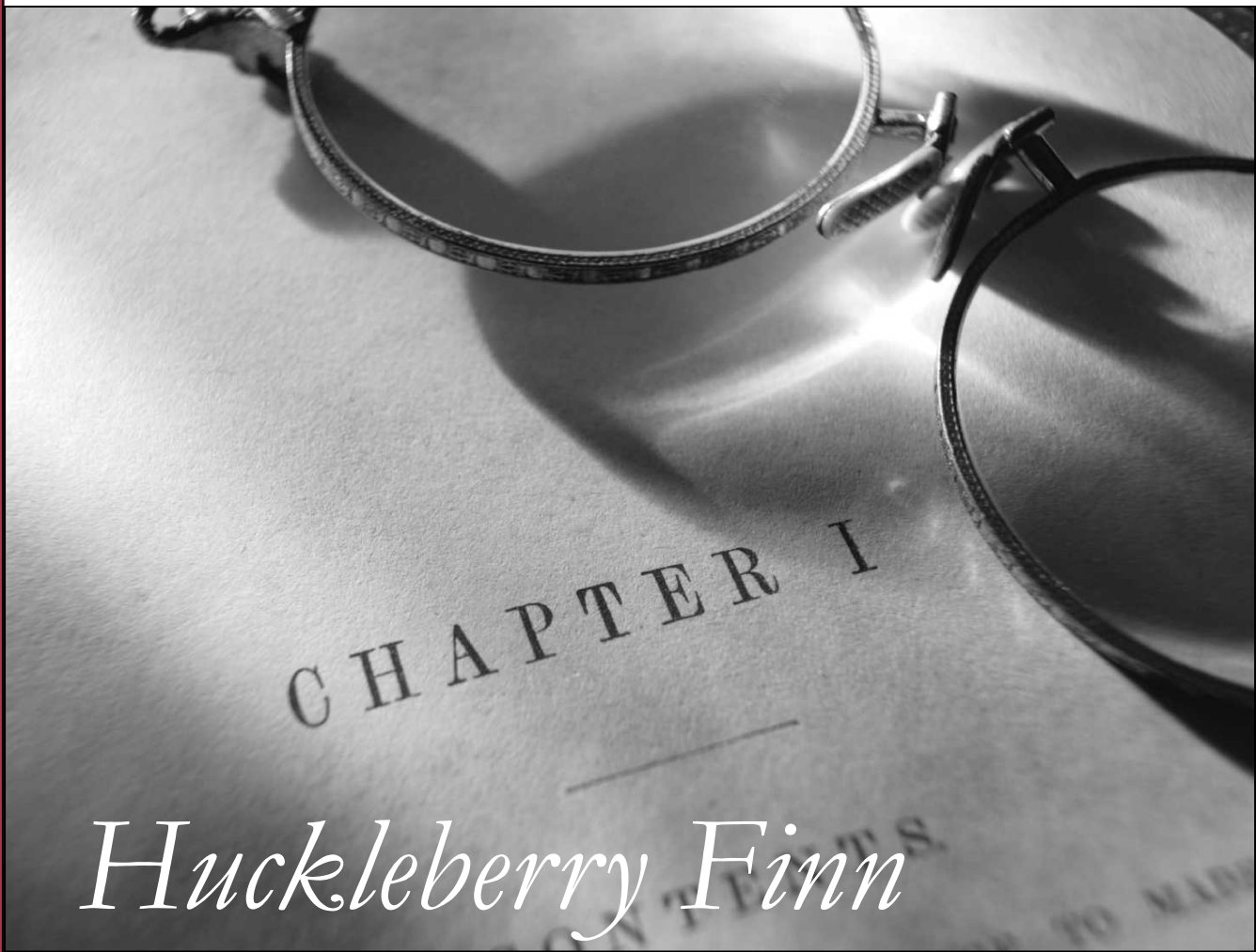


The Classics Club

Lit Courses on DVD

with Adam Andrews



 *The Center for
Literary Education*

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Mark Twain Biography

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. He was the sixth of seven children, and was born two weeks after the closest approach to Earth of Halley's Comet.

When Twain was four, his family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, a port town on the Mississippi River that would serve as the inspiration for the fictional town of St. Petersburg in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. At that time, Missouri was a slave state in the Union, and young Twain became familiar with the institution of slavery, a theme he later explored in his writing.

In 1848, Twain began working as a typesetter and contributor of articles and humorous sketches for the Hannibal Journal, a newspaper owned by his brother, Orion. When he was 18, he left Hannibal and worked as a printer in New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cincinnati, returning to Missouri four years later. Soon thereafter, on a voyage to New Orleans down the Mississippi, Twain was inspired to pursue a career as a steamboat pilot.

Steamboat pilots needed vast knowledge of the ever-changing river to be able to stop at any of the hundreds of ports and wood-lots along the river banks. Twain meticulously studied 2,000 miles of the Mississippi for more than two years before he received his steamboat pilot license in 1859. Twain served as a river pilot until the American Civil War broke out in 1861 and traffic along the Mississippi was curtailed.

When the war began, Twain joined his brother, Orion, who had been appointed secretary to the territorial governor of Nevada, and headed west. Twain traveled by stagecoach across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains and eventually reached San Francisco, where he worked as a journalist and began lecturing. In 1868 he met Olivia Langdon and married her two years later.

The couple lived in Buffalo, New York and Hartford, Connecticut until Olivia's death in 1904. They had three daughters: Susy (1872-1896), Clara (1874-1962) and Jean (1880-1909).

Twain traveled widely later in life and enjoyed tremendous fame at home and abroad. Oxford University awarded him a Doctorate in Letters in 1907. He was acquainted with many of the important writers of his day, including William Dean Howells, Bret Harte, Artemis Ward, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Twain also became friends with presidents, artists, industrialists, scientists and European heads of state.

Twain made a substantial amount of money through his writing, but he spent much of it in bad investments, mostly in new inventions. He filed for bankruptcy in 1894. With the help of a

friend, financier and Standard Oil principal Henry Huttleson Rogers, Twain was able to reorganize his finances. He then embarked upon an around-the-world lecture tour to pay off his debts, even though he was no longer legally obliged to do so. By the time he died, he had repaid every penny.

In 1909, Twain predicted his own death, saying, "I came in with Halley's Comet in 1835. It is coming again next year, and I expect to go out with it. It will be the greatest disappointment of my life if I don't go out with Halley's Comet. The Almighty has said, no doubt: 'Now here are these two unaccountable freaks; they came in together, they must go out together.' "

Twain died of a heart attack on April 21, 1910 in Redding, Connecticut, one day after the comet's closest approach to Earth. He was buried in his wife's family plot in Elmira, New York.

Mark Twain's voluminous literary output includes journalism, travelogues, short stories, novels, histories, plays, essays and countless lectures and speeches. Some of his most famous works include:

The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County (1867)

The Innocents Abroad (1869)

Roughing It (1872)

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876)

Life on the Mississippi (1883)

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)

The Prince and the Pauper (1882)

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (1889)

The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894)

Notes on the Discussion

Context

What important world events took place in the lifetime of the author?

How important is the American Civil war to an understanding of this story? What role does it play?

Setting

Where does the story take place – in what geographical region of the country? Why is this significant?

When does the story take place – before or after the Civil War? How do we know?

Characters

List the main characters in the story. Describe them by answering some questions from the Socratic List.

Huck:

Jim:

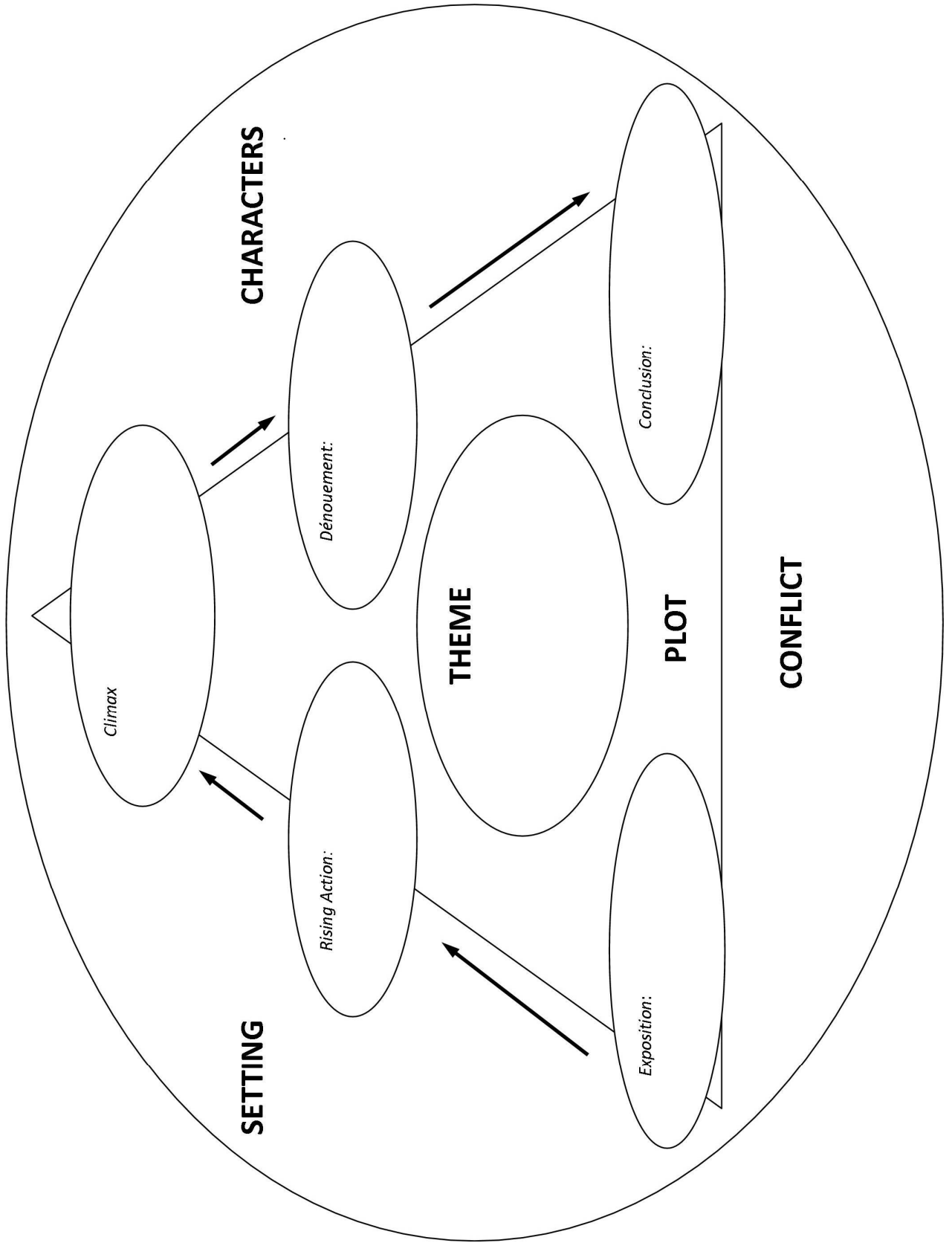
Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas:

Tom Sawyer:

The King and the Duke:

Other Characters:

Huck Finn by Mark Twain: Story Chart



Conflict

What types of conflict are present in this story? Man v. Man? Man v. Nature? Man v. Society? Man v. God/Fate? Man v. Himself?

Which characters represent “civilization” in this story? How do you know? What are they trying to get Huck to do?

How might you put the conflicts of the story into the form of questions? What questions describe the main conflicts here?

Plot: Climax

Describe the situation leading up to the climax of the story.

How does the climactic scene present a resolution to the main conflict of the story?

Plot: Denouement and Conclusion

How does Tom Sawyer figure into the denouement of the story? What is his role?

Compare Tom’s ideas for freeing Jim with Huck’s ideas. How does his comparison illustrate the story’s central conflict?

Theme and Style: Irony

What are the major themes of this story? How does the story deal with them?

Some modern critics have called this a “racist” book because of its use of demeaning language. How does an understanding of the story’s themes provide an answer to this critique?

What is irony, and how does Mark Twain use it to emphasize the story’s theme? What specific uses can you remember?

Style: Symbolism

What is a literary symbol?

What is the most important symbol in Huck Finn, and what does it represent?

List one or two places in the story where this symbol is used.

Suggested Essay Assignments

1. Describe Twain's use of symbolism in *Huckleberry Finn*. In particular: how does Twain's use of the Mississippi River help him emphasize his themes?
2. Describe Twain's use of irony in *Huckleberry Finn*:
 - a. How is Huck's struggle with the issue of Jim's flight ironic? How does this use of irony help Twain emphasize his themes?
 - b. How is Tom's plan to help Jim escape ironic? How does this use of irony help Twain emphasize his themes?
3. What is the most important conflict in *Huckleberry Finn*? Which characters represent the sides in the conflict, and what do they stand for?
4. Describe Mark Twain's view of organized religion as expressed in *Huckleberry Finn*. How does Twain's use of character emphasize his views?
5. Explain the significance of Huck's final comment about "lighting out for the territory ahead of the rest." What does Huck mean by this phrase? What does Twain mean? How do you know?
6. Discuss the significance of the setting of *Huckleberry Finn*. Why is it important that the story take place when and where it does?

For more information:
visit www.centerforlit.com
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