

# Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

## *Sample Analytical Paper Topics*

The following paper topics are designed to test your understanding of the novel as a whole and to analyze important themes and literary devices. Following each question is a sample outline to help get you started.

### **TOPIC #1**

Humor is a tool Mark Twain uses in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to satirize the evil in his society. Write a paper analyzing the satiric situations in the novel that suggest the hypocrisy and ridiculousness of society's prevailing attitudes toward the institutions of religion, education, and slavery before the Civil War.

#### **Outline**

I. Thesis Statement: *Mark Twain exposes the evil in his society by satirizing the institutions of religion, education, and slavery.*

#### **II. Twain satirizes religion**

- A. The Widow Douglas and Miss Watson
  - 1. Miss Watson's prayers are never answered
  - 2. Widow Douglas tucks her head down to pray before meals
- B. The Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons
  - 1. The feuding families sit calmly in church together
  - 2. The families have forgotten the reason for their feud
- C. Huck's decision not to turn Jim in as a runaway slave
  - 1. Huck decides to "go to hell" rather than turn in his friend Jim
  - 2. Huck struggles with his conscience over harboring a runaway slave

#### **III. Twain satirizes education**

- A. Huck drops out of school
  - 1. Twain uses Huck, an uneducated narrator, to criticize society's corruption, including education
- B. Tom Sawyer reads books, but his plans and schemes fail because they are impractical
- C. Jim is a loving father-figure to Huck. He cannot read but is wise beyond book-learning

#### **IV. Twain satirizes slavery**

- A. The slaves come in for prayers at night at the Widow Douglas' house
- B. Jim escapes from his owner
  - 1. He has overheard her saying that she cannot resist selling Ji.
  - 2. He would be sold down river where slaves were mistreated
- C. Jim wants to go north to earn his freedom
  - 1. To free his wife and children, Jim plans to buy them

- D. Jim and Huck's close relationship
  - 1. On the raft, away from civilization, Jim and Huck are almost equals
- V. Conclusion: *The satire in this novel is a critical commentary on the hypocrisy in the institutions of religion, education, and slavery.*

## TOPIC #2

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is often referred to as "The Great American Novel." Write a paper showing how the novel vividly depicts the American scene along the Mississippi River before the Civil War. Describe the lifestyle, language, and mode of travel of the townspeople along the river.

### Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *In the novel, Twain represents American life along the Mississippi River before the Civil War through his authentic depiction of the lifestyles, dialects, and modes of travel of the townspeople who lived there.*

### II. Twain depicts American lifestyles along the river

- A. Lifestyle of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson
  - 1. Superstitious beliefs
  - 2. Attitudes about civilized life and education
  - 3. Religious beliefs
- B. Lifestyles of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons
  - 1. Aristocratic life
  - 2. Feuding families
- C. Lifestyle in Bricksville, Arkansas
  - 1. Sherburn shoots Boggs
  - 2. Lynch mob goes after Sherburn
- D. Fraudulent activities of the king and the duke
  - 1. Cheating the Wilks sisters out of their inheritance
  - 2. Pretending to be Peter Wilks' brother at the funeral
- E. Lifestyle on the Phelps Plantation
  - 1. Attitudes about slavery
  - 2. Family relationships
- F. Behavior of the townspeople
  - 1. Tar and feather the king and the duke
  - 2. Threaten a runaway slave with guns

### III. Twain depicts American dialects along the river

- A. Missouri Negro
  - 1. Jim and some minor characters
- B. Southwestern
  - 1. Arkansas gossips (Sister Hotchkiss)
- C. Ordinary "Pike County"
  - 1. Huck, Tom, Aunt Polly, Ben Rogers, Pap, and Judith Loftus

- D. "Pike County"
  - 1. Thieves on the *Walter Scott*
  - 2. The King
  - 3. Bricksville loafers
  - 4. Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas Phelps

#### IV. Twain depicts American modes of travel along the river

- A. Steamboat episodes
  - 1. The wrecked *Walter Scott*
  - 2. The steamboat that wrecked the raft
  - 3. The King and Duke arrive at Peter Wilks' place on a steam boat
- B. Rafts
  - 1. Simple and inexpensive travel
  - 2. Used by Huck and Jim
- C. Canoes
  - 1. Used to travel from the raft to the shore
  - 2. Used for travel upstream

- V. Conclusion: *The novel depicts the lifestyles, modes of travel, and colloquial speech of Twain's day and is therefore a genuine American novel.*

### TOPIC #3

Mark Twain would have us believe that aristocrats were ridiculous and out of place in frontier America. Write a paper analyzing the aristocratic characters Twain satirizes in the novel. Explain the way in which he used these characters as a harsh commentary on the whole idea of an aristocracy.

#### Outline

- I. Thesis Statement: *Twain ridicules the aristocratic characters in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by portraying them as fraudulent, pretentious, overly sentimental, and violent.*
- II. Aristocratic characters in the novel
  - A. Fraudulent activities of aristocratic characters
    - 1. The so-called king and duke defraud the townspeople
  - B. Violent activities of aristocratic characters
    - 1. The Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons kill each other for revenge, yet sit across from each other in church with guns propped against the pews
    - 2. Colonel Sherburn kills Boggs
    - 3. Phelps neighbors use guns to hunt a runaway slave
  - C. Sentimentality of aristocratic characters
    - 1. The sentimental art and poetry of the Grangerfords is satirized
    - 2. Wrecked steamboat is named after Walter Scott, whose sentimental fiction glamorized the aristocracy
  - D. Pretentiousness of aristocratic characters
    - 1. The king and the duke pretend to be royalty
    - 2. The king and duke lower themselves to associate with "two felons on a raft" (Huck and Jim)
    - 3. Grangerfords are pretentious about their house and furnishings

**III.** Conclusion: *Twain satirizes aristocracy through the subtle ridicule of the aristocratic characters in the novel.*

## **TOPIC #4**

Through the eyes of a 13-year-old narrator who simply speaks his mind, Twain reveals the conflicts inherent in the society of his day. Write a paper discussing Huck's point-of-view in the novel. In what ways does his natural innocence help to expose the hypocrisy of people and institutions in the novel?

### **Outline**

- I.** Thesis statement: *Through Huck's innocent point-of-view, we see the conflict between individual freedom in the natural world and the constraints society places on the individual in the civilized world.*
- II. Huck's point-of-view and the conflict between natural freedom and civilized society**
  - A. The Widow Douglas tries to "sivilize" Huck
    1. Proper dress and manners
    2. Proper education
  - B. Huck's father
    1. Exploits Huck for his money
    2. Locks Huck in the cabin all day
    3. The new judge grants his father custody of Huck
    4. Huck is physically abused by his father
  - C. Religious hypocrisy
    1. Miss Watson's slaves come in for prayers every night
    2. Holding him captive, Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas pray with Jim
  - D. Religious teachings about slavery
    1. If you help a runaway slave to freedom, you will go to hell
  - E. Slavery from Huck's point-of-view
    1. Decides to tear up the letter to Miss Watson and steal Jim out of slavery again
    2. Huck's point-of-view brings out Jim's humanity
- III.** Conclusion: *Through the point-of-view of a young narrator who longs for the freedom of the natural world, we are led to condemn the hypocrisy of a constraining society.*