



Summer Reading - Sophomore 2017

This summer's reading selection for the sophomore class is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—the story of a young man's coming of age and search for adventure along the Mississippi River in antebellum America. In many ways, *Huckleberry Finn* marks the beginning of American Literature while also solidifying Twain as one of America's foremost authors and cultural critics. The book and its rendering of the American South is, in equal measure, both fascinating and confounding. The novel's true strength lies not only in Twain's satire of America but also in how vividly true that picture remains.

Perhaps the most redeeming aspect of *Huckleberry* is its language—Twain's use of dialect, vernacular, and colloquial speech gave both license and validation to all of the strange peculiarities and peculiar possibilities of every author who has written in his wake. American literature would not be as strange, malleable, or true if it hadn't been for Twain's novel and his willingness to finally write in the robust language of a rapidly changing country and conscience. This novel also marks the first instance of an African-American, Huckleberry's counterpart and travel-mate, Jim, as an actual human being—free to test the waters of fully-fledged human consciousness.

As always, the blessing of Twain's raucous storytelling coincides with the very troubling overabundance of the word 'nigger'. In recent years, Twain's use of the word has raised an ongoing and healthy debate about not only its place in the novel but also its context in American culture. The well-deserved trepidation over the word has led to altered editions (exchanging the word in question with 'slave') and a slightly diminished position for *Huckleberry* in the American canon. Although Twain wrote the book in the language of his time, it has become increasingly and ironically clear that he might not have understood the power of the word and its lasting effect on the book's readers. Though it might be more convenient for us to distance ourselves from the use of the word, it is also important to realize that the word itself is central to Jim's identity and his own personal understanding of himself and therefore his search for acceptance and freedom. Without the word, and all of its negative connotations, there is no *self* for Jim to discover. Without Jim's struggle towards self-actualization, there is no innocence for Huckleberry to lose, and without the mutual crisis of consciousness that both protagonists inherit there is no novel, and without this book American literature is much less interesting and far less genuine. We will approach this novel as we do each text in sophomore literature for what it is—a piece of art—full of blots and blemishes, and truer to the human predicament because of those defects.

Best,
Mrs. Hare and Mr. Shelton