PLAY GUIDE

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MARK TWAIN'S

Huckleberry Finn

BY RITA GRAUER & JOHN URQUHART

Mark Twain AMERICAN GENIUS

Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, was born on November 20, 1835, in the little town of Florida, Missouri. When he was only four, his family moved to nearby Hannibal on the Mississippi River. Sam spent his youth watching steamboat men and all sorts of exotic visitors: pioneers heading West, traveling preachers, slaves in chains, circus troops, and minstrel shows among them. It must have made a powerful impression on the boy, because years later these memories formed the basis for many of his novels and short stories.

His father died when Sam was only 13, leaving the family with no source of income. He quit school and became a printer's apprentice for a few years, then joined his older brother in the newspaper publishing business and began his career as a writer. In 1853, bored at the age of 18, he set out to see the country and headed out east to Pennsylvania and New York. While on the road, he wrote some comic travel letters which were published in western newspapers.

In 1856, Clemens started down the Mississippi River on a planned trip to South America. Before he got very far, though, he became an apprentice on a steamboat, returning to the river of his boyhood. He stayed on the Mississippi for five years, becoming a Master Pilot—until the Civil War disrupted river traffic. What he saw on the river made a long-lasting impression, for he later said, "I got acquainted with all the different types of human nature.... When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography, I generally take a warm personal interest in him for the reason that I have known him before—met him on the river."

Clemens next headed west to Virginia City, Nevada, and San Francisco. In each, he found work as a journalist, writing for local newspapers. During this time, he began to develop his very personal way of writing. Using humor and exaggeration, he told stories of the West and its people. Some papers in the East published his work and he began to be known as "Mark Twain"—a name he took from the riverboat term for "safe water." With "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" he became famous throughout the country in 1865.

A year later, a newspaper in Sacramento sent him on a trip to Hawaii, publishing his letters about his travels. He returned east to New York through Central America and, in 1871, arrived in Hartford, Connecticut, where he was to live for

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the next 20 years. Two important things had happened to Twain in the meantime: he had gotten married, and he had completed his first full-length book, *The Innocents Abroad.*

The years he and his wife spent in Hartford were some of his happiest and busiest. Here he wrote a number of his most famous novels, including *Roughing It* (1872), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Tramp Abroad, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* and *The Prince and the Pauper* (all in 1880), and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889.) At the end of these years, Twain was the most famous writer in America and was popular in Europe as well.

Tragedy also struck during this time. Three of Twain's four children died while still young, and a series of bad investments left the family nearly bankrupt. Though he was a talented writer, like his father and brother before him, Twain was a terrible businessman.

In 1891, Twain and his wife moved to Berlin, Germany, staying in Europe for the next nine years. When they returned, tragedy struck again. Twain, the victim of his own bad business sense, not only lost all his money, but was deeply in debt. His brother and sister died, and shortly thereafter his wife, whom he loved very much, followed them. Now he was faced with a staggering debt and no one to comfort him. In this circumstance, Twain did what he had to do: in 1895, at age 60 and in poor health himself, he began a lecture tour of the world to earn enough money to pay off his debt. By 1904, he had accomplished this. He returned to New York City and continued living on the east coast until his death on April 21, 1910.

Twain was an unusual man in his personal life, often wearing an all-white suit and sealskin coat. A shaggy-haired "man's man," he loved drink and outrageous pranks. William Dean Howells, Twain's close friend, described his "fierce intensity, his wild pleasure in shocking people," but called him "the most serious, most humane, most conscientious of men."

Twain was as much at home in the brawling saloons of Virginia City as in his spacious mansion in Hartford. He was a total American, often making fun of European customs and manners. For a genius, he was notably unsure of his work and himself, but was eager to please his audience. It is this trait, combined with his good humor and compassion for others, that led him to create some of the most colorful and interesting works in American literature. ★

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WHAT LIFE WAS LIKE FOR THE AU

When Sam Clemens was growing up in the 1840s, Missouri was one of only a handful of states west of the Mississippi River. In addition to Missouri, only Iowa, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, and California had made steps toward statehood. The rest of the West was a vast, lightly settled territory. People were just beginning to adopt the notion of "manifest destiny"—the idea that the nation was meant to expand from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean and include everything in between. Most of the West was virgin land, with only a few pioneers, prospectors, cowboys, and Native American tribes living there. Game was abundant and the beauty of the land was awe-inspiring.

Life was not easy, though. The hot, dry climate of the Southwest was difficult for the early settlers. There were few roads, and the mountain ranges were a challenge to anyone trying to reach the West Coast. This sense of struggle to overcome difficulties left its mark on the people. A type of frontier spirit with a longing for adventure sprang up. And nowhere was this more present than in Hannibal, Missouri.

During Twain's youth, Hannibal was on the edge of the frontier. The wide, lazy Mississippi on one side was the route to and from the rest of the nation. It brought all sorts of opportunities and strange wonders—preachers and con men, refined ladies and steamboat hands alike—and led the way to new worlds. The woods and prairie on the inland side of town were great for having "adventures." Though there wasn't much money—Twain once said, "everybody was poor, but didn't know it"—growing up in Hannibal was about as exciting as it could be.

Not everyone had a carefree childhood, though, and there was great change coming. In the years before the Civil War, people began to question more and more the institution of slavery and the idea that one person could own another. Others felt that slavery was absolutely necessary, and that without it the United States economy would fail. Every time a new state was added to the Union, there was an argument over whether it would allow slavery or not. Every time an election was held, the laws regarding slavery would change. The country was in a crisis, and black people everywhere were suffering as a result.

The life of a slave was not a happy one. Slaves were regarded as property and had no rights under the law. They could be sold to other owners, and their own families could be broken apart. In the South, slaves were not permitted to leave the plantations without permission; any white person finding a slave "at large" without a pass could take him to the authorities. Slaves could not own firearms or hold a meeting without a white person present. It was against the law to teach slaves how to read or write,

(right) Mark Twain and John Lewis, a servant at Quarry Farm (the Clemens summer home) whose altruism, strength, and courage Twain admired and who is thought to be one of the models for the character of Jim in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

n's Times

IOR—AND THE CHARACTERS—OF *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

(left) This photograph of slaves working outside the plantation cotton gin, taken by Timothy O'Sullivan in Beaufort, South Carolina, in April 1862, is among the first photographs ever exhibited of slave life in the South.

and they could not strike a white man, not even in self-defense.

Plantation life was a struggle just to exist. Most slaves lived in crude, drafty, leaky shacks, often without furniture. Clothing was usually limited to four shirts, four pairs of trousers (two of wool for winter), one pair of shoes, and a jacket for colder weather. Because most slaves worked out-of-doors all day, this was barely enough to keep them clothed. Food was also limited, with hominy, corn meal, fatback, and salt pork as the standard meal. Some slaves were allowed to have their own gardens to grow vegetables, but this was not common. Slave owners often beat their "property" and kept them in chains to control runaways. No rights, poor housing, little food or clothing, and brutal masters—no wonder every slave longed to be a free man!

In reality, though, the free black man was not much better off. He still had no political rights and could not vote or serve on a jury in the South. All free Negroes were restricted in their movement and the kind of work they could seek. In the north, they were kept in positions of labor where they were forbidden to be skilled craftsmen or enter one of the professions. Many northern states required them to own property before they could vote. There was strict segregation in public transportation everywhere. Under these difficult conditions, few blacks were able to achieve positions of respect within the community or a life that approached that of the white middle class.

Though it was a state where slavery was permitted, Missouri also had a large group of people opposed to it. These "abolitionists" began to be more active and to increase in numbers in the 1850s. Slavery was practiced mainly in the counties along the Mississippi, on smaller farms, and in private households. The number of slaves in the state decreased steadily before the Civil War, and everywhere there was talk of changing to a free state. In spite of this, free blacks were not accepted as equals by the white majority.

The geography of the land, the spirit of the frontier, the politics of the day—all affected young Sam Clemens. His boyhood was an exciting time for him and a difficult one for the country. It was also a time of great change. Twain grew up in the years before and during the Civil War, and like the nation, he was never quite the same after it. Years later, when he wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* he looked back to his earlier days and remembered the way things were—a wild time, full of adventure, excitement, and doubt. ★

FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has raised a good deal of controversy over the years. Many people believe that the book should be banned, that it shouldn't be taught or read. Why do you suppose some people feel this way? Do you agree? Do you think that book banning is ever an appropriate measure? If yes, what kind of books should be banned and under what circumstances?

2. Jim runs away from Miss Watson because he wants to be a free man. He wants to earn enough money to buy the freedom of his wife and family. Jim does not wish to belong to another person. He wants to belong to himself. Jim is a fictional character born in the imagination of Mark Twain, but there were many, many real African Americans who lived and died as slaves and who longed to be free just as Jim does. Research what life was like for the slaves who lived during Mark Twain's boyhood.

3. As you watch the play, pay attention to the relationship between Huck and Jim. What is their relationship like at the beginning of the play? Does this relationship change as the play progresses?

4. Is Huck's relationship with Jim different than his relationship with others in the play?

5. How does Huck's friend Tom Sawyer treat Jim? Is it different or similar to the way that Huck treats him? ★

MARK TWAIN and the Oral Tradition

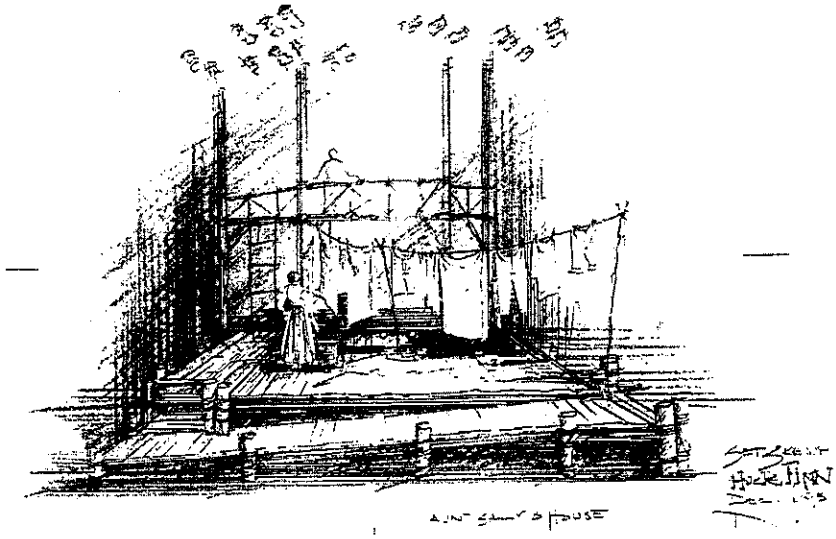
In his writing, Mark Twain followed a tradition that reached its peak in the American Southwest: the custom of spoken storytelling. Much of his work—his novels, short stories, and travel letters—is based upon the influence of the "yarn spinners" popular during most of the 1800s.

These "yarns" were tall tales, full of humor, local color, and exaggeration. They often also featured superstition and a deep suspicion of things Eastern or European. Yarns were told in spoken form by humorists who talked with a very dry, deadpan manner. Frequently repeated, the tales grew more fantastic each time they were told so that they often became very elaborate, nearly unbelievable stories. Listeners loved the result and accepted almost any stretch of the imagination as long as it was colorfully spoken.

Yarn spinning became a very popular pastime in rural America, and their tellers were the chief type of entertainment in the country store, at the courthouse, on the riverboat, and by the campfire. Eventually, yarns began to be written down and sold cheaply so that more people than ever would become familiar with them. They even found their way into politics. Abraham Lincoln and Davy Crockett were two of the first politicians to successfully use yarns in their speeches and in debates.

After the Civil War, Americans had more free time and more money. As a result, they were looking for more entertainment. To meet this demand, several popular pastimes came into being. These included the minstrel shows (with their all-male casts and racist humor), showboats with singing, dancing, and storytelling, and touring theatrical troupes. The tradition of yarn spinning was carried on by groups of humorists who had their own bag of tricks. Using the skill of the old storytellers, this new breed of performer usually took on a false, funny name and used puns, backward English, and local dialects in their stories. In telling the tales, the humorists adopted a very dramatic manner designed to please the audience.

Mark Twain perfected this type of humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* His great genius allowed him to record in writing exactly the way people spoke. Using his remarkable listening ability and a fine memory, he was able to recreate the sounds of the southern Negro dialect, the drawl of the backwoods whites, and the refined speech of the upper class. Take a look at any of Jim's dialogue and contrast it with the way Huck talks. Both sound absolutely real but are really quite different. Twain's gift was to take the style of the humorists and transfer it from the spoken word to the written word. Few writers would attempt such a thing, and even fewer writers would be successful at it.



Twain himself had great respect for the spoken word and the oral tradition he inherited from the old yarn spinners. In fact, he felt that a story could be better told if it was spoken, rather than written out. He once said that a story "should flow as flows the brook down through the hills and the leafy woodlands, its course changed by every boulder it comes across. With a pen in hand," he continued, "the stream is a canal; it moves slowly, smoothly ... sleepily." Those who knew him felt that Twain himself was an even better storyteller than writer; his friend Albert Bigelow Paine wrote, "At dinner, it was his habit, between courses, to rise from the table and walk up and down the room, waving his napkin and talking—talking in a strain and with a charm that he could never quite equal with his pen."

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Twain merely sat down and wrote what he heard. There is much more than yarn spinning in *Huckleberry Finn.* There are passages of fine description which approach the level of poetry. Using his ability to notice the things about him (developed in his years as a journalist), Twain describes in beautiful detail the great river and the surrounding forests. And he delves into human emotions, the ways people feel. Amusement, remorse, prejudice, curiosity, fear are all there in *Huckleberry Finn.* He examines the meaning of slavery and freedom, right and wrong, and growing up—all while telling a wonderful series of rich, funny, and inventive yarns that bond together into one great tale of almost mythic sweep.

About the only thing better than reading *Huckleberry Finn* would be to hear it spoken as it was meant to sound. The IRT's production of the play does this and recalls Twain's oral tradition at the same time. ★

(above and below)
Scenic sketches by Joseph P. Flauto.