

# MARK TWAIN AND HUMOR

1 week

High School American Literature

## DESIRED RESULTS:

What are the “big ideas” that drive this lesson?

*Many authors, including Mark Twain, utilize humor as a way to comment on contemporary culture.*

## Essential Questions:

- To what degree is the humor in *Huckleberry Finn* a commentary on the surrounding culture? To what degree is the humor in *Huckleberry Finn* simply a reflection of the surrounding culture?
- How is humor created?
- In what ways can humor be thought-provoking?

## CORE UNDERSTANDING AND SKILLS:

### Students will need to know:

- Ways that the minstrel tradition reflected continuing racial prejudice and oppression after the Civil War.
- Mark Twain’s response to the racial questions of his day.
- The way Twain uses satire to illustrate the irrationality and folly of racial prejudice at the same time that he also at times reflects his own continuing prejudices.
- Verbal strategies and techniques used to convey humor, especially ironic humor

**Students will need to be able to:**

- Analyze devices writers use to create verbal humor, particularly incongruity between language and situation.
- Evaluate ways that humor can be used to fulfill a serious purpose.

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE LESSON:****Performance Tasks, Projects:**

Contributions to class discusses will not be formally graded, but they will show students' comprehension of the topic (my classes are small enough that I expect every student to speak at some time).

**Quizzes, Tasks, Academic Prompts**

- Contributions to internet-based discussion board. After our initial discussion of passages in *Huck Finn*, I'll ask students to contribute comments to the discussion board about other passage we haven't discussed in class, reflecting whether the chosen passages use humor to comment on society or simply reflect social prejudices. Students may either initiate discussion of a passage they have chosen or respond to a discussion initiated by other students. Since I teach more than one section of the course, this discussion board allows students to exchange ideas with all the other students in the course, not just other students in their section.
- For their final essay, students will be given a passage about comedy (in general, not just in Twain) and asked how it applies to *Huck Finn*. To write this essay, they will need to show understanding of the idea about humor (which, in literary terms, is not quite synonymous with comedy) we have discussed over the course of the novel.
- To complete these tasks, students will need to be able to identify strategies used to create verbal humor, have an understanding of situational humor, and have historical information about the blackface minstrelsy tradition in nineteenth century America. They need to be able to closely analyze the language of the text, understanding connotation and tone, in order to understand the nature of the humor in specific selected passages and in the novel as a whole.

**What teachings and learning experiences will equip students to demonstrate the targeted understandings?**

This "lesson" about humor in *Huck Finn* will be spread out over several sessions, so

each part will take place on a different day (not necessarily consecutive); each class meeting may also include other topics and activities not mentioned here.

### **Part One** (assignment given before students begin to read *Huck Finn*)

Students will make posts to the internet-based discussion board responding to two of Twain's statements about humor, both found in the the humor section of Twainquotes.com:

- Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.
- Humor much not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.

Students may write about their personal response to these statements or connect the statements to humor in contemporary popular culture. We won't necessarily discuss these ideas in class (at least, not until later), but they will serve as a backdrop to our reading of *Huck Finn*.

### **Part Two**

After having read through chapter 10 of *Huck Finn*, students will first analyze the conversation between Huck and Jim at the end of chapter 8 (beginning at "So we went over to where the canoe was," p. 102 in Railton's edition of the novel and suggested by Railton as a good connection with his minstrelsy material), focusing on these questions:

- How does this conversation characterize Huck? What is his attitude toward Jim? To what degree is Huck sympathetic with Jim's escape and to what degree is he uncomfortable with his knowledge of the escape?
- How does this conversation characterize Jim? Does the use of dialect in his telling of the story of his escape affect our attitude toward him? What is the relationship between Jim's tale of his escape from Miss Watson at the beginning of this section and his analysis of "signs" at the end of the section? Do we respond differently to these two sections of his dialogue? How does the juxtaposition of these two sections of dialogue affect our understanding of Jim as a character?
- Are any parts of this dialogue funny? (Or do we think Twain intended parts to be funny, even if the humor is lost on us?) What is the nature of the humor in this section? How do we respond to this humor? (Is there anything about the humor that makes us uncomfortable?)

At this point, we will look at the information that Railton gives about Blackface Minstrelsy, available either in his edition of *Huck Finn* or on his website.

- After reading the introductory paragraph, students will look at illustrations of sheet music covers that Railton includes, discussing the way the images portray the African-American figures, and compare those illustrations to the Kemble illustrations for *Huck Finn*. How do these images convey a stereotype that would be comforting

to a white viewer in the nineteenth century (and perhaps infuriating to an African-American viewer)?

- Then students will read the minstrel text “Bones Opens a ‘Spout Shop,’” included in Railton’s edition of the novel. This could be read in several ways—asking students to read silently, asking two students to read the dialogue for the rest of the class, or asking students to read the dialogue in pairs. If two students read for the class, I’ll be careful about the casting and will avoid casting an African-American student as “Bones.”
- We will analyze the nature of the humor in this dialogue, discussing ways that the dialogue offers the same stereotypes of African-American characters seen in the images on the sheet music covers and analyzing the ways that both the dialogue and the images reflect the white culture from which they came.

Then we’ll return to the text of *Huck Finn*, focusing (as Railton suggests) on the dialogue between Huck and Jim about “signs” at the end of chapter 8. We will consider:

- How knowledge of the minstrel tradition expands or changes our understanding of this dialogue
- In what ways we think Twain is simply reflecting the customs of his culture in this dialogue or whether we think the language of the dialogue comments on and satirizes elements of the culture. As part of this discussion, we may think about how dialect is used in both the dialogue in *Huck Finn* to characterize African-American figures

### **Part Three**

After reading chapter 18, students will consider the nature of the humor in this chapter, focusing on the gap between Huck’s understanding of the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud and the reader’s understanding. In class, we focus on the passage beginning with Buck’s explanation of the feud to Huck and ending with the church service (pp. 174 -176 in Railton’s edition of the novel). Students usually see quickly that there is a gap between Huck’s understanding of the situation and the reader’s understanding of the situation. In discussion, we will focus on the way that Twain uses incongruity in the narration to allow the reader to see what the characters miss, in particular the incongruity between Buck’s description of the feud and the sermon on brotherly love. The humor in this episode clearly suggests commentary on social values (certainly the feud in particular, but perhaps also armed conflict in general).

### **Part Four**

At this point, we’ve had at least two conversations about humor in class, one about a passage where the text may simply reflect values of nineteenth century society embodied in the minstrel tradition and one which clearly implies commentary on the ideas of honor and bravery at the heart of the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud. Now students are ready to use the ideas about humor involved in these conversations as they encounter the crucial “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” episode in chapter 31.

- When students come into class on the day that we're ready to discuss chapter 31, they'll find the Twain's two quotations about humor projected on the board (the ones they wrote about before beginning the novel). I'll give them about ten minutes to write a substantial paragraph applying one of these statements about humor to chapter 31. Students may refer to their books in writing these paragraphs, so they should support their ideas with direct references to the text.
- After they've turned in their paragraphs, I'll give students the opportunity to talk about what they wrote with the rest of the class.
- In groups of three or four, students will spend about five minutes tracing the incongruities in the section of from "Once I said to myself" to "I might as well go the whole hog" (pp. 283-285 in Railton), with a focus on answering these questions:
  - Has Huck's understanding of race changed since the beginning of the novel? If so, how? And how do we know?
  - Does the language of the passage lead the reader to share Huck's understanding of race? Or does it lead the reader to a different understanding? Give specific examples of diction and imagery that either leads the reader to an understanding that is congruent to Huck's understanding or that suggest incongruity between Huck's understanding and the reader's.

## Part Five

At this point, students should have a framework for thinking about the final episode of the novel at the Phelps's farm. In class discussion and on the internet discussion board, students should focus their attention not just on discussing the events of the chapters but on analyzing the language that conveys these events. As these discussions unfold, students will consider the following questions:

- To what degree does the humor in this final section reflect the same sort of humor seen in the minstrel tradition, using dialect to emphasize Jim's perceived inferiority to the white reader?
- To what degree does the language in this final section of the novel reveal a humorous gap between Huck's understanding of events and the reader's understanding of events? (Students will probably agree that the incongruity between Tom's Monte Cristo fantasies and the reality of the situation is absurd—but is there social commentary implied in his understanding of what is happening to Jim?)
- Overall, what kinds of incongruity is Twain exploiting in the end of the novel?
  - Is he relying on a simple incongruity between the characters' delusions and the reader's more realistic understanding of the situation to provoke laughter?
  - Is the reader invited to have a more developed understanding of Jim's humanity than the white characters? Does the novel's ending expose the white characters' flawed and cruel treatment of Jim? Or does it allow readers, along with the white characters, to see Jim as an uncomplicated (even though kind) clown figure?

## Part Six: Optional follow-up

A day after the initial discussion of the novel's ending, divide students into four to five groups. Each group will read and discuss one of the selections in the end of Railton's edition of the novel, all reflecting late nineteenth ideas about race in America and/or contemporary responses to the novel. After the discussion in small groups, members of each group will share their ideas about their piece with the rest of the class, first summarizing its main ideas and then comparing it to the portrayal of American society seen in *Huck Finn*, with a special focus on the understanding of race suggested by the texts.

**Group 1:** "The Negro Out of Politics" (Railton, 385-386)

**Group 2:** "Mars Chan" (Railton, 392-396)

**Group 3:** "The Freedmen's Case in Equity" (Railton, 396-400)

**Group 4:** Two contemporary reviews of *Huck Finn*, from the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine* (Railton, 425-427)

**Group 5:** Two other contemporary reviews of *Huck Finn*, from the *Atheneum* and the *Saturday Review* (Railton, 417-421)

After each group has reported, we will discuss these questions:

- Compare Twain's use of humor to explore race in America with the way these other writers treat race in America.
- Compare your understanding of humor in the novel with the contemporary reviewers' view of Twain's humor.
- After reading the novel and comparing it (even if only briefly) to the writing of Twain's contemporaries, in what ways do you think that Twain is using humor to comment on the society of his time? In what ways do you think that Twain's humor simply reflects the society of his time?

### **Common Core Connections:**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1: read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

### **Lesson Extension:**

Twain uses humor in his analysis of American society. Compare Twain's use of humor with the humor employed by contemporary observers of America, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

Adapted/formatted from *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe

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## DESIRED RESULTS:

What are the “big ideas” that drive this lesson?

- Many authors, including Mark Twain, utilize humor as a way to comment on contemporary culture.

What are the “essential questions” that students will need to answer in order to understand the “big ideas”?

- To what degree is the humor in Huckleberry Finn a commentary on the surrounding culture? To what degree is the humor in Huckleberry Finn simply a reflection of the surrounding culture?
- How is humor created?
- In what ways can humor be thought-provoking?

## CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

Students will need to know:

- Ways that the minstrel tradition reflected continuing racial prejudice and oppression after the Civil War.
- Mark Twain’s response to the racial questions of his day.
- The way Twain uses satire to illustrate the irrationality and folly of racial prejudice at the same time that he also at times reflects his own continuing prejudices.
- Verbal strategies and techniques used to convey humor, especially ironic humor.

Students will need to be able to:

- Analyze devices writers use to create verbal humor, particularly incongruity between language and situation.
- Evaluate ways that humor can be used to fulfill a serious purpose.

## SUGGESTED ASSESSMENTS:

- Contributions to internet-based discussion board. After our initial discussion of passages in Huck Finn, I’ll ask students to contribute comments to the discussion board about other passage we haven’t discussed in class, reflecting whether the chosen passages use humor to comment on society or simply reflect social prejudices. Students may either initiate discussion of a passage they have chosen or respond to a discussion initiated by other students. Since I teach more than one section of the course, this discussion board allows students to exchange ideas with all the other students in the course, not just other students in their section.
- For their final essay, students will be given a passage about comedy (in general, not just in Twain) and asked how it applies to Huck Finn. To write this essay, they will need to show understanding of the idea about humor (which, in literary terms, is not quite synonymous with comedy) we have discussed over the course of the novel.

- To complete these tasks, students will need to be able to identify strategies used to create verbal humor, have an understanding of situational humor, and have historical information about the blackface minstrelsy tradition in nineteenth century America. They need to be able to closely analyze the language of the text, understanding connotation and tone, in order to understand the nature of the humor in specific selected passages and in the novel as a whole.
- Contributions to class discusses will not be formally graded, but they will show students' comprehension of the topic (my classes are small enough that I expect every student to speak at some time).

#### LEARNING EXPERIENCE:

1. This "lesson" about humor in Huck Finn will be spread out over several sessions, so each part will take place on a different day (not necessarily consecutive); each class meeting may also include other topics and activities not mentioned here.
2. Part One- Students will make posts to the internet-based discussion board responding to two of Twain's statements about humor, both found at the humor section of [www.Twainquotes.com](http://www.Twainquotes.com):
  - Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.
  - Humor much not professedly teach, and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever.
3. Students may write about their personal response to these statements or connect the statements to humor in contemporary popular culture. We won't necessarily discuss these ideas in class (at least, not until later), but they will serve as a backdrop to our reading of Huck Finn.
4. Part Two- After having read through chapter 10 of Huck Finn, students will first analyze the conversation between Huck and Jim at the end of chapter 8 (beginning at "So we went over to where the canoe was," p. 102 in Railton's edition of the novel and suggested by Railton as a good connection with his minstrelsy material), focusing on these questions:
  - How does this conversation characterize Huck? What is his attitude toward Jim? To what degree is he sympathetic with Jim's escape and to what degree is he uncomfortable with his knowledge of the escape?
  - How does this conversation characterize Jim? Does the use of dialect in his telling of the story of his escape affect our attitude toward him? What is the relationship between Jim's tale of his escape from Miss Watson at the beginning of this section and his analysis of "signs" at the end of the section? Do we respond differently to these two sections of his dialogue? How does the juxtaposition of these two sections of dialogue affect our understanding of Jim as a character?
  - Are any parts of this dialogue funny? (Or do we think Twain intended parts to be funny, even if the humor is lost on us?) What is the nature of the humor in this section? How do we respond to this humor? (Is there anything about the humor that makes us uncomfortable?)

5. At this point, we will look at the information that Railton gives about Blackface Minstrelsy, available either in his edition of Huck Finn or on his website. After reading the introductory paragraph, students will look at illustrations of sheet music covers that Railton includes, discussing the way the images portray the African-American figures, and compare those illustrations to the Kemble illustrations for Huck Finn. Question:
  - How do these images convey a stereotype that would be comforting to a white viewer in the nineteenth century (and perhaps infuriating to an African-American viewer)?
6. Then students will read the minstrel text “Bones Opens a ‘Spout Shop,’” included in Railton’s edition of the novel. This could be read in several ways—asking students to read silently, asking two students to read the dialogue for the rest of the class, or asking students to read the dialogue in pairs. If two students read for the class, I’ll be careful about the casting and will avoid casting an African-American student as “Bones.”
7. We will analyze the nature of the humor in this dialogue, discussing ways that the dialogue offers the same stereotypes of African-American characters seen in the images on the sheet music covers and analyzing the ways that both the dialogue and the images reflect the white culture from which they came.
8. Then we’ll return to the text of Huck Finn, focusing (as Railton suggests) on the dialogue between Huck and Jim about “signs” at the end of chapter 8.
9. We will consider
  - How knowledge of the minstrel tradition expands or changes our understanding of this dialogue
  - In what ways we think Twain is simply reflecting the customs of his culture in this dialogue or whether we think the language of the dialogue comments on and satirizes elements of the culture. As part of this discussion, we may think about how dialect is used in both the dialogue in Huck Finn to characterize African-American figures
10. Part Three-After reading chapter 18, students will consider the nature of the humor in this chapter, focusing on the gap between Huck’s understanding of the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud and the reader’s understanding. In class, we focus on the passage beginning with Buck’s explanation of the feud to Huck and ending with the church service (pp. 174-176 in Railton’s edition of the novel).
11. Students usually see quickly that there is a gap between Huck’s understanding of the situation and the reader’s understanding of the situation. In discussion, we will focus on the way that Twain uses incongruity in the narration to allow the reader to see what the characters miss, in particular the incongruity between Buck’s description of the feud and the sermon on brotherly love. The humor in this episode clearly suggests commentary on social values (certainly the feud in particular, but perhaps also armed conflict in general).
12. Part Four- At this point, we’ve had at least two conversations about humor in class, one about a passage where the text may simply reflect values of nineteenth century society embodied in the minstrel tradition and one which

clearly implies commentary on the ideas of honor and bravery at the heart of the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud.

13. Now students are ready to use the ideas about humor involved in these conversations as they encounter the crucial “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” episode in chapter 31. When students come into class on the day that we’re ready to discuss chapter 31, they’ll find the Twain’s two quotations about humor projected on the board (the ones they wrote about before beginning the novel). I’ll give them about ten minutes to write a substantial paragraph applying one of these statements about humor to chapter 31. Students may refer to their books in writing these paragraphs, so they should support their ideas with direct references to the text.
14. After they’ve turned in their paragraphs, I’ll give students the opportunity to talk about what they wrote with the rest of the class.
15. In groups of three or four, students will spend about five minutes tracing the incongruities in the section of from “Once I said to myself” to “I might as well go the whole hog” (pp. 283-285 in Railton), with a focus on answering these questions:
  - Has Huck’s understanding of race changed since the beginning of the novel? If so, how? And how do we know?
  - Does the language of the passage lead the reader to share Huck’s understanding of race? Or does it lead the reader to a different understanding? Give specific examples of diction and imagery that either leads the reader to an understanding that is congruent to Huck’s understanding or that suggest incongruity between Huck’s understanding and the reader’s.
16. Part Five-At this point, students should have a framework for thinking about the final episode of the novel at the Phelps’s farm. In class discussion and on the internet discussion board, students should focus their attention not just on discussing the events of the chapters but on analyzing the language that conveys these events. As these discussions unfold, students will consider the following questions:
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  - To what degree does the language in this final section of the novel reveal a humorous gap between Huck’s understanding of events and the reader’s understanding of events? (Students will probably agree that the incongruity between Tom’s Monte Cristo fantasies and the reality of the situation is absurd—but is there social commentary implied in his understanding of what is happening to Jim?)
  - Overall, what kinds of incongruity is Twain exploiting in the end of the novel?
  - Is he relying on a simple incongruity between the characters’ delusions and the reader’s more realistic understanding of the situation to provoke laughter?

- Is the reader invited to have a more developed understanding of Jim’s humanity than the white characters? Does the novel’s ending expose the white characters’ flawed and cruel treatment of Jim? Or does it allow readers, along with the white characters, to see Jim as an uncomplicated (even though kind) clown figure?
17. Part Six- Optional follow-up: A day after the initial discussion of the novel’s ending, divide students into four to five groups. Each group will read and discuss one of the selections in the end of Railton’s edition of the novel, all reflecting late nineteenth ideas about race in America and/or contemporary responses to the novel.
18. After the discussion in small groups, members of each group will share their ideas about their piece with the rest of the class, first summarizing its main ideas and then comparing it to the portrayal of American society seen in Huck Finn, with a special focus on the understanding of race suggested by the texts.
- Group 1: “The Negro Out of Politics” (Railton, 385-386)
  - Group 2: “Mars Chan” (Railton, 392-396)
  - Group 3: “The Freedmen’s Case in Equity” (Railton, 396-400)
  - Group 4: Two contemporary reviews of Huck Finn, from the San Francisco Chronicle and The Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine (Railton, 425-427)
  - Group 5: Two other contemporary reviews of Huck Finn, from the Atheneum and the Saturday Review (Railton, 417-421)
19. After each group has reported, we will discuss these questions:
- Compare Twain’s use of humor to explore race in America with the way these other writers treat race in America.
  - Compare your understanding of humor in the novel with the contemporary reviewers’ view of Twain’s humor.
  - After reading the novel and comparing it (even if only briefly) to the writing of Twain’s contemporaries, in what ways do you think that Twain is using humor to comment on the society of his time? In what ways do you think that Twain’s humor simply reflects the society of his time?

#### COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1: read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

#### SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSION:

- Twain uses humor in his analysis of American society. Compare Twain's use of humor with the humor employed by contemporary observers of America, such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.