

The Scarlet Letter is no Huck Finn!

1day

High School English

DESIRED RESULTS:

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

- Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a groundbreaking work because it was the first American book which did not adhere to British literary standards, instead using a distinctly American vernacular intended for an American audience and dealing with American subjects and issues.

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

- How does the style and content of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* differ from an earlier American masterpiece such as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*?
- In particular, how does the “voice” of Huck compare to the voice of the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter*?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

Identify what the students will know and/or be able to do.

- Through close reading of text excerpts, students will be able to compare and contrast works of literature and identify key characteristics of differences in tone, voice, and context.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENT(S):

- Annotation of texts, completion of worksheet with partner (think-pair-share)

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

Use the WHERETO acronym to consider key design elements:

1. W – Where is it going? Students generally do not enjoy reading *The Scarlet Letter* on account of its style. Help them to build a bridge from Hester to Huck by really focusing on the differences in tone and language between the two books. (Note: You might preface this lesson with a class that introduces students to the ongoing controversy surrounding *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*’s use of the “n” word and its controversial treatment of race.) Students need to notice the stark contrast between the voice of Hawthorne’s distant narrator and Huck’s first-person point-of-view.

2. H – Hook the Students – Read Twain’s letter to William D. Howells, July 21, 1885- students will appreciate the fact that the author of *AHF* did not like Hawthorne's style either.
3. E – Explore and Equip – Students will feel great success in their analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* because we will have just finished the unit. By using their skills on a familiar text, they will feel more confident when asked to use those same skills on a new text.
4. R – Rethink and Revise – The discussion questions embedded in the text of *AHF* will make it easy for pairs or groups of students to make inferences and use textual evidence to back their impressions and opinions.
5. E – Exhibit and Evaluate – group discussion will help to gauge student understanding.
6. T – Tailor to Student needs – pairs/groups will be assigned in order to cater to student strengths.
7. O – Organize for maximum engagement – this lesson will take a full forty minutes with the goal that the students will be intrigued by Huck and by his story and that they will consent to follow Twain (and the teacher) in leading the unit.

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS

- Worksheet: “From Hester to Huck”

Name: _____ Per: _____

“From Hester to Huck”

Re-read the first chapter of The Scarlet Letter and annotate the text, noting the IMPRESSIONS Hawthorne conveys in it. Make a few observations at the bottom as to Hawthorne’s tone, diction, symbolism, setting and anything else you find worth noting now that you have finished the book.

Chapter 1 The Prison-Door

A throng of bearded men, in sad-colored garments and gray, steeple-crowned hats, intermixed with women, some wearing hoods, and others bareheaded, was assembled in front of a wooden edifice, the door of which was heavily timbered with oak, and studded with iron spikes.

The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house, somewhere in the vicinity of Cornhill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot, and round about his grave, which subsequently became the nucleus of all the congregated sepulchres in the old church-yard of King's Chapel. Certain it is, that, some fifteen or twenty years after the settlement of the town, the wooden jail was already marked with weather-stains and other indications of age, which gave a yet darker aspect to its beetle-browed and gloomy front. The rust on the ponderous iron-work of its oaken door looked more antique than anything else in the new world. Like all that pertains to crime, it seemed never to have known a youthful era. Before this ugly edifice, and between it and the wheel-track of the street, was a grass-plot, much overgrown with burdock, pig-weed, apple-peru, and such unsightly vegetation, which evidently found something congenial in the soil that had so early borne the black flower of civilized society, a prison. But, on one side of the portal, and rooted almost at the threshold, was a wild rose-bush, covered, in this month of June, with its delicate gems, which might be imagined to offer their fragrance and fragile beauty to the prisoner as he went in, and to the condemned criminal as he came forth to his doom, in token that the deep heart of Nature could pity and be kind to him. This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history; but whether it had merely survived out of the stern old wilderness, so long after the fall of the gigantic pines and oaks that originally overshadowed it,--or whether, as there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door,--we shall not take upon us to determine. Finding it so directly on the threshold of our narrative, which is now about to issue from that inauspicious portal, we could hardly do otherwise than pluck one of its flowers and present it to the reader. It may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow.

TONE:

DICTION:

SYMBOLISM:

SETTING:

Now complete the remainder of this worksheet.

1. How does Chapter 1 of *The Scarlet Letter* prepare us for the rest of Hawthorne's book?

2. *"I can't stand George Eliot and Hawthorne and those people; I see what they are at a hundred years before they get to it and they just tire me to death."*

– **Mark Twain to William D. Howells, July 21, 1885**

(Yes, our next book was written by someone who HATED Hawthorne's style! Now take a look at this first chapter, and see what you can observe about tone, diction and point-of-view. How might *this* book differ from *The Scarlet Letter*?)

3. “YOU don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly -- Tom's Aunt Polly, she is -- and Mary, and the Widow Douglas is all told about in that book, which is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before.”
- Picture the narrator in your mind. Who is speaking? Is the speaker male or female? How old? What time period might he or she come from?
4. “Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six thousand dollars apiece -- all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up. Well, Judge Thatcher he took it and put it out at interest, and it fetched us a dollar a day apiece all the year round -- more than a body could tell what to do with. The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out. I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back.”
- Now who do you see in your mind? How old is this guy? What actor could you picture playing his part in a movie adaptation?
 - Why doesn't he like to live with this Widow lady, and why does he go back? What is going on with the money?

5. "The widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and she called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it. She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn't do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up. Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them, -- that is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better."

- When the Widow "tuck(s) down her head and grumble(s) over the victuals", what is she doing?

6. "After supper she got out her book and learned me about [Moses and the Bulrushers](#), and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people."

- What does this narrator think of the Bible?

7. "Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. Here she was a-bothering about Moses, which was no kin to her, and no use to anybody, being gone, you see, yet finding a power of fault with me for doing a thing that had some good in it. And she took snuff, too; of course that was all right, because she done it herself."

- What does it mean to be a hypocrite?

8. "Her sister, [Miss Watson](#), a tolerable slim old maid, with goggles on, had just come to live with her, and took a set at me now with a spelling-book. She worked me middling hard for about an hour, and then the widow made her ease up. I couldn't stood it much longer. Then for an hour it was deadly dull, and I was fidgety. Miss Watson would say, "Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry;" and "Don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry -- set up straight;" and pretty soon she would say, "Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry - - why don't you try to behave?" Then she told me all about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. She got mad then, but I didn't mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change, I warn't particular. She said it was wicked to say what I said; said she wouldn't say it for the whole world; *she* was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where

she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. But I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn't do no good."

- Who is Miss Watson, and what does she look like? Does her behavior remind you of anyone in real life or fiction/tv/movies?

- What does Huckleberry (our narrator) think about religion in general?

9. "Now she had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day long with a harp and sing, forever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together."

- Why does Huckleberry (Huck) think heaven would be boring?

10. "Miss Watson she kept pecking at me, and it got tiresome and lonesome. By and by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers, and then everybody was off to bed. I went up to my room with a piece of candle, and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared I did wish I had some company. Pretty soon a spider went crawling up my shoulder, and I flipped it off and it lit in the candle; and before I could budge it was all shriveled up. I didn't need anybody to tell me that that was an awful bad sign and would fetch me some bad luck, so I was scared and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned around in my tracks three times and crossed my breast every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no confidence. You do that when you've lost a horseshoe that you've found, instead of nailing it up over the door, but I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider."

- Huck and other characters use the “n-word” many times in the novel. What do you think this means about him? About the novel?

- How can we tell that Huck is superstitious?

11. “I set down again, a-shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for the house was all as still as death now, and so the widow wouldn’t know. Well, after a long time I heard the clock away off in the town go boom -- boom -- boom -- twelve licks; and all still again -- stiller than ever. Pretty soon I heard a twig snap down in the dark amongst the trees -- something was a stirring. I set still and listened. Directly I could just barely hear a “*me-yow! me-yow!*” down there. That was good! Says I, “*me-yow! me-yow!*” as soft as I could, and then I put out the light and scrambled out of the window on to the shed. Then I slipped down to the ground and crawled in among the trees, and, sure enough, there was Tom Sawyer waiting for me.”

- Huck seems homesick. What does he miss?

- From this brief chapter, do you think Huck is a “good” kid or a “bad” or, like most of us, somewhere in between?

- Describe in a few sentences how this chapter differs from The Scarlet Letter. What do you notice about the narrator's tone, word choice and perspective?
- Huck is going to be telling us his own story. What will that mean for us as readers?
- Do you have any predictions about the novel?

ver·nac·u·lar

Pronunciation: \və(r)- nɑ-kyə-lər\

Function: *adjective*

1 a: using a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured, or foreign language **b:** of, relating to, or being a nonstandard language or dialect of a place, region, or country **c:** of, relating to, or being the normal spoken form of a language

2: applied to a plant or animal in the common native speech as distinguished from the Latin nomenclature of scientific classification <the *vernacular* name>

3: of, relating to, or characteristic of a period, place, or group ; especially : of, relating to, or being the common building style of a period or place <vernacular architecture>

