

Powerful Memories, Powerful Words

Student Activity



Mark Twain at the writing desk in his study at Quarry Farm in Elmira, NY, 1874 Courtesy Elmira College, The Center for Mark Twain Studies

Huckleberry Finn.

“... I have no race prejudices, and I think I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. Indeed I know it... All that I care to know is that a man is a human being – that is enough for me...”

– Mark Twain

Black people and black voices were part of Sam Clemens’ life from the beginning. Every summer as a child Sam spent several weeks on his uncle’s farm, where an old slave called “Uncle Daniel” thrilled the youngsters with ghost stories. One of his most lasting childhood memories was not so pleasant, however. It was of a dozen men and women, chained together, waiting to be shipped down-river to the slave market. “They had,” he said, “the saddest faces I ever saw.”

Part A. While Twain grew more successful and prosperous, he never forgot those childhood memories. He understood slavery to be cruel and unjust – a picture he wanted to portray in his most controversial book,

In the film *Mark Twain*, we meet Mary Ann Cord, the former slave whose story so moved Twain that, changing her name to “Aunt Rachel,” he committed her words to paper in *The Atlantic Monthly* in “A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It.”

“Aunt Rachel”... was our servant, and colored... She was sixty years old ... a cheerful, hearty soul, and it was no more trouble for her to laugh than for a bird to sing... [I asked her:] “Aunt Rachel, how is that you have lived sixty years without trouble?”

[She said,] ...“Misto Clemens, is you in ‘arnest?... Has I had any trouble? Misto Clemens, I’s gwyne to tell you, den I leave it to you. I was bawn down amongst de slaves....

Born a slave in Virginia, Mary Ann Cord married and had seven children. In 1852, her heart was broken when her family was sold away from her at auction. She lost touch with all of them. Years later, during the Civil War, she was living in North Carolina when Union officers occupied her owner’s plantation. A black regiment arrived to guard the house. Cord continued her story:

I was a stooping down by de stove ... an’ I’d jist got de pan ‘o hot biscuits in my han’ an was ‘bout to raise up when I see a black face comin’ aroun’ under mine an de eyes a-lookin’ up into mine ... an I jist stopped right dah an’ never budged! Jist gazed and gazed, ... an de pan begin to tremble, an’ all of a sudden I knowed!...“Boy!” I says, “if you ain’t my Henry, what is you doin’ wid dis welt on yo wris’ an’ dat sky-ar on yo’ forehead? De Lord God ob be praise, I got my own ag’in!”

Oh, no, Mister Clemens, I hain’t had no trouble. An’ no joy!

Hearing the old woman talk reminded Twain not only of the horrors of slavery, but also of the power of vernacular storytelling. Twain channeled that power in *Huckleberry Finn* as he had Jim, the runaway slave, tell his story in his own words.

Ask someone whose background and life have been quite different from yours – perhaps a World War II veteran, a person from a different part of the country, or a recent immigrant – to describe a significant experience in his or her life. Tape-record their story and then put in writing their words exactly as they used them – including inflections, pauses and special phrases. Don’t “correct” their language. Now weave this into a short story to share with your

classmates.

Part B. *Tom Sawyer* was the best loved of all of Mark Twain's books – “a celebration of small-town boyhood in which the hero solves a murder mystery, manages to eavesdrop on his own funeral, and tricks his friends into painting his fences.” *Tom Sawyer* gives us a very “whitewashed” version of childhood. *Huckleberry Finn* – which has been debated, attacked and censored ever since its publication in 1885 – was something else entirely.

Written in dialect like the story of Mary Ann Cord, *Huckleberry Finn's* power lies in the characters' own “voices.” As the story begins, Huck says:

*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...*

Set before the Civil War, it is the story of two runaways – a white boy, Tom's friend Huckleberry Finn – who is fleeing civilization – and a black man, Jim, who is running away from slavery. Huck's experiences with Jim make him question everything he has been taught about black people and slavery, about right and wrong, good and evil.

When Huck awakens to hear Jim crying for his lost children, he realizes for the first time that “I guess Jim misses his family the way white folk'd do their'n.” Later, Huck feels he has been wrong to help Jim escape and writes a letter to Jim's owner telling him where his fleeing property can be found. But before mailing it he hesitates, remembering Jim's kindness on their trip on the river and how Jim had said that Huck was the best friend he'd ever had in the world, “and the only one he's got now...”

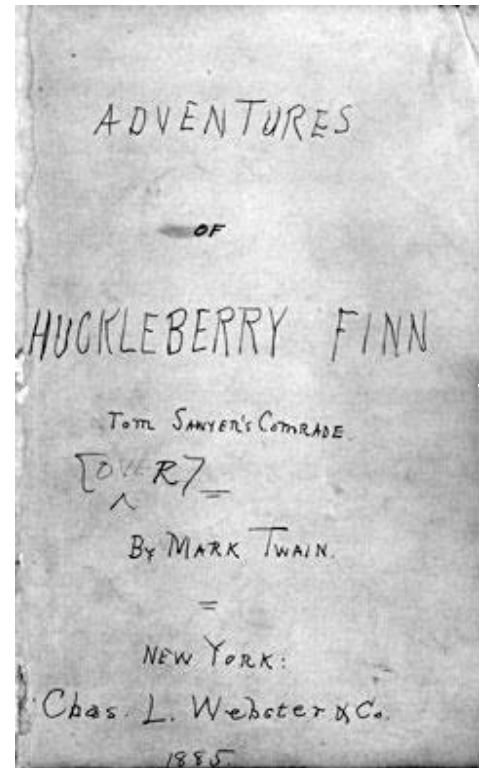
Huck continues:

... and then I happened to look around and see that paper.

I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

“All right then, I'll go to hell” – and tore it up.

Do you think conditions have changed for the better? Conduct a **week-long media watch** to find TV news stories and newspaper articles about current race relations. Pick one issue, **research how relevant it was in Twain's day** and, if it was, how it was treated in the media and literature then. Write your findings on a separate sheet of paper.



Mark Twain's handwritten title page for "Huckleberry Finn." Courtesy Buffalo and Erie County Library