



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Democracy Through Huck's Eyes in *Huckleberry Finn*

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Lesson Overview

In this lesson, students will explore the role of realism in developing a space for democracy in American literature. Students will consider the extent to which both art and literature can reflect democratic principles and societal norms, and they will critically analyze the ways that Twain uses realism in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Of particular importance to this lesson is Twain's use of Huck as a narrator. Students will create a timeline of Huck's thoughts, feelings, and motivations in the first 15 chapters so they can engage in discussions about Huck's reliability and perspective. Then students will rewrite a scene from *Huckleberry Finn* from a perspective other than Huck's to better understand how Huck's viewpoint affects the story.

Note: This lesson is the 2nd in a 4-lesson series.



Essential Questions

- How does Mark Twain's language affect the meaning of the story of *Huckleberry Finn*, and as readers in the 21st century, how do we approach the language he used in the 19th century?
- How do the stories of Jim and Huck grapple with the Founding principles put forth in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal"?
- How do Huck's internal conflicts reveal the tension between individual moral insight and societal definitions of right and wrong?
- How does Huck and Jim's journey illuminate the unalienable rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"?

Learning Objectives

- Analyze the narrative perspective of Huck to understand how his viewpoint affects the story.
- Evaluate how realism in literature can serve as a vehicle for democratic thought and conversation.
- Engage in critical discussions about Twain's choice of Huck as a narrator for the story.
- Critically consider the ways that art and literature can reflect democratic principles and societal norms.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **NAR 4.A** Identify and describe the narrator or speaker of a text.
- **NAR 4.B** Identify and explain the function of point of view in a narrative.
- **CHA 1.A** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character.
- **FIG 5.B** Explain the function of specific words and phrases in a text.
- **LAN 7.D** Select and use relevant and sufficient evidence to both develop and support a line of reasoning.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- *The Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet
- *The Abduction of Rebecca* by Eugène Delacroix
- Read and Ruminare Journals (see opening mini-lesson for guidelines)

- Graphic organizer on *The Gleaners* and *The Abduction of Rebecca* – 1 per student
- Artwork of the Mississippi River – 5 pictures – 1 set per each small group of students
- Excerpt from *Literature and Life* – 1 per student
- Realism Versus Romanticism Student Worksheet – 1 per student

Warm-Up

Post the following prompts on the board and ask students to write their thoughts in response.

- What does it mean for art and literature to be American?
- What does it mean for art and literature to be democratic?
- How might individuals from different cultural backgrounds define “American” or “democratic” art?
- In your opinion, what elements (artistic or literary) do democratic works include?

When students have finished writing, ask them to share their thoughts with a partner or in a small group. Then have several share with the whole class. Ask students to keep these thoughts handy because they will need them for another activity.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING, PART 1: DEFINE THE GENRE

STEP 1

Ask students to explain what they know about realism. Then show them this etching titled *The Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet. Tell students that the women are gleaning wheat, which was a practice in which people who were poor or needy would pick up the leftover wheat from a field where most of it had already been harvested. Say that this piece of art is representative of the mid-19th-century realism movement in France, which followed the Romantic movement. Have students watch the video “[Millet, The Gleaners](#).”

(The etching is available under [Open Access from The Met](#), although the actual painting is at the [Musée d'Orsay](#).)

STEP 2

Hand out the following graphic organizer and ask students to complete the column under *The Gleaners*.

Observe	<i>The Gleaners</i>	<i>The Abduction of Rebecca</i>
Subject matter		
Colors used		
Background/Backdrop		
Interesting details		

STEP 3

Show students *The Abduction of Rebecca* by Eugène Delacroix. (This painting is available under Open Access from The Met.) Ask students to complete the column under *The Abduction of Rebecca*. Potential student responses to both pieces of art are indicated in the following graphic organizer:

Observe	<i>The Gleaners</i>	<i>The Abduction of Rebecca</i>
Subject matter	• Peasants • Working life • 3 women gleaning wheat • Daily existence in 19th-century France	• A woman is being carried off on a horse. • The horse is running or rearing. • A man is following on horseback at a gallop.
Colors used	• Muted colors • Neutrals, mostly • The women's hats are all different colors: blue, orange, and green.	• Dark, intense colors • Reds, blues, golds • White is occasionally used and makes elements pop against the dark background.
Background/Backdrop	• Rooftops of houses • Workhorses • Overseer on horseback • Trees and haystack	• Castle that is burning • Smoke covers a blue sky. • The castle is on a rocky ridge.
Interesting details	• Lines are not harsh. • Softness makes it enjoyable to look at. • Neutral colors are calming.	• The woman (Rebecca) looks almost asleep. • All 3 men in the painting appear to be active.

STEP 4

Have students talk to a partner about the similarities and differences of these 2 pieces of art. Ask a few volunteers to share their thoughts with the class.

Explain to students that *The Gleaners* was created in an art style called Realism, in which artists sought to produce works that focused on the common person and was faithful to everyday, ordinary life. This movement occurred after the Romantic movement (which is shown in *The Abduction of Rebecca*), where dramatic action was emphasized. Relate this information to literature and remind students that Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote romances, whereas the author they will read next (Mark Twain) wrote in a realistic style.

STEP 5

Give students the following excerpt from *Literature and Life* by the American author William Dean Howells. Explain that Howells wrote the essays in *Literature and Life* at the end of the 19th century and the very beginning of the 20th century. Howells was Twain's contemporary, and both were adherents of realism.

The following is an excerpt from an essay in *Literature and Life*:

We [American authors] have been now some hundred years building up a state on the affirmation of the essential equality of men in their rights and duties, and whether we have been right or been wrong the gods have taken us at our word, and have responded to us with a civilization in which there is no "distinction" perceptible to the eye that loves and values it. Such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else. It seems to me that these conditions invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common, and to the portrayal in every art of those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity, if he would thrive in our new order of things. The talent that is robust enough to front the every-day world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things alone worthy of painting or carving or writing. The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art.

—William Dean Howells

STEP 6

Have students form groups of 3 or 4. Have each group read the excerpt and discuss the following questions:

- According to Howells, what is American art?
- Look back at your definition of American art and literature from the Warm-Up. To what extent do you agree or disagree with Howells's ideas about American art?

- Does Howells think that American art is democratic? Explain your thoughts.
- Howells writes about “essential equality” and “common beauty” as key ingredients of American art. Who is depicted in the artworks that Howells is referring to? Who is not depicted? How should these answers affect our understanding of Howells’s definition of American (and democratic) art?

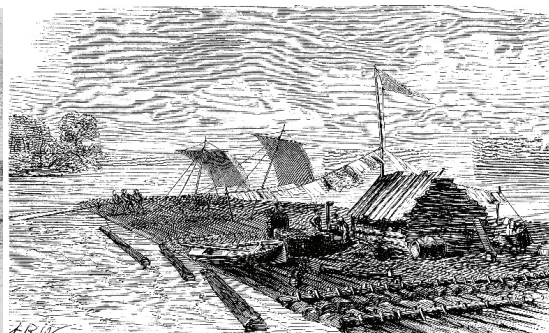
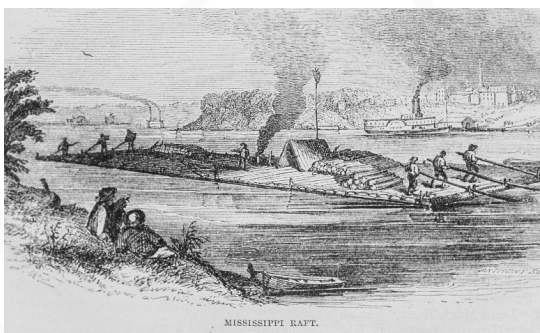
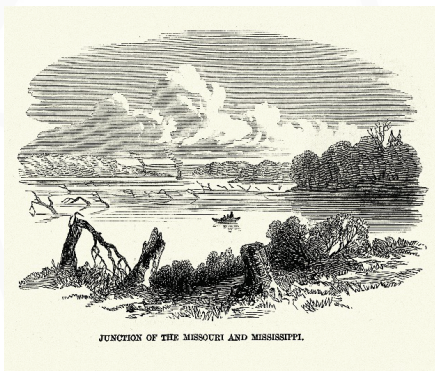
DEBRIEF

After students have talked about these questions in their small groups, facilitate a whole-class discussion. Highlight Howells’s thoughts about American beauty being “common beauty” and American grandeur being “common grandeur”; or, in other words, the kind of “beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else.” Relate that opinion to the 1800s art style of Realism, which focused on the common person, such as in *The Gleaners*. Be sure to emphasize that Howells doesn’t think America has arrived at producing “American art”; that’s why he says art needs to “become democratic.”

BEFORE READING, PART 2: SETTING

STEP 1

Place students into small groups of 3 or 4. Give each group copies of the following pieces of art that depict the Mississippi River around the era that *Huckleberry Finn* is set (1840s Missouri). Note: All these artworks depict the Mississippi River. Although they’re not all from the 1840s, they approximately represent aspects of the setting of *Huckleberry Finn*.



STEP 2

Ask students to make a list, in their groups, of the things they notice about the environment of each illustration.

Some characteristics they might note are rough conditions for people, lots of trees, large clouds, rafts, steamboats, makeshift shelters (on the rafts), large rivers, a wilderness look, lots of wildlife, smoke from chimneys, people on the shore, and people on the raft.

STEP 3

Have groups share their list with the whole class. Record all the ideas on the board and group similar ideas together so that you have 1 list of characteristics.

Revisit Realism

Ask the following questions and connect this activity to the ideas of realism and democratic art:

- What aspects of life along the Mississippi River in the 19th century are artists choosing to highlight as “common beauty”? Why do you think this is the case?
- Are the artists of these illustrations faithfully representing all aspects of life in mid-19th-century America? What aspects of life may not be represented or included? How should this discussion affect our understanding of the artwork? Explain your thoughts.

STEP 4

Facilitate a whole-group discussion that analyzes the illustrations. Help students see what is being appreciated in the artwork (natural life, exploration, travel, innovation, etc.) and what is missing (religious dogma, slavery, racism, social norms, etc.).

Ask

- What would you add, take away, or leave the same in these artworks to make them more democratic?
- Is it possible to have a fully democratic piece of art?

DEBRIEF

Discuss these questions with students and ask them to articulate the limits of art. Acknowledge that art carries with it a certain perspective that is limited because its author is human and all human beings are limited. Similarly, authors are limited in their viewpoints, which is why we, as readers, need to both cognitively empathize and critically analyze texts. This principle is particularly true if we seek to help art and literature become more democratic.

DURING READING

Discuss the purpose of a narrator with students and ask them how we can judge the reliability of a narrator. Explain that reliability is important to consider because everyone's perspective is shaped by their own beliefs and experiences. Specifically, in *Huckleberry Finn* the reader should pay attention to these ideas because Twain seeks to present a realistic figure in Huck. However, Huck's perspective is clearly shaped by his specific identity—a young, white boy from the 1840s. Why do you think Twain makes Huck the narrator, even though Huck carries all the assumptions, blind spots, and limited viewpoints of his time and social position? Why doesn't Twain choose an omniscient narrator who is able to fully understand the experiences and viewpoints of all the characters?

ESTABLISH A PURPOSE

Tell students that while they are reading they will complete 7–10 Read and Ruminare Journal entries for these chapters. See the opening lesson "Unpacking Language and Meaning in *Huckleberry Finn*" for guidelines regarding these entries.

READ ACTIVELY

Have students read chapters 1–15 of *Huckleberry Finn* and complete their journal entries. Remind students to annotate their text with questions and mark any details that give them new insights or information about the characters or setting of the story.

AFTER READING

With the whole class, revisit the idea of realism in literature. Discuss with students how Twain's use of Huck as a narrator reinforces this style. Then discuss how Huck's narration illuminates the complexities of equality as outlined in the Declaration and the societal realities of the time.

INTERACTIVE TIMELINE

STEP 1

Place students into small groups of 3 or 4 and give them the following instructions.

Instructions: After reading chapters 1–15 of *Huckleberry Finn*, identify key words, thoughts, or moments that reveal Huck's reliability as a narrator. Consider events that illuminate Huck's perspective—particularly moments where Huck voices moral dilemmas about Jim's freedom. Also, look for instances in Huck's narration that show the contradiction between ideals of equality and societal norms (slavery, social niceties, etc.). Create an interactive timeline that uses visuals and quotations to represent these moments. Each key moment included should have a brief description; relevant words, phrases, or quotations; and symbols or visual elements that aid in understanding.

STEP 2

Give students time to work on their timelines and provide support as needed.

STEP 3

Facilitate a gallery walk featuring each group's timeline. Have students note how each project illustrates the following elements:

- The reliability of Huck as a narrator
- Huck's perspective and how it illuminates key conflicts (internal/external)
- Twain's use of Huck to illuminate the ideals of equality and highlight the realities of the mid-19th century

DEBRIEF

Engage in a whole-group discussion of Huck's reliability as a narrator. Is he trustworthy and believable? Why do you think Twain chose to have a young boy as his narrator?

Ask:

- In what ways does Twain use Huck's narration to illustrate the principle: "All men are created equal"? *Note: Be sure that students are familiar with the Founders' meaning behind this principle related to the "state of nature" that everyone is born into.
- How does Huck's narration show the ways in which applying the Declaration's principles equally and universally was a source of conflict in America?

WRITE AN ESSAY

Give students the following essay prompt and ask them to write their response on a physical or digital document.

Essay Prompt:

In this assignment, you will explore the narrative perspective in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by rewriting a scene from the first 15 chapters from the perspective of a character other than Huck. This exercise will help you understand how perspective shapes storytelling and its implications for democratic thinking in literature.

Instructions:

- Choose a specific scene from the first 15 chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* that you find compelling. Consider moments that reveal significant conflicts or character developments.
- Rewrite your selected scene from the perspective of a different character (e.g., Jim, Tom Sawyer, or even a minor character).

- After rewriting the scene, write a brief reflection (1–2 paragraphs) addressing the following questions:
 - How does the perspective of the chosen character alter the meaning or the effect of the scene?
 - In what ways does this exercise illustrate the idea of literature as a site for democratic thinking? Consider how different perspectives contribute to a fuller understanding of the story and its themes.

Considerations:

- How does the character's voice differ from Huck's? What unique language or tone does that person use?
- What insights or biases does this character bring to the scene? How does that person's understanding of the situation differ from Huck's?
- How do the character's feelings and motivations shape the narrative? What emotions does that person experience during the scene?
- How might your chosen character's culture, background, or life experiences lead that person to notice details that Huck overlooks?
- Approach this assignment thoughtfully, recognizing the limitations of understanding a character's full experience—particularly a character written by an author who lived more than 100 years ago. Focus on what the text explicitly shows us about your chosen character's thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

Closing

In closing, ask students to reflect on the following questions:

- How does rewriting a scene from *Huckleberry Finn* deepen your understanding of democracy in literature?
- Do you think Twain is being democratic in his writing? Explain.
- Do you think Twain thought of his writing as democratic? Why or why not?
- How can we as readers fill in gaps or limitations in Huck's perspective while still appreciating Twain's literary techniques?

Realism Versus Romanticism

Student Worksheet

Use this graphic organizer to record your observations about 2 pieces of artwork in different styles of 1800s European art. *The Gleaners* by Jean-François Millet is representative of the realism style, while *The Abduction of Rebecca* by Eugène Delacroix is representative of the Romantic style.

Observe	<i>The Gleaners</i>	<i>The Abduction of Rebecca</i>
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Interesting details		