



SPHERE

Fostering Civil Discourse and Diverse Viewpoints for Every Classroom

Charting Democratic Truths in Fictional Waters

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Lesson Overview

The activities in this lesson will help students understand the role of situational irony in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In the Warm-Up they will identify prominent literary works in the mid-19th century that are relevant to the novel. Then students will uncover textual details that explore the use of situational irony. After reading the last chapters of the book, students will consider phrases (such as "by the book") through the lens of situational irony to better understand the message Twain is trying to send through *Huckleberry Finn*. Finally, students will engage in a synthesis essay that explores the major themes of the novel in conjunction with the principles of equality and liberty as intended by the Founding Fathers.



Note: Throughout this unit, the goal has been to analyze literature through multiple lenses—not to find 1 “right” interpretation, but to understand how diverse viewpoints enrich our discussions and understanding. In concluding the study of *Huckleberry Finn*, be transparent about acknowledging both the value of Twain’s writing and its limitations by inviting students to consider the value of multiple perspectives through conversation and dialogue.

This lesson is the 4th 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 Mark Twain’s use of language and character development to deepen your understanding of realism in literature.
- Understand Twain’s use of situational irony to illuminate key tensions and themes related to democracy, equality, and liberty.
- Synthesize your thoughts about the connection between Huck’s moral dilemmas and the right to liberty as intended by the Founding Fathers.
- Interpret and articulate important themes in *Huckleberry Finn* through the development of a thesis-driven essay that uses textual evidence as support.

Targeted Skills (AP Literature)

- **CHA 1.A** Identify and describe what specific textual details reveal about a character.
- **CHA 1.D** Describe how textual details reveal nuances and complexities in characters’ relationships with one another.
- **CH 1.E** Explain how a character’s own choices, actions, and speech reveal complexities in that character and explain the function of those complexities.
- **STR 3.B** Explain the function of a particular sequence of events in a plot.

- **STR 3.E** Explain the function of a significant event or related set of significant events in a plot.
- **LAN 7.A** Develop a paragraph that includes a claim that requires defense with evidence from the text.
- **LAN 7.B** Develop a thesis statement that conveys a defensible claim about an interpretation of literature and establishes a line of reasoning.

Materials

- Sphere Education's [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#)
- *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- Students' Read and Ruminare Journals (see opening mini-lesson for these guidelines)
- Venn diagram (in Warm-Up) – 1 per student
- Uncovering Situational Irony in *Huckleberry Finn* Student Worksheet – 1 per group

Warm-Up

STEP 1

Give half the students the book title *The Count of Monte Cristo* and give the other half the book title *The Man in the Iron Mask*. To make this more seamless, you might print each title on a different color of paper.

STEP 2

Post the following criteria on the board and tell students they need to find this information on the internet for their specific book.

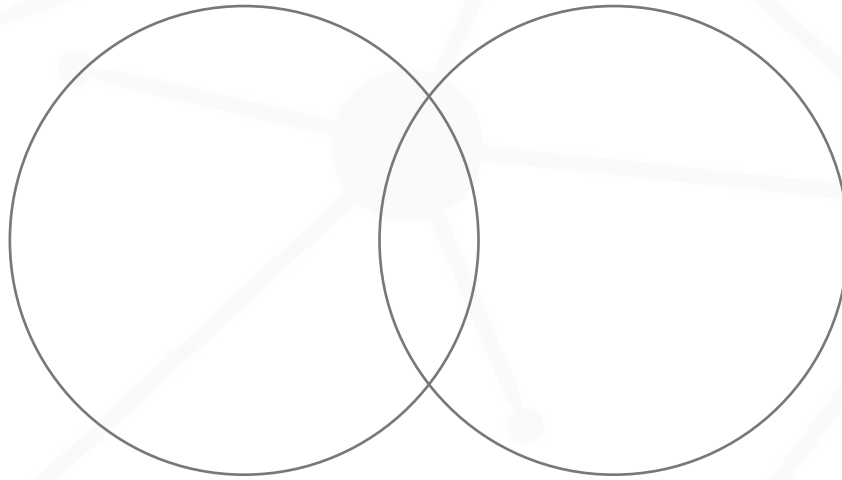
- Author
- Year originally published
- Major setting(s)
- Major characters
- Short plot description

STEP 3

Pair students up so that each partner has a different book title. Give them a Venn diagram like the diagram shown here, and ask them to compare and contrast the 2 books. What is similar and what is different?

The Count of Monte Cristo

The Man in the Iron Mask



STEP 4

As a whole class, discuss the similarities and differences between the books. The point of this Warm-Up is to prepare students to understand the schema of Tom Sawyer—particularly his desire to recreate the “swashbuckling tales” he reads (such as those written by Alexandre Dumas).

*Note: If students are struggling to get the idea that Dumas wrote dramatic adventure stories that mirror the romantic notions popular in the early 19th century, show them the movie trailers for *The Man in the Iron Mask*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, or *The Three Musketeers: Part I: D'Artagnan*.

Lesson Activities

BEFORE READING

Ask students why they think this book was called *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Why wasn't it called something else, like *Life on the Mississippi* or *Tales from the River*?

Now that students have a better understanding of the types of stories written by popular authors (in the 1840s) like Alexandre Dumas, ask students to consider what Twain was doing by putting the word “adventures” in the novel's title.

SAY

Twain chose to call this an “adventure” story, but Huck's adventures are quite different from the romantic European tales that were popular. Whose definition of “adventure” or “heroism” is Twain both using and challenging?

Revisit this quotation by William Dean Howells (Lesson 4.1), an American author in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

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.

ASK

- Do you think Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in hopes of helping the arts “become democratic”?

Tell students that democracy depends on each person having unalienable rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Of note is the idea of liberty.

ASK

- What does it mean to have liberty?

Take a few ideas from students and then project on the board (or ask students to independently read) the following thoughts from Allan Carey in the “Powers of Government Derived from the Rights of Individuals” section of the [Principles and Argument of the American Founding](#): “The Founders held liberty to be a more robust principle than we commonly think about it today. It included not only the basics of being able to keep oneself alive, like seeking out food and finding work but also other ideas linked to the pursuit of happiness. This latter idea led them to distinguish liberty, or the freedom to act in a way that promotes virtue, from license, or the freedom to do whatever one wants regardless of morality or religion.”

ASK

- What does it mean to you that liberty is the freedom to promote virtue?
- What might it have meant to a person who lived in Mark Twain's time?
- How does the meaning of liberty, as intended by the Founders, compare to your own definition of liberty? To the definition of someone who lived in 19th century America?

Facilitate a discussion with students about the definition of liberty.

UNDERSTANDING SITUATIONAL IRONY

Tell students that this final section of *Huckleberry Finn* will challenge us to think about the idea of liberty. In these chapters, Twain does not tell us what to think about liberty, nor does

he come right out and define it for us. But he does use the story itself—and particularly the literary device of situational irony—to illuminate this idea and help us think more deeply about it.

STEP 1

Define situational irony for students or watch this video called “[Situational Irony: The Opposite of What You Think](#)” from TED-Ed.

STEP 2

Ask students to discuss the following questions with a partner. Then facilitate a whole-group discussion.

- What makes a situation ironic?
- What is not a situation that is ironic?

STEP 3

On the board, create a chart with 2 columns. On 1 side, list the characteristics of situations that *aren't* ironic. On the other side, list the characteristics of situations that are ironic. Leave the list up on the board or have students take notes about the characteristics. Importantly, help students understand that irony depends on shared expectations about what's “normal” or “appropriate.” Our judgments about what's ironic are influenced by individual, societal, and cultural perspectives.

STEP 4

Divide students into small groups and give them a graphic organizer that looks like the following. Tell students that these are all situations that have occurred in the chapters we have read thus far. Have students fill in the 2 right-hand columns and remind them that they are to think about the reasonable expectations that someone in the 19th century would have for the situation.

Characters Involved	Situation	Reasonable Expectations for the Situation	Why This Situation Is Ironic
• Widow Douglas • Huck Finn	The Widow Douglas tries to “civilize” Huck		
• The Grangerfords • The Shepherdsons	Feuding families		

• The Duke • The King	Performing the balcony scene in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>		
• The Duke • The King • Huck Finn	Huck suspects the men are con artists.		

STEP 5

Circulate around the room and check students' thinking about (1) what someone might reasonably assume and (2) why they believe the situation in a question is ironic. Potential student responses are noted in, but not limited to, the following table:

Characters Involved	Situation	Reasonable Expectations for the Situation	Why This Situation Is Ironic
• Widow Douglas • Huck Finn	The Widow Douglas tries to "civilize" Huck	• She sends Huck to school. • She dresses Huck in nice clothes. • She teaches Huck manners.	The Widow Douglas tries to civilize Huck by teaching him about heaven and hell. The irony is that even though the Widow tries to civilize Huck by teaching him Christian morals, she still owns slaves, which seems to go against Christian morals.
• The Grangerfords • The Shepherdsons	Feuding families	• They argue and fight. • They actively stay away from each other. • Any time they are around each other they are angry and vengeful.	The irony is that the families sit together in church and after church they go and shoot each other.

• The Duke • The King	Performing the balcony scene in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>	• The Duke and King account for the fact that they are both men. • They are very familiar with Shakespeare and rehearse the play.	The irony is in the Duke and King not caring about the fact that they are supposed to be acting as actors. They act in a silly manner and don't care if they are true to Shakespeare's intentions or not.
• The Duke • The King • Huck Finn	Huck suspects the men are con artists.	• A person who suspects the men are con artists would be skeptical of everything they are doing. • A person would be very wary of any suggestions.	The irony is that Huck is taken in by the people whom he suspects to be con artists.

STEP 6

Debrief students' findings as a whole class. Then explain to students that this last section of *Huckleberry Finn* will use irony to get us to think more about the concept of liberty—particularly the idea of the Founders that “distinguish[es] liberty, or the freedom to act in a way that promotes virtue, from license, or the freedom to do whatever one wants regardless of morality or religion.”

PREDICT

Give students the following prompt and ask them to respond on a physical or digital document.

Prompt:

How do you think Twain will create an ironic situation that addresses the concept of liberty? Predict what will happen in the last chapters of the story. Write a brief summary of your thoughts.

When students have finished writing, ask them to share their predictions in a small group or with a partner.

DURING READING

If needed, revisit the idea of situational irony to ensure that students are able to identify it in the last chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*. Then tell students that they will be looking for

situational irony related to the idea of liberty as they read Chapters 31 through the end of the book.

ESTABLISH A PURPOSE

- Tell students that while they are reading they will complete 7–10 Read and Ruminare Journal entries for Chapters 31 to the end (Chapter the Last). See the opening lesson “Unpacking Language and Meaning in *Huckleberry Finn*” for guidelines regarding these entries.
- You may ask them to specifically note language that shows situational irony (such as Huck saying “All right, then, I’ll go to hell!” in Chapter 31).

READ ACTIVELY

- Have students read Chapters 31 to the end 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

Engage in a whole-group discussion about the last chapters of the book. Be sure to engage students in uncovering the details that portray the adventure books that Tom was reading (by Dumas and other writers). Ask students why Tom insisted on Jim escaping like 1 of his dramatic adventure books. What was Huck’s response to Tom’s insistence? Continue the discussion with the following questions:

ASK

- What were some examples of situational irony that you found as you read?
- In Chapter 31, why is it ironic that Huck says “All right, then, I’ll go to hell!” and tears up the note he was going to send to Miss Watson?
- What is ironic about Tom and Huck’s escape plan for Jim? What point is Twain making?
- What do we find out about Jim at the end of the book? How does this event affect your thoughts about the situational irony? What is Twain trying to convey through this?
- What does the phrase “by the book” mean to you? What is Twain doing when he makes fun of this phrase by having Tom insist that there is a “right way” for Jim to escape?

WRITE AN ESSAY

Give students the following essay prompts. Ask students to choose a prompt and write their complete essay on a physical or digital document, using evidence from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

*Note: This writing assignment will help you be able to assess how well students are able to synthesize their thoughts and practice both cognitive empathy and critical analysis of the reading.

Essay Prompt 1:

Analyze how Mark Twain's use of language in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* shapes the reader's understanding of the novel's key characters. In your response, consider how specific textual details show realism (or the "beauty" of American literature) and show the "expression of America in art." As you write, keep in mind William Dean Howells's statement: "Such beauty and such grandeur as we [American authors] 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."

Essay Prompt 2:

In the context of the final chapters of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, discuss how Twain employs situational irony to comment on the concept of liberty—particularly distinguishing between liberty as the "freedom to act in a way that promotes virtue" and liberty as "the freedom to do whatever one wants regardless of morality or religion." How does this irony challenge the reader's understanding of liberty and/or mirror the Founding Fathers' ideas of liberty as presented in the Declaration of Independence?

Essay Prompt 3:

Analyze how *Huckleberry Finn* both challenges and reinforces the social expectations of its time. Consider how Twain critiques some aspects of 1840s society while potentially overlooking others. How might readers from different backgrounds respond to Twain's social critique? What perspectives are present and which ones seem to be missing from his vision of American democracy?

Instructions

- Choose specific passages from the book that support your thoughts.
- Analyze the ways that the language and the fictional situations reveal deeper truths about democracy or liberty.
- Discuss how Twain uses character development (or lack thereof) to explore important ideas about democracy and liberty.

Considerations

- How do the situations and characters you chose reflect the historical difficulties of equally and universally applying the principles of the Declaration to everyone?
- How do Twain's language and use of irony challenge or confirm your understanding of equality and liberty as presented in the text?
- How do the conflicts in the story illuminate larger themes of authenticity versus

performance, the tension between romanticism and realism, and the need for art to be more democratic?

- How do multiple perspectives and ideas about “American beauty,” “democratic art,” and “liberty” enrich our understanding of these terms in differing times and places?

Closing

In closing, ask students to reflect on the following questions as a whole group or individually in an exit ticket.

- How does Twain's use of realism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contribute to the “expression of America in art” as written by William Dean Howells?
 - What moments in the text were particularly meaningful for you? Explain.
- Considering the themes of equality, liberty, and democracy coupled with Twain's use of language and situational irony, what message do you think Twain is ultimately conveying about American society in the 19th century?
 - How are these themes similar to or different from the issues raised in *The Scarlet Letter*?
 - How are these themes similar to or different from contemporary issues?

Uncovering Situational Irony in *Huckleberry Finn*

Student Worksheet

Complete the table by filling in what you know about the perspective of the characters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Use clear language to convey your thoughts and explain your ideas in complete sentences.

Characters Involved	Situation	Reasonable Expectations for the Situation	Why This Situation Is Ironic
- Widow Douglas - Huck Finn	The Widow Douglas tries to “sivilize” Huck		
- The Grangerfords - The Shepherdsons	Feuding families		
- The Duke - The King	Performing the balcony scene in <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>		
- The Duke - The King - Huck Finn	Huck suspects the men are con artists.		