### THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER

At the very start of 'The Adventures of Huck Finn', Huck asks Jim to tell him his fortune. Jim replies, "your future is drifting like the river". He's right. For the story of Huck Finn is not just one story, following a set route from the beginning to the end of the film; Huck's story weaves this way and that, as one adventure follows another.

But there is another reason why Jim links Huck's future with the river; in 'The Adventures of Huck Finn', the location, the Mississippi river plays a key role in the action. The river is like a character in its own right.

Discuss in groups the importance of the river to the film. Think of other films you have seen recently. Did it matter where they were set? Would the stories have worked just as well if they were located somewhere else? Would the story of 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' be the same in some other location?

The main reason for the river's significance is the simple fact that Huck and Jim follow the course of the river on their adventures. Consequently the course of the river becomes closely linked with the narrative, or plot, of the film. The river provides the film with a narrative structure.

Draw a line to represent the section of the Mississippi featured in the film.

Starting where the film begins, label Huck's adventures along the line. Try to make it clear whether a particular adventure happens on or along the banks of the river You may find it easier to work together as a group, recalling what happened to him before plotting each episode in chronological order on your line.

In the original novel by Mark Twain, the episodes you have plotted fell into neat self-contained chapters. Yet despite the flow of the action in the film, it is still easy to spot the beginning and end of each adventure.

Look back at your river chart and select two episodes in Huck's journey. Can you remember how each one was triggered? Did either Huck or Jim leave the raft?

Did someone else come on board? Was the adventure caused by a change in the weather? What prompted the action?

Next, try to recall how each of these adventures ended, or moved on. Did Huck initiate the change? Or Jim? Were they rescued by someone? Again, did the weather play a part?

Quite often the story moves on because of a coincidence. One adventure ends and a new one begins because Huck and Jim just happen to bump into someone else, who just happens to cross their path at a particular time (and often in the nick of time!).

The Mississippi is more than a setting for these adventures; it is also a symbol. For Huck, it is a symbol of escape from his dreary life with Widow Douglas, and for Jim it represents .freedom.

#### AN AMERICAN CLASSIC

The film, 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' is based on the classic American novel, 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', published over a hundred years ago. The author, Mark Twain, set the book about life on the Mississippi fifty years before - so the film is set in a world one hundred and fifty years ago.

To recreate life on the Mississippi in the 1830's, the film makers went to a great deal of trouble researching the period. They found, for instance, that glass was rare and highly prized -so characters in the film tend not to drink from bottles, but from kegs or earthenware jugs. Watches, too, were rare - so very few characters in the film carry watches.



Try to list as many things as possible shown in the film that are 'period' the list might include examples of clothing, language - even attitudes.

Why do you suppose the film makers have chosen to make a film with a historical setting - a 'period drama'? Do you think they couldn't find a modern story worth filming? Or did the film makers believe 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' was still relevant to modern audiences?

Were they right? How did you and the rest of your class react to the film? Did the historical setting get in the way of the story? Or did it add to it? Or didn't it matter?

Think of other films you have seen recently. How many were set in the present? How many in the past? How many in the future? Do you think it is fair to say that what is modern is more 'relevant', and what is set in the past is 'irrelevant'?



Discuss in groups what 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' has to say to a modern audience. Is it relevant because of the themes? Or is it relevant because, like anv good film. it is full of emotion, of humour, suspense and so on?

## A SPIT-LICKING GOOD TIME

A 'spit-licking good time' is what Huck says is in store for the audience at the start of the film; setting up the snow-balling adventures which are to follow. But 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' is more than just an adventure story. The film raises all sorts of ideas that go far beyond the setting of the Mississippi and what happens to Huck.



What do you think are the main themes in the film? Is it about escape? If so, escape from what? And to what? Or is the film about discovery?

As Huck journeys down the river, he makes another journey inside himself. Huck learns to reject some of the things he assumed were true, and learns all sorts of new things about himself.

Go back to the plan of the river you made earlier In groups try to plot on the plan the way that Huck develops as a character from the small-minded boy at the start of the film to the more noble Huck that he has grown into at the end. What events help shape Huck's development?

# **SLAVERY**

More than anything, it is the presence of Jim, the runaway slave, that shapes Huck's character in the film. Jim provides Huck with friendship but also guidance. He teaches Huck to open his eyes.

And yet it is Jim's character which firmly locks the film in a historical setting. The presence of the slaves means that the story could only take place in the early 19th century. With slavery long since abolished, Jim's story could not feature in a modern story.

The Slave Trade, like any 'trade', consisted of shipping goods from one place to another and selling them at a market. What made the slave trade unique was that the 'goods' were human beings; men and women taken from their homes in Africa, shipped to the Americas on long

ocean crossings in dreadful, cramped conditions, and sold mostly in the southern states of America to the owners of cotton plantations who needed the labour. They withheld the slaves' basic freedom and rights, and even claimed 'ownership' of any children born to the slaves in their control. Eventually slavery was abolished, but not just because keeping slaves was immoral and cruel; slavery was uneconomic, and only when it wasn't worth keeping slaves did moral arguments against slavery start to creep in and people take note.



What does 'The Adventures of Huck Finn' have to say about the issue of slavery? Think about the film's main characters, and fill in their attitudes in the following chart.

CHARACTER ATTITUDE TO SLAVERY HOW THEY SHOW IT YOUR REACTION TO THIS

JIM

HUCK (at start of film)

HUCK (at end of film)

WIDOW DOUGLAS

THE KING/THE DUKE

COLONEL GRANGER FORD

SIRUS (the foreman at the Grangerfords)

Did you always react negatively to any character who supported slavery? Or did the film suggest that we can still have sympathy for characters whose views might be misguided? What about those characters who 'don't know any better'. Does this make their attitudes more acceptable?

#### CREATING SUSPENSE

Adapting a novel for cinema needs film makers to think in visual images.

In 'The Adventures of Huck Finn', some of the most memorable moments are those where there is a mood of suspense: a drunk Pap chasing Huck around his log cabin threatening to kill him; Huck at the point of handing over Jim to the authorities; Huck hiding in the closet from The Duke and The King; Jim carrying the wounded Huck trying to reach the paddle steamer before it leaves port, and so on.

One of the most successful moments of suspense happens early on in the film, when Jim creeps up on Huck in the middle of the wood. From whose point(s) of view do we watch the action? Can you remember the way the camera moves to achieve this affect? How important is it in creating the feeling of suspense that we don't know it is Jim creeping up on Huck?

This is how Mark Twain describes the episode:

"1 see the moon go off watch and the darkness begin to blanket the river But in a little while I see a pale streak over the free-tops, and knowed the day was coming So I took my gun and slipped off towards where I had run across that camp fire, stopping every minute or two to listen. But I hadn't no luck, somehow; I couldn't seem to find the place. But by-and-by, sure enough, I catched a glimpse of fire, away through the frees. I went for it, cautious and slow. By-and-by I was close enough to have a look, and there laid a man on the ground. It most give me the fan-tods\*. He hud a blanket around his head, and his head was nearly in the fire. I set there behind a clump of bushes, in about six foot of him, and kept my eyes on him steady. It was getting gray daylight, now. Pretty soon he gapped, and sfretched himself, and hove off the blanket, and it was Miss Watson's Jim! I bet I was glad to see him. I says:

"Hello Jim!" and skipped out." \*(hallucinations bought on by fear and quaking)

What are the differences between the original text and the film version? Is the original version intended to create a feeling of suspense? Why do you think the film makers introduced changes? What is lost or gained in the film version?

Have a go at story-boarding the original version. Decide before you start what mood you want to achieve - will this be a suspense sequence? Or will you aim for slapstick? Or horror? The choice is yours. Once you have agreed on the overall feel of the scene, take it step by step, working out from whose point of view you will show the action, and how quickly you will give your audience each bit of information.

The original classic novel is available from Puffin Books.

# FILM EDUCATION

Film Education is a film industry sponsored body. Its aims are to promote the use of film in the school curriculum and to further the use of cinemas by schools. To this end it publishes a variety of free teaching materials, organises visits, lectures and seminars.

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