

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.

Task

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.

Task

'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.

Task

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'?

Task

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 any 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.

Task

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.

Task

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
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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)*

Task

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.

Written by Louise Chater. Produced by Film Education for Buena Vista International (UK) Ltd.

Designed by Cathy Johnson.

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