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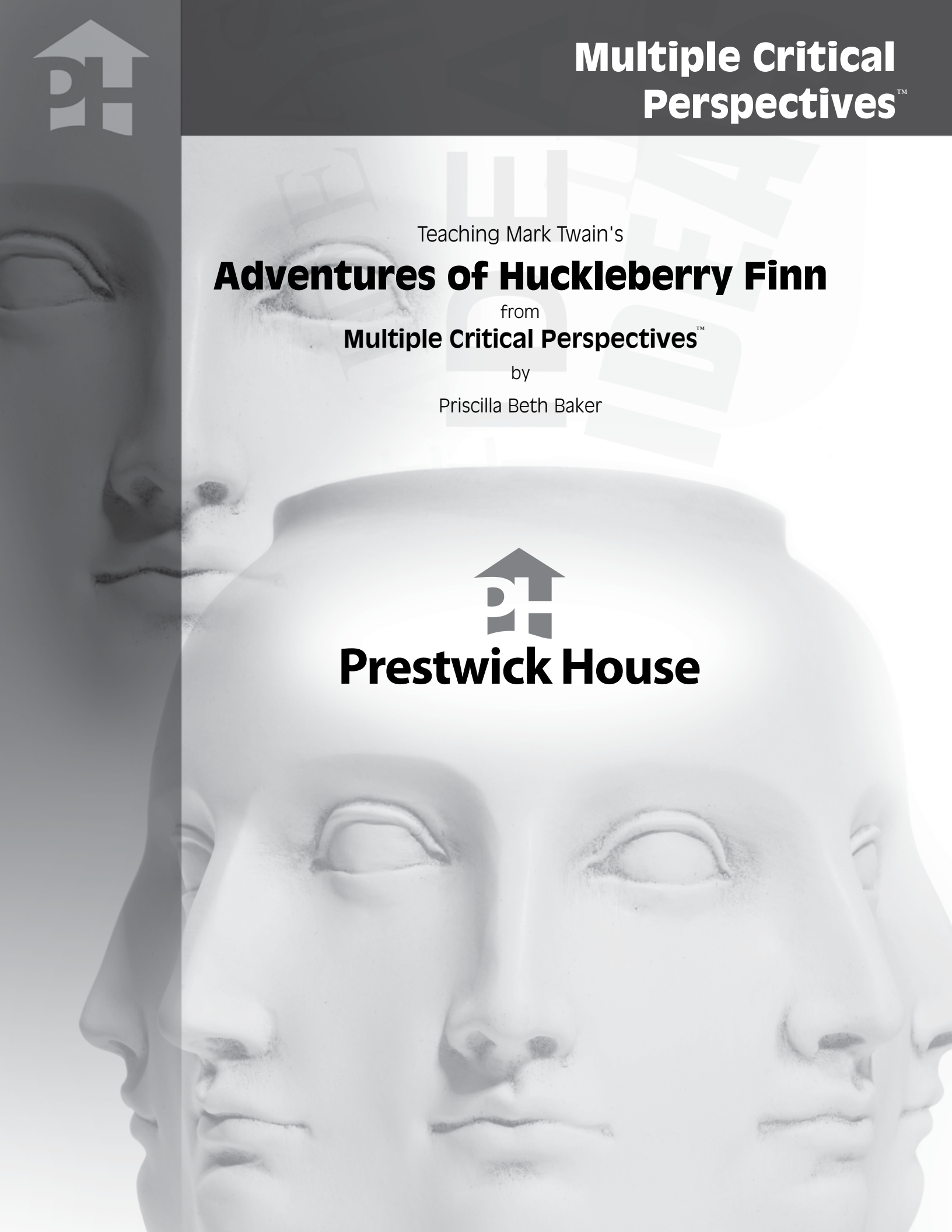

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Mark Twain's

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

THE PEN NAME ADOPTED BY Samuel Langhorne Clemens "Mark Twain," has become synonymous with modern American literature. The pseudonym makes reference to "two fathoms," a common measure of the river's depth called out to a riverboat pilot. Twain grew up working on boats along the Mississippi River, where he encountered people who would inspire many of the characters in *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is something of a *picaresque* in that the plot centers on a journey resulting in a series of loosely connected events. Thematically and stylistically, Twain emphasizes realism over romanticism, a preference most clearly reflected in the distinctions he makes between Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. Huck is the uneducated pragmatist, and Tom the romantic book scholar. Despite Tom's obvious "style," it is clear that Twain admires Huck's shrewd and perceptive common sense while he ridicules Tom's fussiness. Twain obviously admires Huck's compassion for his fellow man—a quality Tom Sawyer certainly lacks.

In addition to his apparent affection for and admiration of Huck, Twain uses the character to give a voice to his own opinions, especially expressing his overall contempt for organized society. In Twain's view, the individual is far superior to the collective group, and only the individual, acting apart from the crowd, can effect positive change. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn is that individual. He asserts that he would willingly "go to hell" if it meant that he could save his friend, the slave, Jim. Thus, Twain illustrates the irony in the society he delights in criticizing. Huck's sentiments run counter to the accepted values of the day—even those sanctioned by the organized Church—his recognition of Jim as a fellow human being reveals that he embraces the fundamental tenets of Christianity with far more depth, compassion, and understanding than any other character. Twain derides those who claim to be Christians yet own slaves, their "baptized property," bought for "forty dirty dollars," and those who proudly flaunt their coffee table Bibles while feuding to the death over a cause that no one even remembers.

In Huck, Twain has created an imaginative, resourceful—and most importantly—a truthful narrator. Because Huck is literal-minded, the story unfolds exactly as Huck sees it. Even though Huck does not necessarily understand everything he is seeing and commenting on, the reader does. Huck's innocence contrasts sharply with the jaded, manipulative characters he meets on his journey. Huck is literally reborn when he stages his own death at the beginning of the novel to escape Pap; he is then figuratively reborn at the end of the novel when he emerges as an enlightened and discerning adult.

The Mythological/Archetypal Approach Applied to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a-life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Huck's Journey as a Quest

1. Copy and distribute the following handouts: *Notes on the Archetypal/Mythological Approach*, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Archetypal Activity One Information Sheet*, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Archetypal Activity One Graphic Organizer,* and *Huck Finn Archetypal Activity One: Charting Huck's Quest*.

2. Have students, either individually or in pairs, consider Huck's journey as an Archetypal Quest and complete the graphic organizer and chart to indicate which events and characters correspond to the elements of the hero's quest. Remind them that some of the stages may be represented metaphorically rather than literally.

3. Reconvene the class.

4. In full-class discussion, consider the following:

   - What are the motivations for Huck's journey? How does "destiny" play a role?

   - Do Huck's motivations change? If so, how and why?

   - Discuss the preparations Huck makes for his journey.

     - Financially:
     - Circumstantially:
     - Emotionally:

   - Whom does he meet who helps him with these preparations?

   - What social and emotional skills must he acquire to be successful?

   - Discuss the personal and geographic obstacles Huck encounters throughout his journey. What other sorts of obstacles does he encounter? How would these obstacles tie to a major theme or themes in the novel?

   - At what moment or moments in the novel is the reader sure Huck's quest will be a success? In what ways, if any, can it be considered unsuccessful?

Formalism Applied to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called "New Critics," and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Analyzing Plot Structure

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn *Formalist Activity 1: Key Terms for Analyzing Plot*, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn *Formalist Activity1: Plot Analysis Worksheet*, and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn *Formalist Activity 1: Plot Analysis Graphic.*

2. Review the information covered in the *Key Terms* handout.

3. Divide the class into pairs or small groups and instruct them to complete the *Plot Analysis Worksheet.* Remind them that they will not necessarily be noting plot events in the order in which they occur because there is likely to be more than one complication and reversal as the action rises to the climax.

4. When pairs or groups have agreed on their notes on the Worksheet, have them complete the *Plot Analysis Graphic*. Now they *are* to note the plot events in the order in which they occur, and they should begin to see how each complication or reversal intensifies the plot and builds toward the conflict.

5. As pairs or groups complete Step 4, have them consider the following questions and prepare to discuss them:

   • What is the primary *inciting incident* in the novel?

   How does this event initiate or propel the main plot line?

   • What is the primary *conflict* in the novel?

   How and when is the *conflict* introduced?

   How is this *conflict* related to the inciting incident? How is the *climax* the inevitable highest point of this *conflict*?

   • What sorts of *complications* and *obstacles* does Huck face?

   Which ones are the most central to the resolution of the main *conflict*?

   How does each *complication* contribute to the "rise" of the action?

Marxist Theory Applied to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

1. In a well-written essay, analyze Twain's use of superstition as a unifying motif in the novel and trace the resulting shifts in tone.

2. Compare and contrast Huck and Tom in terms of character traits and the theme of realism versus romanticism.

Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories "owned" the culture. This idea is called "dialectical materialism," and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of

9. Is the work consistent in its ideologies, or is there an inner conflict?

10. Do other types of criticism—feminist, psychoanalytic, or others—overlap the Marxism?

11. After reading this text, do you notice any system of oppression that you have accepted? If so, what system, and how do you think you came to accept it?

Activity One

Analyzing Characters as Representative of the Oppressed

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *Notes on the Marxist Approach* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: Marxist Activity One Graphic Organizer.

2. Divide the class into six small groups or a number of groups divisible by six.

3. Assign to each group one of the following characters/pairs/groups from the novel:

   - Huck
   - Tom
   - Jim
   - The Duke & the Dauphin
   - The Grangerfords
   - The Wilks family

4. Instruct students to record their findings on the Graphic Organizer provided. Among the issues, each group should consider the following:

   - Physical description
   - Role in the novel
   - Societal group and relevance to the novel
   - Hopes and aspirations and relevance to the novel

5. Reconvene the class and allow each group to share its findings with the class.

6. As a final point of discussion, ask students to consider the following: