

Lesson Seven

Objectives:

- Students will use the Mark Twain's Mississippi web site.
- Students will consider the historical context for Mark Twain's attitude toward the post-Civil War American South.
- Students will read and analyze selections from Mark Twain's portrayal of various features of the American South—e.g., slavery, racism, violence, mythology.
- Students will discuss their understanding of Twain's writings in groups and report their findings and areas of discussion to the whole class.
- Students will compare and contrast Twain's critical and satirical portrayal of Southern culture with the humorous and positive depiction by Uncle Remus (Joel Chandler Harris).
- To demonstrate their ability to connect their literary analysis to historical context, students will write a brief, focused essay on the topic.

Notes on the Lesson:

This lesson will be most effective with curricular preparation on the history of Reconstruction and the post-Civil War South. Also, the lesson is intended for history classes that have access to computers during class time so students can do research for the assignment. If necessary, teachers may be able to print out and copy the selected materials. Twain and Harris were both Southerners; however, teachers may wish to draw attention to Twain's upbringing in the border and western area of Missouri and Harris's in the "older South" of central Georgia.

Materials Needed:

Teachers will project the following video clip from the Mark Twain's Mississippi archive—[Myth and Reality in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](#) with Prof. Shelley Fisher Fishkin

Teachers desiring a brief overview of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, can consult the article at Wikipedia—http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adventures_of_Huckleberry_Finn.

Students will read selected chapters from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at the Mark Twain's Mississippi archive—<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=huckfinn.html>

Students will read a selected chapter from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* at the Mark Twain's Mississippi archive—<http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=mississippi.html>

Students will access and read selections from *Uncle Remus* by Joel Chandler Harris at Project Gutenberg—<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext00/remus11.txt>.

Teachers may wish to access the following article for background on the *Uncle Remus* stories and the author Joel Chandler Harris—http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncle_Remus.

Time Required:

The lesson will require two 50-minute periods for the introductory activity, reading of Twain selections, and for the group discussion. In addition, one night of homework will be required for students to read the selected materials from *Uncle Remus* by Joel Chandler Harris. If teachers wish to extend the lesson, they may add an additional period or night of homework to complete an essay on the topic.

Introduction:

The writings of Mark Twain represent some of the finest satirical and critical works in American fiction. In this lesson, students will examine Twain's writings, such as *Huck Finn* and *Life on the Mississippi*, for his portrayal of southern life both before and after the Civil War. Teachers will provide students with some background on the economic, social, and political developments in the Reconstruction South that Twain found problematic. For contrast, students will also consider the stories and purpose of Uncle Remus as a positive and humorous contrast to Twain's negative depiction of the South in his writings. Ultimately, students will be asked to establish a connection between the literature and the historical context in which it was written.

Assignment:

1. To begin the lesson, teachers may wish to refresh students' recollection of the economic, social, and political situation in the American South following the Civil War, ca. 1865-1900. Teachers should show the video clip from Shelley Fisher Fishkin above (approx. 4 minutes) to: A) provide some context for Mark Twain's attitudes toward the South, and B) introduce his satirical purposes in *Huck Finn* and other writings. As students watch the video clip, ask them to identify 3-4 attitudes that Twain held toward the American South. When the clip is finished, the teacher should survey student responses, taking no more than 10-15 minutes for this introductory activity.
2. At this point, teachers may wish to provide a brief overview of the plot of *Huck Finn* as background for the selected chapters students will be reading.
3. Tell students that they will be divided into three groups, two of whom will be reading a selection from Twain's *Huck Finn*, the other a selection from Twain's semi-autobiographical *Life on the Mississippi*, recounting his life as a steamboat pilot on the river. The three groups can either be selected randomly, heterogeneously based on ability level, or by student choice. Either ask or appoint one or two students in each group to act as recorder for the group's discussion.
4. Ask students to read their assigned selection: 1) Chapter XLV. Southern Sports from *Life on the Mississippi*, 2) Chapter XVI. Expectation. A White Lie. Floating Currency. Running by Cairo. Swimming Ashore from *Huck Finn*, and 3) Chapter XVIII. Col. Grangerford. Aristocracy. Feuds. The Testament. Recovering the Raft. The Wood-pile. Pork and Cabbage from *Huck Finn*. As students read, have them briefly answer the questions on the reading guides, which they may later use for participation in the group discussion.

5. For homework, students should read the Preface and the selected portion of the Introduction to Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus*, the portions of which are rendered below. Teachers may either copy this selection or refer students to the Project Gutenberg site listed above. Also students should read from the Gutenberg site one of each of the following of their choosing (they are brief): *Legends of the Old Plantation*, *Plantation Proverbs*, *His Songs*, *His Sayings*. To conclude the first class session, teachers may wish to provide brief background on the character of Uncle Remus and the author Joel Chandler Harris. Provide handouts to students of the reading guide and ask them to fill it out as they read the selections.

6. To begin class the following day, have students organize their groups by forming three circles, so that they can easily interact. Also, students should have their completed reading guides and any other notes in front of them to assist with the discussion. Each group should have a designated "reporter" or two who will facilitate and take notes on the main areas of discussion, any differences in interpretation, and any conclusions reached. Reporters can simply use the reading guides to structure the discussion. As the discussion proceeds, the teacher should filter around the room, encouraging students to: A) analyze the assigned readings, B) use specific examples to support their points, and C) make references to specific historical events to provide context. **Note: Each group will be discussing a different selection from *Huck Finn* or *Life on the Mississippi*, but all three groups will be using material from *Uncle Remus*.**

7. When the discussions are completed (about 30 minutes), teachers should call on each of the reporters to provide a 3-4 minute synopsis of the discussion points for each group. Teachers can help focus the lesson with the following questions and/or points:

- Compare and contrast the portrayals of the American South by Twain and Joel Chandler Harris. Why do you think they might have differed in some areas?
- What features of the South did each tend to emphasize?
- How did they see (if implicitly or at all) the Civil War as affecting the South in the period 1865-1900?
- What historical developments and events in the period 1865-1900 might help place the writings of both men in context?
- How did they address and handle the issues of race and ethnicity?
- What controversies have surrounded the Uncle Remus stories and *Huck Finn*? **Note: Teachers may wish to address the use of the term "nigger" in both Twain's and Harris's books. How does each author intend use of the epithet? Is it ever appropriate to use the term? Should schools avoid books that employ the term?**
- Evaluate the importance and influence of literature in shaping people's attitudes toward a particular subject, such as a geographic region, race, etc.

8. Either for homework or as a timed exercise in class, teachers may wish to assign students to complete the following prompt: *Analyze the condition and status of the American South in the period, 1865-1900. In your response, refer to significant historical developments as well as the writings of Mark Twain and Joel Chandler Harris.*

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Selections from Uncle Remus

PREFACE AND DEDICATION TO THE NEW EDITION

To Arthur Barquette Frost*:

DEAR FROST:

I am expected to supply a preface for this new edition of my first book—to advance from behind the curtain, as it were, and make a fresh bow to the public that has dealt with Uncle Remus in so gentle and generous a fashion. For this event the lights are to be rekindled, and I am expected to respond in some formal way to an encore that marks the fifteenth anniversary of the book. There have been other editions—how many I do not remember—but this is to be an entirely new one, except as to the matter: new type, new pictures, and new binding.

But, as frequently happens on such occasions, I am at a loss for a word. I seem to see before me the smiling faces of thousands of children—some young and fresh, and some wearing the friendly marks of age, but all children at heart—and not an unfriendly face among them. And out of the confusion, and while I am trying hard to speak the right word, I seem to hear a voice lifted above the rest, saying "You have made some of us happy." And so I feel my heart fluttering and my lips trembling, and I have to bow silently and slip away, and hurry back into the obscurity that fits me best.

Phantoms! Children of dreams! True, my dear Frost; but if you could see the thousands of letters that have come to me from far and near, and all fresh from the hearts and hands of children, and from men and women who have not forgotten how to be children, you would not wonder at the dream. And such a dream can do no harm. Insubstantial though it may be, I would not at this hour exchange it for all the fame won by my mightier brethren of the pen--whom I most humbly salute.

Measured by the material developments that have compressed years of experience into the space of a day, thus increasing the possibilities of life, if not its beauty, fifteen years constitute the old age of a book. Such a survival might almost be said to be due to a tiny sluice of green sap under the gray bark. Where it lies in the matter of this book, or what its source if, indeed, it be really there--is more of a mystery to my middle age than it was to my prime.

But it would be no mystery at all if this new edition were to be more popular than the old one. Do you know why? Because you have taken it under your hand and made it yours. Because you have breathed the breath of life into these amiable brethren of wood and field. Because, by a stroke here and a touch there, you have conveyed into their quaint antics the illumination of your own inimitable humor, which is as true to our sun and soil as it is to the spirit and essence of the matter set forth.

The book was mine, but now you have made it yours, both sap and pith. Take it, therefore, my dear Frost, and believe me, faithfully yours,

Joel Chandler Harris

* Arthur Barbette Frost produced an illustrated edition of the Uncle Remus stories and also illustrated the first edition of Twain's *Huck Finn*.

INTRODUCTION

I am advised by my publishers that this book is to be included in their catalogue of humorous publications, and this friendly warning gives me an opportunity to say that however humorous it may be in effect, its intention is perfectly serious; and, even if it were otherwise, it seems to me that a volume written wholly in dialect must have its solemn, not to say melancholy, features. With respect to the Folk-Lore scenes, my purpose has been to preserve the legends themselves in their original simplicity, and to wed them permanently to the quaint dialect—if, indeed, it can be called a dialect—through the medium of which they have become a part of the domestic history of every Southern family; and I have endeavored to give to the whole a genuine flavor of the old plantation.

Each legend has its variants, but in every instance I have retained that particular version which seemed to me to be the most characteristic, and have given it without embellishment and without exaggeration.

The dialect, it will be observed, is wholly different from that of the Hon. Pompey Smash and his literary descendants, and different also from the intolerable misrepresentations of the minstrel stage, but it is at least phonetically genuine. Nevertheless, if the language of Uncle Remus fails to give vivid hints of the really poetic imagination of the negro; if it fails to embody the quaint and homely humor which was his most prominent characteristic; if it does not suggest a certain picturesque sensitiveness—a curious exaltation of mind and temperament not to be defined by words—then I have reproduced the form of the dialect merely, and not the essence, and my attempt may be accounted a failure. At any rate, I trust I have been successful in presenting what must be, at least to a large portion of American readers, a new and by no means unattractive phase of negro character—a phase which may be considered a curiously sympathetic supplement to Mrs. Stowe's wonderful defense of slavery as it existed in the South. Mrs. Stowe, let me hasten to say, attacked the possibilities of slavery with all the eloquence of genius; but the same genius painted the portrait of the Southern slave-owner, and defended him.

A number of the plantation legends originally appeared in the columns of a daily newspaper—The Atlanta Constitution and in that shape they attracted the attention of various gentlemen who were kind enough to suggest that they would prove to be valuable contributions to myth-literature. It is but fair to say that ethnological considerations formed no part of the undertaking which has resulted in the publication of this volume. Professor J. W. Powell, of the Smithsonian Institution, who is engaged in an investigation of the mythology of the North American Indians, informs me that some of Uncle Remus's stories appear in a number of different languages, and in various modified forms, among the Indians; and he is of the opinion that they are borrowed by the negroes from the red-men. But this, to say the least, is extremely doubtful, since another investigator (Mr. Herbert H. Smith, author of *Brazil and the Amazons*) has met with some of these stories among tribes of South American Indians, and one in

particular he has traced to India, and as far east as Siam. Mr. Smith has been kind enough to send me the proof-sheets of his chapter on The Myths and Folk-Lore of the Amazonian Indians, in which he reproduces some of the stories which he gathered while exploring the Amazons...

...The difference between the dialect of the legends and that of the character—sketches, slight as it is, marks the modifications which the speech of the negro has undergone even where education has played in deed, save in the no part reforming it. Indeed, save in the remote country districts, the dialect of the legends has nearly disappeared. I am perfectly well aware that the character sketches are without permanent interest, but they are embodied here for the purpose of presenting a phase of negro character wholly distinct from that which I have endeavored to preserve in the legends. Only in this shape, and with all the local allusions, would it be possible to adequately represent the shrewd observations, the curious retorts, the homely thrusts, the quaint comments, and the humorous philosophy of the race of which Uncle Remus is the type.

If the reader not familiar with plantation life will imagine that the myth—stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes—who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery—and who has all the prejudices of caste and pride of family that were the natural results of the system; if the reader can imagine all this, he will find little difficulty in appreciating and sympathizing with the air of affectionate superiority which Uncle Remus assumes as he proceeds to unfold the mysteries of plantation lore to a little child who is the product of that practical reconstruction which has been going on to some extent since the war in spite of the politicians. Uncle Remus describes that reconstruction in his Story of the War, and I may as well add here for the benefit of the curious that that story is almost literally true.

J. C. H.

Lesson Seven: Literary Portrayals of the Reconstruction South
Reading Guide for Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, Chapter XLV

1. How does Twain compare and contrast the attitudes of Northerners and Southerners toward war? What does he suggest is the cause for Southerners' attitudes toward war?
2. What is the argument over moonlight supposed to demonstrate?
3. How does Twain portray the cockfight that he witnesses? How does he himself react to the scene?
4. What does Twain say about the Southern attitude toward women? To what does he attribute this?
5. Twain concludes this chapter with a description of a mule race, which he tends to view more positively. How does this description qualify, if at all, his previous points in this chapter?
6. What themes run through Twain's depiction of the various features of Southern life that he witnessed? What problems does he see with Southern society?

Lesson Seven: Literary Portrayals of the Reconstruction South
Reading Guide for Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter XVI

1. Why is Jim so excited to see what he believes is Cairo?
2. The book is narrated by Huck Finn. Why do you think Twain decided to present the story in the first-person with a boy as the narrator?
3. What internal conflict does Huck experience as he ponders his helping a runaway slave escape? How does Huck interpret and assess his actions?
4. Several men approach the raft and ask about its passengers. How does Huck handle the situation? Why do the men offer Huck \$20 to move on without landing? Why do you think Twain included this incident and what is he trying to suggest about the South?
5. How does the slave Jim view his situation and the lot of "negroes" in general?
6. What happens to Huck and Jim's raft at the end of the chapter? What does the manner of the raft's destruction say about life along the southern Mississippi?

Lesson Seven: Literary Portrayals of the Reconstruction South
Reading Guide for Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Chapter XVIII

1. How does Huck describe Colonel Grangerford and his family? What values of the South do they seem to represent?
2. What precipitates the confrontation between the Grangerfords and Harney Shepherdson?
3. According to Buck Grangerford, what is a feud? How does Twain satirize his attitude?
4. What happens as the families arrive at church the next Sunday? What point is Twain trying to make here?
5. What happens between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons by the end of the chapter? What particular features of Southern society does Twain criticize in this story?
6. What attitudes do the whites in the story display toward black slaves?

Lesson Seven: Literary Portrayals of the Reconstruction South
Reading Guide for Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus*

1. Who is the intended audience for Harris's folk tales? What does the author identify as the purpose of his book?
2. What is problematic about Harris's reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? What racial attitudes are suggested by the Preface and Introduction to *Uncle Remus*? What features of southern life does Harris try to bring to the reader's attention?
3. Read one of the Legends of the Old Plantation stories. Whom do you think the characters are supposed to represent? What if any "lessons" are suggested by the story?
4. Read several of the Plantation Proverbs, 1-2 of His Songs, and several of His Sayings. What themes run through each of these formats about slave life in the South?
5. What is your reaction to the dialect that Harris gives to Uncle Remus? What do the stories, songs, and proverbs suggest about how blacks responded to their condition of slavery?
6. Overall, how do the Uncle Remus stories portray the South prior to the Civil War? What if any features of life seem to have been omitted?