The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Ernest Hemingway declared that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn."

T. S. Eliot called it a "masterpiece."

Now an accepted part of the American literary canon, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is required reading in over 70 percent of American high schools and is among the most taught works of American literature.

Although state NAACP organizations have supported various protests against the book, the NAACP national headquarters' current position paper states:

You don't ban Mark Twain—you explain Mark Twain! To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse the idea. Mark Twain's satirical novel, Huckleberry Finn, accurately portrays a time in history—the nineteenth century—and one of its evils, slavery.

Mythological Analysis

Despite the connotation of its name, the mythological approach to analyzing literature is a 20th century development.

It helps us understand how stories contain structures and symbols very much a part of all cultures.

These structures and symbols are embedded in all literature, no matter its date of composition.

**Innocence**

The world and we are one.

No division or separation from others.

Suffering is minimal and short-lived.

Death is a foreign concept.

For the most part, life is happy and peaceful.

**Initiation**

Three events can cause a fall from innocence:

- **death** (tells us that no one, even ourselves, is immune)
- **awareness of evil** (violates our belief in fairness and justice in the world...if bad can go unpunished, our moral compass has failed us)
- **sexual awakening** (creates intense desire that can be frustrating, granted and then taken, or rejected...all damage our abilities to trust others or ourselves)

**Chaos**

Where all art is created.

The struggle of our existence to reconcile the information revealed to us through our initiation experience.

For many, the desire is to move backwards into innocence, but a true hero is not defeated by this knowledge.

A true hero transforms the knowledge into wisdom.

He reconciles good vs. evil and is strengthened by it.

**Resolution**

It is important to remember that the hero moves forward with open eyes.

He has integrated knowledge into a fuller, richer, truer vision of the world.

He goes on, not IN SPITE OF, his knowledge, but BECAUSE of it.

- It is intriguing to note that many heroes in modern and postmodern eras fail to achieve resolution in the final stage—Huck Finn, Jay Gatsby, Willy Loman, Holden Caulfield.
- By contrast, heroes and heroines in ethnic/women's literature find a way through darkness to peace, usually finding aid in community: Toni Morrison, Zora Neale Hurston, Anne Tyler, Alice Walker.
The Details of the Journey...

INNOCENCE
Ordinary Life/Known World
Call to Adventure

INITIATION
Threshold/Crossing into the Unknown
(Departure, Meeting Allies, Gift, Mentor)

CHAOS
The Abyss
Confronting Challenges
Final Ordeal

RESOLUTION
Atonement
Return

Types of Archetypal Journeys

- The quest for identity
- The epic journey to find the promised land/to found the good city
- The quest for vengeance
- The warrior’s journey to save his people
- The search for love (to rescue the princess/damsel in distress)
- The journey in search of knowledge
- The tragic quest: penance or self-denial
- The fool’s errand
- The quest to rid the land of danger
- The grail quest (the quest for human perfection)

Archetypal Mythological Heroes

The Innocent
Possesses an innate understanding but has little basis in wisdom or knowledge.
The innocent understands intuitively.

Examples:
- Walt Disney’s Goofy
- Jack from Jack and the Beanstalk

The Trickster
Teaches through deception, tomfoolery and playfulness. Often seen as irreverent and disrespectful.
The trickster often challenges the status quo through subversive tactics—thus, a favorite in teen films

Examples:
- Pretty in Pink
- The Breakfast Club
- Shakespeare’s fools
- Odysseus’s deception of Polyphemus

The Warrior
Does not subvert the system (like the trickster) instead faces it head-on.
Acknowledges rules, matches strength against established boundaries.
Demonstrates it is possible to be good, wise, pure, decent, and still win.

Examples:
- Odysseus
- Achilles
- Arthur and Lancelot
- Hamlet
- McMurphy from One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest

The Teacher/Prophet
Turns adventures to instruct initiates.
Integrated into society—the matured hero who becomes other-directed, using wisdom to guide others.
Going beyond example-setting, to instruct others.

Examples:
- Star Wars: Obi Wan Kenobe or Yoda
- Mr. Yimagi from The Karate Kid
Archetypal Mythological Heroes

**WISE FOOL/SAINT**

At the other end of the spectrum, the saint returns to a child-like innocence, learning that a lifetime of experience compels an innocent wonder of the world.

The wise fool/saint usually takes himself out of the complexity of the world to lead a simple, austere life.

**Example:**

Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, based on the life of Gautama Buddha.

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**ARCHETYPAL HEROES**

The point of each of these distinct heroes is to guide us to a truth that eludes us, to make us aware of the entrapment of our existence, that, for all its realistic appearance, is not reality.

These archetypes appeal to our need to recapture a sense of paradise...