The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Read The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain, and complete a typed report using the format explained below:

A Note on Twain’s Language:
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is probably the most important American novel ever published. The poet T.S. Eliot called it a “masterpiece,” and the novelist Ernest Hemingway proclaimed: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn." Although the book is required reading in over 70 percent of American high schools, it is not without controversy. The book has been called racist for its use of the word “nigger.” Before you begin reading the novel, read David Bradley’s commentary on the book (attached). As you read the commentary, ask yourself: “What is Bradley’s argument for why Huckleberry Finn should be taught, and how does he address the charges of racism, specifically Twain’s use of the word N-word?” Once you have read the novel, be prepared to address the following question: Should the novel continue to be taught in American high schools? Why or why not?

Major Work Report Format

Note on Citations: To correctly cite your quotations, simply place the appropriate page number(s) in parentheses after each quotation. For example:

“You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no maer” (1).

I. Setting:
A. Quote a passage of at least 50 words that describes the setting.
B. What is the location of the story? When does it take place?
C. How is the setting of the story significant?

II. Point of View:
A. Quote a passage of at least 50 words that illustrates the work’s point of view.
B. Explain how the point of view relates to the telling of the story. What is the narrator’s perspective, and how does the narrator’s perspective (whether first, third person limited, or third person omniscient, or other) relate to the telling of the story?

III. Characters:
Write a profile of three major characters in the work. For each character, include the following: What is the character’s role in the story? What is the character’s significance in the story? What adjectives describe the character?

IV. Conflict:
A. Quote a passage of at least 50 words that contains a significant conflict.
B. Explain the significance of the conflict in this scene. What kind of conflict is it – internal or external?
C. What is the significance of the conflict toward moving the story forward and complicating the plot?
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V. Theme: Theme is a universal idea, common to all humans. What is the author saying about this idea? What truth about human experience is being identified? For example, if one of the themes of the work is “love,” what is the author saying about love? These are the most valuable ideas from the work; they should relate to human experience and other works of literature.
A. Quote a passage of at least 50 words that relates to a major theme in the work.
B. What is a major theme in the work? State it as a complete sentence that contains a universal idea and a statement of opinion about that idea/truth.
C. Identify another work of literature or art that echoes this theme. Explain the similarity.

VI. Writing Style
A. Quote a passage of at least 50 words that illustrates the distinctive writing style of the writer.
B. Explain what characteristics of the writer’s style -- such as: tone, diction, use of language (detail), and syntax (length and use of sentences) – make the writer’s style distinctive.

VII. Opening and Closing
A. Quote a significant sentence from the opening scene. What is the significance of the work’s opening scene?
B. Quote a significant sentence from the closing scene. What is the significance of the work’s closing scene?

VIII. Reflection:
Now that you have read the novel, read David Bradley’s commentary a second time. Then, respond to the following questions: Do you agree with Bradley’s argument? Should the novel continue to be taught in American high schools? Why or why not?

IX. Statement of Academic Integrity:
I encourage you to discuss this book with friends and family over the summer; however, make sure that your report is made up solely of your words, along with appropriately cited quotations from the novel. Type the following statement at the beginning of your report and sign your name after it to verify that it is solely your work.

I certify that the words in this report are solely my own. Any words that are not solely my own have been correctly cited. Signed ______________________

DUE DATE: Bring your typed report and hand it in on the first day of class in September. Be prepared for a quiz on the book.

-You may buy a copy of the book at Watermark Books, 612 Commercial Avenue, Anacortes. Phone: 293-4277.
-Or free copies are available: See Mr. Backman in Room 39 or go online.

Bring the following items on the first day of class in September:
-Your complete typed report on The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
-A three-ring binder with college ruled notebook paper inside (NO SPIRAL).
-A blue or black pen.

David Bradley’s commentary on The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
--from The New Yorker, June 26, 1995.
The first time I was called a nigger was on the playground on my first day of school in Bedford, Pennsylvania -- in a region some have called God's country, because of an abundance of both nature and churches. There was also an abundance of bigots, and a shortage of blacks; epithets were uncommon. When a little boy of Irish extraction confronted me with “nigger,” I had never before heard the word. If he hadn’t bloodied my nose, I’d not have known to cry.

I kept this, and similar incidents, secret until a pair of bullies stripped me and whipped me with briars, to the usual soundtrack. Then I consulted my elders. My grandmother told me to ignore “poor white trash,” and taught me to keep my face impassive “to deny them satisfaction.” My mother advised me to walk away with dignity. My father said that I should turn the other cheek. Fortunately, my uncle taught me combat skills; I escaped elementary school alive.

My first encounter with “nigger” in a book came several years later, when I read “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” which I liked, though I did not like Tom. In fact, I loathed that lazy, lying hooky player, but I pitied “the juvenile pariah of the village,” Huckleberry Finn, until he says, “Jim told Ben Rogers, and Ben told a nigger, and the nigger told me.” Tom replies, “They’ll all lie. Leastways all but the nigger. I don’t know him. But I never see a nigger that wouldn’t lie.”

I almost put the book down. Suddenly, however, I saw a difference: both boys called the Negro “nigger” but Tom decided he was a liar, not because he knew he had lied, as with the white boys, but because all Negroes lied. Huck, on the other hand, considered the Negro as reliable as the white boys. When Huck said “nigger,” he meant Negro. When Tom said “nigger,” he meant liar. Tom was a bigot. Huck might not be. Hooked, I followed him to his own book.

There he says “nigger” often but means nothing by it -- and Jim uses it as frequently. Huck first identifies Jim as “Miss Watson’s big nigger,” but afterward calls him Jim. Tom wants to tie Jim up and play tricks on him; Huck not only refuses but turns to Jim for advice, and argues with him. In town, Huck tells Tom he wouldn’t want to eat with a Negro “as a steady thing”; on Jackson’s Island, he just says, “Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot cornbread.”

Huck does treat Jim like a nigger once, in Chapter 15. After the two have been separated in a fog, they are reunited, but instead of expressing his relief Huck mocks Jim with an outlandish tale and calls him “a tangle-headed old fool.” Jim’s response is something my grandmother might have said: “Trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed.” I expected Huck to bristle at this, but he tells us, “It was fifteen minutes before I would work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger -- but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither.” So, I thought not all poor white trash are bigots. My responses may have been unsophisticated, but, reading “Huckleberry Finn,” I began to distinguish connotation from denotation, to judge intent by action rather than rhetoric.

“Huckleberry Finn” is the most frequently taught novel in the United States, and probably the most frequently attacked. In previous decades, the attacks came from whites worried about what has come to be known as “family values.” Now the attacks come from blacks disturbed by the word “nigger.” I understand parents’ desire to protect children from the world’s hurtful connotations, but I believe that “Tom Sawyer” and “Huckleberry Finn” brought valuable lessons home to me, not despite the word “nigger” but because of it. I also understand the impulse to attack “offensive” expressions. The pervasiveness of American racism often makes me feel not offended so much as overwhelmed. And “nigger” is offensive not because it was said by literary characters in 1845 but because it is meant by literal Americans in 1995. W.E. B. Du Bois wrote that the problem of the color line is the problem of the twentieth century. What is offensive is that it will be the problem of the twenty-first. America ought to be a place where “nigger” has only historical meaning. Until that happens, the safest place for a child to learn about the word is in a book. From there, it cannot bloody any child’s nose.