

Uncle Tom's Cabin and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn – Essay Assignment

So you've read the novels, visited the museums, and read several critical essays and other support materials. Maybe even too many:

- Lionel Trilling, a professor of literature at Columbia University and an American man of letters of great note, claimed in a 1948 introduction to the book that *Huck Finn* is “one of the world’s great novels” and a “central document of American culture.”
- Randall Fuller, the Herman Melville Distinguished Professor of American Literature at the University of Kansas, argued in an NEH essay published in 2013 that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is America’s “First Great American novel.”
- Jane Smiley, a Pulitzer winning novelist, essayist and professor of literature, claimed in *Harper's Bazaar* magazine in January, 1996, that *Huck Finn* has “little to offer in the way of greatness” and that there is “more to be learned about the American character *from* its canonization than *through* its canonization” (emphasis hers).
- James Baldwin, one of our greatest thinkers and writers of the mid 20th Century, questioned the value of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a protest novel in his 1949 essay.
- MIT professor of American Studies Leo Marx, considering the ending of the novel, wrote a qualification of Trilling’s praise in a 1953 edition of *The American Scholar*.
- Prof. Patricia Turner (African-American Studies, University of California, Davis; Folklorist, in an interview with NPR, discussed why African Americans “loathe” the stereotype of Uncle Tom, and how much that has to do with what followed the novel.
- Ron Powers, in his biography of Twain, gives a short history of the critical reception of the novel and Twain’s writing process.
- Joan D. Hendrick, history professor at Trinity College, in an essay from 2007, explains how Stowe’s life drove her literary choices in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- Jason Courtemanche, professor of American literature and composition at UConn, wrote two blog posts in which he raises the idea that Twain’s satire in *Huck Finn* exposes our own racial bias, particularly concerning Jim’s intelligence.
- Edward Griffin, English professor emeritus of the University of Minnesota, argues in his 2013 essay “Jim’s Secrets; What Twain knew but Huck Finn Didn’t,” that Jim is a much more psychologically complex character than we often give him credit for being, and is actually in control of his own ‘adventure.’”
- Jonathan Arac, English professor at the University of Pittsburgh, writes in his 1997 essay, that both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* need to be read more closely, with a recognition for how historians and literary critics have influenced our readings of both novels.

What we want you to do is examine the novels and supporting materials, considering both what you think about each novel’s value and what the critics think. After you have reached an understanding of the major points made by each critic, **take a stance of your own.**

What is the value of the novels? Are they great literature? Are they documents of historical and or cultural value? Are either “great American novels?” What are the arguments for greatness or weakness? Why should these novels still be taught today? Or should they not be? **Consider carefully, explore your options and then take a stance. Support your stance with quotes from the novels AND from the critics. Enter into the conversation – “they say” the novel is great or terrible; what do “you say?” (NOTE: you do NOT need to quote each and every critic and source we have shared with you – only what you NEED to make your case.)**

Steps to take:

- Read the novels carefully, considering what you like and dislike about them as you read
- Read each essay carefully, outlining the major points made by the critics, and determining how their arguments support or attack your initial reading of the novels (we will do some of this in class)
- Be sure to consider issues such as: race, historical context, character development, style and structure, authorial control, morality, cultural value, etc
- Decide on a stance on the value of the novels – write this stance as clearly and as concisely as possible
- Take many notes on specific textual references that support or attack your stance – the novels should be your primary materials!
- Write a rough draft that clearly explains your stance and clearly uses the novels and the critics to defend your stance – you are trying to persuade your reader that your stance is right
- Share with a classmate, peer review, re-write, re-write and then turn in!

Paper should be no longer than **8** pages, no less than **5**. Paper should be typed, space and a half, 12 pt. font in a readable font such as Times New Roman. **Rough Draft will be due on 10/12, Final Draft due 10/21.**