

Summer Reading 2019

Sophomores

Sophomores are required to read two books for English this summer:

- 1) Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
- 2) Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

We will give you a multiple-choice test on both books during the second English class next fall; therefore, please 1) read these books with care this summer; 2) bring your copies of them with you when you arrive in the fall and review the books before the test. To do well on the multiple-choice test, you will need to know the action of the novels in some detail, as well as know their overall structure: we will ask questions both about details and about overall structure. For the most part, the questions on the test will follow the reading questions on this study guide, so you can help yourself by thinking about those questions (and the aspects of the novel they require a knowledge of) as you read. Be sure to bring this study guide with you when you arrive in the fall, to help you review for the test.

We will discuss these works during the first week of English class, and we will ask you to write an in-class paragraph about one of them. You will need your copy of the text to write this in-class.

Note: Your test and in-class writing will be graded and will count as an important part of your first-quarter grade.

Please use the following study guides as you read these novels: knowing something about the novels and thinking about the study questions will make reading the novels more enjoyable and should help you do well on your test and in-class writing. On the last page of this document, we give you two sample multiple-choice questions, to give you an idea of the kinds of questions you will need to be able to answer on the test.

Study Guide for Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Although many readers consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be “the great American novel,” it hardly promises to measure up to such claims in its first few chapters. The narrator is a rather stubbornly ignorant 12-year-old boy, whose primary interests are smoking, fishing, and avoiding adults. One adult he most especially wishes to avoid is his mean, abusive, alcoholic father. In fact, it is Huck's effort to escape his father's clutches that forces him to leave his friends behind and flee down the Mississippi River in a canoe. Along the way, Huck meets—and gradually develops an unlikely friendship with—a runaway slave from Huck's town, named Jim. That's when things get interesting. Together, this poor, ignorant white boy, who nevertheless feels “naturally” superior to a slave, and this determined black man, who sees Huck's value primarily in helping him to gain his freedom (in Ohio), overcome a handful of physical, social, and moral ordeals as they make their way down the great river on a raft.

Although Twain wrote the novel in the 1880s, he situates the action of the story in the pre-Civil War South – the time of his own childhood. Thus, Twain knew very well that the problem of slavery in America would eventually require a long and bloody war to bring about any kind of resolution. As Huck and Jim’s journey takes them deeper and deeper into the society—and, for Jim, the mortal dangers—of the slaveholding South, Huck is forced to choose between loyalty to certain truths he has always been *told* and the truth as he knows it in his heart. At that point, Huck’s struggle prefigures the national struggle that would take place some thirty years later.

The novel is a critique of racism, and yet its narrator, Huck, espouses racist views, ones that he has learned both consciously and subconsciously not only from the culture at large, but from the few kind-hearted people in his life, such as his Aunt Sally. He is a product of his culture, and yet he’s also to some extent an outsider—a runaway, the son of the town drunk. Twain intentionally uses Huck’s point of view as an outsider within slaveholding society to offer a poignant critique of racism. But this critique may at first be difficult to discern. Huck frequently uses the n-word, and in the era in which Twain wrote, the n-word was both commonly used *and* a term of deliberate racist intention. It is a troubling word, and Twain uses it with a strong sense of irony (meaning that there is a divide between Huck’s point of view and Twain’s intention). The novel is the story of Huck’s deep, radical friendship with Jim and of their joint quest to find freedom, and yet, even so, Huck uses the n-word repeatedly. Thus, the use of the n-word is *deliberately* disturbing, and its use reminds the readers of the violent dehumanization that was central to a slaveholding society.

1. As a narrator, Huck is a “talker” and not a writer. He says that “Mr. Mark Twain” wrote an earlier story about Huck and Tom and others (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*). What does the author gain by handing over “the sequel” to such a peculiar boy?
2. Although Huck doesn’t “know” nearly as much as Tom Sawyer, he’s still a pretty careful observer of the life around him. What kinds of things seem to capture Huck’s attention most often? How does that attentiveness come to play a significant role in the development of Huck’s character?
3. Once Huck and Jim miss “the turn” up the Ohio River—and Jim’s plan to gain his freedom is dashed—the story takes on a darker tone. How does the Grangerford episode contribute to that change of tone? What does Huck learn about “respectable people” from his short visit with the Grangerfords?
4. For twelve chapters, Huck and Jim are taken “prisoners” by two con-men who present themselves as the Duke of Bridgewater and the Dauphin of France (“son of Looy the Sixteen and Marry Antonette”), though they also assume other identities. Twain obviously has fun developing humorous antics for these characters. But what does Huck—who does *not* find them entertaining—seem to learn through his encounter with them?

5. The last chapters of the novel bring Tom Sawyer back into the story. Some readers find Tom's re-appearance an awkward reversion for Huck to a kind of behavior he had seemed to outgrow; others find Tom's arrival, for Huck, a welcome return to Huck's roots—and a clever way to resolve some plot elements. Do you sympathize with either of these reactions? Do you feel that all the detailed and complex efforts to help Jim “escape” (and the change of tone they create) add to the novel or detract from it?

Study Guide for Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a British boarding school novel, set in an alternative 1980s and 1990s, one in which reality doesn't quite look the same as readers expect. The novel, published in 2005, received abundant acclaim, as has the author—including a Nobel prize and a knighthood of the British empire.

Resist the urge to look up summaries of the novel before you read—this novel is suspenseful and thrilling, and you will enjoy the novel more if you allow yourself the careful unfolding of the mystery. Initially, you may feel unclear as to what's happening, but Ishiguro is a deliberate storyteller, and you will eventually learn all that you need to know. The narrator is a young woman, Kathy, telling us the story of her time at a prestigious boarding school, Hailsham, from a perspective later in her life when she is an adult. Her focus is on the relationships among the young people of Hailsham, those close bonds developed at boarding school among peers and with faculty, relationships that continue to grow in complexity during adulthood. Gradually, the vision of the novel widens to include the larger society, as we learn more about the world of the novel. *Never Let Me Go* is a deeply personal, intimate novel about friendship, and it is also subtly a political novel, with implications about autonomy, individual choice, and the communal good. Ishiguro resists giving readers a clear answer, but he raises many questions about the responsibility of an individual within society.

Reading Questions:

1. Ruth and Tommy are Kathy's best friends, the great loves of her life. But their relationships are also fraught with deceit and mistrust. How do Kathy's views of Ruth and Tommy shift from the beginning of the novel to the ending? How does the political situation they live in influence their friendship in disastrous ways?
2. From the beginning, we can see that art is important to the novel, yet some of the students are deemed good artists and others are not. Some art is judged worthy of “collection,” while others are not. Why doesn't Tommy believe that he is good at art, and why does it matter (or not) ultimately? What is the role of the “collections” in the lives of the students? How are these collections related to the meaning of art and to the individual identity of each student?

3. Interestingly, there seems little coercion or violence involved in this society. None of the characters ever rebel in significant ways, and yet there appears to be little force used to enforce the rules of the society. Why does Ishiguro construct this world in this way? How does the lack of violence influence your view of the characters and this society?
4. The song “Never Let Me Go,” by Judy Bridgewater, becomes the title of the novel. What is the significance of the song to Kathy, both while at Hailsham and later in life? How does the song also alter Kathy’s understanding of her guardian, Madame? What is the effect of Ishiguro’s choice of the title on your understanding of the novel’s messages?
5. In this alternative world, much of ordinary society is recognizable and realistic. Why does Ishiguro set the novel not in a far-distant future (as is often the case with dystopian novels), but in our own past, with the inclusion of clearly dated technology, such as cassette tapes? What influence does the setting and the time have on the novel’s message?
6. Look at the specialized roles of the characters: the carers, the guardians, the possibles. What is the role of the guardians, and why do they cultivate an idea of Hailsham students as special? How does the behavior of Miss Lucy cast doubt on their roles (and on the larger society for which the students are being groomed)? What is a “possible,” and why does Ruth want so desperately to find her possible? Why does the society use such specialized language, including “donation” and “completion,” and how do these terms mask the actual process they describe?

Sample Multiple-Choice Questions:

1. The guardian Lucy expresses her discomfort with the system of Hailsham in all of the following ways except when she
 - A. leaves abruptly
 - B. reveals to the students that their fantasies of becoming actors will never happen
 - C. smuggles contraband cassettes into Hailsham
 - D. scribbles out pages of her own notes
 - E. encourages Tommy to ignore his fears about his lack of creativity
2. What combination of elements allows Huck to fake a murder scene in his father’s cabin?
 - A. a six-foot-long catfish, a whiskey jug, and a shotgun
 - B. a woman’s bonnet and a playbill for the Royal Nonesuch
 - C. a canoe, an ax, and a bucket of fake blood
 - D. a wild pig, an ax, and a sack of grain
 - E. a raft, a hairball, and a Bible

ANSWERS: 1. C; 2. D.