



12th Grade Summer Reading and Questions (non-AP, girls formerly in 204 and 210)

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn

We ask that students please have their own copies of the books, and not use the library, so that they can have a book to use (and annotate) in class.

Discussion Questions for Huckleberry Finn

1. Why does Twain warn us not to analyze the story? (Dare we discuss the novel for an hour?)
2. Why did Twain write in dialect? Did you like or dislike reading in dialect?
3. If you've read *Tom Sawyer*, how is Huck's story similar or different? Did reading *Tom Sawyer* or not matter to your reading of *Huck Finn*?
4. In what ways is the novel a satire of society?
5. How are Tom and Huck similar/different? How are Jim and Huck similar/different?
6. What role does superstition play in the story?
7. When Huck finds out that searchers are headed to Jackson Island to search for Jim, he doesn't hesitate to return to Jim. He says, "they are after us!" when really, the searchers are after Jim. Why does he, too, flee down the river?
8. What do we learn about Huck after the episode of the wreck? What do we learn about Jim?
9. Grangerford and Shephersons: Why does Twain include this violent episode?
10. The Duke and the King: Who are they? Why are they on the river? Why do they stay with Huck? Why does Huck stay with them?
11. How does the tone of the novel change when Tom reappears in it?
12. Jim's escape from the Phelps' farm is a farce. Why did Twain write it as such?
13. To help Jim escape, Tom wants to do things the way they've always been done, even if tradition doesn't make logical sense. How were other characters in the novel similar?

14. Huck Finn is a thirteen-year-old boy. Why does Twain use a child as the center of consciousness in this book?
15. Consider the role of lying in the book. Why is there so much lying? Is this an "immoral" book?
16. Consider the role of family units. Huck and Widow Douglass/Miss Watson; Huck and Pap; Huck and Jim; the Grangerfords; etc.
17. Discuss the place of morality in *Huckleberry Finn*. In the world of the novel, where do moral values come from? The community? The family? The church? One's experiences? Which of these potential sources does Twain privilege over the others? Which does he mock, or describe disapprovingly?

Discussion Questions for *Ella Minnow Pea*

1. In what ways is **Ella Minnow Pea** unconventional? How is it more like a fable than a novel? What characteristics does it share with other fables? Does it offer a clear moral?
2. Why has Mark Dunn chosen to tell this story through letters rather than a more straightforward narrative? What does Dunn gain by eschewing a single narrative voice in favor of many characters writing to one another about the events that beset their island-nation? What ironies are involved in writing letters about the disappearance of the letters of the alphabet?
3. In response to the first proclamation proscribing the use of the letter "Z," Tassie warns, "it stands to rob us of the freedom to communicate without any manner of fetter or harness" [p. 10]. In what sense can **Ella Minnow Pea** be read as a satire of censorship and the restriction of free speech?
4. All the inhabitants of Nollop are forced into linguistic contortions to avoid being prosecuted by the High Council, substituting words like "cephalus" for "head" and "sub-terra" for "underground" [p. 99]. What are some of the other more amusing verbal acrobatics they are forced to perform?
5. Nate Warren suggests that Nollop was a "charlatan" and a "con man" and that the pangram—"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog"—responsible for his divine status may have been stolen from someone else. What is Dunn suggesting here about the ways in which human societies venerate and mythologize sacred texts and heroic ancestors?
6. What strategies do the islanders use to protest, oppose, and finally overthrow the tyranny of the High Council? How do these strategies create suspense in the novel?
7. When council representatives come to confiscate Rory Cummel's property, they tell him they are only doing the will of Nollop and that "There is no other Supreme Being but Nollop" [p. 121]. Seen in light of recent events, in the Middle East and elsewhere, can the novel be read as a commentary on religious authoritarianism? What does the novel suggest about the dangers of humans assuming they know God's will with absolute certainty?

8. **Ella Minnow Pea** dwells heavily on the theme of communication—reading, writing, and talking. What is Dunn suggesting by having the members of the High Island Council read the falling letters as signs—supernatural communications from Nollop—which ultimately make communication nearly impossible? What does the novel as whole say about the nature and purpose of communication and community?
9. How important are the love relationships in the novel—for example those between Tassie and Nate and between Rory and Mittie—to the main action? How do they enhance the plot?
10. Tassie writes that she longs to "live across the channel. . . . With telephones that actually work, and television and computers and books—all the books one could ever hope to read" [p. 32]. What does the novel imply about the dangers of trying to create a utopian society? What examples of intolerant societies—religious or otherwise—exist in the world today? Is the message of this novel relevant to those situations?
11. What is the significance of Amos Minnow Pea writing, quite by accident, a sentence which surpasses Nollop's illustrious pangram? In what way does this undermine the divine value that the high council attributes to Nollop's sentence?
12. At the end of the novel, Ella suggests a memorial to those who suffered from the High Council's tyranny: "a large box filled with sixty moonshine jugs—piled high, toppling over, corks popping, liquor flowing. Disorder to match the clutter and chaos of our marvelous language. Words upon words, piled high, toppling over, thoughts popping, correspondence and conversation overflowing" [p. 206]. Why is this an appropriate memorial? In what ways is language chaotic? In what ways is it ordered and restrictive? Why is Ella comparing liquor and conversation in this passage?
13. How does Dunn manage to make **Ella Minnow Pea** both a whimsical fable and a serious anti-authoritarian satire? What elements of the novel seem comical or lighthearted? What elements seem more pointed? How well does the author integrate them into the story?