***The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

**Thematic Links:**

* Coming of Age: Huck’s Search for Identity
* Social Responsibility: Conformity and Civilization
* Friendship and Betrayal
* Freedom and Enslavement

**Exploration of Themes**

* **Coming of Age: Huck’s Search for Identity**

The transition of the adolescent from carefree childhood to responsible adulthood. Generally, because young adults’ search for identity can lead to isolation, confusion, and rebellion, this theme emphasizes psychological growth or maturity. While adolescents may seek independence and freedom to explore the unknown world around them, they are simultaneously dependent on adults in their lives for security, for economic and emotional support. Adolescents seek peer support as they struggle for independence, the freedom to discover themselves and their capabilities.

* **Social Responsibility; Conformity and Civilization**

These two themes, though distinct, engage Huck Finn from the outset when the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson seek to guide Huck’s development as a proper citizen with schooling, wholesome living, and religion, all of which Pap counters by teaching ignorance, abuse of self and others, and instinctive but uncivilized behaviors. Tom Sawyer tries to teach Huck how to live based upon his own readings of Romance fiction, lessons largely lost on practical-minded Huck. Interestingly, Huck learns about social responsibility, when and how to conform, and a truer meaning of being civilized from Jim, a runaway slave, and from negative examples of those who hurt others.

* **Friendship and Betrayal**

Without an initial act of friendship or promise, betrayal would be non-existent. After all, how can one betray a person or society he has not acknowledged and cares nothing about? The very act of betrayal suggests that in a world of friends and enemies, one has delivered the former to the latter. While Huck is still learning to be a friend, he plays pranks on Jim that are hurtful. Likewise, when Huck and Jim have helped the King and Duke, the pair abuse and take advantage of them, ultimately selling Jim. Ask students to write a short paragraph about what friendship means in their lives. Which is more important: to be a friend or to have a friend? (Ask them to choose one or the other, although they will agree that both are

important, and list their reasons for their choice). Discuss: How does one go about learning to be a friend?

* **Freedom and Enslavement**

Any work set in the American South in the 1830’s involving a runaway slave and a white boy must perforce be about enslavement and freedom. Both Jim and Huck define and redefine what it means to be free, even as they encounter scores of kinds of slavery, from alcoholism and ignorance to racism and economic want. Ask students to define freedom with examples of what each type of freedom will do in their lives (for example, not depending on others for a ride=having one’s own car). Discuss: Are there occasions when freedoms involve enslavements, (for example, having one’s own car/freedom=paying for gas, insurance, tires and having to work for those things)?