

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg by Mark Twain

Book Information

Mark Twain, The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg
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Interest Level: UG

A stranger who feels mistreated by a supposedly incorruptible town concocts a vengeful scheme to test the honesty of its leading citizens.

Topics: Behavior, Revenge; Classics, Classics (All); People, Strangers; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Edward Richards the old cashier of the town bank who becomes guilt ridden over his secret

Howard Stephenson the supposed author of the notes to the nineteen citizens of Hadleyburg

Jack Halliday a town skeptic

Mary Richards Edward's wife, who shares in his guilt

Mr. Burgess the town reverend, who keeps Mr. Richards's secret

Mr. Cox the editor of the town's newspaper

Mr. Goodson a town skeptic who dies before the novel begins

Mr. Wilson and Mr. Billson two men who are the first to argue over their claims to the bag of gold at the town meeting

Vocabulary

blasphemous irreverent

derisive mocking or scoffing

somnambulist a person who walks in his or her sleep

unsmirched unsoiled; not dirty or dishonored

Synopsis

According to the narrator, Hadleyburg is the "most honest and upright town in all the region round

about." The people of Hadleyburg pride themselves on upholding the reputation of their beloved town. They keep their young people sheltered from temptation and teach them the importance of honesty. One day, a stranger is offended in Hadleyburg. This vindictive stranger carries his grudge against the town and develops a plan to destroy Hadleyburg's most valuable asset, its reputation.

When the stranger returns to Hadleyburg, he visits the home of Mr. and Mrs. Richards. The stranger explains to Mrs. Richards that he must leave a heavy sack for her husband and insists that it be delivered to its rightful owner. He leaves, and Mrs. Richards reads the paper that is attached to the sack. She discovers the bag is filled with one hundred and sixty pounds of gold coins. The note explains that, one night, a kind man gave the stranger twenty dollars and some good advice. According to the note, the stranger did not know the man's name, but he wanted the man to have the money. The rightful owner could claim the bag by writing a note that stated the advice he had given the stranger.

When Mr. Richards returns home, he finds his wife in a state of excitement. They decide to publish the note in the local newspaper. Mr. Richards gives the note to Mr. Cox, the local newspaper editor, who later regrets publishing it because he could have split the money with Mr. Richards, and few people would have known.

Hadleyburg becomes famous overnight, and its reputation spreads across the country. The citizens of the honorable town are excited that their reputable town will have a chance to prove its honesty to the world. Three weeks pass. With only one week remaining until the town meeting is held where the bag of gold may be claimed, nineteen of Hadleyburg's most respected citizens receive a copy of the same letter. The author of the letter, a man by the name of Stephenson, claims that he knows to whom the money belongs. He says that Mr. Goodson, a member of the community who has died, gave the stranger the twenty dollars.

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Stephenson claims that he and Goodson spoke of the event. He also claims that Goodson was grateful to the recipient of the letter for a good deed the recipient had done for him. Stephenson goes on to give each of the nineteen people the phrase that will enable them to claim the money: "You are far from being a bad man: go, and reform." Each of the nineteen people believes he is the only person to receive the letter. Not able to remember the good deed supposedly done for Goodson, each of the nineteen men spends the entire night creating possible examples of his goodness.

Eventually, all nineteen citizens, including Mr. Richards, give their notes containing the correct phrase to Mr. Burgess, the town reverend. Mr. Burgess reads the notes at a large town meeting that is attended by many members of the press. The first note Mr. Burgess reads, signed by Mr. Billson, contains the correct response. In all the commotion, Mr. Wilson stands up, believing it was his name that was called, for he also wrote a note with the correct phrase. The crowd roars, as the two men verbally battle over the rights to the bag of gold. The crowd calls for the bag to be opened and the note inside to be read. The note inside the bag repeats the correct phrase. Eventually, Mr. Burgess reads eighteen other notes claiming the gold, all with the correct phrase. Out of kindness, Mr. Burgess does not read the note from Mr. Richards. This makes Mr. Richards appear to be the only honest man of the nineteen principal citizens.

Eventually, the postscript of the stranger's note is read. This postscript explains the scheme that has just unfolded. In his note, the stranger explains that his desire was to "corrupt Hadleyburg the incorruptible." The room is shocked. The crowd demands the sack be ripped open. Inside, the Chair finds only gilded disks of lead. They begin an auction for the sack of lead disks, with the proceeds to go to Edward Richards, who they believe is the last of the nineteen to keep his honor intact. Richards is distraught, but does not object. Meanwhile, a stranger suggests that the eighteen men should bid on the coins, as they tried to steal the bag in the first place. Eventually, the bag is sold

for forty thousand dollars. When the Richardses get home, they are sent checks for \$38,500 from an anonymous source with a note explaining that the stranger lost the bet he made with himself because Richards had not been tempted like the other eighteen citizens. Mr. Richards and his wife become consumed with guilt. They are tortured by their consciences and are sure that Mr. Burgess will reveal their note to the town. Soon, the couple becomes very sick, and Mr. Richards destroys the checks. The couple dies after Mr. Richards confesses their sin to Mr. Burgess. By the end of the story, Hadleyburg changes its name and becomes very wary of strangers.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What most likely caused Mr. and Mrs. Richards to become sick, paranoid, and then die. Is there anything they could have done to make their lives easier?

Mr. and Mrs. Richards are consumed by their guilt for not having been exposed like the other frauds at the town meeting. The praise they receive for their righteousness only fuels their despair. They become convinced that Mr. Burgess is going to reveal the note Mr. Richards wrote in order to claim the bag of gold, and they allow this fear to destroy their lives. Some students may believe that, if they had confessed their sin early, their shame would not have been as great and their lives may have been saved.

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Literary Analysis

Hadleyburg is a community that is carried away by its reputation for honesty. Do you know of any cities that have tried to establish a similar reputation to set themselves apart from other communities? Do you think it is realistic for a city to try to live up to a town motto as Hadleyburg did at the beginning of the novel?

There are several cities that have distinct slogans about the character of their citizens. One example is Philadelphia, known as the city of brotherly love. Hadleyburg makes a ridiculous claim that all of its citizens are incredibly honest. By trying desperately to uphold the reputation of their town, the citizens of Hadleyburg are forced to lie and deceive each other so as not to tarnish their beloved reputation.

Inferential Comprehension

According to Mr. Richards, Mr. Burgess was innocent of the accusations against him that led to his unpopularity within the town of Hadleyburg. Even though Mr. Richards knew this, he did not speak out in Mr. Burgess's defense. What do you think the crime against Mr. Burgess may have been, and why do you think Mr. Richards did not defend the innocent man?

Since the story does not say what Mr. Burgess had been accused of, the students' answers will vary. Whatever the offense was, it had to be important enough to ruin Mr. Burgess's, and probably the town's, reputation. If a publicly known crime is committed and nobody is punished, the entire town's reputation is shattered because any one of the citizens could be the law breaker. By placing the blame on somebody, guilty or innocent, the town has identified the troublemaker, and the rest of the citizens keep their reputations intact. Mr. Richards was probably afraid to defend Mr. Burgess because he understood the town's need for an honest reputation, and he did not want to put himself into the position of becoming its scapegoat.

Constructing Meaning

How do you think most readers feel about the stranger's plan to corrupt Hadleyburg? Do you think most readers were happy or upset about the outcome of the stranger's plan? How did you feel when you read the book?

The answers to this question will vary. One answer may be that the reader was pleased the stranger's plan to corrupt Hadleyburg succeeds. It seems as if the citizens of Hadleyburg see themselves as superior because of their supposed honesty. However, some readers may feel the plan is too cruel and hurt too many people.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Have your students read another short story by Mark Twain and ask them to research the author's life. The students can then write an essay on how Mark Twain's life and experiences are reflected in his writing.

Extending Meaning The stranger who plots against Hadleyburg claims that someone from the city did something to anger him. Ask your students to hypothesize what one of the citizens might have done to make the man so angry. Then ask them to write a short story describing this offense and justifying his method of revenge.

Understanding Dialogue Have the students reread the scene of the town meeting. You can then split the students into small groups and ask them to write a short skit using created dialogue, but based on the town meeting scene from the story. The students can then act out the skit in front of the class.

Identifying Persuasive Language Divide your class into small groups. Ask each group to discuss the effect of the stranger's plan on Hadleyburg. Then, ask the students to act as if they are members of the Hadleyburg Chamber of Commerce. Have them create a press release and a new town motto to save Hadleyburg's reputation.