

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

Book Summary

Consisting of 43 chapters, the novel begins with [Huck Finn](#) introducing himself as someone readers might have heard of in the past. Readers learn that the practical Huck has become rich from his last adventure with [Tom Sawyer](#) (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*) and that the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson, have taken Huck into their home in order to try and teach him religion and proper manners. Instead of obeying his guardians, however, Huck sneaks out of the house at night to join Tom Sawyer's gang and pretend that they are robbers and pirates.

One day Huck discovers that his father, Pap Finn, has returned to town. Because Pap has a history of violence and drunkenness, Huck is worried about Pap's intentions, especially toward his invested money. When Pap confronts Huck and warns him to quit school and stop trying to better himself, Huck continues to attend school just to spite Pap. Huck's fears are soon realized when Pap kidnaps him and takes him across the Mississippi River to a small cabin on the Illinois shore.

Although Huck becomes somewhat comfortable with his life free from religion and school, Pap's beatings become too severe, and Huck fakes his own murder and escapes down the Mississippi. Huck lands a few miles down at Jackson's Island, and there he stumbles across Miss Watson's slave, [Jim](#), who has run away for fear he will be sold down the river.

Huck and Jim soon learn that men are coming to search Jackson's Island, and the two fugitives escape down the river on a raft. Jim's plan is to reach the Illinois town of Cairo, and from there, he can take the Ohio River up to the free states. The plan troubles Huck and his conscience. However, Huck continues to stay with Jim as they travel, despite his belief that he is breaking all of society and religion's tenets. Huck's struggle with the concept of slavery and Jim's freedom continues throughout the novel.

Huck and Jim encounter several characters during their flight, including a band of robbers aboard a wrecked steamboat and two Southern "genteel" families who are involved in a bloody feud. The only time that Huck and Jim feel that they are truly free is when they are aboard the raft. This freedom and tranquility are shattered by the arrival of the duke and the king, who commandeer the raft and force Huck and Jim to stop at various river towns in order to perform confidence scams on the inhabitants. The scams are harmless until the duke and the king pose as English brothers and plot to steal a family's entire inheritance. Before the duke and the king can complete their plan, the real brothers arrive. In the subsequent confusion, Huck and Jim escape and are soon joined by the duke and the king.

Disappointed at their lack of income, the duke and the king betray Huck and Jim, and sell Jim back into slavery. When Huck goes to find Jim, he discovers that Jim is being held captive on Silas and Sally Phelps' farm. The Phelps think Huck is their visiting nephew, Tom Sawyer, and Huck easily falls into the role of Tom. Tom Sawyer soon arrives and, after Huck explains Jim's captivity, Tom takes on the guise of his own brother, Sid. After dismissing Huck's practical method of escape, Tom suggests they concoct an elaborate plan to free Jim. Tom's plan is haphazardly based on several of the prison and adventure novels he has read, and the simple act of freeing Jim becomes a complicated farce with rope ladders, snakes, and mysterious messages.

When the escape finally takes place, a pursuing farmer shoots Tom in the calf. Because Jim will not leave the injured Tom, Jim is again recaptured and taken back to the Phelps farm. At the farm, Tom reveals the entire scheme to Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas. Readers learn that Miss Watson has passed away and freed Jim in her will, and Tom has been aware of Jim's freedom the entire time. At the end of the novel, Jim is finally set free and Huck ponders his next adventure away from civilization.

About *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In 1876, the same year as the publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, [Mark Twain](#) began work on another boy's tale of adventure along the Mississippi. After deciding that [Tom](#) was unfit to narrate the book, Twain chose Tom's counterpart, the disreputable [Huckleberry Finn](#). Huck was already well known to an American audience thirsting for more of Twain's brand of humor, and Twain hoped to capitalize on his recent literary successes. Despite the end of the Civil War in 1865, it was a tumultuous time for America. Southern Reconstruction had fallen into disarray, and a new racism of segregation and condoned inequality replaced the slavery that had been abolished with the Emancipation Proclamation.

Twain's original intention, as he stated to William Dean Howells, was to take "a boy of twelve and run him on through life (in the first person)." In the aftermath of the war and the failure of Reconstruction, however, the work quickly bogged down as the book began to address the issue of freedom and slavery; it was not a path that [Twain](#) was eager to take. After writing the first few chapters, Twain's inspiration for the tale began to fade, and he set aside the work to pursue other projects such as *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) and *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881).

In 1882, Twain again took up the manuscript and began developing the story of the young, white boy named Huck and the enslaved, black man named [Jim](#). He worked sporadically over the next two years and finished the manuscript in July of 1883. Two years later, in February of 1885, Huck Finn reintroduced himself to American readers: "You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of [The Adventures of Tom Sawyer](#); but that ain't no matter."

Huck's journey down the Mississippi River has been called an odyssey by some and a pilgrimage by others. Indeed, characteristics of each abound. Like Homer's *Odyssey*, the novel is episodic — that is, it is composed of a series of episodes — and in many ways Huck's adventure is a pilgrimage (a journey of exalted purpose or moral). Some consider the novel to be of the picaresque genre, which originated in Spain and depicts in realistic detail the adventures of a roguish hero, often with satiric or humorous effects. Others contend that Huck does not fit the role of rogue and that, therefore, the novel does not qualify as picaresque.

Twain did not consider the novel his best work, and he was completely unprepared for the reception that would follow. In a caustic review immediately following *Huck Finn's* publication, *Life* magazine condemned the book that contained graphic instances of nudity and death. The Concord Public Library followed by declaring the book held little humor and regarded it as the "veriest trash." And popular author Louisa May Alcott echoed the sentiments by saying that perhaps Twain should stop writing for American boys and girls altogether if this was the only work he could offer.

Although several initial reviews were negative, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was also quickly commended as an American classic for its expression of the American imagination. The ability to adapt to any situation, the tranquility and promise of the country's great river, and the colorful and varied characters that inhabited the vanishing frontier are all represented within its pages. These elements prompted one of the most famous observations about *Huck Finn* in 1935, when Ernest Hemingway remarked that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn* . . . It's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." The novel is, indeed, a masterful display of hoaxes, frauds, and pranks, all elements of American humor that Twain had explored in his own readings and previous writings.

Character List

[Huckleberry Finn](#) Narrator and main character of the novel.

Jim Runaway slave who joins Huck in his flight down the Mississippi.

Tom Sawyer Huck's civilized best friend who enjoys extravagant stories and schemes.

Pap Finn Huck's abusive, drunken father who plots to steal his son's reward money.

The Duke River con man who claims to be the Duke of Bridgewater and takes control of Huck and Jim's raft.

The King River con man who claims to be the disappeared heir to the French throne and takes control of Huck and Jim's raft.

Widow Douglas Town widow who tries to civilize Huck through kindness and religion.

Miss Watson Widow Douglas's sister who tries to civilize Huck through manners and religion.

Aunt Polly Tom Sawyer's aunt and guardian.

Jo Harper, Ben Rogers, and Tommy Barnes Town boys who are members of Tom Sawyer's "band of robbers."

Judge Thatcher Kindly town judge who watches over Huck's reward money.

Mrs. Loftus St. Petersburg town woman whom Huck visits disguised as a girl.

Jake Packard, Bill, and Jim Turner Gang of murderers whom Huck and Jim discover on the sinking steamboat the *Walter Scott*.

The Grangerfords Distinguished family who watches over Huck when Huck and Jim are separated. The family maintains a deadly feud with the neighboring Shepherdsons.

Buck Grangerford Youngest Grangerford boy who befriends Huck and is subsequently killed by the Shepherdsons.

Emmeline Grangerford Grangerford daughter who wrote romantic epigraphs and died at 14.

The Shepherdsons Distinguished family who feuds with the Grangerfords.

Boggs Harmless Arkansas town drunkard who is shot by Colonel Sherburn.

Colonel Sherburn The man who shoots Boggs and repels the lynch mob who comes after him.

Peter Wilks Deceased townsman. His grieving family takes in the duke, the king, and Huck as Peter Wilk's two brothers and boy servant.

William and Harvey Wilks Peter Wilks' brothers who live in England.

Mary Jane, Susan, and Joanna Peter Wilks' nieces who are tricked by the duke and the king.

Dr. Robinson and Levi Bell Two men who do not believe the duke and the king are the Wilks brothers.

Silas Phelps Tom Sawyer's uncle.

Aunt Sally Phelps Tom Sawyer's aunt.

Themes

Freedom

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* both Huck and the runaway slave Jim are in flight from a society which labels them as outcasts. Although Huck has been adopted by the Widow Douglas and been accepted into the community of St. Petersburg, he feels hemmed in by the clothes he is made to wear and the models of decorum to which he must adhere. But he also does not belong to the world Pap inhabits. Although he feels more like himself in the backwoods, Pap's drunken rages and attempts to control him force Huck to flee. At the end of the book, after Jim has been freed, Huck decides to continue his own quest for freedom. "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." Huck is clearly running from a civilization that attempts to control him, rather than running in pursuit of something tangible. He is representative of the American frontiersman who chooses the unknown over the tyranny of society.

As a slave, Jim has likewise been denied control over his own destiny, and he escapes to prevent being sold down to New Orleans, away from his wife and children. But Jim is chasing a more concrete ideal of freedom than Huck is. For Jim, freedom means not being a piece of property. Jim explicitly expresses his desire to be free as they approach Cairo and the junction with the Ohio River: "Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom." But after they pass Cairo in the confusion of a foggy night, Jim's quest for freedom is thwarted and he must concentrate on survival. After Jim's capture, Tom and Huck attempt to free him in a farcical series of schemes that actually make escape more difficult and dangerous. Huck indicates that a simple removal of the board that covers the window would allow Jim to escape, but Tom declares that is too easy. "I should hope we can find a way that's a little more complicated than that, Huck Finn," Tom says. After Jim escapes and is recaptured, Tom reveals that he has been free all along. Miss Watson had died and left him free in her will. The irony of freeing a free man has concerned many critics, who believe Twain might have been commenting on the failure of Reconstruction after the Civil War.

Conscience

Huck's main struggle in the book is with his conscience, the set of morals with which he has been raised. As they begin to approach Cairo, and Jim looks forward to his freedom, Huck says his conscience "got to troublin' me so I couldn't rest." He rationalizes that he didn't lure Jim away from his owner, but "conscience up and says every time, 'But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could 'a' paddled ashore and told somebody.'" During this scene he wakes up to the fact that he is helping a slave gain freedom, something he has been brought up to believe is wrong. So in an attempt to relieve his guilt, he sets off for shore, telling Jim he is going to find out if they have passed Cairo, but really intending to turn Jim in. When he meets up with two men looking for a runaway slave, he confronts a true test of conscience, and fails, in his eyes. The two men ask him about the man on board, and Huck protects Jim by making up an elaborate tale about his father who is dying of smallpox, a highly contagious disease. When he returns to the raft, Jim rejoices in his cover-up, but Huck instead is "feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong." He decides that

he is naturally bad, and that he only did what made him feel better. Not being able to analyze his actions, Huck fails to recognize that he has taken a stand against a morally corrupt society. Later, after Jim has been turned in by the King and Duke, Huck must again wrestle with his conscience as he decides to play an active role in freeing Jim. Up until this point he had only protected Jim from discovery; now he must help Jim escape, an even more serious crime. But rather than let his "conscience" guide him, Huck listens to his heart, which tells him that Jim is a human being, not property. He turns his back forever on society's ethics and decides he'd rather "go to hell" than turn his back on Jim. Through Huck, Twain attacks that part of the conscience that unquestioningly adheres to society's laws and mores, even when they are wrong.

Race and Racism

Probably the most discussed aspect of *Huck Finn* is how it addresses the issue of race. Many critics agree that the book's presentation of the issue is complex or, some say, uneven. No clear-cut stance on race and racism emerges. Despite the fact that Huck comes to respect Jim as a human being, he still reveals his prejudice towards black people. His astonishment at Jim's deep feelings for his family is accompanied by the statement, "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." And even after he has decided to help free Jim, Huck indicates that he still does not see black people overall as human beings. When Aunt Sally asks "Tom Sawyer" why he was so late in arriving, he tells her the ship blew a cylinder head. "Good gracious! Anybody hurt?" she asks. "No'm. Killed a nigger." "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt," she responds. As some critics have pointed out, Huck never condemns slavery or racial prejudice in general but seems to find an exception to the rule in Jim. Nevertheless, the fact that Huck does learn to see beyond racial stereotypes in the case of Jim is a profound development, considering his upbringing. He lived in a household with the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson where slaves were owned. And Pap's rantings over a free black man indicate his deep racial prejudice. When confronted with the fact that a free black man was highly educated and could vote, Pap decides he wants nothing to do with a government that has allowed this to happen. He wants the free man, whom he calls "a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger," to be sold at auction. In other words, all black people are slaves, white man's property, in his eyes. Such are the views on race with which Huck has been raised. But there is no agreement as to what Twain's message on the subject of race is. While some critics view the novel as a satire on racism and a conscious indictment of a racist society, others stress the author's overall ambivalence about race. Critics have had a difficult time reconciling the stereotypical depictions of Jim and other slaves in the book with Huck's desire to free Jim.