With *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) Mark Twain developed an archetypal American hero. Huck Finn, the natural boy, resistant to civilization and hungry for adventure, morally right and often legally wrong, is as vivid and familiar a personality to readers as any childhood friend. The novel is a classic of American literature, and, many believe, the greatest work of a great author. Since *Huckleberry Finn*’s publication in 1885, it has appeared in over 150 American editions alone and 200,000 copies are sold each year. *Huckleberry Finn* has also been translated into over 50 languages and at least 700 editions have been published worldwide. The novel has also been controversial since its publication, primarily because of its racial content, and it has been repeatedly banned by various libraries and schools.

Twain introduced the character of Huck Finn in his 1876 novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as a partner in Sawyer’s adventures. Like many of the characters and events in the novels, Huck Finn was based on someone Twain knew while growing up in Hannibal, Missouri. Twain began writing what became *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* soon after publishing *Tom Sawyer* with ideas left over from the novel. *Huckleberry Finn* took him nearly seven years to complete as he struggled to finish the story several times and let the manuscript rest while working out the story’s direction.
Set in the 1830s or 1840s, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* features Huck as the first-person narrator of the novel. He is running from the Widow Douglas’s attempt to turn him into a respectable citizen, as well as from his alcoholic, abusive father. With Huck on his journey is Jim, a runaway slave owned by Miss Watson, the widow’s sister who also tries to civilize Huck in the early chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*.

As Huck and Jim travel along the Mississippi River by raft and canoe, they encounter a variety of people from many social classes, from con artists to kind-hearted wealthy families. Both seek total freedom and enjoy the liberty they have along the way. Huck eventually ends up at the Phelps farm where Jim is held as a runaway slave. In the end, both Jim and Huck remain free as Huck will not let himself be adopted and changed by the Phelps. He plans to continue his journey.

*Huckleberry Finn* satirizes society’s hypocrisy as it demonstrates the positive results of moral action. Twain explores these ideas as Huck deals with issues of right and wrong and wrestles his conscience several times over helping Jim escape in the book. As Hamlin Hill explains in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, “*Huckleberry Finn* explores whether any human being can transcend his society, violate his training, achieve independence from external pressure and judgment.”

Twain also uses *Huckleberry Finn* to explore issues of slavery and race relations. The novel as a whole has been interpreted as an attack on racism, something supported by Twain’s own opinions on the subject. Huck comes to see that though Jim is black and a slave, he is also a person and loyal friend who repeatedly protects Huck. While many critics have praised his take on racism, a significant number have taken issue with what they consider to be Twain’s stereotypical depiction of Jim. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been seen as racist because the word “nigger” is used more than 200 times. This racial content is one of the primary reasons why the book has been banned from certain schools and libraries. Despite such controversies, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* remains among the most important and beloved American novels. Richard Lemon of *People Weekly* wrote on the occasion of the novel’s centennial, “Huck Finn’s overriding virtue is that he stays simple: He is a boy who loves freedom and the American land and can instruct us in both.”

**BIOGRAPHY**

**MARK TWAIN**

Born Samuel Langhorne Clemens in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835, the author was raised in Hannibal, Missouri. This town along the Mississippi River later served as a source of inspiration for his novels, including the early chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As a boy, Clemens’s limited formal education ended when his father died and he was apprenticed to a printer at the age of twelve. By his early twenties, Clemens was fulfilling a childhood dream by working as a steamboat pilot on the Mississippi. It was there that he first heard the boating term “mark twain,” which he would adopt as a pen name. The Civil War ended Clemens’s work on the river but led him into his journalism career. Clemens traveled west with his brother Orion, who was the territorial secretary of Nevada.

Clemens first took the name Mark Twain while writing for the Nevada-based *Territorial Enterprise*. Twain launched his book publishing career by the mid-1860s with humorous nonfiction, first with a collection of previously published pieces entitled *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*. In 1876, Twain introduced the character of Huckleberry Finn in the novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, based on real people and events in Hannibal and his uncle’s Florida farm. Twain published his best-known novels, including *Huck Finn* (1885), in the 1880s, and earned a reputation as one of the greatest living American writers. Twain continued writing humorous nonfiction until his death from heart disease on April 21, 1910, in Redding, Connecticut.

**PLOT SUMMARY**

**Chapters 1–3**

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* opens with Huck introducing himself and explaining what has
happened to him since the end of the last book by Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He and Tom split the $6,000 they found, and the Widow Douglas took Huck in. She forces him to live by rules, quit smoking, and go to school. Her sister, Miss Watson, teaches him about religion and contributes to his education. One night, Huck slips out of the house and finds Tom Sawyer waiting for him. After creating mischief with Jim, an adult slave owned by Miss Watson, Huck and Tom meet other boys. They form a gang of highwaymen headed by Tom. Miss Watson tries to teach Huck to pray, but he decides there is nothing to it. Huck tells readers that he has not seen his father, Pap, in over a year and he is glad about it. After playing with Tom’s gang for a month, Huck resigns. The most mischief the gang gets into is breaking up a Sunday school picnic.

**Chapters 4–6**

A few months later, Huck has learned to read a little and grown to tolerate his new lifestyle. He sees tracks outside, which makes him run to Judge Thatcher’s. Huck sells him the $6,000 plus interest from his *Tom Sawyer* adventure for $1. Huck later finds Pap in his room. Pap threatens to beat Huck if he continues going to school. Pap tells him, “You’ve put on considerable many frills since I been away. I’ll take you down a peg before I get done with you.” He tells his son that he heard about the money. Huck tells him that the money belongs to Judge Thatcher now. The widow and the judge go to court to gain guardianship of Huck, but the new judge in town refuses to give it to them. Under the threat of violence, Huck gets his father money, which he spends getting drunk. The new judge tries to help by cleaning Pap up and putting him up in a spare room in his home. Pap persists in his legal fight for Huck’s money, and occasionally beats his son for continuing to attend school. As Huck reasons, “I didn’t want to go to school much before, but I reckon I’d go now to spite pap.” He takes Huck to a cabin on the Illinois shore. Although Pap gets drunk and beats him, Huck enjoys not having rules again. He refuses to go back to the widow’s, though she tries to rescue him. The beatings and his father’s drunken behavior compel Huck’s decision to run away.

**Chapters 7–9**

While checking the fishing lines for his father, Huck finds a canoe and hides it. When Pap leaves for town to sell part of a raft they found, Huck loads everything from the cabin in his canoe. He also makes it look like there was a robbery and Huck was killed. After ensuring his father has returned to the cabin, Huck takes his canoe to Jackson’s Island where he hides and goes to sleep. The next morning, Huck sees a ferryboat float by with Pap, the widow, and others looking for Huck’s body. While enjoying life on the island, Huck comes across Jim. Jim thinks Huck is a ghost until Huck convinces him otherwise. Huck shares the story of what happened to him, and Jim tells him that he has been hiding on Jackson’s Island since Huck allegedly died. Jim ran off because Miss Watson had been picking on him and seemed finally ready to make good on her threat to sell him. Huck and Jim hide the canoe and move the supplies into a cavern on a ridge in the middle of the island. Huck is content and enjoys exploring the island’s shore in the canoe during the day. During his travels, Huck catches part of a lumber raft. He also comes across a house floating by. Huck finds a dead man inside, but Jim will not let
him look at the body. Huck and Jim take all the
goods of value from inside the home.

Chapters 10–13
Among the goods, Jim and Huck find money. Huck decides to trick Jim by putting a dead
rattlesnake on his blanket. Another rattlesnake later joins it and bites Jim. Huck feels guilty,
believing that he had brought bad luck by handling a snake skin. Jim takes care of the bite and
recovers in a few days. Bored, Huck decides to
disguise himself as a girl and find out what is
going on in town. Huck he goes to the home of
newcomer Mrs. Judith Loftus, pretending to be
Sarah Williams. He learns from her that some in
town think that Huck staged his own death,
while others believe that Jim killed him. There
is also a reward for turning Jim in. Still others
believe that Huck’s father killed him and made it
look like a robbery so that he could get his hands
on his son’s money. Mrs. Loftus thinks Jim is on
Jackson’s Island. Huck learns that her husband
and another man are going to the island that
night to look for Jim. Huck returns to the island,
sets up a decoy camp, and takes off with the raft
and canoe with Jim.

Huck and Jim drift down the river, passing
St. Louis. They stop each night and buy food.
Passing a steamboat wrecked on a rock, Huck
insists they check it out, though Jim is reluctant.
On board, Huck finds two men stealing what is
a board and arguing about a killing. When Huck
sends Jim to set the men’s boat adrift, Jim returns
and tells Huck that their own raft is gone.
Worried, Huck steals the men’s boat and they
take off after the raft. They get their raft back
after a storm and put the stolen items from the
men’s boat on board. While Jim takes care of
the raft, Huck finds a riverboat and convinces
the operator to go back to the crashed ferryboat
with a fake story. Huck believes the widow would
be proud of what he has done, “because rascals
and dead beats is the kind the widow and
good people takes the most interest in.”

Chapters 14–16
Huck and Jim enjoy the loot from the wreck. Huck reads some of the books they found to
Jim, which leads to a conversation about what
kings do. When the talk turns to the biblical
King Solomon, Jim tells Huck that he does
not think Solomon was wise because he was
going to cut a child in half, arguing, “You take
a man dat’s on’y got one or two chillen; is dat
man gwyne be waseful o’ chillen? No, he ain’t;
he can’t ‘ford it. He know how to value ‘em.”
Huck tells Jim that he missed the point of the
story, but Jim will not listen.

Huck and Jim decide to go to Cairo, Illinois,
sell the raft, and take a steamboat up the Ohio
River to the free states. On the second day of
their journey, a fog comes up, throwing off their
plans. Huck is in the canoe and gets separated
from Jim on the raft for a long time. When Huck
finally catches up with Jim, Huck pretends like
nothing had happened. Jim finally realizes Huck
was fooling him and gets angry:

When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de
callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz
mos’ broke because you wuz los’, en I didn’
k’yer no’ mo’ what become er me en de raf’.
En when I wake up en find you back ag’in, all
safe en sou’n, de tears come, en I could ‘a got
down on my knees en kiss yo’ foot, I’s so
thankful. En all you wuz thinkin’ ’bout wuz
how you could make a fool uv old Jim wid a lie.

Huck feels guilty and apologizes, noting, “I
didn’t do no more mean tricks, and I wouldn’t
done that one if I’d ‘a’ knowed it would make
him feel that way.”

While Jim is excited because he is nearly
free, Huck feels like he has done wrong to Miss
Watson. Huck thinks, “I got to feeling so mean
and so miserable I most wished I was dead.” As
Jim makes plans for his freedom, Huck feels even
worse. He decides to go ashore at first light and
tell on Jim in the town they think might be Cairo.
Huck tells Jim that he is making sure it is Cairo.
Huck feels conflicted because Jim says Huck is
his friend, and he winds up protecting Jim from
some runaway slave catchers. They learn that
they have floated far south of Cairo and con-
tinue to travel, but they lose the canoe. They take
the raft downstream looking for a canoe to buy.
The raft is apparently destroyed by a steamboat
in the fog, and Huck cannot find Jim. Huck
takes hold of a plank and finds a house onshore.
years. One day, Sophia Grangerford asks Huck to go back to church as a favor for her to get her New Testament, which she left there. Huck finds a slip of paper inside with a time on it. She is happy to get her book.

Jack, the slave assigned to Huck, leads him to Jim, whom the Grangerford slaves had been hiding in the nearby woods. Jim has been repairing the raft and buying supplies. The next day, Sophia has been found to have run off and married a Shepherdson son. This event leads to a gunfight that Huck watches from a tree. The colonel and two sons are killed as are several Shepherdsons. Huck feels guilty for contributing to the incident. He finds Jim, who is glad to see him. Jack had told Jim that Huck was dead. The pair continues their travels on the Mississippi River.

Chapters 19–20
While ashore one day, two men beg Huck to let them join him and Jim on the raft. Both men are con artists who have been run out of town; though they had not known each other before, they decide to join forces. The younger man claims he is a duke, while the elder says he is the missing dauphin and rightful Louis XVII, the son of the French King Louis XVI. Jim is excited to treat them like royalty; Huck soon decides they are fakes, but keeps up the act anyway.

The duke and king decide they will put on a play though the dauphin has not acted before. With Huck, the duke and the king go into a small town. The whole community is at a revival camp meeting two miles outside town. Huck and the king go to the meeting, where the king bilks people out of money. In the meantime, the duke goes to the print shop to make up posters promoting his schemes and a runaway slave poster with Jim’s description on it. So they can travel during the day, the duke says they can tie up Jim as needed and claim he is a runaway slave they are taking downstream.

Chapters 21–23
As the raft travels both day and night, the duke and the king work on their performance for the production they plan to put on. Reaching a small town in Arkansas, Jim stays with the raft while Huck, the duke, and the king go ashore. The con artists rent the town courthouse and prepare for the show. At the show, only twelve people show up. They laugh at the duke’s and king’s interpretation of certain Shakespearean scenes. The duke promises a new, funny show, and he prints up handbills for the event. Ladies and children will not be admitted.

A house full of men shows up at the production. It is short: just the king naked and painted prancing on all fours for a few moments. While the audience laughs, they feel taken but do not want everyone else in town to know they have been. They decide to let the rest of the town see it so everyone is equal. The duke and king do well on the second night as well. On the third night, the audience consists of men who have seen the show and come loaded with rotting produce to throw at them. The duke and Huck run to the raft before the show started; the king is already there. The next morning, Huck finds Jim upset by thoughts of his wife and children. Huck finds Jim’s feelings odd, thinking, “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.”

Chapters 24–26
Traveling a little farther, the king and the duke decide to work two towns on opposite sides of the riverbank with Huck’s help. So he will not be bothered or questioned, they leave Jim on the raft, painted blue and in the King Lear costume, with a sign that says “Sick Arab.” From a man going aboard a steamboat, the king learns about a recently deceased citizen. The king decides to pose as a reverend, the England-based brother of the deceased man who had hoped to see his minister brother before his death. The duke poses as the reverend’s other brother, a deaf-mute.

The townspeople, including the deceased man’s daughters, believe the con men. Dealing with $6,000 in cash the dead man left behind for his brothers in his cellar, the king and the duke are surprised to find that the stash is more $400 short. The duke decides they should make up the difference and give the money to the daughters, to prove they are honest men. Their con is nearly exposed when the town doctor believes the men are frauds and tells everyone so. No one will believe it, and Mary Jane, one of the deceased man’s daughters, gives the $6,000 back to the king to invest.

The king, the duke, and Huck, who acts as their valet (“valley”), stay in the family home. Huck grows fond of the daughters and feels guilty about helping to steal their inheritance. Huck decides to
rectify the situation by stealing the money back for them.

**Chapters 27–30**

Late at night, Huck puts the money in the coffin; it is buried with the dead man the next day. The king tells the group after the funeral that he would settle the estate immediately and return home. He auctions the house and property right away. The king even sells the slaves though the daughters did not want it done. When the king and duke learn the money is missing, Huck blames it on the slaves and they believe him. He tells Mary Jane everything that has happened, even though telling the truth seems to him “so kind of strange and unregular.”

The deceased man’s real brothers arrive and have trouble getting people to believe that they are who they say. There is a public confrontation over which set of brothers to believe. The investigators decide to dig up the body to see if he has a tattoo described differently by each pair. When the coffin is opened, everyone is surprised to see the missing money there. Huck runs away in the excitement. As he leaves with Jim, he sees the duke and king coming toward them fast in a rowboat. Huck reports, “So wilted right down onto the planks then, and give up; and it was all I could do to keep from crying.” They come aboard.

**Chapter 34–39**

Tom and Huck plan to free Jim. Tom objects to Huck’s straightforward plan, saying, “What’s the good of a plan that ain’t no more trouble than that? It’s as mild as goose-milk.” Instead, Tom devises an elaborate plan reminiscent of a popular adventure novel. The boys decide that, instead of lifting up the leg of the bed to slip Jim’s chain off, they should saw through the leg of the bed—only after Huck convinces Tom that sawing through Jim’s leg is not a good option. Instead of using the door to escape Jim’s cabin prison, Tom decides they will tunnel their way out.

**Chapters 40–43**

On the night of the planned escape, Aunt Sally catches Huck in the cellar and is suspicious. She tells him to go to the parlor where armed farmers were gathered. Afraid, Huck answers her questions. After he is sent upstairs to bed, he goes out again, finds Tom and Jim, and they escape. The men shoot at them, and while Jim is free, Tom gets shot in the leg. Huck and Jim insist on going for a doctor for him, though Tom does not want it. Jim hides while Huck convinces a doctor in town to come to treat Tom and not say anything. Huck runs into Uncle Silas, who sends Huck home to appease Aunt Sally.

By breakfast, the doctor has brought Tom home on a mattress with Jim tied up behind them. Sally is happy that Tom is alive. While the men argue about whether to hang Jim, the doctor stands up for him, telling how he helped with Tom. When Tom recovers, he tells his aunt that Jim is already free; Miss Watson has died other than Tom Sawyer. Tom’s Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas welcome the boy into their home as their nephew.

When he hears the steamboat coming, Huck goes to head Tom off. After convincing Tom that he is not a ghost, Huck tells him about the immediate situation, and Tom agrees that Huck should continue to pretend to be him. Tom also agrees to help Huck steal Jim back. At the Phelps' plantation, Tom tells Sally that he is Sid Sawyer, Tom’s brother. Huck and Tom learn that Jim tells the town people about the king and duke being frauds. When Huck and Tom sneak out of the house at night, they fill each other in on their lives. Huck and Tom pass the king and duke, who are being tarred and feathered.
and freed him in her will. Tom’s Aunt Polly shows up and reveals the truth about the boy’s identity and confirms that Jim is free.

In the final chapter, Tom reveals that he planned for them to free Jim, have adventures on the river, and return home to celebrate Jim as a hero and a free man. Tom gives Jim $40 for the trouble he caused. Huck worries the money he had at home is gone, but Tom says it is all still there. Jim tells Huck his father is dead; Pap was the man in the floating house. The Phelpses offer to take Huck in. Tom suggests that he, Huck, and Jim head for the Indian Territories to have some adventures. Huck ends his story, saying,

But 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.

Themes

Freedom

Both Huck Finn and Jim are on a quest for freedom, trying to escape the rules of society. By declaring their independence in this manner, the two are fulfilling an American dream of living as they choose to without being subject to the restraints and restrictions they do not embrace. They find life most agreeable on their raft and canoe on the river, despite many mishaps along the way.

Huck avoids efforts to “sivilize” him by the Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, and others he meets along the river. In the first few chapters of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck goes to school, quits smoking and swearing, and learns how to pray. While Huck uses these life skills down the line—his reading skills entertain Jim—and does care about doing the right thing—he does not like the duke’s and king’s plans for bilking Mary Jane and her sisters—he cherishes his freedom to choose where he goes and how he lives.

Huck enjoys living in the cabin with Pap more than with the widow, though Pap beats him, insults him, and only wants his money. There, Huck can swear and smoke. It is only when this situation becomes too difficult that he runs away, meets up with Jim on Jackson Island, and begins his quest in earnest. By the end of the novel, not much has changed. The Phelpses want to adopt Huck, but he plans to continue his journey before any more rules of society can be thrust upon him.

Jim’s quest for freedom is more complex than Huck’s. He ran away from Miss Watson because he believed she was finally going make good on her threat to sell him in New Orleans. Huck and Jim initially head toward free states where Jim can escape the bonds of slavery. Jim hopes to buy his family’s freedom once he is free. While Huck feels some conflict over helping a slave escape, Huck ultimately sees Jim as a friend and helps him escape from difficult situations over and over again.

Equality

Huck Finn explores another tenet of the American dream: equality, or rather its absence. Set in Missouri and the South in the pre–Civil War United States, Twain makes the concept of African American personhood more acceptable to his post–Civil War readers by offering an innocent child-hero who understands it instinctively. Twain illustrates the depth of racism in this time period while showing that characters like Huck can overcome them and look at African Americans as people with feelings, families, and friendships, even with whites. Though Huck and other characters uses the word “nigger” to describe black slaves, Huck is also surprised to learn how much Jim really means to him over the course of their travels. No one questions the use of this racial epitaph in the book, though modern readers often find it troublesome and distracting. Huck sees Jim as a friend and a person and so cannot return him to slavery, even though he does not question the larger institution of slavery.
However, in addition to showing that Huck can achieve personal growth in how he regards Jim, Twain also shows that characters, such as the doctor who tends to Tom Sawyer after he is shot, can stand up for the runaway slave as a man of character. Twain also uses people’s racism to protect Jim as part of the story. The duke comes up with several plans so that people leave Jim alone while the con artists bilk townsfolk. The primary one involves printing up fake posters about Jim being a runaway slave so they can leave him tied up during the day. Another plan also plays on racist feelings when the duke dresses up Jim in the King Lear costume, paints him blue, and labels him a sick Arab so people will avoid him when he is alone on the raft.

**Righteousness**

As the story in *Huck Finn* progresses, Huck develops a conscience about what is right and what is wrong, and acts accordingly. He uses his moral sense to expose hypocrisy in others and to try to correct such situations when he can. It is a moral code of the American dream. While Huck almost always does the “right” thing from a moral perspective, because of his upbringing he cannot help but feel that his actions are actually wicked and immoral. When Huck first finds Jim, he promises not to reveal Jim’s secret: “People would call me a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell.” Later, when Huck tries to convince himself that the right thing to do is to turn Jim in, he cannot defy his conscience:

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn’t try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn’t come. Why wouldn’t they? It warn’t no use to try and hide it from Him. Nor from me, neither. I knewed very well why they wouldn’t come. It was because my heart warn’t right; it was because I warn’t square; it was because I was playing double. I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth say I would do the right thing and the clean thing, and go and write to that nigger’s owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knewed it was a lie, and He knewed it. You can’t pray a lie—I found that out.

Even though he feels that he is the wicked one, not the institution of slavery, Huck embraces his “wickedness” and makes peace with it. In doing so, Huck demonstrates to Twain’s post-Emancipation readers that the right thing and the traditional thing may not be the same.

Although Huck is not above stealing for survival, he does have standards. In chapters 12 and 13, for example, he ensures that the men he overheard talking about a killing and stealing have a chance to come to justice, an action of which he is sure that the Widow Douglas, his standard for morality, would be proud.

When Huck and Jim take up with the duke and king, Huck does not mind taking part in their schemes. He does not protest about the shows they put on that sucker a village of men into paying to watch a naked, painted king prancing around. But when they claim to be the uncles of Mary Jane and her sisters and try to control their wealth, Huck takes issue with their deceit. Huck helps the men because he feels he has to, but he also feels guilty and thinks of a way for Mary Jane to retain what is rightfully hers.

**HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

**Slavery in Pre–Civil War America**

By the 1840s, the era in which *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set, the issue of slavery was
very divisive in the United States. The agrarian states of the South relied on slave labor, especially on large plantations, and did not want to give up the right to own slaves. However, only a third of white Southerners owned slaves, primarily those who were wealthy land owners. The rest of the white population in the South was generally poor, often living in conditions comparable to many slaves with little chance of advancing economically and socially. Many of them embraced slavery and racism as a way to feel superior to someone and endure their hard lives. Pressure from northern abolitionists did not change these attitudes, so every time a new territory was admitted to statehood a battle broke out between northern and southern states in the U.S. Congress.

Missouri played a prominent role in this struggle between South and North. In 1818, the territory petitioned for statehood. Members of Congress from the North protested because slavery was practiced there, putting off Missouri’s statehood for a time. It was not until Kentucky Representative Henry Clay devised a compromise in 1820 that Missouri was admitted to the Union. To keep the balance of slave and free states—and thus assure that slavery would still be allowed in the South—Clay proposed admitting Maine as a free state at the same time. Clay also put forth that slavery also not be allowed in other territories acquired with the Louisiana Purchase north or west of Missouri.

Clay’s proposal was accepted, and Missouri was admitted to the United States in 1821. Despite the compromise, new wrinkles ensued as more territories were acquired. In 1845, for example, Texas, a slave state, was annexed. The balance between slave and free states continued to be precarious in Congress. Clay continued to play a prominent role in creating compromises to avoid internal war. His Compromise of 1850 involved Congress passing the Fugitive Slave Act, which forced the return of slaves who made it to free areas of the United States to be returned to their rightful owners. In return, the western part of the United States would be free of slavery. The standoff continued until the Civil War erupted in the early 1860s.

**The Post–Civil War South**

When Twain was writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the late 1870s and early 1880s, the South was undergoing another change. As the Civil War ended in 1865 and the Confederate states surrendered to the Union, the South faced a time of physical, political, and emotional reconstruction. During Reconstruction, slavery was erased from the South and the federal government helped integrate the newly freed blacks into their new lives with increased civil rights.

While the radical reconstructionists tried to punish former Confederates in the late 1860s and early 1870s, so-called redeemers, supported by white supremacy groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, were in charge of all former Confederate states by 1877. Redeemers, often conservative Democrats, passed legislation that undermined federal Reconstruction in the South. Southern states passed laws that led to fewer political and civil rights for blacks. While public discrimination was still illegal according to an 1883 U.S. Supreme Court decision, private discrimination was legal.

Even so, blacks faced many forms of segregation and discrimination in their public lives as well. Jim Crow laws and poll taxes affected the ability of many African Americans to vote, for example. Thus thousands of blacks left the South beginning in 1877. The so-called exodusters left southern states in this time period looking for a better life in Kansas, only to encounter more racial hostility. Those blacks who remained in the South often faced conditions no better than during slavery, with many remaining poor as sharecropping farmers or domestic workers. By 1880, about 90 percent of African Americans living in the South made their living in these professions—about the same proportion as before the Civil War.

**CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is arguably the best known and most iconic novel by Twain, but it is one mired in controversy since its publication. Some writers see it as the most influential American novel, including Pulitzer and Nobel Prize–winning author Ernest Hemingway, who, in *Green Hills of Africa*, offers *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* its most well-known and enduring compliment:

> All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

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*Literary Themes for Students: The American Dream, Volume 1* 49
Others regard the novel as an unorganized mess that is highly overrated. It has been subject to bans by schools and libraries for being harmful to young readers because of its apparently racist leanings.

When *Huckleberry Finn* was originally published in 1885, the novel generally received harsh reviews from contemporaries. Famous author Louisa May Alcott was one prominent voice dismissing the book. Jonathan Yardley of the *Washington Post* quotes her as writing, “If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses, he had best stop writing for them.” The novel was also deemed unsuitable for young audiences by a number of critics and promptly banned by the public library in Concord, Massachusetts.

*Huckleberry Finn* did receive some initial positive reviews as well. Writing in London’s *Saturday Review* in 1885, Brander Matthews declares that the novel is not as good as *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but also finds that “the skill with which...
the character of Huck Finn is maintained is marvellous.” Matthews goes on to praise the character himself:

Huck Finn is a genuine boy; he is neither a girl in boy’s clothes like many of the modern heroes of juvenile fiction, nor is he a “little man,” a full-grown man cut down; he is a boy, just a boy, only a boy.

The acclaim grew louder by the twentieth century when the novel began being seen as a masterwork. Biographer Albert Bigelow Paine writes in his 1912 book *Mark Twain, a Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens*, “The story of Huck Finn will probably stand as the best of Mark Twain’s purely fictional writings. A sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, it is greater than its predecessor; greater artistically.” Focusing on Huck himself, Waldo Frank lauds the character in 1919 in *Our America*, “Huckleberry Finn is the American epic hero. Greece had Ulysses. America must be content with an illiterate lad. He expresses our germinal past. He expresses the movement of the American soul through all the sultry climaxes of the Nineteenth Century.”

While Huck Finn’s popularity reached its height by the middle of the twentieth century, some controversies still remained about the book even at century’s end. The loose structure of the novel is often considered a major flaw. Richard Lemon of *People Weekly* makes this assessment: “there’s hardly a plot worth speaking of, only a series of adventures.” One long-standing source of controversy is the way the novel ends, which in many eyes does not match the power of the rest of the book. When Huck reaches the Phelps farm and finds the family expecting his friend, Tom Sawyer, many critics find the set-up too coincidental. Also problematic for critics is the way Huck regresses in this section. Huck goes along with the elaborate, if not torturous, schemes devised by Tom to help Jim escape without much protest. For some critics, this change in Huck seems unexpected considering the way he had evolved over the course of the novel.

More controversial than the novel’s structural or stylistic shortcomings are Twain’s depictions of slavery, racism, and race relations. While many accept that Twain had anti-racist intent when he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, it is this aspect of the book that is often the source of modern day bannings. Yardley quotes John H. Wallace, a member of the Human Relations Committee of Mark Twain Intermediate School, considering a ban in 1982: “The book is poison. It is anti-American; it works against the melting-pot theory of our country; it works against the idea that all men are created equal.” The American Library Association, which tracks the number of “challenges” leveled at controversial books in libraries nationwide, lists *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as the fifth most-challenged book in libraries between 1990 and 2000.

Despite such continuing tumult and bannings, the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is still used in classrooms, and its reputation is still strong. A 1995 *Washington Post* article sums up the ongoing debate: “*Huckleberry Finn* will always attract the attentions of the bowdlerizers and the censors, and every so often some dimwitted or fainthearted school administrator will see fit to suppress it, but like the great river by and upon which it is set, it just keeps rolling along.”

**CRITICISM**

Sacvan Bercovitch

*In the following excerpt, Bercovitch examines how Twain’s novel is a watershed achievement in deadpan humor, and how that approach makes the work open for various interpretations of a hypothetical American ideal.*

Mark Twain’s humor is deadpan at its best, and *Huckleberry Finn* is his funniest book, in all three senses of the term. Accordingly, in what follows I use the terms tall tale, con man, and deadpan reciprocally, fluidly, on the grounds that Twain’s deadpan—the third, sinister, “odd or curious” sense of funny—incorporates (without submerging, indeed while deliberately drawing out) the other two forms of humor.

His method involves a drastic turnabout in deadpan effect. In order to enlist the tall tale and con game in the service of deadpan, Twain actually reverses conventional techniques. That is to say, the novel overturns the very tradition of deadpan that it builds upon. As a rule, that tradition belongs to the narrator. Huck has often been said to speak deadpan-style; but the funny thing is, he is not a humorist, not even when he’s putting someone on (as he does Aunt Sally, when he pretends to be Tom Sawyer). In fact, he rarely has fun; he’s usually “in a sweat,” and on the rare occasion when he does try to kid around (as
when he tells Jim they were not separated in the fog) the joke turns back on itself to humiliate him. Huck’s voice may be described as pseudo-deadpan; it sounds comic, but actually it’s troubled, earnest. The real deadpan artist is Mark Twain of course, and what’s remarkable, what makes for the inversion I just spoke of, is that this con man is not straight-faced (as Huck is), but smiling. To recall Twain’s distinction between the English comic story and the American humorous story, the author is wearing the Mask of Comedy. He hides his humor, we might say, behind a comic facade. The humor, a vehicle of deceit, is directed against the audience. The tale itself, however, is constantly entertaining, often musing, sometimes hilarious; apparently the storyteller is having a wonderful time, laughing through it all—and actually so are we.

So here’s the odd or curious setup of *Huckleberry Finn*: the deadpan artist is Mark Twain, wearing the Comic Mask, doing his best to conceal the fact that he suspects that there’s anything grave, let alone sinister, about his story, and he succeeds famously. Then, as we laugh, or after we’ve laughed, we may realize, if we’re alert, that there’s something we’ve overlooked. We haven’t seen what’s funny about the fact that we’ve found it funny. This artist has gulled us. He has diverted our attention away from the real point, and we have to go back over his story in order to recognize its nub.

The nature of re-cognition in this sense (understanding something all over again, doing a double take) may be simply illustrated. Consider a culture like the late nineteenth-century Southwest, which was both racist and egalitarian. The minstrel show was a genre born out of precisely that contradiction. So imagine a deadpan minstrel act that goes like this. The audience hears a funny story about a stereotype “darkie” and they smile and laugh along. The nub of course is that they are being laughed at; they’ve been taken in and made the butt of a joke. Once they see that, if they do, they understand what’s truly funny about the story, and they’re free to laugh at themselves for having laughed in the first place. That freedom may be compared to the shock of the funny bone. It’s a complex sensation, engaging all three meanings of funny, not unlike the odd tingling, vibration you feel when you’re hit on the funny bone. A light touch might mean no more than a bit of healthy fun—say, the wake-up call of the tall tale (the joke reminds you of your egalitarian principles). A sharp touch might be unnerving—a satire directed against the system at large (you recognize that this self-proclaimed egalitarian society is fundamentally racist). A direct and vicious cut would be painful, a sensation of violence, as in the sinister sense of “funny” (you realize that egalitarianism itself is a joke and that you’re a sucker for having believed in it).

Twain’s humor, to repeat, spans all three forms. *Huckleberry Finn* is the apotheosis of American deadpan, a masterfully coordinated synthesis of all three layers of the meaning of funny, with the emphasis on the sinister. It is worth remarking that the novel is unique in this regard. Twain achieved this feat only once. His earlier works are rarely sinister, not even when they’re brimful of violence, as in *Roughing It* (1872), or for that matter *Tom Sawyer* (1876). His later works are rarely funny, not even when they’re brimful of jokes, as in *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (1892) or the tales of

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**Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**

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**The Confluence of the Mississippi and Red Rivers is shown in this hand-drawn map from a French manuscript, 1766 © Corbis**
terror collected posthumously as The Great Dark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is Twain's greatest synthetic work, incorporating every stage of his development as "America's Humorist," from the unalloyed cheer of "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" through the fierce satire of The Gilded Age to the David Lynch—(or Robert Crum—) like world of "The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburgh" Twain's mode of coordination in Huckleberry Finn, the dialectic behind his fantastic synthesis, is a drastic reversal of effect: the deadpan artist with the Comic Mask. And the procession of nubs or snappers he delivers constitutes the most severe shocks in our literature to the American funny bone.

As Huck tells the story we come to feel that his conscience is the object of Twain's expose. It's conscience that makes Huck a racist, conscience that keeps leading him astray, and we interpret his conscience, properly, as an indictment of the values of the antebellum Southwest. But there was no need in 1885 to indict slave society. Primarily Twain's deadpan is directed against his readership, then and later, even unto our own time—against, that is, the conscience-driven forms of liberal interpretation. To a certain extent, his project here reflects the frontier sources of tall-tale humor that I quoted at the start of this essay: the storyteller's "pleasure in dethroning the condescension of gentility at the thickly settled Eastern core, while at the same time reproducing the radical discrepancies and incongruities at the root of all American experience," Eastern-intellectual as well as roughneck-Southwest. What better, and more cutting, way to accomplish these ends than to get the Eastern gentility to identify condescendingly with this con-man's outcast-redneck hero?

And it's precisely in this sense, I submit, that a distinct liberal theme permeates the discourse about the novel, a critical main current that runs through virtually all sides of the argument (provided that the critic does not dogmatically, foolishly, condemn the book for being racist). To judge from a century of Twain experts, Huck is "self-reliant," "an Adamic innocent," "exemplifying the... strong and wholesome [individual that]... springs from... the great common stock," exemplifying too the heroics of "the private man... [for whom] the highest form of freedom [resides in]... each man's and each woman's consciousness of what is right," and thereby, in its absolute "liberation," "ultimately transcending even anarchy as confinement"—in sum, an independent spirit," "the affirmation of adventure," "enterprise," and "movement," the soul of "tolerance," and common sense." More than that: Huck and Jim on the raft have been taken as an emblem of the ideal society. In contrast to the settlements, they represent the "spiritual values" of "individualism compatible with community"—not just the proof of "Twain's commitment to black civil rights" (and his appeal to "compensate" the blacks on "the national level" for "injuries" done them during the slavery era), but his summons to the "cause of freedom" in general. Huck and Jim together forecast "a redeeming hope for the future health of society"; they stand for the very "pinnacle of human community"; they provide "a utopian pattern of all human relationships." Critics have reiterated these "great redemptive fact[s] about the book" over and again, with what can only be called reflexive adoration. As Jonathan Arac observes, "it is as if we' uttered in self-congratulation: 'Americans have spiritually solved any problems involved in blacks and whites living together as free human beings and we had already done so by the 1880s.'" I would add that, beyond smugness, what this attests to is the process of interpretation as self-acculturation—a striking example of what I called the literary enterprise of socialization, in compliance with the charge bequeathed to "teachers of American literature" (society's "special custodians"), to inculcate the values of "enterprise, individualism, self-reliance, and the demand for freedom."

More interesting still, this process of interpretation reveals just how socialization works. The abstractions I've just rehearsed are admittedly "American ideals" but they are applied as universals, as though Huck represented not just what America but what all humanity ought to be. Thus a particular cultural vision—individualism, initiative, enterprise, and above all personal freedom ("What Huckleberry Finn is about is the process... of setting a man free")—becomes a sweeping moral imperative. And as moral imperative it is then reinstated, restored as it were from heaven to earth, from utopian "alternative world" to actual geographical space, as a definition of the quintessential American. As Norman Podhoretz, editor of the conservative journal Commentary, has written: "Sooner or later, all discussions of Huckleberry Finn turn into discussions of America." Or in the words of the late Irving Howe, writing in his leftwing journal Dissent: "Huck is not only the most American boy in our own literature, he is also the character
with whom most American readers have most deeply identified.” Or once again, according to the centrist Americanist scholar Eric Sundquist, *Huckleberry Finn* is “an autobiographical journey into the past” that tells the great “story of a nation.” Harold Bloom accurately summarizes the tone of his collection of “best critical essays” on the novel when he remarks that the “book tells a story which most Americans need to believe is a true representation of the way things were, are, and yet might be.”

That “need to believe,” is the core of the “American humor” of *Huckleberry Finn*. It may be true that in its magnificent colloquialism the novel marks “America’s literary declaration of independence...” But as a deadpan declaration the model it presents is, mockingly, the illusion of independence. It reveals our imprisonment within what Lewis Hyde, in his sweeping overview of the Trickster figure, calls the “joints” of culture. For Hyde, this concept involves a heroic view of the possibilities of interpretation. He pictures the Trickster’s cultural work in physiological terms, as an assault upon the vulnerable parts of the social body, most tellingly its “flexible or movable” joints, where variant spheres of society (home, school, church, job) intersect. At these anatomical weak points, he writes, Tricksters come most vividly to life, unsettling the system, transgressing boundaries, exposing conflicts and contradictions—thus freeing us, he contends, as sympathetic interpreters of their subversion, from social constraints. If so, Mark Twain is a kind of laughing anti-trickster. It’s not just that he’s mocking the tricksters in the novel: Tom, the Duke and King, Huck himself. It’s that he’s mocking our would-be capacities for Trickster criticism. What’s funny about our interpretation of the novel—both of the narrative and of its autobiographical hero—is that what begins as our independent assessment, and often our oppositional perspective, leads us happily, of our own free will, into the institutions of our colonizing culture.

Thus it was all but inevitable that in our multicultural era, Huck should be discovered to be (in addition to everything else that’s positively American) multicultural. This is not the place to discuss Huck’s blackness—or for that matter the possibility of his ethnic Irish-Americanness—but it’s pertinent here as elsewhere to recall Twain’s warning that interpretation may be a trap of culture. He speaks abundantly of the nature of that trap in his later writings—in letters to friends, for example, reprimanding them for presuming that “there is still dignity in man,” whereas the plain fact is that “Man is... an April-fool joke played by a malicious Creator with nothing better to waste his time upon”; and in essays protesting that he has “no race prejudices... nor color prejudices, nor creed prejudices... I can stand any society. All that I need to know is that a man is a human being; that is enough for me; he can’t be any worse”; and in journals documenting how “history, in all climes, all ages, and all circumstances, furnishes oceans and continents of proof that of all creatures that were made he [man] is the most detestable... below the rats, the grubs, the trichinae... There are certain sweet-smelling, sugarcoated lies current in the world... One of these... is that there is heroism in human life: that he is not mainly made up of malice and treachery; that he is sometimes not a coward; that there is something about him that ought to be perpetuated.” In his posthumously published novel, *The Mysterious Stranger*, Twain exposes the nub itself—lays bare the mechanism of the trap of hope. Here his stand-in deadpan artist, Satan, pairs up with a poor-white, innocent, sound-hearted little boy, a boy not unlike Huck—befriends him and conjures up for him a variety of alluring spectacles and promises, only to reveal, at the end, the absurdity of each one of them. “You perceive now,” Satan declares, that it “is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream.” And then the boy’s epiphany: “He vanished, and left me appalled: for I knew, and realized, that all that he had said was true.”

That’s the humorous point of *Huckleberry Finn*, if we’re alert. The novel’s underlying moral and motive, its deadpan plot, is that this grand flight to freedom—black and white together, the individual regenerated by nature—was all a dream. Not a grotesque dream, to be sure, but a foolish one because it is a dream that befools. Recall the image of the novel with which critical tradition has left us. The plot is a river story, the style is a flow of humor, and our interpretation is a raft that promises protection (from conscience, from civilization, from all the slings and arrows of outrageous adulthood). Now consider the facts. The river keeps returning us again and again and yet again to the settlements, the raft proves to be a con-man haven, and on this “raft of trouble,” on
this river that betrays and kills, we’re left with two mock-symbolic figures. One is Huck Finn, bondslave to society, mostly scared to death, speaking a language we don’t trust, and (as Pap puts it, in a drunken flash of insight) an Angel of Death. The other is Jim, the fugitive black who need never have run off, and who leads Huck into what Jim himself, early in the novel, calls the Black Angel’s hell’s-pact. So the nub is: the Angel of Death and the Black Angel, on a deadpan raft-to-freedom, drifting deeper and deeper into slave territory. It makes for a savagely funny obituary to the American dream.


**SOURCES**


