Mark Twain’s classic *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is told from the point of view of Huck Finn, a barely literate teen who fakes his own death to escape his abusive, drunken father. He encounters a runaway slave named Jim, and the two embark on a raft journey down the Mississippi River. Through satire, Twain skewers the somewhat unusual definitions of “right” and “wrong” in the antebellum (pre–Civil War) South, noting among other things that the “right” thing to do when a slave runs away is to turn him in, not help him escape. Twain also paints a rich portrait of a the slave Jim, a character unequaled in American literature: he is guileless, rebellious, genuine, superstitious, warmhearted, ignorant, and astute all at the same time.

The book is a sequel to another of the author’s successful adventure novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, originally published in 1876. Although *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is very much a “boys’ novel”—humorous, suspenseful, and intended purely as entertainment—*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also addresses weighty issues such as slavery, prejudice, hypocrisy, and morality.

After Twain finished writing the first half of the novel, he expressed doubts about the book’s potential success. In a letter to his friend William Dean Howells in 1877 (quoted by biographer Ron Powers in *Mark Twain: A Life*), Twain confessed: “I like it only tolerably well, as far as
I have got, & may possibly pigeonhole or burn the MS [manuscript] when it is done.''
Fortunately, Twain did not burn the manuscript; when it was published in England in 1884 (U.S. publication 1885), it quickly became the most successful book Twain had yet written.

Soon after it was published, the public library in Concord, Massachusetts, refused to carry *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because of its perceived crudeness. This ban turned into a publicity coup for Twain and his book. In a letter published in the *Hartford Courant*, the author responds gratefully, noting that “one book in a public library prevents the sale of a sure ten and a possible hundred of its mates.” Twain also notes that the library’s newsworthy action will cause the purchasers of the book to read it, out of curiosity, instead of merely intending to do so … and then they will discover, to my great advantage and their own indignant disappointment, that there is nothing objectionable in the book after all.

Despite Twain’s assurances, the book continues to spark controversy over its subject matter even today. Some modern critics argue that the book is inherently racist in its depiction of Jim and its frequent use of the term “nigger.” Other critics, speaking in support of the book, point out that the terms used in the book are authentic to the story’s setting; they also point out that Jim is by far the most heroic character in the novel, and is the only major character to demonstrate kindness and self-sacrifice without hesitation. The book has generated so much critical material that a special edition containing both the novel and several important essays was published by Bedford Books in 1995 under the title *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*, edited by Gerald Graff and James Phelan.

Despite the controversy surrounding the book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is widely recognized as Twain’s masterpiece, and is often identified as “the Great American Novel.” Respected writers such as William Faulkner and T. S. Eliot have written of the book’s importance to American literature. And although critics have been divided on the book’s...
merits since its first publication, Pulitzer and Nobel Prize–winning author Ernest Hemingway, in *Green Hills of Africa*, offers *The 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.

PLOT SUMMARY

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which takes place along the Mississippi River sometime in the 1830s or 1840s, begins with two brief statements to the reader that appear before Chapter 1; both of these display Twain’s trademark sense of humor. In the first, under the heading “Notice,” Twain warns readers against attempting to find any sort of deep meaning in the book. He lists different punishments for readers who seek motive, moral, or plot within the narrative. The second, called “Explanatory,” assures readers that the dialects used by different characters in the book are based on real regional dialects, and have been researched thoroughly. As Twain notes, “I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.”

Chapters 1–3

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is written as a first-person narrative from the point of view of the title character, Huckleberry (or Huck) Finn. Huck addresses the reader directly throughout the work, and occasionally refers to events that occurred in one of Twain’s previous works, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, in which Huck was a supporting character. Of the previous book, Huck notes, “That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly.”

Huck picks up his story where it left off in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: he and Tom, two boys who live on the Mississippi River in the Missouri town of St. Peters burg, found a large amount of gold left by robbers in a cave. The money—amounting to six thousand dollars each—has been put in the care of Judge Thatcher, who gives the boys interest earnings in the amount of one dollar each day. Huck has been unofficially adopted by the Widow Douglas (to the apparent dismay of her sister Miss Watson), who hopes to transform the rough-edged boy into a forthright young man. For Huck, such a life is too restrictive; as he puts it, “All I wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change.”

One night Tom Sawyer shows up to take Huck to a secret meeting with some other boys;
as they sneak away from the house, one of Miss Watson’s slaves—Jim—hears the boys, who carefully evade him. Tom takes the group of boys to a cave along the river. He plans to start a gang of highway robbers to terrorize the local roadways, killing and ransoming the men travelers and kidnapping the women—who, according to the plan, would eventually fall in love with them. The group discusses the logistics of such an operation, including what a “ransom” is and what happens when the robbers’ cave becomes overfilled with kidnapped women and men waiting to be ransomed. Soon enough, Huck realizes that Tom’s gang of robbers is only meant to engage in pretend robberies; this disappoints him, though he still plays along. Tom also tells Huck how to summon a genie from a tin lamp; Huck later tries this without success, and decides “all that stuff was only just one of Tom Sawyer’s lies.”

**Chapters 4–6**

Over the next several months, Huck becomes accustomed to his life with Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. He even starts growing fond of school. One morning, Huck finds tracks in the snow outside the widow’s house; he is certain they belong to his father, called Pap, an abusive drunk whom Huck has not seen for over a year. Huck immediately visits Judge Thatcher and gives up his fortune to keep his father from getting hold of it, selling it to the judge for a single dollar.

Huck returns to his room one night to find Pap waiting for him. 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.” Then Pap takes Huck’s only dollar to buy whisky.

Pap visits Judge Thatcher in an attempt to get at Huck’s money. Thatcher and Widow Douglas try to secure legal guardianship of Huck, but the judge who hears the case is not willing to “interfere” and officially break up Huck’s “family.” Later, the same judge takes Pap into his home in an attempt to help him straighten his life out. Pap promises to reform, but he continues to drink and gets kicked out of the judge’s house.

Pap persists in his legal fight for Huck’s money, and occasionally beats his son for continuing to attend school. As Huck states, “I didn’t want to go to school much, before, but I reckoned I’d go now to spite pap.” Eventually, Pap snatches Huck and takes him to a secluded log cabin on the Illinois side of the Mississippi River, where he keeps the boy against his will. Kept away from the widow, Huck soon returns to his comfortable old ways, wearing rags for clothes, smoking, and swearing. Pap beats him regularly, however, and Huck waits for a chance to escape.

**Chapters 7–9**

One morning, while checking some fishing lines, Huck spots an empty canoe drifting down the river. He hides the canoe to help when he makes his escape. Later that day, Pap leaves for town, and Huck sees his chance. He stages the cabin so it appears that someone has broken in and killed him, and that his body is somewhere in the river. This, he believes, will keep Pap and Widow Douglas from trying to track him down. He takes the canoe, stocked with some food and tools, to a heavily wooded island in the middle of the river called Jackson’s Island.

The next morning, Huck wakes to the sound of cannon fire; he sees smoke near the ferryboat upriver, and figures out what is happening. “You see, they was firing cannon over the water, trying to make my carcass come to the top.” The ferry draws closer to the island, and Huck sees many people he knows aboard it, including Pap, Judge Thatcher, and Tom Sawyer. Once the ferry departs, Huck knows they will not return.

After a few days of camping and fishing, Huck finds evidence of others nearby. He leaves for a different part of the island, and is surprised when he sees Miss Watson’s slave Jim camped alone in the woods. Huck approaches, but Jim—thinking Huck has died—is terrified by what he assumes to be Huck’s ghost. Huck explains how he escaped from Pap’s cabin, and asks why Jim is out in the woods. Jim tells Huck that he ran off when he heard Miss Watson was planning to sell him to a slave trader from New Orleans. Huck promises not to tell Jim’s secret to anybody.

Huck and Jim find a large cavern in the center of the island, and decide it would make a suitable camp protected from the elements. One night, they see a frame house drifting down along the river; they row the canoe out to it and climb inside, where they find a dead man who has been shot in the back. Jim covers the dead man’s face and tells Huck not to look at it.
The two also find some supplies in the house, including some knives, candles, and a hatchet, which they gather up and take with them.

**Chapters 10–12**

One evening, Huck finds a rattlesnake in the cave and kills it; as a prank, he leaves it in Jim’s bed to find later that night. When Jim gets in bed, however, he finds not just the dead rattlesnake but also its live mate, which bites him. It takes four days for Jim to recover.

Huck, feeling anxious for excitement, decides to put on a dress and bonnet—found when they scavenged the drifting house—and go ashore, pretending to be a girl. He comes upon a shanty occupied by a woman he has never seen before, and knocks on the door.

Pretending to be a girl named Sarah Williams, Huck listens as the woman tells him about the latest news in town: Huck Finn has been killed, and Miss Watson’s slave Jim is the main suspect since he disappeared the very night after Huck did. A three-hundred-dollar reward has been offered for the apprehension of Jim, and the woman’s husband is part of a group of men preparing to search Jackson Island for the fugitive slave. During the course of the conversation, the woman realizes that “Sarah” is actually a boy, and confronts him. Huck invents a new lie, calling himself George Peters, and manages to earn the woman’s sympathy as well as a snack for the road. Huck hurries back to the island and warns Jim about the coming search party.

Huck and Jim set off from the island and continue down the Mississippi River, passing St. Louis and other towns along the way. One stormy night, they spot a steamboat wrecked on some rocks. Huck convinces Jim to board it and see if they can find anything worth taking. Once on board, Huck clandestinely discovers three criminals are already on the wreck; two of them have the third tied up, with the intention of leaving him to die. Huck tells Jim they should set the criminals’ boat adrift and escape themselves, but Jim informs him that their own raft has broken loose and drifted away.

**Chapters 13–15**

Huck and Jim search the perimeter of the wrecked steamer in search of the criminals’ boat. They find it, and as soon as the opportunity presents itself they hop in and cut it loose. Afterward, Huck feels bad about leaving the criminals aboard the sinking wreck; not wanting to be responsible for anyone’s death, even thieves and murderers, he decides to stop downriver and let someone know there are people trapped aboard the wrecked steamer. Huck and Jim catch up to their raft and reclaim it. Soon after, Huck spots a ferryboat and approaches the captain with a tale about a horse-ferry getting snagged on the wrecked steamboat. He tells the captain that his family is stuck on the sinking wreck. As the ferryboat heads off to help, Huck feels proud of this good deed:

> I wished the widow knowed about it. I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rascallons, because rascallons and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people takes the most interest in.

Soon after, Huck sees the wreck of the steamer floating downstream, with no sign of survivors. He feels bad for the gang of criminals, but quickly recovers. He and Jim sort through the plunder the criminals had stashed in their boat, finding cigars, books, blankets, and clothes, among other things. As they smoke the cigars, the two discuss the lives of kings, particularly King Solomon and the “dolphin” (Dauphin, the heir to the French throne), a boy who had been destined to become the king of France but either died or went into hiding after the French Revolution to avoid execution.

Huck and Jim continue down the river, trying to reach a town called Cairo, where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi; there, they hope to proceed up the Ohio River on a steamboat to reach one of the “free states” where Jim would no longer be considered a slave. They get stuck in a fog bank and become separated, with Jim on the raft and Huck in a canoe. When Huck finally catches up with Jim—who has fallen asleep—he wakes Jim and plays a prank on him, convincing Jim that he must have dreamed up the whole separation. When Huck reveals his prank, Jim, who had been overjoyed to see Huck again, gets upset; he had considered Huck his friend and had been worried about him, but Huck’s only interest was in making Jim look like a fool. After thinking it over, Huck apologizes to Jim.

**Chapters 16–18**

As they continue on their search for Cairo, Huck begins to question the morality of his own actions. He is, after all, helping a slave escape his owner—an action Huck sees as a betrayal to the owner. Still, when a group of men approaches Huck looking for runaway slaves,
Huck protects Jim by keeping the men away from the raft; he hints to the men that his father is on the raft, and that he has smallpox.

Huck and Jim soon realize that they have drifted far south of Cairo and the Ohio River. Since taking the raft against the current is impossible, they devise a plan to canoe back upriver during the night in search of Cairo; however, they find their canoe has disappeared. As they drift downriver looking for someone willing to sell them a canoe, their raft is struck by a steamboat headed upriver; the two are separated, and Huck struggles to shore.

Huck falls into the company of the Grangerford family, who take him in (Huck tells them his name is George Jackson). Huck soon discovers that the Grangerfords are in the midst of a feud with another local family, the Shepherdsons. Huck also discovers—through the family’s slaves—that Jim is alive and well, and that their old raft is still seaworthy. Before Huck can leave the Grangerfords, though, the feud between the families explodes: daughter Sophia Grangerford runs away with Harney Sheperdson to get married, and neither family approves. This culminates in a gunfight between the two families, and Buck Grangerford—youngest of the clan, and Huck’s closest friend in the family—is killed. Huck escapes the trouble, finds Jim, and they continue down the river.

**Chapters 19–21**

As Huck searches for berries near the shore one day, two men run toward him and beg Huck to help them reach safety, saying a search party of men and dogs is after them. Huck takes the two back to the raft, where they reveal their stories: the two are con men, each running a different racket, who happened across each other during their separate escapes from angry townspeople. The two men try to outdo each other with their stories. The younger man claims to be the rightful Duke of Bridgewater, while the older claims to be none other than the now-elderly Dauphin, the rightful heir to the throne of France. Each of the men asks for special, “royal” treatment from the other, and Huck and Jim end up acting as servants for both. Huck eventually admits to the reader that he knows the men are not really royalty (though he refers to them as “the duke” and “the king” throughout the rest of the book), but he plays along just to keep things peaceful.

Huck tells the two inquisitive con men that Jim is his family’s slave, and that he and Jim are on their way to live with Huck’s uncle south of New Orleans. The group reaches a small town, and finds the entire population away at a prayer meeting; the duke helps himself to the local printing office, earning some cash and printing flyers that advertise Jim as a runaway slave from a plantation near New Orleans. By showing the flyer, the group is free to travel the river during the day as well as night; if anyone inquires about Jim, they can say he is a runaway slave who has already been caught.

**Chapters 22–24**

The duke and the king continue to ply their trade as they move along the river, posing as distinguished actors and swindling locals out of the admission to their show; they always manage to stay one step ahead of the angry townspeople. Then the con men hear of an inheritance yet to be claimed by a local dead man’s distant brothers, and decide to pose as the two brothers so they can get the inheritance.

The men show up at the village posing as Harvey and William Wilks, brothers to Peter Wilks, who is deceased. Harvey, played by the king, affects an English accent, while William—played by the duke—pretends to be a deaf-mute. Huck acts as their servant, while Jim stays at the raft.

**Chapters 25–27**

The two “Wilks brothers” are welcomed by the townspeople, including Peter Wilks’s three nieces, Mary Jane, Susan, and Joanna. Mary Jane gives the king a letter revealing the location of Peter’s hidden fortune, which amounts to nearly six thousand dollars that is to be left to the nieces. The girls entrust the fortune to their new uncles. Huck, who has grown fond of the girls, decides he will not let the con men steal their inheritance, and steals it back from the duke and the king. He is almost caught, and in a panic he drops the money into the deceased Peter’s coffin.

The con men auction off the Wilks family’s slaves, and then discover that the inheritance money is missing. Huck shrewdly suggests that the slaves stole the money, and were now beyond the reach of the con men. The duke and the king believe him.

**Chapters 28–30**

As the con men prepare to auction off the rest of Peter Wilks’s property for cash, Huck
realizes—much to his consternation—that the only way to help the girls is to tell Mary Jane the truth, even though telling the truth seems to him “so kind of strange and unregular.” He tells her everything, including where he left the money.

Just as the duke and the king finish selling off the Wilks estate, two men arrive in town claiming to be the real Harvey and William Wilks. Unsure whom to believe, the townspeople grab Huck and the con men until the matter is sorted out. Peter’s coffin is exhumed—part of a test to determine which set of Wilks brothers can identify a tattoo on Peter’s chest—and the townspeople discover the money inside the coffin. In the excitement, Huck escapes from the crowd and makes his way back to the raft. As he and Jim start off down the river, the duke and king catch up and board the raft.

Chapters 31–33
The king and the duke, desperate for money, spend their time huddled in secret conversations. Meanwhile, Huck and Jim plan to leave the two con men behind as soon as the opportunity arises. At one stop, Huck slips free of the king and the duke in a town and runs back to the raft, hoping to escape with Jim. When he arrives, Jim is nowhere to be found. He discovers that the king and the duke have sold Jim off to locals as a runaway slave; by presenting the fake flyer the duke had printed—the one offering a two-hundred-dollar reward for Jim—they sell their “rights” to Jim for forty dollars in cash. In this way, the duke and the king manage to swindle the locals and betray Huck and Jim.

Huck debates what he should do; he knows that “the right thing and the clean thing” is to write a letter to Miss Watson, telling her the location of her runaway slave. However, when he thinks of what a great friend Jim has been, he decides to follow the path of “wickedness” and help Jim escape. As Huck surveys the Phelps farm, where Jim is being held, he is spotted by one of the family’s slaves and is mistaken for a visiting nephew. Huck plays along, and soon discovers that the “nephew” he is impersonating is none other than Tom Sawyer. Tom’s Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas welcome the boy into their home as their nephew.

Huck manages to intercept the real Tom Sawyer before he reaches the Phelps farm, and after convincing Tom that he is not a ghost, explains the whole situation to him. Tom is thrilled at the prospect of adventure; not only does Tom pretend to be Sid Sawyer (since the Phelpses have already met “Tom”), but he also agrees to help Huck free Jim.

Chapters 34–39
Tom and Huck come up with plans to set Jim free. Huck’s plan is straightforward and simple, which is why Tom objects: “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 classic adventure novel, deliberately avoiding any easy or obvious solutions. For example, instead of lifting up the leg of the bed to slip Jim’s chain off, Tom insists they saw through the leg of the bed—and that only after Huck convinces him that sawing through Jim’s leg is not a viable option. Instead of using the door to escape Jim’s cabin prison, Tom decides they will tunnel their way out.

Tom and Huck fill Jim’s cabin with snakes, rats, and spiders to make his prison more dire, and continue working on equally absurd things like a rope-ladder that will never be used and a “warning letter” to tell Uncle Silas of impending trouble. Aunt Sally notices that items such as shirts and spoons are disappearing from the household, but does not suspect that Tom and Huck are using them for any big escapade.

Chapter 40–42
On the night of the escape, Uncle Silas brings additional men to guard Jim’s cabin, but Jim and the boys slip out through the tunnel and head for the woods. They are spotted, and some of the men open fire. Although they escape, Tom is shot in the calf and needs a doctor. Instead of running away to safety, Jim insists on staying with Tom while Huck gets a doctor. However, Huck gets trapped back at the Phelpses’ before the doctor returns. Eventually the doctor, Tom—still ill from his wound—and Jim all show up at the farm. The doctor tells everyone that Jim “ain’t a bad nigger,” and that he helped the doctor treat Tom’s wound even though he knew staying would cost him his freedom.

When Tom recovers the next morning, he tells Aunt Sally all about their plan to free Jim—not knowing that Jim has been recaptured. Tom objects, and reveals that Miss Watson, Jim’s former owner, died two months before; in her will, she stipulated that Jim be set free. When asked why he would go through so much trouble to set a free man free, Tom says he “wanted the
adventure of it.” At that moment, Tom’s Aunt Polly appears at the Phelps farm and reveals the true identities of “Sid” and “Tom.” She also confirms that Jim is a free man.

Huck makes two important discoveries. Tom tells him that Judge Thatcher is still holding Huck’s money for him, all six thousand dollars and more. Then Jim confesses to Huck that the dead man he saw in the frame house floating down the river, so many weeks before, was actually Huck’s father.

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

Slavery

Slavery is one of the key thematic elements in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The novel takes place in Missouri in the 1830s or 1840s, at a time when Missouri was considered a slave state. Soon after Huck fakes his own death, he partners with Jim, a runaway slave from the household where Huck used to live. Although the book purports to be about Huck’s “adventures,” the story is driven by Jim’s attempt to achieve freedom and safety for himself, and ultimately for his wife and children. Huck is, in a sense, just along for the journey; however, it is Huck’s perspective on Jim’s struggle that allows the author to address the topic of slavery in a unique and entertaining way.

By telling the story from the point of view of a young white man raised amid slavery, Twain looks at the issue from an entirely different viewpoint than previous writers: while Huck almost never fails to do the “right” thing in the eyes of the reader, 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 Abiliationist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell.”

As Jim believes he is close to achieving his own freedom, his thoughts turn toward saving
his family from slavery. Huck is shocked by Jim’s plans, which he relates to the reader:

He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn’t sell them, they’d get an Ab’litionist to go and steal them.

The issue of slavery plays a part in the most important events in the book: Jim runs away because he believes he will be sold to a slave trader and separated from his family; Huck lies to people he meets to hide the fact that Jim is a runaway slave; the king turns Jim in as a run-away slave—not knowing Jim actually is one—just to con some locals for cash; Tom and Huck help Jim escape his captors so he can again try for his freedom; Jim forfeits his freedom in order to help keep Tom alive; and finally, the pair realize that all their running and scheming was in vain because Jim is a free man after all.

Dehumanization

In The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, blacks are subject to dehumanizing treatment from nearly every white character in the book. This is not inconsistent with a tale set in the pre–Civil War South, where blacks were routinely viewed as property above all else. Indeed, one of Huck’s primary inner conflicts deals with his “wicked” impulses to treat Jim as more than just someone’s property. Additionally, Jim’s escape is prompted when Miss Watson considers selling him off to a slave trader despite the fact that Jim has served her well and she knows that such an action would separate Jim from his family.

One notable example of the white characters’ disregard for black characters’ humanity occurs in Chapter 32, when Huck shows up at the Phelps residence pretending to be Tom Sawyer. Huck, speaking to Aunt Sally, invents a mechanical problem that held up the boat he supposedly traveled on:

“It warn’t the grounding—that didn’t keep us back but a little. We blewed a cylinder-head.”

“Good gracious! anybody hurt?”

“No’m. Killed a nigger.”

“Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.”

Prejudice

Throughout the novel, the white characters operate under the belief that Jim—because he is black—simply cannot comprehend certain concepts and explanations. Huck in particular comments on numerous occasions about Jim’s inability to understand the way the world works. The recurring irony in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is that the white characters frequently have an inaccurate or even absurd view of how the world works themselves.

Twain uses this device to great comic effect by showing that Jim often has more common sense or cleverness than the other characters in the book, though prejudice prevents the other characters from seeing it. For example, when Huck tries to explain to Jim why it is natural for French people to speak a different language, Jim takes Huck’s own flawed logic and turns it on its head, “proving” that it makes no sense at all for French people to speak a different language. Huck fails to even acknowledge that Jim has outwitted him, stating simply, “I see it warn’t no use wasting words—you can’t learn a nigger to argue.”

Similarly, in Chapter 35, Tom ponders whether or not they should saw through Jim’s leg for the planned escape—not because it is necessary, but because he has read of such things in adventure books. Eventually Tom decides,
“There ain’t necessity enough in this case; and besides, Jim’s a nigger and wouldn’t understand the reasons for it, and how it’s the custom in Europe; so we’ll let it go.”

Even when Jim is recognized for his commendable actions, as in Chapter 42, prejudice still taints the acknowledgment he receives. When Tom is shot during the attempt to free Jim, Jim decides he will not leave Tom until a doctor has treated him, even though such an act will probably cost Jim his freedom. When Jim says this, Huck tells the reader he knows Jim is actually “white inside”; the implication in Huck’s words is that only a white person could show such kindness and consideration for another person. And though any white person who had been instrumental in helping to save Tom’s life would have been hailed as a hero, the doctor’s praise is limited to simply letting everyone know that Jim “ain’t no bad nigger.”

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

**The Missouri Compromise**

The Missouri Compromise, also known as the Compromise of 1820, was an agreement reached between antislavery legislators from the North and pro-slavery legislators from the South. In this agreement, Missouri was allowed to enter the Union as a slave state, but all other territories north of Missouri’s southern border were forbidden from practicing slavery.

By 1820, the issue of slavery was becoming an incendiary topic in the United States. Many people in the North felt that the practice violated the basic tenets of a free country. Many in the South, who relied heavily on slave labor to support industries critical to the country as a whole, disagreed. States began to establish their own laws regarding slavery, and quickly split into two groups: “free states,” which comprised the northern half of the country, and “slave states,” which made up the southern half.

In 1819, Alabama was officially admitted to the United States as a slave state; this made the total number of free and slave states equal. When Missouri sought statehood, some lawmakers from the North insisted that the Missouri state constitution include language forbidding the practice of slavery. Many lawmakers from the South felt that new states, like all previous states, should be free to decide—without federal intervention—whether or not to allow slavery. When Maine was admitted as a free state in 1820, a compromise was proposed: Missouri would be admitted as a slave state, but all other territories north of Missouri’s southern border would be forbidden from joining the country as slave states. (These territories included what would eventually become Kansas, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas.)

The Missouri Compromise, like most effective compromises, was not popular with lawmakers on either side of the issue. Charles Richard Johnson, in *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery*, expresses a view common in the North: “The Missouri Compromise temporarily calmed the sectional rift but did nothing to resolve the problem of an immoral system in a society that stressed its morality.” Former President Thomas Jefferson, however, supported the southern point of view that the compromise violated a state’s ability to make its own laws; in a personal letter, currently archived at the Library of Congress, Jefferson expressed his doubts about what the Missouri Compromise would ultimately accomplish:

> A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived [sic] and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper.

Although Jefferson’s dire prediction eventually came true, the Missouri Compromise served as a crude yet effective way to address the divisive issue of slavery in the United States for nearly forty years. Indeed, it was not until the *Dred Scott* case in 1857—in which the Missouri Compromise was ruled unconstitutional—that the rift over slavery would finally split the country into two factions poised for war.

**Slavery along the Mississippi River**

In the early 1800s, the Mississippi River and its tributaries served as the primary trade route for the western portion of the United States. The river ran south from Canada through “free states” such as Iowa before flowing through the “slave states” of the South like Missouri, where *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* takes place. With the advent of the steam-powered riverboat, trade became possible not just from north to south—following the current of the river—but also against the current from south to north. New Orleans became an important port for supplying slaves to plantations and farms located on the fertile lands along the Mississippi River in states such as Arkansas, Mississippi, and Missouri.
In *Black Life on the Mississippi: Slaves, Free Blacks, and the Western Steamboat World*, Thomas C. Buchanan reveals that this era of two-way river traffic also meant that runaway slaves from the South could use the Mississippi River as a means of escaping north, where they would be considered free. As Buchanan puts it, “Riverboats connected city and country, North and South, slavery and freedom.” Many slaves were used as workers on steamboats; according to Buchanan, “Imprecise steamboat schedules and the crowds at levee districts made slaves’ off-the-boat freedoms possible. With boats circulating in and out of ports, slaves were able to elude masters and agents.”

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, escaped slave Jim hopes to raft down the Mississippi River to its junction with the Ohio River. From there, according to Huck, “We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble.” (Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from Missouri, was also technically a free state, but the white population was often both sympathetic to their slave-holding neighbors and hostile to free blacks.) This type of journey was not uncommon for slaves hoping to reach freedom.

**Race Relations in Missouri Before and During the Civil War**

Though *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* takes place decades before the Civil War, Twain wrote the book in the mid-1880s. The intervening fifty years saw many changes in race relations in the state of Missouri, some of which had consequences that affected the entire country.

While Missouri was classified as a slave state in 1820, it was not a region with a long history of slavery. White settlement of Missouri was still fairly new at the time, and the slave-dependent “plantation way of life” of the Deep South was not well established there. Still, Missouri became home to a court case many believe directly led to the Civil War: *Dred Scott v. Sanford*.

In 1857, a slave named Dred Scott sued for his freedom after his original owner died. Scott had lived for many years in Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, both of which were considered free regions without slavery; however, Scott had ultimately been brought back to the slave state of Missouri. After a lower Missouri court found in favor of Scott, the case was eventually appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court ruled against Scott, stating that he was property belonging to his former master’s estate. The backlash from this ruling mobilized antislavery advocates throughout the northern United States, further polarizing North and South and leading indirectly to the secession of the Confederate South and the Civil War.

During the Civil War, Missouri was a “border state” that separated the antislavery Union from the pro-sovereignty Confederacy; though Missouri was considered a slave state prior to the war, its citizens voted to remain a part of the Union. In fact, the state was claimed as an ally by both sides during the war, and developed two governments: one favoring the Union, and one favoring the Confederacy. Although Missouri was very much a state divided, majority sentiment remained with the Union. As Eric Foner notes in his book *A Short History of Reconstruction*, Missouri was one of the border states that “underwent internal reconstructions that brought to power new classes anxious to overturn slavery and revolutionize state politics.”

**CRITICAL OVERVIEW**

When *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884, Mark Twain was already a very successful writer. However, his popularity did not always translate to favorable reviews from critics who questioned the true literary merits of his “humorous” works.

Upon its publication, the book enjoyed the best initial sales of any of Twain’s books; according to biographer Ron Powers, writing in *Mark Twain: A Life*, the first edition of the novel continued to be printed for six years. An unnamed reviewer for *Athenaeum* boldly agrees with the reading public, stating that “the book is Mark Twain at his best.” Brander Matthews, writing for London’s *Saturday Review*, notes, “Although it is a sequel, it is quite as worthy of wide popularity as *Tom Sawyer*.” Matthews also remarks that “the essential simplicity and kindliness and generosity of the Southern negro have never been better shown than here by Mark Twain.”

Some reviewers noted the skill and inventiveness with which Twain presented the unique dialects of the region; an unnamed reviewer for the *San Francisco Chronicle* even calls Twain “the Edison of our literature,” and calls the
book “eminently readable.” A reviewer for the Hartford Courant describes the story as “so full of life and dramatic force, that the reader will be carried along irresistibly.” However, T. S. Perry, in a mostly positive review for the Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine, noted a flaw in the book that has been echoed by many modern critics: “It is possible to feel, however, that the fun in the long account of Tom Sawyer’s artificial imitation of escapes from prison is somewhat forced.” A reviewer for the San Francisco Evening Bulletin offers both praise and insult in the same breath: “It is an amusing story if such scrap-work can be called a story.” The reviewer also notes that the story contains “very little of literary art,” and is rather “a string of incidents ingeniously fastened together.”

The book was subjected to numerous other criticisms as well. Just one month after its American publication, the public library of Concord, Massachusetts, chose not to offer the book to its patrons; the reason, according to biographer Powers, was “because of its coarseness of language and questionable morals.” Newspapers across the country ran articles about the Concord ban, and many reviewers concurred with the library’s decision. An unsigned reviewer for the San Francisco Daily Examiner states that the book is “well described by the author, as being without a motive, a moral, or a plot.” A reviewer for the Boston Daily Advertiser refers to the novel as “wearisome and labored,” while an unnamed reviewer for the Boston Evening Traveller describes the book as “singularly flat, stale and unprofitable.” This same reviewer also offers a particularly harsh insult contradicted by the book’s steady sales: “It is doubtful if the edition could be disposed of to people of average intellect at anything short of the point of the bayonet.”

In response to such harsh criticisms, an unsigned reviewer for the Atlanta Constitution fired back: “It is difficult to believe that the critics who have condemned the book as coarse, vulgar and inartistic can have read it.” The reviewer notes that “the moral of the book, though it is not scrawled across every page, teaches the necessity of manliness and self-sacrifice.” Indeed, in the decades after it was first published, literary scholars praised The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as one of Twain’s most morally complex works.

In more recent years, however, the novel has not received the attention or acclaim it once commanded from readers and critics. Although many critics point to the literary failings of the book’s final chapters, the main source of complaint for modern readers is the racist attitude presented by many of the characters, especially Huck. Specifically, many modern readers have remarked on the fact that the word “nigger” appears so liberally and unapologetically in the book—even though the term is authentic to the antebellum Missouri diction Twain works hard to recreate. The American Library Association, which tracks the number of “challenges” leveled at controversial books in libraries nationwide, lists The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as the fifth most-challenged book in libraries between 1990–2000.

Despite the controversies that surround it, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is still widely considered Twain’s masterpiece; according to biographer Ron Powers, the book has sold in excess of twenty million copies worldwide.
MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

An abridged audio adaptation of the novel was released by Caedmon in 1998. This version is narrated by Ed Begley, and is currently available in audiocassette format.

An abridged audio adaptation was released in CD format by Naxos Audiobooks in 1995. This version features narration by Garrick Hagon.

An abridged audio adaptation narrated and adapted by Garrison Keillor was released by Highbridge Audio in 2003. This version is currently available in both audiocassette and CD format.

An unabridged audio adaptation, narrated by Dick Hill, was released in 2001 by Brilliance Audio. It is currently available in both CD and audiocassette format.

An abridged audio adaptation narrated by Wil Wheaton was released by Dove Audio in 1993; this version is currently available as a digital download through audible.com.

An electronic version of the book was released for Microsoft Reader by Amazon Press in 2000. This version features an introduction by John D. Seelye, and is available through amazon.com.

The first filmed adaptation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a black-and-white silent film released in 1920. The film was directed by William Desmond Taylor, and is not currently available.

Another filmed adaptation was released in 1931 by Paramount; this was the first “talking” version of the film, directed by Norman Taurog and starring Jackie Coogan—a child star most famous for his role as the title character in Charlie Chaplin’s masterpiece *The Kid*—as Huckleberry Finn. This version is not currently available.

Yet another film based on the book was released in 1939 by MGM; this version was directed by Richard Thorpe and starred Mickey Rooney in the title role. It was released in VHS format by MGM in 1999.

A full-color film adaptation of the novel was released by MGM in 1960. The film was directed by Michael Curtiz, and starred Eddie Hodges as Huck and Tony Randall as the king; it is currently available on DVD through Warner Home Video.

A filmed musical adaptation of the novel was released by MGM in 1974, directed by J. Lee Thompson and featuring songs by Richard and Robert Sherman (famous for their work in movies such as *Mary Poppins* and *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*). This version is currently available on DVD through MGM.

An adaptation of the novel was released by Disney in 1995; this version starred Elijah Wood as Huck Finn and Courtney B. Vance as Jim, and was directed by Stephen Sommers. Although every film adaptation has been criticized to some degree for not staying true to the book, this version in particular features a radically altered ending. This version is currently available on DVD from Walt Disney Video.

The novel has been adapted for television several times: first in 1955, then again in 1975 (with Ron Howard in the title role), yet again in 1981, and once more in 1985. The 1975 version was released on VHS by Twentieth Century Fox in 1996, and the 1985 version was released on VHS by MCA Home Video in 1992. None of these versions is currently available.

An animated television adaptation of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was created by Koch Vision in 1984. This version was released on DVD in 2006.

*Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a stage musical version of the novel, began its run on Broadway in 1985 and remained there until 1987. This version featured music and lyrics by legendary country musician Roger Miller, with performances by John Goodman and René Auberjonois, among others; a soundtrack of the original cast recording was released by Decca U.S. in 1990, and is currently available in CD format.
In the following excerpt, Fowler discusses how Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has contributed to America’s discourse on race and racism.

There are many instances in American society where we attempt to distance ourselves from our more shameful moments and embrace those that are more flattering to us. Nor are we the only ones to do so. Twain comments on the phenomena in *The Innocents Abroad* when he is passing through Versailles and sees that all the images being recalled are of victories, not of their defeats or embarrassments. The same is evident in America. It is impossible not to be moved by the Holocaust Museum on The Mall in Washington, D.C., and one of the underlying motifs of the Museum is how America acted as the Grand Savior in coming in and helping free the Jews from concentration camps. Still one cannot help being struck by the outcry on the other hand when a museum commemorating the Trail of Tears or the years of slavery are proposed. Americans would rather not recall that.

Such a failure to truly digest our history keeps many Americans in the cyclical racism which perpetuates itself. W. E. B. Dubois stated that the question of the American twentieth century would be race. Although the man was a genius, he didn’t have to be to make that observation; the issues that caused the greatest difficulty at the Constitutional Convention in the eighteenth century had been race, the issue which had plagued the nation in the nineteenth century and caused it to enter into the most costly war during its existence had been race, and since much of the country at the turn of the twentieth century was seeking ways to continue the status of blacks as second-class citizens, it was quite evident that the Civil War was only another step in the process, and certainly not the last. Lynchings were prominent at the beginning of the twentieth century; in the middle, lynchings like that of Emmet Till would still be in the news; at the end, in 1998, they would continue to haunt the nation as James Byrd Jr., a black man in Texas, was dragged behind a truck until his head and other body parts were scattered over several miles.

Racism still exists and procreates; no one disputes that. But the process of social evolution has caused the form of racism to morph in some interesting ways.

While the issue seem to be growing, few if any have so epitomized the issue as Mark Twain, especially his book *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, considered to be the great American novel by quite a few scholars and the origin of American writing by even more. *Huck Finn* is one of those books that attracts attention not because critics assert that it is a badly-written book but because it is too well-written; that is, it refuses to avoid language and topics that some would rather not deal with. The timeliness of Twain’s work is evident when records show that attempts to ban it somewhere in America have occurred every single year in the 1990s. No other book or established writer in the American canon ignites such hostile debates. Each school year some parent has raised the issue of banning the novel or rewriting it to soften the usage of words like “nigger” and Jim’s broken English. This is counter productive. Avoiding the fact that such events happened either (1) convinces youth that it is a problem that should continue being avoided, or (2) suggests that it is a problem no longer significant or already solved.

This seems to be one of the two things Mark Twain proposes in his writings to help solve the race problem in America; it is what he meant in a letter he wrote as a recommendation for the gentleman who later became a mentor for Frederick Douglass—that to a certain extent whites owe them, not that it could be made up in reparations but in an acknowledgment that whites owe them, not that it could be made up in reparations but in an acknowledgment that blacks are penalized because of their blackness and that the problems of white segregation and Jim Crow laws last even long afterwards. Mark Twain becomes the first American to truly ask whites to look in that mirror, and acknowledge some benefit from what was (and still is) going on with blacks. As with the Germans in Berlin, with the alcoholic or domestic abuser, the acknowledgment should not bring about unbearable guilt; rather it should begin the process of healing.

Malcolm X put it best: If someone has stabbed you in the back, and at some point they become “gracious” enough to pull the knife out of your back, they should at least acknowledge the fact that it is going to leave some type of scar. Much of African American literature and Twain’s own writings deal with the frustration that blacks feel because no matter
what they achieve, white society would never be able to simply look beyond the color of the skin they see before them; every action, good or bad, must be judged within the context of blackness. If a black succeeds or does something outstanding, he is looked at as the exception to his race—any black in this position can probably recall hearing white society say (not always directly) something along the lines of, “You’re not like the rest of them!” Any negative black action must be read within the context of race as well. This is what Twain is examining in the character of Jim; no matter how noble he may act he will always be regarded as a nigger—Huck follows this principle throughout most of the novel. When he does begin to see things differently he notices this discrepancy in how the Phelps treat Jim. He has been good and sacrificed himself to save Tom Sawyer, so the community resolves not to curse him anymore. Of course since he is a nigger they never think about removing some of the heavy chains around his neck. As Fishkin points out, this is exactly the same frustration Malcolm X voices years later when he cries, “Do you know what white racists call black Ph.D.’s?” and answered “Nigger!”

It is hard to forget the horrible scene in *Huck Finn* when Pap is ranting at Huck. His words, however, help us to later appreciate Huck’s dilemma when trying to help Jim. If this is the only authority in Huck’s life, can we blame him for his fears and deformed conscience?

Perhaps one of the most telling lines in Pap’s ranting is his suggestion that allowing a nigger to vote had kept him from doing the one thing within his legal and moral power to do to change things in his favor, which was vote himself. What it reflects is a growing disillusionment with a government and a distancing of oneself from it. This is dangerous, for what option is then left to Pap? The only action we see him admit to taking after that sense of distancing is an assault upon the nigger himself—he shoves the nigger off the road when he wants to get by. Such disillusionment is evident even more so in modern society. While the percentage of people who are voting steadily falls, the percentage of people expressing anger or rejecting the government grows, and the only action left available to them outside of the voting booth is vigilante justice. Hence we have larger citizen militias and more beatings, murders, and incidents designed not so much to effect change but to express a distancing from the system. Pap is the first of the Angry White Males.

The second proposal or assertion that Mark Twain makes which would ease racial tension in America is to discard the concept of race as an absolute. This suggestion has gained popularity in the last decade, as popular and scientific works assert that what we believe to be race is largely a cultural construction. Twain examines this false color line explicitly in *The Tragedy of Pudd’nhead Wilson*. When Rowena, a very light skinned Negress, exchanges her own legally black child (by a white man) for the legally white one, no one knows the difference. Like a number of African American writers during this period, Twain is playing with the color line arguing against the validity of race construction. It is the same question argued genetically by a number of scholars. In 1991, papers like *The Washington Post* ran features asking the question, “Does Race Exist?” arguing that if we attempt to classify people based upon one characteristic, even skin color, the definition of race becomes meaningless. My students were shocked to know that there are some races considered white who are darker than black people and some races considered black who are lighter than many Caucasians.

The process of redefining or re-naming has long played a significant role in American life. It is evident with Mark Twain a.k.a. Mr. Brown a.k.a. Samuel Clemens. It is evident with other figures dealing with race, like Malcolm X, a.k.a. Detroit Red a.k.a. Malcolm Little a.k.a. El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. It is not incidental that Twain’s most famous work on race is centered around Huckleberry Finn who constantly changes names and takes on different identities from the little girl he pretends to be with the widow to ultimately claiming to be Tom Sawyer. The power of naming and redefining one’s self outside of societal norms is what enables Huck (and the novel) to continue.

The problems which have been stereotypically assigned to groups of people based on race are evident in all aspects of society, further reducing the constructs of race, but the obstacles to overcoming racism are just as evident on all sides. Whites are not alone in their unwillingness to deal with the past as it really was. The vehemence with which some blacks attack Twain for what they (mistakenly) see as his racism is matched only by the antipathy many whites seem to have for Malcolm X, but no two stories are more American than these two. Instead of
the vehement anger voiced by many, these two Americans—their lives and their writings—should be among the most inspirational. It is true that Twain’s background is filled with events typical of any white youth growing up in Missouri during the pre-Civil War years; it is also true that Malcolm’s writings, his anger, his gullibility are understandable given his background. What is important, however, is not where these two humans began, but where they were able to go from there, and how they did so. Any reader who cannot be moved by the courage of these men to accept responsibility for their futures, regardless of their pasts, misses the greatest examples of what it means to be American. For like these two, it is true that America has some skeletons which continue to haunt her—high among these are its racism and homophobia.

There is a passage in *Huckleberry Finn* which spells it out precisely. As they float down the great river Huck says, “What you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others.” The race card in America has always been a potential threat to overturning our raft.

Like the book itself, the argument does not end with despair or closure, but with hope and possibility. Huck ventures off to new adventures. He is not, at that point, a perfect human being or completely reformed, but we know through his experiences that there is hope. He has already taken steps which leave us with the sense that as he grows older, he will grow wiser as well.

Time allows atrocities to occur in the short term—lynchings, slavery, relocation, concentration camps—but overriding them all, inevitable, unstoppable, progress marches on. Mark Twain himself is a wonderful example of this; as the son of a slave owner, it is not surprising that many of the views Twain espoused during his youth and early twenties were typically racist. Indeed, as Arthur Pettit notes, the height of Twain’s racism seems to occur during the 1860s when he is out West. Much of his writing during this period profited from his use of the tradition of the black buffoon as scapegoat to entertain whites. He continues in this vein for a time after 1867, but once he becomes a member of the eastern establishment and the son-in-law of a man who had been a leading conductor of the Underground Railroad, Clemens begins a reevaluation of himself and the Negro, a turning point that within a year would lead him to launch a new career towards service to the black race. Like Huck Finn and his creator, Samuel Clemens, though we are not yet where we wish to be, there is hope that as we grow older, we too will grow wiser.

**Source:** Gregory Fowler, “‘If I Warn’t Too Drunk to Get There…’: On Race,” in *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, Spring 2001, pp. 49–58.

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