

Book Summaries help you understand books studied in schools and give you insights that make for great book reports. Gain a new perspective by reading about the author, and learn how settings, characters, and themes help make these books acclaimed works of literature.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Published 1884

I. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Twain's life is important to his writing, for his major works rely upon materials from his Hannibal, Missouri, boyhood and his careers as a Mississippi River pilot, a western miner, and a journalist.

Four years following his birth on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, Twain moved with his family to Hannibal, where he was shaped by experiences that would be transformed into such works as *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. When Twain was eleven his father died. Apprenticed as a printer, he began to contribute sketches to his brother's newspaper. As a young man he worked as a printer and journalist in a number of cities, including New York, but returned to the Mississippi River in 1857 to fulfill a childhood dream of becoming a river pilot. He held this job until 1861 when river traffic was halted by the Civil War.

After serving very briefly with the Missouri militia, he traveled to the Nevada Territory with his brother Orion, who had been appointed secretary to the governor. In Nevada he worked as a journalist and as a prospector for silver and gold. By 1864 he was a reporter in San Francisco, and in 1865 he published 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County' in a New York newspaper. Reprinted widely, the story gave him his first literary fame when it was reissued two years later. He delivered his first lecture in 1866, beginning a forty-year career as a performer whose public image became as famous as his books.

As a California correspondent, he traveled to Hawaii, then known as the Sandwich Islands, and later to Europe, the Mediterranean, and Palestine. His 1867 foreign travels became the basis of his first book, *Innocents Abroad* (1869). While enjoying the popular success of his writing, Twain settled in the East. In 1870 he married Olivia Langdon, daughter of a wealthy merchant from Elmira, New York, and became editor and part owner of a Buffalo newspaper. A year later, he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, where he spent a large portion of his increasing income on a spectacular mansion (now restored as a memorial) on Farmington Avenue.

Twain's prolific writing career stemmed partly from the financial demands of his expensive life style. He turned to a variety of sources for his material: travel, his early life, and history. In 1872 he published *Roughing It*, a collection of irreverent sketches based upon his travels and his western experiences. While *The Gilded Age* (1873), written with Charles Dudley Warner, employed contemporary issues and provided a label for an era, *Tom Sawyer* made use of his Hannibal boyhood. *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) was another travel book, and *The Prince and the Pauper*, a historical comedy. *Life on the Mississippi* recounted the author's pilot days, and *Huckleberry Finn*, by most estimates his greatest work, was a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*.

By the time he produced his historical fantasy *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, Twain had finished his most important work. The 1890s brought him great personal misfortune with a financial collapse resulting from his unprofitable investment in a typesetting machine and the bankruptcy of the publishing company he had founded to distribute his works. In 1896, while he was making a worldwide lecture tour to pay his debts, his daughter Susy died of meningitis in Hartford. Susy's death, like that of

his first child and only son, Langdon, in 1872, devastated Twain, and the family never again resided in the Hartford house.

After *Following the Equator* (1897), another travel book, Twain worked on a variety of projects, many of which were published after his death. These works, most of which were overwhelmingly pessimistic, included 'The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg' (1900), 'What Is Man?' (1906), and 'The Mysterious Stranger' (1916). His final years were marked by increasing infirmity and unhappiness as he endured the deaths of his wife in 1904 and his daughter Jean in 1909. Toward the end of his life, Twain lived in New York, and he died at 'Stormfield,' his estate in Redding, Connecticut, on April 21, 1910.

At the time of his death, Twain had achieved international celebrity and was perhaps the most famous American. Like many famous people, he created a public image that masked inner conflicts. A complex and brilliant man, he was more than a simple humorist; as a social critic, historian, philosopher, novelist, and popular entertainer, he continues to fascinate readers and biographers.

II. OVERVIEW:

Huckleberry Finn, one of the central works of American literature and a worldwide bestseller, traces the moral education of a young boy whose better impulses overcome both self-interest and the negative forces of his culture. Huck, a homeless boy whose only relative is his disreputable father, is taken in by a respectable widow who seeks to educate him. She forces him to go to school, but Huck dislikes being 'so cramped up and sivilized [sic] as they call it.' His father abducts him, and Huck prefers the freedom of his father's shack to the constraint of more genteel surroundings.

Freed from civilizing influences and placed in the company of his father, a vicious racist who boasts of his own illiteracy, Huck seems like a poor candidate for moral growth. But when Pap Finn nearly kills the boy during an alcoholic delirium, Huck escapes and meets the runaway slave Jim, who provides him with the opportunity to make a significant moral choice. Huck has been shaped not only by his father's view that one should act out of self-interest, but also by his society's belief that God's law mandates slavery. As he protects Jim, Huck feels certain that he will go to hell. Nonetheless, he transcends his upbringing and learns to value essential human bonds of trust beyond his own interest. Throughout the novel the boy witnesses a variety of human corruption, pretension, and violence, but maintains his integrity through his ability to identify with others.

Huckleberry Finn delivers its powerful message through Huck's narration. His rich language and humor remain fresh. Huck's journey down the river has become part of American mythology, and the issues of freedom and responsibility he confronts still concern American culture. Readable, entertaining, and significant, this novel deserves its status as a 'classic.'

III. SETTING

A sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* takes place in the 1830s or 1840s. It begins in St. Petersburg, a fictional town much like Hannibal, but its main action occurs on the Mississippi River. After Huck meets Jim on Jackson's Island, the two travel down river on a raft that comes to symbolize their brotherhood and freedom. Hoping to drift to Cairo, Illinois, where Jim can escape to freedom, they are diverted by a fog and travel southward to Arkansas instead. The trip ties together a series of adventures which, as many commentators have remarked, contrast the peace and freedom of the raft with the violence, corruption, and constraint of the shore.

IV. THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Huckleberry Finn tells this story from his own point of view and in his own language. A boy of about fourteen, he has been left to his own devices since his mother's death. Huck's negligent father, Pap Finn, has an unnaturally pale complexion that results from his dissolute life and represents the most virulent white racism. Characterized by his drunkenness, hypocrisy, selfishness, and prideful ignorance, he is interested in his son only for the fortune of six thousand dollars Huck acquired in *Tom Sawyer*. Pap abducts Huck from his guardian, the Widow Douglas, who imposes 'sivilization' on him in the form of table manners, school, and church.

Although Huck enjoys the freedom of life with his father, his sympathy for others saves him from developing Pap's outlook and habits. Huck identifies with the plights of the lowly and reprehensible as well as the kindly and virtuous. He assists Jim and the vulnerable Wilks sisters, but reasoning that he might one day be a murderer himself, he also tries to help murderers trapped on a derelict steamboat. He feels compassion during the brutal punishment of the King and the Duke, con men who have betrayed him.

Jim, a runaway slave, defines for Huck the nature of genuinely civilized conduct. Jim is first presented as the victim of a joke by Tom Sawyer and Huck, and later suffers a snakebite as the result of one of Huck's tricks. But when Huck attempts to deceive Jim, claiming that Jim's anxiety over Huck's being lost on the river was a dream, the slave asserts the central demands of human dignity and solidarity. When Huck asks him to interpret the significance of debris on the raft, evidence that he has been duped, Jim says that Huck has betrayed friendship with a lie: 'Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's an makes 'em ashamed.' Jim, who hopes someday to free his own family, becomes Huck's surrogate father and establishes for him a code of conduct that the boy again encounters with the Wilks sisters.

The King and the Duke, two scoundrels with a wide range of money-making schemes, collect money by faking religious conversion at camp meetings, staging bogus Shakespearean performances, pretending to be Louis XVII and the Duke of Bridgewater, selling Jim, and forcing Huck to participate in a scheme to defraud the Wilks sisters of their inheritance. But when one of the sisters attempts to catch Huck in his lies, another sister stops her because he is 'a stranger and so far from his people. How would you like to be treated so?' She says, 'You oughtn't to say a thing to another person that will make them feel ashamed.' The girl apologizes to Huck, confirming her hospitality toward outcasts and strangers. While Huck is compelled to lie in this case, he saves the girl's inheritance. Generally his lies serve to protect himself and others, contrasting with the more harmful untruths of his father, the King, the Duke, and Tom Sawyer.

In this book Tom Sawyer functions as a foil: Huck's practical intelligence is contrasted with Tom's absurd schemes that he draws from books. Tom's ideas for rescuing Jim, accepted by Huck as superior wisdom, are a source of humor, but they denigrate Jim and lead to unnecessary danger. Tom's boyish fantasies are linked to the madness of a society governed by false chivalric codes of honor.

The *Walter Scott*, the derelict steamer named after the enormously popular author of historical romances, suggests an attitude toward the ideals of chivalry as they are practiced in the American South. These ideals are acted out as murderous fantasies by the Grangerfords, who impress Huck with their refinement and 'culture' (plaster parrots and morbid art) but are involved in a bloody feud, and by Col. Sherburn, who shoots down an unarmed man for insulting him. Society's institutions are built on some of the same illusions Tom draws from books, with terrible consequences. Religion is employed in the service of slavery, and Huck has to overcome his 'conscience' in order to act morally toward Jim.

V. LITERARY QUALITIES

Although it begins with the warning, 'Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot,' *Huckleberry Finn* contains these three elements. Major themes—freedom and responsibility, truth and falsehood, death and rebirth, and identity—support the action and provide structure. But the novel's ending has drawn extensive criticism. Critics argue that Tom Sawyer's coincidental appearance and his elaborate plan to rescue Jim make the ending highly improbable. Arguably, Huck's cooperation with Tom negates the moral development he has experienced and reduces Jim to the figure of fun he was at the book's outset. Some defenders of Twain's ending suggest that it provides a circle, bringing the boy back to where he began, and others interpret the failure of Tom's plan as the destruction of the illusion of chivalry.

The book's loose structure may be classified as a picaresque narrative because its unity derives from following a central character through a series of episodes. Like Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605), *Huckleberry Finn* treats questions of illusion and reality by portraying Huck's contact with a number of levels of society. In addition, the novel's unity might be defined by Huck's education or initiation, his maturation through experience and insight.

The single most cohesive feature in the novel is Huck's engaging narration. Because the reader often knows more than Huck does, his naive narration lends irony to the work. As an artist, Twain was most conscious of language, providing not only for the richness of Huck's speech but for the variety of dialects represented.

VI. SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

Although regarded as a classic, *Huckleberry Finn* has engendered controversy from the start. The Concord Public Library in Massachusetts banned it shortly after publication. In reporting approvingly of this action, the *Boston Transcript* noted that members of the library committee found the book 'the veriest trash' and 'rough, coarse, and inelegant.' The Springfield *Republican* found the novel 'a gross trifling with every fine feeling' and 'harmful.' These objections, grounded on the view that only idealized portrayals of young persons can be edifying, can be dismissed easily by contemporary readers; more serious, however, are charges that the book encourages racism.

In 1957 New York City junior and senior high schools dropped the novel from a list of approved books because it uses the term 'nigger' and allegedly stereotypes Jim. More recently, a number of court cases have been fought to remove it from lists of required reading on grounds of racism. For example, in 1982 an administrative aide at, ironically, the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Virginia, stated, 'The book is poison....It works against the idea that all men are created equal....anybody who teaches this book is a racist.'

Some elements in Jim's character do suggest stereotyping—his superstition, his seeming passivity and gullibility—but he is generally superior to the book's white characters. Pap Finn's 'whiteness' stands in contrast to Jim's color as does his vice to Jim's virtue. Pap's color is linked to his racism. He is white 'not like another man's white, but white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl—a tree toad white, a fish-belly white.' He gains his sense of worth by feeling superior to black men, whatever their attainments. Far from degrading Jim, Twain measures the worth of all of the other characters against him.

The impact of the term 'nigger' cannot be discounted, however. The sensibilities of students will be offended by its use if they come to the book without adequate historical background. The characters' attitudes and terminology must be measured against the times in which they live.

VII. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Throughout *Huckleberry Finn* a variety of lies are told. Discuss which seem to be useful and which harmful. Why?
2. How do the King and the Duke take advantage of society? Contrast them with Huck and Jim.
3. Death is everywhere in the book, from Huck's make-believe murder of himself, to his father's corpse in the floating house, the feud, Emmeline Grangerford's art, and the Wilks funeral. Does this make the book morbid? How does Huck handle his fear and understanding of death?
4. Huck tells a series of lies about his family. What do these reveal? How does he seek a sense of belonging?
5. At first Jim seems to be a simple character. What are some ways in which the author develops him?
6. How does Jim serve as a father figure to Huck? Contrast him with Pap Finn.
7. Pap Finn thinks only about himself, and at the beginning of the book Huck seems self-interested too. How is Huck brought to consider others?
8. The Grangerfords are 'civilized' but engage in meaningless slaughter. How do Huck's impressions of them convey the author's social criticism?
9. Many critics have found flaws with the novel's ending. Do you believe it undercuts or contributes to the book? Why?

VIII. RELATED TITLES AND ADAPTATIONS

As a major figure in American and world literature, *Huckleberry Finn* has appeared in every medium: illustration, film, radio, theater, television, and even cartoon. The most faithful of these is perhaps the 1986 PBS adaptation. The most interesting is probably John Seelye's *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1970), which rewrites the book to suit its critics. Seelye provides rougher language and an unhappy 'inevitable' ending. This experiment truly illuminates the original, and its introduction is a delightful history of critical response to the novel. Nat Hentoff's *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1982) treats the controversy surrounding the book. Perhaps the most successful adaptation to appear in movie theaters was *Huckleberry Finn* (1939), directed by Richard Thorpe and starring Mickey Rooney, Walter Connolly, William Frawley, Rex Ingram, and Lynne Carver.

The Huckleberry Finn character is first introduced in *Tom Sawyer*, where he plays a secondary role but is established as a homeless orphan with a reputation as a troublemaker. The story about Tom Sawyer lacks the weighty themes of its sequel, but provides a highly enjoyable account of the imagination and abandon that characterize boyhood. Although *Huckleberry Finn* can be enjoyed without any prior familiarity with *Tom Sawyer*, the earlier book introduces Huck's relationship with Tom and explains his attainment of a six thousand-dollar estate.

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