

Bloom's Literature

How to Write about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Reading to Write

Because of its reputation as one of the greatest and one of the most studied American novels, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may seem an intimidating book on which to write an essay. With scores of books and hundreds of articles already written about it, if it has not inspired more analysis and criticism than all Mark Twain's other writings combined, the amount by which it trails cannot be great. It would be natural for you to fear you cannot possibly say anything new about the book. Try to put that thought out of your head and approach the novel as you would a gold mine waiting for you to come and scoop up its riches. Essentially the story of a boy and a man drifting down the Mississippi River on a raft, *Huckleberry Finn* is not a particularly complex novel. However, it offers an abundance of colorful characters, exciting episodes, humorous incidents, and challenging ideas. Although scholars and critics have worked on the novel for more than a century, they keep finding things in it that no one seems to have noticed before. New ideas do not simply jump off the book's pages. You have to work at finding them, and one way to do that is constantly to ask yourself questions about the book as you read it.

Perhaps the first question to ask is what it is about *Huckleberry Finn* that attracts so much attention and so much praise. It may seem an obvious question, but you should nevertheless keep it in mind as you read the novel. There are many reasons why the book is considered important, but those reasons are not all compatible, and not everyone agrees on what makes *Huckleberry Finn* great. In fact, in 1996 the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jane Smiley published an article in *Harper's Magazine* arguing that *Huckleberry Finn* is vastly overrated and actually a very poor novel—and one that should not be inflicted on students. A reasoned response to Smiley's article would make a good essay topic.

What matters most in your topic choice is that you have your own views on the importance of *Huckleberry Finn* and you can support those views with concrete evidence and reasoned arguments. As you form your own views, consider some of the broad qualities possessed by any novel that is regarded as worthy of praise: powerful prose, a compelling narrative, believable characters, and challenging ideas. Critics and readers generally—though not universally—agree that *Huckleberry Finn* possesses all these qualities. Indeed, in 1884 when the novel was first published, it was regarded as a major turning point in American literature.

In *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), the great American novelist Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), who would later receive a Nobel Prize in Literature, made a comment about *Huckleberry Finn* that has been frequently quoted and analyzed but never fully explained:

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.... it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.

What Hemingway may have meant by that extravagant praise would provide the basis for a challenging and possibly exceptionally strong essay. However, regardless of your topic, as you read *Huckleberry Finn*, you would do well to ask yourself what it was about the novel that moved Hemingway to say what he did about it. Was it the power of the novel's story? The development of its characters? The naturalness of Huck's vernacular narration? A combination of all these qualities, or possibly something else?

Although many people regard *Huckleberry Finn* as one of the great American novels, others, including Jane Smiley, think it a poor book and have campaigned to remove it from schools—an issue that is, incidentally, the subject of Nat Hentoff's young adult novel *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (1982). The outcry against the novel began shortly after its original publication, when Louisa May Alcott—the author of *Little Women* (1868)—persuaded the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library to ban *Huckleberry Finn*. The library's committee issued a public notice to explain its decision:

One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it [*Huckleberry Finn*] immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a

series of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people.

Modern readers may have trouble understanding some of *Huckleberry Finn*'s vernacular dialogue, but few would share the Concord library committee's objections to the book. Nevertheless, the book is probably more controversial now than it was in the 19th century. Twentieth-century attacks on *Huckleberry Finn* shifted to a different objection—the book's alleged racism. African-American readers in particular have been troubled by its frequent use of the word *nigger*, particularly in reference to the escaping slave Jim. Is the book racist? That is a very serious question and one that demands an answer. However, before you try to judge whether the book is racist, you must define your terms. What do you mean by *racist*? If the mere use of the word *nigger* makes a person racist, does that mean that most modern African-American comics and rap artists are racists? If not, why not? Defenders of *Huckleberry Finn* argue that Huck's use of the word as the book's narrator (which is not the same thing as Mark Twain's using the word) was natural for a southern boy of his time and background. It should be clear you must look deeply into what Huck is saying and how he behaves. If the word *nigger* were replaced by some unobjectionable word, would the book still appear to be racist? If so, why?

A primary reason why modern readers regard *Huckleberry Finn* as racist may be that they fail to see the powerful ironies that permeate the book. For example, consider this simple exchange in chapter 32, in which Huck invents a story for Aunt Sally Phelps, who, unbeknownst to him, thinks that he is her nephew Tom Sawyer and wants to know why the steamboat on which he arrived was grounded:

I didn't rightly know what to say, because I didn't know whether the boat would be coming up the river or down. But I go a good deal on instinct; and my instinct said she would be coming up—from down towards Orleans. That didn't help me much, though; for I didn't know the names of bars down that way. I see I'd got to invent a bar, or forget the name of the one we got aground on—or—Now I struck an idea, and fetched it out:

"It warn't the grounding—that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt...."

As Aunt Sally soon demonstrates, she is a loving, gentle, and generous person who would never do an unkindness to anyone, including black people. Indeed, she goes out of her way to make sure that Jim is comfortable and has plenty to eat when he is held captive on her property. Nevertheless, because of her training in a white-ruled slave culture, it does not occur to her that a black person's being killed in a steamboat accident is as tragic as the death of white person. Should not the quoted passage be read as an example of Mark Twain's use of irony to expose the racist underpinnings of southern culture? It is also a very humorous passage, as the contradiction between "killed a nigger" and "it's lucky because sometimes people do get hurt" makes modern readers want to shout to Sally, "Aren't you listening?" Well, the same remark might be leveled at readers of *Huckleberry Finn*: We need to listen carefully as we read, before drawing conclusions.

Other examples of powerful irony can be found throughout *Huckleberry Finn*. In order to read those passages correctly, you need to keep your mind open to the nature of irony—using language to express ideas that appear to contradict the literal meaning of what is said. A particularly apt example occurs in chapter 6, in which the drunken Pap Finn rants about a black college professor from Ohio whom he once encountered. By Pap's own words, the man was the very model of an ideal citizen—intelligent, highly educated, impeccably clean, well dressed, and evidently well mannered (the exact opposite of Pap himself). Pap goes on:

"And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all me—I'll never vote agin as long as I live."

To determine whether it is fair to call *Huckleberry Finn* a racist book, you will need to work out the meaning of passages such as that.

Topics and Strategies

This section discusses both general and specific ideas for possible essay topics. You need not limit your essay choice to the topics discussed here. If you allow your imagination to roam freely, you may find that your ideal topic combines ideas from two or more of the suggestions discussed here or that these suggestions help you come up with original ideas. Keep in mind that the broad categories under which topics are discussed are designed merely to help you find the subjects that interest you most and help focus your thinking. Some topics might fit under other headings. It is the topics, not the categories, that matter.

These suggestions are not intended to serve as outlines for what you yourself should write. In fact, it is a good idea to approach every suggestion by questioning whether the ideas it expresses are valid and worth developing. Literature is not an exact science. Different authorities can, and often do, disagree on issues, and *Huckleberry Finn* is a virtual battlefield for disagreement. You should also remember that questions raised here, or that you raise, do not necessarily have right or wrong answers. Avoid the trap of searching for conclusive proofs that may not exist. The strength of your essay will come not merely from the decisiveness of your conclusions, but from the power and clarity of the arguments you advance to reach them. Whatever topics you choose to write about, use your imagination and try to consider all possible sides of every question.

Themes

Although *Huckleberry Finn* is a comparatively simple narrative, it touches on so many different themes that it has kept critics, scholars, and students busy making fresh discoveries through several generations. On one level, for example, it is a coming-of-age story about a young boy who seeks to escape from the burdens that society places on him, only to accept the greater burden of responsibility for someone else. The story is thus also about the interdependence of human beings, the nature of friendship, and the meaning of family.

Sample Topics:

1. **Imposture and identity:** What do the frequent names changes and false identities of major characters contribute to the plot?

One of the most amusing things about *Huckleberry Finn* is the frequency with which its major characters pretend to be people other than who they really are. Huck becomes proficient at changing his identity and quickly contriving cover stories. At various times, he calls himself "Sara Mary Williams," "George Peters," "George Jackson," "Charles William Allbright," "Aleck James Hopkins," "Adolphus," and even "Tom Sawyer." Toward the end of the book, when the real Tom Sawyer reappears, he calls himself "William Thompson," then claims to be his own brother, Sid Sawyer. Meanwhile, the real names of the scoundrels who call themselves the Duke of Bridgewater and the King of France are never revealed, and both those characters assume other identities at various times. Indeed, it seems that most of the time no major character is really who he claims to be. Are there discernible patterns in all these name and identity changes? How do they affect Huck's relationships with other people? What purpose might Mark Twain have had in putting his characters through so many changes?

2. **Parental child abuse:** What does *Huckleberry Finn* say about the nature of child abuse and its effects on an abused child?

So much attention is paid to *Huckleberry Finn*'s treatment of subjects such as slavery and race relations that its theme of child abuse is generally overlooked. It is a surprising oversight, in view of the fact that the novel's central character is a young boy running away from an alcoholic father's physical abuse; however, the fact that this theme has been neglected opens the field for you to discover fresh perspectives on the subject. If you opt to write on this topic, begin by paying close attention to everything Huck says about his father—not merely in the early chapters in which Pap Finn makes his only appearances, but throughout the novel. Note the ways in which Pap mistreats and frightens Huck and also see if you can detect indications of Pap's influence on Huck's personality and behavior. For example, can you detect any signs of how having an abusive father affects Huck's attitudes toward other adults or his relationships with substitute-parent figures, such as the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, Jim, the Grangerfords, and the Phelps? Also, do not overlook the King and the Duke, who may be more like Pap Finn than any other characters in the novel and who also become something like father figures to Huck. If you wish to carry this topic even further, read Jon Clinch's *Finn* (2007), a powerful novel that explores Pap Finn and attempts to show what makes him the kind of man he is. If you wish to make this a compare and contrast

essay, look at Tom Canty's relationship with his abusive father in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881).

3. **Dysfunctional families:** Does *Huckleberry Finn* express any views about the possibility of families being whole and functional?

Closely related to the subject of child abuse is the subject of dysfunctional families, another pervasive theme throughout Mark Twain's writings. Indeed, it is difficult to find completely whole and healthy family units in any of his fiction. Almost all his fictional families are either missing one or more natural parents or have flaws that prevent them from functioning properly. For example, Tom Sawyer is an orphan being raised by his aunt; Huck Finn's mother is dead and his father is an abusive and absent alcoholic. As *Huckleberry Finn* unfolds, Huck goes through a series of surrogate family units—first with the Widow Douglas and her sister, until his father takes him away; with Jim—and later with Jim, the King, and the Duke—on the raft; with the Grangerfords; with the King, the Duke, and the Wilks sisters; and, finally, with the Phelps. Are any of these units successful? If so, in what ways? What do all these experiences teach Huck about family? Is it disdain for being "sivilized" or distaste for family life that impels him to want "to light out for the Territory" at the end of the novel?

4. **Vice on the river:** What does Huck's narrative say about greed, corruption, and depravity on the river?

A powerful undercurrent running through *Huckleberry Finn* is Huck's generally deadpan descriptions of the many forms of vice that he observes as he goes down the river. He encounters gamblers, murderers, robbers, con men, and charlatans and gets caught in the middle of a murderous and utterly pointless feud. Although he is constantly struggling with his conscience over the morality of helping a slave to escape, he rarely expresses any judgments on the corruption and wrongdoing that he observes. Why is that? Does he simply accept vice as part of the natural order of things? Or does he see himself as unfit to pass judgment on others? What does his behavior say about his natural instincts? To get at answers to these questions, pay special attention to Huck's introspective moments, when he reflects on his own sins and speculates about what he may become, as in chapter 13, when he thinks that "there ain't no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself . . ." Note also another remark that Huck makes in that chapter, when he reflects on what the Widow Douglas might think, if she knew about his efforts to save the murderers on the wrecked steamboat *Walter Scott* from drowning: "I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rapsCALLIONS, because rapsCALLIONS and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people takes the most interest in." Is it possible that Huck's limited religious training has conditioned him to go overboard in his empathy for criminals?

Character

Huckleberry Finn has so many fascinating and well-developed characters that it may offer the widest range of topics on character of any of Mark Twain's books. Dozens of different kinds of essays might be written on Huck alone. You could, for example, examine how he matures throughout the novel, how he battles with his conscience, how he develops into a first-rate liar, or how he overcomes his training as a white southerner to bond with the slave Jim. To come up with fresh topics of your own, try this experiment: Identify an episode in the novel in which Huck's behavior is particularly interesting and ask yourself if that behavior reveals something about Huck's nature. For example, the way in which Huck fakes his own murder and escapes from his father's control in chapter 7 demonstrates more intelligence and initiative than we might expect from Huck. Is he merely imitating what he imagines Tom Sawyer would do in the same situation? Or he is drawing on a reservoir of intelligence and creativity that shows up in other episodes in the novel?

Other characters on whom essays might focus include Jim, Pap Finn, the King, the Duke, the Grangerford family, Colonel Sherburn, Silas and Sally Phelps, the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, and Tom Sawyer. If your assignment lets you extend your enquiries beyond this one book, you might find it interesting to compare the Huck of this novel with the Huck of *Tom Sawyer* or the Huck of one or more of the later sequels, such as *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894) and *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896). Comparisons among sets of different characters can also be rewarding; some of these are discussed in the section on Compare and Contrast essays below.

An important matter to consider in *Huckleberry Finn* or any other novel is the extent to which its characters are, in fact, *characters*, and not merely one- or two-dimensional figures who serve as props who move the story along. True characters are complex and three-dimensional, or fully rounded, people, about whom readers learn enough not to expect them to behave exactly the same in every similar situation. You can test a character's complexity by asking whether he can surprise you. You might start with Huck and Jim; do they always behave predictably?

Sample Topics:

1. **Huck's development:** What signs of growth and maturity does Huck show throughout *Huckleberry Finn*? At the end of his narrative, in what important ways does he differ from the character he is at its beginning?

One way to read *Huckleberry Finn* is as a coming-of-age novel by paying close attention to signs of Huck's increasing maturity as the story progresses. His diverse and often horrendous experiences would seem certain to change any young boy, but how does Huck's narrative reveal his changes? The most obvious place to look is at Huck's changing attitude toward Jim, whom he evidently comes to see as a fellow human being rather than a slave or an object of property. Do Huck's attitudes toward slavery and other African Americans show similar changes? Does he show increasing initiative and independence as the story advances? What other changes does he display? Finally, are there signs of regression in his maturity in the final chapters, in which he acquiesces to Tom Sawyer's elaborate "evasion" plans for Huck's escape? If you wish to carry this topic further, you might consider comparing *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* as coming-of-age novels.

2. **Huck as a liar:** Is Huck a natural liar, or is he forced into lying by circumstances?

Mark Twain had a lifelong interest in distinctions between truth and lies and wrote a great deal on both. Since he often tried to be ironic or facetious—in remarks such as "Never tell the truth to people who are not worthy of it"—it is not always easy to know when he was being serious. Nevertheless, it should be possible to understand why he makes Huck Finn lie. Throughout *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck repeatedly gets into difficult situations from which he tries to extricate himself by lying. Notable examples include his pretending to be a girl when he meets Mrs. Loftus in chapter 11, his making the slave-catchers he confronts in chapter 16 believe there are smallpox victims on his raft, and his allowing Aunt Sally Phelps to think he is Tom Sawyer when he meets her in chapter 32. His lies often trip him up and force him to invent other lies. Does he tend to lie only out of necessity? Are some of his lies more complicated than they need to be? Are there patterns to his lying and do those patterns change as his narrative progresses? Another aspect of the subject to consider is the elements of irony connected with Huck's lying, such as the moment in chapter 29 when Levi Bell tells Huck, "I reckon you ain't used to lying, it don't seem to come handy; what you want is practice."

This should be a fun topic on which to write. You will need to begin by reading *Huckleberry Finn* carefully to identify all the episodes in which Huck lies. Try to classify these episodes by the types of lies that Huck tells, by the circumstances in which he lies, and by the consequences of his lying. When you complete your cataloguing of Huck's lies, you should be able to discern patterns that will allow you to answer the questions discussed here. It may help you to read some of Mark Twain's remarks about truth and lies in his other writings, and you will find many such remarks in published collections of quotes, such as R. Kent Rasmussen's *The Quotable Mark Twain*.

3. **Jim:** How fully rounded and convincing is Jim as a character?

In some ways, Jim may be the most compelling character in *Huckleberry Finn*, but we do not know nearly as much about him as we do Huck because we must rely on what Huck chooses to tell us, and Huck naturally says more about himself. The novel even has several long sections in which Jim disappears from Huck's narrative (most notably chapters 25–27). Within the context of *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim is a slave, a commodity whose legal ownership is often at issue. Jim's treatment in discussions of the novel is often not much different; at times he seems to be regarded more as a commodity than as a character in the book. What does the novel really tell us about him? Is its portrait of him fully rounded and consistent? Does it show him changing and maturing as it does Huck?

This topic is a rather open-ended one. Whatever approach you take, you should aim at constructing a full portrait of Jim that encompasses his background, his family ties, his religious and superstitious beliefs, his intelligence, his honesty, his loyalty to friends, his ignorance and naivete, and anything else you see as important. Read everything Huck says about Jim, but do not be too quick to accept Huck's own judgments. Look instead at what Jim's words and actions tell you.

4. **The rapsallions:** How does Huck really feel about the King and the Duke?

Almost immediately after the scoundrels who call themselves the King of France and the Duke of Bridgewater enter the story in chapter 19, they take control of the raft and put Huck and Jim through a series of mostly unpleasant experiences that push them ever farther from their goal, the Ohio River and freedom. They force Huck to assist in their criminal schemes, they threaten him with violence, and eventually the King sells Jim back into slavery for 40 dollars, only to blow the entire

sum on whiskey and gambling. Huck knows all along that the scoundrels are "low-down humbugs and frauds," but despite all that they do to him and Jim, he feels sorry for them when they finally receive their just desserts by being tarred and feathered in chapter 33 and regrets not being able to save them. Do his feelings merely reflect his good heart and general empathy toward all human beings? Or, does he have ambivalent feelings toward the scoundrels that show up elsewhere in his narrative? Does he look upon them as father figures?

To write an essay on this topic, carefully examine everything that Huck says about the King and the Duke. Look for indications that he empathizes with them or appreciates things they do. Does he seem to relish the excitement they add to his life? Are his feelings toward them similar to his feelings toward his abusive father, Pap Finn?

5. **Tom Sawyer:** Would *Huckleberry Finn* be the same kind of book if Tom Sawyer were its protagonist instead of Huck?

Mark Twain started planning *Huckleberry Finn* shortly after finishing *Tom Sawyer*. That novel was a big success, but he quickly decided that Tom Sawyer was unsuitable for the kind of protagonist he wanted for his new book. Why might he have come to that conclusion? Had he decided to use Tom, instead of Huck, perhaps he could have given Tom an equally good reason for running away, so he could end up on the raft with Jim. After all, *Tom Sawyer* says nothing about Tom's father; like Huck, Tom could have had a good-for-nothing father turn up in town to claim his share of the treasure, just as Pap Finn does. Assume, however, that Mark Twain did use Tom as his protagonist. How differently might the book's events have played out? How different might Tom's narrative voice have been?

It is possible that no one has ever developed an essay on this topic, so it should give you latitude to be original. To pull it off, however, you will need to read both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, as Mark Twain based his opinion of Tom on the character he created for that earlier novel. The Tom Sawyer of *Huckleberry Finn* may or may not be the same kind of character as the Tom of *Tom Sawyer*, but that question is irrelevant. You will need to assess the Tom of *Tom Sawyer* and imagine him taking Huck's place in *Huckleberry Finn*. What fundamental characteristics do you find that would make Tom a poor substitute for Huck? It may help to know that it was important to Mark Twain that his protagonist have a good heart.

History and Context

The title page of *Huckleberry Finn*'s first American edition identifies the story's setting with some precision:

SCENE: THE MISSISSIPPI VALLEY

TIME: FORTY TO FIFTY YEARS AGO

Since Mark Twain published the book in the United States in 1885 (the year after it came out in England), it appears that he intended its setting to be between about 1835 and 1845—the very period in which he had grown up in Missouri. However, neither the story's precise time nor its precise location greatly matters. In fact, the geography of *Huckleberry Finn* seems almost deliberately vague. While it mentions the names of real states and rivers and a number of real towns, such as St. Louis, Missouri, Cairo, Illinois, and New Orleans, all the places that Huck actually visits are fictional and we cannot even be sure where they are. What *is* important is that Huck's story is set somewhere in the slaveholding South at a time well before slavery became a divisive national issue in the United States. Few white people then questioned the legality or morality of slavery, and their general acceptance of it is an important premise of *Huckleberry Finn*. Indeed, Huck never questions whether slavery is right or wrong. So far as he is concerned, it is part of the natural order of things, and he goes through the entire novel believing that by helping Jim escape, he is committing a sin.

Sample Topics:

1. **Slavery:** How is slavery depicted throughout *Huckleberry Finn*?
2. *Huckleberry Finn* deals with slavery in the pre-Civil War American South, but slavery is far from being the book's central subject. A main character, Jim, is an escaping slave, but we see little of his life before he flees St. Petersburg. In fact, apart from glimpses of working slaves belonging to the Grangerfords, Wilkses, and Phelps, Huck's narrative does not delve into the day-to-day conditions of slaves. Nevertheless, it says a great deal about slavery as an institution. How does it achieve that and what views about slavery does it express? Does it condemn the institution directly or indirectly? Does it condone it? Or does it seem to have no point of view on the subject? Does Mark Twain use irony to attack slavery?

This is a large subject for a school essay, with an immense amount of material, so you should try to narrow your focus. You might, for example, limit your topic to how *Huckleberry Finn* uses irony to attack slavery or you might look at the book's treatment of slavery in the context of Mark Twain's outspoken views against the institution. Although he grew up in a slave-owning family whose members never thought to question the morality of slavery, Mark Twain eventually came to regard slavery as "a bald, grotesque, an unwarrantable usurpation" for which "it would not be possible for a humane and intelligent person to invent a rational excuse ..." Can you find any echoes of those sentiments in *Huckleberry Finn*?

A good place to begin research on Mark Twain's views on slavery is Terrell Dempsey's *Searching for Jim: Slavery in Sam Clemens's World* (2003). You might also read the discussions of slavery in this book's chapter on *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), a novel that treats the subject much more directly than *Huckleberry Finn* does.

3. **Abolitionism:** What use does *Huckleberry Finn* make of southern white fear of abolitionists?

Closely related to slavery is the subject of abolitionism—the organized movement to abolish slavery in the United States during the early 19th century. Huck alludes to abolitionists several times in his narrative, but uses the term in a slightly different sense, to describe people—usually northerners from free states—who tried to liberate individual slaves. Such people were not only despised and feared within white slaveholding communities, they also violated federal laws against taking slaves into other states against the wishes of their legal owners. In Huck's mind, abolitionists are about the most "low-down" form of human beings imaginable, and he repeatedly expresses his contempt for himself for doing what abolitionists do. In addition to revealing Huck's struggles with his conscience over his abolitionist behavior, *Huckleberry Finn* has Tom Sawyer exploit white fear of abolitionists to stir up excitement around the Phelps' farm the night that he and Huck finally spring Jim free from his captivity.

As the basic outlines of what *Huckleberry Finn* says about abolitionists are readily evident, an essay on this topic needs to probe more deeply into what the novel says about white fear of abolitionism. Part of your goal should be to assess how realistically the novel treats the subject. This will necessitate your doing a background read on the era of slavery, the nature of the abolitionist movement, and the fear that it aroused within slaveholding communities. To that end, there is no better place to start than with Terrell Dempsey's *Searching for Jim: Slavery in Sam Clemens's World*. For a much different take on the novel, read John Seelye's revision, *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1970 and 1987), which removes Tom Sawyer from the end of the narrative and shows that southern white attitudes toward abolitionists were no laughing matter.

Philosophy and Ideas

Another way to consider *Huckleberry Finn* is to explore the broad philosophical ideas it expressed, such as the meaning of freedom, the nature of racism, and the essence of truth. This approach is related to the study of themes described above, but it works at a more general level.

Sample Topics:

1. **Freedom:** What does *Huckleberry Finn* say about the meaning of freedom?

One of the most pervasive themes throughout Mark Twain's many writings is the quest for freedom. It is easy to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is about Huck and Jim's quests for freedom, but what kind of freedom do they really seek? Jim begins the novel as a slave; by law, he is the property of another person, Miss Watson. He naturally seeks to be free from the legal confines of chattel slavery and particularly from the peril of being sold down the river and forever separated from his wife and children. However, as a legally free black man living amid a white racist society, what kind of freedom can he and his family hope to enjoy?

As a legally free white boy, Huck seeks a different kind of freedom—escape from both the abuse of his father and the civilizing influences of the Widow Douglas and her sister. The novel ends with Huck and Jim apparently triumphing, but is either truly free? Conversely, is it possible that they have been free all along without fully realizing it? The best way to get answers to these questions is to read *Huckleberry Finn* attentively and look for every indication of what kind of freedom Huck and Jim seek, clues that they may already be enjoying such freedom, and signs of what the future may hold for them.

2. **Conscience:** What does *Huckleberry Finn* say about how a person's conscience dictates his actions?

When Huck witnesses the tar and feathering of the King and the Duke in chapter 33, he goes home feeling that somehow he is to blame, even though he had nothing to do with the awful event. "But that's always the way," he reflects, "it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway."

Throughout his entire narrative, Huck struggles with his conscience, particularly in the matter of his helping Jim to escape from slavery. As a white southerner, Huck is conditioned to accept slavery as a legal and morally justified institution and to regard abolitionists as the most "low-down" form of human scum. Does his perseverance in helping Jim escape from slavery thus represent a significant triumph over his conscience? Does the novel provide any clues as to why Huck's conscience is formed as it is? Are there any indications that matters of conscience trouble any other characters in the book? In trying to answer these questions, you should pay particular attention to Huck's introspective remarks about his conscience in chapters 16 and 31.

Mark Twain wrote a great deal about the nature of conscience and what he called the "moral sense." For a helpful discussion of this subject, see the article by Earl F. Briden listed in the Bibliography below. You might also find it helpful to read Mark Twain's story "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut" (1876), a compelling monologue in which an unnamed author describes his lethal confrontation with his conscience.

3. **Civilization:** What does *civilization* mean to Huck?

Among the most famous passages in *Huckleberry Finn* is Huck's final paragraph, in which he says he must "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." That passage makes a nice bookend to the novel, whose first chapter opens with Huck complaining about the Widow Douglas's efforts to "sivilize" him. Huck thus expresses exactly the same attitude toward civilization at the end of his narrative that he expresses at its beginning. He seems to resist the idea of civilization throughout the novel, but what can that idea possibly mean to him? So far as we know, at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck is nearly illiterate and knows almost nothing of the world outside St. Petersburg. By the end of the novel, however, he has had some formal schooling, has learned to read, has lived in the homes of at least four respectable families (the Widow Douglas, the Grangerfords, the Wilkses, and the Phelps), and has traveled more than 1,000 miles. Nevertheless, his attitude toward civilization remains the same. Why?

To write on this topic, you will need to keep an open mind on what *civilization* means to Huck, as you will find that he uses the word *sivilize* only three times in the entire book (chapters 1, 6, and unnumbered last). Your goal should be to discover what the word means to Huck and why he ultimately rejects being civilized. Pay particular attention to chapters 17 and 18, in which Huck lives with the Grangerfords. There, apparently for the first time, he seems to become reconciled to the idea of living in a fine home and being regarded as civilized. However, could what happens to that family affect his ideas about civilization?

4. **Racism:** Is *Huckleberry Finn* a racist book?

This book opens with a prologue about how scholar Shelley Fisher Fishkin first encountered *Huckleberry Finn* when she was a high school junior in 1965. As she recalls, she was expecting the novel to be a humorous adventure story, similar to *Tom Sawyer*, and was stunned by the essay topic that her English teacher assigned: "How Mark Twain used irony to attack racism in *Huckleberry Finn*." That challenge is as valid now as it was when Fishkin's teacher posed it more than four decades ago. Is the novel racist, as many critics have charged? How much of the criticism directed at the book has to do with the book's frequent use of the racially charged word *nigger*? To answer these questions, you will need to define what makes a book racist. You will need to assess how Mark Twain uses irony to depict 19th-century views on race. You can start by reading this book's first chapter. You would also do well to read discussions of *Huckleberry Finn* by African Americans, such as scholars Jocelyn Chadwick and David L. Smith and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (see Bibliography below). Morrison wrote a new introduction to *Huckleberry Finn* for the Oxford Mark Twain edition—which was edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin, who has also written several important books on race in Mark Twain's writings. Fishkin might never have written her books on Mark Twain or edited the Oxford edition had she not received the essay assignment she was given in high school.

Form and Genre

An essay about *Huckleberry Finn*'s form would examine aspects of how the novel is constructed, what literary techniques Mark Twain uses, and how and why the novel's structure succeeds or fails. The novel's basic form is a first-person narrative related by

its youthful protagonist, Huck, who, as we learn in the novel's last paragraph, has written down his story as a book. In this regard, it is similar to *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), another first-person narrative that is supposed to be handwritten. An important question to ask as you read *Huckleberry Finn* is how it might differ if it were told in a different form, such as a third-person narrative similar to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

The term *genre* is used in a variety of ways, but basically refers to the category into which a work fits. A single work might properly be assigned to several different genres, and that is true of *Huckleberry Finn*. Among the genre terms applied to it are coming-of-age novel, or bildungsroman, and picaresque. It might also be classified as historical fiction or regional fiction, as Mark Twain set it in the American South during the era of slavery, about three or four decades before the time he published it. However, what might qualify it as a historical novel or a regional novel is not merely the fact that it is set in the South of the past, but that its story and themes would not work anywhere else or in any later time period. Finally, the book's strong comic elements might justify classifying it as a humorous novel. The appropriateness of applying any of these terms to *Huckleberry Finn* would make a good subject for an essay, as long as your essay addresses the question of why the issue matters in the first place.

Sample Topics:

1. **Huck as an author:** Does Huck really write a book that tells his story?

In the very last paragraph of *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck says, "there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it . . ." If we read that passage as the literal truth (within the context of the novel), must we conclude that Huck actually *wrote* a book and did not merely narrate his story orally? Are there reasons why it matters whether he wrote the book or not?

This topic could be fun, as some clever detective work will be needed to answer the question of whether Huck wrote a book. If well handled, the topic could provide the basis for a strong essay. However, it might not be an easy essay to write. The important issues are not whether Huck actually wrote down his story in his own hand, but why that question matters and what *Huckleberry Finn* has to say about books generally. You will therefore need to approach this topic at two levels. The first is the fun part—searching Huck's narrative for evidence that he is capable of writing a book. Look for clues relating to his literacy and understanding of language and pay particularly close attention to the first and last paragraphs of his narrative. If you conclude that he did write the book, determine *when* he wrote it—relative to the time of the story—and why that question matters. On the second level, you will need to examine what Huck says about books and reading throughout his narrative. Among Huck's numerous allusions to books, the very first may be the most important—his discussion of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in the first two paragraphs of chapter 1. Huck twits Mark Twain himself for not always telling the truth in his book; is he also hinting that his own book will be more truthful? Other books that Huck mentions include Bibles and testaments, schoolbooks, books looted from the wrecked *Walter Scott* (note the name of the steamboat!), books in the Grangerford house, and Joanna Wilks's dictionary. Pay particular attention to Huck's many references to books read by Tom Sawyer. Do all Huck's allusions to books add up to a coherent attitude toward literature or books or suggest reasons why he would or would not want to write a book himself?

2. **Huck Finn as a picaro:** Should *Huckleberry Finn* be classified as a picaresque novel?

Picaresque novels are typically satiric narratives that follow the adventures of amiable rogues, who are usually the narrators. The term comes from the Spanish word for "rogue," *pícaro*. Picaresque tales tend to be episodic, with their heroes traveling from place to place, having encounters with the lowest members of society and triumphing over the middle-class people with whom they clash along the way. Picaresque elements can be found in many of Mark Twain's books, and perhaps most notably in *Huckleberry Finn*. Is it accurate to classify the book as picaresque?

If you write an essay on this topic, you should begin by spelling out what you mean by "picaresque" and "picaro." To do that, you will need to do some background reading on picaresque fiction in a literature textbook or a general literary reference work. The classic picaresque tale is Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605). Reading that novel merely for background information would be a tall order, but you can find synopses in publications such as Frank N. Magill's *Masterplots* (1996), which can be found in many libraries.

3. **The "evasion" chapters:** What do the final chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* contribute to the book?

From a literary viewpoint, one of *Huckleberry Finn*'s most controversial aspects is the sharp, perhaps even jarring, contrast

between the last 10 or so chapters and the rest of the book. Huck and Jim's river voyage ends in chapter 31. Huck is finally free from the King and the Duke, but the two scoundrels have sold Jim to Silas Phelps, who holds him prisoner, expecting to receive a reward from the man whom he believes to be Jim's rightful owner in New Orleans. After Huck finds Phelps's farm, he determines to set Jim free, but the novel changes radically in chapter 33 when Tom Sawyer reappears (he is Phelps's nephew) and offers to help free Jim. Huck sensibly suggests simply stealing the key to the hut confining Jim, but Tom instead concocts an elaborate and time-consuming scheme to liberate Jim in "style." The chapters that follow are commonly known as the "evasion" episode, after Tom's statement that "when a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion." Aside from young readers who enjoy the humorous excesses of Tom's ludicrously complicated scheme, few readers admire the evasion chapters. When Ernest Hemingway wrote the lavish praise of the novel discussed at the beginning of this chapter, he advised readers to stop at the point where Jim is stolen from Huck, saying "That is the real end. The rest is just cheating." John Seelye took Hemingway's advice several steps further when he rewrote Mark Twain's novel as *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In Seelye's version, Tom Sawyer never reappears, and the story ends abruptly with Jim being killed by slave catchers. It is a shocking conclusion but one that Seelye believes is more realistic than Mark Twain's.

An essay on this topic should address three interrelated questions: In what important ways do the evasion chapters differ from the rest of the book? Do they strengthen or weaken the novel? And, finally, why might Mark Twain have written them as he did? To answer the first two of those questions, you should pay special attention to what happens to Huck and Jim's character development in those chapters. Does Huck continue to mature? Or does he show signs of regression? Is Jim's comparatively passive behavior consistent with what the earlier chapters say about him? How does what happens in the final chapters conform with Huck and Jim's quests for freedom? The third question is the most difficult and one that has yet to find an explanation that satisfies all critics and scholars. To get ideas on how to deal with that question, look at one or two of the many analytical works listed in the Bibliography below. Of particular relevance are Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Lighting Out for the Territory* and James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadious M. Davis's *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn."* Reading Seelye's *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* should also give you some helpful ideas.

Language, Symbols, and Imagery

Among the many reasons *Huckleberry Finn* ranks as an important work is its role in freeing American literature from the confines of the genteel literary tradition associated with such writers as James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. That tradition strove for high literary standards, which were measured, in part, by polite language and faultless grammar. The vernacular narrative voice of *Huckleberry Finn* is something much different; it is often far from being polite and its grammar is almost never faultless. It is, however, always energetic and natural—characteristics that make the book seem as fresh and real today as it did when Mark Twain wrote it. The same cannot be said for many works of the genteel tradition. Indeed, *Huckleberry Finn*'s language may be a primary reason why Ernest Hemingway said that "All modern American literature comes from ... *Huckleberry Finn*."

Sample Topics:

1. **Huck's language:** What does the novel's vernacular language contribute to the book?

What makes *Huckleberry Finn*'s language so strikingly different from that of other novels of its time is that the book's narrative voice is that of a young, uneducated boy from the edge of the western frontier who is too ignorant and naive to recognize the imperfections of the language he speaks. It is so filled with errors and crudeness that members of the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library committee denounced the book as "the veriest trash" and called it "rough, coarse and inelegant ..." Is it? If so, is that necessarily a bad thing?

You might also wish to write on the topic of Huck's frequent use of the word *nigger*. Is it a necessary part of the narrative? Would the book be as powerful without that word? This topic touches on such an emotionally charged issue that before you undertake it, you should probably discuss it with your instructor.

2. **Symbols of southern decadence:** What kind of picture of southern culture does *Huckleberry Finn* offer?

In addition to its being an attack on slavery and racism, *Huckleberry Finn* is also often seen as an attack on the moral and

cultural decay of the American South, a phenomenon that Mark Twain blamed on the debilitating effects of slavery on slaveholders and the South's antiquated ideas about chivalry, the nobility of royalty, and other "romantic juvenilities." His most focused attack on the South can be found in chapters 40 to 47 of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), which describe his return to New Orleans in 1882. In that book, he even goes so far as to hold the Scottish writer Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) partly responsible for the U.S. Civil War because his novels encouraged white southerners to hang on to outmoded romantic ideals and thereby resist the kinds of progressive changes that would have allowed the South to keep up with the North's development. All these ideas were on Mark Twain's mind when he was writing *Huckleberry Finn*, and traces of them can be found in his novel. What an essay on southern decadence should try to do is show what kind of a picture of the South the novel builds.

As you read *Huckleberry Finn*, you will not find explicit condemnations of the South. To write on this topic, you will need to look for symbols of romanticism and decadence and the use of ironic language. An example of an obvious symbol is the wrecked steamboat in chapter 13 in which Huck stumbles upon two criminals who are about to murder a partner. The image of a wrecked steamboat containing no one but murderers is powerful in itself; it is made even more powerful by the boat's name—the *Walter Scott*. An example of powerful irony is the Grangerford family (chapters 17–18). To Huck's naive eyes, the Grangerfords represent the very pinnacle of southern culture. However, that same family destroys itself in an utterly pointless feud with the Shepherdsons in which the only thing that seems to matter is honor. Might the Grangerfords' feud be seen as a symbol of the self-destructive tendency of the South? For more subtle examples of symbols, consider how the scoundrels whom Huck meets in chapter 19 claim to be the King of France and the Duke of Bridgewater and demand to be treated as royalty. Pay attention also to Huck and Jim's discussion of kings in chapter 23.

3. **The majestic Mississippi:** How does the river function as a symbol in *Huckleberry Finn*?

Mark Twain wrote about the Mississippi River in many different works but perhaps nowhere more poignantly than in *Huckleberry Finn*. An essay should find much to say about the river's use as symbol in the novel. For example, when Huck and Jim's raft trip begins, the river acts as a highway to freedom. However, when they accidentally pass the Mississippi's confluence with the Ohio River, the Mississippi becomes something different as it then carries Huck and Jim further from their goal and deeper into the heart of slavery, the last place they wish to go. If you write on this topic, look for the river's other symbolic meanings, such as its role as a cleanser of sin and a provider of bounty. Pay special attention to what Huck says about the river itself and note the distinctions between things that happen on the river and things that happen on land.

For additional ideas on Mark Twain's feelings toward the Mississippi, consider dipping into his *Life on the Mississippi*, the first part of which is discussed in another chapter in this book. You will find more ideas on Mark Twain's use of place in *Huckleberry Finn* and other works in R. Kent Rasmussen's *Cyclopedia of Literary Places*, which is listed in the Bibliography below.

4. **Ironic language:** How does Mark Twain use irony to create comic effects and to convey more serious points in *Huckleberry Finn*?

Huckleberry Finn is a book rich in ironies, both large and small. Other sections of this chapter discuss some of Mark Twain's uses of ironical language in relation to specific thematic issues. Regardless of the topic on which you write, you should stay alert to the use of irony. Indeed, Mark Twain's use of irony would make a fine essay topic. If you decide to write this, begin by identifying passages that use irony. A good example is the King and Duke's putting \$415 of their own money into Peter Wilks's sack of gold coins to "make up the deffisit" (chapter 25), only to lose everything because they are too greedy to get away with what they have already stolen. That minor incident might be seen as a use of irony that achieves a comic effect while also making a serious point about the consequences of greed. A broader use of irony is Huck's constantly thinking that he is doing the wrong thing by helping Jim escape, when he is actually doing the right thing.

After collecting examples of ironies in the book, separate them into categories, such as comic, serious, or both, and look for patterns as to how and where each type of irony is used. Be sure to define what you mean by irony and explain how some of the examples you discuss work. Your goal should be to show what the different kinds of irony contribute to the book. You should also consider the question of whether some of Mark Twain's irony might be so subtle or obscure that readers overlook it and misunderstand what the book is trying to say. For further ideas on this point, read the discussion of racism in the section on Philosophy and Ideas.

Compare and Contrast Essays

Writing a compare and contrast essay allows you to be creative on at least two levels: first, in finding aspects of one or more works to compare; then in finding significant points to make about the similarities and differences you observe. Writing this type of essay may offer your best chance of doing something original. An essay comparing *Huck Finn* with *Tom Sawyer* could be a very strong one, but its subject would not be original. On the other hand, comparisons of Aunt Polly with her sister Sally Phelps or of Pap Finn with the King or the Duke would be more original topics.

Compare and contrast topics offer considerable scope for developing original ideas, but they also present a trap to avoid, namely, failing to develop your essay fully. You are likely to begin a comparison essay by compiling lists of similarities and differences between pairs of characters, types of plots, different points of view, or other aspects of *Huckleberry Finn*. That is certainly a sensible way to start. However, do not assume that inventories of comparisons mean anything by themselves. It would not be enough simply to list Tom and Huck's similarities and differences. You would also need to say something about *why* the two boys are similar or different, how their similar and different traits relate to other aspects of their personalities, and how those traits affect their behavior and help to drive the novel's story lines. (For a discussion of Tom-and-Huck comparisons, see the Compare and Contrast section of this book's chapter on *Tom Sawyer*.)

The sample topics that follow represent only a fraction of possible compare and contrast topics. You will find additional ideas relating to *Huckleberry Finn* in other chapters, but you should be able to come up with original ideas of your own.

Sample Topics:

1. ***Huckleberry Finn* v. *Tom Sawyer*:** Are these two novels similar or very different kinds of books?

As you know, *Huckleberry Finn* is a direct sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. In fact, the beginning of its story line is so closely connected to the end of *Tom Sawyer* that if its first few chapters were changed from a first-person to a third-person narrative and added to *Tom Sawyer*, readers would scarcely notice the transition. After those first few chapters, however, *Huckleberry Finn* starts to change and becomes a very different kind of book. It has some of the same characters and settings as *Tom Sawyer*, but is it the same kind of novel? Many scholars and critics argue that the books are fundamentally different. An essay comparing the books that builds a convincing case for considering them very different could be a strong one. However, it would need to go beyond superficial differences between the books and probe for essentials, such as what the books are about, how they are structured and narrated, how they use humor and irony, and emphasize what makes *Huckleberry Finn* the greater book.

While *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* may truly be very different books, you should not overlook their similarities. Indeed, some readers argue that *Huckleberry Finn* is more than a mere sequel to *Tom Sawyer*—that in many ways it is a reworking of the *same* story. Before dismissing that idea out of hand, consider some of the parallels between the two books: The protagonists are both young boys who attempt to run away from civilization and who respond successfully to unusual challenges and reach higher levels of maturity. Both boys are terrorized by loathsome adults, face crises of conscience, and make difficult choices requiring self-sacrifice. You should find other examples of parallels between the two books.

2. **The King v. the Duke:** Are the novel's two scoundrels essentially the same or different types of characters?

The scoundrels who call themselves the King of France and the Duke of Bridgewater are among Mark Twain's most entertaining comic inventions. Sometimes hilariously outrageous and at other times loathsome, these rascals who take control of Huck and Jim's raft in chapter 19 make an intriguing pair of characters to discuss in a compare and contrast essay. Both are greedy con men, but how similar are they otherwise? Are they equally unprincipled and ruthless? Or do they operate under different ethical principles? How do their similarities and differences affect their ability to work together and their interactions with other characters? Does one of them play a more dominant role? Do they exhibit elements of modern comedy teams made up of straight men and stooges? If so, which of them is the straight man and which is the stooge? There are clearly many points on which the scoundrels can be compared.

To write on this topic, study everything that Huck says about the King and Duke in chapters 19 through 33. Pay close attention to their own words and actions. If you conclude the King and the Duke are significantly different types of characters, look for evidence to explain what makes them different. Could Mark Twain have created them to symbolize different forms of depravity along the Mississippi River?

3. **The novel v. films:** What do the difficulties of adapting *Huckleberry Finn* to the screen reveal about the novel itself?

Since 1920, about a dozen attempts have been made to adapt *Huckleberry Finn* to the screen, in both feature films and television dramas. None of these efforts has been recognized as a complete success, and most are regarded as failures. Why the greatest novel by one of America's greatest writers has not fared better on the screen raises interesting questions about the problems of adapting literary works to other media. It also raises interesting questions about the nature of *Huckleberry Finn* as a novel. Is there something about the book's structure, plotlines, or subject matter that helps to explain why it has yet to be adapted to the screen successfully? A partial answer to that question may lie in a comparison of the novel with one of its screen adaptations.

The easiest way to undertake an essay on this topic would be to watch a film version of *Huckleberry Finn* on a machine you can pause, reverse, and replay so that you can study individual scenes carefully. However, you should avoid watching any film version until you have read the novel completely. Before seeing the film, write out a checklist of what you regard as the most important points that the novel makes. Examples might include Huck's flight from "civilization," Huck's growing awareness of Jim's humanity and his and Jim's developing relationship, and the insanity of the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud. Your checklist might also include brief notes on the novel's characters, particularly Huck and Jim's. Leave room on your list to add comments as you watch the film. Then, while you are watching the film, keep an eye on your checklist and note the ways in which the film lives up to, or departs from, the novel.

Keep in mind that prose and film are different media that do not and cannot tell stories in the same ways. Even the best film adaptations of literary works omit characters and episodes and make other changes. What your essay should discuss, then, is not such details as whether a film includes every episode in *Huckleberry Finn* (and no film does), but whether the film is true to the novel's fundamental spirit and whether its characters are faithful representations of those in the novel. If you conclude that the film fails to meet those standards, can you find difficulties—such as Huck's narrative voice—within the novel that may account for the problems?

A good film to use for this exercise is the 1993 Disney feature, *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, which stars Elijah Wood as Huck, as copies of it should be readily available. That film also makes a particularly good case study because it departs from Mark Twain's novel in many interesting ways. A primary question to ask of that film is whether its Huck is the same character as the novel's Huck. You should also consider how the film's comparatively heavy-handed treatment of slavery compares to the more subtle points made in the novel.

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