

"The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel about a young boy's coming of age in the Missouri of the mid-1800's. The main character, Huckleberry Finn, spends much time in the novel floating down the Mississippi River on a raft with a runaway slave named Jim. Before he does so, however, Huck spends some time in the fictional town of St. Petersburg where a number of people attempt to influence him.

Before the novel begins, Huck Finn has led a life of absolute freedom. His drunken and often missing father has never paid much attention to him; his mother is dead and so, when the novel begins, Huck is not used to following any rules. The book's opening finds Huck living with the Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. Both women are fairly old and are really somewhat incapable of raising a rebellious boy like Huck Finn. Nevertheless, they attempt to make Huck into what they believe will be a better boy. Specifically, they attempt, as Huck says, to "sivilize" him. This process includes making Huck go to school, teaching him various religious facts, and making him act in a way that the women find socially acceptable. Huck, who has never had to follow many rules in his life, finds the demands the women place upon him constraining and the life with them lonely. As a result, soon after he first moves in with them, he runs away. He soon comes back, but, even though he becomes somewhat comfortable with his new life as the months go by, Huck never really enjoys the life of manners, religion, and education that the Widow and her sister impose upon him.

Huck believes he will find some freedom with Tom Sawyer. Tom is a boy of Huck's age who promises Huck and other boys of the town a life of adventure. Huck is eager to join Tom Sawyer's Gang because he feels that doing so will allow him to escape the somewhat boring life he leads with the Widow Douglas. Unfortunately, such an escape does not occur. Tom Sawyer promises much--robbing stages, murdering and ransoming people, kidnaping beautiful women--but none of this comes to pass. Huck finds out too late that Tom's adventures are imaginary: that raiding a caravan of "A-rabs" really means terrorizing young children on a Sunday school picnic, that stolen "joolry" is nothing more than turnips or rocks. Huck is disappointed that the adventures Tom promises are not real and so, along with the other members, he resigns from the gang.

Another person who tries to get Huckleberry Finn to change is Pap, Huck's father. Pap is one of the most astonishing figures in all of American literature as he is completely antisocial and wishes to undo all of the civilizing effects that the Widow and Miss Watson have attempted to instill in Huck. Pap is a mess: he is unshaven; his hair is uncut and hangs like vines in front of his face; his skin, Huck says, is white like a fish's belly or like a tree toad's. Pap's savage appearance reflects his feelings as he demands that Huck quit school, stop reading, and avoid church. Huck is able to stay away from Pap for a while, but Pap kidnaps Huck three or four months after Huck starts to live with the Widow and takes him to a lonely cabin deep in the Missouri woods. Here, Huck enjoys, once again, the freedom that he had prior to the beginning of the book. He can smoke, "laze around," swear, and, in general, do what he wants to do. However, as he did with the Widow and with Tom, Huck begins to become dissatisfied with this life. Pap is "too handy with the hickory" and Huck soon realizes that he will have to escape from the cabin if he wishes to remain alive. As a result of his concern, Huck makes it appear as if he is killed in the cabin while Pap is away, and leaves to go to a remote island in the Mississippi River, Jackson's Island.

It is after he leaves his father's cabin that Huck joins yet

another important influence in his life: Miss Watson's slave, Jim. Prior to Huck's leaving, Jim has been a minor character in the novel--he has been shown being fooled by Tom Sawyer and telling Huck's fortune. Huck finds Jim on Jackson's Island because the slave has run away--he has overheard a conversation that he will soon be sold to New Orleans. Soon after joining Jim on Jackson's Island, Huck begins to realize that Jim has more talents and intelligence than Huck has been aware of. Jim knows "all kinds of signs" about the future, people's personalities, and weather forecasting. Huck finds this kind of information necessary as he and Jim drift down the Mississippi on a raft. As important, Huck feels a comfort with Jim that he has not felt with the other major characters in the novel. With Jim, Huck can enjoy the best aspects of his earlier influences. As does the Widow, Jim allows Huck security, but Jim is not as confining as is the Widow. Like Tom Sawyer, Jim is intelligent but his intelligence is not as intimidating or as imaginary as is Tom's. As does Pap, Jim allows Huck freedom, but he does it in a loving, rather than an uncaring, fashion. Thus, early, in their relationship on Jackson's Island, Huck says to Jim, "This is nice. I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here." This feeling is in marked contrast with Huck's feelings concerning other people in the early part of the novel where he always is uncomfortable and wishes to leave them.

At the conclusion of chapter 11 in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck and Jim are forced to leave Jackson's Island because Huck discovers that people are looking for the runaway slave. Prior to leaving, Huck tells Jim, "They're after us." Clearly, the people are after Jim, but Huck has already identified with Jim and has begun to care for him. This stated empathy shows that the two outcasts will have a successful and rewarding friendship as they drift down the river as the novel continues.

