

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN STUDY GUIDE

by Greg Power

For the novel by
Mark Twain



Synopsis

Huckleberry Finn, the outcast of the Mississippi River town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, son of a drunkard, habitual truant, smoker and liar, is going to be civilized by the widow and her sister, Miss Watson, even if it kills him. Though he chafes under their regime, bit by bit Huck reforms: he stops smoking in the house, he eats with a fork, lays off swearing around the widow, learns to read and write, sleeps in a bed, and even wears shoes when the weather warrants it. When Huck's Pap returns from downriver somewhere, all the widow's good work is undone. Pap takes Huck off to a cabin in the woods and he soon backslides into his wild ways. Huck would be happy if it weren't for Pap's drinking, his beatings, and his threats to kill Huck.

One day when Pap leaves Huck alone and heads to town to see about getting his hands on Huck's \$6,000.00 (Huck's share of the money he and Tom Sawyer took from the robbers in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*), Huck escapes. He makes it seem as though he has been murdered and his body thrown into the river. On Jackson's Island he meets Miss Watson's slave, Jim. Fearful that Miss Watson was going to sell him down river to New Orleans, Jim has escaped. Together the two fugitives find a raft and drift downstream. Their plan is to drift to the mouth of the Ohio River at Cairo, Illinois. There they will sell the raft and buy riverboat passage up the Ohio to freedom.

Their plans founder when they bypass Cairo in the fog. Unable to take the raft upstream, they continue drifting south. When the raft is run over by a steamboat, Huck swims to shore and soon finds himself caught in the crossfire of a decades-old feud between the Grangerford and the Shepherdson families.

Eventually, both Huck and Jim find their way back to the raft and continue downstream. Their idyllic world, seemingly safe from the violence and hypocrisy of the little river towns they pass, is soon invaded by two con men, "the king" and "the duke," who promptly drag Huck and Jim into their swindles. Stealing from camp-meetings, staging grotesque or obscene parodies of Shakespeare, the two charlatans appeal to and profit from the worst in human nature. Huck grows increasingly disgusted with them, but not until they plan to defraud three orphan girls out of their

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late uncle's money does Huck act. Although he informs on them, the plan fails, and the two escape again to Huck and Jim's raft, one step ahead of the mob.

Eventually, the king and the duke betray even Huck and Jim. They sell Jim to a local farmer, Silas Phelps, who plans to return him to his owner and collect the reward. "After all this long journey, and after all we'd done for them scoundrels, here was it all come to nothing," bemoans Huck, "everything all busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars."

The last fifth of the novel describes Huck's attempts to rescue Jim from a return to slavery. Though his conscience bothers him about breaking a central taboo of southern society, that against freeing slaves, Huck's heart sends him a different message: that Jim is a man with all the emotions and hopes of any man, white or black, and as such Jim is as deserving of freedom as Huck is.

Chapters 12–16

Vocabulary:

Part 1: Riverboat Jargon

It is said that the Eskimo have thirty different names for snow. Since the Eskimo depend for their livelihood on a close knowledge of the workings of nature, this specialized vocabulary helps them to understand and communicate clearly about their world. Such a specialized vocabulary is called a group's *lexicon* or *jargon*. Many of the vocabulary words in *Huckleberry Finn* are jargon that deal with the river and steamboats. Having grown up along the river, Jim and Huck would be familiar with these terms.

Using a dictionary, write the definition of the technical terms below in the blanks provided. Several have been done for you.

1. Aft: At, in, toward, or near a ship's stern.
2. Backwater (verb): Paddle backwards
3. Berth:
4. Bilgewater:
5. Bitt: Posts to which lines are tied
6. Boiler Deck: The first deck above the main deck on a riverboat; it contained staterooms and was primarily for passenger use.

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Questions:

1. In Chapter 12 Huck and Jim do some serious thinking about the morality of “borrowing.” What conclusion do they come to? Do you find any flaws in their reasoning? What point do you think Twain was trying to make in this passage?
2. On board the sinking *Walter Scott*, Twain presents the reader with another moral dilemma in progress: Huck hears Jake and Bill discussing whether to murder Jim Turner, who is himself a murderer. What decision does Jake Packard make? Is it really a “moral” decision, as he claims it is? What point do you think Twain is trying to make in this passage?
3. In dealing with the thieves on board the *Walter Scott*, how does Huck demonstrate to the reader that he has a good heart, that he is compassionate? What moral reasoning does he use in choosing to help the thieves?
4. When Huck talks to the watchman in Chapter 13, what story about himself does he make up? (This is the second persona that Huck adopts in the novel.)
5. What is the apparent fate of the thieves?

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14. Huck concludes that whether he does “right” (turning in Jim to the slave hunters) or “wrong” (continuing to help Jim to escape) his conscience will still make him feel bad. What does Huck conclude he ought to do? Why do you think that either way Huck’s conscience bothers him ?

15. How do you, personally, tell right from wrong?

Have you been in a situation where it was hard for you to tell right from wrong? Describe the situation. How did you decide what to do or what to conclude about right and wrong?

16. Read Job 32:7–9; Psalm 25:8, 9; and Romans 2:12–16. According to these verses, how can we tell right from wrong?

Writing Project:

Twain set aside the manuscript for *Huckleberry Finn* after the sinking of the raft. It was not clear to the author where the story ought to go from this point. He did not resume writing for several years. If you were Mark Twain, where would you take the story from this point? In two or three paragraphs, summarize how you would finish the novel. Remember, Huck and Jim’s reason for traveling down river was to escape the Widow Douglas, Pap, and slavery.

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supposedly is a preacher; he talks and prays like a Christian.

2. Being educated in Greek and Latin at medical school, he knows that the king's "Greek" is fraudulent; he knows that they do not talk like Englishmen; he is generally less trusting and more suspicious than the rest of the town. There is a suggestion that because he is a "man of science" he is less gullible than ordinary men and less quick to be taken in by the king's show of piety.

3. Jim, a runaway slave would be caught and returned to his "owner," and Huck would be punished for helping a slave escape and/or be returned home to Pap or the widow.

4. Huck tells Joanna that he is Harvey's "valley" (valet), that the King of England comes to their church in Sheffield in the summer time and to bathe in sea water there, that there are 17 different preachers at their church, and that servants in England never get off for the holidays—not even for the Fourth of July.

5. Originally, Huck's plan was to steal the girls' money back, give it to them, then escape on the raft with Jim. When he is forced to hide the money in the coffin, his plans change. He tells the truth to Mary Jane and asks her to leave town lest her face reveal to the king and the duke what she knows. When she returns in the evening, she is to light a candle in her window. If Huck doesn't turn up by eleven, it means he is safely out of the way. Mary Jane is then free to turn in the king and the duke and retrieve the money from the buried coffin. If Huck has not been able to escape, she is to defend Huck before the townspeople (and presumably prevent him from being lynched).

6. The arrival of two other men claiming to be the real Wilks brothers ruins his plans. He is only able to escape by a fluke.

Analysis:

7. Huck is recognizing that these two men are not simply good-natured petty thieves (like Huck himself, perhaps?) but truly have evil intentions. Earlier Huck seemed to think there were two Providences, one who wanted to punish wrongdoing and another who wanted to bless people. Now he seems to be saying that one of the Providences is the devil himself. (Either that or he is allowing for a third Providence.) He may be thinking that the Providence to whom one turned for help depended upon the kind of person: bad people can turn to the devil for help in doing evil; good people can turn to God for help in doing right. This may also be an ironic comment on the King's use of the word.

8. Huck said that the music "just warmed you up and made you feel as good as church letting out. . . after all that soul-butter and hogwash I never see it freshen up things so, and sound so honest and bully." Twain uses this passage to draw a sharp contrast between the music and the words of the king, emphasizing how the king's lies are the opposite of the "honest" singing.

9. Huck was glad that he'd been able to place the blame on the slaves without any harm coming to them. Huck may be dishonest, but he is good-hearted and doesn't want people to suffer. This part of Huck's character was also seen when Huck and Jim stole the boat from the thieves on the sinking *Walter Scott*, but planned to send someone back to rescue them before the boat sank completely.

Dig Deeper:

10. Answers will vary.

Chapter 31

Questions:

1. The king and the duke try various swindles as the raft drifts southward, including a lecture on