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Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain · *1885 · original English text*

A boy on a raft, and a man fleeing slavery, go down the Mississippi. Huck's "conscience," formed by a slaveholding town, tells him that helping Jim is a sin. The book's moral climax is the costly choice to do right anyway. The language of the time includes racial slurs; they need honest historical context, and they are not repeated here.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

When a society's "conscience" defends a wicked law, what does it cost to do what is right?

"All right, then, I'll go to hell"

Huck, tearing up the letter to Miss Watson · Chapter XXXI

Huck believes, wrongly, that he is choosing damnation. In fact he is choosing loyalty and mercy toward Jim, against a law and a catechism that have called evil good. The cost is real to him; the book asks the reader to see that the town, not the boy, has been miseducated.

KEY CHARACTERS

Huck Finn
a miseducated conscience learning mercy

Jim
loyalty, fatherhood, a man seeking freedom

Tom Sawyer
adventure as a game; a costly joke

The Widow Douglas
kindness within a slaveholding order

Miss Watson
piety, ownership, a late will

Pap
tyranny and degradation

The Duke & the King
fraud and sham religion

The Grangerfords
honour turned into a feud

Aunt Sally Phelps
kindness that still cannot see Jim

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Widow and Pap

CHAPTERS I–VII

"Sivilization," and a father who is worse than the woods.

- **Huck** has been taken in by the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, who mean to "sivilize" him
- His father, **Pap**, a violent drunk, claims the boy and the money and locks him in a cabin
- Huck fakes his own death and escapes to the river
- On Jackson's Island he finds **Jim**, Miss Watson's slave, who has run rather than be sold down the river

> *"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter."*
>
> **Huck** · Chapter I

02 The Raft

CHAPTERS VIII–XVI

A companionship forms, and the first test of Huck's trained conscience.

- Huck and Jim drift south by night, meaning to reach Cairo and the Ohio — freedom for Jim
- They miss Cairo in the fog; the Mississippi takes them deeper into slave country
- Huck's conscience troubles him for "stealing" Jim; he almost paddles ashore to betray him
- He cannot do it; he returns to the raft and to the man who has been loyal to him

> *"I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way."*
>
> **Huck, when he thinks of Jim as almost free** · Chapter XVI

03 Feuds and Frauds

CHAPTERS XVII–XXX

The shore is more dangerous, and more foolish, than the river.

- A steamboat wrecks the raft for a time; the boys are received by the Grangerfords, whose feud with the Shepherdsons is deadly and empty
- Two confidence men, the "Duke" and the "King," take over the raft and work towns with lies and sham piety
- They attempt to steal a dead man's inheritance; Huck, with Mary Jane's family at risk, sabotages the fraud
- The King and the Duke, running out of credit, sell Jim back into captivity

04 I'll Go to Hell

CHAPTER XXXI

The moral centre of the book, in a few pages.

- Huck learns that Jim is held at the Phelps farm
- He writes a letter to Miss Watson, telling where Jim is — the "right" thing as his training names it
- He remembers Jim's kindness on the raft, and the companionship of the river
- He tears the letter up: "All right, then, I'll go to hell." He will steal Jim out of slavery again

> *"I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. … All right, then, I'll go to hell"*
>
> **Huck** · Chapter XXXI

05 The Phelps Farm

CHAPTERS XXXII–XLIII

A true decision is almost turned back into a game — and then the truth comes out.

- The Phelpses mistake Huck for their nephew **Tom Sawyer**; Tom himself arrives and plays along
- Tom engineers an absurd "rescue," full of bookish cruelty, though he already knows Jim is free
- Jim is recaptured, then released: Miss Watson has died and freed him in her will
- Tom is shot in the scheme and Jim refuses to abandon him — loyalty again, from the man they have used
- Huck, hearing that Aunt Sally means to "sivilize" him, will light out for the Territory

Conscience · Loyalty · Freedom · False Piety · Courage · The River

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Chapter XXXI is the moral climax. Huck's theology is wrong (helping Jim is not a sin); his loyalty is right. Hold both facts.
2. Jim is a man, a father, and often the adult on the raft. Watch how the book, and how other characters, do or do not treat him as one.
3. The Duke and the King use religion as a tool. So, in another key, does a society that can quote a catechism to defend slavery.
4. The Phelps farm chapters are a problem many readers feel: Tom turns a soul's freedom into a stunt. The book lets you judge that.
5. The spoken language includes racial slurs of the period. They are part of the historical record of contempt; they are not to be made casual in class.
6. "Lighting out for the Territory" is not a complete moral ending. What has Huck learned that he cannot unlearn, even if he runs?

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #76, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/adventures-of-huckleberry-finn/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.