Like The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876), to which it is a sequel, this novel opens in the fictional Mississippi River village of St. Petersburg. However, its action soon shifts to Huck and Jim’s long raft trip down the river — one of the most notable in a long line of literary voyages. Along their way, they repeatedly encounter symbols distinguishing the free North from the slave South and the movement and purity of the river from the stagnation and decadence of the shore. Although the novel’s broad geographical setting is real, every place — apart from the river itself — in which action takes place is fictional, typically a composite of real places that Mark Twain personally knew.
Mark Twain

Given Name: Samuel Langhorne Clemens

Born: November 30, 1835; Florida, Missouri

Died: April 21, 1910; Redding, Connecticut

Quick Reference

First published: 1884 (1885; United States); revised new edition, 2001

Type of work: Novel

Type of plot: Social satire

Time of work: Early to mid-nineteenth century

Asterisk denotes entries on real places.

Places Discussed

*Mississippi River *Mississippi River. The novel’s primary backdrop, the Lower Mississippi is the motive force that drives both the raft and the narrative. Most of the novel’s action actually takes place ashore, but no character ever strays far inland, and the river’s presence always looms. Rich in symbolism, the river washes away sin (such as bawdy houses and murderers), bestows wealth (including bountiful fish and valuable flotsam), and wreaks destruction (destroying both steamboats and towns), all the while inexorably carrying everything upon it ever deeper into the South and its harsh plantation slavery — exactly where Huck and Jim do not want to go. They allow the river to carry them south because they lack the means to navigate upriver and because forces beyond their control repeatedly prevent them from obtaining such means.

Twain was intimately acquainted with the river. He spent his childhood on its banks and as a young man piloted steamboats between St. Louis and New Orleans. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn does a masterful job of conveying the river’s beauty and terrible majesty through the eyes of its ingenuous narrator, Huck.

St. Petersburg St. Petersburg. Sleepy riverfront Missouri village in which Huck lives with the Widow Douglas and her sister when the novel opens. It is modeled on Twain's boyhood home of Hannibal, Missouri. The village and the widow’s proper home represent decency and the forces of civilization, against which Huck rebels. After his alcoholic father kidnaps him and takes him upstream to a crude hut on the Illinois shore, Huck initially feels liberated. However, after his father repeatedly abuses him, Huck runs off on his own. He never expresses an interest in returning to St. Petersburg. Indeed, the novel ends with him expressing a wish “to light out for the Territory” — presumably an allusion to the untamed West.

Jackson’s Island Jackson’s Island. Mississippi River island below St. Petersburg to which Huck flees on a canoe after faking his own murder. There he finds Jim, a slave running away from St. Petersburg because he fears he is about to be sold “down the river” — every Missouri slave’s worst nightmare. The island is easy swimming distance from the free state of Illinois, but that state offers
no refuge to Jim because fugitive slave laws make its western shores the dangerous hunting ground of slave catchers. Huck and Jim remain on the island until the prospect of imminent discovery spurs them to load their things on a raft and flee downriver.

Raft Raft. Flat craft on which Huck and Jim float down the river. After a brief idyll on the island, Jim and Huck learn that slave catchers are coming and flee together on a lumber raft with a pine-plank deck about fifteen feet long and twelve feet wide that they have salvaged from flotsam delivered by the rising river. Their primary home through most of the remaining narrative, the raft represents their most reliable sanctuary from the evils of the shore and thus symbolizes the freedom they both seek. Huck’s descriptions of life on the raft contain several idyllic masterpieces.

*Cairo *Cairo (kay-ROH). Town at Illinois’s southern tip where Huck and Jim intend to land, sell their raft, and buy steamboat passage up the Ohio River into free territory. In a critical juncture in the narrative, however, they drift past Cairo in the fog. The Mississippi continues carrying them ever deeper into slave territory and thwarts every plan they make to return upstream.

*Ohio River *Ohio River. Major tributary of the Mississippi River, which it joins below Cairo. As the major physical barrier separating northern “free” states from southern “slave” states, the Ohio represented a threshold of freedom to African Americans and was thus an appropriate choice as Huck and Jim’s primary destination. Although Huck and Jim never actually see the river, the distinct clear-water channel that its water creates in the muddy Mississippi alerts Huck to the fact that he and Jim have drifted past Cairo. A detailed and colorful explanation of the differences between the waters of the Ohio and the Mississippi Rivers is a crucial part of the novel’s so-called “raft chapter,” which has been omitted from most editions of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn because Mark Twain used it earlier in Life on the Mississippi (1883).

Grangerford home Grangerford home. Prosperous plantation apparently located on the Kentucky side of the river. After their raft is smashed by a steamboat, Huck is separated from Jim and taken in by the prosperous Grangerford family, whose home represents the thin veneer of southern civilization. It offers everything Huck wants in life, but after all the Grangerford men are killed in a senseless feud that unmasks southern degeneracy, he returns to the river with Jim, who has repaired the raft while hiding nearby.

*Pike County *Pike County. Real Missouri county, about fifteen miles south of Hannibal, from which Huck claims to come when he meets the King and Duke, scoundrels who board the raft and take control, again making it impossible for Huck and Jim to return upriver. The county was notorious as the birthplace of worthless frontier characters before the Civil War and is thus another symbol of the South’s decadence.

Bricksville Bricksville. Arkansas town in which Huck witnesses still more depravity: a shooting, a would-be lynch mob, and the King and Duke’s lurid stage show, the Royal Nonesuch. “Bricksville” is ironically named, as its streets are all mud, and its houses are rotting wood-frame structures gradually sliding into the river.
Pikesville Shabby Arkansas village that is the raft’s last stop. Jim becomes a prisoner on the nearby farm of Tom Sawyer’s Uncle Silas and Aunt Sally Phelps. In a wholesale departure from the tone and movement of the narrative, Huck and Tom spend the novel’s last chapters in a farcical plot to free Jim. Afterward, Huck rebels against Aunt Sally’s plan to adopt and “sivilize” him and proposes “to light out for the Territory” — presumably the vast Indian territory west of Arkansas and Missouri.

Essay by: R. Kent Rasmussen

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