

What it takes to Unlearn

Mark Twain's Journey
to Huckleberry Finn



INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain was so far ahead of his time that he shouldn't even be talked about on the same day as other people. Look what he did with his brilliant satire. For the first time in the history of literature a White man talked about a relationship between a Black man and a White boy. ~Dick Gregory, Callus on My Soul (2000)

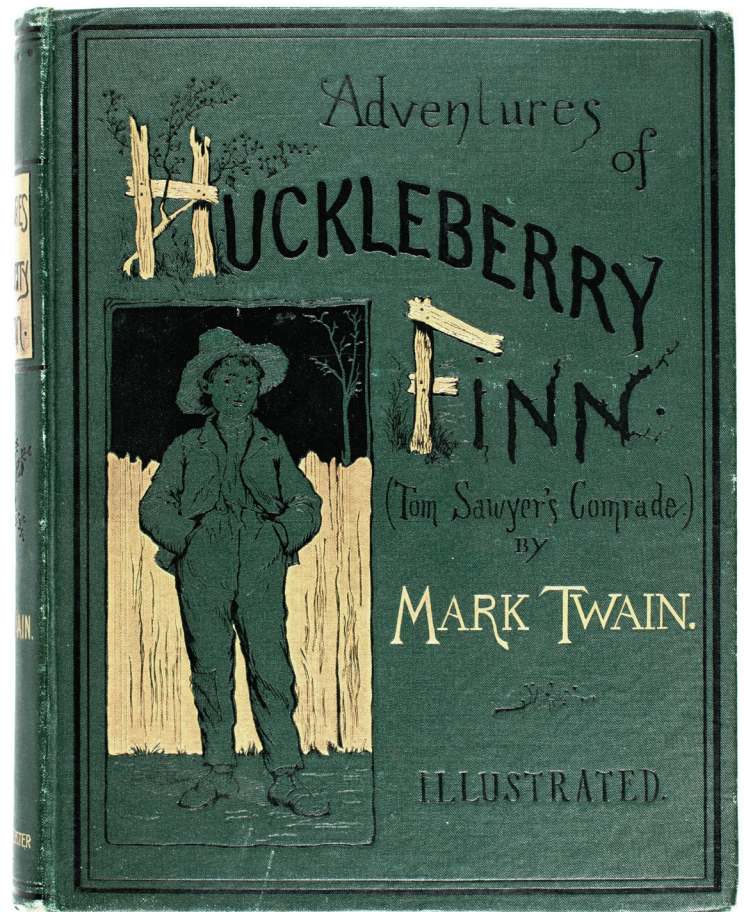
Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a fierce and penetrating critique of racism in America that was decades ahead of its time. So was Twain's own sustained commitment to combatting racism and speaking honestly about race relations.

Twain had grown up in Missouri before the Civil War. Missouri was among the States that allowed slavery; Twain's family owned slaves.

So, much like Huck himself, he had to "unlearn" all he'd been taught as a boy.

In an 1895 notebook entry written when he was 60, Twain was describing himself – as well as Huck – in observing that a “sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision.” For both Twain and Huck, the “sound heart” won out, teaching a conscience deformed by a racist upbringing in a slaveholding family. And in *Huck Finn*, it is runaway slave Jim – of sound heart, mind and conscience – who teaches Huck to be a better person.

Looking back on his childhood at age 41, Twain wrote a friend in 1876 that as late as age 19 or 20, he had been nothing but “ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chuckle-headedness – and an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all.” Twain even volunteered as a Confederate soldier shortly after the Civil War began. He lasted just two weeks before deserting.



Published in New York by Charles L. Webster and Company, on February 18, 1885.

All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." ~Ernest Hemingway

TWAIN IN HANNIBAL, MISSOURI

Both Twain's paternal and maternal grandparents were slave owners; so were his parents. His father's failures as a land speculator led him to sell the family's last slave in 1842, when Twain was seven years old.

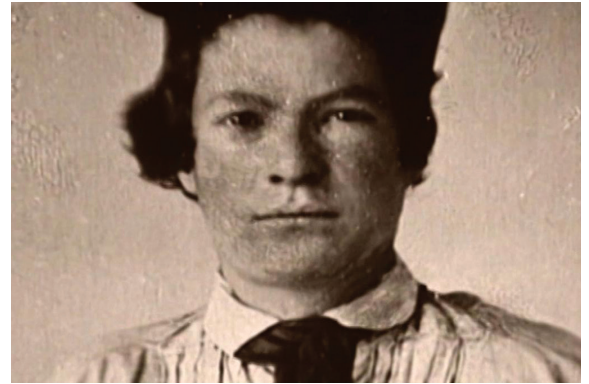
The frontier town of Hannibal in which Twain was raised had only 30 inhabitants as late as 1830; it was not incorporated as a town until 1845, when Twain was ten. **While the town grew and thrived rapidly during Twain's childhood, it was also the scene of violence and cruelty he'd never forget.**

As a boy, Twain saw a slaveholder throw a piece of burning iron into a slave's face. "It bounded from the man's skull," he would later write. "He was dead in an hour."

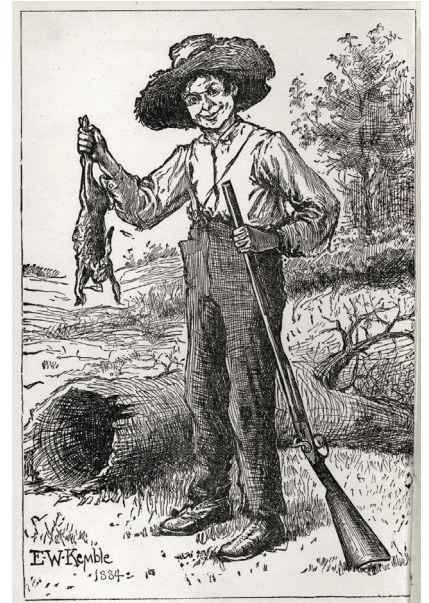
Also as a boy, Twain was playing with a gang of boys on the Mississippi River island that would become Jackson Island in *Huck Finn*. While doing so, the body of a drowned runaway slave surfaced in the water. **The onetime slave, named Neriam Todd, had been secretly fed for weeks by a white boy who became the model for the character of Huck.** When bounty hunters tracked Todd down, he drowned in trying to flee. The bounty hunters mutilated the corpse and left it in the river, confident that when it surfaced it would serve as a lesson for others.

Twain's attitude toward black Americans continued to evolve through his encounters with a slave called Daniel Quarles, known to children like Twain as "Uncle Dan'l." Quarles was an outstanding storyteller; at night, black and white children would gather around him as he told folk stories in which prey like rabbits always outwitted vicious and cunning predators like foxes. **Jim would be modeled in part on Daniel Quarles, who also made a guest appearance as "Uncle Dan'l" in Twain's novel, *The Gilded Age* (1873).**

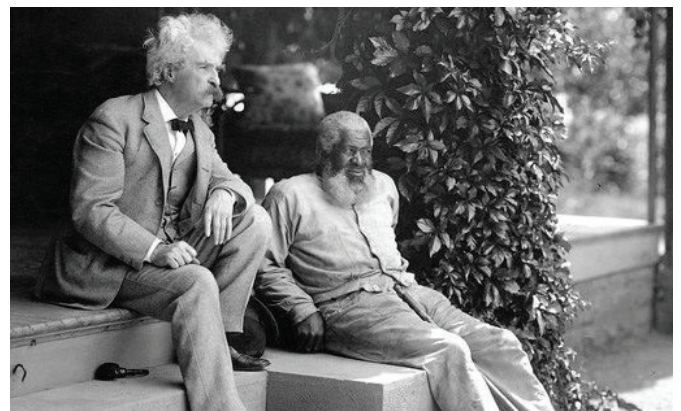
Twain with his longtime friend John T. Lewis, of whom the author remarked "I have not known an honest man nor a more respect-worthy one." Lewis is said to have inspired in part the character of Jim in Huck Finn.



Samuel Clemens, age 15. Hannibal, Missouri, 1850



Edward W. Kemble, young illustrator from New York, created 174 illustrations for this groundbreaking novel.



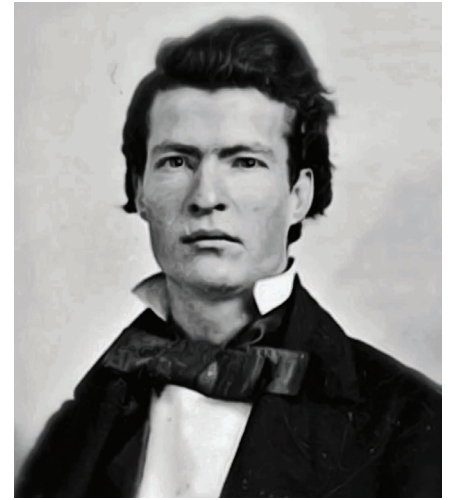
"Uncle Dan'l Grinding an Axe" Watercolor by Barry Moser



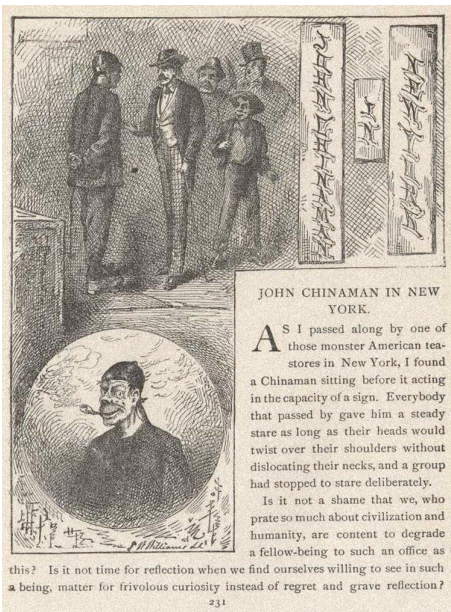
FROM HANNIBAL TO HUCK FINN

It was as a young reporter in California during the 1860s that Twain began writing critically about race while covering stories involving the oppression of California's growing Chinese population. "One Sunday afternoon," he recalled in his 1906 Autobiography, "I saw some hoodlums chasing and stoning a Chinaman...and I noticed that a policeman was observing this performance with amused interest – nothing more."

When Twain's San Francisco newspaper refused to publish his report of what had happened, he rewrote the story as a scathing satire and published it in Nevada as "What Have the Police Been Doing?" (1866) Harshly critical of corrupt police officers who continually victimized the local Chinese population, the article earned Twain the hatred of San Francisco's chief of police.



Young Mark Twain



"John Chinaman in New York" sketch

In *John Chinaman in New York*, an ensuing sketch that Twain published at age 35, he did for the Chinese what he would later do for black Americans like Jim: he treated them as human beings, with a history and a culture expressed through private reflections, at a time when most white Americans viewed them as subhuman.

By the time Twain published *John Chinaman* in 1870, he was living in New York State and writing editorials like the one that appeared in the *Buffalo Express* in 1869, in which he angrily decried the white mob that had lynched a black man – cleared *after* death of committing the crime that had triggered his lynching.

By the 1870s, Twain was also writing oral histories of blacks he met, including the remarkable *A True Story* (1874), in which a onetime slave describes how seven of her children were sold away from her.

Already, at this point, Twain was exhibiting **his commitment to accurately capturing dialects – black and white – of his characters; he saw this as a sign of his respect for them and the truth.** In chapter 16 of *Huck Finn*, Huck recalls Jim "saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife...and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an *Ab'litionist* to go and steal them."



Huck and Jim. Illustration by Edward W. Kemble.

I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices. All I care to know is that a man is a human being, and that is enough for me; he can't be any worse.

~Mark Twain, Harper's Magazine, September, 1899

By the decade in which he published *Huck Finn*, Twain had gone still further, adopting positions on topics such as **reparations for slavery** that would still strike many as radical today. Writing to *Atlantic Monthly* editor William Dean Howells, Twain vowed that he would do his “part of the reparation due from every white man to every black man.”

“He held himself responsible for the wrong which the white race had done to the black race in slavery,” Howells later wrote, in *My Mark Twain*.



Mark Twain and Helen Keller

In 1882, Twain created an endowment at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania to **pay the tuition of black students**; by the end of the decade, he was also paying the tuition of other students, including **Warner T. McGuinn**, who was one of the first black students to attend Yale Law School. McGuinn graduated first in his class and became the mentor to Thurgood Marshall, who would one day be the first black justice to serve on the U.S. Supreme Court. A legendary lecturer and speaker, Twain also frequently performed his lectures in Black churches without receiving compensation; the monies he would have earned went to charity instead.

Twain also became friendly with **Helen Keller**; he was instrumental in helping to finance Keller's education and was deeply impressed by her courage in overcoming her deaf blindness. In 1929, Keller wrote in *My Mark Twain in Midstream: My Later Years*: “He never embarrassed me by saying how terrible it is not to see, or how dull life must be, lived always in the dark... He knew that we do not think with eyes and ears, and that our capacity for thought is not measured

by five senses. He kept me always in mind when we talked, and he treated me like a competent human being. That is why I loved him.”

In the spring of 1883, Twain wrote to Karl and Hattie Gerhardt: “Whenever a colored man commits an unright action, upon his head is the guilt of only about one tenth of it, and upon your heads and mine and the rest of the white race lies fairly and justly the other nine tenths of the guilt.”

Months later, it was this Mark Twain who completed *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

LIKE HUCK, HE'D JOURNEYED FAR SINCE LEAVING HANNIBAL.

Text by Mike Fischer, Production Dramaturg and Assistant Director for First Stage's "BIG RIVER: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."

What it takes to Unlearn

Huckleberry Finn's journey toward **greater understanding** was similar to Mark Twain's journey. They both started with false beliefs involving black Americans. But their minds and hearts changed over time...

Being born in a family of slave owners, Twain was taught at an early age to see himself as more human than slaves because of his race. The message was clear: white people had the right to treat black people differently because of the color of their skin rather than the content of their character. Something inside Twain started to change when, as a boy, he watched a slaveholder throw a piece of burning iron into a slave's face...and he felt the slave's excruciating pain.

- **Have you ever experienced racism directly or have you witnessed it happening to someone else? Have you enjoyed (or been deprived of) privileges as a result of your racial identity?**

Even in the U.S. Constitution, slaves were considered 60% human. Such a widely held but misinformed belief about an entire group of people is called a **stereotype**. We learn stereotypes through our families, peers and other people, or from the media. Stereotypes are always harmful, because they don't allow us to see people as unique individuals.

- **Think about the stereotypes you might associate with different racial/ethnic groups. What do you hold true about different people and groups based on other factors such as gender, age, what they look like, or other characteristics?**

We all hold stereotypes. Some of these stereotypes are **unconscious**, and even **unintentional**, but that doesn't make them any less harmful or hurtful. They affect our thoughts, feelings and actions toward other people and groups.

- **Do you think you have unconscious stereotypes?**

At age 41, Twain wrote that as late as age 19 or 20, he had been nothing but "ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chuckle-headedness – and an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all."



All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. (...) Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world. ~Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In BIG RIVER, Jim sings:

- *I wish by golly / I could spread my wings and fly / and let my grounded soul be free / for just a little while.*
Imagine yourself as Jim and not being allowed basic freedoms... How does this make you feel?
-
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● **Why do you think Jim wanted his freedom back?**

Early in BIG RIVER, Huck and Jim have this conversation:

Huck: (...) How'd you get to be a slave?

Jim: My mother was a slave.

Huck: So you were born into it.

Jim: You could say so. But it doesn't seem quite right to me. Somehow I always felt I was free – that's why I'm going North and claiming the freedom that's rightfully mine.

Nearing the end of the play, Jim sings:

People reach new understandings all the time / They take a second look / Maybe change their minds.

● ***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1885. Do you agree with Jim that people reach new understandings? In what ways has thinking about race changed since Twain's novel was published?**

● **What would you like to unlearn about the way you see and treat other people?**

We all have something to contribute to this world. If we come together by embracing our differences while also understanding what we have in common, we will be able to build a better and more peaceful world that's centered on love rather than hate.

***Just like the earth, just like the sun
Two hearts together are better than one.***

From BIG RIVER: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

With this production of *BIG RIVER: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, First Stage once again offers all of us the opportunity to read an old story in a new way and see it with fresh eyes.

BIG RIVER is an epic journey into the heart of America, as it was in 1885 when the novel was written. In *Huck Finn*, Mark Twain fiercely denounced the injustices of his time – injustices that are still present today and that demand a closer look and further discussion. In our production of BIG RIVER, we have explored the growing friendship between Huck and Jim as they drift down the Mississippi, moving from slavery toward freedom. Just as their love overcomes the hatred that threatens to drown them, First Stage is reaffirming its commitment to telling stories that soften hearts and lead to constructive action, in our lives and our community. First Stage's production also further highlights the moral authority of a runaway slave like Jim and a young slave named Alice.

This booklet provides a framework to better understand what prompted Mark Twain to write such a poignant story. With Jim as his moral compass, Huck traces Twain's own journey from a state of ignorance to a state of love. Our booklet's proposed conversation starters enable individual reflection and conversation regarding our own ongoing journey toward becoming our best selves.

Follow the journey!

BIG RIVER

THE
ADVENTURES
OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN



We wish to acknowledge the Greater Milwaukee Foundation for their generous support.