Huckleberry Finn: 
Escape from Conscience 
and the Discovery of the Heart

“All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn.*”

—Ernest Hemingway, 
*The Green Hills of Africa*
The prototypal novel of escape opens on the modern age with Mark Twain's greatest novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Looking back to the place of this novel in the modern American novel of escape, we can see that *Huckleberry Finn*—apart from its stylistic techniques, its realism, its language—is the first modern American novel in which the theme of escape is dominant. All other elements in the work—plot, character, setting, and conflict—are subordinate to this theme. Further, *Huckleberry Finn* has not only a certain "archetypal" value, but seems to be an important starting point for a number of important American novels that follow it. For *Huckleberry Finn* contains all of those ingredients that have gone into the escape novels that have come after it: violence, the difference between the uses of rhetoric and the contrasting realities, conscious and unconscious hypocrisy, gratuitous cruelty—all are included in this novel, but in amounts that may seem immodest or overplayed when we compare the work with the escape novels that follow it. Virtually its entire structure is built upon the escape motif: it touches upon plot, conflict, and symbolic and mythic elements.

Just as *Huckleberry Finn* is the prototypal novel of escape in the modern American novel, so Huck himself is the prototypal escaper. Perhaps Huck's foremost reason for wanting to escape is the high incidence of violence around him—of which he himself is occasionally the target: when Pap Finn, in the throes of the dt's, threatens to kill Huck, the boy escapes by heading for the river. Later, when Huck, in company with the fugitive slave Jim, boards a half-submerged paddle-wheeler, he overhears a conversation between two thieves. The conversation concerns a third member of their group who has threatened to betray the other two. Here the two thieves are trying to decide whether to kill their betrayer or let him stay, trussed up aboard the sinking boat, where, so they hope, nature will take
its course. There are the later episodes of the Boggs-Sherburn incident and the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud, which make the previous threats of violence and plans for violence pale by comparison. Next to the otherwise high incidence of violent and painful death, the deaths stemming from the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud are piled up in wholesale quantities.

Initially, Huck is not consciously escaping from all of the hypocrisies, cruelties, and hyper-sentimentalities that accumulate as he moves farther downriver; it is only after he finds himself in the process of escaping from these and more that he consciously begins to grow disillusioned with the shore civilization; only after he sees dogs set afire with turpentine for the amusement of sadistic town loafers, slaves hunted down, men tarred and feathered—only then will Huck feel the need to "light out" from the civilization that countenances such inhuman degradations.

Huck contains within himself all of the urges to flight that will appear in the escapers who come after him. In many ways these too will attempt to escape the same kind of fraud, violence, and hypocrisy that Huck is attempting to flee. We shall see these impulses at work in such escapers as Theron Ware (The Damnation of Theron Ware); John Andrews (Three Soldiers), and Lieutenant Frederic Henry (of A Farewell to Arms). That Huck's first flight is into the kind of world his father inhabits—the world of shiftlessness, irresponsibility, and amorality—does not necessarily indicate that Huck is shiftless, irresponsible, or amoral. But when he sees his selfhood threatened—regardless of the sources of the threat—he does not stop to reason, but instinctively takes off for the woods, where a fellow can smoke, fish, swear, and lie around without being bothered by the customs of his (female) civilizers.

There are perhaps as many kinds of escape in Huckleberry Finn as there are escapers. These involve not only Huck, but
Jim, and the King and the Duke. These escapes, however, are variations on Huck's. What they do have in common, though, is the desire to shed the restraints and cramping influences of the shore civilization, whether of the slave masters, as in Jim's case, irate townsfolk in the King's and the Duke's, or drab, prosaic realities as in Tom's. But not all of these, of course, are portrayed with equal realism or with equal seriousness, as in the burlesque escape (or Evasion) in the last chapters of the novel; yet within limitations each escape has its purpose. The first of these is Huck's escape from the shore civilization, which takes place in the middle chapters and in the last chapter. These escapes are generally made at night. Huck and Jim, like the fugitives they are, make a practice of "shoving off" after dark. As Huck recounts: "Soon as it was night, out we shoved."

But though Huck's escapes are largely impulsive, determined by the circumstances of the moment—his escape from Pap, his flight to Jackson's Island—Huck occasionally resorts to an ingenuity worthy of the more imaginative Tom Sawyer; indeed, where Tom's notions of escape are derivative and romantic, an enactment of his fantasy life, Huck's are designed to work in the real world. One example of such an "evasion" is his own faked murder.

Jim's escape is of course closely allied with that of Huck. Indeed, it is more dangerous, for if Jim is caught, he may well face hanging as an example to other would-be runaways.

The third of these escapes involves the King and the Duke. Certainly the two frauds, although they have their own unique problems, are forced into escapes that have much in common with those of Huck and Jim: when the King and the Duke find themselves—as they often do—in the act of running away, their escapes are just as urgent for them as are those of Huck and Jim. If they are caught, the consequences, in their own way, will be just as serious.
Besides the variants on Huck's escape embodied in those of the King, the Duke, and Jim, Huck's own escapes alter with the circumstances that precipitate them. Huck's first escape is from the Widow Douglas (the smothering Mom); and though his other escapes may have more of the dramatic element in them, the escape from the Widow, low-keyed as it is, is one of the most significant in the novel; for it is the overcivilizing restraints of the Widow and Miss Watson that Huck must run away from if he is to step into the responsibilities that true freedom and manhood demand.

The escape from Pap is more pressing, more fraught with danger to Huck's physical safety. But if the danger to Huck's freedom as represented by the threat that Pap poses is more immediately pressing than that of the Widow and Miss Watson, what the Widow and her spinster sister represent is potentially more insidious. In the case of these two, the danger is psychological, threatening to Huck's present boyhood and, later, free manhood. In short, in the difference between Huck's half-formed values and the rigid system of beliefs of the two mother figures lies the fulcrum of the novel; that difference represents the essential conflict between Huck and his civilization, the dichotomy between that civilization and the truths that the raft and the river come to represent.

Huck's third escape is from the Grangerford household, with its "aristocratic" code of family pride, its clannishness, its cold cruelty. This escape, however, though perhaps not having the significant implications of the escape from the Widow, is by far the most traumatic of Huck's flights; for he has a genuine liking for the Grangerfords, who seem to be far more decent (to Huck) than either the oversentimental Widow or her starchy sister. They at least possess a certain stoical dignity that neither the Widow nor her sister possesses. Yet, Huck is literally
sickened at the bloody skirmish between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons:

It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't going to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them. (p. 154)

A minor variation on the three previous escapes is that of Huck's escape from the Duke and the King toward the end of the novel. Escape here is not so much brought about by threats to Huck's physical welfare; it is more in the nature of a secession from his participation—or, better, passive compliance—in the fraudulent carryings-on of the rapscallions. In a sense, this is Huck's declaration of independence from the violence, the hypocrisy, and the fraudulence of the shore. When the King and the Duke fall out, Huck feels that it is time for him to light out. As he tells us,

the minute they was fairly at it, I lit out, and shook the reefs out of my hind legs, and spun down the river road like a deer—for I see our chance; and I made up my mind that it would be a long day before they ever see me and Jim again. (pp. 267–68)

Huck's final escape is of course the oft-cited flight from the "sivilizing" intentions of Aunt Sally. To Huck, Aunt Sally represents—benevolent soul that she is—all of those influences he had escaped from in his initial flight from the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. In contrast to the prim ways of the Widow and the starchy ways of Miss Watson, each threatening Huck's freedom, the threat that Aunt Sally represents does not grow out of primness or fastidiousness but out of a possessive,
oversentimentalized "love." Like Miss Watson and the Widow, Aunt Sally, too, represents a civilization that threatens Huck’s freedom as effectively as it restricts that of the black man. Thus, Huck’s only alternative is to light out once again for the territory, not only of the land but of the heart.

If the flight from Miss Watson represents Huck’s escape from the restrictions of civilization, his attempt to escape from Pap is motivated by far more urgent pressures: escape from the Widow and Miss Watson is precipitated by boredom and the feeling of being closed in; escape from Pap is prompted by Finn’s cruelty. Thus, his decision to escape from his father is an immediate consequence of Huck’s untenable situation; for the boy is not only a prisoner of Pap (in the literal sense), his very life is imperiled by him. Although it is true that the threats to Huck as represented by Miss Watson and the Widow are threats to his desire for freedom, and, in their way, no less real than those of Pap, Huck nevertheless—realist that he is—has little doubt about which is the more pressing and immediate danger.

Although Huck has thus far only played with the idea of escape, or played at escape (as portrayed as early as chapter 1), by chapter 6 he has already begun to consider a genuine and permanent escape—specifically from Pap—as a serious, and perhaps the only, possibility. The alternative of going back to the Widow and being “cramped up and sivilized” is distinctly out of the question now; but remaining with Pap is even less possible. There is no dilemma now; there is only the need for a plan of escape. As he tells us,

I thought it all over, and I reckoned I would walk off with the gun and some lines, and take to the woods when I run away. I guessed I wouldn’t stay in one place, but just tramp right across the country, mostly night times, and hunt and fish to keep alive, and so get so far away that the old man nor the widow couldn’t
ever find me any more. I judged I would saw out and leave that
night if pap got drunk enough, and I reckoned he would. (p. 48)

Huck is no longer daydreaming—whether of heaven or of hell—but already making carefully calculated plans for escape. Further along in the story, with the growth of their urgency, the plans take on even more calculation and elaboration: “I struck another idea; I judged I’d hide [the canoe] good, and then, stead of taking to the woods when I run off, I’d go down the river about fifty mile and camp in one place for good, and not have such a rough time tramping on foot” (p. 54). At this point Huck begins to conceive of his master plan, not simply for escaping, but for making his escape effective: “I got to thinking that if I could fix up some way to keep pap and the widow from trying to follow me, it would be a certainer thing than trusting to luck to get far enough off before they missed me; you see, all kinds of things might happen” (p. 55). What this master plan finally amounts to involves nothing less than his own “murder.” Tom Sawyer’s presence—to “throw in the fancy touches”—would make the plan perfect of course.

Although the flight, once decided upon, is, as we have seen, carefully planned, its governing element is more impulsive than reasoned out. Walter Blair suggests that Huck does not rationalize or philosophize about his escape. It is instinctive and impulsive, the threatened organism withdrawing from danger. There is no conscious philosophizing or moralizing behind Huck’s flight, and although we are occasionally treated to what appear to be interior monologues—as in Huck’s decision to “go to hell”—Huck largely depends on what an older way of life might have referred to as his “better instincts.” Thus, the impulse to escape proceeds from two motives: to get away from Pap—who threatens physical destruction—and to get away from the overcivilizing strictures of the Widow Douglas and her sister.
On a less immediate level, Huck's escape from civilization is not merely an escape from the white civilization, or from a slavocracy; it is an escape from the evils which that civilization nurtures, and which transcends the evils of slavery. Further, even if the civilization of the antebellum South would not make "a body sick" at its violence and its false sentimentality, the cant and the fakery it demands for homage would themselves drive a boy like Huck to light out. It is true that Huck's values at the time of his escape are hardly conscious, for he himself is still largely the "slave" of those values of the society. But one need not be a slave in a slave civilization to feel the restraints and the restrictions of that civilization, whatever its nature. The ways of civilization, for Huck at least, cramp the style of a boy who would much rather be out sleeping in the woods where the "old ways [were] best."

Yet, for all his happy barbarianism, Huck is no Rousseauean figure. He may be innately noble, and certainly he has been touched by nature; but he is, after all, the child of the sluggish river civilization from which he attempts to escape. By the time he does escape, he has already been exposed to his society and those of its values that still cling to him. Had Huck never been exposed to the slave society, he might never have come to know the agony (and later, the triumph) involved in the struggles between his society-formed conscience and his heart. It is only when he is finally able to get away from that society that Huck finds happiness, short-lived though it is. And the things that give him happiness make up an idyllic, though prudishly forbidden, catalog: smoking, fishing, floating downriver on a raft, or swimming naked. His plunges into the river, when he runs away from Pap and when he dives off the raft for a swim, become even more pointedly "baptismal." This baptism, or spiritual rebirth, is the first in a line of such immersions; later, other heroes in other countries will take their plunges
into rivers to escape their respective predicaments. When we come to John Andrews in Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers* and Frederic Henry in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, we shall see a kind of ritualistic (connective) link among these escapers.

In its initial stages, Huck's escape is largely impulsive. This, however, does not signify that Huck does not eventually make conscious moral choices in his escapes. Not only do his choices gradually become more moral, but they become more effective in the manner in which they affect him. Within Huck a struggle ensues between society's conscience and his heart, a struggle that begins in those dim, barely conscious areas, but gradually rises to the surface of conscious moral choice as Huck floats farther downriver. Yet, even while all this is taking place, the shore conscience still acts as a powerful censor to Huck's better nature. In considering the step to help Jim in his flight from slavery to freedom, Huck tells himself: "It would get all around, that Huck helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame" (pp. 269-70). Huck's decision to write to Miss Watson revealing Jim's whereabouts temporarily puts him at peace with his shore conscience—"I felt good and all washed clean of sin" (p. 271)—until he arrives at his second and more consequential decision.

It is only after Huck's inner morality triumphs over the imposed morality of the shore that his words concerning his letter to Miss Watson come to take on the unstylized honesty of the anti-sermon. There are no long rationalizations now as to what people will think, or why he needs to go and hide his head in shame for "stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm" (p. 270). Huck remembers Jim's countless acts of kindness and consideration, his concern for his welfare, his loyalty—and he takes the great plunge, not merely from the shore into the river, but from the values of one into
the moral imperatives of the other. He does what is, after all, the decent thing, having nothing to do with the "ought" of his society but with the "should" of his own better instincts. If saving Jim from the predators means that he will have to go to hell, then, "all right [he will] go to hell."

The relationship between Huck and Jim becomes more mutually dependent the farther from Saint Petersburg they get. As early as chapter 11, Huck's concern for Jim is already one of those impulsive feelings that initially precipitated his own escape. But when Mrs. Loftus tells Huck that Jim is the prime suspect in his, Huck's, "murder," the lad wastes no time in paddling across to Jackson's Island to give Jim the word: "There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!" (p. 92). On this occasion—the first time Huck shows his concern for Jim—he does not stop to think of him as a runaway slave; rather, he thinks of him as another fugitive, like himself. Indeed, his identification with Jim is so complete that when he tells Jim to "Git up and hump yourself," he does so as one escaper giving urgent instructions to another. For Huck's statement "They're after us!" includes them both. From the moment when Huck tells Jim that the slavehunters are after "us" until he tears up the letter to Miss Watson, Huck's compassion is aroused. It is not merely the compassion of one human being for another less fortunate creature, but of one fugitive for another. Huck, in helping Jim to escape, is expanding the meaning of his own escape. Thus, his escape is meaningful in terms of human freedom itself.

Pap Finn is no small influence on Huck's chronic itch to light out, for Huck is his father's son in more ways than biology alone would account for. Initially, Pap sets the pattern for Huck's later escape values. When Judge and Mrs. Thatcher attempt to reform Finn, he escapes their ministrations, much as Huck later escapes those of Miss Watson, the Widow, and
Aunt Sally. A number of critics, however, have seen Huck's true father (his spiritual father, that is) in the runaway slave, Jim; but some have denied that Jim serves that purpose. However, if there be merit on both sides of the argument, one cannot deny that Pap is not merely Huck's biological father; he is, in his own way, as much Huck's spiritual father as is Jim.

Whereas Huck is attempting to escape a degenerate, if not a venal, society, Pap Finn is attempting to escape that society whose characteristics were already fading away even while they were so much being taken for granted, a settlement society in which the government was beginning to take more of a hand. Pap's tirade against the "gov'ment" for allowing northern Negroes to vote, for denying him jurisdiction over his son, and for keeping him from his "rightful" share of his son's fortune have a familiar ring. The contrasts between a Negro educated in the North and a sottish, illiterate southern white are pointed. Indeed, Finn is a foe of education, as is shown in chapter 5, when he asks Huck to read a passage from a book and follows this by accusing Huck of "putting on frills" when the boy demonstrates his ability to read. Pap wants to escape the "gov'ment" and all those forces that would bend him into a law-abiding citizen. But Finn has degenerated to such an extent that he can only hang around the ragged edges of Saint Petersburg, or thrust into the woods a short distance beyond the town where he can be free from the law and minimum social obligations. His wish to escape a corrupting environment—which has already corrupted him—does not grow into the more vital actions of the westward movement. Pap's spirit is already too moribund for a meaningful escape into the West.

In contrast to Pap's escape, Huck's has wider—and deeper—implications. Here are two aspects of a larger American civilization from which both father and son are attempting to escape. In the father's case, the escape is generally from the meliorative
or beneficent aspects of the larger civilization that would eventually free slaves and even at some future date give them the vote! Huck is attempting to escape the same civilization that Pap would flee, but of course for other reasons.

Yet the civilization that can use Jim both as slave and as plaything is "too many" for Huck, whereupon he decides that he has had enough of that civilization. Those last lines of his "book" do not simply refer to a two-week lark with the territory Indians; after all that Huck has been through, his words are much too determined for that. Furthermore, knowing what he is in for, Huck sees those words as having a ring of desperation in them. And so, when Huck tells us that he's "got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. [Because] I been there before," we believe him.

1. The shorter title will be used throughout this chapter.