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History's Turning Points (11) –
Huckleberry Finn – I

Lead: Historical study often reveals twists in the human journey. Consider a literary turning point: Samuel Clemens' *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Mark Twain's epic novel of journey and redemption started in dispute and has remained controversial into the 21st Century. The story of Huck Finn, the slave Jim,

and the fascinating cast of characters they encountered along their way down the Mississippi was greeted with howls of priggish denunciation when it was first published. “Hackwork,” “rubbish,” “coarse” were just a few expletives directed toward the book. The Concord Massachusetts Public Library called it more suited to “slums than to...respectable people.”

Some of this was understandable. Considering the kind of prose in earlier 19th Century Romantic writing, Twain’s embrace of Realism and his journey into the vernacular must have been a shock. This work sits upon a literary turning point and was soon emulated by London, O. Henry, Fitzgerald, Lewis, Dos Passos, and

Hemingway who praised the novel. By the 1920s the world of academic criticism was following William Lyon Phelps who called *Finn* “not only the great American novel. It is America.” Lionel Trilling said in 1950 it was “one of the world’s great books.” *Huckleberry Finn* soon became required reading for school children in many districts and was intensely studied by undergraduate English majors.

Yet, by the 1960s, changes in public perception and the progress of the Civil Rights movement had made certain parts of Twain’s narrative offensive to many students of the novel: Next time: The “n-word” and *Huckleberry Finn*.

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Resources

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Hill, Richard. *Mark Twain Among the Scholars: Reconsidering Contemporary Twain Criticism*. New York, NY: SJK Publishing Industries, Inc., 2002.

Twain, Mark (Samuel L. Clemens). *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Tom Sawyer's Comrade)*. Introduction, Notes, and Bibliography by Michael Patrick Hern, ed. New York, NY: Norton, 2001.

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