Translating Huck: Difficulties in Adapting "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" to Film

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TRANSLATING HUCK: DIFFICULTIES IN ADAPTING

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

TO FILM

by

Bryce M. Cundick

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

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This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

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As chair of the candidate’s graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Bryce M. Cundick in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2), its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

TRANSLATING HUCK: DIFFICULTIES IN ADAPTING

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

TO FILM

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Department of English
Master of Arts

Filmmakers have had four main difficulties adapting *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to film: point of view, structure, audience and the novel’s ending. By studying the different approaches of various directors to each obstacle, certain facts emerge about both the films and the novel. While literary scholars have studied *Huck* from practically every angle, none have sufficiently viewed the book through the lens of adaptation, despite the fact that it has been adapted to film and television over twenty times. The few critics who have studied the adaptations have done so using dated methodologies that boil down to little more than a question of how faithfully the films recreate the novel. By judging a movie solely on the basis of the book’s merits, critics ignore the fact that a change in medium necessitates a change in material. With each adaptation, a new opportunity arises to study the novel from a fresh standpoint.
I would like first to thank Denisa and Tomas, for their bright smiles and unwaivering support and patience with long days. I would also like to thank my committee chair, Dennis Cutchins, for putting up with hours of questions and providing the best sounding board for countless ideas of varying quality. He helped the good ones to stay and the bad ones to conveniently disappear. And finally, I would like to thank my two committee readers, Jay Fox and Dennis Perry, for their support and close reading.
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Translating Huck: 
Difficulties in Adapting *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to Film

I. Introduction

In her review of the 1993 Disney film *Huckleberry Finn*, Janet Maslin states that “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn’ is an either-or proposition. Either the sweeping breadth and satirical tone of Mark Twain’s classic novel are somehow approximated, in which case the material will elude most young viewers, or the story must be scaled down” (C15). And looking at the adaptations which have been produced thus far, this certainly seems to be the case.

My master’s thesis focuses on the difficulties directors and screenwriters have had adapting *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to film. While literary scholars have studied *Huck* from practically every angle—from New Historicism to Queer Theory—none have sufficiently viewed the book through the lens of adaptation, despite the fact that it has been adapted to film and television over twenty times. The few critics who have studied the adaptations have done so using dated methodologies that boil down to the question of how faithfully the films recreate the novel. By judging a movie solely on the basis of the book’s merits, critics ignore the fact that a change in medium necessitates a change in material. In the same way that a translation cannot elicit the same result as the original if it tries to only substitute word for word, a film adaptation cannot succeed as a “transliteration.” With each adaptation, a new opportunity arises to study the novel from a fresh standpoint. When a book like *Huckleberry Finn* has been adapted so many times with so many different approaches, this opportunity should not be missed.
Review of Literature

Film Adaptation

The application of adaptation theories to novels has yet to be fully realized. Although *Huckleberry Finn* is one of the seminal American novels, there are few articles written about the adaptations, and only one critical work of book length. The majority of these come to little more than an educated viewer’s response to the film versions. Most critics evaluate each adaptation strictly by how faithful it stays to the text, and this highlights the main difficulty of a fidelity approach: the critic inevitably compares the film not to the novel, but to his or her own interpretation of it. This view often conflicts with other critics, especially with a book as complex as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In other words, each reader “adapts” a book in his own mind as he reads it—he walks away thinking of the novel in a certain way. “It tells the tale of a boy’s coming of age” or, “It focuses on deconstructing American society” or a combination of any number of views. But each view—each reading or adaptation—is unique, and none is “right.”

This closely resembles a concept theorist Paul de Man addresses in his famous article, “The Resistance to Theory.” De Man was often concerned with the relation between a text and its “meaning,” ultimately concluding that it is impossible to come up with a definitive meaning for any text.

The self-evident necessity of reading implies at least two things. First of all, it implies that literature is not a transparent message in which it can be taken for granted that the distinction between the message and the means of communication is clearly established. Second, and more problematically, it implies that the grammatical decoding of a text leaves a
residue that has to be, but cannot be, resolved by grammatical means, however extensively conceived. (De Man 439)

In the first implication he addresses, he states that even on a basic linguistic level it is not entirely possible to separate the message from the medium. In other words, the telling and the tale are bound together. One can discuss the tale without the telling, but one must recognize that discussion can never be complete, because the telling is an integral part of the tale. Or, from a literary perspective, a book and its meaning are intertwined—a critic can discuss aspects of the book’s meaning, but only adapted aspects. Once the telling has been separated from the tale, the result is something different.

De Man’s second implication is that the complete meaning of even a single statement cannot be resolved. Or as he later phrases it, “There are elements in all texts that are by no means ungrammatical, but whose semantic function is not grammatically definable, neither in themselves nor in context” (439). In other words, even by trying to resort to picking apart a statement according to grammatical rules, there is no guarantee of success; ambiguity is a part of language. For De Man, all language is tied up in a series of tropes, or figurative meanings. So if language itself cannot be absolutely understood, neither can a book or, by extension, an interpretation of a book.

Before any progress can be made in the study of Huckleberry Finn adaptations, this problem must be adequately addressed. The knee-jerk reaction is to say that if de Man is right, and the text cannot be fully separated from its meaning, then the likelihood of any adaptation succeeding becomes uncomfortably slim. No criticism of a text can be complete in and of itself—it can only recreate or reference aspects of the actual text, thus
becoming as tropological as the text itself. This is precisely where adaptation theory
should be of most use to any critic in any field.

In its fullest sense, any time anyone discusses a text, an adaptation occurs.
Literary criticism exists because this principle works. With film adaptations, scholars
have a chance to study this process using tangible and precise boundaries. To put it
differently, by studying the process of adapting a novel to film, critics have a chance to
better understand the process by which they adapt texts. Ironically, most adaptation
critics choose to ignore this point because they feel it threatens their analysis. However,
that same ambiguity can be turned into a strength instead of a weakness. Understanding
the basic history of film adaptation theory helps bring this principle into focus.

In 1957, George Bluestone laid the foundation upon which much of adaptation
studies have been built, and later theorists widely reference him. Adaptation as a whole
had been discussed before Bluestone, but he was the first to seriously look at film
adaptation in depth. In his work, Novels into Film, Bluestone begins by making an
assertion whose root is similar to de Man’s: people who criticize a film for not living up
to the novel on which it is based assume “a separable content which may be detached and
reproduced, as the snapshot reproduces the kitten” (5). He goes on to state that this sort
of assumption shows a “lack of awareness that mutations are probable the moment one
goes from a given set of fluid, but relatively homogeneous, conventions to another; that
changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium”
(5).
So early on, Bluestone criticizes this myopic approach, claiming that it is far better to release the adaptation from any expectation of fidelity. But he contradicts himself later.

What happens . . . when the filmist undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel—the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached. (Bluestone 62)

If one studies this statement carefully, one sees that he has fallen into the same rut he condemned other critics for following—the idea that the meaning can be separated from the message. Bluestone has simply made it more generalized, saying that a broad meaning might somehow be culled from the message.

This is but a symptom of a larger problem of Bluestone’s: his work teems with contradictions. For example, the method he uses is inherently a mix of structuralism and genetic criticism that clashes with his stated goals. He describes it in the preface he added to his book in 1956: “By evolving an exact record of alterations, deletions and additions of characters, events, dialogue, I was able to reduce subjective impressions to a minimum” (XI). On the one hand, Bluestone believes he can reduced a film to its essence by picking it apart piece by piece. Essentially, he turns each film into a glorified shooting script and uses that to compare the films to the books, trying to discover why certain changes were made. But remember, he says that “changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium” (5). If this is true, then so is
the converse. In his rush to “reduce subjective impressions,” Bluestone adapts the adaptation, forcing the material to go from linguistic to visual and then back to linguistic form. At times it helps to objectify the film version in hopes of better understanding it—counting the number of shots in a scene in order to get an exact feel for the pacing, for example. But this technique should be applied sparingly in order to avoid the same mistake as Bluestone. While he claims that directors adapt a “paraphrase” of a novel, he himself refuses to look at this periphrastic version, choosing instead to paraphrase both the film and the novel on his own terms first.

Although not named as such, his methodology is basically an application of genetic criticism: by studying the details of a text and its context, one might come to an understanding of how and why the creator of the text created it that way. In this case, Bluestone tries to understand films by comparing them to the novel, but when he uses this method to take an “unbiased” look at a film, he cannot escape his underlying assumption that the book is superior to the movie. For example, in his analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, he focuses on how the film has departed from the text. He notes the extensive use of biological functions as a theme in Steinbeck’s work, and then shows how “none of this appears in the film. . . . If the film adaptation remains at all faithful to its original, it is not in retaining what Edmund Wilson calls the constant substratum in Steinbeck’s work” (152). True, his analysis does take into account some of film’s strengths—its ability to portray vivid scenery and actions, for example (163)—but even the words he chooses to describe how directors adapt a text belie his bias. For example, he frequently refers to the adaptation process as a “mutation,” a word that brings with it several undertones, none of them positive.
Basically, Bluestone sets out a certain theory and then fails to fully adhere to it. Because of the pioneering nature of the work, these mistakes are forgivable—he laid the groundwork on which many others have built. Unfortunately, most have followed this same pattern: they refine the theory, but when the time comes to apply it, they return to the same fidelity approach they profess to abhor.

In 1996, Brian McFarlane ostensibly took adaptation studies in a different direction in his work *Novel to Film*. He launches a pointed attack against the idea of using fidelity to judge films, claiming that by that mindset, “the really serious-minded film-goer’s idea of art would be ‘a good faithful adaptation of *Adam Bede* in sepia, with the entire text read off-screen by Herbert Marshall” (8). He points out that “fidelity critics, at whatever level of intellectual distinction, inevitably premiss their reading and evaluation of the film on the implied primacy of the novel” (McFarlane 197). And so he concludes that “it is one thing for the film-maker to make an ‘effort, successful or not, to preserve intact [the novel’s] essential contents and emphases,’ . . . quite another for the critic to limit his view of the film to its comparative success in this respect” (McFarlane 195).

To replace the fidelity approach, McFarlane offers a rigid structuralist methodology that basically consists of completely objectifying the book. He writes of *cardinal functions*—“‘hinge points’ of narrative . . . that open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story” (13). In his criticism of McFarlane’s work, Dennis Cutchins notes that the text uses “confusing and seemingly pointless” vocabulary (Understanding 4). McFarlane manages to make his methodology seem like rocket science, whereas in actuality, it consists of breaking a film down into its separate shots.
and scenes and then comparing those to the cardinal functions (main narrative points) of the novel. All of this effort, and he essentially ends up with the same “paraphrase of the novel” that Bluestone sets out.

McFarlane relies on structuralism to an alarming degree. Throughout the text, he uses theories from Propp, Levi-Strauss, and Roland Barthes. Cutchins discusses at length the difficulties of this approach—it opens McFarlane up to so many of structuralism’s weak points, and he makes no effort to address them (5). For example, Vladimir Propp was one of the first theorists to posit the idea of folklore motifs—he argued that all Russian fairyttales could be broken down into seven archetypes, an argument which has been abandoned for quite some time (Cutchins 5). Elsewhere, McFarlane uses Roland Barthes to support his structuralist ideas—but he cites quotes by Barthes that do not concern film. What he doesn’t mention is the fact that when Barthes turned his attention to cinema, his ideas were decidedly poststructuralist (and contradict his earlier statements), as seen in *Image—Music—Text*. Using a theory to shed light on a subject is one thing; ignoring weaknesses of that theory seems reckless.

And also like Bluestone, McFarlane can’t escape fidelity. As Cutchins points out, McFarlane “continually frets about it. . . . His talk of cardinal functions and catalyzers may be little more than a sophisticated way of saying, ‘but the book was better’” (Understanding 9-10). But why does fidelity continually rear its head, even in studies where it supposedly has been slain? Critics like Bluestone and McFarlane want to show that the message and the means are separable—that the message can be recreated any number of times by using a different means. Here the problem at last goes back to de Man’s observation that the message cannot truly ever be separated from the means, which
explains why adaptation critics inevitably get drawn back to the original message/means combination: the novel. Adaptation critics have been insisting there is a single message with two or more means, but they need to acknowledge that de Man’s principle applies to films, as well, which also have messages inseparable from their means of presentation. In other words, once an adaptation has occurred, multiple messages as well as multiple means exist for the same material. If critics would simply embrace this apparent problem, their interpretations could overcome it and be the better for it.

To understand this, it helps to look outside this discussion to another theorist: Ernst Bloch. In his essay, “Visible Anticipatory Illumination,” Bloch discusses the justification for art in any form. First he presents the problem: “‘What is the good about imitating the shadows of shadows?’ Plato asks and thus makes his theory of concepts intellectually almost blunt” (356). In other words, he asks why art should even be bothered with.

The way in which art overcomes this resistance and become something truly worthwhile is through what Bloch terms “anticipatory illumination.” “The exaggeration and the telling of stories (Auszabelung) represent an anticipatory illumination of reality circulating and signifying in the active present . . . . Here, individual, social, and also elemental events are illuminated that the usual or sharp senses can barely detect” (Bloch 358). In other words, true art allows us to transcend the everyday reality around us and see beyond it. In Plato’s terms, it lets us pierce the shadows and see the Ideal beneath. What is more, Bloch states that the best sort of artwork—the one with the largest degree of anticipatory illumination—is the piece that is fragmented and not wholly finished: “Only the already formed openness in great art works provides the material and the form
for the great cipher of the actual” (361). The holes in great art allow more meaning and understanding to be gleaned from them. Of course, Bloch believed this anticipatory illumination would eventually lead mankind to a Marxist utopia—that the fragments present in art imply a future time when those fragments will be filled in and complete. This is all fine and good for art, but what does it have to do with adaptation?

At its best, adaptation can accomplish a sort of anticipatory illumination for any piece of art. It opens the text—makes it fragmented in a way—as the adapter tries to portray his or her own meaning. The goal of adaptation, ideally, is the same as Bloch’s hoped for utopia, albeit without the Marxist overtones; each added adaptation gives audiences another chance to understand the work—to complete it. When critics analyze a text, they adapt it in hopes of making it more understandable and complete to others; they point out ways of thinking about the text that make their audience return to the text and understand it in a new light. Film can do the same thing. In other words, the desire to be grounded in one meaning isn’t really necessary, because that one single meaning is but a part of what the whole meaning might become. Adaptation studies ought to serve as a case study to the rest of critical theory for what criticism can truly accomplish, because all criticism is adaptation in one form or another.

With all of this stated, it is time to come back to adaptation theory in specific, particularly focusing on how this thesis will approach it. Of course, there have been other works written on the subject besides those by Bluestone and McFarlane. Robert Stam, Timothy Corrigan, Joy Gould Boyum, and Linda Seger are just some of the critics who have looked at this field. I have chosen to focus on Bluestone and McFarlane as seminal representatives from that discipline. Most recognize Bluestone as the pioneer in
the field, and McFarlane’s work has had sufficient influence on later adapters that it can serve to stand for the more modern approaches. As Cutchins put it, “McFarlane’s Novel to Film has become, for many in the field, the favored treatment of film adaptations” (Understanding 1). In the end, adaptation theory is still a developing field, and it is uncertain at this point whose theories and methodologies will endure the test of years. Each of the theorists mentioned above has his or her own approach to adaptation—a thesis-length work could be written on adaptation theory alone. However, that is not my intent—after a brief overview of the theoretical context, I hope to put the theory to work.

Gerald Mast wrote an important article on literature and film in 1982—an article published by the MLA in Interrelations of Literature. In it he claims there are three main values that literary critics look for in adaptations: a “respect for the integrity . . . of the original literary text,” a preference for the film that is reflective rather than passionate, and an assumption that a work should be as unique as possible (280-281). On the other hand, from a filmmaker’s point of view, none of these points necessarily makes a film successful. Simply look to the latest adaptation phenomenon: The Lord of the Rings. Certainly the most successful adaptations in history if viewed from a purely capitalist point of view, the films make broad changes to the books, are far more passionate than reflective, and could easily be classified as tributes to special effects. They will perhaps garner some attention from adaptation theorists, but likely only because their sheer popularity will demand it, much as the Harry Potter craze has spawned a number of “serious” literary interpretations of the books.

It appears that the majority of adaptation studies share the same book-centered mindset of Bluestone, if for no other reason than the fact that they usually pick a literary
“classic” and then go off in search of the adaptations that have been made of it. A possible explanation for this lies in the audience for whom adaptation theorists usually write: other literary scholars. In an attempt to obtain validity, they study the same canonical works that have so much respect with scholars. As Mast puts it, “Although the filming of a literary work has been called ‘adaptation’ by some and ‘translation’ by others, both terms imply (indeed demand) a respect for the original text as the fixed foot of a compass around which the film version must resolve” (280).

Ideally, once theorists fully establish the field, adaptation studies will address the other side of the discipline: successful movies that are adapted from unsuccessful, non-“literary” works. As long as the definition for success of a film or novel is based on the criteria of literary scholars, adaptation studies will not be able to look at itself in an unbiased manner. In the meantime, I believe both forces can be appeased. For this reason, I have chosen *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as the text through which to study some of the issues at work in an adaptation.

Once a film adapts a literary text, the two media work together to expand the original into something more—a sort of mix between literature and film. A middle ground appears where each can comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the other, with neither in the dominant position. An exploration of the middle ground between the book and the films can provide a much fuller source of analysis. Another theorist helps bring this concept of the middle ground into more manageable terms—but only after some serious explanation.

In his essay, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger outlines an approach by which one might understand existence itself. I refer to Heidegger not
necessarily because his ideas coincide completely with those of adaptation theory, but
because some of his discussions help bring clarity to a difficult concept. The theory is
quite complicated and circular, but basically Heidegger sets up a relation between three
ideas: Earth, World and Art. The best way to explain this theory is to use the comparison
Heidegger applies to make his point. Take a Greek temple. By itself, it “portrays
nothing. It simply stands there in the middle of the rock-cleft valley” (Heidegger 88).
The ground on which it stands is Earth; “Earth, self-dependent, is effortless and untiring”
(Heidegger 90). In other words, Earth is the way the planet is with no intervention by
man.

By standing on Earth, the temple “first gives to things their look and to men their
outlook on themselves”—it “opens up a world” (Heidegger 89). World is the
interpretation that society and men impose upon their surroundings. So while there is
only one Earth, there can be many different Worlds encompassed on it, depending on
how many societies and interpretations exist. The temple acts in the place of Art, which
connects the Earth to the World. It is the focus point through which men interpret Earth
and make it World. In other words, by understanding the temple—Art—men understand
Earth and construct a World.

Adaptation theory can take the place of Art between the Earth of the novel and the
Worlds of the films. Heidegger spoke of Art as a type of projective discourse—by
interpreting Art, critics project meaning on the object they discuss. To illustrate this, he
described a painting by Van Gogh of a pair of peasant’s worker shoes (Heidegger 87).
Heidegger claimed that by portraying the shoes, Van Gogh allowed his audience to
understand them in a way that would have been impossible had they just looked at them
in reality. They understand the World of the peasant woman—its harsh existence and unceasing struggle—as well as the Earth itself—as they better understand the connection the peasant has with the Earth. The shoes “belong to the earth, and [they are] protected in the world of the peasant woman” (Heidegger 87). So Art takes what is already existent and looks at it in a way that lets the audience understand it in a new light.

Just as Art helps audiences understand Earth and World, adaptation theory can help critics understand both the novel and its adaptations. In this example, Art functions in the same role as the middle ground spoken of earlier. But to apply it properly, one must try to avoid absolutes—statements such as “the meaning of the book is” or “the film means” imply that there is only one way to interpret the novel or the movie. Heidegger warns against this by saying “truth is un-truth” (95-96). In other words, you cannot understand all facets of a truth. You might grasp one and master it, but you must remember that it is only one aspect. If you insist that is the only interpretation, you sacrifice all the other potential truths you might have understood. In order for adaptation theory to work as Art—as a middle ground—critics who use it must constantly remind themselves that any conclusions they make are not absolute. By refusing to insist on one interpretation—of either a book or a film—critics can keep the middle ground fertile for the discovery of further truths.

In fact, it appears that this middle ground provides an automatic platform for Bloch’s anticipatory illumination to appear—regardless of the text or the film, the middle ground is unfinished and ready to accept any number of interpretations. What does the book say about the films, but more importantly (from a literary perspective), what do the films say about the book? There have already been thousands upon thousands of pages
written in study of Huck Finn. As literary scholars interested in film, the goal should not simply be to understand how movies work—it should be to glean more knowledge about literature, as well. Thus far the majority of adaptation critics have been content to either theorize in general about the field or use it to pick apart films. It is time to put it to another use: analyzing texts.

_Huckleberry Finn Adaptation Studies_

Because adaptation theory is such a new and growing field, few critics have taken the opportunity to apply its tenets to even such a well known book as _The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn_. In fact, so far there have been only three major critics who have studied _Huck_ adaptations at all. Before going forward with analysis of the films, it is important to take the time to note what has already been said, paying particular attention to strengths and weaknesses.

Laurie Champion wrote a brief six page article entitled “Critical Views on Adaptations of Huckleberry Finn” that appeared in _The Critical Response to Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn_. She reviews the major film versions, giving the critical response to each, then looks at adaptations in other art forms—such as the Juilliard Music school opera rendition of _Huck_ (Champion 242). Champion outlines a few reasons the book is hard to adapt: the first person point of view and the difficulty of the material; but she does not go into any detail about why these are sticking points (238). Her work focuses mainly on what others have said about the films. She herself does not seem to have seen them—at least she never refers to her own impressions about any of the films she mentions.
Perry Frank penned a fourteen page article ("Adventures of Huckleberry Finn on Film") that appeared in *Huck Finn Among the Critics*. He goes into greater detail than Champion, taking time to summarize the plots of the main adaptations, as well as briefly evaluate each. For Frank, the main difficulty in adapting *Huck* is that “Hollywood . . . has been uncertain about whether to treat [it] as a major adult work, or as a children’s tale” (305), though he also cites more technical issues, such as trouble casting the right actors to play Huck and Jim and finding the right place to film the movie (306). Frank provides a more complete listing of *Huck* films, though since he wrote the article in 1985, it is now dated, and he omitted a few adaptations that had already been made at that time.

Perhaps the most complete treatment of *Huckleberry Finn* adaptations is Clyde Haupt’s *Huckleberry Finn on Film*, written in 1994. He set out five goals for each of the eleven *Huck* adaptations he studied: to provide “historical and production background” information, give plot summary, compare the plot to the novel, analyze it “in terms of its thematic concerns and those of Twain’s novel,” present the “critical and popular receptions” and give an “overall evaluation” (2). Because of its purported scope, it helps to go into greater detail about what this work actually accomplishes. If Haupt had been successful in his aims, it would imply that further extensive analysis would be redundant.

Haupt’s book essentially amounts to a look at the creative process that went into each film. It’s much more historical than critical, which is disappointing, since Haupt claimed that he wanted to “use these films and Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as areas for exploration and discovery” to try and pinpoint “what the novel and a film adaptation reveal about each other” (2-3). For the most part, Haupt’s work fails to live up
to these lofty goals—likely for a number of reasons. Because of this the study presented in this current thesis fundamentally differs from Haupt’s.

First of all, Haupt arranges his book by film. Instead of comparing themes and issues across the films, he essentially presents a number of isolated essays, one per film, that relate to each other only loosely. Of course, it makes sense to arrange the work by film, since so much of Haupt’s research went into studying the historical process that went into making each movie. And in that respect, he has created a valuable work that this paper frequently cites. But that dominates the book, more often obscuring the “areas for exploration and discovery” than bringing them into focus.

In addition, when it comes to the statements and claims Haupt does make about the adaptations as adaptation, he has very little in the way of critical theory to support him. Simply reviewing the bibliography reveals that he fails to cite any major theorists, whether they be intellectuals like Bloch, Heidegger or de Man, or novel to film specialists such as Bluestone. This results in a string of misinformed, biased statements that offer no real contribution to adaptation theory as a whole. For example, when Haupt sums up why he prefers the 1986 mini-series to all other versions, he states, “This picture made Twain say what he had only hinted at in his book. If there is a measure for excellence in adapting books to film, surely it is making authors speak a truth on film that they do not speak in print” (150).

One such “truth” he claims is important is Huck’s statement in the mini-series, “If prayin’ and wishin’ made any difference, we wouldn’t have missed Cairo in the fog” (Haupt 148). Haupt notes that “no Huck has ever said anything so profoundly disturbing. . . . Truth to tell, not even Twain’s Huck is this despairing” (148). Haupt further
complicates the issue of fidelity—making the novel the standard of judgment—by arguing that good adaptations must interpret what the author intended, even if the author never actually stated or even implied it. But who should be the one to decide what the author intended in such a case? Haupt seems to think he has the authority to interpret what Twain “really meant” without ever showing us why he, Haupt, should be believed.

Haupt evaluates each adaptation strictly by how faithful it stays to the text, and this highlights the main difficulty of a fidelity approach: the critic inevitably compares the film not to the novel, but to his or her own interpretation of what the novel “is.” This view often conflicts with other critics’, especially with a book as complex as *Huck*. As stated previously, a fidelity approach seems to indicate an unwillingness to truly apply adaptation theory to its fullest—to leave the book behind and meet the film halfway.

Haupt’s work garnered some critical attention—most of it mixed—from Twain and film scholars alike. Matthew Bernstein of the *Film Quarterly* said that “Haupt’s book is a perceptive and insightful look at how *Huck Finn* has been variously visualized, dramatized, musicalized, and pulverized for film and TV across seven decades” (66). Bernstein also points out that, although Haupt “does not make narrative fidelity the litmus test of a good Huck movie,” he concludes that “the further a film/TV show gets from Twain’s book, the less satisfying” (66). In other words, even starting out with the stated goal not to judge the films by the measure in which they stay faithful to Twain’s book, Haupt still ends up at the conclusion that the films can only succeed by staying close to the novel. Just as with Bluestone before him and McFarlane a few years later, Haupt claims to abandon fidelity as a requirement for success, but once he launches into his analysis, he ends right back at the same conclusion.
Glen Johnson of the Catholic University of America had the following to say in the *Mark Twain Forum*: “Huckleberry Finn on Film is frustratingly uneven, but valuable for the amount of information it contains.” He goes on to note a serious problem in the area of research. “Haupt's concluding bibliography contains two books by Mickey Rooney, but only two works on Twain published since 1985” (Johnson). Johnson sums up his review by saying that “whoever finally produces a work on the cultural life of *Huckleberry Finn* worthy to share the shelf with . . . Louis Budd's *Our Mark Twain*—will be grateful to Haupt's hours in front of movie and TV screens.” In other words, Haupt did much of the early research on the history of *Huck* films, but he left plenty of room for actual analysis of them. This thesis hopes in part to fill this gap in scholarship, while at the same time attempting to avoid some of the pitfalls previous scholars have fallen into.

**Background Discussion**

**Order of Analysis**

After viewing fourteen *Huck* adaptations, and with the work of these scholars in mind, I believe the biggest difficulties in adapting *Huck* to film seem to fall into three simple categories: the beginning, the middle and the end. While this might seem rudimentary at first, I mean more by the statement than that everything in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, from the first page to the last, is difficult to adapt. Rather, I mean that each section of the novel offers unique challenges that every adapter must overcome, and these obstacles are more apparent by viewing each section in isolation.

From the first page of the novel, it is clear that directors will have trouble not unique to *Huck*: the need to adapt the first person point of view. Many other first person
works, such as Melville’s *Moby Dick* or Fitzgerald’s *Great Gatsby*, have been notoriously hard to adapt. *Huckleberry Finn* offers a good platform on which to discuss this difficulty. The first person point of view colors the whole novel and thus affects every aspect of any adaptation. Additionally, filmmakers must decide at the beginning how to adapt Huck himself, which is no small task by itself.

The middle section of the novel presents a different set of difficulties. First of all, *Huckleberry Finn* has an awkward plot form to adapt. One might assume that the novel’s picaresque qualities would translate easily to the screen. For much of the novel, Huck and Jim go through a succession of adventures as they float their way down the river. Apparently, too often it is tempting for directors to ignore the novel’s themes and focus solely on advancing the plot. The problem is that by drawing out only the plot, many of the events in the novel become nonsensical. Adapting the plot, in short, is much harder than it looks.

A second trouble spot connected to this is the matter of the book’s audience. As Frank pointed out, Hollywood cannot decide whether *Huck* is a children’s book or an adult’s book. Most people believe the novel is appropriate for children, but the actual events of the story are much more suited to adults. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents a unique problem: if directors try to stay faithful to the book, then they will produce a fairly dark movie—one that is in no way faithful to the impression readers have of the novel. As will be shown, this problem can in large part be attributed to Mark Twain himself.

Finally, many critics have condemned the ending of the story for its departure from the tone of the rest of the book. This is an area where adaptation studies has much
to contribute to the study of *Huckleberry Finn*. Each director of a *Huck* film has had to solve this dilemma: how should the story “really” end? By viewing their many efforts and ideas, one can put the theories of critics to the test and see if the ending is truly flawed or simply inevitable.

To conclude, this paper will try to constrain itself to a study of the problems that arise chronologically through the book, from the beginning to the end. Technical matters such as cinematography, casting and scoring might be touched upon in passing, but they are not the focus of the research. Unfortunately, many thematic issues will also largely be ignored. This is not because they have no effect on the adaptation process, but rather because they can at times be ignored by adapters without harming the final product. In other words, each principle discussed in this thesis will be an issue *every* adapter will need to address in one way or another. The issue of race, for example, is certainly key to the novel, but the 1931 version largely ignores it—and is still successful as a film.

Of course, this in turn begs the question: how does one determine whether a film is “successful” or not? One of the problems with previous adaptation studies is that success is judged by fidelity to the book. With this methodology, Sommers’ 1993 *Huck* would be dismissed as a failure, because it certainly fails to live up to many of the themes of the novel. However, it succeeds in what it sets out to do—depict the more adventurous parts of the book while leaving the heavier material alone. In other words, each adapter sets the standard by which he or she should be judged. One does not say a slapstick comedy fails as a film because it doesn’t meet the standard of an winning drama, and one does not dismiss *The Ten Commandments* because it isn’t funny enough. In *Huck’s* case, the novel has many different levels—adventure, humor, social commentary and so forth.
Filmmakers must choose which of these levels they want to address, and then they may be judged by how well they met their objectives. Thus a film like the 1931 adaptation which ignores racial issues can be said to succeed, even though in so doing it ignores a piece of the novel. This paper focuses solely on matters that must be addressed, not those which simply may be addressed.

In addition to the literary implications of this study, the bibliographic work for the adaptations is woefully lacking. The few articles and books that do address the adaptations all criticize each other for being incomplete—they each mention versions that others miss, but none has a complete listing. With that in mind, this paper will also present in an appendix a more complete list of Huck adaptations (see Appendix II).

**Film Versions Studied**

Since *Huckleberry Finn* has been adapted so many times and in so many ways, one must restrict study in a paper of this length to a limited number of versions. I have chosen five that represent aspects of all the adaptations. Here I will briefly describe each film’s critical reception and justification for inclusion in this study.

The first of the films, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was released in 1939 by MGM, starred Mickey Rooney and was directed by Richard Thorpe. The critics received it quite poorly. The New York Times called it “an average, workmanlike piece of cinematic hokum” that “affords little, if any, insight into the realistic boyhood world of which old Mark wrote with such imperishable humor,” although since it opened the same weekend as the now-classic John Ford film *Stagecoach*, it is little wonder that this version didn’t compare favorably (Crowther, “At the Capitol” 27). While *Variety* said
that it didn’t “catch the rare and sparkling humor and sincerity of the author’s original,” Newsweek stated, “If The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn fails to capture the real flavor of Mark Twain’s time on the Mississippi, it does succeed in blending reliable screen ingredients into colorful and palatable entertainment” (Haupt 57-58).

However, even with this skeptical reception, this version has endured and even prospered over the years—almost every reviewer of later films uses this version as the measuring stick to judge later attempts. One likely reason for this is that it has been around the longest. Haupt states that

> the 1939 adaptation has enjoyed the most public awareness. Fifty years after its release, it is still the most readily available, complete rendition. It has been rented for decades on 16mm, and has been on tape virtually from the inception of home video. It is safe to claim that this version has been seen by more viewers than any other, perhaps more than all others combined. (47-48)

Modern literary critics are split in their opinion of the 1939 film. In his evaluation, Haupt describes it as “a very good adaptation of the novel’s spirit, if not its narrative letter” (61), “mainly because of its mature treatment of Huck’s interpersonal relationships” (68). Then again, Frank calls it “uninspired,” “aimed at a juvenile audience without attaching too much importance to the underlying meaning of the novel or the potential for richer cinematic approaches” (296-297). Essentially, the movie has been popular despite the remarks of critics. It doesn’t matter if it fails to live up to the reputation of Twain’s work—it succeeds as a film, and many still view it as their favorite
version. For this reason, any serious study of *Huck* adaptations must include the Mickey Rooney version.

Michael Curtiz directed the next film studied—MGM’s 1960 *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. If one judged it solely by the talent of the director, it should have been a classic. Curtiz had experience directing action in the form of Errol Flynn swashbucklers, as well as drama—he directed *Casablanca*. He seemed set on not making the same “mistake” that had been made in Rooney’s casting. “Some 15,000 letters were received from ‘perfect’ Huck Finns or their doting parents. Nearly 500 boys were given personal interviews and half a dozen were summoned to Hollywood for film tests” (Rothwellstockton X9). They took every effort to find the right Huckleberry.

The producers took the same approach when they adapted the setting. After searching for the ideal place to film the movie, they settled on the Sacramento River, declaring it to be “more like Twain’s Mississippi than the Mississippi itself is today” (Rothwellstockton X9). Samuel Goldwyn, Jr. of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced the adaptation and described their goals as follows:

The spirit of Twain—and the setting is important to this—is what we are most anxious to put on the screen. This means not only the adventure and humor of the book, but also its deeper emotions, particularly as found in the run-away slave’s quest for freedom and his devotion to Huck. I’m hopeful readers of the book will find our screen play, by James Lee, to be just as faithful to this spirit as the river settings we have found here [in the Sacramento River]. (Rothwellstockton X9)
Clearly the creators had every intent to make a film as close to the book as possible. In fact, they spent $1,400,000 on its production: “allowing for inflation, the 1960 value of investment exceeds production costs on any [Huck] adaptation, before or since” (Haupt 80). However, somewhere in the creative process, things went wrong.

After the impressive search for the right Huck, Curtiz chose a boy perhaps as far from the stereotypical Huck as possible. Eddie Hodges had made his way to fame by playing Winthrop in Broadway’s production of *The Music Man* (Rothwellstockton X9)—and for good reason. He resembles Ron Howard’s Opie-like take on Winthrop in the film version of *Music Man* far more than Mark Twain’s Huck of the novel. Bosley Crowther of the New York Times said that “the action is but a shadow of the classic of Mark Twain, and Eddie Hodges makes a weak Huck” (“Pictorial Quality” X1). Elsewhere Crowther noted that any adaptation of *Huck Finn* “takes its basic characteristic from the quality” of the child actor who portrays the title character (“Screen: Twain Classic” 17). Thus, Hodges makes the film “‘cute’—cheerful, chummy, sentimental and, eventually monotonous and dull” (“Screen: Twain Classic” 17).

Other reviews were also fairly negative. *Variety* called it “handsome but lackluster,” *Time* claimed Hodges was not the novel’s “young river rat who lived in a wharf barrel and smelt like his surroundings,” though *Good Housekeeping* said Hodges was “the perfect choice for the role of Huck” (Haupt 82-83). That last review says it all: this *Huck* version has been so whitewashed for families it turned into a failure of a film. By trying to please everyone from parents to literary critics—the film fell apart.

The dissatisfaction with the version has persisted through the years. Haupt calls it “the biggest disappointment among all *Huck* adaptations” and says that “the whole
production is off-center and disoriented” (80). As before, Frank disagrees, claiming it “goes beyond appeal to the juvenile audience and attempts to capture some of the flavor of the novel,” and he points out that Crowther gave it “high marks . . . on the location setting . . . and the photography” (298). One begins to notice that literary critics can’t seem to agree on how to accept any one adaptation of Huck. This simply strengthens the observation that each critic in essence adapts the book in order to analyze it. Clearly Frank and Haupt both came away from reading The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn with a different idea of what the book “meant.” Thus, their analysis varies widely. Again, the key to overcoming this pitfall is to look not at the book or the movie alone—but at the rule-free area created between them by contrast.

To summarize, the 1960 version is important to include in a study of Huck adaptations for a number of reasons. It enjoyed top talent and a huge budget for the time, yet still failed.

Georgi Daneliya wrote and directed perhaps the most extreme version of Huck Finn, Sovsem propashchij (Hopelessly Lost), in 1973. Most American critics have been unable to view the film. Haupt almost completely ignores the movie—he only mentions that a “Russian film” was produced, though no facts are given about it at all (8). A few, such as Perry Frank, make a note of its production and the main players involved (303). In addition, New York Times film critic Vincent Canby referred to this version in passing as “a curiously slick, prettified adaptation” (38). Nevertheless, the Cannes Film Festival nominated the version for a Golden Palm award in 1974, making it the only film adaptation of Huck to be nominated for anything. The lack of research into this film is disappointing, as it is one of the most unique and deep adaptations of Huck in existence;
Daneliya took great care in its construction. A dubbed English copy was released on videocassette in Canada in 1988 under the title *Huck Finn*, and while it has since disappeared from the market, one can obtain it second hand, leaving no excuse for critics not to study it.

Different difficulties arise, however, when adapting *Huck* in a foreign language—most noticeably the need to tackle the various dialects. Daneliya had to decide whether or not to use regional Russian dialects for the different characters. Although Huck and Jim have extremely different speech patterns in the novel, Daneliya thought that “the result would have been very artificial and would not have brought us closer to the spirit of the novel,” so he decided to have all actors use the same dialect—going so far as to dub over the voices of actors whose accent didn’t match the others (Shabad 32). This attention to detail and “the spirit” represents Daneliya’s entire approach.

When asked what Daneliya saw to adapt in Twain’s work, he said, “Mark Twain is very close to me. He deals with humor, and at the same time in a serious vein, with such things as good and evil” (Shabad 32). This again brings up the point of what exactly directors adapt when translating a book from the page to the screen. Daneliya saw humor mixed with good and evil, and so he tried to convey that through his art. Another director might legitimately see something else—no interpretation is necessarily more correct than another. What matters is how well that director’s interpretation works as a film. Daneliya’s does surprisingly well and offers the opportunity for a rich analysis.

In 1986, PBS aired a four part mini-series adaptation of *Huck*. The biggest difference between this version and the other adaptations is the fact that Peter Hunt, the director, had twice as much time to work with. While the average *Huckleberry Finn*
movie usually lasts less than two hours, Hunt’s goes on for 212 minutes. This extra time allows the adaptation to feel less rushed and to include more of Twain’s plot. Hunt took great pains to stay as “true” to the book as possible—likely due to the fact that the National Endowment for the Humanities was one of the big contributors to the production, and they insisted on following Twain (Mitgang H1). In keeping with this goal, they employed a number of Twain scholars to oversee and consult on the adaptation process: Robert H. Hirst, editor of the Mark Twain Project; Walter Blair from the University of Chicago; Hamlin Hill of the University of New Mexico; and Justin Kaplan, the author of “Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain” (Mitgang H1).

However, the extra time is not necessarily a good thing—its length inspired Marvin Kitman of *Newsday* to say that he “watch[ed] the raft so long in the first episode it seemed [he] was getting seasick” (24). John O’Connor of the New York Times described the version as “too reverential. . . . It lacks a downhome liveliness” (C17), and *People’s* Jeff Jarvis said that “the plot moves so slowly it doesn’t appear to move at all” (Haupt 146). Then again, Clifford Terry of the Chicago Tribune said the work was “excellent, though necessarily selective” (7). Haupt described it as “without peer. There are some fine adaptations of Twain’s novel, but as of this writing, only of this one can it be said that Huck told his own story and, in terms of it, ‘He told the truth, mainly’” (150).

One explanation for this disparity might well be the fact that most reviewers still hold on to the 1939 Rooney version as the model to judge all other adaptations. Kitman said that the film was “more violent than the old movie version with Mickey Rooney” (24). Michiko Kakutani of the New York Times wrote an article entitled “Adapting and Revising Twain’s Huck Finn” that was printed the day the third part of the mini-series
aired. It is telling to note that Kakutani mentions “five feature films, two television
movies and various plays and musicals,” but refers specifically only to four adaptations:
the mini-series, Broadway’s recent “Big River,” a claymation “The Adventures of Mark
Twain” that had recently been released—and Rooney’s 1939 film (C11). Regardless of
whether or not critics originally liked Rooney’s version, they certainly seem to use it to
judge the more current adaptations.

But Guy Gallo, the screenwriter for the PBS version, specifically tried to avoid
following in the footsteps of Hollywood renditions as represented by Rooney’s 1939 take
on the character. As his interviewer, Herbert Mitgang phrased it:

In the opinion of the producers and scenarist of this latest adaptation, the
work can be envisioned as two different novels. There is the Hollywood
“Huck,” what might be called the freckle-faced version, featuring a
somewhat witless youth, with his smarter friend Tom Sawyer hovering in
the background, plus all the whitewash of that fence. And then, there is
the novel that caused Ernest Hemingway to write 50 years ago: ‘All
modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called
‘Huckleberry Finn.”’ (H1)

But it isn’t just that Hollywood created a new Huck—Mark Twain himself started this
duality. He made sure that the public would receive his book and think of it the way he
intended—Hollywood did nothing more than follow his lead. One of the main
difficulties encountered when adapting *Huck* is fairly unique to any “great work” of
American literature—or any literature with a strong following, actually. The public has a
popular perception of the novel—one which filmmakers must adhere to if they hope to
gain that audience’s trust and money. This refers to the difficulty of what I call adapting
the audience, and it will be explored in detail in a later chapter.

In any case, the creators of the PBS version wanted to do something different.
When Gallo approached the adaptation process, he stated that he
was taken with its much darker side. Here were two outcasts, a black
slave and a troubled white boy oppressed by his ignorant father, on a
journey to freedom. Every time their raft touched ground—touched the
United States—they got into trouble. The ‘white trash’ boy, who has
inherited the prejudices of his father and the community, and the black
slave come to love each other. The journey is of their growing affection.”

(Mitgang H1)

For the most part, he succeeded. When compared to the ebullient red-headedness of
Eddie Hodges, the difference is as clear as black and white. A scene where an
abolitionist is hung on camera is in ways more violent than most films of that time or
now. However, this has an unintended consequence that Kitman notes in his review:
“The one thing they didn't check for is the humor. . . . Not a trace of it here. It's untainted
by anything funny” (24). It seems almost impossible for adapters to capture all the many
facets of Twain’s *Huck*, and this may be one reason why the films never remain as
memorable as the book.

The film was produced by Disney and written and directed by Stephen Sommers, who
would later go on to make his name directing action movies such as *The Mummy* and *Van
Helsing*. But his Huckleberry stint was much more subdued. He said that he “had always
wanted to write and direct. And this book, ‘Huck Finn,’ is my dream. A work of genius” (Weinraub C17).6

Critics accepted the film for the most part. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times gave it three stars out of four, calling it a “graceful and entertaining version.” New York Times film critic Janet Maslin said that “there are times when this ‘Huck Finn’ grows colorless, although it always holds the attention,” but she also notes that Sommers does an excellent job creating a “sprightly, good-humored introduction to a book that would otherwise be seriously out of fashion” (C15). Judging from the enduring popularity of the novel and the inevitable creation of more Huck adaptations, however, one wonders when exactly the book went “out of fashion.” But Maslin’s comment does suggest the difficulty of adapting a work steeped in the conventions and ideals of one age to a new audience. In any event, as the latest Huck adaptation, Sommers’ version serves well to illustrate current approaches.

**Conclusion**

This final adaptation brings up an important detail. In his review, Ebert makes a point of stating that Sommers’ purpose was “to entertain and [not] to offend,” almost as if in apology—as if the entertainment facet of the film makes it somehow less valuable. Film and literature critics alike often seem too ready to dismiss a work of art that makes entertainment a primary goal—especially when it is an adaptation of an “American classic” like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. But the desire to entertain should not disqualify a movie as a successful adaptation, particularly in this case, as there can be no debate that one of Twain’s primary goals was to entertain, as well.
Actually, letters from Mark Twain suggest his openness to adaptive distortion. He tried numerous times to adapt *Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the stage, both on his own and with the help of others. He wrote a letter asking William Dean Howells to adapt *Tom*, saying “You can alter the plot entirely, if you choose” (Haupt 4). And when Howells recommended his cousins, Paul and Vaughn Kester, do the work, Twain wrote them and said, “Turn the book upside down & inside out if you want to. If you wish to add people, incidents, morals, immorals, or anything else, do it with a free hand. My literary vanities are dead, & nothing I have written is sacred to me” (Haupt 4-5). True, Twain often owed massive amounts of money, and this might have had some influence on his willingness to let others change his work during the adaptation process, but these comments still seem to apply. It seems he wouldn’t have had issue with any film adaptation of his novels.

Another quote from a movie critic helps conclude this introductory section. Roger Ebert notes that the Disney Huck has been cleaned up considerably from the one who appears in Twain’s novel, but acknowledges that “Huck has been sanitized for years in the movies (just as Widow Douglas tried to ‘sivilize’ the original).” This brings up an interesting point: the idea of Huck as a character who transcends either the page or the screen. In a sense, he has become a mainstay of American culture, offering one explanation as to why directors seem unable to resist adapting him. But no matter how hard people try to “sivilize” Huck, he remains as intractable and youthful as ever. The same can be said about the book as a whole—many adapters try to “sivilize” it, but as will be seen in this study, the novel has thus far remained problematic.
II. The Beginning

Introduction

In the novel, the first few scenes introduce the characters and conflicts, and the same holds true for each of the films, as well. But the adaptation process is more complex than simply transferring plot. Twain also uses the first chapters to introduce his readers to Huck as a narrator. In fact, one of the first traits of Huckleberry Finn is the first person point of view, a narrative aspect notoriously hard to adapt. Consequently, in any Huck adaptation one can inspect how the director translates the point of view from the page to the screen. Fortunately, this question is answered in the first few scenes of each film. A careful viewing of each of those scenes in light of point of view allows the critic to make several observations about the various approaches. At the same time, certain patterns present in each of the movies emerge, allowing one to glean additional insights about the adaptation process.

Point of View

Critics have long held that point of view plays a key role in any narrative, but they have disagreed about its exact influence. In his book, Recent Theories of Narrative, Wallace Martin outlines the changing opinions on point of view since the 1930s. Conventionally critics have tended to classify narratives into one of three groups: first, second or third person, with the possible addition of the omniscient and limited subcategories in third person. Of course, writers rarely use second person, especially when dealing with a subject of novel length. However, Martin distinguishes between seven different types of narrators, including everything from authorial narration to an
implied narrator (135). In addition, he shows major differences within types of first
person narration alone: whether it is the past recounted to a listener or reader, or the
present represented as stream of consciousness (Martin 140). This distinction seems
simple at first—simply a matter of tense. Yet when one studies it carefully, one sees that
*when* the narration occurs is just as important as who narrates it.

Stream of consciousness, for example, tries to transcribe exactly what a mind
thinks, as it thinks it. The reader encounters the narrator’s thoughts and experiences at
the same time as the narrator himself, with (theoretically) no intervention by the author.
On the other hand, in a traditional narration, the teller—whether the author or a created
narrator in the book—can select what to include and what to leave out, essentially
adapting the tale for his or her specific purposes. Even more importantly in relation to
*Huck*, that selection process’s timing makes a distinct impact on the narrative. Knowing
that Huck is either writing or telling this story immediately after it happened—and not as
an adult looking back at the adventure with the added help of life experience—allows the
reader to place more trust in Huck. He hasn’t had the time to alter the events too
drastically through memory.

As Anna Barbauld observed in 1804, when the narration purports to tell events
that happened in the distant past, it loses a sense of credibility, even though critics usually
overlook this vital point (Martin 131). In real life, if someone were to recount a story that
happened decades earlier with the same amount of detail readers expect in a novel, her
audience would be skeptical at best; “it is implausible for someone to remember
conversations years later” (Martin 131). In fact, these points have led critics like Käte
Hamburger to declare that first person narratives are not fiction at all but “feigned reality
statements” (Martin 142). In other words, first person accounts are too close to reality to be described as fiction. Clearly, the importance of point of view goes much deeper than a simple cosmetic difference—this choice by an author has the potential to alter every scene of the book, a principle which becomes clearer through a close study of point of view at work in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

**Point of View and Huckleberry Finn**

Literary critics have recognized the importance of point of view in Huck Finn for a long time. As Martin points out, “If Huckleberry Finn were recounted by Mark Twain rather than Huck, it might not be much more interesting than Tom Sawyer” (130). Critic Harold Beaver devoted several chapters to the subject in his work Huckleberry Finn, noting how the point of view helps create comedy and mystery, (134-135). Basically, Beaver shows how because Huck is easily impressed and prone to lying, Twain can use him to present any number of jokes with a completely straight face. For example, Huck can walk around the Grangerford home and be awed by the majesty of it all, even though the details he supplies show the reader the truth: the Grangerfords are a symbol of Twain’s critique of Southern society, “a gun happy, fraudulent, sentimental, hypocritical time-warp” (135). So the first person device lets Twain make observations without fear of repercussion, much like the persona of Mark Twain let Samuel Clemens do the same thing.

Janet Holmgren McKay also studied Twain’s point of view in her article “‘Tears and Flapdoodle’: Point of View and Style in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” She points out how truly complex the narration of the story is. On the surface it seems as
though Twain had created a simple backwoods boy of a narrator and then had him launch into his tale. “What Twain actually does in *Huck Finn* is to use certain strategically placed vernacular and colloquial features to create the impression of an untutored narrator, while simultaneously developing a sophisticated, innovative literary style which uses a full range of standard English constructions and literary devices” (McKay 201). The impression a reader gets from Huck’s voice is that it would be simple to write. But in her paper, McKay shows how much effort Twain had to exert to appear untutored.

Because of its apparently simple nature, one can too easily dismiss the means by which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* conveys meaning. De Man cautions against this—and McKay proves his point. “The success of this stylistic *tour de force* depends upon the consistency with which Twain maintains Huck’s narrative point of view. If Huck’s language convinces the reader of his innocence, his perceptions and actions must support this impression. This essential interdependence of form and content further requires that Huck’s style be rigorously coherent” (McKay 202). For a director to succeed in adapting the novel, he or she must take as much care creating and balancing the point of view as Twain did in its construction.

Any critic who studies *Huck Finn* must address point of view in one way or another. All we have of the book—whether it be the plot or the characters or the setting or anything else—we have because Huck told us about it. Or at the least, Twain told us about it through Huck. Even what we know about Huckleberry himself is all due to how he presents himself. He is our intercessor with the story. So anything that has been said only could be said based on whatever Huck saw fit to say.
But point of view does not just convey the plot—it also allows readers to immediately identify with the narrator. We sympathize with Huck because we believe that we know him well. However, when the time comes to adapt a first person novel to the big screen, this same point of view that offered a great advantage becomes a hindrance. There are many different approaches to adapting the first person, such as voiceover or limited narration. Some directors even make the author of the book a character in the film, letting him walk across the screen and explain the implications of what has happened. By examining the techniques Twain uses in *Huck Finn* to make the book succeed, and then comparing those same traits with the action of the adaptations of the novel, it becomes clear that, while exactly recreating the point of view is impossible in film, some approaches are better than others.

There can be no doubt that, despite Huck’s simple dialect in telling the story, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is as deep as any other work of literature. Critic Harold Beaver discusses the many layers of *Huck Finn*, consisting of Sam Clemens playing the author Mark Twain who is writing a book in which he must take on the persona of Huckleberry Finn. This results in some fairly complex framing that only really surfaces now and then—at other times it lurks beneath the surface, affecting the story without the reader knowing it (Beaver 132). For example, when Huck first describes Pap in the text, we read the following:

> He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn’t no color in his face, where his face showed; it was
white; not like another man’s white, but a white to make a body sick, a
white to make a body’s flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white.
(Twain, *Annotated* 53)

Beaver points out that while on the surface this seems 100 percent Huck, a closer
inspection reveals the amount of effort put in to this passage. Pap is described as all
black and white—the color white is “hammered in” six times—he is a “living corpse”
(Beaver 132). And indeed, soon that prediction becomes reality when Jim finds him in
the ruined brothel. “This cannot be Huck’s contrivance; nor ultimately Mark’s. It runs
too deep. Such all-controlling symbolism, which is both racial and metaphysical, can
only be ascribed to Sam” (Beaver 132).

This point directly applies to the difficulties directors have when adapting the text
to film. The work isn’t simply plot—it’s richly layered literature. When someone tries to
translate a poem into a new language, they have to decide which interpretation of the
poem is most important. While a poem in English may have many different meanings, its
counterpart in German can only be sure to retain one. At the same time, in German it
may then take on new levels of meaning—if the translation is a good one—that may or
may not exist in the English version.

An analogous situation applies to adapting literature to film. A director must look
at the text and decide what is of utmost importance—what he or she wants most to
translate to the screen. Often that choice ends up being the plot of the novel—not, if I
may be allowed to use the word, its “spirit.” When we see Pap on the screen, we usually
see him as a drunken child-beater, and nothing more. Twain, however, deliberately
created an ambiguous character, for though he describes Pap in black and white terms,
Huck has some feelings for the man—he is his father after all. But once Pap has been translated to film, he is either good or bad—seldom is he both. And directors are usually too eager to paint Pap as a villain.

The one exception to this occurs in Peter Hunt’s 1986 mini-series. With the extra time he had to work with, Hunt could show the audience a much clearer picture of what Huck’s life might have been like with Pap. On the one hand, Pap’s beatings are cruel and unforgiving—we see him take a cane to Huck and thrash him so much that we wonder how Huck can stand it. But Hunt also includes a montage of Huck and Pap working together—doing simple chores around the hut. In these brief scenes, something else emerges: viewers recognize that Huck is free from the restrictions the Widow and Miss Watson placed upon him.

We don’t see this in the novel because of Huck’s own editing process: he condenses two months living with Pap into a simple:

It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study. Two months or more run along, and my clothes got to be all rags and dirt, and I didn’t see how I’d ever got to like it so well at the widow’s, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular . . . . I didn’t want to go back no more . . . . But by-and-by pap got too handy with his hick’ry, and I couldn’t stand it. (Twain, *Annotated* 60-61)

This segment lasts all of two paragraphs in the novel, but when portrayed on the screen—with the time to do it correctly—it is much harder to overlook.
In a sense then, Huck was abused in both environments. He was mistreated emotionally by the Widow and Miss Watson, and physically by Pap. He fakes his murder because he doesn’t want to return to either situation. In a simple picaresque, there needn’t be much logic to tie one scene to the next, but by actually screening what is already in the book—but obscured—Hunt shows us that this is no simple picaresque. This is just one example of how the first person point of view can color the novel and obscure facts that become clear once they are properly displayed on film. But that proper display is hard to achieve and even harder to do consistently.

Taking the time to carefully look at point of view and how it affects the narrative in the film adaptations can help us understand not just how the films function, but how the novel is pieced together, as well. Just as point of view in a novel is immediately identifiable, the way directors have adapted it to film is clear after the opening scene. Thus, by viewing the openings of each of the five films, the strengths and weakness of each film’s technique become apparent, and opportunities arise to study aspects of the book, as well.
Analysis of the Opening Scenes

1939

The 1939 Mickey Rooney version of *Huckleberry Finn* takes a fairly conventional approach to adapting the first person point of view of the novel. Director Richard Thorpe chooses to play it safe, using neither voiceover narration nor internal monologue. The first shot is of a school house, and the first scene depicts a teacher taking roll at the beginning of class—Huckleberry doesn’t appear until the scene dissolves from the classroom to the river. This choice initially seems odd, but the way Thorpe arranges his shots shows that he is very much in control.

Everything associated with the schoolhouse says order. The chairs are in neat rows, and the teacher’s desk sits in the exact middle (see Fig. 1).

The first glimpse the audience gets of the interior is full of visual symmetry—the teacher lords over the class as she calls roll. To the right of her lies an open book that looks suspiciously like a bible. To the left and behind her hangs a chalkboard in pristine
condition except for two things. First is the equation, 62471 times 4 equals 249884.

There is no evidence of any calculations used to reach that answer—simply the numbers written in clean chalk. And second, above the teacher is an ironic sentence written in cursive: “Kindness is to do and say the kindest thing in the kindest way.” The audience gets the impression that this class is run with an iron fist—and the teacher’s severe face and harsh voice say that kindness doesn’t enter into it in any form (see Fig. 2).

![Image of a teacher at a desk with a blackboard showing the equation 62471 times 4 equals 249884]

Fig. 2. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Richard Thorpe.

When this visual setup combines with the teacher’s lines, the meaning is clear: society might frown on Huckleberry Finn, but society is completely hypocritical. The teacher realizes Huck isn’t there when he doesn’t answer to his name on the roll, and she decides to give the following sermon:

Children, I want Huckleberry to serve as an example to you. I want you to realize how he’s wasted his time. Why I don’t suppose he even knows that Gaul was divided into three parts. And I’m sure he doesn’t know that Newton discovered the law of gravity. But we mustn’t get angry at him.
We must feel sorry for him. Poor Huckleberry—he must be a very unhappy boy. (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Dir. Richard Thorpe)

Thorpe found a brilliant way to visually show how unimportant school is to Huck. It is nothing more than a useless building where useless facts are crammed into unsuspecting children, and they are expected to repeat them back when asked. As the teacher finishes her lecture, the scene dissolves to show Rooney as Huck, asleep by the side of the river, fishing. The order of the schoolroom has been replaced with the natural chaos of the outdoors, and Huck, despite his teacher’s observation, looks as happy as could be (see Fig. 3).

Thorpe’s version shows that it isn’t necessary to have voiceover or internal monologue to recreate a point of view. If one were to ask Twain’s Huck what he thought of school, Huck would likely describe it as it was shown by Thorpe. Thus, the feelings and ideals of Huck have seeped through the film at this beginning to alter reality itself and show it the way Huck would view it. Unfortunately Thorpe doesn’t stay true to this
strong beginning for the course of the movie, but he at least provides this good example of point of view adaptation.

1960

Michael Curtiz’s approach to adapting Huck’s voice is also simple: he ignores it. The movie opens with Huck running along the river bank, jumping up and down and waving foolishly to a passing steamboat (see Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Michael Curtiz.

He looks youthful and exuberant—full of the pleasures of life. But he doesn’t look anything like the introspective and doubtful Huck from Twain’s story. Of course, Curtiz was under no obligation to portray that side of Huck. But after a few moments, Hodges (playing Huck) opens his mouth and complicates matters. He speaks of his wishes to “be goin’ somewheres,” but it sounds clunky and forced to the ear. While Hodges looks and acts nothing like the introspective Huck, his dialogue has been written to sound like him.
This conflict between the way the movie looks and the meaning it tries to convey weighs the film down from start to finish. It completely ignores the first person point of view, trying instead to render the book as if it had been written in third person. We never get a chance to understand Huck’s motivations and the way he sees things. This might be acceptable if it were approached correctly. Having the opportunity to see Huck as others would see him—instead of only as he sees himself—would be a valuable insight. But even if the dialogue were well written, the casting would still get in the way.

Perry Frank mentions the fact that many film critics had problems with Huck’s casting for the film. Two critics “commented on the inadequacy of Eddie Hodges as Huck, and felt the appeal of the film was hurt by this crucial miscasting. [One] describes Hodges as ‘cute,’ but points out that this characteristic misses the essence of Huck as many see him” (Frank 298). Haupt agrees (83). In this respect they are correct. Hodges seems far too cuddly and clean—and young-looking, even though he was 13 at the time of filming—for many of the actions and conflicts Twain’s Huck encounters and overcomes. But not even the best child actor in the world could have saved this rendition of the character. There’s no way for the audience to get inside his head and understand what he’s thinking and why he does what he does, so the audience is left wondering why the “cuddly and clean” boy acts childishly at times but maturely at others.

Again, the objection here is not to Curtiz’s basic adaptation choices. Each filmmaker should be allowed to adapt the book as he or she sees fit. However, once these decisions are made, directors should stay true to their stated goals. On the one hand Curtiz tries to film a children’s movie, but at the same time he tries to present many of
the heavier undertones of the novel. This creates a conflict between the message and the means of presentation, and this is what ultimately makes the film fail.

It would be too easy to attribute the flaws of this film’s introduction to an inexperienced director, but when Curtiz made the movie in 1960, he had already won an Academy Award for directing *Casablanca*. Critics widely acknowledged that movie as one of history’s best. Curtiz clearly knew his craft. In his defense, he does use some camera techniques to good effect in the opening scene of *Huckleberry Finn*. Once Jim and Huck are in the same shot together, Curtiz has Huck sit on a barrel—bringing him to the same level in the shot as Jim (see Fig. 5).

![Fig. 5. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Michael Curtiz.](image)

He switches angles two more times—in one, we see Jim from a slightly low angle, while Huck remains level with the camera (see Fig. 6). But before we can jump to conclusions about the meaning of this, Curtiz reverses it, having Huck shown from a slightly low angle while Jim is level (see Fig. 7).
One might be tempted to dismiss this as coincidence, but when one realizes the
tremendous difference in height between the two actors, it is clear that these choices were
deliberate.

Unfortunately, this is the limit of Curtiz’s artistic approach to adaptation in this
film; he tries few other tricks to get his audience invested in Huck. When he does try to
convey subtler points, it’s done through dialogue which screams exposition. For an
example one need look no further than this same opening scene. Jim comes to tell Huck
to go home to the Widow, and the following conversation ensues:

Huck: Tell the Widow and Miss Watson you just couldn’t find me, Jim.

Jim: It’s gonna be dark soon.

Huck: Yup. Ah! It’s beginning to smell like the evening.

Jim: You’ll be safe at the Widow’s. That’s the one place your pap won’t
come. Your pap, Huck—he’s looking for you. It’s best we go,

Huck—come on. (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir.
Michael Curtiz.)
It isn’t that this dialogue is terrible—it’s that it’s trying to accomplish too much. On the one hand, it has Huck trying to wax poetical—something that doesn’t fit Eddie Hodge’s cherubic face at all—while on the other, it has Jim telling Huck something he is completely aware of. If Huck really were afraid of Pap as much as Jim seems to think he is, there would be no need for Jim to remind Huck of the fact; not if Huck were as deep a thinker as his “smell like the evening” statement implies. This is simply another example of the film trying to show one thing while say another. It tries to do both and ends up doing neither.

The difficulty in Curtiz’s take on *Huck Finn* isn’t that he changes the book. He actually stays quite faithful to the text, all things considered. But Twain’s novel shows the reader Huck through the most biased of filters—himself. Many of the things Huck does in the book are fairly stupid.

We accept Huck because he always manages to make himself sound good. We like him, and so we forgive him his faults. Curtiz doesn’t allow us to get to know Huck—to get inside his head. He tries to portray the events as they happen in the book, and that portrayal leaves us disappointed. For example, Haupt notes that the Grangerford-Sheperdson feud in Curtiz’s film is “reduced to a few encounters with armed idiots in a barnyard” (83). But if you take a step outside Huck’s narration to look at what’s really happening in the scene, you see clearly that Twain has little regard for the feuding families. Buck describes the feud as follows:

A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man’s brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in—and by-and-by everybody’s killed
off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and takes a long
time. (Twain, Annotated 187)

The Grangerfords might be rich, and Huck might be awed by them, but it’s hard to make
a case that Twain admires them—or that we should, either. Curtiz only films what’s
already there in this scene—he just doesn’t do it through Huck’s eyes.

Though this film is a fairly unsuccessful adaptation, it actually creates a
tremendous opportunity to learn more about the book. Because Huck filtered the novel in
his telling, the chance to see what it might look like without that filter should not be
missed. In this case, everything falls apart. The plot makes little sense, the characters
don’t seem real and the conflicts look forced. Not only does this film reemphasize the
importance of point of view, but it opens the novel up for further interpretation. Critics
can see what Jim might look and act like if Huck weren’t the one describing him, or what
the relation between Huck and the King and the Duke really was.

Of course, good adaptations can do this as well, but it usually isn’t as obvious. A
bad adaptation of a good book automatically makes one wonder what went wrong.
Dennis Cutchins made this same observation about the failed adaptation of The Great
Gatsby: “Understanding why Gatsby collapses as a film can actually help students
understand what is unique about the novel; what, in other words, makes this story good
literature, and at the same time, apparently bad film” (Adaptations in the Classroom
297). In the search for that answer, many valuable insights can be gleaned. So in that
way, a poor adaptation of a novel can be of even more worth to the literary critic than a
good one.9
In 1973, Soviet filmmaker Georgi Daneliya wrote and directed *Sovsem propashchij*, translated in English as *Hopelessly Lost*. Practically no American film critic has taken the time to analyze the film, though Perry Frank did describe Daneliya as “a gifted film artist with a penchant for Twain” (303). Daneliya actually does with his narrative what Curtiz only had the chance to do in his.

Again, this can easily be seen in the opening scene that introduces Huck. The film starts with a lengthy shot of a steamboat. We see it docking and, interestingly, we see Pap hanging around the docks, though of course we do not know who he is at the time. But the actual narrative really begins when the camera cuts to Huck, the Widow and Miss Watson, all sitting at the dinner table, waiting (see Fig. 8).

![Fig. 8. Huck Finn. (Hopelessly Lost, international title). Dir. Georgi Daneliya.](image)

This film’s Huck, Roma Modyanov, was eleven—two years younger than Hodges, and while he does look young, he has none of the youthful exuberance that Hodges oozed.
The dinner table scene is a basic one, common to most adaptations. What isn’t common is its length.

In all it lasts almost three minutes but consists of only 23 shots—an average of almost 8 seconds a shot, though some last as long as 28 seconds. Time seems to drag forever, which essentially places the audience in Huck’s bored shoes. And the dialogue doesn’t help relieve the monotony. Until Huck finally shouts his wishes that the Widow and her sister’s manners can “go to blazes,” there are only ten words spoken distinctly—three of them Huck’s name as the sisters constantly chide him for his poor manners. All of this conveys Huck’s situation far better than a voiceover narration could. It is the film equivalent of showing, not telling.

This opening scene also introduces a tool Daneliya sparingly uses throughout the film: voiceover—not to narrate, but simply to convey Huck’s thoughts. As the Widow strokes his head in comfort, we hear Huck thinking, “Tugs at my hair with that comb every day. Drat her! She’s pulling it all out.” Daneliya resorts to this technique at times to depict what the first person narration of Twain’s story manages to show—what Huck thinks of everything. Surprisingly, Daneliya is one of the only directors to put this approach to use. If it were done constantly, it would likely begin to grate on the nerves. But used in the right amount, it adds an element of the point of view usually lost on film.

Seen from a point of view aspect, *Lost* is the most extreme adaptation of *Huck*, most likely due to the fact that it was produced in Soviet Russia—about as far from American Hollywood as one could get at the time. The film lacks typical elements such as a consistent soundtrack or a linear, easy plot. Most Hollywood productions—especially ones that might have children in the audience—seem to assume they will be
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playing to an audience with a low intelligence. Frankly, this approach isn’t suited to adapting *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for anything, including a children’s movie. So much time is spent showing every aspect of the plot (in films like the 1974 musical or the 1981 version) that it gives the film a breathless, nonsensical pace. In other words, in their effort to make the film understandable to all, directors usually make *Huck* more confusing.

Take the first few chapters of *Huck* as an example. All directors but Daneliya insist on showing Huck getting kidnapped by Pap and taken to his hut by the river. But Daneliya conveys the same information with one simple jump cut that takes less than a second to show. True, it is disorienting at first, but the audience quickly understands what has happened. Pap demands money from the Widow for Huck, and the next thing we see, Huck has been taken and is trying to escape. This frees up many valuable minutes for Daneliya to portray what he wants to—not what he feels he must. American directors should take note.

1986

Peter Hunt’s version mixes many of the elements of the other adaptations, relying primarily on portraying the action, but also using limited voiceover narration. One important change Hunt makes is unique among the other four versions: he has Huck mention Tom Sawyer. Huck’s voiceover at the beginning comes straight from the book: “You don’t know me, without you have read a book by the name of ‘The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,’” but that ain’t no matter.” Starting the film out in this manner indicates a different goal than the other films: Hunt seems to be saying that he wants to stay truer to
the novel as a whole rather than to its individual pieces. The luxury of more time gives
the movie the chance to flesh out the narrative more—providing more details from the
novel.

At the same time, Hunt’s setup says something about the pacing and technique of
the film, as well. Very little actually happens on screen during Huck’s voiceover. We
see pictures of a steamboat docking at St. Petersburg, and people getting off and milling
about the town. But the only shot we get of Huck is of him on a raft in the river (see Fig.
9).

Fig. 9. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Peter Hunt.

Perhaps one could argue this establishes Huck’s relation to the river—that the first
glimpse we have of him is where he most loves to be—but in any case, Hunt introduces
no immediate conflict. In other words, one element that seems to have been lost in the
mini-series is any sense of urgency. The film proceeds at a deliberate pace, showing as
much as it can for as long as it can, with no need to combine or edit drastically.
Occasionally Hunt will pay attention to small details such as framing, but many other
times it is like his opening shot of Huck on the river and the pan of St. Petersburg. One of Hunt’s main objectives seems to have been to film what life was like in Huck’s time.

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the voiceover narration disappears for most of the rest of the film. In most films, narration’s main use is as exposition—to tell things that can’t be shown on the screen easily. Since Hunt has the time, he eliminates that need, except at the beginning in order to get things going. Even then, one wonders what the real need of it was from a film perspective: it doesn’t really offer the audience any new information, except to let them know this work is based on a novel. Hunt shows everything else—Huck’s relation to Miss Watson and the Widow, for example—in explicit detail. In other words, this introduction and brief use of point of view adaptation seem to be present only to reference the text, as Hunt does with the rest of the film.

However, it would be unfair to judge Hunt’s entire approach to adapting point of view by this one scene, since it is out of character with the rest of his film. If one looks to the very next scene—Huck and the Widow and Miss Watson eating supper in the dining room (see Fig. 10)—all the strengths of Hunt’s technique emerge.
Huck is clearly uncomfortable in his fine clothes, and his expression matches his mood. When asked to say the prayer, Huck complies:

Lord—Lord, thank you for these here vittles. They’s mostly real fine.

Only maybe sometimes you could have the cook make things all mixed up—in one pot. So’s the juice could kind of swap around and the things go better. And while I’m asking, one time I got a fish line, but no hooks. I sure could use some hooks. The preacher says, he who asks, gets. So I’m asking. *(Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Peter Hunt)*

Miss Watson interrupts him, accusing him of blasphemy. She eventually calls him “a fool boy—and a sinner, whose right and just reward will be the fires of everlasting Hell,” to which Huck replies that if she’s going to Heaven, he’d rather go to Hell.

This exemplifies Hunt’s normal approach to adapting point of view. In the first forty pages of the novel, each of this scene’s elements can be found. In chapter one, Huck says that nothing was wrong with the food he ate at the Widow’s, “that is, nothing
only everything was cooked by itself. In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better” (Twain, *Annotated* 10). Miss Watson tells him about “the bad place,” as well, to which Huck responds, “I wished I was there” (Twain, *Annotated* 12). Of the aftermath, he says “she was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn’t see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn’t try for it. But I never said so, because it would only make trouble, and wouldn’t do no good.” (Twain, *Annotated* 12). Finally, Huck talks of his experience with prayer, as well: “[Miss Watson] told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn’t so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn’t any good for me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn’t make it work” (Twain, *Annotated* 38).

In essence, Hunt took episodes from three different chapters and combined them into one scene which conveys much of the same information. To show the point of view, he simply has Huck say out loud the things he wrote down in his book. The Huck that results from this adaptive technique, however, differs from the Huck we meet in Twain’s work. Twain’s Huck is quiet and reserved. He doesn’t say all his smart retorts like wanting to go to Hell so that he wouldn’t have to be with Miss Watson—because it isn’t in his nature. He is quite non-confrontational. Hunt’s Huck, however, comes right out and says them.

Again, there is nothing inherently wrong or right with this approach—all directors must make this decision: to show Huck as he really is or to portray him as he thought of himself. Having a first person narrator colors not just the events, but the narrator himself.
Hunt chose to show Huck as Huck thought of himself, and he stayed consistent with that portrayal throughout the film, so it worked. Had he opted to go back and forth between the two, as Curtiz did, it likely would have had the same confusing effect as it had in that earlier film.

1993

Stephen Sommers, in his 1993 adaptation of *Huck Finn*, takes special care in the first scene of the movie to capture the reader’s sympathies in the same way that Twain caught them with the use of the first person. Specifically, Sommers uses voiceover narration by Huck, camera work, costume design, music and dialogue to encourage his audience to root for Huck as soon as they see him—or hear him, as the case may be. And as a result, the film succeeds at what it tries to do—it gives audiences what the film calls a “spit-lickin’ good time.” A more thorough analysis of the first few minutes of the film helps bring this to light.

The movie opens with a series of crude drawings based on the book’s events, all of them placed on a black background as the opening credits roll. At the tail end of this succession, we first meet Huck—through a voiceover. Because there is nothing else to look at on the screen except for a slow zoom on the drawing of Huck, we can devote our full attention to his voice in the same manner that a reader can limit focus to the words on the page (see Fig. 11).
Sommers uses an excellent device to transfer the advantage of first person to the screen. While many movies begin with a crawl to tell the audience the back story of the movie, a crawl is much different than Sommers’ technique. They are rarely written in the first person—their main goal is to inform, not to persuade or endear. Likewise, many movies begin with a voiceover—often one of the characters of the movie speaking directly to the audience. But these voiceovers usually occur while something is already happening on the screen. Distracted by their eyes, the audience can’t give their ears their full attention, thus they lose the sense of sympathy the literary first person brings with it. Twain’s Huck has our whole attention—not part of it. With Sommers’ method, we are drawn into the movie in the same way a first person narrator draws us into the book.

Interestingly, Sommers doesn’t have Huck speak anything verbatim from the book when he starts his monologue. Instead, he opts to have Huck generally introduce himself—keeping the spirit of Huck’s voice from the novel. In the book, Huck begins with a lengthy plot summary of everything that had happened in *The Adventures of Tom*
Sawyer, a giant plot exposition that works only because it also serves to introduce the reader to Huck’s quirks as a narrator. The movie doesn’t need this—there is no call to try and support it with a back story that gets in the way of the actions on which Sommers has chosen to center his film. So Sommers pens a paragraph that captures Huck’s spirit and has that serve as the basis for the voiceover:

My name’s Huck. Huck Finn. This story’s about me and a slave named Jim. It’s mainly the truth. Oh sure, there’s a few stretchers here and there, but then I never met anybody who didn’t lie a little when the situation suited ‘em. So kick off your shoes, if you’re wearing ‘em. Get ready for a spit lickin’ good time.

Sommers keeps to this approach—recreating the spirit, not the letter—as the opening scene truly begins. The movie cross-fades from Huck’s voiceover and drawn face to a match cut of a live Huck, played by Elijah Wood, in the same position (see Fig. 12).

Fig. 12. The Adventures of Huck Finn. Dir. Stephen Sommers.
Suddenly a fist comes from behind the camera, punching Huck squarely in the face. Then the film cuts to a shot of Huck’s opponent as seen by Huck. Nowhere in Twain’s work does anything remotely resembling this fight occur. But Sommers uses this scene to take the time to reinforce Huck as a character—who he is and what he stands for—in the same way Martin says Twain does in the novel. “Rather than being added as an appendage that will transmit the plot to an audience, narrative point of view creates the interest, the conflicts, the suspense, and the plot itself in most modern narratives” (Martin 130-131). The same could be said about how Sommers uses camera work in the film.

He places the audience directly in Huck’s shoes again and again. When the pretty boy punches, his fist fills the screen—he practically hits the camera. When Huck punches back, his fist comes from behind the camera. This set up, coupled with the constant close-ups of both characters, make the audience feel very much a part of the action. To heighten that sensation, Sommers crams 43 shots into a single 107 second scene. That’s an average of a cut every two and a half seconds, but sometimes cuts come in a series of less than one second glimpses. The audience can never settle down—they are forced to try and keep up with the action. At times Sommers also uses subtle jump cuts. He switches from a group shot of the fight to another one slightly further away. But the characters aren’t in the positions you would expect them to be—it takes a few seconds of searching to identify where everyone is. An upbeat soundtrack weaves these cuts together, making them part of a cohesive whole and not too confusing. The final effect makes the audience feel the excitement and danger of a fist fight. They root for Huck because Sommers has put them in Huck’s position.
The contrast in the costumes of both characters involved in the fight suggests how the audience should feel toward each. Huck is dressed in a ragged shirt and rough overalls. His hair is tousled and his face dirty. His opponent, on the other hand, is dressed like a young fop, complete with prettily bound tie and buttoned-down vest. His hair is neatly combed and his face scornful. In fact, he is the opposite of Huck in practically every way. Huck has dark hair and is short, his opponent is blond and taller. Huck stands ready to fight, slowly shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His rival bounces around like a kangaroo. Huck remains silent while his enemy continually taunts him. All of this adds up to a clear message: Huck is the underdog of this fight. He has nothing about him that says he should be able to beat his opponent.

Sommers uses this to play upon the sympathies of the audience. Many naturally root for the underdog—especially when the opponent is a pompous buffoon. So we don’t just relate to Huck through his voiceover; we root for him to succeed. We cheer for him when he does. He soundly thrashes the pretty boy, leaving him muddied and wet. In essence the roles of the two characters have been reversed. The pretty boy is left far dirtier than Huck began, and Huck remains dry, even though he has been in the river just as much as his foe (see Fig. 13).
The blond boy claims that he “whupped” Huck, but the audience knows differently. Huck ran because he had more pressing business.

The camera seamlessly shifts from one conflict to another. In the first—the fist fight—the audience knows what’s at stake and who to root for. Once that’s established, the next conflict comes in through the eye line match shot of Huck seeing Pap’s boot print. Sommers shoots the print at an oblique angle which, when coupled with the change of the music to a minor key, tells the audience that this is something they should be afraid of. We don’t question Huck’s reasons for running—we know that he has just discovered he’s in more danger than the pretty boy can ever offer. Sommers uses the fist fight to make his audience root for Huck, and they automatically continue to root for him in this next conflict.

Camera angles also play an important part in this construction of Huckleberry. As long as Huck is fighting the pretty boy—and losing—we see him from a slightly high angle, suggesting that he is in a weak position. However, Sommers sets up the scene
very nicely once Huck has the upper hand. The pretty boy is lying in the river, and Huck
drags him over and straddles him. From then on, we see Huck from an extremely low
angle (see Fig. 14) and the pretty boy from an excessive high angle (see Fig. 15)—even
though both are still facing the camera as before. This mirrors the reversal in cleanliness
from earlier. Now Huck is fully in control and the pretty boy is at his mercy.

Fig. 14              Fig. 15

Fig. 14. *The Adventures of Huck Finn*. Dir. Stephen Sommers.

Fig. 15. *The Adventures of Huck Finn*. Dir. Stephen Sommers.

Haupt states of the 1993 version that “what was lost in the creation of this film is
what is missing from virtually every other *Huck* adaptation. Ironically, it is what the
book always offers, and most adapters are reluctant to use: Twain’s Huck, the complexity
of his character and the richness of his language” (Haupt 168). But I have to disagree
with his reasoning. Haupt states that “since these films have the novel as their common
source, the book is the standard against which each *Huck* adaptation is examined” (1-2).
Again, this is an approach which sets his whole study up for failure.
Ideally, a film should function as a film first and an adaptation second. Using the book as the standard of judgment is like claiming a photograph of the Grand Canyon is bad just because it doesn’t bring the actual canyon with it. Sommers read *Huck Finn* and took from it *his* Huck—not exactly Twain’s, but a workable character nonetheless. That’s part of the adaptation process. He then uses the medium available to him to present his Huck. The two are different, but Sommers’ Huck retains some of the qualities that made Twain’s memorable—particularly the point of view.

**Other Observations on the Beginning**

**The Use of Foils**

Comparing the openings of the different films can lead to additional insights about adaptation in general. For example, two of the films follow the pattern of using foils to characterize Huck. As already noted, Stephen Sommers uses the pretty boy (see Fig. 16)—but he was just repeating that which had been done before him. Michael Curtiz also includes a “pretty boy” in the opening scene (see Fig. 17).

Fig. 16


Fig. 17

This one is a cabin boy on a steamship—the proud and rather overweight possessor of the position Huck covets. Again, the boy is dressed impeccably in an all white suit, and he walks with a back as straight as a board. Indeed, his acting is so poor that it’s clear Curtiz had a hand in telling him what to do on screen. He looks Huck up and down, sniffs, then walks away. And no wonder—Huck is dressed in his typical old overalls and straw hat. But because the pretty boy dislikes Huck (and we dislike the pretty boy), the audience is intended to take a quick liking to the protagonist.

In fact, one of the reasons Curtiz’s Huck is ultimately unbelievable is due in large part to this pretty boy scene. In the novel, Twain’s Huck has a hatred of fancy clothes and being forced to dress up, and Curtiz’s Huck is no different. For example, when he first arrives at the Wilks house, the sisters dress him up in some fancier clothes—clothes which do not fit a young boy at all (see Fig. 18).

Fig. 18. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Dir. Michael Curtiz.
In fact, he even goes to Jim and complains about his outfit. However, Huck also idolizes the pretty boy—he wants nothing more than to become a cabin boy, as well. And when he gets the chance, he jumps at it (see Fig. 19).

![Figure 19](image)

Fig. 19. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Dir. Michael Curtiz.

When compared to the earlier scene (Fig. 17), it is clear that Huck has reached his goal—and he is beaming. But this directly conflicts with his earlier expressed distaste for civilization. Had Curtiz simply presented one Huck or the other, it wouldn’t feel as jarring. But in his attempt to please all crowds, he ultimately fails.

In the 1939 version, Richard Thorpe uses an approach similar to the pretty boy foil, though to different effect. Soon after we see Huck sleeping by the river, a troop of boys sneak up on him, trying to trick him. Naturally, Huck ends up getting the upper hand, and then all of them get into a conversation. These boys aren’t as pretty as the pretty boys Curtiz and Sommers employ, but they serve the same purpose: to show what normal boys of the time are like, and how Huck is different. For example, he smokes his
pipe with ease, but when one of the troop—the one closest to being a true pretty boy (see Fig. 20)—asks to do the same, Huck tells him he’ll get sick.

![Image of two boys smoking pipes](image)

**Fig. 20. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.** Dir. Richard Thorpe.

The boy doesn’t listen and smokes anyway—and then ends up getting sick. The boys all look to Huck almost as a mentor—he spouts off sage words of wisdom, telling them why drinking Mississippi River water is fine: “You look at the graveyards—that tells the tale. Why trees don’t grow worth a shucks in Cincinnati graveyards, but in St. Louis graveyards they grow up about eight hundred feet tall. It’s all an account of the water the folks drank before they was laid up. Cincinnati corpses don’t richen the soil any.” With this addition, Thorpe places Huck in a unique position. He is more than a boy, but when we see him interact with adults, we see that he is also less than a man.

Daneliya and Hunt use a different foil to show Huck’s place in society: the Widow and Miss Watson. The sisters clearly represent what society expects from its citizens—they always appear well groomed and dressed, and their manners are impeccable. In contrast, Huck squirms and complains, even though his dress is proper.
As in Thorpe’s technique, this shows the audience that Huck on the one hand is being forced to fit into society—in dress, at least—but he is bent on being dragged there kicking and screaming the entire way. The other three films also utilize the sisters, but not to introduce Huck. Their roles are reduced, reinforcing the audience’s impression of Huck rather than defining it. In fact, the Widow and Miss Watson are one of the few constants in all Huck adaptations. His journey and destination might change from film to film, but his starting point almost always remains the same.

Thus, all directors use other characters to help the audience understand Huck and his goals and personality. The use of foils is one of the easiest ways to portray a first person narrator. In the book, we get to know Huck and how he thinks through his narration—he shows or tells us. Without the use of extensive—and unnecessary—voiceover narration in a film, this same approach isn’t possible. So directors take the time at the beginning of the film to show how Huck interacts with people around him. In each film, this is a successful technique.

**Outside Adaptations**

Another trait many of the films share is that of reaching outside of the book to other Twain works in order to try to adapt the text more effectively. For example, Haupt points out that the line Rooney delivers about corpses enriching the soil, quoted in the last section, comes almost directly from Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (64-65). Compare the quote from the Child of Calamity in *Life*: “You look at the graveyards; that tells the tale. Trees won't grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a Sent Louis graveyard they grow upwards of eight hundred foot high, it’s all on account of the water
the people drunk before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don't richen a soil any" (Twain, *Life* 50). There are a few differences in word choice, but that’s about it.

Likewise, the opening fight scene in Stephen Sommers’ adaptation comes from another Twain work. The pretty boy Huck fights is nowhere to be found in the original text. Turn to *Tom Sawyer*, however, and the source is clear: Tom meets and fights a strange boy dressed in a “dainty” cap, “new and natty” pantaloons, and a necktie (Twain, *Sawyer* 5)—a description that, minus the cap, depicts Wood’s film opponent perfectly.

Interestingly, these “outside adaptations” usually seem to be some of the strongest sections or lines in their respective films. One reason for this might be that the directors, in their search for the right way to adapt *Huck*, turn to Twain’s other writings that deal with the same subject matter. *Tom Sawyer* and *Life on the Mississippi* are two of the works that immediately come to mind as being important to read to understand *Huck* better, the first because it is the work *Huck* supposedly sequels, and the second because much of the action in *Huck* takes place on the Mississippi, and in *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain inserted many autobiographical elements.

In other words, as Sommers and Thorpe approached the film, they could read other works of Twain for pieces that gave them the same original impression as *Huck* did—in this case, *Tom Sawyer*’s introduction or the selection from *Life on the Mississippi*. They could then film that strictly by the text, because it was, in essence, a pre-made adaptation of the *Huck* they saw in the novel—the adaptation of the book they encountered during their reading of it. It still feels authentic on film, because it is based on the same author. No screenwriter had to make changes and no director had to wonder if it would fit with the rest of the material. Further research into this area of adaptation
would be well rewarded, both in *Huckleberry Finn* studies in particular and other adaptations in general.

**Conclusion**

At first glance, the opening scenes in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would seem to be rather simple to adapt, but in reality they take care and a deft touch to properly portray. What complicates matters even more is the fact that the manner in which each film begins greatly affects how it will end. In the book, Twain devotes a lot of time to establishing the relation of Huck to Tom Sawyer—an effort which is only rewarded (debatably) when Tom shows up again at the ending. With this in mind, filmmakers need to decide how they want the film to end before they can decide how it should begin. For example, Hunt’s mini-series, with its extra time to work with, can afford to include Tom at the start, because he can also appear at the finish. In the Mickey Rooney version, however, there is no time for that to happen, so Tom does not appear at the beginning. Of course, the different approaches to the ending will be discussed in a later chapter. For now, suffice it to say that when approaching *Huck*, directors need to have their entire storyline in mind before they can adapt even the beginning. And if they can successfully portray the start, they immediately are thrown into an even more challenging conundrum: how to adapt the middle sections of the novel.
III. The Middle

Introduction

The adaptation obstacles present in the middle portion of *Huckleberry Finn*, which for the purposes of this paper consists of everything after the opening scenes but before Jim is taken from Huck, require a different approach for study than the one used in the previous chapter. Depending on the purposes of filmmakers, there are many different issues they might choose to focus on or try to transfer from the novel to their films, issues ranging from themes like racism and the role of religion to matters such as Huck as a role model for modern children. And indeed, some—but not all—directors do address these exact issues. But these subjects do not *need* to be addressed for an adaptation to work—not in the same manner that point of view calls for attention, for example.

However, two elements exist in the middle portion of the novel that share the same intrinsic role that point of view fills: structure and audience. This particular book presents unique challenges in those areas, obstacles to adaptation that make the process extremely difficult. As will become clear, these are areas that every adapter will need to deal with sooner or later, even if they try to ignore them at first. But these components are not as easy to pin down as point of view—it is hard to look at a single scene (such as the opening in the previous chapter) that exemplifies the handling of these elements for each film. Every director takes a different approach. Thus this chapter focuses not on individual scenes but instead on the problems themselves, using examples from some of the films to illustrate the difficulties at work and why they will always require attention.
Structure

On the surface, *Huck* seems to be little more than a classic picaresque. Harmon and Holman’s *Handbook to Literature* defines that as “a chronicle, usually autobiographical, presenting the life story of a rascal of low degree engaged in menial tasks and making his living more through his wits than his industry. [It] tends to be episodic and structureless” (389). And *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seems to be a good example of that. Compare it with the genre’s chief qualities that Harmon and Holman list:

1. “It chronicles a part . . . of the life of a rogue. It is likely to be in the first person.”
2. “The chief figure is drawn from a low social level.”
3. “The novel presents a series of episodes only slightly connected.”
4. “Progress and development of character do not take place.”
5. “The method is realistic. Although the story may be romantic in itself, it is presented with a plainness of language and a vividness of detail.”
6. “Thrown with people from every class and often from different parts of the world, the picaro serves them intimately in some lowly capacity and learns all their foibles and frailties.”

*Huck* certainly fits in with 1, 2, 5, 6 and 7, and the novel seems at first to match up with 3 and 4. However, Twain’s deceptively simple plot disguises the complex currents that run under the surface and transform this work out of the picaresque and into something more.
A look at what sort of structure *Huck* really consists of helps to make this argument more clear.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin developed an interesting theory that directly relates to the structure of *Huckleberry Finn*: the chronotope. He defines it as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). In simpler terms, it means that each book establishes a certain relationship between movement through time and movement through space. Some books move chronologically: they begin at the beginning and trace the evolution of a character through time until by the end that character has significantly changed. A typical *bildungsroman* such as *Great Expectations* exemplifies this type. Other books move spatially with little actual movement through time: the characters go on a long voyage where the place constantly changes, but by the end they are little altered, even if theoretically much time has passed. *The Odyssey* exemplifies this genre, and Bakhtin also refers to Voltaire’s *Candide* as representing it, as well (90-91).

One problem with the structure of *Huckleberry Finn* is that Twain has essentially mixed two normally contrasting chronotopes. When Bakhtin describes the chronotope of the Greek romance—the one represented by *The Odyssey*—he notes that “it changes nothing in the life of the heroes, and introduces nothing into their life. It is, precisely, an extratemporal hiatus between two moments of biographical time” (90). This is what the beginning and end of *Huckleberry Finn* consist of. Many critics point out that the structure of the novel is cyclical—Huck returns to practically where he started. When we arrive at the Phelps farm, no changes have occurred in Huck, Jim or Tom—despite the fact that we know from the middle portion that changes did indeed occur.
This is due to the fact that, as stated, the entire middle portion is based on a different chronotope—that of the road, or in Huck’s case, the River. Where Bakhtin’s theory really begins to apply to *Huck* is in his discussion of this type of road chronotope. This version is “both a point of new departures and a place for events to find their denouement. Time, as it were, fuses together with space and flows in it (forming the road)” (Bakhtin 243-244). So the road gives authors the opportunity to have space and time change at the same rate, which is one reason that it has been such a popular device in novels. In addition, “on the road (‘the high road’), the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—the representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point” (Bakhtin 243). No wonder that Twain used the road as the main structural pattern for the entire middle section of his novel: it allowed him to comment on virtually every aspect of American culture he could wish.

Huck and Jim are brought from one adventure to another as they float downriver. But one should note, as does Eliot, that the river is a much more active device than the road. The land comes to Huck and Jim rather than the other way around—they step onto a raft in one place, and they step off it in another with very little effort. Much less than walking or even driving. “It is the River that controls the voyage of Huck and Jim; that will not let them land at Cairo, where Jim could have reached freedom; it is the River that separates them and deposits Huck for a time in the Grangerford household; the River that reunites them” (Eliot 47). They are at the mercy of nature and are brought along at a pace not of their choosing. And as they encounter one struggle after another, they change and evolve—becoming unique individuals and establishing their own code of living.
So what *Huckleberry Finn* basically consists of is a road chronotope book ended by a Greek romance chronotope. When you compare this conclusion with the characteristics of the classic picaresque, *Huck* no longer seems to fit. First of all “progress and development of character” *do* take place. The ending might obscure some of that progress, but Huck and Jim both grow and become unique individuals—much changed from the people they were at the start of the novel.13

Secondly, the “series of episodes” are much more than “slightly connected.” Frank Baldanza, for example, states that “Mark Twain—in all probability unconsciously—constructed whole passages of *Huckleberry Finn* on an aesthetic principle of repetition and variation” (168). As an example, Baldanza compares Huck’s escape from Pap’s cabin at the start of the book—sawing through the logs and hiding his work with a blanket—with Jim’s escape from the Phelps’s barn—digging through the dirt and again hiding the result with a blanket (168). Adams says that it is dangerous to call *Huck* a picaresque and stop, “for the inconsequence does not preclude plan, and the aimlessness is only apparent” (176-177). Unfortunately for most of the film adaptations, it seems they stopped at the picaresque classification.

For example, well-known film critic Roger Ebert makes an interesting observation in his review of Sommers’ 1994 *Huck*: “It was a little eerie, halfway through the movie, to realize that Twain wrote the original American road picture, and that in some way not only all of American literature, but also ‘Easy Rider,’ ‘Bonnie and Clyde,’ ‘Five Easy Pieces’ and ‘Thelma and Louise’ came out of his novel” (Ebert). This is likely one of the main reasons adapters keep turning to *Huck* for source material—its picaresque qualities make it feel like it should fit in to a common film genre.
Unfortunately, it is far more complex than its “road picture” qualities suggest, and the book’s “road picture” segment is often where directors go astray. The fact that the novel fits so well into two of Bakhtin’s chronotope classifications implies its complexity. For Bakhtin, the primary use of the chronotope is that it allows the author to take philosophical ideas and give them the attributes of time and space. Whatever meanings we glean from art, science or literature, Bakhtin says,

in order to enter our experience (which is a social experience) they must take on the form of a sign that is audible and visible for us (a hieroglyph, a mathematical formula, a verbal or linguistic expression, a sketch, etc.). Without such temporal-spatial expression, even abstract thought is impossible. Consequently, every entry into the sphere of meanings is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope. (258)

In other words, only chronotopes allow us to learn anything. The fact that Twain made such extensive use of them (even if he didn’t know them as such) implies that he had many meanings to convey to the audience—meanings beyond the simple plot of the story. This is the case with the Grangerford episode in Curtiz’s 1960 version—the one Haupt criticized for reducing to “a few encounters with armed idiots in a barnyard” (83). Taken out of context, it seems pointless and random. One wonders why Curtiz even included it. But for Twain, it expresses a variety of ideas—criticism of Southern society being only one example—in a compact form.

Since it is relatively easy to adapt the adventures on the river, one can focus on those and overlook the other side to each of those events. It is hard to point to one aspect of one film or another and use that as an example, because this is a principle that is best
seen in context. Suffice it to say that for Twain, the river sequence was a piece of the novel as a whole, and when directors try to take it out of context, it usually ends up backfiring because it has lost some of the structure and meaning that lie behind the picaresque.

**Audience**

Adapters must make an even more important decision when it comes to the middle section of *Huckleberry Finn*—who the audience of the movie will be. On the surface the novel appears to be aimed at children and would thus fit into a popular genre of Twain’s time: the Boy Book. However, the first person point of view hides the adult material that lurks beneath. By first looking at the Boy Book elements of *Huck* in print and on film and then comparing those elements to the more adult themes of the novel, it becomes clear that the book presents adapters with a unique challenge: it is two-faced. The public views it as a children’s book, but the actual text tells a much different story.

From its inception, *Huckleberry Finn* tried to appeal to as many different audiences as possible. When Twain sat down to write the book, he initially viewed it as a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, referring to it as “another boy’s book” (Walker 171), a genre established by such works as Thomas Bailey Aldrich’s *The Story of a Bad Boy* and Thomas Hughes’ *Tom Brown’s School Days* (Gribben, “Elements” 15). While books of this genre varied in actual form—encompassing everything from “juvenile romance” to “literary burlesque,” they typically shared “a reverence for boyhood, an autobiographical flavor, a setting in the past, and a code of behavior alien to most adults” (Gribben,
“Elements” 15), elements clearly present in *Huck*, even though the actual subject matter is quite different.

The Boy Book view of *Huck* has persisted since Twain’s death. Louis Budd observes that one of the reasons *Huck* has still been classified as a Boy Book is that up until Twain’s death in 1910, the two books were bracketed much more often than one of them was elevated far beyond the other. The continued linkage had the effect of keeping *Huckleberry Finn* within the genre of the juvenile book, that is, of seeing Huck as an eternal boy rather than an adolescent who is growing up fast while we watch.” (198)

In other words, because we first encounter Huck in a children’s book—*Tom*, we want to believe that the next time we meet him—in *Huck*, he is still a child. And no wonder: he’s only fourteen. In fact, Twain purposefully cultivated the reception of the book to make it as marketable as possible: “I conceive that the right way to write a story for boys is to write so that it will not only interest boys but will also strongly interest any man who has ever been a boy. That immensely enlarges the audience” (the emphasis is Twain’s) (Gribben, “Elements” 151). Twain constructed a book with a boy as the protagonist who has to deal with very adult problems, but then he made sure to present it as a simple Boy Book.

Many have maintained this view of *Huck Finn* over the years. Children regularly encounter the book in their schooling, and so when those children grow older, they remember *Huck* as being a book for children. Directors are no different. Usually the Boy Book elements of the novel emerge on film in two forms: the age of Huck and the conflicts he encounters. For example, in Michael Curtiz’s 1960 version, thirteen year old
Eddie Hodges plays Huck as a boy whose only real goal in life is to be “goin’ somewheres.” Events happen to Hodges’ Huck, but he doesn’t start any himself, just as children often find themselves forced to react instead of act. In fact, Hodges’s Huck seems to be passed from one set of foster parents to another—the Widow Douglass to Jim to the King to Mary Jane. The emphasis moves away from the youth seeing and doing to him being seen and things being done to him.

One should note that these are elements in the novel, as well. Twain’s Huck certainly has more things happen to him than he initiates himself, but the sort of things that happen is different—he joins a circus or plays at steering a steamboat. Curtiz adheres to the approximate age of Huck, but not his maturity level. In fact, the image of Huck in adult clothes (see Fig. 18) represents this idea well. Because Curtiz emphasizes the younger Boy Book elements of Huck’s character, when Hodges is called on to do some of the actions Twain’s Huck had to complete—essentially filling the role of an adult at times—he looks foolish and out of place. Twain gets away with this in the novel primarily because he has a better balance between the Boy Book elements and the adult themes.

When Elijah Wood took the role at the age of twelve in 1993, he did so in a similar manner. Actually, Wood’s Huck seems much closer to Tom Sawyer—the epitome of a Boy Book boy. Remember, Sommers even took the first scene of his film from Tom Sawyer, not Huck Finn. Wood’s Huck follows the idealized boy most people remember from their childhood encounter with the novel: he is free-spirited and feisty, getting into one scrape after another but always able to pull himself out of them. His goal is to “go for the glory,” and if he happens to learn something along the way, all the better.
But while this may be the stereotypical Huck, it isn’t the complex character most critics have found present in Twain’s original.

For this reason, literary critics have often tried to wrench *Huck* free of its Boy Book roots and turn it into more of a mature novel. One prime example is T. S. Eliot who, in 1950, declared that Huck was “one of the permanent symbolic figures of fiction,” or, as Louis Budd put it after quoting Eliot, “if you don’t grasp *Huckleberry Finn* as a profoundly adult work of literature, then you are a childish, inadequate reader” (Budd 200). A main reason for this view is that the conflicts and issues Twain deals with in *Huck* are decidedly adult: racism, alcoholism, child abuse, hypocrisy of religion—the list goes on and on. James Cox says that “Huck’s relation to and involvement in Jim’s freedom lift him out of the childhood world and lift his lies from what we might call the world of low picaresque into what we want to see as the realm of higher humanity” (“Hard Book” 394). The struggles Huck deals with are far more important and threatening than the more lighthearted conflicts found in other Boy Books and books for children.

The adult book elements of the novel also emerge on film in the same two forms: the age of Huck and the conflicts he encounters. In an adaptation not included among the five primary films presented in this paper, Robert Totten chose Ron Howard to play Huck in his 1975 version—despite the fact that Howard was twenty-one at the time. While this makes for some awkwardly funny scenes (Huck being abused by a Pap who is shorter than he is, for one), it also adds adult elements. Howard’s Huck and Mary Jane cannot have the same innocent relationship which Hodges’ Huck enjoyed; when we see an older Huck standing next to a beautiful young lady, we automatically see a romantic
relationship, one which Totten acknowledges and even expands. When Huck tries to tell Mary Jane about the true identity of the King and the Duke, it almost looks as if he is about to propose marriage (see Fig. 21).

Fig. 21. Huckleberry Finn. Dir. Robert Totten.

Patrick Day’s Huck in 1986 (age 17) and Mickey Rooney’s interpretation in 1939 (age 19) also bring up a suggestion of romance between Huck and Mary Jane. But both of these Hucks are usually more empowered than even Howard’s—they seem to have more control over their fate and to be more aware of the consequences their actions might bring. For example, when Wood’s younger Huck faces Pap, the danger is very real. Pap lunges with a knife at a much smaller Huck, clearly intent on killing him. Yet with Mickey Rooney’s older Huck, such a threat would be unlikely—he’s more than old enough to take care of himself. And so Thorpe reduces the violence to Pap half-heartedly kicking Huck awake. Thus when directors choose to focus on the adult themes (as they do in Day’s and Rooney’s versions), they compensate by increasing Huck’s age. That in turn renders other themes of the book less valid.14
The ultimate difficulty is that *Huckleberry Finn* is a two-faced book. On one hand it is a humorous adventure story about a boy on a river. On the other, it takes a bleak look at society’s ills and weaknesses. Critics noticed this fact at Huck’s first appearance on the market. For example, the *Atlantic* described it as a “book for young folks” and the Hartford *Daily Times* said that “it will hugely please the boys” (Fischer 130-134). Yet the *New York Sun* declared it was “neither a boys’ book nor a grownup novel” (Fischer 132). The *Athenaeum* stated in its review that *Huck* was “meant for boys,” though it did add that “there are few men . . . who, once they take it up, will not delight in it,” and other critics often repeated the same sentiments (“Anonymous” 113). From the beginning, no one could decide quite how to categorize it.

The blame for this problem can be placed squarely at the feet of Mark Twain himself, and nowhere is this clearer than in the history of illustrating the original novel. Beverly David observes that

> because one of [Twain’s] main concerns was the manipulation and control of a mass audience, illustration became a tool that converted the cruelty and sexuality of the story into a series of humorous boyish adventures. *Huck Finn* was a pictorially pleasant book about a good-looking boy that would amuse an easily offended, always apprehensive, “genteel” 19th century audience. (290)

In short, Twain wanted to make sure that the illustrations depicted the material of a typical Boy Book, regardless of what the actual content might be. He knew that the impression his audience would have of the book would be largely influenced by the pictures accompanying it (David 271).
When Twain wrote Edward Kemble, the original illustrator for *Huck Finn*, concerning how to depict the campmeeting where the King pretends to be a reformed pirate, he said, “Let’s not make *any* pictures of the campmeeting. The subject won’t *bear* illustrating. It is a disgusting thing, & pictures are sure to tell the truth about it too plainly” (David 281). Here Twain acknowledges that adapting the book to picture format would inevitably reveal its darker side. He recognized that *Huck*’s means and message were vital to its success.

The means—print format—managed to hide much of Twain’s message, allowing him to comment on horrid scenes like the campmeeting without being in danger of having the average audience catch on to what he was doing. For example, in the campmeeting scene, the King swindles an entire congregation of their money, claiming he is a converted pirate who plans to go convert the rest of his associates in the Indian Ocean (Twain, *Annotated* 231). But Twain doesn’t stop there—he has Huck give the following description of the King’s behavior:

So the king went all through the crowd with his hat, swabbing his eyes, and blessing the people and praising them and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there; and every little while the prettiest kind of girls, with the tears running down their cheeks, would up and ask him would he let them kiss him, for to remember him by; and he always done it; and some of them he hugged and kissed as many as five or six times. (Twain, *Annotated* 232).
Kemble actually illustrated this exact scene—“the lecherous old rascal kissing the girl at the camp-meeting,” but of course Twain objected (Twain, *Annotated* 236-237). What was instead included to depict the scene was the following (see Fig. 22):

![Fig. 22. Twain, Annotated 231.](image)

The difference is striking when compared to film versions of the camp-meeting. In Hunt’s version, he has the King not only kiss the women, but fondle their bottoms, as well (see Fig. 23). What’s more, the women visibly enjoy it! (see Fig. 24). It’s clear why Twain would want to hide this from a late 19th century audience. It is a scathing attack both on the people who prey on these believers and the believers who let themselves become prey. By having the illustration stay whimsical and cute, it effectively hides the theme in a literary sleight of hand.
When adapting *Huck* to film, directors who choose to follow the “faithful” route can’t help but fail because of this same obstacle Twain recognized: when you use a different means to convey this message, it is no longer possible to pretend it’s fare for children. On one hand lies the Boy Book outer shell. If directors choose to depict that, they need to abandon much of the plot of the book, for time and time again Twain’s commentary and criticism of culture such as in the campmeeting scene seep through. On the other hand, if directors choose to depict the social commentary, then the Boy Book coating—the part most readers remember best—disappears, leaving many audiences complaining that “the book was better.” When literature and film critic Perry Frank notes that “Hollywood, like the larger society, has been uncertain about whether to treat *Huckleberry Finn* as a major adult work, or as a children’s tale” (Frank 305), he only remarks on the effect, not the cause.

Some directors have tried to create a film that has the same softening effect the original illustrations had on the novel. One excellent example of this principle appears in
J. Lee Thompson’s 1974 musical version, not one of the five main films analyzed in this thesis, but the one that takes this approach to the extreme. Thompson depicts the Grangerford feud with a more bombastic flare—exaggerating the actual events to make it seem more carnivalesque. He has the camera show violence and deceit as if they were taking place in a warped world—one where characters can die all around, but people still laugh and joke while the carnage occurs.

The Grangerfords go from a literal song and dance number to all out war, as Colonel Grangerford happily shoots Sheperdsons while explaining to Huck what a feud is (see Fig. 25)—and then he is shot and killed himself, leaving Huck as confused as the audience (see Fig. 26).

To make this scene even more absurd, Thompson chose to set it to sprightly fiddle music. Apparently he hoped to lighten the effect of the violence, but instead it seems to make it even more grotesque.
Regardless of the approach, some of the scenes just can’t seem to make the transition into pictures and still have the same effect that they had on the page. The actual plot of the novel abounds with issues like child abuse and racial oppression, yet the choice of viewpoint character hides these elements just as well as the illustrations. Huck doesn’t fully understand why such things are wrong or immoral, so he can’t present them as they truly appear. But when it comes time to adapt the work, the seedier aspects rise to the surface.

One solution to this adaptation conundrum lies in discovering where *Huckleberry Finn* fits into the larger scheme of literature. As we have seen, *Huck* lies at a crossroads of children’s and adult novels. When Twain penned the book, it didn’t easily fall into any one category. Today things have changed with the advent of a new audience: young adults.

The young adult novel came into its own in 1967 with the publication of S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders*. Hinton wrote the book while she was still a young adult herself, and as such it appealed to readers of that same age. “There was something about *The Outsiders* that captured the imagination of its readers and spawned a new kind of literature, ‘books,’ as Richard Peck has put it, ‘about young people parents thought their children didn’t know’” (Cart 45). Scholars credit it with transforming the type of novels written for teenagers—taking what had been till then a rather formulaic genre and turning it on its head.

In some ways *Huck*, written about seventy-five years before *The Outsiders*, may be seen as a pioneering work in this genre. Alan Gribben makes a thorough comparison of *Huck Finn* to other Boy Books, but he also points out some of the changes Twain
made to the genre in order to set *Huck* apart from the crowd. Specifically, Gribben notes that Huck writes the ending of the novel in the present tense, showing that

if Mark Twain initially planned to abide by prevailing conventions of the autobiographical Boy Book, his decision to allow this boy to narrate his own story *without first growing up* blocked those intentions, obliging (or rather enabling) him to ignore, and ultimately elude, the limitations of a predictable form” (Gribben, “Manipulating” 20-21)

In other words, typical Boy Books were told from the first person—but the narrator was grown up, able to make judgment calls on mistakes in the past and add an overall didactic tone. Yet Twain decided to have Huck tell his story while he was still young, and that change alone altered the whole feel of the book.

In his text on current young adult literature, Michael Cart mockingly refers to the many standard “characteristics” of the field: a teenage protagonist, first-person voice, limited number of characters (often sketchily developed), a time span that is less than a year, undistinguished setting, pop culture references, plenty of dialogue, a colloquial style, around 200 pages long and “hang the plot on a problem that can—after lots of hints of impending doom—be resolved satisfactorily by the protagonist without adult interference”—and the author has to be sure that the protagonist is changed for life by the end (243-244). Many of these traits are present in Hinton’s work, and in a sense *The Outsiders* can take responsibility for starting those clichés, though of course they weren’t clichéd at the time. However, most of these traits are also clearly found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. *The Outsiders* didn’t appear ex nihilo—by having
Huck “write” his story while he was still a young adult, Twain sowed one of the seeds that would later grow into the young adult novel.

If a book like *Huckleberry Finn* appeared in today’s young adult market, there would be no need to put a sugar coating on it. So-called “bleak” young adult books regularly deal with racism and child abuse, not to mention other taboo subjects like rape or homosexuality. But that market didn’t exist when Twain was writing. Adaptations of modern young adult novels do not need to worry about a century’s worth of misperception, but a successful “faithful” adaptation of *Huck* is extremely difficult due to the gap between the book’s actual content and the public’s memory of it.

**Conclusion**

There are too many obstacles to adaptation in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to even hope to study them all—particularly in this middle section. The novel is rich with themes, from the utility of religion to the hypocrisy of Southern culture. Ideally, each theme could be traced through all the Huck adaptations, taking the time to analyze how America’s changing perceptions over the years have influenced each of the films as well as how each of the film’s changes relate back to the book. But one must remember that directors do not need to adapt each of those themes in order for their film to be a success. This chapter has focused primarily on broad issues that any adaptation will have to address in order to work as a film. In the end, *Huck*’s structure and audience make a truly “faithful” adaptation nearly impossible. So much needs to be altered that directors should be careful before making any further changes, making sure that those
changes are made in order to present better their personal adaptation as opposed to what they think audiences will want.
IV. The End

Introduction

The end of the book is by far the most controversial point, critically speaking. Some critics choose simply to ignore it, claiming that it doesn’t fit with the rest of the novel, but movies don’t have that luxury. Filmmakers have tried many different approaches to “fixing” the conclusion, and through those altered endings, one can explore why and if the book’s ending really does contrast with the rest of the novel. Fortunately, due to the nature of the material, we can return to a close individual inspection of each film’s approach, much as was possible in the chapter that focused on the beginning of the novel—but first some background information is helpful.

A Review of the Debate

To gain an appreciation for the sort of debate that has raged among critics over the ending of the novel, it helps to review a summary of some of the main debaters in that discussion. One of the first defenders of the novel’s ending was T. S. Eliot, who stated that for Huckleberry Finn, neither a tragic nor a happy ending would be suitable. No worldly success or social satisfaction, no domestic consummation would be worthy of him; a tragic end also would reduce him to the level of those whom we pity. Huck Finn must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere. His is not the independence of the typical or symbolic American Pioneer, but the independence of the vagabond. . . . Hence, he can only disappear; and his disappearance can
only be accomplished by bringing forward another performer to obscure the disappearance in a cloud of whimsicalities.” (48-49)

Of course, it is to be expected that Eliot, one of the strongest champions of complex and obscure works, would approve of any sort of ambiguity in a text. Then again, he makes a strong point when he observes, “Like Huckleberry Finn, the River itself has no beginning or end. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River” (49). For Eliot, Twain created a character so in tune with the River that his whole adventure was patterned after it.

Critic Lionel Trilling agrees with this sentiment, though he places more qualifications on his endorsement. In his essay, “The Greatness of Huckleberry Finn,” he argues that “in form and style Huckleberry Finn is an almost perfect work,” but he concedes that the ending is “too long . . . and certainly it is a falling off, as almost anything would have to be, from the incidents of the river” (90). He points out that while “it is a rather mechanical development of an idea,” “some device is needed to permit Huck to return to his anonymity, to give up the role of hero, to fall into the background which he prefers, for he is modest in all things and could not well endure the attention and glamour which attend a hero at a book’s end” (Trilling 90). Both critics argue that Huck should stay consistent with the character he has proven himself to be earlier—that his is not the role of an epic hero who returns with a boon to bestow, but rather that of a rogue who will continue to live life in the shadows.

Leo Marx does an admirable job of representing the other side of the argument: that the book’s end is nothing more than a colossal disappointment. He says that despite the defense of any critic, almost any reader of the book will be let down by the ending
because “they rightly sense that it jeopardizes the significance of the entire novel. To take seriously what happens at the Phelps farm is to take lightly the entire downstream journey” (Marx 114-115). In other words, by turning the ending into a virtual burlesque, Twain betrayed the natural character development of both Huck and Jim.

Earlier, Huck had made drastic changes from the boy he started as at the beginning—when the King and the Duke are ridden out of town on a rail, Huck comments, “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (Marx 118). This comments shows a depth of understanding not typical for a fourteen year old boy—and definitely not what you would have expected from the Huck who “got an old tin lamp and an iron ring and went out in the woods and rubbed and rubbed till [he] sweat like an Injun” in hopes of summoning a genie earlier in the novel (Twain, Annotated 43). And then there is the infamous “all right, then, I’ll go to Hell” line that Huck delivers when he decides to help free Jim (Twain, Annotated 344). Huck is willing to take responsibility for his actions, and willing to brave the fires of Hell in order to save his friend. According to Marx, as soon as Tom shows up, “we are asked to believe that the boy who felt pity for the rogues is now capable of making Jim’s capture the occasion for a game” (118).

Then again, James Cox notes that Huck is “reborn” as Tom in this section, and that in most ways he acts as Tom would:

There is bitter irony in Huck’s assumption of Tom’s name because the values of Tom Sawyer are so antithetical to the values of Huck Finn; in the final analysis, the two boys cannot exist in the same world. When Huck regains his own identity at the very end of the novel he immediately feels
the compulsion to ‘light out for the territory’ because he knows that to be
Huck Finn is to be the outcast beyond the paling fences (Remarks 151).

For Cox, Huck’s assumption of the identity of Tom for these final chapters explains
many of his actions and attitudes. One should keep in mind how important Tom was to
Huck at the beginning of the book. Huck was willing to believe quite a lot if Tom was
the source—right down to the existence of a genie in a lamp. When Tom reappears, it is
natural for those old habits and hero-worshipping tendencies to reappear for the first
while—until something major occurs to dispel them and show Huck’s true growth, in this
case the threat of truly returning to a “sivilizing” environment.

Most critics agree that Huck’s refusal to be “sivilized” is the correct way to finish
the story. “The impression that Clemens has to leave, and does leave, in the reader’s
mind and feelings is that Huck will continue to develop” (Adams 190). The reader sees
that Huck has changed because he is no longer content to be acted upon by others—he is
now fully ready to be an autonomous individual, free from society as represented by both
the Widow and Tom Sawyer.

In the second paragraph of the book, Huck is ready to run away from the Widow
until Tom steps in. “He hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers,
and I might join if I would go back to the Widow and be respectable. So I went back”
(Twain, Annotated 10). Contrast this with the final sentences of the novel: “I reckon I 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. I been there before” (Twain, Annotated 444). This is
the transformation Huck has gone through—with or without Tom, Huck is finished with
society and ready to make decisions on his own.
Of course, Huck isn’t the only character who seems changed in the last scenes of the novel. Jim, who on the raft had been “an individual, man enough to denounce Huck when Huck made him the victim of a practical joke,” “ceases to be a man” and has been “made over in the image of a flat stereotype: the submissive stage-Negro” (Marx 119). Marx argues that Jim betrays his earlier character to become little more than pawn to a plot device. This claim seems less debatable at first—Jim certainly seems to be much less human, and he shows very little in the way of agency, bowing before the machinations of Tom no matter how odd or twisted they may be.

However, Jim has come to the heart of Southern society. His foolhardy trek downriver has only made it so that when he is caught, the people who catch him are far more supportive of slavery—and opposed to runaways—than they would have been further north. An example from one of the films helps clarify this point. While Hunt’s portrayal of a lynching on screen earlier in the mini-series is extremely dark, it does show just what sort of trouble Huck and Jim are into. In fact, in that same scene, Huck asks a boy standing by why they didn’t hang the slave. The boy responds that the slave is worth $700, while the “damn abolitionist ain’t worth the rope it cost to hang him.”

Of course, Huck is able to lie his way out of that trouble should the need arise, but Jim’s skin color makes such an approach impossible. He has no other choice but to go along with whatever schemes Tom comes up with. If it had been Huck alone, Jim probably could have had enough confidence to truly protest. But with the addition of Tom, making a struggle would be foolish indeed. Because of the novel’s light tone at the end, one can easily forget this fact when reading the book.
When seen on film, however, the peril is usually clearer in viewer’s minds. For example, with the King and the Duke on board the raft in Hunt’s version, Jim noticeably changes—filling the role of the slave. The same applies for almost all of the adaptations. Jim does the cooking and serving, he is bossed incessantly by the King and the Duke—and he obeys. Seen on film, it is clear that he has no other choice if he wishes to maintain his cover. Since the actual ending of the novel has never been filmed, it is impossible to say that this would definitely hold true for the escape sequence as well, but these earlier scenes indicate it would.

In any case, Marx disapproves of critics who say that the end fits the structure of the rest of the book. “Such structural unity is imposed upon the novel, and therefore is meretricious. It is a jerry-built structure, achieved only by sacrifice of characters and theme” (Marx 123). In other words, if almost every reader can tell something is wrong with the end, that it doesn’t fit with the rest of the novel, who are critics to try and defend it by saying that it is the proper structural thing to do?

Critics haven’t just dissected the ending of *Huck*—some have also taken the time to suggest how it could be improved. Marx points out that “to bring *Huckleberry Finn* to a satisfactory close, Clemens had to do more than find a neat device for ending the story. His problem, though it may never have occurred to him, was to invent an action capable of placing in focus the meaning of the journey down the Mississippi.” (Marx 114). Critic Richard Adams suggests one problem with the ending is that “once Huck’s final decision has been made there is no longer any important part for Jim to play. His function in relation to the theme has been to test, or to furnish occasions when events would test, Huck’s growing moral strength and mature independence” (189). With that in mind, he
proposes that for the ending to be effective, Jim should be taken out of the picture as quickly and painlessly as possible (Adams 189).

This debate is one area in which the different film adaptations can truly add something vital to the discussion. Adaptations allow viewers and readers alike to put these theories to the test—to see how the book would read if the ending actually were changed. By looking at each film’s ending individually, some surprising insights come to light.

1939

The 1939 version takes considerable departures from the book’s ending. Right after the King and the Duke have their run in with the Wilks sisters, we find out that they have turned Jim in for the reward money. But Jim isn’t taken to the Phelps farm—he is boated back north to St. Petersburg to go on trial for the murder of Huck. Huck, meanwhile, finds out about it and rushes upriver on a steamboat—actually piloting it himself for a stretch. He arrives just in time to save Jim from a violent mob lynching, actually running through the mob into the jail where Jim is imprisoned. Huck delivers a strong speech about the troubles of slavery, and everyone sees the evils of their ways. A bit overdramatic, perhaps, but consistent with the conventions when the film was made. The Widow agrees to free Jim—if Huck goes to school, wears shoes, lives with her and quits smoking. Huck agrees and gives her his pipe.

The next we see, the Widow and Huck are waving goodbye to Jim as he rides off on a steamboat. Huck is dressed in fancy clothes, and he reaches in his pocket for a handkerchief—but a pipe comes out with it. The Widow sees it, and Huck swears he had
forgotten about that one. They turn around to leave, and we see that Huck has another pipe in his back pocket. The camera tilts down as they walk away, revealing that he has already taken off his shoes again.

The fact that the movie has a different ending than the book is irrelevant—it actually works quite well for the adaptation Thorpe presented. Haupt said “the film’s purpose is to offer an adaptation that departs from the book in order to show the lengths to which a white boy might go for the sake of his black friend” (58). The movie reaches a climax on all levels of the plot, allowing Rooney’s Huck to come to the realization of how important Jim is to him and how wrong it is for him to be kept a slave. Huck is turned into more of a hero figure. And the cyclical pattern remains—Huck returns to St. Petersburg, where he started as a laid back carefree youth, to free Jim from prison and death.

Additionally, this ending brings to light an issue unresolved in the novel. As critic Julius Lester put it, at the end of the book, “we are . . . to believe that an old white lady would free a black slave suspected of murdering a white child” (Twain, Annotated 438). In his film, Thorpe acknowledges this point and develops it into an interesting “what if” scenario—what if Jim were somehow returned back to St. Petersburg without Huck? As outlandish as the ending may seem in parts, it isn’t that much of a departure from the book. To Kill a Mockingbird and the Gregory Peck film based on it wouldn’t appear for over twenty years, but the finale scene of Thorpe’s Huck shares a surprising similarity to some of the racially charged tones of that film. In any case, Thorpe’s work leads one to ask questions of the book that one might not have arrived at had one not seen the film.
This ending satisfies some of the main critics’ complaints. Marx criticized the book for “the flimsy contrivance by which Clemens frees Jim”—Miss Watson is “the enemy” and should have no part in the actual resolution of the plot (Marx 116). Thorpe has addressed this issue. Huck manages to free Jim by working hard and showing his unwavering devotion. Better yet, by ending with a shot of an empty pair of shoes, the film shows that Huck still refuses to be “sivilized,” something which all critics agreed was appropriate for the ending. In fact, one could argue that this finale “invent[s] an action capable of placing in focus the meaning of the journey down the Mississippi” (114), as Marx had suggested. So it works for the film—but would it have worked for the novel?

Seen in this light, the main difficulty with the 1939 ending is that it implies the movie has been little more than an abolitionist tract, something which the novel certainly is not. *Huckleberry Finn* continues to intrigue readers because of its many layers. Just when one thinks one might have the novel “figured out,” one comes across another passage that turns that interpretation on its head. Not so with Thorpe’s film—he has supplied his viewers with one meaning. This does not imply that viewers are not able to ignore that meaning and come to others if they wish, but because the conclusion leaves little to the imagination, it does make it more difficult.

And there is another obstacle, as well. Marx says that in the book, the scenes with Tom don’t fit with the rest of the novel—that they are “too fanciful, too extravagant” (117). Perhaps that is true, but Thorpe’s version is just as fanciful and extravagant. Huck turns into such an outgoing, fearless young boy that he reminds us more of Tom Sawyer than of Huck. Haupt suggests that the filmmakers might have been inspired by the
novel’s misidentification of Huck with Tom at the Phelps farm—that they took that misidentification and spread it through the whole novel, creating an “amalgamation of Huck and Tom’s personality into Mickey Rooney’s characterization of Huck Finn” (60-61). And this seems a fair assessment. However, it is interesting to note that, after going through the trouble to eliminate Tom entirely from the plot, Huck still ends up acting as Tom would have acted in the same situation. In any case, the 1939 ending works in the film, but would likely fail as a possible finale for Twain’s novel.

1960

Michael Curtiz’s version shows how not to end a Huckleberry Finn plot, whether in print or on film. In this version, once Jim reaches Cairo, he is almost free. Basically all he needs to do is swim across a small river and then no one can catch him. Getting to the river is difficult, however, since the area is crawling with slave catchers. To avoid them, Huck and Jim join a circus, with Jim pretending to be the Emperor of Patagonia and Huck assuming the role of his translator. The King and the Duke show up at the circus and expose Huck and Jim for frauds, then demand the reward money for catching a runaway slave.

Huck steals the keys to Jim’s chains by dressing up as a girl and going into the Sheriff’s house—basically the Mrs. Loftus scene, transposed to the ending. But when he unlocks Jim, we see that the chains have hurt Jim’s ankles, making walking difficult. Somehow they make it to the river anyway, with hounds in pursuit. Huck takes Jim’s vest and leads the dogs away with its scent while Jim makes it to safety. The sheriff and the King and the Duke catch Huck, but Huck claims the King and the Duke are
abolitionists and that they made him help Jim escape. The sheriff believes it and takes the two frauds off. Huck swims over to Jim, and they have a tearful farewell. The film ends with Huck headed on a raft to a steamboat while Jim waves goodbye from the shore.

First of all, as an ending for anything, this version doesn’t work well. It has too many holes and unexplained contrivances. True, the acting doesn’t help, and the musical score has little to add. Haupt says, “When Jim and Huck join the troupe as the Prince of Patagonia and his interpreter, respectively, all patience with the film is lost. . . . What made it all go wrong is hard to say, but if there is a word that captures all that went wrong, that word is ‘preposterousness’” (83-84).

Jim’s appearance as the Emperor of Patagonia only makes matters worse. Throughout the film, Curtiz had shown an insistence to lessen the potentially racist themes of the novel. Perhaps the best example of this is a simple line, traced in the movie and the book. In the text, Huck marvels at Jim’s intelligence, saying that “he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger” (Twain, Annotated 137). However, in this film, it is Jim who marvels at Huck, saying “I always said you’s got an uncommon level head for a white boy.” This shows the approach Curtiz took—he transformed one racist remark into another of a different kind. Apparently worried he might insult black audiences, he goes to the other extreme and has a black man insult a white boy. While most filmmakers tried to make Jim as admirable a character as possible, few did it at the expense of Huck. But what makes matters even more complicated is a line Huck says about the Emperor of Patagonia: he has “an uncommon level head for a Patagonian.” Patagonia is on the southern tip of South America; its natives are not Black. And then Jim and Huck speak a language so obviously gibberish (it consists of words like “gobbeldy-gook” and “pop”),
that again, it is an insult to the Other. So it seems that for Curtiz, the only group he was worried about offending was African Americans. It is admirable to try and avoid slandering blacks, but to do so by slandering other races hardly seems the correct approach.

1973

Georgi Daneliya’s *Hopelessly Lost* seems to take some of Ernest Hemingway’s advice about the novel to heart. The famous author advised readers to stop reading *Huck* once Huck decides to free Jim, calling everything after that “cheating.” *Lost* ends with Huck and Jim paddling their raft out to rescue the King and the Duke, who have just been brutally tarred and feathered by the townspeople (following another production of the Royal Nonesuch). Despite the fact that Jim and Huck have already missed Cairo and have no visible prospects for ever reaching freedom—Jim still has his legs in iron chains after the Duke sold him for twenty dollars—the film ends with all four of them on the raft. Huck’s voiceover says, “It’s starting all over again. I wish they’d go to blazes. It’s alright. I’ll put up with anything to help Jim to get to be a free man.” The camera tilts up to show the rest of the river, and then it fades to black.

Surprisingly, this fits the rest of the film well. If we go back to Bloch’s idea of broken art being the most beneficial, then *Hopelessly Lost* definitely follows suit. Would it draw hordes of viewers to the box office? Certainly not. But therein lies its strength. It doesn’t seem like Daneliya created the movie to make money off his work, but rather to present the public with a personal vision—a vision or idea best expressed by adapting *Huckleberry Finn*. To truly understand this ending, one would be required to analyze the
rest of the film; unlike the other adaptations, this is a hard film to take apart and study in pieces. But of course, the same applies to the novel.

Seeing the parts Daneliya has chosen to portray and how complex their relations are, one gains a better understanding of the complexity of the book, and how picking it apart and trying to separate one theme from another inevitably leads to something less than the original. This is not to say that the effort shouldn’t be made—understanding separate pieces definitely has its advantages. But in that process, we must remember we are adapting the novel to fit our needs. This ensures we never get too comfortable thinking we finally have it all “figured out.”

Would this ending have worked for the book? That depends on what the goal of the novel was. Too often critics look at *Huck* and seem to assume Twain was only interested in the text as art, whereas numerous statements by the author show this was anything but the case. The most obvious example is the Notice that appears at the beginning of the book: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot” (Twain, *Annotated* 3). But while some could argue this was included with the book for simple humorous reasons, Twain clearly hoped to profit from the novel. His promotion of the work on its publication was criticized—the Boston *Daily Globe* said that Twain “has consented to convert himself into a walking sign, a literary sandwich, placarded all over with advertisements of his wares” (Twain, *Annotated* lxxiv). In addition, his preoccupation with making the work as suitable as possible for the largest audience, as discussed at length in the last chapter, indicates that the book was not simply art, but an investment.
With all of this in mind, then the answer to the question posed at the beginning of the preceding paragraph is a resounding “no.” An ending this abrupt would certainly have alienated the public at large. Too much of the story remains to be told. So while it would have worked for the book-as-art, it would not have carried the book-as-investment side which was important to Twain. Still, *Hopelessly Lost* gives viewers and critics a better understanding of why a “broken” ending works, both in film and literature. The next version studied shows the ill effects of a “fixed” conclusion.

1986

Peter Hunt’s version attempts to reflect the book’s finale (for better or worse)—although he takes one large liberty with the ending. As in the novel, Huck shows up at the Phelps farm to rescue Jim, only to be mistaken for Tom Sawyer. The real Tom shows up, and he secretly agrees with Huck to help free Jim. The two boys go out to the shed where the Phelps have locked Jim, and they quickly discuss the best way to get Jim free. The dialogue follows Twain fairly closely, with Huck telling Tom that they should use a shovel to bust the lock off the door, then “shove off down the river on the raft, with Jim, hiding day-times and running nights, the way me and Jim used to do before” (Twain, *Annotated* 368). But when Tom objects that the plan is “too blame’ simple,” and starts suggesting his wild schemes to make it more difficult, Huck berates him for his “booky foolishness,” grabs the shovel and follows the plan he had suggested first. From that point, the adaptation goes back to following the book quite consistently.

So at last we have the ending some critics had been clamoring for—Huck puts to use the newfound strength of character he had found on his raft voyage. He stands up to
Tom and does what his heart tells him to do. One would assume this would solve all the complaints aimed at the book over the years. Haupt says that “this act is the culmination of a no-nonsense outlook on life that began much earlier, when all Huck’s illusions fell in the creek with Buck’s bullet-riddled body at the close of the Grangerford episode” (147).

And for the mini-series, it works. Like Thorpe’s version, this conclusion lets Huck become the hero and save the day. He completes the coming-of-age process at last.

But I don’t believe the ending would have worked for the book. In part this is because, again like Thorpe’s version, it implies that Huck’s voyage down river meant something—that he had to learn to stick up for himself and do what he thought was right, not what Tom or the Widow or even God—through religion—told him. In a way, that makes his journey mean more; by showing that he took the lesson to heart, it deepens that single meaning. But in another way, it also literally makes that journey mean less. With this much emphasis on one meaning, many others are left by the wayside. In other words, it makes the one meaning more powerful while at the same time eliminating many other interpretations.

This refers back to the theories of Bloch and Heidegger. I believe that one of the reasons *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been successful as a novel is because the ending is so perplexing.

Where [art] is ruptured, unsealed, unfolded by its own iconoclasm, wherever the immanence has not been pushed to formal and substantial completeness, wherever that great art presents itself as still being fragmented. There, an objective, a highly objective hollow space with an *un-rounded immanence*, is opened . . . and particularly there, the *aesthetic*
utopian meanings of the beautiful, even of the sublime, reveal their conditions. . . . Only the already formed openness in great art works, provides the material and the form for the great cipher of the actual.

(Bloch 361)

In other words, Huck’s provocative ending makes it possible for critics to keep returning to the novel and finding new facets—just one example being the parallels between Huck at the beginning of the novel and Jim at the end. In Heideggerian terms, it guarantees the impossibility of ever reaching an absolute truth. Just when someone might believe to “understand” the novel, another critic will cite a passage that brings that interpretation into question. Had Twain provided the sort of ending Hunt gave his film, it is possible that Huckleberry Finn would never have reached the same level of greatness in the eyes of critics. This is not to say that the novel would not stand with other great works of literature unless it had this sort of ending—merely that the ending is one of the elements that sets it apart.

This brings up an interesting point: of all the adaptations I have watched of the book, not one stays true to the novel’s ending. This is not stated to say that those adaptations have failed in what they set out to accomplish, but rather to give a possible explanation for why the book endures while the films are forgotten. Just as a translation from one language into another loses many shades of meaning present in the original, so in an adaptation many shades of meaning are potentially lost or gained. The only way for the translation to succeed on the same level as the original is if it brings something new to the table. The endings have tried thus far to limit themselves to one interpretation; perhaps if one were to try to recreate the controversial ending of the novel, it might have
more success in artistic circles. *Hopelessly Lost* does this to an extent—by simply omitting anything resembling an ending—but a strictly “faithful” approach to the ending has yet to be attempted.

**1993**

In Stephen Sommers’ 1993 adaptation, the biggest difference at the end is the exclusion of Tom Sawyer and the entire episode with the Phelps. Thus, things proceed rather quickly, with no need for elaborate escape plans. Huck springs Jim from a prison by the Wilks’s house, not the Phelps barn, and Huck—not Tom—is shot while they try to escape. Despite the fact that Jim has reached the safety of the raft, he chooses to carry Huck back to help, offering up his own life in the process. The enraged mob catches Jim and throws a rope over a tree in preparation for the lynching. At the last moment, Mary Jane Wilks steps in with a shotgun and saves the day. As in the novel, we learn that Jim was freed in Miss Watson’s will.

Remember, Sommers’ version had promised a “spit-lickin’ good time,” and the ending lives up to this promise. In this sense, his version is one of the most consistent adaptations made so far. Adams says that “the disclosure that Miss Watson has died and freed Jim in her will is all that is needed, and the less said about it the better” (189), implying that the end should be drastically cut down. Sommers managed to do this, but at the same time charge the ending with an energy not even present in Thorpe’s elaborate conclusion. In part this is likely because the film naturally builds to this climax. Throughout the film there had been extensive use of special effects and action sequences.
There is not much else to say about the ending as it applies to the film except that it exemplifies the virtues of picking a direction and sticking with it to the end.

This version of the end clearly would not have worked in the novel. To have an adult—and a fairly minor character to boot—step in to save the day with a single shotgun blast to the sky would likely have resulted in even more accusations of Deus ex Machina, although it certainly would have gotten the ending over quickly. Yet one feels that with a book as complex as Huckleberry Finn, a hasty finish would not have matched the rest of the tone of the novel. While Huck has many action/adventure elements present in the text—elements Sommers emphasizes—it is not simply an action tale. The ending suffers the same side-effect as Hunt’s version—it tries to force a single meaning on the story.

Conclusion

Looking at all the different adaptations as a whole, certain patterns emerge. First of all, every film ends with Huck’s refusal to be “sivilized,” whether symbolically (such as the shot of Huck’s empty shoes in Thorpe’s version) or literally (as in Sommers’ version, where the final shot shows Huck running into the sunset). Critics all agreed on this point, as well. Thus it isn’t the last few pages of the book that troubles audiences and critics and filmmakers—it’s the entire escape plot.

In Bluestone’s Novels into Film, he notes a study conducted on adaptations in the mid 1950s. “Lester Asheim, in his sample of twenty-four film adaptations, found that . . . sixty-three per cent of all films in the sample had a romantic happy ending, but forty per cent (one-fourth the entire sample) required an alteration of the story to accomplish it; and that in no case was a “negative” ending retained” (42). Thus it should come as no
shock that all the films tried to “fix” *Huck’s* ending. But surprisingly, none of them seem likely candidates for alternative versions to the novel’s finish, despite the fact that many of them incorporate changes critics have suggested over the years.

Is it too much of a stretch to believe that Twain, who had labored over the book for years, and had even spent over seven months editing it extensively after he had finished it (Blair 351), chose the ending deliberately—that he was satisfied that was the way the book *ought* to end? When Twain went on the road to do public readings, he often used excerpts from *Huck*.

“The Escape” (as Twain called it on the road) was not only popular but the highlight of Twain’s public readings. When Twain introduced “the episode where Tom and Huck stock Jim’s cabin with reptiles, and then set him free, in the night, with the crowd of farmers after them,” on his and George W. Cable’s stop in Pittsburgh on December 29, 1884, it proved to be, as he wrote Olivia, “the biggest card I’ve got in my whole repertoire. . . . It went a-booming.” (Twain, *Annotated* clxiii)

Obviously the perception of the ending’s humor has changed since Twain’s time, but it appears he was not just proud of its comical side, but of its fitting nature, as well. Twain wrote his wife about how his co-lecturer received the ending section. “‘Cable’s praises are not merely loud, they are boisterous, . . . Says its literary quality is high and fine—and great; its truth to boy nature unchallengeable; its humor constant and delightful; and its dramatic close full of stir, and boom, and *go*. Well, he has stated it very correctly’” (Twain, *Annotated* clxiii). Comparing the alternatives, as shown by the various films, Twain’s ending may very well be the most fitting for his novel.
V. Conclusion

By no means is the adaptation process ever “simple,” regardless of the material being adapted. However, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seems to offer more challenges than the typical process involves. The first obstacle that must be overcome is the first person point of view—it permeates the novel to a greater extent than any other element. In fact, it is impossible for directors to ignore it, even if they might wish they could. As stated previously, everything we encounter in the novel, we encounter because Huck told us about it. This is an element of the novel that *must* be addressed in one way or another. Some directors have chosen to depict events as Huck saw them, others have tried to edit out his filtering and show a more unbiased portrayal. Depending on the decisions that are made about point of view, the entire effect of the adaptation might change, resulting in anything from the intriguing puzzle of Daneliya’s *Hopelessly Lost* to Sommers’ “spit-lickin’ good time.”

In a related fashion, the novel’s structure is a sticking point that every adaptation will have to take up. Many have tried to simplify the plot, presenting only what seem to be the “main” elements. Interestingly, these main elements change for each film. For example, while almost all films include the episode with the Wilks sisters, Hunt’s long mini-series omits it. This simply reinforces the idea that each person’s “reading” of the text, or idea of what the text “means,” is unique. In any case, adaptations that have edited out portions of the novel illustrate how cohesive the book really is. Remove a piece here or there, and the rest seems to change, meaning less or not making as much sense. So while the book may appear to be a simple picaresque with interchangeable episodes, the adaptations prove that it is far more complex and set in its structure.
The enigma of the audience is an element that not many other novels—and adaptations—share. Because of Twain’s unique approach to writing and marketing the book, he created an obstacle for adapters that wouldn’t become clear for decades. In a way, this highlights the importance of illustrations to a text—they affect the audience’s perceptions of the material and are in essence adaptations in and of themselves.

Surprisingly, in *Huckleberry Finn*’s case, the illustrations seem to be what audiences and adapters remember most of the story—the picture of a boy wearing ragged overalls and a battered straw hat (see Fig. 27).

![Fig. 27. Twain, *Annotated* 1.](image)

A strong argument could be made that it is this *image* directors keep getting drawn to—this is the idea they want to adapt, and the text seems to get in the way. Perhaps a more thorough inspection of the illustrations and a comparison between them and the scenes of the book would shed more light on this subject. In any case, the question of audience is a
dilemma that each adapter will have to tackle before he or she can successfully depict

*Huck* on film.

And finally there is the problematic ending. Without completely abandoning the plot of the story, all directors need to decide how they want to approach Twain’s finale.\(^\text{16}\) Looking solely at the criticism of the ending, one would assume that directors would either stay true to Twain, recognizing that the way he finished the book was the only fitting end, or change it drastically and thereby show a much improved version. But as we have seen, neither of these results materialized. Directors shy away from the actual ending, preferring instead to create one of their own. While some of these finales work for their respective films, none would necessarily be “better” for the book.

**Areas for Future Research**

There are adaptation obstacles that this thesis has not fully addressed. For example, *Huck* is a “classic,” a classification that brings another adaptation stumbling block to the table: the motivations of the filmmakers. It appears that the majority of directors begin *Huck* adaptations with one main goal in mind: to make money. Any time a “classic” is adapted to the big screen, one advantage it theoretically has is built-in name recognition. One has but to read the videocassette covers to see that almost all of the *Huck* adaptations promote themselves as a “retelling of an American classic.” The exact wording may change, but the thought remains the same: the idea of a familiar story will draw audiences into the films. Of course, as has been seen in this study, this seldom happens—the adaptations end up being so bad that no one sees them, regardless of whether or not they recognize the name. Novels like *Huck* have become classics because
of their continual attraction to critics—because of their complexity. “Classics” in literature are usually far more intricate than the bestsellers of the day like Clancy or Grisham which are relatively easier to adapt.

Further complicating matters for *Huck* is that fact that it functions as a sequel of sorts to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, a novel of a very different sort, and one not nearly as complicated to adapt. Often in the past, adapters fresh off a successful *Tom* film turn their sights on *Huck* for the natural sequel. This concept extends beyond the scope of this study, but further research would benefit not just the understanding of how the two books relate to each other, but perhaps also how adaptation theory applies to sequels or works by the same author.

In fact, this thesis barely scrapes the surface of the research remaining to be done on *Huckleberry Finn* adaptations alone. As can be seen in the appendix, there are dozens of visual adaptations of *Huck*, and that only looks primarily at adaptations of the book, not the character; numerous *Tom Sawyer* adaptations have been left off the list. Hardly any of these have been seriously studied by critics—and there are many different levels they could be studied on.

For example, some of the films offer the chance to see *Huck* and Twain himself in an entirely new light. Of particular interest is *Hopelessly Lost*. Knowing Daneliya made it in Soviet Russia puts the story in a new perspective. Pap’s diatribe against the government, for example, has enormous Marxist overtones not as obvious in American versions. Jim’s hope for freedom, the King and the Duke’s machinations, the portrayal of the American West—all of these mean something else when shown through such a different lens. It is no wonder that the Soviet government allowed the film to be
produced—it comes off as a scathing criticism of American Capitalist society. With that in mind, a comparison of the same elements in the book and critics’ previous interpretation of them (Marxist or not) would further enlarge our understanding of Twain’s work and themes. In other words, a close viewing of any of the films on an individual basis would provide more than enough material for extensive analysis.

The theme of racism and racial relations plays an enormous role in both the novel and all of the *Huckleberry Finn* adaptations. Because they have been made throughout the history of America, a cultural studies look at the changing views of race as seen through *Huck* adaptations would also prove fertile ground for study. The same could be said of themes like religion or politics. *Huck* has many different things to say about many different topics, and the films inevitably highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of his opinions, each of which could be expanded into a larger study. In addition, much could be written about individual themes that the films add to the book. How does music or lighting or costuming add or detract, for example? One must remember that just as novels have strengths through which theme is portrayed, so do films. Neither side should be neglected.

Even in the field of adaptation theory, much more remains to be covered. Too often it is easier to assume as a critic (as I do in this thesis) that the auteur theory is correct—that the director can take full responsibility for the film in its final state. Of course that idea is preposterous for the vast majority of films. Screenwriters, actors, editors, producers—all of them play a crucial role in the development of a movie. Studying the production history of any of these films—for example, the differences between the screenplay and the final product—remains to be explored. Clyde Haupt laid
a good foundation, doing much of the research into the basics of production for the eleven versions he studied, but more can and should be done.

And then there’s the inevitability of more adaptations emerging in the future. One promising production, mentioned in my appendix, is a screenplay currently circulating, ambitiously titled “Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn.” Critic Jim Zwick praises the adaptation by Ralph Wiley, saying, “Instead of relying on Huck’s interpretation as narrator of the novel, Wiley gives us his interpretation of what Twain meant in each scene.” Only portions of the screenplay are available for public use, but Wiley has co-authored two books with Spike Lee, and as of February 2000, the script was supposedly “under consideration” by the director (Zwick). The fact that it has yet to be produced or enter pre-production does not bode well for the script, but hopefully it will still see the screen in one form or another.

To conclude, with the creation of so many adaptations, there now exist multiple means and meanings that all fall into the category of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. In the end, the novel lies at an unfortunate crossroads of many different adaptation obstacles, and its enduring popularity acts as a sort of siren’s song that keeps drawing directors in, only to let them crash on rocky shores. Luckily for adaptation scholars, it does not matter much whether a film sinks or sails, because each result has valuable lessons to teach about both the films and the novel they are based on.
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Appendix I

Opening Scene Analyses

Shot by Shot Analysis of 1993 Sommers Version

0:00—Zoom of crude picture drawing of Huck against a black background. Peppy music in background. **Voiceover of Huck:** “My name’s Huck. Huck Finn. This story’s about me and a slave named Jim. It’s mainly the truth. Oh sure, there’s a few stretchers here and there, but then I never met anybody who didn’t lie a little when the situation suited ‘em. So kick off your shoes, if you’re wearing ‘em. Get ready for a spit lickin’ good time.”

0:17—Cross fade to match cut of close up of Huck—he gets punched in the face

0:21—Cut to Huck’s opponent (Pretty Boy, or PB for short.) **PB:** “Come on, Finn!”

0:22—Cut to group scene, mid high angle

0:28—Cut to pan across group **PB:** “Come on, Finn!”

0:32—Cut to slight high angle of group **PB:** “Let’s go! Hit me. Hit me! Come on!”

0:35—Cut to close up of PB **PB:** “Hit me!”

0:36—Cut to close up of Huck getting punched **Huck:** “That all ya got?”

0:41—Cut to group scene, PB punches camera (Huck)

0:43—Cut to close up of PB

0:44—Cut to close up of Huck getting punched

0:45—Cut to group scene, PB punches again and raises hands in triumph

0:48—Cut to farther back shot of group scene, mid high angle

0:49—Cut to reaction shot of Huck

0:51—Cut to shot of PB, turning back to face camera (Huck)

0:51—Cut to close up of Huck punching camera (PB)

0:52—Cut to close up of PB getting punched

0:53—Cut to group scene, Huck punches PB

0:55—Cut to close up of Huck

0:56—Cut to close up of PB

0:57—Cut to reaction shot of boy **Boy:** “Yeah! Knock him into Tuesday, Huck!”

0:58—Cut to close up of Huck punching camera (PB)

0:59—Cut to group scene of Huck punching, PB gets knocked around, faces camera to show a zoom in of his bloody nose **Crowd:** “Oooh!”

1:04—Cut to Huck backing away

1:06—Cut to PB, zoom in **PB:** “Ahhh!”

1:07—Cut to Huck ducking

1:08—Cut to PB going into the river

1:10—Cut to high angle shot of PB in river, Huck goes in and drags him closer

1:17—Cut to reaction shot of boy **Boy:** “Go for the glory, Huck!”

1:18—Cut to reaction shot of another boy **Other Boy:** “Yeah. Go for the glory!”

1:20—Cut to low angle close up of Huck getting ready to punch camera (PB) **Huck:** “Personally I can’t see no glory in punching an ignorant lard ass,”

1:25—Cut to high angle close up of PB **Huck:** “But,”
1:26—Cut to low angle close up of Huck, still ready to punch camera (PB) Huck: “I gots to.”
1:27—Cut to high angle close up of PB wincing, ready to get punched PB: “Ahhh!”
1:28—Cut to low angle close up of Huck getting a concerned look on his face; music switches to minor chord
1:32—Cut to oblique angle close up of boot print
1:34—Cut to level angle shot of Huck looking around
1:36—Cut to low angle close up of Huck looking worried
1:38—Cut to shot of boat in the water
1:40—Cut to low angle close up of Huck looking determined
1:44—Cut to level angle shot of Huck getting up and running away. PB stands up, muddied and wet PB: “I whapped him! I whapped him good!”
1:49—Cut to dolly shot of Huck running along the river, a steamboat in the background. Music back to major key
1:57—Cut to dolly shot of Huck, backlit by the sun, running through trees
2:00—Cut to closer dolly shot of Huck, backlit by the sun, running through trees
2:04—Cut to shot of slave camp, music fades out, indicating end of scene
Shot by Shot Analysis of 1986 Hunt Version

0:00—Fade in (from black) slow zoom out of Huck on a raft on the river  Voiceover of Huck (alterations from Twain’s opening in italics): You don’t know me, without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made up by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly.

0:16—Cross fade to shot of river landing Voiceover of Huck: There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing.

0:23—Cross fade to shot of river as seen from landing, slow boom shot (slight high angle) left of people getting off at landing and heading to town Voiceover of Huck: I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another [Super title comes on screen: St. Petersburg, 1844] [. . .] Now the way that the book winds up, is this: My Pap disappeared, and I was left alone, so the Widow Douglass . . . and her sister Miss Watson . . . took me in, and allowed they’d sivilize me.

0:41—Cross fade to shot of Huck in fine clothes, scowling at a table

0:47—Cut to farther back shot of Huck and Widow and Miss Watson at dining table, female slave walking away, Huck throws salt over his shoulder Watson: Take your hands away! What a mess you’re always making! Huck: But it’s bad luck! You gotta toss— Watson: Hush!

0:53—Cut to shot of Widow Widow: Huckleberry, will you say the blessing, please?

0:55—Cut back to 0:41 shot Huck: Lord—Lord, thank you for these here vittles. They’s mostly real fine. Only maybe sometimes you could have the cook make things all mixed up—in one pot. So’s the juice could kind of swap around

1:15—Shot of Miss Watson Huck: and the things go better

1:17—Cut back to 0:53 shot Huck: And while I’m asking,

1:18—Cut back to 0:41 shot Huck: One time I got a fish line, but no hooks. I sure could use some hooks.

1:22—Cut back to 1:15 shot Huck: The preacher says,

1:24—Cut back to 0:41 shot Huck: He who asks, gets. So I’m asking.

1:26—Cut back to 1:15 shot Watson: Enough of your blasphemy

1:28—Cut back to 0:41 shot Watson: boy!

1:28—Cut back to 0:53 shot Watson: Leave the table!

1:30—Cut back to 0:41 shot Huck: I heard him—he said it!

1:31—Cut back to 1:15 shot Widow: The reverend meant something

1:32—Cut back to 0:41 shot Widow: else, Huckleberry.

1:34—Cut back to 0:53 shot Widow: He meant you should ask for spiritual gifts like courage—or charity.

1:38—Cut back to 1:15 shot Huck: Well how in

1:39—Cut back to 0:47 shot, Huck stands up Huck: dagblammation is a body supposed to know that? Watson: You’re a fool boy—and a sinner, whose right and just reward will be the fires of everlasting Hell.

1:47—Cut back to 1:15 shot Watson: Mark my words, boy.

1:48—Cut to close up of Huck standing Huck: Ma’am—you reckon you’re headed to the other place—the good one—when you’re done here?
1:54—Cut back to 1:15 shot Watson: Indeed I do.
1:55—Cut back to 1:48 shot Huck: Well you can have it!
1:56—Cut back to 1:15 shot Huck: I reckon
1:57—Cut back to 1:48 shot Huck: the bad one will do me just fine!
1:59—Cut back to 0:53 shot Watson: You may go
2:00—Cut back to 1:15 shot, Miss Watson stands, but camera rises, too—remains level
angle Watson: to your room immediately without your dinner,
2:02—Cut back to 1:48 shot Watson: and you may stay there—and pray for
2:04—Cut back to 0:53 shot Watson: salvation, from your wicked
2:06—Cut back to 2:00 shot Watson: heathen state of damnation
2:08—Cut back to 1:48 shot, Huck storms out
2:09—Cut back to 2:00 shot, Miss Watson reacts
2:09—Cut back to 0:53 shot, Widow reacts Widow (rings bell): Nancy!
2:12—Cut to Huck’s bedroom, end of scene
Shot by Shot Analysis of 1974 Daneliya Version

0:00—Fade in (from credit shots of map) to shot of steamboat on river.
0:15—Cut to close up, low angle shot of smokestacks on boat.
0:15—Quick cut to closer shot of smokestacks, tilt down to boat and then follow man by boat—he goes to shore and ties something around his shoes.
0:53—Cut to shot of Huck and Miss Watson and the Widow all at the dinner table—staring at empty plates.
1:10—Close up shot of Miss Watson.
1:15—Close up shot of Widow.
1:22—Close up shot of Huck—he finally tears a bit of bread off a platter and goes to eat it.
1:34—Close up shot of Widow. **Widow:** Huckleberry
1:36—Close up shot of Huck putting the bread back and waiting
1:43—Cut to Jim coming in the door, followed by a black woman servant. Camera pans to follow her as she puts a bowl of soup in front of Huck, who adds a spoon of salt and then goes to eat it, but Miss Watson stops him. **Miss Watson:** Huckleberry
2:11—Close up shot of Miss Watson getting soup and starting to pray indistinctly
2:19—Close up of Widow praying indistinctly
2:23—Close up of Huck—not praying, then praying—but all he’s doing is clicking his lips
2:29—Close up of Miss Watson praying indistinctly
2:37—Close up of Widow praying indistinctly, then—**Widow:** Amen
2:45—Close up of Huck, looking up. **Huck:** Amen He grabs his spoon and uses his fingers to fish out a large piece of meat from the soup.
2:53—Close up of Miss Watson looking at Huck and glaring. **Miss Watson:** Huckleberry!
2:56—Close up of Huck in the middle of putting the meat in his mouth. He stops.
3:00—Close up of Widow looking at Huck. **Widow:** Watch me dear. She shows him the proper way to eat soup. The camera follows the spoon down to the bowl and up to her mouth.
3:17—Close up of Huck trying to do the same. He drops the spoon.
3:25—Close up of the spoon dropping and spilling the salt. **Widow:** Merciful Heavens!
3:27—Close up of Huck, looking at the spoon. **Huck:** Ah—you and your manners go to blazes! He throws some salt over his left shoulder. **Miss Watson:** Huckleberry!
3:33—Close up of Miss Watson scowling
3:35—Close up of Huck looking back at her. He sighs and rests his chin on his hand. The Widow strokes his hair.
3:40—Close up of Widow. **Widow:** Poor little lost lamb.
3:43—Close up of Huck looking at the Widow. **Huck:** (voiceover) Tugs at my hair with that comb every day. Drat her! She’s pulling it all out.
3:50—Cut to Jim, tossing hairball. (End of scene)
Shot by Shot Analysis of 1960 Curtiz Version

0:00—End of credits, maintain shot seen during credits of the river at sunset, a steamboat making its way up it. **SUPERTITLE: The Mississippi River Late Summer 1851 Steamboat: Hooooo000000oo**

0:10—Cut to Huck running along shore, pan left (sunny daylight shot) **Steamboat: ooo0000oot!**

0:15—Cut to closer on Huck, continue pan left, stop, Huck takes off his hat, waves and jumps up and down **Huck: Hoot Hoot! Steamboat: Hoot! Hoot!**

0:24—Cross fade to shot of gangplank of steamboat being lowered, tilt down and pan left **Boy: Hannibal! Hannibal Missouri! Hannibal Missouri!**

0:36—Cut to rope being thrown ashore, pan right **Boy: Hannibal Missouri! Sailor: Come on, make room for the Hannibal passengers down there! Now get them barrels marked [beer] on up here! (last statement not quite intelligible)**

0:49—Cross fade to market scene by boat, Huck runs up and sees ship **Sailor: Now move that [big bird] cargo higher! (still not completely intelligible)**

0:57—Cut to Huck coming toward camera, looks at ship

1:02—Cut to cabin boy delivering suitcase—subtle eyeline match from Huck’s gaze **Cabin Boy: Here you are sir. Thank you!**

1:08—Cut to Huck waving, runs off left

1:10—Cut to low angle shot of Huck looking at the steamboat **Sailor: All right, not put them Memphis boxes on top of the**

1:13—Cut to people waving from the ship **Sailor: Nachez cargo!**

1:16—Cut to cabin boy disembarking, giving birdcage to passenger, bowing, Huck comes and bows to him **Sailor: Get a move on now! Hurry up or we’ll be a day late into New Orleans!**

1:31—Cut to close up on cabin boy and Huck, boy eyes Huck, sniffs, and stalks off

1:39—Cut to Jim approaching—same shot as 0:57—slight pan left **Jim: Oh Huck!**

1:50—Cut back to Huck, Jim meets him **Jim: Huck! Huck Finn! Huck: Oh—it’s you, Jim. Jim: The Widow Douglass wants you Huck. She’s got supper on the table. Huck: Tell her I stowed away on the Nachez Queen, and I’ll probably be going to South America. Jim: I can’t tell the Widow a stretcher like that, Huck.**

2:06—Cut to close up on Huck and Jim, Huck sitting on a barrel so both are level to the camera **Huck: They got a river in South America, Jim, and it ain’t even been charted yet. They need folks to help ‘em.**

2:12—Cut to close up on the pair from a different angle—Jim now seen from a low angle, Huck is level to camera **Huck: ‘Course I’ll have to go down the river to New Orleans first. Wouldn’t that be the beatenest, Jim? New Orleans. Jim: Wouldn’t be nothing but trouble. You’ll have enough of that if you don’t get home—you and me both.**

2:24—Cut back to 2:06 shot, at end of shot pan right **Huck: Tell the Widow and Miss Watson you just couldn’t find me, Jim. Jim: It’s gonna be dark soon. Huck: Yup. Ah! It’s beginning to smell like the evening. Jim: You’ll be safe at the
Widow’s. That’s the one place your pap won’t come. Your pap, Huck—he’s looking for you. It’s best we go, Huck—come on.

2:47—Cut to them leaving, pan right—Huck is closer to the camera and now seen from a low angle, while Jim is level. **Boy:** All aboard for St. Louis! **Huck:** I sure would like to be going somewheres. **Jim:** Come on, Huck—let’s go. **Boy:** All aboard for St. Louis!

3:00—Cross fade out of scene
Shot by Shot Analysis of 1939 Thorpe Version

0:00—Fade in (from black) high angle shot of distant school house with kids playing outside, bell rings and they head inside


0:17—Cut to close up on teacher, to the right of her we see an open book that looks like a bible, to the left of her we see written neatly the math problem: 62471 times 4 equals 249884 Teacher: Huckleberry Finn?

0:20—Cut to oblique angle reaction shot of students Teacher: Has anyone seen Huckleberry Finn? Students: No teacher.

0:27—Cut back to 0:17 shot Teacher: I suppose he’s down at the river associating with raft men and other worthless people.

0:31—Cut back to 0:01 shot, slow zoom on teacher, maintaining virtual symmetry Teacher: Children, I want Huckleberry to serve as an example to you. I want you to realize how he’s wasted his time. Why I don’t suppose he even knows that Gaul was divided into three parts. And I’m sure he doesn’t know that Newton discovered the law of gravity. But we mustn’t get angry at him. We must feel sorry for him. Poor Huckleberry—he must be a very unhappy boy.

1:04—Cross fade to high angle shot of Huck in the distance, fishing (and sleeping)

1:05—Cross fade to oblique angle close up of Huck’s foot tied to fishing line, tilt up to oblique angle shot of sleeping Huck

1:17—Cut to shot of boys sneaking up on Huck

1:30—Cut back to end of 1:05 shot—Huck sees boy trying to grab his line

1:33—Cut back to 1:17 shot, Huck tricks boy into falling into the water Huck: Oh! Wet Boy: Did it on purpose!

1:41—Cut to closer shot of 1:17, boy getting out of the water, slight tilt up to show all boys, then slight tilt down to see Huck drink straight from the river Huck: I did not! Ben. Oh no—honest. Hello y’all—Sam, Harry, Elliott. Boy (#1): Say Huck, my mother says that Mississippi water isn’t fit to drink.

1:55—Cut to closer shot of Huck and the boys Huck: Oh that ain’t so. Mississippi water’s a lot better for you than drinking a lot of that old clear water that ain’t got no mud in it.

2:00—Cut to boy (#1) closer up Boy (#1): She said muddy water’s unhealthful.

2:04—Cut to Huck closer up, lighting pipe, sitting next to boy in suit Huck: Why that ain’t so. You look at the graveyards—that tells the tale. Why trees don’t grow worth a shucks in Cincinnati graveyards, but in St. Louis graveyards they grow up about eight hundred feet tall. It’s all an account of the water the folks drank before they was laid up. Cincinnati corpses don’t riche the soil any. Boy in Suit: Say Huck, lend me your pipe, will you? Huck (smoking): No, smoking’s bad for you. Say, is tomorrow sure enough the last day of school?
2:24—Cut to a boy missing some teeth, closer up  **Toothless boy:** Sure enough.

2:25—Cut to close up of Huck  **Huck:** Gosh. This term sure has gone fast.

2:28—Cut to close up of third boy  **Third Boy:** It has for you. You ain’t been in school.

2:30—Cut back to 1:55 shot  **Huck:** Say, did you hear who was going to get promoted yet?  **Wet Boy:** No.  **Toothless Boy:** Tell Huck what you heard. Boy (#1): I heard the Teacher say she was sick of sending notes to the Widow Douglass.  **Huck:** I figured she’d get tired of it sometime.

2:41—Cut to a close up of missing teeth boy  **Toothless Boy:** Don’t you know it ain’t right to read other folks’ mail?

2:44—Cut back to 2:25 shot  **Huck:** Why sure I do. It’s bad luck, too. Besides—I didn’t read ‘em. I tore ‘em up and ate ‘em. That takes the curse off ‘em. What else did you hear?

2:52—Cut to shot of boy (#1) with others in background  **Boy (#1):** Teacher said she was going to see the Widow tomorrow morning. She says you weren’t going to get promoted.

2:57—Cut back to 2:04 shot  **Boy in Suit:** That’s sure bad. Give me a suck on your pipe, will ya Huck?  **Huck** (handing pipe over): Yeah that’s sure is bad. Here the Widow takes me in and gives me good vittles and nice clothes—and what do I do? I don’t go to school and don’t get promoted, that’s what I do.

3:11—Cut back to 2:52 shot  **Toothless Boy:** Why don’t you run away to your pap?

3:13—Cut back to 2:04 shot  **Boy in Suit:** Oh, his pap’s dead. Ain’t that so, Huck?

**Huck:** No, I judge he’s alive. They thought they found him floating on his back in the river, but—shucks, anybody knows a drunk don’t float on his back. Why, I judge Pap’s down river somewheres. Even if I knew where he was, I wouldn’t want to live with him. Gosh, I just can’t help from thinking about that Widow when she hears that I . . . Shucks, I warn’t cut out for no schooling anyway. And if the Widow gets mad at me and starts ranting down on me, I’ll just up and tell her that I . . . But I suppose she’d start crying, and I’d—I’d feel onery and low down . . . I told you ya shouldn’t have smoked that pipe.  **Boy in Suit** (running off): Something I had for lunch.

3:57—Cut back to 2:44 shot  **Huck:** The Widow’s gonna feel mighty bad. Oh! And wait’ll Miss Watson hears about it!

4:11—Cross fade out of scene to shot of Miss Watson talking to Jim
Appendix II

A List of Visual Adaptations of
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

The following chart lists most of the visual adaptations of *Huckleberry Finn*—with a few notable exceptions. It does not include most of the adaptations of *Tom Sawyer*, in which Huck is a character but not the main focus. Nor does it include most play adaptations of the novel. Since the book is long out of copyright, these play adaptations are far too numerous and hard to track and distinguish from one another. I have also omitted most animated versions. I found at least 6 in my studies, but exact dates, overlap, and production information was unreliable at best. Finally, as a disclaimer it should be noted that the following might have some omissions. However, this list is by far more complete than any other yet existent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>“Mark Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn’”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>Produced by Klaw &amp; Erlanger and written by Lee Arthur, this is the first adaptation to have been completed. Mark Twain himself had some influence over this production—he heard the script and gave permission for them to call it &quot;Mark Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn,'&quot; though he never saw it on stage. Huck and Tom were played by adults—Arthur Dunn and Jack Slavin—and they each had a romantic love interest. The plot centered around suspicions that Huck and his father were responsible for burglaries around town, but it is later discovered that the King and the Dauphin are the true culprits. It opened to favorable reviews, but lasted less than forty performances and never made it to Broadway. (Twain, <em>Annotated</em> cx-cxiv)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1918-1946</td>
<td>“Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn”</td>
<td>Comic Strip</td>
<td>This was a daily and Sunday comic strip drawn by Clare Victor Dwiggins. It had a little to do with <em>Tom Sawyer</em>, but nothing to do with <em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em>, plot-wise. (Twain, <em>Annotated</em> cxxxii-cxxxiii) Actually, the name of the strip changed in 1928 to &quot;School Days,&quot; and the names of the characters changed as well, dropping the Tom and Huck references. (Thomson)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td><em>Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Silent Film</td>
<td>Directed by William Desmond Taylor for Paramount Studios, this silent film marked the first screen adaptation of the book. (Huck had appeared two times earlier in two adaptations of <em>Tom Sawyer</em>, but this paper focuses primarily on adaptations connected somehow with the book, not simply the character.) In this version, Huck appears as a ghost to Mark Twain at night, and the events unfold as if they were Twain's dream. It follows the book faithfully—even including Tom's escape plans—but at the end, Huck decides to go live with Mary Jane instead of heading out for the territory. (Haupt 11-25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td><em>Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>This film, directed by Norman Taurog for Paramount, was filmed as a direct sequel for 1930's <em>Adventures of Tom Sawyer</em>. It brought back the same cast—Junior Durkin as Huck and Jackie Coogan as Tom. This is actually a fine adaptation of <em>Huck</em>, despite the fact that the role of Jim is drastically reduced. Tom goes on the raft with Huck and Jim, and it's his machinations that get them into—and out of—trouble. Particularly amusing is the scene where Jim and Tom show up to save Huck from Pap’s cabin. Jim just wants to open the door, but Tom insists on making it more memorable—a nice reversal of the book's ending. The film ends with Huck deciding to live an honest life—he embraces life with the Widow and Miss Watson so that he can impress Mary Jane. True, one could argue this drastically changes the theme from that of the book, but the fact is that this movie is very well done. It <em>adapts</em> scenes from the book and turns them into something different, but still good.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td><em>Tom Sawyer Detective</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>An adaptation of the Twain-written sequel to <em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em> and <em>Tom Sawyer</em>. Directed by Louis King and starring Donald O'Connor (of <em>Singin' in the Rain</em> fame) as Huck.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>This is the Mickey Rooney version, directed by Richard Thorpe for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. Rex Ingram plays the part of Jim—the next year he appeared as the genie in <em>The Thief of Baghdad</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Comic Strip</td>
<td>During the 1940s Clare Victor Dwiggins “drew <em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em> for the Ledger Syndicate; it was not a straight adaptation of Twain's novel but rather a fantasy series in which Injun Joe appeared frequently as the villain.” (Thomson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944</td>
<td>“Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Comic Book</td>
<td>From 1947-1971, the Gilberton Company published a monthly comic book based on a literary classic in a series named <em>Classic Comics</em> (renamed <em>Classics Illustrated</em> in 1947). “Huckleberry Finn” was one of the first books to receive this treatment. (“William E. Blake”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1946</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Wesley Britton lists this film in his <em>Mark Twain Encyclopedia</em>, but I can find no record of its production or existence. Britton claims it was produced by MGM, but since MGM had just released the Mickey Rooney adaptation in 1939, it seems doubtful they would rush to do another one. In all likelihood, Britton simply listed the same film twice. (Britton 501)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>“Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Radio Drama</td>
<td>NBC <em>Radio Theater</em> adapted <em>Huck</em> into an hour long radio drama (Britton 503).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>“Huck and Jim”</td>
<td>Unproduced Musical</td>
<td>Kurt Weill (who cowrote <em>The Threepenny Opera</em> with Berthold Brecht—including the song “Mack the Knife”) and Maxwell Anderson (author of <em>Key Largo</em>) planned to adapt <em>Huck</em> for Broadway, but Weill died, and these plans never materialized. (“Mark Twain on Broadway,” par. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Unproduced Film</td>
<td>MGM announced a musical version of <em>Huck</em> that would star Dean Stockwell as Huck, Gene Kelly as the King and Danny Kaye as the Duke, with music by Alan Lerner and Burton Lane. Sadly, it was never produced. (<em>Twain, Annotated</em> cxxxiv)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Live Television</td>
<td>Herbert Swope, Jr. directed this “kinescope recording of a live performance” for the CBS produced “Climax” series. In one of the most surprising adaptations, the role of Jim was cut entirely. (Haupt 72-78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>“Livin’ the Life”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>This off-Broadway production lasted for 25 performances. It was written by Jacques Urbont (“All in Love”), Bruce Geller (creator of “Mission Impossible”) and Dale Wasserman (who wrote the lyrics for “Man of La Mancha”). (“Mark Twain on Broadway,” par. 6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Musical Television</td>
<td>This short (one hour) televised musical aired on the “U.S. Steel Hour” on CBS. Elliot Silverstein directed Jimmy Boyd as Huck, and it was actually a sequel to “Tom Sawyer,” which had been produced with the same cast and crew a year earlier for the same program. Jack Carson played the Dauphin, and Basil Rathbone the Duke. The music was composed by Frank Luther. (Haupt 78-80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</td>
<td>Musical Film</td>
<td>This is the Michael Curtiz version, starring Eddie Hodges as Huck. The music—portions of it, at least—is a vestige of the score (by Lerner and Lane) of the proposed but unproduced 1952 version.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>“What Does Huckleberry Finn Say?”  “The Art of Huckleberry Finn”  “Huckleberry Finn and the American Experience”</td>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Directed by Larry Yust, this three part educational film was hosted and narrated by Clifton Fadiman. (Alexander)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>“Mark Twain Tonight!”</td>
<td>Television Special</td>
<td>An airing of Hal Holbrook’s famous portrayal of Mark Twain. In the persona of Twain on tour, Holbrook delivers many of Twain’s speeches, including his oral versions of Pap’s anti-government speech and Huck’s wrestle with his conscience over freeing Jim (Dawidziak 139).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968-1969</td>
<td>“New Adventures of Huck Finn”</td>
<td>Television Series</td>
<td>Produced by Hanna-Barbera, this series was a pioneer in the use of animation and live action. It has little to do with Huck, but consists of Huck, Tom and Becky Thatcher having a series of adventures in animated settings that rarely reference Twain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Filmstrip</td>
<td>Adapted by Educational Dimensions Corp. (Britton 503)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Genre</td>
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<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>“Aventuras de Huck”</td>
<td>Television Series</td>
<td>This Mexican television series ran for 60 episodes. The Internet Movie Database lists a full cast, indicating that this is, indeed, a unique adaptation, but other information is lacking. (“Aventuras”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td><em>Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn Among the Indians</em></td>
<td>Unproduced Film</td>
<td>Universal bought the rights to produce this Twain-written sequel to <em>Huck</em>, but it was never produced. (Twain, <em>Annotated cxxxiv</em>)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>“Huck Finn”</td>
<td>Opera</td>
<td>Hall Overton, in collaboration with Judah Stampfer, wrote this opera for the Juilliard School of Music. It had a very limited run. (Champion 242-243).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td><em>Sovsem propashchij</em> (Russian)</td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>In English, <em>Hopelessly Lost</em>. The Russian adaptation by Georgi Daneliya discussed at length in this paper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td><em>Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Musical Film</td>
<td>J. Lee Thompson started directing this film, a sequel to 1973’s <em>Tom Sawyer</em> musical film. Robert Blumofe ended up completing it. It has music by Robert and Richard Sherman, who composed the songs for numerous children’s films, from <em>Bedknobs and Broomsticks</em> to <em>Mary Poppins</em> to <em>The Parent Trap</em>. It stars Jeff East as Huck and Paul Winfield as Jim, with Harvey Korman as the King and David Wayne as the Duke.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td><em>Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Television Film</td>
<td>Directed by Robert Totten, this version stars Ron Howard as Huck and Don Most as Tom Sawyer. In an interesting technique, Mark Twain (Royal Dano) strolls across the screen now and then to narrate events as they happen. Ultimately forgettable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>“Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Animated Television Series</td>
<td>This animated series based on the novel first appeared in Japan, where it won some of the highest ratings in Japanese history (Fishkin 144).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Filmstrip</td>
<td>Adapted by Educational Dimensions Group (Britton 504)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>“Huckleberry Finn and His Friends”</td>
<td>Television Series</td>
<td>Made in Canada, produced by a West German firm and directed by Jack Hively, this series incorporated plots from both <em>Huck</em> and <em>Tom Sawyer</em>. In all, its episodes add up to a little over 11 hours total. (“Huckleberry Finn and His Friends”)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Television Film</td>
<td>Directed by Jack Hively for Schick Sunn, and starring Kurt Ida, this version went straight to television. It seems to combine the bad traits of all the unsuccessful adaptations, while avoiding all of the good ones.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td><em>Rascals and Robbers: The Secret Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Directed by Dick Lowry for CBS’s Playhouse Video, this is an intriguing blend of <em>Tom Sawyer</em> and <em>Huckleberry Finn</em>. It follows neither story line, instead telling the tale of how Tom and Huck end up saving their hometown from being swindled. Peppered throughout are references to the other books, however. A pure children’s adventure, it succeeds at what it sets out to do and would likely prove interesting to study more in-depth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>“Sawyer and Finn”</td>
<td>Television Series Pilot</td>
<td>This pilot centered itself around Tom and Huck as adults. It never resulted in a television series (Dawidziak 139).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>“Huck and Jim on the Mississippi”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>This short-lived musical was directed by Joshua Logan (who wrote <em>South Pacific</em> and directed <em>Paint Your Wagon</em> and <em>Camelot</em>) and was produced at Florida Atlantic University. (“Mark Twain on Broadway,” par. 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>“Big River”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>This musical version was written by Roger Miller (who also wrote the songs for Disney’s <em>Robin Hood</em>) and went on to win seven Tony awards, including Best Musical, making this adaptation the only one to receive awards of any kind. (“Big River”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Con Sawyer and Hucklemary Finn</em></td>
<td>Television Film</td>
<td>This ABC weekend special starred Drew Barrymore (3 years after she did E.T.) as Con Sawyer. Mainly an adaptation of <em>Tom Sawyer</em>, but notable for its gender-bending twist on Twain's classics. (“Adventures of Con Sawyer”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn—4 Hours</em></td>
<td>Mini-series</td>
<td>This is the full version of Peter Hunt's PBS mini-series. It isn’t readily available on VHS or DVD. (On a side note, Hunt also directed <em>Sawyer and Finn</em>, an adaptation of Tom Sawyer, two years before he tackled Huck.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn—2 Hours</em></td>
<td>Television</td>
<td>This is the truncated version of Hunt's mini-series—the one most easily obtainable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td><em>Adventures of Mark Twain</em></td>
<td>Claymation Film</td>
<td>Directed by Will Vinton (the man behind the claymation California Raisins) for Clubhouse Pictures, this film holds the claim of first full-length claymation movie. It has little to do with <em>Huck Finn</em>, however. In it, Mark Twain decides to fly a space balloon ship into Haley's comet, and Tom Sawyer, Huck and Becky Thatcher stowaway and try to talk him out of it. It's also interspersed with retellings of some of Twain's works, from <em>The Diary of Adam and Eve</em> to <em>The Mysterious Stranger</em>. So naturally, it is extremely disturbing in places and doesn't seem really suitable for children. More a statement on Twain theory than a light hearted movie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td><em>Back to Hannibal: The Return of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn</em></td>
<td>Television Film</td>
<td>This adaptation was made for the Disney Channel and directed by Paul Krasny. It portrays the events that happen when a grown Tom—a lawyer—and Huck—a newspaperman—come to help Jim (played by Paul Winfield, who also played the role in the 1974 musical), who is accused of murdering the husband of Becky Thatcher (played by Megan Follows of <em>Anne of Green Gables</em> fame). Surprisingly, the Duke (Ned Beatty) shows up to lend a hand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>Huck and the King of Hearts</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Directed by Michael Keusch for Prism Pictures, this film transports Huck (Chauncey Leopardi) into the present day. He goes on a road trip with Jim (Graham Greene) as they flee an evil drug lord (Joe Piscopo). It is a strange attempt at humor and drama, and is to be avoided at all costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td><em>The Adventures of Huck Finn</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>This is the Stephen Sommers version that stars Elijah Wood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td><em>Tom and Huck</em></td>
<td>Film</td>
<td>A Disney film directed by Peter Hewitt, this is a rare case where a <em>Tom</em> movie was produced as a sort of sequel to a <em>Huck</em> adaptation. Stephen Sommers—who directed the 1993 <em>Huck</em>—wrote the screenplay. This is an adaptation of <em>Tom Sawyer</em>, but with the fleshed out character of Huck as he appears in <em>Huck Finn</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>“Huck Finn—Mark Twain”</td>
<td>Television Episode</td>
<td>Part of the Learning Channel's “Great Books” series narrated by Donald Sutherland, this 50 minute episode focused on <em>Huck</em> and included reenactments of some of the key scenes. (Dawidziak 142)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>“Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Unproduced Screenplay</td>
<td>Written by Ralph Wiley, this screenplay has garnered some attention from Twain critics (such as Shelley Fisher Fishkin) and was even rumored to be under consideration by Spike Lee. While some sections are available to read online—and appear promising—it has yet to be produced. (Zwick)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>“Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Documentary</td>
<td>This was a PBS documentary studying the controversy over <em>Huck Finn</em>. It aired January 26, 2000 and was the first of a four part series called “Culture Shock.” In addition to interviews and analysis, it dramatically portrayed several of the scenes from the book. (Born to Trouble)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>“Big River”—ASL Adaptation</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>Roger Miller’s musical was revived as a musical for both hearing and deaf audiences. It had a cast of both hearing and deaf actors, presenting songs and script in both English and ASL. It was nominated for two Tony awards, including Best Revival of a Musical. As of this date, it is touring the country. (Big River)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huck Finn”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>Adapted by R. Rex Stephenson with music by John Cohn and C. Michael Perry. It “follows Mark Twain’s novel from Huck running away from The Widow Douglas to join Jim for their adventures down the Mississippi River. They encounter the King and the Duke; get involved in a Shakespearian production of ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ are joined by Tom Sawyer and end up at Aunt Sally’s, where Jim is freed and Huck takes off for ‘Injun Territory.’ About 90 minutes.” It has been produced by the Blue Ridge Dinner Theater and is currently for sale at encoreplay.com, a company based in Salt Lake City. (Encore)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>With text by Rob Lauer and music by Peter Lewis, this production is set to premiere June 7, 2005 at Swamp Gravy, a folk life theater in Georgia. (“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,” Swampgravy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous</td>
<td>“Reflections of Mark Twain”</td>
<td>Musical</td>
<td>Presented at the Mark Twain Outdoor Theater in Hannibal, Missouri for at least the past eight years, this presentation includes several recreations of scenes from <em>Huckleberry Finn</em>. Most notably, however, is the absence of Jim from any of the depictions. (Fishkin 39-40)</td>
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</tbody>
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Notes

1 This does not include the many formats listed in Appendix II such as musicals or filmstrips.

2 As Twain himself humorously illustrated. He translated the French version of his short story “The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County” back into English, purposefully translating it literally on almost a word-for-word basis. For example, in the original English version, one sentence reads, “I do wonder what in the nation that frog throw’d off for.” In the retranslated English version, it has changed to, “I me demand how the devil it makes itself that this beast has refused” (Twain, “Jumping Frog”).

3 For example, in the sentence, “Would all boys and girls with brown hair please stand up,” the speaker might be referring to all boys and then only girls with brown hair, or all children with brown hair.

4 True, this thesis apparently follows this pattern, but I have done so for additional reasons which I will soon address.

5 It is important to note that there are two versions of this PBS edition. During production, Hunt et. al. cut the film down by an hour and a half to two hours, then released that edition for sale. It was shown a few times on Showtime (Mitgang H1), and is still available for purchase. This is not, however, the version studied for this paper. The mini-series in its entirety has never been released on video or DVD in America, but a DVD copy which plays on American computer drives is available in Australia. The picture quality isn’t ideal, but the overall work is far superior to that of the butchered American video release.

6 Some of this might have something to do with the fact that Sommers calls Michael Curtiz, director of the 1960 version, his idol (Weinraub C17), yet another interesting connection between the different adaptations.

7 And as becomes clear in some of the films, Huck thinks of himself as much more outgoing than he really is. This becomes clear once the text is adapted. While Huck thinks of a lot of things, he rarely follows through on them, whether they be actions or words. This will become clear later in this chapter.

8 This is the case in the Ron Howard version directed by Robert Totten in 1975, although he thankfully uses the technique sparingly.

9 In Curtiz’s case, much still remains to be gleaned from the film in relation to the book. This is beyond the scope of this thesis, but clearly much more analysis and research needs to be done.

10 Despite the lack of criticism, this version has been dubbed and released on video in the United States and can still be obtained in second hand stores, if one looks hard enough.
This link between the beginning and the end of the adaptations of *Huck* presents an opportunity for teaching in the classroom. By first viewing one of the adaptations and then comparing its plot structure to that of the book, students can become involved in a discussion on how the beginning affects the end, and whether or not the ending of the novel (or the film) is appropriate. Film shows students that novels were not set in stone before they were written—the author had just as much free reign with the story line as the director or screenwriter has with the adaptation. In effect, seeing an adaptation can break the feeling of solidity that a novel offers. Students can feel free to agree or disagree with the direction the author took or the themes he or she brought out, and vice versa with the adaptations.

In a sense then, Twain doesn’t resort to *Deus ex Machina* only at the ending of the novel. He has had God intervene in Huck and Jim’s adventure throughout the story. The miraculous freeing of Jim at the end only comes across as more blatant because the River isn’t the one to deliver it.

More will be said about this in the next chapter.

Pap isn’t the only conflict this happens to. Another good example is the King and the Duke. When audiences see a young man being pushed around by two old swindlers, the effect isn’t as believable. Twain’s Huck would have had serious problems if he were to rebel against the King and Duke, but this isn’t the case with an older Huck such as the one portrayed by Mickey Rooney. And indeed, Rooney ends up running from the King and the Duke with little trouble. The only reason Rooney’s Huck ends up not being able to leave is that a rattlesnake bites him, forcing Jim to go for help and be caught.

Or even in the more well-known *Catcher in the Rye*

Of course, directors could choose to throw out most of the plot as well, but that raises the question of what an adaptation consists of—how close must it remain to the text to qualify as an adaptation? This is obviously outside the scope of this paper, but would undoubtedly serve as a solid foundation for another study.