Leslie Fiedler obligingly provided it when he read homoerotic attraction into the Moby-Dick, that would possess some profound insight into the American character. Link Huck to other, though “lesser,” American novels such as Herman Melville’s very voice of unpretentious truth.” The last requirement was some quality that would American colloquial speech .... He is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of in the novel his style--Trilling was glad to dub “not less than definitive in American some simplicity, some innocence, some peace.” What Twain himself was proudest of is the novel all American literature grows out of, that this is a great novel, that this is even a serious novel.

Although Huck had his fans at publication, his real elevation into the pantheon was worked out early in the Propaganda Era, between 1948 and 1955, by Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Wood Krutch, and some lesser lights, in the introductions to American and British editions of the novel and in such journals as Partisan Review and The New York Times Book Review. The requirements of Huck’s installation rapidly revealed themselves: the failure of the last twelve chapters (in which Huck finds Jim imprisoned on the Phelps plantation and Tom Sawyer is reintroduced and elaborates a cruel and unnecessary scheme for Jim’s liberation) had to be diminished, accounted for, or forgiven; after that, the novel’s special qualities had to be placed in the context first of other American novels (to their detriment) and then of world literature. The best bets here seemed to be Twain’s style and the river setting, and the critics invested accordingly: Eliot, who had never read the novel as a boy, traded on his own childhood beside the big river, elevating Huck to the Boy, and the Mississippi to the River God, therein finding the sort of mythic resonance that he admired. Trilling liked the river god idea, too, though he didn’t bother to capitalize it. He also thought that Twain, through Huck’s lying, told truths, one of them being (I kid you not) that “something... had gone out of American life after the [Civil War], some simplicity, some innocence, some peace.” What Twain himself was proudest of in the novel his style--Trilling was glad to dub “not less than definitive in American literature. The prose of Huckleberry Finn established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech .... He is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice, the very voice of unpretentious truth.” The last requirement was some quality that would link Huck to other, though “lesser,” American novels such as Herman Melville’s Moby-Dick, that would possess some profound insight into the American character. Leslie Fiedler obligingly provided it when he read homoerotic attraction into the relationship between Huck and Jim, pointing out the similarity of this to such other white man-dark man friendships as those between Ishmael and Queequeg in Moby-Dick and Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper’s Last of the Mohicans.

The canonization proceeded apace: great novel (Trilling, 1950), greatest novel (Eliot, 1950), world-class novel (Lauriat Lane Jr., 1955). Sensible naysayers, such as Leo Marx, were lost in the shuffle of propaganda. But, in fact, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has little to offer in the way of greatness. There is more to be learned about the American character from its canonization than through its canonization.

Let me hasten to point out that, like most others, I don’t hold any grudges against Huck himself. He’s just a boy trying to survive. The villain here is Mark Twain, who knew how to give Huck a voice but didn’t know how to give him a novel. Twain was clearly aware of the story’s difficulties. Not finished with having revisited his boyhood in Tom Sawyer, Twain conceived of a sequel and began composition while still working on Tom Sawyer’s page proofs. Four hundred pages into it, having just passed Cairo and exhausted most of his memories of Hannibal and the upper Mississippi, Twain put the manuscript aside for three years. He was facing a problem every novelist is familiar with: his original conception was beginning to conflict with the implications of the actual story. It is at this point in the story that Huck and Jim realize two things: they have become close friends, and they have missed the Ohio River and drifted into what for Jim must be the most frightening territory of all—down the river, the very place Miss Watson was going to sell him to begin with. Jim’s putative savior, Huck, has led him as far astray as a slave can go, and the farther they go, the worse it is going to be for him. Because the Ohio was not Twain’s territory, the fulfillment of Jim’s wish would necessarily lead the novel away from the artistic integrity that Twain certainly sensed his first four hundred pages possessed. He found himself writing not a boy’s novel, like Tom Sawyer, but a man’s novel, about real moral dilemmas and growth. The patina of nostalgia for a time and place, Missouri in the 1840s (not unlike former President Ronald Reagan’s nostalgia for his own boyhood, when “Americans got along”), had been transformed into actual longing for a timeless place of freedom and democracy, safe and hidden, on the big river. But the raft had floated Huck and Jim, and their author with them, into the truly dark heart of the American soul and of American history: slave country.

Twain came back to the novel and worked on it twice again, once to rewrite the chapters containing the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, and later to introduce the Duke and the Dauphin. It is with the feud that the novel begins to fail, because from here on the episodes are mere distractions from the true subject of the work: Huck’s affection for and responsibility to Jim. The signs of this failure are everywhere, as Jim is pushed to the side of the narrative, hiding on the raft and confined to it, while Huck follows the Duke and the Dauphin onshore to the scenes of much simpler and much less philosophically taxing moral dilemmas, such as fraud. Twain was by nature an improviser, and he was pleased enough with these improvisations to continue. When the Duke and the Dauphin finally betray Jim by selling him for forty dollars, Huck is shocked, but the fact is neither he nor Twain has...
come up with a plan that would have saved Jim in the end. Tom Sawyer does that.

Considerable critical ink has flowed over the years in an attempt to integrate the
Tom Sawyer chapters with the rest of the book, but it has flowed in vain. As Leo
Marx points out, and as most readers sense intuitively, once Tom reappears, “[m]ost
of those traits which made [Huck] so appealing a hero now disappear .... It should be
added at once that Jim doesn’t mind too much. The fact is that he has undergone a
similar transformation. On the raft he was an individual, man enough to denounce
Huck when Huck made him the victim of a practical joke. In the closing episode,
however, we lose sight of Jim in the maze of farcical invention.” And the last twelve
chapters are boring, a sure sign that an author has lost the battle between plot and
theme and is just filling in the blanks.

As with all bad endings, the problem really lies at the beginning, and at the
beginning of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn neither Huck nor Twain takes
Jim’s desire for freedom at all seriously; that is, they do not accord it the respect that a
man’s passion deserves. The sign of this is that not only do the two never cross the
Mississippi to Illinois, a free state, but they hardly even consider it. In both Tom
Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, the Jackson’s Island scenes show that such a crossing,
even in secret, is both possible and routine, and even through it would present legal
difficulties for an escaped slave, these would certainly pose no more hardship than
locating the mouth of the Ohio and then finding passage up it. It is true that there
could have been slave catchers in pursuit (though the novel ostensibly takes place in
the 1840s and the Fugitive Slave Act was not passed until 1850), but Twain’s moral
failure, once Huck and Jim link up, is never even to account for their choice to go
down the river rather than across it. What this reveals is that for that his self service to
real attachment between white boy and black man, Twain really saw Jim as no more
than Huck’s sidekick, homoerotic or otherwise. All the claims that are routinely made
for the book’s humanitarian power are, in the end, simply absurd. Jim is never
autonomous, never has a voice, always fulfills his purposes subordinate to Huck’s, and,
like every good sidekick, he never minds. He grows ever more passive and also more
affectionate as Huck and the Duke and the Dauphin and Tom (and Twain) make ever
more use of him for their own purposes. But this use make of him is not
supplementary, it is integral to Twain’s whole conception of the novel. Twain thinks
that Huck’s affection for Jim is a good enough reward for Jim.

The sort of meretricious critical reasoning that has raised Huck’s paltry good
intentions to a “strategy of subversion” (David L. Smith) and a “convincing
indictment of slavery” (Elliot) precisely mirrors the same sort of meretricious
reasoning that white people use to convince themselves that they are not “racist.” If
Huck feels positive toward Jim, and loves him, and thinks of him as a man, then that’s
enough. He doesn’t actually have to act in accordance with his feelings. White
Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To
most Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they
almost invariably fail to understand that how they feel means very little to black
Americans, who understand racism as a way of structuring American culture,
American politics, and the American economy. To invest The Adventures of
Huckleberry Finn with “greatness” is to underwrite a very simplistic and evasive
theory of what racism is and to promulgate it, philosophically, in schools and the
media as well as in academic journals. Surely the discomfort of many readers, black
and white, and the censorship battles that have dogged Huck Finn in the last twenty
years are understandable in this context. No matter how often the critics “place in
context” Huck’s use of the word “nigger,” they can never excuse or fully hide the
deeper racism of the novel--the way Twain and Huck use Jim because they really
don’t care enough about his desire for freedom to let that desire change their plans.
And to give credit to Huck suggests that the only racial insight Americans of the
nineteenth or twentieth century are capable of is a recognition of the obvious--that
blacks, slave and free, are human.

[section cut]

Should Huckleberry Finn be taught in the schools? The critics of the Propaganda
Era laid the groundwork for the universal inclusion of the book in school curriculums
by declaring it great. Although they predated the current generation of politicized
English professors, this was clearly a political act, because the entry of Huck Finn
into classrooms sets the terms of the discussion of racism and American history, and
sets them very low: all you have to do to be a hero is acknowledge that your poor
sidekick is human; you don’t actually have to act in the interests of his humanity.
Arguments about censorship have been regularly turned into nonsense by appeals to
Huck’s “greatness.” Moreover, so much critical thinking has gone into defending
Huck so that he can be great, so that American literature can be found different from
and maybe better than Russian or English or French literature, that the very integrity
of the critical enterprise has been called into question. That most readers intuitively
reject the last twelve chapters of the novel on the grounds of tedium or triviality is'
clear from the fact that so many critics have turned themselves inside out to defend
them. Is it so mysterious that criticism has failed in our time after being so robust only
a generation ago? Those who cannot be persuaded that The Adventures of
Huckleberry Finn is a great novel have to draw some conclusion.

I would rather my children read Uncle Tom’s Cabin, even though it is far more
vivid in its depiction of cruelty than Huck Finn, and this is because Stowe’s novel is
clearly and unmistakably a tragedy. No whitewash, no secrets, but evil, suffering,
imagination, endurance, and redemption—are like life. Like little Eva, who eagerly
but fearfully listens to the stories of the slaves that her family tries to keep from her,
our children want to know what is going on, what has gone on, and what we intend to
do about it. If “great” literature has any purpose, it is to help us face up to our
responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the
territory.