

Discussion on  
whether tom sawyer  
has gone too far in  
the adventures of tom  
sawyer...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Even though Tom Sawyer is just a young boy in the chapter “ Here a Captive Heart Busted,” his actions cross the boundary of child’s play and enter into the boundaries of wrongdoing. This comical, yet tedious chapter in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* gives insight into a main point of the novel, that Jim is a human being just like the whites and deserves to be treated like one. At this pre-Civil war time, most people conceive slaves to be sub-human, or half-human, which allows them clear consciences to sell and use them for labor. Needless to say, slaves were not allowed to escape. Runaway slaves like Jim were not sympathized as humans claiming freedom, but chastised for stealing property from their masters. Twain challenges us in this view, and uses the simple hearted Huck Finn to recognize human characteristics in him like love, kindness, and loyalty. After many chapters of this metamorphosis in Huck’s mind, Tom Sawyer enters the story. The way he treats Jim stands in sharp contrast to Huck’s way, and his absurd demands cause the reader to become exasperated. An evaluation of specific details leads us into a better understanding of Twain’s racial beliefs.

In the “ Captive Heart” chapter, Tom demands Jim to do ten ridiculous tasks: each task originates in Tom’s notion that Jim must perform the role of an adventurous prisoner. These tasks are so ludicrous that even Huck has a hard time seeing the point. They are tediously described as “ the work and bother of raising the mullen, and jew’s-harping the rats, and petting and flattering up the snakes and spiders and things, on top of all the other work he had to on pens, and inscriptions, and journals, and things, which made it more trouble and responsibility to be a prisoner than anything [Jim] ever undertook” (254). One of Tom’s ideas is for Jim to write out a lengthy

inscription explaining the woes of a prisoner on the side of the “ prison” walls. Yet, Tom rejects the log walls because “ they don’t have log walls in a dungeon: we got to dig the inscriptions in a rock” (249). Comically, the grindstone they choose is too heavy for the two boys to carry all the way that Jim has to slide out of his chain, walk out into the field, and carry it back with Huck. That the prisoner temporarily frees himself in order to fulfill conditions to be free is ironic, and it reveals that Tom regards Jim’s freedom as a game; unfortunately, Jim does not feel this way, his escape is a matter of rights, freedom, and his life. Tom and Jim’s different priorities create a conflict that pulls the readers to desire Tom to stop handling Jim’s life so haphazardly.

Another instance where Tom’s absurd notions are fulfilled at Jim’s expense occurs when Tom demands that Jim have a rattlesnake for a dumb pet. Tom expects Jim to tame it and pet it so that it will love Jim and follow him around everywhere. Scared for his life, Jim pleads, “ Please Mars Tom doan’ talk so! I can’ stan’ it!” (251). Tom replies, “ Jim, don’t act so foolish. A prisoner’s got to have some kind of a dumb pet [?] there’s more glory to be gained in your being the first to ever try it than any other way you could ever think of to save your life” (251). Again, a conflict arises between Tom and Jim’s priorities; Whereas Tom is playing a game, Jim is negotiating his life and freedom. The structure Twain uses here causes readers to protest that it does not matter if Jim gains any glory by being a pretend prisoner. Instead, readers are encouraged to sympathize with him and want him to become free. Furthermore, it is clear that Jim is not the fool, but rather Tom. Yet, because Jim is a slave, he must submit to any whimsical idea Tom may have

because he is white. Through such interactions, Twain leads readers to recognize a great injustice in slavery.

There is only so much nonsense that Jim can take. Every preposterous new idea adds to his frustration. He finds “ so much fault with [having an onion sent to him in his coffee], and with the work and bother of raising the muller, and jew’s harping the rats, and petting and flattering up the snakes and spiders and things, on top of all the other work he had to do on pens, and inscriptions, and journals, and things, which made it more trouble and worry and responsibility to be a prisoner than anything he ever undertook, that Tom most lost all patience with him” (254). Here, Jim’s complaints can be understood and forgiven because they are so acceptable. Although Jim should have the right to protest these ridiculous ideas, Tom loses patience with Jim the one who thinks with reason and clarity. He counters that Jim “ was just loadened down with more gaudier chances than a prisoner ever had in the world to make a name for himself, and yet he didn’t know enough to appreciate them, and they was just about wasted on him. So Jim he was sorry, and said he wouldn’t behave so no more [?]” (254). Readers are allowed to witness a sensible adult man under the controls of a silly young boy. Readers can sympathize that Jim is forced to try to make a name for himself as a prisoner, when all he wants to do is be free and be united with his family. He is even forced to appease his white friend by apologizing that he is behaving wrongly. Such a humble admission causes Jim’s character to be viewed as noble and friendly. No doubt, Twain forms these details to comment that Jim is a human who is capable of thinking and making

decisions. Readers are made to feel that it is an injustice for Jim to be subject to Tom's whims.

Chapter thirty-eight of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* elaborately depicts the schemes of a young boy to create a fanciful adventure about a captive prisoner. As charming as this plot is, it loses its fun when the prisoner turns out to be a real slave. Tom's attempts at fun are so out of place that readers become frustrated that Jim is forced to perform such stupid and unnecessary tasks. Tom's requests and attitude show that he does not take Jim seriously as a human being. This attitude contrasts to that of Huck who has learned to value Jim through the relationship he formed with Jim on the river. Mark Twain fashions these details to infuriate readers at the injustice of slavery and challenges them to regard former slaves as whole human beings. To treat them negligibly is to be as outlandish as Tom Sawyer.