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JONATHAN ARAC

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
(Mark Twain, United States, 1884)

Everyone thinks they remember the story, but the voice is what really lingers. Huckleberry Finn, the preteen boy who narrates the novel, and his companion Jim, a runaway slave, are floating on a raft down the Mississippi in the American South of the 1840s. Jim is in danger of being captured and re-enslaved, so they need to lie low, and they travel at night. Despite the danger, Huck finds beauty. “It’s lovely to live on a raft,” Huck says,¹ and the sentence might be the alliterative, eight-syllabled opening line of a ballad. The book’s language is poetic, but not often so close to verse. The next sentence broaches quite a different rhythm, extending itself with unexpected turns that give a sense of unforced, widely ranging speech and thought alike: “We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened—Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to *make* so many” (chapter 19; here and in all subsequent quotations, emphases are Twain’s).

Huck’s narrative is not only oral in rhythm, it is local in vocabulary. “Al-low” in the sense of *think* or *conclude* is a regional usage of the U.S. South and Midwest. Huck’s grammar breaks the rules of the schoolroom, a discipline to which he has been subjected back at home, but that he prefers to evade. Standard English dictates *lie* where Huck has “lay”; abjures the pleonasm of *about* after “discuss,” of *he* after “Jim”; requires the plural *were* instead of “was”; demands the participial form *taken* instead of “took.” Against all this bossiness, Huck’s speech feels free, and yet he and Jim are also engaged in reflection, and their conversation is about judging. Alone on the river, left to their own devices, they discuss the nature of things in bold cosmological debate between equals: “Jim said the moon could a *laid* [all the stars]; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn’t say nothing against it, because I’ve seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done.” Social hierarchies of free and slave, black and white, are suspended in a democratic utopia. These memorable passages feel timeless, a scene of

¹ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). All subsequent quotations are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

mythmaking itself mythical, but they are part of a sequence measured as “two or three days and nights,” in a few pages set between the force of murderous feuds and the fraud of con men claiming to be royalty.

When the impending dawn forces Huck and Jim to pull over and hide, they

slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come. Not a sound, anywheres—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t’other side—you couldn’t make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up, away off, and warn’t black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away—trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t’other side of the river, being a wood-yard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywheres; then the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers; but sometimes not that way, because they’ve left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you’ve got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going it!

A little smoke couldn’t be noticed now, so we could take some fish off of the lines, and cook up a hot breakfast. And afterwards we would watch the lonesomeness of the river, and kind of lazy along, and by and by lazy off to sleep. Wake up, by and by, and look to see what done it, and maybe see a steamboat, coughing along up stream, so far off towards the other side you couldn’t tell nothing about her only whether she was stern-wheel or side-wheel; then for about an hour there wouldn’t be anything to hear nor nothing to see—just solid lonesomeness. Next you’d see a raft sliding by, away off yonder, and maybe a galoot on it chopping, because they’re most always doing it on a raft; you’d see the axe flash, and come down—you don’t hear

nothing; you see that axe go up again, and by the time it's above the man's head, then you hear the *k'chunk!*—it had took all that time to come over the water. So we would put in the day, lazying around, listening to the stillness.
(chapter 19)

Huck responds with all his senses: you can taste the fish for breakfast; smell the flowers or the rotting gars; feel the cool water or the sand underfoot; hear the quiet, broken by frogs a-cluttering, sweeps screaming, steamboats coughing, or galoots k'chunking; and above all, see the many things he and Jim see. What might be summarized as a single noun—*dawn*—opens into an extended process, punctuated by emergences. First a “dull line,” then a “pale place,” next “little dark spots” and “long black streaks,” before the “east reddens up” and images can at last be categorized more precisely as “mist” and a “log cabin.” The process is registered through a second-person narration: “you couldn't make nothing else out” but then “by and by you could see.” Together with the “we” of Huck and Jim, the reader is invited also to share the experience of wonder and pleasure.

Mark Twain here naturalizes, as part of the American frontier landscape taken in and uttered by an uneducated youth, the techniques of impressionist prose so important in Western art writing from Flaubert to Conrad and beyond. The privilege of sensitive spectatorship is extended from the leisure class down the social scale, bringing to fulfillment an experiment that in the early nineteenth-century British poetry of William Wordsworth had met a far more mixed response. The risk, overcome by Twain, is that the putatively natural perceiving consciousness will seem to be ventriloquized by the highly cultivated author. Marks of the authorial vocabulary and sensibility may be felt in the abstract nouns so important in composing the passage: *paleness*, *lonesomeness*, and *stillness*. Samuel Clemens, as a young man before he had become Mark Twain, learned to read the river, as he recounts in *Life on the Mississippi*, and his active working skill becomes Huck's power to explain “a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way.” The sequence is full of work, but always by others.

The flow of language is the sign of Huck's voice, felt in his words and intonation, while the author has constructed the sentences, in all their intricacy. The second paragraph of the quotation above, beginning with “a little smoke,” starts with a rather short sentence and moves through three sentences of increasing length, until concluding with the shortest in the sequence, “So we would put in the day, lazying around and listening to the stillness.”

The first paragraph features a Faulkner-length sentence 269 words long (starting with “the first thing to see” and running to the end), splattered with commas to set its microrhythms and built sequentially onto eleven semicolons, the punctuation mark most associated with high literacy.

Twain uses the story situation to motivate Huck’s hyperattentiveness. He and Jim are on the lam, and danger lurks anywhere, so they need to notice everything. Hiding during the day enforces an idleness usually enjoyed only by rich people. Lowly men at leisure, singing the praises of their simple life—this is backwoods pastoral, guarded against the dangers of evident idealization by its awareness of stinky smells in nature and wood-yard cheats in society. The unusual verb form *to lazy* marks the enforced idleness, and names it with an ordinarily pejorative word, but Huck’s blithely reiterating the term sets at ease any Protestant ethic anxieties. The euphoric narration transfigures a state of deprivation (“nothing to hear nor nothing to see”) into satisfying plenitude (“just solid lonesomeness”), and the catachresis is imperceptible except to critical analysis. Huck and Jim, “lazying around, listening to the stillness,” bring into informal, everyday prose something like what Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” had achieved only through elevated verse: for *lazying*, read: “the breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body”; and for *listening to the stillness*, read: “with an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, / We see into the life of things.”²

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is not a visionary lyric, though it memorably incorporates such moments. Its title suggests a picaresque novel, which signals not only roguery but also comedy. The book is very funny, as well as comic, in many ways. The large comic frame depends on the history separating the time of Huck’s adventures, in the 1840s, from the time of Twain’s writing, which began in 1876, and the book’s publication, first in England, for copyright purposes, in 1884, and then in the United States in 1885. The Civil War (1861–65) had abolished slavery in the United States, and therefore every reader has had a different perspective on the laws and customs of slave society than was possible for anyone in the time of the book’s action. When a rich, famous, worldly author entrusts his narrative to a provincial outcast of limited literacy, it already produces the structural potential for irony, but when everyone in the author’s world knows more and sees differently

² *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 206.

from everyone in the novel's world, it multiplies ironic possibilities. Huck's distance from the norms and mores of his time may, in this instance, bring him closer to us. His alienation from his society seems a strength rather than a ground for pathos. There is also a trick here to flatter the readership: if Huck is relatively uncultured, he is therefore, by a common logic, necessarily more natural, and if he is also more like us, then we allow ourselves credit for his good nature.

Huck is not wholly formed by his culture, yet he is shown to believe in the social customs governing slavery, even though he breaks them in allying himself with Jim, and at several points quite specifically acting to protect Jim. Readers applaud his actions and laugh indulgently at his self-doubts and self-castigations. The worse he thinks he is, the better we know he is.

Late in the book, this pattern of opposites stretches its farthest. Jim has been separated from Huck and betrayed; he is locked up on a farm way down river from his home in Missouri. Huck imagines that it might work better for Jim if Huck sends a letter back to the owner Jim has run away from. That way, if he must be re-enslaved, at least he can be reunited with his family and the community he knows. But then Huck realizes that if he returns home with Jim, he will be known as someone who helped a slave to escape. This fantasy of social "shame" awakens thoughts of moral guilt: "That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain't no disgrace" (chapter 31). The rhetorical stakes are raised. Huck's "conscience" kicks in, and his mind becomes a theater in which several versions of small-town Missouri and all-American, religious talk play themselves out, while he listens and tries to duck.

The language of religious admonition morphs into Huck's language, and the interference between different registers of speech raises a laugh. Huck preserves the formal model of the periodic sentence. The main verb ("dropped") is suspended for nearly one hundred words from the sentence's start, but the rhythms are bent into breathlessness, and the words, too, are twisted:

At last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven, whilst I was stealing a poor old woman's nigger that hadn't ever done me no harm, and now was showing me there's One that's always on the lookout, and ain't agoing to allow no such miserable doings to go on only just so fur and no further, I most dropped in my tracks I was so scared. (chapter 31)

The conventionally dead metaphor of the “hand of Providence” comes to life to slap Huck one, while the alien syntax suspends his identity and transports him into a space of moral agonizing.

Next Huck hears in his mind the voice of the schoolmarm, given a twist by his own dialect and by a wavering in personal pronouns: “There was the Sunday School, you could a gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire” (chapter 31). Huck’s imperfect impersonation causes the voice of authority to condemn itself out of its own mouth (“as I’d been acting”), rather than condemning him. Moreover, it is both comic and true to social hegemony that even though he hasn’t gone to Sunday school, he knows what he would have learned if he had.

Then the rapid repetitive rhythms of preacherly exhortation take over: “It was because my heart warn’t right; it was because I warn’t square; it was because I was playing double.” And one of his most famous lines still seems part of the preaching voice, “You can’t pray a lie.” By this point, he feels compelled to write the letter, and afterward he purrs in the voice of revival testimony, “I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time” (chapter 31).

But Huck can’t stay saved. Once he has written the letter, he remembers all that Jim has meant to him on their travels together. The form parodies visions of the devil, as images of the black man arise to keep the young soul from heaven’s path, and the rhetorical modeling is seductive—not breathless, nor haranguing, nor pushy, like the churchy voices, but an artful balance of overlapping doublets and triplets: “I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing.” All the commas make it sound like Huck again, ventilating the sentence and easing its movement. As this string of memories unrolls, Huck decides to help Jim escape again. The language of this decision gains force from its sudden snap back to the discarded religious idiom. Huck concludes, “All right, then, I’ll *go* to hell” (chapter 31). The syntax has the direct simplicity of the memories of Jim, but the key word, deferred to the end, returns to the language that is alien to Huck’s own human sympathy.

Huck melodramatically, in a gestural extravagance equal and opposite to what he rejects, chooses hell over heaven, Jim over the society that enslaves him, and yet he does it in language that seems to modern readers racist. He calls Jim a “nigger.” This term was not nearly so essential to Samuel Clemens’s speech, in his adult life, as it is to Huck’s. Over the course of the book, the term appears hundreds of times. The word is part of the historical and social distancing between author and character, and yet the word is not now a dead

relic of slavery, nor was it when the book was written. Rather, the word did and still does active damage in the long working through a legacy of brutal inhumanity.³

Twain's use of the word is both willful and constrained. In part, it seems a rhetorical strategy of deidealization, keeping a dirty face on Huck so he does not seem too angelic. This may be given a polemically higher name as realism, as if one merely recorded what was there, but in the management of Huck's decision to "go to hell," there is evidently much calculation. To make the comic miracle of Huck's decision seem the pure act of natural goodness that socially misknows itself as damned, Huck has been allowed to hear only some of the voices possible in the 1840s, or even in the novel. Back home in Missouri, Widow Douglas speaks for the established hellfire religion, but Aunt Polly offers a gospel of love that might have inspired Huck, as it did many abolitionists. The American national credo, "all men are created equal," was celebrated every July Fourth. Huck knows this holiday, and it comes during his river trip (which begins with the river's June rising). The word *nigger* may have permeated Huck's environment as deeply as *mutha-fucka* does some now (and may have in Huck's time, too, had we the sources to tell us), but writers, even realists, find the means they need to achieve the effects they wish. Contrast two scandalous eighteenth-century novels, *Les liaisons dangereuses* and *Fanny Hill*: does Laclos's purer language make his novel less truthful about sexuality? Twain made great art out of dreadful history, and his work survives its time of writing, but it bears the scars of a racist society. Its language implies a literary world in which it was unthinkable that African Americans would ever form a consequential part of Twain's readership.

The character of Jim presents some of the same problems. Jim is shown as a brave man and a good man, and at moments he and Huck are treated as equals. Yet the representation of Jim also draws on comic traditions that were highly disrespectful to the African Americans that made up their subject matter. In particular, American minstrel shows, an immensely popular form of entertainment from the 1840s through the rest of century, offered musical numbers and comic sketches in which white performers, in blackface makeup, masqueraded as African Americans.

Blackface minstrelsy underlies some of the way Jim appears, but worse trouble comes in the long sequence that ends the book. Tom Sawyer has

³ See Jonathan Arac, "*Huckleberry Finn*" as *Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997).

come down from Missouri to where Jim is being held. Tom knows that Jim is no longer a runaway but “free as any cretur that walks this earth” (chapter 42), because the woman who had owned him has died and freed him in her will. But Tom insists on staging elaborate schemes “to set a nigger free that was already free” (chapter the last), casting Jim as a noble prisoner, and Huck and Tom as his rescuers. *The Count of Monte Cristo* is one of many literary models for Tom’s ideas of “style.” This scheming is not the book’s best comedy, and it leads to “a raft of trouble” (chapter 42): Tom gets shot and Jim risks his freedom to save him.

In this most fantasicated portion of the book, as in earlier sequences, Twain deploys a fundamental gesture of realism. *Huckleberry Finn* criticizes other books, so that we think it is realer than they are. The fraudulent scoundrels who join Huck and Jim claim to be a king and a duke, cheated of their lands and identities and outcast to the wilderness. Their phoniness comes from little bits of European history and culture, including butchered versions of Shakespeare. If this nonsense is high culture, than Huck’s ignorance and unimagination, which mean he responds only to what is before him, seems far preferable. Yet Huck defers to Tom Sawyer, who always plays out his life on themes from his reading. If Tom is Quixotic, then Huck is a juvenile Sancho Panza. He heeds the good sense of life against the folly of books. Such juvenilization means that sexuality has far less role in American realism than in its European counterparts. Realism as polemic propels Twain’s formidable rejection of the historical romances of Walter Scott and Fenimore Cooper. *Life on the Mississippi* asserts that Scott had undone Cervantes’s critique of romance, and caused the Civil War, by filling the heads of Southern readers with false ideas of chivalric valor. Twain’s elaborate demolition of “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” (1895) makes one of the funniest critical essays ever written.

In its time, *Huckleberry Finn* was understood as realistic for its evident refusal to idealize. It shows life in the lower reaches of society, and it shows that life as grim. It also shows the moral value of Huck and Jim, despite their lowly status and lack of education. This may also seem, from another perspective, idealization. It may be impossible to adjudicate this book’s realism, but it is worth testing how it fits the various frames that have defined realism, the crucial term in the history of Western thinking about the novel. The most influential theories of literary realism were codified by several European critics, born in the late-nineteenth-century years when realism became a slogan, who then in the 1930s and 1940s gave it scholarly basis. *Huckleberry Finn* makes trouble for these ideas. It does not behave, and its acting up casts doubt on old books.

For Erich Auerbach, realism violates classical rhetorical norms that treated socially low characters in low style and that associated low life with the comic. Through its new effects of style, realism could represent the existential seriousness of everyday life. But Twain's style serves other uses. The sunrise passage, discussed above, is idyllic, and more sober-toned passages are melancholic. When Huck approaches a farm, he is oppressed by the feeling of a ghost town, which is only exacerbated by a sign of life: "I heard the dim hum of a spinning-wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again; and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that *is* the loneliest sound in the world" (chapter 32). Huck's decision to go to hell, as discussed above, is made comic, and it is relieved of any decisive role in the plot.

For Mikhail Bakhtin's language-based analysis of realism, *Huckleberry Finn* would also fail the test of seriousness. Bakhtin found in Dostoevsky's set-pieces of scandal the footprints of "reduced laughter," but Twain makes you laugh out loud. Twain loves to clash together different ways of talking. On the page before the novel begins, he explains that the characters speak seven different dialects that are "pains-takingly" differentiated. He pretends to fear that otherwise "many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding." But this is not what Bakhtin means by the speech of the other. Dostoevsky, for Bakhtin, exemplified heteroglossic realism because he made the voices of his villains as compelling, or more so, than those of his heroes. What might be an ideological weakness becomes a literary strength—many good readers have not recognized that Dostoevsky was on the side of Christianity, not nihilism. No one has ever thought Twain favored slavery, or that any character in the book presents a serious alternative to Huck. Colonel Sherburne denounces the cowards who people his town, echoing views that were often Twain's own, but then he shoots a harmless fool. Jim is a good man, and he acts more bravely than Huck ever does, but African-American readers, just like white readers, have chosen Huck rather than Jim as their place of identification. Huck's voice prevails.

Georg Lukács would have valued Twain's critical satire against many features of bourgeois life, and yet Twain does not show human beings making their history, which for Lukács is the fundamental reality to which literature is responsible. The means by which Jim is freed—not by Huck's efforts but by the will of a far-off woman who died months earlier—if read as historical allegory, would suggest that the Civil War, the means by which all American slaves were freed, had been an extrinsic accident, not a collective action. The failure of action in *Huckleberry Finn* puts it in Lukács's negative category

of “naturalism” together with Flaubert and Zola, rather than in his positive category of realism with Balzac and Tolstoy and Thomas Mann. Maybe Lukács also had a problem with funny books. But maybe Twain pulled his works’ punches so that they would be bought and read; his literary clowning did not just sugarcoat a message but made sure it was not there. Twain laid down the law to critics in the “Notice” immediately following the title page: “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.”

Huckleberry Finn contains tensions that arise from its compromises. This does not make it unique among novels of the United States or of the world. Novels are acts of communication and also items of commerce. They must answer to authorities different from those of the author. This problem extends even to the question of what exactly a proper edition of the novel should include. Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) contains a passage of some five thousand words recounting songs and repartee on a raft in the old days on the river. He explained that this came from a book he was writing about Huckleberry Finn (already known to readers as Tom Sawyer’s companion in Twain’s 1876 novel), but then this “Raftmen Episode” did not appear in *Huckleberry Finn*. Should it be put in later editions? The reason it was omitted is adequately, if tersely, documented: the novel’s publisher thought it might be left out, and Twain agreed. By one theory of editing, this means that the omission was an external imposition on the author’s intention; but it could equally be argued that the author changed his mind. Twain had plenty of chances in the remaining thirty-five years of his life to restore the passage if he had wished to. The publisher was a young nephew of Twain’s whom Twain himself had set up in charge of the publishing house, which primarily published Twain’s works. So the idea of an alien commercial intrusion does not make sense; Twain treated his work commercially through and through. Samuel Clemens’s pen name was registered as a trademark. No less than Charles Dickens in England, his fellow great philistine comic humanist, Mark Twain aimed to sell.

Since 1942, some editions of *Huckleberry Finn* have included the Raftmen Episode, and the established scholarly edition does, but many editions still do not, and the inclusion or exclusion of the passage has not made any difference to how people read the book. The passage contains wonderful American dialect humor writing and a rich summary of folklore traditions, so it fits in, but it is simply an episode. Aristotle long ago argued that episodes are not essential, although they may contribute to a work’s excellence.

If so substantial an episode may be present or absent, it raises questions about the book overall. Is it primarily episodic, or does some strong principle of unity organize it? From the book's opening in Missouri, through the trip downriver, to the ending, some change of fortune occurs—Jim is freed, and Huck is liberated from anxiety about his alcoholic, abusive father. Yet the book's narrative economy muffles the process by which these changes occur. As in Shakespeare's comedies, both Jim's manumission and the death of Huck's father are revealed only in the very last pages of the book. They happened some time earlier and were concealed, Jim's freedom by Tom Sawyer so as to allow for the charade of Jim's "evasion" (chapter 39) from imprisonment, and Huck's father's death by Jim, for reasons left to the reader's speculation. So all that Huck did on Jim's behalf has not been essential to this plot. Whether or not Huck decided to go to hell, Jim was already free, and Tom Sawyer would in any case have arrived with the news at the farm where Jim was held.

Rather than seeking organic unity, it seems better to recognize that *Huckleberry Finn* operates discontinuously, by repetition and difference more than by beginning, middle, and end. The strongest moments of the book, including the passages I have discussed above, are sublime, as defined by the classical critic Longinus. By sublime, Longinus does not mean highfalutin. The sublime may arise from the representation of silence and from terse, simple language: his treatise praises the opening of the Hebrew Bible (" 'Let there be light,' and there was light.") The sublime means simply the greatest literary experience. It does not depend on unity. Like a "whirlwind" or thunderbolt it tears up any smooth pattern or texture, so it stands out from the work in which it occurs. For Longinus, the sublime depends on a series of identifications: the words of a great moment seem "the echo of a great soul" that is the author's, and in reading such passages, we are "uplifted" by feeling as if we had ourselves produced those words. Longinus's key term in Greek is *ekstasis*, literally getting out of one's place, a "transport" into a new state or position.⁴ Longinus's analysis helps explain how Mark Twain became identified with Uncle Sam and known in the United States as "Our Mark Twain," while *Huckleberry Finn* has become not only the best-known and most-loved work of American literature, but also the most vehemently defended. To have to answer questions about the impact of Twain's racial language has seemed to some readers to foul their own moral decency.

⁴ "Longinus," *On the Sublime*, ed. D. A. Russell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). My translations are from this Greek text.

It is a wonderful, and yet rather puzzling, feature of liberal culture that America's most-beloved novel, the most American of novels, so savagely mocks life in the United States. This without even considering slavery, which the book treats with no nostalgia or apologetics. Slavery has been abolished in the United States, so there is some ground for feeling better about things, but the book offers little comfort. Through Huck's narration, the small-town decencies in Missouri seem confining if not wholly pointless, compared to the pleasures of hanging out with friends or fishing. And on the river, Huck encounters no society, except Jim's, preferable to what he left behind. The Southern gentry life of the Grangerfords is appealing until he realizes that they are caught up in a senseless and deadly feud with the Shepherdsons, and in Arkansas, which was in Twain's America a byword for rural idiocy, the riverfront life is not only murderous but also mean-spirited. The King and Duke provide many laughs, but they also sell Jim back into slavery.

The American institution that *Huckleberry Finn* most unremittingly attacks is the Christian church. Twice the novel stages false scenes of conversion, the pretense of a sinner redeemed, but Huck's pap and the King are just fooling the holy to make a buck off them. When Huck decides to go to hell, it is against the voices of religion. Even if some American readers now criticize Twain's treatment of racial matters, many have taken inspiration from Huck's relation to Jim and have found in it the possibility of interracial friendship and social commitment alike. The years of the American civil rights movement, from after the Second World War to the 1960s, were also the time in which academic critics brought *Huckleberry Finn* to the forefront of established American literature, as many readers had already placed it in their own hearts long before it became required reading. Yet perhaps American secular intellectuals on the left were flying the race flag as camouflage. Far more than it fosters progressive interraciality, *Huckleberry Finn* attacks the social cowardice of the religion that was in Huck's 1840s and Twain's 1880s and that remains, in the new millennium of George W. Bush even more emphatically, the core religion of the United States, a Bible-based Christianity committed to the drama of the individual soul choosing heaven or hell. Twain represents this religion as ignorant and, above all, selfish.

This attack matters only if literature does, but the understanding of literature that had begun to prevail in Twain's time, and that dominated the twentieth century, suggests it may not. This notion of literature, nowadays second nature to cultivated readers, is a fairly recent cultural product. In the English language of the eighteenth century, the term *literature* referred to all of value that was written, including nonfictional, even scientific and religious writing. Beginning in the era of romanticism, poetry, fiction, and drama

came to define the more restrictive sense of literature as imaginative belles lettres. This new sense of literature asserted autonomy: literature was valued for being original, not for effectively following the rules; for being the work of a unique imagination rather than part of a social transaction. Writers were supposed to answer to their own will rather than to any other set of expectations. This autonomy, however, diminished writing's social role. Literature offered the splendors of a world that was its own, but it therefore no longer exercised any direct claim on the world in which its readers pursued their political and economic lives. Before Samuel Clemens was born, in the United States of the 1820s, the historical fiction of Fenimore Cooper was understood as participating directly in debates about how the nation had come into existence and what that might mean for life in the present, but by the time he died in 1851, Cooper already seemed a relic, ripe for Twain's later debunking of his "literary offenses."

As Twain came of age in the midnineteenth century, national narrative, as practiced by Cooper, was challenged by an emergent mode of narrative that was literary in the new sense. The decisive new fiction of 1850, *The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne, like Cooper looked back to American history, but the work deliberately guarded itself from direct involvement in the politics of its day, with which Hawthorne himself, in his nonauthorial role, was much involved. Dedicated to Hawthorne, Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) is the encyclopedic literary narrative of this moment, and it has come to dominate American literary study. In contrast, the comprehensive national narrative *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) made far more impact at the time, but has only recently begun to receive the academic study that it merits. The figure of the sensitive spectator is crucial in literary narrative, whether Miles Coverdale in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*; Ishmael, the narrator of *Moby-Dick*; or, as noted above, Huck himself. This figure invites identification by a sensitive reader. In Stowe's novel the scope of this figure is limited to Augustine St. Clare, who occupies only the middle third of the novel, and is killed off as a dangerous failure.

Works by Hawthorne, Melville, and above all Twain, became models for American literature, even though they were written at a tense distance from the actually existing United States. American writing of the nineteenth century is full of distinctive voices, whether in the essays and journals of Emerson and Thoreau, the poetry of Whitman and Dickinson, or the fiction of Melville and Twain. In the 1960s and 1970s, the civil rights movement and the women's movement struggled to enlarge what it means to be American, who may count as American. This transformation has allowed readers now to recognize that the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick

Douglass, produced to combat slavery, are not just propaganda about a dead issue but are also great and valuable, despite lacking such distinctive voices. *Huckleberry Finn*, by contrast, satirizes slavery after its abolition. It offers an unforgettable voice that has echoed through later American writing. But what has it meant that literature traded power for voice?