
UNIT 11 BACKGROUND TO ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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11.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit has a bifocal objective: it aims to put Mark Twain's novel in the sociocultural context of 19th century America, and it will direct your attention to some of the contradictions and questions that have been raised around the novel in the hundred years of its publication.

11.1 INTRODUCTION

I should like to begin this study of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by referring to three contradictory things about the novel. These are:

- i) The novel was described by no less a writer than Hemingway as being 'the source of all modern American literature.' Yet the book on its first publication in the US was banished from Concord Public Library as being the "veriest trash," (as having "no reliable sense of propriety" as "rough, coarse and inelegant . . . more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people."
- ii) *Huckleberry Finn* is now an acknowledged classic that has been filmed no less than six times, televised and turned into a strip cartoon and an opera. Huck's journey on a raft down the Mississippi in the company of a runaway slave has become legendary. But the ending of the novel has been found wanting and has caused considerable discussion among critics with Lionel Trilling and T.S. Eliot joining in the debate. So much so that a spoof of it has been done under the title *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1970) by John Seelye. In the introduction to the book, Huck tells us that one twentieth century "cricket" said that the book [*Huckleberry Finn*] was sloppily put

together and so he decided to pick up the parts - the good ones - and put together one they would like. Huck goes on to say: "... now that they've got their book, maybe they'll leave the other one alone."

- iii) The novel has long been known as an anti-racist book with Mark Twain's sympathies lying on the side of Jim. But recently the book has been denounced as being "racist" because of Huck's frequent and apparently unthinking use of the word 'nigger' for Jim. As a result there have been demands by some African Americans that the book be withdrawn from the school curriculum. The wheel has apparently come full circle.

As you see, these apparent contradictions take you right into the heart of the novel and touch upon many of the issues that have exercised the mind of readers about it in recent times. The book is very much alive and its 'adventures' continue.

The debate for and against allowing young people free access to *Huckleberry Finn* has been fictionalized in Nat Hentoff in his book *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* (1982) on grounds of racism, sexism and immorality.

11.2 KEY QUESTIONS

Let me reformulate some of these issues:

- i) Do you think it is merely a children's book? Does it raise issues that are likely to be of interest to adults? What are they?
- ii) How do you account for the immense popularity of the book?
- iii) Do you find the novel's morality offensive or subversive in anyway? Think of specific issues.
- iv) Do you think the novel has a flawed ending? In what way?
- v) And lastly, do you think that it is a racist book? More precisely, how have Hick and Jim been represented in the novel?

These are some of the questions that you could ask yourself as you read the novel. And there will no doubt be others that you will find yourself asking.

Ponder each of the questions as you read the novel. We shall discuss these in the course of the study material.

11.3 HOW TO USE THIS STUDY MATERIAL

1. The first thing of course is to read the novel at least twice. The first reading will give you an overall idea of the story and of what happens where. It is only in the second reading that characters and events start falling into place and a pattern begins to emerge.
2. Reading of the background material should come at this stage but please feel free to adopt any other method to suit your convenience. Only remember, your prime focus should be on the text.
3. You will be well advised to make jottings as you go along with your reading of the text or criticism.
4. Since every novel is a product of its time, you need to place *Huckleberry Finn* in the socio-cultural context of 19th century America. *Huckleberry*

Finn though published in 1885 deals with a period "forty or fifty years ago," which means that it depicts a period before the American North clashed with the South in the Civil War of 1861-65, fought principally over the issue of slavery and states' rights. Slavery which is a most important focus in the novel had been abolished almost 20 years before (in 1865) the novel was published in the US. But abolition of slavery did not mean the disappearance of attitudes that were associated with it.

5. The text of the novel used in this Study Material is that given in the Cambridge University Press edition edited by Jane Ogborn in the Cambridge Literature series, published in 1995. All references to the text will be indicated by both the chapter number and the page number to facilitate reference.

11.4 AMERICAN SOCIETY DURING 1865-1914

Between the end of the Civil War (1865) and World War I, American society witnessed several momentous changes. These were:

1. Perhaps the single most important change took place as a result of massive industrialization. From a rural, agrarian isolated republic consisting largely of farms, villages and small towns, America became in the course of 5 decades an industrialized, urbanized and continental nation, a world power that had come to terms with Darwin's theory of the survival of the fittest and with profound changes in its cultural values and social institutions.
2. With industrialization came the growth of American cities. By the turn of the century only about one-third of the population lived on farms.
3. By the end of World War I one half of the American population lived in a dozen or so cities.
4. The country's population grew phenomenally from 31 million in 1860 to 131 million in 1940 with masses of men moving westward. The exodus reached its peak during 1860-1920. American emigration agents tempted Europeans with promise of free land for the taking and offered to transport them to the Dollar land for as little as thirty-five dollars.
5. Control over industries passed into the hands of fewer and larger companies.

In the last two decades of the 19th century, a very small number of men controlled steel, railroad, oil and meat packing industries without significant competition. With these came a new generation of captains of industry and masters of capital. These men were also called buccaneers and robber barons.

6. Most of the wage earners were employed by corporations and big business houses.
7. The massive industrialization resulted in widespread prosperity but the prosperity was achieved at great social and psychological cost.
8. Industrial conflicts became organized and often violent.
9. Racial slavery had been abolished as a result of Abraham Lincoln's proclamation of emancipation. But the attitudes associated with it survived.

To an extent they still do. For details of events, books and persons connected with slavery in the US in the 19th century, please read Section 6 of this Unit.

10. The post-Civil War America does not figure prominently in Mark Twain's novels except in *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* (1873), which he wrote in collaboration with C.D. Warner. Both *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) are set in the pre-Civil War period, an era he was inclined to idealize. In both he goes back to his childhood memories. But so far as *Huckleberry Finn* is concerned, the question is: does this idealization apply to Twain's handling of the black-white relationship in the novel?

11.5 MARK TWAIN

11.5.1 Chronology of Important Dates

1835 (November 30)	born Florida, Missouri
1839	The Clemens family moves to Hannibal, Missouri.
1847	Father, John Marshall Clemens died
1848-54	Worked as printer on various Hannibal newspapers.
1855-57	Worked as printer in St. Louis, New York, Philadelphia, etc.
1857-61	Cub-pilot and pilot on Missouri steamboats
1861-62	Prospector in Nevada



Sam Clemens, printer's apprentice, 1850.
(Courtesy *The Mark Twain Papers*,
The Bancroft Library, University
of California at Berkeley)



Olivia L. Clemens, 1885.
(Courtesy *The Mark Twain Papers*,
The Bancroft Library, University of
California at Berkeley)

1862-64	Worked as reporter and correspondent for Virginia City's Territorial Enterprise.
1864-66	Worked as reporter and freelance writer for San Francisco newspapers and magazines.
1865 (November)	"Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog" published in <i>Saturday Press</i> (New York).
1866 (March-August)	Correspondent in Sandwich Islands for <i>Sacramento Union</i>
1866-67	Correspondent for San Francisco <i>Alta California</i> (New York).
1867 (June-November)	Quaker City excursion to Europe and Palestine.

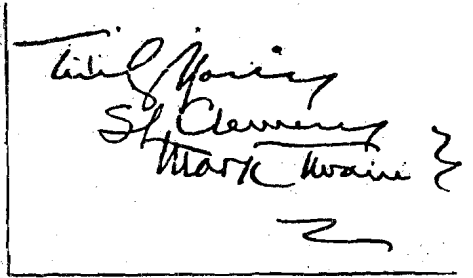
1867-69	Miscellaneous newspaper correspondence and lecturing.
1869	<i>The Innocents Abroad</i> published, met William Dean Howells.
1870	Married Olivia Langdon of Elmira, New York; settled in Buffalo as editor of <i>Express</i> .
1871	Moved to Hartford, Connecticut; continued lecture tours.
1872	<i>Roughing It</i> published; lecture tour in England.
1873	<i>The Gilded Age</i> a novel in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner; second lecture tour in England.
1875	<i>Sketches, New and Old</i>
1876	<i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>
1878-79	Extended Visit to Germany, Switzerland, and Italy.
1880	<i>A Tramp Abroad</i>
1881	Began investments in Paige typesetting machine.
1882	<i>The Prince and the Pauper</i>
1883	<i>Life on the Mississippi</i>
1884-85	Toured in a programme of platform readings with George W. Cable; established Charles L. Webster & Co., publishers.
1884 (December)	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> published in England.
1885	<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> published in America by his own firm.
1889	<i>A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court</i>
1891-95	Residence in Germany, Italy and France, with business trips back to the United States.
1894	Paige typesetter pronounced a failure; Webster company bankrupt.
1894	<i>The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson</i> (novel)
1895-96	Lecture tour through Southern hemisphere.
1896	<i>Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc</i>
1896 (August)	Favourite daughter Susy, dies of meningitis.
1897-1900	Residence in Vienna and London
1897	<i>Following the Equator</i>
1900	<i>The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg and Other Stories</i> ; took house in New York; active with Howells in anti-imperialism campaign.
1901	Litt.D. conferred by Yale University.
1902	LLD conferred by University of Missouri.
1903	Moved with family to Italy for his wife's health.
1904	Olivia Langdon Clemens died in Italy.
1906	<i>What is Man?</i>
1907	Litt.D. conferred by Oxford University
1908	Took up residence at Stormfield, near Reading, Connecticut.
1909 (December)	Daughter Jean died.
1910 (April 21)	Died at Stormfield; buried at Elmira.
1916	<i>The Mysterious Stranger</i>

11.5.2 Some Highlights of Mark Twain's Career

For important landmarks in Mark Twain's life, please refer to the chronology given above. But I should like to highlight some important facets of his career and achievements.

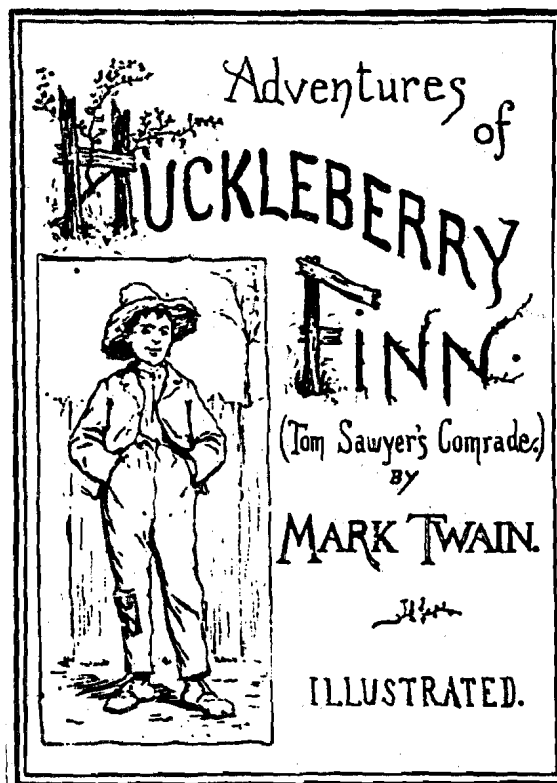
1. In the best tradition of Americans, Mark Twain was many things--a printer, riverboat pilot, journalist, humorist, lecturer, publisher, businessman, soldier, besides being a writer.
2. Mark Twain the pen name adopted by Samuel Langhorne Clemens is a nautical expression used by leadsmen on steamboats for a depth of water. It

literally means "two marks," which means two fathoms or 12 feet. The two-fathom depth is the dividing line between safe and dangerous shallow water for steamboats.

A handwritten signature in cursive script. The first line reads 'Will Morley'. The second line reads 'St. Clemens'. The third line reads 'Mark Twain' followed by a large closing curly brace '}' and a horizontal flourish below it.

Autograph of "Mark Twain"/Samuel L. Clemens

Sam assumed this public persona from early 1863. Thereafter almost all of his work appeared under the adopted name, though he generally inserted "Samuel L. Clemens" within brackets on the title pages of his books. The cover of the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn* however carries the pen-name Mark Twain only.



Cover of the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain was more than a mere pseudonym; it was a new identity, a new image that Clemens deliberately cultivated with the help of "well placed interviews and lecture tours, magazine articles and books and public gestures and good works. He achieved of fame, wealth, luxury; and friends of the highest circle. He also found fame's shortcomings: endless requests for money and autographs, the absence of privacy, and the loss of self to the public. This last, most subtle demon of fame proved inescapable. When Samuel Langhorne Clemens tired of being Mark Twain, he could not destroy him."

Mark Twain was no less a cultural phenomenon than a writer. He first attracted notice as a humorist and his comic stage performances were an integral part of his persona as much as what he wrote. Then he gradually changed into a distinguished writer and finally became a social philosopher. In other words the Mark Twain persona continued to grow and change.

3. Samuel Clemens wanted to be rich and famous. He wanted to replicate Artemus Ward's success as a humorist on the stage. Eventually he became one of the great speakers of the era and delivered nearly a thousand lectures and speeches in the persona of Mark Twain.

Background



True Williams captured Mark Twain's first-lecture stage fright so well that the publisher used this picture to promote *Roughing It*

During his lecture tours he came to India also in 1896 and spent two months here. During this period he visited Bombay, Allahabad, Varanasi, Calcutta, among other places.

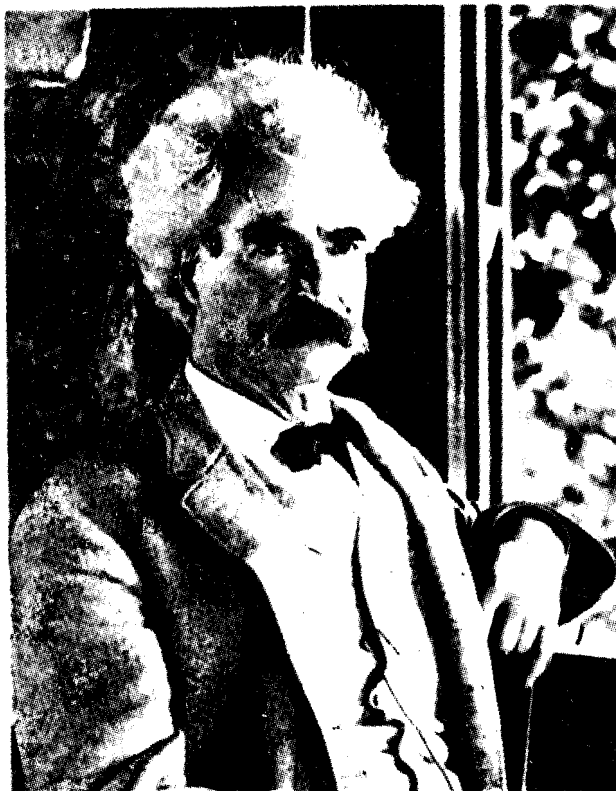
Mark Twain's writing and speaking career were closely intertwined. Just as his success as a writer drove him to the platform, his lecturing helped shape him as a writer and also helped him promote his books.

In 1884-85 he gave readings from *Huckleberry Finn* and other books of his. Mark Twain's writings give evidence of his awareness of an audience and the importance of the spoken word. This is particularly true of *Huckleberry Finn*.

11.5.3 A Note on Mark Twain's Writings

Mark Twain began his career as a humorist--as a writer of humorous sketches and as a humorous public speaker. (His career as a speaker has already been referred to.)

His retelling of a well-known tall tale *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras Country* first published in 1865 won him immediate recognition. Later he wrote several books of travel and adventure which included *Innocents Abroad* (1869), *Roughing It* (1872), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Following the Equator* (1897). Here we shall take a close look at four novels of his beginning with *The Gilded Age* (1873).



MARK TWAIN (1835-1910) was the first great American to visit India. He came in 1896 at the age of 60, as part of a round-the-world lecture tour. He was fascinated by the sights and sounds of India. In *Following the Equator*, an account of his world tour, Twain recorded his impressions. India, he said, was the "cradle of the human race, birthplace of human speech, mother of history, grandmother of legend, great-grandmother of tradition....the one land that all men desire to see, and having once seen, by even a glimpse, would not give that glimpse for all the shows of all the rest of the globe combined."

1. *The Gilded Age* (1873):

Written in collaboration with C.D. Warner the novel was a satire on the corruption and the obsessive greed of nineteenth century America. The novel began in a dinner conversation in 1872 during which Sam and his friend berated the novels (their) wives read for their entertainment. The wives responded by challenging the men to produce a better novel. The book which is a combination of satire, melodrama and sentimentality is now chiefly remembered for its title, which gave its name to the post-Civil War period that it describes.

2. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)

Twain's first solo venture into the territory of fiction, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) is rooted in the memories of his childhood in Hannibal.

Described by Mark Twain as a hymn to boyhood, it presents an idyllic but unsentimental picture of childhood in pre-Civil War rural America. With mischief, boy's pranks, and boy-girl romance, it combines melodramatic events like body snatching, robbery and murder, that match Tom and Huck's boyish imagination. The boy's adventures end on a triumphant note when Tom reveals in the court who the real murderer is, and when Tom and Huck discover the murderer's treasure and become rich. His next book *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) takes off from where he had left off in this book.

3. In *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), a scientific nineteenth century man finds himself in a primitive world of superstition, faith and ignorance symbolized by Arthurean England. Combining humour, wit, burlesque, literary parody and satire, the novel expresses Mark Twain's dislike of the past and of romance and his respect for American shrewdness and practicality. But though the novel satirizes the stupidity and superstition of Arthurian England, he does not spare his own age either. His attack on slavery is one example.
4. Mark Twain's last novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) resembles *Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) in being set in a small Missouri town modelled on Hannibal before the Civil War. It deals with two of his favourite themes, the first of which is the issue of slavery which he explores more honestly and also most directly. The second theme is the effect of environment on the formation of character which he studies by resorting to two completely unrelated lookalikes, slave and free babies, and the familiar plot device of the changling.

Twain's later writing became increasingly dark and bitter. Personal misfortunes came in the form of bankruptcy following the failure of business ventures. Then came a series of bereavements in the family. These misfortunes were responsible, partly at least, for the dark strain of pessimisms and despair in his writings.

Mark Twain is one of those few writers in the world who have been great and popular both. It is an achievement for him to have narrowed down the gap between the two adjectives. He possessed a marvellous ear for the way people talk and this gives his books an unequalled authenticity. His masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn* has been called the "fountainhead of American colloquial prose."

11.6 NEGRO SLAVERY IN AMERICA

Slavery goes back to prehistoric times. As we have read in Block I in America it started with the need of white settlers for cheap labour to work on plantations. This need was met by the transportation of great numbers of slaves from Africa. These persons of African origin who settled in America are now known as African Americans and the literature produced by them is called African American literature. You will be reading the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, an African American writer.

The following summary is meant to help you to understand the background of slavery in America and the attitudes surrounding the institution, and Mark Train's interaction with it.

11.6.1 Negro Slavery in the US: A historical View

1. Samuel Sewall, a Massachusetts jurist, was among the early humanitarians whose book *The Selling of Joseph* (1700) was an early appeal against slavery.

His personal solution for the problem of slavery was to pay wages to his slave.

2. George Washington (1732-99) wished to see the end of slavery by legislative authority and in his will emancipated his own slaves.
3. The most unforgettable condemnation of Negro slavery in early American literature occurs in Crèvecoeur's *Letters of An American Farmer* (1782). He said that whites had crucified the blacks and were devouring them.
4. Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), the author of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, was among those who saw an inconsistency between American democracy and Negro slavery. He also foresaw the end of slavery. He inherited slaves and although he freed five at his death, he also left many slaves to his descendants.
5. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century an elaborate ideology developed in the South in defense of slavery. Among the defenders was John C. Calhoun (1782-1850) US Vice-President (1825-32) and political philosopher who referred to ancient Athens and asserted that slavery offered the firmest basis for splendid culture. Some other beliefs were: "The Bible nowhere condemns, and throughout recognizes slavery;" "Man is born to subjection The proclivity of the natural man is to domineer or to be subservient."
6. The Constitution of the US effective in 1789 permitted the abolition of foreign slave trade in 1808.
7. Colonization seemed a significant part of the antislavery movement in the 1820's. The Congress gave money for settling free Negroes and freed slaves to Liberia on the West coast of Africa.
8. In 1829 William Lloyd Garrison who was only 24 started publishing *The Genius*. His denunciation of a slave trader earned him a term in prison and he became the first American "immediatist," taking the position that although slavery could not be ended immediately, it was the moral duty of good people to act and talk as though it should and could. He started publishing, *The Liberator* in 1831. The journal closed in December 1865.
9. There have been several slave rebellions. A major rebellion composed of from sixty to eighty slaves was led by Nat Turner in Virginia in August 1831 in which fifty-seven whites died. This increased the southern fear of emancipation doctrines. Nat Turner dictated his confessions in prison in 1831.
10. Among the numerous runaways from the slave states into the North the most notable was Frederick Douglass (1817-95), a Maryland-born mulatto who escaped to New York in 1838 and became an abolition activist. His *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), became a classic among slave narratives. He was a friend of Mark Twain's father-in-law who was an abolitionist.
11. Under the Missouri Compromise (1850), Missouri was admitted as a slave state but Maine came in as a free state, thus keeping the balance between the North and the South in the Congress.
12. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 made it a crime not to report anyone suspected of being an escaped slave.

13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, a white woman, wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to arouse public sentiments against slavery, particularly in the northeast.

The book was an immediate success selling over 300,000 copies in its first year.

14. Negro slavery came to an end in USA on 18 December 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. The freeing of the slaves, however, did not mean the end of racism, thus fulfilling Alex de Tocqueville's prophecy that the abolition of slavery would not mean the end of the negro problem.
15. The Reconstruction of the South following the end of the Civil War (which meant restoring its proper relationship with the Union) aimed, among other things, at assuring the newly emancipated Negro not only his freedom but his political and civil rights. The Reconstruction collapsed in 1877 with the recalling of Federal troops from the South. With this came to an end any serious effort to protect the Negro in his constitutional rights. In the words of W.E.B. Du Bois - "The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again towards slavery."
16. Jim Crow is the name of the policy of segregating and discriminating against Blacks especially by laws passed in the South in the late 19th century. This policy was not seriously challenged until after World War II.
17. It was on 19 May 1954 that the US Supreme Court held that it was unconstitutional for the public schools to segregate the races.

11.6.2 Mark Twain and Slavery

Mark Twain grew up in a white slave-holding society in which he probably heard the word 'nigger' more often than any other term for African Americans.

Born into a slave culture Sam assimilated the belief that difference in skin colour meant a difference not only in caste but in fundamental rights. In his Autobiography Mark Twain says: "In my schooldays I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local paper said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it."

But Sam had a special affection for Uncle Dan'l, a slave at his Uncle's farm at Florida, Missouri. Uncle Dan'l was wise and tender and it was there that "I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of his fine qualities."

His father John Marshall Clemens owned a slave. In 1841 he sat on a circuit court jury that sent three abolitionists who had ushered some slaves north to freedom to the penitentiary. He had received his greatest accolade for his unyielding attitude to slavery.

Sam's father-in-law Jervis Langdon on the other hand was a noted abolitionist and a friend of Frederick Douglass, an ex-slave and a journalist and a leading abolitionist. The father-in-law played an important part in shaping up Sam's anti-slavery attitude later.

Mark Twain spent every summer for nineteen years from 1871 to 1889 at Elmira, New York. It was here in 1874 that he heard from the cook Mary Ann Cord, an ex-slave the story of her separation from her husband and children at the auction block and her eventual reunion with her younger child. Mark Twain found it "a shameful taste of wrofig and hardship" and published it in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The story

obviously left a lasting impression on Mark Twain's mind for it demonstrated to him that blacks cared for their children as whites did.



Quarry Farm, Elmira, New York, (Courtesy *The Mark Twain Papers*,
The Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley)

The story was to find an echo in *A Connecticut Yankee* and also in *Huckleberry Finn* (Chapter 23) where Huck reports Jim mourning his separation from his children. Curiously the entry under Negroes in the American Cyclopedia stated: "Negroes are comparatively insensible to pain." According to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, the most important thing Mary Ann Cord taught Twain was that the vernacular--in her case, the ungrammatical dialect of a woman with no formal education--could move a narrative forward dramatically and effectively" (p.88).

Shelley Fisher Fishkin draws attention to a letter written by Mark Twain on 24 December 1885 (the year of *Huckleberry Finn*'s publication in the US) to Dean Francis Wayland of the Yale Law School agreeing to finance the education of a promising black student Warner T. McGuinn. The letter throws light on Mark Twain's views on racism: "We have ground the manhood out of them [the blacks], and shame is ours, not theirs, and we should pay for it" (p.101).

Mark Twain wrote an anti-lynching editorial entitled "Only a Nigger" in the *Buffalow Express* in 1869 in which he explored the subject of racism satirically using the rhetoric of the bigot ironically. Here is a sample: "Only a 'nigger' killed by mistake--that is all . . . But mistakes will happen, even in the conduct of the best regulated and most high-toned mobs, and surely there is no good reason why Southern gentlemen should worry themselves with useless regrets, so long as only an innocent 'nigger' is hanged, or roasted or knotted to death, now and then . . . what are the lives of a few 'niggers' in comparison with the impetuous instincts of a proud and fiery race? (Shelley Fisher Fishkin, p. 82).

But the charge that *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book remains. During the 1950s the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) called for *Huckleberry Finn*'s banning from schools and libraries.

11.6.3 Writing about and by African Americans before *Huckleberry Finn*

Novelist David Bradley, author of *The Chaneyville Incident* refers to *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) as "the First Nigger Novel" and holds that it is a work that prefigured the fiction of African American writers in the twentieth century including his own (See Shelley Fishkin, p.110). But Harriet Beecher Stowe's immensely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) came first. With docile Uncle Tom as the central figure, it

preached the evils of slavery to a nation that needed to learn Christian humility. Recent African American scholars have however questioned the image of the submissive Tom as a role model for African Americans.

Background

African American literature appeared in many forms in the early 1800's. White abolitionists encouraged the writing and publication of slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs. Nat Turner who led a slave rebellion in 1831 told his life story in prison called *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831). Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) was an autobiography.

William Well Brown's *The Escape or a Leap for Freedom* (1858) was the first African American play. And Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) was the first African American novel in America.

I would like you to dip into *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and also sample some of the others. Anthologies which could be consulted are mentioned in the Section on **Further Reading**.

11.6.4 American Fiction: The Rise of Realism

The two terms that are used to describe American prose fiction of the nineteenth century are the romance and the novel. Both are large hold-all terms, difficult to define precisely.

Writers like Cooper, Hawthorne and Melville who wrote before the great divide of the Civil War of 1861-65 have been loosely grouped under the rubric of romance writers. The romance writers were mainly preoccupied with man alone or with man and nature rather than with man in relation to society. Their concerns were spiritual rather than social, personal rather than political. The result was a preference for lonely, grand, unsociable heroes and characters. In terms of form this led to recourse to myth and symbolism and allegory.

On the other hand Mark Twain, W.D. Howells and Henry James who came after produced novels that stood in a direct relation to the society in which they lived.

The realistic novel of which Mark Twain was the great exemplar deals with life as it is lived. The urge to portray things as they are and as they happen is really paramount in the post-Civil War period and this accounts for important developments in American fictional structure and prose style towards realism.

However, these two categories are not exclusive. Henry James in fact called the disjunction between the two as a 'clumsy separation.' It is with this commingling of romance and realism in mind that Richard Chase has used the term romance novel to describe the American fiction of the 19th century. Professor A.N. Kaul's term for it is Critical Romance. And he has demonstrated that despite Hawthorne's repeated claims to be a writer of romances, three volumes of his fiction namely, *The Scarlet Letter*, *The House of Seven Gables* and *The Blithedale Romance* examine some of the issues of the modern world like "democracy, individual freedom, the status of women, the problems and possibilities of liberal democracy as well as socialism." On the other hand, *Huckleberry Finn* has, according to him, a strong element of romance in it, symbolized by the raft which becomes a "home" and where "you feel free and easy and comfortable."

Of the three writers of novels, though Twain was the most popular, Howells was the most influential. Howells was a prolific writer and his novels of the 1880's and 1890's were particularly realistic. As a critic he called for a literary realism that would treat ordinary Americans truthfully. He held that with this truth "the book

cannot be wicked and cannot be weak; and without it all graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of nature."

The third novelist, Henry James, was a realist of the inner life and believed that the literary artist should not merely hold a mirror to the surface of social life but probe the psychological and moral nature of human beings deeply.

Together these three novelists brought realism to maturity, perfected vernacular style and explored the literary possibilities of presenting inner life, leaving the novel open for further experimentation in regard to themes and techniques.

11.7 LET US SUM UP

Any literary work must be seen both in relation to the life experience and values of its author and to the sociocultural content of the times in which it remains firmly rooted. This is crucially important in the case of *Huckleberry Finn* which deals with the sensitive issue of slavery.

By the time he had come to write this novel, Mark Twain had left Hannibal and had settled at Elmira, New York and had outgrown his slave-holding heritage. His friend William Dean Howells said that he had become "the most desouthernized southerner" that he had known. However, Twain's presentation of slavery and the language used for it have been faulted and the book has been objected to as being racist. The 'adventures' of Huck and Tom in the book may have come to an end but not the adventures of the book.

The background information about the author and the age provided here should help you to probe the issues raised in this Unit, particularly the writer's treatment of slavery, further.

Another remarkable thing about *Huckleberry Finn* is its innovative use of dialect by the semi-literate 14 year old boy Huck as the central consciousness in the novel.

11.8 GLOSSARY

Abolitionist	one who favours abolishing the practice of Negro slavery.
huckleberry	nineteenth century slang for an inconsequential person. Originally it is the name of a variety of deep-blue edible berry native to North America.
lynching	Putting a person to death for an alleged offense without a legal trial. The practice particularly prevalent in 19th century America is probably named after Col. Charles Lynch (1736-96), American Justice for Peace and farmer, who presided over illegal self-constituted courts that held summary trials and awarded punishments to offenders without the due process of law. Lynching was given to both whites and blacks. For an attempted lynching in <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> see chapters 21 and 22.
nigger	a pejorative slang term for a non-white person; derived from the Spanish word negro.

tar and feathers smear with tar and then cover with feathers as a punishment. This punishment is given to the king and the duke in chapter 33 of the novel.

Background

territory here, the still uncivilized frontier.

American Civil War (1861-65) The war between the northern US State (usually known as the Union) and the Confederate States of the South was fought between April 1861 and April 1865. The Southern States had seceded from the Federal Union over the issue of slavery and States rights. In the war they offered military resistance to the superior industrial strength of the north for four years but the main Confederate Army surrendered in April 1865.

The war was a kind of watershed in American history as it was in Mark Twain's life. It formally ended slavery and accelerated western expansion. It temporarily destroyed the South's economy and estranged the South from the rest of the Union still more. Besides, it increased the interest of the rest of the country in the South. This helped to increase the popularity of Mark Twain's books set in the South.

11.9 QUESTIONS

1. How many times does the writer use the offensive word *nigger* in the novel?
2. What is your own response to the novel? Do you like it? Why?

11.10 FURTHER READING

Text

Clemens, Samuel Langhorne. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Thomas Cooley. Second Edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977.

Besides the text, the book contains background sources and criticism.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Jane Ogborn. Cambridge: Univ. of Cambridge Press, 1995.

Other Books

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*. New York, 1997.

Inge, M. Thomas. *Huck Finn among the critics: A Centennial Selection 1884-1984*. Washington: US Information Agency, 1984.
Contains Background, Early Responses, Modern criticism and information on the novel in pictures and in film and an annotated checklist of criticism.

Sattlemeyer, Robert and J. Donald Crowley, eds. *One Hundred Years of "Huckleberry Finn": Centennial Essays*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.

Contains a 14-page long useful introductory essay entitled "The Continuing Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Other Critical Essays."

UNIT 12 *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* AND ITS NARRATIVE

Structure

- 12.0 Objectives
- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Some Key Questions
- 12.3 Preliminary Information about *Huckleberry Finn*
 - 12.3.1 Sources
 - 12.3.2 Composition
 - 12.3.3 Time and Setting
 - 12.3.4 Mississippi
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- 12.5 Distinctive Features of the Narrative
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 - 12.5.2 First Person Eye Witness Boy Narrator
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- 12.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.7 Glossary
- 12.8 Questions
- 12.9 Further Readings

12.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit has a two-fold objective:

- i) to give you some preliminary information about the novel i.e. its sources, composition, time and setting; and
- ii) by focussing on the narrative examine how the narrative technique adopted in the novel contributes to the total meaning of it.

12.1 INTRODUCTION

The study of narrative has assumed a new importance in recent times. Human beings have always liked to hear or tell stories. But narratives are no longer restricted to prose fiction. The word narrative has emerged as a large hold-all term that includes T.V. newsreaders' 'story' about, let us say, Kashmir, comics, ad films, inscriptions on tombstones even mime. As Roland Barthes says, "narratives may be represented in the medium of language, spoken or written, in images fixed or moving, in gestures or a combination of these." Further, "narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, mime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation." In other words narratives are ubiquitous, surrounding us on all sides. To use Barthes' words again, "narrative is

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international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself". No wonder narratives are now considered central to human culture.

Explaining the primacy of narrative, Jonathan Culler says that stories are "the main way we make sense of things, whether in thinking of our lives as a progression leading somewhere or in telling ourselves what is happening in the world." It is in recognition of the important part that narrative plays in human life that a whole new branch of knowledge has grown round narrative and narration, called narratology. Apart from Jonathan Culler and Roland Barthes, some of the names connected with theories on the subject are Bakhtin, Northrop Frye, A.J. Greimas, Robert Kellog, and Robert Scholes. In case you feel interested, you could as a first step dip into *Recent Theories of Narrative* by Wallace Martin (Cornell University Press, 1986) and some other books suggested in the Section in *Further Readings*.

It is important for you to realize that our study of narrative in *Huckleberry Finn* will need to take into account all the factors that influenced the telling of the tale.

12.2 SOME KEY QUESTIONS

While approaching the issue of narrative, I would like you to recall the novels you have read as part of your course or otherwise and ask the following questions:

- i) Who is the narrator in each one of them? Is the author and the narrator the same person? Or are they different? Is the story told in the first person/third person?
- ii) What advantages do you see in the writer's choice of the narrator? Ask these questions regarding *Huckleberry Finn* also as you read the novel.

12.3 PRELIMINARY INFORMATION ABOUT *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

12.3.1 Sources

Some characters and episodes in *Huckleberry Finn* have been traced to their sources in books that Mark Twain had apparently read and in his childhood experiences. For instance, Jim's original was a middle-aged slave, Uncle Dan'l by name, who lived in Sam's Uncle's farm in Florida, Missouri where Sam spent a great deal of his time. "... the most memorable servant of the Quarleses [Sam's Uncle's family] was middle-aged Uncle Dan'l, sensible, honest, patient, the children's comrade in adventure, their adviser and ally in time of trouble." It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race," wrote Mark, "and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities" (Dixon Wecter, 271). Huck himself was drawn from a childhood friend of his, Tom Blankenship. Like Huck Finn, Tom was ill-fed, an outrageous wreck of rags, dirty, ignorant, cheerful, carefree, and altogether enviable, being the only really independent person--boy or man--in the community . . . The woods and the waters around Hannibal were his education. Living by his wits, suspicious of every attempt to civilize him, . . . he had none of the unimportant virtues and all the essential ones. The school of hard knocks had given him a tenacious grasp on reality, despite his faith in dreams, omens and superstitions. But it had not toughened him into cynicism or crime, and he had as good a heart as ever any boy had" (Dixon Wecter, 276).

Huck's attempt to delude Jim into believing he has been dreaming during the fog is modelled on the story of Pike told by William Wright who was a friend of Twain's. The feud between Shepherdsons and Grangerfords and the shooting of Baggs by Col. Sherburn were similarly modelled on real life incidents.

12.3.2 Composition

Huckleberry Finn took eight years to write. Mark Twain began writing on what he called "Huckleberry Finn's Autobiography" in the summer of 1876 and after 400 pages he liked it "only tolerably well." He laid it aside for about 3 years, restarted writing it (Chapter 17-21) in the winter of 1879-80 and the following summer and then came back to it in the summer of 1883.

Mark Twain wanted to write a boy's book, a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*. The title of Huck's book reminds us that he is Tom's comrade but he also wanted it to be unlike *Tom Sawyer* by using a first-person narrator: "I shall take a boy of twelve and run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer--he would not be a good character for it." Clearly he was planning a book that was generically different from its predecessor. And generically different *Huckleberry Finn* is from *Tom Sawyer*.

Huckleberry Finn begins in the vein of *Tom Sawyer* but the adventures of Tom and Huck continue only for a short while--till the third chapter at the end of which Tom drops off. With the entry of Pap Finn the narrative takes a sharp turn. Soon Huck and Jim begin their journey to freedom on a raft down the Mississippi.



Pap Finn wads in Huck's room to surprise him
in chapter 5 of *Huckleberry Finn*

Tom reappears in the last section of the book but as I shall try to argue later Tom's reintroduction is meant to be a satiric comment on those who like Tom delay Jim's achievement of freedom for whimsical reasons of their own. Unlike *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn* is more than a children's book, it is a comic masterpiece for adults.

and a profound novel that explores such universal themes as freedom and bondage, race relations, conscience, greed and human cruelty.

Narrative

12.3.3 Time and Setting

The novel is set in anti-bellum America, which means America of the pre-Civil War period, more precisely forty or fifty years before it was published in 1884.

The settings are the riverside town which was Samuel Clemens' boyhood home, Hannibal, represented in the novel as St. Petersburg, his Uncle Quarles' farm he visited during his holidays which reappears as Silas Phelps' plantation near Pikesville, and the Mississippi river on which he was a steamboat pilot as a young man. The book is thus firmly rooted in Sam's early experiences. As he once wrote: "I confine myself to the boy life out on the Mississippi, because that had a peculiar charm for me and not because I was not familiar with other aspects of life."



Mark Twain's last visit to his boyhood home in 1902. (Courtesy, Library of Congress, Pictures & Prints Division)

Does the book then merely look back at an idyllic period of childhood and young manhood? It doesn't because during the 1840's the question of slavery was a most important issue in the United States particularly in the Middle West--his own state Missouri was a slave owning State and figures as such in the novel. And the problem has not been entirely resolved yet. So the novel is not merely nostalgic--it is Janus-faced looking back and looking towards the future.

12.3.4 Mississippi

Since the Mississippi river figures centrally in *Huckleberry Finn*, a short note on a few physical details about it and Mark Twain's relationship with it would be in order.



Map of the area covered in the novel, drawn by Charles Dibner, *Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, 1943. "Everyman's Library." Courtesy Elsevier-Dutton Publishing Co., Inc.

"The river flows through over 1,250,000 square miles and 31 States. It rises in northern Minnesota's Lake Itasca, flows due south about 2,350 miles and empties into the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans, Louisiana. Virtually the entire river is navigable."

Hannibal where Sam grew up is situated on the banks of the Mississippi. He lived there from 1839 to 1853. Except for two short spells, Twain lived on or within sight of the river from the time he was four until he was 25. Later he worked in river towns. In 1875 he became an apprentice steamboat pilot and spent four years on the Mississippi itself. In 1861 he revisited the river at least 8 times though he was never to live on it again. In June 1902 he and a childhood friend John Briggs climbed Hannibal's Cardiff Hill and saw the river for the last time. Later, recalling this moment he said that he "was seeing now the most enchanting river-view the planet could furnish. I never knew it when I was a boy; it took an educated eye that had travelled on the globe to know and appreciate it."

Naturally, the river figures prominently in some of his writing. He wrote a memoir of his apprentice pilot days serialized in *The Atlantic Monthly* which later reappeared in an expanded form as *Life on the Mississippi*. The river's presence is felt throughout in *Tom Sawyer* and is even more central to *Huckleberry Finn*. Though Huck and Jim are on the river aboard their raft in only about a fifth of its 43 chapters, the river is either mentioned or referred to in almost every chapter.

A question to ask while you are reading the novel is "How would you characterize the experiences that Huck and Jim undergo while on the river? Bountiful? Terrible? Or both? Does it fulfil Jim's quest for freedom? Or does it hinder it?"

12.3.5 St. Petersburg

The fictional town in this novel as also in *Tom Sawyer* was clearly modelled on Mark Twain's hometown of Hannibal in northeastern Missouri.

Find out how many chapters are set in the town.

12.3.6 Jackson's Island

Fictional uninhabited island on the Mississippi towards the Illinois shore, about three miles down St. Petersburg. Huck flees to the island to escape his brutal drunken father and Jim has run away to this place for fear of being sold by his owner Miss Watson. Inevitably Huck runs into Jim and they both join forces to begin their journey on a raft down the river. Read Chapter 9 for a description of the island.

12.4 THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

I hope you have been able to read the novel by now. I should like to introduce this section by recalling two lines from Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*.

Referring to the story of the 'murder' of his father, by the runaway Christy, the girls say:

Susan: That's a grand story

Honor: He tells it lovely.

Do you see which factors are important in a narration or storytelling? Clearly three factors are important in the process of narration: the teller of the tale, events of the tale, and how the teller presents these events. A fourth element is the audience. The choice of the events that compose a tale and how they are presented are influenced by

a number of considerations including the age, sex, race, social status of both the teller and the audience. The conventions governing the narration and the language used in the narration are also important.

But before we analyse the narrative we shall do well to consider the narrative structure of the novel. The novel is episodic in structure. It could be divided into three parts.

Part I: Prelude to the Journey of Escape

The first eleven chapters could be grouped together as they are all set in or near St. Petersburg.

It is not often that a character in a literary text takes over as a narrator in another text. This is what happens in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The novel begins in the vein of *Tom Sawyer* with Huckleberry Finn introducing himself as the narrator and recounting the events of the earlier book. But Tom is dropped off in chapter 3 and along with him is dropped the romantic element in the form of his attempt to form a gang of robbers. There is a sharp change in the narrative in chapter 4 when Pap Finn, Huck's drunken father, is introduced. Huck who cannot stand the Widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson's attempts to 'civilize' him cannot stand the disturbing presence of his father even more. He fakes his own death in the cabin where his father has confined him and escapes to Jackson's Island. Separately Miss Watson's slave Jim too escapes to the Island on learning of her plan to sell him down the river for 800 dollars. Both the fugitives meet on the Island and Huck promises to Jim never to give him away.

On hearing that people are after Jim, both decide to escape on a raft down the Mississippi in quest of freedom. These eleven chapters help prepare the groundwork for the story of the great escape by Huck and Jim.

Part II: Journey on a Raft



Loading the Loot onto the Raft.

The next twenty chapters (Ch.12-31) are the central part concerned with the journey of Huck and Jim down the Mississippi first by themselves and later in the unwelcome company of two frauds, the king and the duke.

Narrative

The journey is interrupted several times with episodes on the shore in many of which the two frauds take a part.

A most important focus in this part is Huck's relationship with Jim which involves his wrestling with his conscience.

First Huck and Jim run into a wrecked steamboat called *Walter Scott*. Huck tries to help its trapped inmates but without success. Later both agree not to get mixed up with such adventures.



Leaving the Wreck

Huck discovers that Jim does not have a good opinion of royalty. After a storm he plays a prank on Jim but apologises to him later. Because of the fog Jim's plan to escape to freedom via Cairo and Ohio river go awry. As Huck listens to Jim's joy on his approaching freedom there is a conflict in his mind but ultimately he throws in his lot with Jim. Immediately afterwards he saves Jim from slave hunters by putting them on a false scent. Later they escape being mown by a steamboat.

The adventures on the shore begin with Huck's encounter with the Grangerfords who have a long-standing but pointless feud with the Shepherdsons in which many of them get killed.

From chapter 19 onwards the two frauds take control of the raft. Their adventures include posing as a reformed pirate and printer, doing Shakespeare's plays and most of all impersonating the English brothers of a local man Peter Wilks who has recently died. In this last trick they almost manage to fool a whole town.



"I Am the Rightful Duke of Bridgewater."



"I Am a King!"

Huck discovers that the king has sold Jim for 40 dollars to Silas Phelps. His guilt over helping the runaway slave Jim resurfaces and he writes a letter to Miss Watson

confessing everything. But he finally tears off the letter and is now determined to help win back Jim's freedom. Three points of focus in this part are:

- i) Jim's plans to escape to freedom go awry because of the fog and they move deeper into slave territory.
- ii) Huck successfully wrestles with his conscience over being a party to Jim's escape.
- iii) Huck is an unwilling witness to the spectacle of cruelty, selfishness and greed during the adventures on shore.

Part III: Freeing of Jim

The last part consisting of 12 chapters (Ch.32 to Ch.43) is mainly concerned with Tom's over-elaborate plan to free Jim or what he calls 'evasion'. All action takes place in and around Pikesville.

Huck goes to the Phelps farm in search of Jim but is mistaken by Sally Phelps, Tom Sawyer's aunt, for Tom. Guessing that Tom is expected at the farm, Huck makes for the town on the pretext of fetching his luggage and meets Tom on the way. Huck explains the situation to Tom and goes back to the farm along with his [Tom's] luggage.

When Tom comes he is received as his brother Sid. Huck tells him of his plan to free Jim but is both shocked and surprised when the respectable Tom agrees to be a 'nigger stealer.'

Huck is unhappy to see the ignominious exit that the two frauds make covered with tar and feathers. Tom correctly guesses that Jim is held prisoner in a cabin. From this point on Tom takes over in planning and directing an elaborate operation of escape for Jim.

In the escape Tom is injured by a shot in the calf. Leaving Tom in the raft, Huck fetches a kindly old doctor to treat his injury.

Tom's disappearance causes considerable worry to Uncle Silas. Soon Tom is brought home by the old doctor and Jim is taken prisoner. The doctor reveals that Jim instead of running away nursed Tom back to health. Tom now discloses that Miss Watson had released Jim two months back in her will. Knowing that Aunt Sally plans to civilize him Huck decides to light out for the territory and remain a free person.

Does *Huckleberry Finn* have a unified structure? In what way?

I have used the question form in the sub-title for two reasons--because in one of the two epigraphs to the book Mark Twain warns the readers not to look for a plot in the novel or else they will be lost; and secondly because there is a continuing debate about the issue of unity and coherence in the book.

Mark Twain has been described as being temperamentally incapable of sustained concentration required for tight and well-developed plots. According to Bernard DeVoto, he "was not a systematic thinker." And he did not work on the novel systematically. It has also been suggested that the freedom of the picaresque form suited his talent ideally. But the episodic structure implicit in the picaresque form notwithstanding, the novel has been credited with possessing internal unity and coherence. In fact as has been suggested earlier Mark Twain's use of the modified form of picaresque narrative serves his purpose best--for it allows him to make social criticism through the eye witness first person boy narrator and at the same time focus

on Huck's moral growth. Apart from thematic unity, the various episodes are held together by the unifying voice of the narrator and his point of view.

The structure though episodic is not without a sense of design. The journey on the river which constitutes the core of the novel is both preceded and succeeded by events on shore in St. Petersburg and Pikesville respectively. The river or the road that moves itself also lends a kind of unity to the structure by controlling the journey and taking Huck and Jim in a particular direction. As T.S. Eliot says, the river will not let them land at Cairo, where Jim could have reached freedom; it is the River that separates them . . . and the River that reunites them. Moreover, as Lionel Trilling suggests in his essay "The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*," "the hero's departure from the river and his return to it compose a subtle and significant pattern."

The episodes themselves are stitched together by the recurrent pattern of symbolic death and rebirth. The pattern begins when Huck fakes his own death in order to escape his drunken father's control and continues till the end when he has to find his own identity--Who am I? at the Phelps's place. The disclosure that Tom's Aunt Sally has mistaken him for Tom, makes Huck feel relieved: "it was like being born again, I was so glad to find who I was" (p. 252). This pattern of symbolic death and rebirth and the endless yarnspinning that it involves are essential to Huck's survival and freedom and moral growth.

The ending of the novel has been a subject of debate among critics. But since it involves the thematic concerns of the novel also it would be better to discuss the question later in this study material. But I would like you to re-read the ending and form your own response to it. Keep the following question in mind as you do so.

1. Does the ending represent a falling off? If so, in what way?

12.5 DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE NARRATIVE

12.5.1 Picaresque form

The structure of *Huckleberry Finn* is firmly rooted in the tradition of the simple linear form of the picaresque narrative which goes back to Petronius's *Satiricon*. In *The Nature of Narrative*, Scholes and Kellogg say: "In picaresque narrative a rogue tells the story of his own experiences in the contemporary world, usually involving his travels from place to place and through a wide spectrum of society. The main interests of picaresque fiction are social and satirical" (p. 73-74). This pattern Mark Twain has modified to suit his artistic purpose.

His central character-narrator is of course not a rogue and his is not a road journey but a journey down the Mississippi. On the contrary he is a poor white boy who living on the fringe of respectable society serves as a moral touchstone in the course of his journey and whose lengthiest encounter in the novel is with a pair of rogues, among others.

Scholes and Kellogg suggest that the picaresque narrative could be turned outward to expose the weaknesses of the society or it could be turned inward in which case it became a confession and recorded the moral regeneration of the narrator. *Huckleberry Finn* is remarkable because it blends both: it is a severe indictment of the corruption, moral decay and intellectual impoverishment of the society to which Huck is a witness but it is also an unpretentious account of his moral growth vis-a-vis his relations with Jim.

12.5.2 The first person eye witness boy narrator

The narrative in *Huckleberry Finn* is based on realism and truth. Mark Twain achieves this effect principally by using a first person eye-witness boy narrator. This

device ensures greater reliability. The fact that the boy narrator is a character living on the periphery of society without any 'respectable' ambitions of his own, together with his moral sensitivity makes his narrative more objective and more truthful.

Narrative

In the first paragraph of the novel itself Huck the narrator separates himself from the author of *Tom Sawyer* who at times tampered with truth.

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventure of Tom Sawyer* but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There were things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.

By distancing himself for Mark Twain, Huck is making space for himself as a truthful teller of his story.

12.5.2.1 The Spoken Idiom of the Narrative

The opening paragraph also identifies a key feature of the narrative, namely, the spoken idiom used in it.

"The oral quality of Huck's written narrative sets it apart from some other first person narratives. Though Huck is composing a book--and he is aware of it (. . . if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't tackled it and ain't a-going to no more.") he adopts the style of a person speaking to other persons. (The use of the vernacular idiom which has won extravagant praise from Hemingway and others will be discussed in a later Unit.) But it is important to note that Huck as narrator shows an awareness of the presence of an audience/reader. Evidence of this which is widespread in the narrative includes the use of the pronoun 'you'.

Moreover Huck's language has a recognizable oral quality marked by the frequent use of run-on sentences with the help of "and", "and then" and so on, by what Walter Ong in his book *Orality and Literacy* (1982) calls the additive oral style.

The widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it. She put me in them new clothes again, and I couldn't do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up. Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time (p.11).

The conversational idiom used here helps in producing the intended effect of simplicity and innocence and naivete which is in sharp contrast to the inflated language of the tricksters in the novel. The spoken idiom used by Huck to narrate also makes the transition to dramatic presentation easier. Mark Twain sustains the tone of the spoken idiom almost throughout the novel which closes with Huck Finn signing off as yours truly in the manner of a letter to the reader.

Apart from signifying the narrator's awareness of the audience/readers' presence this direct address and more especially the spoken idiom help to make the discourse more intimate and more credible. A similar use of the pronoun 'you' can be found in chapter 18 where Huck is describing Col. Grangerford:

His hands was long and thin, and every day of his life he put on a clean shirt and full suit for head to foot made out of linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it; . . . He was as kind as he could be - You could feel that, you know, and so you had confidence.

He sustains the tone of the spoken word throughout the novel which closes with Huck Finn signing off as yours truly in the manner of a letter to the reader.

787
me + civilize me + I
can't stand it, I been there
before.

The end, yours truly Huck Finn.

The final page of the manuscript of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (Courtesy the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, Buffalo, New York.)

I want you to keep track of any other evidence of the narrator's awareness of the readers.

12.5.2.2 Density of Narration

Huck's narration is circumstantial, dense with details. Here is a sample from Huck's description of how he faked his own death:

Now I thought of something else. So I went and got the bag of meal and my old saw out of the canoe and fetched them to the house. I took the bag to where it used to stand, and ripped a hole in the bottom of it with the saw, for there weren't no knives and forks on the place--pap done everything with his clasp-knife about the cooking. Then I carried the sack about a hundred yards across the grass and through the willows east of the house, to shallow lake that was five mile wide and full of rushes - and ducks, too, you migh say, in the season . . . (7:47, italics added).

The circumstantiality of the narrator including details of different kinds attests to the power of observation of the eye-witness and inspires the readers' confidence. Huck puts this skill to good use, while faking stories to lull suspicion and put people on the wrong scent. When the king and the duke ask Huck about Jim, he tells them a sob story about the death of everyone in the family except "pa and my brother, Ike, and how pa went to live with Uncle Ben who got a little one-horse place forty four mile below Orleans (20:148)." But while narrative density is used by Huck to survive in a world full of violence and fraud, the duke and the king have the same skill to deceive and cheat others.

12.5.3 Modes of Presentation

A careful study of the narrative reveals that Huck the narrator is telling his story some time after the events have happened, though how much time has elapsed it is difficult to say. Since Huck is the original experiencer of those events it is possible to distinguish between Huck the protagonist and Huck the narrator. Much of the narrative strategy depends on how the author handles the chronological gap. At times the narrator self consciously refers to his narration. In chapter 7 for instance, he talks to the readers about the inadequacy of his language to describe a scene ("you know what I mean - I don't know the words to put it in" p. 48). In chapter 18 he refers to the need to trim his narrative ("I don't want to talk much about the next day. I reckon I'll cut it pretty short", p. 134). Such occasions are however few and far between.

Principally the narrator either proceeds with the narrative of the past but bobbing up at regular intervals with reflections/comments in the present; or reports the events verbatim withholding his identity completely. A combination of both these modes helps Mark Twain to break monotony and sustain interest at the same time ensuring greater realism and credibility.

The first mode could be illustrated by the following excerpt:

Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. Here she was a bothering about Moses, which was no kin to her, and no use to anybody . . . (1:12).

The unselfconscious care with which the narrative moves between past and present and back into the past helps keep it flowing. Notice also that the narrator's reflections or comments are brief, which also contributes to keeping the narrative unclogged.

Here is a slightly longer piece of reflection when Huck gets separated from Jim in the fog.

I kept quiet, with my ears cocked, about fifteen minutes, I reckon. I was floating along, of course, four or five mile an hour; but you don't ever think of that. No, you feel like you are laying dead still on the water and if a little glimpse of a snag slips by, you don't think to yourself how fast you're going, but you catch your breath and think, my! how that snag's tearing along. If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in a fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try to find it once--you'll see (15:100-01).

Huck uses the present tense as narrator not only to reflect or remark or comment but also to indicate his intense involvement while describing past events. This is clear from the two sentences immediately following the excerpt quoted above:

Next, for about a half an hour, I whoops now and then; at last I hear the answer a long ways off, and tries to follow it, but I couldn't do it, and directly I judged . . . (p. 101).

Huck's use of the historical present is in fact habitual and helps cut down the distance between the narrative and the readers and increase the dramatic quality of it.

This brings us to the second mode or what we could call the dramatic mode of presentation in which Huck's experiences come through to us directly without having passed through his consciousness. Huck's meeting with Judge Thatcher in chapter 4 is an example. His meeting with Jim on Jackson's Island is even more to the point. Here is part of the narration:

By and by Jim says:

But looky here, Huck, who wuz it dat 'uz killed in dat shanty, ef it warn't you?

Then I told him the whole thing and he said it was smart. He said Tom Sawyer couldn't get up no better plan than what I had. Then I says: 'How do you come to be here, Jim, and how'd you get here?'

He looked pretty uneasy, and didn't say nothing for a minute. Then he says:

'Maybe I better not tell?'

'Why, Jim?'

Well, dey's reasons. But you wouldn't tell on me ef I 'uz to tell you, would you, Huck?

'Blamed if I would, Jim.'

Well, I b'lieve you, Huck. I--I run off.

'Jim!'

'But mind, you said you wouldn't tell--you know you said you wouldn't tell, Huck.'

Well, I did. I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest injun I will. People would call me a low down Ablitionist and despise me for keeping mum--but that don't make no difference. I ain't going to tell, and I ain't agoing back there anyway. So now, let's know all about it.' (8:57-58)

Such passages are of course not meant to be read in isolation but they unmistakably hit their target. The absence of narrative commentary enables the spontaneity of Huck's promise not to betray Jim as also Jim's trusting nature, to come through to the reader at first hand and with full force. And both these perceptions are crucial to the meaning of the novel.

Critics have pointed out some difficulties with the narrative.

First, in two cases Huck the retrospective narrator keeps back the knowledge that he now (in the narrative present) has and presents the events with the limited knowledge that he as a participant had at the time.

In chapter 9 Jim discovers from looking into the floating house that Pap Finn is dead but withholds the information till near the end when he breaks the news to Huck (p. 328). Also the information that Mis Watson had freed Jim in her will is kept back by Tom when Huck meets him in Chapter 33. Again Huck the narrator who now has the information connives at Tom's silence. Of these the second piece of knowledge is more crucial. But I feel that these silences on the part of the narrator could be looked at as part of his presentational strategy. If Huck had disclosed the information that Jim had already been freed it would have diluted the presentation of the intensity of Huck's moral struggle involved in first writing the letter to Miss Watson and then tearing it off. So if Huck the narrator withholds the vital piece of information it is entirely to make the presentation of events rhetorically effective and aesthetically satisfying. These two examples also highlight the essential ambiguity of truth and fiction at the heart of the text.

12.5.4 Narrative Irony

Mark Twain's use of an adolescent who has the innocence of a boy and who doesn't always understand his experience completely serves the author's satiric purpose admirably.

The writer's use of irony deserves notice here. "Irony is always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more--or less--than another, irony must be either actually or potentially present. In any example of narrative art there are, broadly speaking three points of view--those of the characters, the narrator, and the audience. As narrative becomes more sophisticated, a fourth point of view is added by the development of a clear distinction between the narrator and the author. Narrative irony is a function of disparity among these three or four viewpoints. And narrative artists have always

been ready to employ this disparity to make effects of various kinds" (The Nature of Narrative, p. 240).

Narrative

In the case of *Huckleberry Finn* the irony resulting from the disparity of understanding between the author and the boy narrator makes Mark Twain's satire far more effective than it would have been if he had made his comments directly. Paragraph 3 of chapter 1 offers an example:

The widow rung a bell for supper and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there wasn't really anything the matter with them" (emphasis added) (1:11-2).



The Widow Takes Huck to Church

Twain's comment on the pieties of women like Widow Douglas and Miss Watson made through Huck the narrator would lose half their force if he had made them directly. What Huck does here is to defamiliarize the practice of saying grace and look at it afresh. An even better example of the narrative irony in the service of satire is Huck's reaction to Jim's talk of being free as their raft neared Cairo.

It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'Give a nigger an inch, and he'll take an ell.' . . . Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children - children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (16:108 italics added).

The disparity between the traditional viewpoint voiced by the essentially naive Huck and the humanistic viewpoint of the author implied here makes a damning comment on the racist society that poisons even young minds.

This narrative irony contributes a great deal to the pleasure we derive from reading narrative literature.

12.5.5 Popular Elements in the Narrative

One of the several factors that account for the continuing popularity of *Huckleberry Finn* is the presence of folk motifs in the novel. A major motif in it is the quest motif (Death and rebirth is another). And this could be traced in the novel with the help of the categories of characters suggested by V. Propp in his *Morphology of a Folktale*. Propp believes that a folk tale has seven characters each of whom embodies a function or role—villain, donor, helper, the sought for person, dispatcher, hero and false hero. Though not all of these character types can be spotted in the novel, one could find close approximations of hero and false hero in Huck and Tom respectively. If the quest in the novel is for freedom, then Huck could be called a hero, (or an anti hero) who is also a helper because he tries to secure freedom for Jim. On the other hand, Tom is the false hero because he arrogates to himself the heroic role of Jim's emancipator and in the process puts him to avoidable torture and indignity. As for villain, several characters seem to fit the role--Miss Watson whose plan to sell Jim alarms him and induces him to run away, and Pap Finn and the king and the duke.



"Now, Jim, You're a Free Man."

The other major motif is the motif of rebirth that runs almost through the length of the narrative. These underlying threads help to unify the narration internally.

Another popular element which Twain was familiar with and which he incorporated in the narrative is the tall tale, tricks and yarns. A tall tale is "a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdote which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness." Two clear examples of tall tales are the tales

told by the so-called king and the duke to each other in the presence of Huck and Jim. These tales are principally meant to impress them both and they certainly succeed in inducing them to agree to wait upon the royalty but they also ironically succeed in exposing them to be frauds to Huck. In contrast to their wicked tricks and yarnspinning is the innocent yarnspinning of Huck who has to invent yarns on the spur of the moment for the purpose of survival throughout the book.

12.6 LET US SUM UP

As we have seen, the narrative puts a premium on truth and realism. Tom's book-derived romanticism stands rejected. By the time we reach chapter 31 the entire trajectory of the narrative prepares us to expect the final steps towards securing Jim's freedom. But the ending of the novel with Tom's over-elaborate romantic plan to free the already free Jim comes as a big setback. Jim's story doesn't end as we expect it to. Is this a defect in the novel? If the story had ended as expected, wouldn't it have been a fairy tale ending? Seen in the context of the status of African Americans in America, isn't the present ending a truer, more realistic ending?

12.7 GLOSSARY

narrative	A working definition of narrative is given by the Oxford English Encyclopedic Dictionary as a spoken or written account of connected events in order of happening. Events are indispensable to a narrative.
Picaresque novel	A novel that gives a first person account of the travels of a character, originally a picaro or rogue.
'evasion'	a corruption of the French word evasion, or escape; Tom uses it in order to describe the escapes of a prisoner: "When a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion. It's always called so when a king escapes, fr instance." Huckleberry Finn (39:302). This terms is also used in the last chapter. (see p.327)

12.8 QUESTIONS

- Point out the narrative irony in the following passage (ch.31, p.240.) "Once I said to myself goes to everlasting fire".
Hint: What is Huck's intention in these reflections?
What does the passage achieve at the end?
What is the target of criticism in it?
- Analyse the following passage pointing out the narrative strategy employed in its different parts (ch.25, p. 189).
"Then one of them....turns loose and goes to crying fit to burst."
- Pick out passages where Huck the narrator speaks to the readers directly.
- Make a list of events presented dramatically without comment by the narrator.

12.9 FURTHER READING

Wecter, Dixon, *Sam Clemens of Hannibal*, Boston 1952, excerpted in Norton critical edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 2nd ed. 1997.

Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory*, Oxford: OUP 1997 Chapter 6, pages 83-94 entitled "Narrative."

Scholes, Robert and Robert Kellogg. *The Nature of Narrative*. New York: OUP, 1966.

Basic book for the study of narratives in general.

Twain, Mark. *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*. With an introduction, Notes and Bibliography by Michael Patrick Hearn. New York: Charleson N. Potter, 1981.
A most useful edition to consult. Notes are particularly useful.

UNIT 13 THEMES AND CHARACTERIZATION IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

Structure

- 13.0 Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Theme(s)
- 13.3 Twain's Art of Characterization
 - 13.3.1 The characterization of Huck
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- 13.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 13.6 Glossary
- 13.7 Assignment
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13.0 OBJECTIVES

As well as providing you with some preliminary information about *Huckleberry Finn*, the Unit offers a perspective on the themes and the characters in it. Apart from the principal theme of freedom and slavery, it discusses other themes and motifs and then goes on to focus on Huck and his moral development. The characterization of Jim will consider the ways in which Mark Twain departs from the stereotype of a negro appearing in fiction and on stage.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Any literary work must be seen both in relation to the life experiences and values of its author and to the socio-cultural context of the time and place in which it remains firmly rooted. This is particularly important in the case of *Huckleberry Finn* which deals with the sensitive issue of slavery.

By the time he came to write *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain had left Hannibal and had settled in Elmira and had outgrown his slave-holding heritage. His friend W.D. Howells called him "the most desouthernized Southerner." However, his presentation of slavery, particularly the way in which Jim is freed in the novel has been faulted.

The background information provided earlier about the author and the age should help you to read the text again and make your own judgement about the book's treatment of slavery and some other issues raised in the book.

13.2 THEME(S)

Huckleberry Finn has been a happy hunting ground for critics wanting to classify its genre and identify its theme or themes.

Is it a boy's book, a book of travel and adventures? It has long been read as a classic for boys. Or is it a comic book or a book that contains adult social criticism and satire? Or is it a boy's book in the sense of being a book about growing up?

A related and a more important question is: What is the book about? Or, since every important novel is about a number of things the key question is:- What is *Huckleberry Finn* particularly about?

Before you read further, I want you to note down what you consider to be the important themes/motifs in the novel. You could write the theme(s)/motifs singly or in pairs of opposite ideas. My own list would read something like this:

growing up
death and rebirth
romantic imagination versus reality
civilization versus freedom
individual versus society
river versus town

Which of these, according to you, is the principal theme?

Very obviously, the theme of freedom and slavery is the central preoccupation of the book--it is the spine of the novel that gives it strength, though there are other thematic strands intertwined with it.

Freedom in the novel is multidimensional. It of course means physical freedom for both Huck and Jim, Huck from the suffocating 'civilizing' atmosphere at Widow Douglas and from his brutal drunken father, and Jim from chattel slavery. But, it also means freedom from inherited prejudices--which is what Huck achieves in relation to Jim at the end.

For Huck freedom also means freedom from the constraints of civilized society. Already an outcast Huck doesn't have the kind of attachments that Jim has or that Tom has. He wants to be able to plough a lonely furrow by lighting out for the territory. In other words freedom for Huck is centrifugal--running away from "the security of home to the wilderness of the outside world."

But for Jim freedom means freedom to be reunited with his wife and children. His concept of freedom is centripetal. In more practical terms, Jim is 'free' towards the end having been freed by his owner Miss Watson in her will. But Tom's elaborate plan to 'free' him in style ironically prolongs his slavery and the episode can be read as Twain's recognition of the dubious reality of the meaning of freedom for Negroes even after the abolition of slavery in 1863. Twain seems to be asking - Can Jim ever be free? Also, can Huck really escape civilization? Since freedom for Huck and Jim means different things, Twain seems to be interrogating the idea of freedom/slavery in the novel and he leaves the question open-ended.

This section is necessarily brief because the points suggested above will be dealt with later on also when the characterization of Huck and Jim is considered. But one can see how the other themes and motifs are intertwined with the chief theme. For instance the idea of individual liberty and social conformity is closely connected with the larger theme of freedom and slavery. This theme is realized through the character of Huck who values his liberty above the demands of society. A non-conformist, his individualism needs to be distinguished from what Shulman has described as the romantic individualism of Tom, the anarchic individualism of his father Pap Finn and the acquisitive individualism of the king and the duke. And it coexists with a very sensitive social conscience. Moreover, Huck spends some of the best moments of his life in perfect communion with Jim on the raft. In this respect Twain is probably

suggesting the possibility of individualism which is inseparable from rather than opposed to community.

Themes and Characterization



Discussing Stars

Huck however remains essentially a loner and when he finds the freedom to be and to do as he likes threatened by Aunt Sally's decision to adopt and 'sivilize' him, he makes up his mind to light out for the territory in search of non-civilized freedom.

Here Twain can be seen spelling out another sub-theme--that of civilization versus nature. What does civilization mean in the novel? It means conformism, respectability and bookish piety and it coexists with acceptance of slavery. Witness the aristocracy or the planter class represented in the novel by the Grangerford whose pretence of civilized values depends parasitically upon the labour of hundreds of niggers. Nature on the other hand stands for untutored innocence, absence of hypocrisy and instinctive sympathy towards those in trouble. In the opposition between the two the novel satirizes civilization and leans heavily towards nature. But the dichotomy is not absolute. For civilization is not always devalorized in the novel as is clear from the episode involving Pap Finn. Pap Finn lives in the midst of nature and denounces education and stands up for slavery.

Another sub-theme that is tangentially linked to the idea of freedom and slavery is the opposition between imagination and reality. This sub-theme emerges through the novel's structure which is framed, as it were, by romantic episodes at each end in sharp contrast to the reality of the middle section. In Chapter 3 Huck rejects Tom's bookish romanticism and his imaginings as lies. "I got an old tin lamp and an iron ring and went out in the woods and rubbed and rubbed till I sweat like an Injun, calculating to build a palace and sell it; but it wasn't no use none of the genies come. So then I judged that all that stuff was only one of Tom Sawyer's lies. I reckoned he believed in the Arabs and the elephants, but as for me I think different" (3:26, italics added).

Likewise Huck sees little sense in Tom's over-elaborate romantic plan to free Jim, though he falls in line with it eventually. When Huck calls Tom's plan of digging the foundation of Jim's cabin foolish, Tom persists with his romantic plan invoking the authority of the printed word: "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way--and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that I ever heard of and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things. They always dig out with a case knife . . . And it takes them weeks and weeks and weeks, and for ever and ever" (35:274-75).

Tom's romantic plan stands condemned not only because it wilfully imagines difficulties where there are none but also because of his utter indifference to the torture and humiliation Jim has to undergo.

Huckleberry Finn is a thematically rich text and this discussion does not exhaust all the possibilities.

I suggest that you work out some of the sub-themes suggested above in greater details on your own.

13.3 TWAIN'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

Since Huck is both a first person narrator and the central consciousness in the novel, we not only get to know every other character in the novel as they filter through his consciousness but also himself very intimately.

A preliminary question to ask is: How has the novelist presented his central character(s) in *Huckleberry Finn*?

At some stage in your study this question should turn into a general enquiry also--How do novelists present their characters? How, for instance, does Hawthorne present his characters? Comparison and contrast always help to bring out the similarities and differences between the authors sharply and to fix them in the mind.

13.3.1 The Characterization of Huck

Before discussing Huck's character in the novel, it will be helpful to go back to *Tom Sawyer* and see how Huck has been presented there and also to examine the sources of his character in Mark Twain's life.

13.3.1.1 Huck in *Tom Sawyer*

. . . the juvenile pariah of the village . . . son of the town drunkard. Huckleberry was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town because he was idle and lawless, and vulgar, and bad--and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society, and wished they dared to be like him . . . the romantic outcast. (6:)

Exercises

1. What I want you to do now is to see in what way Huck in *Huckleberry Finn* is similar to this description and how he is different.

The extract describes him as 'idle,' 'lawless,' 'vulgar,' and 'bad.' Fasten on each of these terms and see if you can use them for Huck in this novel.

2. Huck is the first person narrator in this novel as he was not in *Tom Sawyer*. What effect does this new strategy have on your reactions to Huck as you assess his character?

13.3.1.2 Sources in Mark Twain's Life

According to Dixon Wector, Tom Blankenship with whom Sam had played as a boy was the prototype for Huck Finn. In Mark Twain's words, "Tom was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person--boy or man in the community . . . We liked him; we enjoyed his society. And as his society was forbidden us by our parents, the prohibition trebled and quadrupled its value, and therefore we sought and got more of his society than of any other boy's."

(Norton:279, Italics added)

This unorthodox boy, however, eventually ended up as a respectable "justice of peace in a remote village of Montana."

Clearly Mark Twain was drawing upon his childhood memories for his Huck.

Much of what we can say about Huck has been anticipated in Unit 2 while dealing with him as a narrator. Since Huck as the central consciousness is not always aware of the full significance of his experiences, the writer makes use of irony resulting from the discrepancy between the narrator's point of view and the author's point of view to convey his view of character.

Huckleberry Finn is one of those novels that provide a balance between character and plot. And Huck is the case of a developing character who changes inwardly, which according to Scholes and Kellog is the most important element in characterization.

13.3.1.3 Huck



Huckleberry Finn

It is easy to romanticize the character of Huck. His age--he is a teenager, his innocence, and spontaneity that go with it, his being on the fringe of society and the absence of any pretensions to respectability--all this coupled with his promise to help Jim escape and their river journey on a raft are good enough material for a romantic view of Huck. Some of the positive epithets used to describe him are: heroic, a picaresque saint, an imagist poet. He is also described as a Prometheus, a frontier Thoreau, a Mississippi Moses, a Tocquevillian hero. It is therefore important for us to see Huck for what he is.

One could start off by saying that Huck is something of a sceptic. This scepticism coupled with his naivete help him examine what elders say afresh. For instance, he does not accept what Miss Watson says about Providence and the efficacy of prayers. Tom's romantic fiction of Spaniards and rich Arabs also leave him cold. But the same boy is superstitious almost as much as Jim.

Huck's matter-of-factness goes along with a decided lack of sentimentality or 'sentimentering' as he calls it. In the Wilks episode he is clear sighted enough to see through the 'slush' and 'hogwash' of the king's eulogy of Peter Wilks. But this does not prevent him from rating the immature drawing and the poetry of Emmeline as very good.

His honesty is a most important feature of his character but he makes no fetish of it. His pragmatism is clear in his repeated lying in order to get out of tight corners and also to help others to do so. Lying in fact is part of his strategy for survival in a world which is hostile and where truth telling is risky. Survival is also what induces him (and Jim) to borrow things like watermelons from riverside fields though Huck is aware of the thin line that separate 'borrowing' from stealing ('Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime, but the widow said it wasn't anything but a soft name for stealing and no decent body would do it" (12:82).



Borrowing Watermelon and Corn

Perhaps the best feature of Huck's character is his sympathy which is at once spontaneous and unsentimental for those in trouble. When he sees lights burning late at night, he is put in mind of sick folks. The sight of a supposedly drunken man in the circus who tries to ride a horse delights the audience but makes him feel miserable. (It warn't funny to me, though. I was all of a tremble to see his danger" 22:173.) When he realizes that the men trapped in the wrecked steamboat *Walter Scott* are doomed to die, he considers "how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix" (13:89). This basic kindness takes a more active form when he cannot playact as a valet to the king any longer in the Wilks episode and discloses the true identity of the two frauds to Mary Jane. But if he saves her and the rest of the family from the cheats, he also feels deeply anguished at the tar and feathers punishment given to them ("I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadfl thing to see. Human beings can be so kind to one another" (33:260). This is charity at its highest. The paradox is that for all his dislike of civilization, Huck is a deeply social being whose sense of responsibility makes him the least carefree of boys. This aspect comes out in his relationship with Jim.

13.3.1.4 Huck's Moral Development

Critics have referred to *Huckleberry Finn* and rightly--as a novel of education, recording the moral growth of Huck. He has been called a lifelong learner and explorer of new territories.

His moral development takes the form of his emancipation from inherited prejudices relating to slavery, which is heavily dependent on his realization of Jim's essential humanity. Several decisions are crucial in this process.

His first decision is made very early in the novel when, a runaway from civilization himself, he promises not to tell on Jim. ("People would call me a lowdown Ablitionist and despise me for keeping mum--but that don't make no difference. I ain't agoing to tell, and I ain't agoing back there anyway" (8:58). This decision is spontaneous--these words are spoken casually on the spur of the moment and are not an after-thought of Huck the narrator and marks the beginning of his community with Jim ("I was ever so glad to see him. I wasn't lonesome now"). It also constitutes an act of quiet defiance of the mores of a slave-holding society represented on the one hand by Miss Watson who would sell her slave and on the other by Pap Finn who though poor himself resents the superior education of a free negro.

Huck's decision to humble himself before Jim for playing a practical joke on him is a momentous step in his spiritual progress. It is so because it leads to another momentous decision of his to save Jim from the slave hunters. The joke consisted in making Jim believe that their separation during the fog was all a dream and it springs from a settled belief that negroes were inferior creatures and were 'natural' objects of fun. At first Jim is taken in by Huck but later when things sink in he replies in a speech which is marked at once by righteous indignation and hurt pride that Huck has tried to humiliate a friend. Huck is truly repentant:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger--but I done it, and I wasn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd aknowed it would make him feel that way.

(15:105)

Huck's decision to fool the slave hunters with a tale of smallpox and save Jim is a logical conclusion. But this decision is not arrived at without a battle between the promptings of his heart and the voice of his 'deformed conscience.' As Huck and Jim near Cairo, Jim anticipating his freedom gets to be jumpy and excited. But this fills Huck with dread for it dawns upon him that he is conniving at the escape of a slave

who is someone else's property ('Conscience says to me, 'what had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?' 16:107). His misery increases when Jim talks of securing the release of his wife and children by stealing if necessary ('Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was the nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children--children that belonged to a man I didn't even know, a man that hadn't done me no harm" (16:108). But eventually his human instincts prove more powerful than his belief in the sanctity of property in human flesh and he takes the right decision to save Jim. Huck's assurance to the slave hunters that he "won't let no runaway niggers get by me if I can help it" points up his moral dilemma for the fact is that he can't help taking the right decision.

Huck's process of re-education has well and truly begun. And one of the ghosts of the racist society that bedevils Huck's companionship with Jim is exorcised.

It is natural that there should be greater intimacy even physical intimacy between the two. On return to the river from the bloody feud of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons Huck feels that "nothing ever sounded so good" like Jim's voice, and "Jim he grabbed me, and hugged me, he was so glad to see me" (18:137). It is at this point that they feel "there warn't no home like a raft" suggesting an idyllic non-racist community of two lazing along the river naked on a raft.

The new closeness is evident in three ways--one, his appreciation of the way in which Jim keeps a vigil in his place, two, his recognition of the common humanity that binds them, and three, Jim's sharing of his daughter Elizabeth's story with Huck.

I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that. When I waked up, just at day-break, he was sitting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself . . . He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural but I reckon it's so. (23:179)

Huck's moral development is rather spiral than linear for his final struggle with his conscience covers much the same ground as his preceding combat except that the problem presents itself to him in religious terms. This struggle is preceded by Huck's discovery that Jim has been sold by the king for 'forty dirty dollars' and his subsequent crying:

After all this long journey, and after all we'd done for them scoundrels here was it all come to nothing, everything all busted up, and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and among strangers too, for forty dirty dollars (31:240).

Huck's struggle with his conscience is more intense this time because the punishment for helping Jim escape is dreadful--he will go to hell (. . . "people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire" p.241). He writes a letter to Miss Watson and feels lighter for a moment but when he recalls his relationship with Jim and their moments of togetherness on the raft, he takes the plunge:

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. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and . . . would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend

old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper.

Themes and Characterization

It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it.

I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: 'All right then, I'll go to hell'--and tore it up. (31:241-42)

Once again Huck's innate goodness has triumphed over the mores of the slave-holding society he has internalized.

The ending of the novel has dissatisfied many people for Huck here is not the Huck he has developed into. But though in these chapters he concedes the leadership to Tom, there is no wavering on his part on what he has set his mind to--the freeing of Jim: "When I start in to steal a nigger, I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What want is my nigger. . . ." And he falls in line with Tom, he does so reluctantly, which means his heart is in the right place.

13.3.2 The Characterization of Jim

I hope reading of *Huckleberry Finn* has enabled you to form your own impressions of Jim. Before you read on, I want you to do this exercise.

Given below is a list of words some of which could be applied for Jim.

- (a) Tick off those that you think could be applied to him.
- (b) Identify at least one illustrative example for each one you choose.

caring, ignorant, superstitious, kind, loyal, dignified, logical, generous, brave.

13.3.2.1 Source in Mark Twain's Life

In his *Sam Clemens of Hannibal*, Dixon Wecter gives the following information regarding a prototype for Jim.



Jim-Miss Watson's Slave

But the most memorable servant of the Quarleses [the family of Cleen's uncle, John Quarles, of Florida, Missouri] was middle-aged Uncle Dan'l, sensible, honest, patient, the children's comrade in adventure, their adviser and ally in time of trouble. "It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race," wrote Mark, "and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities." Wector goes on to say how Uncle Dan'l became the acknowledged original of Huck Finn's friend "Nigger Jim," whose unshakable loyalty, generous heart, and unconscious dignity--even when Huck makes game of his credulity--raise him to the rank of Mark Twain's noblest creations."

13.3.2.2 Jim

Like Huck, Jim too has been romanticized and has been presented as a larger-than-life figure. In one view both Huck and Jim "are related to the demigods of the river, to the barbarous primitivism of the Negro, and beyond that to the archetypal primitives of the Golden Age, instinctively good, uncorrupted by reason, living close to nature and more influenced by its portents than by the conventions of civilization" (Miller:100). Another critic turns him into a walking myth--"the great residue of primitive, fertile force." Jim has even been praised for being superstitious. It is therefore important to view Jim objectively.

For this a helpful lead has been provided by A.N. Kaul who goes back to the work of some apologists for slavery in the South, like George Fitzhugh and who describes what these apologists have called the Sambo personality. In his monograph entitled *History, Sociology and the American Romance*, Kaul says:

Sociologists like George Fitzhugh had developed a theory of black personality popularly shorthanded as "Sambo". They rejected the notion of a separate species . . . Blacks were human but infantile. They had their good points, but it was sheer sentimentality to attribute to them mature qualities as, for instance, sustained purpose or durable relationships. Hence the non-sanctity of black marriage and the supposed painlessness of family break-up when husbands or parents were sold one way and wives or children the other. The black or Sambo was essentially improvident, gullible, irresponsible--a "grown up child," in Fitzhugh's phrase, totally dependent on parental, that is to say slave-master's absolute authority. (Kaul:34)

This longish excerpt about the Sambo personality throws considerable light on the characterization of Jim. In the modern world, Kaul suggests the Sambo personality would be attributed not to a defect in the genes but to conditioning. The slave-master's authority over the life of the slave was absolute going beyond the authority of father over the son. "It included, not just the authority to chastise, but the power to dispose off the slave in any manner, to dictate (not just regulate) the mode of his life, his work, his family and sexual power. . . " (:35). It was the exercise of this absolute power that made the victim infantile. This insight should enable us to view Jim's infantile behaviour as being a result of conditioning and social heredity than an expression of his true or natural personality.

To begin with, Jim is presented as Miss Watson's slave, superstitious and gullible, who is a butt of Tom Sawyer's jokes. Tom hangs Jim's hat on a tree while he [Jim] is asleep and Jim comes to believe that the witches put him in a trance and rode him all over the state. The story becomes increasingly dramatic with each telling, with the result that Jim becomes a sort of 'celebrity' among the negroes. Clearly, in presenting Jim as something of a comic figure. Mark Twain has used the available stereotype of a negro. But the writer also shows that given the right opportunity, atmosphere and challenge, the same Jim emerges with a new dignity and human capacity, leaving the stereotype mask behind.

Jim's positive qualities begin to show up as he and Huck meet in the Jackson's Island. This relationship is one of mutual dependence. If Huck promises not to tell on Jim

and later saves him from his captors, Jim acts as a protector of Huck, almost a surrogate father. This role begins on the island itself where his folk wisdom regarding young birds saves Huck from the storm that lashes the place. Later he builds a wigwam on the raft, which amounts to providing a 'home' to Huck.

During the journey he shields Huck from the ghastly sight of Pap Finn's dead body by showing great delicacy of feeling and discretion. Protective as a father, he often "didn't call me when it was my turn" (Chapter 23).

The incident that helps most to establish Jim's humanity is when he deeply regrets beating his 4-yr-old daughter Elizabeth when she did not shut the door without realizing that she was deaf and dumb.

But Jim's finest moment comes when he reacts to Huck's practical joke after the fog with great dignity charging Huck with nothing more or less than a violation of the code of friendship. At first Jim is taken in by Huck's mischievous suggestion that there was no fog and that he had dreamed up the whole incident. But he soon recovers his humanity. In this scene one can see him moving out of the stereotype and becoming a human being capable of dignity and emotion and loyalty.

13.4 THE ENDING OF *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

The last 12 chapters (from Ch.32 to Ch.42) concerning the rescue of Jim from captivity at the Phelps's farm constitute the ending of the novel. They begin with Huck's dismay at the selling of his soul mate and his entry into the Phelps's farm in search of him and end with Jim's final rescue and Huck's subsequent decision to light out for the territory in search of freedom.



Huck Meets Mr. Phelps

There has been a great deal of disagreement about the appropriateness of the ending. Among those who have justified the ending are Lionel Trilling and T.S. Eliot who have done so on formal or other grounds. While Trilling concedes that there is a 'falling off' in the final episode containing the elaborate game of Jim's escape, he thinks the novel has a "formal aptness" with Huck returning to "his anonymity which he prefers." Eliot defends the ending because "it is right that the mood of the end of the book should bring us back to that of the beginning" (Inge:110).

On the other hand, there is a widespread dissatisfaction (including among the students) at the way the ending betrays the novel's quest for Jim's freedom. Leo Marx faults the ending on three counts: (1) "the flimsy devices of plot," (2) "the discordant farcical tone," and (3) "the disintegration of the major characters." All of these, according to Marx betray the failure of the ending." The dissatisfaction arises from the fact that the trick ending involves a sudden change of heart in the slave owner Miss Watson, which is unexplained and which seems to trivialize the serious issue of freedom for the slave. This has the effect of turning the enemy into a friend, "the oppressor [into] "the liberator," as A.N. Kaul puts it. The farcical tone also has the effect of dissipating the seriousness of the novel's business. And there is a slideback in the principal character when Huck accepts Tom's leadership and Jim submits himself to all the humiliation heaped upon him by Tom.

The ending of the novel may not be well rounded but it is I think a true reflection of the state of the slave after the formal emancipation was announced in 1863. As is well known, the Emancipation did not mean the disappearance of slavery and the attitudes that went with it.

The emancipation was followed by a brief period of reconstruction which in turn was followed by the compromise of 1877. This last led to a reaction in the form of Jim Crow laws which denied basic civil rights to the blacks. It was only in 1954 when Justice Warren rejected segregation in schools that a near-apartheid situation eased a little for them. If the ending of the novel is read against the background of what happened to the blacks in America, it will not appear to be as arbitrary and wilful as it may otherwise do.

Mark Twain published the novel over 20 years after the Emancipation of 1863 but he had the prescience of a great writer to read the signs of the times and to look into the future. The novel could be read as Mark Twain's satiric comment on those who wielded power and who wilfully delayed delivering to them what they had agreed to give them.

As for Huck, though he concedes the leadership to Tom (Don't the best lack all conviction?) he is wise to reason why Tom had agreed to help Huck free Jim--

And his Aunt Polly she said Tom was right about old Miss Watson setting Jim free in her will; and so, sure enough, Tom Sawyer had gone and took all that trouble and bother to set a free nigger free! and I couldn't ever understand, before, until that minute and that talk, how he could help set a nigger free, with his bringing up

(42:325)

This comment constitutes a very severe indictment of all the drama Tom has staged in 'freeing' Jim. For Tom it was all self-indulgence and fun.

So far as Jim is concerned, he tends to get back into his Sambo image but in his loyalty to the injured Tom he outshines every other character in the novel and in spite of his docility and patience he manages to retain an individuality of his own.



Aunt Polly Appears

13.5 LET US SUM UP

Mark Twain's engagement in *Huckleberry Finn* is principally with the twin theme of freedom-and-slavery, though he interweaves sub-themes like imagination and reality, civilization and nature, and individual and society with it. During the course of his exploration he asks what it means to be free and also what it means to be a slave. The issue is complex for freedom means different things for Huck and Jim and both freedom and slavery are projected in the novel as objectives that are not quite easy to achieve.

I used the phrase the twin theme of freedom and slavery in the beginning advisedly because Huck's freedom is heavily dependent on Jim's emancipation and his moral growth is incomplete without his acceptance, the humanity of the black man without reservation.

One source of the enduring appeal of the book lies in the Huck-Jim relationship. The controversial ending of the novel may appear to be a setback to Jim's quest for freedom but it will make better sense if it is seen against the historical experience of the blacks in America.

13.6 GLOSSARY

chattel slavery: a chattel is a moveable possession, any possession or piece of property other than real estate. So chattel slavery is a system wherein the slave belongs to his/her owner.

stereotype:	a person or thing that conforms to an unjustifiably fixed usually standardized mental picture. (Also a printing plate cast from a mould of composed type.)
burlesque:	mock-serious; comic imitation especially in parody of a dramatic or literary work.
Reconstruction:	Reconstruction Acts passed by the US Congress required the giving of the vote to Blacks.
Jim Crow Laws:	laws passed by the Southern states of the US laying down the policy of segregating and discriminating against Blacks. (Originated from the refrain 'jump-Jim-Crow' of a plantation song.)

13.7 ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the twin theme of freedom-and-slavery in *Huckleberry Finn*.
2. Describe in some detail how Huck wrestled with his conscience on learning that Jim had been sold to Phelps' plantation and bring out its distinctive character.
3. In the burlesque closing chapters, Jim--whom the readers "have come to love and admire--becomes a cartoon figure and the victim of meaningless tortures." Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer. What reasons can you suggest Twain may have had for the protracted terminal chapters?

13.8 FURTHER READING

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UNIT 14 LANGUAGE IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

Structure

- 14.0 Objectives
- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Mark Twain on Writing
- 14.3 Language in *Huckleberry Finn*
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- 14.5 Use of Racist Language
- 14.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 14.7 Glossary
- 14.8 Assignment
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14.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to pay close attention to an important aspect of *Huckleberry Finn's* achievement, namely its language and to study how it contributes to the total effect of the book and also account for its tremendous popularity over the years.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1776 American colonies became politically independent. But it took more than a century for American literature to become linguistically independent. This declaration came with the publication of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884 in which the American vernacular was "first used as the medium of great fiction."

Mark Twain's strategy to allow a 14-year-old uneducated white boy to tell his own story in his own language accomplished a quiet revolution in the world of letters in America. American literature was never the same afterwards. It was probably to his innovative use of dialect among other things, that Hemingway was referring when he called *Huckleberry Finn* "the best book we've had" and when he traced all American writing to it. "There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

14.2 MARK TWAIN ON WRITING

Mark Twain was passionately interested in the problem of style, said Lionel Trilling in his introduction to the Rinehart Edition of *Huckleberry Finn* and went on to add: "The mark of the strictest literary sensibility is everywhere to be found in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*." Since style forms such an important part of the total effect of the novel, it will be useful to summarize Mark Twain's views on the art of writing as expressed in his essays and letters.

That he was a highly conscious artist and that he took great pains in using different dialects in the novel is clear from one of the two notices printed at the start of the novel:

In this book a number of dialects are used. To wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremist form of the backwoods south-western dialect; the ordinary "pike-country" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding.

The excerpt also makes patent Twain's reliance of the spoken idiom of the people.

Mark Twain's style reflects his hatred for pretence and pretentiousness. "Affectation in all its myriad aspects was ever abhorrent to him, and what he most relished in an author was a straightforward concreteness of presentation. We may be sure that he would have approved Bruentiere's assertion that "a good writer is simply one who says all he means to say, who says only what he means to say, and who says it exactly as he meant to say it."

Mark Twain was furious with James Fenimore Cooper the author of *Leatherstocking Tales* for what he called his literary offences which included offences of style. He laid down 7 rules for good writing each of which he thought was violated in *The Deerslayer*. Good writing, according to Twain, requires that "an author shall say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it; use the right word, not its second cousin; eschew surplusage; not omit necessary details; avoid slovenliness of form; use good grammar; and employ a simple and straightforward style."

Another writer he was critical of was Walter Scott. In a letter (1903) to Brander Matthews he asked a series of questions about Scott's style, which he obviously held to be unanswerable:

Are there in Sir Walter Scott's novels passages done in good English--English which is neither slovenly nor involved? Are there passages whose English is not poor and thin and commonplace, but of a quality above that? Did he know how to write English, and didn't do it because he didn't want to? Did he use the right word only when he couldn't think of another one, or did he run so much to wrong because he didnt know the right one when he saw it?

The spate of queries serves to emphasize the strict standards Mark Twain had set for himself. Using the right word was for him a most important skill.

Twain put the greatest value on the use of the right word or what he called 'that elusive and shifty grain of gold.' The difference between the almost right word and the right word, he said, was a large matter . . . "it's the difference between the lightening bug and the lightning." It "lights the reader's way and makes it plain . . . Whenever we come upon one of those intensely right words in a book or a newspaper the resulting effect is physical as well as spiritual, and electrically prompt."

No wonder Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* is a triumph of style, a living proof of his consummate care with words.

14.3 LANGUAGE IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

14.3.1 Contrast with *The Scarlet Letter*

- (i) Since it was Mark Twain who established the use of colloquial language for serious literary purposes in American literature, it would be a good idea to start with comparing and contrasting his language in *Huckleberry Finn* with Hawthorne's language in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Given below are four extracts, two each from *The Scarlet Letter* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Examine them carefully and note the difference between them.

- (1) The founders of a new colony, whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness they might originally project, have invariably recognized it among their earliest practical necessities to allot a portion of the virgin soil as a cemetery, and another portion as the site of a prison. In accordance with this rule, it may safely be assumed that the forefathers of Boston had built the first prison-house somewhere in the vicinity of Corn-hill, almost as seasonably as they marked out the first burial-ground, on Isaac Johnson's lot .
(SL, Ch. 1).
- (2) Walking in the shadow of a dream, as it were, and perhaps actually under the influence of a species of somnambulism, Mr. Dimmesdale reached the spot, where, now so long since, Hester Prynne had lived through her first hour of public ignominy. The same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the storm or sunshine of seven long years, and foot-worn too, with the tread of many culprits who had since ascended it, remained standing beneath the balcony of the meeting house. The minister went up the steps. (SL, Ch. XII)
- (3) Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheeful; but it wasn't no use: I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. (HF, Ch. I)
- (4) 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 softens up, away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along, ever so far away . . . it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by-and-by you could see a streak on the water . . .
(HF, Ch. XIX)

Hawthorne's language is British English and standard literary language and has the elegance associated with it. He is not using the spoken language of the people. Twain on the other, uses Huck's dialect for serious literary purposes and his sustained use of it for the entire length of novel is one of the chief delights of the book.

But though Huck's language is close to spoken English of rural Southwest America, Mark Twain has not created it merely by copying the speech pattern of a young semi-literate white boy. Used by the writer to replace the traditional literary style, it itself is a new literary style and utmost care has gone into its fashioning. Mark Twain has apparently done a lot of stitching and unstitching though when we read the final product we are carried away by the apparent effortlessness of Huck's narration. Implicit in this is the recognition that the narrator is naive and untutored. Such a recognition is imperative when Huck is the eye-witness narrator-participant in the novel and has to take the readers along.

14.3.2 Identifying Characters by their Language

Having talked about the innovative use of colloquial English in *Huckleberry Finn*, it is time to examine how Mark Twain has used language to create characters. The

language note at the start of the novel suggests that characters speak differently, which means we should be able to identify a character in the way he/she speaks.

Here is an exercise I want you to do.

Exercise

Given below are several excerpts from the book. Read them and see if you can identify the speaker. Also decide what it is that enables you to identify the speaker. Is it syntax, the arrangement of words in the sentence? Or is it a grammatic habit? Or a habit of pronunciation? Try to be as specific as you can.

- (i) I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?--that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now--that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet is got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger, and--'
- (ii) 'Yes--en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'.'
- (iii) 'you'd & ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittn mos' drowned too, dat you would, ha.... Chickens knows when its gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile.'
- (iv) 'Blame de pint? I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de real pint is down funder--it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be wasteful O' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. He know how to value 'em. But you take a man dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. He as soon chop a chile, in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo.' A chile or two, mo'er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun dad fetch him!'
- (v) Well, the men gethered around, and sympathized with them, and said all sorts of kind things to them, and carried their carpet-bags up the hill for them, and let them lean on them and cry, and told the king all about his brother's last moments, and the king he told it all over again on his hands to the duke, and both of them took on about that dead tanner like they'd lost the twelve disciples. Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger.
- (vi) 'Yes, it is good enough for me; it's as good as I deserve; for who fetched me so low, when I was so high? I did myself. I don't blame you, gentlemen--far from it; I dont blame anybody. I deserve it all. Let the cold world do its worst; one thing I know--there's a grave somewhere for me. The world may go on just as its always done, and take everything from me--loved ones, property, everything--but it can't take that. Some day I'll lie down in it and forget it all, and my poor broken heart will be at rest.' He went on a-wiping.
- (vii) The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind--as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him.

- (viii) 'I say orgies, not because it's the common term, because it aint--obsequies bein' the common term--but because orgies is the right term. Obsequies ain't used in England no more, now--it's gone out. We say orgies now, in England. Orgies is better, because it means the thing you're after, more exact. It's a word that's made up out'n the Greek orgo outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew Jeesum, to plant, cover up; hence inter. So, you see, funeral orgies is an open or public funeral.'
- (ix) I says to myself, this is another one that I'm letting him rob her of her money. And when she got through, they all jest laid theirselves out to make me feel at home and know I was amongst friends. I feel so ornery and low down and mean, that I says to myself, My mind's made up; I'll hive that money for them or bust'.
- (x) It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head; and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter, I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might do as well go the whole hog.
- (xi) 'Oh, it's de dad--blame witches, sah, en I wisht I was dead, I do. Dey's awluz at it, sah, en dey do mos' kill me, dey sk'yers me so. Please to don't tell nobody 'bout it sah, er ole Mars Silas he'll scole me; 'kase he say dey ain't no witches. I jis' wish to goodness he was heah now--den what would he say! I jis' bet he couldn' fine no way to git aroun' it dis time. But it's awluz jis' so; people dat's sot, stays 'ot; dey won't look into nothn' en fine it out fr deyselves, en when you fine it out en tell um 'bout it, dey doan' b'lieve you.'
- (xii) 'Well, some of the best authorities has done it. They couldn't get the chain off, so they just cut their hand off, and shoved. And a leg would be better still. But we got to let that go. There ain't necessity enough in this case; and besides, Jim's is a nigger and wouldn't understand the reasons for it, ...'
- (xiii) 'It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way--and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things.'

14.3.3 Huck's Language

Let's now converge on Huck's language and note the features that characterize it and then compare and contrast it with the language used by other characters.

Here is an exercise for you. Read the following excerpt and write notes on the features that help to identify it.

Now the way the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six thousand dollars apiece--all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up. Well, Judge Thatcher, he took it and put it out at interest, and it fetched us a dollar a day apiece, all the year round--more than a body could tell what to do with. The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, ad allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, cosidering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. (1:11)

Features

This paragraph allows us to sample several though not all features that one associates with Huck's style.

1. A principal feature of Huck's style is the use of run-on sentences with the help of coordinate conjunctions such as **and**, **then**, **so** and **and so**, with subordination kept to the minimum. This together with simple colloquial diction facilitates a smooth flow of words, that does not get clogged. The cumulative effect of such run-on sentences is to strengthen the impressions of the naivete of the narrator and his lack of linguistic sophistication.

There are other idiosyncratic features of Huck's style that deserve notice.

- i) Huck uses a tautology when introducing a subject:
 - Judge Thatcher, he took it . . .
 - Here the subject is repeated.
 - The Widow Douglas, she took me . . .
- ii) Two highly favoured lexical items are **well** and **by and by** (though the latter does not figure in this excerpt).
- iii) Note the non-standard spellings - **sivilized**.
Are there many such spellings in Huck's language?
Not many.
- iv) Notice use of double negatives but then this is often characteristic of colloquial English.
 - I **couldn't** stand it **no** longer . . .
- v) The verb **allowed** is used in its older sense - affirmed. The Widow Douglas . . . allowed she would sivilize me.

You will be able to spot many more features in Huck's language as you read the novel.

Huck's narrative style is used to achieve a variety of effects. He uses it for lyrical description as in the dawn passage (Ch. 19), for inner wrestling with his conscience over slavery (most notably in ch. 31), for detailed description, for parody and for satire.

14.3.4 A Preliminary Note on African American Language

1. I like to begin by recalling the words of the African American dramatist LeRoi Jones about the dual heritage of African American language.

It is absurd to assume, as has been the tendency, among a great many Western anthropologists and sociologists that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro's mind because he learned English. The very nature of English the Negro spoke and still speaks drops the lie on that idea.

2. The scholars today believe that the prolonged contact with European Americans resulted in the African in America adopting some Eurocentric patterns but that both African American Language and African American culture have roots in African patterns. As W.E.B. DuBois put it nearly a century ago in *Souls of Black Folk* (1905), "One ever feels his two-ness--an American, a Negro."
3. A principal area in which the uniqueness of African American English (AAE) is evident is in pattern of grammar and pronunciation. Many of these reflect those that operate in West African languages. For example: Many West African languages do not have the English sound **th** and in AAE this sound is represented by the next closest sound as a **'d'**, a **'t'**, an **'f'**.

4. r sound

The "r" sound at the end of a word and after a vowel is not heard in AAE. Instead a vowel sound is used e.g. summertime is **summahtime** in AAE.

5. Final and medial consonants

These are reduced to a vowel sound or a single consonant sound. Thus child becomes **chile** in AAE.

Other examples:

Don't becomes **doan**

mind **mine**

These are a few of the patterns that one could find in African American English.

14.3.5 Jim's Language

1. What I want you to do now is to read the following excerpt from a speech by Jim and write brief grammatical notes about it.

Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz him dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to get shot, would he say, "Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor fr to save dis one?" Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You bet he wouldn't. Well, den, is Jim gwyne to say it? No, sah - I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a doctor; not if it's forty year!' (Ch. 40:309)

2. Which terms of affection does Jim use for Huck in the course of the novel?

14.4 LANGUAGE AND POWER

Language has often been used to exert power over others. There are two examples of this in *Huckleberry Finn*.

The first example of the use of language as a tool of power relates to the attempt of the frauds to manipulate people through the tall tales they tell. Common both, this manipulation takes two forms. First soon after their rescue by Huck and Jim from the howling mob, they lay claim through the fake titles to the power and status associated with them by appropriating the discourse of the nobility. The switch from one discourse to the other is clear when the two are juxtaposed:

Well, [says the duke] I'd been selling an article to take the tartar off the teeth - and it does take it off, too, and generly the enamel along with it - but I staid about one night longer than I ought to . . . (19:143).

Yes, My great-grandfather, elderson of the Duke of Bridgewater, fled to this country about the end of the last century, to breathe the pure air of freedom; married here, and died, leaving a son, his own father dying about the same time . . . and here am I, forlorn, torn from my high estate, hunted of men, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heart-broken and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft! (19:145)

The parodic appropriation produces the desired effect ("Jim pitied him ever so much, and so did I") and though Huck recognizes them for what they are, both agree to wait upon them as though they were royalty.

Secondly, the frauds manage to befool not only the Wilks family but almost the whole town--at least for a time. In this example they conceal their deceit in a parody of the language of familial love and ceremonial discourse. Listen to the king speaking to the family:

Well, by-and-by the king he gets up and comes forward a little, and works himself up and slobbers out a speech, all full of tears and flapdoodle about its being a sore trial for him and his poor brother to lose the diseased, and to miss seeing diseased alive, after the long journey of four thousand mile, but its a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us by this dear sympathy and these holy tears, and so he thanks them out of his heart and out of his brother's heart, because out of their moutns they can't, words being too weak and cold, and all that kind of rot and slush, till it was just sickening; and then he blubbers out a pious goody-goody Amen, and turns himself loose and goes to crying fit to bust. (25:189)

Stylistically this passage is far more complex and uses several devices of language to satirize the king's attempt to defraud the Wilks girls. The following points could be made about it.

- (1) Most of the king's speech is reported indirectly by Huck who is of course the narrator and eye witness, which means that the key words are the king's. More specifically the phrases--a sore trial, poor brother, miss seeing the diseased alive after the long journey of four thousand mile, out of his heart, out of his brother's heart, out of their mouths they can't, words being too weak and cold--are all words of the king. All these formal expressions are part of the vocabulary of love but in the mouth of the king they sound bombastic.
- (2) There is one sentence of the king's that is repeated verbatim - it's a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us by this dear sympathy and these holy tears.
- (3) Huck both introduces and ends the report about the king's 'address' in the words of his own choice. It is very uncommon for Huck to get angry but here Mark Twain abandons irony and uses direct satire. Huck's own feelings are clear in the phrase - all full of tears and flapdoodle and all that kind of rot and slush.
- (4) Huck's choice of other words is equally significant. He hints at the king's dramatic positioning by using the words - he works himself up and slobbers out a speech and near the end blubbens out a pious goody - goody Amen.
- (5) The king's words are embedded in Huck's sentence. Since Huck uses the simple construction of a run-on sentence, the embedding has the effect of suggesting a contrast between the king's insincere bombast about familial love and Huck's outraged simplicity.

These manipulative attempts by the king and the duke not only expose the frauds but also show the hollowness of the institution of nobility itself. Additionally, these examples have the effect of questioning and displacing the official discourse associated with genteel birth, respectability and honour.

- (ii) Tom is another character who wields the weapon of language to quell questioning and enforce obedience. He has read chivalric romances and he is obsessed with doing things the right way, which means what is prescribed in these books, irrespective of its foolishness or of the suffering it might cause. When Ben Rogers questions the wisdom of ransoming prisoners without knowing what 'ransom' means, Tom says he doesn't know but invokes the authority of books: "I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've

got to do" (2:19). Later when during a discussion of the plan to rescue Jim from slavery Huck questions the need for a rope-ladder, he insists on doing things in a regular way. And he dismisses the suggestion to use a hickovy bark ladder instead as 'perfectly ridiculous.' When Huck calls Tom's plan to dig an escape tunnel with case-knives foolish he replies: "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way - and it's the regular way. And these ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things" (35:274).

Later Tom uses the words duty and principle and succeeds in silencing Huck. But the disclosure that Jim's was already free turns the whole into a parody of romantic rescue. What Mark Twain is doing here is to ridicule the whole discourse spun round the authority of books on chivalric romance.

14.5 USE OF RACIST LANGUAGE

Mark Twain has been accused of using racist language in *Huckleberry Finn*. According to one count he has used the degrading word *nigger* as many as 211 times in the course of the book. The accusation against the writer seems to stick because of Huck's frequent and apparently unthinking use of it.

Significantly Huck uses the term not only in the beginning, before he has learnt to value Jim as a human being but afterwards also. As late as in chapter 42, after the injured Tom and recaptured Jim have been brought in, Huck reports an excited Aunt Sally "scattering order right and left at the niggers." Later Tom's disclosure that Jim is already a free man makes him realize how "he could help a body set a nigger free." Both these instances are particularly neutral occasions when Huck did not need to have use the terms if he did not want to. Earlier in the Phelps farm where he is mistaken for Tom, he fibs about an explosion on the boat.

'Goodness gracious! anybody hurt?'

'No'm. killed a nigger.'

'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt . . .'
(32:250)

Aunt Sally's traditional attitude denying humanity to the blacks is understandable but Huck's equally insensitive reply is baffling. Notice that Huck is not the only sympathetic character to use the term; the doctor who treats the injured Tom is another. He has a kind word for Jim who loyally refused to escape to freedom "I never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, yet he was resking his freedom to do it, and was all tired out, too, . . ." (42:320).

One explanation is that the term was in indiscriminate use in Twain's America and even sensitive people who are sympathetic to the negroes like Huck and the doctor used it without a twinge of conscience. Second, the use of the word could be seen as a hangover of the racist views that he held in his Hannibal days.

Even more offensive is the use of the word as a metaphor for a contemptible person at the end of chapter 24. Huck is commenting on the sob drama the king and the duke put up when they pose to be the brother of Peter Wilks, newly arrived from England.

Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.
(24:187)



Aunt Sally Talks a Blue Streak

The use of the word is highly ironic because Huck is expressing his disgust at the drama the two frauds are staging but he does it by using a term that express a contempt for the negroes. Obviously the term has become a part of Huck's vocabulary.

But if Twain lets Huck use the word *nigger* indiscriminately his use of the colour dichotomy and symbolism shows greater sensitivity. These instances relate to Pap and Jim, one a father, the other a father figure.

When Pap appears for the first time, his face 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" (5:31). This 'white' man is shown resenting an educated negro who was almost white in colour for his proud bearing. This opposition makes nonsense of the dichotomy based on colour.

Huck who has internalized the colour symbolism - black standing for evil and white for goodness - but when faced with Jim's loyalty says: "I knowed he was white inside" (40:309).



Pap!

14.6 LET US SUM UP

Mark Twain's innovative use of Huck's colloquial language constitutes a most important landmark in American literature. The language of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne and Melville was formal and 'literary' and at its worst also showy. Twain changed it all by successfully demonstrating that colloquial speech could be used effectively to achieve a variety of literary effects.

But though as Richard Chase says it is close to the spoken idiom of rural, South West America, the language of *Huckleberry Finn* is itself a new literary style. This new style has been consciously cultivated and adapted to meet the requirements of a long story. A self-taught genius that he was, he laid the utmost emphasis on using the right word in the right place.

Huck's language is described as "an unfallen Adamic dialect." But since he is the narrator also we get to hear through him several other voices. Principal among these is Jim's black dialect which though sometimes called 'realistic' is perhaps more correctly described as "romanticized folk speech" Other voices include the voices of vicious characters like Pap, those who like the king and the duke use language to manipulate people, or who like Tom use it as a tool of power. Mark Twain's use of racist language has been commented upon. But though wholly unconscious, it perhaps shows how even a great writer is limited by his time and place. And yet in spite of this limitation the language of *Huckleberry Finn* remains for a large number of people an unfailing source of its appeal that cuts across the boundaries of time and place.

14.7 GLOSSARY

Nigger: slang is an offensive term of contempt used for Negroes.

The word *nigger* first appears in 1700 in Samuel Sewall's *Diary*, where the word is spelt with only one 'g': "'Tis to be feared, we have no other kind of Title to our Nigers." It is a variant form and pronunciation of Negro, a word which originated from the Latin word *niger* for black.

A leading black educator is reported to have said: "The white man may not intend *nigger* to be derogatory--but to the black man it is always derogatory and demeaning." Ralph Ellison the author of *The Invisible Man* held that the white immigrants uncertain of their own identity seized upon "the presence of black Americans and used them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the 'outsider' . . . Perhaps one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term *nigger*--it made them feel instantly American." (*Going to the Territory*, 110-111)

discourse: can mean a number of things. Essentially it is language in use. In linguistics it means 'a stretch of language larger than a sentence. Basically it is language which is understood as utterance and thus involves both speakers/writers and also listeners/readers.

14.8 ASSIGNMENT

- i) In what way does Huck's language reflect his character?
- ii) Bring out the differences between the language used by the king and the duke.
- iii) How does Tom try to impose himself on Huck?

14.9 FURTHER READING

David Sewall. "We Ain't All Trying to Talk Alike: Varieties of Language in *Huckleberry Finn*" in Sattelmeyer, Robert and J. Donald Crowley, Ed. *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985.

Janet Holmgren McKay. "Tears and Flapdoodle: Point of View and Style in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain, 1910-1980* by Louis J. Budd Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1983, pp.194-201.

Brander Matthews. "Mark Twain and the Art of Writing," in *Critical Essays on Mark Twain, 1910-1980*, pp.54-65.

Dilip Kumar Das. "Language, Ideology and Style in Mark Twain," in *Mark Twain: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*, ed. Prafulla C. Kar. Delhi: Pencraft, 1992, pp.60-72.

Richard Chase. "Mark Twain and the Novel" in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. 1957; rpt. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1973, pp.139-56.

Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*, New York, Vintage Books, 1987, p.110-111.

UNIT 15 HUMOUR AND OTHER ISSUES IN *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Humour
 - 15.2.1 Humour in Character
 - 15.2.2 Humour in Situation
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 - 15.2.4 Farce
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 - 15.2.6 Defining the Limits of Fun
- 15.3 Intertextuality
- 15.4 Is *Huckleberry Finn* a Racist Book?
- 15.5 Major Critical Approaches to *Huckleberry Finn*
 - 15.5.1 Criticism during 1885-1950
 - 15.5.2 The Post-1950 Criticism
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- 15.8 Assignment
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15.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit begins by discussing the different kinds of humour in *Huckleberry Finn* against the background of the work of literary comedians in 19th century America. It then goes on to deal with intertextuality in the novel and more importantly with the explosive issue of whether or not the novel is racist. Finally, it gives major critical approaches to the novel.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain, it will be recalled, made his literary debut as a humorist, one among the many who flourished in the Civil War period. These humorists who are described as "literary comedians," "Phunny Phellows" and "Misspellers" were a rage in their time delighting Americans both with their writing and from the lecture platform. They evoked laughter by using grotesque exaggeration and by being irreverent towards men and traditional beliefs. More specifically, they used eccentric spellings, (which was a kind of rebellion against traditional culture), puns, malapropism, anti-climax and burlesque and a quaint style.

Perhaps the tallest among these humorists was Charles Farrar Browne who following the fashion of the day appeared in print and in the platform under the non de plume of Artemus Ward. He was a friend of Mark Twain. Here is a sample of a 'filler' he wrote for the editor of the newspaper *The Plain Dealer*:

The Plane Dealer:

Sir

i write to no how about the show bisnes in Cleeveland i have a show consisting in part of a Calfony Bare two snakes tame foxies & also wax works . . . now mr. Editor scratch off few lines and tell me how is the show bisnes in your good city i shal have

hanbils printed at your offis you scratch my back i will scratch your back, also git up a grate blow in the paper about my show don't forgit the wax works.

Yours truly

Artemus Ward

"People laugh," Ward explained, "more because of my eccentric sentences than on account of the subject matter.." He went on : "There is no wit in the form of a well-rounded sentence.. If I say Alexander the Great conquered the world and then sighed because he could not do it some more, there is a funny mixture." Among other things he ridiculed popular romances and burlesqued the lecturers--philosophers, politicians, ministers, professors--who dispensed wisdom and inspiration to people, outhumbugging "all the humbugs the world ever saw."

Aretemus Ward was only one of the humorists--there were many more among whom there were three others who need to be mentioned: Henry Wheeler Shaw (non de lume, 'Josh Billings'), David Ross Locke ('Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby') and Charles Henry Smith ('Bill Arp'). Through their play with words, their irreverence and exaggeration and burlesques and parodies, all these Phunny Phellows laughed at sentimentality and pretentiousness.

If he had affinity with Artemus Ward and other literary comedians Mark Twain also absorbed a great deal from the tradition of Southwestern humor modifying it in the process. In fact the comic tradition of the Southwest is, in the words of Bernard De Voto, "the matrix of Mark Twain's humour." To come to specifics, four elements of Southwestern humor have been incorporated in *Huckleberry Finn*. They are: the conmen (the king and the duke), the camp meeting, the circus and the Royal Nonesuch. Two debts could be mentioned here. The motif of the camp meeting in the novel (Chapter 20) has been traced to Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Suggs* (1845). Captain Suggs 'works' a camp meeting and makes a collection and disappears with it just as the king does a similar thing in *Huckleberry Finn*. Also, the hoax that Huck plays on Jim after the fog (in Chapter 15) is a version of the Western hoax perpetrated upon Pike in Dan De Quille's *The Big Bonanza* (1877).

15.2 HUMOUR

Mark Twain's humour in *Huckleberry Finn* is clearly firmly rooted in the tradition of American humour. But it has appealed to readers across centuries and continents also, which shows its universality.

Exercise

Now identify the devices Mark Twain has used in the novel for a similar purpose. Be specific, as far as you can by noting down chapter and page numbers.

"Most amiable and charming, Sir, you shake the sides of the world with merriment." That was what the Chancellor of Oxford University said while awarding Mark Twain his honorary degree. If this tribute is true of any one book of Mark Twain's, it is true of *Huckleberry Finn*.

It is an extremely funny book and its humour is unfading. What is the source or rather what are the sources of humour in it?

Huckleberry Finn is at once a book about boys and about adults, or more specifically, about a boy's view of the world of adults. Does humour lie in the way the 14-year old

boy views things? Does it lie in the language used? Or in the situation in which the central character finds himself?

Humour and other
issues

Another important area of enquiry is--is the book humorous in only one way? Or do we come across humour of different kinds in it? All this should lead on to answer the question: what is the quality of humour in this novel?

What is humour? Without waiting to define it at great length, we could say: Humour lies in oddity, in the perception of incongruity. This incongruity may be between the ideal and the real, between things as they seem and as they are, it may be between the language modes, between the genteel and the vernacular. "The characteristic situation in American humorous writing," says Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "is that in which cultural and social pretensions are made to appear ridiculous and artificial" (386). This insight is particularly apt for *Huckleberry Finn* because a major preoccupation of the novel is exposure, exposure of sham and pretensions and artificiality in the anti-bellum society. And though there is much comedy of the purer sort, humour has primarily been used as a tool of attack, for ironic and amused comment and satire. Twain's is mostly a lambent flame that plays around the social institutions and practices without burning them. It sometimes scorches too but never reduces them to cinders.

For the sake of convenience the discussion has been arranged under humour arising out of character, situation and language.

15.2.1 Humour in Character

Huck:

Much of the humour in the book arises out of Mark Twain's choice of a 14-year-old narrator and the qualities he endows him with. The following points could be made. Some of these have been made earlier.

1. Huck, we have already said, is an 'unreliable' narrator, which means that he does not always understand things completely. This disparity in understanding results in irony which leads to humour. Huck's naive response to the practice of saying grace shows that he does not understand its traditional importance. Consequently he is able to defamiliarize the practice even as he questions its intrinsic value. The same is true of his response to Widow Douglas' formula about praying. Again, the innocent questioning of Buck by Huck brings out the mindlessness of the killings in the feud. Much the same naivete and criticism are evident in his description of the Grangerford parlour and his immature praise for Emmeline's poetry.
2. Twain withholds a sense of humour from Huck. Consequently, like the dead pan expression of his creator on the lecture platform, Huck keeps a straight face almost never breaking into laughter. The only time he laughs is when he sees the king cavorting on the stage all naked. Huck seldom loses his temper either. This lets the full humour of the situation to come through to the reader. The way Huck wriggles out of tight situations time after time with smart lies furnishes evidence of this. Such situations are all the more humorous because Huck is a vulnerable character who survives in the generally hostile world of adults on the strength of his wit. Besides, here we have the impishness of a child combined with his almost never failing invention.
3. Twain casts Huck in the mould of an ancient Greek comic type of character, Eiron, a character who deprecates himself, one who thinks he is worse than he thinks he is. This comes out very clearly in two episodes connected with Huck's dilemma on whether or not to help free Jim. In the first episode

(Chapter 16) he accuses himself of not being "a man enough" who hadn't "the spunk of a rabbit" to tell the slave hunters about Jim. His eventual decision shows Huck to be a true gentleman and friend but he thinks he is being weak and spineless. Later in chapter 31 Huck again acts splendidly when he decides to stand by Jim and go to "hell"--that is in fact his finest moment--but he believes he is being irremediably wicked. Twain modifies the mould because unlike an eiron figure Huck does not merely pretend that he is worse than he is; he believes that he is a hopeless sinner. The result is laughter combined with admiration for him.

If Huck is an eiron figure, the king and the duke are alazons, boastful characters, who are also accomplished conmen. Both are figures of pure comedy. Each of them tells an extravagant tale to force Huck and Jim into treating them with deference due to their rank. The very rank that they usurp also enables Twain to attack hereditary nobility. He also uses them to comment on the gullibility and sentimentality of the people. This is clear in two episodes, one in which the king works a camp meeting and the other when the two attempt to cheat the Wilks' family. Here the king is taking up a collection for pirates:

So the king went 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 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.

Though the king is a bit of a lecher, he is more interested in cash than in kissing. What Twain is doing here is to invite us to laugh at the misplaced sentimentality of the people. At times when their impostures become too blatant, Twain gives up irony and launches a direct satirical attack on the frauds. Their attempt to defraud the Wilk's children is a case in point. But Twain's satire is never allowed to remain harsh. For example here are three harsh things that Huck says about the king and the duke:

- i) It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race (Ch.24).
- ii) I never see anything so disgusting. (Ch.25)
- iii) . . . all that sot and slush it was just sickening. (Ch.25).

These hits are direct and severe but when Huck sees them cruelly tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail, his charity softens his earlier harshness:

Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them, poor pitiful rascals, . . . Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.

There is another example of direct satire in Col. Sherburn's speech to the mob after his murder of Buggs (Ch.22) in which Twain seems to be speaking for himself and which is rather harsh. Altogether, however, what we have in *Huckleberry Finn* is amiable or amusing satire.

15.2.2 Humour in Situation

Situational humour has been talked of in different contexts earlier.

It only needs to be said that there are scenes which are excellent examples for the study of humour in all its aspects--in character, situation and language. The king's speech at the Wilk's home is one such example and has been analysed earlier.

15.2.3 Humour in Language

- i) Huck's use of words like 'grumble' while referring to the practice of saying grace has already been referred to.

Another funny word he uses is 'leak' to refer to the tearshedding of the frauds: "I never see two men leak the way they did" (25:189).

- ii) Malapropisms never fail to amuse. Following the example of the literary comedians, Twain uses malapropisms, e.g. diseased for deceased (25, 193).

affront for 'confront'

The doctor says: We'll take these fellows to the tavern and affront them with t'other couple . . ." (29:224).

- iii) The king's attempt to explain etymologically why he has used the word orgies for obsequies takes a dig at fake scholarship and is both audacious and vastly amusing.

I say orgies, not because it's the common term, because it ain't--obsequies bein' the common term--but because orgies is the right term. . . . It's a word that's made up out'n in the Greek orgo, outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew jeesum, to plant, cover up; hence inter. So you see, funeral orgies is an open er public funeral' (25:193-94).

- iv) Ironically when Huck misuses the word mumps and then tries to explain it as something extremely serious to Susan and the harelip at the Wilks' home he ties himself up in knots. (28:219)

15.2.4 Farce

There are scenes of pure fun also such as Aunt Sally counting and miscounting the spoons and confusion caused by Tom and Huck's 'borrowing' of shirts and sheets for the evasion. It is delightful to see boys scoring over adults, which is entirely in tone with the youthful spirit of the book.

15.2.5 Burlesque

The writer's use of burlesque to poke fun at Tom's make-believe world derived from conventional romance-writers in the first three chapters and the last ten chapters has been referred to earlier.

Mark Twain is also using irony to criticize the white society for what Shelley Fisher Fishkin calls "the virtual enslavement of free blacks in the South during the 1880s" (97).

15.2.6 Defining the limits of Fun

What this book does very well, I think, is that it defines the limits of what constitutes fun or rather what does not constitute fun. For what is fun for Huck and Tom turns out to be torture and humiliation for Jim. Behind such insensitive fun seeking is the assumption that blacks aren't like whites and are easy game for white fun. Huck seeks fun with Jim twice but both times he fails. As part of his first attempt he ties a dead rattlesnake round Jim's bed but when Jim is bitten by a snake, he has a sense of guilt. But after the second attempt involving the fog incident he vows never to play mean tricks on Jim.

Tom however never learns. His evasion plan that means prolonged but needless torture and humiliation gives him "the best fun he ever had in his life and the most intellectual" (Ch.36). In saying this Tom defines what fun should not be.

To sum, we have several kinds of humour in *Huckleberry Finn*. If there are moments of pure comedy, farce and impish humour of children, we also have humour as a tool of attack all buoyed up by the irrepressible zest of youth.

Exercise

In what different ways is Twain critical of white society?

- its racism
- its violence
- its gullibility
- its sentimentality

Is the attack ironical? Or is it direct?

Think of specific instances.

15.3 INTERTEXTUALITY

This is a term used to describe relationship between literary texts. This relationship is one of interdependence.

The assumption behind this concept is that texts are not isolated phenomena. They grow out of other texts and, as Jonathan Culler puts it, are made "possible by prior works which they take up, repeat, challenge, transform."

Mark Twain downplayed literary influences boasting that his wide culture was all of it real, none of it artificial for he said he did not know anything about books.

Even so his reading which became wider especially after 1870s provided him "with much matter that he conquered and annexed to his territory."

As for *Huckleberry Finn* "he trotted along in the track of funny American writers; he echoed more than a baker's dozen of them in this book alone," as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. put it. Besides there are echoes from foreign authors by the score--which is quite astonishing considering that the book's narrator is a semi-educated boy.

These sources enumerated by Walter Blair are: Old Testament authors, Cellini, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Bunyan, Pepys, Defoe, LeSage, Saint-Simon, Casanova, Goldsmith, Scott, Moore, Trollope, Carlyle, Dumas, Dickens, Reade, Taine and W.E.H. Lecky.

Much of the humour of *Huckleberry Finn* depends upon the reader's awareness of the works of Shakespeare particularly *Hamlet*, *Othello*, & *Romeo and Juliet* and they will be able to savour Mark Twain's fully only if they have read the texts which are here mutilated and are able to see the incongruity between the original and the travesty of it.

15.4 IS *HUCKLEBERRY FINN* A RACIST BOOK?

Huckleberry Finn has been one of the most controversial books in American literature. It was banned by the Concord Public Library soon after its publication in February 1885 because it was thought to "contain but little humour and that of a very coarse type," "the veriest trash," "more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." The wheel came full circle in 1957 when the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) condemned the book for its use of the vernacular term 'nigger' that was described as an affront to the dignity of a

whole race. Since then the controversy has generated a considerable body of criticism centring round the characterization of Jim. Many black critics have objected to the way blacks have been depicted in the novel. Probably the most irreconcilable critic among them is Chicago educator Dr. John H. Wallace who has described it as "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written." But equally interestingly some of the best defences of the book also have come from black authors including Ralph Ellison and the Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison. And it has been called (by a white critic) "arguably the greatest anti-racist novel by an American" (Fishkin, 23). Mercifully the critical divide between the book's defenders and detractors is not entirely along colour lines.

Exercise

Before you proceed I would like you to examine your response to the novel on the question of racism. Focus particularly on the use of the word "nigger" and the presentation of Jim.

Let me suggest an analogy that would bring home to you the offensive nature of the word. What would your response be if an Indian writer used the derogatory word *bhangi* for a person who belongs to the lowest caste in the caste hierarchy?

Make notes about Twain's characterization of Jim so that you can argue that

- i) *Huckleberry Finn* is not a racist book
- ii) *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book.

The charge of racism must be decided in terms of the total effect of the novel.

I would like to make the following points:

1. There are many voices in the novel--the voice of racism is one of them. But the speaker Pap Finn is far from being a sympathetic character--he is a drunkard, a violent criminal, a cruel father who is merely interested in getting hold of Huck's money. The speech is so self-condemnatory that Twain merely lets Huck report it without feeling the need to refute it.
2. Mark Twain's use of the offensive word 'nigger' has been objected to not only because it tarnishes a whole race but also because it encourages bigotry. However the usage has been defended on grounds of realism. In a 1991 interview, Ralph Ellison said: "Mark Twain was being quite realistic when he used the term. If I find it necessary, if I'm writing about characters who use that language, I put it down. That's the way it is. We have to learn to come to terms with it" (Fishkin, 197). Mark Twain had successfully transcended his own earlier racial bias and he was far in advance of his time. In fact he had the prescience of a great writer to foresee how history would delay the fruits of freedom to the blacks and he put it in the ironic ending of the novel. Even so he apparently did not wish to create a psychological resistance in the minds of the contemporary readers by using a word other than the usual dialect word. We must also remember that Huck's use is entirely unselfconscious and he continues using it even after he has learnt to appreciate Jim's humanity. One can only conclude that Ellison's defence notwithstanding, Mark Twain was a creature of his times. But this does not mean that *Huckleberry Finn* is racist.
3. Mark Twain, it seems, used the available stereotype of a comic negro to start with. Initially Jim is ignorant, superstitious and gullible and an easy target for white jokes. But until his fraudulent sale by the king he is a growing, evolving character. In the course of his development Twain demolishes several myths of negro inferiority--that negroes are stupid, that they are

grown up children who need looking after and that they don't feel the bonds of family affection as strongly as the whites do. At his best Jim comes across as an adult, responsible, affectionate, protective and loyal, loyal to a fault. The novel shows that Jim may be illiterate and sometimes irrational but he is not stupid. He knows bird lore that saves Huck from the violent rain storm. In sharp contrast to his greedy sadistic father, Jim acts as a surrogate father. He warns Huck not to have anything to do with Walter Scott, an advice he disregards as a result of which both come perilously close to being trapped on the sinking boat. Jim builds a wigman which is a kind of home for both. He puts in extra hours of duty so that Huck could sleep longer. Lastly he nurses Tom who is his chief tormentor back to health, in complete disregard of his own interests. Twain obviously intends to raise him in our esteem.

Jim however shows unmistakable traces of his comic origin, in the beginning and particularly in the end when he is gleefully made to accept 40 dollars given by Tom for being such a patient prisoner.

... Jim was pleased/ most to death, and busted out, and says:

'Dah now, Huck, what I tell you? ...

I tole you I got a hairy breas', en what's de sign un it; en I tole you I ben rich wunst, en gwineter to be rich agin; n it's come true; en heah she is! Dah, now! doan's talk to me - signs is signs, mine I tell you; en I knowed jis's well at I, uz gwineter be rich agin as I's a stannin heah dis minute!'

(Chapter the last: 327)

The slideback into his earlier superstitious comic manner is shocking. But this as also Twain's use of the word 'nigger' in no way detract from the position that *Huckleberry Finn* is anti-racist both in structure and characterization. As Toni Morrison said, it was in fact to Mark Twain's credit that he insisted on bringing combustible issues which the Americans of 1880s were trying to bury, on the table. She believes that the cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim's captivity on into each generation of readers." A novel that deals with the explosive issue of racism and makes plentiful use of irony requires a sophisticated response. But we cannot blame the book for the fault of understanding of some of the readers.

15.5 MAJOR CRITICAL APPROACHES TO *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

This section appropriately comes at the end of the Block. For the text of the novel is primary, and reading and re-reading it will pay rich rewards and lead to a deeper understanding of it. So keep coming back to the text and ruminate over it, and also keep comparing it with other texts wherever such comparisons are possible.

Theoretically it is quite possible for you not to read this section. But I hope you realize that our understanding of this text, any text, is a cumulative process. It is invariably based on the insights of other readers who came upon the novel earlier for what are critics but more efficient, better equipped readers?

Sometimes reading a good critical essay can set your own thoughts in motion and you may find yourself following the trail of an idea of your own.

The best thing you could do therefore is to be a sceptic like Huck - question accepted opinions.

"A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read," said Clemens. But his own *Huckleberry Finn* is a classic with a difference. It is popular with both the general reader and the critic and is also controversial, with controversy dogging it from its first American publication in 1885. Initially found objectionable for its "trashy morality," it has now been denounced for its perceived racism. But the book continues to be read in classrooms and outside and to be subjected to close scrutiny not only by students, teachers and literary critics but by educators as well who are worried over its influence on young minds.

The popularity of the book at home and abroad is clear from the fact that as many as 145 American editions and 696 foreign editions of it in 53 languages and 47 countries came out during the period 1884 to 1976.

As for criticism, 3 books, over 600 articles and 8 anthologies of criticism came out during the same period. The centenary of *Huckleberry Finn* saw the publication of two anthologies of criticism entitled *Huck Finn Among the Critics* (1984) edited by M. Thomas Inge and *One Hundred Years of Huckleberry Finn* ed. by Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley. And there is a journal devoted exclusively to Mark Twain, *Mark Twain Journal* that contains articles on *Huckleberry Finn* among other works.

Indians too have contributed to the Twain scholarship with articles and more recently (1992) with an anthology of criticism on Twain edited by Prafulla Kar, which includes one Indian article on *Huckleberry Finn*. Another Indian contribution is entitled *Mark Twain and Nineteenth Century American Literature* (1993) edited by E. Nageswara Rao.

Clearly Walter Blair was right when he said in his preface to *Mark Twain and Huck Finn* (1960) that *Huckleberry Finn* was "unique in being held in the highest esteem by critics and at the same time prodigiously popular in the United States and throughout the world."

The criticism could be studied under two heads - Criticism during 1884-1950 and The Post-1950 Criticism.

15.5.1 Criticism during 1884-1950

This was a period of general assessment and later of historical studies.

In spite of the ban by the Concord Public Library *Huckleberry Finn* received good reviews and notices. Some fifty articles appeared during 1884-1920. The critics/reviewers focussed on "the general effect and effectiveness" of the novel and helped establish it as Mark Twain's masterpiece and as one of the masterpieces of the English language. Andrew Lang (1891), for instance, called it "the great American novel." The praise reached a particularly high pitch with H.L. Mencken (1913) who said it was "one of the great masterpieces of the world" and called Mark Twain the father of American literature, the first genuine American artist of the blood royal."

In the next thirty years i.e. between 1921 and 1950 more than 80 essays appeared, which were dominated by historical studies. Important areas of literary history that received attention were:

1. influences like that of folklore, Western humour and Mark Twain's upbringing
2. sources of Huck; for the Grangerford piano and for the duke and his tooth-powder.

3. literary comparisons with *Don Quixote*, *Tom Sawyer* and *Horatio Alger* books.

The period was marked by a controversy that was sparked off by Van Wyche Brooks' (1920) argument who said that Mark Twain's artistic development had been arrested by his frontier upbringing and under the genteel influence of his mother, wife, and friend and mentor Howells. As a result he held *Huckleberry Finn* to be "of quite inferior quality." Bernard De Voto (1932) disagreed saying that Mark Twain's frontier experience combined with his knowledge of common American life provided him with creative inspiration. De Voto also deals with several elements in *Huckleberry Finn* - Mark Twain's use of the picaresque form, his brief but masterful characterization of Pap Finn and of the king and the duke, and the use of the vernacular.

With him [Huck Finn] goes a fullness made and shaped wholly of America. It is only because the world he passes through is real and only because it is American that his journey escapes into universal and is immortal. His book is American life formed into great fiction.

This entire period comes to a close with a landmark essay that the distinguished critic Lionel Trilling wrote by way of introduction for the Rinehart edition of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1949. This was followed by T.S. Eliot's introductory essay to another edition of the text in 1950. Apart from praising it both defended the ending of the novel. In doing so they sparked off a controversy in which almost every critic of American literature has taken part and which shows no sign of stopping even today. Besides, as John Gerber says, "Trilling anticipated the flood of New Criticism in the following years by discussing the book's language and structure ("in form and style *Huckleberry Finn* is an almost perfect work"), its symbolism (the river as god, Huck as its servant), and its psychological tensions (Huck vis-a-vis Jim). The essay has also given us a memorable phrase "a community of saints" Trilling used to describe the idyllic relationship between Huck and Jim on the raft..

The stage was set for close critical analysis and interpretation.

15.5.2 The Post-1950 Criticism

There has been a virtual explosion of criticism on *Huckleberry Finn* during this period and the interpretations have been as extensive as they have been diverse. No area--whether it be literary history, structure and the ending, characters, language, humour and latterly racism--has been left unexplored. For greater clarity important criticism has been grouped under major areas of interest in the novel.

Theme(s)

What is *Huckleberry Finn* about?

The question has evoked a bewildering variety of responses from its readers over the years. We can get some idea of this variety from the items listed below: alienation, conscience, death, faith in human goodness, freedom, initiation, loneliness, lying, morality, etc. Some critics express the theme in pairs of opposing words: appearance and reality, imagination and reality, freedom and slavery, individual and society and power and love. This list is based on John Gerber's article entitled *Introduction: The Continuing Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some of those who you might find worth paying attention to are the following: James Cox focuses on initiation of Huck accomplished through symbolic death and rebirth. For Leo Marx the purpose of the journey is quest for freedom. Also disagreeing with Trilling and Eliot's defence he finds that the ending is unsatisfactory because it detracts from the urgency and dignity with which the quest began. According to Richard P. Adams the theme is the growth of Huck's personality and his acceptance of adult responsibilities. Henry Nash Smith views the novel as a story of the conflict between self and society.

Structure and the ending

Humour and other issues

The structure of the novel, particularly the ending, has engaged the minds of a large number of critics. The criticism recognizes often explicitly, that *Huckleberry Finn* is picaresque and therefore episodic in nature, that its composition was interrupted, and that Mark Twain was not good at advanced planning.

Critics are ranged in two groups--there are those who are not satisfied with the structure and those who have defended it for its unity and coherence. The question of the ending is apparently an urgent and meaningful one for between 1950 and 1991 80 articles have defended it. The Norton Critical Edition has a section devoted to the problem of the ending.

The first to find the structure wanting was Thomas Sergeant Perry who in a review (1885) said that the ending was 'somewhat forced.' Hemingway who traced (1935) all modern American literature to *Huckleberry Finn* was more forthright--he asked the reader to stop where Jim is stolen. "That is the real end. The rest is cheating." Herman Wouk who considers *Huckleberry Finn* "the crown of our literature" thinks (1956) it to be a jerky, uneven, patchwork tale." He added that if one applied the classical standards of European fiction it was one long barbarous mistake. Leo Marx argues that though *Huckleberry Finn* is a masterpiece "the most serious motive in the novel, Jim's yearning for freedom, is made the subject of nonsense. The conclusion, in short, is farce. . ." William Van O'Connor goes farther than most when he argues that "the critical acumen of Eliot and Trilling notwithstanding, there are a number of flaws in *Huckleberry Finn*, some of them attributable to Twain's refusal to respect the work of art and other attributable to his imperfect sense of tone." Contesting Howell's notion that he was "the Lincoln of our literature," he says that *Huckleberry Finn* is not the great American novel.

Among the first to defend the structure are Trilling and Eliot. In spite of detecting "a certain falling-off in the ending," Trilling finds "a formal aptness" in it. Eliot justified the ending saying that the mood of the end of the book should rightly bring us back to that of the beginning and asked: "Or if this was not the right ending for the book, what ending would have been right?" Frank Baldanza (1955) argues more rigorously and persuasively that the book is knit together by an inner pattern of repetition and variation. Perhaps the most convincing defence of the structure comes from Richard Adams who says that instead of plot in the traditional sense, *Huckleberry Finn* has "a symbolic pattern or organisation of imagery" and that "the basic structure which exposes the theme of the boy's growth and which carries the weight of the incidents and the imagery throughout is a pattern of symbolic death and rebirth."

Some critics have divided the novel into suitable units to explain the structure. According to Professor Gladys Bellamy the book in spite of its episodic nature falls 'naturally' into three 'thematic units.' Martin Staples Shockley in a 1960 essay describes *Huckleberry Finn* as thematically coherent and structurally unified and proposes "a logical, ordered, five-part structure, with introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion."

Some of the views on the ending have already been referred to. Those who dislike the ending do so because Mark Twain's tone changes from satire to burlesque and from seriousness to farce and this abrupt change is accompanied by Tom's entry and his taking over and diminishment of the characters of Huck and Jim. But there has been a growing realization that the ending is deeply ironical. The defence of the ending by three black novelists could be mentioned.. Ralph Ellison rejected Hemingway's view that the novel really ended with the stealing away of Jim and charged that he had missed 'completely the structural, symbolic and moral necessity "for the last part. It was that part that gave the novel its significance or else it would be "a boy's tale," "meaningless." More recently, Toni Morrison the Nobel Prize

Winner and author of *The Bluest Eye* felt that the last part of the book was Mark Twain's commentary on the "collapse of civil rights for blacks" in the 1880's. Even more recently the award-winning novelist David Bradley author of *The Chaneysville Incident* said that none of the critics of the ending had been able to suggest an alternative ending. "They all failed for the same reason that Twain wrote the ending as he did. American has never been able to write a better ending, America has never been able to write any ending at all" (Quoted in Fishkin, 202-03). Shelley Fisher Fishkin who uses views of the novelists referred to above to make a strong case for reading the ending as deeply ironic says: "*Huckleberry Finn* may end in farce, but it is not Twain's farce--it is ours" (Fishkin, 199).

Huck and Jim

Critics have generally tended to romanticize Huck. He has been called a picaresque saint, a Prometheus, a frontier Thoreau, a Mississippi Moses, among other things. But there are dissenters like William Van O'Connor (1955), who believes that Huck's appeal is through an immature sort of innocence and that "if we refuse to overvalue him as a symbol, we may be less inclined to overvalue the novel . . ." (Inge, 382). Similarly Robert Keith Miller (1983) discounts the notion that *Huckleberry Finn* is "a novel of education" and believes that Twain never intended us to perceive Huck and Jim as "a community of saints" and that they are "attractive but imperfect" (Miller: 100).

Jim too has been presented as a larger-than-life figure. Roger Salomon relates both Huck and Jim "to the demigods of the river, to the barbarous primitives of the Negro", . . James Cox is almost as eloquent. Describing him as "the conscience of the novel," Cox calls him the "great residue of primitive, fertile force" (Inge: 153).

On the other hand Ellison objected to the characterization of Jim because Twain fitted him into the stereotype mask of a minstrel show darky and "it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity--and Twain's complexity--emerge" (Norton: 421-22).

Daniel G. Hoffman argues that though Jim begins in the minstrel stereotype of a comic negro, Twain tries to make him come out of it "to stand before us in the dignity of his own manhood" (Norton: 435).

15.6 LET US SUM UP

We have come to the end of our journey of exploration.

Huckleberry Finn is a fascinating text to read and study. Far from being a classroom fossil that some classics come to be, it is alive, perhaps more alive than earlier. It is alive because it tries to deal with the contentious issues of racism and freedom and slavery. It is to this 'contestatory' quality of the book that Toni Morrison draws attention to in her brief but compelling discussion of it in the second of her William E. Massey lectures delivered in 1990 (published as *Playing in the Dark*, Picador, 1993). The incorporation of this combative critique of slavery would, she believe, make *Huckleberry Finn* "another, fuller book."

Huckleberry Finn is a veritable kaleidoscope. It is extremely funny and its humour has not faded. When it makes satiric comments it does so with ironic naivete and does not pretend to judge. This non-judgemental quality is one reason among many of the enduring charms of the novel. It has a kind word even for the two rascals, the king and the duke, who do Huck and Jim most harm. What is even more fascinating is the troubled togetherness of Huck and Jim on the raft, each one incomplete without the other, each one needing the other to be truly free, and human and whole.

15.7 GLOSSARY

- New Criticism:** The name of a 'movement' in literary criticism which developed in 1920s. The New Critics advocated close reading and detailed textual analysis and tended to disregard the mind and personality of the writer.
- minstrel show:** a stage entertainment popular in America in the 19th century in which an actor impersonating as a negro burlesqued his character.

15.8 ASSIGNMENT

1. Discuss the use of humour as a tool of attack in *Huckleberry Finn*
2. List the points that you would use to argue that *Huckleberry Finn*
 - (i) is a racist book,
 - (ii) is not a racist bookWhat are your personal feelings about the issue?
In what way does your being an Indian affect your response to the book?
3. Can you relate *Huckleberry Finn* to any other novel/play you have read in your M.A. course or otherwise? Do you see any points of similarities/differences between this novel and Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*?
4. Attempt a character sketch of Jim and Huck.
5. To what extent would you regard *Huckleberry Finn* as an extended attack on the institution of slavery?

15.9 FURTHER READING

Clemens, Samuel Langhorne. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long and Thomas Cooley. Second ed. New York: Norton, 1977.

Contains besides the complete text with useful footnotes the following sections: Backgrounds and Sources and Criticism. Essays in the latter section are arranged under the following sub-heads: Early Views, Form and Symbol: The River and The Shore, The Problem of the Ending and Huck, Jim and Tom. The essays include those by Thomas Sergeant Perry, Brander Matthews, Van Wyck Brooks, Bernard DeVoto, Lionel Trilling, T.S. Eliot, Leo Marx, James M. Cox, Roy Harvey Pearce, Henry Nash Smith, Kenneth S. Lynn, Ralph Ellison, Daniel G. Hoffman, Walter Blair and Judith Fetterley. There is of course a select bibliography.

Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. *Lighting Out for the Territory: Reflections on Mark Twain and American Culture*. New Delhi: OUP, 1997.

Deals, among other things, with the issues of racism particularly in *Huckleberry Finn*. A must reading (available in the American Library, New Delhi.)

Hearn, Michael Patrick. *The Annotated Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Clarkson H. Potter, 1981. (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Green Hills of Africa* 1935. New York: Scribner's, 1963. Briefly mentions Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn*

Hentoff, Nal. *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book*. New York: Delacorte Press, 1982.

A novel about censorship set in motion when a school librarian refuses to take *Huckleberry Finn* out of circulation, defying her principal's order. The book is charged with being racist, sexist and immoral.

Inge, M. Thomas. *Huck Finn among the Critics: A Centennial Selection 1884-1984*. Washington: USIS, 1984.

Besides the introduction. contains two essays by way of background, early reviews by Brander Matthews and Thomas Sergeant Perry and other early responses by Andrew Lang, Sir Walter Besant, William Dean Howells and H.L. Mencken. The section on Modern Criticism includes essays by Lionel Trilling, T.S.Eliot, Leo Marx, James M. Cox, Frank Baldanza, Richard P. Adams, and Janet H. McKay. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on Film is part of the Appendix.

A major attraction of the volume is its annotated checklist of criticism on the novel from 1884 to 1983. (Available in the American Library, New Delhi.)

Kar, Prafulla C. *Mark Twain: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Delhi: Pencraft International, 1992.

Contains three essays on *Huckleberry Finn*. Useful reading.

Kaul, A.N. "Mark Twain: *Huckleberry Finn*" in *History, Sociology and The American Romance*. New Delhi: Manohar, (in association with Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla), 1990, pp.28-30.

A lucid insightful discussion of the novel from the sociological point of view. Essential reading.

Miller, Robert Keith. "*An American Odyssey: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*", in *Mark Twain*. New York: Frederick Ungar Pub Co. 1983.

Contains a somewhat irreverent reading the novel. Useful reading. (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

William E. Massey Sr. *Lectures in the History of American Civilization*, 1990. London: Picador, 1993, pp.54-57.

Contains a brief discussion on the "implications of the Africanist presence" at the centre of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Rubin Jr. Louis D. Ed. *The Comic Imagination in American Literature*. New Jersey: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1973.

Contains four useful chapters: "Introduction: the Great American Joke" (p.3-15); 'Mark Twain: The Height of Humor' (pp.139-147); 'The Minstrel Mode' (p.149-56); 'The Barber' kept on Shaving": The Two Perspectives on American Humour' (pp.385-405). (Available in American Library, New Delhi.)

Sattelmeyer, Robert and J. Donald Crowley. Eds. *One Hundred years of Huckleberry Finn*. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1985.

Contains several useful essays including "Introduction: The Continuing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" by John C. Gerber(pp.1-12) and "We Ain't All Trying to Talk Alike: Varieties of Language in *Huckleberry Finn*" by David Sewall (pp.201-15) and others.

Essential reading (available in American Library, New Delhi).

Smith, Henry Nash. 'Mark Twain: The Adventures of *Huckleberry Finn*.' in **The American Novel From James Fennimore Cooper to William Faulkner**. New York: Basic Books, 1965, pp.61-72.

Discusses the relevance of the book to the present times.

Twain, Mark. **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn**. Ed. Jane Ogborn. Cambridge: CUP, 1995.

All references to the text in the Study Material are to this edition. This edition contains several pages of Resource Notes besides a glossary.

The moral question involved in the kind of 'borrowing' described in Chapter 12 assumes serious dimensions in *Death of a Salesman* where it is related to the way Willy has brought up his children.

Brander Matthews, "Mark Twain and the Art of Writing" in **Critical Essays on Mark Twain 1910-1980**, ed. Louis J. Budd (Boston, Mass.: G.K. Hall, 1983), p.61.

Humour and other issues

NOTES