

A Community of Saints

Huckleberry Finn: 1948

By Lionel Trilling

In 1876 Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and in the same year began what he called “another boys’ book.” He set little store by the new venture and said that he had undertaken it “more to be at work than anything else.” His heart was not in it—“I like it only tolerably well as far as I have got,” he said, “and may possibly pigeonhole or burn the MS when it is done.” He pigeonholed it long before it was done and for as much as four years. In 1880 he took it out and carried it forward a little, only to abandon it again. He had a theory of unconscious composition and believed that a book must write itself; the book, which he referred to as “Huck Finn’s Autobiography,” refused to do the job of its own creation and he would not coerce it.

But then in the summer of 1882 Mark Twain was possessed by a charge of literary energy which, as he wrote to Howells,* was more intense than any he had experienced for many years. He worked all day and every day, and periodically he so fatigued himself that he had to recruit his strength by a day or two of smoking and reading in bed. It is impossible not to suppose that this great creative drive was connected with—was perhaps the direct result of—the visit to the Mississippi he had made earlier in the year, the trip which forms the matter of the second part of *Life on the Mississippi*. His boyhood and youth on the river he so profoundly loved had been at once the happiest and most significant part of Mark Twain’s life; his return to it in middle age stirred memories which revived and refreshed the idea of *Huckleberry Finn*. Now at last the book was not only ready but eager to write itself. But it was not to receive much conscientious help from its author. He was always full of second-rate literary schemes and now, in the early weeks of the sum-

mer, with *Huckleberry Finn* waiting to complete itself, he turned his hot energy upon several of these sorry projects, the completion of which gave him as much sense of satisfying productivity as did his eventual absorption in *Huckleberry Finn*.

When at last *Huckleberry Finn* was completed and published and widely loved, Mark Twain became somewhat aware of what he had accomplished with the book that had been begun as journeywork and depreciated, postponed, threatened with destruction. It is his masterpiece, and perhaps he learned to know that. But he could scarcely have estimated it for what it is, one of the world’s great books and one of the central documents of American culture.

Wherein does its greatness lie? Primarily in its power of telling the truth. An awareness of this quality as it exists in *Tom Sawyer* once led Mark Twain to say of the earlier work that “it is *not* a boys’ book at all. It will be read only by adults. It is written only for adults.” But this was only a manner of speaking, Mark Twain’s way of asserting, with a discernible touch of irritation, the degree of truth he had achieved. It does not represent his usual view either of boys’ books or of boys. No one, as he well knew, sets a higher

The late Lionel Trilling (1905-1975) is remembered as a great literary critic, writer, and teacher. During his 43 years as a professor of literature and criticism at Columbia University, Trilling wrote several books, including The Liberal Imagination and Sincerity and Authenticity, published numerous essays, and worked with thousands of students. “Huckleberry Finn: 1948” is reprinted from The Moral Obligation to be Intelligent: Selected Essays, by Lionel Trilling. Copyright © 2000 by Lionel Trilling. Reprinted with permission of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, LLC. The essay was first published as the introduction to a 1948 edition of Huckleberry Finn.

*William Dean Howells was a writer and editor of the Atlantic Monthly.



value on truth than a boy. Truth is the whole of a boy's conscious demand upon the world of adults. He is likely to believe that the adult world is in a conspiracy to lie to him, and it is this belief, by no means unfounded, that arouses Tom and Huck and all boys to their moral sensitivity, their everlasting concern with justice, which they call fairness. At the same time it often makes them skillful and profound liars in their own defense, yet they do not tell the ultimate lie of adults; they do not lie to themselves. That is why Mark Twain felt that it was impossible to carry Tom Sawyer beyond boyhood—in maturity “he would lie just like all the other one-horse men of literature and the reader would conceive a hearty contempt for him.”

Certainly one element in the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*, as also in the lesser greatness of *Tom Sawyer*, is that it succeeds first as a boys' book. One can read it at ten and then annually ever after, and each year find that it is as fresh as the year before, that it has changed only in becoming somewhat larger. To read it young is like planting a tree young—each year adds a new growth ring of meaning, and the book is as little likely as the tree to become dull. So, we may imagine, an Athenian boy grew up together with the *Odyssey*. There are few other books which we can know so young and love so long.

The truth of *Huckleberry Finn* is of a different kind from that of *Tom Sawyer*. It is a more intense truth, fiercer and more complex. *Tom Sawyer* has the truth of honesty—what it says about things and feelings is never false and always both adequate and beautiful. *Huckleberry Finn* has this kind of truth, too, but it has also the truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart.

Perhaps the best clue to the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* has been given to us by a writer who is as different from Mark Twain as it is possible for one Missourian to be from another. T.S. Eliot's poem “The Dry Salvages,” the third of his *Four Quartets*, begins with a meditation on the Mississippi, which Mr. Eliot knew in his St. Louis boyhood:

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god...

And the meditation goes on to speak of the god as

almost forgotten

By the dwellers in cities—ever, however, implacable,
Keeping his seasons and rages, destroyer, reminder of
What men choose to forget. Unhonoured, unpropitiated
By worshippers of the machine, but waiting, watching and
waiting.

Huckleberry Finn is a great book because it is about a god—about, that is, a power which seems to have a mind and will of its own, and which to men of moral imagination appears to embody a great moral idea.

Huck himself is the servant of the river-god, and he comes very close to being aware of the divine nature of the being he serves. The world he inhabits is perfectly equipped to accommodate a deity, for it is full of presences and meanings which it conveys by natural signs and also by preternatural omens and taboos: to look at the moon over the left shoulder, to shake the tablecloth after sundown, to handle a snakeskin, are ways of offending the obscure and prevalent

spirits. Huck is at odds, on moral and aesthetic grounds, with the only form of established religion he knows, and his very intense moral life may be said to derive almost wholly from his love of the river. He lives in a perpetual adoration of the Mississippi's power and charm. Huck, of course, always expresses himself better than he can know, but nothing draws upon his gift of speech like his response to his deity. After every sally into the social life of the shore, he returns to the river with relief and thanksgiving; and at each return, regular and explicit as a chorus in a Greek tragedy, there is a hymn of praise to the god's beauty, mystery, and strength, and to his noble grandeur in contrast with the pettiness of men.

Generally the god is benign, a being of long sunny days and spacious nights. But, like any god, he is also dangerous and deceptive. He generates fogs which bewilder, and contrives echoes and false distances which confuse. His sandbars can ground and his hidden snags can mortally wound a great steamboat. He can cut away the solid earth from under a man's feet and take his house with it. The sense of the danger of the river is what saves the book from any touch of the sentimentality and moral ineptitude of most works which contrast the life of nature with the life of society.

The river itself is only divine; it is not ethical and good. But its nature seems to foster the goodness of those who love it and try to fit themselves to its ways. And we must observe that we cannot make—that Mark Twain does not make—an absolute opposition between the river and human society. To Huck much of the charm of the river life is human: it is the raft and the wigwam and Jim. He has not run away from Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas and his brutal father to a completely individualistic liberty, for in Jim he finds his true father, very much as Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *Ulysses* finds his true father in Leopold Bloom.* The boy and the Negro slave form a family, a primitive community—and it is a community of saints.

Huck's intense and even complex moral quality may possibly not appear on a first reading, for one may be caught and convinced by his own estimate of himself, by his brags about his lazy hedonism, his avowed preference for being alone, his dislike of civilization. The fact is, of course, that he is involved in civilization up to his ears. His escape from society is but his way of reaching what society ideally dreams of for itself. Responsibility is the very essence of his character, and it is perhaps to the point that the original of Huck, a boyhood companion of Mark Twain's named Tom Blenkinship, did, like Huck, “light out for the Territory,” only to become a justice of the peace in Montana, “a good citizen and greatly respected.”

Huck does indeed have all the capacities for simple happiness he says he has, but circumstances and his own moral nature make him the least carefree of boys—he is always “in

*In Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* both Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn* appear frequently. The theme of rivers is, of course, dominant in the book; and Huck's name suits Joyce's purpose, for Finn is one of the many names of his hero. Mark Twain's love of and gift for the spoken language make another reason for Joyce's interest in him.

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a sweat" over the predicament of someone else. He has a great sense of the sadness of human life, and although he likes to be alone, the words "lonely" and "loneliness" are frequent with him. The note of his special sensibility is struck early in the story:

Well, when Tom and me got to the edge of the hilltop we looked away down into the village and could see three or four lights twinkling where there were sick folks, maybe; and the stars over us was sparkling ever so fine; and down by the village was the river, a whole mile broad, and awful still and grand.

The identification of the lights as the lamps of sick-watches defines Huck's character.

His sympathy is quick and immediate. When the circus audience laughs at the supposedly drunken man who tries to ride the horse, Huck is only miserable: "It wasn't funny to me...; I was all of a tremble to see his danger." When he imprisons the intending murderers on the wrecked steamboat, his first thought is of how to get someone to rescue them, for he considers "how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix. I says to myself, there ain't no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself yet, and then how would I like it." But his sympathy is never sentimental. When at last he knows that the murderers are beyond help, he has no inclination to false pathos. "I felt a little bit heavy-hearted about the gang, but not much, for I reckoned that if they could stand it I could." His will is genuinely good and he has no need to torture himself with guilty second thoughts.

Not the least remarkable thing about Huck's feeling for people is that his tenderness goes along with the assumption that his fellow men are likely to be dangerous and wicked. He travels incognito, never telling the truth about himself and never twice telling the same lie, for he trusts no one and the lie comforts him even when it is not necessary. He instinctively knows that the best way to keep a party of men away from Jim on the raft is to beg them to come aboard to help his family stricken with smallpox. And if he had not al-

ready had the knowledge of human weakness and stupidity and cowardice, he would soon have acquired it, for all his encounters forcibly teach it to him—the insensate feud of the Graingerfords and Shepherdsons, the invasion of the raft by the Duke and the King, the murder of Boggs, the lynching party, and the speech of Colonel Sherburn. Yet his profound and bitter knowledge of human depravity never prevents him from being a friend to man.

No personal pride interferes with his well-doing. He knows what status is and on the whole he respects it—he is really a very *respectable* person and inclines to like "quality folks"—but he himself is unaffected by it. He himself has never had status, he has always been the lowest of the low, and the considerable fortune he had acquired in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is never real to him. When the Duke suggests that Huck and Jim render him the personal service that accords with his rank, Huck's only comment is, "Well, that was easy so we done it." He is injured in every possible way by the Duke and the King, used and exploited and manipulated, yet when he hears that they are in danger from a mob, his natural impulse is to warn them. And when he fails of his purpose and the two men are tarred and feathered and ridden on a rail, his only thought is, "Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel hardness against them any more in the world."

And if Huck and Jim on the raft do indeed make a community of saints, it is because they do not have an ounce of pride between them. Yet this is not perfectly true, for the one disagreement they ever have is over a matter of pride. It is on the occasion when Jim and Huck have been separated by the fog. Jim has mourned Huck as dead, and then, exhausted, has fallen asleep. When he awakes and finds that Huck has returned, he is overjoyed; but Huck convinces him that he has only dreamed the incident, that there has been no fog, no separation, no chase, no reunion, and then allows him to make an elaborate "interpretation" of the dream he now believes he has had. Then the joke is sprung, and in the growing light of the dawn Huck points to the debris of leaves on the raft and the broken oar.

Jim looked at the trash, and then looked at me, and back at the trash again. He had got the dream fixed so strong in his head that he couldn't seem to shake it loose and get the fact back into its place again right away. But when he did get the thing straightened around he looked at me steady without ever smiling, and says:

'What do dey stan' for? I'se gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what became er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun', de tears come, en I could a got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.'

Then he got up slow and walked to the wigwam, and went in there without saying anything but that.

The pride of human affection has been touched, one of the few prides that has any true dignity. And at its utterance, Huck's one last dim vestige of pride of status, his sense of his

position as a white man, wholly vanishes: "It was 15 minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I wasn't sorry for it afterwards either."

This incident is the beginning of the moral testing and development which a character so morally sensitive as Huck's must inevitably undergo. And it becomes an heroic character when, on the urging of affection, Huck discards the moral

The Life that Shaped Mark Twain's Anti-Slave

By Ken Burns,
Dayton Duncan, and
Geoffrey Ward

He was a Southerner and a Northerner, a Westerner and a New England Yankee—a tireless wanderer who lived in a thousand places all around the world. He would call just two of them home: the Missouri town of his childhood, which he would transform into the idealized hometown of every American boy, and the magnificent Connecticut house he built for his wife and children, which he hoped would shelter them from hardship, but where heartbreak found them nonetheless.

During his long life, he was a printer's apprentice and a riverboat pilot, a prospector who never struck gold, and a confederate soldier who never fought a battle. He was considered the funniest man on earth—a brilliant performer on the lecture circuit who could entertain almost any audience—and a spectacularly inept businessman whose countless schemes to get rich quick threatened again and again to

Ken Burns, Dayton Duncan, and Geoffrey Ward collaborated to produce Mark Twain, a celebrated PBS documentary released in January 2002. Mark Twain carries viewers from rural Missouri, where Samuel Clemens spent his boyhood, to an estate in Connecticut where he raised his children and began to rethink his southern upbringing. This same team was responsible for PBS documentaries such as The Civil War and Baseball, for which they earned Emmy, Grammy, and People's Choice Awards. This article is excerpted with permission from the narrative of the film Mark Twain, produced by Florentine Films, Walpole, N.H.

bring him to ruin. But above all, Mark Twain was a writer, a natural born storyteller, and a self-taught genius with words who understood before anyone else that art could be created out of the American language.

He wrote constantly, newspaper stories, poetry, plays, political diatribes, travel pieces, irreverent musings about religion, and a series of autobiographical sketches noted as much, he admitted, for the tall tales they spun as for the truth they told. And he wrote books—books read by millions—including the deceptively simple story of a backwards boy and a runaway slave that showed his people a whole new way to think about themselves.

He was born Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the sixth of seven children, two months premature and so thin and sickly, his mother remembered, that "I could see no promise in him."

Every summer, Sam spent several weeks on his uncle's nearby farm. There, he and his cousins gathered in the evening in the cabin of an old slave they all called "Uncle Dan" who thrilled them with ghost stories and introduced them to spirituals and jubilees. According to Ron Powers, a Twain biographer, "race was always a factor in his consciousness partly because black people and black voices were the norm for him before he understood there were differences. They were the first voices of his youth and the most powerful, the most metaphorical, the most vivid storytelling voices of his childhood. Uncle Dan'l and Aunt Hannah, who was rumored to be a thousand years old and a confidant of Moses, these were towering personalities to him."

One of his most lasting childhood memories was of a dozen men and women chained together waiting to be shipped down river to the slave market.

"They had," he said, "the saddest faces I ever saw."

By the 1870s, Samuel Clemens was an acclaimed writer, with a wife named Livy, three children, enormous wealth, and a magnificent house in Hartford, Conn., to match.

The Hartford house may have been the Clemens's home, but every summer for 20 years they packed up and moved back to Elmira, N.Y., to be with Livy's sister, Susan Crane, at her country place called Quarry Farm. The cook at Quarry Farm was an ex-slave named Mary Ann Cord. One late afternoon in 1874, as Sam and Livy and the children listened, she told them her life story. Twain was so moved by the way Mary Ann Cord told her story that he set out to put it down on paper, changing her name to "Aunt Rachel":

It was summer time, and twilight. We were sitting on the porch of the farmhouse, on the summit of the hill, and "Aunt Rachel" was sitting respectfully below our level, on the steps, for she was our servant, and colored. She was 60 years old, a cheerful, hearty soul, and it was no more trouble for her to laugh than for a bird to sing.

I asked her, "Aunt Rachel, how is it that you've lived 60 years without trouble?"

She said, "Misto Clemens, is you in 'arnest?"

"Why," I said, "I thought—that is, I meant—why, you *can't* have had any trouble. I never heard you sigh, and never seen your eye when there wasn't a laugh in it."

She said, "Has I had any trouble? Misto Clemens, I's gwyne to tell you, den I leave it to you. I was bawn down 'mongst de slaves...."

Mary Ann Cord had been born a slave in Virginia, where she married and gave birth to

code he has always taken for granted and resolves to help Jim in his escape from slavery. The intensity of his struggle over the act suggests how deeply he is involved in the society which he rejects. The satiric brilliance of the episode lies, of

course, in Huck's solving his problem not by doing "right" but by doing "wrong." He has only to consult his conscience, the conscience of a Southern boy in the middle of the last

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seven children. Then in 1852, her family was torn apart.

An' dey sole my ole man, an' took him away, an' dey begin to sell my chil'en an' take *dem* away, an' I begin to cry; an' de man say, "Shet up yo' damn blubberin'," an' hit me on de mouf wid his han'. An' when de las' one was done but my little Henry, I grab' *him* clost up to my breas' an' I ris up an' says, "You shan't take him away," I says, "I'll kill de man dat tetches him!" But my little Henry whisper an' say, "I gwyne to run away, an' den I work an' buy yo' freedom." But dey got him, de men did.

She lost touch with her husband and all her children. Years later, during the Civil War, she was living in North Carolina when black troops fighting for the Union occupied her owner's plantation and asked her to bring them breakfast.

I was a-stoopin' down by de stove, an' I'd jist got de pan o' hot biscuits in my han' an' was 'bout to raise up, when I see a black face come aroun' under mine, an' de eyes a-lookin' up into mine, an' I jist stopped *right dab*, an' never budged! Jist gazed, an' gazed, an' de pan begin to tremble, an' all of a sudden I *knowed*! De pan drop' on de flo' an' I grab his lef' han' an' shove back his sleeve, an' den I goes for his forehead an' push de hair back so, an' "Boy!" I says, "if you ain't my Henry, what is you doin' wid dis welt on yo' wri's an' dat sk-yar on yo' forehead? De Lord God ob heaven be praise', I got my own ag'in!"

Oh, no, Misto Clemens, I hadn't had no trouble. An' no joy.

Mark Twain wrote down Mary Ann Cord's story precisely as she had told it and sent it off to *Atlantic Monthly* editor William Dean Howells with a note warning, "It has no humor in it. You can pay as lightly as you choose for that, if you want it," he added, "for it is rather out of my line." Titled "A True Story Repeated Word for Word As I Heard It," it marked his first appearance

in the *Atlantic Monthly*. The slave-owner's son from Missouri was discovering new ways of looking at the world.

Later, Twain began *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a work that would take him a decade to complete.

Huck's experiences with Jim turn upside down everything he has been taught about black people and white, about slavery and freedom, about good and evil. The novel reaches its moral climax when Huck is faced with a terrible choice. He believes he has committed a grievous sin in helping Jim escape and he finally writes out a letter telling Jim's owner where her runaway property can be found. Huck feels good about this at first he says and marvels at how close "I come to being lost and going to hell." But then he hesitates.

I got to thinking over our trip down the river; and 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 how glad he was when I came back out of the fog; ... and such-like times; and would always call me honey, ... and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time ... [when he 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.

I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding me breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell!"—and tore it up.

Bring Mark Twain to Your Classroom

■ Start with PBS's online, interactive scrapbook:

www.pbs.org/marktwain/scrapbook/index.html. Mark Twain loved making scrapbooks; this is one he would be proud of. With pictures, quotes, essays, and chapters highlighting his journey from boyhood to literary immortality, this is the perfect place to get acquainted with Twain.

■ Next, order your copy of Ken Burns's *Mark Twain*:

www.pbs.org/marktwain/filmmakers/shop.html. This fascinating, 220-minute documentary (which costs just \$24.98) reveals Twain's awakening to the horrors of slavery, his great success as a writer and repeated failures as a businessman, and his dedication to his wife and children—almost all of whom he outlived.

■ When you're ready to develop those lesson plans, head to the "Learn More" section:

www.pbs.org/marktwain/learnmore/index.html. Here, you'll find five classroom activities for middle and high school students (don't miss #4 on how slavery affected Twain), selected writings (including excerpts from *Huckleberry Finn* and "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It"), a chronology of Twain's life, and links to other resources.

This fall, look for "Ken Burns American Stories," a new weekly series on PBS that will air many of Burns's documentaries; *Mark Twain* will air in two parts this November on the 18th and the 25th.