

Mark Twain

LIT. 214
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"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn. If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since." - Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, 1935.

William Dean Howells was one of Twain's early admirers, and he wrote the following on Twain's style:

"So far as I know, Mr. Clemens is the first writer to use in extended writing the fashion we all use in thinking, and to set down the thing that comes into his mind without fear or favor of the thing that went before or the thing that may be about to follow" (*PAL* website).

Huck Finn concerns itself with a number of themes:

- The quest for freedom
- The transition from adolescence into adulthood
- Alienation and initiation
- Criticism of pre-Civil War southern life
 - Racism
 - Elitism of planters
 - Ignorance
 - Shallowness of religion
 - Pride
 - Support of slavery
- Condemnation of literary Romanticism

Twain's contributions to American Literature include the following (definitions are from *PAL*):

- **Alienation** - the feeling of not belonging - caused by: a. a person, who does something that creates the feeling of not belonging - examples: conscientious objection to war, disobedience (like Thoreau's refusal to pay the poll-tax), or breaking the law; b. society forces a person to do something against one's wishes: drafted for war; not allowed to wear a beard at a job; job discriminations because of alternate lifestyles, etc.; c. a combination of the above. Note: Once a person is alienated, he/she may remain alienated or do something about it, that is initiate a course of action.
- **Initiation** - an examination of oneself and to take steps to change the alienated situation.

- **Journey** - generally this change is symbolized, in literature, by a physical journey or movement from one place to another - it could mean moving out of home, changing majors or campuses, leaving or joining church, etc.
- **Suffering** - during the journey or movement there is some kind of suffering - physical, mental, psychological, etc.¹ This suffering is important to "cleanse" the past; it also suggests that change is not easy, it has its toll.
- **Reconciliation** - after a painful journey (self-examination) there comes a reconciliation or removal of the feeling of not belonging. It takes two forms: a. a return to the former place- classic example of the return of the biblical prodigal son, or b a discovery of a new place or situation that gives the initiate a sense of belonging - a divorce and remarriage, for example.
- **Communication** - this is an optional step, because not all initiates wish to talk about or share their experiences; however, many do, like Rip Van Winkle in Washington Irving's famous short story.
- **The use of Common Speech** –
- **The Common Man as ‘Hero’** –
- **Embedded Humor into Narrative** –
- **Story as more than Plot** –

Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* (1952) is considered one of the greatest American novels since World War II, explained in an essay what Twain had meant to him and to American literature:

“Mark Twain ... transformed elements of regional vernacular speech into a medium of uniquely American literary expression and thus taught us how to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners. For indeed the vernacular process is a way of establishing and discovering our national identity.”

¹ Plato discussed this at length, as did Aristotle in *Ars Poetica*. But Twain spun a new twist to the struggle.