

## CRITICS DISCUSS

### THEMES, MOTIFS AND PATTERNS IN *Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

“It is the River that controls the voyage of Huck and Jim; that will not let them land at Cairo, where Jim could have reached freedom, it is the River that separates them and deposits Huck for a time in the Grangerford household, the River that re-unites them, and then compels upon them the unwelcome company of the King and the Duke.... We come to understand the River by seeing it through the eyes of the Boy; but the Boy is also the spirit of the River.... Thus the River makes the book a great book. As with Conrad, we are continually reminded of the power and terror of Nature, and the isolation and feebleness of Man. Conrad remains always the European observer of the tropics, the white man’s eye contemplating the Congo and its black gods. But Mark Twain is a native, and the River is his God. It is as a native that he accepts the River God, and it is the subjection of Man that gives to Man his dignity. For without some kind of God, Man is not even very interesting.”

T. S. Eliot, Introduction

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*  
(Cresset, London 1950) vii-xvi; (Chanticleer, NY 1950)

“According to [James M. Cox], the ‘fake murder’ that Huck stages in order to get away from his father, ‘is probably the most vital and crucial incident of the entire novel,’ and Cox’s observations on this event come close to defining the basic structure of the novel. The basic structure, which expresses the theme of the boy’s growth and which carries the weight of the incidents and imagery throughout, is a pattern of symbolic death and rebirth... The central action on the river begins with Huck’s pretended death. It ends with his mistaken recognition as Tom by Aunt Sally Phelps, when he feels that ‘it was like being born again, I was so glad to find out who I was.’ This pattern is kept in the focus of the reader’s attention...by repeated deaths and escapes occurring between, before, and after the main events.... [Huck] grows, therefore, during the time of crucial change, by ‘dying’ out of society, withdrawing into nature on the river, and then returning or being ‘reborn’ into society with a new and different attitude toward it.”

Richard P. Adams

“The Unity and Coherence of *Huckleberry Finn*”  
*Tulane Studies in English* VI (1956) 87-103

“The nakedness of Huck and Jim when they are alone on the raft becomes a symbol of how they have shucked off the excrescences of the real world, their clothes, and have come as close as possible to the world of the spirit. All journeys, even allegorical ones, must have a goal. What is the goal of Huck’s journey?... The pattern is, very simply, one of an ever-increasing engagement of the world of the raft, of the spirit, with the world of the shore, of reality.”

Lauriat Lane, Jr.

“Why *Huckleberry Finn* Is a Great World Novel”  
*College English* XVII (October 1955) 1-5

“Doubleness patterns the book thus: (a) the real thing is presented, as in the death of Boggs, and then (b) the parody of it, as in the mock imitation of his tragic death (Chapter 21). The structure of *Huckleberry Finn*, as I see it, consists of a recurrent counterpointing of the real or true thing or event with the juxtaposed parody of it. Nothing is not parodied. Everything exists thus in doubleness, by contraries. Twain pairs, for example, the real circus (Chapter 22) with the King’s Royal Nonesuch, a peepshow parody of the real thing: ‘the king come a-prancing out on all fours, naked, and he was painted all over, ring-streaked-and-striped, all sorts of colors, as splendid as a rainbow’ (Chapter 23). Here’s the naked truth, a parody of it. With doubleness of selfhood goes masked selfhood in clothes, false fronts and false words, false identities, maudlin sentiments and lies. While disguise occurs not only on land but also on the river, the river on the contrary is the sole sanctuary for nakedness, literally and spiritually. Even the raft, when it touches land, is masked. Twain manages the death-and-rebirth motif on the same principle as for the mask motif, namely that while the river is not exempt from death, it is the sole sanctuary for rebirth. On land occur only false rebirths, false reformations (e.g., Pap’s fraudulent reformation in Chapter 5).

That the river represents conscience is indicated by the fact that the river gnaws at the land. At Parkville the stores and houses are 'set up three or four feet above the ground on stilts, so as to be out of the reach of the water when the river was overflowed'.... That the river cuts bluffs asunder is manifested...allegorically in the fact that the King, when asked what Wilks had tattooed on his breast, feels 'squashed down like a bluff bank that the river has cut under' (Chapter 29). That bluff of land is personified by the King. In the river's always gnawing at the land and the town's always drawing back from it Twain provides the analogy for Huck's own plight. Huckleberry, having paddled up a creek in search of berries, confronts instead his other self--personified in the pair of frauds....

Their journeying southward in order to go northward strikes me as justifiable both at the literal and the thematic level. Their journeying southward masks their true intention. Everything in the novel goes masked, even Moses in the bulrushes; and that's what saved him. (In Chapter 18 Jim, like Moses, is saved by the disguise of marsh-bushes.) Doubleness and the corollary motif of mask dominate the patterns of the book. 'Was Jim a runaway nigger?' ask the Frauds (in Chapter 20); to which question Huck fakes the reply: 'Goodness sakes! would a runaway nigger run south?'"

R. W. Stallman  
"Reality and Parody in *Huckleberry Finn*"  
*College English* (May 1957) 425-6

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