

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF MARK TWAIN

(1835-1910)

"In form and style *Huckleberry Finn* is an almost perfect work....The form of the book is based on the simplest of all novel-forms, the so-called picaresque novel, or novel of the road, which strings its incidents on the line of the hero's travels. But, as Pascal says, 'rivers are roads that move,' and the movement of the road in its own mysterious life transmutes the primitive simplicity of the form: the road itself is the greatest character in this novel of the road, and the hero's departures from the river and his returns to it compose a subtle and significant pattern. The linear simplicity of the picaresque novel is further modified by the story's having a clear dramatic organization: it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a mounting suspense of interest.

As for the style of the book, it is not less than definitive in American literature. The prose of *Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech. This has nothing to do with pronunciation or grammar. It has something to do with ease and freedom in the use of language. Most of all it has to do with the structure of the sentence, which is simple, direct, and fluent, maintaining the rhythm of the word-groups of speech and the intonations of the speaking voice.

In the matter of language, American literature had a special problem. The young nation was inclined to think that the mark of the truly literary product was a grandiosity and elegance not to be found in the common speech. It therefore encouraged a greater breach between its vernacular and its literary language than, say, English literature of the same period ever allowed. This accounts for the hollow ring one now and then hears even in the work of our best writers in the first half of the last century. English writers of equal stature would never have made the lapses into rhetorical excess that are common in Cooper and Poe and that are to be found even in Melville and Hawthorne.

Yet at the same time that the language of ambitious literature was high and thus always in danger of falseness, the American reader was keenly interested in the actualities of daily speech. No literature, indeed, was ever so taken up with matters of speech as ours was. 'Dialect,' which attracted even our serious writers, was the accepted common ground of our popular humorous writing. Nothing in social life seemed so remarkable as the different forms which speech could take--the brogue of the immigrant Irish or the mispronunciation of the German, the 'affectation' of the English, the reputed precision of the Bostonian, the legendary twang of the Yankee farmer, and the drawl of the Pike County man. Mark Twain, of course, was in the tradition of humor that exploited this interest, and no one could play with it nearly so well. Although today the carefully spelled-out dialects of nineteenth-century American humor are likely to seem dull enough, the subtle variations of speech in *Huckleberry Finn*, of which Mark Twain was justly proud, are still part of the liveliness and flavor of the book.

Out of his knowledge of the actual speech of America Mark Twain forged a classic prose. The adjective may seem a strange one, yet it is apt. Forget the misspellings and the faults of grammar, and the prose will be seen to move with the greatest simplicity, directness, lucidity, and grace. These qualities are by no means accidental. Mark Twain, who read widely, was passionately interested in the problems of style; the mark of the strictest literary sensibility is everywhere to be found in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*.

It is this prose that Ernest Hemingway had chiefly in mind when he said that 'all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*.' Hemingway's own prose stems from it directly and consciously; so does the prose of the two modern writers who most influenced Hemingway's early style, Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson (although neither of them could maintain the robust purity of their model); so, too, does the best of William Faulkner's prose, which, like Mark Twain's own, reinforces the colloquial tradition with the literary tradition. Indeed, it may be said that almost every contemporary American writer who deals conscientiously with the problems and possibility of prose must feel, directly or indirectly, the influence of Mark Twain. He is the master of the style that escapes the

fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice, the very voice of unpretentious truth."

Lionel Trilling
"Mark Twain's Colloquial Prose Style"
The Liberal Imagination (1950)
Richard Nordquist
Thoughtco.com (8 October 2019)

"There is something so special and ingenuous about the style that one can readily agree with Albert Stone when he says that 'the vernacular language...in *Huckleberry Finn* strikes the ear with the freshness of a real boy talking out loud.' Stone's comment hits home on several counts. First, this style does 'strike the ear'--we hear it as we read it--and that quality, coupled with its colloquialness, creates the illusion of talk. Second, because of the way Twain controls both the language and the point of view, we are struck over and over again with how true the story is to the boy who tells it.

Tony Tanner notes that 'from the start of his writing career, Clemens reveals a preoccupation with language problems.' Twain's interest in language started with his lifelong love of good talk. His constant preoccupation with the artful fictions of platform speaking, in which certain artificial hesitations and pauses added to the apparent naturalness of the delivery, led him to try to capture these variations of speech in writing. Louis J. Budd does not exaggerate when he stresses Twain's commitment to 'talk': 'Even after he was established as a leading author he would analyze oral performance much more consciously and astutely than the craft of writing.'

Twain's respect for and understanding of the spoken word and its power of expression led him to try to capture some of its qualities in his written style and in his presentation of all types of discourse. To ensure the authenticity of dialect in written form, he went through the painstaking process of 'talking and talking and *talking* till it sounds right.' He applied his standards for oral presentations to written works by subjecting them to 'the most exacting of tests--the reading aloud'...It is this art, this ability to maintain the semblance of talk in written form while at the same time investing it with the spirit and animation of the speaker, that informs and controls the narrative of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain attempted, through his style in *Huckleberry Finn*, to give expression to what Henry Nash Smith calls the vernacular values of 'homely wisdom and rugged honesty that were an implicit indictment of empty elegance and refinement.' For Twain, style, the way in which an idea is expressed, was inextricably linked to the character of the observer. Style in language was a reflection of the speaker's personality and mode of perception.

Twain drew on two sources for vernacular models. His primary inspiration was the oral tradition of the frontier--the boastful bombast of the tall-tale teller and the plain, understated style of the simple, uneducated American. In addition, he frequently praised the naïve qualities in young people's writing. He saw the fresh perceptivity of children mirrored in their composition. Thus, he says in his 'Complaint about Correspondents,' 'the most...interesting letters we get here from home are from children seven and eight years old.... They write simply and naturally, and without straining for effect.' In his 'Autobiography,' he takes pleasure in quoting lengthy passages from his daughter Susy's biography of him.

In *Huck Finn*, Twain created a narrator with a boy's innocence and a social outcast's honesty. He achieved this effect with certain vernacular features, such as nonstandard verb forms, a limited vocabulary, and apparently simple syntactic relations, while building into the style a highly sophisticated, innovative literary voice that stretches the English language to its limits and draws on a wide variety of poetic devices. Huck's limitations as a narrator enabled Twain to experiment freely with the range of expressiveness inherent in the colloquial style without the necessity of doctoring it to meet standard literary expectations.

The kinds of errors that Huck makes are by no means haphazard; Twain carefully placed them to suggest Huck's basic illiteracy but not to overwhelm the reader. Nonstandard verb forms constitute Huck's most typical mistakes. He often uses the present form or past participle for the simple past tense, for

example, *see* or *seen* for *saw*; his verbs frequently do not agree with their subjects in number and person; and he often shifts tense within the same sequence.

On the most obvious level, Huck's frequent substitutions of present for preterit is typical both of nonstandard English and of conversation in general. In another sense, Huck's present tense takes his experiences and generalizes them to the habitual present, as when, in describing a typical Mississippi sunrise, he tells the reader, 'you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and you make out a log cabin in the edge of the woods.'

In a similar way, Huck frequently uses the modals *could* and *would* in his descriptions of nature. Thus, in that same 'Sunrise on the River' description the beginning of Chapter 19, Huck tells the reader what 'you could see' and 'you could hear.' The *could* preterits, suggesting repeated activity, coupled with the impersonal *you*, generalize the response and imply the unstated condition--'whenever you were there or whenever the sun rose.' When Huck describes the summer storm he and Jim watch on Jackson's Island, he starts in the simple past tense and then says: 'It *would* get so dark that it looked all blue-black outside...and the rain *would* thrash along...and here *would* come a blast of wind that *would* bend the trees down' (Chap. 9; italics are added). These *would* constructions suggest repeated actions and events and create a generalized sense of the past.

Huck's present tense also identifies his involvement in the process of storytelling. He uses what Martin Joos calls 'the narrative actual present' that 'has a firm basis in speech, where the use of actual tense for past events comes naturally to the lips of a man who gets himself involved in what he is talking about.' Thus, Huck tells us that 'the king gets up and comes forward a little' or 'the king begins to work his jaw again.' Finally, Huck uses the timeless present to frame his moral judgments or his comments and generalizations: 'Music *is* a good thing'; 'Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another.' Except for these gnomic statements, Huck does not use the present tense to step out of his narrative and offer retrospective evaluations of the events of the story. Only in the opening and closing paragraphs does he discuss his narrative function: 'You don't know about me...'; 'Tom's most well, now...so there ain't nothing more to write about.'

Huck's choice of verbs is both colloquial and concrete. His verbs are active and direct, as are those of other characters. In Huck's world it doesn't get dark, it 'darkens up'; *Tom Sawyer* doesn't end, it 'winds up.' When the King gets caught in a big lie at the Wilkses, he doesn't turn white but he 'whitened.' Huck frequently 'lights out' and 'strikes' home, town, or the raft. When he is on the run, he 'humps' it to get away. Many of these active verbs are two-part--verb plus adverbial particle--'soften up,' 'tie up,' 'set out,' 'lay up,' 'drift along,' 'blubber out.' These constructions are especially common in American English; they lend a colloquial quality to the prose while at the same time adding to the rhythm.

While Huck's vocabulary is rich in concrete finite verbs (they average 15 percent of the text, in contrast to 5 percent for adjectives), participial verb forms fulfill an important role as modifiers. Huck's frequent use of present participles as postnominal adjectives adds to the rhythm of his style. Thus, for example, in the sunrise passage, the reader shares the vision of 'the paleness, spreading around' and 'dark spots drifting along.' Frequently, Twain adds the colloquial 'a-' prefix to Huck's present participles, and he couples these forms with two-syllable adverbials for even greater rhythm. During the thunderstorm, Huck glimpses 'treetops a-plunging about, away off yonder.' At the circus, the bareback riders go 'a-weaving around the ring' (Chap.22). When Huck recalls the highlights of their trip, he remembers Jim and him 'a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing' (Chap.31).

In addition to the nonstandard verb forms, Twain establishes Huck's basic illiteracy with a series of strategically placed errors. Huck uses certain dialect terms in place of more standard choices, *without* for *unless* or *except*, for example. Huck confuses some similar-sounding words, such as *diseased* for *deceased*, and he shares this confusion with other characters. The King regularly mixes up terms, such as his substitution of *orgies* for *obsequies*. In some cases, it is impossible to tell whether a mistake is Huck's or simply his naïve report of someone else's mistake. In this regard, Twain occasionally has Huck use a dialect spelling, which sometimes reflects a dialect pronunciation, as with *deffersit* for *deficit*, and

sometimes just a misspelling, as with *sivilize*. Huck keeps his distance by misspelling alien forms, and the reader recognizes them as someone else's words and sentiments.

Although the dialect forms stand out, Robert Lowenherz calculates that Twain restricted 'dialect spelling to less than one percent of Huck's narrative speech...consistently throughout the novel.' Similarly, in revising *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain introduced many nonstandard features in strategic places while regularizing the grammar at other points, so that the dialect and suggestions of illiterate usage "might count." Among those nonstandard features, the most prominent other than the verb forms are the frequent occurrence of double negatives, the use of adjectives for adverbs, and a redundancy of subjects--for example, 'Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me.' Huck's double negatives frequently have a literary effect. For example, in the first paragraph of the novel Huck's 'but that ain't no matter' characterizes him as both illiterate and self-effacing.

On the surface, Huck's syntactic patterns appear simple, but they are more complex than they seem. Twain does not adopt the childish and boring pattern of having one simple sentence follow another. In fact, Huck's sentences are not particularly short, except for an occasional matter-of-fact evaluation ('She was right about the rats,' 'The seegars was prime,' 'The statements was interesting, but tough'). Nor do Huck's sentences lack complexity, but they are made to seem simple by a lack of overt indications of subordination between clauses and phrases. For example, Huck characteristically uses the conjunction *and* to link any number of subordinate and coordinate ideas, a practice that suggests a lack of linguistic sophistication.

So, for example, in a sentence in which Huck describes his intense activities as he engineers his escape from Pap, the relationship among the predicates depends upon the narrative sequence--one activity follows another: 'Well, *next* I took an old sack *and* put a lot of rocks in it,--all I could drag--*and* I started it from the pig, *and* dragged it to the door *and* through the woods down to the river *and* dumped it in, *and* down it sunk, out of sight' (Chap.7; italics added). Prepositional phrases locate the action, add rhythm, and break up the repetition of verbs linked by *and*. The juxtaposition of the adverbial particle before the subject and verb in 'down it sunk' (by contrast with 'dumped it in') breaks the pattern of the other predicates and adds a note of finality.

When Huck describes a scene rather than a series of activities or events, the relationship among parts of sentences is even looser. Frequently, however, there is still the connection based upon time within the narrative sequence. As the sun rises on the Mississippi, 'The first thing to see...was a kind of dull line...then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up....' The semicolon recurs as regularly as *and* to establish loose connections.

Huck's more complex sentences are not difficult to understand, because he uses simple sequencing to link ideas together. Thus, a sentence describing the circus contains a series of sophisticated absolutes--participial phrases with subjects--as well as other modifiers, but it reads like one impression naturally following another: 'And then one by one they got up and stood, and went a-weaving around the ring so gentle and wavy and graceful, the men looking ever so tall and airy and straight, with their heads bobbing and skimming along, away up there under the tent-roof, and every lady's rose-leafy dress flapping soft and silky around her hips, and she looking like the most loveliest parasol' (Chap.22). As Richard Bridgman notes, 'Huck's remembering mind lays in these details one after the other without any urge toward subordination.'

This sentence incorporates another of Huck's typical syntactic patterns. When he uses a string of three adjectives, he frequently uses *and* and occasionally *or* ('the watermelons, or the cantaloupes, or the mushmelons, or what') after each one. This practice accords each idea equal weight while at the same time adding to the rhythm. With Huck's apparently simple syntax, Twain is able to produce some remarkable effects. In one of the novel's most interesting passages, Twain has Huck report one of the King's performances by summarizing part and giving part verbatim. In a single sentence, Huck sets the scene, records the speech, and offers an evaluation. '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...'

Huck's narration frames his account of the King's speech. Twain begins with Huck's introduction, moves into Huck's rendition of the King's words ('it's being a sore trial for him and his brother'), and finally, in the middle of the sentence, he gives us the King himself speaking ('it's a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us'). From this point on, we move gradually back to Huck's voice, passing once again through the intermediate stage of Huck's account of the King...The large number of loosely coordinated clauses, the repetition of certain phrases ('by and by') to link sentences together, occasional ambiguity or vagueness about a pronominal referent, occasional sentence ellipsis, variable sentence length, and a wide range of verb tenses and aspects all contribute to the 'colloquialness' of the Huck Finn style.

It is, however, probably Huck's vocabulary above all else that 'strikes the reader's ear.' Huck's limited vocabulary depends for its power on strategic repetition, the coining of new terms, and the expansion of traditional functions for words. Huck repeats certain key words, such as *monstrous*, *lonesome*, and *comfortable*, again and again. The repetitions, while suggesting his limitations, serve to reinforce the novel's themes and Huck's preoccupations. In the same way, Huck has certain pet phrases like *pretty soon* and *by and by* that seemingly signify little more than his imprecision about time, but reveal both the tempo of Huck's life and the importance he attaches to events.

Huck has to make each word count, and a good word often occurs with more than one meaning. For instance, Huck uses pow-wow once meaning 'to talk' ('we would go to the cave and pow-wow over what we had done'), another time with the sense of 'a great deal' ('a pow-wow of cussing'), and finally as 'engine' or 'engine noise' ('her lights would wink out and her pow-wow shut off'). Each of these uses is both colloquial and peculiarly American.

A brief look at any dictionary of Americanisms reveals how many first uses are credited to Twain. In Huck, Twain discovered the perfect spokesperson for the innovativeness of American English. Huck takes full advantage of English's flexibility in word function; he is particularly adept at creating finite verbs from words with a wide variety of other primary functions. When the King and the Duke first latch on to Huck and Jim, to satisfy the King's need for attention--his need to be addressed as 'Your Majesty'--Huck and Jim 'set to *majesty*ing him' (Chap.19). In the same sequence, the King sighs over his fate, and the Duke demands to know 'What are you alassin' about?' Huck can also find new meanings for nouns and turn verbs into nouns. Having pretended at one point to choke on a chicken bone in order to stall for time, he hits another song, 'so I played another chicken-bone and got another think' (Chap.26). Although Huck is sparing with his adjectives, when he needs a new descriptive term, he finds it. So, for example, a circus lady's dress is 'rose-leafy.'

The poetic qualities of the Huck Finn style are in many ways inextricably linked to its colloquialness. As Perry Miller observed, Twain 'ultimately employed simplicity of style for fecundity of effect.' Certainly Huck's constant lexical resourcefulness constitutes poetic creativity. But over and above the tremendous inventiveness of Huck's vocabulary and the authenticity of the dialect forms stands Twain's skillful use of alliteration and verbal imagery of all sorts, particularly hyperbole, metaphor, and onomatopoeia. In the sunrise passage, for example, Huck's poetic constructions are simple and down-to-earth, reflecting his own experience. He has certainly heard 'bull frogs a-cluttering' (onomatopoeia). His frequent night excursions would make him familiar with quiet 'like the whole world was asleep' (simile), and his affinity with nature makes his description of 'everything smiling in the sun' (personification) totally appropriate. Furthermore, Huck's understanding of nature leads him to present his perceptions as concrete qualities of the external world. Thus, he sees the river 'soften up' and change color from black to gray.

Alliteration in the sunrise passage centers on the sibilant /s/, which suggests the hushed calm pervading the scene—*streaks/sometimes/sweep/screaking/still/sounds/see/streak/snag/swift/sweet/smell/smiling/sun/song-birds*. Many of Huck's descriptions are rich in sense imagery. Charles Clerc notes that using traditional classifications, Twain manages to get four of the five senses into the sunrise scene--sight, smell, touch, and sound. In his description of the thunderstorm on Jackson's Island, Huck uses an onomatopoeic word—*fst*—for a syntactic transition ('and next, when it was just about the blues and blackest--*fst!* it was as bright as glory'). Similarly, the thunder goes 'rumbling, grumbling, tumbling, down the sky towards the underside of the world.' Finally, Huck uses a homely simile to liken the sound to 'rolling empty barrels down stairs,--where it's long stairs and they bounce a good deal, you know.'

Despite his extraordinary verbal facility and inventiveness, Huck is a most unassuming narrator. His style is so colloquial and seemingly unaffected and unrehearsed that we frequently feel as if he is carrying on a conversation with us. This effect is heightened by his liberal use of direct addresses to 'you,' the reader. When Huck describes his own activity or an event in nature, Twain seems most able to balance his art with the artlessness of Huck's voice. When Huck accounts for what he hears, reads, or observes in social settings, his narrative voice, while no less entertaining, seems somewhat more contrived. As Henry Nash Smith notes, although Huck is 'primarily an observer,' he 'is endowed with Mark Twain's own unambiguous attitude toward the fraud and folly he witnesses.

One contrivance that most readers happily overlook with the appropriate 'suspension of disbelief' is Huck's ability to remember and report verbatim lengthy direct accounts of other characters' speech and writing. In fact, among these reports are some of the novel's most amusing sections. Our delight in Emmeline Grangerford's doggerel 'Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots' and in the Duke's shameless distortion of Hamlet's soliloquy is heightened by Huck's sober admiration. These fabrications are pure Twain; Huck serves as an excuse to create them. They have little to do with Huck's story except insofar as they capture the essence of what passed for culture in rural pre-Civil War America. Of course, they also serve as an additional proof of Huck's naivete and in that way further endear him to the reader.

A few of these social commentaries are meant to instruct rather than amuse. One such passage is the 'half-a-man' speech that Colonel Sherburn addresses to the lynch mob headed by Buck Harkness. Smith comments that 'the Sherburn episode seems unusually isolated. None of the principal characters is involved in or affected by it...and Huck is a spectator whom even the author hardly notices.' By comparison, Pap's rather lengthy diatribe against the 'govment' seems to belong in the novel and in Huck's memory. It develops Pap's character as town drunk, petty philosopher, and racist, and it is likely that Huck has heard some version of the speech on many occasions: 'Whenever his liquor begun to work, he most always went for the govment' (Chap.6).

Twain carefully differentiates the style in these 'speeches' to represent the speakers. His prefatorial note to *Huckleberry Finn* speaks eloquently for his attention to his characters' voices....Although Twain had a very good ear, he uses dialect variations principally for characterization and only secondarily for linguistic authenticity. For example, Pap and Colonel Sherburn have many rhetorical devices in common. They pose questions and offer the answer--'And what do you reckon they said? Why they said...'; 'Do I know you? I know you clear through' (Chaps. 6 and 22). They repeat key words, uttering them in apparent disgust. But Pap's speech represents the ramblings of a drunk. He is contemptible and even occasionally amusing, for example, when he describes his broken-down old hat. He sounds like Huck. He uses the 'a-' participles--'a-standing' and 'a-coming.' He uses multiple negatives, incorrectly formed superlatives ('awfulest'), contractions, parentheticals, and many *ands* to link ideas.

Although the colonel's language shares some of these features ('pitifulest'), it is in general both more sophisticated and more standard. Most readers will not condone Sherburn's lawlessness or his arrogance, but he does not seem contemptible nor in the least amusing. Pap is certainly as dangerous as the colonel, but the colonel's language requires him to be taken more seriously.

Huck recounts many dialogues in the course of telling his story. Dialogues move the story along, providing both drama and moments when the action can pause. But an important purpose of most dialogues is to let characters speak for themselves. Readers have an opportunity to view characters from different angles as they hear them interacting with one another. In a first-person narrative, dialogues allow the narrator to portray himself in different ways and to comment on other characters with his introductions and transitions or 'stage directions' as Twain called the tags introducing and following directly reported discourse.

One of the best-constructed dialogues in the novel is a conversation between the Duke and the King after their Wilks scam collapses and they have escaped the town and returned to the raft. The gold that they stole and Huck hid in Wilks coffin excites so much interest when it is discovered that the scoundrels are able to flee, but neither of them knows how the gold got there. Huck is, of course, a silent party to their conversations; his fate rests on how they resolve the issue. Throughout the interchange, heavy with

pregnant pauses, the reader shares Huck's tension about the outcome. Huck's tags, 'kind of absent-minded like,' 'kinder slow, and deliberate, and sarcastic,' 'kind of ruffles up,' 'pretty brisk,' 'bristles right up' (Chap.30) involve careful observation combined with understatement to catch the nuances of sarcasm, indignation, and anger as the two participants become increasingly frustrated with one another.

As the Duke and the King spar back and forth, their language is a perfect reflection of their approaches to life. The King is lazy, insinuating, and somewhat sniveling, the Duke is sarcastic, aggressive, and quick. As in any ordinary conversation, the two play off each other's words, when the King leads off with--'Mf! And we reckoned the *niggers* stole it,' the Duke counters with 'Yes...we did.' Then they bounce back and forth: 'Leastways--*I* did'; 'On the contrary--*I* did.' When the Duke says 'Don't you reckon *I* know who had the money in that coffin?' The King shouts back, 'Yes, sir! I know you *do* know...'

In the course of this exchange, the King manages to become genuinely confused, and although he confesses because the Duke physically abuses him, he is left with questions. The Duke is unshakable in his convictions, refusing even to acknowledge the fact that it was his idea to add their money to Peter Wilks's--to make up 'the deffersit' between what Wilks actually left and what he said he left. The Duke gets in the last word: 'G'long to bed--and don't you deffersit *me* no more deffersits, long's you live!' For these two con men, who live by their wits and their tongues, the glibbest is also the strongest.

Many of the dialogues in the novel involve Huck interacting with strangers he encounters. In almost every instance, he is wary and cautious in these exchanges, frequently spinning lies to cover up his true purpose and identity. He relies upon the fact that people are frequently lonely, like to hear themselves talk, and are starved for some excitement. In his conversation early in the novel with Mrs. Judith Loftus, with just a little prompting she tells him everything he wants to know about town gossip surrounding Jim's and his disappearances. Although she sees through his masquerade as a girl, she also provides him with an explanation: 'You've been treated bad, and you made up your mind to cut. Bless you, child, I wouldn't tell on you!'

In a parallel conversation toward the end of the novel, Huck arrives at the Phelps farm, trusting to Providence to help him find a way to free Jim. Without uttering more than a half a dozen words, Huck passes himself off as cousin Tom, learns he's with Aunt Sally, and explains his presence by agreeing with Aunt Sally that his boat had, in fact, gone aground. Huck's reticence not only allows him to gather information, it plants ideas in other people's minds. He convinces slave hunters, who approach the raft, that his family is down with smallpox by asking for help but refusing to explain why he needs it...

In terms of sheer linguistic ingenuity, probably no other dialogue in the novel can match this one between the 'brothers' and the 'sisters' of the Phelps farm after Huck and Tom help Jim escape. Each of the country people tries to outdo the other in recounting the outlandish details of Jim's escape. Their spirited talk is punctuated by explanations and interruptions, as well as little asides--'pass that air sasser o' m'lasses, won't ye' (Chap.41). Finally, Aunt Sally gets in the last word as she recounts in detail the aggravation and fear she experienced as a result of the events of the preceding days.

Twain expended real care on these exchanges. These people share many dialect features with Huck and Pap, and their talk is liberally sprinkled with dialect pronunciations--'that-air,' 'sich,' 'fust,' 'kivered'--and some eye dialect--'wuz,' 'cretur.' But it is the idiosyncrasies of the individual speakers that really makes the passage work. Mrs. Hotchkiss is fond of quoting herself; 's'I' is a running refrain, played off in one case against 's'e' for 'says he' and in another against 'sh-she' for 'says she.' She leads off the 'clacking' and picks up whenever another speaker stops to breathe--'My very *words*, Brer Penrod'; 'You may *well* say it, Brer Hightower!' When Sister Phelps paused dramatically in the middle of her account--'you explain *that* to me, if you can!--any of you!--she is met with an appreciative chorus of support.

Huck offers no commentary on this dialogue. He is preoccupied with the dangers facing Jim and Tom, and he is an outsider in this setting. The dialogue provides dramatic evidence of the degree to which Tom's childish desire for adventure has worked up the country folks, thereby creating even greater dangers for Jim. It also attests to Huck's lack of control in the last section of the novel.

The relationship that develops between Huck and Jim provides, for many readers, the most lasting memory of the novel. Ironically, the anti-establishment, anti-religious stance Huck must assume to befriend Jim and Twain's characterization of Jim are also the novel's most controversial aspects. Banned on occasion for the former, the novel has been removed from reading lists more recently for the latter.... Twain was among a handful of white writers who explored seriously the complexities of race relations and invested black characters with dignity and power.... Twain was an astute enough observer of dialect variation to recognize many of the features of vernacular black English long before linguists began detailed dialect studies. From the moment Jim appears, he represents Twain's 'Missouri negro dialect.' When he says 'Who dah?' he doesn't use the copula; he substitutes initial *d* for initial *th*; and he drops his final *r*. The first and second features are typical of black English, although the second occurs in other dialects as well; the third is typical of southern American English.

When Jim says 'Say--who is you? Whar is you? Dog my cats if I didn't hear sumf'n. Well, I knows what I's gwyne to do. I's gwyne to set down here and listen tell I hears it again' (Chap.2)--the third-person *is*, *knows*, and *hears* with *I* and *you* is common in black English, as is the *f* for medial *th* in 'sumf'n.' The other dialect features are typically nonstandard, but Twain uses more elaborate dialect spelling for Jim. White characters say 'goin'; Jim and other black characters say 'gwyne.'

Jim as a character changes in the course of the novel, as a slave he seems simple and childlike, but as an independent partner with Huck in their river trip, his superstitions become useful insights and his feelings and thoughts become more profound. As Huck's respect for Jim grows, so does Jim's character. His language, however, is generally consistent. In his most memorable speeches, he is both articulate and powerful. The difference between his speech and Huck's rests on a few dialect features and spellings rather than on word choice or syntax.

One of the novel's finest speeches, and surely one of the most poignant in American literature, is Jim's mournful account to Huck of how he discovered that his four-year-old daughter Elizabeth had lost her hearing from a bout of scarlet fever. He had ordered her to shut a door and when she didn't obey, he hit her, but her only reaction was to cry.... With the exception of one word, *wind*, Twain consistently represents the black English feature of consonant cluster reduction, in which the second of two consonants in final word position is lost--'chile, jis, behine, move', *lan'*, *en*, and so on. He also uses the initial *d* for *th* and the final *f* for *th*. Jim's language looks more nonstandard because of the eye dialect Twain employs--*wuz*, *uv*. However, aside from the dialect and a few idiosyncratic forms--*my*, *my lan*--this could be Huck talking. The parenthetical aside--'it was a do' dat open innerds'; the onomatopoeia--'ker-blam'; the balanced modification--'easy and slow,' 'sof' en still'; and the syntactic arrangement of active verbs linked with *and*--'en scrope aroun' en open de do'...en poke my head in' are all very similar to Huck's style.

No matter how eloquent Jim is, the special dialect forms that distinguish his speech create a barrier for the reader. But when Huck reports what Jim says, that barrier is removed. In the climactic passage of the novel, Huck's memory of Jim's voice and his report of Jim's words prompt him to tear up his letter to Miss Watson turning Jim in and to decide to rescue Jim and 'go to hell.' Huck's memories of his 'adventures' center on his relationship with Jim on the river.... When Huck says of Jim, 'and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now,' the present-tense verb ('he's got') and the *now* suggest that Huck is interpreting his relationship to Jim at the moment he is making his decision. However, the phrase seems to be embedded in what Jim said about events earlier in the novel. In fact, Huck is repeating almost verbatim Jim's earlier speech in Chapter 16: 'you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de *only* fren' ole Jim's got now.'

When Jim says it, it sounds like pleading, not an affirmation of a friendship between equals. When Huck remembers it, Jim's fate still rests in his hands, but the memory captures Huck's commitment as well as Jim's. Jim is not present to make his case in person; it is Huck's memory of Jim and Jim's words that determines his change of heart. As James M. Cox notes, 'Huck has internalized the image of Jim.' Huck and Jim's voice have become one.

In *Huckleberry Finn* Twain discovered a unique combination of character, narrator, and subject matter that allowed him to concentrate his effort on developing the colloquial style into a powerfully poetic

medium. In this passage, all of those pieces come together. There is no pretense, no particular drama to be played out, not even a specific moment or scene to be recorded. It is pure Huck. The language captures Huck's memories of the happiest moments he shared with Jim on the river. The river's gentle motion comes through in the present participles and in the parallel modifiers. Huck's images of Jim rehearse the trip. What Huck "sees" are not the details of Jim's actual appearance, but Jim's kindness and the warm bond the two share.

The delicate balance that Twain maintained by using a colloquial form of English for literary purposes in *Huckleberry Finn* was not immediately clear to his contemporaries, nor was it easy for those who recognized its brilliance to imitate. Twain himself never again used Huck's innovative voice effectively. Thus, for example, in *Tom Sawyer Abroad* (1894) and *Tom Sawyer, Detective* (1896), Huck narrates but Tom is the center of attention. Other narrators, Hank Morgan, for instance, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), did not limit Twain enough. Only in the 'Autobiography,' where he was not compelled to maintain a consistent narrative persona, does he approximate his achievement in *Huckleberry Finn*, but there his purpose was so loose that it provided no focus for the style.

Yet many of the most prominent artists of the twentieth century, including Sherwood Anderson, Hemingway, and Faulkner, have acknowledged the inspiration they derived from this novel. In *Huckleberry Finn* Twain proved the potential of the colloquial style. His challenge to traditional forms of literary discourse is one of the novel's lasting legacies to American literature.

Janet Holmgren McKay
"An Art So High": Style in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
New Essays on Huckleberry Finn, ed. Lewis J. Budd
(Cambridge U 1985) 62-79

Irony always involves contradiction. The 5 main types of *irony* in literature are: (1) *verbal irony*--contradiction between what is said and what is meant in an extreme overstatement (as in sarcasm) or in an extreme understatement; (2) *Socratic irony*--contradiction between the position or feigned ignorance of the speaker in discourse and what the audience infers to be so; (3) *dramatic irony*--contradiction between what a character thinks is so and what turns out to be so; (4) *situational irony*--contradiction between what a character thinks is so and what the audience knows to be so; (5) *irony of fate*--contradiction between what happens by coincidence and what one expects in the normal course of events. Coincidence is usually an unconvincing contrivance, but in some cases, as in the novels of Thomas Hardy and Jean Stafford, fateful coincidence is part of a convincing tragic vision. The ability to recognize irony is said to be a measure of intelligence.

Huckleberry Finn includes all 5 types of irony. Twain employs *Socratic irony* as he narrates through Huck, whose thinking exhibits *situational irony*; Huck uses *Socratic irony* when he lies; the sarcastic Pap Finn displays both *verbal irony* and *situational irony* in his racist diatribe; and the ending of the book seems to be happy but that is *dramatic irony* because Huck, Jim and Tom appear to be free but all three are still in mental bondage due to their conditioning--if a reader understands that, the *irony* also becomes *situational*. Television sit-coms rely heavily on *situational irony*. Teachers use *Socratic irony* when they pose questions to which they think they have the answers. When Huck arrives at the Phelps place at the very time they expect Tom Sawyer and gets mistaken for Tom, that is *irony of fate*--as Huck acknowledges at the beginning of the story: "There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth."

Michael Hollister (2014)

"Many who have read Mark Twain's works are aware of his keen satire, present in several of his novels. While satire is his most commonly known literary element, Twain has a distinctive style that is evident throughout his works. Twain's careful choice of diction and vivid descriptions give his novels a sense of realism amongst an element of adventure. Mark Twain is known for his repeated use of pointed satire and his use of vernacular dialogue, as well as his calculated yet carefree writing style, imagery, and use of child heroes in some of his most famous novels.

In both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's writing style is, at first glance, sloppy and unrefined. The raw, uneducated vernacular of the people of St. Petersburg can be convoluted and full of slang that it is difficult to understand. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that Twain's diction is carefully calculated to give the reader the sense of a carefree narrative. As eloquently stated in a literary criticism article regarding *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain's writing style is characterized by his 'adroit use of exaggeration, stalwart irreverence, deadpan seriousness, droll cynicism, and pungent commentary on the human situation. All of this is masked in an uncomplicated, straightforward narrative distinguished for its introduction of the...vernacular into American fiction that was to have a profound impact on the development of American writing' (5). The slang, numerous abbreviated words, and blatantly incorrect grammar serve to develop the characters in a more human way. Twain also uses vernacular outside of the Southern setting of St. Petersburg.

Twain's dialogue in his novel *The Prince and the Pauper* illustrates Twain's perception of the dialogue of sixteenth century England. The novel mixes Twain's trademark, seemingly carefree style in the narrative with the exaggerated formalisms of the Old British vernacular, such as the phrase 'Learning softeneth the heart and Pauper to highlight class differences, as the vernacular of the beggars is much rougher than the overly formal and breedeth gentleness and charity' (39). Twain also uses the dialogue in *The Prince and the Pauper* in the educated exchanges of the nobles.

Aside from his trademark use of vernacular dialogue, Twain also develops a nearly palpable setting for his novels through the use of imagery. The combined use of dialogue and imagery inject a sense of realism to his settings and characters, allowing for better enjoyment of the story and easier relationships between the reader and the characters. Twain establishes both the small, typical Southern feel of St. Petersburg and the gritty yet luxurious elements of London through imagery and descriptive language, often using figurative devices such as similes to develop a scene. The imagery serves to transport the reader to each scene, such as the night following Tom Sawyer's witnessing of Doctor Robinson's murder: 'The ticking of the clock began to bring itself into notice. Old beams began to crack mysteriously. The stairs creaked faintly' (69). The imagery establishes a nearly tangible sense of fear and dread, and it provides a dark and ominous tone to the scene. The element of realism among the adventurous, fictional elements is a large part of what makes Twain's novels so well loved by audiences, young and old....

Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn's moral maturation illustrate Twain's criticisms of racial discrimination, the motivation of greed in society, and the corrupt nature of the adult world prompting the loss of childhood innocence. Satire is a powerful weapon in Twain's arsenal, and coupled with his use of appropriate vernacular, descriptive imagery, and calculated yet carefree diction, Twain is able to effectively communicate deeper meanings and underlying themes through relatively simple stories."

Sites.google.com

"Huck can be an unreliable narrator, and his naïve misreading of situations creates dramatic irony, which contrasts Huck's essentially good nature to the cynicism and hypocrisy of adults. Dramatic irony refers to situations where the reader knows more than a character in a book, and Twain employs it often in *Huck Finn*. Early on Huck fails to understand that the Widow Douglas prays before taking her meals: '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 warn't really anything the matter with them.' An extended example comes later when Huck goes to the circus. Because he is unaccustomed to the tropes of the performance, he is amazed that the clown has such witty comebacks and that the apparently drunk man in the audience turns out to be a performer: 'then the ringmaster he see how he had been fooled,' he says, not guessing the ringmaster is in on the deception as well. These instances develop Huck's character as innocent and uncorrupted, in opposition to the manipulative and jaded characters he meets with Jim."

Sparknotes.com

"Mark Twain, who read widely, was passionately interested in the problems of style; the mark of the strictest literary sensibility is everywhere to be found in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*.... He is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice, the very voice of unpretentious truth. Twain was often asked for advice on the art and craft of

writing. Sometimes he responded seriously, sometimes not. Here's a piece of writing advice from a letter he wrote on 20 March 1880 to a student named D. W. Bowser:

"I notice that you use plain, simple language, short words and brief sentences. That is the way to write English--it is the modern way and the best way. Stick to it; don't let fluff and flowers and verbosity creep in. When you catch an adjective, kill it. No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them--then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice'."

"Mark Twain's Colloquial Prose Style"
dararochlinbookdoctor.com (6 June 2016)

"Mark Twain (1835-1910) is the writer who once observed, 'The difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning'....In his essay, 'Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses' (1895), Twain took the author of *The Deerslayer* and *The Last of the Mohicans* to task for his flawed writing style. Scathingly, but hilariously, he writes:

"Another stage-property that he pulled out of his box pretty frequently was the broken twig. He prized his broken twig above all the rest of his effects, and worked it the hardest. It is a restful chapter in any book of his when somebody doesn't step on a dry twig and alarm all the reds and whites for two hundred yards around. Every time a Cooper person is in peril, and absolute silence is worth four dollars a minute, he is sure to step on a dry twig. There may be a hundred other handier things to step on, but that wouldn't satisfy Cooper. Cooper requires him to turn out and find a dry twig; and if he can't do it, go and borrow one. In fact, the Leatherstocking Series ought to have been called the Broken Twig Series." Earlier in his essay, Twain had asserted: 'There are nineteen rules governing literary art in domain of romantic fiction--some say twenty-two. In *Deerslayer*, Cooper violated eighteen of them.' Twain then goes on to outline these eighteen rules:

1. A tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere.
2. The episodes of a tale shall be necessary parts of the tale, and shall help develop it.
3. The personages in a tale shall be alive, except in the case of corpses, and that always the reader shall be able to tell the corpses from the others.
4. The personages in a tale, both dead and alive, shall exhibit a sufficient excuse for being there.
5. When the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk, and be talk such as human beings would be likely to talk in the given circumstances, and have a discoverable meaning, also a discoverable purpose, and a show of relevancy, and remain in the neighborhood of the subject in hand, and be interesting to the reader, and help out the tale, and stop when the people cannot think of anything more to say.
6. When the author describes the character of a personage in his tale, the conduct and conversation of that personage shall justify said description.
7. When a personage talks like an illustrated, gilt-edged, tree-calf, hand-tooled, seven-dollar Mark Twain Shirtless Friendship's Offering in the beginning of a paragraph, he shall not talk like a Negro minstrel at the end of it.
8. Crass stupidities shall not be played upon the reader by either the author or the people in the tale.
9. The personages of a tale shall confine themselves to possibilities and let miracles alone; or, if they venture a miracle, the author must so plausibly set it forth as to make it look possible and reasonable.

10. The author shall make the reader feel a deep interest in the personages of his tale and their fate; and that he shall make the reader love the good people in the tale and hate the bad ones.

11. The characters in tale be so clearly defined that the reader can tell beforehand what each will do in a given emergency.

An author should:

12. Say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.

13. Use the right word, not its second cousin.

14. Eschew surplusage.

15. Not omit necessary details.

16. Avoid slovenliness of form.

17. Use good grammar.

18. Employ a simple, straightforward style."

"Mark Twain's Rules for Good Writing"
Interesting Literature.com

Michael Hollister (2020)