

Huck and

'Sivilization'

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Summary

Mark Twain's major novel has been read as an opposition between life on the Shore and life on the River. This paper expands on that opposition to discuss a set of categories (home, family, education, wealth, companions, national mode, and ethics) in relation to the contexts of Nature and Civilization.

Resumo

O principal romance de Twain tem sido interpretado como uma oposição entre a vida na terra e a vida no rio. Este trabalho usa esta oposição básica para apresentar um conjunto de categorias (lar, família, educação, riqueza, companheiros, modo nacional e ética) em relação aos contextos da Natureza e Civilização.

Huckleberry Finn can be read as a tension between the two opposing poles of "sivilization" and nature. That civilization spelled with an S is Twain's way of indicating that his two unschooled heroes view the traditional benefits of civilization (spel-led with a C) with a certain well-founded suspicion. They see it mainly as an abstract term that signifies repression in all kinds of ways: wearing shoes, eating meals at a table and at fixed hours, going to school and the bizarre practice of "book-larnin", all the way to most extreme forms of physical and spiritual repression involved in the civilized institution of slavery. If slavery is at the spiritual center of the novel, as some critics believe, and if it is Huck's confrontation with one of the givens of his culture that comes up against his

native decency, then it is no accident that Mark Twain has tried to turn upside down our usual assumptions of the relative value of life in towns and in the wilds. Normally, of course, we assume that sleeping in a bed is better than sleeping on the ground, and going to school — for all its pains — has educational advantages that an untutored existence lacks. There must be something besides bright lights that attracts yokels to cities the world over. Yet it is basic assumptions like these that the novel calls continually into question.

As one might expect in a complex work of art, the novel does not simplistically say: nature is good, civilization is bad. Twain does not romanticize nature like Fenimore Cooper. His response is not typically traditional and literary but one born of his own youthful interaction with a midwestern 19th century American environment in the process of transformation. Here is Huck in his room at the Widow's, right before he accidentally burns the spider:

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. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood...

Nature here is not benevolent Mother Nature, though there are a number of lyrical passages in the novel, especially in the flight section, which describe Huck and Jim living contentedly in her bosom. The terms of Huck's discourse in this passage are "mournful", "dead", "going to die", and his mental state, a powerful

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feeling of presentiment and fear. The leaves and wind, the owl and the dog are all heard in anthropomorphic tones and put on nearly equal terms with a ghost, but their voices are messages from the world, a code that Huck can't "make out" or decipher, but that needs to be done for his safety and peace of mind. The interaction in the passage is total — physical, psychological, and spiritual.

The noted Twain scholar, Henry Nash Smith, has stated in his introduction to the Riverside edition (1958) of the novel that Twain abandoned his original plan for the narrative of Huckleberry Finn and substituted a "different structural principle". The linear movement of the journey on the raft becomes bipolar, as it becomes clear that, as Smith says, the river journey "literally leads nowhere". The bipolar contrast is between the raft and the life in the towns along the riverbank, "the River versus the Shore". This bipolarity can be extended throughout the novel — beyond the satirical middle section of the novel dealing with the antics of the King and Duke — and it can, I believe, be expanded to embrace a fuller range of contrasting categories. Changing Professor Smith's terms slightly, one could schematize the novel in the bipolar contexts of Civilization and Nature, and relate them in turn to various pervading categories.

CONTEXT

CATEGORY	'SIVILIZATION'	NATURE
1. HOME	house	River
2. FAMILY	the Widow	Pap
3. EDUCATION	school	woods
4. WEALTH	money	fish, game, rafts, etc.
5. COMPANIONS	Tom	Jim
6. MODE	Romantic/European -tradition	common-sense/ American - innovation
7. ETHICS	conventional morality	pragmatism & survival

The first category, Home, contrasts living in a house, where Huck unhappily finds himself at the beginning and the end of the novel, to the River, where he escapes. It seems a simple opposition of domestic repression versus natural freedom, and that is the way Huck interprets it. The stakes are higher when Jim begins to partake of Huck's destiny, since for Jim slavery and freedom are to be taken literally depending on whether he dwells in a house or on the River, i. e. with or without white folks. That the River is never named and is spelled with a capital letter suggests that Twain means us to take the journey of their flight to freedom as symbolic and universal. This category can be closely combined with the second, Family, to complicate the distribution of advantages and disadvantages. Huck prefers going barefoot to wearing shoes, a bed of leaves under the star to the comforts of a real bed and lamp, and the uncertainty of irregular meals to the three square meals of the widow's house. And yet, domestic things are not perceived as necessarily bad in themselves. The problem is that they are confining to what he perceives as his natural freedom, his ability to come and go as he pleases and make the hundred little quotidian choices without which a man may become a slave to comfort. Twain may want to make us aware of the negative side of these creature comforts, that we have given up a harder, simpler, freer life as their price. This is, of course, the message of that other native genius, Thoreau, in his cry for "Simplicity" in Walden.

What ties a man to his home is his Family and this category shows the ambivalence in Huck's choices more clearly. The Widow is a kind old lady, while his real father, Pap, is an ignorant and cruel tyrant, jealous of his son's civilized advantages and anxious to deprive him of them. That Pap is also the town drunk and Huck has neither mother nor siblings increases

the boy's social alienation. When Pap goes through his phony miraculous reform for the judge, we are meant to see the hypocrisy of trying to reform people for whom (as Huck says) the shot-gun may be the only remedy. The old reprobate kidnaps his son and carries him off to the woods (chapt. 6), which again reverses the value of the terms. Hucks really enjoys his new-found communion with the natural life: "It was kind of jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study." But then that freedom turns into an even worse form of domestic slavery, and we are reminded of how bad tyrants unrestrained by any kind of law can be: "...by and by Pap got too handy with his hick'ry, and I couldn't stand it. I was all over with welts. He got to going away to much, too, and locking me in." The beatings and confinement are much worse than what he underwent at the Widow's, so the terms are reversed after all: life in the woods, but on Huck's own terms. With respect to the category of Wealth, the balance tips back to the side of nature. Huck and Jim need no money; they live on fish and game, which the woods and river supply with lavish abundance. Even Pap can get an easy living by gathering the logs offered free by the River, but it is significant that he sells the logs — and buys whiskey with the money. Money is, of course, the object of the Duke and the King's greed and the cause of all the human suffering they are prepared to inflict for its sake. Huck, for his part, cares nothing for the treasure that he and Tom found. The judge is keeping it in trust for him whenever he should need it, and his no-good father expends a lot of energy trying to get it away from him.

In his killing of the pig, his own symbolic death, Huck thinks he has finally found a way to have freedom on his own terms. He has died to the civilized world and has found in Jim an ideal companion for a new and

more natural life. In this flight section of the novel, the language is lyrical in its praise of life in the outdoors. The River and woods are shown to be full of arcane lore of the sort not found in the conventional Education, category 3. That Twain and Melville, major novelists of 19th century American literature, and Whitman, its greatest poet, were all self-taught men is a point worth remembering. But again, education is not unambiguous, especially when we consider it together with Huck's two Companions, category 5. Jim is superstitious, but his beliefs come from the slave culture for whom portents and supernatural signs were as real as the sun and moon. As uneducated "white trash", Huck shares many of these beliefs, and what is more he respects Jim's superior knowledge about them. Chapter 14 is a comic paean to Jim's intelligence, as Huck even bows to his weird logic of the comic dialogue on the French language.

As Huck admits, and this is the beginning of his perception of Jim as a human being, "he was almost always right; he had an uncommon level head for a nigger." That final qualification introduces what is to become the basic conflict in Huck's character, which he is to triumphantly overcome in his transformation into a moral being. The crisis comes in chapt. 31 when the conflict between "sivilized" values and natural decency take on their full meaning. Conventional morality says: "It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I war to ever see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame" — this from a boy who couldn't care less for the opinions of respectable people. The irony is that Huck has run away from the town and rejected its values, but he is to a certain extent a product of those values, as every rebel reflects, if only negatively, what he rebels against.

Now, here is the voice of the natural man, who once he feels "all washed clean of sin" in his sense of conventional virtue decides therefore to write a letter and turn in his companion as a runaway slave:

But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking — thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And 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, talaking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind.

Fellow-feeling and human solidarity prove to be stronger than the hypocrisies of conventional morality, and Huck makes his great moral decision: "All right, then, I'll go to hell" — and he tears up the letter and thinks no more about reforming, a word which ironically recalls his father's pseudo-reform earlier in the novel.

Compare Huck's other companion, Tom Sawyer, who unlike Jim the outlaw, comes from a respectable family, goes to school, etc. Compared to Jim's creative superstition, there is Tom's perverted imagination, the product of book-learning, or at least book-reading. Jim and Huck's forebodings usually come true, but Tom's fantasies, like his raid on the Sunday School Picnic, are notable mainly for their unreality. Like Don Quixote, Tom reads too many romances and often comes to grief because he believes what he reads. Tom's Mode, category 6, is the Romantic one of the European literary tradition. If Twain turned his back on that tradition and is the product of the nativist heartland culture, as Bernard Devoto claims, Tom would be Twain's warning of the price of ignoring the plain common-sense of the plains which Huck so beautifully embodies.

Tom's distortions are anything but innocent, as shown in his elaborate plan for effecting Jim's escape, based, it should be noted, on his wide reading in European romance. Jim is nearly recaptured and Tom himself catches a bullet as punishment for giving away the game, but the whole artifice is revealed as perverse when we learn that it was unnecessary all along and Tom had known of Jim's freedom from the beginning. Right before this sordid revelation, however, the business in chapt. 35 of how to free Jim's leg iron from the bed-post is illustrative of the traditional and common-sense approaches to experience. Tom thinks they ought to saw Jim's leg off because "that's how it's the custom in Europe" and one mustn't argue with authority. Huck is respectful enough towards what he perceives as his betters, but wouldn't it make more sense just to lift up the bed and slip off the iron? Tom says, in unconscious praise of his friend: "Huck, you don't ever want to do anything that's regular; you want to be starting fresh all the time." The grim humor of the episode does not conceal the lesson of the relative values of a corrupt and exhausted tradition and the fresh and pragmatic spirit of innovation that Whitman and others saw as distinctively American.

The last category, Ethics, concerns Huck's relation to virtue. I have suggested that Huck's basic virtue is decency. One might also add a natural truthfulness, which may seem paradoxical when applied to such a prodigious liar. What I mean by truthfulness is his truthfulness to himself, his facing up to it when he does something he feels isn't right, as in the fine scene when he humbles himself to a "nigger" for playing a mean trick on him on the raft. After his apology, Huck says: "I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither." Huck is upright and honest in the important things. When he lies, it is for survival, as when he is caught

dressing up as a girl and has to compound "stretcher" upon "stretcher" to get out of a tight spot. His lies often have the purpose of protecting Jim from discovery and in that way serve a higher truth.

The motif of relative truth is, in any case, introduced in the very first paragraph of the book, when Huck the narrator comically presents Mr

Mark Twain, the author, as one who "told the truth, mainly." There are two noteworthy things here: the presentation of the artist as artificer, one who lies in fiction to tell greater truths about life, and the mention of Tom Sawyer as being "mostly a true book." The sequel — and *Huckleberry Finn* seems to have started out as a sequel — will be related by Huck himself and, despite tall tales and

bizarre adventures, will leave behind the fables of childhood in Tom Sawyer and come to deal with an adult world of moral ambivalence. This is a World for which a child of nature — whose very name, Huckleberry, signifies a wild fruit — a Rousseauian man largely uncorrupted by civilization but wary of its follies, is fit to live in and narrate. □