



## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

featuring Jocelyn Chadwick, Author,  
*The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Huckleberry Finn*  
and Ron Powers, Author, *Mark Twain: A Life*

Wednesday, September 19, 2012  
Omni Parker House  
Boston, MA



### Jocelyn Chadwick Twain, Race, Relevance—Still?

Consider the following:

“I want things to go back to the way they were.” “I do not understand this America.” “America for Americans.” “I am from the old school...brought up in a different time, different era.” “All the immigrants come here, illegal...they get all the rights; we got nothing; let a foreigner come in this country, they all get it...one big gigantic rip-off. Used to be a hell of a good country; I just don’t know what happened.” “I ain’t votin’ for no nigger.” “So, just how *did* you and your family *get* to Texas?”

Sound strange? Not really;

I have heard, read, or seen these statements within the last year. What fascinated and concerned me then and continues to fascinate and concern me today is the level, the preponderance, and the consistency of this vitriol. I have come to a singular conclusion: *race* continues to be a primary way many people construct, deconstruct, and understand meaning in our country today. Race and the role it plays in America’s history continue to impact every individual, everyday.

---

**Jocelyn Chadwick** has more than 30 years of experience as a teacher, scholar, and author. She is returning to teach at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is a nationally recognized Mark Twain scholar. She has presented papers and workshops around the country and abroad. A noted and published writer, she is the author of *The Jim Dilemma: Reading Race in Huckleberry Finn*, and is currently writing another book on Twain.

**Ron Powers**, a Pulitzer Prize-winning and Emmy Award-winning writer and critic, has studied and written about Mark Twain for many years. He is the author of 12 books, including *Dangerous Water: A Biography of the Boy Who Became Mark Twain* and *Mark Twain: A Life*. He is the coauthor of three books, including the #1 *New York Times* bestseller *Flags of Our Fathers*. He lives in Vermont.

## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

So, now we come to it, *IS* Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as relevant today as it was in 1885, in 1995? Can this novel, a work that literally changed Sam Clemens' personal perspective and career path, *speak* to and, more importantly, *inform* a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience, and should this work remain in the curricula of the nation's high schools?

Last year, Alan Gribben published *Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn*, the New South Edition. His goal in *re-editing* both novels was to provide an "epithet-free edition," for he asserts *he* knows how affected and ill-served African Americans are when we see the word *nigger*. He further asserts in his introduction that Twain "... scarcely concerned himself about the feelings of African American or Native American readers." As a response to Gribben's concern and bowdlerization, I published, "The Quintessential Assault: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* vs. Political Correctness and Comfort" in Spring 2011. Bowdlerization is *never* acceptable under any circumstances, and as educators, if *we* cannot explain to ourselves, critics, and our students *why* a piece of literature is a necessary read, then we need to rethink our position for including it in our curricula.

Then, why *do* we teach this novel, and why do those who support it, insist on its inclusion in contemporary classrooms? I think one critical answer to these queries lies in the Common Core State Standards document itself. If we can take the Core at its word, the overriding objective for English/Language Arts is to graduate critically thinking, global students who can tackle a variety of texts not only to extract meaning, but also to use those texts to inform their own decision-making and communication. For example, two Common Core Standards on Reading state:

- Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

- Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

And one Reading Standard for Literacy in History/Social Studies:

- Evaluate an author's premises, claims, and evidence by corroborating or challenging them with other information.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a complex text requiring readers to delineate and evaluate conversations, positions, beliefs, practices, actions, and places and time. It is a text requiring students to know more about the history in which Twain constructs the narrative. This novel requires critical reading and critical thinking—both which continue long after the initial reading of the text.

Not only does Mark Twain yet matter, but also the fundamental points he brings to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are now more timely and relevant than ever before. As Antonio says in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, "...what's past is prologue." If students *are* to emerge from our classrooms as critically thinking, global citizens rather than protected, iconoclastic, and xenophobic individuals who seem devoid of being able to understand their present *because* they possess an insufficient knowledge of the past, we cannot, indeed, we must not shield them from relevant literature and concomitant informational texts and the historical context rounding out and inspiring that literature.

I have often told parents around the country, English/language arts classes are not designed to present "happy literature." English/language arts classes are not designed to recall the so-called "happy days" of the fifties. English classes are not even designed to germinate the next generation of English teachers. English/language arts is the

*only* course required K-12, and rightly so. But we *must* understand exactly what is it we do as English teachers to warrant such an inclusive and broad swath in a student's educational life. What *are* our goals, and to today's occasion, how does Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "fit?"

Mark Twain was indeed a prolific writer; more importantly, he *evolved* into a writer of conscience who earnestly embraced social awareness and social justice—not the defined social justice of our 21<sup>st</sup> century, but the hard fought social justice of his own nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, his essays, letters, journals, short stories, and novels reflect many social themes relevant to his time—namely, family, religion vs. faith, the emerging American persona, the American vernacular, wealth, class, friendship, women, and... race. It is Twain's exploration and deconstruction of race, race in America, that keeps people around the world riveted to much of his work, and particularly to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 127 years after he first published it.

Race. Today, ask most Americans of any ethnicity about their views on race, and their responses will be they think now is better than ever, and we have no issues on race anymore. In fact, you may hear the response, why are we *still* talking about it? Interesting. Twain believed America would eventually become "... a place for all people..." In two separate interviews, one in Australia on 14 October 1895 and in another in India, 8 February 1896, reporters asked him about his views on the "racial feelings in the United States." Essentially, Twain's perspective of the future was that America would become a place for all people," "that things [would] right themselves." Again, from his nineteenth-century perspective and his mode of writing, however, we cannot and do not expect Twain to provide "happy novels" of America at that time. We see his shift to realism as early as his short story,

"A True Story," written in 1874. What we must ask ourselves now is that if Twain felt "things would right themselves," have they done so? Are we now in the United States, and the world, in a place where race no longer is an issue, a social concern? *Is* America now a place for all people?

Earlier I stated that as an English teacher, I must always ask myself *why* am I teaching a certain work. What must the varied texts I bring to my students accomplish? I do believe and know that literature can present realities to students in such a way they can experience the reality of a life-changing moment, the depth of a tragedy, the transcendent euphoria, and the sometimes-inescapable chasms of life, but in so doing not leave students feeling singled out or destroyed because of the experience. English teachers can and do bring informational texts to our students that round out and contextualize the literary pieces. At the end of the day, we want students to wrestle with serious issues in an environment where they feel safe to explore, deconstruct, ask the hard, uncomfortable questions, knowing they will be safe. We want our students to be critically thinking global citizens—not fearful or suspicious of race or difference but curious. We want them to be explorers of culture and life. But in order to accomplish these objectives, we must have the requisite literature, informational texts, and other resources.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* allows educators to place students directly into an historical period that *did* support slavery, that *did* possess instances of religious hypocrisy, that *did* have incidents of human cruelty, that *did speak and sound* like the varied citizens of the South, and that *did* have those moments of human triumph. Racism is not comfortable, acceptable, the norm; Twain illustrates quite clearly this thesis in the relationship between Jim and Huck, including the much challenged last 14 chapters. Some students have asked me, "Is Huck at the end of

## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

the novel no longer a racist?” I respond: Huck is not the same at the end of the novel; he will never look at another African American and *not think* of Jim. Does this mean he has fundamentally changed—a 360 degree turn? No, but it does mean he has begun a process. On this process, Twain says, in one of his interviews in India: “...I am of [the] opinion that in course of time that difficulty will settle itself. The negroes at present are merely freed slaves, and you can’t get rid of the effects of slavery in one or even two generations. But things will right themselves. We have given the negro the vote, and he must keep it.”

What Twain’s novel does is to provide the *opening* for a conversation and process among Americans—a conversation and process in which we yet find ourselves feverishly entangled. We *want* this race conversation to be over already, but it is not, and we need works such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in our classrooms to provide a context, a literary point of historical departure. Those who express desires to protect students and African Americans from harsh language, Twain’s use of Southern dialect, the conundrum of the final 14 chapters, such as Alan Gribben, have yet to answer for me this question: Do we use texts for the comfort of our students, or do we use texts to illustrate and explore; to comprehend and question our present?

I first traveled abroad to England when I was 17 and then again for 18 months, completing my doctorate, I was stunned by two realizations: one—for the first time in my entire life, 17 years old, I was called a “Yank.” Not Black, not African American, not nigger. For the first time, I was *not* initially defined by race. Two: The British *knew* their history and were eager to discuss it. I mention these two formative incidents because works, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, take us into an historical moment within a fictional narrative, while allowing us to discover

facets about ourselves in our present. These kinds of works also provide a context for us to continue conversations long after they have been published.

I began this conversation with quotes I have heard, read, or viewed recently. I assert to you now, we need works such as *Adventures in Huckleberry Finn* in our classrooms, supported by informational, digital, and other primary/secondary resources. Race is yet a volatile issue because we refuse to talk *and* listen; we refuse to have *the* conversations. Rather, we sustain impressions, perspectives, and myths about difference. Within those contemporary quotes cited earlier, you also heard echoes of Twain’s characters--Pap Finn, Aunt Sally, Miss Watson, the doctor, Colonel Sherburn, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, the King and the Duke—fiction melds into reality. Two of the quotes I used earlier—one I have heard and read from many sources—“I want things to return to the way they were” and “America for Americans.” As these quotes have been said to me personally, as well, I often respond, Whose America? Which Americans? Return to what time?

In a recent interview, another keen observer of our fundamental culture, Bob Dylan addressed essentially the same question Twain did in 1896 with regard to racial attitudes in America. Dylan replied: “...people [are] at each other’s throats just because they are of a different color.” “The stigma of slavery, founded on the backs of slaves, will hold any nation back.” “If slavery had been given up in a more peaceful way, America would be far ahead today, [but] blacks know that some whites didn’t want to give up slavery.” Whatever one’s opinion about Dylan’s comments, their importance lies within the conversation Dylan has sparked—discomfort included.

It is true, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an “in your face” experience—real, visceral,

intense. It is true Jim uses many voices to survive his environment. It is true Huck demurs his own voice in front of his “friend” Tom. But...it is also true that Huck damns his own soul to Hell for a belief forged in experience. It is true that *Jim* decides his fate—even to return into slavery to do the *right, humane* thing for Tom who sees him as less than human. It is true that all Huck has experienced has branded him in ways even he does not wholly understand about human relationships and difference.

So---*does* Huck yet matter? Think of the question in this way: You cannot ride a bike without being willing to fall. Unless you *are willing* to fall, you will never learn to ride a bike. In the end, what is it we *really* fear from this work? Is the mirror just a bit too clear, too revealing, perhaps? We need Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—in its pristine, sometimes uncomfortable state—now more than ever—and we need it within the instructional framework not of isolated metaphors, similes, syntax, or word count but of critical thinking and conversation, of exploration and discovery so that we may finally begin *our* process—our journey toward a better understanding of ourselves—*all* of us.

By the way, to the person who asked me, “Just how did your people get to Texas?” I responded, “Slavery.”

**Ron Powers**  
**On Unleashing Our**  
**American Odysseus:**  
**Teaching Mark Twain**  
**in the Classroom**

Thank you. Thank you Jim Stergios and Pioneer Institute for inviting me here to share this podium with my friend Jocelyn Chadwick on the topic of Mark Twain. And his centrality even today to

the American idea. And thus his relevance in our classrooms.

You’re a very fortunate audience: this morning you are hearing from two people who between them share all knowledge of this seminal author.

Ms. Chadwick knows everything there is to know about Mark Twain. . .and I know the rest.

I congratulate Jamie Gass and Pioneer’s Center for School Reform for their audacity in taking up the cause of awakening young people in our schools to classic American literature; and in particular, to the works of my homie, Sam Clemens.

I call him my “homie” even though I didn’t know him personally; he lived over by the river; but I recall that he liked for folks to call him Sam.

Now, a moment ago, I used the word “audacity” in reference to the Center’s efforts. Let me tell you what I mean by that.

It’s not easy to get young people today interested in the classics, or in history, or in anything that smacks of the past. I’m sure that most of you in this room know that far better than I. I talked to some teachers of history in putting together these remarks, and you won’t be surprised to know that I got an earful.

Listen to one of them: a college professor whom I know and admire. This man is a published historian and a gifted and passionate classroom teacher. Yet speaking from years of experience with his young students, he had this to say:

“Nothing can inspire in them an interest in history. Nothing.”

We recoil in our hearts from the absolutism of this remark. But listen now to the words of the late social philosopher Christopher Lash in his great work of nearly thirty-five years ago, *The*

## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

*Culture of Narcissism*. Lash begins his book with a meditation on what he calls “the devaluation of the past” and “our waning sense of historical time,” which he places at the center of, quote, a “cultural crisis.” And he argues:

“Having trivialized the past by equating it with outmoded styles of consumption, discarded fashions and attitudes, people today resent anyone who draws on the past in serious discussions of contemporary conditions or attempts to use the past as a standard by which to judge the present.”

“Resent” the past and people who draw on it. “Nothing can inspire in them an interest in history.” We need not agree entirely with these and other gloomy assessments to recognize that a threat exists to the very root system of our growth, and our children’s growth, as civilized human beings.

An endangered root system: one that connects us with what Lash called “the past as a political and psychological treasury from which we draw the reserves that we need to cope with the future.” A system that is withering into the dim nourishment of “nostalgia,” even as the culture it once enriched withers into self-absorption. A culture of narcissism.

I hope I’ve brightened up your morning so far.

The rest of what I have to say is good news. Or to be more accurate—you have good news.

The good news is that the Pioneer Institute’s Center for School Reform is launching a challenge to these despairing assumptions. The challenge is to prove that our past can indeed educate and enrich our present. And it has chosen as its prime example a figure from the American literary past who embodies the American past entire—in all the luster, the energies, the optimism, the discovery, the fresh

imagination of the New Republic. And also the necessary timeless witness to American avarice, corruption, and the depravity of human bondage.

Our focus this morning is Mark Twain’s masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This morning I hope to add to Professor Chadwick’s evidence of why it is a masterpiece; and why—and how—it should be taught as such. Yet as singular as it is, *Huckleberry Finn* is but a fragment of the larger and I would say revolutionary legacy that Mark Twain assembled: a legacy of restless personal witness to the world around him.

In this he was unlike the previous generation of American poets and novelists—the great educated patriots such as Emerson and Hawthorne and Fuller and Holmes who clustered around this very city and held Saturday meetings on these very grounds, and essentially founded American literature. A literature that, however lasting its content, could never entirely free itself from an ancient transatlantic heritage. Mark Twain was unlike them in that he widened the field of study from the academy and the library to the continent itself, and took as his text the habits and speech of ordinary living people, the teeming humanity that flowed toward the future without restraint upon a mighty river.

Mark Twain not only wrote an epic and distinctively American body of work, he lived an epic and distinctive American life. The life and the work are inseparable. His legacy of personal witness—of roaming the landscape and the waterways, and observing and listening to and directly interposing himself into what he encountered—all of this conjoined to produce a tremendous inventory of defiantly proletarian journalism and fiction: a literature of realism that discovered the poetry and the truth-telling in the vernacular; a literature that hastened America’s final victory in its war of independence from

Europe: the liberation of its native-born national soul.

Now—why am I spending time here giving you a great panoramic vision of this man’s life and work when the subject of the morning is *Huckleberry Finn*? I promise you, I’ll get to Huck in a moment. I’m painting this larger picture because I believe that it can give us the resources for teaching Mark Twain in the classroom in a context far more expansive, more thrilling, more compellingly human, than has generally been attempted. Or dreamed of.

It may be true, as I suggested earlier, that for most people in our society, and perhaps nearly all our children, William Faulkner was wrong: the past *is* not only past, it is dead.

But we can bring it to life again. Sam Clemens can show us the way.

Sam reminds us that history. . .is. . .*story*. Not simply an assemblage of facts and dates and abstract theories. Sam reminds us that those who comprise history, and who wrote what we are calling “classic” literature, were people, not simply names on a page in a text. Properly understood and taught, they are presences who invite us into what the late novelist John Gardner called “*the vivid and continuous dream*”—that imaginative state in which the reader forgets that she is deciphering typography, and enters into the universe of the story itself.

Many people may not care about history anymore, but people are open to *story*; people crave story. The need is practically in our DNA. This is true of young people especially. Story is the means by which a child learns to sort out order and reason from a chaotic world. Joan Didion famously wrote, “We tell one another stories in order to live.” And Tim O’Brien began perhaps the greatest of all his short fictions, “Lives of the

Dead,” with this jarring yet reassuring assertion of belief: “For this too is true: stories can save us.”

Stories do not have to be fictional. The characteristic that unifies fiction and compelling nonfiction is narrative. What happened, and what happened next? And why did that matter? Narrative nonfiction is the most popular genre in America today because it helps satisfy our “legitimate hunger for the real,” as Michael Arlen put it.

That truth, I believe, can guide us as we contemplate strategies for re-awakening our schoolchildren to the immense treasures of *Huckleberry Finn* and from there on in to the depths of Mark Twain’s universe. And not just our students, but their teachers and their parents as well. And everyone in the great chain of educational policy. Because I somehow sense that this is what it is going to take: a unified reclamation of a grievously under-used national resource. That resource is not only of Mark Twain’s work. It is also life that informed that work. Blended with the work. Became the work. Mark Twain is his own greatest story. And as I’ve suggested, we all love a good story.

How many here have glimpsed that full story? How many realize, for instance, that this man was present at the creation of nearly every cornerstone national moment of his lifetime? I didn’t. Or I didn’t put it all together until I began researching my biography of him, and then it took my breath away.

Consider:

He is born at the dawn of the mass media age. Newspapers, fed by telegraph, in nearly every town. A unifying force in a land of settlements in the wilderness. What is his first job? Typesetter.

## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

He learns to read via a revolutionary primer that made its first appearance in 1836, less than a year after his birth. *The McGuffey's Readers*, sold door-to-door, spread literacy to the national melting-pot with their revolutionary but simple technique, now known as phonics. Thus the Readers not only enabled Sam, but created Mark Twain's mass proletarian readership. Rural and small-town kids who did not have access to the Puritan *Horn Book*.

He leaves Hannibal at age 17, this kid who has never been beyond the curve of the earth. Next thing you know he's writing letters home about the World's Fair in New York and then sitting in the visitor's gallery of the U.S. Senate in Washington just to get out of the snow—it's February 1854—where he watches Stephen Douglas and William Seward debate on whether to repeal the Missouri Compromise.

He experiences the Golden Age of steamboating, perhaps America's greatest mythic era. Captures it almost alone, in *Life on the Mississippi*.

He sticks his big toe into the early weeks of the Civil War, just long enough to write one of the lasting pieces of Civil War fiction: *A Private History of a Campaign that Failed*.

Then he hightails it out west with his brother Orion to be present at the creation of the Wild West on the Comstock Lode in Nevada. Chronicles that in *Roughing It*.

He gets run out of Virginia City and fetches up in San Francisco, where he mingles with the wild artists and poets who are just then forming the American urban counter-culture. The great-grandparents of the beats and the hippies. Gets run out of San Francisco and hides out in the Nevada Hills, where he hears a tall tale about a frog that he will refine into an American classic.

He comes back East just in time to sign up aboard the first luxury ocean cruise in American history—the voyage to Europe and the Holy Land aboard the *Quaker City*. Draws upon that experience to write *The Innocents Abroad*, the book that absolutely obliterates American travel writing as the worship of European antiquity. And also the book that establishes him forever as a legitimate literary figure, thanks to a perceptive review in *The Atlantic*, that Boston-based Bible of the Brahmins. The writer of that review, William Dean Howells, anoints Mark Twain in five timeless words: “Quite worthy of the best.”

Just off the *Quaker City*, he goes to Washington and signs on with a couple of New York papers as a political correspondent. His boarding-house roommate is the author of the Fifteenth Amendment that gives African-Americans the right to vote. He covers Reconstruction and the post-war rise of land speculation and greedy industrial capitalism that comes to be known as The Gilded Age. Comes to be known because Mark Twain calls it that, in a novel called *The Gilded Age*. And he gets off a good wisecrack or two: “Whisky taken into committee-rooms in demi-johns and taken out in demagogues.”

Then he slows down a bit. Gets married, settles down, starts thinking about the old days in Hannibal, and writes his first solo novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It has yet to go out of print.

This gets him to age 40, in 1876. Just about to the doorstep of *Huckleberry Finn*. He has thirty-four more years of life—years in which he circles the globe, goes after American imperialism, writes thunderous essays of social criticism on the topics of racial lynching and false patriotism and human exploitation...introduces Winston Churchill to his first American lecture audience...talks on a telephone, rides in a car, buys a white suit, and

plays miniature golf in Bermuda with Woodrow Wilson.

And finally in 1910 he takes the rest of the day off and hops aboard Halley's Comet.

*Where has this American Odysseus been hiding?!*

He's been hiding in plain sight. He has *been hidden* in plain sight. His epic adventures remain on the record... yet most Americans today, certainly most of our young people, remain unaware of the flesh-and-blood Mark Twain. And how his literature was fed by his ravenous appetite for experience in the world: by his capacity for inhabiting that state of mind identified by the great rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel as "radical amazement."

By "radical amazement," of course, Rabbi Heschel meant "wonder"; an awareness of the divine beneath the surface of the ordinary. Heschel wrote, "Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin."

Mark Twain never grew indifferent to the sublime wonder of living, no matter how often or how deeply it pained him to live his life. But I think that many scholars and critics have long since grown indifferent to his radical amazement. For decades, too many of our intellectuals—by no means all, but too many—have forsaken the living, behaving, historical Mark Twain to pursue the abstracted, psychological Mark Twain.

Something about him has always spoken to the inner Freud of his examiners—starting with the eminent Van Wyck Brooks only ten years after Sam's death. Brooks, it seems, read a magazine piece about a certain Viennese uber-shrink, and applied the master's methods, or thought he did, in a book called *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*. Brooks's thesis was that if it hadn't been for all those pesky women in his life, his

mother, for instance, Sam might have amounted to something. Thank you, Sigmund.

This diagnostic impulse caught on, and it prevailed into the mid-1980s, when the Great Deconstruction Scare hit our shores and awakened everyone's Inner Derrida. Suddenly Sam was not simply a neurotic; he had become the Ultimate Dead White Male: his two names (one of them "*Twain*") a symptom of his fatal duality; his humor nothing more than a "mask" for his many evasions and subversions, and don't get me started on that cigar.

Okay, one cigar-type of example: in her 1989 book *Dark Twins: Imposture and Identity in Mark Twain's America*, the academic scholar and professor Susan Gillman instructed us that "Twain experienced creativity not through the model of the pen-penis disseminating its writings on the virgin page, but rather as illegitimately sexualized, a threateningly uncontrollable power."

This pronouncement drew from Frederick Crews, a somewhat less excitable critic, the remark that playing by these hermeneutic rules, Ms. Gillman would have no trouble detecting a cry of pain in a greeting card.

We can thank our lucky stars for scholars such as Dr. Chadwick and others, who elevate us with their moral passion and their discipline and their grace. But I sometimes wonder whether academics in general hate Mark Twain because they don't think that anybody should be able to write that well without going through tenure.

Now let's take things to the public-school classroom, where a maddening irony has held sway for half a century. *Huckleberry Finn* is studied, and more often shunned, as a toxic litmus of American racism.

## Why Huck Finn Matters: Classic Literature in Schooling

Racial relations as examined and depicted in this novel is a subject of enormous legitimacy, as Ms. Chadwick has just demonstrated. But the net effect of that focus has been to narrow Mark Twain; squeeze him nearly dry of his juices; to wring out from him the rest of his Odysseus-like achievements and personality. The very qualities we should be amplifying as elements in his fascinating narrative.

I'm now going to try and demonstrate what I mean by the transformative power of Sam's life and work. I'm going to read to you a couple of short passages, each on the theme of friendship. The first is by Ralph Waldo Emerson, who began the work of making America American, and who remains one of our greatest philosophers. This is from his essay titled "Friendship," was published in 1841.

I'll keep you in suspense as to the author of the second.

Here's Emerson:

"A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him I may think aloud. I am arrived at last in the presence of a man so real and equal, that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought... and may deal with him with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another."

I'm sure we can all get behind that. Emerson's mode here is rhetoric, the Augustan style of discourse that he and his generation of poets and thinkers offered as a model for the new Republic.

And now I will read you another passage on the theme of Friendship. This one will be from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, published by Mark Twain in 1885.

The passage is from Chapter 15.

Huck Finn and his companion, the runaway slave Jim, are in the midst of their Mississippi journey. A dense fog has come over the river at night, and Huck has left Jim alone on the raft. He's taken a small canoe and gone searching along the shoreline for a place to secure the raft until morning. Huck gets lost in the fog, and it takes him more than half an hour of frantic paddling until he can find his way back.

Jim, meanwhile, is in a panic. He has managed to steer the raft into some underbrush, breaking an oar in the process, and littering the raft's surface with leaves and branches. When Huck does not immediately return, Jim calls out into the darkness for him. Huck does not answer, and the runaway slave assumes he has drowned. Now Jim begins a frenzy of weeping and wailing. Finally, he falls asleep.

When Huck re-boards the raft and discovers his sleeping comrade, he decides to play a trick on him. He convinces Jim that he was never lost, but that Jim fell asleep and dreamed the whole terrifying episode. Jim is confused and embarrassed at first. But gradually, he begins to realize that Huck has been playing him for a fool.

Jim is just starting to figure out the truth when Huck points at a pile of leaves and rubbish on the raft, and the broken oar, and asks,

"What does *these* things stand for?"

"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 facts 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' k'yer no' mo' what become 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. But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back.

“It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way.”

Which of these passages moved you more? Which of them enlisted your eye, your ear, your collaboration, your heart—and your curiosity to know more about the story? And about the person who wrote it?

Putting these two passages side by side, we get a closeup view of the great transformation in American literature: from learned, top-down rhetoric to experiential, ground-zero narrative, if you will pardon my over-simplification. I don't know how long it took Emerson to write his enduring essay, “Friendship,” but I do know how long it took Mark Twain to write that passage and the rest of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It took him all the fifty years of his accumulated life: the listening and observation, the travel, the

interposing of himself into what he encountered—and, oh yes, the genius.

And by the way, did you notice how subtly and conclusively this raft episode settles the question of racism in the work? Robert Hirst, the editor of the Mark Twain archives at Berkeley, has remarked that this is surely the first time in an American novel—and who knows, maybe the last—that a white character has apologized to a black one?

This is the flesh-and-blood Mark Twain whom we should bring into the classroom along with his great works. Let's do it before the Aunt Sallys of the educational world finish their work of adopting and civilizing him. I can't stand it. I've been there before.

Thank you.

### ***About Pioneer***

Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to improve the quality of life in Massachusetts through civic discourse and intellectually rigorous, data-driven public policy solutions based on free market principles, individual liberty and responsibility, and the ideal of effective, limited and accountable government.



**PIONEER INSTITUTE**  
PUBLIC POLICY RESEARCH

85 Devonshire Street, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02109 |  
T: 617.723.2277 F: 617.723.1880 |  
[www.pioneerinstitute.org](http://www.pioneerinstitute.org)