Published in 1884, but set during the pre-Civil War 1840s, Samuel Clemens’ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* invokes and complicates 19th-century literary conventions and cultural assumptions about nature and societal norms. Clemens, writing for a popular audience in what many authors and critics — including Ernest Hemingway — have claimed is the most important American novel ever written, begins his famous work with a warning to readers: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot will be shot” (2). It proves to be an ironic admonition for a text that has cultivated a cottage industry of criticism, much of which wrestles with the role that nature plays in this semi-fictive world set on and near the Mississippi River and the western frontier. In this regard, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seems to insist that those interested in the relationship between the natural and constructed worlds avoid tempting interpretations regarding the role of the landscape in the novel and its relationship to the society tied to it.

The novel’s first section focuses primarily on Huck Finn’s adventures in and around St. Petersburg, Missouri, a small town on the Mississippi River, home to Huck’s childhood friends, Judge Thatcher, Huck’s abusive father, and the Widow Douglas, who adopts Huck and attempts to “sivilize” him. Huck’s views, as expressed in what Twain describes as an “ordinary ‘Pike County’ dialect” (2), have for over a century led readers and critics alike to view the opening section as proof that this fictive but familiar world near the edge of the frontier broke neatly along a singular line, one half belonging to the wild, free realm of the wilderness area specific to the river and the frontier beyond its western shore, and the other to that of the cramped confines of the civilized towns, with their rules, schools, adults, and duties.

In his groundbreaking study of 19th-century, land-based American literature, *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith argued the following: “Natural man beleaguered by society, but able to gain happiness by escaping to the forest and the river: this is undoubtedly an important aspect of the meaning that thousands of readers have found in the novel” (95). Smith's interpretation, presented in an axiomatic manner that does not invite a rejoinder, harmonizes with countless others, but fails to account for what occurs in the novel, or how, more importantly, Clemens constructed the text. Though Huck repeatedly complains about the disadvantages associated with being civilized, his outlook remains equally grim while he is in the woods and on the Mississippi.

The second section of the novel features Huck and Jim’s “adventures” as they make their way down the river. Commencing when Huck fakes his own murder while his father is away in St. Petersburg, the section is replete with accounts of death, deceit, cowardice, and cruelty, all of which conclude in the section of the book that has, until relatively recently, left many readers confused and frustrated, especially those who subscribe to the nature/culture dichotomy when attempting to interpret the text. On the river, while Huck escapes his dead father and Jim flees for his life in a society built by and around slavery, the two encounter in succession a half-sunken house of thieves, slave catchers, swindlers, “a steamboat that had killed herself on a rock” (65), and another one that tore the raft in half.
— a boat that, as Huck states, “all of a sudden [...] bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us” (91). These run-ins with the worst elements of society underscore how the novel blurs the distinction between the natural and unnatural, and between the ostensibly free frontier associated with the river and the West, and the cultural clutter common to that place at that time.

Two passages, in particular, have defined the orthodox, first-order understanding of the novel's environmental binary; the first describes Huck's idyllic existence in the bosom of the river: “Two or three days, and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely. Here is the way we put in the time. It was a monstrous big river down there — sometimes a mile and a half wide; we run nights, and laid up and hid daytimes; soon as night was most gone we stopped navigating and tied up [...] Then we set out the lines. Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the daylight come” (113); the second model is the oft-quoted excerpt from the final scene, wherein Huck famously claims, “But I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before” (281). Fittingly, the novel ends with Huck revealing his inability to learn from experience, having apparently not noticed throughout his harrowing adventures how thoroughly society had spread, like smallpox, along the length of the Mississippi and soon the width of the rest of the continent.

Still, just as the myth of the untamed river and the related idea of open land to its West seem to inoculate the often somber but resilient protagonist against the downsides of the industrial revolution, European culture, and urban life in the Gilded Age, the novel would in turn, and for centuries to come, debunk quixotic ideals while reifying faith in the land and the literature it inspires.

Bibliography


Colin Irvine

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA


https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/adventures_of_huckleberry_finn
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA