

“Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand.”

Insight into Satire from John Seelye’s The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Evaluating the timeless quality of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the literary critic Lionel Trilling declared, “Wherein does its greatness lie? Primarily in its power of telling the truth” (Trilling 82). In Mark Twain’s novel, Huck is innocent and impassive, with as honest a voice and “as good a heart as ever any boy had.” Through his unadulterated, unfiltered perspective, we can ourselves perceive the cruelties of Huck’s world, and, from the internal moral struggles that Huck shares with us, we come to trust him despite his pariah status. His vernacular renders him a believable personality, and his openness immediately endears him to us, facilitating our acceptance of his values as our own. Huck’s gift of speech and its influence on the reader become even more evident when juxtaposed with “de ole true Huck” from John Seelye’s *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Although the original Huck’s awareness persists, the added vulgarity mars Huck’s innocence, somewhat tainting both the boy’s voice and the story’s message. By gratuitously dirtying Huck’s language and decency and histrionically altering the oft-criticized ending, Seelye reveals both the importance of purity to the original Huck’s credibility and the folly of many critical responses that the book has elicited. In appeasing the complaints of numerous criticisms of Mark Twain’s old Huck, Seelye parodies their caviling of Twain’s work and augments our appreciation for the original Huck. Thus, through his own successful satire, Seelye reminds us how and why Twain was so successful in the original *Huckleberry Finn*.

In crafting a rendition that travesties the concerns of *Huckleberry Finn*’s literary critics, Seelye satirizes their criticism and shows how disastrous their suggestions might have been had Mark Twain implemented them. The book satirizes literary critics first by addressing each one’s proposed modifications in the “P.S.” chapter, lampooning the pundits as bickering nitpickers; Seelye’s Huck then proceeds to tell a new story hyperbolizing the critics’ proposals to the point of desecrating

Huckleberry Finn. For one, the vulgarity that Seelye inserts to appease Bernard DeVoto disrupts many poignant scenes in the book, diminishing their effect; for example, after apologizing to Jim for the fog joke, Huck observes, “After a while I seen that Jim had rolled over and was looking at Fair Rowena again” (Seelye 121), leading to a joke about birds, women, and the black man’s stupidity. This quick transition from sober humility to bawdy humor mitigates the magnitude of Huck’s lesson about friendship and care. To address the critics that question Mark Twain’s ending to the book, Seelye’s new Huck instead tells about Jim’s drowning, leaving the boy stranded alone with no idea of his deceased Pap. Although this tragic end satiates Leo Marx’s call for a disappointing conclusion, the inconsequentiality of Pap’s death and the sudden loss of Jim ruin the plot and trivialize Huck’s journey downstream. Without Jim, *Huckleberry Finn* loses not only its mission but also its most complete character, its agent for change, its juxtaposition of black man and white man, and its sole role model and parental figure. Thus, Seelye’s propitiation answers literary critics’ gripes to a ridiculous extreme, turning Huck’s adventure into more of a cruel joke than a meaningful journey. The tale is humorous, but it is precisely this humor that manifests the aptness – or at least survivability – of Twain’s choices for the audience and the ending. The ludicrousness of Seelye’s Huck suggests that literary criticism has its limits, especially once critics such as Marx begin responding to other critics, creating the metafiction that Seelye parodies in his introduction.

In particular, the lewdness of Seelye’s Huck undermines our admiration of a speaker who has supposedly remained largely free from the assumptions and preconceptions of the society around him. Instead, the new indecent Huck invites laughter but also the worry that society has exposed him to contemptible language and viewpoints, the very viewpoints that the original Huck admirably combated or eluded. For example, Huck often objectifies women throughout the text, first in prostitution: “Pap said a piece of ass ever now and then was a good thing, but if he wanted any he knew where he could get it just like a rented room, by the day or week, and not get snarled up

in any long-term lease” (Seelye 27). Even though Huck recounts his *Pap*’s words, he nevertheless presents them with pride, as if sharing wisdom. Likewise, prior to confessing the Duke and King’s scheme, Huck debauches Mary Jane as he describes her figure: “She hiked up her shift to dry her eyes and I seen everything there was and damn near come in my britches. She was a beauty, red hair and all” (Seelye 284). Whereas the original Huck praises Mary Jane’s candor and beauty, the new Huck is “powerful curious what she looked like in nothing but her red hair” and dreams to “get a look at a naked red-haired lady” (Seelye 293). Huck still confesses to Mary Jane, but his sensual objectification of an otherwise admirable character disrupts the flow of his otherwise impassive storytelling and renders Huck as more of a lecherous, mischievous teenager than the pure-hearted boy we have come to love.

Uncouth word choice separates Seelye’s Huck from Twain’s Huck, manifesting the importance of voice and language to our trust in Huck. Though generally independent in reality, Huck’s purity and our faith in his honesty and storytelling are inextricably intertwined in our reading, since our vision of the speaker influences how seriously and poignantly we accept his message. Corrupting our trust, the vulgar Huck describes his surroundings with much less discretion than Twain’s Huck, as the juxtaposition of Pap’s dead body scenes reveals:

TWAIN’S HUCK

There was heaps of old greasy cards scattered around the floor, and old whisky bottles, and a couple of masks, made out of black cloth; and all over the walls was the ignorantest kind of words and pictures, made with charcoal.

SEELYE’S HUCK

There was heaps of old greasy playing cards scattered around over the floor, the kind with pictures of naked men and women doing all sorts of wild things to one another so’s to get your pecker stiff, and old whisky bottles, and a couple of masks made out of black cloth; and all over the walls was the dirtiest kind of words and drawings made with charcoal. Somebody had writ “FUK YOU” across one wall so’s it was the first thing you see when you come in. (Seelye 73).

Perhaps Twain’s Huck and Seelye’s Huck saw the same scene in the floating house, but Twain’s Huck reserves judgment, whereas Seelye’s Huck *interprets* the scene, both the purpose of the playing

cards and the vulgar intentions of the defacer; Seelye's Huck displays an acquired *knowledge* or *understanding* of the blasphemous scene, making us appreciate even more how Twain's Huck withholds detail, as we might expect from an innocent boy struggling against social norms. Vulgar language is everywhere: Jim explicitly envisions Tom Sawyer to be "a mean man someday" (Seelye 121), and Buck calls Miss Sophia "no better than a slut" (Seelye 181). Of all the characters', though, Huck's language is the most appalling, because his credence depends heavily on his objectivity and his lack of judgment; by calling the Duke and King "pricks" (Seelye 321) and deeming Silas Phelps "fat," Huck seems obnoxious. Even though he is just as perceptive as the original Huck, Seelye's satirical rendition simply has no propriety and, as a result, is much less endearing to the reader, making it more difficult for us to believe his moral struggles or care about his well being at the end of the book. In brief, the Seelye's Huck's vulgarity manifests the effect of voice and language on our impression of a character, increasing our appreciation for the pristine honesty that made the original Huck such an amenable, engaging storyteller.

More than anything else, Seelye's *True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a testament to satire and its ability to simultaneously draw laughter and dispel otherwise impenetrable convictions. Toni Morrison's statement on Mark Twain's masterpiece also applies to Seelye's book: "The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it *is* the argument that it raises" (Morrison xxxiii). *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for all its humor, *is* the argument that numerous critics have unleashed into print, but, unlike those criticisms, Seelye proves his point with the curve of our smile rather than with the windings of an argument. In laughing at the inefficacy of the vulgar Huck and the inconsequentiality of the new ending, we open both mouth and mind to the absurdity of some of the literary critics' objections, such as those concerning the influence of Mark Twain's wife and Christianity, or those demeaning Huck's language as too rough for children. As a result, Seelye furthers our appreciation for not only the oft-criticized choices that Mark Twain made in writing *Huckleberry Finn* but also the

way in which satire exaggerates and exposes the flaws in fallacious presumption and pedantic criticism; as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* satirized Southern aristocracy, *The True Adventures* satirizes literary critic and librarian aristocracy. All in all, Seelye further demonstrates what Mark Twain once established: “Against the assault of Laughter nothing can stand.”

Works Cited

Eliot, T.S. "Introduction," pp. 44-49. [Course Reader pp. 223-225].

Marx, Leo. "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," pp. 50-60. [Course Reader pp.233-238].

Morrison, Toni. "Introduction," pp. xxxi-xli. [Course Reader pp. 327-332].

Seelye, John. *The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

Trilling, Lionel. "The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*." *The Liberal Imagination*, pp. 81-91. 1950.

[Course Reader pp. 227-232].