Huck is a passive hero for most of the book. The negative description of his mother, his isolation and loneliness, and his laconic deadpan, self-effacing manner of humorous speech all seem to account for this passivity. Nevertheless, he reacts on Jim's behalf on several occasions in important ways. Unfortunately, the last part of the novel is dominated by twelve chapters in which Huck seems to do little in contravening the travesties worked by Tom Sawyer. The events of chapter 7 are crucial in establishing Huck's other side--his ability to act with determination. As readers who recognize this ability, we are prepared to find the last fifth of the novel especially frustrating.

Huck is aroused by his father after a night of terror, and offers a self-protective lie to escape further violence. We see our first extended view of the Mississippi River as Huck finds and hides a drifting canoe to use once he can "fix up some way to keep pap and the widow" from following him. Pap's "style," by no means as elaborate as Tom's but equally compelling, causes him to rush off to town for a drinking spree while Huck formulates and executes a brilliant plan to evade discovery; he loots the cabin, makes a false trail, and kills a wild pig and uses its blood to suggest that he was murdered and dumped in the river. The detailing here presents Twain at his best as an arresting realist. Dialect is primarily found in verbs, otherwise the short sentences and clear actions are straightforward. Huck remains detailed in his description, giving readers their second real taste of the Mississippi as he glides down it in his canoe, toward Jackson's Island, "dark and solid, like a steamboat without any lights."

Critics, like [Robert] Bridges of Life in 1885 [26 February], found the murder of a pig and the false murder unprepossessing. For Huck, however, it is his most dynamic act, fathered by the need for preservation; the sequence is inventive, well adapted to its milieu, and full of suspense. But it also has a special importance to the final outcome of the novel. As Huck proceeds, act by act, to create the perfect murder, he establishes his capacity for successful innovation, for carrying out complex lifesaving projects. In short, he proves his abilities in contriving everything he might need to contrive at the end of the novel to secure Jim's escape from the Phelps Farm. This fact is the chief source of the tension we as readers feel at the end of the novel when Huck makes himself subservient to Tom's lesser travesty. So significantly less pointed are Huck's actions at the end of the book than here in chapter 8 that it has caused even the most sophisticated critics to assume that Twain merely fell into his ending. In fact, again in reversal, the ending is foreshadowed here; Twain establishes the basis for our frustration with and rejection of Tom's romantic shenanigans with Huck's coolly deliberate step-by-step execution.

If further evidence were needed to suggest how much the contrast between chapter 8 and the last twelve chapters of the book is designed to frustrate us as readers and heighten our disapproval of Tom's actions, Twain has provided the first evidence of a crucial motif following this plan. At the climax of his scheme, Huck declares: "I
did wish Tom Sawyer was there, I knew he would take an interest in this kind of business, and throw in the fancy touches." He adds a further line--"Nobody could spread himself like Tom Sawyer in such a thing as that"--to lead the reader away from a possible demurral; it was Tom who talked Huck back into town, and into his troubles with Pap and the widow. The second comment causes the reader to focus attention elsewhere. Huck's faked murder has a deeper undertone than Tom's apparent death by drowning in *Tom Sawyer*. Each time Huck refers to Tom's style in the future it will cause him trouble, and it will reemphasize the divergence of the two boys in their relation to reality.

The concluding paragraphs of the chapter treat us to Huck's first compelling descriptions of the starry night over the river, its sounds, and its beauty. The reader's real voyage of discovery is thus set to begin. Huck's ability to act decisively has been clearly demonstrated; it will be contrasted only later by his subservience and passivity in the face of Tom's more elaborate "style."

Huck's escape from Pap and "sivilization" initiates his meeting and joining with Jim on Jackson's Island. The Jackson Island interlude establishes trust between the two fugitives in an almost legalistic form. They begin to create a world and an ethic which will distinguish their raft on the Mississippi as one of the great American images of freedom and brotherhood. Tom Sawyer had also gone to Jackson's Island, in fact, and left the people on shore as sure of his death as they now are of Huck's. In the sentence-by-sentence texture of Huck's observations and objectives, however, tremendous differences can be discovered between his persona and Tom's. As the reader is initiated into the raft journey, he is also almost immediately initiated into Huck and Jim's more caring relationship, and sees Huck as a deeper mentality than Tom with simpler and more immediate concerns of food, safety, and survival. Because of Huck's dry humor and because of the more compelling results of his actions in regard to Jim, Huck is both detached from others and involved with them. His detachment is far more adult and Twainian than was Tom Sawyer's. Huck's closeness in mutual simplicity and sympathy with Jim provides him with his personal basis for abandoning the restrictions of the authorities of the village, their laws, and their public opinion.

Jackson's Island is first seen in the night, "big and dark and solid, like a steamboat without any lights." A big lumber raft is also seen coming, and Huck hears the voices of the men, one of Twain's many suggestions of heightened powers of perception on the river. After Huck naps, he wakes "in the grass and cool shade, thinking about things and feeling rested and rather comfortable": this is only the second time in the novel that he has registered "comfort." With "friendly" squirrels overhead, and feeling "powerful lazy and comfortable," Huck has attained the real boy's ideal state as identified in the literature of the realistic bad boys of the post-Civil War era.

In Tom Sawyer's Jackson's Island adventures (chapter 16 in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*) the natural observation is drawn out into an extended study of an inchworm that then gives way to boys swimming, and, finally, to a distant steamboat firing a cannon to raise the presumably drowned boys. In the following chapter, Tom visits his bereaved family, but does not take pity on them by revealing his survival, leaving that--with obvious cruelty--for a later grand entrance.

With Huck, events are much more tightly directed. Here, too, a steamboat floats on the river firing blasts to raise the presumably dead boy. But here, the people of the town form a unit on the steamboat. Huck "bosses" his own world, and ironically receives a "gift" by finding his daily bread. In the second paragraph, the cannon is already firing, as Huck explains with deadpan humor, "You see, they was firing cannon over the water, trying to make my carcass come to the top." Huck gets baker's bread, "what the quality eat," by fishing out a loaf in search of his "remainders." He comments that prayers that the bread find him must indeed work but "I reckon it don't work for only just the right kind," couching his disclaimer in countrified vernacular-sounding speech. Huck maintains the motif of concern over "the quality" and the right kind versus himself. His view of the steamboat is substantially closer than in *Tom Sawyer*, on the decks of "the ferry-boat full of people" he sees "Most everybody ... Pap, and Judge Thatcher, and Bessie Thatcher, and Jo Harper, and Tom Sawyer, and his old Aunt Polly, and Sid, and Mary, and plenty more. Everybody was talking about the murder." Simultaneously, he is almost murdered in a
comic moment when the Captain "hopes" Huck's body is washed ashore and Huck responds, "I didn't hope so," and a cannon blast then deafens Huck, "If they'd a had some bullets in, I reckon they'd got the corpse they was after." For Huck, the townspeople are a matter of closer but more detached detail than for Tom--and as he enumerates them name by name, the reader derives a sense of St. Petersburg's caste and class. For Huck, the ongoing deadliness is continuous and always surprising, although, as in the violence of a Buster Keaton film, not deadly. It will become deadly to Huck only through friends like Buck (rhymes with Huck) who is indeed found dead in the river. The action, for now, is wrapped in the deadpan voice of the comedian, dry detachment in keeping with his social detachment. But his humorous involvement has the implications of deadliness; on one side stand the townspeople on the steamboat, on the other the self-isolated practical boy, seeking merely his own comfort, safety, and survival--goals that the cast of characters on the boat would deny him.

Setting up housekeeping on the island, Huck occupies himself first with a businesslike examination of his island. Becoming "boss" of the island in a rather professional way, discovering both snakes, which will soon figure in the action, and the still-smoking ashes of a campfire, he is driven up a tree, out in a canoe, and finally into stealthy woodcraft and sophisticated detective work. Jim and Huck are quickly united at this point, for the ashes turn out to be Jim's fire, at which he is discovered sleeping the next night. Huck is, once again, taken for a dead person. But finally recognized as a live one, he enters into partnership with Jim. Huck and Jim establish at once the motif of mutual trust. Huck feels certain that he can count on him (Twain putting the pronoun for Jim in italics) not to tell. The sense of security in flight first goes Huck's way in this novel, since both Huck and Jim came to the island three days previously, shortly after Huck was killed, as Twain has Huck say it, using their easy literality to create verbal humor. They share a meal and comfort before Jim offers his confidence, in turn, to Huck.

Jim almost immediately, but with some caution, relies on Huck as deeply as Huck has relied on him. When Jim says that he run off (Twain again using italics, now for Jim's secret), it is couched amidst promises extracted from Huck not to tell. Huck even adds the proper ambivalence to his not telling by saying that people would call him a "low down Abolitionist and despise me," but he isn't going back there anyway--an early but clear statement that leaving a social setting frees the frontiersman from its flawed social beliefs and hatred of nonconformists. Yet Huck has been shown to have at first blush the continuing conscience of his community--as expressed earlier in Miss Watson's holding slaves and Pap's attitude toward "free niggers." For Huck and Jim, reciprocity is established in this initial interchange. Both are involved in life and death flights. Huck's defining battle later will be to retain his focus directly on the personalized ethic--his heart--which overcomes abstract ideas such as those which govern his antagonists.

Jackson's Island is still a place of nature as it was in Adventures of Tom Sawyer, but its quality is now joined to the problem of Huck's survival, Jim's freedom, and social ostracism. Tom observed an inchworm and went on playing; when Jim observes the birds flying low and predicts rain, he and Huck superstitiously move to higher ground, are saved from the rising river, and end up enjoying hot cornbread in their cave, secure above the flood. Huck's description of the thunderstorm includes metaphors of hell in references to "dark as sin" and "the underside of the world." For Huck and Jim, their folk superstition has saved them where religiosity would have been useless. This position contrary to Miss Watson's is developed through Twain's use of natural images and occurrences.

When Huck and Jim discuss bees not stinging idiots, Huck delivers his minstrel tag-line: "Jim said bees wouldn't sting idiots; but I didn't believe that, because I had tried them lots of times myself, and they wouldn't sting me." Nature in Huck Finn is part of the comic growth of the action--here Huck is the false-naïf pretending to be a real naïf. The effect of the minstrel format is to level both characters, uniting them in repartee, but allowing them the freedom of open discussion. In later minstrel sequences their open arguments reveal their presuppositions about mankind while pointing up their innocent virtue. The conversation here turns to livestock, a minstrel version of a bank swindle and, finally, for Jim's last ten cents, to Balum's Ass, who lost Jim's money, in a low-comedy repetition of Miss Watson's doctrine of gifts, by giving it to the poor at church. Burlesque nonsense though this seems, Twain the comic writer is still developing central issues. The ongoing considerations of how good is
achieved, whether through religious or personal acts, is reviewed in caricature. These events lead Jim to reflect on slavery and the expropriation of a human being's value: "I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'." Jim's reference to his value as a slave foreshadows his urge to buy his wife and children out of slavery. Thus, even silliness on Jackson's Island leads inevitably back into Huck and Jim's personalities, their safety, and the crucial social issues surrounding their lives. Snakes and practical jokes add further dimensions. The island would have to be "big and solid" to support this heavy a freight of the novel's developing themes.

Most of the island chapters are occupied with a rise in the river, punctuated with the "stock" minstrel routine. Huck and Jim also investigate a derelict house floating downstream, where Jim discovers a dead man but does not tell either Huck or the reader that it is Huck's father. Huck and Jim acquire a number of comic items, like a wooden leg ("we couldn't find the other one"), but the action is sinister, carried out in a devastated house with the "ignorantist" kind of words scrawled on the walls, and a dead body, shot in the back. They talk of riches and death and superstition. Knowledge of nature helps them to find comfort.

Huck's forgetfulness of natural rules causes him to nearly kill Jim when he attempts to play his first joke on Jim by curling a snakeskin in Jim's blankets. Huck's "ever so natural" joke is almost deadly as the snake's mate strikes Jim. The snake skin is a Tom Sawyer practical joke, but is significantly milder than the later stories of Bricksville loafers who like to set stray dogs on fire or tie tin pans to their tails to see them run themselves to death. In part, harsh-seeming practical jokes are part of Twain's realism, for country-style practical jokes are sometimes cruel beyond what contemporary urban-dwellers could imagine; earlier regional humorists—not only those of the Southwest—recorded many in their writings. However, hiding a snakeskin in Jim's blankets to frighten him is also, at the literary level, an example of the pattern of Tom going from play and more personal action to "effects" on other people, such as his aunt or the schoolmaster. When Huck attempts the same pattern, Jim is reduced to pulling on Pap's jug and declines into near-convulsions and death. His recovery takes four days and nights. Notably, Jim gets out of his head like Pap, and Pap is named and included in the resultant events, thus recalling as a consequence the novel's ugliest and most degraded scene. Since this action was Huck's, "all my fault," his embarrassment is an appropriate outcome—one which Twain will build on as Huck and Jim progress on the raft after the storm. After this first practical joke, Huck will make one more before abandoning such effects. Reasonably enough, the joke episodes are taken by most critics as crucial stages in Huck's maturation, and their use to show Huck's changing respect for Jim is clear evidence of how events are packed in the narrative, giving it a far more dramatic emotional development than occurs in Tom Sawyer.

Twain in this area of the book is establishing the character of his hero and the innocence with which he responds to the world. Huck on Jackson's Island shows special values. One close parallel example is J. T. Trowbridge's "Young Joe," the lead story in Young Joe and Other Boys (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1879). It describes the adventures of an uneducated boy who takes a wealthy, somewhat vain, city baker on a duck hunt. The boy laughs at the errors of the poor-shooting greenhorn, and, when the greenhorn allows their dory to drift away, he must preserve them both on a storm-harried island by his ability to fish, hunt, and cook. In country dialect, the boy at first berates and goads the merchant, but soon laughingly accepts the situation, although still treating the merchant wryly and almost disdainfully. After Joe recovers the dory on the far side of the island, he allows the merchant to start unbuttoning his clothing to make flags to bring help, but stops him before the Nor'easter freezes him. He explains his prank by noting that the merchant went to sleep not thirty minutes after their first dinner, when work needed to be done to secure their survival. The merchant rewards the rough lad with his fine fowling gun, causing tears of gratitude in the lad's eyes, and achieving a sentimental completion. Without the melodrama of the murderous Pap, the story, even with its survival element, is less compelling. Jim's freedom also elevates the quest of Huck's story to a higher level as an American epic using American types. After all, Young Joe, as a country boy, is as American as Huck. But Twain has used the fictional medium with greater dexterity, making his hero more reticent, enlarging the nature and meaning of the action by reference to a great national issue. In comparing the voices of the two boy speakers, we see that Huck's is the more sympathetic, adult, humorous—both
as naive and as dead-pan narrator. Twain's "softenings" of Huck make him the more potent narrator. "Young Joe" would repay further study by anyone seeking to determine the full extent of Huck Finn's uniqueness.

The minstrel routines also give evidence of how Twain builds motifs of importance using contemporary American materials and modes. Even in bits of narrative, the comedy of the naif is dominant. As Jim recovers from snakebite, Huck describes other examples of bad luck, including Old Hank Bunker, who looked at the moon over his left shoulder, got drunk, fell off the shot tower, and "spread himself out so that he was just a kind of layer, as you may say; and they slid him edgeways between two barn doors for a coffin ... , but I didn't see it. Pap told me." The comic set-piece was a Twain favorite, appearing in his lectures and in Roughing It, after he converted it from stories heard elsewhere—-one paradigm appearing in the Yankee Blade around 1847.1 Here, it belongs to Huck not as a true story, but rather as a literalism borrowed from Pap, identified as an unreliable source. Huck is thus further matured as he borrows freely from a well-honed comic tradition of Yankee humor as converted by Mark Twain to western tall tales—a truly national blending. Huck's persona blends here with Twain's as lecturer, and he becomes the American literary comedian. Add to this persona the quest for freedom and safety on one of America's great arteries, and we do indeed have the stuff of a national epic.

Huck and Jim's next escape from trouble occurs when Huck, in girl's disguise, visits Mrs. Judith Loftus. Mrs. Loftus provides the second endorsement of Huck, following the widow's cautious approval early on. Again, the similarity to Tom Sawyer is notable, for Tom also left the island and went to shore to overhear the grief-stricken conversation of Aunt Polly, Sid, Mary, and Mrs. Harper, only to return with childish drama to reclaim a treasured chalk, rubber ball, and marble from his friends back at the hidden camp. Twain's invigorated and visionary sense of the melodrama of survival causes a heightened parallel by making the stakes of Huck's secret trip to shore the danger of discovery and capture by armed adults.

Mrs. Loftus is a gossipy newcomer whom Huck pumps for information. She speaks in another variant of Pike dialect about how much better off her relatives "used to was." She also reasons shrewdly about Jim, Pap, and the reward to be gotten by searching Jackson's Island. Huck, already at risk, becomes uncomfortable at the news of a greater threat. When Huck, uncharacteristically fidgeting, picks up a needle and threads it by poking the needle eye at the thread, Mrs. Loftus suspects and soon proves by several tests that he is a boy in disguise. A note on Twain's "realism" is in order here, since the needle-threading is sometimes pointed out as evidence of close attention to detail: in The Prince and the Pauper (chapter 13) Twain identifies the man's and woman's ways of threading needles as exactly opposite those ways described here; Twain was interested in realistic-seeming rather than accurate details—his is the art of comic plausibility, with the sex differentiation a symbolic point rather than a fact. It is at once as meaningful as all the other seemingly realistic details in the book, including the calling of Jim a "nigger." Incidentally, Mrs. Loftus calls Huck in disguise an "innocent" for not recognizing the importance of the three-hundred-dollar reward for Jim. She is thus attached to the world of money that Huck has fled. The money motif will be ongoing in relation to Jim's story, even to Jim himself.

Huck's fidgeting is hardly typical of his coolness in more difficult situations. When Mrs. Loftus discovers him to be a boy, she leaps to the assumption that he has been "treated bad"—which is true—and is a "runaway prentice"—which is not true. The business of discovery is elaborate, and at the point of confrontation, Mrs. Loftus looks at Huck "very pleasant. ... I ain't going to hurt you, and I ain't going to tell on you, nuther." She uses the same currency of not telling as do Huck and Jim, and she concludes to protect "George Peters" and his "secret" ... "treated bad. ... Bless you child, I wouldn't tell on you." Her blessing foreshadows the more expansive offer to pray for him by Mary Jane Wilks later in the novel. The episode has three functions. First, it is part of a chain leading from the kindly Providence of the widow to the endorsement of Huck in the Wilks episode. Second, it advances the melodramatic action of disguise and escape that bears directly on the safety of Huck and Jim. Both are now clearly in flight from the slavery and repression attendant to their respective social levels. Behind them and behind this scene as motivation lies banishment down the river for Jim and loneliness and a possibly murderous imprisonment in an isolated cabin for Huck. Last, even the obviously kindly Judith Loftus is motivated by greed to
recapture the runaway slave—but not the runaway apprentice—showing the corrupting influence of race even on this good person.

Biblically, Huck claims to be seeking Goshen rather than St. Petersburg as he develops a new lie to fit Mrs. Loftus's apprenticeship proposal. She gives him food and this time lets him escape. His departure occurs only after she questions him on his farm knowledge—more "stock" questions consistent with the Jackson Island discussion. She accepts the answers, but coaches him on how to disguise himself further and stands pat on her own decision to befriend the runaway white apprentice even while hoping to reap the reward from capturing the runaway black slave. Her skepticism shows in her naming of him: "Now trot along to your uncle, Sarah Mary Williams George Alexander Peters, and if you get into trouble you send word to Mrs. Judith Loftus, which is me, and I'll do what I can to get you out of it." She continues with words that would make a perfectly logical slave song if set to music: "Keep the river road, all the way, and next time you tramp, take shoes and socks with you. The river road's a rocky one, and your feet'll be in a condition when you get to Goshen, I reckon."

Huck's visit with Mrs. Loftus establishes a world distinct from the awful towns and plantations which Huck will visit. In this world, simplistic and folksy, kindliness and knowledge are distinct from social standing and from established social connections. Mrs. Loftus is both a newcomer to the community and an insightful humanitarian—the sort who might see "youth" in a full-grown humorist, for example, as did Livy with Clemens. Economics governs attitudes toward Jim, and knowledge of who murdered Huck—Jim or Pap—is hidden in ignorance and supposition, but greed dominates. The episode embodies Twain's mentality as a comic spokesman for the new American frontier, with the ethical ambiguity of changing social relationships and the powerful humanity of free men let loose to make their own way in the world. The episode is yet another appropriate entryway for an American epic, reflecting American experience as personalized in Twain's own life and now converted into the imagery and language of his comic fiction.

Huck, of course, has his own set of hidden allegiances, developed in the previous episodes, to Jim, and so uses all his skills to secure Jim's escape, carefully noting times, doubling back, and lighting a decoy campfire to throw off pursuit. Huck quickly arouses Jim: "Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!" This use of the word "us" represents the full joining of the fates of the two refugees: "Jim never asked no questions, he never said a word; but the way he worked for the next half an hour showed about how he was scared. By that time everything we had in the world was on our raft. ..." Without lights, "dead still, without saying a word," Huck and Jim on the raft slip below the tip of Jackson's Island—and—in silence and darkness, without any fanfare of false "style"—begin the greatest literary voyage in later nineteenth-century fiction.

Note


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