

Draftings In

Volume 4
Number 1 *Draftings In Interactive Reading*

Article 7

1989

The Deception of an Honest Narrator, or Can We Take Huck at His Word?

Michael J. McKinlay
University of Northern Iowa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright © 1989 by the Board of Student Publications, University of Northern Iowa

Recommended Citation

McKinlay, Michael J. (1989) "The Deception of an Honest Narrator, or Can We Take Huck at His Word?," *Draftings In*: Vol. 4 : No. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/draftings/vol4/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Draftings In* by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.

The Deception of an Honest Narrator, or Can We Take Huck at His Word?

by Michael J. McKinlay

(Part One: This Reader's Context, as an Author and as a Critic.)

You don't know me, without you have read something else ever written by a Mr. Mike McKinlay, the writer of this here paper. I have known Mr. McKinlay all my life and have ever been near by him, though he don't allus lissen to what I say to him. But that is nothing, 'cause I don't allus lissen to him neither. But we's best of pals, I can tell you for sure, even though we don't allus see eye-t'-eye. Like now, for an instance, he's got me jawin like some kind of flea-bit whelp of a Missouri river-boy, which I ain't never been, and ain't never had a mind to be neither. Mr. McKinlay sez that he wants me like this so's you the reader gets drawn into interest in what he's gonna talk about in this here paper. I own that he probly knows better'n I do what he wants, though he don't know much about what I want, and really don't much care neither, I warrant; though sometimes he'll catch on and lissen. Well, that's the way life is, I 'spect, and it won't do me no good to go on about it.

Now there, I've been jawin and agoing on 'bout all kinds of things, and went and forgot all 'bout the mannering that I have been brought up by, not that I use it much, but then I don't need to, I reckon. I am the narrative voice that Mr. McKinlay uses when he does his writing. Sometimes I change myself on account of what I need to in order to say things just the right way. I don't allus talk like this, and sometimes I do, just as I said before, on account of what's right to write. So now that I've laid it all out for you, so's you kin read it easy, like findin' sandbars in the river, I think I should leave off and get right down to what he's on about.

And, in the process, I'll be changing my tone and style to

suit the rather stringent academic demands on such things as term papers.

I participate in several kinds of writing activities: nonfiction, both academic and nonacademic, fiction, poetry, and even some drama. My particular style of writing usually takes the form of a monologue with the reader in attendance, knowing that he or she is being addressed directly and knowing at the same time that I mean to address him or her directly. It is a characteristic that runs throughout my writing. Furthermore, I have been told that those instances when I incorporate dialogue into my writing are some of my best writing, because the dialogue seems true: it *sounds* right.

But it poses some problems as well. I cannot hope to be able to speak personally to every kind of experience, but when I write I need to be able to speak as though it *is* from personal experience. The voice must be true; it must be believable. If the voice does not sound right (to me), what I write using that voice will not sound true and real in itself. For fiction this is a perilous problem. Since the purpose of fiction lies mainly in its ability to allow the reader to believe in it, things that can adversely affect the reading process, such as a false-voiced narrator, can adversely affect the fiction to the point of causing its destruction. Without a true voice, a fiction cannot be told; the *story* will lie dormant until the writer can find the true voice.¹ Even when I feel sure I know the whole story already--beginning, middle, and end--without the proper voice to tell the story, I can't begin to write it.

In this sense the voice of the narrator becomes the primary vehicle or force behind the fiction. In essence, it translates the referent (that-which-is-the-story) to something accessible to the reader (the story that becomes the reader's text). As such, it runs the risk of aborting the reading at the onset. Voiceless or improperly-voiced texts destroy themselves.

It has been said that context will determine the word. Our understanding of the word as it is meant depends primarily on the context in which it is used, which in turn allows us to understand the context itself--an ongoing process much like the old chicken-egg question.

Literature, as a product of language, runs primarily on this principle. The actions of the characters in any work are a language of sorts which is understandable within the context of the work itself. We say that we are willing to accept certain actions (or suspend our disbelief of them) because they appear to have meaning within the context of the work. If the actions do not follow the context, disbelief becomes difficult to suspend.

While the decision of whether or not an action (or word) is understandable within its context is usually considered to be under the jurisdiction

of the reader, it must be recognized that the writer is quite often (although not always) the first person to question whether something appears appropriate within the context he or she is building--whether that context is a word, a paragraph, a stanza, or a book.

It is this belief, that writers are the first "hurdle of believability," that is particularly significant in my approach to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What I am about to discuss is the process through which Mark Twain produced the sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, highlighting those details which obviously relate to my premise. Then we will look at the result of Twain's decision: the use of the first-person narrative of Huck and what it means to the overall narrative of *Huckleberry Finn*.

The Necessity of Autobiographical Narrative

(Part Two: Wherein the Critic, Unknown to the Author, Discovers What He's All About)

Before I discuss Twain's thoughts about what he was planning to write and how he would go about it, allow me to build some context (in the form of background information) for you to understand Twain's state of mind *before starting Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain wrote to William Dean Howells on July 5, 1875:

I have finished the story [*Tom Sawyer*] & didn't take the chap beyond boyhood. I believe it would be fatal to do it any shape but autobiographically--like Gil Blas. I perhaps made a mistake in not writing it in the first person. If I went on, now, & took him into manhood, he would be like all the one-horse men in literature & the reader would conceive a hearty contempt for him. It is *not* a boy's book, at all. It will only be read by adults. It is written only for adults. . . .

By & by I shall take a boy of twelve & run him on through life (in the first person) but not Tom Sawyer--he would not be a good character for it. (*Smith and Gibson* 1: 91-2)

Obviously, even before *Tom Sawyer* had been published Twain had been thinking of writing a sequel to, or at least some continuation of, the book. Perhaps he recognized its potential, regardless of his feigned

cynicism. While his desire to "run him on through life" surely seemed to be his intent, perhaps to reveal something about the process of growing up, he also noted almost immediately that the character could not be Tom Sawyer. It is also important to note that Twain recognized a particular need to use the first person. After a frantic summer of writing in 1876, he wrote Howells telling him that he had

begun another boys' book--more to be at work than anything else. I have written 400 pages on it--therefore it is very nearly half done. It is Huck Finn's Autobiography. I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have got, & may possibly pigeonhole or burn the MS when it is done. (*Smith and Gibson* 1: 144)

Odd as it may seem, Twain's response was in large part due to the development of his narrator. Certainly Huck does a great deal of growing up through his adventures, and his thoughts are very dark, being reflections of his own problems as well as those of his society. But Huck's honesty speaks clearly through the narrative: his voice is true. As Huck speaks to the reader we can only believe his experiences of growing up. With regard to the voice itself, the author intuitively has a measure of understanding for the reader in his "Explanatory" note at the beginning of the book:

In this book a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwoods South-Western dialect; the ordinary "Pike County" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last. The shadings have not been done in a hap-hazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech.

I make this explanation for the reason that without it many readers would suppose that all these characters were trying to talk alike and not succeeding. (xxvii)

That Twain was attuned to the differences in the characters he depicted is a foregone conclusion; postmodern readers know Twain as an acute social commentator with a critical eye for detail and for the personal foibles of the characters he sketches. Twain was keenly aware of the differences in speech among different persons. He was extremely well-traveled. His journeys spanned the length and breadth of his own country--both up and down the Mississippi, from California to New York--and across the Atlantic to Europe and the Holy Land.

It is significant that Twain felt the differences in speech were important in depicting his characters. This does not simply imply that the same words used by different characters are spelled and used differently, but that the author felt so strongly about the differences that he decided it was

necessary to inform the reader of them. By interpolation, the honesty of the descriptive voices is translated to the honesty of the narrative voice of our hero, Huck Finn. This honesty is then magnified through the use of the first-person narrative.

Albert E. Stone, Jr., in "*Huckleberry Finn and the Modes of Escape*," notes that Huck is an "ideal reporter"--a commentator on the social order of the time, a kind of alter ego of Twain's. In *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, Walter Blair investigates the relationship between the author and his character:

The shift to Huck as narrator would liberate Mark Twain from any limitations which an overweening desire to haul off and be literary in the third person had imposed. Huck's character, of course, would have a great deal to do with this. A boy so sensitive and so shrewd was bound to record scenes and actions with insight; but since he was unabashedly uncouth, he was bound to do this unnaturally and unpretentiously. Since he was almost completely humourless, he was bound to be incongruously naive and somber on many laugh-provoking occasions. The author's experience would help him climb into Huck's skin. He too was sensitive and perceptive, and he too had been informed of his lack of manners and culture. (75)

Even the critics find it easy to take Huck at his word.

The question is, Why? Why is it that we as readers are so willing to accept the yarns spun for us in *Huckleberry Finn*? Is it because Huck makes no bones about the lies he tells to the people he meets in his adventures, yet is perfectly willing to let us in on them (as was the case, among others, of the trick he plays on Jim in the fog)? Is it because we are willing to accept as truth what is written by a young innocent such as Huck, who views writing as largely incomprehensible but still authoritative to those with the authority to understand it (as in the Judge's "buying" of Huck's fortune for a dollar)?²² Or is it simply a function of reading fiction that we are willing to accept as truth the information offered to us by the author via his narrator?

This last point is probably the closest to the truth, largely because few readers (except us nosey, critical types) are willing to press the case against a work and its inner workings in a search for what it is that makes a story tick. Most readers read for pure and simple enjoyment, caring not a fig for the employment of such vague and desperate terms as "willing suspension of disbelief" and "mock reading"; instead, most readers are concerned solely with getting through the book before something interrupts them. As long as they themselves can sustain the reading, they will take for granted that the author can do the rest.

In any case, we can be fairly certain that Twain never intended the question of Huck's narrative honesty to become an issue in reading the book, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The Evidence Produced

(Part Three: The Author and the Critic Step Aside for the Real Authority to Speak)

I see I had spoke too sudden, and said too much, and was in a close place. I asked her to let me think, a minute; and she set there, very impatient and excited and happy and eased-up, like a person that's had a tooth pulled out. So I went to studying it out. I says to myself, I reckon a body that ups and tells the truth when he is in a tight place, is taking considerable many resks; though I ain't had no experience, and can't say for certain; but it looks so to me, anyway; and yet here's a case where I'm blest if it don't look to me like the truth is better, and actuly *safer*, than a lie. I must lay it by in my mind, and think it over some time or other, it's so kind of strange and unregular. I never see nothing like it. Well, I says to myself, at last, I'm agoing to chance it; I'll up and tell the truth this time, though it does seem most like setting down on a kag of powder and touching it off, just to see where you'll go to.

(Adventures of Huckleberry Finn 239)

When Huck tells the truth to Mary Jane Wilks he breaks a longstanding habit. The reader can see Huck's perplexity at both the necessity and his own willingness to go ahead and tell the truth for once. He's in a fix, and that's no mistake, and it's righted soon enough. But the incident focuses the reader's attention on just how much Huck lies throughout the narrative. This is the subject of George Montiero's, "Narrative Laws and Narrative Lies in *Adventures of Huck Finn*." Montiero puts forth the case that the entire narrative of *Huckleberry Finn* runs from one of Huck's lies to the next, including the beginning and ending portions of the book (which I will address later).

Huck tells plenty of "stretchers" to just about everybody in the book including the reader (19). That Huck records his "stretchers" in some detail and surrenders them to the reader, gives one the sense that Huck

is being largely honest throughout the writing of his narrative (since nothing is said about Mr. Mark Twain after the first paragraph of the novel).

The one facet of the story that truly speaks to this element of the work is the friendship that grows between Huck and Jim. It is the gauge by which Huck's narrative honesty can be measured. When Huck discovers Jim on Jackson Island, he gives Jim his word that he won't tell on him (52), and this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. Even so, there is trouble in paradise; we see Huck deliberate over his loyalty to his friend and what his conscience tells him is supposed to be right. Sometimes Huck's social conscience gets in the way of his own feelings of what is right and wrong, coloring his reactions. When the two are separated in the fog on the river and Huck pretends that Jim imagined it, Jim tells Huck off. Huck's response is:

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. (105)

When Huck considers his actions in helping Jim to escape slavery, he again lets the reader in on exactly what he's thinking and feeling:

I begun to get it through my head that he was most free--and who was to blame for it? Why, *me*. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest; I couldn't stay still in one place. It hadn't ever come home to me before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it staid with me, and scorched me more and more. (124)

Even more surprising than the idea that Huck is having these kinds of thoughts is the fact that he is willing to confide them to the reader. That he is willing to "lick . . . boots for shame" if anyone he knows were to find out about his "closet-abolitionism," he openly discusses with the reader. The conclusion of Huck's turmoil is of course the now-famous line, "All right, then I'll go to hell," an admission not only to himself of what his true feelings are (yet another learning experience), but to the reader as well, giving us the opportunity to see what both Huck and Twain have learned. They have learned that friendship between whites and blacks is possible and that the differences between the two may only be in a person's frame of mind (as in Huck's comment when Tom is shot and Jim insists on getting a doctor for him--"I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say" (341)).

If this is indeed the sort of thing Twain was anticipating from his

narrator, then it may explain why choosing Huck as a first-person narrator was so essential to the work Twain was looking to write. I feel that Huck's narrative honesty contributes to what may be the central driving force throughout the novel: Jim's and Huck's friendship as a function of Huck's initiation into adulthood. Certainly the foibles of society that he notes along the trip also enhance Huck's growing up. By no means do I intend to imply that Twain *meant* the book to be a tract on better white-black race relations, though maybe he did ("if a child can do it, then why can't we all?" sort of thing)--but I'm sure I do not want to press that reading here.

The point is that since Huck tells the reader all of these very personal, occasionally unflattering, things about himself, one can only react with a positive attitude toward Huck's narrative--that it is as true and real as the person telling it.

And yet . . . is it really? For aren't we let in at the beginning on the knowledge that we are being told a story by a fictional character, written by someone who turns out to be using a different name than his own? Is it possible that Huck's honesty goes too far--and at the very start, no less--and actually destroys the fiction? And if the fiction is destroyed, can anything be learned by it?

To answer the last question first: the fiction is "laid bare" only twice--in the opening and closing lines of the novel:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by a Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing . . . all is told about in that book--which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before. (1)

. . . and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more. . . .The End, Yours Truly, Huck Finn. (362)

The middle, as it were, is completely without self-referentiality. As such, the fiction--the real fiction of the book--is not destroyed, but left intact. Since Huck's comment at the onset occurs before that actual fiction takes place, there is no fiction for it to destroy--and once we are into the novel, we perhaps can forget during the experience the impact of Huck's admission of fictionality. At the end of the novel Huck speaks again of his book, but mentions nothing of his own fictionality. As a result, if the reader does not connect the realization of Huck's writing with his earlier state

ment regarding his fictionality, then the final statement also does not destroy the fiction. Even if it does, the fiction has already taken place, the experience has passed, and even the realization of the fiction's fictionality does not destroy it, for it no longer exists.

Strange, isn't it, that fiction (which is lying) should be accepted as fact (an observable truth) by the reader for much the same reason Huck lies throughout the novel? For Huck, lying is expedient, it is necessary to make things work out all right--and it's easier too. The truth is the very last resort. Huck saves Jim from the two slave hunters by telling a lie, but when in a "close place" (both with Mary Jane and during his turmoil before "I'll go to hell") he tells the truth (to Mary Jane in the first instance; to the reader on both occasions). Meanwhile, Twain gets people like me to treat Huck almost as though he were a real person by telling a lie, that is, this story. In turn, I have "lied" about Huck, revealing to you the reader only that information which supported my thesis: that the manipulation of narrative voice is a matter of infinite art.

End Notes

¹The "true voice," of course, can be that of a truly unreliable narrator.

² For instance, when the "band" gets together in the second chapter, someone asks Tom whether or not they had to kill all the families of boys who told the secrets of the band (which Huck is doing, by the way) and Tom replies, "Oh, certainly. It's best. Some authorities think different, but mostly it's considered best to kill them" (10). The authorities that think different are never identified by Tom; those who do think it best are never identified either. More importantly, none of the boys questions Tom who, as Huck reports, says "I've seen it in books; and so of course that's what we've got to do."

Works Cited

- Blair, Walter. *Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1960.
- Monteiro, George. "Narrative Laws and Narrative Lies in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." *Studies in American Fiction* 13.2 (1985): 227-237.
- Smith, Henry Nash and William M. Gibson. *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960.
- Stone, Albert E. Jr. "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Modes of Escape." *The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain's Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1961.
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Eds. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer. Berkeley: U of California P, 1985.