

# THE TRICKSTER

dited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBY



## Bloom's Literary Themes

## THE TRICKSTER

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities





#### Bloom's Literary Themes: The Trickster

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## Bloom's Literary Themes

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## Series Introduction by Harold Bloom: Themes and Metaphors

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#### 1. Topos and Trope

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a topos, ancient Greek for "place." Literary topoi are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A topos can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom's Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: the irony of one age is rarely the irony of another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

### 2. Contest as both Theme and Trope

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what

the great creators called "cutting contests," from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker's Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.

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## Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom



The figure of the Trickster is all but universal in the world's cultures, and generally emerged from shamanistic origins. Folklore and anthropology are essential to the study of the Trickster, and I particularly recommend the religious historian Mircea Eliade's seminal study, *Shamanism*.

This though is a volume about the *literary* theme of the trickster, and so I will remark here upon some of that wily figure's transformations in Homer's Odysseus (Ulysses), Chaucer's Pardoner and Wife of Bath, Shakespeare's clowns, fools, sprites, and villains. Later come the trickster's ongoing fortunes in Melville, Mark Twain, and Franz Kafka. The list could be extended, but these will suffice.

All "practical jokesters" are tricksters, but the converse scarcely is true. Odysseus-Ulysses is the archetype of the survivor, and you do not want to be in the same boat with him. He will reach the shore, you will drown. The Trojan Horse is his most notorious trick, yet there are many more. In his final incarnation he is Joyce's endlessly amiable Leopold Bloom, but Poldy is a sport in the annals of Ulysses. Shakespeare's scurvy politician Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* is the more representative figure.

The evil trickster in the highest degree in Shakespeare is Iago, the truest *diabolos* in all of literature. The clowns and fools in the Shakespearean cosmos are too wise to be innocent but also too benign to be harmful. Shakespeare balances his clowns and sprites between the Chaucerian models of the likeable but ambiguous Alice, the Wife of Bath, and the uncanny Pardoner, who is suspended between cupidity and faith.

In American literature the trickster stars as Melville's *Confidence Man* and in a sophisticated second innocence as the magnificent

Huckleberry Finn, ancestor of Hemingway himself and of his Nick Adams. The master of the trickster theme in modern literature, Franz Kafka, is a link to its long history in Yiddish culture, including on the stage and in prose fiction. After Kafka, we are all tricksters, evading our doom as best we can.

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# THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN (MARK TWAIN)



# "The Trickster Tricked: Huck Comes Out of the Fog in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"

by Robert C. Evans

Mark Twain's great novel Huckleberry Finn is a book brimming with tricks, trickery, and tricksters. Tom Sawyer, for instance, is obviously one of the latter; so are the Duke and the Dauphin; and so, to a lesser extent, is Huck himself. Tricks provide much of the hilarity we associate with this book, as when young Tom (pretending to be a newly arrived stranger), without warning or permission, suddenly and boldly kisses Sally Phelps, a much-older relative whom he has only just met: "he reached over and kissed aunt Sally right on the mouth, and then settled back again, in his chair, comfortable, and was going on talking, but she jumped up and wiped it off with the back of her hand, and says: 'You owdacious puppy!" Tom, instead of apologizing in the face of the woman's now-ignited wrath, only digs the hole deeper by explaining, "I didn't mean no harm. I—I—thought you'd like it." When an exasperated Aunt Sally then calls him a "born fool" and picks up a nearby stick, Tom pushes the joke even further by explaining that he had been told by "everybody" that she would like to be kissed, but then he promises, "I won't ever do it again. Till you ask me." By this time Aunt Sally is about to explode: "Till I ask you! Well, I never see the beat of it in my born days! I lay you'll be the Methusalem-numbskull of creation before ever I ask you—or the likes of you!" (HF 287). Tom

2 Mark Twain

continues to push the gag further and further until he finally explains that he is in fact the young relative whose arrival she has long been expecting. When a now-joyful Aunt Sally rushes to embrace and kiss him, Tom gives the joke one last twist: "No, not till you've asked me, first" (HF 288).

Tricks of this sort help make Huckleberry Finn enormously funny, but sometimes the tricks have a darker and more disturbing effect. This is especially true of the tricks played on black characters, and it is particularly true of the trick played by Tom on Jim in the final chapters of the novel. Tom is the only person at the Phelps farm who knows that Jim has already been freed from slavery in the will of the now-dead Miss Watson, Jim's former owner, but Tom, instead of announcing Jim's liberty as soon as he arrives, instead contrives an elaborate and often dangerous plot to "free" Jim from the small shack in which he is now imprisoned. The closing chapters thus have the ironic effect of only helping to emphasize how far, in fact, Jim remains from true freedom, even after the details of Miss Watson's will are finally revealed. Tom's trick on Jim, like many of the tricks played by white characters on black characters in this book, leaves a bad taste in one's mouth, partly because the tricks remind us of how truly vulnerable the black characters are. Practical jokes between friends help highlight, affirm, and strengthen pre-existing friendships. Practical jokes played on persons with less power than oneself, however, can seem crude, thoughtless, demeaning, and even mean. Reading about such tricks can therefore be disturbing. Twain, in a sense, thus plays a massive trick on any reader who picks up Huckleberry Finn and expects it to be a book as full of innocence and lighthearted fun as The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. The story of Huck is a far more disconcerting, perplexing, and thought-provoking book than its predecessor, in part because so much of its trickery involves such dark overtones.

One of the best examples of Twain's crafty use of trickery occurs in Chapter 15, when Huck, in a canoe, becomes temporarily separated from Jim, who remains on their raft, as the two make their way down the Mississippi River. For a long time the two remain separated as their crafts speed along the swiftly moving water, enveloped by a thick fog. Huck becomes increasingly afraid, and at one point he tries to explain and justify his agitated emotions by directly addressing the reader: "If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in the fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try it once—you'll see" (HF 101).

Huck appeals to the reader's sense of sympathy, suggesting that if we could only imagine ourselves in his place, we would understand and forgive his fears. He later mentions that after fighting the river for hours in search of Jim, he became exhausted and that, although he did not want to fall asleep, "I was so sleepy I couldn't help it" (*HF* 102). When he finally woke up to find that the fog had cleared, "I thought I was dreaming, and when things begun to come back to me, they seemed to come up dim out of last week" (*HF* 102). Fortunately, however, he now spots the raft and makes his way toward it.

When Huck arrives at the raft, he sees Jim "setting there with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering oar. The other oar was smashed off, and the raft was littered up with leaves and branches and dirt. So she'd had a rough time" (HF 102). Huck sees, in other words, an image of Jim that should instantly remind him (and the reader) of himself and of his own quite recent experiences in the canoe. Like Huck a few moments before, Jim is exhausted and now asleep; he is alone; and he is probably frightened. However, just when we might expect Huck to sympathize with Jim and embrace him joyfully, to treat Jim with the same kind of empathetic understanding that Huck himself had so recently sought from the reader, Twain plays a trick on us by having Huck play a trick on Jim. Without any warning or explanation, Huck immediately adopts the attitude and behavior of a trickster: "I made fast and laid down under Jim's nose on the raft, and began to gap, and stretch my fists out against Jim" (HF 103). Huck, that is, pretends to be awaking from sleep, and the practical joke on Jim has now begun. The novel seems, suddenly, to have reverted to an earlier, more lighthearted tone, and the dark, "dismal and lonesome" atmosphere of the past few pages seems about to evaporate and instead be replaced by some good fun at Jim's expense. Yet the joke, thanks to Twain the trickster, will soon be on both Huck and the reader.

The paragraphs that now follow are among the most famous and most important in the novel: They mark a significant moment of transformation, a crucial stage in Huck's moral maturation and in his development toward ethical adulthood. What begins as a trick on Jim, designed to make him look and feel foolish, soon evolves into an episode in which it is Huck who not only behaves like a fool but eventually feels far worse than one. The tone of the episode moves rapidly from apparently good-natured fun to something far more

4 Mark Twain

profound and serious, as Twain shows his capacity to move far beyond the lighthearted but somewhat meaningless high jinks of Tom Sawyer. Huck, in this episode, becomes the trickster tricked, but the trick is also partly played by Twain on the unassuming reader. Anyone who begins reading this episode by identifying with Huck's spirit of apparently innocent play ultimately has the rug pulled out from under him. Likewise, anyone who starts reading this passage by expecting that Jim, the supposedly foolish "darky," will be the object of hilarious laughter is soon disabused of that notion. Twain, in a splendid twist, manages to turn the admittedly superstitious Jim—the stereotypically naïve, ignorant, and untutored slave—into a figure of almost tragic dignity, a figure who seems far more worthy of our respect than anyone else in the novel. By the end of this chapter, it is Huck who feels foolish, as should any reader who may have shared Huck's assumptions about Jim. Huck, at least, has the excuse of youth to help explain his juvenile attitudes and thoughtless conduct in this chapter (he is only thirteen). The society surrounding Huck (and Twain), however, has no similar justification.

To read the conclusion of Chapter 15 for the first time is to feel a bit of a shock; to read it a second or third time is to experience a kind of revelation, as the double-edged subtleties and ironic implications of Twain's phrasing rise to the surface. For instance, the fact that Huck initially stretches his "fists out against Jim" seems at first to be merely a gesture of pretended awakening. It is possible to argue that there may be a hint of veiled or unconscious aggression in Huck's fisted gesture, but the fact that he does indeed touch Jim seems to be the most significant aspect of this detail. That touch symbolizes the level of intimacy that has developed between the two, a white boy and an older black man-a man who has now become a kind of father figure to Huck. Although the mischievous Huck is about to injure the bond that is signified by that touch, the temporary damage done to their relationship will soon ironically result in an even stronger tie—a tie that might never have formed if Huck had not learned a valuable lesson through his trickery. Paradoxically, then, the trick that threatens to break Huck's ties with Jim actually strengthens them. At the beginning of this episode, Huck only pretends to awaken, but by the end of the chapter he will in fact have awakened in a far more serious and consequential sense.

Jim's deep delight that Huck has returned safely ("It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true") should already begin to make the

reader feel uncomfortable. Jim is so clearly a good, kind, and caring man that the idea of playing a trick on him (especially at this point of heightened emotion, when he feels so vulnerable) already seems unsettling. When Jim welcomes his young friend back as "de same ole Huck—de same ole Huck," we can already see that his phrasing is partly right and partly wrong. Huck, by beginning his deception, has indeed begun to behave like the "de same ole Huck" who has teased and tricked Jim in the past, but he is also departing from the "Huck" whom Jim thinks he knows intimately and can trust. Huck, for the sake of a cheap laugh, is in the process of violating the bond that has thus far developed between the two during their trip down the river. Thus, when Jim welcomes back "de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness" (HF 103), there is a darkly ironic undertone to his final word.

Huck, however, refuses—at least for now—to openly reciprocate the love Jim showers upon him. Instead, he pursues his trick, asking Jim if he has been drinking. Jim is incredulous: "Drinkin'? Has I ben a drinkin'? Has I had a chance to be a drinkin'?" (HF 103). Huck thus plays a trick on Jim by pretending to think that Jim must be inebriated, but Twain cleverly turns the trick on Huck by repeating the word "drinkin" so insistently that the reader is inevitably reminded of an earlier episode in the book in which Jim actually was shown to be drinking. In this episode, memorably emphasized in the first edition of the book by an illustration drawn by E.W. Kemble (HF 64) in which a bug-eyed Jim is shown hopping up and down on one leg, draining a bottle of whiskey, Jim plays a trick on Jim that ends up being very dangerous. Readers will remember Huck, knowing Jim's fear of snakes, has killed a rattlesnake and "curled him up on the foot of Jim's blanket, ever so natural, thinking there'd be some fun when Jim found him there" (HF 64). Here again, Twain tricks the trickster. Unfortunately, Huck not only forgot about the snake, but he also forgot that "wherever you leave a dead snake, its mate always comes there and curls around it" (HF 64-65). Jim is therefore bitten by the dead snake's mate, and he grabs the whiskey to try to help alleviate his considerable pain. Thus, when Huck accuses Jim of having been drinking on the raft, it is hard not to recall this earlier episode when Jim was actually driven to drink as the result of Huck's own pranks. Huck has apparently failed to learn his lesson from his tricks in Chapter 10, and indeed he never admitted his responsibility for the dangerous situation, but in the aftermath of Huck's trick in