

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

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Mark Twain and
African-American
Voices

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In memory of my mother,
Renée B. Fisher,
writer and musicologist,
who taught me to listen to
the music and the words
and the music of the words

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Clare Hall
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S. F. F.

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WAS HUCK BLACK?

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Introduction

The Negro looks at the white man and finds it difficult to believe that the "grays"—a Negro term for white people—can be so absurdly self-deluded over the true interrelatedness of blackness and whiteness.

RALPH ELLISON¹

The range of models critics cite when they probe the sources of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is wide. It includes the picaresque novel, the Southwestern humorists, the Northeastern literary comedians, the newspapers Twain contributed to and read, and the tradition of the "boy book" in American popular culture.² Twain himself weighed in with a clear statement about the roots of his main character, claiming that Huck Finn was based on Tom Blankenship, a poor-white outcast child Twain remembered from Hannibal, and on Tom's older brother Bence, who once helped a runaway slave.³ These sources may seem quite different. On one level, however, they are the same: they all give Twain's book a genealogy that is unequivocally white.

Although commentators differ on the question of which models and sources proved most significant, they tend to concur on the question of how *Huckleberry Finn* transformed American literature. Twain's innovation of having a vernacular-speaking child tell his own story in *his own words* was the first stroke of brilliance; Twain's awareness of the power of satire in the service of social criticism was the second. Huck's voice combined with Twain's satiric genius changed the shape of fiction in America.

In this book I will suggest that Twain himself and the critics have both ignored the African-American roots of his art. Critics.

between Twain's work and African-American traditions to examinations of his depiction of African-American folk beliefs or to analyses of the dialects spoken by his black characters.⁴ But by limiting their field of inquiry to the periphery, they have missed the ways in which African-American voices shaped Twain's creative imagination at its core.

Compelling evidence indicates that the model for Huck Finn's voice was a black child instead of a white one and that this child's speech sparked in Twain a sense of the possibilities of a vernacular narrator. The record suggests that it may have been yet another black speaker who awakened Twain to the power of satire as a tool of social criticism. This may help us understand why Richard Wright found Twain's work "strangely familiar," and why Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, and David Bradley all found Twain so empowering in their own efforts to convert African-American experience into art.⁵

As Ralph Ellison put it in 1970, "*the black man [was] a co-creator of the language that Mark Twain raised to the level of literary eloquence.*"⁶ But his comment sank like a stone, leaving barely a ripple on the placid surface of American literary criticism. Neither critics from the center nor critics from the margins challenged the reigning assumption that mainstream literary culture in America is certifiably "white."

This book suggests that we need to revise our understanding of the nature of the mainstream American literary tradition. The voice we have come to accept as the vernacular voice in American literature—the voice with which Twain captured our national imagination in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that empowered Hemingway, Faulkner, and countless other writers in the twentieth century—is in large measure a voice that is "black."

Mark Twain was unusually attuned to the nuances of cadence, rhythm, syntax, and diction that distinguish one language or dialect from another, and he had a genius for transferring the oral into print.⁷ Twain, whose preferred playmates had been black, was what J. L. Dillard might have called "bidialectal"; as an engaging black child he encountered in the early 1870s helped reconnect Twain to the cadences and rhythms of black speakers from Twain's own childhood, he inspired him to liberate a language that lay buried within Twain's own linguistic repertoire and to apprehend its stunning creative potential. Twain, in turn, would help make that language available as a literary option to both white and black writers who came after him. As Ellison put it in 1991, "he made it possible for many of us to find our own voices."⁸

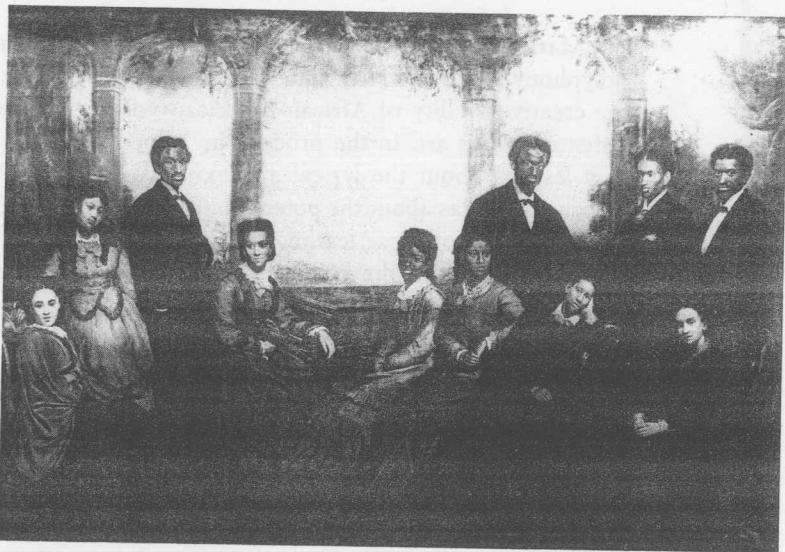
Mark Twain helped open American literature to the multicultural polyphony that is its birthright and special strength. He appreciated the creative vitality of African-American voices and exploited their potential in his art. In the process, he helped teach his countrymen new lessons about the lyrical and exuberant energy of vernacular speech, as well as about the potential of satire and irony in the service of truth. Both of these lessons would ultimately make the culture more responsive to the voices of African-American writers in the twentieth century. They would also change its definitions of what "art" ought to look and sound like to be freshly, wholly "American."

Am I suggesting that the sources and influences that scholars have documented over the last hundred years are not important to our understanding of Twain's career as a whole? No. Southwestern humor, for example, clearly played a key role in shaping Twain's art, particularly in such early works as *Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*. But there is something about *Huckleberry Finn* that sets it off from Twain's earlier work and makes it seem less a continuation of the art he had been developing and more of a quantum leap forward; its unrivalled place in both the Twain canon and in the American literary canon reflects this special status.⁹ In *Huckleberry Finn* something new happened that would have an enormous impact on the future of American literature. That "something new" has never been adequately accounted for. My suggestion is this: here, more than in any other work, Twain allowed African-American voices to play a major role in the creation of his art. This fact may go a long way toward clarifying what makes this novel so fresh and so distinctive.¹⁰

Twain's responsiveness to African-American speaking voices should come as no surprise to us, for the intense and visceral nature of his response to African-American *singing* voices has been widely documented. After entertaining the Fisk Jubilee Singers in his home in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 1897, Twain wrote,

Away back in the beginning—to my mind—their music made all other vocal music cheap; and that early notion is emphasized now. It is utterly beautiful, to me; and it moves me infinitely more than any other music can. I think that in the Jubilees and their songs America has produced the perfectest flower of the ages; and I wish it were a foreign product so that she would worship it and lavish money on it and go properly crazy over it.¹¹

Twain acknowledged his admiration for the beauty and power of these songs and their singers in the publicity blurb he wrote for the Fisk Jubilee Singers on their European tour: "I do not know when anything has so moved me as did the plaintive melodies of the Jubilee



The Fisk Jubilee Singers whose talents Twain lauded in the publicity blurb he wrote for their European tour in 1873. (Courtesy, Special Collections, Fisk University Library)

Singers.” Calling their music “eloquent” (underlining the close connection in his mind between speech and song), Twain wrote, “I heard them sing once, and I would walk seven miles to hear them sing again. You will recognize that this is strong language for me to use, when you remember that I never was fond of pedestrianism.”¹²

Katy Leary, a servant of the Clemens family, reports that one evening as a group of guests were sitting in the music room looking out at the moonlight at the home of Charles Dudley Warner, a neighbor in Hartford, Twain “suddenly got right up without any warning” and began to sing “negro Spirituals.” He sang “low and sweet,” Leary recalled, and “became kind of lost in it.” When he came to the end of the song, “to the Glory Halleluiah, he gave a great shout—just like the negroes do—he shouted out the Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!” Those who were there said that “none of them would forget it as long as they lived.”¹³

As his voice projected in song black voices from his childhood, Twain’s bearing would become strangely transformed. Drawing on accounts by guests who were present, Justin Kaplan describes an evening at Twain’s Hartford home in 1874:

After dinner, with a log fire blazing in the red-curtained drawing room, he sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” “Golden Slippers,” “Go Down,

Moses”. . . . He swayed gently as he stood; his voice was low and soft, a whisper of wind in the trees; his eyes were closed, and he smiled strangely. Through the sadness and exultation of these songs which he had known through boyhood, he transported himself far from the circle of polite letters and from the New England snowscape, and he found it difficult to go back. . . .¹⁴

Twain could often be found singing his favorite African-American spirituals when he was farthest from home—in Liverpool in 1873, as well as in Florence in 1904, the night his wife, Livy, died.¹⁵ William Dean Howells recalled the “fervor” and “passion” with which Twain’s “quavering tenor” sang these songs during his last visit to Twain’s home in Redding, Connecticut, shortly before Twain’s death.¹⁶ Twain identified with these songs in ways that went to the core of his being; they spoke uniquely to a part of himself that no other art could touch.

African-American speaking voices played much the same role, on a subliminal level, in Twain’s consciousness.¹⁷ Twain never expressed his admiration for the power of African-American speaking voices as publicly as he expressed his admiration for the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but many such voices, in addition to the two that I will focus on in this book, made deep impressions on him during the years preceding *Huckleberry Finn*. During his childhood, Twain had stood in awe of the storytelling powers of a slave named Uncle Dan’l, whom he remembered from summers spent on his uncle’s farm in Florida, Missouri. In his autobiography, when Twain described “the white and black children grouped on the hearth” listening to Uncle Dan’l’s folk tales, he recalled “the creepy joy which quivered through me when the time for the ghost story of the ‘Golden Arm’ was reached—and the sense of regret, too, which came over me for it was always the last story of the evening.”¹⁸

In the late 1860s and 1870s, Twain was impressed by the narrative skills of black speakers like Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Cord (a servant at the Clemenses’ summer home in Elmira, New York). In 1869, the “simple language” in which Douglass told a story in the course of social conversation struck Twain as so remarkably “effective” that he described it in detail in a letter to his future wife:

Had a talk with Fred Douglas, [sic] to-day, who seemed exceedingly glad to see me—& I certainly was glad to see *him*, for I do so admire his “spunk.” He told the history of his child’s expulsion from Miss Tracy’s school, & his simple language was very effective. Miss Tracy said the pupils did not want a colored child among them—which he did not believe, & challenged the proof. She put it at once to a vote of the school, and asked “How many of you are willing to have this colored child be with you?” And they *all* held up their hands! Douglas added: “The children’s



Frederick Douglass, whose eloquence in the course of social conversation impressed Twain in 1869. (Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library, San Marino, California)



Mary Ann Cord, former slave, and servant at Quarry Farm, the Clemenses' summer home in Elmira, New York, whose storytelling inspired Twain's first contribution to the *Atlantic Monthly*, "A True Story" (1874). (Courtesy, University of Maryland, College Park)

hearts were right." There was pathos in the way he said it. I would like to hear him make a speech. . . ."

And in 1874, the "vigorous eloquence" with which former slave Mary Ann Cord told the story of her reunion with her son after the Civil War inspired Twain's first contribution to the esteemed *Atlantic Monthly*; a quarter-century later, Twain would still recall her stunning "gift of strong & simple speech."^{20*} Twain wrote that he found the story she told a "curiously strong piece of literary work to come

unpremeditated from lips untrained in the literary art," showing his awareness of the close relationship between speaking voices and "literature." "The untrained tongue is usually wandering, wordy & vague," Twain wrote; "but this is clear, compact & coherent—yes, & vivid also, & perfectly simple & unconscious."^{21*} Throughout his career as a lecturer and as a writer, Twain aspired to have the effect upon his listeners and readers that speakers like Frederick Douglass and Mary Ann Cord had upon him.²²

Ernest Hemingway declared that "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*."²³ William Faulkner called Twain "the father of American literature."²⁴ The African-American roots of Twain's art, however, have never been fully recognized or explored. In 1987 Toni Morrison issued a call for critics to examine "literature for the impact Afro-American presence has had on the structure of the work, the linguistic practice, and fictional enterprise in which it is engaged."²⁵ This book is a response. My goal is to foreground the role previously neglected African-American voices played in shaping Mark Twain's art in *Huckleberry Finn*. Given that book's centrality in our culture, the points I make implicitly illuminate, as well, how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctively "American" about American literature.²⁶

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Part One

JIMMY

1

*Been a listening all the night long,
Been a listening all the night long¹*



Twentieth-century American criticism abounds in pronouncements about how Twain's choice of a vernacular narrator in *Huckleberry Finn* transformed modern American literature. Lionel Trilling, for example, felt that

The prose of *Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech. . . . It has something to do with ease and freedom in the use of language. Most of all it has to do with the structure of the sentence, which is simple, direct, and fluent, maintaining the rhythm of the word-groups of speech and the intonations of the speaking voice. . . . [Twain] is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice. . . .²

"As for the style of the book," Trilling concluded, "it is not less than definitive in American literature."³ As Louis Budd noted in 1985, "today it is standard academic wisdom that Twain's central, precedent-setting achievement is Huck's language."⁴

Before Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, no American author had entrusted his narrative to the voice of a simple, untutored vernacular speaker—or, for that matter, to a child. Albert Stone has noted that "the vernacular language . . . in *Huckleberry Finn* strikes the ear with the freshness of a real boy talking out loud."⁵ Could the voice of an *actual* "real boy talking out loud" have helped Twain recognize the potential of such a voice to hold an audience's attention and to win its trust?

Twain himself noted in his autobiography that he based Huck Finn on Tom Blankenship, the poor-white son of the local drunkard whose pariah status (and exemption from school, church, etc.) made him the envy of every "respectable" boy in Hannibal.⁶ Twain wrote,

In *Huckleberry Finn* I have drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community, and by consequence he was tranquilly and continuously happy, and was envied by all the rest of us. We liked him, we enjoyed his society. And as his society was forbidden us by our parents, the prohibition trebled and quadrupled its value, and therefore we sought and got more of his society than of any other boy's.⁷

What demands our notice is that although Tom Blankenship may have been the model for Huck's place in society, Twain never suggested that there was anything memorable about the nature of his "talk." Huck's talk, on the other hand, as many critics have noted, is the most memorable thing about him.⁸ I suggest that there was another "real boy talking out loud" whose role in the genesis of *Huckleberry Finn* has never been acknowledged.

On 29 November 1874, two years before he published *Tom Sawyer* or began *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain published an article called "Sociable Jimmy" in the *New York Times*.⁹ "*Sociable Jimmy*" takes the place of honor as the first piece Twain published that is dominated by the voice of a child. This fact alone would seem to mark it as deserving of scholars' attention. Strangely enough, however, it has been almost totally ignored.¹⁰

In this article, Twain says he originally sent the sketch of "Jimmy" home in a letter in the days when he was a public lecturer. Although this initial letter has disappeared, subsequent letters Twain wrote home to his wife allow us to determine that the encounter he relates happened in December 1871 or January 1872, in a small town in the Midwest, probably Paris, Illinois, and that the child in question definitely existed.¹¹ Twain reports that he had supper in his room, as was his habit, and that a "bright, simple, guileless little darkey boy . . . ten years old—a wide-eyed, observant little chap" was sent to wait on him. The intensity of Twain's response to the child is striking. He notes that he wrote down what the child said, and sent the record home because he

. . . wished to preserve the memory of *the most artless, sociable, and exhaustless talker I ever came across*. He did not tell me a single remarkable thing, or one that was worth remembering; and yet he was

himself so interested in his small marvels, and they flowed so naturally and comfortably from his lips, that his talk got the upper hand of my interest, too, and *I listened as one who receives a revelation*. I took down what he had to say, just as he said it—without altering a word or adding one.¹²

Twain's "revelation" involved his recognition of the potential of a "bright, simple, guileless . . . wide-eyed, observant" child as narrator. I suggest that the voice of Jimmy, the "most artless, sociable, and exhaustless talker" Twain had ever come across, became a model for the voice with which Twain would change the shape of American literature.

It was a voice that Twain contained within himself, a language and set of cadences and rhythms he could generate fluently on his own, having been exposed to many such voices in his youth. Jimmy triggered his recollection of those voices, and sparked his apprehension of the creative possibilities they entailed. We can view the remarkable impression Jimmy made upon Twain, then, as connected to Twain's awareness of the ease with which he could speak in that voice himself. As he put it in a letter to Livy written shortly after he met Jimmy, "*I think I could swing my legs over the arms of a chair & that boy's spirit would descend upon me & enter into me*."^{13*} It was a crucial step on the road to creating Huck.

"Sociable Jimmy" consists mainly of what Twain presents as a transcription of Jimmy's engaging conversation (see Appendix). Twain had been intrigued for several years by the possibilities of a child as narrator, but this was the first time that he developed this perspective at any length in print.¹⁴ Along with "A True Story," which ran in the *Atlantic Monthly* the same month "Sociable Jimmy" ran in the *Times*, it also represented one of Twain's first extended efforts to translate African-American speech into print. Indeed, to the extent that critics took notice of the piece at all, it was as an experiment in African-American dialect. Jimmy's defining characteristic for critics seemed to be the fact that he was black. For Twain, however, Jimmy was mainly a charming and delightful *child* who captured his heart and captivated his imagination.

In the "Explanatory" with which *Huckleberry Finn* begins,¹⁵ Twain enumerates seven dialects used in the book, one of which is "Missouri negro dialect." Critics have debated whether Twain did, in fact, use seven dialects, or more, or fewer; but they have generally assumed that the only "negro dialect" in the book is that spoken by African-American characters. On a phonological level, that assumption is correct: only African-American characters, for example, say "dat," as opposed to "that." But phonology alone does not describe

a *voice*, as the voluminous criticism about what makes Huck's voice distinctive clearly shows. Voice involves syntax and diction, the cadences and rhythms of a speaker's sentences, the flow of the prose, the structures of the mental processes, the rapport with the audience, the characteristic stance as regards the material related.

The cadences and rhythms of Jimmy's speech, his syntax and diction, his topics of conversation, attitudes, limitations, and his ability to hold our interest and our trust bear a striking resemblance to those qualities of speech and character that we have come to identify indelibly with Huck. Both boys are naive and open, engaging and bright. They are unpretentious, uninhibited, easily impressed, and unusually loquacious. They free-associate with remarkable energy and verve. And they are supremely self-confident: neither doubts for a minute that Twain (in Jimmy's case) or the reader (in Huck's) is completely absorbed by everything he has to say. I am not suggesting that Twain was being intentionally misleading either in his "Explanatory" or in his comments about the roots of Huck in Tom Blankenship: rather, I put forth the far from controversial notion that artists are notoriously unreliable critics of their own work. As I point out later on, Twain's blending of black voices with white to create the voice we know as Huck's may well have been unconscious.

On a linguistic level, my discussion of what Huck and Jimmy have in common is indebted to the work of three critics whose sophisticated analyses of Huck's characteristic speech patterns provide invaluable points of departure: Richard Bridgman, Janet Holmgren McKay, and David Carkeet.

One of the key elements Richard Bridgman identifies as emblematic of Huck's speech patterns and of Twain's organizing structure in the novel is *repetition*. Bridgman comments that repetition reaches a particularly "conscious structural function in extended passages where phrases are repeated." Huck:

We got a LICKING every time one of our snakes come in her way, and she allowed these LICKINGS warn't NOTHING to what she would do if we ever loaded up the place again with them. I DIDN'T MIND THE LICKINGS because they didn't amount to NOTHING; but I MINDED the trouble we had to LAY IN another lot. But we got them LAID IN.¹⁶

The same subtle repetition of key words and phrases characterizes Jimmy's speech in "Sociable Jimmy," as the following examples show:

1. But de res' o' de people, DEY HAD A GOOD TIME—mos' all uv 'em HAD A GOOD TIME. DEY ALL GOT DRUNK. DEY ALL GITS DRUNK heah, every Christmas, and carries on and has AWFUL GOOD

TIMES. . . . Pa used to GIT DRUNK, but dat was befo' I was big—but he's done quit. He don' GIT DRUNK no mo' now.

2. Dat's an AWFUL BIG church—AWFUL HIGH STEEPLE. An' it's all solid stone, excep' jes' de top part—de STEEPLE. . . . It's gwine to kill some body yit, dat STEEPLE is. A man—BIG man, he was—BIGGER'n what Bill is—he tuck it up dare and fixed it again—an' he didn't look no BIGGER'n a boy, he was so HIGH up. Dat STEEPLE's AWFUL HIGH.¹⁷

In a passage Bridgman does not cite but that makes the point about repetition as well as the one he does cite, Huck says,

I set down again, a shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for the house was all STILL as death, now, and so the widow wouldn't know. Well, after a long time I HEARD the clock away off in the town go BOOM—BOOM—BOOM—twelve licks—and all STILL again—STILLER than ever. Pretty soon I HEARD a twig snap, down in the dark amongst the trees—something was a stirring. I set STILL and LISTENED.¹⁸

In a similarly repetitive passage in "Sociable Jimmy," Jimmy characterizes the sound made by a clock in town with the identical onomatopoeic construction.

It mus' be awful to stan' in dat steeple when de CLOCK is STRIKIN'—dey say it is. BOOMS and jars so's you think the world's a comin' to an end. I wouldn't like to be up dare when de CLOCK'S A STRIKIN'. Dat CLOCK ain't just a STRIKER, like dese common CLOCKS. It's a BELL—jist a reglar BELL—and it's a buster. You kin hear dat BELL all over dis city. You ought to hear it BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. . . .¹⁹

Another dimension of Huck's vernacular speech that Bridgman identifies as particularly significant is Twain's willingness to "invest words with new meaning."

The surface of his prose is littered with queer ore quarried from Huck's mine. A melodeum is "pretty *skreeky*," . . . Huck "*smouches*" a spoon, he has "*clayey*" clothes . . . he speaks of an undertaker's "soft *soothering* ways," . . . the king inquired what he was "*alassing* about" . . . he guts a catfish by "*hagging*" it open with a saw; and finally he says that a certain surprise would make "most anybody *squash*." . . .²⁰

"The effect of these words," Bridgman writes,

—dialect, nonce, slang—is that of poetry. Carrying expository meaning, they flash out with a light unique for prose. They are employed less to build an effect cumulatively, more to make an effect immediately. And they contribute to the gradually accumulating feeling in American literature for the importance of the single word. . . .²¹

Jimmy's lexicon is, in its own way, equally creative. When his employer's daughters catch a cat in the house, "dey jis' *scoops* him."

The clock Jimmy admires "ain't just a striker, like dese common clocks . . . it's a *buster*." The brother named Bob "don't git drunk much—jes' *sloshes*, roun' de s'loons some, an' takes a dram sometimes."²²

Bridgman also notes "the frequent use of present participles in Huck's prose."

Huck uses participial constructions especially when there is a violent or otherwise memorable action. . . . "They swarmed up the street towards Sherburn's house, A-WHOOPING and YELLING and RAGING like Injuns. . . . Lots of women and girls was CRYING and TAKING ON, scared most to death."²³

Jimmy, too, favors participial constructions to describe memorable actions: "You don't never see Kit A-RAIRIN an' A-CHARGIN' aroun' an' KICKIN' up her heels like de res' o' de gals in dis fam'ly does gen'ally."²⁴ Linguist Janet Holmgren McKay observes, as well, that "frequently, Twain adds the colloquial 'a-' prefix to Huck's present participles, and he couples these forms with two-syllable adverbials for even greater rhythm." Jimmy does the same.²⁵

Finally, Bridgman notes that "the participle and the reiterated conjunction of a long list 'and . . . and . . . and . . . and . . . and . . .'—are two of the least evident yet most pervasive forms of repetition to be found in Huck's version of the vernacular."²⁶ "Huck's remembering mind," Bridgman writes, "lays in these details one after the other without any urge toward subordination."²⁷ McKay also comments on Twain's propensity to make Huck's sentences "seem simple by a lack of overt indications of subordination between clauses and phrases. For example, Huck characteristically uses the conjunction *and* to link any number of subordinate and coordinate ideas, a practice that suggests a lack of linguistic sophistication."²⁸

"And" is a common conjunction in Jimmy's speech as well: "He tuck de bottle AND shuck it, AND shuck it—he seed it was blue, AND he didn't know but it was blue mass . . . AND so he sot de bottle down, AND drat if it wa'n't blue vittles. . . ." Or, as he says elsewhere, "Dey all gits drunk heah, every Christmas, AND carries on AND has awful good times." The particularly long list of names Jimmy rattles off, also connected by "and"—"Bill, an' Griz, an' Duke, an' Bob, an' Nan, an' Tab, an' Kit, an' Sol, an' Si, an' Phil, an' Puss, an' Jake, an' Sal," and so on—so impresses Twain that he quickly scribbles it all down on "the flyleaf of Longfellow's *New-England Tragedies*," presumably the closest thing handy on which to write.

McKay enumerates several other dimensions of Huck's voice, virtually all of which characterize Jimmy's voice, as well. "The kinds of errors that Huck makes are by no means haphazard," McKay writes. "Twain carefully placed them to suggest Huck's basic illiteracy but not to overwhelm the reader." McKay notes that "nonstandard verb forms constitute Huck's most typical mistakes. He often uses the present form or past participle for the simple past tense . . . and he often shifts tense within the same sequence."²⁹ She identifies "the frequent occurrence of double negatives" as the second most prominent nonstandard feature in Huck's speech other than the verb forms.³⁰ McKay underlines "a redundancy of subjects" as characteristic of Huck's speech patterns. Each of these nonstandard features characterizes Jimmy's speech as well.³¹

Yet another dimension of Huck's style that McKay emphasizes is his "skillful use of . . . verbal imagery of all sorts, particularly hyperbole, metaphor and onomatopoeia." McKay cites such similes as "like the whole world was asleep," and such onomatopoeia as thunder "rumbling, grumbling, tumbling down the sky."³² Jimmy, too, is no stranger to simile (the drowned cat is "all swelled up like a pudd'n") or to onomatopoeia (the clock "booms and jars so's you think the world's comin' to an end," and "Bob . . . jes' sloshes roun' de s'loons").

McKay notes Huck's preference for using adjectives in place of adverbs.³³ Interestingly, two of the specific adjectives Huck uses most frequently in this way—"powerful" and "considerable"—are also in Jimmy's lexicon.³⁴ Jimmy says, "He's powerful sickly." Huck says, "I was most powerful sick"; "he got powerful thirsty"; "I was powerful lazy and comfortable"; "[they] had such a powerful lot to say about faith"; and "I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds." Jimmy says, "Some folks say dis town would be considerable bigger . . ." Huck says, "I read considerable to Jim about kings, dukes and earls and such"; "This shook me up considerable"; "I beat it and hacked it considerable"; "He hopped around the cabin considerable"; and "We've heard considerable about these goings on."³⁵

Jimmy and Huck both use "snake" rather unconventionally as a verb. Jimmy says, "Dey snake him into de cistern," and Huck asks, "What do we want of a moat, when we're going to snake him out from under the cabin?"³⁶ The words "particular" (as in "choosy" or "discriminating") and "reckon" (as in "think") are standard elements in both boys' speech patterns, and both boys end sentences for negative emphasis with their dialect variant of the word "scarcely": Jimmy