**from *The Liberal Imagination*, by Lionel Trilling**

In form and [style](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/styleterm.htm) *Huckleberry Finn* is an almost perfect work. . . .

The form of the book is based on the simplest of all novel-forms, the so-called picaresque novel, or novel of the road, which strings its incidents on the line of the hero’s travels. But, as Pascal says, "rivers are roads that move," and the movement of the road in its own mysterious life transmutes the primitive simplicity of the form: the road itself is the greatest character in this novel of the road, and the hero’s departures from the river and his returns to it compose a subtle and significant pattern. The linear simplicity of the picaresque novel is further modified by the story’s having a clear dramatic organization: it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and a mounting suspense of interest.

As for the style of the book, it is not less than definitive in American literature. The [prose](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/proseterm.htm) of*Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American [colloquial](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/colloquterm.htm) speech. This has nothing to do with [pronunciation](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/pronunciaterm.htm) or [grammar](http://grammar.about.com/od/fh/g/grammarterm.htm). It has something to do with ease and freedom in the use of [language](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/languageterm.htm). 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](http://grammar.about.com/od/pq/g/voicephoneticsterm.htm).

In the matter of [language](http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/languageterm.htm), American literature had a special problem. The young nation was inclined to think that the mark of the truly literary product was a grandiosity and elegance not to be found in the common speech. It therefore encouraged a greater breach between its[vernacular](http://grammar.about.com/od/tz/g/vernacularterm.htm) and its literary language than, say, English literature of the same period ever allowed. This accounts for the hollow ring one now and then hears even in the work of our best writers in the first half of the last century. English writers of equal stature would never have made the lapses into [rhetorical](http://grammar.about.com/od/rs/g/rhetoricterm.htm) excess that are common in Cooper and Poe and that are to be found even in Melville and Hawthorne.

Yet at the same time that the language of ambitious literature was high and thus always in danger of falseness, the American reader was keenly interested in the actualities of daily speech. No literature, indeed, was ever so taken up with matters of speech as ours was.["Dialect,"](http://grammar.about.com/od/d/g/dialectterm.htm) which attracted even our serious writers, was the accepted [common ground](http://grammar.about.com/od/c/g/commongroundterm.htm) of our popular humorous writing. Nothing in social life seemed so remarkable as the different forms which speech could take--the [brogue](http://grammar.about.com/od/ab/g/brogue.htm) of the immigrant Irish or the mispronunciation of the German, the "affectation" of the English, the reputed precision of the Bostonian, the legendary twang of the Yankee farmer, and the drawl of the Pike County man. Mark Twain, of course, was in the tradition of humor that exploited this interest, and no one could play with it nearly so well. Although today the carefully spelled-out dialects of nineteenth-century American humor are likely to seem dull enough, the subtle variations of speech in *Huckleberry Finn*, of which Mark Twain was justly proud, are still part of the liveliness and flavor of the book.

Out of his knowledge of the actual speech of America Mark Twain forged a classic prose. The adjective may seem a strange one, yet it is apt. Forget the misspellings and the faults of grammar, and the prose will be seen to move with the greatest simplicity, directness, lucidity, and grace. These qualities are by no means accidental. Mark Twain, who read widely, was passionately interested in the problems of style; the mark of the strictest literary sensibility is everywhere to be found in the prose of *Huckleberry Finn*.

It is this prose that [Ernest Hemingway](http://grammar.about.com/od/shortpassagesforanalysis/a/hemrepstyle078.htm) had chiefly in mind when he said that "all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Hemingway's own prose stems from it directly and consciously; so does the prose of the two modern writers who most influenced Hemingway's early style, Gertrude Stein and Sherwood Anderson (although neither of them could maintain the robust purity of their model); so, too, does the best of William Faulkner's prose, which, like Mark Twain's own, reinforces the colloquial tradition with the literary tradition. Indeed, it may be said that almost every contemporary American writer who deals conscientiously with the problems and possibility of prose must feel, directly or indirectly, the influence of Mark Twain. He 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, the very voice of unpretentious truth.