I doubt whether anyone would dispute the claim that Huckleberry Finn is one of the most famous figures in the literary gallery of American individualists. But Mark Twain has a darker purpose: to demonstrate the false promise of individuality. To argue that the ideology of the center influences Huck’s marginal life, and that Huck himself carries it into this zone, complements previous critical work questioning the novel as a model for a freer life in the refuge of nature.¹ This explains why Twain does not offer a positive example of freedom in the final chapters, an early indication of the cynicism that fuels his later years. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) is filled with Hank Morgan’s reflections on the hegemonic influence of culture: “Training—training is everything; training is all there is to a person. . . . We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own: they are transmitted to us, trained into us” (162). The centered, essential subject is critiqued here, but that issue had already been broached four years earlier. Twain is fully conscious of representing a hegemonic social structure in the text; therefore, Huck, as the narrator and “author” Twain invents, is equally aware. Hence, the final dangled promise of freedom and its retraction is the grand prank Huck plays in the novel, only this time the reader is the victim.²

I begin by theorizing the kind of marginality Huck pursues to prevent his reincorporation: he assumes the identity of a criminal, presenting
himself as a threat to St. Petersburg’s naturalized definition of order in refusing to obey the established laws and mores. I then analyze the restrictions that complicate reading Huck as a figure of autonomy; then elaborate on Twain/Huck as author(s) articulating a counter-hegemonic proposal that there is still a possibility for agency, but that that viewpoint breaks with the popular conception of individualism.

* * *

American literary realism is traditionally attributed with promoting the efficacy of the individual to free him- or herself from social control. Henry Nash Smith attributed to Huckleberry Finn (1884–85) a message of “fidelity to the uncoerced self,” helping to institutionalize the novel’s association with a nonconformity that transcends the constraints of history and culture through physical separation (123). Jonathan Arac believes Twain tries “to keep pure a reader’s sense of Huck’s individual autonomy” (Idol 61), and that the novel was canonized precisely because it helps critics to maintain that myth (see “Nationalism”). There is ample evidence on the surface of the text to support this reading, and Twain’s own hatred of arbitrary social conventions accounts for a protagonist who claims to prefer the margins. Huck is already a marginal figure due to his poverty and social pedigree when the novel begins, but his outsider status is slowly being dismantled by the Christian benevolence of Widow Douglas who cleanses Huck so as to socially incorporate him. The negative view of society and its institutions is exactly how Huck comes to perceive going to school, wearing “town” clothes, and praying to God. He understands that he will have to alter his identity, his natural self, according to the dominant culture’s rules if he is to partake in its rewards.

After his father forces him to leave the widow, Huck contemplates life away from St. Petersburg’s social structure and includes a curious detail: “Two months or more run along, and my clothes got to be all rags and dirt, and I didn’t see how I’d ever got to like it so well at the widow’s . . . I didn’t want to go back no more” (30). This closing point complicates Huck’s supposed desire for escape by indicating his adaptability to the ways of civilization. Contrary to any notion of an inherent, transcendent identity repressed by society, Huck is quite capable of transformation as he begins to move comfortably in the town,