

"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn.... All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

-Ernest Hemingway

Good afternoon. Welcome to The Literary Debate Forum, I'm Ben Thotup. Tonight I am honored to present Alexis de Tocqueville, French aristocrat and social scientist.

Alexis: Thank you, Ben.

Ben: Mr. Tocqueville, in your book, *Democracy in America*, you claim that the United States has none, and most likely will never have great literature.

Alexis: Quite the contrary, I am afraid. Did I not say that I was convinced that they would ultimately have a literature? I predicted that its character will be peculiarly its own, and it is. However, even the more remarkable works do not reach the caliber one would see amongst an aristocratic people. Nobility enforces strict rules, and it is these rules that American writers sorely lack. They do not have the discipline of the European writer, and, as such, will never develop a decent literary style that is not founded in the style thereof.

Ben: I'm afraid I would have to disagree. Willa Cather, Jack London, and Herman Melville are a tiny sampling of the fine authors that come to mind. They exemplify what many have called a truly unique, American style, and are considered to have written great literature. What is your take on these great novelists?

Alexis: I do not dispute that they are accomplished writers, popular among other Americans. However, they would never gain appreciation in an aristocratic society. Again, their styles reflect the coarse, almost savage nature of your democratic nation. As your nation strives to emulate its European forefathers, our works, old and new, will continue to dominate.

Ben: Also joining us today is Huckleberry Finn, known for his controversial autobiographical story. How are you doing today, Mr. Finn?

Huckleberry: Hello thar, mister Thotup and mister Tokevale. Why, I'm finer than frog hair! Jest please don't be messin' 'roun with no misters on my count – you kin call me plain Huck.

Ben: Mr. Finn, I mean, Huck, your book has been both revered and reviled throughout history. In fact, a committee at the Concord Public Library found it "more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people," and actually banned it from their shelves. They weren't the first, and most definitely won't be the last. In light of Mr. de Tocqueville's views, how would you defend your work?

Huck: Defend it? I reckon I never wrote nothin' worth defendin'. I jest told how me and Jim was bidin' time down the ole' river. We had good times and saw things prettier'n a speckled pup under a red wagon, we did, and I had lots to tell. Mister Talkvan jest don' get what's the reason for writing, I s'pose.

Alexis: This is precisely my point. The reason for writing is to share in a sense of peaceful enjoyment. The aristocratic writer is not only more refined, but more in tune with the nature of human wit and interest. They had rather be amused than intensely excited; they wish to be interested, but not to be carried away. (175)

Huck: Well, now, I ain't no expert, but it seems to me that if'n you can get folk intensely excited and carried away, that's some mighty fine writing. Settin' 'round in big chairs and discussin' things cain't compare to livin' it.

Ben: Mr. de Tocqueville, what was it you wrote about the difficulties a common man in a democracy faces when trying to write?

Alexis: Such men can never acquire a sufficiently intimate knowledge of the art of literature to appreciate its more delicate beauties, and the minor shades of expression must escape them (176). By this I mean that there is a strong correlation between the social and political state of a man and his ability to produce great literature. Only educated men of leisure are able to refine their skills.

Ben: I must ask, Mr. de Tocqueville, why do you focus on only one sort of leisure? Huck, would you kindly read from page 55 of your book, starting right here?

Huck: Shore, "...the rain would thrash along by so thick that the trees off a little ways looked dim and spider-webby; and here would come a blast of wind that would bend the trees down and turn up the pale under-side of the leaves; and then a perfect ripper of a gust would follow along and set the branches to tossing their arms as if they was just wild; and next, when it was just about the bluest and blackest -- fst! it was as bright as glory, and you'd have a little glimpse of tree-tops a-plunging about away off yonder in the storm.." Boy, I remember that night!

Ben: I would venture to say that Huck quite effectively displayed delicate beauty and shades of expression in this passage, among others.

Alexis: I did say that the rare exception would occur. However, while Mr. Finn may find readers in spite of his defects, his writing is of no comparison to such as the French literature of the eighteenth century.

Huck: Ain't nobody unnerstands that truck, mister Ticknose! Way's I see it, it's like that man Jesus the Widow Douglas always goes on about. He spoke in them thar pareebels, so's more folk could unnerstan' what he said. He did gooder'n he would if he tried talkin' all fancy-like. Folk follerd him everyplace. Jest 'magine if he used all your high-faluten words, nobody'd talk about him hunnerts year after he died. Iff'n you want a man to listen to what you say, you gotta speak like he do.

Alexis: You do have a point, which is why I wrote that the only authors whom I acknowledge as American are the journalists. They indeed are not great writers, but they speak the language of their country and make themselves heard. (174)

Huck: Mister Toadvan, that dog don't hunt. Idinnit possible to be both great litriture and understandable? Isn't that what speakin' the language of their country is? I mean, the story's the story, right? I'druther read it nice and easy. Iff'n I have to go 'round my elbow to get to my thumb, I'm be less likely to go much farther. All them rules and such just makes for a hairy ride without no fun. Nosir, I reckon that any man what writes a book that's entertaining in plain English is all right, and every bit as good as a hunnert of your French books.

Ben: Gentleman, I'm afraid we are running out of time. Do you have any final words?

Alexis: While I concede that American writers do have a unique style, I maintain that they have not achieved notable literary propensity. My predictions have yet to be disproved: small productions will be more common than bulky books; there will be more wit than erudition, more imagination than profundity; and literary performances will bear marks of an untutored and rude vigor of thought, frequently of great variety and singular fecundity. The object of authors will be to astonish rather than to please, and to stir the passions more than to charm the taste. (177)

Huck: All's I k'n say is, thank thunder you was right, mister Torquevet. Them books you go on about sound much better'n any what which they's got at them fancy liberries in France. Americans write plenty fancy stuff jest like them, and they can keep 'em. I'druther be astonished and stirred to passion than educated, aristicatic, and bored off my nut.

The preceding was made possible by the wonder of poetic license, grants from the makers of time and sanity, and readers like you. Alexis De Tocqueville's narrative was modeled after his book, *Democracy in America* (Richard D. Hettner, Ed. Penguin Books; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England 1956). Fictional character Huckleberry Finn was extracted from the book of his namesake, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Mark Twain Penguin Books; Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1959)

No cats were harmed in the writing of this essay.