

sake, I am afraid, but because it was very slow, hill and down-hill, and very unlike any way in which any man in any natural circumstances of life or death ever expressed himself about anything.

MARK TWAIN

[Huck Finn on *Hamlet*] (1885)[†]

The duke told him, and then says:

“I’ll answer by doing the Highland fling or the sailor’s hornpipe;¹ and you—well, let me see—oh, I’ve got it—you can do Hamlet’s soliloquy.”

“Hamlet’s which?”

“Hamlet’s soliloquy, you know; the most celebrated thing in Shakespeare. Ah, it’s sublime, sublime! Always fetches the house. I haven’t got it in the book—I’ve only got one volume—but I reckon I can piece it out from memory. I’ll just walk up and down a minute, and see if I can call it back from recollection’s vaults.”

So he went to marching up and down, thinking, and frowning horrible every now and then; then he would hoist up his eyebrows; next he would squeeze his hand on his forehead and stagger back and kind of moan; next he would sigh, and next he’d let on to drop a tear. It was beautiful to see him. By-and-by he got it. He told us to give attention. Then he strikes a most noble attitude, with one leg shoved forwards, and his arms stretched away up, and his head tilted back, looking up at the sky; and then he begins to rip and rave and grit his teeth; and after that, all through his speech, he howled, and spread around, and swelled up his chest, and just knocked the spots out of any acting ever I see before. This is the speech—I learned it, easy enough, while he was learning it to the king:

[†] *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895 rpt. 1901), 181–83. Here a con man, claiming to be the Duke of Bridgewater, tries to teach a soliloquy from *Hamlet* to another con man, who claims to be the Dauphin, or heir apparent to the throne of France. The narrator, Huck himself, is impressed with the speech, though it consists of disjointed fragments from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Richard III*.

1. Types of dances.

To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 For who would fardels bear, till Birnam Wood do come to
 Dunsinane,
 But that the fear of something after death
 Murders the innocent sleep,
 Great nature's second course,
 And makes us rather sling the arrows of outrageous fortune
 Than fly to others that we know not of.
 There's the respect must give us pause:
 Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst;
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The law's delay, and the quietus which his pangs might take,
 In the dead waste and middle of the night, when churchyards
 yawn
 In customary suits of solemn black,
 But that the undiscovered country from whose bourne no
 traveler returns,
 Breathes forth contagion on the world,
 And thus the native hue of resolution, like the poor cat i' the
 adage,
 Is sicklied o'er with care,
 And all the clouds that lowered o'er our housetops,
 With this regard their currents turn awry,
 And lose the name of action.
 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.
 But soft you, the fair Ophelia:
 Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws,
 But get thee to a nunnery—go!

Well, the old man he liked that speech, and he mighty soon got it so he could do it first-rate. It seemed like he was just born for it; and when he had his hand in and was excited, it was perfectly lovely the way he would rip and tear and rair up² behind when he was getting it off.

*Winn to
same part Hamlet*