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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author’s life can inform and expand the reader’s understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author’s experience. In this lesson, explore the author’s life to understand the novel more fully.

In his preface to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain acknowledges, “Most of the adventures recorded in this book really occurred. . . . Huck Finn is drawn from life; Tom Sawyer also . . .” Before adopting the pen name of Mark Twain, Samuel Langhorne Clemens grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, a town on the Mississippi River where several steamboats stopped every day. Although not an orphan like Tom Sawyer, Clemens was only eleven years old when his father died. Like Tom, he was a rebellious and high-spirited boy who cut school to play in the woods, swim in the river, and explore caves with his friends. One of those friends, Tom Blankenship, was the son of the town drunk and Twain’s model for Huckleberry Finn.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Have students take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points learned from the Audio Guide.

Read the following essays from the Reader’s Guide: “Introduction to the Novel” “Mark Twain, 1835–1910,” and “Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.” Divide the class into groups and assign one essay to each. The groups will present a summary of the main points they learned from their essay.

Writing Exercise

Have the students write a short essay about a favorite novel whose main character is a child. How is childhood depicted in the novel—idyllically, comically, fearfully? Discuss the opportunities and problems the subject of childhood might pose for a writer of literary fiction.

Homework

Distribute Handout One: Mark Twain’s Literary Influence. Read Chapters I–III. Prepare your students to read approximately twenty-five pages per night in order to complete reading this book in eight lessons. How do the first three chapters present this period in American history? How does Twain depict education? How does Twain depict religion?

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The novel sets Tom's adventures against the backdrop of village life in the Midwest during the first half of the nineteenth century. Twain shows the intellectual and emotional narrowness of small-town life. For Tom, the chief institutions of society are school and church. Both emphasize rote learning, using memorization and repetition, focusing on moral development through conformity and propriety. Rules and standards are enforced by coercion, whether in the form of hellfire sermons by the minister or whippings by the frustrated schoolmaster.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to identify specific passages in the first three chapters where Twain uses humor or sarcasm to critique the traditions of small-town life. Present and discuss the concept of satire (the practice of scrutinizing human vice or folly through irony, derision, or wit) by examining how Twain's storytelling affably critiques the assumptions at work in Tom's world.

Discuss how the techniques of humor and satire allow us to recognize implicit cultural assumptions and principles both in Tom's world and in our own culture. Does Twain's use of humor reflect skepticism and distrust toward the society portrayed in the novel?

Writing Exercise

The whitewashing of the fence in Chapter II is probably the best-known episode in the book. Does the restrictive nature of school and church lead Tom and other children to be more inventive outside of school?

What point is Twain making regarding human nature? Write two pages on whether the limits of school and church make Tom and the other boys more inventive or less inventive.

Homework

Read Chapters IV–VI. Consider the accounts of the address by Mr. Walters, the Sunday School Superintendent, and the sermon by the Rev. Sprague. What is added to these descriptions by the style in which Twain presents them?

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is told from a third-person omniscient point of view. As early as the third page, Twain presents the unspoken thoughts of Aunt Polly and Tom in two successive sentences in the same paragraph: “And it flattered her to reflect that she had discovered that the shirt was dry without anybody knowing that that was what she had in her mind. But in spite of her, Tom knew where the wind lay, now.” Throughout the book, the narrative voice—whose vocabulary, sensibility, and insights are clearly those of an adult—inserts itself between the reader and the characters and events being described.

Discussion Activities

How does the third-person adult perspective provide extra dimension to the presentation of the characters, setting, and events of the first six chapters?

Discuss the address of Mr. Walters, and the sermon by the Rev. Sprague. What is the tone of the narrator during these segments? How does the way these passages are written add to the tone and effect of the book thus far?

Writing Exercise

Have each student, as Tom or Huck, write a one-paragraph description of the personality of the other character and the nature of their relationship. Ask several students to share their work with the class. How does the story change when it is narrated from Tom’s or Huck’s point of view?

Homework

Read Chapters VII–XI. Consider Aunt Polly as she has been presented thus far. Do you find her character sympathetic or not? Explain.

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

While Tom serves as the protagonist, a number of vibrant characters provide foils. Aunt Polly provides an adult foil, Huck provides a foil that makes Tom appreciate his own world, and Becky challenges Tom to be a man.

Discussion Activities

Novelist E.L. Doctorow observes that Tom Sawyer's is a "world of two distinct and, for the most part, irreconcilable life forms, the Child and the Adult. . . . And because power and authority reside in the Adult, Tom is necessarily a rebel acting in the name of freedom. Thus he is understood not as a bad boy but as a good boy who is amiably, creatively, and as a matter of political principle bad—unlike his half brother Sid, who is that all too recognizable archetype of everyone's childhood, the actually bad boy who appears in the perverse eyesight of adults to be good" ("Sam Clemens's Two Boys," in *Creationists*). Is this a valid statement? How might Sid be a foil and/or antagonist to Tom? If Doctorow is right, how do you think this will affect the rest of the story? Will Tom ever be recognized as good? Does Twain make a statement about human nature that transcends Tom's small-town world?

Writing Exercise

List Tom's three most prominent personality traits, backing up each choice by describing any incidents in the text thus far that serve as the basis for that choice. How do the incidents help us understand his character and the tensions in his life?

Homework

Read Handout Two: Mark Twain's Comic Voice. Read Chapters XII–XVI. Pay particular attention to the passage about Peter the cat in Chapter XII. What might be Twain's main intention, and how does his use of language contribute to the fulfillment of that intention?

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language.

Some figurative language asks us to stretch our imaginations, finding the likeness in seemingly unrelated things. Simile is a comparison of two things that initially seem quite different but are shown to have significant resemblance. Similes employ connective words, usually “like,” “as,” “than,” or a verb such as “resembles.” A metaphor is a statement that one thing is something else that, in a literal sense, it is not. By asserting that a thing is something else, a metaphor creates a close association that underscores an important similarity between these two things.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the stylistic power of a tall tale serves to extend and deepen the story, characters, and themes. The most frequent stylistic effect is hyperbole—exaggeration, usually for comic purposes and often enhanced by biblical or Shakespearean echoes. With hyperbole, Twain makes a point by overstating it. This reflects the influence of the frontier tradition of the tall tale, as well as the rhetorical extravagance of Artemus Ward, Petroleum V. Nasby, and other popular humorists of Twain’s time.

Discussion Activities

Split the class into groups. Review the first sixteen chapters. How many tall tales can you find? Which ones are the best, and why? Do these tall tales serve as metaphors? Do they provide us with additional insight into Tom’s world? What does it take for Tom to weave a successful tall tale?

Writing Exercise

Read the class the hilarious account of Peter the cat’s reaction to the spoonful of Pain-killer. Have them practice using hyperbole by writing a brief account of an ordinary incident enlivened by comically exaggerated descriptions. Ask several students to read their accounts aloud in class.

Homework

Distribute Handout Three: The Mighty Mississippi. Read Chapters XVII–XXII. What is the larger significance of Tom’s brass andiron-knob, and of the schoolmaster’s anatomy book?

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Most of the settings illuminate Twain's conception of childhood as reflected in Tom's adventures. As a result, Tom himself becomes a symbol of the complexities of the child's world, the adult world, and the intersections between these two worlds.

Discussion Activities

A particularly powerful symbol, the Mississippi River represents adventure, freedom, and the world beyond St. Petersburg. The boys' journey to Jackson Island begins their separation from the safety and security of small-town life. How are the river and the island symbols? What cues in the text suggest they might have a symbolic function? How does the storm affect Tom, and what might it represent? Why does he believe God sent the storm as punishment for his misbehavior?

Writing Exercise

Have your students write a brief essay examining one of the following topics. Discuss the symbolism of the piece of bark on which Tom writes his note to Aunt Polly, with emphasis on how it functions to show several different sides of Tom's nature. Or analyze how the fence Tom whitewashes in the novel's first chapters serves as a symbol. How was Aunt Polly's punishment both fitting and ironic?

Homework

Read Chapters XXIII–XXVII. Has Tom changed at all since the beginning of the book, or does he just keep displaying the same traits over and over again?

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Chapter XXIII gives the best depiction of Tom's maturation, reflecting his character development. In Chapter X, after witnessing the murder of Dr. Robinson, he and Huck had taken a blood oath, on pain of dropping down dead, that they would never tell anyone what they saw. Motivated entirely by fear of Injun Joe, their silence may very well cost an innocent man his life. But as Muff Potter's trial proceeds toward the certainty of a guilty verdict, Tom suffers increasing torments of conscience, leading up to his revelation and testimony.

Discussion Activities

In his 2004 book on Mark Twain, Larzer Ziff maintains that "Tom's adventures do not follow one another in any necessary order because Twain is not concerned with the evolution of Tom's character" and that "none of Tom's adventures alters his character or matures him—he is always the boy he was." Is this view valid? Why or why not? Can you find evidence to support Ziff? Can you find evidence to refute him? Cite passages from the text to support your view. Extend this discussion by conducting a debate on Ziff's interpretation.

Writing Exercise

Does Tom's choice to testify seem credible in terms of his character as it has been presented to us? Cite any earlier instances of similar behavior that might foreshadow this action.

Homework

Read Chapters XXVIII–XXXI. Based on how Tom's previous adventures have turned out, what do you think will happen in the end?

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

Discussion Activities

Have students review the main events in the novel thus far. What are the most significant events? How has Twain chosen to pace the story? Is it too fast-paced and too fantastical? Is it realistic and believable? By drawing together a series of events and tall tales, is the novel the ultimate tall tale?

Writing Exercise

Mark Twain wrote, “Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities. Truth isn’t.” Using information from your discussion, have students write one page about how fiction might be “less strange” than truth. Conclude with a statement on how this quotation illuminates the novel or sheds light on the plot of the novel or the novel as a whole.

Homework

Read Chapters XXXII–Conclusion. Students should come to class prepared to discuss whether the novel has any larger thematic intent beyond the depiction of boyhood in a river town in the 1840s.

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Using historical references to support ideas, explore the statements *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* makes about the following themes:

Childhood

The novel is generally regarded as a sunny, if not idyllic, portrayal of childhood. But there is a minority opinion, as exemplified in the title of a 1980 essay by Cynthia Griffin Wolff, "*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer: A Nightmare Vision of American Boyhood.*" Which of these two views seems to you the more accurate assessment, and why?

Maturity

In the Conclusion, Twain writes: "So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a *boy*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a *man*." Has Tom in fact significantly matured over the course of the book? If so, in what ways, and as the result of which experiences?

Freedom vs. Responsibility

In the last chapter, Huck Finn seems absolutely unwilling—indeed, unable—to submit himself to the constraints of society and its expectations, while Tom speaks for a more accommodating approach. Which of the two views, if either, do you think Twain is affirming? Explain the reasons for your choice.



Homework

Begin working on essays. Outlines are due at the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. Write these on the board. What elevates a book to greatness? Then ask them to discuss, within groups, other books that include some of these characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does Twain create in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*? Does this novel speak for more than one boy and his personal concerns? What does this voice tell us about the choices and responsibilities for a boy coming of age in mid-nineteenth-century America?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to write the back-cover copy for a new edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, explaining why a contemporary audience would find the novel an entertaining and rewarding reading experience.

Homework

Students will finish their essays and present their topics and arguments to the class.

Mark Twain's Literary Influence

Mark Twain has entered permanently into American popular culture. Almost everyone is familiar with the image of the man—the unruly mane of white hair with matching moustache and eyebrows, the white suit, the ever-present cigar. And most people quote his sayings, including many who don't know it's Mark Twain they're quoting: “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to”; “To cease smoking is the easiest thing I ever did; I ought to know because I've done it a thousand times”; and, of course, “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.”

However, it may surprise some people to learn how highly Twain is regarded by serious literary critics. He is the subject of many biographies and countless works of literary analysis. Even more tellingly, he is held in extremely high esteem by other writers. One of the earliest tributes—and still perhaps the best-known—appears in Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935): “All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . . [I]t's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since.”

Ralph Ellison, whose *Invisible Man* (1952) is considered one of the greatest American novels since World War II, explained in an essay what Twain had meant to him and to American literature: “Mark Twain . . . transformed elements of regional vernacular speech into a medium of uniquely American literary expression and thus taught us how to capture that which is essentially American in our folkways and manners. For indeed the vernacular process is a way of establishing and discovering our national identity.”

Twain's influence as a master of the vernacular was also demonstrated by Ellison's friend and fellow novelist Saul Bellow. Bellow's first two novels were small-scale “literary” works. But his third novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), whose very title is a kind of tribute to Twain, was a major breakthrough in his career. It is a large, sprawling book, narrated in the lively, slangy, very American voice of Augie himself, and filled with vivid characters and both grotesque and hilarious incidents.

Another demonstration of Twain's influence came in 1996 with the publication of the Oxford Mark Twain, a twenty-nine volume set of all the books Twain published in his lifetime. Each volume contains an introduction by a leading contemporary author, some of whom describe Twain's importance in their discovery of literature and their own development as writers. These authors include Arthur Miller (“Death of a Salesman”), Cynthia Ozick (*The Shawl*), Kurt Vonnegut (*Slaughterhouse-Five*), and Toni Morrison (*Beloved*).

William Faulkner is sometimes regarded as the greatest American novelist since Mark Twain. Like Hemingway, Bellow, and Morrison, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the world's most prestigious literary honor. Faulkner's debt to Mark Twain is clear in some of his best work, such as the stories “Barn Burning” and “The Bear,” which show boys coming of age as they are exposed to the cruelty and violence around them. It was a debt that Faulkner was happy to acknowledge. At a literary conference in Japan in 1955, he called Twain “the father of American literature . . . the first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs.”



Mark Twain's Comic Voice

Mark Twain began his literary career as a writer of comic essays and sketches. He continued to write short humorous pieces throughout his life, although in his last years the humor frequently took on a dark and bitter tone. It is his novels—especially *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—that are his greatest claim to fame and his greatest contribution to our literature. But even these works, as grim and shocking as they can sometimes be, are enlivened throughout by his sense of the ridiculous, and by a comic voice unmistakably his own.

When Twain began writing in the 1860s, America's most popular humorists were Charles Farrar Browne, who wrote under the name of Artemus Ward, and David Ross Locke, whose pseudonym was Petroleum V. (for Vesuvius) Nasby. Both used dialect, with comic misspellings, poor grammar, and exaggerated wordplay and turns of phrase, often for satirical purposes. When Ward gave a public performance in Virginia City, Nevada, in December 1863, Twain, who had already taken him as a literary model, met and befriended him. Twain's earliest literary success was a comic piece called "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Published in November 1865 and widely reprinted in newspapers across the country, it earned him a national reputation.

Thirty years later, in the essay "How to Tell a Story," he discussed the essence of his comic technique. One component of that technique is "[t]o string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities."

Here is a delightful example: "The first time I ever saw St. Louis, I could have bought it for six million dollars and it was the mistake of my life that I did not do it." Another occurs in Chapter IV of *Tom Sawyer*, in the reference to the "boy of German parentage" who "once recited three thousand [Bible] verses without stopping; but the strain upon his mental faculties was too great, and he was little better than an idiot from that day forth." In this instance, readers will have no trouble finding the satirical point beneath the surface absurdity.

The actor Hal Holbrook, who has brilliantly portrayed Mark Twain in his one-man show *Mark Twain Tonight!*, once told an interviewer that the targets of Twain's humor were "[h]ypocrisy, pomposity, the narrow mind, the prejudiced mind, stupidity, brutality—all those things. You know that quote of his, 'Against the power of laughter nothing can stand'? How you can push at an injustice, move it a little, century by century. But only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast."

With his realistic descriptions and settings, his vivid and often coarse characters, and his rich, colorful language, Mark Twain did more than anyone else to move American literature past the suffocating refinement and sentimentality of the mid-nineteenth century. Yet he was also a deeply insecure man who longed to be taken seriously by the literary establishment of his time. Misunderstanding his own genius, he at times considered his long and lifeless biography of Joan of Arc to be his best work. But his readers have always known that his best and most serious writing is often his funniest.



The Mighty Mississippi

From its source in Lake Itasca in northwestern Minnesota, the Mississippi River flows south for 2,340 miles until it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. Though not very deep, it is as much as two miles wide at various points. It divides the United States into eastern and western halves. In the early part of the nineteenth century, when Mark Twain was young, railroad travel was in its infancy. It would be decades before elaborate rail networks crisscrossed the nation. In that period, America's principal highways for both passengers and freight were its rivers, and none more so than the Mississippi.

Mark Twain grew up in Hannibal, Missouri, which was the model for St. Petersburg in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. At the same time he was writing the novel, Twain produced “Old Times on the Mississippi,” a series of reminiscences of his boyhood and youth and of his training as a riverboat pilot. These sketches, which many consider his best work after *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, were later revised and incorporated into a larger work about the river called *Life on the Mississippi* (1883).

The book's fourth chapter begins: “When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient. . . . These ambitions faded out, each in its turn; but the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained.” The circuses and minstrel shows of Twain's youth

would arrive, excite all the boys of the town, and then depart. But the river was always there. Twain describes how the sleepy little town would stir to life with the arrival of a boat and then resume its slumber once the boat had left.

For young Sam Clemens and his comrades, the river represented freedom, adventure, and escape from family, school, church, and all the rest of the narrow routine of everyday existence in Hannibal. It was the road to distant and fabulous places, such as St. Louis, and even more remote and exotic locales farther south. He left Hannibal at eighteen and visited New York and Philadelphia before settling in St. Louis. He became an apprentice riverboat pilot at twenty-one and earned his pilot's license two years later, in April 1859. He worked the river for two more years, until the outbreak of the Civil War ended all commercial travel on the Mississippi.

Mark Twain never lived in Hannibal or worked on the river again, but he often returned in memory, and they inspired his finest and most enduring works. He frequently maintained that these were the happiest times of his life. Writing to his friend and fellow novelist William Dean Howells while composing “Old Times on the Mississippi” for Howells's *Atlantic Monthly*, he claimed, “I am a person who would quit authorizing in a minute to go piloting, if the madame would stand it.”

