

## Summary Report from the Literature and Culture Section

NIWA TAKAAKI

KYOTO UNIVERSITY

On the evening of July 27, during a short period between the plenary session and the Reception, the first gathering of the Literature and Culture Section took place. We began with self-introduction for mutual understanding. Then, because the time was rather limited, we called upon Prof. Hortense Spillers to make some additional comment on Martin Luther King, Jr. in terms of the characteristics of his style and language, as was shown in his “I Have a Dream” and “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which she had mentioned in her keynote lecture. She complied with our request, giving an exciting illumination to the topic.

In the morning session of July 28, we discussed the manner in which Mark Twain involved himself in the “progressive Christianity,” as Dr. Spillers called it in her lecture. First, Prof. Uenishi Tetsuo from Tokyo Institute of Technology read his prepared paper, entitled “Modernization and Christianity in the United States—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a Case Study.” Uenishi, touching upon his own experiences as Christian activist, expressed his opinion that he would like to regard *Huckleberry Finn* as a fine document of the author’s criticism of contemporary Christianity. Twain shifted his vocational milieu from the Southwest to the East, in the critical period for the nation with the Civil War in between. Traditional Christianity in America had undergone a considerable change even in Twain’s own antebellum Southwest. Once in postbellum New England after marriage, he entered into social relationship with a group of liberalist intellectuals that constituted his new family circle, thus inevitably immersing himself in the new wave of Christianity. Twain wrote his masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn*, now settling himself in one of the most “progressive” communities of the East, and recollecting the antebellum “backward” Southwest where vagrant Huck’s story sets its background. As Twain himself experienced a sea change of religious environment and even personal faith, *Huckleberry Finn* reflects the author’s own ambivalent situation over the drastic transfiguration that Christianity in America had undergone for the few decades. The masterpiece retains his empathy toward those bigots who were unable to comprehend Christian liberalism—those who were eventually to form the Christian right in today’s America.

Prof. Takeda Takako from Nagoya College made her comment on Uenishi’s point of view, reading her own paper entitled “Was Mark Twain a Christian or an

atheist?” Drawing our attention to “another religious community, Elmira, New York,” she suggested that “the concept of civil religion might be a key to understanding Twain’s religious notion and his contemporary Christianity.” According to Takeda, Twain was certainly a racist until he came to live in the East, where, after marriage, he was “reformed” by his wife Olivia, both in terms of religious habits and concepts. Under her influence, and that of Elmira, Twain made a “conversion” from pro-slavery to anti-slavery. This conversion led to the famous “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” episode in *Huckleberry Finn*. Takeda also insisted that Elmira’s Park Church, where the Langdon family attended, was crucial for Twain’s religious conversion, in the sense that Park Church was not only “non-sectarian” but “humanitarian,” under the guidance of liberal pastor Thomas Beecher, who drew no line between in and out of the church. Through his close association with Thomas and his wife Julia, Twain left his racism for racial equality. He went so far as to write a story for the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which he showed his deep sympathy to his black heroine’s agony as a slave. The New England “progressive” Christianity as was typically illustrated in Elmira and Hartford contributed to nurture Twain’s humanitarianism, further polishing his acute awareness of social injustice. Twain could be regarded as a Christian or as an atheist, depending upon the definition, but according to the concept of civil religion, on which Dr. Spillers depends for her “progressive Christianity” idea, Twain was certainly a Christian. Takeda ended up by expressing her hope for Uenishi’s further relation to his personal experiences.

Uenishi and Takeda made some brief additions to their presentations. Dr. Spillers also gave her words of appreciation to the two panelists, with a comment that, after listening to them, she had realized afresh the importance of Mark Twain. Then followed an active session of questions and answers between the panelists and the floor members. Among the topics were: the further definition of “progressive” church, Tom Sawyer’s position in terms of Christianity, the interpretation of the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, the significance of the King and the Duke in terms of nineteenth-century liberal Christianity and social modernization, and so on. The rebuttal ended up with the question: was Twain against bigoted religion or rather against liberal religion?