



# Readings at the Edge of Literature

*Myra Jehlen*

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Myra Jehlen's aim in these essays is to read for what she calls the edge of literature: the point at which writing seems unable to say more, which is also, for Jehlen, the threshold of the real. It is here, she argues, that the central paradoxes of the American project become clear—self-reliance and responsibility, universal equality and the pursuit of empire, writing from the heart and representing shared values and ideas. Developing these paradoxes to their utmost tension, American writers often produce penetrating critiques of American society without puncturing its basic myths. For instance, Mark Twain's *Puddn'head Wilson* begins as a slashing satire of racism, only to conclude by demonstrating that even an invisible portion of black blood can make a man a murderer.

Throughout these essays Jehlen demonstrates the crucial role that the process of writing itself plays in unfolding these paradoxes, whether in the form of novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Virginia Woolf; the histories of Captain John Smith; or even a work of architecture, such as the Guggenheim museum in Bilbao.

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