



---

Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse

Author(s): DAVID L. SMITH

Source: *Mark Twain Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Black Writers on "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" One Hundred Years Later (FALL, 1984), pp. 4-12

Published by: [Alan Gribben](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41641246>

Accessed: 06/06/2013 06:26

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Alan Gribben is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Mark Twain Journal.*

<http://www.jstor.org>

## Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse

They [blacks] are at least as brave, and more adventuresome [compared to whites]. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of fore-thought, which prevents their seeing a danger till it be present. . . . They are more ardent after their female: but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation. Their griefs are transient. Those numberless afflictions, which render it doubtful whether heaven has given life to us in mercy or in wrath, are less felt, and sooner forgotten with them. In general, their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection. To this must be ascribed their disposition to sleep when abstracted from their diversions, and unemployed in labor.

—Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (187-88)

Almost any Euro-American intellectual of the nineteenth century could have written the preceding words. The notion of Negro inferiority was so deeply pervasive among those heirs of "The Enlightenment" that the categories and even the vocabulary of Negro inferiority were formalized into a tedious, unmodulated litany. This uniformity increased rather than diminished during the course of the century. As Leon Litwack and others have shown, even the Abolitionists, who actively opposed slavery, frequently regarded blacks as inherently inferior. This helps to explain the widespread popularity of colonization schemes among Abolitionists and other liberals.<sup>1</sup> As for Jefferson, it is not surprising that he held such ideas, but it is impressive that he formulated so clearly at the end of the eighteenth century what would become the dominant view of the Negro in the nineteenth century. In many ways, this Father of American Democracy—and quite possibly of five mulatto children—was a man of his time and ahead of his time.<sup>2</sup>

In July of 1876, exactly one century after the American Declaration of Independence, Mark Twain began writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: a novel which illustrates trenchantly the social limitations which American "civilization" imposes on individual freedom. The book takes special note of ways in which racism impinges upon the lives of Afro-Americans, even when they are legally "free." It is therefore ironic that *Huckleberry Finn* has often been attacked and even censored as a racist work. I would argue, on the contrary, that except for Melville's work, *Huckleberry Finn* is without peers among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly anti-racist stance.<sup>3</sup> Those who brand the book "racist" generally do so without having considered

the specific form of racial discourse to which the novel responds. Furthermore, *Huckleberry Finn* offers much more than the typical liberal defenses of "human dignity" and protests against cruelty. Though it contains some such elements, it is more fundamentally a critique of those socially constituted fictions—most notably romanticism, religion, and the concept of "the Negro"—which serve to justify and to disguise selfish, cruel, and exploitative behavior.

When I speak of "racial discourse," I mean more than simply attitudes about "race" or conventions of talking about "race." Most importantly, I mean that "race" itself is a discursive formation, which delimits social relations on the basis of alleged physical differences.<sup>4</sup> "Race" is a strategy for relegating a segment of the population to a permanent inferior status. It functions by insisting that each "race" has specific, definitive, inherent behavioral tendencies and capacities, which distinguish it from other "races." Though scientifically specious, "race" has been powerfully effective as an ideology and as a form of social definition, which serves the interests of Euro-American hegemony. In America, race has been deployed against numerous groups, including Native Americans, Jews, Asians, and even—for brief periods—an assortment of European immigrants.

For obvious reasons, however, the primary emphasis historically has been on defining "the Negro" as a deviant from Euro-American norms. "Race" in America means white supremacy and black inferiority<sup>5</sup>; and "the Negro," a socially constituted fiction, is a generalized, one-dimensional surrogate for the historical reality of Afro-American people. It is this reified fiction which Twain attacks in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain adopts a strategy of subversion in his attack on race. That is, he focuses on a number of commonplaces associated with "the Negro," and then he systematically dramatizes their inadequacy. He uses the term "nigger," and he shows Jim engaging in superstitious behavior. Yet he portrays Jim as a compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing and even wise man. Indeed, his portrayal of Jim contradicts every claim presented in Jefferson's description of "the Negro." Jim is cautious, he gives excellent advice, he suffers persistent anguish over separation from his wife and child, and he even sacrifices his own sleep in order that Huck may rest. Jim, in short, exhibits all the

qualities that "the Negro" supposedly lacks. Twain's conclusions do more than merely subvert the justifications of slavery, which was already long since abolished. Twain began this book during the final disintegration of Reconstruction, and his satire on antebellum Southern bigotry is also an implicit response to the Negrophobic climate of the post-Reconstruction era (Berkove; Gollin; Egan, esp. 66-102). It is troubling, therefore, that so many readers have completely misunderstood Twain's subtle attack on racism.

Twain's use of the word "nigger" has provoked some readers to reject the novel. (See Hentoff). As one of the most offensive words in our vocabulary, "nigger" remains heavily shrouded in taboo. A careful assessment of this term within the context of American racial discourse, however, will allow us to understand the particular way in which the author uses it. If we attend closely to Twain's use of the word, we may find in it not just a trigger to outrage, but more importantly, a means of understanding the precise nature of American racism and Mark Twain's attack on it.

Most obviously, Twain uses "nigger" throughout the book as a synonym for "slave." There is ample evidence from other sources that this corresponds to one usage common during the Antebellum period. We first encounter it in reference to "Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim" (Ch. 2). This usage, like the term "nigger stealer," clearly designates the "nigger" as a piece of property: a commodity, a slave. This passage also provides the only apparent textual justification for the common critical practice of labelling Jim, "Nigger Jim," as if "nigger" were a part of his proper name. This loathsome habit goes back at least as far as Albert Bigelow Paine's biography of Twain (1912). In any case, "nigger" in this sense connotes an inferior, even subhuman, creature, who is properly owned by and subservient to Euro-Americans.

Both Huck and Jim use the word in this sense. For example, when Huck fabricates his tale about the riverboat accident, the following exchange occurs between him and Aunt Sally:

'Good gracious! anybody hurt?'  
'No'm. Killed a nigger.'  
'Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt' (Ch. 32).

Huck has never met Aunt Sally prior to this scene, and in spinning a lie which this stranger will find unobjectionable, he correctly assumes that the common notion of Negro subhumanity will be appropriate. Huck's off-hand remark is intended to exploit Aunt Sally's attitudes, not to express Huck's

own. A nigger, Aunt Sally confirms, is not a person. Yet this exchange is hilarious, precisely because we know that Huck is playing upon her glib and conventional bigotry. We know that Huck's relationship to Jim has already invalidated for him such obtuse racial notions. The conception of the "nigger" is a socially constituted and sanctioned fiction, and it is just as false and as absurd as Huck's explicit fabrication, which Aunt Sally also swallows whole.

In fact, the exchange between Huck and Aunt Sally reveals a great deal about how racial discourse operates. Its function is to promulgate a conception of "the Negro" as a subhuman and expendable creature, who is by definition feeble-minded, immoral, lazy, and superstitious. One crucial purpose of this social fiction is to justify the abuse and exploitation of Afro-American people by substituting the essentialist fiction of "Negro-ism" for the actual character of individual Afro-Americans. Hence, in racial discourse every Afro-American becomes just another instance of "the Negro"—just another "nigger." Twain recognizes this invidious tendency of race-thinking, however, and he takes every opportunity to expose the mismatch between racial abstractions and real human beings.

For example, when Pap drunkenly inveighs against the free mulatto from Ohio, he is outraged by what appears to him as a crime against natural laws. (Ch. 6). In the first place, a "free nigger" is, for Pap, a contradiction in terms. Indeed, the man's clothes, his demeanor, his education, his profession, and even his silver-headed cane bespeak a social status normally achieved by only a small elite of white men. He is, in other words, a "nigger" who refuses to behave like a "nigger." Pap's ludicrous protestations discredit both himself and other believers in "the Negro," as many critics have noted. But it has not been sufficiently stressed that Pap's racial views correspond very closely to those of most of his white Southern contemporaries, in substance if not in manner of expression. Such views were held not only by poor whites but by all "right-thinking" Southerners, regardless of their social class. Indeed, not even the traumas of the Civil War would cure Southerners of this folly. Furthermore, Pap's indignation at the Negro's right to vote is precisely analogous to the Southern backlash against the enfranchisement of Afro-Americans during Reconstruction. Finally, Pap's comments are rather mild compared to the anti-Negro diatribes which were beginning to emerge among politicians even as Twain was writing *Huckleberry Finn*. He began writing this novel during the final days of Reconstruction, and it seems

more than reasonable to assume that the shameful white supremacist bluster of that epoch—exemplified by Pap's tirade—informed Twain's critique of racism in *Huckleberry Finn*. (See Pettit, *Mark Twain and the South*, 35-50).

Pap's final description of this Ohio gentlemen as "a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free-nigger" (Ch. 6) almost totally contradicts his previous description of the man as a proud, elegant, dignified figure. Yet this contradiction is perfectly consistent with Pap's need to reassert "the Negro" in lieu of social reality. Despite the vulgarity of Pap's personal character, his thinking about race is highly conventional and, therefore, respectable. But most of us cannot respect Pap's views, and when we reject them, we reject the standard racial discourse of both 1840 and 1880.

A reader who objects to the word "nigger" might still insist that Twain could have avoided using it. But it is difficult to imagine how Twain could have debunked a discourse without using the specific terms of that discourse. Even when Twain was writing his book, "nigger" was universally recognized as an insulting, demeaning word. According to Stuart Berg Flexner, "Negro" was generally pronounced as "nigger" until about 1825, at which time Abolitionists began objecting to that term (57). They preferred "colored person" or "person of color." Hence, W. E. B. Du Bois reports that some black Abolitionists of the early 1830s declared themselves united "as men, . . . not as slaves; as 'people of color,' not as 'Negroes'" (245). Writing a generation later in *Army Life in a Black Regiment* (1869), Thomas Wentworth Higginson deplored the common use of "nigger" among freedmen, which he regarded as evidence of low self-esteem (28). The objections to "nigger," then, are not a consequence of the modern sensibility but had been common for a half century before *Huckleberry Finn* was published. The specific function of this term in the book, however, is neither to offend nor merely to provide linguistic authenticity. Much more importantly, it establishes a context against which Jim's specific virtues may emerge as explicit refutations of racist presuppositions.

Of course, the concept of the "nigger" entails far more than just the deployment of certain vocabulary. Most of the attacks on the book focus on its alleged perpetuation of racial stereotypes. Twain does indeed use racial stereotypes here. That practice could be excused as characteristic of the genre of humor within which Twain works. Frontier humor relies upon the use of stock types, and consequently, racial stereotypes are just one of many types present in *Huckleberry Finn*. Yet while valid, such an appeal to generic convention would

be unsatisfactory, because it would deny Twain the credit which he deserves for the sophistication of his perceptions (see Ellison, Hansen, Lynn).

As a serious critic of American society, Twain recognized that racial discourse depends upon the deployment of a system of stereotypes which constitute "the Negro" as fundamentally different from and inferior to Euro-Americans. As with his handling of "nigger," Twain's strategy with racial stereotypes is to elaborate them in order to undermine them. To be sure, those critics are correct who have argued that Twain uses this narrative to reveal Jim's humanity. Jim, however, is just one individual. Much more importantly, Twain uses the narrative to expose the cruelty and hollowness of that racial discourse which exists only to obscure the humanity of all Afro-American people.

One aspect of *Huckleberry Finn* which has elicited copious critical commentary is Twain's use of superstition (see especially Hoffman, "Jim's Magic"). In nineteenth century racial discourse, "the Negro" was always defined as inherently superstitious.<sup>6</sup> Many critics, therefore, have cited Jim's superstitious behavior as an instance of negative stereotyping. One cannot deny that in this respect Jim closely resembles the entire tradition of comic darkies (see Woodard and MacCann), but to observe this similarity is a negligible feat. The issue is, does Twain merely reiterate clichés, or does he use these conventional patterns to make an unconventional point? A close examination will show that in virtually every instance, Twain uses Jim's superstition to make points which undermine rather than revalidate the dominant racial discourse.

The first incident of this superstitious behavior occurs in Chapter 2, as a result of one of Tom Sawyer's pranks. When Jim falls asleep under a tree, Tom hangs his hat on a branch. Subsequently, Jim concocts an elaborate tale about having been hexed and ridden by witches. The tale grows more grandiose with subsequent retellings, and eventually Jim becomes a local celebrity, sporting a five-cent piece on a string around his neck as a talisman. "Niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it, and he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country," the narrator reports. Jim's celebrity finally reaches the point that "Jim was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches." This is, no doubt, amusing. Yet whether Jim believes his own tale or not—and the "superstitious Negro" thesis requires us to assume that he does—the fact remains that Jim clearly benefits from becoming more a celebrity and less a "servant." It is his owner,



not Jim, who suffers when Jim's uncompensated labor diminishes.<sup>7</sup>

This incident has often been interpreted as an example of risible Negro gullibility and ignorance, as exemplified by blackface minstrelsy. Such a reading has more than a little validity, but can only partially account for the implications of this scene. If not for the final sentence, such an account might seem wholly satisfactory, but the information that Jim becomes, through his own storytelling, unsuited for life as a slave, introduces unexpected complications. Is it likely that Jim has been deceived by his own creative prevarications—especially given what we learn about his character subsequently? Or has he cleverly exploited the conventions of "Negro superstition" in order to turn a silly boy's prank to his own advantage?

Regardless of whether we credit Jim with forethought in this matter, it is undeniable that he turns Tom's attempt to humiliate him into a major personal triumph. In other words, Tom gives him an inch, and he takes an ell. It is also obvious that he does so by exercising remarkable skills as a rhetorician. By constructing a fictitious narrative of his own experience, Jim elevates himself above his prescribed station in life. By becoming, in effect, an author, Jim writes himself a new destiny. Jim's triumph may appear to be dependent upon the gullibility of other "superstitious" Negroes, but since we have no direct encounter with them, we cannot know whether they are unwitting victims of Jim's ruse or not. A willing audience need not be a totally credulous one. In any case, it is intelligence, not stupidity, which facilitates Jim's triumph. Tom may have had his chuckle, but the last laugh, clearly, belongs to Jim.

In assessing Jim's character, we should keep in mind that forethought, creativity and shrewdness are qualities which racial discourse—see Thomas Jefferson—denies to "the Negro." In that sense, Jim's darky performance here subverts the fundamental definition of the darky. For "the Negro" is defined to be an object, not a subject. Yet does an object construct its own narrative? Viewed in this way, the fact of superstition, which traditionally connotes ignorance and unsophistication, becomes far less important than the ends to which superstition is put. This inference exposes, once again, the inadequacy of a positivist epistemology, which holds, for example, that "a rose is a rose is a rose." No one will deny the self-evidence of a tautology; but a rose derives whatever meaning it has from the context within which it is placed (including the context of traditional symbolism.) It is the contextualizing activity, not *das Ding-an-sich*, which generates meaning. Again and again, Twain attacks racial

essentialism by directing our attention, instead, to the particularity of individual action. We find that Jim is not "the Negro." Jim is Jim, and we, like Huck, come to understand what Jim is by attending to what he does in specific situations.

In another instance of explicitly superstitious behavior, Jim uses a hairball to tell Huck's fortune. One may regard this scene as a comical example of Negro ignorance and credulity, acting in concert with the ignorance and credulity of a fourteen-year-old white boy. That reading would allow one an unambiguous laugh at Jim's expense. If one examines the scene carefully, however, the inadequacy of such a reductive reading becomes apparent. Even if Jim does believe in the supernatural powers of this hairball, the fact remains that most of the transaction depends upon Jim's quick wits. For example, the soothsaying aside, much of the exchange between Huck and Jim is an exercise in wily and understated economic bartering. In essence, Jim wants to be paid for his services, while Huck wants free advice. Jim insists that the hairball will not speak without being paid. Huck, who has a dollar, will only admit to having a counterfeit quarter. Jim responds by pretending to be in collusion with Huck. He explains how to doctor the "quarter" so that "anybody in town would take it in a minute, let alone a hair-ball" (Ch. 4). But obviously it is not the hair-ball who will benefit from acquiring and spending this counterfeit coin (cf. Weaver and Williams).

In this transaction, Jim serves his own interests while appearing to serve Huck's interests. He takes a slug which is worthless to Huck, and through the alchemy of his own cleverness, he contrives to make it worth twenty-five cents to himself. That, in antebellum America, is not a bad price for telling a fortune. But more importantly, Twain shows Jim self-consciously subverting the prescribed definition of "the Negro," even as he performs within the limitations of that role. He remains the conventional "Negro" by giving the white boy what he wants, at no real cost, and by consistently appearing to be passive and subservient to the desires of Huck and the hair-ball. But in fact, he serves his own interests all along. Such resourcefulness is hardly consistent with the familiar, one-dimensional concept of "the superstitious Negro."

And while Jim's reading is formulaic, it is hardly simple-minded. He sees the world as a kind of Manichean universe, in which forces of light and darkness—white and black—vie for dominance. Pap, he says, is uncertain what to do, torn between his white and black angels. Jim's advice, "to res' easy en let de ole man take his own way" (Ch. 4), turns out to be good advice, because Huck greatly

enjoys life in the cabin, despite Pap's fits of drunken excess. This mixture of pleasure and pain is precisely what Jim predicts. Admittedly, Jim's conceptual framework is not original. Nonetheless, his reading carries considerable force, because it corresponds so neatly to the dominant thematic patterns in this book, and more broadly, to the sort of dualistic thinking which informs much of Twain's work. (To take an obvious example, consider the role reversals and character contrasts in *Pudd'n-head Wilson* or *The Prince and the Pauper*). And most immediately, Jim's comments here reflect tellingly upon his situation as a black slave in racist America. The slave's fate is always torn between his master's will and his own.

In this reading and other incidents, Jim emerges as an astute and sensitive observer of human behavior, both in his comments regarding Pap and in his subtle remarks to Huck. Jim clearly possesses a subtlety and intelligence which "the Negro" allegedly lacks. Twain makes this point more clearly in the debate scene in Chapter 15. True enough, most of this debate is, as several critics have noted, conventional minstrel show banter. Nevertheless, Jim demonstrates impressive reasoning abilities, despite his factual ignorance. For example, in their argument over "Poly-voo-franzy," Huck makes a category error by implying that the difference between languages is analogous to the difference between human language and cat language. While Jim's response—that man should talk like a man—betrays his ignorance of cultural diversity, his argument is perceptive and structurally sound. The humor in Huck's conclusion, "you can't learn a nigger how to argue," arises precisely from our recognition that Jim's argument is better than Huck's.

Throughout the novel, Twain presents Jim in ways which render ludicrous the conventional wisdom about "Negro character." As an intelligent, sensitive, wily and considerate individual, Jim demonstrates that one's race provides no useful index of one's character. While that point may seem obvious to many contemporary readers, it is a point rarely made by nineteenth-century Euro-American novelists. Indeed, except for Melville, J. W. DeForest, Albion Tourgee, and George Washington Cable, white novelists virtually always portrayed Afro-American characters as exemplifications of "Negroness." In this regard, the twentieth century has been little better. By presenting us a series of glimpses which penetrate the "Negro" exterior and reveal the person beneath it, Twain debunks American racial discourse. For racial discourse maintains that the "Negro" exterior is all that a "Negro" really has.

This insight in itself is a notable accomplishment. Twain, however, did not view racism as an isolated phenomenon, and it was his effort to place racism within the context of other cultural traditions which produced the most problematic aspect of his novel. For it is in the final chapters—the Tom Sawyer section—which most critics consider the weakest part of the book, that Twain links his criticisms of slavery and Southern romanticism, condemning the cruelties which both of these traditions entail. (See Altenbernd). Critics have objected to these chapters on various grounds. Some of the most common are that Jim becomes reduced to a comic darky (e.g., Marx, Schmitz), that Tom's antics undermine the seriousness of the novel, and that these burlesque narrative developments destroy the structural integrity of the novel. Most critics see this conclusion as an evasion of the difficult issues which the novel has raised. There is no space here for a discussion of the structural issues, but it seems to me that as a critique of American racial discourse, these concluding chapters offer a harsh, coherent, and uncompromising indictment.

Tom Sawyer's absurd scheme to "rescue" Jim offends, because the section begins with Huck's justly celebrated crisis of conscience, which culminates in his resolve to free Jim, even if doing so condemns him to hell. The passage which leads to Huck's decision, as familiar as it is, merits reexamination:

I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the *only* one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper. . . . I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up (Ch. 31).

The issue here is not just whether or not Huck should return a contraband<sup>8</sup>—an escaped slave—to its proper owner. More fundamentally, Huck must decide whether to accept the conventional wisdom, which defines "Negroes" as subhuman commodities, or the evidence of his own experience, which has shown Jim to be a good and kind man and a true friend.

Huck makes the obvious decision, but his doing so represents more than simply a liberal choice of conscience over social convention. Twain explicitly makes Huck's choice a sharp attack on the

Southern church. Huck scolds himself: "Here was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire" (Ch. 31). Yet despite Huck's anxiety, his choice is obviously correct. Furthermore, by the time that Twain wrote these words, more than twenty years of national strife, including Civil War and Reconstruction, had established Huck's conclusion regarding slavery as a dominant national consensus. Not even reactionary Southerners advocated a reinstitution of slavery. Since the Southern church had taught that slavery was God's will, Huck's decision flatly repudiates the church's teachings regarding slavery. And implicitly, it also repudiates the church as an institution by suggesting that the church functions to undermine, not to encourage, a reliance on one's conscience. To define "Negroes" as subhuman removes them from moral consideration and therefore justifies the callous exploitation of them. This view of religion is consistent with the cynical iconoclasm which Twain expressed in *Letters from the Earth* and others of his "dark" works.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, Tom Sawyer appears to us as a superficially charming but fundamentally distasteful interloper. His actions are governed not by conscience but rather by romantic conventions and literary "authorities." Indeed, while Tom may appear to be a kind of renegade, he is in essence thoroughly conventional in his values and proclivities. Despite all his boyish pranks, Tom represents a kind of solid respectability—a younger version of the Southern gentleman, as exemplified by the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons (see Hoffman, *Form and Fable*, 327-28). Hence, when Tom proposes to help Huck steal Jim, Huck laments that "Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger stealer!" (Ch. 33). Such liberating activity is proper for Huck, who is not respectable, but not for Tom, who is. As with the previous example, however, this one implies a deep criticism of the status quo. Huck's act of conscience, which most of us would now endorse, is possible only for an outsider. This hardly speaks well for the moral integrity of Southern (or American) "civilization."

To examine Tom's role in the novel, let us begin at the end. Upon learning of the failed escape attempt and Jim's recapture, Tom cries out, self-righteously: "turn him loose! He ain't no slave; he's as free as any creatur that walks this earth" (Ch. 42). Tom has known all along that his cruel and ludicrous scheme to rescue the captured "prisoner" was being enacted upon a free man; and indeed, only his silence regarding Jim's status allowed the scheme to

proceed with Jim's cooperation. Certainly, neither Huck nor Jim would otherwise have indulged Tom's foolishness. Tom's gratuitous cruelty here in the pursuit of his own amusement corresponds to his less vicious prank against Jim in Chapter 2. And just as before, Twain converts Tom's callous mischief into a personal triumph for Jim.

Not only has Jim suffered patiently, which would in truth represent a doubtful virtue. (Jim is not Uncle Tom.) Jim demonstrates his moral superiority by surrendering himself in order to assist the doctor in treating his wounded tormentor. This is hardly the behavior which one would expect from a commodity, and it is *precisely* Jim's status—man or chattel—which has been fundamentally at issue throughout the novel. It may be true that Tom's lengthy juvenile antics subvert the tone of the novel, but they also provide the necessary backdrop for Jim's noble act. Up to this point, we have been able to admire Jim's good sense and to respond sentimentally to his good character. This, however, is the first time that we see him making a significant (and wholly admirable) moral decision. His act sets him apart from everyone else in the novel except Huck. And modestly (if not disingenuously), he claims to be behaving just as Tom Sawyer would. Always conscious of his role as a "Negro," Jim knows better than to claim personal credit for his good deed. Yet the contrast between Jim's behavior and Tom's is unmistakable. Huck declares that Jim is "white inside" (Ch. 40). He apparently intends this as a compliment, but Tom is fortunate that Jim does not behave like most of the whites in the novel.

Twain also contrasts Jim's self-sacrificing compassion with the cruel and mean-spirited behavior of his captors, emphasizing that white skin does not justify claims of superior virtue. They abuse Jim, verbally and physically, and some want to lynch him as an example to other slaves. The moderates among them, however, resist, pointing out that they could be made to pay for the destruction of private property. As Huck observes: "the people that's always the most anxious for to hang a nigger that hain't done just right, is always the very ones that ain't the most anxious to pay for him when they've got their satisfaction out of him" (Ch. 42). As if these enforcers of white supremacy did not appear contemptible enough already, Twain then has the doctor describe Jim as the best and most faithful nurse he has ever seen, despite Jim's "resking his freedom" and his obvious fatigue. These vigilantes do admit that Jim deserves to be rewarded, but their idea of a reward is to cease punching and cursing him. They are not even generous enough to remove Jim's heavy shackles.

Ultimately, *Huckleberry Finn* renders a harsh

judgment on American society. Freedom from slavery, the novel implies, is not freedom from gratuitous cruelty; and racism, like romanticism, is finally just an elaborate justification which the adult counterparts of Tom Sawyer use to facilitate their exploitation and abuse of other human beings. Tom feels guilty, with good reason, for having exploited Jim, but his final gesture of paying Jim off is less an insult to Jim than it is Twain's commentary on Tom himself. Just as slaveholders believe that economic relations (ownership) can justify their privilege of mistreating other human beings, Tom apparently believes that an economic exchange can suffice as atonement for his misdeeds. Perhaps he finds a forty-dollar token more affordable than an apology. But then, just as Tom could only "set a free nigger free," considering, as Huck says, "his bringing-up" (Ch. 42), he similarly could hardly be expected to apologize for his pranks. Huck, by contrast, is equally rich, but he *has* apologized to Jim earlier in the novel. And this is the point of Huck's final remark, rejecting the prospect of civilization. To become civilized is not just to become like Aunt Sally. More immediately, it is to become like Tom Sawyer.

Jim is, indeed, "as free as any creatur that walks this earth." In other words, he is a man, like all men, at the mercy of other men's arbitrary cruelties. In a sense, given Twain's view of freedom, to allow Jim to escape to the North or to have Tom announce Jim's manumission earlier would be an evasion of the novel's ethical insights. While one may escape from legal bondage, there is no escape from the cruelties of this "civilization." There is no promised land, where one may enjoy absolute personal freedom. An individual's freedom is always constrained by one's social relations to other people. Being legally free does not spare Jim from gratuitous humiliation and physical suffering in the final chapters, precisely because Jim is still regarded as a "nigger." Even if he were as accomplished as the mulatto from Ohio, he would not be exempt from mistreatment. Furthermore, since Tom represents the hegemonic values of his society, Jim's "freedom" amounts to little more than an obligation to live by his wits and to make the best of a bad situation.

Slavery and racism, then, are social evils which take their places alongside various others which the novel documents, such as the insane romanticism that inspires the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons blithely to murder each other, generation after generation. Twain rejects entirely the mystification of race and demonstrates that Jim is in most ways a better man than the men who regard him as their inferior. But he also shows how little correlation

there may be between the treatment one deserves and the treatment one receives.

If this conclusion sounds uncontroversial from the perspective of 1984, we would do well to remember that it contradicts entirely the overwhelming and optimistic consensus of 1884. And no other nineteenth-century novel so effectively locates racial discourse within the context of a general critique of American institutions and traditions. Indeed, the novel suggests that real individual freedom, in this land of the free, cannot be found. "American civilization" enslaves and exploits rather than liberates. It is hardly an appealing message.

Given the subtlety of Mark Twain's approach, it is not surprising that most of his contemporaries misunderstood or simply ignored the novel's demystification of race. Despite their patriotic rhetoric, they, like Pap, were unprepared to take seriously the implications of "freedom, justice, and equality." They, after all, espoused an ideology and an explicit language of race which was virtually identical to Thomas Jefferson's. Yet racial discourse flatly contradicts and ultimately renders hypocritical the egalitarian claims of liberal democracy. The heart of Twain's message to us is that an honest person must reject one or the other. But hypocrisy, not honesty, is our norm. For too many of us continue to assert both racial distinction and liberal values, simultaneously. If we, a century later, continue to be confused about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, perhaps it is because we remain more deeply committed to both racial discourse and a self-deluding optimism than we care to admit.<sup>10</sup>

*Williams College*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The literature on the Abolition movement and on antebellum debates regarding the Negro is, of course, voluminous. George Fredrickson's excellent *The Black Image in the White Mind* is perhaps the best general work of its kind. Fredrickson's *The Inner Civil War* is also valuable, especially pp. 53-64. Leon Litwack closely examines the ambivalence of Abolitionists regarding racial intermingling (214-46). Benjamin Quarles presents the most detailed examination of black Abolitionists, though Vincent Harding offers a more vivid (and overtly polemical) account of their relationships to white Abolitionists (101-194).

<sup>2</sup>The debate over Jefferson's relationship to Sally Hemings has raged for two centuries. The most thorough scholarly accounts are by Fawn Brodie, who suggests that Jefferson did have a prolonged involvement with Hemings, and by Virginus Dabney, who endeavors to



exonerate Jefferson of such charges. Barbara Chase-Riboud presents a fictionalized version of this relationship in *Sally Hemings*. The first Afro-American novel, *Clotel; Or the President's Daughter* (1853) by William Wells Brown, was also based on this alleged affair.

<sup>3</sup>For dates of composition, see Blair. For a discussion of Melville's treatment of race, Carolyn Karchner's *Shadow Over the Promised Land* is especially valuable. Articles on *Benito Cereno* by Joyce Adler and Jean Yellin are also noteworthy. Rayford Logan and Lawrence J. Friedman provide detailed accounts of the racist climate in Post-Reconstruction America, emphasizing the literary manifestations of such attitudes. Friedman's discussion of George Washington Cable (99-118), the outspoken Southern liberal, is very informative. For a general historical overview of the period, C. Vann Woodward's work remains unsurpassed. John W. Cell offers a provocative reconsideration of Woodward's arguments, and Joel Williamson's new book documents the excessively violent tendencies of Southern racism at the end of the century.

<sup>4</sup>My use of "racial discourse" has some affinities to Foucault's conception of "discourse." This is not, however, a strictly Foucaultian reading. While Foucault's definition of discursive practices provides one of the most sophisticated tools presently available for cultural analysis, his conception of power seems to me problematic. I prefer an account of power which allows for a consideration of interest and hegemony. Theorists such as Marshall Berman (34-35) and Catherine MacKinnon (526) have indicated similar reservations. Frank Lentriccia, however, has made a provocative attempt to modify Foucaultian analysis, drawing upon Gramsci's analysis of hegemony. See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge, Power/Knowledge* (esp. 92-108), and *The History of Sexuality*, (esp. 92-102).

<sup>5</sup>This is not to discount the sufferings of other groups. But historically, the philosophical basis of Western racial discourse—which existed even before the European "discovery" of America—has been the equation of "good" and "evil" with light and darkness (or, white and black.) (See Derrida; Jordan, 1-40; and West, 47-65). Economically, the slave trade, chattel slavery, agricultural peonage, and color-coded wage differentials have made the exploitation of African-Americans the most profitable form of racism. Finally, Afro-Americans have long been the largest American "minority" group. Consequently, the primacy of "the Negro" in American racial discourse is, to use Althusser's term (87-126), "Overdetermined." The acknowledgment of primary status, however, is hardly a claim of privilege.

<sup>6</sup>Even the allegedly scientific works on the Negro focused on superstition as a definitive trait. See, for example, W. D. Weatherford and Jerome Dowd. No one has commented more scathingly on Negro superstition than William H. Thomas, who was, by American definitions, a Negro himself.

<sup>7</sup>Hoffman in *Form and Fable* (331) reveals an implicit understanding of Jim's creativity, but he does not pursue the point in detail.

<sup>8</sup>This term became a part of the official military

vocabulary during the Civil War, referring to a slave who had gone "AWOL."

<sup>9</sup>A number of works comment on Twain's religious views and the relation between his critiques of religion and of racism. See Ensor; Pettit, "Mark Twain and the Negro"; and Gollin.

<sup>10</sup>I would like to thank my colleagues, David Langston and Michael Bell, for the helpful suggestions which they offered to me regarding this essay.

## Works Cited

- Adler, Joyce. "Melville's *Benito Cereno*: Slavery and Violence in the Americas." *Science and Society*, 38 (1974), 19-48.
- Altenbernd, Lynn. "Huck Finn, Emancipator." *Criticism*, 1 (1959), 298-307.
- Althusser, Louis. *For Marx*. London: Verso Editions, 1979.
- Berkove, Lawrence I. "The Free Man of Color in *The Grandissimes* and Works by Harris and Mark Twain." *The Southern Quarterly*, 18.4 (1981), 60-73.
- Berman, Marshall. *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982.
- Blair, Walter. "When Was *Huckleberry Finn* Written?" *American Literature*, 30 (March 1958), 1-25.
- Brodie, Fawn. *Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History*. New York: Norton, 1974.
- Brown, William Wells. *Clotel; Or the President's Daughter*. New York: Arno Press, 1969.
- Chase-Riboud, Barbara. *Sally Hemings*. New York: The Viking Press, 1979.
- Cell, John W. *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Clemens, Samuel. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Eds. Scully Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, E. Hudson Long, and Thomas Cooley. 2nd ed. New York: Norton, 1977.
- Dabney, Virginus. *The Jefferson Scandals*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981.
- Derrida, Jacques. "White Mythology." *New Literary History*, 6 (1974), 5-74.
- Dowd, Jerome. *Negro Races*. New York: Macmillan, 1907.
- Du Bois, William E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk. Three Negro Classics*. Ed. John Hope Franklin. New York: Avon, 1965.
- Ellison, Ralph. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage, 1964, 45-59.
- Egan, Michael. *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: Race, Class and Society*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977.

## Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse

- Ensor, Allison. *Mark Twain and the Bible*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1969.
- Flexner, Stuart Berg. *I Hear America Talking*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage, 1980.
- . *Power/Knowledge*. Ed. Colin Gordon, New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Fredrickson, George M. *The Black Image in the White Mind*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971.
- . *The Inner Civil War*. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971.
- Friedman, Lawrence J. *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970.
- Gollin, Richard and Rita. "Huckleberry Finn and the Time of the Evasion." *Modern Language Studies*, 9 (Spring 1979), 5-15.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- Hansen, Chadwick. "The Character of Jim and the Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*." *Massachusetts Review*, 5 (Autumn 1963), 45-66.
- Harding, Vincent. *There Is a River*. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1981.
- Hentoff, Nat. "Huck Finn Better Get Out of Town by Sundown." Column. *The Village Voice*, 27 (May 4, 1982).
- . "Is Any Book Worth the Humiliation of Our Kids?" Column. *The Village Voice*, 27 (May 11, 1982).
- . "Huck Finn and the Shortchanging of Black Kids." Column. *The Village Voice*, 27 (May 18, 1982).
- . "These Are Little Battles Fought in Remote Places." Column. *The Village Voice*, 27 (May 25, 1982).
- Higginson, Thomas Wentworth. *Army Life in a Black Regiment*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.
- Hoffman, Daniel. *Form and Fable in American Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- . "Jim's Magic: Black or White?" *American Literature*, 32 (March 1960), 47-54.
- Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*. Ed. Merrill D. Peterson. New York: Viking, 1975.
- Jordan, Winthrop. *White Over Black*. New York: Norton, 1968.
- Karchner, Carolyn. *Shadow Over the Promised Land*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.
- Lentricchia, Frank. "Reading Foucault (Punishment, Labor, Resistance)." *Raritan* 1.4: 5-32.
- . "Reading Foucault (Punishment, Labor, Resistance)." Part II. *Raritan* 2.1: 41-70.
- Litwack, Leon F. *North of Slavery*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961.
- Logan, Rayford. *The Negro in American Life and Thought The Nadir, 1877-1901*. New York: The Dial Press, 1954.
- Lynn, Kenneth S. *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1959.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs*, 7.3 (1982), 515-544.
- Marx, Leo. "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling and *Huckleberry Finn*." *The American Scholar*, 22 (Autumn 1953), 423-40.
- Paine, Albert Bigelow. *Mark Twain, A Biography*. New York: Harper, 1912.
- Pettit, Arthur G. "Mark Twain and the Negro, 1867-1869." *Journal of Negro History*, 56 (April 1971), 88-96.
- . *Mark Twain and the South*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1974.
- Quarles, Benjamin. *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1969.
- Schmitz, Neil. "Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the Reconstruction." *American Studies*, 12 (Spring 1971), 59-67.
- Thomas, William Hannibal. *The American Negro*. New York: The Negro Universities Press, 1969. Reprint of 1901 ed.
- Weatherford, W. D. *Negro Life in the South*. New York: Young Men's Christian Association Press, 1910.
- Weaver, Thomas and Williams, Merline. "Mark Twain's Jim: Identity As An Index to Cultural Attitudes." *American Literary Realism*, 13 (Spring 1980): 19-30.
- West, Cornel. *Prophesy Deliverance*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982.
- Williamson, Joel. *The Crucible of Race*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Woodard, Fredrick and MacCann, Donnaræ. "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Traditions of Blackface Minstrelsy." *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, 15:1-2 (1984), 4-13.
- Woodward, C. Vann. *Origins of the New South*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971.
- . *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. Third Edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Yellin, Jean Fagan. "Black Masks: Melville's 'Benito Cereno.'" *American Quarterly*, 22 (Fall 1970), 678-89.