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Source: *Mark Twain Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Black Writers on "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" One Hundred Years Later (FALL, 1984), pp. 38-42

Published by: [Alan Gribben](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41641251>

Accessed: 24/02/2014 13:24

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No matter what we may wish to tell other nations about ourselves and our American Dream, the ambivalence of many Americans toward matters of race relations remains a factor that is often used to illustrate the hypocrisy of the professed creeds of the United States. If a literary classic is that which transcends its time and is relevant for the present, the racial implications of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—negative though they are in some respects—may be of value in understanding American civilization. Not only did Mark Twain include overt and subliminal commentary on his own day but he also displayed the uncertainties that have marked the so-called “American dilemma.” As we continue to extol the virtue of our democratic experiment to others, the world may well point to our “classic” as evidence of our inherent hypocrisy.

The greatness of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been accepted without much question. To identify its apparent weaknesses subjects the critic to charges of undue sensitivity or literary naïvete. But one does not have to be particularly knowledgeable, for example, to realize that a slave seeking freedom would hardly travel southward on the Mississippi River. Yet, Twain apologists claim that such a concern for historic validity denies the power and license of literary imagination. That other aspects of this realistic novel tax a reader's credulity can be dismissed by those who remind others of Twain's early notice: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” In the end, many considerations of the novel's shortcomings fade before the discussions of its “greatness.”

From Ernest Hemingway's declaration (“all modern American literature comes from [it . . . and] it's the best book we've had”) to the numerous studies of the novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has indeed become part of the folklore of American culture. Throughout the years, critics have cited such elements as Twain's deviation from a genteel tradition that had become artistically stifling in the latter part of the nineteenth century and his picaresque use of the Mississippi River that stresses the symbolic role of that river in American life. Others have pointed to the novel's exploration

into such abstract principles as loyalty, morality, freedom, alienation, conscience, and non-compliance to unjust laws to prove merit. Furthermore, in its use of the vernacular, the work unwittingly fulfills Noah Webster's eighteenth-century observation that a national literature would not be created until there was an acceptance of American English as an artistic medium. All of these characteristics suggest that the novel is an outstanding one.

Twain's chronicle of the adolescent Huck Finn, however, was not without its detractors and doubters even from the beginning. Perhaps no work in American literature has been banned as consistently nor as frequently. Initially, its very points of greatness bothered many. Early arbiters of taste thought stories should be didactic and uplifting. They insisted that tales display a respect for or a commitment to the genteel tradition. Huck was viewed as an inappropriate hero. His language, filled with slang and irreverent allusions with no regard for the rules of grammar, left much to be desired. He was disrespectful of adults and seemed to have little interest in telling the truth. No wonder the prim Louisa May Alcott complained: “If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses he had better stop writing for them.”

Interestingly, but not unexpectedly, Twain's early critics and readers were not exercised about the racial implications of the novel. The Philadelphia Centennial of 1876 had ushered in a new spirit among American painters who recognized not only a need for a continued representation of American subjects but also an obligation, despite the immediate social and political problems, to present in a visual manner the possibilities of American democracy. For many of them this meant delineations of the newly-freed slaves; nevertheless, even the most tolerant American artists and audiences have had difficulty in dealing with certain phases of our national life despite ardent attempts. In the nineteenth century, most Americans were more comfortable with the portraits drawn by the popular writers and practitioners of the plantation tradition. Although Twain chose to resurrect the ante-bellum period, the picture of the imagined happy and contented slaves is augmented by Jim who seeks freedom. The other

slave characters who appear infrequently seem shadowy reminders of an unaltered plantation tradition.

That there is still some discomfort with Twain's novel is evident from the nature of its defenders and assailants. The focus has shifted. It is Jim, rather than Huck, who presents the problem for some readers. Questions naturally arise. Did Twain use the slave figure in a pejorative way that would have satisfied his audience? Is Jim simply an embodiment of the popular minstrel tradition, or is he in reality an example of "the noble savage"? While apologists for the novel insist upon the "nobility" of Jim, the fact remains that there were (and still are) acceptable stereotypes that appealed (as they do today) to the American public.

Given the racial climate of the late 1870s and the 1880s with its uncontrolled animus, one might wonder what Twain hoped to accomplish. Second-guessing authors has become big business in academe. In fact, there are those who have made entire careers out of merely speculating on the various meanings of a text without necessarily reading it. Indeed, literary reputations have been made and broken on the basis of how well others accept the serious accounts of what so-and-so meant when such-and-such was written. Finding evidence to support various theories is never difficult; hence, these hypotheses and defenses enter into literary criticism. Academicians are not alone in these exercises. The history of book promotion and banning demonstrates that there are those who—like literary critics—select certain aspects of a work to condemn or praise the entire production. Through the years one can find works and/or authors who have especially lent themselves to mis-readings, re-interpretations, and thinly-veiled inquiries. This has often led to overt and covert censorship. And so it has been with Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

The earliest censors who believed the novel would corrupt the young have been replaced by later ones who claim the book is racist and degrading. Needless to say, dealing with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* on racial grounds creates its own dilemma. To suggest anything on the subject is to run the risk of treading on sensitive ground. One can be accused of narrowness, meanness of spirit, and being amenable to censorship. But to attempt to use the novel as a lesson in tolerance also seems to avoid the central issue in view of the excessive use of the word "nigger" by all of the characters including Jim. (Those who have counted the word's appearance maintain it occurs between 160 and 200 times.) The fact that current editors often explain at length that the term was not as pejorative as

modern readers imagine because it was a commonly-used designation for slaves in the 1830s and 1840s does little to lessen its impact. Nor does it give comfort to those students, parents, school boards, and other organizations who question the use of the book in public schools. Clearly, the novel presents a problem for those youngsters who have not had a chance to think through the subtleties of racial epithets. Thus, for many readers there is an implied racism in the novel that does not disappear even when Twain advocates insist the work is a "classic" which should be read.

Some parents and school boards have assumed the deletion of the novel from required reading lists is one viable option. As late as 1984, efforts were made in Springfield, Illinois, to ban the book from the high school curriculum. By implication there seems to be an acceptance of the notion that to require students to read the novel is to perpetuate its presumed derogatory point of view. Those who would ban it have accepted the argument that students will be embarrassed, hurt, or otherwise damaged. Those who oppose such action assume that blacks can and ought to "understand" the use of a term that is categorized as vulgar and offensive when applied to a Negro.

Implicit in many of the discussions of the novel are some unasked questions about the author. Whether or not Twain was a racist in a moot point that does not need to be addressed, although it is amazing to note the number of times readers find it necessary to assert with conviction: "Twain was not a racist." (Some critics apparently believe the statement is sufficiently powerful to dispel any such notion.) I still remember one of my teachers who discussed Jim by explaining in an uncomfortable way that Twain paid the tuitions of some Negro students who attended Yale University. I could never understand the relationship between Jim and those unnamed students, but I suppose it must have had something to do with what Huck might have called "conscience"—Twain's and my teacher's.

I suspected even then that—given the time, the conditions, and his background—Twain's racial attitudes probably did not vary appreciably, at least publicly, from the dominant ones of his day. That he may have become a concerned paternalistic figure like his friend William Dean Howells or that he was to examine slavery sharply and critically in *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson*, (1894) does not alter the fact that the young Mark Twain served as a Confederate irregular. No matter what he used as a later explanation, his separation from that service had more to do with his desire to go westward than with any strong commitment or switch of loyalties.

His knowledge of race, furthermore, was probably limited to a particular group. There is no reason to suppose he would have known much about such men and women as Maria Stewart, William Hamilton, Joseph Coors, or James Forten. The Missouri of Mark Twain was a cultural world apart from that of John Jones, the multi-millionaire of Chicago, who was making his mark in the financial empires of the Midwest. But in the final analysis, it is the novel—not Twain—that must be reviewed.

If one assumes that the literary classics of a nation represent the ideals, unspoken values, and psychology of a people, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents some fascinating ambiguities. On one level, there is the possibility of viewing the novel in terms of the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance, the freedom of the spirit, the dignity of humanity that cannot be enslaved, and the ultimate note of optimism that emphasizes the ability "to light out for [new] Territory ahead of the rest." Yet, the novel gives mixed signals on matters of race. The slave characters are, for the most part, undeveloped stereotypes who perform within the mandates of the plantation tradition. Mention of a free black appears in the context of Pap's diatribe against the "govment." While sophisticated readers may dismiss Pap as part of the "ornery" ones, the fact remains that he repeats a widely-held denigration of blacks believed by those who object to a Negro's dress, education, right to vote, and claims to freedom. The history of American race relations reveals that Pap was not alone in such complaints. Furthermore, the people of the novel are essentially the poor whites and rogues of the Mississippi Valley. Colonel Sherburn clearly is of a better class, but readers meet him during an act of violence. The Grangerfords and Shepherdsons are presented through their mindless feud; but they are also in a state of decline as is the Wilks family. With the exception of Jim, it is a fairly sorry lot of people.

And what of Jim? Much can be made of reducing the adult black male to a figure whose fate rests with an unlettered white teenager. Others might argue that Jim's status is a condescending reminder of that "peculiar institution," forgetting in the process that tales of slavery represent historic fact as well as form a popular literary tradition among those readers who find the work of such writers as Joel Chandler Harris to be a valid portrait of the ante-bellum period. (In the twentieth century, the popularity of slave romances and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*, 1936, suggests that the image of the mythical Old South still lives.) Some readers may decry Jim's superstitious nature and take his reliance upon "signs" as an indication of his backwardness. Forgetting that these folkways—like

all such customs—explain the inexplicable to primitive people, readers may be inclined to join in poking fun at Jim. Yet, he represents a variety of viewpoints and may indeed be most representative of Twain's own ambivalence.

While he demonstrates throughout the novel that he has learned the important lesson of masking his feelings, of living behind the veil, Jim is also a manifestation of an acceptable character type for American readers. At the end of the novel when he could have saved himself from discovery, he comes out of hiding with the full knowledge that he is jeopardizing his freedom. Perhaps nowhere in American literature has the sacrificial nature of loyalty been more simply presented. Jim, however, is more than a shallow stereotype. When he first appears on Jackson's Island, he has outsmarted his owner who plans to sell him down the river for \$800. His subsequent recitation of his wins and losses in speculative enterprises from banking to livestock—albeit elementary—lends credence to his final assertion that his riches now include himself and he is "wuth eight hund'd dollars." Early Jim and Huck establish a sense of trust, and the two runaways are mutually protective of each other despite Jim's legal impotence. Between them a form of racial integration takes place. While Huck lies to save Jim (and not without some misgivings), the older man is the instrument providing for Huck's "education." Whenever Huck is inclined to let the baseness of his human condition assume control, it is Jim who guides him. The bond between the two characters is so strong that if one takes Jim away, Huck—as we know him—ceases to exist.

Clearly, the relationship of Jim and Huck goes beyond that of a free white boy and an enslaved black man. Black mammies have become an integral part of American culture. There are still those who nostalgically recall childhood days with them. But little has been done with the black man in fiction. If he is not in the tradition of Uncle Tom or Uncle Remus, then he is often a fugitive from justice or from an enslaving society. While Jim is all of these, he is also the only "real" father that Huck has. We do not know much about Jim, but we do know that he has great love for his family and longs for the day when he will be free in order to reclaim them. In the meantime, Huck is his "family."

For most of the novel, one cannot forget that Huck—the free white boy—seems unusually preoccupied with matters of death. On the other hand, Jim—the enslaved black man—is concerned with life and manages to teach Huck something about the meaning of life itself. If Huck comes to demonstrate that conscience is not the captive of man-made laws or that it can transcend the

the mob. They claim that this is a clear example of Twain's intent. By dropping the voice of Huck, the novelist obviously makes that address stand out boldly. While aesthetically this shift in point of view may weaken the consistency of the work, Sherburn certainly makes a strong statement. But within the context of the novel, what does the Sherburn incident really mean? Noticeably, it does not alter the action except to save the Colonel from a mob although it does allow a brief platform for Twain to express his own contempt for mobs in an era known for such activities and lawlessness. However, if this mob is dispersed by the harsh reality of Sherburn's words, then the mob that recaptures Jim at the end of the novel is not concerned with the niceties of human behavior. If its members had not been aware that they could not pay for another's property or if the doctor had not requested that they "be no rougher than you're obleeged to," then this mob would not have been as yielding as the one which Sherburn faced.

An even more telling aspect of Twain's presentation of American race relations comes in the introduction of Tom's great escape plan for Jim at the end of the novel. The pragmatic Huck realizes the stupidity of their actions, as does Jim, but the romantic Tom insists they must follow him. In these episodic pranks, Jim is not only the victim but is also co-opted to go along in order to humor Tom who never considers that he is compromising the dignity of a man. Huck's silent assent to the procedure makes him an accessory. In the end, Tom does not succeed in freeing Jim, who is recaptured and faces the possibilities of even harsher treatment. The central irony should not escape the reader. While he has been in this final captivity, Jim has in reality been free—a fact that Tom suppresses in order to play his role and carry out his agenda. In the meantime, Jim's freedom has come from the old order: "Miss Watson died two months ago, and she was ashamed she ever was going to sell him down the river, and *said* so; and she set him free in her will."

Written during one of the darkest periods of American race relations, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* spoke to all segments of nineteenth-century society. Committed racists would have taken a perverse delight in the pseudo-minstrel antics of some of Jim's actions as well as the legitimizing of the word "nigger" by one of the nation's most popular writers. Those readers more inclined toward a sense of fairness would have been able to point with pride to the nobility of Jim or to his eventual freedom. They could take comfort in Colonel Sherburn's speech which, in a day of frequent lynchings, spoke to that brutality.

Present-day responses to the novel still probably operate on these two levels. While scholars may speak eloquently of the various themes to be found in Twain's work, to suggest the novel is a condemnation of the institution of slavery or that Jim represents the triumph of the human spirit over the most degrading attempts to subdue it might seem to be an optimistic begging of the question when others deplore the apparent elements of racism. That there is much concern with the presence of an objectionable word is perhaps unfortunate because to focus on an epithet seriously limits one's perception of other aspects of the novel. But such a concern is understandable and cannot be dismissed. It is also symptomatic of those latent attitudes that are so difficult to discard. Ultimately *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a "classic" may tell more about the nation than many Americans want to know.

As an expression of the racial ambiguities of the United States, the novel goes beyond a catalogue of the ills of the nineteenth century. Although the days of physical slavery have passed, spiritual slavery continues supported by latter-day representatives of Miss Watson, Uncle Silas, and Aunt Sally. Meaning well, they continue to find solace and justifications for their actions within their religion. While the 1880s had a full share of racial romanticists who did not understand the reality of Reconstruction or the depth of feeling that was to mark the anti-black attitudes, modern America has not been free from equally unrealistic visions. Whether or not he intended to do so, Mark Twain unwittingly satirized those who would romanticize race problems and—in the process—prolong them. The romantic "do-gooders," like Tom, remain among us to conceive elaborate schemes that ultimately fail. Racial epithets are still—unfortunately—too much a part of the spoken and unspoken language of the nation. Notwithstanding desires to the contrary, for many Americans notions of superiority do not vary greatly from Pap's. They seldom stop to think of the illogical conclusions that result. It is "enough to make a body ashamed of the human race." On the other hand, the novel does suggest—and rightly so—that the fates and fortunes of the races are so closely intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. Either consciously or unconsciously, Twain produced a classic statement that weighs the nation in the balance. He described an America that was his and an America that is ours. To ban the novel is to condemn the messenger for the message.

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