

Should *Huckleberry Finn* be taught in the schools? The critics of the Propaganda Era laid the groundwork for the universal inclusion of the book in school curriculums by declaring it great. Although they predated the current generation of politicized English professors, this was clearly a political act, because the entry of *Huck Finn* into classrooms sets the terms of the discussion of racism and American history, and sets them very low: all you have to do to be a hero is acknowledge that your poor sidekick is human; you don't actually have to act in the interests of his humanity. Arguments about censorship have been regularly turned into nonsense by appeals to Huck's "greatness." Moreover, so much critical thinking has gone into defending Huck so that he can be great, so that American literature can be found different from and maybe better than Russian or English or French literature, that the very integrity of the critical enterprise has been called into question. That most readers intuitively reject the last twelve chapters of the novel on the grounds of tedium or triviality is clear from the fact that so many critics have turned themselves inside out to defend them. Is it so mysterious that criticism has failed in our time after being so robust only a generation ago? Those who cannot be persuaded that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a great novel have to draw some conclusion.

I would rather my children read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, even though it is far more vivid in its depiction of cruelty than *Huck Finn*, and this is because Stowe's novel is clearly and unmistakably a tragedy. No white-wash, no secrets, but evil, suffering, imagination, endurance, and redemption—just like life. Like little Eva, who eagerly but fearfully listens to the stories of the slaves that her family tries to keep from her, our children want to know what is going on, what has gone on, and what we intend to do about it. If "great" literature has any purpose, it is to help us face up to our responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the territory.

from *Twain, Mark: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
A Norton Critical Edition 3rd Ed. New York:
 DAVID L. SMITH Norton, 1999.

Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse†

They [blacks] are at least as brave, and more adventuresome [compared with whites]. But this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought, 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*

† From *Saints or Evildoers? Black Perspectives on "Huckleberry Finn"*, ed. James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Jenney, and Thaddeus M. Davis (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 103–20. Reprinted with permission.

1. The Portable *Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Viking, 1975) 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.² 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.³

In July 1876, exactly one century after the American Declaration of Independence, Mark Twain began writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel that illustrates trenchantly the social limitations that American "civilization" imposes on individual freedom.⁴ 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 peer among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly antiracist stance.⁵ Those who brand the book racist generally do so with-

2. The literature on the abolition movement and on antebellum debates regarding the Negro is, of course, voluminous. George M. Fredrickson's excellent *The Black Image in the White Mind* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971) is perhaps the best general work of its kind. Fredrickson's *The Inner-Civil War* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971) is also valuable, especially pp. 53–64. Leon Litwack, in *North of Slavery* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961) 214–46, closely examines the ambivalence of abolitionists regarding racial intermingling. Benjamin Quarles presents the most detailed examination of black abolitionists in *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969), although Vincent Harding offers a more vivid (and overtly polemical) account of their relationships to white abolitionists, see *There Is a River* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981).

3. 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 (*Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History* [New York: Norton, 1974]), and by Virginia Dabney, who endeavors to exonerate Jefferson of such charges (*The Jefferson Scandals* [New York: Dodd, Mead, 1981]). Barbara Chase-Riboud presents a fictionalized version of this relationship in *Sally Hemings* (New York: Viking, 1979). The first Afro-American novel, *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter* (New York: Viking, 1979), was also based on this alleged affair.

4. For dates of composition, see Walter Blair, "When Was *Huckleberry Finn* Written?" *American Literature* 30 (Mar. 1958): 1–25.

5. For a discussion of Melville's treatment of race, Carolyn Karcher's *Shadow over the Promised Land* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980) is especially valuable. Also noteworthy are two articles on "Benito Cereno": Joyce Adler, "Melville's *Benito Cereno*, Slavery and Violence in the Americas," *Science and Society* 38 (1974): 19–48, and Joan Fagan Yellin, "Black Masks: Melville's *Benito Cereno*," *American Quarterly* 22 (Fall 1970): 678–89. Rayford Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial, 1954), and Lawrence J. Friedman, *The White Savage: Racial Fantasies in the Postbellum South* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 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, the outspoken southern liberal (99–118), is very informative. For a general historical overview of the period, C. Vann Woodward's *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971) and *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1974) remain unsurpassed. John W. Cell, in *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1982), offers a provocative reconsideration of Woodward's arguments. Finally, Joel Williamson's *The Crucible of Race* (New York: Oxford UP, 1984) documents the excessively violent tendencies of southern racism at the end of the century.

out 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 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.⁶ "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 that 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, 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 that Twain attacks in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain adopts a strategy of subversion in his attack on race. That is, he focuses on a number of commonplace associated with "the Negro" and then 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 children, and he even sacrifices his own sleep so 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 his 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.⁷ It is troubling, therefore, that so many readers have completely misunderstood Twain's subtle attack on racism.

Twain's use of the term "nigger" has provoked some readers to reject the novel.⁸ 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 important, 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" (chap. 2). This usage, like the term "nigger stealer," clearly designates the "nigger" as an item of property: a commodity, a slave. This passage also provides the only apparent textual justification for the common critical practice of labeling 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).⁹ 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."
 (Chap. 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 offhand 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

6. 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, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982) 34–35, and Catherine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7.3 (1982): 526, have indicated similar reservations. However, Frank Lentricchia ("Reading Foucault [Punishment, Labor, Resistance]," *Rarities* 1.4 [1981] 5–32, 2.1 [1982] 41–70) has made a provocative effort to modify Foucaultian analysis, drawing upon Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971). See Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980) esp. 92–108, and *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1980) esp. 92–102.

7. 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 Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology," *New Literary History* 6 (1974): 5–74; Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black* (New York: Norton, 1968) 1–40, and Cornel West, *Prophets of Deceit* (Philadelphia: Westminster P., 1982) 47–65. Economically, the slave trade, chattel slavery, agricultural penance, 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 "overdetermined," to use Louis Althusser's term (*For Marx*, [London: Verso, 1979] 87–126). The acknowledgment of primary status, however, is hardly a claim of privilege.

8. See Lawrence I. Berkove, "The Free Man of Color in *The Grandestones* and Works by Harris and Mark Twain," *Southern Quarterly* 18.4 (1981): 60–73; Richard Gollin and Rita Collins, "Huckleberry Finn and the Time of the Evasion," *Modern Language Studies* 9 (Spring 1979): 5–15; Michael Egan, *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: Race, Class and Society* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities P., 1977) esp. 66–102.

9. See Nat Hentoff's series of four columns in the *Village Voice* 27 (1982): "Huck Finn Better Get out of Town by Sundown" (May 4); "Is Any Book Worth the Humiliation of Our Kids?" (May 11); "Huck Finn and the Shortchanging of Black Kids" (May 18); and "These Are Little Battles Fought in Remote Places" (May 25).

1. *Mark Twain: A Biography* (New York: Harper, 1912).

this exchange is hilarious precisely because we know that Huck is playing on 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 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 "Negroism" 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 to be a crime against natural laws (chap. 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 one. 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 could 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 with the anti-Negro diatribes that 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*.²

Pap's final description of this Ohio gentleman as "a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger" (chap. 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,

2. See Arthur G. Pettit, *Mark Twain and the South* (Lexington U. of Kentucky P. 1974).

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 "nigger" until about 1825, at which time abolitionists began objecting to that term.³ 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.'"⁴ 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.⁵ 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 "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 he deserves for the sophistication of his perceptions.⁶

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. Twain uses the narrative to expose the cruelty and hollow-ness of that racial discourse which exists only to obscure the humanity of all Afro-American people.

One aspect of *Huckleberry Finn* that has elicited copious critical commentary is Twain's use of superstition.⁷ In nineteenth-century

3. *I Hear America Talking* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1976) 57.

4. *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics*, ed. John Hope Franklin (New York: Avon, 1965) 245.

5. (Boston: Beacon, 1962) 28.

6. See Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964) 45-59; Chabwick Hansen, "The Character of Jim and the Endings of *Huckleberry Finn*," *Massachusetts Review* 5 (Autumn 1963): 45-66; Kenneth S. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southern Humor* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959).

7. See especially Daniel Hoffman, "Jim's Magic: Black or White?" *American Literature* 32 (Mar. 1960): 47-54.

racial discourse, "the Negro" was always defined as inherently superstitious.⁸ 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,⁹ but in some instances apparent similarities conceal fundamental differences. 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 that 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 Jim's hat on a branch. Subsequently Jim concocts an elaborate tale about having been hexed and ridden by witches. The tale grows more grandiose with each repetition, 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." That 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 reduces the amount of his uncompensated labor.¹

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 it 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 story telling, 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, that 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 that racial discourse—as in the passage from Thomas Jefferson—denies to "the Negro." In that sense, Jim's darky performance here subverts the fundamental definition of "darky." For "the Negro" is defined to be an object, not a subject. But 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 hair ball 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 hair ball, the fact remains that most of the transaction depends upon Jim's quick wits. 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 hair ball 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" (chap. 4). But obviously it is not the hair ball that will benefit from acquiring and spending this counterfeit coin.²

In this transaction, Jim serves his own interest while appearing to serve Huck's interest. He takes a slug which is worthless to Huck, and through the alchemy of his own cleverness contrives to make it worth

8. Even the allegedly scientific works on the Negro focused on superstition as a definitive trait. See, for example, W. D. Weatherford, *Negro Life in the South* (New York: Young Men's Christian Association P, 1910), and Jerome Dowd, *Negro Races* (New York: Macmillan, 1907). No one has commented more scathingly on Negro superstitions than William Hannibal Thomas in *The American Negro* (1901; New York: Negro Universities P, 1969), by American definitions he was himself a Negro.

9. See Fredrick Woodard and Donnarue MacCann, "Huckleberry Finn and the Traditions of Black-face Minstrelsy," *Inter racial Books for Children Bulletin* 15:1-2 (1984): 4-13.

1. Daniel Hoffman, in *Form and Fable in American Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1961), reveals an implicit understanding of Jim's creativity, but he does not pursue the point in detail (331).

2. See Thomas Weaver and Merline Williams, "Mark Twain's Jim: Identity, as an Index to Cultural Attitudes," *American Literary Realism* 13 (Spring 1980): 19-30.

twenty-five cents to himself. That, in antebellum America, is not a bad price for telling a fortune. But more important, 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 simplistic. 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" (chap. 4), turns out to be good advice, because Huck 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 that informs much of Twain's work. (To take an obvious example, consider the role reversals and character contrasts in *Pudd'nhead 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 14. 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 instance, in their argument over "Poly-voo-franz," 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 a man should talk like a man—betrays his ignorance of cultural diversity, his argument is otherwise perceptive and structurally sound. The humor in Huck's conclusion, "you can't learn a nigger 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 race provides no useful index of character. While that point may seem obvious to contemporary readers, it is a point rarely made by nineteenth-century Euro-American novelists. Indeed, except for Melville, J. W. DeForest, Albion Tourgée, 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 with a series of glimpses which pen-

trate 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 his effort to place racism within the context of other cultural traditions 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 that both of these traditions entail.³ Critics have objected to these chapters on various grounds. Some of the most common are that Jim becomes reduced to a comic dorky,⁴ 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 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 has begun with Huck's justly celebrated crisis of conscience culminating in his resolve to free Jim, even if doing so condemns him to hell. The passage that leads to Huck's decision, 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. (Chap. 31)

The issue here is not just whether or not Huck should return a fugitive slave to its lawful 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 what is obviously the morally correct 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: "There was the Sunday

3. See Lynn Allenbernd, "Huck Finn, Emancipation," *Criticism* 1 (1959): 298-307.

4. See, for example, Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Scholar* 22 (Autumn 1953): 423-40, and Neil Schmitz, "Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the Reconstruction," *American Studies* 12 (Spring 1971): 59-67.

school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire" (chap. 31). Yet despite Huck's anxiety, he transcends the moral limitations of his time and place. By the time Twain wrote these words, more than twenty years of national strife, including the Civil War and Reconstruction, had established Huck's conclusion regarding slavery as a dominant national consensus; not even reactionary southerners advocated a reinstatement of slavery. But since the pre-Civil War southern church 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 their callous exploitation. This view of religion is consistent with the cynical iconoclasm that Twain expressed in *Letters from the Earth* and other "dark" works.⁵

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 Shepherdsons.⁶ 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!" (chap. 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 now (and in Twain's own time) would 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 cretur that walks this earth!" (chap. 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); he demonstrates his moral

superiority by surrendering himself in order to assist the doctor in treating his wounded tormentor. This is hardly the behavior one would expect from a commodity, and it is precisely Jim's status—man or chattel—that has been fundamentally at issue throughout the novel. It may be true that the lengthy account of Tom's juvenile antics subverts 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" (chap. 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 resist, however, 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" (chap. 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 punishing 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" (chap. 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

5. A number of critical works comment on Twain's religious views and the relation between his critiques of religion and racism. See Allison Enzor, *Mark Twain and the Bible* (Lexington: U of Kentucky P, 1969); Arthur G. Pettit, "Mark Twain and the Negro, 1867-1869," *Journal of Negro History*, 50 (Apr. 1971): 88-96; and Gollin and Gollin 5-15.

6. See Hoffman, *Form and Fable* 327-28.

just to become like Aunt Sally. More immediately, it is to become like Tom Sawyer.

Jim is indeed "as free as any creature 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 have been 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 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 make the best of a bad situation, just as he has always done.

Slavery and racism, then, are social evils that take their places alongside various others which the novel documents, such as the insane romanticism that inspires the Grangerfords and Shepherds' 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 the 1980s, we would do well to remember that it contradicts entirely the overwhelming and optimistic consensus of the 1880s. 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 liberating. 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 that 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. 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.⁷

7. I would like to thank my colleagues David Langston and Michael Bell for the helpful suggestions they offered me regarding this essay.

SHELLEY FISHER FISHKIN

Jimmy [from *Was Huck Black?*][†]

Twentieth-century American criticism abounds in pronouncements about how Twain's choice of a vernacular narrator in *Huckleberry Finn* transformed modern American literature. Lionel Trilling, for example, felt that

The prose of *Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech. . . . It has something to do with ease and freedom in the use of language. Most of all it has to do with the structure of the sentence, which is simple, direct, and fluent, maintaining the rhythm of the word-groups of speech and the intonations of the speaking voice. . . . [Twain] is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice. . . .¹

"As for the style of the book," Trilling concluded, "it is not less than definitive in American literature." As Louis Budd noted in 1985, "today it is standard academic wisdom that Twain's central, precedent-setting achievement is Huck's language."²

Before Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, no American author had entrusted his narrative to the voice of a simple, untutored vernacular speaker—or, for that matter, to a child. Albert Stone has noted that "the vernacular language . . . in *Huckleberry Finn* strikes the ear with the freshness of a real boy talking out loud."³ Could the voice of an actual "real boy talking out loud" have helped Twain recognize the potential of such a voice to hold an audience's attention and to win its trust?

Twain himself noted in his autobiography that he based Huck Finn on Tom Blankenship, the poor-white son of the local drunkard whose pariah status (and exemption from school, church, etc.) made him the envy of every "respectable" boy in Hannibal. Twain wrote,

In *Huckleberry Finn* I have drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community, and by consequence he was tranquilly and continuously happy, and was envied by all the rest of us. We liked him, we enjoyed his society. And as his society was forbidden us by our parents, the prohibition trebled and quadrupled its value, and therefore we fought and got more of his society than of any other boy's.⁴

† From *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Copyright © 1993 by Shelley Fisher Fishkin. Used by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc. The author's notes have been edited. Fishkin's citations from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are to the version edited by Walter Blair and Victor Fischer in *The Works of Mark Twain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Bracketed page references are to this Norton Critical Edition.

1. Lionel Trilling, "The Greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*," 91–92.

2. Louis J. Budd, "Introduction," *New Essays on 'Huckleberry Finn'*, 90–91.

3. Albert Stone, *The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain's Imagination*, 151.

4. Mark Twain's *Autobiography*, ed. Paine, 2: 174–75.

been so little explored by scholars, most of whom have tacitly assumed that there are separate white and black traditions. All this is in the book, but it is available in this moderate form only if one makes use of the excellent and extensive footnotes, which consistently cool down the sizzling prose of the text.

The galvanic text keeps pulling us away from a developing argument to return us to Ms. Fishkin's particular scholarly obsession with real-life original models for literary characters. She has two in particular: Jerry, a young slave Twain mentions as a "gay and impudent and satirical" friend of his teen-age years in the opening paragraphs of an essay, "Corn-Pone Opinions"; and 10-year-old Jimmy, the subject of "Sociable Jimmy," an neglected sketch Twain published in *The New York Times* in November 1874, two years before beginning *Huckleberry Finn*.

Jerry, who may or may not have existed—Ms. Fishkin says either he "or someone very much like him" probably did—is said to have opened to Twain the satirical possibilities of the imitative rhetorical device called signifying. But it is Jimmy that Ms. Fishkin and the jumped-up title of her book are caught by: "Compelling evidence indicates that the model for Huck Finn's voice was a black child instead of a white one." Now, Twain said Huck was drawn from a boy named Tom Blankenship "exactly as he was," but he said nothing about that white boy's voice, and it's Huck's voice, his talk, after all, that matters so much.

Jimmy, described by Twain as "artless" and "sociable," "a bright, simple, guileless darkey boy," is indeed a talker worth hearing: "Bill's down on cats. So is de gals. . . . When dey ketches a cat bummin' aroun' heah, dey jis' scoops him—'deed dey do.' Dey snake him into de cistern—dey's been cats drowned in dat water dat's in yo' pitcher. I seed a cat in dare vistiddy—all swelled up like a pudd'n." The evidence presented to link this talk to Huck's seems to me strong insofar as it relates to general features of black American speech, and trivial when it insists that Huck in some way is Jimmy. It is not a good use of our time to read that both Huck and Jimmy are humorless, at home with dead animals, and the like.

Insisting on the direct connections among Jimmy and blackness and Huck prompts us to ask, "What sort of Huck?" "What sort of black?" Are all the possibilities of angry beauty and cultural resistance and edgy affection so marked in Huck to be convincingly attached to black American speech and experience—only to lead to a little cute "darkey," bright but guileless? Leaving aside that Huck hardly seems guileless, such a reductive chain leaves both Huck and blackness diminished, caricatured. Jimmy is a cross between a lawn ornament and a minstrel clown, represented pretty well by the insipid Huck of the latest Disney film but not by anything in black culture, or by Twain's Huck either. Besides, if one registers Huck as black in any literal way, much of the powerful moral and social irony of the story disappears and some central scenes become nonsense.

Now and then, Ms. Fishkin actually makes a different claim: that Twain's experience with Jimmy released memories of childhood experiences with black friends, sounds and sights that made possible the formation of the most important literary voice in our culture. That such a voice is so rich, carrying with it so much that is not simply white and

colloquial and boyish and safely charming, is a point that has not before been much discussed.

Ms. Fishkin, a professor of American studies at the University of Texas, has some sharp words for a critical tradition she is not averse to associating with "segregation" and "miscegenation," but she gives little attention to the implications of her own position. She does not much consider this "blending" of black and white in the vernacular, even whether it is really a blending or, as one of her notes puts it, a "warring" between the two voices.

Finally, while she addresses the blunt charge of white literary tradition "appropriating" black experience, she does not consider the possibility that her reassuring book may simply make things comfy again, make Huck into a cute little "darkey" like Jimmy, one who can protect us from such things as Toni Morrison's frightening readings of "the parasitical nature of white freedom" portrayed in the novel, the way in which Huck's growth depends on Jim's "serviceability" and thus is inextricably tied to "the term 'nigger.'" Ms. Fishkin's smooth talk about cultural blending and her gush about such things as black spirituals flowing "to the core of [Twain's] being" are all soul-butter and flapdoodle in comparison.

TONI MORRISON

[This Amazing, Troubling Book]†

Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Palpable alarm. Unlike the treasure-island excursion of *Tom Sawyer*, at no point along Huck's journey was a happy ending signaled or guaranteed. Reading *Huckleberry Finn*, chosen randomly without guidance or recommendation, was deeply disturbing. My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable—rather more. It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shameful. Yet the satisfactions were great: riveting episodes of flight, of cunning; the convincing commentary on adult behavior, watchful and insouciant; the authority of a child's voice in language cut for its renegade tongue and sharp intelligence. Liberating language—not baby talk for the young, nor the doggedly patronizing language of so many books on the "children's shelf." And there were interesting female characters: the clever woman undecieved by Huck's disguise; the young girl whose sorrow at the sale of slaves is grief for a family split rather than conveniences lost.

Nevertheless, for the second time, curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was my original alarm, coupled now with a profoundly distasteful complicity.

† Introduction to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), xxxv-xli. Reprinted by permission of International Creative Management, Inc. Copyright © 1996 by Toni Morrison. Bracketted page references to this Norton Critical Edition have been added after the original references.

Then, in the mid-fifties, I read it again—or sort of read it. Actually I read it through the lenses of Leslie Fiedler and Lionel Trilling. Exposed to Trilling's reverent intimacy and Fiedler's irreverent familiarity, I concluded that their criticisms served me better than the novel had, not only because they helped me see many things I had been unaware of, but precisely because they ignored or rendered trivial the things that caused my unease.

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain's use of the term "nigger" would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eighth-grade class and would have spared all of us (a few blacks, many whites—mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. Name calling is a plague of childhood and a learned activity ripe for discussion as soon as it surfaces. Embarrassing as it had been to hear the dread word spoken, and therefore sanctioned, in class, my experience of Jim's epithet had little to do with my initial nervousness the book had caused. Reading "nigger" hundreds of times embarrassed, bored, annoyed—but did not faze me. In this latest reading I was curious about the source of my alarm—my sense that danger lingered after the story ended. I was powerfully attracted to the combination of delight and fearful agitation lying entwined like crossed fingers in the pages. And it was significant that this novel which had given so much pleasure to young readers was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars.

Usually the divide is substantial: if a story that pleased us as novice readers does not disintegrate as we grow older, it maintains its value only in its retelling for other novices or to summon uncapturable pleasure as playback. Also, the books that academic critics find consistently rewarding are works only partially available to the minds of young readers. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* manages to close that divide, and one of the reasons it requires no leap is that in addition to the reverence the novel stimulates is its ability to transform its contradictions into fruitful complexities and to seem to be deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited. The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it is the argument it raises.

My 1980s reading, therefore, was an effort to track the unease, nail it down, and learn in so doing the nature of my troubled relationship to this classic American work.

Although its language—sardonic, photographic, persuasively aural—and the structural use of the river as control and chaos seem to me quite the major feats of *Huckleberry Finn*, much of the novel's genius lies in its quiescence, the silences that pervade it and give it a porous quality that is by turns brooding and soothing. It lies in the approaches to and exits from action; the byways and inlets seen out of the corner of the eye; the subdued images in which the repetition of a simple word, such as "lone-

some," tolls like an evening bell; the moments when nothing is said, when scenes and incidents swell the heart unbearably precisely because unarticulated, and force an act of imagination almost against the will. Some of the stillness, in the beautifully rendered eloquence of a child, is breathtaking. "The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine" (59)[47]. ". . . it was big trees all about, and gloomy in there amongst them. There was freckled places on the ground where the light sifted down through the leaves, and the freckled places swapped about a little" (61)[49]. Other moments, however, are frightening meditations on estrangement and death. Huck records a conversation he overhears among happy men he cannot see but whose voices travel from the landing over the water to him. Although he details what the men say, it is how distant Huck is from them, how separated he is from their laughing male camaraderie, that makes the scene memorable. References to death, looking at it or contemplating it, are numerous. ". . . this drowned man was just his [Pap's] size, . . . but they couldn't make nothing out of the face . . . floating on his back in the water. . . . took him and buried him on the bank. . . . I knowed mighty well that a drowned man don't float on his back, but on his face" (30)[24]. The emotional management of death seeds the novel: Huck yearns for death, runs from its certainty and feigns it. His deepest, uncomic feelings about his status as an outsider, someone "dead" to society, are murmuring interludes of despair, soleness, isolation and unlove. A plaintive note of melancholy and dread surfaces immediately in the first chapter, after Huck sums up the narrative of his life in a prior book.

Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes. . . . I got so downhearted and scared I did wish I had some company. (2)[16]

Although Huck complains bitterly of rules and regulations, I see him to be running not from external control but from external chaos. Nothing in society makes sense; all is in peril. Upper-class, churchgoing, elegantly housed families annihilate themselves in a psychotic feud, and Huck has to drag two of their corpses from the water—one of whom is a just-made friend, the boy Buck; he sees the public slaughter of a drunk; he hears the vicious plans of murderers on a wrecked steamboat; he spends a large portion of the book in the company of "[Pap's] kind of people" (166)[142]—the fraudulent, thieving Duke and King who wield brutal power over him, just as his father did. No wonder that when he is alone, whether safe in the Widow's house or hiding from his father, he is so very frightened and frequently suicidal.

If the emotional environment into which Twain places his protagonist is dangerous, then the leading question the novel poses for me is, What

does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts? The answer, of course, is Jim. When Huck is among society—whether respectable or deviant, rich or poor—he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its seariness. Yet he is depressed by himself and sees nature more often as fearful. But when he and Jim become the only “we,” the anxiety is outside, not within. “. . . we would watch the lonesomeness of the river . . . for about an hour . . . just solid lonesomeness” (158) [136]. Unmanageable terror gives way to a pastoral, idyllic, intimate timelessness minus the hierarchy of age, status or adult control. It has never seemed to me that, in contrast to the entrapment and menace of the shore, the river itself provides this solace. The consolation, the healing properties Huck longs for, is made possible by Jim’s active, highly vocal affection. It is in Jim’s company that the dread of contemplated nature disappears, that even storms are beautiful and sublime, that real talk—comic, pointed, sad—takes place. Talk so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel.

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point; that no enduring adult fraternity will emerge. Anticipating this loss may have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim. Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in nineteenth-century literature, here, nevertheless, Jim’s portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain’s black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on “actual” blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. There may be more than one reason for this extravagance. In addition to accommodating a racist readership, writing Jim so complete a buffoon solves the problem of “missing” him that would have been unacceptable at the novel’s end, and helps to solve another problem: how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the minstrel paint. The foregone temporariness of the friendship urges the degradation of Jim (to divert Huck’s and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and minstrelizing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood.

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer’s impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. Unarticulated eddies that encourage diving into the novel’s undertow—the real place where writer captures reader. An excellent example of what is available in this undertow is the way Twain comments on the relationship between the antebellum period in which the narrative takes place and the later period

in which the novel was composed. The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel. The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim’s freedom in agonizing play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim’s captivity on into each generation of readers.

Or consider Huck’s inability to articulate his true feelings for Jim to anybody other than the reader. When he “humbles himself” in apology to Jim for the painful joke he plays on him, we are not given the words. Even to Tom, the only other friend he has and the only one his own age, he must mask his emotions. Until the hell-or-heaven choice, Huck can speak of the genuine affection and respect for Jim that blossoms throughout the narrative only aslant, or comically to the reader—never directly to any character or to Jim himself. While Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck’s feelings for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered unimpeachable by Twain’s calculated use of speechlessness. The accumulated silences build to Huck’s ultimate act of love, in which he accepts the endangerment of his soul. These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy—a realistic portrait of how a white child *would* respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative’s complexities and, by the way, highly prophetic descriptions of contemporary negotiations between races.

Consider the void that follows the revelation of Jim as a responsible adult and caring parent in chapter 23. Huck has nothing to say. The chapter does not close; it simply stops. Blanked by eye dialect, placed auspiciously at chapter’s end, held up, framed, as it were, for display by Huck’s refusal to comment, it is one of the most moving remembrances in American literature. Then comes the “meanwhile-back-at-the-ranch” first line of the next chapter. The hush between these two chapters thunders. And its roar is enhanced by Huck’s observation on the preceding page: that although Jim’s desperate love for his wife and children “don’t seem natural,” Huck “reckon[s] it’s so” (201) [170]. This comment is fascinating less for its racism than for the danger it deflects from Huck himself. Huck has never seen nor experienced a tender, caring father—yet he steps out of this well of ignorance to judge Jim’s role as a father.

What I read into this observation and the hiatus that follows Jim’s confirmation of his “naturalness” is that the line of thought Jim’s fatherhood might provoke cannot be pursued by the author or his protagonist (this is Huck’s adventure, not Jim’s). It invites serious speculation about fatherhood—its expectations and ramifications—in the novel. First of all, it’s hard not to notice that except for Judge Thatcher all of the white men who might function as father figures for Huck are ridiculed for their hypocrisy, corruption, extreme ignorance and/or violence. Thus Huck’s “no comment” on Jim’s status as a father works either as a comfortable evasion for or as a critique of a white readership, as well as being one of the gags Twain shoves in Huck’s mouth to protect him from the line of thought neither he nor Twain can safely pursue.

As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim’s confession and regret about parental negli-

gence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck's desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions. If the runaway Huck discovered on the island had been a white convict with protective paternal instincts, none of this would work, for there could be no guarantee of control and no games-playing nonsense concerning his release at the end. Only a black male slave can deliver all Huck desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him—but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father figure would demand. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free. This delicate, covert and fractious problematic is thus hidden and exposed by litotes and speechlessness, both of which are dramatic ways of begging attention.

Concerning this matter of fatherhood, there are two other instances of silence—one remarkable for its warmth, the other for its glacial coldness. In the first, Jim keeps silent for practically four-fifths of the book about having seen Pap's corpse. There seems no reason for this withholding except his concern for Huck's emotional well-being. Although one could argue that knowing the menace of his father was over might relieve Huck enormously, it could also be argued that dissipating that threat would remove the principal element of the necessity for escape—Huck's escape, that is. In any case, silence on this point persists and we learn its true motive in the penultimate paragraph in the book. And right there is the other speech void—cold and shivery in its unsaying. Jim tells Huck that his money is safe because his father is dead.

"Doan, you 'member de house dat was float'n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn' let you come in? . . . dat wuz him" (365–66) [295]. Huck says and thinks nothing about it. The following sentence, we are to believe, is Huck's very next thought: "Tom's most well now. . . ."

As a reader I am relieved to know Pap is no longer a menace to his son's well-being, but Huck does not share my relief. Again the father business is crased. What after all could Huck say? That he is as glad as I am? That would not do. Huck's decency prevents him from taking pleasure in anybody's death. That he is sorry? Wishes his father were alive? Hardly. The whole premise of escape while fearing and feigning death would collapse, and the contradiction would be unacceptable. Instead the crevice widens and beckons reflection on what this long-withheld information means. Any comment at this juncture, positive or negative, would lay bare the white father/white son animosity and harm the prevailing though illicit black father/white son bonding that has already taken place.

Such profoundly realized and significant moments, met with startling understatement or shocking absence of any comment at all, constitute the entrances I mentioned earlier—the invitation Twain offers that I could not refuse.

Earlier I posed the question. What does Huck need to live without despair and thoughts of suicide? My answer was, Jim. There is another question the novel poses for me: What would it take for Huck to live hap-

pily without Jim? That is the problem that gnarts the dissolution of their relationship. The freeing of Jim is withheld, fructified, top-heavy with pain, because without Jim there is no more book, no more story to tell.

There is a moment when it could have happened, when Jim, put ashore at Cairo, would have gone his way, leaving Huck to experience by himself the other adventures that follow. The reasons they miss Cairo are: there are only saplings to secure the raft; the raft tears away; Huck "couldn't budge" for half a minute; Huck forgets he has tied the canoe, can't "hardly do anything" with his hands and loses time releasing it; they are enveloped in a "solid white fog"; and for a reason even Huck doesn't understand, Jim does not do what is routine in foggy weather—beat a tin pan to signal his location (115–16) [91–92]. During the separation Huck notes the "dismal and lonesome" scene and searches for Jim until he is physically exhausted. Readers are as eager as he is to locate Jim, but when he does, receiving Jim's wild joy, Huck does not express his own. Rather Twain writes in the cruel joke that first sabotages the easily won relief and sympathy we feel for Jim, then leads Huck and us to a heightened restoration of his stature. A series of small accidents prevents Jim's exit from the novel, and Huck is given the gift of an assesting as well as already loving black father. It is to the father, not the nigger, that he "humbles" himself.

So there will be no "adventures" without Jim. The risk is too great. To Huck and to the novel. When the end does come, when Jim is finally, tortuously, unnecessarily freed, able now to be a father to his own children, Huck runs. Not back to the town—even if it is safe now—but a further run, for the "territory." And if there are complications out there in the world, Huck, we are to assume, is certainly ready for them. He has had a first-rate education in social and individual responsibility, and it is interesting to note that the lessons of his growing but secret activism begin to be punctuated by speech, not silence, by moves toward truth, rather than quick lies.

When the King and Duke auction Peter Wilks's slaves, Huck is moved by the sorrow of Wilks's nieces—which is caused not by losing the slaves but by the blasting of the family:

. . . along about noon-time, the girls' joy got the first jolt. A couple of nigger-traders come along, and the king sold them the niggers reasonable, for three-day, drafts as they called it, and away they went, the two sons up the river to Memphis, and their mother down the river to Orleans. I thought them poor girls and them niggers would break their hearts for grief; they cried around each other, and took on so it most made me down sick to see it. The girls said they hadn't ever dreamed of seeing the family separated or sold away from the town. . . .

The thing made a big stir in the town, too, and a good many come out flatfooted and said it was scandalous to separate the mother and the children that way. (234–35) [195].

Later, when Huck sees Mary Jane Wilks with "her face in her hands, crying," he knows what is bothering her even before he asks her to tell him about it. "And it was the niggers—I just expected it." I think it is

important to note that he is responding to the separation of parents and children. When Mary Jane sobs, "Oh, dear, dear, to think they ain't ever going to see each other any more!" Huck reacts so strongly he blurts out a part of the truth just to console her. "But they *will*—and inside of two weeks—and I *know* it" (240) [198]. Her dismay over the most grotesque consequences of slavery catapults him into one of his most mature and difficult decisions—to abandon silence and chance the truth.

The change from underground activist to vocal one marks Huck's other important relationship—that between himself and Tom Sawyer, to whom Huck has always been subservient. Huck's cooperation in Jim's dehumanization is not total. It is pierced with mumbling disquiet as the degradation becomes more outré. "That warn't the plan"; "there ain't no necessity for it"; "we're going to get into trouble with Aunt Polly"; ". . . if you'll take my advice"; "what's the sense in . . ."; "Confound it, it's foolish, Tom"; "Jim's too old. . . . He won't last"; "How long will it take?"; "it's one of the most jackass ideas I ever struck." But these objections are not enough. Our apprehension as we follow the free fall of the father is only mildly subdued by our satisfaction at the unmanicled exit of the freedman. Tom Sawyer's silence about Jim's legal status is perverse. So perverse that the fact that Huck never speaks of or considers returning to his hometown to carry on with his erstwhile best friend (this time in safety *and* with money of his own) but wants to leave civilization altogether is more than understandable. Huck cannot have an enduring relationship with Jim; he refuses one with Tom.

The source of my unease reading this amazing, troubling book now seems clear: an imperfect coming to terms with three matters Twain addresses—Huck Finn's estrangement, soleness and morbidity as an outcast child; the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim's and his relationship; and the secrecy in which Huck's engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society is necessarily conducted. It is also clear that the rewards of my effort to come to terms have been abundant. My alarm, aroused by Twain's precise rendering of childhood's fear of death and abandonment, remains—as it should. It has been extremely worthwhile slogging through Jim's shame and humiliation to recognize the sadness, the tragic implications at the center of his relationship with Huck. My fury at the maze of deceit, the risk of personal harm that a white child is forced to negotiate in a race-inflected society, is dissipated by the exquisite uses to which Twain puts that maze, that risk.

Yet the larger question, the danger that sifts from the novel's last page, is whether Huck, minus Jim, will be able to stay those three monstergestalters as he enters the "territory." Will that undefined space, so falsely imagined as "open," be free of social chaos, personal morbidity, and further moral complications embedded in adulthood and citizenship? Will it be free not only of nightmare fathers but of dream fathers too? Twain did not write Huck there. He imagined instead a reunion—Huck, Jim and Tom, soaring in a balloon over Egypt.

For a hundred years, the argument that this novel is has been identified, reidentified, examined, waged and advanced. What it cannot be is dismissed. It is classic literature, which is to say it heaves, manifests and lasts.

Mark Twain: A Chronology

- 1835 Samuel Langhorne Clemens born November 30 in Florida, Missouri, to Jane Lampton Clemens and John Marshall Clemens.
- 1835–46 Though financially strapped, John Clemens, a justice of the peace, is a pillar of the community in Florida and nearby Hannibal, to which the family moves in 1839.
- 1847–52 John Clemens dies. Sam is apprenticed to a Hannibal printer, Joseph P. Ament. Writes early sketch, "A Gallant Fireman," for his brother Orion's newspaper, *The Western Union*.
- 1853–57 Works as printer and reporter in St. Louis; New York; Philadelphia; Keokuk, Iowa; and Cincinnati. Publishes three "Thomas Jefferson Snodgrass" letters in *Keokuk Post*.
- 1857–61 Apprenticed to Horace Bixby, senior pilot of the riverboat *Paul Jones*. Earns his pilot's license in April 1859. Forced to give up his new career when Union gunboats close the river to commercial traffic.
- 1861–64 Tries soldiering for two weeks with a group of Confederate volunteers, the Marion Rangers. Travels by stage-coach with Orion Clemens to the Nevada Territory, where he attempts to stake a timber claim and to prospect for silver. Gives up prospecting and returns to his old trade as a reporter on the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada. In February 1863, begins signing his articles "Mark Twain."
- 1864–66 Moves to San Francisco as a reporter for the *Morning Call*. On November 18, the *New York Saturday Press* publishes "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog," a tall tale that is pirated by newspapers across the country, helping to make Mark Twain famous. Spends four months in Hawaii, returning to San Francisco to lecture on the "Sandwich Islands." Sails to New York as a correspondent for the *San Francisco Alta Californian*.
- 1867–68 Visits Europe and the Holy Land on the ship *Quaker City*; the trip is the inspiration for *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). Lectures on his adventures.
- 1869–71 Lives in Buffalo and becomes a dues-paying member of the Young Men's Association (Y.M.A.), whose library curator will later receive the manuscript of *Huckleberry Finn*. In February 1870, marries Olivia Langdon, the