

Heroic Imagination Stories Series

Huck Finn

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Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, A Norton Critical Edition, ed. Thomas Cooley, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999.



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has aroused controversy from the time that it was published. The Springfield *Republican* in March 1885 praised the Concord public library for banning the book, saying that it is “trashy and vicious,” “a bitter...satire on the weaknesses of humanity” that “degenerates into a gross trifling with every fine feeling.” In 1984, a public school official, John H. Wallace, who opposed the teaching of the book at the Mark Twain Intermediate school in Fairfax County, Virginia, called the book, “the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written.” On the other hand, David L. Smith, in “Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse,” argues to the contrary that *Huckleberry Finn* is without peer among Euro-American novels “for its explicitly antiracist stance.” “the Negro,” Smith says, 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*.” [underline mine] Toni Morrison, who calls *Huckleberry Finn* “This Amazing, Troubling Book,” largely agrees with Smith



and says that demands to remove the novel from public libraries and the required reading lists of public schools strike her as “a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children.” J. D. Salinger, the author of one of the best novels of the twentieth century, the socially satirical *The Catcher in the Rye*, told, as Twain’s book is, from the perspective of an adolescent boy, believed *Huckleberry Finn* to be the greatest American novel.



Critics who restrict their understanding of the book to the question of whether the use of the word, “nigger,” regardless of the context in which it is used or the speaker using it, in itself constitutes racism on the part of the author miss the point. Mark Twain has created TWO unforgettable heroes in this novel, one white and one black. Jim, the slave who is escaping being “sold down the river” by his owner, Miss Watson, sacrifices his freedom and his hope of ever being reunited with his family, to help and nurse Huck Finn’s wounded friend, Tom Sawyer. Huck sacrifices what he has been taught, and fervently believes to be, his only hope of salvation in the afterlife for Jim’s sake. “There was the Sunday School [that]...learnt you... that people that acts as I been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.” Fully acknowledging the power upon him of that “Christian” teaching, Huck, who has thought to betray Jim in a letter to his owner, bravely decides, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” and tears the letter up.

In addition to providing us with two heroes, Twain gives us a lesson in what a false hero is. From the beginning of the novel, when Tom Sawyer play-acts the adventures of heroes in books, to the very end, when he proposes escaping down the river to free Jim, whom he already *knows* has been emancipated by the repentant Miss Watson, Tom Sawyer exemplifies the commonly held false conception of what a hero is. In the beginning he forms a “gang” who will enact his romantic fantasies.

‘ what’s the line of business of this Gang’
 ‘Nothing only robbery and murder,’ Tom said.
 ‘But who are we going to rob? Houses—or cattle—or—’
 ‘Stuff! stealing cattle and such things ain’t robbery, it’s burglary,’ says Tom Sawyer. ‘We ain’t burglars. That ain’t no sort of style. We are high-waymen. We stop stages on

the road, with masks on, and kill people and take their watches and money.’ (21)

At the end he justifies his plan to free a man who is already free.

‘The first time I caught Tom, private, I asked him what was his idea, time of the evasion?—what it was he’d planned to do if the evasion [i.e., spiriting away a supposedly enslaved Jim] worked all right and he managed to set a nigger free that was already free before? And he said, what he had planned in his head, from the start, if we got Jim out all safe, was for us to run him down the river, on the raft, and have adventures plumb to the mouth of the river, and tell him about his being free, and take him back home on a steamboat, in style, and pay him for his lost time, and write word ahead, and get out all the niggers around, and have them waltz him into town with a torchlight procession, and a brass band, and then he would be a hero, and so would we.” [underline mine] (294)

Tom Sawyer is a hero-manque. He seeks the “show,” the spectacle of what he thinks is heroism. Huck and Jim know better. They become heroes quietly, in the full knowledge that by their actions they are risking their lives and their freedom. They have learned the hard way what an escape to freedom entails. As Robert Harris, in another context, has said,

...any rash fool can be a hero if he sets no value on his life and hasn’t the wit to appreciate danger. But to understand the risks, perhaps even to flinch at first, but then to summon strength to face them down—that in my opinion is the most commendable form of valor... (*Conspirata*, 53)

It is precisely their possession of such valor that makes Huck and Jim heroes

In response to the critics who think that Twain’s satire is designed to denigrate African-Americans, it must be argued that throughout the book the objects of his scorn are not African Americans, but are rather, all the “respectable” people, all the hypocritical “Christians” who give lip service to a superficial conception of Christianity while they exploit and brutalize their fellow human beings. Twain openly shows the outright inhumanity in Southern society--i.e., Huck’s violent abusive



father, the Duke and the Dauphin, the feuding “aristocratic Grangerfords and Shephersons, —but, more skillfully, he uses ironic satire to lay bare the utter hypocrisy of the “kindly” people, those whose consciences are satisfied if they express the slightest recognition that a slave is a thinking, feeling human person. For example, when the doctor, “a very nice, kind looking old man,” who has treated the wounded Tom, attempts to lessen the fury of Jim’s cruel captors, and “speak[s] up” for Jim, he says,

‘Don’t be no rougher on him than you’re obleeged to, because he ain’t a bad nigger. When I got to where I found the boy, I see I couldn’t cut the bullet out without some help, and he warn’t in no condition for me to leave, to go and get help... {Then] out crawls this nigger from somewheres, and says he’ll help; and he done it, too, and done it very well....I never see a nigger that was a better nuss [nurse] or faithfully, and yet he was risking his freedom to do it. I liked the nigger for that; I tell you, gentlemen, a nigger like that is worth a thousand dollars—and kind treatment too. (289)

Yet even though the doctor acknowledges Jim’s heroic action and deep compassion, and adds to his assessment of Jim—first as an object having considerable commercial value, and only, second as a man of virtue— a weak plea for less brutal treatment of Jim, it was nevertheless the doctor himself who handed a helpless Jim over to the slave catchers:

...as good luck would have it, the nigger was setting by the pallet [where the wounded boy is lying] with his head propped on his knees, sound asleep; so I motioned them in, quiet, and they slipped up on him and grabbed him and tied him before he knowed what he was about, and we had no trouble....He ain’t no bad nigger, gentlemen; that’s what I think about him. (289)

It amazes me that anybody could fail to recognize the scalding irony with which Twain exposes the “nice” doctor. Far from denigrating African-Americans, Twain shows them to be by far the moral superiors of their owners. For example, Miss Watson, who, although she treats Jim “pooty rough,” has promised him that she would never “sell [him] down to Orleans,” is finally tempted by sheer greed to break her promise:

I hear ole missus tell de wider she gwyne to



sell me down to Orleans, she didn' want to, but
she could git eight hund'd dollars for me, en it
'uz sich a big stack o' money she couldn' resis.

Jim, on the other hand, not only surrenders his chance of escape to nurse a white boy Tom Sawyer, but from the very beginning of their journey to the last moment when he keeps silence to keep a promise he has made, he treats Huck with a protective, loving care which no white person has shown him. When he thinks Huck is lost on the swollen river, he *swims after the raft* for more than a mile to catch up with him. When he finds Huck, he weeps with joy. Indeed, Jim becomes Huck's surrogate father, an almost angelic counterpart to the ignorant, mindlessly cruel devil who actually fathered him.



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn lays bare a society in which two powerless heroes resist complicity with a thoroughly pervasive, almost universal immorality, that was bred by the “peculiar institution,” slavery. In my judgment Twain wrote this book because he distrusted the power of the Emancipation Proclamation or any of the laws enacted during the Reconstruction period—the time he was writing-- to uproot or even to challenge the deeply rooted, socially and religiously sanctioned, bigotry that pervades American culture.

A very brief summary of the plot:



Caught between the confining strictures of the two elderly women, who are trying to “sivilize” and educate him, and the irrational brutality of his drunken father, Huck escapes imprisonment in a shack where his father has been holding him. He ingeniously kills a wild pig, smears its blood in a trail to the river, loads down the sack in which he has put the dead pig, and throws it in the river. His plan is to convince his father and the

whole town that he has been murdered by an intruder. The plan works. While the townspeople are shooting a cannon over the water in an effort to make “Huck’s dead body” rise to the surface, Huck is hiding out on Jackson Island, where he lives a totally satisfying life of liberty.



On the island he finds Jim, a fugitive slave. Because the searchers for the slave are getting too close, Huck and Jim take off down the river on a raft that the roiling currents of the river have washed up to them. Huck and Jim have a great number of harrowing escapes from detection and a variety of wild adventures as they float Southward down the river. Sharing mutual fear as well as mutual joy in their natural surroundings and each other, they become fast friends. After a series of adventures—including Huck’s dressing up as a girl to get provisions on land, helping a pair of lovers, separated by their families’ violent, senseless feud, to

escape over the river and get married, and finally meeting and temporarily teaming up with a pair of con men, the “Dauphin” and the “Duke.” With the entrance of the two charlatans, Twain’s satire becomes extremely broad; its targets are the rascals as well as the ignorant townspeople who are taken in by them. In these episodes satire is purely comical; the inhabitants of the small towns that line the river are foolish and ignorant, but they are not evil.

Huck and Jim escape the company of the two rogues and resume their journey down the river. Then, while Huck leaves the raft to try to discover where they are, Jim is taken by the Phelps family, who lock him away in a cabin. “Aunt Sally” Phelps is the aunt of Tom Sawyer. She has been waiting for Tom who was sent to visit. When Tom is delayed and Huck appears, Aunt Sally thinks Huck is Tom, and Huck assumes that identity. When Tom does arrive, his response to seeing Huck is exactly what Jim’s initial response was on meeting Huck on Jackson island; i.e., he thinks Huck is a ghost come to



haunt him—so much for the innate susceptibility and superstition of African Americans. Tom catches on to the ruse and assumes a false identity, saying that he is William Thomson from Ohio. Tom resolves to free Jim from captivity and to join Huck and Jim on the raft. Tom hatches a very complicated plan to save Jim, which entails stealing various items from Aunt Sally that they will need in the escape. To distract attention on the night of the planned escape, Tom writes an anonymous letter to the Phelps's saying, "There is a desprate gang of cutthroats from over in the Ingean Territory going to steal your runaway nigger tonight. In consequence, just as they are about to free Jim, a group of armed townsmen come to catch the gang. Tom, Huck and Jim flee, but Tome gets shot in the leg. Hence, the appearance of the "kindly doctor" and the brutality of the men who have recaptured Jim. It is not until Tom's Aunt Polly appears and the wounded bed-ridden Tom learns that the slave catchers are about to seize Jim, that we learn that Jim has been free all along, and, what is more Tom *has known* that Jim was emancipated by a repentant Miss Watson. The book ends with Huck's resolution to light out for the Territories.

Tentative Lesson Plan

1. Why does Pap insist that Huck must not go to school?

Answer: Pap thinks that because Huck has learned to read and write he feels superior to his father. This is a good opportunity to discuss the problem as it exists to this day, i.e., in some ethnic groups parents resist schooling (especially higher education) for their children because they believe that, once educated, their children will despise them, or will become alienated from them.

2. When the raft has been grounded and Huck tells Aunt Sally that a steamboat has been wrecked, Aunt Sally responds in this way,

"Goodness gracious! Anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well it's lucky; because sometimes people get hurt."

What does this exchange tell us about the way in which Whites perceive Blacks at this period in history?

Answer: Black slaves are commodities only. An African American slave had NO identity. Often in wills and "Slave Schedules" (i.e., census of slaves) they are listed only by first name (or, worse, by a number) and price.





3. What are the “King” and the “Duke” doing in the novel, i.e., what function do these characters have in the whole?

Answer: They are used to show us the incredulity and ignorance of people living in rural areas.

4. What does their fate (being tarred and feathered and ridden out of town on a rail) tell us?

Answer: Incredulity turns into violence. Because the townspeople feel they have been fooled—and led to fool themselves (and consequently made to appear inferior to the tricksters), they become a mob, easily subject to mindless rage. See p. 182. As the dead Wilkes doctor puts it,

“the ignorant tramp, with his idiotic Greek and Hebrew as he calls it. He is the thinnest kind of imposter—has come here with a lot of empty names and facts which he has picked up somewhere, and you take them for *proofs*, and are helped to fool yourselves by these foolish friends here, who ought to know better.

5. What does Twain have to tell us about the mob mentality that led to lynching?

Answer: See Sherburn’s speech to the crowd on p.162.

“The average man don’t like trouble and danger. But if only half a man [the leader of the mob]..shouts ‘Lynch him, lynch him! you’re afraid to back down—afraid you’ll be found out to be what you are—*cowards* --and so you raise a yell, and hang on to that half-a-man’s coat tail and come raging up here, swearing what big things you’re going to do. The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that’s what an army is—a mob; they don’t fight with courage that’s born in them, but with courage that’s borrowed from their mass.”

****Here you should use and discuss Philip Zimbardo’s articles on the anonymity of individuals in a mob which leads to violence.**

6. What does Twain tell us about money? Its use and abuse, and the status it confers upon one who has it?

Answer: See Miss Watson’s reason for wanting to sell Jim. See Pap’s use and abuse of money. See the SheGrangerford and Sherburn feud. See the episodes concerning the “King” and the “Duke,” and their desire to “make up the defisit.”

7. What is Twain’s view of organized religion?



Answers: See throughout. For example, consider Huck's terror of the hell to which he is bound for saving Jim. Consider the "King" and "Duke" as Evangelists. Consider the widow's teaching Huck about "Moses and the Bulrushers" and Huck's response to the story ("I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people.") And Miss Watson's misreading of Scripture; i.e., She misunderstands the meaning of the word "closet" in the admonition to retire to your closet [bedroom] to pray, rather than proclaiming your prayers in public to show how good you are, so she teaches Huck in a literal closet.

***Here is the place to discuss the Southern slave-owners' religious justifications for slavery. Especially the "Children of Ham" argument.*

8. How does Twain portray Tom Sawyer in this book, as opposed to his earlier *Tom Sawyer*?

Answer: Here Tom is portrayed as a dangerous fantasist and a poseur. Huck's admiration of Tom is shown to be misplaced. His feeling that Tom is superior to him is his error.

9. What is Twain's attitude toward women in this novel? How does he portray them?

Answer: They are generally sweet-natured but dumb. They clearly are shown to need a man's hand to guide them. These attitudes—prevalent in 19th Century America (as well as England, France, Germany, etc.)—are clearly in direct contradiction of the fact that women showed remarkable strength, courage, and intelligence as they set out in covered wagons to settle the West. Discuss the reasons—particularly political and economic—for thinking of women as pretty, stupid, delicate flowers. Cui Bono?

10. What does the use of Southern dialect add to the novel? especially considering that the dialect words, though different in spelling, sound exactly as they do in Standard English.

Answer: This should be a completely open discussion. Students should be encouraged to consider the place of dialect in contemporary America; for example Spanglish, Eubonics, etc.

Learning Assignment for the Huck Finn Essay





Write a two-page essay: Reflect on racism, sexism, and other oppressive and hateful forces at work during Huck Finn’s adventures. If Huck were alive today and took a journey somewhere in the U.S., what would be the parallels in his past and current “adventures”? Choose a geography for his journey and describe what you think will be re-occurrences in his past and present journey and what adventures will be markedly different.

