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Twain Tries His Hand at Jarring
or
Why Critics of *Huck Finn* Just Have To Grow Up

by Justin Katz

Growing Up.

I grew up with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* Predictable, yes, but true. What's more, I dare say that a large part of my general aesthetic, where aesthetics can be said to intermingle with morality in youth (i.e.—what just *feels* right), was influenced by that trip down the river. Oh I loved *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, too, but when I played St. Petersburg, I always took the role of Huck. I liked to see myself as the outcast kid who still managed to get things right on occasion. The "get things right" part was the important one to me... I've never much liked being an outcast, contrary to the historically recent pleasure that the "bourgeoisie" has derived from playing at being downtrodden as indicated by the mainstream popularity of grunge music, rap, film noire, and an ever increasing "Other."[1] In this respect, I never subscribed to the simplistic reading of Huckleberry as the image of adolescent freedom, the "cool" waif, but to that of Huck as the sensitive boy who is truly concerned with interpersonal relationships and in whom the reader cannot but sense a progression toward a more "mature" (in our current sense of the word) morality, until, of course, the controversial ending (perhaps this is why, as a youngster, I could never quite understand the closing sentiment of the book). I suppose that, for our society as a whole, the "get things right" aspect has been of diminishing importance to the point at which

merely the fact of being a gangster, or a mobster, or a mass murderer is "cool." It would make for an interesting study to trace the progression that led from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield to Dean Moriarty to... well, I'm getting off the topic. I was leading to a defense of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, not *because* of my history with the book, although the impetus for the defense was undoubtedly formed there, but, as I will try to make evident, *in spite* of it.

I find it ironic that the philosophy that leads to much of the caustic criticism of Mark Twain's most famous book, that of escaping from the mores of "sivilization," seems largely derived from the very interpretation of the book's "philosophy" that incites the criticism (or at least the philosophies of each are derived from related sources), like a student who dismisses Thomas Jefferson's original draft of *The Declaration of Independence* because he owned slaves or a teenager who attacks a capitalist parent without considering that his or her affected socialism is a privilege bought by the capitalism against which it fights.[2] The question of the book is hardly addressed without at least a glancing mention of the fact that the book has been hyper-canonized, making an attack on *Huck Finn* into some symbolic assault on the literary status quo. Perhaps to buttress the link between *Huck Finn* and that terrible and oppressive canon,[3] a legion of critics sees *Huck Finn* as a more honest, albeit possibly subconscious, statement of Mark Twain's view on "race" and slavery than his statement that "the shame" of slavery "is ours," meaning "whites."[4] Surely, it may be possible to see this as yet another contradiction from the man who seemed to have a different persona for each of his societal and professional roles. Or, without insisting that one statement must prove true to Twain's ideology at the expense of the other, it is also possible to interpret the dual statements as contradictory while equally honest. Since contradiction proves nothing in and of itself, however, not even that contradiction is the rule for a particular person (because in order to remain uniformly contradictory, he or she would

have to be *un*contradictory in some area, thus not being uniformly contradictory), the first question must still be whether or not there is one after all.

There is with *Huck Finn*, as with any book of renown, an almost unlimited supply of potential "contradictions" and controversies. Given the existence of at least a mention of more than one character in even the most liberally tinted book, there will be critics who search for sexual, sexist, classist, or racial undertones of dominance and subjection.[5] The two major controversies over *Huck Finn* are unarguably those of "race" and the ending. I would, however, suggest that these *two* controversies are really *one*, because not only will the most successful comment on either take the other into consideration, but a position on one at least implies a position on the other. This is to say that a critic who dislikes the ending will likely do so because of the change in tone, style, theme... just plain direction of the novel, and that direction has largely to do with Huck's (or Twain's) treatment of Jim. From the other direction, a problem with the book's racial ideology will likely begin with the ending and follow the strains suggested there through the beginning: had the book ended in a way that would have circumvented either controversy, any racist aspects of the beginning would be forgiven by the justification of "development."

But the book ends as it does, and therefore has evoked some of the most vehement debates in the history of criticism: some statements of which stand in direct contradiction to the usual habits of the critics who write them. Faced with a heated discussion about *Huck Finn*, professors who have previously espoused disruption for disruption's sake regardless of sense or artistry will suddenly suggest that studying the "disruption" caused by *Huck Finn* cannot do otherwise than lead to an inordinate amount of ill-will because the book itself is a failure, and critics who specialize in the use of *motivation* and *intention* to deconstruct heroes will remove

Mark Twain entirely from their criticism.[6] I believe that much of the controversy over *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is founded on a willful lack of deliberation over what it was that Mark Twain was actually trying to do, and that what is often considered to be the failure of the book is actually the success that defines its meaning.

***First a look at a zealously typical criticism of* Huck Finn.**

As made clear by his essay, "Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," Julius Lester does not like *Huckleberry Finn*; and that's just fine by me. If he doesn't want his children to have to read it, far be it from me to say that they must. As a rhetorical tool meant to convince a reader of his point of view, Lester's argument uses emotion to good effect, and blind emotion may convince people who are already in agreement, but if he *really* wants "white males" to "recognize" that *Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn* "is a dismal portrait of the white male psyche" (his stated goal for the essay) [7] then he should have been more thorough.[8] Lester's complaint is unarguably against what he sees as a racist book, but he attempts to broaden the scope of his argument by suggesting that "racism is not the most insidious and damaging of the book's flaws." (346). This attempt to add targets to his attack so that he might be less open to accusations of bias is unnecessary and surreptitious.[9] If the book is racist, then it would be perfectly moral to a racist reader. If it is immoral, then it is so predominantly because of its racism (especially in the way questions of morality are handled by Lester).

According to Lester, *Huck Finn* is "immoral in its major premises, one of which demeans blacks and insults history" (342), and his very first example is Twain's "odious parallel" between Huck's ordeal with his father and slavery (342). "A boy held captive by a drunken father is not in the same category of human experience as a man enslaved." (343). Ignoring the fact that

Lester conveniently forgets to mention that Huck's Pap chased him around with a knife trying to kill him, forcing Huck to sleep with a gun pointed at his own father,[10] and realizing how taboo what I'm about to say is, I'd suggest that the fact of being owned contains a spectrum of "human experiences," some of which wouldn't have been more terrorizing than Huck's tribulation. Of course slavery was "a horror," but Huck wasn't forced to take a "time-out," he was nearly killed by, and was nearly forced to kill, his own father! I imagine that Lester might suggest that, being a "white" boy at the end of the 1900s, I can only *imagine* what it would be like just to be owned regardless of treatment (and that only poorly as evidenced by my support of Huck); but then, he's in the same boat isn't he? Having never been owned, himself, he, quite literally, can *only* imagine. I do not mean to minimize the impact of the experience of 20th century racism, but that is not the issue at hand, and, in several ways, in a different "category" than slavery. The relationship is certainly closer between these latter two experiences than between either and that of Huck, but they are still not identical situations. I believe that in order for two experiences to be "parallel" they would *have* to be in different "categories." By rejecting this geometrical fact of the word *parallel*'s inherent analogy, Lester undermines any chance of "white males" ever recognizing their "dismal psyche" by disallowing their ability to perceive beyond of their position: saying as much as, "they can never understand our suffering, and any reference that they can find in their own experience would be an insult." But if "whites" can never understand, and any attempt (by finding a parallel experience) would be an insult, how can they be expected to even try?

I, for one, would like to try to relate to Lester's conclusion enough to understand it, but, as it turns out, he has made it a nearly insurmountable task because he repeatedly fails to follow what can be our only common ground in this case: the text (I say this with a recently cultivated

understanding that the project of the day in literary criticism is to prove that everything, even what is seen as factual, is culturally relative, but respond by suggesting that since, flawed as it may be, discourse is our only method of literary communication, a person who couches his or her opinion in a discussion of a particular book ought to consider the actual printed words to be, as I've said, a common ground and the battle to be waged over the interpretation of those words). A key aspect of Lester's complaint against Twain is his *intentional* racism, which, as such, ought to be readily apparent. "Twain *applies* a veneer to slavery" (342); he "*willfully* refused to understand" (343); "Twain *wants*" us to accept the impossible actions of his characters (343); he has a "contempt for blacks" (344); "Twain doesn't care about the lives the slaves actually lived" (345); and, somehow, he also "holds [Huck] in contempt" (348).[11] What I'm trying to show is that Lester's complaint centers around what Twain *wanted*, what he *consciously* placed in his novel specifically for the purpose of being decipherable to the reader. For this reason, when Lester states that "Jim clearly is not... a human being [as] emphasized by the *fact* that Miss Watson's will frees Jim but makes no mention of his wife and children" (345, emphasis added) without addressing the *fact* that she didn't own Jim's wife and children, he is evincing a lack of concern for the words that Twain actually wrote. Yes, Lester is not literally wrong: as far as the reader knows, Miss Watson's will did not make the mention that he desires. She *could have* mentioned it (perhaps in the context of giving Jim the money with which to buy them), but not only is this justification of Lester's error a bit of a stretch, it snaps entirely when it is considered that the fact of Jim's freedom is related by Tom, a character who would have neither ability nor motivation to enumerate the terms of the document that set Jim free. In similar fashion, that Miss Watson would free Jim despite the suspicion that he might have killed Huck doesn't seem to be a "fairy tale... about themselves" that "[w]hite people want to believe" (345) when it is

considered that the last information that the reader has about the controversy is that many people in St. Petersburg were returning to the idea that Pap was the murderer. It doesn't seem, to me, to be illusory that a woman who would consider freeing her slaves at all *and* was personally familiar with the previous activities of Huck's Pap would fall on the "Pap did it" side.

This point is minor, however, compared to the more thematically central defiances of logic that Lester believes Twain to have *wanted* the reader to accept as plausible, such as the idea that Jim wouldn't have known that Illinois and Iowa were free states (343). In this particular instance, Twain makes of point of letting the reader know that Jim *does* possess this knowledge. Jim knows that he could be tracked if he tried, by land, to escape through Missouri (the only place to which he could go by this means being Iowa to the north); he also states that "ef [he] stole a skift to cross over [the river], dey'd miss dat skift, you see, en dey'd know 'bout whah [he]'d lan' on de yuther side en whah to pick up [his] track" (66), thus letting the reader know that landing in Illinois was not the end of the chase. Given this information, it's perfectly plausible that he would choose the Cairo route. Yes, he could have avoided the problem of a missing "skift" had he swum from Jackson Island to Illinois, but he would still run the risk of being followed (as well as the physical demand of hoofing it across the state). By river there could be no tracks. Moreover, the only way that the Cairo route would make any sense as a means of escape is if Jim *did* know that Illinois was free, so it wouldn't be too much trouble to catch a "steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States" (95). It is, intentionally I think, a different question to ask why Jim continued southward after missing Cairo, but, for now, this question is intricate and off-topic enough for me to confine my answer to two thoughts on the subject: 1) a string of difficulties, beginning with the loss of their canoe (106), leads straight through the remainder of the book, and 2) an origin of some of the more dubious difficulties

(such as the first, the disappearance of the canoe) need not be evidence of Twain's hope that the reader will suspend belief when the reader does not attempt to entirely discount the famous relationship that was developing between the *two* fugitives, one of whom was a boy with one remaining friend who, as Lester would, I'm sure, readily admit, could not comprehend the terror of the adult's predicament. Let it suffice, for the moment, to say that, ultimately, it is Lester, through his failure to notice how much Jim really does know and understand, who sees the character in a derogatory way.

So what of *Huck Finn*'s morality (or lack thereof)? In my opinion, Lester's ground is equally infirm on this count and his stance is even more insidious and less forgivable than his cry of racism. Relying on John Gardner's *On Moral Fiction*, Lester attacks what he sees as Twain's *intentional* (again) lack of egalitarian character development and his construction of a dangerous type of hero: the eternal adolescent (mostly dangerous, according to Lester, in the hands of "white" males, who must "recognize" the fact because "[a]ll of us suffer the consequences as long as they do not" [348]). Lester uses Gardner's words to define "true art":

> True art is *by its nature* moral. We recognize true art by its careful, thoroughly honest search for and analysis of values. It is not didactic because, instead of teaching by authority and force, it explores, open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach... and rouses trustworthy feelings about the better and the worse in human action.[12]

Even leaving uncounted that Gardner himself cites *Huck Finn* as an example of the good old days of literary morality despite the complications of its dialect (97), it seems as if Lester conveniently overlooks aspects of Gardner's point that might serve to complicate matters. Perhaps I am being too harsh here, because Lester's argument does spawn from the ideology laid

forth, in part, by Gardner, but it doesn't seem that he's interested in probing that ideology in its completion. Consider one of Gardner's proposed testing methods for "moral art":

> ...a Republican reader should not be personally offended by some character's unfair attack on Eisenhower. We allow characters to be themselves; we delight in their foolishness; but if the reader knows in his bones that the attack is [the author's] own, that [he] cares more about his political opinion than he does about maintaining the artistic illusion of a coherent, self-sustained fictional world, then the reader has good reason for throwing out the book. (92)

At first this test may seem to be evidence against Twain, and perhaps we find, here, Lester's impetus for so stringently trying to show the immoral strands of *Huck Finn* as intentionally installed by the author. Given Gardner's statement, however, I would suggest that the "immoral" strains of *Huck Finn* are *not* Twain's, so the work would not fall into the category that is to be thrown out (even Lester suggests that Twain holds Huck, his supposed hero, "in contempt," as I'll address in a moment). In response, Lester might say that Twain's agenda, whatever it may have been, led him to break the "illusion of a coherent, self-sustained fictional world"; but this would either bring us back to the points that he missed in regards to racism, or push us forward too quickly to the controversial ending. It has also been suggested to me by Dr. Arthur Riss, in reference to this paper, that if Twain's intention were separate from a "political" comment on slavery, then his fault was actually in *lacking* an agenda in this area. Truly, the picture looks bleak for any who might disagree with either of these two detractors, so let's look at their arguments more closely.

The book is immoral, according to Lester, because its "notion of freedom is the simplistic one of freedom from restraint and responsibility" (or, more colorfully, "the teat of adolescence"

to which "[white males] persist in clinging… long after only blood oozes from the nipples") (347), in other words: Huck, who is the closest to this model in the novel (finally succeeding, Lester might say, when he decides to drop everything and head off to the territories at the end). It seems as if Lester has forgotten part of the definition of "true art" that he takes verbatim from Gardner. I dare say that if we leave out the words "the worst" (which Lester does not) and insist that a work of art must bring about "trustworthy feelings about the better... in human action," as evident in its "hero," then the field of possible classics for the last 200 years would be very limited. Mythology[13] might condescend to tell the reader that somebody is or is not a hero, but ever since the turn of the century (the 18th to the 19th, that is) the idea has increasingly been to make characters more human and less overtly heroic. Who is the hero of *Moby Dick*? of *Crime and Punishment*? even of *The Scarlet Letter*? I imagine that from a certain perspective one could find grounds for disqualifying Hercules (or any other hero that one might care to mention). So, according to Lester, having "failed" by putting forth a hero who is in "eternal adolescence" (346), Twain has not created a satisfactory hero, and has therefore not created a satisfactory morality (because, of course, readers would be unable to decipher a moral ideology without the existence of a pure model within the book for them to take as exemplary). Somehow, however, Lester manages to find, with, in my opinion, insufficient justification, that "[n]o matter how charming and appealing Huck is, *Twain* holds him in contempt." (348, emphasis mine). This may be true, but then Huck wouldn't be *Twain's* version of a hero. Perhaps there *isn't* a satisfactory hero in the book. But does there have to be? If "moral art" "is not didactic because... it explores, open-mindedly, to learn what it should teach," wouldn't it be valid moral art that teaches by exemplifying mistakes (the "what should not be taught," "the worst" in Gardner's definition of what may be presented for art to count as "true" and "moral")?

Ultimately, what Lester does not seem to understand is that Twain allowed for, and perhaps even mandated, his argument. Indeed, it is my belief that Lester's reaction is what Twain *wanted*. The best didactic tool that a writer has, and the style of argumentation that has the best chance of converting disputants, is the placing of the reader in a position from which he or she cannot help but come to the author's conclusion and believe it to have been his or her own insight! In contrast, Lester uses powerful language, but does so in a manner that can only persuade those who already agree.[14]

To counter Dr. Riss' suggestion and show that Twain did indeed have an agenda, and an honorable one at that, I'll have to offer up my reading of *Huck Finn*.

My Reading.

This is, perhaps, the point at which the opinions of critics diverge: did Twain do it all on purpose or did he just flub it? I believe that *Huck Finn* is an incredibly well-crafted book. Considering how careful he was during the first thirty-one chapters leading up to Huck's famous decision to "*go* to hell" (202),[15] I find it hard to believe that Twain would tag on an ending that drastically changes the tone of the novel, bring back a character that he has discredited at the beginning (Tom), and seem to tear down the theme that he has developed so carefully heretofore merely in order to have the book finished. A popular thought in this area is that Twain lost courage, could not follow through, etc., etc., etc. But these opinions fail by imagining that an ending that did satisfy all these demands would have been, in 1885, both difficult and controversial. Of course our modern perspective makes this question largely relative, but how hard would it have been for Twain, in his own era, to have written the book in a way that would have satisfied today's critics? Not very, I think: it probably would have been the safest way to

go, even in his day. Other critics have defended *Huck Finn* by focusing on the change in point of view over the past hundred-some-odd years and suggesting that "even with the full modern treatment, [Jim] would be no more of a man — a 'compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing, and wise' man — than the Jim that Twain portrayed in the ending of *Huckleberry* Finn."[16] In the interest of world peace, and giving credence to the sheer number of critics who have, over an extended period of time, found there to be a change in the book toward the end, I'll concede that, while this last quote might be true in its suggestion, it is more of a comment on the inadequacies of the "modern treatment."

If Twain was conscious of the change at the end and crafted it with even a fraction of the care that he gave to the previous chapters, why did he take the risk? Here the opinion's may split again: either he was racist/immoral or anti-racist/discussing morality. The fact that he knew what he was doing, in and of itself, wouldn't lead to any conclusions in either direction. I believe the position of the book on questions of "race" to have been anti-racist and, moreover, anti-false-anti-racist (post-emancipation abolitionism, if you will). Of course, the ground upon which these distinctions must necessarily stand is slippery, so I realize that my proof for this matter cannot rely on an "if this then that" equation of simple logic, rather it must be like those mathematical equations that approach a number infinitely and so can be taken, for practical purposes, as that number. So let's start with something that is usually over-looked, likely because it is taken as easily understood.

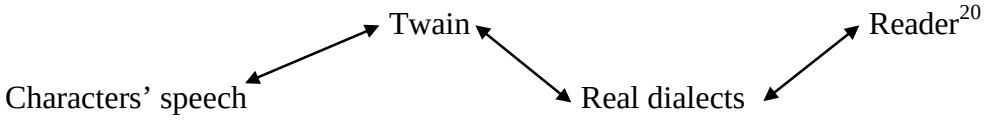
The "Notice" and "Explanatory" are about giving the reader a position (a relative investment) in the story (27). The "Notice" is, of course, ridiculous because the order to not look for a motive, moral, or plot suggests that there is one of each to be found (thus encouraging the search), and, moreover, the order could never be enforced.[17] The "Notice" does, however, set up

a "real" relationship between the author and the reader, because the author (within the scenario that Twain has designed) can have a "real world" effect on the reader. While the "motive, moral, and plot" of a book are the usual means through which an author attempts to influence his or her audience, Twain is strengthening the readers investment in the story by suggesting that, through an outside instrument, his influence can have a physical, as opposed to ideological, effect.

The idea of an outside instrument is an important one to retain while considering the "Explanatory" (in this case in terms of a "real world" *reference* for the author's use). The first paragraph of the "Explanatory" addresses the trouble to which the *author* went to make the dialects accurate to his memory; the second paragraph explains that he is giving the reader this information to avert the conclusion that the *characters* are "trying to talk alike and not succeeding." Realizing that the first paragraph explains something about the author's construction of dialects in the text and the second paragraph explains something about the first paragraph, a reader might[18] justifiably expect the second paragraph to refer to the subject of the first: "*I* tell you this so that you won't think that *I* was trying to make them all sound alike and failed." As it is, one claim does not support the other: the fact that *the author* put significant work into making all of the characters sound different (implicitly saying "authentic") tells us nothing about what those *characters* were trying to do. The disjunction that this causes, giving Mark Twain enough credit to deny that he was just being cutsie, forces the question of to whom "*characters*" refers.[19] Obviously, if these independent-from-the-author characters refer to the people from whom the author derives his dialects (from memory, remember), then his explanation as to his adept replication of their language would have absolutely nothing to do with how *they* were trying to speak. In fact, the entire "Explanatory" is unnecessary: the fact that Twain represented the dialects correctly raises the question more than it dispels it because,

had *he* failed to present them all differently, there would be no basis for the inquiry that the "Explanation" is ostensibly meant to answer. If "*characters*" refers to the characters in Twain's book, then either it is *he*, the creator of them, who is trying to make them all speak differently (in which case we are back to the question of his being "cutsie" in the second paragraph) or the characters are "real," in that they can speak in dialects that force the author to refer to outside sources (those people whom he actually knew to speak similarly) in order to convey their use of language, so offering the source of his expertise is unnecessary because knowledge of either group (those he really knew or the characters) tells the reader nothing about the motivations of the other.

Whatever the case, the "Explanation" is useless, as I've said, because the extent to which Twain was able to convey differences of speech raises the question of the *reasons* for those differences, yet he gives us no evidence as to what the characters, themselves, were trying to do. Indeed, the characters *are* trying to speak alike to the extent that they don't realize that they are speaking differently (as Jim puts it, "Is a Frenchman a man?... *Well* den! Dad blame it, why doan' he *talk* like a man?" [97], thus implying that he and Huck "talk" the same... like "men"). I would suggest that the purpose of the "Explanatory" is to set up a relationship between reality and fiction, because the *author* is explaining that he used a precedent from the real world in his design of the language of his fictional characters while giving his characters the ability to do (or not do) something for which he must then learn to account in his style.

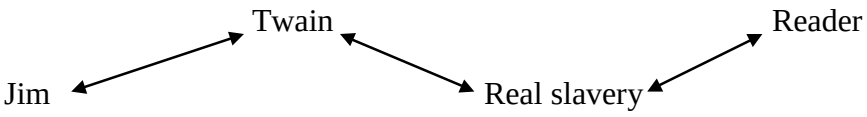


As with the relationship created by Twain's stated method of modeling dialects, the relationship between the book world and the "real" world is relative, a series of reference points by which to understand the story through parallel experiences, as Huck's and Jim's experiences prior to their escape were parallel. Applying this theory to the controversial ending, it seems logical that if the characters are separated both from Twain and reality in this way, and are capable of having intentions and acting (even if only in speech) independently from the author, then it would be the duty of the characters to make Jim's escape difficult (as Tom complains that the Phelps family does not). Since they don't, it is up to the author to create impediments (reasons for heading south, missing Cairo, not going straight into Illinois). This reading might shed some light on suggestions that Twain had some kind of "difficulty" with the ending (after all, had they lived in Medieval Europe the Phelps family might have had a dungeon) and, as a consequence, it jars on the reader. I don't imagine that it would be an overly-radical suggestion that Twain's reasons for taking the story in the direction that he does are no better than Tom's for "authoring" such a ridiculous process by which to free Jim (remember that both rely on ideas of literary precedents and genres — Twain emulates boy's adventure, comedy, satire stories, and Tom uses his favorite Romantic classics as reference material). Had Twain made it appear as if the difficulties had come from the Phelps family, then the reader would probably not be as flabbergasted and would not have such a low opinion of Tom.

The parallels do not stop with Twain and Tom. When it is considered that, at Huck's moral juncture, Tom comes into an adventure in progress with privileged information a new link is seen: this time to the reader. Tom's reappearance for the Phelps section does lead to a change in the book (as is evident from the controversy over the end), but only inasmuch as we were expecting (read "hoping") for something different. A reader hoping to read a Jim-as-hero-

escaping-from-slavery story would be, essentially, hoping to do (or hoping that the author does) exactly what Tom tries to do from his point of view: make the book interesting in a certain way, in part by making Jim into a specific type of hero. In the Connecticut of the 1880s, this would translate into a desire to "set [Jim] free" even though "he was already free" (Twain, 262). It is not necessarily requisite to this conclusion that the reader of this, or our, era would see Jim, specifically, as free; it is enough that the post–Civil War reader (and, more so, the modern reader) would consider freedom as some intrinsic quality of humanity in much the same way that it is possible, now, to see the Emancipation Proclamation as an overdo formality — the Civil War itself can be said to have set free people free (like a liberation of civilian hostages in a hostile country who are being held *unjustly* or *against their rights*).

Following the relationship schemata set up by the "Notice" and the "Explanatory," a similar connection can be shown between Jim and the reader:



Ultimately, a reader who is upset at the ending is put in a parallel role to Tom — wanting to set a free slave free in a manner that accords to his or her own sense of heroism (and, if you wish, morality). As stated by Fritz Oehschlaeger, "something in us longs for quite a different outcome, one that would allow Jim to retain his heroic stature and force Huck to live up to the decision that accompanies his tearing up of the letter to Miss Watson."[21] In other words, like Tom, the reader wants circumstances to allow Jim and Huck to become heroes according to the reader's definition. While the reader is not so obviously in Tom's position of being able to change the course of the actual novel, he or she *can*, for him- or herself see the characters in a

different way than the author might have intended them and try to convince others to see the book from his or her point of view, or, as has been attempted, go so far as to rewrite the story. If the Phelps family had lived up to its responsibility to make the rescue of Jim difficult (or if Twain had put them in a position that would conform to a more Romantic standard — having a dungeon, for example), then the reader might have been satisfied with Tom's adherence to Romantic methods of freeing Jim. From another angle, reading any book comes down to, at some level, having something interesting to do (no matter how intellectual or socially relevant the aspect that arouses the interest), and if the avenue of examining the story for a hidden meaning, message, or agenda is forbidden by the author (as per the "Notice"), then there is no other reason to read the book but for the adventure of it... an adventure that would hardly have been had Jim and Huck simply stepped over the river into free country or had unhampered success making the trip via Cairo. And if the act of looking for a moral in a fictional story can have a mortal effect on the real reader, then the reader can be seen as having some investment in the story (which resembles Tom's in degree — a failure of the "evasion" would only have affected Tom emotionally had he not been shot, and that only to the extent that he considered himself invested in the plot; likewise, a reader can rightly expect no more impact than an emotional one, no matter how violently emotional that impact may be, except in the unlikely event that the warning of the "Notice" is true). What the reader wants (if he or she would have preferred having the Phelps ending replaced by one in which Huck and Jim become the reader's types of heroes) is an "in tune with the tone of the book" and "as I expected" ending that conforms to the literary tradition of "realism" or at least the genre that the first three-quarters of *Huck Finn* exemplify, whatever that might be. Perhaps Twain changed the thrust of the book so drastically (for people to feel justified in saying that he failed), even calling it an "evasion," in

order to force the reader to see that he or she really did want a particular ending. Moreover, since "real" slaves were freed (ostensibly) before the book was written, the reader and author would be the ones with external knowledge that Jim would be free in the "real world," just as Tom is the only character participating in the Phelps episode that knows that Jim is free in St. Petersburg.

In the End: Growing Pains.

Perhaps the extent of the controversy over *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* exists because the relationship schemata drawn by Twain falls into a category that is neither entirely realistic nor fantastic (in the literary senses of the words). The world of the book is not meant to be exactly that of Twain's contemporary reality, perhaps not even historical reality, nor is it entirely unrelated. Moreover, the fact that Tom deems it necessary to *invent* difficulties to relieve a situation that America had just experienced a Civil War to end on a larger scale cannot have been expected to do otherwise, where Huck's unruliness (the "controversy" of that era) was not an objection that disassociated the reader too soon from the story, than rasp against the sensibilities of the fashionable "bourgeois" post-emancipation abolitionists[22] — a position with which Twain must have had plenty of experience running with Connecticut's upper crust.[23]

Despite this schemata, Twain still manages to let the reader know where he stands through the impossible to justify racism of the other characters. As Richard Hill suggests:

> Even very young readers can sense that the complacent Christianity of the Phelpses and the casual brutality of those pious neighbors, Sister ("I'd skin every last nigger") Hotchkiss and Brer ("I 'low I'd take 'n' lash 'm") Marples, offer an authorial indictment as powerful as that in any other section of the novel. (332)

Not only does the reader know the story behind the strange artifacts that these "pious neighbors" find to be evidence that Jim was not a "cretur 'ts in his right mind," but the ever increasing number of supposed accomplices makes these, the bigots of the book, seem foolish because the job that "*forty* [people] couln't a done" (254) was the work of three people, two of them "white" boys, and the actual prisoner the least enthusiastic about the work. More to the point, I believe that even the most ardent Twain basher would find it difficult to refute the idea that Twain was at least *trying* to impart unto the reader a sympathy for Jim (even if that sympathy is one that, uncomplicated by a larger sense of the history of race relations, only unworldly children could feel), making the harsh treatment of him, at least at this point, an attitude to be disdained.

In the end, though, I must confess that one must drop from "the teat of adolescence" in order to understand *Huck Finn* as an adult. Perhaps Twain was too successful at merging grand, mature ideas and a children's adventure story: one must tear down beliefs and rebuild them in a less innocent way to continue to find the book edifying through the cataract of older-age.

Neither Huck nor Jim nor Tom is a simple hero. In my opinion, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is more successfully a story about maturation and growth because of this fact. Adults have no simple heroes. For this reason, I may ultimately be thwarted by an unsympathetic adherence to the suggestion that Twain's having disrupted the flow of the book does not answer the question of whether or not it makes a racist statement. I will, however, suggest that not only doesn't an argument that he lost courage or couldn't follow through with what we might today call a proper ending seem to make sense when considered in tandem with the chronology and geography of its origin; the fact that Twain paints the "pious neighbors" in such a poor light and elicits sympathy for Jim, whose reward for sacrificing his freedom for

Tom's life is a more restrictive and harshly executed imprisonment (258), would be insufficiently explained away, in my opinion, by an insistence that Twain either lost courage *again* and returned to his previous tone or was making some kind of an apology. I can only assert that *Huck Finn* never left the field of anti-racism: Twain's motivation just went deeper, so he complicated what could have been a simple statement.

I'll conclude with another parallelism that was to be my trump-card, but that I was unable to perfect to a satisfactory degree. Returning to the "Notice," the list of threats that Twain promises his readers should they engage in three specific literary activities, it is possible to find a parallel list of characters who received the penalty within the book. It does work very well that Tom, the penultimate creator of unnecessary plans, methods, and plots, is shot. "He had a dream," says Huck, "and it shot him." (252). It is also very interesting that Twain sends Huck, the center of the books famous moral crises, off to the territories at the end, effectively banishing him. As for who it is that "attempt[s] to find a motive in [the] narrative [and is] prosecuted" (27), I have been unable to unearth a perfect exemplar, but have come up with some interesting and, if I do say so myself, clever thoughts. Of course the Duke and King, those with motives related only to their own greed, are literally prosecuted, but they are less important characters than I'd like to use for this closing fancy. Perhaps I could point to the fact that an entire mob fails to prosecute Colonel Sherburn, whose killing of a man seemed largely senseless (or unmotivated) and cold-blooded (146), or, oppositely, that his motive wasn't one that justified murder and that is why his name sounds like "sure burn"; but he is an even more minor character. Better yet, I like to think that the parallel is to be found in Jim, who is unfairly prosecuted for having undeniably good and pure motives.[24] Perhaps we can, if we must, take this as an example of the seriousness of Twain's threat: absolutely no searching for motives, or

acting toward realization of those motives, will be tolerated. On the other hand, we can consider the suggestion to be that, even though we risk prosecution, we must *always* look for motives, morals, and plots wherever they might exist. Or perhaps it is actually the adult reader who attempts to discern whether Twain's motives were racist or noble that is prosecuted by having a book that he or she may have revered in his or her innocent youth prove tumultuous. As a closing question, in keeping with my current general aesthetic, I ask: what value is there in fighting for a cause that is so widely accepted that we would not risk being criticized by somebody, somewhere? But then, Twain didn't really expect us to follow his orders, did he?

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[1] The increase of this last being both in the number of people who claim to be a member of the group and in the general use of the term — a useless and dangerous one because it unites *everybody* as if in opposition to something that doesn't exist, a non-other, while simultaneously permitting everybody to not feel akin to anybody should they so choose.

[2] Examine Mary Dalton of Richard Wright's *Native Son* for the type.

[3] With which, it bears mentioning, as a college graduate of a state school in the late 1990s, I have had limited experience, discussing, instead, numerous books from a heterogeneous sea of "alternative" literature that leads to a graduating class of whom it is possible that any two English students might not be able to discuss any one book with any real comprehensibility.

[4] Wil Haygood, "Twain Letter Revives Old Question: Detractors Say They Still Think *Huck Finn* Has Racist Taint," *Boston Globe* 15 Mar. 1985: 3.

[5] With these examples I do not intend to claim that there are no controversies that deal in other areas than relationships (such as the controversy over the ending of the novel at hand), these are just a few common motifs that fall easily into a simple example.

[6] Both of these examples are taken from personal experience: the first from Arthur Riss in the classroom, the second from correspondence with Gerry Brenner, author of "More than a Reader's Response: A Letter to 'De Ole True Huck'".

[7] Julius Lester, "Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" in *A Case Study in Critical Controversy: Adventures of Huck Finn*, ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan (Boston/New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995) 348.

[8] To be sure, there are numerous, and less simply disputed, arguments that *Huck Finn* is a racist book. In the interest of brevity, however, I've chosen Lester as a rather extreme example against which to present a broad position that might require more elaboration, if not expansion and reformulation, in order to be more universally applicable.

[9] This stratagem directly follows a literary guilt trip by which Lester suggests to his reader that any disagreement would merely be a predictable "arrogant dismissal" that would fail to be human enough to justify his not being "cynical" and "allow[ing] for the possibility that what [he has] written may be accepted as having more than a measure of truth." (346).

[10] Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Boston/New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995) 54.

[11] The emphasis on each of these is my addition.

[12] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1977) 19.

[13] This reference to mythology becomes more significant when it is discovered that Lester takes Gardner's summary of *Homer's* definition of a hero ("the hero's business is to reveal what the gods require and love" [Gardner, 29]) to be Gardner's own and, by the act of unqualified quoting, *his* own (Lester, 345).

[14] Or those who are quick to join in with whichever voice is the most audible and most simply understood and supported at the time. These "converts", however, could never have been dangerous opponents, especially in an intellectual field, and make for fickle allies.

[15] It is not my objective, here, to trace this progression as nearly every essay that I've come across that supports *Huck Finn* does (see Richard Hill, as cited in the footnote #16). Perhaps, to facilitate this avoidance, it will suffice to say that the mere fact that there is an entire catalogue of essays dealing specifically, and, in some cases, exclusively, with the ending of the book, some type of expectation *must* have been effectively created. Whether this creation is an example of dexterous crafting or an accident is another question, and one that is closely related to the remainder of my argument.

[16] Richard Hill, "Overreaching: Critical Agenda and the Ending of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" in *A Case Study in Critical Controversy: Adventures of Huck Finn*, ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan (Boston/New York: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1995) 327.

[17] Unless, perhaps, a reader is foolish enough to write an essay about what he or she has found. If a reader is this foolish, then, in the realm of the imagination, the threat would be real: the *claim* of the "Notice" is that it is "*by order of the Author*" (a real person), so it is he who is making the decree, and "*per*", meaning "by means of" (I've double checked this for myself) the "*chief of ordnance*" (another ostensibly real person), so it is "G.G." who will exact the punishment. It has been suggested to me that the "Per" makes the "Notice" read as if the author is being ordered by G.G. to give this warning — sort of a "by order of the author, by order of the chief of ordnance" — but I believe that this view mistakes the meaning of "Per". Even if the meaning of "Per" can be taken in both ways depending upon context, the fact that Twain uses "the Chief of Ordnance" suggests that "by means of" is the correct meaning: the duty of deciding what to censor falls much more in the realm of legislation than combat (it isn't even a General or Chief of the Military — it's specifically the chief of *artillery*), in which case it would be interesting for one to argue that "Ordnance" is dialect for "Ordinance", but perhaps a bit of a stretch.

[18] I was tempted to say "should", but changed my mind. It is, after all, the 1990s.

[19] To my experience, it has sometimes been no easy task to convince people that there *is* a disjunction. In the interest of finding interesting discussions, if this is your position, please keep an open mind to the possibility that it may be something that you've missed.

[20] The arrows go in both directions because, while the final result is that the characters do something that the reader understands, the reader also interprets the character's actions through his or her own assumptions.

[21] Fritz Oehschlaeger, "'Gwyne to Git Hung': The Conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn*," in *One Hundred Years of "Huckleberry Finn": The Boy, His Book and American Culture*, ed. Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley (Columbia: University of Missouri P, 1985) 117.

[22] Those wealthy people whose charity balls and auctions have been perceived as notoriously phony for the past one-hundred and fifty years.

[23] I'd like to draw your attention back to footnote #14 to make a parallel between this mentality and that which conforms to the loudest and/or currently popular doctrine. It should also be said that I am not, in any way, attacking abolitionists, emancipationists, or civil activists; my complaint on this matter is only against those who would support a cause, *any* cause, merely because it is fashionable, a position that should be, if it is not, unpalatable to those who feel some real emotional investment in an issue from either point of view (pro or con).

[24] In the interest of "waxing poetic", I will not get into an argument over the existence of "pure" motives right now.

To be honest, I rather believe that there's no such thing as an entirely "pure" motive in that no actions are selfless: even the most "selfless" act is, on some level, the most palatable one to perform at a given moment.