5-1-1987

Black and White (and Not Much Gray) in Huckleberry Finn

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Recommended Citation
Waldschmidt, Hilde, "Black and White (and Not Much Gray) in Huckleberry Finn" (1987). All-College Writing Contest.
https://publications.lakeforest.edu/allcollege_writing_contest/38

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Soon after publication of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, Mark Twain was troubled by repeated attempts to censor his masterpiece - attempts that still continue today, over one hundred years later. Condemned as the product of a white racist, *Huckleberry Finn* is, ironically, much more intolerant of whites than of blacks. The fact that so many of its readers so completely miss the pro-black leanings of the novel only confirmed in Twain's mind the gullibility and wrongheadedness of the average person. Twain explains, “I have no race prejudices. . . All that I care to know is that a man is a human being - that is enough for me; he can’t be worse” (Foner 237). As Twain astutely predicted in a letter to Charles L. Webster on March 18, 1885,

The Committee of the Public Library of Concord, Mass. have given us a rattling tiptop puff which will go into every paper in the country. They have expelled Huck from their libraries as “trash suitable only for the slums.” That will sell 25,000 copies for us sure. (Twain, *Selected Letters* 153)

Examination of *Huckleberry Finn* along with other of Twain’s works discloses Twain’s sympathetic assessment of blacks and his antipathy toward a society that nurtured the institution of slavery.

What appears to be Twain’s settled, mature perspective on the humanity of Negroes is suggested in the sketch “A True Story,” which paints a dignified portrait of a black woman known as Aunt Rachel. In this work, the narrator, struck by her constant good humor and cheer, one day asks Aunt Rachel how she has managed to avoid trouble throughout her life. “Has I had any trouble?” she says. “Misto C—, I’s gwyne to tell you, den I leave it to you” (Twain, “A True Story” 95). She proceeds to tell of her background and of her seven children. “Dey was black, but de Lord can’t make no chil’en so black but what dey mother loves ’em an’ wouldn’t give ’em up, no, not for anything dat’s in dis world” (Twain, “A True Story” 95). But as a slave and, therefore, as a piece of property, Aunt Rachel is forced to give up her children. The love within Aunt Rachel’s family, the grief she feels upon separation from her family, and the longing of the family members to be reunited after the Civil War suggest Twain’s understanding of the heartaches that blacks endured - an awareness contrary to the racist contention of the time that blacks felt no family ties (Foner 265).

The enlightened attitude revealed here was not characteristic of Twain’s earlier thought, however. The pro-slavery point of view which permeated Southern thought in the nineteenth century heavily colored Twain’s early views. In his autobiography he explains,
In my schoolboy days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong about it. No one arraigned it in my hearing; the local papers said nothing against it; the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing and that the doubter need only look in the Bible if he wished to settle his mind—and then the texts were read aloud to us to make the matter sure; if the slaves themselves had an aversion to slavery, they were wise and said nothing. (Twain, Autobiography 6)

As a result, Twain did not question the morality of the institution for many years. It was not until after the Civil War that he became sensitive to the economic factors that motivated the owning of slaves and caused men to overlook its inhumane aspects. With this new awareness, Twain resolved to atone for his prior acceptance of slavery by, among other things, paying a black man’s way through Yale and by attacking slavery in his writings (Foner 250). Twain also welcomed opportunities to speak to Negro congregations while, at the same time, often claiming to be too busy to lecture for white churches (Foner 283). His sharpened sensitivity, however, did not blunt his appreciation for humor involving black people. For example, he describes a minstrel show:

The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny - delightfully and satisfyingly funny.... The real negro show has been stone dead for thirty years. To my mind it was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most competent laughter-compeller and I am sorry it is gone. (Twain, Autobiography 61)

Twain also recalls a decidedly non-humorous incident when a black man was lynched for a crime he did not commit. “Ah well,” Twain sarcastically writes, “Too bad, to be sure! A little blunder in the administration of justice by Southern mob-law; but nothing to speak of. Only ‘a nigger’ killed by mistake - that is all” (Foner 285).

The basic attitude toward blacks suggested in “A True Story” is solidly established in Huckleberry Finn. It is difficult to imagine that anyone, after careful reading of the novel, could consider it racist. Critics of the novel inaccurately interpret Jim’s superstitious behavior and apparent stupidity as a negative reflection on the black race. In one instance, near the beginning of the novel, Huck asks Jim to read his fortune using a hairball (Twain 24). Jim respectfully tells Huck that the hairball will not work unless Huck gives him some money. In the end, Huck gives Jim a slug - valueless to Huck but worth twenty-five cents to Jim - in return for advice from Jim. Whether or not Jim really believes in the mystical powers of the hairball is unimportant. Instead, the fact that Jim is able to give Huck ‘free’ advice and to fulfill his role of servant to the master while simultaneously earning a generous payment, suggests a cleverness in Jim so subtle it easily escapes detection (Smith 255).

Another incident in which Jim’s superstition is advantageous to him also occurs early in the story. While Jim sleeps under a tree, Tom mischievously removes Jim’s hat from his head and places it in the tree (Twain 9). Upon awakening, Jim explains this phenomenon to the other slaves by telling them that during the night witches hypnotized him and took him
for a ride on their broomsticks. After they were finished, they placed Jim’s hat in the tree so he would know what had happened. With time, his story becomes increasingly exaggerated, and he becomes the most popular slave in the area. As a result, “Jim was most ruined for a servant, because he got stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches” (9). By means of this story, Jim is nearly able to transcend his position as a slave, while his own attitude toward the credibility of his story remains ambiguous. But even if Jim believes his own tale, his skills as a rhetorician are impressive. In effect, he elevates his position among the slaves and creates the foundation for an improved future for himself within his community (Smith 254). It can be argued that Jim’s story achieves the desired effect because the other slaves are superstitious and ignorant. But the counterargument is that the degree to which the other slaves believe Jim’s story is also left ambiguous (Smith 254).

Jim’s rhetorical abilities are further apparent in his discussions with Huck. Trying to explain to Jim why Frenchmen speak differently from Americans, Huck says,

“Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?”
“No, a cat don’t.”
“Well, does a cow?”
“No, a cow don’t, nuther.”
“Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?”
“No, dey don’t.”
“It’s natural and right for ’em to talk different from each other, ain’t it?”
“Course.”
“And ain’t it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from us?”
“Why, mos’ sholy it is.”
“Well, then, why ain’t it natural and right for a Frenchman to talk different from us? You answer me that.”
“Is a cat a man, Huck?”
“No.”
“Well, den, dey ain’t no sense in a cat talkin’ like a man. Is a cow a man?—er is a cow a cat?”
“No, she ain’t either of them.”
“Well, den, she ain’t got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of ’em. Is a Frenchman a man?”
“Yes.”
“Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan’ he talk like a man? You answer me dat!”
(Twain 111-112)

The reason that Huck’s final remark, “I see it warn’t no use wasting words—you can’t learn a nigger to argue,” has a humorous effect in that Jim, although lacking factual information, presents a better argument using Huck’s method of arguing (112). Huck simply resorts to the term ‘nigger’ in his racist comment in order to save face (Mailloux 116).

Used during Twain’s time as a derogatory term, the word ‘nigger’ degrades blacks as subhuman creatures. By presenting these ‘subhuman’ beings, especially Jim, as much more
humane and sensitive than the majority of the whites, Twain emphasizes the small-mindedness of the latter, including even the immature Huck early in the novel. And Twain’s use of ‘nigger’ throughout the novel underscores the irony of the relationships he develops. Despite this fact, however, attempts to eliminate the term from the novel are still frequent. It is worth noting that Frederick Douglass, the most renowned and respected black man of the nineteenth century, approved of the dialect in the novel. Without such dialect, he maintained, the true flavor of the culture of the time would be lost (Foner 280).

Even if Jim were depicted as an ignorant, superstitious black slave, evidence of his superior qualities as a human being would far outweigh these shortfalls. The misguidedness of any attempt to censor Huckleberry Finn is best shown through a comparison of the character of Jim to that of the majority of whites presented in the novel. For instance, strong anti-black sentiments are delivered from the mouth of Pap early in the story. Enraged at the fact that a black man he had met is allowed to vote in Ohio, Pap launches into a tirade against the ‘govment’. The particular ‘nigger’ that Pap has in mind is a clean-cut, well-dressed, learned professor at a college. Pap expresses the popular racist sentiment of the society when he storms, “Here’s a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets on to be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet’s got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take a- hold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger...” (Twain 37). The contrast between the dignified black man and Pap couldn’t be clearer:

(Pap) was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn’t no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man’s white, but a white to make a body sick; a white to make a body’s flesh crawl - a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. As for his clothes - just rags, that was all. (Twain 26)

In portraying Pap as a degenerate drunkard almost without redeeming qualities, Twain leads the reader to disavow Pap’s conclusions and thereby in effect, to reject the conclusions of the society that Pap endorses (Smith 251).

The insensitivity of white society is further developed in the account of the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. Whereas Pap is a poor, lower-class, town drunk, these two families represent the aristocracy of the South, respected and sophisticated families involved nonetheless in a feud, the cause of which has long been forgotten (Twain 150). The irrationality and brutality of the murders during this incident are striking and suggest a frightening truth: a society which forbids its members to discuss and debate openly and rationally so basic a topic as the humanity of one part of itself, thereby dramatically retards the ability of its members to consider any topic openly and rationally and condemns these members to a life of anti-intellectualism, emotionalism, and turbulence.

Support for this premise can be found throughout the novel. The mindless emotionalism of the Southerners is evident in every crowd scene in the book. The King and the Duke recognize the gullibility of the masses, and use this failing to their advantage. The King, a
rabble-rousing frontier con man, makes his living by posing as a preacher and regularly passing the plate, while the Duke, an actor, elicits sentimentality and hard cash from his befogged Southern audiences. The opportunities for economic advancement in their professions are practically limitless. As the King points out at one stop, “Hain’t we got all the fools in the town on our side? And ain’t that a big enough majority in any town?” (Twain 246).

Twain’s commentary reaches a climax of sorts in the occurrences in a little town in Arkansas. The townspeople, bored and dehumanized, find entertainment only in violence. “There couldn’t anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dog fight - unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death” (194). They also enjoy watching Boggs, the town drunk, make a spectacle of himself. But Twain’s major point is expressed through the reaction of the aristocratic Colonel Sherburn. Irritated by Boggs’ behavior, the Colonel, in the presence of Boggs’ young daughter, shoots and kills him and then proceeds home. When a townsman calls for the lynching of Sherburn, and when the crowd, in the excitement of the moment, takes up the cry and surges toward Sherburn’s home, Sherburn calmly and scornfully draws the mob up short. “The idea of you lynching anybody! It’s amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man!...Why a man’s safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind—as long as it’s daytime and you’re not behind him” (202). As Sherburn continues, it is as though Twain himself were speaking: “Do I know you? I know you clear through. I was born and raised in the South, and I’ve lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man’s a coward” (202).

The way in which Huck, a young boy with a natural instinct for goodness, interacts with society, also implies something about the character of the people who surround him. Huck learns that lying is the only way he can survive. He is so distrustful of others that he not only lies to most people but also never tells the same lie twice (Trilling 330). Basically honest, Huck is forced by society to ignore his own instincts. This honesty is apparent when he tries to pray after deciding to betray Jim. But he is unable to because, “You can’t pray a lie” (Twain 295). Huck lets down his defenses and tells the truth only when he is certain he is dealing with honest and trustworthy people. Once, after lying to Jim, he feels so bad, even though his feelings have been strongly tainted by racism, that he apologizes to him. “It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterward, neither” (120). On another occasion, while talking to Mary Jane, he encounters a unique situation. “I reckon a body that ups and tells the truth when he is in a tight place is taking considerable many resisks...and yet here’s a case where I’m blest if it don’t look to me like the truth is better and actuly safer than a lie...I never see nothing like it” (259).

Realizing that the people around him are generally hypocritical and insensitive, Huck elicits the responses he desires by appealing to their cruelty (Erskine 298). When some slavehunters demand to search Huck’s raft for runaway slaves, he, in an attempt to save Jim, tells them that his Pap has smallpox and begs for their help. Fearing that they also might catch the contagious disease, they leave the small, vulnerable boy without searching the raft (Twain 127). Later, at the Phelps’ house, Huck finds himself entangled in his lies. To get back on safe ground, he relies on Aunt Sally’s insensitivity as he explains his tardy arrival:
“It warn’t the grounding—that didn’t keep us back but a little. We blew out a cylinder-head.”
“Good, gracious! anybody hurt?”
“No’m. Killed a nigger.”
“Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.” (306)

Although Huck considers himself to be relatively isolated from society, its influences upon him are significant. The magnitude of his struggles over whether to follow his own instincts and help Jim or to obey the dictates of society and turn Jim in, suggest the extent to which society influences him (Trilling 332). At the beginning of the novel, Huck accepts society’s evaluation that blacks are subhuman. As he gets to know Jim better, however, his attitude changes dramatically. He begins to appreciate Jim’s quality as a friend, though he is probably unaware at a conscious level of the patience and sensitivity and sweet-temper edness the reader recognizes in Jim, qualities apparent, for example, when Jim takes over Huck’s watch so that Huck can sleep through the entire night (Twain 127). In one key scene, Huck awakens and hears Jim crying softly because he misses his family. Huck, surprised, observes, “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n. It don’t seem natural, but I reckon it’s so” (215). A number of times, once for instance when he insists on going aboard the ship with the murderers, Huck acts impulsively and risks his own and Jim’s capture (93). Each time, however, Jim forgives Huck completely. When Jim finds Pap’s body on another boat, he protects Huck from the potential shock (69). Throughout the novel, by means of major and minor events, the reader gradually becomes aware of the many admirable qualities of ‘nigger’ Jim, and of his evident superiority to most of the whites.

It is notable that of all the people who are killed in the course of the novel, none are black. The blacks are not ruled by the same emotionalism that governs white society. As victims of society, they need always to be completely aware of circumstances. Cautious and alert, they take action only in the most favorable or urgent conditions (Carrington 41). For instance, upon hearing of Miss Watson’s intent to sell him, Jim formulates a plan of escape quickly and acts decisively. After being sold to Silas Phelps by the King, Jim waits until the King and the Duke are in town before he exposes the frauds and achieves justice (Carrington 20).

Jim, in effect, becomes a father figure to Huck. Through his relationship with Jim, Huck develops and matures and becomes a more caring individual. The same boy who, at the beginning of the novel, was insensitive to violence and was forced by circumstances to consider patricide is, by the end of the novel, far more concerned with the predicament of others. He is not long able to describe brutality in his previously detached manner (Kaplan 21). Commenting on the feud, he says, “I ain’t a-going to tell all that happened - it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn’t ever come ashore that night to see such things. I ain’t ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them” (Twain 160). His sensitivity is not naive, however. He knows that “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another,” yet he is still willing to befriend them and to help them whenever possible (321).
With his new attitude toward Jim and his more mature outlook on life, Huck is unable to continue to follow the dictates of society. His new vision leads him to resolve, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell...[I’ll] take up wickedness again, which [is] in my line being brung up to it...And for a starter [I’ll] go to work and steal Jim out of slavery...” (297). Twain, twenty years after the novel was completed, describes Huck’s dilemma as a struggle between “a sound heart and a deformed conscience” (Foner 271). It is, most probably, his relative isolation from society that permits Huck to be able finally to disregard the values that society upholds. As Twain observes, conscience “can be trained to approve any wild thing you want it to approve if you begin its education early and stick to it (Kaplan 16).

In a society where laws are accepted blindly and inhumanity and brutality flourish, true freedom is unattainable. Only when Huck and Jim are on the river, removed from the influences of society and ruled by natural laws, are they truly free. It is ironic that after Miss Watson dies and Jim is legally free, he remains chained and is treated as a slave, another reminder that the laws of society are haphazard and in conflict with reality (Smith 60). It is not Jim’s self-sacrificing attempt to save Tom, but rather Tom’s announcement concerning Miss Watson’s will that brings the townspeople finally to unchain Jim. Merit, it appears, has no bearing on the laws of this society. As Twain cynically remarks in his Letters from the Earth, “[Man] hasn’t a single written law...which has any but just one purpose and intention—to limit or defeat a law of God” (Twain, Letters from the Earth 39).

To support the suppression of Huckleberry Finn, in other words, is to join ranks with those intent upon verifying Twain’s observation that the average person is dedicatedly wrongheaded. It is to set aside the sweetness and heroism of Jim and the reawakened natural morality of Huck and, instead, to march in step with the feuders, the lynchers, the weepers - indeed with all the permanently befuddled of the world.

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