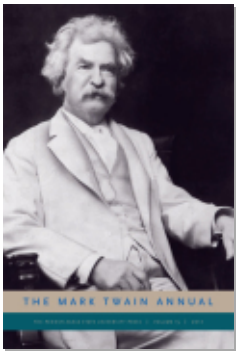
"A Fiction of Law and Custom": Mark Twain's Interrogation of White Privilege in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*



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Mark Twain's Interrogation of White Privilege in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn *is, this article argues, a novel that attacks the very premise of racial hierarchies through Twain's satirical presentation of those who so willingly endorse the practice of subjugating those of nonwhite races. Through a close reading of the text and an examination of Twain's own experiences with African Americans (and his writings about those experiences), it demonstrates how Twain uses various characters throughout the novel—including the widow Douglas and Miss Watson, Pap Finn, the king and duke, and others—to serve as negative examples of those who cling to racist ideologies. Reading through the lens of critical race theory, a new approach to teaching the novel as an attack on the foundations of racism emerges. In the end, this article argues that Twain was focused on dismantling the "fiction of law and custom" that he knew racial hierarchies to be.*

Keywords: *critical race theory*, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, *white privilege*

In a letter to British publisher Grant Richards, James Joyce wrote of his collection of satirical stories titled *Dubliners*, "I seriously believe that you will retard the course of civilization in Ireland by preventing the Irish people from having one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass" (qtd. in Ellmann 90). This statement encapsulates Joyce's motivations in writing the collection of stories. He wanted to show the Irish people how the rest of the world viewed them, specifically as a people clinging to a traditional and long-dead past that hindered their social, economic, and cultural advancement. It was his hope, as is the hope of many satirists, to effect some sort of social change on the part of his readers.

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In much the same way as Joyce did in his collection of short stories, Mark Twain offered a reflection of American society—specifically a satirical representation intended to effect societal and attitudinal shifts toward nonwhites—throughout much of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this article, I will argue that Twain's masterpiece reflects the views of a social idealist who sought to empower the disenfranchised by eradicating the long-held and firmly entrenched belief in racial hierarchies that posited whites as the superior race. By filtering the text through the lens of critical race theory, I will highlight Twain's deconstruction of the concept of racial privilege through his satirical attacks on those who continued to hold fast to the ideas of racism, and argue that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is Twain's version of Joyce's nicely polished looking-glass.

Critical race theory has been applied across multiple disciplines as a method of both studying and changing the ways in which we as a society view the construct of race. Drawing on the progressive achievements toward racial equality brought about by the civil rights movement, critical race theory forwards the idea that race is an arbitrary social construct, with the ultimate goal of building on the advancements made in the United States during the 1960s. One of critical race theory's foundational tenets is what is known as the social construction thesis, which states that both race itself and the corresponding racial hierarchies within society are "products of social thought and relations. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (Delgado and Stefancic 31). In other words, race is something that humans invented, a method of differentiating ourselves from others. The racial hierarchies that Americans established as a result of that invention are themselves based on this arbitrary construct, and the practices of slavery and racial subjugation are predicated on this hollow foundation. Race is, in Twain's words, "a fiction of law and custom" (*Pudd'nhead Wilson* 9).

The legal scholar Cheryl Harris discusses the origins of racial segregation and points to a deeper cause than merely skin color as the foundation for racial division. She writes, "Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress Blacks and Indians; rather, it was the *interaction* between conceptions of race and property that played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination" (Harris 1716). She here posits the idea that it was the historical view of whites regarding blacks as property that transformed race into a commodity, something that was bought and sold in open-air markets until the nineteenth century in

the American South. However, as I will soon illustrate, that view of blacks as property did not fully disappear with the end of the Civil War. If anything, the idea of whiteness as a privileged social class became *more* pronounced in the years following the war. But as critical race theorists and others have argued, that concept of privilege was an arbitrary construct perpetuated by the same whites who stood to gain from the custom's preservation in the newly reunified United States. Mark Twain articulated this exact thesis in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Twain's personal experiences with racial divisions and slavery in the antebellum South are well documented. He spent summers during his childhood on a farm owned by his uncle, John A. Quarles, where there were, to Twain's recollection, "fifteen or twenty negroes" (Twain et al. 210). During these visits, he grew to treat the enslaved blacks as more than merely the property that they legally were. As he said in his autobiography, "All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in effect comrades. I say in effect, using the phrase as a modification. We were comrades, and yet not comrades; color and condition interposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of, and which rendered complete fusion impossible" (Twain et al. 211). It is interesting to note the marked division that Twain denotes in this passage. Full and unfettered friendship with the slaves was not a possibility, but only because of the color of their skin. The social prohibition against being true friends with members of the opposite race was such that whites were forced to keep blacks at a distance, as something less than friends.

But the young Twain, at least in spirit, defied that social custom. On a deeper level, he was able to see these humans that were owned like farm animals as something more than property. He was able to see them as human beings: "It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities. This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more and have suffered no impairment. The black face is as welcome to me now as it was then" (Twain et al. 212). In this recollection, we see the genesis of a man who sought to call into question the racial hierarchies he saw around him, and he would do so as a writer, using his signature pen warmed up in hell. As Shelly Fisher Fishkin argues, "In *Huckleberry Finn* and throughout his life and work, Mark Twain interrogated his culture's categories and conventions of what it meant to be 'black' or 'white'" (79).

From the first pages of the novel, Twain invites his readers to proceed with a level of skepticism. The "Notice" that appears on the opening page of the text suggests, albeit somewhat sarcastically, that we as readers are meant to

see the author's own feelings toward society in the pages that follow: "Persons attempting to find a Motive in this narrative will be prosecuted, persons attempting to find a Moral in it will be banished, persons attempting to find a Plot in it will be shot" (*HF*, np). The unnamed "G.G., Chief of Ordnance" cited as the source of this notice is, as argued by several scholars, George Griffin, an African American who worked for the Clemens family as the butler. Although Twain himself wrote to M. Paul Bourget in 1897 that the Notice was an attempt to "playfully warn the public" that they shouldn't take the novel "seriously" (*HF*, 376), I would suggest that its inclusion develops the authorial intention of breaking down the inhuman treatment of others. The "offenses" listed in the Notice are exactly the things readers look for in a novel of any sort; the suggestion that searching for those things is a crime may be read as one of Twain's own personal attacks against the establishment of what he sees as unfair and arbitrary laws, as well as the punishment meted out for the commission of "crimes" like the one of which Huck himself is guilty in facilitating Jim's escape from slavery.

It is important, too, to consider the fact that, if G.G. is in fact George Griffin, then the order is being handed down by a black man to a (presumably) white reader. This reversal of societal roles in terms of the speaker's race is important to what I will be arguing—namely, that Twain was calling for the dissolution of the barriers that fostered a sense of supremacy for no other reason than the color of one's skin. By elevating a black man to the position of an authority figure who is declaring the law for white readers, Twain immediately draws attention to the idea that race is an arbitrary social construct, and one that shouldn't be taken any more seriously than his Notice to readers.

Rather than dismiss the Notice as simply an inside joke, I would suggest that it is meant to be read in much the way that Jocelyn Chadwick-Johnson argues we are meant to read the novel as a whole: "Twain submerges the reader deeply into a narrative that is simultaneously literal and symbolic. The result is to create an atmosphere conducive to critical thinking and discussion" (40). The Notice, then, is just the first of many elements by which Twain plunges the reader in to the symbolic atmosphere of the novel. By in effect daring his readers to ignore the moral, much like Tom Sawyer when he wants to capture the fly in church, Twain makes us all the more determined to find one.

In something of an ironic twist of rhetorical technique, Twain's novel works in a very structuralist fashion to build a comprehensive argument that works to then deconstruct any belief in white supremacy on the part of his readers, and it does so via Twain's trademark satire. The foundation for this rhetorical structure

is, as I have already laid out, the Notice at the novel's beginning. The first "floor" of this structure, then, manifests itself in the forms of the widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson and their reliance on the Bible as the authoritative voice for their worldview. As both women rely on biblical teachings for their understanding of the world and for guidance as to how to act in all their affairs, it may be presumed that it also facilitates their acceptance of the institution of slavery. As Twain said in his autobiography, "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" (Twain et al. 212). Because the Bible endorsed slavery and the corresponding superiority of whites, the practices were essentially handed down from God Himself. And as God is the perceived ultimate authority in the town of St. Petersburg, there was no questioning the legitimacy of that argument.

Lewis Leary posits the idea that Twain infused *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with this idea of the prevailing belief that slavery was acceptable in the eyes of God: "In Hannibal's worldview slavery was established by God for the well-being of both slave and master. What slave in his right mind would flee? White slave culture offered several answers to this troublesome question: Slaves were childlike creatures, easily led astray by cunning abolitionists, who tricked them into leaving the natural order of slavery" (Leary 34). According to society's views at the time, then, it wasn't the slave owners who needed to be chastised. Rather, it was those who would try to manipulate the thinking of slaves who were the true enemy. This belief was so strong in the nineteenth-century South that the sentiments prevailed long after the end of the Civil War. Southerners truly believed that the newly freed slaves were even more naïve to the world around them without the oversight of white owners, and they needed to be segregated and subjugated for their own good.

The circular logic on which many a biblical-based argument is predicated has been the bane of more than one composition teacher, due in no small part to the sensitivities associated with questioning the belief systems of an unquestioning student. Twain, however, has no such sensitivities. He directly confronts the wisdom taught by the Bible in a scene during which Huck and Jim argue about the story of King Solomon. Huck recounts the story as best he can, but he is only parroting back the words he has heard from Miss Watson and the widow Douglas. And that pair of teachers is only repeating the words they have read in

the Bible. What is lacking in all these steps is any sort of actual understanding of the story. Because the women don't understand it as anything more than the literal word of God, they are unable to explain the deeper significance of the story to Huck; Huck, in turn, has no way of explaining the story to Jim outside of arguing that Solomon was the wisest man in the world: "Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self" (*HF*, 94).

Huck's appeal to the widow's authority is a reflection of her own appeal to the Bible as the undeniable word of God. Ironically, however, it is the last step in the rhetorical process—Jim, the uneducated slave—who is the one to question the absurdity of cutting a child in half. Huck is forced to fall back to the same defense he inevitably received from his female teachers whenever he questioned anything he was told about the Bible: "But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile" (*HF*, 95).

This passage brings to the forefront the idea that relying on the words of others—be they words that appear in print or that come from a person in authority—is a very dangerous practice when one doesn't understand the true meaning of those words. For instance, the Bible itself, that foundational text on which the widow Douglas and Miss Watson base their own behaviors, seems to contradict itself in regards to the institution of slavery. On one hand, there are several biblical references that seem to support the practice. Two clear examples include the Book of Ephesians, which orders slaves to obey their masters, and the Book of Titus, which decrees that slaves should be submissive to their masters. On the other hand, however, Paul the Apostle tells the Galatians, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Despite these seeming contradictions, those Southerners at the time who subscribed to the belief in the Bible as the word of God invoked only those scriptures that supported their beliefs. For example, Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy, argued that slavery was "established by decree of Almighty God" and that the practice was "sanctioned in the Bible" (qtd. in Rowland 286). In short, then, those who supported the institution of slavery were able to support their beliefs with biblical arguments just as easily as those who favored the abolition of slavery were. Twain's message, I would argue, is that clearly there is something wrong in any logic that can be simultaneously supported and dismantled by the same source of information, and that those who use the Bible to support their racial supremacist agendas need to abandon such an argument.

The character in the novel who may qualify as the most outspoken proponent of white supremacy is Pap Finn. Ironically enough, however, Pap is also

an outspoken critic against education and, more specifically, the ability to read (and, by association, the ability to formulate opinions and moral codes as a result of reading). After berating Huck for having learned to read—and subsequently asking Huck to read to him—he angrily slaps a book out of Huck's hands. But it is during his famous diatribe against the government that Pap Finn's beliefs about the true nature of white supremacy emerge. He begins by ranting about his being forced to live in a shanty, despite his own net worth (a sum that he claims as his because the money belongs to his son): "The law takes a man worth six thousand dollars and up'ards, and jams him into an old trap of a cabin like this, and lets him go round in clothes that ain't fitten for a hog" (*HF*, 33).

Issues regarding who it is that actually owns the $6,000 aside, Pap's argument drips with irony. He has described the existence of the average slave in the American South, and argues against the fairness of that treatment. The specific dollar figure that Pap quotes is much higher than an average slave would have sold for at auction; a male field hand typically sold for between $1,100 and $1,600 at the high end of the market (Evans 202).[1] However, the comparison is still a valid one. Pap is infuriated by the fact that he, a white man who is arguably worth a significant sum of money, lives in the conditions he does. The fact that he alone is to blame for his condition does not enter into his thinking. He only sees himself as a wealthy man who, as a result of that wealth, deserves to live in better conditions. As Edward Piacentino argues, "Pap fails to face up to the unpleasant reality that it is he, not the government, who is responsible for his ineptitude" (20).

Following his attack of the government, Pap unleashes another round of vitriol on a free black man in Ohio who is a college professor; Alex Pitofsky argues that it is this speech that "initiates *Huckleberry Finn*'s investigation of racism" (61). What infuriates Pap about this man is that he is able to vote—something Pap says he was going to do himself had he not been too drunk to do until he found out that a black man was afforded the same right—and that he hasn't been sold as a slave: "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 and—" (*HF*, 34).

Pitofsky writes of Pap Finn that he "is quite ordinary—just another white supremacist of the 1840s. [. . .] Pap seems aware that he is, as Huck suggests, a man with 'no more quality than a mud-cat'" (62). Pap's social standing lies in stark contrast to those members of the more polite society of St. Petersburg, but

the racism that infuses his worldview is a common thread that links him to that more upper-class world. The difference between the two, as Pitofsky points out, is one of class. Whereas Pap's racism is banal and typical of what Piacentino terms his "poor-white class" (20), those members of respectable St. Petersburg society "assume that their racism is compatible with their purported commitments to justice and the moral doctrines of Christianity" (Pitofsky 62). If we as readers are meant to see Pap Finn as a deplorable individual—he is, among other undesirable traits, an immoral, lazy, hypocritical alcoholic who abuses his son—then I would suggest that his racist views are also a quality we are meant to include in the catalog of qualities we find abhorrent. But that abhorrence forces those readers who still hold fast to their own justifications of racial supremacy to reconcile their beliefs with their distaste for Pap. This moment serves as a powerful example of what James Joyce would term his nicely polished looking-glass some thirty years later. Readers are forced to see themselves in Pap, no matter how much they might recoil from that reflection.

The next level of Twain's deconstructionist structure is manifested in the form of the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, and their interfamily feud that has been going on for thirty years. While the literary feud in the novel has historical roots in the Darnell-Watson feud (about which Twain writes in *Life on the Mississippi*), its incorporation into *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has a much more important thematic purpose. The inclusion of the Shepherdson-Grangerford feud in the novel is to remind readers what their devotion to slavery's preservation led to, specifically the Civil War. Ironically, however, the combatants in this feud can't even remember why it is that they're fighting. Both families' bloodlust, then, has no tangible goal outside of killing one another. There is no higher purpose, no greater good for which each side is fighting. Buck explains to Huck about the feud, "It started thirty year ago, or som'ers along there. There was trouble 'bout something, and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and he up and shot the man that won the suit. [. . .] but they don't know, now, what the row was about in the first place" (*HF*, 146).

The fact that the feud continues without any of the participants truly understanding what it is that they are fighting about may be read, I would argue, as an allegory of Americans' preoccupation with arbitrarily defined racial divisions and the lengths to which they were willing to go to preserve (or dismantle) them. In this line of thinking, the feud represents not only a reminder of the American Civil War—an event that would have been fresh in many of the minds of Twain's early readers—but more specifically the South's insistence on

fighting to preserve a way of life that was both immoral and inhuman. With the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and Jim Crow laws in the South following that side's surrender, it could be argued that many Southerners at the time refused to give up the fight following Lee's surrender at Appomattox.

This brief section of the novel ends with the elopement of Sophia Grangerford with Harvey Shepherdson, a scene reminiscent of the forbidden union of Romeo and Juliet. The ensuing fight between the two families results in the death of Buck Grangerford, the only time we hear of Huck crying in the novel. The fact that Twain makes it a point to tell us that Huck shed tears over the death of his young friend is very telling. Huck's crying highlights once and for all the futility of the feud, a futility made manifest in young Buck's death. His death was meaningless, as nobody could define what he was fighting for. His life was equally meaningless, because he spent the duration of it participating in that undefined cause. Just as this feud is being fought for reasons that nobody is able to explain, hundreds of thousands of Southerners lost their lives in defense of slavery, itself a by-product of the arbitrary nature of racial divisions. Through his allegorical representation of the Civil War, Twain is demonstrating the absurdity of fighting—or, in the case of the postbellum South, legislating discrimination and enforcing those laws through threats of violence—to defend racist practices. The only result, as Buck's death suggests, is anguish for those on both sides of the conflict.

My earlier allusion to *Romeo and Juliet* is more than simply a convenient literary comparison. I would suggest that an argument can be made in favor of Twain's intentionally linking his own masterpiece with Shakespeare's play, a suggestion that is strengthened by the duke's mangling of Hamlet's soliloquy.[2] However, this connection goes further than merely that brief comic interlude in Twain's writings. Consider, for example, his writing in *Is Shakespeare Dead?* where Twain makes it apparent that he is more than familiar with the Bard's works. In true Twain fashion, he uses his expansive knowledge to satirize those who would argue over the validity of arguments regarding the identity of the true author. To be able to discuss that particular issue in any context requires a thorough knowledge of the subject. Thus, I would argue that Twain has inserted another moral lesson, daring his readers to find it (in defiance of G.G.'s Notice): there is much wisdom to be gleaned from reading literature. And just as Shakespeare was attempting to impart moral lessons to his audiences, so, too, is Twain.

What may be read as the most glaring example of the arbitrary nature of social superiority in the novel is manifested in the characters of the king and

the duke. After the two con men each claim royal lineage and demand specific privileges based on those absurd claims, the reader immediately understands that these men are nothing more than fraudsters. Their false claims to some kind of social superiority, however, are a clear reflection of the idea of racial supremacy in the United States. Historically, white men originally declared themselves superior over nonwhite for no other reason than the fact that they claimed a sense of enlightened intelligence that they deemed superior to those nonwhite minds. In other words, because the words regarding racial superiority were spoken, they became true, just as is the case with both the king and the duke's stories of their royal birth. And just as those men feel entitled to deference from the others, so, too, did white men require respect and obedience from nonwhites. Both are predicated on hollow foundations that are constructed from arbitrary decisions made by those who stand to gain the most from the establishment of these customs.

In this pair of tricksters, we are shown the human manifestation of racial privilege in all its absurdity. We see the embodiment of what Delgado and Stefancic described as the social invention of categories that are created when convenient (i.e., beneficial) for the creator. Because their invented social status benefits the pair in terms of both securing their space on the raft and, as we will see later, ensuring their comfort while on board, their self-designation as superior to both Huck and Jim is an exact reflection of the white man's placement of himself above African Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Twain's suggestion following the establishment of the new hierarchy on the raft is that it is exactly this sort of separation and elevation of particular classes that dissolves peace and happiness in a society. Social classes based on anything—be it race, wealth, birthright, or anything else—are inherently arbitrary constructions. Placing someone above another for any reason invites trouble, as Huck points out to the reader: "It would have been a miserable business to have any unfriendliness on the raft; for what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others" (*HF*, 165). Twain, through Huck, is here instructing his readers as to the perils of establishing any social hierarchies, racial or otherwise.

Elaine and Harry Mensh discuss this idea of the arbitrary nature of the dominance asserted by the king and duke: "Aside from that conferred by their skin, the king and the duke have no status they can publicly reveal. But their proclamations on the raft of royal birth, which would mark them as lunatics onshore, allow them to assume instant dominion over Huck and Jim" (63). By highlighting the absurdity of their claims to royal lineage, Twain simultaneously manages

to illuminate both the arbitrary nature of perceived racial supremacy and the utter folly of even suggesting that one race is inherently better than another. The declarations that these two frauds use to establish their power on the environment of the raft are as ridiculous as those whites declaring themselves superior to nonwhites, and should be met with identical levels of skepticism.

During their time on board the raft, the king and the duke contrive a series of moneymaking scams centered around fleecing the simpleminded local populace. After conning the residents of several towns out of their money, the king and the duke become the target of disgust on the part of Jim, who in this particular instance serves as an outside observer commenting on the action, much like the chorus in classical Greek tragedy. Jim's ignorance of history—ignorance bred from the fact that, as a slave, he has been prohibited from learning to read—imbues him with a naïveté that allows him to comment on the action from a perspective detached from any sort of intellectual prejudice, knowledge that would have alerted him to the fact that these men were not who they claimed to be.

Jim says at one point, "But Huck, dese kings o' ourn is reglar rapscallions; dat's jist what dey is; dey's regular rapscallions" (*HF*, 199). Huck's reply to Jim may be read as Twain's blanket statement of those men who consider themselves better than others due to no other factor than the color of their skin: "All I say, is, kings is kings, and you got to make allowances. Take them all around, they're a mighty ornery lot. It's the way they were raised" (*HF*, 200). In other words, kings—or white men, metaphorically—are essentially the same throughout the country. They act the way they do because it's how they were taught to act by those who came before them. They are merely continuing a tradition that was established before they were born, a tradition founded on hollow and arbitrary logic that was implemented as a technique to ensure their own well-being in the world. Jim's reply to Huck suggests Twain's ultimate goal: "Sometimes I wish we could hear of a country that's out of kings" (*HF*, 201.). Such a country would, the suggestion is, be one in which social and racial hierarchies didn't exist, and everyone lived harmoniously together as race-less human beings. This is the utopia for which Twain dares us to hope.

Huck's explanation of the behavior of these make-believe royals is based on nothing more than his own limited reading on the subject, or perhaps from information gleaned from stories related to him by his friend Tom Sawyer, who himself got the information from stories he'd read. This idea of learning the "proper" way to do things from reading stories, especially by the younger residents of the town, is a theme oft-repeated in both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*

and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In regards to the latter, by continually hammering the idea that so many of the absurd beliefs (including racial supremacy) held by the younger characters came from books, Twain was, I suggest, questioning the wisdom of relying solely on those sources for the establishment of laws and customs. In other words, just as he questions the wisdom of relying on the Bible for instructions to life, here he is paralleling Huck and Tom's "education" from mass-market adventure stories with those who base their belief systems on biblical teachings. Both are books and, to Twain's mind, both are of equal educational value in terms of justifying any sort of social hierarchy. Of course, the irony is that he is using that very medium to convey his own message, which sets up a sort of existential crisis for the reader of the nineteenth century. By arguing in a book that books shouldn't be looked at as ultimate authorities of social customs, readers were forced to question their own belief in the power of books to convey ultimate truths. After all, if slavery is deemed acceptable because books say it is, then why would it suddenly be wrong to condemn the opposing viewpoint when it, too, appears in a book? Twain unintentionally managed to create a Joseph Heller–esque catch-22 in his novel.

Before that apparent contradiction is resolved, however, we are introduced to Colonel Sherburn, another secondary character that Twain inserts to further remind us of the inherent senselessness of racial privilege. In the post–Civil War South during Reconstruction, racial tensions were still very much in place. Segregation was prevalent throughout the country in both the North and the South, enforced by the racially delineated Jim Crow laws. These overtly racist measures prevented blacks from full integration into an equal society, preventing them from eating in the same restaurants as whites, sitting in the same sections of movie theaters as whites, using the same public restrooms as whites, and a litany of other restrictions. One of the most effective enforcers of these regulations was the infamous Ku Klux Klan, founded as a social club in 1866 in Tennessee (Foner 146). The paramilitary group used violence and intimidation to keep blacks subservient to whites. As Eric Foner writes, "In effect, the Klan was a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy. [. . .] It aimed to destroy the Republican party's infrastructure, undermine the Reconstruction state, reestablish control of the black labor force, and restore racial subordination in every aspect of Southern life" (184). With the group dynamic inherent in the organization of the Ku Klux Klan, the organization was effectively able to quell any attempts by blacks to work toward social equality through the group's use of intimidation and violence.

It is exactly this sort of mob mentality that Colonel Sherburn confronts when he steps out on the roof of his house. After suggesting that the assembled men—a group reminiscent of a Ku Klux Klan gathering[3]—aren't brave enough to lynch anyone in the daylight, Sherburn says to them, "Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you *are* braver than any other people—whereas you're just *as* brave, and no braver" (*HF*, 190). Extending this idea of mob mentality as a substitute for bravery one step further, we can substitute the word "better" in place of "brave." It is only through the mass belief that they, as white men, are somehow superior to their nonwhite counterparts that racist ideology persists in society. Just as groups such as the Ku Klux Klan maintained their authority through numbers, so, too, does racial superiority. As long as the racial majority is able to declare itself superior and maintain enough numbers to enforce that belief, it will remain superior. However, that superiority is based on nothing more than a groupthink belief, much as the group assembled at Sherburn's house is only brave because the members have all convinced themselves that they are brave, and they have the added benefit of safety in numbers. As Thomas Quirk argues, "It is through Sherburn rather than Huck that Twain voices his contempt for the South and the cowardice of mobs. Twain had his opportunity to lynch Sherburn for the cold-blooded killing of Boggs, but apparently his disdain for the mob outstripped his contempt for southern aristocracy" (19–20).

As a sort of literary insurance policy designed to hedge against the failure of his readers to fully understand his attack on the absurd nature of racial hierarchies (and, I would argue, as a way of solving the aforementioned catch-22 in which he seemed to have ensnared himself), Twain presents us with the evasion scene. After being shot in the leg during the escape, Tom Sawyer is in dire need of a doctor. But Tom denies that necessity, instead arguing that the plan is going exactly as it would in an adventure story: "Boys, we done it elegant!—'deed we did. I wish *we*'d a had the handling of Louis XVI, there wouldn't a been no 'Son of Saint Louis, ascend to heaven!' wrote down in *his* biography: no sir, we'd a whooped him over the *border*—that's what we'd a done with *him*—and done it just as slick as nothing at all, too" (*HF*, 340). But Jim and Huck seem to think differently; they know that this is not one of Tom's adventure books, and that without a doctor's attention, he may very well be in grave and all-too-nonfictitious danger. The job of announcing this fear falls to Jim, who says, "Well, den, did is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz *him* dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, 'Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor f'r to save dis one?' Is dat like mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You

bet he wouldn't! *Well* den—is *Jim* gwyne to say it? No, sah—I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a *doctor*; not ef it's forty year!" (*HF*, 340–41).

Huck's reaction to Jim's refusal to go on without first getting a doctor to help Tom Sawyer is one that readers may see as high praise from a white boy directed toward a black slave: "I knowed he was white inside" (*HF*, 341). For Huck to acknowledge Jim as anything other than a slave—a nigger—demonstrates that he is able to see through the exterior skin to the person inside. And what Huck sees beneath the skin—a white man—is indicative of the idea that racial difference is nothing more than a superficial demarcation, and that that demarcation means nothing in terms of a person's humanity.

This comment by Huck has been interpreted as a vital point in the novel in terms of Twain's antiracist message. As Carl Wieck points out, "Huck's words [. . .] can be considered pivotal to attempting a deeper analysis of the position of blacks and whites in Twain's novel, since inversion of roles and values lies at the heart of the author's ironic and subversive approach to his subject" (108). Just as Twain inverted the social order in his Notice at the beginning of the novel, Huck's inversion of black and white here serves as yet another indicator regarding Twain's ultimate motive. He wants us to view Jim and other blacks not as members of a particular race, but rather as human beings.

This personal epiphany of Huck's is reminiscent of his earlier realization that Jim is the same as any other man who is also a father. When trying to explain the biblical story of King Solomon's idea of splitting a child in two in order to test which of two women was the true mother, Huck discovers (albeit without himself realizing the import of the discovery at the time) that Jim has the same paternal instincts of any other man: "You take a man dat's got on'y one er two chillen: is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it *He* know how to value 'em" (*HF*, 96).[4] In this pathos-laden passage, Jim expresses a concept that was essentially foreign to Huck at the time: Jim is a human being with human emotions. He is a husband and a father who loves his family as much as any white man does. In this passage, Jim's humanity is made manifest for Huck, though the latter seems to pass over it without any sort of recognition as to its import.[5]

However, that conversation joins with other experiences the duo has and works to change Huck's view of Jim in particular and chattel slavery in general. Having lived through his own personal enslavement multiple times—first by the widow Douglas and her attempts to civilize him, then by his father who imprisoned him, and finally by the king and the duke—Huck has come to learn of the inherent unfairness of racial divisions and subsequent dehumanization of

those deemed to be of an inferior race. While he was white in all three instances of his quasi-enslavement, he was always marginalized in much the same way as blacks at the time.[6] Whether it was because of his lack of gentility, his youth, or his nonroyal lineage, Huck was divested of his power and effectively enslaved. Additionally, the enslavement was predicated on arbitrary constructs. In the case of the widow Douglas, it was a result of her blind allegiance to religious teachings; Pap Finn's only source of authority was the biological happenstance that made him the father of Huck; and the king and the duke, as has been discussed, designated themselves superior with nothing more than lies, and then assumed totalitarian control of the raft.

This new understanding on the part of Huck regarding one's own personal humanity and agency informs perhaps his most famous line in all of the novel: "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (*HF*, 271). This is the moment when Huck finally makes peace with the fact that he is helping Jim, a runaway slave, to escape to freedom. It is, he knows, a violation of the law of the society in which he lives; more important, however, it is an act that he believes is one of the gravest sins a person can commit because it violates the social expectations of a white man in this type of situation as dictated by the church.

This passage recalls Huck's own juvenile interpretation of hell earlier in the novel when he decides that he'd prefer not to go to heaven because his friends won't be there: "Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. [. . .] I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go [to 'the good place'], and she said not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together" (*HF*, 4).[7] Taking this opinion of the desirability of ending up in either heaven or hell in terms of who will be in each place, we may read Huck's declaration of his willingness to subject himself to eternal damnation as an extension of this earlier line of thinking. Ignoring, for a moment, the immature nature of choosing an eternal resting spot for one's soul inherent in this passage, there is a more profound way of looking at Huck's words. If those who oppose slavery—and, by association, the continuation of white privilege—are the ones who are deemed non-sinners and will therefore be in heaven, Huck wants to be in hell, away from those people. It is the same as choosing to go to hell because his friends will be there, but in this later case, it is a choice based on a personal perspective of what general type of person he'd like to associate with in the afterlife. By asserting his agency and accepting the moral consequences, we may read Huck as fully rejecting the premise of race and racial supremacy.

While some scholars have argued that Huck doesn't fully appreciate the gravity of the decision he is making in this passage due to his youth, it is beyond question that the statement does represent a change of heart for the novel's young protagonist and, I would argue, one that more represents the words of an adult than most critics have heretofore recognized. Up to this point, he had accepted the societal norms that characterized African Americans as a sort of subhuman species, and slavery not as the evil institution it was described as by abolitionists and others who opposed the practice. The shift in his moral code is a monumental one. To ignore the importance of this change in Huck's mind-set is to miss the point of Twain's satire. Twain himself experienced a similar change of heart during his brief stint in the Confederate Army, a change that was brought on in part by his own firsthand experiences with African American slaves at the time. In mirroring that change in Twain's moral code, Huck is telling us directly that there are things in life that are worth sacrificing everything for, up to and including spending the afterlife in "the bad place," and one of those things is the destruction of racial hierarchies in American society.

This is not the same sort of immature reaction he had when the widow Douglas was lecturing him on why he should want to go to heaven; this is a much more mature decision based on moral lessons he has learned during his time with Jim and the king and duke. This is the decision of a person who has made up his own mind based on his own personal experiences, as opposed to relying on the messages handed down from previous generations whose only authority is drawn from knowledge they, in turn, also received from previous generations. Huck is most in his element, as we have seen throughout, when he is not under the authority of those who claim to have his best interests in mind. He is at his best when he is allowed to make up his own mind, when he is empowered to do what he believes to be right. And his decision to help Jim and risk eternal damnation as a result is perhaps the quintessential moment of Huck's being empowered to do what he believes to be right. It is the single most adultlike decision he makes and, I would argue, is more adultlike than many of the decisions made by the chronological adults that inhabit his world.

Regarding the contemporary reception of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by the public at whom its satirical message was aimed, the novel's themes missed the mark in more than one instance. Perhaps the most famous of all early reviews was that expressed by the Concord Public Library in Concord, Massachusetts. The *New York Herald* reported the library's reaction on March 18, 1885: "The sage censors of the Concord public library have unanimously

reached the conclusion that 'Huckleberry Finn' is not the sort of reading matter for the knowledge seekers of a town which boasts the only 'summer school of philosophy' in the universe. They have accordingly banished it from the shelves of that institution." The book was deemed "absolutely immoral in its tone" and was said to "contain very little humor" by the library committee members. But the perceived immorality, ironically enough, had nothing to do with race. One committee member cited "the language of a rough, ignorant dialect," adding that repeated instances of "bad grammar and an employment of inelegant expressions" called for the book's banning. In other words, the Concord Public Library committee collectively failed to understand the true nature of the novel, as did many other readers of the day.

This failure on the part of contemporary readers to fully comprehend Twain's message may be blamed on the author's desire to write a book that, while challenging the socially accepted practice of racial subversion, was still palatable to a larger reading audience. As Richard Barksdale warns, "If the ironic statement made by an author in a work of fiction is too subtly wrought it will not be effectively communicated to the average reader" (20). Twain's satire fell victim to being "too subtly wrought" to effectively convey the message to the average reader; his nicely polished looking-glass wasn't nicely polished enough. But the satire is clear when it is more closely examined. The message is that white privilege is based on an arbitrary marker; it is a fiction of law and custom.

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Notes

1. Pap's declaration that he is a wealthy man echoes Jim's own self-assessment to Huck in regards to his own value: "Yes—en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars" (*HF*, 57). Of course, Jim, as a slave, doesn't own himself. Given that his rhetoric mirrors that of Pap Finn, the suggestion is, on one level, that they are equal in terms of value. Despite their different skin colors, each bases his own worth on faulty logic.

2. E. Bruce Kirkham argues that Twain chose the specific lines he did for the duke's version of the soliloquy (lines taken from three different Shakespearean plays) because together they "embody themes which bear upon the reading of the novel" (19).

3. Further to the idea that this group is representative of a KKK gathering, Sherburn tells the assembled mass that one of their mistakes was that "you didn't come in the dark, and fetch your masks" (*HF*, 190).

4. It is interesting to read this section, too, in respect to the Three-Fifths Compromise that counted "other persons" (i.e., blacks) as three-fifths of a person in determining state representatives in the United States House of Representatives. The suggestion that a child—in this case, a slave child—could be cut into two pieces may be read as an attack on the compromise, which effectively reduced a single black man into three-fifths of a man.

5. This theme of humanizing slaves based on the recognition of the importance of their own familial relationships in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is echoed in an earlier Twain essay, "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It." Twain is also quoted in Paine's *The Boys' Life of Mark Twain* recalling the sight of a group of slaves waiting to be sold at an auction during his childhood, saying, "They had the saddest faces I ever saw" (7).

6. In something of a postcolonial shift, one may read this marginalized condition as reflecting Homi Bhabha's concept of "not quite / not white" that he articulates in *The Location of Culture* (131).

7. Huck's desire to spend eternity with his friends recalls a note that Twain wrote down in a personal notebook in 1890: "Dying man couldn't make up his mind which place to go—both have their advantages, 'heaven for climate, hell for company!'" (Twain and Anderson 538).

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