



# JIM'S SECRETS: WHAT MARK TWAIN KNEW BUT HUCK FINN DIDN'T

---

**Edward M. Griffin**

**Professor of English, Emeritus  
University of Minnesota**

Article Number: 3

Date of publication: August 15, 2013

---

Follow this and additional works at: <http://purl.umn.edu/148010>

Recommended Citation: Griffin, Edward M. (2013). **JIM'S SECRETS: WHAT MARK TWAIN KNEW BUT HUCK FINN DIDN'T.**

*Journal of Opinions, Ideas, and Essays.* August 15, 2013. Article #3. Available at <http://purl.umn.edu/148010>.

Submissions will be accepted from any member of the University of Minnesota community.  
Access will be free and open to all.

## JIM'S SECRETS: WHAT MARK TWAIN KNEW BUT HUCK FINN DIDN'T

**Edward M. Griffin**

**Professor of English, Emeritus  
University of Minnesota**

Abstract: Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, persistently attacked since 1885 as vulgar and inelegant, has more recently been condemned as elitist, sexist, and racist. The charge of racism turns not only on the pervasive use of the "n" word, but also on a misunderstanding of Jim, the runaway slave, as a minstrel-show stereotype of the powerless simpleton. Urging a reconsideration of Jim's role in light of the literary and psychological features of the captivity narrative, this essay argues that Mark Twain builds the novel around two related forms of captivity: Jim's slavery in the first part of the novel and, in the second part, the joint captivity of Jim and Huck by the Duke and the King. The first half turns on two competing plans: Huck's and Jim's. Huck's is a juvenile plan, open-ended and in search of thrilling adventures. Jim's is an adult plan with specific ends in view: escaping from slavery at the risk of his life and eventually freeing his wife and children. Huck Finn would like to diminish Jim's manhood, but Mark Twain will not allow it. And when Mark Twain realizes that if he defeats Jim's plan he will be writing a tragedy, he searches for a comic ending--with the ostensibly insuperable difficulties resolved--by turning to parody and by using all the trappings of the traditional captivity narrative for social satire until, when all seems lost, by supplying Tom Sawyer to provide a deeply ambiguous tragi-comic rescue. The final section of the essay provides a brief meditation on that ambiguous resolution.

### *I. Still in Trouble After All These Years*

In 1884, Samuel Langhorne Clemens needed a hit with his new novel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but the book seemed jinxed and sure to flop.

He had made some of his customary bad investments, and he was short of money. He had entered the publishing business with the idea that he could get rich by controlling everything—from the writing of the books to their printing and their sales. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was to be sold by prior subscription. When his agents had garnered 40,000 advance commitments, Clemens figured, he would print the book—but not until then. He was sure the 40,000 sales would be reached in early December 1884, just in time for Christmas. This book simply had to be a popular success, so Clemens even consented to toning down some of

the language (there was considerable worrying over whether references to bad smells and dead cats should go in). And he worried about some of the illustrations E. W. Kemble had done. Didn't Huckleberry look too "ugly" and too "Irishy" in the pictures? Such impressions might turn away fastidious readers or the many Irish-haters among Americans.

Despite his precautions, things kept going wrong. The worst event was the discovery, after thousands of copies of some of the illustrations had been run off for the use of the agents, that someone in the engraving shop had mischievously added a phallus to the picture of old Silas Phelps, who is being asked by Aunt Sally, "Who do you reckon it is?" The illustration had to be cut out of the printed copies by hand and replaced at the printing office by a retouched printing of the plate, but reports about the obscene engraving had already got out. The redoing of the illustration postponed the publication until February 1885, after the holiday buying season, and it had alerted the custodians of public morals that there was something naughty about Mark Twain's new book.<sup>1</sup>

After it was finally published, sales proved very disappointing. The timing had been dreadful. Worse, it wasn't getting reviewed in any influential newspapers or journals. Nobody was paying any attention to it at all.

But then Samuel Clemens got lucky. In March 1885, the Library Committee of Concord, Massachusetts, that center of transcendental idealism, announced publicly that Mark Twain's new book, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, was too rough, coarse, and inelegant for inclusion in the library's collection. Mark Twain had been banned in Concord. Within a few days he was panned in the newspapers of Springfield, Massachusetts, and Boston. Those journals editorialized either that the banning was proper or that it was unnecessary because the book was so bad that nobody would read it anyway.

Nothing could have pleased Clemens more. He wrote to his friend Charley Webster, "The Committee of the Public Library of Concord, Mass., have given us a rattling tip-top puff which will go into every paper in the country. They have expelled Huck from their library as trash and suitable only for the slums. That will sell 25,000 copies for sure."<sup>2</sup> Clemens had been around journalism for a long time, and he knew a great deal about human nature. If was just the way the Duke and the King had predicted about the Royal Nonesuch: "If that line don't fetch them, I don't know Arkansaw."<sup>3</sup>

It fetched them. The book had a sale of 42,000 copies by March 18, 51,000 by May 6, and it kept on

selling. Keep the book out of the libraries by all means, said Clemens. The one way people can read *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is to *buy* a copy, not borrow one.

Since that episode nearly 130 years ago, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has regularly been banned, censored, and removed from libraries and reading lists. Yet it has been enormously popular with the public, selling more than ten million copies and undergoing translation into most of the world's languages. It has also attracted persistent critical attention. English professors and high school teachers regularly talk about it in classrooms and even discuss it among themselves.

Of course there's some delicious irony in the story of the potential disaster's turning into a huge success, not only because the effort of the authorities to prevent people from reading *Huckleberry Finn* backfired so dramatically, but also because *Huckleberry Finn* actually is a vulgar, coarse, rough, and inelegant book—hardly the sort of text one would expect to become a schoolbook and to enter the accepted canon of the American literature curriculum.

In the last decades of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, vulgarity, coarseness, and inelegance haven't been the chief reasons *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is still in trouble after all these years. It makes the top-fifteen list of the 100 most challenged, banned, or censored ranks American books in this decade, and it ranks first in histories of the most commonly challenged books in American history,<sup>4</sup> but the more recent charges have been elitism, sexism, and, preeminently, racism. Elitism because, as Roland Barthes famously declared, "Literature is what gets taught."<sup>5</sup> And the teaching has been done by white, male English professors from elite universities who compile the classroom anthologies, referee the criticism, and set the boundaries of the curriculum across the nation. In short, now that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been judged a classic, it can no longer be subversive; in fact, it is the reverse: through the professoriate, it endorses the ideology of the dominant society. Sexist because few women occupy the territory of *Huckleberry Finn*, and those found there are generally rendered as silly girls or obnoxious matrons. And Clemens is now said to reaffirm white supremacy because Huck Finn uses, casually and apparently uncritically, racial epithets—chiefly the "n" word—that we now recognize as repugnant. Moreover, the character of Jim perpetuates a minstrel-show stereotype of the simpleton, the grown man with the mind, emotions, and values of a powerless and impotent

boy who surrenders to the control of two teenage white boys, Huckleberry and eventually Tom Sawyer.

As I shall explain later, I have been involved for some time in a study attempting to reinterpret classic and lesser known American texts according to a paradigm quite different from the ones currently employed by literary historians, so I have had to return afresh to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—surely an important test case for any reconsideration of American literary history. And I take with me on my return the challenges to the text raised by such African-American literary figures as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison as well as what I have read about controversies in many American communities over the presence of Mark Twain's novel in local libraries and classrooms.<sup>6</sup>

## II. *Jim's Secrets: What Mark Twain Knew but Huck Finn Didn't*

With language such a sore spot, it seemed commonsensical to look again at the language itself, seeking to learn more precisely what Jim does and what he says, what Huck does and what he says. Having returned to the text, I have reached these conclusions.

I do *not* believe that Jim considers himself inferior to Huck; neither do I believe that Jim ever accepts Huck's efforts to diminish him from adult to adolescent sidekick. Nor, despite what Huck thinks, is Huck ever in command. Moreover, from the outset Jim is angry. Because Jim is quiet—usually silent—and black, and a slave, Huck misreads Jim and misses the anger. But it is always there, shrewdly masked, guarded, and concealed for tactical purposes, and it becomes progressively more vocal until it finally erupts into terrifying words when the raft approaches Cairo, Illinois, the Ohio River, and free territory. This Jim surprises Huck, and he eludes many readers, but I hope that a close look at what he does, says, and does not say will demonstrate that Jim did not surprise or elude Samuel Clemens.

I propose that we shift focus to the narratives Huck, the first-person narrator, tells about himself and Jim and about their relationship. For *Huckleberry Finn* has two stories to tell—his own and Jim's. The first is a boy's story; the second is a man's. The stories answer the questions, "What does Huck want?" and "What does Jim want?" At first Huck does not realize that these are different questions. He naturally assumes that *Jim* wants what *Huck* wants, and that he and Jim will embark together on the new adventures of *Huckleberry Finn*. So he doesn't hesitate at all when, in chapter eleven, he gets back to Jackson's Island after his visit to Mrs. Loftus and

yells, "Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!" (75).

*Nobody is after Huck.*

He has staged his own death, and for almost all the time of his adventures he is officially dead. They *are* after Jim, but Huck at this moment wants to go along for the ride. He is going to hitchhike on Jim's story and appropriate it as his own. The next five chapters give us Huck's account of how he slowly assembles the pieces of Jim's separate story and slowly comes to understand that Jim has a secret scheme of his own. Despite Huck's desires, moreover, he doesn't fit into Jim's plan. The moment that Huck finally discovers Jim's true intentions is the most dangerous moment in the book, and one of the real danger points in American literature.

What is Jim's story? It's submerged in the narrative. *Jim wants it that way.* He will reveal only so much of his secret as he is forced to. Unlike Huck, Jim isn't eager to unload it. Again and again, Huck tells us, when Huck wants information from Jim, "he only set there and looked at me; never said nothing." Jim is a guarded, suspicious narrator. The last thing Jim needed after running away was to be discovered in the woods. When Huck discovers Jim, Huck was "ever so glad to see" him. "I warn't lonesome, now," says Huck (51). That's not Jim's response. He is not lonesome for somebody to show up and keep him company. He is hardly "ever so glad" to have crazy Huckleberry Finn, the supposedly dead and the most unpredictable kid in town, pop up behind him. Now that Jim has been located, he is not going to tell this white boy any more than he actually has to. Only after carefully determining that Huck doesn't suspect the reason Jim is on Jackson's Island, only after maneuvering Huck to reveal *his* secret, only after discovering that Huck has a canoe packed with provisions (including a firearm), and only after obtaining a pledge of secrecy from Huck does Jim say, "I *run off*" (52). And what is Huck's reflexive response? It is very mixed, very qualified.<sup>7</sup>

No, *he* wouldn't tell. Of course, if his "keeping mum" were discovered, "People would call me a low-down abolitionist and despise me"--but don't you worry, Jim, I know your secret but I will keep it (52-53). Maybe so, maybe no. Huck's language does not, cannot, reassure Jim. But at least Jim now knows what he is dealing with--a kid who has just faked his own death might come through for him under pressure but might not. This kind of company he doesn't need, but Huck is there, a palpable reality to be faced and coped with. And a reality equipped with a canoe loaded with provisions.

A canoe is better than nothing, but what Jim really wants is a raft. The reason he wants a raft is simple. He doesn't want it as a way to communicate with nature, or as a stage on which to act out boyish fantasies, or as a poor boy's toy. He wants it because he is a runaway slave stuck in slave territory and he needs some way to get to free territory without leaving a trace for bounty hunters and their dogs to follow. "You see ef I kep' on tryin' to git away afoot, de dogs 'ud track me; ef I stole a skift to cross over, dey'd miss dat skift, you see, en dey'd know 'bout whah I'd lan' on de yuther side en whah to pick up my track. So I says, a raff is what I's arter; it doan' *make* no track" (53). When he and Huck snare a small section of a lumber raft, pine planking twelve feet wide and about sixteen feet long, it's not much, but it's something. It's precious; in a pinch Jim might be able to ride it to freedom.

Because Huck knows that Jim "run *off*," he thinks he knows Jim's secret. He doesn't. For the deeper secret is that Jim has a *plan*. He has had one all along. He even has a plan for what he will do once he reaches a free state.

*These plans do not include Huck; they never have.*

Huck was a surprise, an unexpected complication, a liability. But there he is. The only thing to do is make the best of the situation and see if Huck's presence can't be converted from a liability into an asset. So Jim keeps his grand design to himself, bides his time, and watches for the main chance.

The pinch comes. "Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!" Huck stresses Jim's wordless response to the news that their presence on Jackson's Island has been discovered: "Jim never asked no questions, he never said a word; but the way he worked for the next half hour showed about how he was scared. By that time everything we had in the world was on our raft and she was ready to be shoved out from the willow cove where she was hid . . ." Finally, when "we got out the raft and slipped along down in the shade, past the foot of the island dead still," neither Huck nor Jim has yet said a word (75-76). But Jim has been thinking all the while.

It's time to drop Plan A and go to Plan B. Float south with the current to Cairo, Illinois, where the Ohio River joins the Mississippi.<sup>8</sup> There Jim can turn northward and escape into free territory. This is risky business. They might miss Cairo, and if they do there's no exit. Jim risks going "down the river" after all, and deeper and

deeper into slave territory. So somehow Jim must get to Cairo and the Ohio River. Get to Cairo. Hiding, traveling at night, looking sharp, get there. Any way you can. Just get there. Even if successful, you still have to go against the current. And here young Huckleberry Finn might come in very handy.

Huck, on the other hand, has no particular destination. He too is in flight, but not flight towards any special place. Just before he counterfeits his death, he plots the adventures of Huckleberry Finn. They are aimless. "I thought it all over," he says, "and I reckoned I would walk off with the gun and some lines, and take to the woods when I run away. I guessed I wouldn't stay in one place, but just tramp right across the country, mostly night-times, and hunt and fish to keep alive, and so get so far away that the old man nor the widow couldn't ever find me anymore" (32).

On Jackson's Island, Huck thinks he has already achieved his dream of the good life. Jim and he have found a cave on high ground at the center of the island. Huck is happy just to have found it. Jim, however, immediately wants them to go to the trouble of hauling their gear to the cave and turning it into a headquarters. Huck objects to all the work involved, but Jim persuades Huck with two arguments. "Jim said if we had the canoe hid in a good place and had all the traps in the cavern we could rush there if anybody was to come to the island, and they would never find us without dogs. And besides, he said them little birds had said it was going to rain, and did I want the things to get wet?" Jim has no childish illusions about the possibilities of the free and easy life. After they finally get everything into the cavern, Huck reveals the severe limits of his dream (58).

"Jim, this is nice," I says. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread."

"Well," Jim replies, "you wouldn't a ben here, 'f it hadn't ben for Jim. You'd a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittn' mos' drowned, too, dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it's gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile"(60).

Huck says that he wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here; at this point Jim would rather be anywhere else but here, on Jackson's Island. Huck at this point thinks that what is "nice" for Huck is necessarily nice for Jim--but Jim knows better.

That distinction is equally true on the river. It's Jim who knows what to do, just as it is Jim who knows

where they are going, and why. Jim builds the shelter on the raft, Jim builds the elevated flooring and the dirt fireplace. Jim does the things a man should do.

Jim is looking for Cairo; Huck is looking for adventures. On the fifth night below St. Louis, Huck finds one: the wrecked steamboat, the *Walter Scott*, which they come across in a driving rainstorm.

"Well," says Huck, "it being away in the night, and stormy, and all so mysterious-like, I felt just the way any other boy would a felt, when I see that wreck laying there so mournful and lonesome in the middle of the river. I wanted to get aboard of her and slink around a little, and see what there was there. So I says:

'Le's land on 'er, Jim.'

But Jim was dead against it. . . . He says:

'I doan' want to go fool'n' 'long er no wrack. We's doin' blame well, en we better let blame' well alone, as de good book says. Like as not dey's a watchman on dat wrack!.'

Huck, however, will have none of Jim's objections. They're too commonsensical, too practical, too grown-up. "Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing?" Huck asks. "Not for pie, he wouldn't. He'd call it an adventure--that's what he'd call it; and he'd land on that wreck if it was his last act."

That's precisely what Jim fears it might be--Jim's last act. But Huck insists, and his final rebuke to Jim reveals how little Huck understands of Jim's perspective. "I wish Tom Sawyer *was* here" (80-81).

Sure enough, Jim is right. The boat is occupied--by a gang of armed robbers. As soon as they discover this fact, Jim, knowing that there is a price on his head, wants off that boat as fast as possible. He heads back to get the raft, which they have tied to the steamboat. Huck, of course, recognizing a patented Tom Sawyer situation, hangs back to see what is going on. When, after overhearing the murder plot, he has to scramble back to Jim, we learn that Jim's worst fears have been realized: the raft has broken loose. It's what comes from preferring childish adventures to leaving well enough alone.

Eventually they find the raft, and they float ever closer to Cairo.<sup>9</sup> For Huck it is a pleasure craft, pleasant in its own right. For Jim the raft is as practical a craft as is a ferryboat. He needs it temporarily to get him someplace important. It can bring him closer to accomplishing his plan.

And on the raft, during the final three days and nights before Cairo, Huck slowly, gropingly, and,

finally, with horror, comes to understand the true story of his companion and to realize that Jim is not, as Huck had assumed, simply one of the boys out for adventure, and that Huck's attempt to convert the adult, black, slave, man into a juvenile sidekick has not worked and will not work.

Huck thinks he is teaching Jim, as they float towards Cairo, smoking seegars and reading about kings, dukes, earls, and Frenchmen. But really Jim is breaking the news to Huck. "I told Jim," Huck says, "all about what happened inside the wreck, and at the ferryboat; and I said these kinds of things was adventures; but he said he didn't want no more adventures. He said that when I went in the texas and he crawled back to get on the raft and found her gone, he nearly died; because he judged it was all up with *him*, anyway it could be fixed; for if he didn't get saved he would get drownded; and if he did get saved, whoever saved him would send him back home so as to get the reward, and then Miss Watson would sell him south, sure. Well, he was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (93). A few pages later, Huck repeats himself: "Jim had a wonderful level head, for a nigger; he could most always start a good plan when you wanted one" (107). We must pay attention to what Jim says and does not say. He does not say that he judged it was all up with *Huck*. Jim does not say that his first thought was what was going to happen to dear old Huck. Jim does say that he thought first of his own dilemma, and he clearly spells out the alternatives. No more adventures, Huck. If they go wrong, I lose everything. I'm not taking that risk. Get it? Huck gets it, and he also must start to realize that Jim and he have very different goals. Jim doesn't consider Huck some sort of brave adventurer at all. He's a threat to Jim's grand design.

So in retaliation Huck starts to speak of Jim as a "nigger." In chapters fourteen and fifteen, when Jim finally has had enough of Huck's childishness and finally faces him with some cold, hard facts, Huck's only defense against the pain of those facts is to punctuate his remarks with the word that is supposed to put Jim in his place, keep him from being a man, reduce him to one of the gang, persuade him that he has no future without reliance on white boys: nigger, Huck says: *nigger*, hoping that by naming him Huck can forestall the truth that Jim is his own man.<sup>10</sup>

In chapter fifteen, Huck treats Jim as a nigger once too often, and Jim rebels. A heavy fog has come in, and Huck takes the canoe with a tow line to tie the raft to a tree, but it tears away and Huck and Jim are

separated. In a nightmarish sequence trying to locate each other as they roar along in the rapid current, they are split apart by a long, wooded island. Finally, after falling asleep from exhaustion, Huck awakes and locates the raft, littered with branches and dirt from careening off islands and snags. He finds Jim sitting at the steering oar, asleep on his arm, and Huck decides to play a trick on Jim, pretending that nothing has happened, that Huck has been there all along, and that Jim had merely dreamed the awful journey in the fog. Huck had played a trick on Jim once before, while they were on Jackson's Island; he had killed a rattlesnake and had placed its dead body at the foot of Jim's blanket to frighten him. But Huck had not anticipated that the rattler's mate would show up and bite Jim. Jim endured four horrible days of pain, but said little about it. This time, however, Jim rises up in righteous fury and jolts Huck by returning insult for insult.

"He looked at me steady, without ever smiling," Huck says, and tells him, 'When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart was mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what become er me or de raf'. En when I wake' up en fine you back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees and kiss yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout, wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.'

"Then he got up, slow, and walked to the wigwam, and went in there, without saying anything but that. But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back.

"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 afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way"(105).

With this reconciliation, we sense that Huck has learned an important lesson. But he has not yet passed his examination. That comes next. They are sure they are near Cairo, and Jim, perhaps feeling that Huck can now understand the true significance of the journey and the raft, for the first time openly narrates the details of his scheme. His dream, unlike Huck's, is a battle plan. It involves work, and saving, and family. "He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss

Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an abolitionist to go and steal them"(124).

*Steal them? Consort with Abolitionists?* Not only has the silent Jim been replaced by the outspoken Jim, the Jim here revealed, the Jim literally itching to get off that raft, has uttered the unutterable, has spoken the forbidden words. Blacks should not even think such thoughts, let alone say them aloud, and to say them boldly in front of a white person--this is rank violation of all the rules.

"It most froze me to hear such talk," says Huck. We can believe it. "He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before." We can believe that, too. "Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free." All the difference in the world. And then Huck gropes for some plank to shore up the world that has just collapsed in front of him: "It was according to the old saying, 'Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell'." That old saying has never meant much to Huck before because he has never been so close to a man just inches from freedom, but he reaches for it now as for a life raft. "Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children--children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm." Huck is unaware of the irony of this remark. The man he doesn't know is Jim; the children are Jim's; and Jim is the man who hasn't done him any harm, but we suspect that beneath this rationalization lies an unspoken insight: *there is no mention of Pap Finn's boy among Jim's children* (124.)

So Huck, at the moment when the dream life on the raft is about to end, when Jim's real life plan must be put into action, decides to listen to the voice of conscience. "It hadn't ever come home to me before what this thing was that I was doing. . . . Conscience says to me, 'What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean?' Finally he says to his conscience, "Let up on me--it ain't too late, yet--I'll paddle ashore at the first light and tell." (123-24). Surely Jim, as he looks over at Huck, recalls Jackson's Island: "But mind, you said you wouldn't tell—you know you said you wouldn't tell, Huck." And Huck's declaration: "Well, I did. I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest *injun*, I will" (52).

Thus Huck enters his examination. Jim knows that this is the moment of greatest risk. As Huck decides

to go ashore and ask if the town is Cairo, Jim "jumped up and got the canoe ready, and put his old coat in the bottom for me to set on, and give me the paddle; and as I shoved off, he says:

‘Pooty soon I’ll be a-shoutin’ for joy, and I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free if it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won’t ever forgit you, Huck; you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’s de *only* fren’ ole Jim’s got, now’” (125). This remark, a desperate statement of the awful truth that ever since Huck inconveniently showed up on Jackson’s Island Jim’s future has inevitably ridden on the boy, seems to take effect.

"I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me. I went along slow, then, and I warn’t right down certain whether I was glad I started or whether I warn’t. When I was fifty yards off, Jim says,

‘Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; de on’y white genlman dat ever kep’ his promise to old Jim’” (125).

This is not what one says to a person paddling to shore merely to make an inquiry. Jim knows what struggle is going on in Huck’s heart and head. He has left only one card to play, and he uses it just at the instant Huck seems to hesitate. Will Huck remain the only white gentleman that ever kept his promise to the black man, or will he act like all the rest? Jim’s life depends on the answer.

And Huck has to answer. He is stopped by a skiff containing two armed men.

"Is your man white, or black?"

Hesitation. Struggle. The words won’t come out. Finally,

"He’s white."

But the hesitation has been enough to raise suspicion.

"I reckon we’ll go and see for ourselves."

And then the most brilliant examination answer in American literature.

"I wish you would," says I, "because it’s pap that’s there, and maybe you’d help me tow the raft ashore where the light is. He’s sick--and so is mam and Mary Ann." Huck provides himself with a father; the smallpox story works and gets Huck and Jim two twenty-dollar gold pieces into the bargain (124-128).

But they learn that in the fog that night they had run by Cairo. It’s all up with Jim. Three hours later the

raft is destroyed by a steamboat. And a few pages later, Mark Twain stopped writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and set the manuscript aside, not to resume it for four more years.

### III. *The Uncomfortable Meshing of Two American Fables*

I believe that he had realized that he had finished a short novel with two interlocking fables, each of them essential to an understanding of American experience. The first, Huck's, is the master fable of the self-reliant, free American spirit, what the early colonists would have called an antinomian and Emerson and his circle would have called a transcendentalist, declaring himself a law unto himself and seeking a congenial natural environment. One could make the case that this resolutely male fantasy has been the Master Narrative of American literature well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The second, Jim's, is the slave narrative version of the captivity narrative, of which the classic example was--and probably still is-- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845). Douglass found *his* Cairo and made it to New York. Once Clemens decided not to borrow Douglass's plot and allow Jim his New York, he was faced with the realization that he, the great American humorist, was looking squarely in the face of writing a tragedy. And in 1876, he couldn't handle that task, so he turned away, hoping his "tank would fill up," as he put it, with another plot.

When he resumed *Huckleberry Finn* in earnest, in 1880 and, after another pause, again in 1883, I believe that he had decided to borrow the predicament central to one of his favorite kinds of recreational reading, the tale of captivity. Hundreds of these autobiographical and biographical stories of people taken captive by Indians, pirates, highwaymen, kidnappers, and others who wanted power and ransom had been published. Clemens owned many of them, and the second book—*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from chapters 18 to 43-- follows, it seems to me, the basic situation of the captivity narrative.<sup>11</sup> Of course, as every reader of this second part of the novel quickly realizes, Clemens shifts gears after Chapter 16. We quickly discover that we are now reading a novel of social criticism, a rough-and-ready, almost grotesque novel of manners, a frontier parody of the concerns of *The Portrait of a Lady*,<sup>12</sup> and we notice that now the action is located not on an island and less and less on the river, but predominantly on the shore. The Sheperdson-Grangerford feud and Sherburn's murder of Boggs reveal the shameful viciousness of society, its pretensions at aristocratic manners on the frontier, and its hypocritical justification of evil; the Royal Nonesuch, the camp-meeting, and the swindle of the Wilkes

family reveal human foolishness and petty greed. These sections are episodes in themselves, almost short stories that could stand alone if they had not been inserted into the novel as set-pieces. Yet underneath the surface target-practice of social satire, and driving the plot of the book, is the continuing problem of what do with Jim and Huck. This predicament posed Clemens a tough fictional challenge, and the narrative strategy he selected to meet that challenge nicely matches that of the captivity story, a tale which I believe is widespread in many genres of American literature. It involves a person suddenly taken captive and held against his or her will, deprived by the captor of freedom, volition, identity, and self-determination. Captivity is a violation of one's person; it is an act of terrorism, for, unlike imprisonment, it strikes unexpectedly and for no apparent reason. The captive is no longer valued as a person but essentially as a commodity to be exchanged, a means for the captor to realize some purpose. Jim's whole life has been a captivity narrative, and in the last part of the book I believe that Clemens puts Huck squarely into that position as well.

Both Jim and Huck are for all practical purposes captured by the King and the Duke. Thus they face the classic predicament of the captive: utter dependence for their very lives upon the will of the captor, who has all the power while they have none. And like all victims of captivity, their range of options is limited: they can end the captivity only by suicide, escape, rescue, ransom, or adoption.

Suicide is of course the ultimate act of desperation by the captive. In most victims the will to survive is so strong that they endure enormous psychological and physical hardships while waiting for a chance to escape (which, typically, rarely comes to them) or awaiting rescue (which also rarely happens) or freedom through the payment of ransom money (the most common conclusion to a captivity).

In the logic of the first section of the novel, Clemens must keep the stories of Huck and Jim essentially different while superficially similar: Huck must think that they are after *us* while Jim knows they are really after *him*. When Jim, excited by the possibility of success, finally reveals how daring his scheme is, the plot will be resolved if Huck can overcome his shock at Jim's unsuspected radicalism and perform an equivalent act of radical courage. Jim's slave narrative has been a captivity narrative all along; for the second segment of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to work, both Huck and Jim must share the same predicament.

The captivity situation allows him to do so. One of the great fantasies of American culture is the belief

that captives can and must escape from captivities. People who have never been kidnapped smugly demand that the victims make a break for it, and they question the courage of the victims if they cannot escape their traps. This is a classic instance of blaming the victim, and real captives know better. Hundreds of first-hand accounts written by actual captives make perfectly clear that escape is the hardest option to accomplish.<sup>13</sup> As Jim, Huck, the Duke, and the King travel ever deeper into the slave-holding, slave-hunting South, Jim has no plausible chance to escape, and he realizes that. Now it is a question of holding on and surviving. The man who was so eloquent near the mouth of the Ohio now has no choice but to keep his mouth shut and his eyes open as they near the delta of the Mississippi. And Huck comes to realize that the Duke and the King have captured him as well. Like Jim, his range of options rapidly narrows. Ransom? Nobody will ransom a dead boy, and Huck is officially dead. Rescue? Why would anyone want to rescue a corpse? Moreover, the two scoundrels make certain to provide no opportunity to escape. The choice remaining both for Jim and Huck is the only choice open to captives and other oppressed people: survival by maneuvering their captors and negotiating, usually slyly, the most tolerable conditions they can get, staying alive to see what happens next. And for Jim, what happens next is Mark Twain's bitter twist on the captivity predicament. His captors do not bargain Jim's freedom in exchange for ransom money; they take the money to sell him into slavery once again.

Just when we all avenues seem blocked, Mark Twain brings Tom Sawyer to the rescue. It takes some torturous maneuvering, to be sure, but Tom finally fulfills his role as redeemer and resolves the captivity narrative according to form. In fact, the tedious final ten chapters of the book are an elaborate parody of the captivity narrative, a story-within-a-story, with Tom trying to act as the author, writing those horrible pretend letters from the captive pleading for deliverance. Mark Twain used the form because he needed it; then he mocked it to death in order to provide a solution to his difficulty.

#### ***IV. On Invisibility***

Mark Twain not only writes a deadly serious parody of the captivity narrative, he also writes a parody of the accepted myth of American history. This is 1885. Twenty-two years earlier, Mister Lincoln had freed the slaves. Reconstruction has been underway for twenty years. Like Tom Sawyer, Lincoln had provided America's Jims with the piece of paper that was to be their emancipation proclamation. But Jim's emancipating rescue by

Tom Sawyer, who has cruelly hidden the fact that Jim has *already* been legally freed by Miss Watson's will, is no great help. Here he is in southern Arkansas, deep in the heart of Dixie, with the report that a slave holder in far-away Missouri has written a piece of paper that says "This is a free man." Jim with his piece of paper is a long way from Cairo still, with little real prospect of realizing his dream. Now the only proof Jim has of his manumission is the word of a perfectly nutty teenaged white kid from Missouri and the endorsement of a fast-talking youngster who now wants to take him to Oklahoma so that they can have adventures among the Indians. Free at last, free at last, but, like the slaves during reconstruction, not at last truly free and equal. With a society as corrupt as the one Mark Twain portrays in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, chances are good that everything will be done to keep that promise empty.<sup>14</sup> Who in the slave South is going to believe Jim's story and credit that piece of paper? What are his chances now of making his way North to realize his grand plan? And Mark Twain, who sends Huckleberry Finn out to "the territory" on the American frontier ahead of the rest, knows from experience that there will soon be no uncontrolled territory to escape to; five years after the novel finally got published, the United States census declared the American frontier closed; eight years later Frederick Jackson Turner gave his classic address on the significance of the frontier in American history.<sup>15</sup>

Jim and Mark Twain both knew a great deal that Huck Finn didn't know. I think they both knew a great deal that many readers of the novel don't know, or don't want to believe. It seems to me, upon reexamining the text, that Samuel Clemens the Southerner understood a century ago a fact that many of us have come only recently to recognize. For a long time white liberal Americans, especially those from the North (and I count myself among them) defined the master/slave relationship as one that so utterly repressed and brutalized Africans in this country that both during slavery and in its aftermath they were kept in a permanent condition of arrested development, helpless because powerless. Thus African-Americans, we thought sadly, had been prevented from developing a culture; they had been systematically kept uneducated and backward. The oppressive system should be destroyed, we believed, precisely so that blacks could be helped to "develop" and enter the mainstream. That is what I was brought up to believe. In our own time, however, the deficiencies of this well-meaning position and its basic premise have been exposed. Yes, the master-slave relationship was brutal and oppressive, but the oppressed people had all along been powerful actors in their story, not inert,

passive objects. Oppressed people had found enormously effective ways to resist cultural annihilation, beat the system's pathology, and develop a rich and complex culture that one could only call African-American. They had negotiated the best terms they could get in a captivity situation, and they had done so in a clear-eyed and hardheaded manner. As Lawrence Levine puts it, "black men and women were able to find the means to sustain a far greater degree of self-pride and group cohesion than the system they lived under ever intended for them to be able to do."<sup>16</sup> But for many white scholars until recent years this has been an invisible culture, one they looked at and didn't see, partly because they didn't want to, partly because it was kept obscured for defensive purposes by African-Americans, and partly because mainstream scholars did not know how to look at it. For all of these reasons it was invisible to Huck until Jim decided to reveal it to him. If we go back over the details of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, however, I believe we will see that it was not invisible to Samuel Langhorne Clemens.

Yet the proper final chapter of *Adventures of Jim the Runaway Slave*, however, could not be written by Mark Twain. He could only prophesy what was going to happen. Only after the hypocrisies of reconstruction and the strange career of Jim Crow became evident could the depth of the irony of his story be plumbed. The sequel, if not the final chapter to Jim's story--and perhaps to Huck's as well--had to wait for the black Oklahoman Ralph Ellison, whose 1952 novel *Invisible Man* may be the finest work of American fiction in the twentieth century. *Invisible Man* is the further adventures of Jim; the theme of that captivity narrative is announced by the message written on another so-called emancipation proclamation that Invisible unwittingly carries around in his briefcase: "Keep this nigger-boy running." And the final words of *Invisible Man* are just as haunting as the more famous final words of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?"<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For side-by-side reproductions of the Phelps illustrations, see <http://mentalfloss.com/article/31107/crudely-drawn-penis-almost-derailed-huckleberry-finn>

<sup>2</sup> The complex composition and publication history of the novel can be found in the introduction and notes to the 2003 University of California Press edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This edition supersedes the 1988 California edition because it includes the text as found in the extensive (665 manuscript pages) first half of Mark Twain's manuscript, which was not discovered until 1990. In 1885, Samuel Clemens gave the second half of the manuscript to the Buffalo and Erie County public library; he could not find the first half and believed it likely that the printer had destroyed it after setting the type. In 1887, however, Clemens discovered the first half and had the pages delivered to the library. James Fraser Gluck, a lawyer and a curator for the library, took the pages home, intending to have them bound. Gluck died in 1897, and the pages remained unbound. Presumably they were left in the possession of his widow,

---

who moved to Hollywood, California. In 1990, the manuscript pages were discovered there by his granddaughter in a steamer trunk stored for many years in her grandmother's attic. After a testy legal battle between the library and various auction houses, the legal claim of the library was affirmed and the complete manuscript restored and housed there. See: *The Works of Mark Twain*. Volume 8 (2003). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Victor Fischer and Lin Salamo with the late Walter Blair. University of California Press.

<sup>3</sup> *Works of Mark Twain, Volume 8: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2003), 195. Hereafter citations to this edition will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged>

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Eagleton, Terry (2008). *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 194.

<sup>6</sup> Graff, Gerald, and James Phelan, eds. (2004). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy*. 2d ed. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's. This edition contains the text plus numerous articles attacking or defending the novel.

<sup>7</sup> In this line of argument, I am indebted at several places to the work of my old friend Neil Schmitz, whose discussion of what he calls "Huckspeech" in *Of Huck and Alice: Humorous Writing in American Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), remains the most trenchant and nuanced account of Mark Twain's linguistic strategies. Owing to our conversations and frequent correspondence over many years, I can no longer remember which of my claims here originated with me and which with him, but the odds are good that the best of them sprang from his insights. He will surely find his shadow falling over many of these pages, and I happily acknowledge his influence.

<sup>8</sup> In his 1895-96 lecture tour, Mark Twain explained that "where the Ohio river comes in . . . they would land & try to escape far north & east away from the domain of slavery." *Works of Mark Twain* (2003), 407. Note 99.2-8. For a map, see: <http://www.bcsd.org/webpages/jcapossere/files/Mississippi%20River%20map.jpg>

<sup>9</sup> The 2003 edition inserts at this point in Chapter 16 the famous "Raftsmen Passage," a lengthy section dramatizing the boisterous ways of Mississippi River raftsmen. It was originally intended for the first edition but was excised and used instead as a section of *Life on the Mississippi*. See: *Works of Mark Twain* (2003), 107-23; 407-12.

<sup>10</sup> Schmitz, *Of Huck and Alice*, 114-17, provides a searching exposition of this point.

<sup>11</sup> Gribben, Alan (1980). *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction*. New York: G. K. Hall.

<sup>12</sup> Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* was published as a book (after earlier serialization) in 1881, four years before the American publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of a modern instance, one involving a bizarre form of "adoption," see: Griffin, Edward M. (1992). Patricia Hearst and Her Foremothers: The Captivity Fable in America. *Centennial Review* 36, 311-26.

<sup>14</sup> Just over a decade later, in 1896, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the US Supreme Court would codify rigid segregation as legal under the Constitution—a system popularly known, with some irony, as *Jim Crow*.

<sup>15</sup> Huck says that his decision to light out for the territory arises from his determination to avoid adoption--along with suicide, escape, rescue, and ransom a potential conclusion to a captivity narrative. Huck senses that in his case adoption does not remedy the captivity predicament but replicates it. "Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before" (362). Frederick Jackson Turner's "frontier thesis" can be found online at: <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/frontierthesis.html>

<sup>16</sup> Levine, Lawrence (1977). *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. (New York: Oxford University Press, lxxv.

<sup>17</sup> Ellison, Ralph (1952). *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House), 581.