According to most of the literature on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's final decision to help Jim escape represents Huck's belief in and affirmation of Jim's humanity. In a very dramatic scene, Huck states emphatically that he will steal Jim out of slavery and willingly "go to hell" for doing so. Yet closer reading of the novel reveals that Huck supports Jim and his quest for freedom somewhat as a rope supports one who is being hanged. On two occasions he deliberately decides to turn Jim in; both efforts are frustrated by his conscience. Notice, however, that it is a conscience which merely tells Huck that Jim is essentially a "good nigger"; it is not a conscience which tells him that Jim is a human being like himself who simply wants to live and be free. Slavery for Huck was one thing, but a free "nigger" was quite another. Clearly, the hand handing out its alms can often look like a fist. Huck's intention is to acknowledge Jim as a fellow human; but his effect is to treat a human being as a "nigger." The full ambivalence of Twain's work cannot be measured unless we understand that Huck's relationship to Jim represents an interesting combination of revulsion and fascination, intimacy and remoteness, attraction and repulsion.

When we think of such moral ambivalence, of such antinomies of moral experience, we stand, as it were, between intellectual incoherence and passionate feeling. As a moral attitude it is enormously puzzling and difficult either to condemn or condone. It is, accordingly, not easy to decide what one must make of Huck Finn; he is hard to decipher. Twain himself complicates matters by making us care far more about Huck's regeneration and altruism than about his treachery. Nevertheless, today, when black Americans speak in their own literary and political voice, we are better placed to appreciate everything which is offensive and caricatural about Twain's representation of both Huck and Jim. Huck's feeling, for instance, that Jim is essentially "white inside" can hardly be distinguished from the racist refusal to associate anyone "black" with human decency. Whatever the ambiguities of this perspective, it is inconceivable that a serious black American novelist could without deliberately mimicking the likes of Mark Twain focus his vision in this way, even if the facts of the plot remained the same.

The main problem in *Huckleberry Finn*, as I see it, centers on understanding little Huck's outstretched hand to Jim. Why is Huck's hand, even in the form of a fist sometimes, ever stretched out in the first place? One answer is that Huck is in many ways stuck with Jim; at least he is half-stuck with him. He is mighty happy to have Jim as "his slave" because it gives him respectability and an opportunity to practice deception on his own white society,
which may interrogate him. As Jim's master, Huck is quite benevolent and regards Jim as fun-loving, good
humored, and happy-go-lucky; in short, as inferior but lovable as long as he stays in his place. Although Huck
may be "trash," as Jim often calls him, Huck's privilege is certainly there, thanks to the social structure. Huck
himself fully understands the great degree of social distance that separates him from Jim and, accordingly, finds it
quite easy to accept their distant intimacy.

Another response to our query is that Huck stretches his hands out to Jim because Huck is lonely, bored, and
afraid. When not trying to play the role of Jim's master, Huck sees Jim as an adult teacher, guide, nurse, and
father. The reductive implication here, however, is that blacks are directly fitted for acting as nurses, teachers, and
fathers (or mammies) of children simply because blacks themselves are childish, frivolous, and, in a very primitive
sense, wise. In short, Huck has internalized the racist and paternalistic view that blacks are children all their lives
long. They exist eternally in a kind of intermediate stage between the child and the fully developed adult.

Perhaps this mysterious mode of existence explains much of Huck's moral ambivalence toward Jim: his desire to
worship Jim the child and dominate Jim the man. One senses throughout their journey Huck's determination to
maintain control of his situation, to make the behavior of adults predictable and safe for himself. Since none of this
can be accomplished with his own cruel father or with his "deadly dull" existence with Christians Widow Douglass
and Miss Watson, Huck escapes them all and turns to nature (the river and wilderness) and Jim. Although at
times both prove problematic, it is clear that it is Jim, and not the river or forest, who creates the greatest
frustration for Huck. As long as Huck can give Jim "old slick counterfeit" quarters and keep him in his proper
place, things are fine. Things are not so fine, however, when Jim stands firm, asserts his selfhood, and exhibits
equal or superior intelligence. It is at such points that readers get some sense of the many negative images
forced upon blacks in America and elsewhere, images which tell us what a "nigger" is supposed to be and do and
what he is not supposed to be and do.

Let us first turn to the conversation which Huck and Jim have concerning the French language: "Spose," says
Huck, "a man was to come to you and say Polly-voo-franzy--what would you think?"

"I wouldn' think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head. Dat is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no
nigger to call me dat."
"Shucks, it ain't calling you anthing. It's only saying do you know how to talk
French."
"Well, den, why couldn't he say it?"
"Why, he is a-saying it. That's a Frenchman's way of
saying it."
"Well, it's a blame' ridicklous way, en I doan' want to hear no mo' 'bout it. Day ain' no
sense in it."

Huck should have at this point simply stopped while he was ahead, as Jim is obviously revealing his ignorance.
However, determined to play out his role as Jim's master, Huck goes on to try to make Jim see things his way:

"Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?""No, a cat don't."
"Well, does a cow?""No, a cow don't, nuther."
"Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?""No, dey don't."
"It's natural and right for
'em to talk different from each other, ain't it?"
"Course."
"And ain't it natural and right for a cat and a
cow to talk different from us?"
"Why, mos' sholy it is."
"Well, then, why ain't it natural and right for a
Frenchman to talk different from us? You answer me that."
"Is a cat a man, Huck?"
"No."
"Well, den, dey ain't no sense in a cat talkin' like a man. Is a cow a man?--er is a cow a cat?"
"No, she ain't
either of them."
"Well, den, she ain' got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of 'em. Is a
Frenchman a man?"
"Yes."
"Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan' he talk like a man? You answer me
dat!"I see it warn't no use wasting words--you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit.
(pp. 113-14)

This conversation contains one of the main ironies of the novel. By negating in reality what it postulates in theory,
the dialogue serves as a comment upon itself. While Huck accepts in theory the notion that it is "natural and right"
for people of different cultures to speak and behave in different ways, he ignores this in practice by refusing to
realize that it is natural for Jim to think differently from him, seeing that Jim has not yet been taught to think in
terms of the white "civilized" world. Instead, Huck finds it only too natural to believe that his way--which in this
case is simultaneously the way of the Christians Widow Douglass and Miss Watson--is the only true and essential way, and that whatever is inaccessible to him is false. We have in consequence at least one good statement by which to judge black people: not only are they unable to argue and reason, but they cannot even learn to do so. Yet on another occasion, Huck insists that Jim "was right; he was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (p. 109). Whatever fault Jim has surely must be attributed to the fact that he is a "nigger"--not an acquired fault, but as Joel Kovel points out, "something hidden deep in the essence of things, and revealed as it seeped outward through [his] skin."²

Huck's racist attitude toward Jim is continued in chapter sixteen. Here we see Huck doubting for the first time the wisdom of helping Jim to escape. Jim exacerbates things by overtly expressing his joy and future plans: "Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free state he would buy his wife, ... and then they would work to buy two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an abolitionist to go and steal them" (pp. 123-24). That Jim should think about such things is to Huck revolting: "It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, 'give a nigger an inch and he'll tak an ell'" (p. 124). In addition to all of their other defects, this familiar "old saying" makes clear Huck's agreement with his white culture that "niggers" are unspeakably thankless, almost morally perverse, and totally undeserving of freedom. Huck thus no longer sees Jim at this point as a fun-loving, happy-go-lucky companion, but as an aggressive, insolent, and "uppity" nigger. It is the exact view of free blacks expressed by his drunken father during his charade against the American government:

"Oh, yes, this is a wonderful gowment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat. ... And what do you think? they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knewed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? ... And to see the cool way of that nigger--why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?--that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the state six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now--that's a specimen. They call that gowment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the state six months. Here's a gowment that calls itself a gowment, and lets on to be a gowment, and thinks it is a gowment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger, and--"(pp. 49-50)

It is indeed hard to escape the feeling that like his father, Huck, who already has what Jim lacks most, namely, freedom, is nonetheless intent on robbing the latter of even that; hard to escape the feeling that what is at work here is some primal envy at the heart of Huck's attitude toward Jim's desire for his family's freedom, a longing to appropriate that familial solidarity from which Huck himself must eternally remain excluded. Huck's confused "friendship" with Jim may thus be read at this point as a rather grim commentary on the unconscious meaning of Huck's altruism and outstretched hand, a virtually Alain Lockeian unmasking of the gesture of self-interest and even hostility concealed within the charitable liberal impulse.

Huck's ambivalence toward Jim continues several chapters later as Huck overhears Jim mourning and seriously considers the possibility that Jim may be human with genuine feelings after all. He remains, however, forever skeptical: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (p. 201). Huck soon discovers that Jim is mourning over his cruel behavior toward his little four-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. Elizabeth, who has become deaf and dumb after contracting scarlet fever, fails to obey Jim's command to close the door:

"She never done it; jis' stood dah, kiner smilin' up at me. It make me mad; en I says agin, mighty loud, I says:'Doan' you hear me?--shet de do!'""She jis' stood de same way, kiner smilin' up. I was a
-bilin"! I says:"I lay I *make* you mine!""En wid dat I fetch' her a slap side de head dat sont her a-sprawlin'. Den I went into de yuther room, en 'uz gone 'bout ten minutes; en when I come back, dah was dat do' a stannin' open yit, en dat chile stannin' mos' right in it, a-looking down and mournin', en de tears runin' down. My, but I *wuz* mad, I was agwyne for de chile, but jis' den ... 'long come de wind en slam it to, behine de chile, ker-biamt—en my lan', de chile never—move'! ... I doan' know how I feel ... all ov a sudden, I says *powl* jis' as loud as I could yell. *She never budge!* Oh, Huck I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Almighty forgive po' ole Jim, Kaze he never gwyne to forgive hiself as long's as he live!' Oh, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plumb deef en dumb--en I'd ben a-treat'n her so!"(pp. 201-02)

This is by no means our first encounter with Jim's rather hostile temper. In addition to calling Huck "trash," Jim sometimes reveals himself in conversations to be quite aggressive, self-righteous, self-centered, and deceptive. In this respect he is no different from the majority of adults when they confront children. The simple truth is that Jim could have and perhaps should have closed the door himself; he had no right to "fetch her a slap side de head dat sont her a-sprawlin'", across the room. It is of little help, moreover, to interpret this scene as Jim's attempt to demand respect for his adulthood. On the contrary, what Jim does is enough to make Elizabeth lose respect for him altogether. Jim himself admits that he had treated Elizabeth "ornery," a term Huck uses to describe the behavior of his own father and others. Accordingly, Jim himself realizes that in his actions toward Elizabeth he is no better than Pap, who beats Huck. For Huck to therefore sympathize with Jim at this point is not readily understandable; for if Huck can explain away Jim's cruelty by simply saying that he was not aware of his daughter's condition, then he should likewise explain away his own father's cruelty by saying that he was an alcoholic. But then again, perhaps we should sympathize with Jim. After all, he is a "nigger."

And what, precisely, is a "nigger" to Huck? In chapter thirty-two, we find that Huck certainly does not speak of "it" as a human being at all. Pretending to be Tom, Huck tells Aunt Sally that his boat blew out a cylinder head:

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?""No'm. killed a nigger.""Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt. ..."(p. 280)

Here, we immediately recognize Mrs. Phelps' refusal to consider a "nigger" as "somebody," but unless we are careful we are likely to overlook the fact that Huck is of the same opinion. When asked "anybody hurt?" it is none other then Huck who replies, "No'm. killed a nigger." In speaking as if a "nigger" is not a human being, both Huck and Aunt Sally are not merely missing something about their slaves but something about themselves as well, or rather something about their internal connection with them. When Aunt Sally wants to be served at table by a black hand or entertained by a black voice, she would not be satisfied to be served by a black paw or entertained by a black crow. And when she wants to spread the gospel, she does not go to great lengths to convert her horses or chickens to Christianity. When Huck is tired and wants to sleep, he does not look to a bird or rabbit. When he is afraid or in trouble, he does not call on Widow Douglass, Miss Watson, or Pap. Everything in their relation to slaves, to Jim in Huck's case, shows that they treat them as more or less human—their humiliation of them, their jealousies, their fears, their punishments, their attachments, and so forth. Indeed, part of the ambiguity and anxiety in the image of American racism is that it really is a way in which certain human beings can treat others whom they *know* to be human beings. Rather then admit this, we say that some people do not count as human beings at all. To understand the institution of American slavery, American racism, Nat Turner, or Bigger Thomas is to understand them all as *human* actualities and possibilities: monstrous, unforgivable, but not therefore the conduct of monsters or animals. Monsters and animals are not forgivable, and not unforgivable, as we do not bear the right internal relations to them for forgiveness to apply.

Neither Huck nor Aunt Sally thus really meant to maintain that blacks are not human. Although Huck does not speak of "niggers" as humans, he at least thinks of Jim as one. His decision to "go to hell" for Jim is but an indication that racial prejudice was slowly becoming psychically insupportable. After writing the letter to turn Jim in, Huck starts to thinking,
thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time. ... But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper. (p. 271)

Huck's feelings at this point make him very vulnerable to Kovel's charge that the abolitionist's attacks were directed not simply at an external source of evil, but also at the appeasement of an inner sense of guilt. We do not question the real need to attack the evil of slavery. However, a complex phenomenon such as abolitionism must have been more than a simple attack on a gross evil. People are never so singular in their motivation. ... Nothing suits the resolution of an inner conflict so much as the presence of an outer facsimile of it, distant enough to spare the self direct guilt, yet close enough to allow a symbolic correspondence. (Kovel, p. 203)

Kovel goes so far as to maintain that the very act of saving a black man from slavery is simply another expression of restoration of the ideology of white supremacy: "[I]nsofar as the white's superego directs him to the aid of the oppressed black, it allows him to bring back into the self a portion of what has been lost; it has restored the self and 'saved' the object, in all the sense of that word. And so blacks have periodically been 'saved' by the ministrations of white reformism except that the saving has all too often been motivated by the desire for the restoration of white integrity" (Kovel, p. 201). While there is much to be said in favor of Kovel's observation, it needs to be noted that this kind of argument—which traces all moral action to egotistic causes, i.e., to the desire to pacify one's conscience—can be used to deny the existence of morality altogether. As Kovel himself argues, "people are never so singular in their motivation." Huck, viewed as a "little abolitionist," is impelled to action for more than one reason. One is that Huck has acquired genuine affections for Jim; another is that Huck's attraction to Jim is also his love of and attraction to himself, as Kovel suggests, and as the above passage detailing Jim's devotion to Huck indicates. Still a third reason is that since Huck thinks he is "bad," he must perform a wicked deed. It is very tempting to attend to one of these aspects to the exclusion of the others, tempting to suppose, for example, that a choice impelled by a feeling of superiority is bad whatever the object aimed at. To speak, however, as if any one motive caused Huck's decision to free Jim without the others playing any part is an abstraction which has led to numerous false readings of Huckleberry Finn and misunderstandings of Huck's relation to Jim.

But here again, readers are not entirely responsible, as Twain is known for his strong proclivity for creating confusion. At every point, one must be aware of his ventriloquist's voice, parodic themes, and ironic author commentary. Twain's use of irony has in particular often been singled out as the source of his treatment of black-white relations. Twain is not a racist, it is said, and his use of "nigger" and similar stereotypes must be understood as attempts to satirize centuries-old assumptions of white superiority. I believe, however, that it is less the total ironic effect itself than the underlying psychological tensions, existential ambiguities, and oppositional structures which reveal the major thrust of Twain's racial consciousness in Huckleberry Finn. The value of Kovel's psychological treatment of the abolitionist's motives is precisely that it underscores what writers like Twain and others knew all along: the pulls, tensions, and ambiguities inherent in race relations and moral choices generally. 3

If Huckleberry Finn appears to most readers to be a triumphant, positive moral statement, it is because much of Huckleberry Finn is the promise of happiness in confronting such moral and racial problems, a promise that is constantly being broken. As long as America keeps being ravished by utilitarian pseudo-progress, it will be
virtually impossible to convince most desegregation advocates that, before the matter is all over, the pre-
desegregation world of race relations may well prove to have been better, even though less free and humane,
than what we have today, notwithstanding its racism, violence, and backwardness. Granted, Huck is not always
_for Jim; but he somehow manages to stay _with him. And in contrast to the forced and phony togetherness
characteristic of much of today's race relations, what we see as a result is, at moments, a rare, genuine
coexistence without aloofness. Viewed, then, from this perspective, the traces of an old immediacy and intimacy
in race relations, no matter how outdated and questionable they may be, acquire a certain rightfulness. Why else,
despite our sympathy with Jim (and other real victims of American slavery), do we still manage to _laugh_ at their
togetherness, at the clownlike behavior and racist statements throughout _Huckleberry Finn_?

Perhaps we laugh not so much because we prefer the pre-desegregation style of racism but because we feel
utterly helpless in its presence. Indeed, part of the appeal of _Huckleberry Finn_ lies in Twain's refusal to cover
stillness, cruelty, and absurdity in racial affairs with a coat of seriousness. The stillness, cruelty, and absurdity
of racism are all laughable precisely because we can't cope with them. Their various subtleties and numerous forms
are literally infinite. The dominant tendency is to simply put up with racism, not take it seriously, and leave it to
itself. To this extent, "funny" refers to something one can't get hold of and can't set to rights. It is for this reason
that stupidity inclines us to laugh much more than intelligence; and despite the nature and extent of their
education, most racists and their racist remarks bear the mark of stupidity. This obviously makes significant
dialogue virtually impossible, since the poorer the possibilities of understanding, the quicker we reach the
boundary of senselessness and ambivalence. We are not sure if we should laugh or cry. The works of Langston
Hughes, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Jessie Fauset, and numerous other black writers reveal a clear
understanding of this. In his 1912 novel, _The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man_, James Weldon Johnson,
speaking of black laughter as the fear of taking racism too seriously, wrote: "I have since learned that this ability to
laugh heartily is, in part, the salvation of the American Negro; it does much to keep him from going the way of the
Indian."  

It makes sense to suppose, then, that readers who continue to admire _Huckleberry Finn_ do so not because they
fail to see its racist implications, but because they find the racism in it laughable and refuse to take it too seriously.
But this sounds both insensitive and disrespectful not only to the millions of men and women who died during
"nigger" Jim's generation, but also to the millions of victims presently suffering from racism today in America and
throughout the Third World. The problem here, however, is not merely one of insensitivity to oppression, but also
of an overinflated reverence for "history," the infamous model attitude being the assertion that "what is done is
done." It suffices to experience oppression out of context and from a distance, i.e., in a milieu that is foreign to
one's own. It is here, too, in the context or name of history, that "great" literary and other cultural products are
shielded from the troublesome query of what they are for, how they came to be, and what they are up to. And just
as it is history that has endowed _Huckleberry Finn_ with the mark of authenticity, it is history that continues to keep
at a distance the embarrassing question of why little white Huck reaches out to a "nigger." People are likely to get
grumpy when they sense the intelligibility of one of their most cherished cultural products crumbling or suddenly
under scrutiny. But sometimes the authority of history, tradition, and public opinion must be ignored.

Notes

references are to this edition, and page numbers are provided in the text.


3. Oddly enough, in their article "_Huckleberry Finn_: A Psychoanalytic Study," Kovel and Barchilon completely
ignore the phenomenon of racism. They explain Huck's ambiguous attitude toward Jim in terms of two
"intrapsychic forces." In addition to Huck's need for a "primitive and symbiotic bond," there is also the need for
"aggression against the symbiotic object. We might expect to find specific instances where this conflict is
actualized in terms of whether to stay with Jim or abandon him, and lined to emergent impulses actually to destroy


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