The Character of Jim and the Ending of `Huckleberry Finn'

DISCovering Authors, 2003

[In the following excerpt, Hansen examines the character of Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, focusing on the way Twain used him to examine the position of blacks in pre-Civil War America.]

An understanding of Jim's character is by no means a simple matter; he is a highly complex and original creation, although he appears at first sight very simple. We meet him first as the butt of a practical joke played by Tom Sawyer, in Chapter II. While Jim is sleeping Tom takes three candles from the Widow's kitchen, leaving a five-cent piece on the table to pay for them. Then he slips Jim's hat off and hangs it on the limb of a tree over his head. Afterwards, Jim decides that his sleep was a trance induced by witches, who rode him all over the world and hung his hat on a limb "to show who done it," and he believes that the devil himself has left the five-cent piece. His version of the episode makes him a very important man in the Negro community. "Jim was most ruined, for a servant," says Huck, "because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches."

The Jim of this first episode is a recognizable type-character, the comic stage Negro, a type who has trod the less reputable boards of the American theatre almost from its beginnings and who is still with us in the grade B movie and in certain television and radio programs. His essential quality in this particular case is that he feels no humiliation as a result of Tom's trick. His ignorance protects him from the mental pain of humiliation and enables him to turn the trick into a kind of triumph. If Jim had suffered as a result of the trick into a kind of triumph—a false triumph, to be sure, but still a triumph—we—the audience—would be inclined to feel pity for him. But since he does not suffer we are free to laugh at the incongruity between his account of the event and the reality. We are free to laugh at him, that is, because his ignorance is so sub-human that he cannot feel mental pain. (pp. 45-6)

Jim is still the stage Negro the next time we see him, when Huck asks Jim to have the hair-ball tell his fortune, but our attitude toward him is very much qualified, since in this episode Huck believes as firmly in Jim's magical powers as does Jim himself. In the first episode the audience was asked to think of itself as white men laughing at old Jim, the comical nigger. Here we are asked to think of ourselves as men, laughing at human ignorance and superstition. We could attribute Jim's ignorance to his color in the first episode; here we must attribute it to his humanity. Perhaps this is overstating the case, since the reader who does not wish to recognize the direction Twain is taking might feel that Huck himself is not fully human; he is only a child, and a White Trash child at that. It seems to me, however, that it requires considerable insensitivity to think of Huck as less than human, even at this early stage in the narrative, and in any case the direction of Twain's development of our attitude toward Jim is clear.

We see Jim next on Jackson's Island, where two episodes deserve particular notice. In the first of them Jim and Huck have been discussing "signs," and Jim predicts that he will be rich because he has hairy arms and a hairy breast. Then he gives us an account of his "specalat'n" in
Twain has done enough by now to prepare us for the first of the tricks Huck plays on Jim. Huck kills a rattlesnake and curls it up on the foot of Jim's blankets. He expects, of course, that Jim will react like any other stage Negro. His eyes will bug out; his teeth will chatter; his knees will knock together; and Huck will have a good healthy laugh. But we are dealing now with someone who is more than a stereotype. "When Jim flung himself down on the blanket ... the snake's mate was there, and bit him."

Huck is sorry and ashamed for what he has done. He throws the snakes away in the bushes, "for I warn't going to let Jim find out it was all my fault, not if I could help it." But he does not blame himself for failing to understand that Jim is a human being, who can be hurt if you play a stupid trick on him. There is something much simpler for which Huck can blame himself, and whenever he can, Huck will use Ockham's razor. "I made up my mind," he says, "I wouldn't ever take aholt of a snakeskin again with my hands, now that I see what had come of it." From this he proceeds to speculating on whether it isn't just as foolhardy to look at the new moon over your left shoulder.

Old Hank Bunker done it once, and bragged about it; and in less than two years he got drunk and fell off the shot tower and spread himself out so that he was just a kind of a layer, as you may say; and they slid him edgeways between two barn doors for a coffin, and buried him so, so they say, but I didn't see it. Pap told me. But anyway, it all come of looking at the moon that way, like a fool.

With the entrance of Hank Bunker we are back in the world of slapstick comedy, and we can recognize how very little Huck understands of what has happened. But the episode has, I think, made some impression. That snake-skin continues to haunt Huck's consciousness far down the river.

At the beginning of Chapter XIV we discover that Jim has a good deal of common sense, when he complains to Huck of how dangerous it is to go looking for the sort of adventures to be found on the Walter Scott. Huck has to admit that Jim is right. "He was most always right; he had an uncommon level head for a nigger." Having begun the chapter with Jim's "uncommon level head," Twain fills the rest of it with the dialogues on whether Solomon was wise and why a Frenchman doesn't talk like a man, which William Van O'Connor condemns as a cheap and inappropriate "minstrel show, end-men sort of humor."

Now there is a considerable distance between the world of the minstrel show and the world of William Van O'Connor, and most of that distance is, of course, to Mr. O'Connor's credit. But the distance is so great that it prevents him from seeing the ways in which these dialogues are appropriate. Jim is "down on Solomon" for threatening to cut a child in two, and this is plainly preparation for our later discovery that Jim cares very much for his own children, and blames himself for having been unintentionally cruel to his daughter.

The dialogue on why a Frenchman doesn't talk like a man is much more complicated. In order to understand it we must remember the conventions of the minstrel show, where Mr. Bones, although he
seems at first sight to be abysmally ignorant in comparison to Mr. Interlocutor, is actually very clever and usually wins the arguments, just as Jim does. But what is important is not that Mr. Bones wins again; what is important is the terms in which the argument is won. Huck argues that since a cat and a cow "talk" differently, and since it is "natural and right" that they should do so, it is equally "natural and right" for a Frenchman to talk differently from an American. Huck's unstated assumption is that ethnic difference is founded in nature, and has, therefore, the same magnitude and necessity as difference in species. Jim immediately spots the fallacy. He agrees that there is a basic difference between a cat and a cow, which requires that they "talk" differently. But he asks:

"Is a Frenchman a man?" "Yes," says Huck. "Well, den! Dad blame it, why `doan' he talk like a man? You answer me dat!"

Jim recognizes, and Huck does not, that all men share a common humanity. When we remember that this argument has been over differences in human language, when we remember that Twain boasted at the beginning of the book of accurately reproducing seven discrete dialects, and when we remember how thoroughly man is divided from man in the society of the Mississippi Valley, this little dialogue takes on an extraordinary richness of meaning.

But Huck's only conclusion is that "you can't learn a nigger to argue." He does not understand how he has been beaten, since, as Henry Nash Smith has clearly demonstrated, he is incapable of handling abstract ideas. But the careful reader will notice that while Huck is not capable of handling abstract ideas, Jim is. Chapter XIV is clearly minstrel show humor, and the Jim of this chapter is equally clearly Jim as Mr. Bones. But within the framework of minstrel show dialogue Twain has created a cluster of meaning both significant and appropriate.

How much do we know about Jim at the end of Chapter XIV? We know that his character is partially a type-character, the comic stage Negro, but that it extends far beyond the limits of that type. We know that his superstitions are shared by some whites. We know that he is human enough to suffer physical pain. We know that he has a considerable amount of common sense, and that within the rather severe limits of his knowledge he is capable of handling abstract ideas. We know also that the ideas he expresses—that there is a kind of wealth in owning oneself, and that all men share a basic humanity—are most appropriate to his own situation.

Huck, of course, has learned much less than the reader. At the level of conscious thought, which is his weakest point, Huck has learned only that it is bad luck to handle a snake-skin, that Jim has "an uncommon level head for a nigger," and that in spite of his common sense "you can't learn a nigger to argue." But in Chapters XV and XVI Huck is placed in situations where he, as well as the reader, is forced to learn something new about Jim.

Chapter XV is devoted to the justly famous episode in which Huck is separated from Jim in a fog. He gets back to the raft while Jim is asleep, and convinces him that the whole experience was a dream, which Jim proceeds to "interpret." Then Huck points to the rubbish on the raft, evidence that the experience was real. He asks Jim what it means, and gets ready to laugh. But the laughter does not come. Instead, Jim tells him that "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." Not the least of Twain's achievements is his ability to give such dignity and force to Negro dialect (not that Negro dialect in itself is weak or undignified; but
literary use of it has generally been both). The Jim of this episode, although he still speaks in the
dialect of the stage Negro, is not the stage Negro, but man in the abstract, with all the dignity that
belongs to that high concept, and he teaches Huck that it is painful, not funny, to play childish tricks
on human dignity. Huck says,

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.

"If I'd a knowed." It is easy to penetrate Huck's feelings, but it is almost impossible to penetrate his
mind. The idea that he hadn't really known Jim has penetrated, however, and it comes briefly to the
surface of Huck's mind in Chapter XVI, when he wrestles for the first time with his "deformed
conscience." Huck thinks,

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. [my italics]

The ambiguity is evidence that Huck's mind has been touched at last. And when Jim calls him "de
bes' `fren' Jim's ever had" and "de on'y white genlman dat ever ` kep' his promise to ole Jim," Huck's
reaction is "I just felt sick." Huck is not one to overstate his emotions; "sick" is as strong a term as he
ever uses for them. He uses it here, and when he watches the Grangerford boys being butchered,
and when the King and the Duke are ridden on a rail, and when he sees the farmers sitting with their
guns in the Phelps' parlor. Jim's appeal to his friendship and his honor, coming immediately after he
has betrayed Jim with a stupid trick and is about to betray him again, hits Huck very hard indeed. It
makes it impossible for Huck to continue to be totally ignorant of who Jim is, and it makes it possible
for him to win this first battle with his conscience.

There are four more passages which seem to me essential to an understanding of Twain's
development of Jim's character. First, we have Jim laughing when Huck is washed overboard by a
wave (Chapter XX). Huck was in no danger, so there is nothing vicious in Jim's laughter. All Huck can
do is grumble that Jim "was the easiest nigger to laugh that ever was." The episode is one more
illustration of Twain's fondness for playing brilliant variations on themes from folk humor. In this case
he has simply and skilfully reversed the roles, making the white man rather than the Negro the butt of
the humor.

Second, and more complex, is Jim's grief over his unintentional mistreatment of his four-year-old
daughter (Chapter XXIV). He had told her to close the door, and when she didn't move, he struck her.
Then he discovered that scarlet fever had left her deaf, and he tells Huck his reaction to this
discovery:

"Oh, Huck, I bust out `a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! `de
Lord God Amighty forgive po' ole Jim, `kaze he never gwyne to forgive hisself as long's he live!'
Oh, she was plumb deef en dumb, Huck, plumb deef en dumb—en I'd been a-treat'n her so!"

To understand what Twain is doing in this passage, we must remember that the popular culture of
Twain's time was far more apt to sentimentalize family relationships than the popular culture of our
own time. The sick or dying child; the old drunkard who deserves kindness because he is
"somebody's grandpa"; mother; the young girl with her child in her arms thrown out in the snow by the stern arm of father—these figures are, by and large, no longer with us. Since that time the popular song has largely abandoned family sentimentality and devoted itself almost exclusively to the emotional spasms of the pubescent. It is easy for us to see how Twain is using popular culture when Huck describes Emmeline Grangerford's drawings and poetry, partly because the intention is so plainly satirical, and partly because Emmeline's emotions differ only in detail rather than in kind from those of the girls in present-day popular songs. But we must make a somewhat greater effort here.

Huck's reaction to Jim's feelings for his family is worth noticing. "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n," says Huck. "It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." "It don't seem natural." As on so many other occasions, Huck is more right than he knows, since, at the level we have been discussing, Jim's feelings are anything but "natural"; they are as conventional as they could possibly be. And yet they are convincing, primarily, I think, because they are given to us in Jim's language rather than in the "soul-butter" style which is used in "grieving" over two other children: William Dowling Botts, deceased, and Charles William Allbright, deceased (the latter is the baby in the barrel in the excised raftsman passage). Twain has produced here a variation on one of the tritest popular themes of his time, and has made it effective and genuine by giving it to Jim. He has achieved the unique distinction of producing the most magnificently written piece of 

American literature, and with it he has added one more dimension to Jim's character.

Third is a facet of Jim's character which is presented to us at many points, but is most completely described during Huck's second struggle with his conscience. This is the Jim who is kind and gentle, who stands Huck's watch on top of his own and always calls Huck "honey." This is Jim as Negro Mammy, and like several of the other faces of Jim it is a skilful variation on a type-character from folk and popular culture.

Fourth, and finally, we have the Jim who is capable of noble action, who sacrifices his freedom in order to save Tom's life. Like the Jim whom Huck tries to make a fool of on the raft, this Jim is man in the abstract, and in both cases he manages to assume this high role while remaining "nigger" Jim, the runaway slave. (pp. 47-55)

Jim is, in part, the comic stage Negro who can be made the butt of Tom's childish humor. But he is also a second Negro type, Mr. Bones, whose cleverness enables him to turn the joke back on the Interlocutor. He is also a third Negro type, the kindly old colored Mammy, the protector of the white child. He is a fourth type, the sentimental family man who weeps for the suffering of his own child. And he is a fifth type, man in the abstract—natural man, if you wish—with the reasoning power, the dignity, and the nobility that belong to that high abstraction. "Begin with an individual," said F. Scott Fitzgerald, "and before you know it you find that you have created a type; begin with a type, and you find that you have created—nothing." But what happens when you begin with five types?

Given Mark Twain's genius for piling theme-with-variations on top of theme-with-variations you arrive at a character who is relatively consistent, who manages to retain his identity through all of his varying roles. You arrive at a character who is human, unlike the type-characters of low comedy, since he can feel both mental and physical pain. You arrive at a character who is capable of a curious and highly original kind of development as he passes from the lower role to the next higher. But you do
not, by any stretch of the imagination, arrive at a fully-rounded character.

It should be recognized that it is by no means easy to create a fully-rounded character for the fictional Negro. He is easily handled if you confine him to the limits of the low comedy type. And he is also easily handled if, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, you make him "the lowly," a person who is not a character in his own right but an object of the white man's character—more specifically, an object of the white man's Christian charity, a person whose chief non-minstrel characteristic is his desire for that freedom the author wishes to grant him. But if you try to make him more, he still tends to lapse into a type. Faulkner generally uses the name "Sambo" in speaking of the Negro in *Intruder in the Dust*, and even Dilsey, in *The Sound and the Fury*, is made generic by the characterization "they endured." The Negro's own attempt to discover his identity has been the central problem for the Negro author; it dominates the fiction of Richard Wright, and it is the central theme of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. But all of this is somewhat beside the point, because I do not believe that Jim's function in the novel requires that he be a fully-rounded character.

Before considering the question of Jim's function in the novel it is necessary to ask another question that has been asked many times before: why didn't Twain let Jim escape to the free states? He could have had him paddle across the river to the Illinois shore. He could have had him go up the Ohio river at Cairo. He could have sent him north when Huck found a canoe below the Grangerford plantation, just before the Duke and Dauphin came aboard. Since it was, after all, Mark Twain who made the book up, he could have sent Jim north at any point and in any manner he chose. And it would have been easy to start Jim north, since Jim's purpose is much more specific than Huck's. Huck is escaping from civilization, but the direction of that escape is, through most of the novel, a matter of supreme indifference to him. Jim is escaping from *slavery* in order to avoid being sold south, away from his family, and he intends to deliver his family from slavery as well. The fact of the matter is that it cost Twain a good deal of trouble, particularly at Cairo, to prevent Jim's more specific intention from dominating the novel. One can sense his relief once he gets Jim past Cairo and settled at the river's pace. And I don't think there can be any question here of Twain's not knowing what he was doing.

*Huckleberry Finn* is not primarily an anti-slavery novel, but certainly it is that in part, and it is my contention that letting Jim go north would spoil the anti-slavery theme and much more as well. Remember that Twain has given us, very early in the novel, a picture of the northern free Negro. In Pap's drunken tirade against the government we learn that the free Negro in Ohio is a college professor who talks all kinds of languages and knows everything, and the reader is being asked, of course, to contrast this to the situation of the Negro—and the white man—in a slave society. Now, with all due respect to Jim's virtues, including his mental ones, it must be recognized that Jim would tarnish this bright image the moment he set foot on Ohio soil. Jim is simply not college professor material.

Furthermore, how is Jim to accomplish his purpose? He intends to work and buy his family out of slavery, but he is an unskilled laborer, and he would have to save every penny for the rest of his life before he would have enough to buy one child. This could, I suppose, be made the theme of a very moving piece of fiction, but surely it is better suited to almost any other talent than Mark Twain's. Or suppose that Jim had taken the other alternative that has occurred to him, of getting an abolitionist to "steal" his family. Such a course would take us unavoidably into the realm of abolitionist ideas, and we have already seen that our narrator, Huck, is incapable of handling ideas. Twain could not report
them to us without doing great violence to Huck's established character.

More important, this is a novel in which two innocents encounter every kind of viciousness and hypocrisy whenever they come in contact with society. If Twain had sent them north he would have had to face the issue of northern viciousness and hypocrisy, and surely this would have confused the anti-slavery theme. Whereas, by keeping them on the river he can admit through Colonel Sherburn that northerners have their own vices without in any way obscuring the reader's impressions of what was wrong with slave society.

Finally, and most important, this is not primarily an anti-slavery novel, nor even a novel in which two innocents encounter a corrupt society, although it is partly that. But first of all it is a novel about a boy escaping from civilization—from a civilization in which slavery is only the most conspicuous cruelty. Remember, however, that the escape is not complete. Twain referred to the book as a conflict between "a sound heart & a deformed conscience," and Huck's conscience still belongs to society. What is Jim's function in this novel? I think it is, quite simply, to be the white man's burden. I do not intend that phrase ironically. I mean that Jim's function is quite literally to be Huck's moral burden. Jim may, and does, disappear from Huck's view temporarily, but he always returns. And finally, by his constant presence, and his constant decency, and his constant humanity he forces Huck to do something more than drift with the river. He forces Huck to come to grips with that part of himself that belongs to society, forces him "to decide, forever, betwixt two things," forces him to decide to go to hell rather than betray his fellow human being. (pp. 55-8)

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|EJ2101202668