## *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* came out in America in 1885 (though published in Britain the previous year). Twain changes literary tack here, perhaps to escape the more conservative and conventional aspects of his previous St Petersburg book and to look, too, to resolve its stylistic unevenness. For *Tom Sawyer* does lack overall unity and coherence, both in terms of style and genre.[29] The third person narrative voice often uses a heightened and deeply conventional form of diction: '[Tom] sat down on a mossy spot under a spreading oak. There was not even a zephyr stirring' (79). Elsewhere, Twain satirises what he calls in the Examination day scene, the 'wasteful and opulent gush of 'fine language'' (171). Where the novel comes alive, though, is in the author's use of direct speech and the vernacular. Thus, for instance, when Dr Robinson has knocked out Muff Potter, Tom and Huck have the following exchange:

> '. . . . maybe that whack done for *him*!'
> 'No, 'taint likely, Tom. He had liquor in him; I could see that; and besides, he always has. Well when pap's full, you might take and belt him over the head with a church and you couldn't phase him. He says so, his own self.' (94)

To generalise from this one example is to suggest Twain's remarkable talent for matching speech patterns to character type and to the class, age, race and background of his different protagonists.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain plays on this strength when, in one of the most celebrated developments in the American literary history, he put his full-length novel into the control (and voice) of his first person narrator and protagonist, the ill-educated and low-class Huck Finn. It is easy nowadays to downplay the importance of Twain's innovatory use of the vernacular. But we should not forget just how radical and important a step this was. Hemingway may have been exaggerating when, in the opening chapter of *Green Hills of Africa* (1935), he said that 'All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. . . There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since'. But his words nonetheless indicate just what a groundbreaking book this was.

In this novel Twain, despite all previous writing done in the vernacular mode, effectively shattered the accepted boundaries of literary language in America. Huck's opening words, 'You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly', are not syntactically correct ('without you have read', 'ain't no') and

use slang forms ('ain't' for 'is not'). But, most importantly, they convey the *impression* of colloquial and vernacular expression without extreme distortion of either spelling or grammar. This is something at which Twain was just brilliant: representing ill-educated forms of speech in a way that was entirely accessible to a general readership.[30]

To measure his achievement we need only look at the opening of George W. Harris's 'Sicily Burns's Wedding', from his *Sut Lovingood. Yarns Spun by a Nat'ral Born Durn'd Fool* (1867). This was a book Twain re-read as he was writing his novel and which undoubtedly influenced him.[31] The start of Harris's 'Wedding' story displays the standard framing device of south-western humour, with the vernacular voice of Sut 'contained' by that of a clearly well-educated and grammatical first narrator. Twain would abandon such a device in his novel, alongside the superior (and conservative) value-scheme normally associated with such a narrator. But Harris's opening also illustrates the difficulty of reading a text that represents dialect language by means of an extreme distortion of grammar and spelling (very much the comic rule until Twain himself amended it):

> '*HEY GE-ORGE*,' rang among the mountain slopes; and looking up to my left, I saw 'Sut,' tearing along down a steep point, heading me off . . . , holding his flask high above his head. . . .
>
> Whar am yu gwine? take a suck, hoss? This yere truck's *ole*. I kotch hit myse'f, hot this mornin frum the still wum. Nara durn'd bit ove strike-nine in hit – I put that ar piece ove burnt dried peach in myse'f tu gin hit color – better nur ole Bullen's plan: he puts in tan ooze, in what he sells, an' when that haint handy, he uses the red warter outen a pon' jis' below his barn; – makes a pow'ful natral color, but don't help the taste much. Then he correcks that wif red pepper; hits an orful mixtry, that whisky ole Bullen makes; no wonder he seed 'Hell-sarpints'.[32]

In his use of Huck's first person voice, Twain avoids such a dense and reader-unfriendly style, establishing an immediate intimacy with the reader, with the direct address to 'you' from the 'me' who writes, and with the easy colloquialism and throw-away manner of 'but that ain't no matter'. The reference, too, to the earlier *Tom Sawyer* seems unforced and unproblematic. Though to have the protagonist of a novel refer to his appearance in a prior fiction, and to the author of that work, is in fact immediately to put at risk any notion of realist transparency (the novel as reflection of life as actually lived). Moreover, it tends to draw attention to the hole in the central premise of the book: how could such an ill-educated boy possibly have an authorial role, and just when might the novel have been composed and written by him? But this is to nit-pick. The

very success of the novel is measured in the way most readers suspend such potential disbelief as they are immersed into its events and their importance. Huck's reference to Mr Mark Twain telling the truth 'mainly' is sly – even while that 'Mr' implies a full respect for his status and profession. And it provides an effective introduction to a document whose young and (in many ways) naïve narrator seems outside the author's control and who appears to do little more than exactly and truthfully describe just what he sees and thinks as events take place.

In a likely response to his apparent dissatisfaction with the developing logic of *Tom Sawyer*, Twain radically reverses his literary approach in this novel. While Tom was a sanctioned rebel and finally belonged inside the community, sharing its values, Huck is an outsider. The only view we get of him in *Huckleberry Finn*, barring the illustrations, is from the inside (as his thoughts and actions are represented). But in *Tom Sawyer* he is described as 'idle, and lawless, and vulgar and bad', and as the village 'outcast' and 'pariah' (63–4). Partly redeemed from this last position as a result of his and Tom's actions in that earlier novel and the fortune that they find, Huck starts this novel uncomfortably poised within society, in the Widow Douglas's care.

But Huck is not at ease with this new domestic world and the Widow's disciplinary regime. In *Tom Sawyer*, he was distanced from Tom's conventional values, only finally lured away from a life lived in, and on, 'the woods, and the river, and hogsheads' by a type of blackmail ('we can't let you into the gang if you ain't respectable') (272). Once with the Widow, Huck is subject to a type of 'reformatory lovingness' as she looks to influence him to accept her and the surrounding society's, 'imperatives and norms'.[33] We see evidence of this when, for example, Huck tells us that: 'The widow she cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb . . .' (18).

But Huck just does not understand much of her worldview, nor of the values she proposes, particularly their religious aspects. He responds accordingly:

> After supper, [the widow] got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers; and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him; because I don't take no stock in dead people. (18)

Twain relies here on his repeated and basic, but most effective, device, defamiliarisation or estrangement – what happens when a fixed and normative way of looking at the world meets (in this case) a narrator who is uncomprehendingly naïve. When Soviet critic, Mikhail Bakhtin describes this technique, he might have had Huck in mind: 'by his very uncomprehending presence . . . [he]

makes strange the world of social conventionality'.[34] Huck dismisses the worth of what is normally taken for granted – traditional religious education and Bible study and their lessons – since, he pragmatically judges, dead people (let alone long-dead people from the scriptures) can be of no use to him. The ironic twist here is that Miss Watson's story is of the freeing of the Hebrews from the oppression of slavery, but she herself remains blind to its relevance to her own position as a southerner and as a Christian. The reader's increasing perception of the hypocrisies, violence, and moral shortcomings of the society through which Huck passes comes about, in part, through such estrangements. It also, however, results from the representation of the African American male slave Jim, who belongs with Huck at the text's centre.

Twain's friend, Joseph Twichell, served as a young chaplain in the American Civil War. The letters he wrote back to his family provide a full and moving account of his experiences. Twichell was a strongly committed abolitionist but it is still noticeable that when he refers to the three servants he had during his army years, two are fully named, as Tim Gleason and Martin Furness, while the third is just 'Joe . . . a colored boy about twenty years old'.[35] Twichell's practice is normal for his time, but the contemporary reader is aware that in such naming lies the heritage of slavery and its denial of the full worth (and identity) of the African American. Twichell's Joe can become Twain's Jim with scarcely a beat lost, so any differences in individual African American character and experience can – by implication – also easily be overlooked. I am not accusing Twain or Twichell of racism (far from it) but I am pointing to Jim's name, and early identification only as 'Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim', (22) as a mark of his less-than-human status in this slave-holding world. Such inferior status then becomes a legacy, as far as the African American's position in the larger nation goes, which would not be completely cast aside until much, much later. In *Tom Sawyer*, a footnote follows the mention of Mr Harbison's dog, 'Bull Harbison': 'If Mr. Harbison had owned a slave named Bull, Tom would have spoken of him as 'Harbison's Bull,' but a son or a dog of that name was 'Bull Harbison'' (96). The slave then is designated more clearly as owned property than even the family dog.

Tom Sawyer, to repeat, is a community insider. Huck and Jim, the two main protagonists of *Huckleberry Finn* are both 'outcasts' ('out-caste' in Jim's case). Whiteness is the accepted norm in *Tom Sawyer*, but it quickly takes on unpleasant connotations in *Hucklebery Finn* when it is explicitly identified with Pap Finn and his 'white' face, 'not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl – a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white' (39). But in terms of the racial politics of the novel, Pap's 'whiteness' is exactly like any other southern man's, just a more extreme version of it.

The pairing of Huck and Jim, two outsiders – in flight from the authority of guardian and father, and owner, respectively – allows Twain to make the type of caustic and fundamental social critique that he could never have developed within the frame of *Tom Sawyer*.

There are many negative allusions to white southern values and behaviour in *Huckleberry Finn*. The Widow Douglas is associated with a 'stiflingly repressive ethic', while the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons – who live according to the codes of southern and supposedly gentlemanly behaviour – are responsible for 'cold-blooded slaughter'. Pap himself is a figure of 'sheer brutality'. As one critic puts it:

> The way in which Pap is described . . . should alert any reader to the idea that, for Twain, the codes by which the dominant culture lives are inextricably linked to ideologies of race, even where his white protagonists are not slave-owners, or when no non-white characters are present in a particular episode.[36]

Twain, then, raises the ideological stakes here, writing a book that takes race and colour as its central subject. W. E. B. DuBois would later say that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line'.[37] Twain, in *Huckleberry Finn*, took on and exposed that problem both in the context of antebellum slavery and of post-bellum prejudice and discriminatory racial practice.

In many ways, Huckleberry Finn departs considerably from Tom Sawyer. I have already spoken of Twain's use of a first person vernacular narration, but this book's stylistic differences go much deeper. In Tom Sawyer, the externalisation of evil in Indian Joe is the stuff of melodrama, as is his grisly end. In the more 'realistic' later novel, Twain tackles anew the issues of social belonging and exclusion, of social identity and of race. Huck is an outsider as Tom never is, but because of his race and youth he can move in and out of society as Indian Joe (Tom Sawyer's outsider figure) cannot. Where, earlier, evil was externalised in terms of a racially-threatening and violent 'other', here Twain turns from melodrama to a clear-eyed look at the social and moral fractures and failings that lie at the very heart of American life.

It will be useful to comment briefly here on the status of Huckleberry Finn as a realist text. Realist texts make a claim to transparency, appearing to offer a clear window outward onto the solid world they represent. Twain, accordingly, uses Huck, his first-person narrator, to provide a seemingly direct depiction of the world through which he moves.[38] The use of Huck's unmediated and lower-class voice allows Twain to produce a genuinely democratic art. The realist manifestos of his friend Howells would stress just such a requirement,

though Howells's own lower-class voices are generally 'framed' by middle-class narrators and their values. Huck's voice, then, carries the reader 'transparently' through to the solidly-framed historical context he describes – that of small-town antebellum life and its bordering Mississippi environment. We are asked to take this regional and historical reality for granted, together with the range of social practices, racial distinctions, and cultural codes that compose it. Such assumptions, and the details that reinforce them, provide the realistic glue holding the whole novel in place.

But as my reference to Howells and his call for a democratic art form suggests, realism was defined in social and ethical, as well as aesthetic, terms in this period. The relationship between the human subject and the surrounding environment and the moral potential of that individual subject, were both very much at stake here. At the time (the 1880s), romantic beliefs in the authority and autonomy of the free and sovereign self – that the individual was in total command of her or his own fate – were no longer easily tenable. Realist texts, accordingly, emphasised the way their protagonists were embedded in and affected by, what we might call a 'thick' social context, and focused on such areas as dress, manners, occupations, community connections and beliefs, as ways of doing this. The closeness of the relationship between the individual and the material details and social practices that composed his everyday life lay at the very core of the genre (when defined within this framework).

Despite the increasing press of environment on character in the rapidly-changing post-bellum American world, realist authors still took the essential wholeness and coherence of the human subject for granted. Indeed, the genre is commonly described in terms of the balance it represents between the pressure of the environment on the individual and the ability of that individual still to act as a free moral agent despite the increasing complications and determining networks of that larger world.

Huckleberry Finn can work as a realist text according to such criteria. From such a standpoint, Huck is seen as a self-determining subject, a sympathetic and free-speaking young boy (in the sense, at any rate, that he speaks the text), making his way through a difficult world but retaining his integrity as he responds to it with a clear-seeing and pragmatic eye. Huck's decision to choose hell rather than to allow Jim back into Miss Watson's hands (for many critics, the climax of the book) can then be read – in realist terms – as an act of individual moral responsibility that counters any tendencies of the larger social environment to condition and shape his actions.

But there are other ways of approaching the book calling this reading into question. If we focus on plot rather than point of view, for example, such melodramatic episodes as the boarding of the Walter Scott and the hiding of

gold in Peter Wilks's coffin, as well as the farcical shenanigans of the 'evasion' routine, signal a failure to conform to realist criteria. And at the ethical level, the possibility of escaping social determinants in independent moral action (Huck's decision) is deeply undermined by three things: by Miss Watson's prior actions (for Jim is in fact already freed); by Huck's passivity throughout the book (he is generally associated with spectatorship rather than action, and his main decision here is not to send the letter he has written); and by his consequent position as Tom Sawyer's helper, as Jim is placed in the role of victim to the boys' superior authority and power. The very idea of Huck as an intending and coherent subject is, moreover, interrogated by the extent to which his language and thought are inevitable products of the larger society that surrounds him, and by the textual emphasis on disguise and identity slippage (Huck recurrently adopts fake names and histories) which necessarily subverts any notion of fixed selfhood. Finally, and looking in an exactly opposite direction, the novel's debt to a Romantic tradition of unfettered individualism (the dream of free and autonomous selfhood which shadows the whole book and accounts for much of its mythic appeal) also undermines realist assumptions.

Where then does this all leave us? To sum up, Huckleberry Finn is generally considered a realist novel, indeed one of the prime examples of American nineteenth-century realism: this is not incorrect. But there are all kinds of instabilities within the text that call this realism into question. And if we look outward to other texts being produced at the time we see that this is not unusual – that realism, as considered as a particular generic movement of this time, cannot be seen as a coherent and unified genre. Caught between the romance, with its conception of the human subject as largely free from social determinants and naturalism (which, to state it crudely, sees the individual as conditioned and shaped by larger and uncontrollable forces) and continuing to rely on many of the plot devices and sentimentality of earlier fictional forms, realism is full of tensions and ambiguities stretching it in different, and often incompatible, directions. Twain's novel is entirely typical in this respect.

As part of his realist agenda, Howells celebrated the use of dialect in the novel, linking it to 'the impulse to get the whole of American life into our fiction'. 'Let fiction cease to lie about life', he wrote, 'let it speak the dialect, the language that most Americans know – the language of unaffected people everywhere'.[39] Indeed, it is in his extended and highly accomplished use of a variety of local dialects and its grounding in the details of everyday Mississippi valley life, that makes Twain, for many, the contemporary writer who best practiced what Howells preached. Huck's vernacular narration contains within

it, and represents, all the other varied voices of his surrounding social world – those of Miss Watson, Jim, Buck Grangerford, Colonel Sherburn, the king and the duke, Aunt Sally and countless others. What Twain does so effectively here is to set Huck's voice in counterpoint with all these other voices.

If 'the power dynamics of society are determined by the language politics of education and literacy',[40] then Huck has very little power in the world through which he moves. Miss Watson keeps 'pecking at' Huck (20), telling him how he should behave. The new judge determines who should be Huck's guardian (42), without Huck having any say in the matter. Colonel Grangerford, dressed in 'linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it' and carrying his 'mahogany cane with a silver head to it' (143–4), regulates his small social world (his family, slaves, and – while he is there – Huck) with absolute authority: 'when . . . the lightning begun to flicker out from under his eyebrows you wanted to climb a tree first, and find out what the matter was afterwards' (144). Tom Sawyer, clearly well read, may be just a boy, but he manages the whole final evasion routine ('when a prisoner of style escapes, it's called an evasion', 337) according to the romance literature he loves. And he gives Huck little determining voice in the enacted events: 'he never paid no attention to me; went right on. It was his way when he'd got his plans set' (312).

But the power dynamics of Huck's world are not just organised according to language politics of literacy. Moving on the fringes of society, and passive by nature, he is pretty much at the mercy of anyone whose words claim power over him (at least, until he finds a way to escape them). Thus Pap, the lowest of the (white) social low, assumes a paternal right to order Huck about, and threatens to 'tan [him] good' should he carry on 'a-swelling [himself] up' by continuing to learn the literacy skills Pap himself lacks (40). The king and the duke, too, scoundrels and confidence men, or – in Huck's own words – 'beats and bummers' (242), take their authority over Huck (and Jim) for granted. As the king snaps at Huck: 'keep your head shet, and mind y'r own affairs – if you got any' (237). Huck does find his own methods of escaping and opposing such authority figures, but in terms of direct language exchange any such opposition is generally muted. When the king and the duke get him and Jim to address them by their supposed titles ('"Your Grace", or "My Lord," or "Your Lordship",' 164), Huck obliges. For he has already learnt from Pap 'that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way' (166).

The brilliance of Twain's novel however lies in the way that the powerful voices that sound within the novel's social world are contained by Huck's own narrating voice. Huck (and Jim's) voices are often, and finally, silenced in their social interaction, and their words have little or no effect. But it is Huck who, in terms of the novel's form, displays the various languages and value-systems of

this south-western community and the ways in which they interact and relate to one another. And it is Huck's own voice in the narrative – for the telling of this narrative is the one thing he does control – that effectively (though usually unconsciously) challenges and tears the mask from all these surrounding languages. Thus, to take one very obvious example, Huck describes the Shephersons and Grangerfords in church with their guns 'between their knees or stood . . . handy against the wall' listening to some 'pretty ornery preaching – all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness' (148). His laconic description reveals the sham that Christianity represents in a community ravaged by internecine violence and suggests how Southern concerns with codes of honour and proper (masculine) behaviour thinly disguise a horrific and brutal savagery. Huck recognises none of this explicitly, but Twain uses his narration to this end and to contest such values. Huck, then, is a relatively silent participant in many of the events described in the book, but the authority that his narrative gives him and the critical perspective it allows, perfectly balances and contests the varied (and more socially powerful) southern voices represented.

Huck ends the novel with silence and solitude before him, planning – in one of the most resonant closing lines in American literature – 'to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest' (366). Such a breaking-off of contact with his immediate world is a final measure of his social alienation. This can be seen as a hopeful ending, that paradigmatic American move to a new and unspoilt landscape where society might start over again. It is easier, though, to see it in more negative terms, for such pioneering commonly (as Huck's phrase suggests) paves the way for the reappearance of what one seeks to escape. And Huck's immediate future is to be potentially voiceless (with no one to talk to) and alone – and to be asocial is, by any larger human measure, scarcely to exist.

In focusing on Huck, I have temporarily put Jim's role in the novel to one side. I now return to that subject. I have suggested that Huck's narration provides a counter-balance to the voices and values of his surrounding social world. While this is true, we should not forget that he is also a product of this world, speaks its common language and shares many of its values. It is in the way that Twain uses Huck's narrative voice that its critical power lies. So, when Huck is wondering whether to write to Miss Watson to inform her that Jim is held as a runaway slave at the Phelpses, he 'give[s] up that notion' in part because 'she'd be mad and disgusted at his rascality and ungratefulness for leaving her, and so she'd sell him straight down the river again' (269). Huck's identity is necessarily constrained by the language and codes of his surrounding society and there is nothing here to suggest he is critical of Miss Watson's likely response. Twain, though, plays on the gap between the notion of Jim's 'rascality'

and the reader's knowledge of what it means to be a slave, forced to serve a master or mistress against one's own free will, to release the irony that rings out so loudly. The text usually attains its other ironic and satiric effects in similar ways.

There is, however, something else in Huck's voice that cuts against any view of it as a device for the simple mouthing of surrounding racial and social prejudices. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in her important book, *Was Huck Black?* (1993), suggests that Huck's voice may have been partly modelled on an African American source: that of the boy whose dialect is freely represented in Twain's short newspaper piece, 'Sociable Jimmy' (1874). She also shows Twain's debt to other African American cultural forms (such as 'signifying' and the trickster tale) in the writing of the novel. She consequently claims that the book, so celebrated for its representation of a distinctly 'American' vernacular style, has – both in its general content and in its particular syntax – African American roots; is a product of 'mixed literary bloodlines'.[41] I reduce Fishkin's argument here to the barest of essentials. The valuable connections she makes here, though, are part of a larger history of interchange between Euro-American and African American verbal and cultural forms that went on at a common and everyday level in the antebellum South (and has gone on ever since).

There is then, in *Huckleberry Finn*, a fluid racial politics at play. Huck may share elements of 'black' speech, but the words he often speaks are racist ones. When Jim first reveals his plan to go and work up North, to buy his wife out of slavery and his children too (or to have an Abolitionist steal them if their legal 'owner' refuses to sell), Huck is appalled. 'He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before. . . . It was according to the old saying, "give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell"' (124).

The novel's representation of race, then, and Huck's view of Jim, are complex. It is difficult to characterise Jim in the novel, as he is only ever seen through Huck's eyes and narrative. He shares Huck's outcast status in terms of social position and power, but is lower on such a scale than even this white-trash boy. Part of a relatively undifferentiated mass and called by a highly demeaning name ('By-and-by they fetched the niggers in and had prayers,' 20), his social value is as owned property, worth eight hundred dollars. His speech has no authority. He starts off the novel as he almost ends it, as the victim of Tom and Huck's practical jokes with no voice in whether or not Miss Watson sells him on (as she is thinking) down to New Orleans.

There has been much critical debate as to whether Jim is represented as a demeaning minstrel stereotype (the racist representation of the African American as uneducated, simple-minded, insensitive and unfailingly cheerful, common in all forms of popular entertainment in the period), or whether he is

presented as an intelligent and clear-thinking adult determinedly looking to bring himself to as full a freedom as can be gained in the America of his time. 'Freedom' is indeed a key concept in this text. Huck's desire for freedom, to escape constraining social bonds, is contrasted with Jim's wish to be free to *enter* society, but up North, with the rights and responsibilities he has been previously denied. Seen from the outside, we can never quite know Jim or know what motivates him. His words and actions may certainly be spurred in part (as those of all slaves necessarily were) by the need to mask his real intentions from his white listeners. On the raft he appears to speak openly and freely to Huck, able to do so because of the latter's own low social status and boyhood state. But even here we cannot be sure quite what is being masked and how far he is using Huck to expedite his own plans. Does he, for instance, remain silent about Pap's death to ensure that Huck still has a reason to continue down-river with him: to protect his own best interests rather than Huck's feelings? Any such speculation is bound to end in uncertainty. We can, however, see a clear development in his representation as the novel progresses.

Jim starts the novel as owned property. Once he has escaped from slavery, we see his fuller human and emotional dimensions, his hopes, and his future plans. The descriptions of his words and actions in Huck's company allows David L. Smith, for instance, to praise the novel for its 'explicitly anti-racist stand' and to describe Jim himself as 'an intelligent, sensitive, wily, and considerate individual', who in his person illustrates the fact that 'race provides no useful index of character'.[42] But this fuller picture is quickly obliterated once the king and the duke come on board the raft to direct operations. First Jim is symbolically re-enslaved, to be tied 'hand and foot with a rope' (176) whenever anyone else appears in view. Then, immediately following Jim's description of the discovery of his daughter's deafness (which reveals the depth of his family feelings and sensitivity), the king and the duke – who care little for his feelings – fashion him into a grotesque 'outrage'. Painting his face 'a dead dull solid blue', he 'didn't only look like he was dead, he looked considerable more than that' (203–4). The metaphorical life is being drained out of Jim here. His dehumanisation and devitalisation are then continued during the evasion routine. The powerful independent voice that began to emerge with Huck on the raft vanishes from sight. Jim becomes instead part of Tom Sawyer's game ('the best fun [Tom] ever had in his life', 313) as he and Huck shape his imprisonment and planned escape after the model of European romantic fiction, subjecting him to acute physical discomfort and pain as they do so – filling his cabin with rats and snakes and spiders, and hiding a piece of candlestick in his food, 'most mash[ing] all his teeth out' as a result (313). Jim's tormented black body becomes here the source for Tom's (and to lesser extent, Huck's) entertainment.

As this happens, he necessarily slips back into stereotype, the unwilling but long-suffering butt of their extended comic routine.

This is the point of the narrative at which countless readers have criticised Twain for faulty planning and for inappropriate comic effect. In recent years, however, critics have suggested sound reasons for such apparently misguided plotting. This takes us back to the novel's historical background. Traditionally, the novel has been seen in the context of slavery. Jim's true and full humanity is accordingly revealed in his one-to-one relationship with Huck on the raft. While Huck's own innate moral goodness is shown in his decision to '*go* to hell' (272), rather than behaving as his southern social world would expect and revealing Jim's whereabouts to his owner. There is considerable power to this reading (despite the problem raised by terms like 'innate moral goodness' which seem to ignore issues of social conditioning completely). We are left here, though, with an obvious question. This echoes Aunt Sally's question to Tom, when she realises that Jim had in fact been given his freedom prior to the whole evasion episode, and that Tom knew this: 'what on earth did *you* want to set [Jim] free for, seeing he was already free?' (361). Why on earth, similarly, should Twain want to write an anti-slavery novel in the 1880s, long after the Civil War was over and more than twenty years after the African American, with Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, had officially been set 'free'? To ask this question is to suggest that the novel might be seen as entirely unchallenging, an exercise in conservative self-congratulation for its audience.

There is some problem in answering this. For Twain, dependent on his popularity for his living and with his reputation built on comic writing, usually tended to indirection and obliqueness when it came to challenging the dominant values and assumptions of his surrounding society (*The Gilded Age* is an exception). It is, accordingly, often difficult to work out his exact authorial intentions, a situation not helped by the fact that his own political and social attitudes were never entirely straightforward and coherent. It may be exactly this indeterminacy that has helped make his texts particularly adaptable to a variety of interpretations, and able to release new meanings according to the concerns and interests of each generation of critics who renegotiate them. Whatever the case, it is clear that as Twain's life continued, so his own awareness, and condemnation, of American racial injustices – and particularly the mistreatment of the African American community – greatly increased. Fishkin, indeed, in writing of Twain's 'insight into white racism toward blacks', claims that he 'subverted and challenged his culture's ingrained pieties with a boldness and subtlety that readers are still struggling to appreciate fully'.[43]

It is difficult, in *Huckleberry Finn*, to see the boldness of this challenge, until one has recognised its subtlety, for it is far from self-evident. But recent critics have convincingly interpreted the evasion sequence in the light of the racial politics of the post-Civil War years. Such readings look at African American experience to see Twain as engaging – in an allegorical way – in the ongoing debate over race and civil rights occurring at that time. Lincoln had committed the United States to 'recognize and maintain the freedom' of the emancipated slaves but this had not happened. African Americans had gained some degree of political and social liberation in the immediate period of Reconstruction (the years 1866–77, when Congress reorganised the South after the War, and looked to find ways for white and African American to live equally together in a 'free' society), but this did not last long. 'The slave', in DuBois's words, 'went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery'.[44] For the white South (with the covert – and sometimes overt – support of the nation as whole) gradually re-established authority and control over its African American population, to enmesh them all over again 'in a seamless web of oppression, whose interwoven economic, political, and social strands all reinforced one another'.[45] That web would remain more or less intact right down to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

Jim's role, as portrayed in the evasion section, mirrors (at an individual level) this larger historical reality. He has been freed by his owner but has since been re-enslaved, and is kept in his prison-house by Tom, despite the boy's knowledge of that freedom. Jim suffers indignity and various painful torments from the two boys. Tom's supposed intention here is eventually (once he has gained his own benefits from the situation) to release him once more into freedom. To present the episode in this way is to historicise it and to read it as 'a satire on the way the United Sates botched the enterprise of freeing its slaves'.[46] Northerners increasingly lost interest in African American civil rights in their concern for sectional reconciliation after the War. A series of 'Black Codes' were introduced in southern states severely limiting the rights of freed slaves (and drastically restricting their voting rights). Slavery was replaced by a share-cropping system, whereby white owners kept ultimate control of their land and continued to hold African Americans in financial dependency. Such conditions went hand-in-hand with 'widespread vigilante intimidation and endemic racism'. 'The average freedman', 'in other words', 'had about as much chance as Jim of realising any practical distinction between his current situation and his previous condition of servitude'.[47]

Jim's representation in this last sequence of the book (and the historical reading it provokes) never, however, quite cancels out what we have previously

read. For it is the passages describing Huck and Jim together on the raft that provide the mythic centre of the novel and which (we can assume) have appealed to so many readers in so many different countries over the years. It is only here, and on Jackson's Island, that the voices of these two marginal figures are allowed to speak freely and (as far as we can tell) openly and in overall harmony with one another. This is not to deny that their agendas are different or that they may deliberately mislead each other at times. The raft is not a place without conflict. Huck, frustrated by Jim's intransigence in arguments and by his own inability to nail down his case, claims that 'you can't learn a nigger to argue' (114). Jim, too, speaks plainly and shows anger toward Huck when he is tricked by him in the fog, using words which would be taboo in normal circumstances (calling a white person 'trash') and getting a genuine apology in response (121). The raft, too, is itself a fragile space, mown down by a steamboat, colonised by the king and the duke, floating downriver ever deeper into slave territory.

None of this, however, affects the utopian dimension to this relationship. On the raft, the troubles and prejudices of river-bank life can largely (if provisionally) drop away. And the balance of the relationship, in the best moments, is an equal one with both man and boy speaking when they will, with neither voice trying to overwhelm or silence the other. The deep affection built up between the two is sounded in the fondness of Jim's greeting to Huck immediately following the feud ('I's mighty glad to git you back agin, honey,' 155), and in Huck's musings in Chapter 31 on just how much Jim has cared for him, and on the pleasurable intimacy of the journey, 'a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing' (271). The quality of Twain's prose captures the easy companionship and the relaxed harmony of these scenes. It is Huck that speaks here: we might construe things differently from Jim's perspective, but there is no prompt or necessity to do so.

Neither 'cramped up' nor 'smothery' like other places (156), on the raft the two can sit naked, their legs dangling in the water, enjoying the near-silences ('you wouldn't hear nothing for you couldn't tell how long, except maybe frogs or something' 159). Jim and Huck step outside the borders of the everyday south-western community, alone together in nature, able to 'feel mighty free and easy and comfortable' there (156). These passages are remarkable in both their lyrical power and their brevity. The image of Jim and Huck together on the raft has become rooted in the American imagination, bringing black and white together in a dreamlike (yet very real – there are, for instance, 'dead fish laying around', 158) space, scarcely imaginable in actual social reality. The short sequences that describe and celebrate their union can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This speaks, I would suggest, both to Twain's knowledge of the intensity of the problems that have plagued relations between the races

in America and to the deep-seated nature of the desire to overcome them. This is, to stress once more, Huck's view of his and Jim's relationship. But that does not alter the fact that this projection of generous interracial ease and harmony offered a model of equality, empathy and social possibility, even in a historical time of intractable racial difference and friction, when any practical resolution to such problems had vanished from sight. That is the ultimate power of Twain's great book.