

(Introduction Article – *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*)

by Toni Morrison: “This Amazing Troubling Book”

Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Palpable alarm. Unlike the treasure-island excursion of *Tom Sawyer*, at no point along Huck’s journey was a happy ending signaled or guaranteed. My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable, rather more. It provoked a feeling I can only describe now as a muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming. Yet the satisfactions were great: riveting episodes of flight, of cunning; the convincing commentary on adult behavior, watchful and insouciant; the authority of a child’s voice in language cut for its renegade tongue and sharp intelligence. Liberating language - not baby talk for the young, nor the doggedly patronizing language of so many books on the “children’s shelf.”

Nevertheless, for the second time, curling through the pleasure, clouding the narrative reward, was my original alarm, coupled now with a profoundly distasteful complicity.

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain’s use of the term “nigger” would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eighth-grade class and would have spared all of us (a few blacks, many whites – mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. Name calling is a plague of childhood and a learned activity ripe for discussion as soon as it surfaces.

Embarrassing as it had been to hear the dread word spoken, and therefore sanctioned, in class, my experience of Jim’s epithet had little to do with my initial nervousness the book had caused. Reading the n-word hundreds of times embarrassed, bored, annoyed – but did not faze me. In this latest reading I was curious about the source of my alarm – my sense that danger lingered after the story ended. I was powerfully attracted to the combination of delight and fearful agitation lying entwined like crossed fingers in the pages. And it was significant that this novel which had given so much pleasure to young readers was also complicated territory for sophisticated scholars.

My 1980s reading, therefore, was an effort to track the unease, nail it down.

Although its language—sardonic, photographic, persuasively aural—and the structural use of the river as control and chaos seems to me quite the major feats of *Huckleberry Finn*, much of the novel’s genius lies in its quiescence, the silence that pervades it and give it a porous quality that is by turns brooding and soothing. Some of the stillness, in the beautifully rendered eloquence of a child, is breathtaking. “The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine” (59) [47]. Other moments, however, are frightening meditations on estrangement and death. Huck records a conversation he overhears among happy men he cannot see but whose voices travel from the landing over the water to him. Although he details what the men say, it is how distant Huck is from them, how separated he is from their laughing male

camaraderie, that makes the scene memorable. References to death, looking at it or contemplating it, are numerous.

“ . . . This drowned man was just his [Pap’s] size, . . . but they couldn’t make nothing out of the face . . . floating on his back in the water . . . took him and buried him on the bank . . . I know mighty well that a drowned man don’t float on his back, but on his face’ (30) [24].

If the emotional environment into which Twain places his protagonist is dangerous, the then the leading question the novel poses for me is, what does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts? The answer of course, is Jim. When Huck is among society-whether respectable, or deviant, rich or poor- he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its scariness. Yet he is depressed by himself and sees nature more often as fearful. But when he and Jim become the only “we”, the anxiety is outside, not within.” . . . we would watch the lonesomeness of the river . . . for about an hour . . . just solid lonesomeness” (158) [136]. The consolation, the healing properties Huck longs for, is made possible by Jim’s active, highly vocal affection. Talk so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel.

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point. Anticipating this loss may have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim. Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in the nineteenth-century literature, here, Jim’s portrait seem unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain’s black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on “actual” blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. There may be more than one reason for this extravagance. In addition to accommodating a racist readership, writing Jim so complete “buffoon” solves the problem of missing him that would have been unacceptable at the novel’s end, and helps to solve another problem: how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the minstrel paint. The foregone temporariness of the friendship urges degradation of Jim (to divert Huck’s and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and the minstrelzing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood.

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer’s impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues that Twain raised in his novel. The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim’s freedom in agonizing play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim’s captivity on into each generation of readers.

Or consider Huck’s inability to articulate his true feelings for Jim to anybody other than the reader. Until the hell-or-heaven choice, Huck can speak of genuine affection and respect for Jim that blossom throughout the narrative only aslant or comically to the reader—never directly to the character or to Jim himself. While Jim repeatedly iterates his love, the depth of Huck’s

feelings for Jim is stressed, underscored and rendered impeachable by Twain's calculated use of speechlessness. These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy- a realistic portrait of how a white child *would* respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative's complexities and, by the way, highly prophetic descriptions of contemporary negotiations between races...

It's hard not to notice that except for Judge Thatcher all of the white men who might function as father figures for Huck are ridiculed for their hypocrisy, corruption, extreme ignorance and/or violence. Thus Huck's "no comment" on Jim's status as a father works either as a comfortable evasion for or as a critique of a white readership, as well as being one of the gags Twain shoves in Huck's mouth to protect him from the line of thought neither he nor Twain can safely pursue. As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim's confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck's desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions. If the runaway Huck discovered on the island had been a white convict with protective paternal instincts, none of this would work, for there could be no guarantee of control and no games-playing nonsense concerning his release at the end. Only a black male slave can deliver all Huck's desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for Huck to feel responsible for and to him- but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father would demand.

Concerning this matter of fatherhood, there are two other instances of silences--one is remarkable for its warmth, the other for its glacial coldness. In the first, Jim keeps silent for practically four-fifths of the book about having seen Pap's corpse. There seems no reason for this withholding except his concern for Huck's emotional well-being. Silence on this point persists and we learn its true motive in the penultimate paragraph of the book. And right there is the speech void, cold, and shivery in its unsaying. Jim tells Huck that his money is safe because his father is dead.

"Doan' you 'member de house dat was float'n down de river, en dey wuz a man in dah kivered up, en I went in en unkivered him and didn' let you come in?... dat wuz him" (365-66) [295]. Huck says and thinks about it. The following sentence, we are to believe, is Huck's very next thought: "Tom's most well now..."

As a reader I am relieved to know Pap is no longer a menace to his son's well-being, but Huck does not share me relief. Again the father business is being erased. What after all could Huck say? That he is glad as I am? That would not do. Huck's decency prevents him from taking pleasure in anybody's death. That he is sorry? Wishes his father were alive? Hardly. The whole premise of escape while fearing and feigning death would collapse, and the contradiction would be unacceptable. Instead the crevice widens and beckons reflection on what this long withheld information means. Any comment at this juncture, positive or negative, would lay bare the white father/white son animosity and harm the prevailing through illicit black father/white father son bonding that has already taken place.

Such profoundly realized and significant moments, met with startling understatement or shocking absence of any comment at all, constitute the entrances I mentioned earlier – the invitation Twain offers that I could not refuse.

Earlier I posed a question, What does Huck need to live without despair and thoughts of suicide? My answer was, Jim. There is another question the novel poses for me: what would it

take for Huck to live happily without Jim? That is the problem that gnarls the dissolution of their relationship. The freeing of Jim is withheld, fructified, top-heavy with pain, because without Jim there is no more book, no more story to tell.

There is a moment when it could have happened, when Jim, put ashore at Cairo, would have gone his way, leaving Huck to experience by himself the other adventures that follow. During the separation Huck notes the “dismal and lonesome” scene and searches for Jim until he is physically exhausted. Readers are as eager as he is to locate Jim, but when he does, receiving Jim’s wild joy, Huck does not express his own. A series of small accidents prevents Jim’s exit from the novel, and Huck is given the gift of an assertive as well as already loving black father. It is to the father, not the black man, that he “humbles” himself.

So there will be no “adventures” without Jim. The risk is too great. To Huck and to the novel...

The source of my unease reading this amazing, troubling book now seems clear; an imperfect coming to terms with three matters Twain addresses—Huck Finn’s estrangement, soleness and morbidity as an outcast child; the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim’s and his relationship; and the secrecy in which Huck’s engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society is necessarily conducted. It is also clear that the rewards of my effort to come to terms have been abundant. My alarm, aroused by Twain’s precise rendering of childhood’s fear of death and abandonment, remains—as it should. It has been extremely worthwhile slogging through Jim’s shame and humiliation to recognize the sadness, the tragic implications at the center of his relationship with Huck. My fury at the maze of deceit, the risk of personal harm that a white child is forced to negotiate in a race-inflected society, is dissipated by the exquisite uses to which Twain puts that maze, that risk.

Yet the larger question, the danger that sifts from the novel’s last page, is whether Huck, minus Jim, will be able to slay those three monsters as he enters the “territory.” Will that undefined space, so falsely imagined as “open,” be free of social chaos, personal morbidity, and further moral complications embedded in adulthood and citizenship? Will it be free not only of nightmare fathers but of dream fathers too? Twain did not write Huck there. He imagined instead a reunion – Huck, Jim and Tom, soaring in a balloon over Egypt.

For a hundred years, the argument that this novel *is* has been identified, re-identified, examined, waged and advanced. What it cannot be is dismissed. It is classic literature, which is to say it heaves, manifests and lasts.