English 117: Literature Seminars II
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Bianca Yuh

The Limited Potential of True Reform

by Bianca Yuh

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been hailed as a literary classic that captures the distinctly American ideals of independence and individualism. The novel is frequently categorized as a coming-of-age story centered on Huck's moral journey as he learns to reject the value system imposed on him by Southern society. However, in the last ten chapters, the novel's serious overtones are eclipsed by a lapse into burlesque comedy, Jim passively submits to Tom's ridiculous schemes, and Huck remains silent in the face of Jim's mistreatment. This shift has led many critics to disparage Twain's inability to follow through on the themes and truths expounded throughout the rest of the narrative. In this view, the ending jeopardizes the significance of Huck's transformation and ultimately Twain is to blame for this lapse in moral vision.

But upon closer examination of Huck's moral progression at key points of decision, it becomes clear that his transformation has not been as radical as one may have previously perceived. Hence, the ending highlights the staying power of Huck's societal "conscience." In order to relieve the relentless tension between his growing friendship with Jim and the dictates of Southern morality, Huck continues to cling to the racist assumptions instilled in him from birth but chooses to make an exception for the Jim he has come to value not only as a fellow human being but as a close friend. In view of Huck's prolonged inability to renounce the Southern code of morality once and for all, the ending is not a "failure of nerve" on Twain's part, but a

calculated attempt to comment on the limited potential of true reform and to satirize the farce that was taking place in the post-Reconstruction South.

Critics such as Leo Marx have claimed that it is out of character for Huck to comply with Tom's plans in the final chapters with little protest; however, Huck's regression to a subordinate role and his high regard for Tom are key features of Huck's natural disposition. Throughout the novel, Huck has given in to more domineering figures for the sake of restoring peace and harmony. For example, soon after Huck comes upon the king and the duke, he quickly realizes that they are no more than "low-down frauds"; yet he does not let on because "it would keep peace in the family" (130). After years of experience dealing with Pap, his violent and overbearing father, Huck has learned that "the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way" (131). So Huck's assent to Tom's proposal is not uncharacteristic by any means. Richard Hill notes that just as Huck deferred to Pap, the king, and the duke in order to prevent any conflict, so he does with Tom (499). Moreover, his respect for Tom has gone undiminished over the course of the narrative. Huck still admires Tom's ability to spin a good story, as evinced by his remark in Chapter 34: "What a head for just a boy to have! If I had Tom Sawyer's head, I wouldn't trade it off to be a duke" (215). Huck even cites Tom's authority on the matter of conscience, a "supposed product of his post-Tom maturity," stating, "It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good nohow. Tom Sawyer he says the same" (Hill 498; 214). Thus, Huck's submission to Tom's plans is not a misstep in characterization, but a development in accordance with the Huck we have come to know.

Huck's increasing maturity leading up to the ending is also often cited as a reason for dissatisfaction with the closing chapters, but in fact, Huck shows little moral progression throughout the novel even as he outwardly rejects his societal "conscience." We witness the

strengthening of Huck's resolve to free Jim at all costs, yet Huck never completely dispenses with the value system of his upbringing. At all the critical points where Huck must choose between adhering to Southern morals—by turning Jim in, and following his own heart—by helping Jim escape, his internal conflict never quite dissipates. When Huck first decides to paddle ashore and turn Jim in, he feels "easy, and happy, and light as a feather," but after Jim calls him the "only fren' ole Jim's got now," Huck changes his mind and invents a story to protect him (102). Afterwards, Huck feels "bad and low" because he "knowed very well [he] had done wrong," indicating that his societal "conscience" still governs his ideas of right and wrong and causes him to feel guilty for his actions (104). Another crucial point of decision occurs when Huck considers writing a letter to Miss Watson to inform her of Jim's location. As Huck muses over the ways he has aided Jim so far, he feels "wicked and low-down and ornery," and his societal "conscience" continues to condemn him (199). Even after he tears up the note and famously declares, "All right, then, I'll go to hell," he still views them as "awful thoughts, and awful words" (201). A signal of Huck's moral transformation would be a lessening of self-reproach and an increase in conviction each time he comes to a crossroads, but no such signal appears. Huck feels just as ashamed and mortified of his actions as he did several chapters ago, revealing the unshakeable hold that the Southern moral code continues to have over him. As Jim O'Loughlin affirms, Huck copes with his inner turmoil by neatly separating his personal feelings for Jim from his stance on slavery (213). Although Huck's personal connection to Jim may outweigh his racist beliefs at key moments of decision, his experience does not fundamentally change his views on race.

The extent to which Huck's upbringing continues to influence his behavior, even subconsciously, is reinforced in the final portion of the novel in order to highlight Huck's moral

stagnancy. When Huck first meets Aunt Sally in Chapter 22, he responds to her inquiries with a hastily concocted story about a cylinder-head blowing out. She proceeds to ask if anyone was hurt and Huck promptly answers, "No'm. Killed a nigger" (206). David Smith has argued that Huck is merely exploiting Aunt Sally's attitudes and playing on her bigotry in order to cook up a credible story; however, the immediate context of the conversation calls this argument into question (ctd. in Hurt 43). At this moment, Huck is placed into a stressful situation where he must react quickly, with no time to mull over his responses. He appears to reply reflexively with whatever comes quickly to mind; therefore, it is unlikely that he adds, "Killed a nigger," as a strategic device to add to the realism of his story. Whether or not Huck believes that a "nigger" counts as a person or not, he is extremely familiar with Southern ideas about racial inferiority, to the point that these beliefs surface without conscious recall. This episode reveals that although Huck often expresses doubts about the morality of his societal "conscience," these racist assumptions remain deeply entrenched within him and he cannot fully escape their influence. Thus, the ending is an apt conclusion to a story that reveals Huck's incomplete moral reformation and his unconscious perpetuation of social morality.

A careful examination of the key points at which Huck recognizes Jim as a human being reveals that he is unable to apply his newfound knowledge about Jim to other members of the black race, further revealing Huck's maintenance of societal values. He often qualifies his beliefs with the assumption that Jim is a deviation from the norm, which allows his fundamental values to remain unchanged. Huck first begins to recognize that Jim's values are comparable to those of a white man when Jim declares that his first act as a free man will be to save "money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife…and then they would both work to buy the two children" (101). An especially poignant scene where Huck realizes that Jim

is no different from any white person occurs when Jim agonizes over his mistreatment of his daughter Elizabeth: "He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder…. 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" (154). As Bennett Kravits notes, the measure of Jim's worth is presented in terms of his ability to imitate the white man's imagined values, loyalty to and compassion for family and friends (15), revealing Huck's "deep immersion in the mentality of the white majority" (Robinson 211). The fact that Jim is capable of the same range of human emotion is an uncomfortable realization for Huck because it presents an intolerable ideological refutation to all that he has been taught, undercutting the racist doctrine of retrogression that saw, according to Kravits, the emancipated slave returning to the "natural" state of sexual and social bestiality supposedly inherent in African culture (13). It is important to note that in these instances, although Huck is compelled to acknowledge Jim's humanity, he never makes generalizations about other slaves from his isolated interactions with Jim.

Because Huck never abandons his racist beliefs even as he learns to accept Jim's humanity, the ending is fitting precisely because it underscores Huck's method of designating Jim as an exception to the rule. He maintains the two disparate categories of whites and blacks, and justifies Jim's humanity by placing him in the first category. Notably, in the penultimate chapter, Huck responds to the news that Jim risked his freedom to find Tom a doctor with this statement: "I knowed he was white inside" (249). In spite of crucial moments where Huck resolved to "go to hell" and reject his societal "conscience" in favor of his own moral convictions, here Huck reveals his preservation of the white mode of thinking in viewing blacks as inherently inferior. In Huck's eyes, Jim's noble actions and capacity for love set him apart from the norm and reveal his humanity, or "whiteness." Therefore, Huck justifies Jim's

extraordinary display of self-sacrifice by reassuring himself that Jim is not like other slaves, for to accept both Jim's heroic actions and Jim's identity as a black man would mean overturning all of his ingrained notions about blacks. Throughout the novel, Huck has struggled with his regard for Jim as a human being and his understanding of the kind of person that society tells him Jim must be. The ending reinforces his coping method—he reconciles the two by making an exception for the Jim he has come to know and love without applying his knowledge to the whole of the black race.

Even as Huck classifies Jim as one who is "white inside," he remains unable to completely cast off society's view of Jim and the accompanying racist implications. Early on, Huck refers to Jim as "this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away" (101). At that point, Huck and Jim's relationship is still tenuous and one can understand why Huck cannot yet view Jim as a human being. However, much later, when Huck muses over the possibility of writing a letter to Miss Watson, he asserts: "It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame" (199). Huck is not only preoccupied with how his actions might appear to others, but also weighed down with guilt and shame as he allows societal beliefs about Jim's identity as a black man to overcome and control him. The concluding chapters present Huck with another opportunity to transcend his societal "conscience" once and for all, yet he fails this final test and continues to dehumanize Jim. Although Huck has come a long way in terms of his growing friendship with Jim, he accedes to Tom's plan with little protest, recognizing in the voice of Tom the voice of the white establishment (Jones 187). When Tom readily agrees to help Huck free Jim, Huck is shocked, admitting, "I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger

stealer!" (210). Once Tom Sawyer steps into the picture, Huck's new perception of Jim is quickly obscured by Tom's evaluation of Jim's worth. It is telling that when Huck later learns that Tom knew all along that Jim had already been freed, a weight is taken off his mind because he couldn't understand how Tom "could help a body set a nigger free, with his bringing-up" (261). Huck's previous defiance of the attitudes of whites towards slaves and determined resolve "to go to hell" for Jim's sake prove to be no match for the ingrained values of Southern society. As Jones notes, Huck has never been fully at ease with his recognition of Jim's humanity because it clashes too sharply with public declarations on the nature of blackness, and nowhere in the story is this more obvious than in the evasion.

Throughout the novel, Twain makes scathing critiques on human nature, thus, Huck's meek submission to Tom's plans in spite of his friendship with Jim continues the commentary on human nature, specifically the limited potential for reform. Bruce Michelson observes that Huck's "passivity in these closing chapters, his reversion…ought to trouble us," but it also raises the question of whether or not it serves a larger purpose and speaks to a broader truth about the world (225). Surely Twain was aware that the ending would be crucial in determining the effectiveness of the themes conveyed throughout the novel; therefore, it is highly unlikely that the evasion sequence was merely a failure of execution. Perhaps, Twain intentionally denies readers the comfort of a storybook ending in order to emphasize the dismaying nature of man and his world. Despite the text's superficial support for the American ideal of "orphaning" the self, Twain's pessimism casts great doubt on humanity's ability to transcend the pettiness of human existence (Kravits 3). After all, it is almost too much to expect that a young boy would be capable of confronting and denying the values of his time (Jones 188). Twain deliberately overturns our expectations about the mature man Huck to be, suggesting, in Michelson's words,

that Huck "has come as far on his moral journey as a plausible boy of that time could" (225). Victor Doyno also recognized this tendency, observing , "Some critics have a conscious or unconscious expectation that a novel about a youth, even a picaresque novel, will bear some resemblance to a bildungsroman or kunstlerroman. Accordingly, they assume that Huck will mature noticeably and are disappointed" (226). Twain is cynical about idealistic beliefs in the human capacity to undergo true reform, and the final chapters constitute a successful execution of his master plan.

Not only does he utilize the ending to highlight the implausibility of reform, he uses the character of Tom Sawyer to satirize and condemn contemporary racist attitudes towards blacks. Tom, obsessed with visions of glory, insists that things be "done right," according to the books, in his plan to rescue Jim from slavery. According to Kevin Michael Scott, Tom's stubborn devotion to convention at the expense of Jim's freedom reveals a larger critique of a Southern culture that holds itself to standards of Southern honor while justifying slavery (187). Just as Tom blatantly disregards Jim's comfort and basic needs as a human being and a freeman, many Southerners continued to treat blacks as inferior and sub-human even after the Civil Rights Act of 1866 extended the rights of emancipated slaves. In light of Tom's knowledge that Jim is a free man, his wish that they could play at the evasion "all the rest of our lives and leave Jim to our children to get out" is one with extraordinarily cruel implications, for it would perpetrate on Jim a confinement only Tom knows would be a re-enslavement (Scott 187). Tom's flippant attitude regarding Jim's fate is meant to be unsettling, for it echoes the insensitivity of many Southerners at the time who refused to accept blacks as human beings despite their legal status as fellow citizens. Another off-putting scene occurs when Tom first wakes up at the Phelps house after being shot. His main concern is the integrity of the process, rather than the fact that Jim is

running away alone and believing himself an escaped slave (Scott 187). Charles Nilon also notes the parallel between Tom's flippant attitude and the predominant Southern treatment of blacks, arguing that Tom displays the "same arbitrary, selfish assurance the South" possessed when it decided the fates of "freed" blacks (62). The striking similarities between Tom's selfish disregard for Jim's welfare and the trivializing manner in which whites toyed with the rights of freed slaves are not merely coincidental, for they reveal Twain's subtle attempts to criticize the human failings that surrounded him.

Critics who view the ending as a major flaw have argued that "the slapstick tone jars with the underlying seriousness of the voyage" (Marx 294), but on the contrary, Mark Twain skillfully employs the burlesque nature of Tom's scheme to critique the post-Civil War South. In order to mirror his own feelings about the precarious state of African-Americans at the time, Twain crafts the ending of the novel into a political allegory of the post-Reconstruction South, intentionally creating feelings of exasperation in the reader when it is discovered that all of the ordeals Jim has been forced to endure amounted to nothing. Characterizing the Reconstruction era, MacLeod writes: "Mere legal emancipation, in short had done nothing to create or sustain the necessary conditions of a genuine liberty for black people," indeed, it took over one hundred more years for blacks to achieve true equality (7). Instead of jeopardizing the significance of the entire novel, the drawn-out and infuriating nature of Tom's rescue plan underscores the larger truth that blacks after the Civil War were technically free by name, but were still treated as slaves and forced to undergo unnecessary hardships. Jim O'Loughlin maintains that Huck's compliance with Tom's schemes "mirrors a collective lack of interest in the fate of African Americans during the 1880s," and moreover, just as Huck's resolve to free Jim fluctuated and wavered, the political will that brought about Emancipation without actual freedom was temporary (18). Thus, the strength of

the novel's ending lies in Twain's refusal to allow Huck to be the kind of hero his society did not deserve.

The ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is indeed a charged topic, for the novel's status as a great American classic is at stake. It is either a masterpiece that succeeds in communicating Twain's beliefs about human nature or a failure because the final chapters overturn all semblance of Huck's supposed moral maturation. Further scrutiny of key moments in Huck's moral journey reveals that Huck merely views Jim as an exception to the rule and retains Southern ideas about racial superiority to the very end. Twain maintains a masterful control and direction throughout that intensify, rather than diminish, in the conclusion. In light of Twain's true intentions, the ending serves to bring home his underlying conviction that humanity is incapable of rising above social institutions and undergoing true reform, and exposes the failings of whites in the post-Reconstruction South. However, the novel should not be swiftly dismissed as another bleak commentary on the deteriorating condition of humanity. In spite of the fact that Huck does not completely renounce his societal "conscience," he comes to appreciate Jim's nobility of character and value him as a friend and father figure. Thus, through the character of Huck, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers a small but sure glimmer of hope for redemption.

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