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Twain's ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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Huck Finn's much-discussed "moral crises" in Chapters 16 and 31 of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are conventionally regarded as climactic moments in the ongoing drama of his moral growth. Underwriting such readings is the notion that they reveal Huck's dynamic character, his dawning recognition of Jim's humanity and his gradual rejection of his society's racism. But running beneath and opposing this narrative of Huck's moral growth is a counter-narrative of moral backsliding, within which Huck persists in denying the legitimacy of his relationship with Jim; he continues, in other words, to see Jim as a "nigger" and himself as, even worse, a "nigger-stealer."

The first tugs of Huck's "shore-trained" conscience in Chapter 16 immediately follow his abject apology to Jim at the end of Chapter 15, perhaps giving the lie to his claim that he "ware'n't ever sorry for it afterwards" (105). As Huck begins contemplating betraying Jim, we see that his "conscience" is the voice of his wounded white psyche; Jim has called him "trash" and Huck has "humble[d himself] to a nigger" (105), and whatever momentary guilt he may have felt for making a fool of Jim is quickly replaced by an urge to deny the legitimacy of their relationship, to relocate Jim "below" him, reassert his obligations to "poor Miss Watson" (124) and the white community, and thereby restore his own self-esteem. After Jim's lecture on true friendship, Huck feels "mean" (105) for making Jim feel bad; one day and several pages later he feels "mean" (124) for making Jim happy:

I got to feeling so mean and so miserable I most wished I was dead. [. . .] Every time he danced around and says, 'Dah's Cairo!' it went through me like a shot, and I thought if it *was* Cairo I reckoned I would die of miserableness. (124)

Jim, of course, survives Huck's "crisis" when Huck can't bring himself to betray his companion to the two men on the skiff, but, as in his "crisis" fifteen chapters later, Huck experiences his loyalty to Jim as a failure of character: "I warn't man enough--hadn't the spunk of a rabbit. [. . .] I got aboard the raft feeling bad and low, because I knowed I done wrong" (125-6). Jim's lecture on friendship does not elevate Jim in Huck's eyes, but rather degrades Huck to a lower position. Huck doesn't regret the dirty trick he played on Jim so much as he regrets the epithet--"trash"--that Jim delivers to him: "It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him take it back" (105). Note that Huck doesn't want to "take back" his own cruel joke; he wants Jim to take back the insult. While the enlightened, liberal reader certainly must celebrate Huck's decisions not to betray Jim, we must also recognize that Huck himself has not changed, has not come to any new awareness of Jim's humanity or his own "deformed conscience," but persists in denying the legitimacy of their relationship.

Shortly after this first crisis, Huck and Jim are separated when a steamboat runs down their raft, and after calling out Jim's name a few times, Huck heads to shore. Nowhere in the episode that follows--Huck's stay at the Grangerfords'--does Huck think about Jim, wonder whether his friend is alive, attempt to search for him, or betray to the reader any concern for Jim whatsoever, until we discover that Jim has been hiding along the shore and keeping watch over Huck throughout the episode.

The immediate, local narrative contexts of both of Huck's crises suggest less-than-admirable motivations for his reflections on right and wrong, diluting the moral weight and urgency conventionally assigned to them. Huck's crisis in chapter 31, for example, occurs immediately after he discovers that Jim *has already been captured* and is being held at the Phelps' farm, suggesting that Huck's struggle is not (only) to do the right thing but to save his own skin. Jim has been captured. The jig is up, and Huck hedges his bets by writing the letter to Miss Watson, hoping, perhaps, to mitigate his culpability if they do get caught. Moreover, his dramatic and climactic declaration "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" (271) is similarly diluted by the fact that he has already voiced (in Chapter 1) his disdain for "the good place" and willingness to go to the "bad place":

Then [Miss Watson] told me about the bad place, and I said I wished I was there. [...] She said it was wicked to say what I said; said she wouldn't say it for the whole world; *she* was going to live so as to go to the good place. Well, I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it. (3-4)

That Huck considers hell preferable to, or at least no worse than, his "cramped up" (2), "dismal regular and decent" (3) life under Widow Douglas and Miss Watson weakens the psychological force and enormity of his self-damnation later in the narrative.

The notion that Huck is a coherently dynamic character underwrites David Smith's argument that Huck's much-quoted response to Aunt Sally's question about whether any one had been hurt in a steamboat explosion--"No'm. Killed a nigger" (279)--constitutes Huck's self-conscious "playing on her glib and conventional bigotry." At that point in the narrative, Smith claims, "[w]e already know that Huck's relationship to Jim

has already invalidated for him such obtuse racial notions," and given this transcendence over the "socially constituted and sanctioned fiction" of racial inferiority, we can only surmise that Huck's use of the term is strategic and self-consciously ironic (Smith 106). But the immediate narrative context of the conversation undermines Smith's reading. Huck has just arrived on the Phelps's farm, when Aunt Sally mistakes him for someone else. "It's you, at last!--ain't it?" she exclaims, and Huck's immediate response is reflexive and preconscious: "I out with a 'Yes'm,' before I thought" (277-8). He doesn't know who the woman is, or for whom the woman has mistaken him, and when he learns that he is supposed to have arrived via steamboat, this information only increases his confusion:

I didn't know rightly what to say, because I didn't know whether the boat would be coming up the river or down. But I go a good deal on instinct; and my instinct said she would be coming up--from down towards Orleans. That didn't help me much, though; for I didn't know the names of bars down that way. I see I'd got to invent a bar, or forget the name of the one we got aground on--or--Now I struck an idea, and fetched it out:

"It warn't the grounding--that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder head."

"Good Gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt." (279)

As Aunt Sally plies Huck with questions, he tells the reader "It was kinder thin ice [. . .] I was getting so uneasy I couldn't listen good. I had my mind on the children all the time; I wanted to get them out to one side, and pump them a little, and find out who I was" (280).

Smith's reading of Huck's self-conscious and devious (i.e., strategic) use of "nigger" in order to "exploit Aunt Sally's attitudes" appears strained given Huck's distraction and desperate ad-libbing. Smith assigns Huck a subversive moral (and linguistic) authority unwarranted by the narrative discourse.

Assuming, however, for the sake of argument, that Huck is in full control of his language at this particular moment, what rhetorical or strategic advantage does the addition of the phrase "Killed a nigger" secure him that a simple "No'm" would not accomplish? The detail adds little if any realism--blowing a cylinder head did not *always* result in fatalities, as Aunt Sally's remark "*Sometimes* people do get hurt" indicates--and nothing in the text suggests that Aunt Sally needs convincing that there actually was an explosion in the first place. Moreover, if we read the remark as a realistic detail designed to make the lie more convincing, this does not necessarily imply any ironic awareness on Huck's part. Perhaps we could speculate that Huck is attempting to preempt any suspicion concerning his alliance with Jim, whom he knows has been taken by Mr. Phelps, by aligning himself with conventional race ideology. But Huck has no reason to believe, and expresses no concern, that this white woman suspects him of anything untoward, particularly concerning a runaway slave; on the contrary, she is convinced Huck is her nephew and eagerly welcomes him with tears and embraces. Indeed, Huck's remark potentially puts him at a distinct *disadvantage* in the ongoing narrative action. Given his situation--ad-libbing in a vacuum--prudence would dictate that Huck offer as little information as possible; for every detail adds weight to a lie, and Huck's is built on "kinder thin ice." While I agree that the phrase carries a subversive meaning, I disagree with Smith's account of its source and of its narrative signification. Smith claims that at

this point in the narrative "[w]e already know that Huck's relationship to Jim has already invalidated for him such obtuse racial notions" (106), a claim that the counter-narrative of moral backsliding renders dubious at best.

Word Count: 1573

Works Cited

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