DEFENSE OF THE ENDING

Huckleberry Finn (1884)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

Richard Hill

"*Huckleberry Finn* has been described as everything from a biracial, homo-erotic romp to a racist-sexist diatribe, with all manner of psychosocial, historiopolitical, and pan-mythological theories in between.... As a concept, 'The Weak Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*' is a given for most modern critics... Unfortunately, [Leo] Marx and his disciples seem to find, in Mencken's words, 'humor and sound sense essentially antagonistic'; and more unfortunately, as De Voto pointed out decades before, 'the color-blind are unqualified critics of painting...[and] the solemn have been granted authority about humor.'

Huck obviously misses his best friend Tom--he never considers Jim as such, as much as Leslie Fielder and others would like to make the match--and as James M. Cox points out, he wants to be like Tom whenever he can, or whenever he is not 'living on too thin a margin to afford Tom's luxurious romances'.... To expect Huck to give up instantly both his ongoing personality and Tom Sawyer is to push the epiphany aspect of his decision to tear up the letter to Miss Watson into the excesses of modern social-agenda fiction.... As Richard P. Adams, in his discussion of the general tendency of Twain's critics to bend thematic patterns into agendacized plots, aptly observes: 'When a critic gets that far out on a limb it is not necessary to shoot him'.… As Alan Gribbern, one of the few critics who disagrees that 'Huck Finn is completely... in thralldom to Tom's bidding,' points out:

> an unjaundiced reading of the texts [both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*] confirms quite the reverse: that Huck resists Tom at virtually every turn in their many colloquies. It is true that Tom usually wins his point, relying in extreme cases on his printed 'authorities'--but he never gains Huck's acquiescence and cooperation until he has rephrased his argument in terms that suit Huck's notions of practicality and reason.

The fact that Corporal Huck finds out all too soon that he has allied himself with a General willing to ferry his troops over the edge of an Alexandre Dumas/Walter Scott romantic waterfall provides both the narrative tension and the hilarity (for those with a sense of humor) of the episode. The comedy works splendidly to set up those twin jolts of reality: fifteen farmers in the parlor with guns and, later, the bullet in Tom's leg. The point here is that, with all his quirks, Huck is much truer to the textual buildup of his character in Twain's ending than critics who assume a higher knowledge of 'thematic unity' would have him. As [Bruce] Michelson points out: 'The book would certainly be tidier if Huck's boyishness were utterly gone at the end, but Mark Twain did not sacrifice his best character for the sake of tidiness, and we should be thankful for that....

I assert that Jim is smarter, more human, and much more pragmatic--both before and after the evasion episodes--than Marx and [Henry Nash] Smith have noticed. David L. Smith sums up the general understanding of Jim's pre-Phelps character as 'compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing, and wise,' and goes deeper when he notes that Jim exploits common attitudes about 'superstitious Negro behavior' to his advantage. As proof, Smith cites the early scenes in which Jim uses Tom's prank nickel to raise his status in the slave community and notes Jim's triumph in 'wily and understated economic bartering' with Huck over the counterfeit quarter and the hair ball.

Though he does not mention it in his essay, David Smith's conclusion that Jim 'clearly possesses a subtlety and intelligence which "the [stage] Negro" allegedly lacks,' leads into a still deeper observation. In the river scene where Huck decides that he must go no further in the 'crime' of helping a slave escape,

he paddles off in the canoe, ostensibly to find out whether they are near Cairo but really to turn in Jim.... What amazing presence of mind he shows as he adroitly manipulates Huck's feelings: 'Pooty soon I'll be a-shout'n' for joy...' This passage demonstrates that Jim is able to employ both sides of the adult-child nature that his slave role has forced upon him. He is the wise adult, skilled at using child psychology on a boy, and at the same time, he is a powerless child (slave) who has learned the hard way to use subterfuge, not brawn, to manipulate the giant (white) creatures who rule him...When in doubt, Jim must sublimate his intelligence and manhood into a seeming childlike passivity while he controls the situation as best he can....

None of Jim's courage, intelligence, and humanity disappear once he is 'Tom's prisoner.' If anything, the final chapters prove him more shrewd and/or noble than ever. His first act upon capture is to expose the king and the duke, an action that demonstrates an inclination toward revenge not found in passive two-dimensional characters.... Jim's first opportunity to prove that he has lost none of his shrewdness and intelligence comes when he is surprised in his hut. He quickly comprehends Tom's plan to fool the witch-haunted old turnkey, and he plays his part in the ruse perfectly.... He knows that his captors are relying on a false handbill to locate his 'owner,' which will give him valuable time. And the prospects for escape look promising, for he is not exactly in a maximum security situation.... He knows, too, that Huck is close by and has reason to hope the boy will help him if he can.... Small wonder that Jim, like Huck, relaxes a bit in these final chapters; after what he has been through, he is, while still anxious to escape, naturally... disinclined to question Huck or Tom....

But whereas most men in Jim's position--black or white--would have endured almost anything to keep such a patron happy, Jim has the courage to find fault when Tom begins to 'spread himself.' The official prisoner complains about the coat of arms, the inscriptions, the rats, the spiders--and he positively rebels at rattlesnakes.... Jim is all assertive adult here, and Tom promptly retreats with, 'Well, then let it go, let it go'... Jim, like Huck, has reserved the right to call off Tom's elaborate over-management whenever the need arises.

In short, Jim's will and mind have by no means been stolen from him by a capricious author or a cruel boy. So long as things 'ain't onreasonable,' it is in Jim's best interest to stick with Tom. He knows that phase two of the escape--the world beyond the Phelps farm--will be infinitely more difficult without Tom's resources.... As to the supposed loss of Jim's noble character in the ending of the book, his nobility is nowhere more evident than in the climax of the escape. Whereas earlier Jim has given of himself in small ways, such as standing extra watches on the raft, in the final chapters he forfeits what is probably his last chance for freedom in order to help the old doctor operate on Tom. Moreover, when he is driven back to the farm with blows, loaded down with chains, and threatened with hanging, he refuses to say a word to implicate his accomplices, even though at this point he might well be harboring a justifiable resentment against Tom....

Jim's timing in revealing to Huck that Pap was the dead man in the floating house suggests more, not less, shrewdness than anything in the earlier chapters.... If Jim had told him that Pap was dead, Huck could have gone back, recovered his money, and lived the truly free life from which Pap, and Pap alone, had always kept him... One could argue that Jim did not tell because he wished, in a fatherly way, to protect Huck from the sadness of losing his real father, but Jim promptly reveals the 'gashly' truth when there is no more danger of his being abandoned. Until then, the desperate runaway slave clearly needed that white boy and 'dasn't tell'….Tom is no doubt planning to buy him a steamboat ticket home to see his wife and children. This is simply no time for a wise adult like Jim to show irritation....

A product of 'raised consciousness' Hollywood or a mass-market paperback version of the story would of course present us with a Jim who speaks perfect English, instructs Tom and Huck in relative morality, outwits his captors at every turn, and single-handedly exposes Southern slavery in all its hypocrisy. But even with the full modern treatment, he would be no more of a man--a 'compassionate, shrewd, thoughtful, self-sacrificing, and wise' man--than the Jim that Twain portrayed in the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*. Jim neither loses his humanity nor becomes a 'stage Negro' in the final section; to claim either point without reservation is to ignore evidence."

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