

FEMINISTS ASSAULT MARK TWAIN

Huckleberry Finn (1884)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

"If Mr. Clemens cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses, he had better stop writing for them." Louisa May Alcott censoring *Huckleberry Finn* from the Concord Public Library, sounding like Miss Watson.

"WOMEN SUBSERVIENT"

"Twain's use of nineteenth-century stereotypes of women as the basis of his female characters in *Huck Finn* allows the reader to understand some of the ways a male-dominated culture perceived woman's place and function. Both the men and the women in the novel illustrate the values of a society that has little regard for human dignity, but the female characters also embody virtues that *could redeem that society if the women were empowered to do so*. The male characters, even the rascals and thieves, are allowed the freedom to accept or reject these values, whereas the women, as members of a subservient group, are obliged to preserve and transmit them." [Italics added]

Nancy A. Walker

"Reformers and Young Maidens:
Women and Virtue in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*"
One Hundred Years of 'Huckleberry Finn' (1985)
eds. Robert Sattelmeyer & J. Donald Crowley

REBUTTAL

As if white women were more oppressed than black slaves! Twain depicts the *culture*--as distinct from the civilization--as dominated by women, not by men. Victorianism was matriarchal. *Huckleberry Finn* was censored by Twain's wife. White women were often the oppressors--especially of black men--not the victims. White women owned more slaves than white men because wives usually outlived their husbands and single white women often could afford to own a slave. That is why Twain makes the owner of Jim a white woman. Miss Watson has the power to redeem *herself*, but she does not free Jim until she is dead and he is of no value to her anymore. Huck is conditioned to racism by Miss Watson as well as by Pap. He runs away from the women because they represent the oppressive matriarchal society. Since 1970 a lot of men have run away from Feminists because they resemble Miss Watson.

"RIDICULES FEMININITY"

"Connoting history and not nature, gender is not a category of human nature.... Since Mark Twain makes Judith Loftus a stranger, there is no reason why Huck cannot pretend to be a runaway apprentice in the first place. One explanation could be that turning Huck into a girl gives Twain the opportunity to ridicule femininity." [Another explanation is that making him try to be a girl is funny.]

Myra Jehlen

"Reading Gender in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*"
Critical Terms for Literary Study (1990)
eds. Frank Lentricchia & Thomas McLaughlin

REBUTTALS

"The preceding essays by Nancy Walker and Myra Jehlen both constitute responses not just to *Huckleberry Finn* but to a general dilemma facing Feminist critics of American fiction.... These two essays differ radically, and in a way that corresponds to a deep division not just within Feminist practice but also within the literary academy as a whole. Whereas Nancy Walker writes as if constrained by the manifest

narrative facts of *Huckleberry Finn*, Jehlen feels entitled to distort or override those facts whenever they might trouble her thesis. In her case, methodology becomes a steamroller that flattens the contours of Twain's plot, making room for wholly wishful 'findings.' In a word, then, these essays epitomize the widest of all academic chasms--the one between empirical and a *prioristic* approaches to inquiry....

Although one could argue that as a slave Jim is socially 'feminized,' Walker does not do so....Jehlen wants Twain's novel not just to show itself amenable to gender study but to *speak* her own ideological position....As the tortuousness of Jehlen's reasoning suggests, you can't really get there from here. Jehlen's discussion is scarcely under way before it displays the most fundamental misconstrual of Huck's depicted character. Huck, says Jehlen, opposes his universal principles to the fundamental tenets of both his class and his race. He achieves heroism by renouncing genteel hypocrisies as Hamlet does by denouncing the rot at the Danish court....By rejecting the false values of his society, Huck eventually becomes a man of integrity... Could this be the same Huck whom Mark Twain himself famously characterized as possessing a 'sound heart' in conflict with a 'deformed conscience.' The whole moral irony of *Huckleberry Finn* depends on Huck's inability to adopt abolitionist 'principles'...The entirety of Twain's brilliantly rendered internal dialogue between Huck's humane impulses and his unreflective acceptance of slavery passes Jehlen by....

Jehlen's viewing the Loftus episode through ideologically tinted lenses produces assertions that are flatly incredible....wildly inflating the importance of Huck's amusing dress-up scene...Thus poor Huck, who wants and receives from Mrs. Loftus only one piece of hard information about his and Jim's plight, is treated by Jehlen to an altogether fantastic trip through the transvestite psychic underworld....Huck, precisely because he is 'all boy,' cannot hope to mimic successfully. Huck readily gets the point, but Jehlen gets it backwards. For Jehlen, Mrs. Loftus's lesson is that male and female traits *are just an act*--that, really, 'anyone can be anything' in a world liberated from sexual stereotyping....Mrs. Loftus does *not* warn Huck, as Jehlen maintains, 'that gender is nurture rather than nature'; she assumes that males and females do things differently by virtue of their inherent constitution....

The ludicrousness of this attempt to shovel contemporary academic dogma into Huck's practical and theory-proof brain ought to be apparent by now....Beyond any sum of distortions on Jehlen's part lies a global refusal of empathy with Twain's moral daring in *Huckleberry Finn*. For her, the *Huck Finn* awaiting her Feminist makeover must be apprehended as a drably conformist work that merely 'articulates and helps define dominant values and ways of seeing the world.' This is to say that...Jehlen empties *Huck Finn* of its reformist energy in order to award her own transformational reading a monopoly on whatever rectitude the book can be shown to possess....On Jehlen's account, the fact that *Huckleberry Finn* has struck so many observers as contributing to interracial understanding becomes an unfathomable mystery. Indeed, her campaign against 'apparently universal' values and 'the fantasy of transcendence' could cause a reader to wonder whether racial justice itself isn't a phony 'universal' from which we ought to withhold our approval."

Frederick C. Crews
"Walker versus Jehlen versus Twain"
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn:
A Case Study in Critical Controversy
(Bedford of St. Martin's 1995) 518-24
eds. Gerald Graff & James Phelan

REBUTTAL TO REBUTTAL

"Frederick Crews concludes his assessment of two recent Feminist considerations of *Huckleberry Finn* by calling for 'empirical accountability in literary study.' For Crews, gender analysis of the novel is viable only when it proceeds empirically rather than 'a prioristically'--that is, only when the critic recognizes that texts have their own independent meanings and purposes and thus restricts herself to such 'literary facts'.... Are not the face of which Crews speaks interpretations, and thereby open to challenge by appeal to different facts?...Though Crews repeatedly invokes the 'literary facts' of the text, he never addresses the question of how we decide which of the virtually infinite number of facts that might be turned up in a text are actually relevant in a given interpretive situation....Let me put this last point more bluntly. One of the

major 'empirical facts' that Crews seems to ignore is the fact that texts very often have effects that are different from the purposes for which they were intended." [This subjective "Reader-Response" theory appeals to Feminists because they cannot read objectively.]

Martha Woodmansee
"A Response to Frederick Crews"
same case study above (1995) 525-27

Michael Hollister (2015)