

## REBUTTALS TO 12 CRITICISMS

*Huckleberry Finn* (1884)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

### “DELIGHTFULLY TERRIBLE”

“Papa read *Huckleberry Finn* to us in manuscript, just before it came out, and then he would leave parts of it with mama to expurgate, while he went off to the study to work, and sometimes Clara and I would be sitting with mama while she was looking the manuscript over, and I remember so well, with what pangs of regret we used to see her turn down the leaves of the pages, which meant that some delightfully terrible part must be scratched out. And I remember one part perticularly [*sic*], which was perfectly fascinating it was so terrible, that Clara and I used to delight in and oh, with what despair we saw mama turn down the leaf on which it was written, we thought the book would be almost ruined without it. But we gradually came to think as mama did.” (Susy Clemens, quoted by Albert Paine, ed. *Mark Twain: A Biography*, 1912).

### “WHY NOT HIDE IN ILLINOIS?”

“The flaws are legion: the downstream journey contradicts any chance to escape (why not hide in Illinois?)...” (William Van O’Connor, “Why *Huckleberry Finn* Is Not the Great American Novel,” *College English* XVII, 1955: 6-10)

#### REBUTTAL

Slave hunters are swarming all over along the Illinois shore with their dogs because Illinois is a free state and that shore is the most likely place to catch runaways. (M.H.)

“William Van O’Connor has totally misread the book.... Jim tells of his original plans for escape [Chapter 8]: he was afraid to flee on foot for fear of being tracked by dogs, and it would have been unwise to steal a skiff to cross over the river because the skiff would have been missed and traced to a likely position on the Illinois shore. He intended to slip ashore some twenty-five miles downstream, by taking hold of a passing raft, but was prevented--luckily for him, as Huck later discovers (in Ch. 11), for Jim would surely have been captured by eager people on the Illinois shore who were on the lookout for a runaway Negro ‘murderer’ of Huck Finn. The only possible goal then was Cairo, far downstream.” (Gilbert M. Rubenstein, “The Moral Structure of *Huckleberry Finn*,” *College English* XVIII, 1956: 72-76)

### “HUCK IS TOO QUICK TO FORGET JIM”

“Near the close of Chapter XVI the raft is run over by an upstream steamboat. In the darkness, after he and Jim have dived into the water, Huck cannot see Jim and his calls go unanswered. Huck then strikes out for shore.... Huck stays with the Grangerfords for many days, perhaps weeks... No thought about Jim enters Huck’s head! It doesn’t occur to him to search for the old Negro.... There is not much indication that Huck is greatly relieved or moved at finding Jim alive.... Perhaps we are to read this passage ironically, as an instance of a boy’s self-centeredness...but it doesn’t explain away Huck’s absence of grief over Jim’s ‘death’ or his failure to search for him if alive, or his general indifference to Jim’s fate.” (O’Connor)

#### REBUTTAL

Huck’s recognition of Jim’s humanity and his feelings for him develop gradually. His behavior in this episode is a measure of his development by this time. Expecting him to feel any more than he does as yet is unrealistic and minimizes his racist conditioning. (M.H.)

“O’Connor...has neglected to say that when they were separated Huck ‘sang out for Jim about a dozen times’... Huck may well have concluded that Jim has been drowned. Anyhow, the moment he sets foot on shore he is stopped in his tracks by the Grangerfords’ dogs, and events thereafter move so rapidly toward a climax that Huck, a virtual prisoner, has no opportunity to look for Jim even if he should think Jim to be alive.... O’Connor tries to give the impression that Twain has forgotten the Huck-Jim relationship too long, but in fact less than two chapters elapse before the two are reunited... Huck is not cold to Jim when they meet. He is shocked, as well he might be!.... Would [Huck’s dozen calls for Jim] have been heard against the ‘booming current’ and the noisy steamboat that ‘started her engines ten seconds after she stopped them’?... Additional calls would certainly have brought upon Jim the dogs which trapped Huck.” (Rubenstein)

#### “INCONSISTENCY”

“The fugitives have apparently forgotten or given up their intention to return north by canoe. This inconsistency is further evidence that Clemens changed his plan for the book during the interval in composition that followed Chapter XVI.” (Leo Marx, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Bobbs-Merrill 1967: 142)

#### REBUTTAL

“One morning about day-break, I found a canoe...here comes a couple of men tearing up the path...” (Chapter XIX) Huck finds a canoe and in the very next sentence, the Duke and the King arrive, causing Huck to fear that the people chasing them are also after him, or Jim. He hears them coming with dogs barking. Goodhearted, he uses the canoe to help the strangers escape. They hide in the trees. Now there is no room for Jim in the canoe, so Huck returns with them to the raft. Jim also pities and wants to help them. The scoundrels take over the raft and Huck and Jim have no chance to go back and use the canoe. (M.H.)

#### “THEMATIC INCOHERENCE”

“Flaws in the novel’s thematic coherence occur chiefly when Mark Twain is not true to Huck’s sensibility or to Huck’s developing character. The latter deficiency is evident in the rescue of Jim masterminded by Tom. The all too easy comic substitution of Tom’s formal and bogus values for the immediate human good runs counter to Huck’s impressive growth...” (Edgar M. Branch, “The Two Providences: Thematic Form in *Huckleberry Finn*,” *College English XI*, 1950: 188-95)

#### REBUTTAL

This criticism incorrectly assumes (1) that Huck is in control of the situation once Tom arrives; (2) that he can be sure Tom would not reverse himself, decide not to become a “nigger stealer” and expose the plan to set Jim free; (3) that Huck’s impressive growth includes the realization that he is right and Tom is wrong. In the historical allegory, Tom represents the romantic racism that maintains the institution of slavery at the time of the story. Hence it would not be true to real life for Huck to prevail. In fact, in the moral allegory, Huck is still in mental bondage to Tom, looking up to him and thinking Tom knows best, even thinking that slavery is proper and that he is going to hell for helping Jim to escape. (M.H.)

#### “THE FINAL EPISODE IS AN EVASION”

“The critics who answered Trilling and Eliot [who defended Twain]...argued that the final episode reduced Huck and Jim to stock characters in a low comedy, that it blurred the significance of the downstream journey, and that, most important, it made a farce of one of the book’s more serious motives: Jim’s yearning for freedom. They charged, in short, that the “Evasion” was just that, a device for masking Clemens’ failure to resolve the complex moral and political issues he had raised.” (Marx, xxxii)

#### REBUTTAL

The book is narrated by Huck and expresses his point of view. Twain conveys his own view indirectly through irony, symbolism, allegory and farce. It is not Twain, but the adolescent racist Tom Sawyer, representing conventional society, who reduces Huck and Jim to “stock characters in a low comedy”--that

is Twain's point: White society is making a farce of "Jim's yearning for freedom." It is Marx and other such critics who fail to recognize the Realism of Twain's allegory. Twain would not be true to real life if he resolved the "complex moral and political issues" he raises, because they were not resolved in the 1840s--nor even after Emancipation--which is one of the allegorical reasons for prolonging the episode and trying our patience. (M.H.)

#### "THE REAL END IS IN CHAPTER XXXI"

"Those who share Hemingway's dissatisfaction with the ending read the book in a rather old-fashioned way, as an advancing narrative that brings, or should bring, the hero to a new state of awareness. For such readers, accordingly, the 'real end' is the moral crisis in Chapter XXXI, when Huck is most fully aware of the truth. They expect the conclusion to bring the significance of the journey into clear focus, and they seek meanings congruent with the actualities of American experience. Their opponents, on the other hand, tend to minimize the importance of the quest for freedom as a controlling theme. They are less concerned with meanings than with those formal elements which provide the coherence and unity necessary to a self-contained work of art." (Marx, xxxii-xxxiii)

#### REBUTTAL

Hemingway's aesthetics required economy. Like virtually all critics, he overlooks the historical allegory that requires Tom to take over at the end of the book. Tom, representing an immature society, illustrates how an otherwise decent young fellow believed in slavery, like otherwise decent adults such as Miss Watson. That point would not be made if the book ended with the scoundrels' theft of Jim. Although it can and has been argued that we could do without some of the material in the last episode, much of it is organic symbolism and some of it--excluding the farce at Jim's expense--is also funny. No doubt Hemingway would still maintain that it would be a stronger book, and more aesthetically satisfactory, if it ended where he thought it should.

The narrative does bring the hero to a "new state of awareness." However, that awareness is not complete. In his heart, Huck becomes fully aware of Jim's humanity, but his head is still conditioned by society. This is more realistic--Huck is only about 14 years old--than if Huck all of a sudden became Mark Twain. That would be Romanticism. The book would also lose its main source of dramatic power: the ironic contrast between what the reader knows and what Huck thinks. This portrayal of Huck is much more "congruent with the actualities of American experience" and also with child psychology than is the romanticism of Leo Marx and other such critics. A realistic reading of the last episode increases the importance of "the quest for freedom as a controlling theme" by showing, with irony and pathos, that both Huck and Jim remain to some extent in mental bondage at the end, thereby dramatizing the power of social conditioning. The reading by Leo Marx minimizes that tragic truth. (M.H.)

#### "TWIN MOCKS THE QUEST FOR FREEDOM"

"...the last fifth of the book (the episode beginning with Huck's arrival at the Phelps place) is a failure of moral theme.... Huck's return to the earlier mood is his defeat, the failure of his journey's meaning.... The meaning of Huck's and Jim's journey is their quest for social freedom, and the mockery of this quest in the last episode destroys unity of meaning." (Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Scholar* XXII, 1953: 423-40)

#### REBUTTAL

It is Leo Marx who mocks the meanings of the book, because he does not see them clearly. Huck does not return to his "earlier mood," he is now clearly far more mature than Tom. Even though he has not yet fully evolved mentally, he has been transformed in his heart, to the extent of choosing to "go to hell" for Jim. Marx misses this moral triumph because he is too literal-minded to recognize irony and allegory. Give the kid a chance, Leo. At the very end, Huck rejects the racist society of Tom and lights out for the Wilderness, the archetypal indication that he is still individuating. Independent as he is and loving Jim as he does, there can be little doubt that he will eventually attain wholeness. (M.H.)

### “THE BOOK IS UNREALISTIC”

“It is expedient to list here the book’s obvious faults... Poetic reality lapses into farce... Huck’s discourse on the domestic manners of royalty is a blemish.... Huck’s confusion when he tries to lie to the hare-lipped girl is perfunctory.... The concluding episodes of the attempted fraud on the Wilks family are weak in their technical devices--the manipulation required to postpone the detection of imposture, for instance, is annoying. Thereafter the narrative runs downhill through a steadily growing incredibility.” (Bernard DeVoto, *Mark Twain’s America*, 1932: 308, 310-20)

“...a melodramatic mixture of reality and unreality... Too often there are bits of action, dialogue, and observation which are not appropriate to [Huck]. There are two sorts of theatricality in the novel, melodrama and claptrap.” (O’Connor)

### REBUTTAL

“Even now I think he should rather be called a romancer, though such a book as *Huckleberry Finn* takes itself out of the order of Romance and places itself with the great things in picaresque fiction. Still, it is more poetic than picturesque, and of a deeper psychology.” (William Dean Howells, *My Mark Twain*)

The criticism “unrealistic” expresses the bias of critics during the 1930s-50s when all fiction had to meet their subjective personal standards as to what they deemed plausible or “convincing.” Realism is relative in the first place. Twain is more than a commonplace Realist, as Huck says at the outset: “There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth.” As a humorist, Twain transcends the limitations of “Realism” with satire, exaggeration, burlesque, parody and farce. And aren’t we glad he did! Try to find a reader who would prefer that *Huckleberry Finn* had been written by Howells or by Henry James. (M.H.)

“Once a certain degree of imaginative intensity has been reached we lose all concern with what is ordinarily called ‘realism.’ The question whether or not something is ‘probable’ or ‘convincing’ becomes mere fiddle-faddle. One no longer needs to be convinced; one simply knows. Huck floated down the river as indubitably as Hamlet saw a ghost or the Greeks hid in a wooden horse.... Even the intellectual, even the sociological, points are made so much the better because Mark Twain scorns the careful ‘realism’ of the problem novelist.” (Joseph Wood Krutch, “Speaking of Books,” *The New York Times Book Review*, 23 May 1954: 2)

### “JIM IS A MINSTREL STEREOTYPE, NOT ADULT”

“Writing at a time when the blackfaced minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim’s dignity and human capacity--and Twain’s complexity--emerge. Yet it is his source in this same tradition which creates that ambivalence between his identification as an adult and parent and his ‘boyish’ naivete, and which by contrast makes Huck, with his street-sparrow sophistication, seem more adult.... Jim’s friendship for Huck comes across as that of a boy for another boy rather than as the friendship of an adult for a junior; thus there is implicit in it not only a violation of the manners sanctioned by society for relations between Negroes and whites, there is a violation of our conception of adult maleness.” (Ralph Ellison, “The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange,” *Partisan Review* XXV, Spring 1958: 215-16)

### REBUTTAL

“The minstrel stereotype...was the only possible starting-point for a white author attempting to deal with Negro character a century ago. How else could young Sam Clemens have known a Negro in the Missouri of the 1840s except as the little white boy on familiar terms with his uncle’s household retainer? The measure of Mark Twain’s human understanding--Mr. Ellison calls it his complexity--is evident when we compare Jim to the famous Negro character in the writings of Mark Twain’s friend, Joel Chandler Harris, remembering that Sam Clemens was in real life to ‘Uncle Dan’I’ as the little boy in Harris’s books is to Uncle Remus....

The Georgia author's Negro fablist never ceases to be the minstrel in blackface. The poetic irony in the Uncle Remus books is one of which Harris was probably unaware: the Negro's human dignity survives the minstrel mask not in Uncle Remus's character but in the satirical stories he tells the white boy. That many of these were thinly veiled avowals of the Negro's pride and dignity and refusal to submit to the unjust yoke of custom would not seem to have occurred to Joel Chandler Harris, whose conscious literary strategy was to palliate Northern antagonism of the South by idealizing antebellum plantation life. But Mark Twain tries to make Jim stride out of his scapegoat minstrel's role to stand before us in the dignity of his manhood. It is true that Mark Twain's triumph here is incomplete: despite the skillful gradation of folk belief and other indications of Jim's emergent stature, what does come through for many readers is, as Mr. Ellison remarks, Jim's boy-to-boy relationship with Huck." (Daniel G. Hoffman, "Black Magic--and White--in *Huckleberry Finn*," *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, Oxford 1961: 317-42)

On this issue, Twain has an authority all his critics lack: He was there. He grew up in a slave state, he knew slaves personally and his family even owned one. "In my school days I had no aversion to slavery. I was not aware that there was anything wrong with it. No one arraigned it in my hearing...the local pulpit taught us that God approved it, that it was a holy thing." (*Mark Twain's Autobiography*, ed. Albert Paine, 1924: 101) Huck's transformation was Twain's.

In addition to the mask a slave like Jim had to wear as a realistic adaptation to a hostile environment, the constant threat of abuse not only to himself but to his family, his lack of formal education and his conditioned dependency might well make him childlike. His innocence is the source of his great appeal. His scene at the end of Chapter XXIII, when he confesses to Huck how he once lost his temper and abused his little daughter 'Lizabeth, when his guilt and grief contrast so extremely with the attitudes of those who have abused him, he reduces all criticisms of his portrayal to quibbles. In over thirty years of teaching the novel, I read that passage aloud to classes over sixty times and never once got through it without choking up. Nothing else I ever read aloud to classes made me cry in public. It always embarrassed me to weep in front of a class and usually took at least thirty seconds before I could make eye contact again with the students. No scene in literature endows a character with more humanity than that one does. None I ever read aloud to students ever moved them more. No book I know has a greater power to transcend race and improve understanding where it counts most--in the heart. See *objective correlative*.

After reading the whole novel, critics should be able to recognize Jim's humanity at least as well as young Huck Finn. They should be able to see that far from being demeaned, Jim is idealized and the most admirable character in the book. That many critics remain stuck in the initial view of Jim through Huck's eyes makes them comparable to Tom Sawyer, who never learns. Such critics display their own prejudice in favor of a different Jim, one more "educated," adult and dignified like themselves, as if the education of Tom improved him instead of making him politically correct--a foolish romantic and a racist besides. Is Jim less human because he like Huck is superstitious and believes that witches rode him all over the state? Do the critics likewise demean the humanity of people today who believe they have seen ghosts, or even of those who believe they have been abducted by space aliens? According to Twain, what counts is character and tolerance. (M.H.)

"JIM IS AN UNCLE TOM"

#### REBUTTAL

This frequent criticism is similar to the preceding one, but focuses specifically on Jim's subordination of himself to whites. As above, such critics do not recognize that (1) we are seeing Jim through the eyes of a goodhearted boy conditioned to see him as subhuman; that (2) Huck's perceptions change on the raft as he gets to know Jim as a person instead of as a stereotype; that (3) on the raft Jim is free to be himself and behaves differently; and that (4) both Huck and Jim are in mental bondage due to their conditioning; therefore their freedom is limited in that sense even in the end when they are physically free. In Chapter XIV, much like Tom Sawyer, Huck talks down to Jim, revealing his ignorance of history while trying to demonstrate his superiority, citing the Widow Douglas as his "best authority." Jim rejects her authority, as he did the authority of Miss Watson, who claims to own him, by running away: "I doan k'yer what de widder say, he [Solomon] warn't no wise man, nuther." With common sense, he even goes on to dispute and ridicule King Solomon, arguing with Huck at length. When Huck asks him what he would think if a

man said to him *Polly-voo-franzy*, Jim assumes it would be an insult and declares, "I wouldn't think nuff'n; I'd take en bust him over de head. Dat is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no nigger to call me dat." If he said that to a white man, he could get hung, shot or sold down the river and might never see his family again. On land, it is common sense for him to restrain himself and play the minstrel stereotype. In the next chapter, after the fog lifts, when he realizes that Huck has played a cruel trick on him, he tells off the white boy and calls him "trash." At the end, back on land, Jim is again a virtual prisoner and, not knowing Miss Watson has set him free, he thinks he must subordinate himself even to the absurdities of Tom Sawyer, or risk exposure and lose his opportunity for freedom and reconciliation with his family. It is easy for critics to think like the slave rebel Nat Turner when their lives and families are not at stake. (M.H.)

#### "THE BOOK SHOULD BE BANNED BECAUSE THE WORD *NIGGER* IS OFFENSIVE"

Black writers as distinguished as Langston Hughes have objected to the book for its use of this word. Later black writers such as David Bradley, an author of realistic fiction, has complained, "We cannot avoid being hurt. Language hurts people, reality hurts people." Even university professors have published articles and books attacking *Huckleberry Finn*, such as *Satire or Evasion?: Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Duke, 1992), by James S. Leonard, Thomas A. Tenney, and Thadius M. Davis. During the 1990s, according to the American Library Association, *Huck* was the 5th most often challenged book in the United States. More recently, John Wallace, a public schools consultant in Chicago, the hometown of President Barack Obama, called *Huck* "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written." (M.H.)

#### REBUTTAL

"It is by the goodness of God that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and the prudence never to practice either of them." (Mark Twain, "Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar," *Following the Equator*, 1897: Vol.1, Chapter 20)

The word is very offensive, depending on the race of the user. So was slavery. The word is evidence of the evil. How can a writer depict the evil of slavery or racism without citing evidence? By the same logic, white writers should not refer to slavery because it is offensive. As a rule, political correctness is anti-American, but in this case it would whitewash our history. To be politically correct when he wrote it, Twain would have had to use the term *Negro*, as did Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison and other black writers, until that term became politically incorrect. To meet today's standard, Twain would have had to use a term unheard of in his day. Consider how the following line would be changed in meaning if back in 1839 Huck had said instead, "He was a mighty good African-American, Jim was." Imagine how ridiculous that term would sound coming from the mouth of Pap Finn and other racists in the book. The first novel by an African-American woman, Harriet Wilson, is entitled *Our Nig* (1859). (M.H.)

#### "TWIN IS A RACIST"

Some of the most angry criticism of *Huck Finn* was published as recently as 1984 in the *Mark Twain Journal*, by Julius Lester, a professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst: "*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a dismal portrait of the white male psyche. Can I really expect white males to recognize that?" Professor Lester condemns all "white American males" because they "persist in clinging to the teat of adolescence long after only blood oozes from the nipples."

Among his criticisms Lester makes the same one made by Victorian ladies in the 19th century, which caused Huck to run away from Miss Watson and the Widow: "In the person of Huck, the novel exalts verbal cleverness, lying, and miseducation." Verbal cleverness—like irony. At the same time, Lester faults Twain for not including "adolescent problems caused by awakening sexuality"—the sort of content that Twain's wife censored from the book. Lester says, "I sympathize with those who want the book banned... While I am opposed to book banning, I know my children's education will be enhanced by not reading *Huckleberry Finn*."

Lester cites only two secondary sources, is unfamiliar with previous analyses of the novel and repeats the debunked complaints that (1) Jim is "childish"; (2) that he "does not immediately seek his freedom" on

the Illinois riverbank among the slave catchers roaming the shore with dogs; and (3) that he drifts past Cairo in the fog and down south after the raft is taken over by the Duke and the King. Lester goes on to allege that the book is unrealistic because (4) “an old white lady would [never] free a black slave suspected of murdering a white child” and protests that (5) “Miss Watson’s will frees Jim but makes no mention of his wife and child.” (6) He even objects that Jim is made a hero (stereotype) when he sacrifices his freedom to help Tom. Since Miss Watson does not own Jim’s wife and child (children) she could not set them free, and since Huck is obviously alive, Jim is no longer suspected of murder. Readers who notice such facts are racists to Professor Lester: “A century of white readers have accepted this as credible, a grim reminder of the abysmal feelings of superiority with which whites are burdened.”

In Lester’s reading, “Twain did not take slavery and therefore black people, seriously.... Slavery was not an emotional reality to be explored extensively with love.” He equates Twain with the villain Tom Sawyer and says, “No matter how charming and appealing Huck is, Twain holds him in contempt.” And yet, remarkably, after heaping all this abuse on Twain, the Professor allows, “If the novel had been written before emancipation, Huck’s dilemma and conflicting feelings over Jim’s escape would have been moving. But in 1884 slavery was legally over.” Lester is apparently unaware that the novel is set in 1839-40, before Emancipation. He “read” the novel without noticing all the evidence--episode after episode--that the story is set during slavery days. Yet he mentions that Miss Watson “set Jim free” in her will. Since it does not matter when it happened to have been written, but only when the action takes place, he must grant that the novel is “moving”--which largely invalidates all his criticisms of the book. As Twain said, “Censorship is telling a man he can’t have steak because a baby can’t chew it.” (M.H.)

#### POLITICAL CORRECTNESS RULES

“Barack Obama is president-elect of the United States, and novels that use the ‘N-word’ repeatedly need to go... Our new President is this very intelligent, highly articulate guy, and the literature we’re foisting on our children typically depicts black men as ignorant, inarticulate, uneducated.... I never want to rationalize *Huck Finn* to an angry African-American mom again as long as I breathe.”

John Foley, English teacher  
Ridgefield High School

Letter to *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (January 2009)

“Into the fray step Twain scholar Alan Gribben and NewSouth books with a one-volume edition of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, scrubbed clean of the offensive word and intended for the academic market. What a travesty. It would, as we say, be delightful to hear Mark Twain on this outrage. It would be nice to have contributions from Juvenal, Jonathan Swift, and Evelyn Waugh as well.”

Notes & Comments  
*The New Criterion*  
(February 2011) 1

Michael Hollister (2015)