

# **The Huck Finn Symposium**

Race Traitor

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# Contents

<b>Editors' note.</b> . . . . .	3
<b>The Law According to Huck</b> . . . . .	4
<b>Huck Finn and the Authority of Conscience</b> . . . . .	7

## Editors' note.

"All modern American literature," wrote Hemingway, "comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." Yes, but what does *Huckleberry Finn* come from? The answer is — the slave narrative.

In the decades before the Civil War, a number of former slaves wrote and published their life stories, often with the help of the abolitionist movement. Many were widely read and did a great deal to arouse northern opinion against slavery. The most famous of the slave narratives at the time (and still the best known) was by Frederick Douglass. Aside from mobilizing opposition to slavery, the narratives also constituted a new literary form. Indeed, one contemporary commentator, Theodore Parker, described the slave narrative as America's unique and original contribution to world literature.

The slave narrative followed a more or less standard form: it began with the horrors of life under slavery, described how the idea of freedom germinated and took shape in the writer's mind, recounted the escape from slavery, and concluded with a statement of the writer's hopes for a new life. *Huckleberry Finn* follows the form, although its main protagonist is not a slave. Huck has run away from Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, his father, and the entire community of St. Petersburg (based on Hannibal, Missouri, where Twain grew up). He meets Jim, a slave of Miss Watson, who has also run off. The two set off together on a raft down the Mississippi, intending to turn north at Cairo, up the Ohio River to freedom.

The climax of the book — and perhaps the most intense moment in all of American literature — takes place in the chapter, "You Can't Pray a Lie," when Huck learns that Jim has been betrayed by two confidence men and is being held as a runaway. Huck's slight exposure to school and church has taught him that the proper course would be to write to Miss Watson, informing her of Jim's whereabouts. He starts to do so, but his mind turns to their trip down the river: "Somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind."

... and then I happened to look around and see that paper. It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell' — and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog.

In a certain sense, the entire project of *Race Traitor* is to examine, from every possible angle, the moment when Huck Finn (and all the modern Huck Finns) decide to break with what Huck calls "sivilization" and take the steps that will lead to Jim's (and their own) freedom.

Last year a literary scholar, analyzing speech patterns, concluded that Twain modeled Huck Finn's speech on that of a 10-year-old black boy he had met at a hotel in New York. (*New York Times*, July 7, 1992.) We cannot judge the validity of her claim; Twain insisted, in the Explanatory

Note, that he was personally familiar with the various dialects used in the book and that he was careful to distinguish among them. When a great writer tells what he is trying to do, it is a good idea to pay attention. But even if it turns out that the scholar is right, in a larger sense the specific model for Huck's speech is beside the point; for who could believe that the language and world view of anybody, black or white, growing up in "St. Petersburg" could fail to be influenced by the presence of slavery and the slave?

Just as America's most beloved literary work has roots in the classic story of the slave's quest for freedom, so will the future of this country depend on the willingness of Americans to identify their quest for self-realization with the destruction of the evil system of white race supremacy, the modern counterpart of slavery.

The following essays were written by students in a class at Harvard. They show that, more than one hundred years after the book was written, the story of Huck and Jim speaks directly to the heart of the modern reader. We refuse to despair for a country that can still cherish such characters.

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## The Law According to Huck

by Joanna Weiss

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a story about breaking the law, but not about breaking all laws. By faking his own death, leaving his hometown, and rafting down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim, Mark Twain's title character proves he isn't afraid to reject a rule or two. Throughout the book, Huck openly defies the authority of church, state, and his elders — and suffers few pangs of guilt about his disobedience. But over the course of his journey, despite his misbehavior, Huck holds fast to one set of guidelines. The rules Huck refuses to break are not voiced by his parents or guardians, not written in the record books or the Bible. They are the laws of the natural world, dictated by superstitions and obeyed through mystic rituals.

Life in a small riverside town is full of rules — government rules that force Huck Finn to go to school and church, cultural rules that force him to sleep in a bed and wear clean clothes, Biblical rules that command him to love his neighbor. The guidelines set by these different institutions often overlap, and always send clear messages. In the Bible readings his guardian frequently prescribes, Huck must hear "Thou shalt not steal" *ad nauseum*. And nineteenth-century Missouri law books contain ample restrictions against theft and robbery. Huck knows that the penalties for transgression range from a night in jail to an eternity in hell. But neither clear-cut prohibitions nor the threat of punishment deters him from taking things that aren't his.

Huck uses his father's wisdom as justification for his robberies of farm fields and markets, for his theft of boats and other large items: "Pap always said, take a chicken when you get a chance, because if you don't want him yourself you can easily find somebody that does, and a good deed ain't never forgot" or "Pap always said it wasn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime." Huck recognizes the flimsiness of Pap's character. He remembers the counter-arguments his Christian guardian offers to Pap's assertions. He nonetheless prefers to follow his father's advice, when it suits him.

“Thou shalt not lie” is another rule Huck frequently ignores. A master of deception, Huck invents believable stories at the drop of a hat and uses clever tricks to cover his frequent slip-ups. When he forgets the fake name he assumed as a guest of the Grangerfords, Huck issues a challenge to young Buck Grangerford: “I bet you can’t spell my name.” Buck’s reply, “G-o-r-g-e J-a-x-o-n,” furnishes him with the information he needs.

Huck needs the food he pilfers; he swipes boats only when his life is in danger. Necessity provides a rationale for most of his lies, as well. Even his most self-indulgent stories wind up serving a valuable purpose. From his trip to St. Petersburg disguised as a girl, he returns to Jackson’s Island with information that ultimately saves Jim’s life.

Huck rarely shows remorse for making up stories, but he feels terrible after he plays a trick on Jim. Huck pretends that a terrible storm, which had separated the two travelers, never took place, and insists that Jim must have dreamed the entire episode. When Jim discovers the truth and expresses disappointment in his young friend, Huck swallows his pride and apologizes:

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger — but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn’t do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn’t done that one if I’d a knowed it would make him feel that way.

By assisting in Jim’s escape, Huck violates strict fugitive slave laws, laws that can result in harsh penalties for whites. By treating Jim as a friend and an equal, Huck shows that he rejects the common interpretation of the Bible, that blacks are inferior to whites. Huck doesn’t come to this conclusion easily. It is difficult for anyone to reject ideas that seem universally held, to abandon notions that are rarely questioned.

Children learn the basic laws of human behavior not through books, but through consistent contact with other people. Huckleberry Finn’s education began with his birth in St. Petersburg, Missouri. St. Petersburg, so far as we know, operates quietly and peacefully under a slaveholding system. But the burden of this system must fall somewhere, and here it falls on identity. Skin color instantly determines the identity of every resident. Before any other judgements can be made, each individual is classified as “white” or “black.” And that simple label determines his or her place in the town’s social structure.

Because Jim is black, his identity is defined chiefly by slavery. Huck first refers to Jim as “Miss Watson’s big nigger.” Miss Watson is Huck’s guardian’s sister; Jim is her property. Throughout his journey, Huck has trouble dismissing that concept. On the raft the two companions share an equal standing. Nonetheless, Huck often reverts to the belief that Jim belongs to somebody. When he wrestles with moral qualms about helping Jim escape, Huck describes his conscience’s haunting message:

What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. *That’s what she done.*

Huck’s conscience is correct; Miss Watson has taught him much of what he knows. While she inculcated some of her lessons through lectures, her behavior sent a far more influential message.

Huck learned about the relationship between blacks and whites every day of his life, through the interactions he saw and experienced. He witnessed poor treatment of blacks at the hands of many of the people he was taught to admire. At night, he recalls, Miss Watson “fetched the niggers in.” His language reveals the thirteen-year-old’s view of the master-slave relationship; to Miss Watson, Huck observed, blacks were animals or objects. Even Pap, an unsavory character but the only parent Huck ever knew, railed extensively on the freedoms that blacks had obtained up north:

“There was a free nigger there, from Ohio ... they said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could vote, when he was at home... I says I’ll never vote again.”

Every encounter he witnessed between Jim and Miss Watson, every tirade on “niggers” he heard from Pap, reinforced Huck’s notion that Jim was his inferior. Huck certainly saw other sides of Jim — he watched the black man’s interactions with his fellow slaves, and recognized his skill with the spiritual realm. But in the world Huck knew best, the world of St. Petersburg, nearly everyone behaved according to traditional guidelines. And for Huck, these rules, far more than the Biblical quotes and the fugitive slave law he knew about in the abstract, helped to codify the “*law*” that blacks were slaves.

It is much easier for Huck to break this law once he leaves the society that taught and enforced it. On a raft in the river, as Huck distances himself more and more from St. Petersburg, he begins to separate himself from all of the rules that governed the first thirteen years of his life. But the separation is not easy, and he finds himself torn between allegiance to his new friend and allegiance to the rules he recently escaped.

Jim, with an unflagging idealism and an astute sense of logic, dismisses the laws Huck can’t easily forget. Jim rejects the notion that superficial differences should cause men to act differently. Trying to explain why the French don’t speak like Americans, Huck insists that because cats and cows don’t speak English, there is no reason a Frenchman should. But Jim immediately recognizes the fallacy in Huck’s argument.

“Is a cat a man, Huck?”

“No.”

“Well, den, dey ain’t no sense in a cat talkin’ like a man. Is a cow a man? — er is a cow a cat?”

“No, she ain’t neither of them.”

“Well, den, she ain’ got no business to talk like either one er the yuther of ‘em. Is a Frenchman a man?”

“Yes. ”

“*Well, den!* Dad blame it, why doan’ he *talk* like a man? You answer me *dat!*”

Huck is frustrated by this exchange, but Jim’s logic here is simple and perfect. He demonstrates his belief that a human is a human, and needs no artificial source of separation from others like him. French or American, Kentuckian or Missourian, black or white, all humans are part of the same species. Just as all cats share the same language regardless of their color or size, Jim insists,

humans should share the same language — and by extension the same rights — regardless of nationality or race. Huck slowly grows to understand this view.

Huck breaks many rules over the course of his passage down the Mississippi. But throughout his journey, he constantly and steadfastly adheres to one value system — a set of codes mandated neither by the Bible nor by the law books. Nature dictates to Huck an elaborate set of customs, whose intricacies he takes great pains to learn and whose advice he takes great pains to follow.

Through his travels with Jim, Huck discovers an extensive list of guidelines, ranging from the proper time to fold a tablecloth to the best way to dispose of a dead man's bee hive. Jim also introduces Huck to an inventory of signs and signals. Some dictate the day's weather. Others predict the future: Jim says he knows he will someday be wealthy because he has hairy arms and a hairy chest. Many announce impending bad luck. ("What you want to know when good luck's a comin' for? want to keep it off?" Jim asks.) Regardless of their origins, Huck associates these rules and omens with Jim's wisdom, and with nature's preeminence. He finds that nearly all of the mystic prophecies hold.

When he breaks one of these "laws," Huck notes, he faces near-immediate retribution. Jim scolds his young friend for inviting bad luck by touching a snake skin. Huck is doubtful, but regrets his actions several days later, when a rattlesnake bites Jim. The boy is certain the two events are connected.

Superstitions played an important role in nineteenth-century slave culture. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass writes about his experience as a slave in Maryland. He recalls one encounter in the woods with another slave, Sandy Jenkins. Seeing that Douglass is distraught, Sandy tell his friend the secret of "a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me."

Although he is skeptical at first, Douglass soon grows to believe Sandy's story. He gains confidence from the root's supposed powers — so much confidence that he defies Mr. Covey, an oppressive slave driver. Like Huck and Jim, Douglass challenges the rules that govern his world. Later in his life, Douglass escaped from slavery.

Huckleberry Finn challenges rules right and left. He turns Bible lessons topsy-turvy and makes a mockery of the legal system. And after a long inner struggle, he finally rejects slavery, the fundamental precept that shapes his former society. Although he is unwilling to touch a snake and cringes at the thought of burning a spider, Huck Finn chooses to renounce much of what he has learned from "sivilization" in St. Petersburg, Missouri. By leading Huck on this course, Mark Twain suggests that the laws of the rattlesnake, the spider, and the cosmos have a power and a permanence that human laws lack.

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## Huck Finn and the Authority of Conscience

by Megan Fritschel

Whether he was an impertinent humorist, a renegade boy adventurer, or a nameless genteel voice in his numerous short stories, Samuel Clemens fought an inner struggle for identity.

Clemens was a nineteenth-century upright journalist and man of letters who was freed of societal constraints by his pseudonym, Mark Twain. It was as if he stepped out of his body of proper manners and society dinners and obtained a license for bawdiness and vernacular humor by stepping into Twain's shoes and taking up his pen. As Justin Kaplan describes, "in February of 1863, when for the first time he signed 'Mark Twain' to a travel letter for the Virginia City *Territorial Enterprise*", [he] thereby committed himself to the identity and obligations of a humorist." This urge to adopt another identity, to reject society (to a certain extent) and revert to a more natural state is acted upon by both Twain and his classic creation, Huckleberry Finn. From the start of the "mostly true book," Huck "lits out" of the Mississippi Valley after various attempts by the Widow Douglas to "sivilize" him. Huck feels more comfortable in his rags, sleeping in the woods, than crammed into the suffocating stiff shirts of society. Going naked is even better. This physical struggle between civilization and a more barbaric state is a manifestation, a continuance on a tangible level, of Huck's inner battle, that of his heart and his conscience.

Much has been made of the dichotomy of The River and The Shore, the one a grand representation of spiritual freedom and the other a symbol of bondage. Henry Nash Smith sees these two physical elements as primarily antagonistic in their relationship:

Huck is drawn ashore repeatedly, and repeatedly returns to the raft, but this apparent movement is merely an oscillation between two modes of experience, and the episodes are restatements, with variations, of the same theme: the raft versus the town, the River versus the Shore.

But is this relationship quite so antagonistic? It would seem that the Shore is indeed a representative of social tyranny and the raft a symbol of egalitarianism. Huck and Jim, as they escape from The Shore and embark upon the raft traveling down river, become good friends, equal in their respect and love for one another, equal in their desire to "light out" and equal in social status. On The Shore, "Admission [is] 25 cents; children and servants, 10 cents." On The River, water becomes a leveling force: the differences between black and white fade and become confused in the equalizing fog which settles down upon the waves. But does the raft truly put Huck and Jim upon equal ground (as it were)? The sleeping arrangements in the wigwam betray a certain hierarchy:

My bed was a straw tick — better than Jim's, which was cornshuck; there's always cobs around in a shuck tick, and they poke into you and hurt.

Huck never explains this curious difference, and whether it is intentional remains unknown. And just as Huck and Tom "slipped Jim's hat off of his head and hung it on a limb right over him" on The Shore, Huck tricks Jim upon the raft: "... I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foots I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' bout wuz how you could make a fool uv old Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash..." As in the dark of the night on the Shore, as in the blinding fog upon the River, Huck takes advantage of Jim, treating him as more of an exasperating gullible child than a friend. Although one person is just himself, two people do constitute a certain kind of society where struggles for interpersonal power will commence, and it is upon the raft that monarchy later invades, with the entrance of the King and the Duke. The child and the black man once again become slaves to an aristocracy, a fraud though it is, and the superficiality of social rank

swallows both Huck and Jim: “So Jim and me set to majestyng him, and doing this and that and t’other for him, and standing up till he told us we might set down.”

Huck cannot seem to rid himself of the Shore; he returns to it again and again, and his trip with Jim upon the raft is not one of “freedom, security, happiness, and harmony,” but one intruded upon by society – not necessarily the physical society of houses and schools but the “vulgarity and malice and fraud and greed and violence” which are both the source and the product of the social consciousness. For it is also upon the raft that we first glimpse flashes of Huck’s internal struggle with the question of freedom and slavery. His heart belongs to the River, is wild and rebellious and full of intense feeling, while his conscience is corrupt with the oppressive force of moral codes:

I was letting on to give up sin, but away inside of me I was holding on to the biggest one of all. I was trying to make my mouth *say* I would do the right thing and clean thing, and go and write to that nigger’s owner and tell where he was; but deep down in me I knowed it was a lie.

Huck must force himself to verbalize his motivations only when conversing with others. He can barely choke out the words authority would like to hear, while his silent debates with himself involve feelings and knowledge, not mere words, and take on a kind of eloquence in their presentation. In their content, to our Twentieth Century ears, these conversations Huck has with his “deep down inside” have an air of irony. Or rather, a strong, wild gust of it. Huck’s problem is that he has not been thoroughly “sivilized.” He has learned, from school, from church, from the Widow Douglas, that slavery is a “right thing and a clean thing.” Within the realm of his conscience, Jim his friend becomes “that nigger,” But Huck’s rebellious heart stops short and cocks an eyebrow, suspicious of his “learning”: “... what’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck.” He is indeed stuck. His situation is that of the raft tied to the dock yet pulled by the current; he is in between worlds and in between urges. When Tom Sawyer agrees to help Jim out of slavery, Huck is confused at this decision, one that he has already made himself:

... yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I *couldn’t* understand it, no way at all.

Even as this dilemma of feeling and action and moral rightness is externalized for Huck to observe, he still does not comprehend the nature of the struggle. His corrupt conscience, the result of moral and religious education, comes to represent the society he cannot fully escape.

Huck recognizes the fallacy of his religious education, not in an ideological analysis, but in a rational assessment: “there ain’t nothing in it” because “if a body can get anything they pray for, why don’t Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork?” Although he does fly to the woods and reason this problem out of his mind, he finds no answers, and so returns to society and accepts Miss Watson’s authority:

I went out in the wood and turned it over in my mind a long time, but I couldn’t see no adventure about it ... So at last I reckoned I wouldn’t worry about it any more, but just let it go.

Even as Huck makes his big decision to help Jim to freedom, his resolute “All right then, I’ll go to hell” still rings of religious retribution in the afterlife; he has decided for his heart, but this seeming triumph holds a steadfast belief in his decision’s moral degeneracy. It is in this reverence for authority that Huck creates an internal enemy and blocks for himself the path of his heart. Tom Sawyer is another embodiment of this authority, and Huck’s willing subservience, his relief at getting the responsibility for his actions off of his own hands, almost gets them both killed and Jim sent back into slavery:

... I knowed mighty well that whenever he got *his* plan ready, it wouldn’t have none of them objections to it.

And it didn’t. He told me what it was, and I see in a minute it was worth fifteen of mine, for style, and would make Jim just as free a man as mine would, and maybe get us all killed besides.

Huck rejects his own autonomy at this point, yielding to the power of authoritative society rather than his own rationality, and this urge proves the most dangerous one of all. Huck’s true autonomy results in his loneliness, a feeling that is intensely disagreeable to him, and although he has a stroke of luck in finding Jim on the island, he hastily creates his own society upon the raft. He embraces religion and societal authority because they externalize his actions and his guilty responses, and relieve him of the responsibility of being alone.

Twain’s German contemporary, Friedrich Nietzsche, defined conscience as “the proud awareness of the extraordinary privilege of *responsibility*, the consciousness of this rare freedom, this power over oneself and over fate... [which has] penetrated to the profoundest depths and become instinct, the dominating instinct.” Huck has given up this responsibility to those he recognizes as authority figures: religion, Southern attitudes, and Tom Sawyer’s imagination. His power over himself has ceased to become instinct and it is because of this adoration for societal clout that his corrupt conscience battles so unceasingly with his deepest instinct of true moral good. It is doubtful that Huck could have ever truly escaped “sivilization,” and it is more doubtful that he would have even wanted to.

It seems to us, thumbing through the well-worn pages of a paperback *Huckleberry Finn*, that Huck’s dilemma is ironic and almost humorous. But even in the post-Civil War era of the 1880s, when Mark Twain scratched out his “story for boys,” Southern society was teaching its children to revere the right to property and to read the Bible. Slavery, though made illegal in the aftermath of the Civil War, was still an institution in the Southern mind, and its peculiarity could only be seen and wondered at, Huck Finn’s physical surroundings symbolize the great unvoiced struggle within him; he wavers in between The River of supposed spiritual freedom and The Shore of repressive civilization, and compromises by tugging the land up onto the raft. These two worlds are no longer antagonistic “modes of experience,” but are mingled together within Huck’s sensibilities, fuzzed at the edges. His good heart strives to save Jim while his reverence for all he has been taught almost destroys his only true friend. In subverting the societal concept of morality, Huck finds happiness but also the overarching guilt stemming from that moral sense that has become, within him, spiritually transcendent. He becomes a slave, subservient to the corrupt conscience of the Nineteenth-Century American South. As he grapples with internal and external influences, we are never really sure of his true identity — Huck Finn, Sarah Williams,

George Peters, Tom Sawyer — and we have the sneaking suspicion that that is just the way Mark Twain — Samuel Clemens — would have wanted it.

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