

and nature are not enough. With this admission, one of the high hopes of *Huckleberry Finn* goes down to defeat, drowned at the river's edge. As Huck says after the King sells Jim, the journey really *has* come to nothing. Everything, indeed, is "all busted up and ruined."

An Enduring, Impossible Dream

However, to end here would be another form of cheating. There is another dimension to the novel that transcends defeat. If the end of *Huckleberry Finn* suggests the way things are, the river portion of the novel provokes our sense of the way things ought to be. . . .

What the raft and the river come to mean is a marvelous condition of unreality—a shucking of our bondage to men, time, and codes of morality in exchange for a kind of freedom and companionship that can never be reached on shore. Long after Tom Sawyer's evasion has blurred into the background of our memory, the image of a black man and a white boy on a raft remains—a fantasy of brotherhood as appealing as it was perishable.

In Defense of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Toni Morrison

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In the following excerpt, consisting of about half of the original introduction, Toni Morrison expresses her own unease after multiple encounters with Twain's novel, beginning with independent childhood readings, followed by a reading in junior high school, and several readings as an adult. She came to see that Huck's internalized misery and fear were somehow assuaged by the presence of Jim. Even though the story closes with Jim as a minstrel figure, there are "undertows," she contends, one of which is the similarity between the ante- and postbellum South. The black man becomes the white boy's surrogate father—his "father for free"—as Morrison puts it. The three problems that the novel ends with are Huck Finn's outcast situation even at the end; the sadness in his and Jim's relationship; and Huck's engagement with racism during the evasion. The question remains: will Huck actually escape the evils of civilization by going West?

Fear and alarm are what I remember most about my first encounter with Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Palpable alarm. . . . My second reading of it, under the supervision of an English teacher in junior high school, was no less uncomfortable—rather more. It provoked a feeling I

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can only describe now as muffled rage, as though appreciation of the work required my complicity in and sanction of something shaming. . . .

In the early eighties I read *Huckleberry Finn* again, provoked, I believe, by demands to remove the novel from the libraries and required reading lists of public schools. These efforts were based, it seemed to me, on a narrow notion of how to handle the offense Mark Twain's use of the term "nigger" would occasion for black students and the corrosive effect it would have on white ones. It struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution. A serious comprehensive discussion of the term by an intelligent teacher certainly would have benefited my eighth-grade class and would have spared all of us (a few blacks, many whites—mostly second-generation immigrant children) some grief. . . .

Although its language—sardonic, photographic, persuasively aural—and the structural use of the river as control and chaos seem to me quite the major feats of *Huckleberry Finn*, much of the novel's genius lies in its quiescence, the silences that pervade it and give it a porous quality that is by turns brooding and soothing. . . . A plaintive note of melancholy and dread surfaces immediately in the first chapter, after Huck sums up the narrative of his life in a prior book. . . .

Although Huck complains bitterly of rules and regulations, I see him to be running not from external control but from external chaos. Nothing in society makes sense; all is in peril. Upper-class, churchgoing, elegantly housed families annihilate themselves in a psychotic feud, and Huck has to drag two of their corpses from the water—one of whom is a just-made friend, the boy Buck; he sees the public slaughter of a drunk; he hears the vicious plans of murderers on a wrecked steamboat; he spends a large portion of the book in the company of "[Pap's] kind of people"—the fraudulent, thieving

Duke and King who wield brutal power over him, just as his father did. No wonder that when he is alone, whether safe in the Widow's house or hiding from his father, he is so very frightened and frequently suicidal.

If the emotional environment into which Twain places his protagonist is dangerous, then the leading question the novel poses for me is, What does Huck need to live without terror, melancholy and suicidal thoughts? The answer, of course, is Jim. When Huck is among society—whether respectable or deviant, rich or poor—he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its scariness. Yet he is depressed by himself and sees nature more often as fearful. But when he and Jim become the only "we," the anxiety is outside, not within. ". . . we would watch the lonesomeness of the river . . . for about an hour . . . just solid lonesomeness". Unmanageable terror gives way to a pastoral, idyllic, intimate timelessness minus the hierarchy of age, status or adult control. It has never seemed to me that, in contrast to the entrapment and menace of the shore, the river itself provides this solace. The consolation, the healing properties Huck longs for, is made possible by Jim's active, highly vocal affection. It is in Jim's company that the dread of contemplated nature disappears, that even storms are beautiful and sublime, that real talk—comic, pointed, sad—takes place. Talk so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel.

Pleasant as this relationship is, suffused as it is by a lightness they both enjoy and a burden of responsibility both assume, it cannot continue. Knowing the relationship is discontinuous, doomed to separation, is (or used to be) typical of the experience of white/black childhood friendships (mine included), and the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute. Every reader knows that Jim will be dismissed without explanation at some point; that no enduring adult fraternity will emerge. Anticipating this loss may



Scene from the 1960 film version of the novel. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free. MGM/The Kobal Collection.

have led Twain to the over-the-top minstrelization of Jim. Predictable and common as the gross stereotyping of blacks was in nineteenth-century literature, here, nevertheless, Jim's portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring in its contradictions—like an ill-made clown suit that cannot hide the man within. Twain's black characters were most certainly based on real people. His nonfiction observations of and comments on "actual" blacks are full of references to their guilelessness, intelligence, creativity, wit, caring, etc. None is portrayed as relentlessly idiotic. Yet Jim is unlike, in many ways, the real people he must have been based on. There may be more than one reason for this extravagance. In addition to accommodating a racist readership, writing Jim so complete a buffoon solves the problem of "missing" him that would have been unacceptable at the novel's end, and helps to solve another problem: how effectively to bury the father figure underneath the

minstrel paint. The foregone temporariness of the friendship urges the degradation of Jim (to divert Huck's and our inadvertent sorrow at the close), and minstrelizing him necessitates and exposes an enforced silence on the subject of white fatherhood.

The withholdings at critical moments, which I once took to be deliberate evasions, stumbles even, or a writer's impatience with his or her material, I began to see as otherwise: as entrances, crevices, gaps, seductive invitations flashing the possibility of meaning. Unarticulated eddies that encourage diving into the novel's undertow—the real place where writer captures reader. An excellent example of what is available in this undertow is the way Twain comments on the relationship between the antebellum period in which the narrative takes place and the later period in which the novel was composed. The 1880s saw the collapse of civil rights for blacks as well as the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*. This collapse was an effort to bury the combustible issues Twain raised in his novel. The nation, as well as Tom Sawyer, was deferring Jim's freedom in agonizing play. The cyclical attempts to remove the novel from classrooms extend Jim's captivity on into each generation of readers. . . .

As an abused and homeless child running from a feral male parent, Huck cannot dwell on Jim's confession and regret about parental negligence without precipitating a crisis from which neither he nor the text could recover. Huck's desire for a father who is adviser and trustworthy companion is universal, but he also needs something more: a father whom, unlike his own, he can control. No white man can serve all three functions. If the runaway Huck discovered on the island had been a white convict with protective paternal instincts, none of this would work, for there could be no guarantee of control and no games-playing nonsense concerning his release at the end. Only a black male slave can deliver all Huck desires. Because Jim can be controlled, it becomes possible for

Huck to feel responsible for and to him—but without the onerous burden of lifelong debt that a real father figure would demand. For Huck, Jim is a father-for-free. This delicate, covert and fractious problematic is thus hidden and exposed by litotes and speechlessness, both of which are dramatic ways of begging attention. . . .

As a reader I am relieved to know Pap is no longer a menace to his son's well-being, but Huck does not share my relief. Again the father business is erased. What after all could Huck say? That he is as glad as I am? That would not do. Huck's decency prevents him from taking pleasure in anybody's death. That he is sorry? Wishes his father were alive? Hardly. The whole premise of escape while fearing and feigning death would collapse, and the contradiction would be unacceptable. Instead the crevice widens and beckons reflection on what this long-withheld information means. Any comment at this juncture, positive or negative, would lay bare the white father/white son animosity and harm the prevailing though illicit black father/white son bonding that has already taken place. . . .

Earlier I posed the question, What does Huck need to live without despair and thoughts of suicide? My answer was, Jim. There is another question the novel poses for me: What would it take for Huck to live happily without Jim? That is the problem that gnarls the dissolution of their relationship. The freeing of Jim is withheld, fructified, top-heavy with pain, because without Jim there is no more book, no more story to tell. . . .

The source of my unease reading this amazing, troubling book now seems clear: an imperfect coming to terms with three matters Twain addresses—Huck Finn's estrangement, soleness and morbidity as an outcast child; the disproportionate sadness at the center of Jim's and his relationship; and the secrecy in which Huck's engagement with (rather than escape from) a racist society is necessarily conducted. It is also clear that the rewards of my effort to come to terms have been

abundant. My alarm, aroused by Twain's precise rendering of childhood's fear of death and abandonment, remains—as it should. It has been extremely worthwhile slogging through Jim's shame and humiliation to recognize the sadness, the tragic implications at the center of his relationship with Huck. My fury at the maze of deceit, the risk of personal harm that a white child is forced to negotiate in a race-inflected society, is dissipated by the exquisite uses to which Twain puts that maze, that risk.

Yet the larger question, the danger that sifts from the novel's last page, is whether Huck, minus Jim, will be able to stay those three monsters as he enters the "territory." Will that undefined space, so falsely imagined as "open," be free of social chaos, personal morbidity, and further moral complications embedded in adulthood and citizenship? Will it be free not only of nightmare fathers but of dream fathers too? . . .

For a hundred years, the argument that this novel *is* has been identified, reidentified, examined, waged and advanced. What it cannot be is dismissed. It is classic literature, which is to say it heaves, manifests and lasts.