
Responding to Toni Morrison's call for an examination of the African-American presence in mainstream American literature, Shelley Fisher Fishkin's study of Mark Twain's Adventures of Huckleberry Finn wants to provide a case study of "how African-American voices have shaped our sense of what is distinctly 'American' about American literature" (9). Fishkin's point of departure is a valid one. In the vast literature on the various literary models and cultural influences that shaped Huck Finn, the role of the African-American oral tradition has been constantly ignored or obscured. Through nine chapters, Fishkin traces this influence with an impressive wealth of detailed research. Her starting point is an interesting "find," a long neglected sketch by Twain, called "Sociable Jimmy." This sketch was known and already reprinted twice before but never appreciated in its possible importance for understanding Twain's version of the vernacular. "Sociable Jimmy" was published in the New York Times two years before Twain began working on Huckleberry Finn, and is, as Fishkin claims, Twain's first attempt to tell a story from the perspective of a child. What distinguishes Fishkin's search for African-American influences on Huck Finn from other approaches, then, is to look for traces of this influence not in Jim but in Huck, and, by implication, in the style of the novel which is, after all, the main source of its strong aesthetic impact.

Fishkin's claim that "Sociable Jimmy" served as a "model for the voice with which Twain would change the shape of American literature" (15) is supported by a careful linguistic comparison between the main characteristics of Huck's vernacular and Jimmy's speech that reveals striking similarities between the two and that I find, on the whole, quite convincing. As Fishkin herself makes clear, this does not necessarily mean that Twain was wrong or lying when he later referred to a poor white boy from his native Hannibal, Tom Blankenship, as the main model for Huck. However, in fleshing out this character in fiction and providing him with an original voice, the notorously eclectic Twain obviously drew on other sources as well. (In "A True Story," for example, he used another real-life African-American character for a highly praised performance "in the vernacular"). That African-American speech played an important role in shaping Twain's particular version of the vernacular, gains additional plausibility when one considers that the Southern vernacular which Twain picked up during his childhood was in itself already a language heavily influenced by African-American speech patterns.

Huck Finn, then, would seem to be shaped by elements of African-American culture to a much larger extent than formerly acknowledged. As Fishkin rightly observes, "in the thousands of books and articles written on Huckleberry Finn...the role of African-American oral traditions in shaping Twain's achievement gets virtually no attention" (133). In an excellent analysis of Huck's style published in 1985, Janet Holmgreen McKay, for example, quite convincingly portrays Jim, paradigmatically. Even this problem, still claims that "Twain drew on two sources for vernacular models. His primary inspiration was the oral tradition of the frontier....In addition, he frequently praised the naive qualities in young people's writing. He saw the fresh perceptivity of children mirrored in their composition." After Fishkin's book, one will have to add another, perhaps even more important, one that Huck black, then, as the title of Fishkin's book suggests, if only with a question mark?

Fishkin herself seems to waver on what conclusions can be drawn from her evidence. Clearly, it is out of "the study of African-American influences on Huck Finn from other approaches, then, is to look for traces of this influence not in Jim but in Huck, and, by implication, in the style of the novel which is, after all, the main source of its strong aesthetic impact."

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this very attempt. At the end, in spite of her best efforts to exculpate Twain on matters of race, and after quoting Booker T. Washington's praise of Twain, Fishkin thus has to admit that another troping fact remains: "Despite Wash­ington's encomiums, however, a troubling fact remains: reading Huckleberry Finn in an Amer­ican secondary-school classroom can be an enormously painful experience for a black stu­dent. Twain's sympathy for Jim may have been genuine, but Jim's voice retains enough of mis­tract in it to be demeaning and depersonizing" (106). In a way, Fishkin has offered a solution by insisting on Huck's blackness: "Given our awareness of Jim's inauthenticity, we can stretch Huck's blackness beyond that of a free black man. Jim's voice was black, black students who find them­selves identifying with Huck may feel somewhat less ambivalence. After all, they are not identi­fying 'against' their race; rather, they are choosing which of two black voices in the book they find more appealing" (107). Why is the more sympathetic black white, then? Somewhat dis­concertedly, Fishkin has to admit at the end that "Jim is the Negro in the book who sounds black, looks black, and is black, is still there . . ." (107). Only one solution remains: "The only way to counter the demeaning ex­perience of encountering Jim's voice is by add­ing others, by exposing students to the elo­quence of Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Du­Bois, to the 'signifying' wit of Charles W. Ches­nut and Paul Laurence Dunbar, to folktales and folk songs, to the rhetorical power of Sojourner Truth, to the lucid anger of Ida B. Wells" (107). What started out as an impressive piece of scholarship, ends up as a failed political lobbying effort. If one were to follow Fishkin in defending Twain against the charge of raci­sm, one would have to proceed by a three-line strategy of defense: first, to claim that Huck is the actual black of the novel; second, if this claim is not fully accepted, to point out that Jim is not as bad as he looks, because even his most sympathetic opponents, African­American culture; and, third, if this claim is not accepted either, to admit defeat and to switch over to politically more acceptable texts.

Why is it so difficult to admit the obvious? Like almost any other writer of the American of the nineteenth century, including many of the Aboli­tionists, Twain held deeply ingrained convictions of racial superiority and was, in this sense, racist. Some of his comments on Native Americans are another, a more engaging (and quite often admirably enraged) democrat who fought against bigotry and racism where he conceived them as such. His anti-impe­rialist record and his democratic credentials are impressive. Twain's relations with African­Americans were often characterized by traces of paternalism, yet they are also case studies of an unerring anti-segregationist attitude. Obvi­ously, such views and attitudes can coexist. In fact, such a "plural identity," as one may claim with good reason, is by no means the exception but the rule, of the way in which individuals are able to negotiate these often contradictory at­titudes and ways of making sense of the world is in itself an interesting manifestation of the possi­bilities and limitations of a particular culture and period. Ultimately, the question of the charge of "racism" in a case like Twain's is whether one is interested in understanding these historical conditions and limitations or whether one is only interested in an act of ideological clas­sification for the sake of one's own contempo­rary agenda.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn reflects Twain's contradictory attitudes towards race. In his characterization of Jim, especially in the be­ginning and end of the novel, Twain employs minstrel stereotypes in a casual, "unreflected" way. At the same time, in creating a dehier­archical fraternity of black and white on the raft, and in Huck's decision to invert ingrained cultural conventions, Twain provides one of the most impres­sive and daring treatments of interracial contact and solidarity in the nineteenth century. Again, a conventional racial symbolism and the sub­version of racist assumptions coexist. In con­trast, there is a tendency in the term racism as a concept of cultural analysis to become an either-or category, providing a new, updated version of the old us / them dichotomy. The consequences for literary interpretation are in­teresting. One of the most striking of these con­sequences is the necessity to homogenize the text in ideological and textual terms. Discus­sions of the heterogeneous textuality of Huckleberry Finn, which defines all attempts to attribute a sin­gle meaning or political position to the book, are therefore consistently ignored by Fishkin. The thought that, as a literary character, Jim may have changing functions in the book, depend­ent on the changing genre contexts with which the novel experiments, never seems to have occurred to her. The portrait of Jim is treated as representation of a political position; as such, he must be made coherent in order to determine whether, to what extent, his char­acterization is racist or not.

With her book, Fishkin does not only want to add to ongoing research on Huckleberry Finn and enrich our understanding of the book. Her main purpose is to make it a contribution to the ongoing controversy about whether Huckleberry Finn is racist and whether it should be removed from school curricula. This recent debate was started by several decisions of American school boards which were denounced as censorship by the lib­eral press. In this debate, as it is, for example, documented in the critical anthology Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn, there seems to be one point of agreement. 2 Not even those in favor of a removal question Twain's good intentions and deny that he em­ployed a subtle rhetorical strategy of deadpan inver­sion in Huckleberry Finn, which was a major achievement in American literary history. What is questioned is whether a 12-year-old reader can be sophisticated enough to realize this rhe­torical strategy. What many of these critics rec­ommend, therefore, is to have the book read only under guidance of a teacher who can pro­vide historical information which would show that Twain, despite ingrained notions of racial superi­ority, was still one of the more enlight­ened Gilded Agers on this issue. For such a teacher, Fishkin would provide useful help in the area of historical information. But I think that this teacher would also have to equip the young reader with enough knowledge about the technique and working principles of fiction, so that he or she will be able to grasp the purpose of the novel's rhetorical strategies.

In this second respect, Fishkin's book is not helpful at all. One consequence of her type of political criticism is a naive interpretative lit­erality. There is never a consideration of literar­y effects that are not produced by direct iden­tification or a literal reading of fiction. There is no acknowledgment of a rhetorical game on Twain's part, who, in a calculated gamble, tries to invert ingrained cultural conventions by deadpan, hyperbole, and a continuous series of humorous confrontations. Fishkin implies, in other words, a certain type of reader—and, inevi­tably, also a certain theory of literary effect. Such implications, however, also function as acts of cultural construction. In its reading of literature, the New Criticism, for example, im­plied a highly sophisticated reader, the student as Wayne Booth, so to speak. The implied