

Finding Jim Behind the Mask:
The Revelation of African American Humanity
in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

by Leslie Gregory

Lauded by literary critics, writers and the general reading public, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* commands one of the highest positions in the canon of American literature. On an international level, it is "a fixture among the classics of world literature" (Kaplan 352). It "is a staple from junior high . . . to graduate school" and "is second only to Shakespeare in the frequency with which it appears in the classroom . . ." (Carey-Webb 22). During the push for school desegregation in the 1950s, however, many parents raised serious objections to the teaching of this text. These objections centered around Twain's negative characterization of Jim and his extensive use of the term "nigger" throughout the text. Many people felt this characterization, along with the most powerful racial epithet in the English language, were insensitive to African American heritage and personally offensive in racially mixed classrooms.

Twain's stereotypical depiction of Jim originates from traditions of his time: "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 . . ." (Ellison 421-22). Minstrel shows, first appearing in the 1840s, were theatrical productions typically performed by white actors who blackened their faces with greasepaint and wore white gloves "to render comic burlesques of African American speech and manners" (Carey-Webb 24). The function of the minstrel mask, the "black-faced figure of white fun," was "to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask" (Ellison 421).

Twain completed *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, at a time when black identity in American society was undefined. Even though blacks had been granted citizenship in 1870 by the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, Southern white society still looked upon them as sub-human creatures without souls or feelings. Post-Civil War Federal Reconstruction programs had failed miserably in their goal to re-unite a divided nation and to give economic and legal assistance to blacks struggling to find their place in white mainstream society. Instead of improving the status of blacks and establishing in practice those rights to which they were constitutionally entitled, the programs only succeeded in proliferating the alienation of an

already demoralized white South and escalating racial tensions. The subsequent passage of Jim Crow Laws fortified the existing chasm between whites and blacks by legalizing segregation and institutionalizing the disenfranchisement of blacks from American society. W. E. B. DuBois frames a tragic but accurate picture of black status during this time in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all: walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of the night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above" (45).

Within the context of this historical period, Twain penned Jim, stereotyping him in the "minstrel tradition," with Negro slave dialect and a mind imbued with superstition (Ellison 422). In defense of Twain's characterization of Jim, however, Daniel Hoffman writes, "The minstrel stereotype ... was the only possible starting-point for a [Southern-born] white author attempting to deal with Negro character a century ago" (435). Although Twain may have used a negative stereotype in his creation of Jim, throughout the novel he provides his audience with a clear view of Jim's humanity behind the minstrel mask. This contradiction reflects the confused view that many held of African Americans in Twain's time, which considered blacks as subhuman with no feelings and emotions even while this view began to be challenged. ^

In order to subvert Muck's misconception of "nigger" Jim, Twain first exposes Jim's humanity when the two are separated from each other on the river during a dense fog. Huck, alone in a canoe, searches for Jim, who is alone on the raft. When Huck finally catches up with the raft, he finds Jim asleep, apparently exhausted from the terrifying ordeal. Instead of waking Jim and celebrating their reunion, Huck decides to play a trick on him. Lying down beside Jim, Huck awakens him and says, "Hello, Jim, have I been asleep? Why didn't you stir me up?" (285). Jim is overjoyed to see his friend alive and tells him so. Huck, however, acts as if he had never left the raft and convinces Jim that he has dreamed the entire episode. Confused and intimidated by Huck's foolery, Jim acquiesces to the lie and thus his own sense of inferiority. Jim reverts to the only means he knows to help him rationalize his bewilderment-superstition. He redefines his real experience with a fictitious interpolation "painted up considerable" with supernatural warnings and signs (287).

However, when Huck mockingly points to "the leaves and rubbish on the raft, and the smashed oar" and asks "what does these things stand for?" Jim realizes that Huck has played a mean trick on him (287). Jim is deeply hurt by Huck's cruelty and exposes the depth of his feelings by telling Huck:

What do dey stan' for? I's gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los, en I didn' k'yer no mo what become er me en de raf. En when I wake up en fine you back agin', all safe en soun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss you' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinking 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. (287)

Jim chastises Huck telling him he is no better than the pile of trash on the raft: "trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head or dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (287). Huck is surprised at Jim's capacity to possess such strong, "human" feelings. His perception of Jim is so subverted that he, despite some reluctance—"It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself to go and humble myself to a nigger"-acknowledges Jim's feelings and his humanity by apologizing to him. Huck decides that he wouldn't "do him no more mean tricks; and I wouldn't done that one if I'd knowed it would make him feel that way" (287).

Twain's audience is given another view of Jim's humanity when Jim shows his capacity to feel lonesome for his family. "Huck overhears Jim often lamenting the loss of his family . . ." (Camfield 105). One morning, Huck sees him "setting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself (337). Huck admits: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (337). Although this statement clearly reflects Huck's "white version of the meaning of blackness," he nonetheless acknowledges Jim's capacity for human love (Jones 177).

Twain once again looks behind the minstrel mask to reveal Jim's humanity in a profoundly moving story told by Jim to Huck about a time when he struck his four-year-old daughter, 'Lizbeth: " 'one day she was a-stannin' around', en I says to her, I says: 'Shet de do!' She never done it; jis' stood dah, kiner smilin' up at me. It make me mad . . ." (337). Jim tells her again, but she still does not respond, so he " 'fetch' her a slap side de head dat sont her a'sprawlin'" (337). Jim is unaware that his daughter's recent bout with scarlet fever has made her deaf. He orders her to get to work one more time, but she still does not respond. Just as he is about to strike her again, Jim notices that she does not react to their cabin door slamming shut from a gust of wind: "'de chile never move!'" (338). Jim finally realizes that his daughter never heard him. He knows now that she could not respond to him because " 'she was plumb deaf en dumb'" (338). Overcome with deep remorse, Jim tells Huck: "I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms en say, 'Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Amighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogive hisself as long's he live!'"

(338). Huck is noticeably silent at the end of Jim's story, leaving Twain's audience with the responsibility of acknowledging Jim's humanity on their own.

A final view of Jim's humanity comes at the end of the text. Jim is a prisoner on the Phelps's Farm awaiting his return to slavery. Huck has discovered where Jim is being held and has decided to help him escape. Then Tom arrives on the farm, and they both begin to plan the escape. Huck "went to thinking out a plan," but he soon defers to Tom's elaborate but ludicrous plan: "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 ..." (384). Jim has little choice but to bow to Tom's dehumanizing, manipulative plan, hiding behind the protective minstrel mask of "humility, ignorance, emotional deadpan, deference and placatory compliance" that all slaves were forced to wear in order to survive under white supremacy and hostility (MacLeod 12). Despite literary criticism to the contrary, however, Jim does not relinquish his humanity. "What Twain shows us, rather, is that Jim is and continues to be a man-but a man under the ugly compulsion to enact a demeaning stereotype, as defensive mask against those who would deny his humanity" (MacLeod 12).

Nowhere in the novel is Jim's humanity more apparent than when he offers the ultimate sacrifice-his freedom-to save Tom's life. Huck and Tom help Jim escape from the Phelps' Farm, and in the process, Tom is wounded. It soon becomes apparent that his injuries are serious. Jim volunteers to stay with Tom while Huck fetches a doctor, even though he knows that he will probably be captured and returned to slavery. Believing that Tom would do the same for him if their places were reversed, Jim says:

Ef it wuz him dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, 'Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor frto save dis one? Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat: You bet he wouldn't! Well, den, is Jim gwyne to say it? No, sah-I doan 'budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a doctor; not if it's forty year! (408)

Huck acknowledges Jim's unselfish act of humanity through the only perspective he knows-his white consciousness: "I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say-so it was all right, now, and I told Tom I was agoing for a doctor" (408). Huck goes to town, finds the doctor, and sends him to where Tom is lying. Jim hides in the bushes and waits. When the doctor finds Tom and realizes the seriousness of his wounds he says, "I got to have help, somehow; and the minute I says it, out crawls this nigger from somewheres, and says he'll help, and he done it too, and done it very well" (414). Even though the doctor admits, "I never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, and yet he was resking his

freedom to do it..." he does what he considers his rightful duty and has Jim captured (414).

Twain used the minstrel tradition in his creation of Jim's character. However, throughout the novel, he also provided his audience with a clear view of Jim's humanity behind the minstrel mask. Twain's juxtaposition of Jim the minstrel and Jim the human being is reflective of the ambiguity of black humanity in the late 1800s. Perhaps this image was also reflective of Twain's own personal search to identify black humanity. Ralph Ellison writes: "it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human complexity-or Twain's complexity-emerge" (422).

In *Was Huck Black?* Shelley Fishkin writes: "In *Huckleberry Finn* and throughout his life and work, Mark Twain interrogated his culture's categories and conventions of what it meant to be 'black or white'" (79). Fishkin contends that Twain may not have done this "consistently or consciously, or that he invariably succeeded in transcending those categories and conventions. On the contrary, it could be argued that, in a number of key ways, he left them in place" (79). However, by giving Jim one of the central voices in the novel and demonstrating Jim's capacity to feel deep, human emotions, Twain demonstrates the contradictions of his culture, portraying Jim through the minstrel stereotype meanwhile revealing the fundamental reality of African American humanity.

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