

Deconstruction: broadly, deconstruction refers to the practice of demonstrating that a text inhabits multiple, contradictory meanings. Opposite or opposing "discourses" can be found within a text that subvert authorial and/or narrative intention. Deconstruction, as a mode of interpreting literature, examines a text's "double-voicedness"—this double-voice can be heard when a text seems to assert one meaning even while it undermines this meaning. In the following essay, Kravitz explores the way Twain's text, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, undermines—even as it idealizes—"one of the most prominent American dreams" as embodied in Huck's quest for self-invention. On the one hand, he maintains, Huck Finn's quest for self-invention romanticizes American ideals of self-reliance and the self-made man. On the other hand, the text doggedly undermines this quest through its parody and satire, ultimately showing that Huck's dream as "self-fashioner" of his own destiny and identity is "stagnant". [For additional reading on deconstruction, see the appendix in *The Scarlet Letter*, pgs. 304-312]

An excerpt from

Kravitz, Bennett: "Reinventing the World and Reinventing the Self in Huck Finn."

Papers on Language & Literature: a quarterly journal for scholars and critics of language and literature (Southern Illinois Univ., Edwardsville) (40:1) [Winter 2004], 3-27.

When Huck Finn reaches the "freedom" of Jackson's Island he believes he has fulfilled his American destiny by imposing his will upon the world. Indeed, Huck evaluates his situation when he arrives on the island as follows: "But the next day I was exploring around down through the Island. I was boss of it; it all belonged to me, so to say, and I wanted to know all about it; but mainly I wanted to put in the time" (64). After staging his own death, Huck arrives on the Island convinced he will be able to abandon civilization and refashion himself in a world of his own. Unconsciously, however, Huck has latched on to one of the most prominent American Dreams, [...]: the dream of domination in the guise of creating a new world, or settling a virgin land (85-88). By setting out to construct a new world—one in which he will become an active self-fashioner rather than the passive participant he had been in the Widow's "sivilized" world—Huck imagines he will be able to avoid the very conflicts Twain has assembled for him throughout the novel. Feeling "pretty satisfied," as he so often does at the beginning of a new adventure, Huck believes himself free of the major interpersonal conflicts that pursue him consistently throughout his quest. No longer will he have to resolve the dilemmas of freedom versus friendship, solitude versus solidarity, and Christian, Puritan conscience versus the natural, pagan values of the "noble savage." But Huck undermines himself in the very passage in which he claims to be "boss of it" all. Huck ends his rumination with the idea that he is "put(ing) in the time." At the very moment Huck seems to control his world, he admits that his main objective is to keep busy and avoid the feelings of loneliness and solitude that attack him whenever Twain decides that Huck is feeling too satisfied.

The image of the virgin land in new-world and American ideology needs no introduction. From Columbus and the Puritans, through the destruction of the Native American tribes, new-world settlers have imagined a green, virgin space waiting to be taken over by yet another version of God's chosen people. Twain, it seems, was aware of this American fantasy, and the rich and complex themes of Huck Finn appear to revolve around this central "unsaid" theme. Though Twain may on occasion have disparaged American Indians in his writings, it does not mean he was unaware of or opposed to his ancestors' hegemonic behavior towards native Americans and even the European settlers who were not orthodox Puritans. In an 1881 speech given to the New England Society of Philadelphia, Twain portrays an understanding of the initial American mission that would only begin to gain acceptability in the American mind close to a century later. The tolerance for the Other implicit in his treatment of America's "errand into the wilderness" should remain a lasting testimonial to Twain's attitude toward one civilization impinging itself upon another in the name of freedom:

'My first American ancestor, gentlemen, was an Indian-an early Indian. Your ancestors skinned him alive, and I am an orphan. Later ancestors of mine were the Quakers William Robinson, Marmaduke Stevenson, et al. Your tribe chased them out of the country for their religion's sake; promised them death if they came back; for your ancestors had forsaken the home they loved, and braved the perils of the sea, implacable climate, and the savage wilderness, to acquire the highest and most precious of boons, freedom for every man on this broad continent to worship according to the dictates of his conscience-they were not going to allow a lot of pestiferous Quakers to interfere with it. Your ancestors broke forever the chains of political slavery, and gave the vote to every man in this wide land, excluding none!-none except those who did not belong to the orthodox church. Your ancestors-yes, they were a hard lot; but nevertheless, they gave us religious liberty to worship as they required us to worship, and political liberty to vote as the church required; and so the bereft one, the forlorn one, am here to do my best to help you celebrate them right.' (Geismar 112)

Much like Huck Finn, Twain in the above passage has claimed to be an orphan, suggesting that he, too—despite the difficulties in doing so—has the right to strike out and create an alternative self and world of his own. Because of the critique of America's Puritan settlers, Twain's ideology, or the way he imagines he lives in relation to his society, allows him to dissociate himself from his new-world origins. By the very fact that the author, Samuel Clemens, has become the implied author, Mark Twain, he has successfully become an "orphan" through his art. But Twain's Puritan pessimism undermines his "meditation on (American) origins" (Macherey 240) and will not allow Huck to succeed in the same type of dissociating mission. Huck may believe that he can "boss" it all, and as an orphan seeks his fortune in "virgin" territory, but Twain has other ideas in mind.

The notion of the "virgin land," or New World, is well substantiated in the text of Huck Finn. From the very moment that he decides to escape from the cabin in which his father imprisoned him, Huck assumes that his own initiative will be enough to fashion a world of his own. But the means Huck uses to escape from captivity is part of the floating debris that belongs to the world he is so desperate to leave behind:

I noticed some pieces of limbs and such things floating down, and a sprinkling of bark; so I knowed the river had begun to rise. I reckoned I would have great times, now, if I was over at the town. The June rise used to be always luck for me; because as soon as that rise begins, here comes cord-wood floating down, and pieces of log-rafts-sometimes a dozen logs together; so all you have to do is catch them and sell them to the woodyards and the saw mill. (53-54)

From the very beginning, Huck's quest to "light out" into the new will be determined by his attachment to the old. He is, indeed, resourceful enough to "kill" his pig-like, natural "self and escape from the grasp of Pap. He is unable, however, to avoid relying on the materials of the world he "abandoned" that seem magically to appear in the river. Far from arriving from some "virgin" untouched place in the world, the wood and the raft are recovered and reconstituted cultural materials of a civilization that Huck desperately seeks to leave forever.

Whenever Huck succumbs to his own ambition, and actually believes he is his own creator, Mark Twain reminds him that civilization is always ready to encroach on his "virgin" territory. In the scene described earlier, when Huck is busy "bossing" Jackson's Island, his dream of domination is destroyed as he discovers the remains of a campfire. Immediately the dangers of his civilization

are reified, as Huck hears a conversation between outlaws on the run. Huck loses his self-confidence but decides to discover exactly who has disturbed his paradise.

Huck never discovers the identity of the mysterious outlaws, but the text does offer him consolation. What will relieve his anxiety and solitude is his encounter with Jim. From this point on, the pair will embark upon a journey into "virgin" territory together. Though they will never succeed in their quest—to refashion their selves in a new world—their solidarity and friendship will serve as a buffer against all the dangers society casts in their path.

That the text does, indeed, engage the possibility of finding "virgin" territory and thus reinventing the world is suggested by Twain's parodic treatment of that most famous "encounterer" of new worlds, Christopher Columbus. When Jim and Huck discover a wrecked ship on the river, and decide to "borrow" whatever supplies might come in handy, Huck imagines how Tom Sawyer would feel were he to participate in their adventure:

"I can't rest, Jim, till we give her a rummaging. Do you reckon Tom Sawyer would ever go by this thing? Not for pie, he wouldn't. He'd call it an adventure—that's what he'd call it; and he'd land on that wreck if it was his last act. And wouldn't he throw style into it?—wouldn't he spread himself, nor nothing? Why you'd think it was Christopher Columbus discovering Kingdom-Come. I wish Tom Sawyer was here."
(97)

By combining the machinations of Tom Sawyer and Christopher Columbus, the implied author deconstructs the notion of Huck and Jim's virgin adventure in a number of ways. First, we once again find the pair exploring would-be new worlds on a shipwreck from the very civilization Huck and Jim seek to avoid. Second, that they intend to "borrow" things suggests that there is nothing new or original in their plan. The parody of Columbus also signifies that Huck and Jim's explorations have been relegated to the absurd. Third, Huck and Jim discover to their dismay that the wreck is still tightly bound to civilization. They encounter a gang of robbers who plan to execute one of their own. In order to escape from their predicament, they are forced to abandon the robber to his death. Last, and perhaps most important, is the connection drawn between Columbus and Tom Sawyer. The latter is a romantic who does everything by the book. He relies on the written word to make his way in the world and learn new things, yet he almost always gets things wrong. Indeed, at his romantic worst, he would like to follow the written advice on the subject, and "steal" Jim out of slavery—in particularly brutal and cruel fashion—even though he knows that Jim has already been set free (304-10). But the wrecked ship, named the Walter Scott, suggests the destruction of romance.

Huck and Jim discover many "riches" in the trunk the gang had stolen from the wreck, such as boots, blankets, books, a spyglass and three boxes of "seegars" (109). They are quite pleased with their efforts because they do not realize that they have fallen into what might be called the "Robinson Crusoe" syndrome. Robinson Crusoe, that earlier settler of "virgin" land, also failed to notice his inability to create anything new; he always depended upon the artifacts of his former civilization to build his new world. As Pierre Macherey describes it, Defoe initiates the theme of "man on an Island" (240). The Island becomes the "indispensable setting, the scene for an ideological motif which was only beginning to emerge; the meditation on origins" (240). Indeed, many of the conflicts that Huck and Jim encounter have something to do with "meditation on origins," of ideals such as freedom, friendship, solidarity, solitude, and the fashioning of the self.

Though Huck and Jim experience danger, separation, escape from death, and Jim's capture and reintroduction to slavery, Huck does not abandon the idea of reaching that "virgin" land with Jim. Planning to liberate Jim from the Phelps' farm, Huck suggests the following plan to Tom Sawyer:

"My plan is this," I says. "We can find out easy if it's Jim in there. Then get up my canoe to-morrow night, and fetch my raft over from the Island. Then the first dark night that comes steal the key our of the old man's britches, after he goes to bed, and shove off down the river on the raft, with Jim, hiding daytimes and running nights, the way me and Jim used to do before. Wouldn't that plan work?" (294)

Ironically, Tom agrees that the plan would succeed but rejects it because it would be too "easy" to free Jim in such a manner. Tom believes a more appealing way involves suffering and humiliation for Jim. That, after all, is the way the "book" says it is supposed to be done. So even in Tom's romantic terms, Huck and Jim will not be allowed to continue as they "used to do before." Their search for a new world down the river is doomed to failure.

Huck's final attempt to find a world of new origins is expressed at the novel's end. After completing his adventures, Huck learns that Jim had previously discovered Pap's dead body, something that would seem to offer Huck a chance at a new beginning, a realistic chance to fulfill the role of "orphan." With that very freedom, however, Huck finds himself trapped once again in the grasp of civilization:

Tom's most well, now, and got his bullet round his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and aint't going to no more. But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before. (366)

Huck has yet to solve the conundrum of self-fashioning in a new world. He is still being pursued by the old, and there is no apparent respite from it. He has discovered exactly how difficult it is to create an authorial voice, become "author of his book," and reinvent his self and his world. Despite his relief at his father's death, Huck is disturbed by Tom's civilized practice of "always seeing what time it is." A romantic quest like self-fashioning is only possible in an environment in which time stands still [...]. Indeed, everything that we have learned about Huck has come from his efforts at being the "author" of his own identity. Yet he now admits that the work was too difficult and he will no longer pursue his authorial dreams.

Perhaps that is why his quest for self-fashioning seems to have run its course. The pull of social convention and intrusion is still overwhelming, which is why the novel cannot have a happy ending. Yet the fear of becoming "sivilized" is still intimidating for Huck, so he opts to "go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the Territory" (365). In terms of the "virgin" land or creating a New World, Huck will be joining the American effort that effectively ended Native American resistance to the total colonization of the continental United States by its white citizens. Indeed, Huck will thus become implicated in the wholesale slaughter of the Native tribes. Whether Huck will become an active participant or seek to escape its horrors in a raft the reader cannot know. What is clear, however, is that Huck will not find the "virgin" land he seeks among the Indians in the already settled Territory.

Though Huck and Jim both set out on the raft to reinvent themselves, their personal agendas are very different. While Huck seeks to "boss" it all, Jim merely seeks to become his own master, though his strategy is determined by Twain's parodic treatment of the black as American Gilded-Age capitalist. Despite his resolve to rise from rags to riches, Jim's economic maneuvers—as he explains to Huck—have been dismal failures:

'Wunst I had foteen dollars but I tuck to specalat'n en got busted out.'

'What did you speculate in, Jim?' "Well, fust I tackled stock.' 'What kind of stock?'

'Why, live stock. Cattle, you know. I put ten dollars in a cow. But I ain¹ gwine to resk no mo' money in stock. De cow up n' died on my nan's.'

'So you lost the ten dollars.'

'No, I didn' lose it all. I on'y los' 'bout nine of it. I sole de hide en taller for a dollar en ten cents.'

'You had five dollars and ten cents left. Did you speculate any more?'

'Yes. You know dat one-laigged nigger dat b'longs to old Misto Bradish? Well, he sot up a bank, en say anybody dat put in a dollar would get fo' dollars mo¹ at de en' er de year. Well, all de niggers went in, but dey didn' have much. I wuz de on'y one dat had much. So I stuck out for mo' dan fo' dollars, en I said 'f I didn't git it I'd start a bank myself. Well o' course dat nigger want' to keep me out er de business, bekase he say dey warn't business 'nough for two banks, so he say I could put in five dollars en he pay me thirty-five at de en¹ er de year.'" (71-72)

Jim's first disappointment in the American capitalist system comes from investing in the "stock" market. Despite the reader's expectation that the stock market would signify an institution such as Wall Street, Twain undermines that notion by replacing it with "live" stock. Jim, the slave capitalist, instinctively understands that market, because he himself has been a victim of a "live stock" economy: one that relies on the institution of slavery.

Jim's woeful economic saga continues. The so-called bank he invests in goes "bust." His final ten cents are given away to the poor, since Jim is sure his kindness—according to the preacher in his friend Balum's church—will be returned a hundred times. He is left without a cent but still considers himself rich because, as he puts it, "'I owns myself, en Fs wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn' want no mo'" (73). Jim's riches, then, come from reinventing himself as his own master, something he will attempt to substantiate and legitimize in the eyes of white society as he travels to the "north" with Huck in search of a new frontier.

That Jim is involved in a quest for self-reinvention is accentuated throughout the novel. Though Jim is often metaphysically lost, Twain provides him with a number of strategies to embark on his search for a new identity. He often does not know who or where he is, but Jim is able to succeed

in the world instinctively. "Say-who is you? Whar is you" (23) Jim exclaims when he hears Huck and Tom approaching at the beginning of chapter two. Jim and Huck, if not Tom, will discover at least partial answers to these questions together. When Huck decides to play a mean trick on Jim, pretending never to have left the raft after having been thrown overboard, Jim repeats the existential questions that guide him in his search for freedom: "Well, looky here, boss, dey's sumf n wrong dey is. Is I me or who is I? Is I heah, or whah is I? Now dat's what I wants to know"¹ (119).

As in most of the questions posited by Huck Finn, Jim will receive only limited answers. He will become a free man, but not through any actions taken by him, Huck, or Tom. Miss Watson's deathbed manumission of Jim has more to do with a guilty conscience and her salvation in the next world than admirable human enterprise. And the 'fog' surrounding Cairo will cause Jim to seek his freedom sailing south into slave country. For Mark Twain, the initiatives of no man, white or black, can overcome the pessimistic notion that human determination counts for little in the making of human history. Thus, Jim is released from the bondage of slavery, though not because of any action of his own. Miss Watson, as "Deus ex machina," frees Jim to soothe her Christian conscience. As Roy Harvey Pearce has remarked, "Huckleberry Finn teaches us .. .that whereas utopianism is possible, Utopians are not" (313-14).

Perhaps the greatest weapon the author grants Jim on his journey of liberation is that Jim is labeled "white inside" (345). Though easily understood as the ultimate racist statement, "white inside" also contains the potential to undercut many of the prejudicial notions that whites held concerning blacks, whether slaves or ex-slaves. Huck is led to view Jim as "white inside" when the latter nobly offers to risk his freedom and watch Tom until a doctor arrives to treat Tom's bullet wound. Huck also finds Jim to be very much like whites when Jim decides that his first act as a free man, as reported by Huck, would be to save "money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them" (124). But the most moving rendition of "white inside" is manifested when Jim agonizes about his children, especially his mistreatment of his daughter Elizabeth. After the duke and the king join them, and Jim completes his night shift guarding the raft, Huck notices Jim's depression:

When I waked up just at day-break, he was setting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself. I didn't take no notice, nor let on. I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life; and 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. he was often moaning and mourning that way, nights, when he judged I was asleep, and saying, "Po' little 'Lizabeth! po' little Johnny! It's mighty hard; I spec' I ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo¹, no mo'!" He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was. (201)

Huck engages Jim in conversation and learns that Jim feels especially guilty for having beaten his daughter when she ignored his instructions only to discover that she had become deaf. Thus the measure of Jim's worth is presented in terms of his ability to imitate the white man's imagined values, loyalty to and compassion for family and friends. If Huck had felt "ornery" and insignificant in the face of Providence (30) Jim is capable of the same emotion when he recalls his shabby treatment of Elizabeth. Twain has, perhaps for the first time in American fiction, created a round black character. Jim possesses a realistic range of human traits and emotions. By doing so, in the

unsaid of the text, Twain has pointed to an intolerable ideological refutation that cannot be stated out loud. By presenting Jim as a family man par excellence, Twain has undermined the racist doctrine of retrogression: that is, the theory of the emancipated slave returning to his "natural" state of sexual and social bestiality supposedly inherent in African culture...

... Rather than present only the single, monologic voice of the oppressor in the struggle between slave and slaveholder, Twain reconstructs the marginalized voice of the slave to subvert the hegemonic retrogressionist theory. Twain portrays Jim as noble, loyal, and the ultimate friend and family man. Twain takes issue with the major racial theories of his day, and those critics who are convinced only of the racist potential of the text and/or Mark Twain would do well to examine the "unsaid" of the text...

...Though Huck is not conscious of the fact, he travels down the river with the spirit of compassion he absorbed from the widow's Providence. Twain has often noted that the human conscience pursues humanity like a "yellow dog," and Huck himself utters that remark after the tar and feathering of the duke and the king. But his compassion emerges not only from the guilt he feels at the two scoundrels' predicament, but also because he learns from this episode that "human beings can be awful cruel to one another" (291). And Huck, despite his occasional insensitivity to Jim, is not a cruel boy. His conscience and compassion motivate him to help Jim, take the king and duke aboard the raft, and foil their plan to defraud the Wilks sisters. Huck's compassion will serve him well in creating a real friendship with Jim, but Twain will not allow him to find a place in which he can feel "satisfied" for a significant period of time.

As we have seen, the prime impediment to Huck and Jim's quest of self-fashioning is the impossibility of reinventing the world and reinventing the self. In the novel, the potential for reform is either dim or non-existent. Despite the text's superficial support for the American ideal of "orphaning" the self, and the Emersonian notion of becoming rather than being, Huck and Jim are essentially impotent. Twain's Puritan pessimism casts great doubt on humanity's ability to transcend the pettiness of human existence. Sometimes Twain does so with humor and sometimes with viciousness, but the result is always stagnant.

The most obvious and humorous episode in *Huck Finn* that questions the human potential for reform occurs when Pap decides to repent his sins by giving up his "noble savage" lifestyle and abstaining from the "devil's brew." After winning custody of Huck—in Pap's terms, allowed to become the boss of his son—Pap goes on a drinking spree to celebrate his victory in the courts. The judge, who had given Pap custody of Huck, decides to "make a man of him":

So he took him to his own house, and dressed him up clean and nice, and had him to breakfast and dinner and supper with the family, and was just old pie to him, so to speak. And after supper he talked to him about temperance and such things till the old man cried, and said he'd been a fool, and fooled away his life; but now he was agoing to turn over a new leaf and be a man nobody wouldn't be ashamed of, and he hoped the judge would help him and not look down on him. The judge said he could hug him for them words; so he cried and his wife she cried again; Pap said he'd been a man that had always been misunderstood before, and the judge said he believed it. The old man said that what a man wanted that was down, was sympathy; and the judge said it was so; so they cried again. And when it was bedtime, the old man rose up and held out his hand and says: "Look at it gentlemen, and ladies all; take a hold of it; shake it. There's a hand that was the hand of a hog; but it ain't so no more; it's the hand of a man that's started on a new life, '11 die before he'll go back. You mark

them words-don't forget I said them. It's a clean hand now: shake it-don't be afeard."
(42-43)

Ironically, the judge is partially correct in his estimation of Pap. Pap does not die "before he'll go back" to his "evil" ways, but he does manage to drink himself to death shortly afterward. Although Pap had supposedly left the "hog's" life and signed and kissed a pledge never to drink again, the judge soon finds him drunk on his porch with a broken arm. The judge, as Huck notes, "felt kind of sore. He said he reckoned a body could reform the ole man with a shot-gun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way" (44). Thus, in amusing fashion, Twain expresses his skepticism in regard to the possibility of reform.

But the most potent argument for the impossibility of reform is presented in the so-called "evasion" scene toward the novel's closure. Many critics have expressed their dissatisfaction about the collapse of the novel's moral stance. Both Jim and Huck revert to grotesque caricatures once Tom arrives at the Phelps farm. Both lose the initiative they have displayed throughout their journey on the raft. Jim is once again a parody of minstrel blackface as he agrees to Tom's tortuous route to escape from slavery. He must be subjected to snakes, rats, and chains to make his impending escape more "real" and thus satisfying to Tom. Huck, having proved himself more creative than Tom throughout the novel, abandons his own initiative and meekly agrees to all of Tom's plans. And Tom, who seems to control his own fate, earns nothing but a bullet wound for his absurd attempt to free Jim the way "the book says." In the context of the text's pessimism, however, the ending is far from inappropriate. True reform has never been possible in the novel, despite the bond of friendship formed between Huck and Jim.

The quest for reinvention, then, of both the self and the world, has ended in failure. But through Huck's and Jim's "meditations on origins" friendship and solidarity have combined to mitigate the harsh reality of human existence. Perhaps Twain's most important contribution to American letters through Huck Finn is not, in Hemingway's tribute, that "all American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain" (22). Rather it is the mixing of black and white voices in a high-brow or low-brow cultural attempt to discover the similarity rather than the differences between oppressor and oppressed. In Jiri's terms, if a Frenchman is a man, "'why doan¹ he talk like a man?'" (114). Jim is interested in establishing the common denominator among men, most often through the freedom, that comes from "owning" one's self. Huck, in contrast, is "willing to go to hell" for a friend because he believes that Jim is "white inside." He is unable to accept the equality of difference, but he is willing to ignore Jim's origins and establish equality based on his friendship with and love for Jim. Their "meditation on origins" has not left Huck and Jim with a coherent plan to fulfill their "self ambitions. They have discovered, however, the only way to confront and to mitigate the horrors of the human condition: that is, the freedom of choice one acquires through solidarity and friendship with the other.