

# What's Funny About *Huckleberry Finn*

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Winter 1999

What's funny about *Huckleberry Finn* is that it's a humorous story. This sounds like a tautology and it is, but in a special sense. The story is humorous because it's told by the quintessential American Boy, Huck Finn, and according to *the* American humorist, Mark Twain, the humorous story is quintessentially American. Here is how Twain explains it, in a late essay entitled "How To Tell A Story":

The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect on the *manner* of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon the *matter*. ... The humorous story bubbles gendly along, the others burst.

The humorous story is stricdy a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an ardst can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it.

The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it; but the teller of the comic story tells you beforehand that it is one of the funniest things he has ever heard, then tells it with an eager delight, and is the first person to laugh when he gets through.

Very often ... [the] humorous story finishes with a nub, point, snapper, or whatever you like to call it. Then the listener must be alert, for in many cases the teller will divert attention from the nub by dropping it in a carefully casual and indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub.<sup>1</sup>

The present essay is about the nubs or snappers in *Huckleberry Finn*, and by extension about a distinctive and (according to Twain) a uniquely American mode of being funny—a Trickster's mode with an American slant. I refer to deadpan, of course, the comic form familiar to Americans through a wide range of folklore, from Yankee Peddler to Riverboat Con Man, and particularly the Western Tall Tale. The joke is told "gravely," the teller is straight-faced—he recounts in earnest detail how Davy Crockett at six years of age killed the biggest bear in Arkansas or how you can get the Brooklyn Bridge dirt- cheap—and what's funny is the listener who believes and marvels at the story. In Twain's case, the joke often reflects the peculiar historical conditions of the Southwestern frontier. These conditions have often been commented on, but their bearing upon Trickster behavior is so striking—they so clearly provide the setting for Twain's notorious Tricksterism—that they are worth rehearsing at some length:

"Tall humor," Henry B. Wonham observes, "is American not because it is incongruous—all humor is that—but because it articulates incongruities

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain, "How To Tell A Story" (1897), in *How To Tell A Story and Other Essays*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkind (Oxford University Press: New York, 1966), pp. 3–4\*

that are embedded in the American experience. A country founded, settled, and closely observed by men and women with extraordinary expectations, both exalted and depraved, could not help but appreciate the distance that separated the ideal from the real, the ‘language of culture’ from the ‘language of sweat,’ the democratic dream from the social and economic reality of the early American republic.”

The “gap” between culture and sweat found in frontier experiences—which characteristically included Indian wars, slave-dealing, *herrenvolk* white racial solidarity, endemic violence, economic instability, fluidity, humbuggery, and speculative fantasy—cultivated a vernacular humor of extremes, along with pleasure in horror and depravity (an outgrowth of urban contact zones, as well)... “Tall” humor was a form of initiation and survival in response to the radical physical and social uncertainties on the edge of settler-colonial expansion. This humor thrived at the borderland of displacement, migration, and violence, finding much of its pleasure in dethroning the condescension of gentility at the thickly settled Eastern core, while at the same time reproducing the radical incongruities and discrepancies at the root of all American experience.<sup>2</sup>

This setting—a new capitalist nation in the violent process of emergence—is a Trickster paradise. Its social and psychological uncertainties, its physical turbulence and shifting borders, make for a world that’s not only ripe for but conducive to all manner of Trickster wiles: transgressing boundaries, defying taboos, mocking rules and regulations. And its “radical incongruities” provide ample scope for Trickster fun in what (according to the Oxford English Dictionary) are the three basic meanings of the word: (i) *Funny* as in “just plain fun,” with the innocence of Young Hermes or Baby Brahma—the child-like humor we designate as “kidding around.” (2) *Funny* in its antiquated meaning of “befool,” as in “playing a hoax on someone,” with the cruel edge of con games associated with Coyote—a cunning humor that thrives on “humbuggery and speculative fantasy” and that often issues as satire, since the hoax that thrives upon the hypocrisies of everyday life—the joke that highlights the “distance separating] the ideal from the real”—serves to reinforce social norms *as ideals*. (3) *Funny* as in “odd or curious,” the chilling sense of some sinister hidden meaning, as when we say there’s “something funny” about Trickster Fox; he might be a killer. This last layer of humor tends towards “horror and depravity.” It’s the kind of humor we associate with sick jokes and the absurd.

Usually deadpan artists specialize in one or another of these ways of being funny—let us call them innocent, satirical, and sinister—but the humor reaches its highest

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<sup>2</sup> Hilton Manfred Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania*, forthcoming from Princeton University Press, 1999- I take this to be not an argument for American exceptionalism but a picture of certain distinctive conditions in the unruly formation of a certain modern culture.

pitch, the finest turn of its “high and delicate art,” when the joke reverberates with all three layers of fun, from (cheerfully) “that’s *funn*^T to (suspiciously) “*that’s* funny.”

Mark Twain’s deadpan is Trickster fun at its best, and *Huckleberry Finn* is his funniest book, in all three senses of the term. What makes it distinctive, however—what separates it from generic deadpan—is Twain’s deliberate and sustained use of the third, sinister, “odd or curious” sense of funny. Without submerging the cheerful and satirical layers of fun—indeed, while drawing these out to their limit—his humor involves a drastic turnabout in deadpan effect, virtually a *reversal* of conventional techniques. The novel is a great example of child-like, fun-filled wonder and a great work of social satire whose comic mode overturns the very tradition of deadpan it builds upon. Ostensibly that tradition belongs to the narrator-hero. Huck speaks “gravely” and often plays the Trickster; but the funny thing is, he’s not a humorist, not even when he’s putting someone on (as he does Aunt Sally, when he pretends to be Tom Sawyer). In fact, he rarely has fun; characteristically he’s in a sweat, and on the rare occasion when he does try to kid around (as when he tells Jim that the two of them were not separated in the fog), the joke turns back on itself to humiliate him. Huck has a stylized deadpan; his voice may sound comic to the comically disposed listener, but actually it’s troubled, earnest. The nub or snapper behind that stylization, the humorous intent of *Huckleberry Finn*, the unusual twist to the joke—is directed against Huck’s apparent deadpan. For of course the “teller” is really Mark Twain, the Comic Writer, and *this* deadpan artist is not straight-faced (as Huck is), but smiling. He wears the Mask of Comedy. Officially, he’s telling a very amusing, sometimes hilarious story, and having a wonderful time at every point. His “story bubbles gendy along,” he’s laughing through it all; and so are we.

So here’s the Trickster set-up, American-style, of *Huckleberry Finn*: the deadpan artist is Mark Twain, wearing the Comic Mask, doing his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there’s anything grave, let alone sinister, about his story—and he succeeds famously. Then, as we laugh, or after we’ve laughed, we may realize, if we’re alert, that there’s something we’ve overlooked. We haven’t seen what’s funny about the fact that we’ve found it all so funny. This Trickster has conned us, somehow diverted our attention away from the real point, and we have to go back over the story in order to recognize its nub.

Recognition in this sense begins with two general premises of Trickster humor. The first is that what’s funny works as a connective. The joke interweaves the different aspects (innocent, satirical, and sinister) of Trickster fun—it makes these volatile, interchangeable. What’s a harmless prank as far as Huck is concerned (e.g., Tom’s coin trick at the start) may be a hoax on Twain’s part. And what seems a hoax to Huck (e.g., the tricks played at the end upon Jim) may have something sinister about it for Twain. In all these instances, satire mingles with brutality and brutality flows into “just plain fun.”

The second general premise of Trickster humor involves the connectives between the joke and its cultural contexts. The linguistic play of deadpan calls up diverse

situations, social, personal, and historical, and by joining these the humor points us towards connections within the culture. The joke may be said to bridge various aspects of life: institutions, practices, beliefs, customs. All humor works in this way more or less, but there's something distinctive (here as elsewhere) about Tricksters. They tend to direct their jokes *against* the very cultural connections that their humor invokes. In a recent overview of the Trickster Figure, Lewis Hyde describes this technique in physiological terms, as an assault upon the vulnerable parts of the social body. He points out that Tricksters work best in the intersections of culture, the intricate, delicate links between different social practices and institutions. Home, job, school, church—these variant spheres are connected by joints, which are in fact anatomical weak-points. Thus the fragility of the knees (where “the shin-bone’s connected to the thigh-bone”), becomes an image for Hyde of cultural weak-points, where (say) official religion jars with official politics, or where variant conventions and rules of behavior (residual, dominant, emergent) may overlap and clash. At these junctures, traditionally, the Trickster comes most vividly to life—unsettling the system, upsetting its rhythms, exposing conflicts and contradictions.<sup>3</sup>

Mark Twain’s Trickster trademark is the shock to the funny-bone. Imagine a culture like the antebellum frontier (or for that matter the Reconstructionist Southwest), which is both racist and egalitarian, and where that contradiction is the sign not just of hypocrisy (ideal versus real) but of separate, deep-rooted traditions, each involving its own disparities between “culture and sweat,” its own configuration of realities and ideals. The minstrel show was a genre born out of precisely these conditions. So think now of this Trickster’s minstrel act: the audience hears a long funny story about a “nigger” and they laugh along. The nub of course is that *they’re* being laughed at; they’ve been taken in and made the butt of a joke. Once they see that, they understand what’s funny about the story, and they’re free to laugh at themselves for having laughed in the first place. That freedom, I’m suggesting, comes with the shock to the funny-bone. It’s a complex sensation, like the odd “tingling vibration” you feel when you’re hit on the funny-bone. A light touch might mean no more than a bit of healthy fun—say, the cheerful wake-up call of social satire (the N-joke reminds you of your egalitarian principles). A sharp touch might be unnerving—a bitter protest directed against the system at large (you recognize that you are part and parcel of a deeply racist society). A direct and vicious cut would be painful, a sensation of pure violence, as in the sinister sense of “funny” (you realize that egalitarianism itself is a joke, you’re a sucker for having believed in it at all).

Twain’s deadpan spans all of these forms. The light touch marks his early career. His tales of the Wild West and Innocents Abroad are sometimes savage in their exposure of pretense, but their manner and tone emphasize the ebullient Pan in the deadpan. Twain’s late career shifts the emphasis to the nihilistic undercurrent in *deadpan*: the deadly laughter of *The Mysterious Stranger*, the doomsday humor of *A Connecticut*

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 1998).

*Yankee*, the absurdist stories collected in *The Great Dark*. *Huckleberry Finn* might be described as early-middle-but-especially-late Twain. It's the apotheosis of American deadpan, a carefully coordinated synthesis of all three layers I've sketched of the meaning of *funny*. Twain's mode of coordination—the dialectic behind his synthesis—is the drastic reversal of effect I spoke of: the Trickster with the Comic Mask. And the nubs or snappers he delivers constitute the most severe set of shocks in the literature to the American funny-bone.

The first shock is that the novel is funny at all. The slave-hunt serves as both metaphor and metonymy for the world it portrays: *Huckleberry Finn* describes a slave-hunt undertaken literally, collectively, by an enslaved society, a culture in bondage to all the Seven Deadly Sins (in addition to the sin of chattel-slavery), and accordingly characterized by violence, mean-spiritedness, ignorance, and deceit. A fair embodiment of this world is Pikesville, a “nondescript” shanty-town somewhere along the river:

All the streets and lanes was just mud; they wam't nothing else *but* mud—mud as black as tar and nigh about a foot deep in some places, and two or three inches deep in *«//the* places. The hogs loafed and grunted around everywheres. You'd see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs come lazying along the street and whollop herself right down in the way, where folks had to walk around her, and she'd stretch out and shut her eyes and wave her ears whilst the pigs was milking her, and look as happy as if she was on salary. And pretty soon you'd hear a loafer sing out, “Hi! *so* boy! sick him, Tige!” and away the sow would go, squealing most horrible, with a dog or two swinging to each ear, and three or four dozen more a-coming; and then you would see all the loafers get up and watch the thing out of sight, and laugh at the fun and look grateful for the noise. Then they'd setde back again till there was a dogfight. There couldn't anything wake them up all over, and make them happy all over, like a dogfight—unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death, (p. 183)

Readers of the novel tend to remember Pikeville not for that bit of “fun” (though that's the town's main source of laughter), but for the Shakespearean soliloquy delivered there by the Duke and the King:

To be or not to be; that is the bare bodkin  
That makes calamity of so long life ...  
'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.  
But soft you now, the fair Ophelia,  
Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws. (p. 179)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1988), pp. 183, 179 [page numbers indicated in the present essay all refer

That's what we laugh at, as we should, but consider the image of the dog running himself to death. And now think of the nub concealed within the Shakespearean parody: the Duke and the King are debased men, the townspeople are debased, and debasement in both cases is a metonym for the slave code. The stray dog is Jim on the run, Huck hounded by "sivilization." The animal kingdom parades before us as in a Trickster's Eden-utopia: pigs, "tigers," dogs, and people mingling happily in the "two or three feet deep" mud (the sow "happy as if she was on salary," the loafers "laugh[ing] at the fun"); and the joke lies in the calamity we humans make of so long life. Clearly, this is the world of the late "dark Twain," the author of *The Damned Human Race* who tells us that his religion is "Calvinism without God," and who, in his Satanic *Letters from the Earth*, explains why man, the lowest of all animals, "is first and last and always a sarcasm."

Question: What's funny about *Huckleberry Finn*? Answer: the teller of this Tall Tale has persuaded us that he's a Comic Writer.

I mean to explore his method of persuasion through three typical jokes. The first is *his* first: Twain's familiar opening "Notice to Readers" (p. iv):

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted;  
persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempt-  
ing to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR,

Per G. G., Chief of Ordnance

This is a crucial point of the story. It introduces the reader to the text and connects Mark Twain ("THE AUTHOR") with Huck Finn, who has written "this narrative." The deadpan connective, "G. G.," links all the above (narrative, reader, author, and protagonist), and the Notice itself is a directive concerning interpretation. A directive *against* interpretation, to be sure, but a deadpan directive, which therefore requires interpretation. For obviously the Notice is a form of kidding around, a prank of sorts; and then, too, there's a satirical side to it, a subversive laughter in the "order" that ridicules authority. And finally there's the violence alongside and around the subversive tone—think of the penalties for trespassing (prosecution, banishment, death), and the deadly pun that reinforces them: "ordnance" is not (just) a colloquial misspelling; technically it means "cannon or artillery"; a "Chief of Ordnance" is an officer ready to blow you to pieces.

All this makes for an especially funny situation with regard to the act of interpretation. For the narrative itself—the book that's the subject of the directive against interpretation—*demands* interpretation all the time. We can't get any of its jokes

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to this edition]; *The Damned Human Race*, ed. Janet Smith (Hill and Wang: New York, 1962), p. 62; and *Letters from the Earth*, ed. Benard DeVoto (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 7.

without figuring out motive and plot, and we can't possibly do *that* without assuming a moral position. Take even the simplest joke: say, the story that Huck tells Jim about Solomon and the disputed child (pp. 94–96). No reader has failed to laugh at the incident and none can fail to notice that it concerns key structures of the culture—fatherhood, the Bible, schools, and civil authority—which are also key themes of the novel. It's perfectly natural, then, for Huck to “slide” from Solomon to kings in general. He tells Jim about European ex-kings who migrate to America and teach French; he then proceeds to explain why people need to know different languages (humans are different from one another, as dogs are different from pigs, pigs from horses, etc.); and Jim counters by pointing out that all people are alike (all people, universally, are different from dogs, horses, pigs, etc.). If he's a man, Jim declares, “*Well, den! Dad blame it, why doan he talk like a man?*” This is a parody of social pretension: Huck, the master of the colloquial style is celebrating the language of the elite, as French then was. And in turn the parody is a sick joke about Southern history: Jim, the victim of chattel-slavery (the example of man-reduced-to-beast-of-burden), is speaking “the language of culture” (Jefferson's language) *in* “the language of sweat” about the self-evident truths of human equality. How can we interpret? And our interpretation is prodded, if we need prodding, by Huck's concluding response: “You can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit.” Huck doesn't see the fun in all this; he's simply frustrated. We do see the fun because we know we're hearing a comic tale (by Mark Twain, humorist); but in order to take that step we have to interpret. In short, we interpret because Huck doesn't.

Now let me recapitulate what's funny about the Notice. There's a joke here that involves us in a contradiction: the official order prohibits interpretation but the narrative demands interpretation. The nub or snapper is that the Notice is *calling attention* to interpretation. It's reminding us of our tendency to look for plot, moral, and motive, and then the narrative itself does the rest of the work: it virtually forces us to interpret. Having recognized that much, we should feel uneasy. There's something funny about this invitation to interpret—it's a Trickster's invitation. What's *his* motive? What's the *plot*?

To begin to explore the issue I turn to my second example, the last joke in the novel. I refer to what is surely Huck's best-known line—his decision to light out for the territory. Our general impression of the scene is that Huck leaves because he seeks freedom: “Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me, and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before” (p. 362). And no doubt Huck does want his freedom; but there's another layer of meaning in the text:

... then Tom he talked along and talked along, and says, le's all three slide out of here one of these nights and get an outfit, and go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns, over in the territory, for a couple of weeks or two; and I says, all right, that suits me... (p. 361)

So Huck decides to light out “ahead of the rest,” and the nub is: *he's just kidding around*. He plans to get an “outfit” and leave for a while (“a couple of weeks or two”),



which we interpret as the flight to freedom—and then (if we follow critical tradition) we proceed to allegorize it as the freedom of the spirit. Over the past century that allegory has established itself as a staple cultural/counter-cultural icon: Huck Finn, the representative rebel (or rebel representative) hero of human potential and selfdefinition (and making it) and the open road.

It's a grand flight of interpretation on our part, but there's something funny about it. Our allegory of this child's-prank depends upon a series of exclusions. Consider the deadpan connection in the episode itself between African Americans and Native Americans: Jim "dressed up for howling adventures amongst the Injuns"! It's a joke akin to the Duke and King's, when they parade Jim through town dressed as a "*Sick Arab*—but harmless when not out of his head" (p. 203). Twain's Trickster play here should alert us to the intricate narrative joint we're in. Huck is about to light out from the Phelps for the territory: this liminal moment joins two crucial dimensions of the social body. First, the dimension of space: the "settlements," as defined by the N- word, are being linked to the "territory," as defined by the I-word. Then, there's the dimension of time: "Injun" is a clue to the cultural connections implicit in the novel's double time-frame. The fictional time, the period of Huck's adventures, is the antebellum South, the slavery era; the authorial time was the era of Indian-killing. Between 1876 and 1885, when the novel was written and published, the territories provided the setting for the final wars (under the notorious banner, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian") against the Native Americans.

Huck's "escape to freedom" is a Tall Tale which suggests how much can be excluded or concealed in the act of interpretation. And it suggests further what this kind of exclusion makes room for. I refer to the cultural icon ("lighting out") that draws its force from a powerful set of commonplaces: the notion that "the territory" in the United States means (and always meant) freedom; the familiar interpretations of "open land" as promise, opportunity, and possibility. The nub that ends *Huckleberry Finn* is that interpretation may be a trap of culture. I mean interpretation now in its institutional sense, as a process developed, nourished, and sanctioned by society—the official hermeneutic, as it were, by which we confirm our beliefs in what our culture has taught us to believe, and through which (according to this snapper) we conceal the unsavory realities of history. In this case, the incongruity between those realities (slavery, genocide) and those beliefs (freedom, innocence) is funny: funny enough, in the sinister sense, to provide the *jinale* to the greatest deadpan act in the tradition of American humor.

*Interpretation may be a trap of culture:* Twain's snapper is especially striking in the context of Trickster fun-and-games. I said before, following Lewis Hyde, that the joints of the social body are cultural weak-points. Hyde adds that Tricksters instinctively fasten on those weak-points through strategies of interpretation; their hermeneutics of invention and surprise, of inversion and perversion, is a kind of endless arsenal of cultural resistance. Thus the Trickster becomes for Hyde a figure across time and place, from Greek Hermes to Allen Ginsberg, for the Artist as Subversive. And of course that

archetype extends by implication to the discerning critic of Art. The impression it conveys of the powers of interpretation is as familiar as it is comforting. Conversely, Twain's joke about Huck's "flight to freedom" is as discomfiting—as shocking and deflating—as it is surprising. The misfit it reveals between the text and the meaning we give it calls attention to the snares of interpretation. Among other things it reminds us that Tricksters steal their weapons of ludic resistance (puns, parodies, inversions) from social institutions—institutions of interpretation which are first and foremost centers of social control. Tricksters know where the status quo is most vulnerable, but so does the dominant culture. Historically, across time and place, the social body has defended itself *precisely at its joints* by means of interpretation. Society works through civic mechanisms and economic networks; culture works through the circulation of meaningful artifacts and stories—symbols, emblems, icons, myths. These constitute the moral and spiritual life-blood of the social body, and its heart is the process of interpretation. Chairman Mao was wrong about the basis of state power. Guns merely force us to submit; interpretation gets us to consent. The effect of a sound cultural heart in a healthy social body is that the body's very joints become a source of strength and revitalization, especially the joints that connect our capacities for creative play with our need for meaning—for purpose, identity, and ideals. Interpretation (so conceived, understood historically, in its institutional context) works by directing that deep and abiding need towards socialization. It turns our world, imaginatively, into a system; it organizes our fantasies and visions in ways that make sense of things as they are; it forges the foundational links between subjectivity and society.

This conservative, cooptive power is what Twain's deadpan compels us to recognize. The joke is aimed not just against ideology, and not just against organized myth. Its target is the adversarial interpreter. Ideology and organized myth are satirized through the figure of Tom Sawyer. That satire has long provided an attractive focus of adversarial criticism, but if we focus on Tom we're being diverted from Twain's deapan point. His joke centers on Huck, and he means by this (by alerting us to our very impulse to focus on Tom) to identify us as adversarial critics—readers for whom interpretation is the road to free and independent thought (the conceptual equivalent for the "open territory")—*within* the institutions from which we claim to light out. We end trapped in the very joints of culture through which we had hoped to escape. It makes for an unnerving shock to the funny-bone, but we owe it to ourselves, and to Twain's art, to account for our laughter.

His snapper has the authority of history behind it. One need only consider the fantastic conservative-cooptive force of the four-fold method of medievalist exegesis, with its levels of meaning ascending in a Jacob's-ladder from earth to heaven, from literal and political to moral and mystical. It is hardly too much to say that for a millennium in the Christian West interpretation thus fortified every social juncture—linked the king's "two bodies" to the relation between men and women, gender dualisms to the metaphysics of mind and body, and that binary in turn to the double visible-spiritual structure of the cosmos. In America, of course (Twain's and ours), the case is alto-

gether different. Officially our interpretative modes are secular, antielitist, based on the separation of church and state, and insofar as the legacy of Christian hermeneutics persists—as indeed it does (that legacy is a major butt of Twain’s humor)—it is a Protestant mode: basically individualist, geared towards subjectivity, centered in personal conscience rather than in church tradition and papal bull. But the results are no less binding and systemic. The success of society in the United States is due in no small part to the fact that the culture developed a distinctive network of moral- spiritual meanings (iconic, mythic, symbolic) together with a complex set of interpretive techniques appropriate to the civic institutions and economic modes of *this* society.

*Huckleberry Finn* is a deadpan exposé of those techniques—an anatomy of the official hermeneutic of nineteenth-century America as this developed from the Jacksonian era through the Gilded Age. As Huck tells the story, the cultural trap of interpretation is most conspicuously marked by conscience. It’s conscience that makes him a racist—conscience that leads him astray at every moral juncture—and we interpret his conscience, properly, as an indictment of the values of the antebellum Southwest. But I believe Mark Twain had another culture in mind. There was no need in 1885 to indict slave society. Primarily, Twain’s deadpan is directed against his readership, then and later (and perhaps still today). I refer to the conscience-driven forms of American liberal interpretation, and to its particular modes of socialization as these flowered during the last decades of the nineteenth century, the age of “the incorporation of America.”<sup>5</sup> No work of art is more revealing of that process. As a Tall Tale, *Huckleberry Finn* draws upon an earlier period, the “free and open” Jacksonian Southwest where the joints of the nation’s emergent social body seemed weakest, most vulnerable to the blatant “gap between the culture and sweat found in frontier experiences ... Indian wars, slave dealing, *herrenvolk* white racial solidarity, endemic violence, economic instability, fluidity, humbuggery, and speculative fantasy.” As a Trickster’s deadpan, the novel turns the Tall Tale (at our expense) into a commentary on the process by which that gap was made a self-revitalizing source of cultural incorporation.

In my first two examples I tried to outline the scope of Twain’s design in this regard. Now to specify his technique (the dynamics of his mock-interpretive nub or snapper), I turn to my third and main example. The passage comes at the end of Huck’s adventures on the river. He lands at the Phelps Plantation, where he meets Sally Phelps, who mistakes him for her nephew Tom Sawyer. Huck instinctively goes along with his new identity, but gets confused in accounting for what now turns out to be his late arrival: Tom had been expected by steamboat some time before. Huck at first explains that the boat had been grounded, then can’t think of *which* grounding—but

I struck an idea, and fetched it out: “It wam’t the grounding—that didn’t keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder head.”

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<sup>5</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), *passim*.

“Good gracious! anybody hurt?”

“No’m. Killed a nigger.”

“Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt. Two years ago last Christmas your uncle Silas was coming up from Newrleans on the old Lally Rook, and she blowed out a cylinder head and crippled a man. And I think he died afterwards. He was a Baptist.” (p. 279) Again, we’re at a key joint of the narrative. The arrival at the Phelps Plantation unites all three sections of the novel (Hannibal, where Tom figures prominently; the journey down the river; and Huck’s adventures at the Phelps); and it connects all three layers of Trickster fun (innocent, satirical, and sinister). It also demonstrates Twain’s hermeneutical imperative—we *must* interpret this scene (its humor leaves us no alternative)—while offering a striking example of what’s funny about our habits of interpretation. I take the joke to lie in the (in)famous one-liner “No’m. Killed a nigger.” We are then diverted from its nub by Aunt Sally’s story of the Lally Rook. To recall Twain’s instruction: when the joke comes, “the listener must be alert, for ... the teller will divert attention from the nub by dropping it in a carefully casual or indifferent way, with the pretense that he does not know it is a nub.” The Baptist is a decoy; it allows the story to bubble gendy along. The nub is encoded in Huck’s throwaway line: “No’m. Killed a nigger.” In what follows I mean to decode Twain’s deadpan by outlining seven points about Huck’s response to which we should be alert.

First, his use of “nigger” is profoundly racist. We can’t say (as too many critics have done) that it’s just slang—a poor ignorant boy’s way of saying African American. What Huck *means* is far worse than what a bigot means by “wop” or “mick.” Huck is saying that a “nigger” is a *no one* (that’s the “joke” in response to the straight-man query, “anybody hurt?”). If we’re alert, the negational form (“No’m”) serves to *highlight* the positive charge of “Killed,” especially because of the pause indicated by the sentence break.

Second, Huck’s response is gratuitous. As again we’re reminded by the sentence break (“No’m. Killed ...”), Huck could just as well have stopped at “No’m.” And be it noted that that kind of gratuitous remark, in all its racist implications, is typical of Huck. The *casualN-word* is fundamental to his vocabulary. As critics over the past three decades have pointed out, the word “nigger” occurs on virtually every page of the novel; and it’s worth emphasizing that it took three generations of readers *before them* to take offense. *Huckleberry Finn* was always controversial, but the first debates centered on issues of class, not race. The complaints had to do with Huck’s delinquency, bad habits, and poor grammar. The N-word went unnoticed until the 1960s, and I believe that the not-noticing was basic to Twain’s deadpan. Part of the joke is that the word was woven into the very fabric of Twain’s democratic culture. The N-word was at once unexamined and ubiquitous—unexamined because ubiquitous, and ubiquitous because unexamined—and never more so than in the era of Reconstruction, when the minstrel show was the most popular American form of humor. Huck’s response is entirely appropriate to him and his readership alike.

It's also appropriate to the plot of the novel. That's the third point to make about Huck's remark. His joke concerns a dead person and death is a main narrative thread death in the deadpan mode, gilded over by humor. A fair example of the gilding process comes in the early passages concerning Tom's gang:

Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of the secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person ... must do it... And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off the list with blood...

Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath ...

Some thought it would be good to kill the *families* of boys that told the secrets. Tom said it was a good idea, so he took a pencil and wrote it in. Then Ben Rogers says:

"Here's Huck Finn, he hain't got no family; what you going to do 'bout him?"

"Well, hain't he got a father?" says Tom Sawyer.

"Yes, he's got a father, but you can't never find him these days. He used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard, but he hain't been seen in these parts for a year or more."

They talked it over, and they was going to rule me out, because they said every boy must have a family or somebody to kill, or else it wouldn't be fair and square for the others. Well nobody could think of anything to do—everybody was stumped, and set still. I was most ready to cry; but all at once, I thought of a way, and so I offered them Miss Watson—they could kill her. Everybody said:

"Oh, she'll do. That's all right. Huck can come in." (pp. 9–10)

This is funny, although not to Huck (he's "most ready to cry"). It's Tom who's having fun, along with us. But Twain the Trickster has a different point in mind. And (as in the case of Huck's response to Aunt Sally) his point is rather obvious once we're on to his method. Indeed, it's a point that's basic to deadpan technique, as Twain describes it: the humor "depends for its effect upon the *manner* of the telling ... [as distinct from] the *matter*." Once we look as it were through the narrative manner to its matter the snapper to the gang-oath is as plain as the ubiquity of the N-word. Death and violence are writ large throughout the novel. The blood-bond that Tom invents is a mirror-reflection of the world of *Huckleberry Finn*. It foreshadows the death-hoax that Huck invents when he leaves for the river ("I pulled out some of my

hair, and blooded the ax good” and made a track so that they’d look “to find the robbers that killed me”) and the horrific scene earlier, when his blind-drunk father chases him around the shack with a “clasp knife,” cursing and roaring (and laughing with “*such* a screechy laugh”) that Huck is the Angel of Death, “saying he would kill me and then I couldn’t come for him no more” (pp. 41, 36). These fantasies come to life, as it were, in the Boggs murder, in scenes of lynching and tar-and-feathering, in the Grangerford-Shepherdson clan massacre. According to Twain scholars, there are thirty-three corpses in *Huckleberry Finn*, and that does not include the section Twain omitted, surely one of the most vivid and most morbid he ever wrote, describing Pap’s dead body. It’s not too much to say that dead bodies, real and imagined, are the anatomical links of Huck’s story. It’s appropriate that G.G.’s “ordnance” (the Notice authorized by a Chief of Cannon and Artillery) should warn that anyone seeking a plot would be shot. Getting killed is a key to the novel’s plot-line.

The fourth point to make about Huck’s “joke” concerns the cause of death. On the river he travels, explosions are a common experience. Aunt Sally confirms this in the case of the poor Baptist, and we can find many other examples in the novel (steamboats grounded, blown up, cutting rafts in two). The point is: this river is dangerous. Critics have tended to sentimentalize the “natural setting” in *Huckleberry Finn* (“the river- god” called the Mississippi), and to be sure the sentiment is invited by its comic author. But Twain the Trickster makes it plain that the river is a constant threat. “Nature,” Satan reports in *Letters from the Earth*, “is a killer,”<sup>6</sup> and *Huckleberry Finn* might have been his proof-text. The river here is the source of storms and water-snakes; it calls up the fog that keeps Huck and Jim from reaching Cairo; its currents and counter-currents, twists and turns, carry the raft ever deeper into slave territory; it is ubiquitously “troublesome” to those who live in its vicinity:

the houses was sticking out over the bank, and they was bowed and bent, and about ready to tumble in... People lived in them yet, but it was dangerous, because sometimes a strip of land as wide as a house caves in at a time. Sometimes a belt of land a quarter of a mile deep will start in and cave along till it all caves into the river in one summer ... the river’s always gnawing at it. (p. 183)

This river affords Huck and Jim some wonderful moments together; and to underscore their “idyll” critics have often quoted Huck’s description of life on the raft: “what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others” (p. 165). But the interpreters have generally failed to add that that’s how Huck *rationalizes* allowing the King and Duke to have their way (“it warn’t no use to tell Jim”)—and they have generally failed to note that *for much of the river journey* (more than half of it) life on the raft is controlled and directed by those

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<sup>6</sup> *Mark Twain, Letters from the Earth, p. 6.*

“scoundrels” (as Huck charitably calls them [p. 268]).<sup>7</sup> Huck and Jim may be in flight on the Mississippi, but the Mississippi is the natural habitat of the Duke and King, just as it is naturally the cause of mud-slides. In this book the river is emphatically not an emblem of Nature’s Nation; it belongs to the world of Hobbes and Darwin, not of Rousseau and Emerson. Nothing is more natural about Huck, nothing more clearly shows how close he is to the river, than does his spontaneous invention of the exploding cylinder that (only) “Killed a nigger.”

Not that Huck needs the river to prompt his invention; he always thinks in terms of death and disaster. That’s the fifth point to note about Huck’s casual response. It alerts us to the fact that he’s a morbid, haunted young boy. I’m referring now to the general way he thinks and imagines rather than to his particular experiences. Twain provides two clues to Huck’s inner world: the lies that Huck tells and the images that he conjures up when he’s alone—in other words, the reality that Huck himself makes up, for others and for himself. In both cases, it’s the reality of the grotesque. The stories he invents for strangers are a series of horror-tales: families dead, dying, or diseased. And his solitary musings take exactly the same form, except that the dead return as ghosts. One such moment occurs on his arrival at the Phelps Plantation:

When I got there it was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny; the hands was gone to the fields; and there was them kind of faint dronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody’s dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the leaves it makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it’s spirits whispering—spirits that’s been dead ever so many years—and you always think they’re talking about *you*. As a general thing it makes a body wish *he* was dead, too, and done with it all. (p. 276)

What’s funny about this description—in both the fun sense of the term and in its “odd or curious” implication—is that actually it’s a lovely Sunday morning; there’s no reason for Huck to think this way, except that that’s the way he thinks. One more example must suffice. I take this from the first chapter, Huck alone in his room at night, conjuring up the world out there in what may be read as an introduction to his general angle of vision:

I went up to my room with a piece of candle, and put it on the table. Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn’t no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and

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<sup>7</sup> Huck and Jim spend eleven days together on the raft (chapters 11–16 and 18); the Duke and the King invade the raft in chapter 19 and remain for at least fifteen days—until chapter 31, when the raft lands at the Phelps Plantation.

a whippo-will and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. (p. 4)

What I termed Huck's casual response—his spontaneous invention of a dead person (or non-person)—is in fact perfectly characteristic, a typical product of his “mournful” fantasy life.

But of course it's not pure fantasy when he invents the cylinder explosion; this time Huck is not alone; on the contrary, he's trying hard to please someone else. He's being led on by Aunt Sally, who prods him about the grounding. He knows what she'd like to hear, and he knows she'll think a “nigger” is “no one,” just as he knows she wants him to be like Tom. And naturally he complies. That's the sixth point to note about his response. Huck *wants* to conform. More precisely, he's a conformist who can't make it. Huck would like to please everyone, even Miss Watson. He would even like to live with Pap, if Pap would let him live; he tries as best he can to “satisfy” the Duke and King; he'd certainly like to join the Grangerfords (at the expense of abandoning Jim) and no doubt the Phelps as well; and he'd *love* to be Tom Sawyer—but he can't. Huck Finn is Woody Allen's Zelig in reverse: a deadpan artist's Zelig. Zelig may not want to be a Chinese chef or a Nazi, but he can't help becoming just like whoever he's with. Huck's dilemma is just the opposite: he can't help being different. Certainly, we sympathize with his difference, we applaud it, but the nub remains. Huck's desire to fit in is underscored by his inability to do so. And he wants to fit in because he believes in society and its values. He believes in racism, class hierarchy, Southern aristocracy, Sunday School religion. Why else would he be so disappointed in Tom's plan to “steal” Jim?

Well, one thing was dead sure, and that was that Tom Sawyer was in earnest, and was actuly going to help steal that nigger out of slavery. That was the thing that was too many for me. Here was a boy that was respectable and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leather-headed; and knowing and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and 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. It was outrageous, (pp. 292–293)

If this were a children's book called *Tom Sawyer*, we could read this passage as a healthy piece of social satire. The white-trash boy is at once denouncing (when he shouldn't) and looking up to (when he needn't) the respectable head-of-the-gang. But *Huckleberry Finn* is something else altogether (as Huck himself notes at the start): it's a complex, sophisticated narrative about a black-white relationship—to recall Twain's phrase, a work “of high and delicate art... [as] only an artist can tell it”—in which an



African American takes on extraordinary human force. Jim, we learn, is the noblest person in Huck's life, the novel's wisest, deepest, and most sympathetic adult figure, the father Huck deserves and never had. Can it be funny that Huck thinks like *this* after their long experience together on the river? After all he has seen of Jim—having actually acknowledged, however reluctantly, Jim's goodness, intelligence (he "was most always right") and caring (he'd "do everything he could think of for me")—can he believe that it would be "ignorant," "leather-headed," and "mean" for Tom to "stoop to this business"(p. 270)?

In order to explain this nub we need to rehearse its context. The last narrative section (the Phelps adventures, occupying about a third of the novel) has become a familiar critical crux. Twain scholars have debated its merits ever since Hemingway advised readers to skip it altogether. Tom's tricks at the Phelps's place amount to a series of minstrel-show send-ups: Jim locked in a wood-shack, following the silly-cruel instructions of a couple of adolescent pranksters, who "smuggle" spiders into the shack, instruct him to write messages in blood, and feed him a corn pone with a candlestick hidden in it ("it most mashed all his teeth out"). "Jim he couldn't make no sense in most of it," Huck comments, "but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied" (p. 309). Tom's higher knowledge in this case comes from the romances of Alexandre Dumas; he names his scheme the Great Evasion; and the joke, it turns out, is that Jim has already been freed. Miss Watson (who earlier had intended to sell him down the river for \$800) set him free on her death-bed (after his escape), so that Tom's games are a hoax, as *in effect* were Huck's efforts all along to help Jim escape. If we carry the logic of this hoax to its absurd end, we could say Jim was *lucky* he didn't get to Cairo and the North, since he would then never have known he was a free man.

Evidently Tom's games did amuse the minstrel-show audience of the 1880s and 1890s, but by the 1920s (as Hemingway's remark indicates) they had become troublesome for readers, and over the past half century critics have roundly denounced them and all that they imply. It's now safe to say (T. S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling to the contrary notwithstanding) that the last third section of *Huckleberry Finn* is a grand sarcasm on Twain's part directed against Tom Sawyer. But it's essential to recognize that this is a Trickster's sarcasm. The satire of the Good Bad Boy (whose mischief- by-the-book we see through and, accordingly, to whom we feel superior) is a Great Evasion to divert us from the nub. What's really funny about the hoax is that Huck goes along with it. He has the same respect for Tom at the end that he does at the start. Fundamentally, "Tom Sawyer's Comrade" (as the novel's subtitle funnily puts it) *is* the same Huck at the end that he was before he set out on his adventures. That's what makes it appropriate for him to respond to Aunt Sally as he does, in spite of all he has learned about Jim. Or rather, *because* of all he has learned, for (as his gratuitous "No'm" should remind us) Huck never develops. He speaks and thinks and feels at the Phelps's pretty much as he does at Miss Watson's. There's a technical reason for this: *Huckleberry Finn* is Huck's autobiographical retrospective, and if he

had realized what we'd like him to have realized—if his Devil's Pact on the river had had any enduring positive value; if it had come to signal a genuine conversion *to* Jim's humanity, rather than just one more confirmation of his own fatalistic low self-esteem (his sense of being damned anyway, in a wonderfully grim-funny display of what Twain meant by "Calvinism without God")—then Huck would have written an entirely different book. He would have felt differently not only about Jim but about Tom and all others, including himself. The boy who might have emerged as critics have told us he did would never have said early in his river-journey that "you can't learn a nigger to argue"; he would have expressed *some* regret about having abandoned Jim to live with the Grangerfords; and certainly he would not have expected Jim to join him and Tom in the territory. That is to say, if Huck Finn had really grown morally, Twain the Trickster could not gull us into thinking that he does. There would be no point or snapper to his story. Humorously speaking, his Tall Tale would be un-American.

*Huck doesn't develop so that we can be conned into believing he does:* in this case, there's something funny about the nub itself. The joke suggests it's a good thing that Huck doesn't change. It reminds us that what we believe in ultimately is Huck's integrity. He has the same fantastic innocence from start to finish. He's always the same lovable boy with the "sound heart"; from the outset his innate decency is set in contrast to society's "deformed conscience"; we come to see in Huck a kind of essentialist Romantic-natural opposition to "sivilization." What's *funny* here (in the con man sense of the term) is that it's Huck's unchanging quality which makes him admirable. And to draw out this con game, it's precisely that admirable aspect of him—the potential we discern *within* Huck's transparent innocence—which invites us to interpret his narrative. As I noted earlier, Twain's hermeneutical imperative turns on the snapper that we engage in interpretation because our hero Huck doesn't. Which is to say: Huck doesn't develop, therefore we do it for him. We know him better than he knows himself. Indeed, we know him as he *cannot* know himself, since his naiveté, his *unfulfilled* potential, wwhat we know about him, and what we cherish.

The deadpan this involves posits two contrary responses on our part: first, our distance from Huck and our superiority to him; and second, our love of Huck and our identification with him. The link between these responses—the joke's nub—lies in Twain's directive for interpretation. I said earlier that the deadpan Notice invites us to seek moral, motive, and plot; the Trickster's point is to guide us into a certain mode of exegesis. We might call it a comic mode in the classic sense of the term. Its purpose is to resolve contradiction and restore order. The snapper this entails is dramatically illustrated in the scene that critics have rendered the *locus classicus* of Huck's moral progress. It comes at the point when Huck learns that the Duke and the King have disclosed Jim's whereabouts. Dismayed that Jim may be "sold down the river ... amongst strangers," Huck decides it would be preferable to return him instead to Miss Watson, "his true and proper owner," so that he can "be a slave at home where his family was." Then Huck succumbs to conscience-stricken memories of

how he himself has been responsible, directly or indirectly, for helping this “runaway nigger”:

I tried the best I could to kinder soften it up somehow for myself by saying I was brung up wicked, and so I warn’t much to blame: but something inside of me kept saying, “There was the Sunday school, you could a’ gone to it; and if you’d ’a done it they’d a’ learn’t you there that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.”

It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn’t try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn’t come... You can’t pray a lie—I found that out... At last I had an idea: and I says, I’ll go and write the letter—and then see if I can pray... So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down, and wrote:

Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send.

HUCKFINN.

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking ... [and went on thinking] 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... I studied a minute,... 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... (pp. 269–271)

What’s funny about this scene is that it’s: (1) playful—it’s a mock-conversion that turns into a Devil’s Pact; (2) satirical—it’s a sweeping indictment of the ravages of Southern Evangelical Calvinism; and (3) odd, curious, and sinister—it’s a savage mockery of our relation to the text. For in order to “get the joke” we *have* to interpret and yet we feel sure that our interpretation is voluntary; the meaning we find seems wholly subjective, a meaning “from the heart,” and yet it’s entirely predictable, a meaning directed step by step by Trickster deadpan. To begin with, we’re led to interpret in a *consistent* pattern of inversions. Huck says “conscience” meaning the Right Thing to Do, and we think “source of evil”; he says “wicked” and we think “kind”; Huck laments that he was “brung up wrong” and we’re glad that he has held fast to his virtues; he tells us he shivered with fear and we think he’s brave and independent; he says,

trembling, “I’ll go to hell” and we think “he’s saved!” This pattern of inversion is an act of protection. That’s the second step of interpretation. Whether or not we’re aware of it, we’re reading between the lines in order to save the “true Huck from everyone around him, from Tom and Miss Watson and the Grangerfords and the Phelps family. And our act of protection is in turn a claim to ownership. This third and triumphant final step of interpretation makes Huck *ours*. The opening gang-oath is worth recalling in this regard. The question that Tom raises about family hostages expands into a much larger question: to whom does Huck belong? The narrative plays out a series of options—Pap, Tom’s gang, Jim—until it becomes obvious (or should) that Huck finally belongs only to *us*. We adopt him, take him into *our* True American family, into our hearts; we interpret him into our likeness; hermeneutically, we recreate Huck as the child-in-us.

Now, all of this (to repeat) is predictable, an interpretive design forced upon by the humor itself. That is, it’s a design carefully elicited from us—with all the Trickster’s “casual” airs and sly diversions (just “bubbling along”)—by Mark Twain, Humorist.

Let us consider the snappers hidden in this narrative situation. First, there’s the issue of “manner” (Twain’s key to the deadpan relation between form and content): Huck Finn is a great writer; his grammar and spelling are faulty, but that only accentuates the beauty of his style, which is extraordinarily simple, spontaneous, and open. And yet we have to protect him all the time from his own text. We have to explain away his words, to redefine the emotions he records, to reverse the convictions he sets out. Huck is a master of the literal statement; he writes with unfailing directness, lucidity, and vivid effect; he’s the prime example (as Hemingway noted) of the American plain style. And yet we have to save Huck at every turn from his own plain meanings. We have no choice, as it were, but to recast “shiver” (when Huck says “it made me shiver”) into *something* positive, to deny the import *for Huck* (the stated effect) of his decision to choose damnation, to white out not only his numerous N-words but the “no one” by which he glosses the word, at the Phelps’s and elsewhere. Once we’ve done all that, we can laugh along *with* Huck, *our* Huck, the uncorrupted child in us who (we’re certain) does *not* believe, would never *really* think, that “you can’t learn a nigger to argue.” To paraphrase Jim: we’re sophisticated folks, and so we know better, and can smile contentedly and be satisfied.

Still, we should be suspicious by this point about the process we’re engaged in. Our interpretation has led us step by logical step from protection to adoption to identification; and at the end our laughter expresses the child-in-us—who is *us*? The answer, I’ve suggested, is the liberal white reader of 1885, and beyond. For the term “liberal white” here refers to a social-symbolic system, an official hermeneutic, an institution of interpretation designed to fortify a certain way of life. “Liberal” so understood is a code word that can stretch to accommodate a wide range of positions, from (say) communitarian to libertarian, from left Democrat to right Republican. And “white” in this configuration can stretch accordingly to include a liberal rainbow-gamut of colors (black, brown, red, yellow). *Huckleberry Finn* has always been controversial, and many

case-books have documented the polemical zigzags evident in its reception. Nevertheless, a consistent liberal theme dominates the discourse, a critical main-current that runs through virtually all sides of the argument (provided that the critic does not dogmatically, illiberally, condemn the book for being merely trashy or utterly racist). I refer to what Jonathan Arac has recently labeled the “hypercanonization” of Huck Finn. To judge from a century of Twain experts, Huck is “the individual in nature,” “independent,” “self-reliant,” “the spirit of youth,” “the spirit of adventure and expansion,” the soul of “mobility,” “enterprise,” “unboundedness,” and “exploration.” More than that: Huck and Jim on the raft have been taken as a kind of communitarian utopia, the emblem of the “ideal society.” In contrast to the restrictive possibilities associated with settlements, together they are seen represent the “spiritual values” of “voluntary association,” “personal freedom” in a context of “true brotherhood,” “responsibility and equality entwined.” Critics have applied these abstractions as universals, but clearly they are universals within a distinctive historical frame, a configuration of beliefs and ideals that make up a singular *cultural* vision. As Norman Podhoretz, editor of the neo-conservative journal *Commentary*, has written: “Sooner or later, all discussions of *Huckleberry Finn* turn into discussions of America.” Or in the words of the late Irving Howe, writing in his left-wing journal *Dissent*, “Huck is not only the most American boy in our own literature, he is also the character with whom most American readers have most deeply identified.” Or once again, in the words of the Americanist scholar Eric Sundquist: *Huckleberry Finn* is “an autobiographical journey into the past” that tells “the story of a nation.”<sup>8</sup>

Twain’s Trickster humor stands out brilliantly *against* the background of this liberal consensus-in-dissent. The nub or snapper of our interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*—both of the narrative and of its “autobiographical” hero—is that what begins as our subjective assessment, and often our oppositional perspective (against “sivilization”), leads us happily, inexorably, *into* the institutions of culture. Thus it was all but inevitable that in our multicultural era, Huck should be discovered to be (in addition to everything else that’s now identified as positively American) multicultural. This is not the place to discuss Huck’s “blackness,” but it’s pertinent here as elsewhere to recall Twain’s warning that interpretation may be a trap of culture. *Huckleberry Finn* is a journey into deadpan, towards a devastating nub. The plot is a river-story, the style is a flow of humor, and our interpretation is a raft that promises protection (from conscience, from Tom’s games, from social enslavement, from racism and ethnocentrism, from all the slings and arrows of outrageous adulthood). But the river keeps returning us again and again to the settlements, the raft proves to be a very insecure haven, and on this “raft of trouble,” on this river that betrays (and kills), we’re left with two mock-symbolic figures. One is Huck Finn, bond-slave to society, mosdy scared to death,

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn as Idol and Target* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1997), p. 3. For critical comments on Huck see Arac, *passim*, and the essays collected in Gerald Graff and James Phelan, *Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy* (Bedford Books: Boston, 1995)-

speaking a language we don't trust, and (as Pap puts it, in his one drunken flash of insight) an Angel of Death. The other is Jim, the fugitive Black who need never have run off, who leads Huck into a Devil's Pact, and who, in doing so, ironically enacts his own version of the official hermeneutic: "Dey's two angels hoverin' round 'bout [every person]. One uv 'em is white en shiny, en t'other one is black. De white one gits him to go right a little while, den de black one sail in en bust it all up. A body can't tell yit which one gwyne to fetch him at the las'" (p. 27). So the nub is: the Angel of Death and the Black Angel, on a Trickster's raft-to-freedom, drifting deeper and deeper into slave-territory. It makes for a savagely funny obituary to the American-myth.

I mean *funny* now in the manner of the late Twain, the comic nihilist who wrote that "only laughter can blow history to rags and tatters at a blast," the "laughing mortician" (as one of his heirs, Nathanael West, put it) who felt "quite sure that (bar one) I have no race prejudices nor color prejudices nor creed prejudices. Indeed I know it. I can stand any society. All that I care to know is that man is a human being—that is enough for me—he can't be any worse." For that deadpan artist, humor was a systematic exposé of the abstractions that held together what looked like an enlightened view of history. He states the rules of the game in "How To Tell A Story," and he shows how they work explicitly (exposes the nub itself) in *The Mysterious Stranger*. Here Satan, the divine Trickster, pairs up with a poor-white, innocent, sound-hearted little boy, a boy not unlike Huck—befriends him and conjures up for him a variety of alluring spectacles and promises, only to reveal, at the end, the absurdity of each one of them. "You perceive *now*? Satan declares, that it "is all a Dream, a grotesque and foolish dream." And then the boy's epiphany: "He vanished, and left me appalled; for I knew, and realized, that all that he had said was true."<sup>9</sup> That's the "humorous" *terminus ad quem* of *Huckleberry Finn*, the seventh and bleakest nub of the joke I've been discussing. "No'm. Killed a nigger" foreshadows the appalling post-snapper insight reserved for all enlightened close readers, those of us who finally "get it"—those who see (*through* the innocent fun and the social satire) the savagery of this most American of all Tall Tales. The exhilarating flight to freedom we'd marvelled at—black and white together, the individual regenerated by nature—was all a dream, a grotesque and foolish dream. Then, if we have the integrity, we may venture to laugh at ourselves for having been caught in the cultural hermeneutic by which we've remade Huck, laughingly, as *ours*.

Where does that leave the problem of interpretation? At best, I think, at the ethical juncture which Emmanuel Levinas describes as the connective between self and Other.<sup>10</sup> *Huckleberry Finn* leads us into something like an absurdist impasse—we must interpret (to get the joke), but we can't interpret (without making a joke of ourselves)—

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<sup>9</sup> Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Library of America: New York, 1997), p. 770; Mark Twain, "Concerning the Jews," in *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, and Essays*, ed. Louis J. Budd (Library of America: New York, 1992), p. 355; and *The Mysterious Stranger*, ed. William M. Gibson (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1969), p. 405.

<sup>10</sup> On the issue of ethics and aesthetics from this perspective, see for example *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Martinez Nijhoff: The Hague, 1981), pp. 199 if.

a comic position that leaves us without the traditional sustaining devices of comedy: bereft of the social norms embedded in satire, devoid of the moral or philosophical alternatives implicit in irony and parody, stripped even of the immemorial “liberating magic” of the folk-tale<sup>11</sup> (the deadpan exposes liberation in this sense as the storyteller’s magic *trick*). What remains, then, is the sheer volatility of the fun that Twain sets loose in this novel. Considered as a Trickster’s monologue, Huck’s story has a certain brilliantly- controlled authorial point-to-it-all; as humor, however, its layers of meaning are not only different but contradictory—cheerful, satiric, sinister—and yet they coexist, interpenetrate, modify, and undermine one another. I’ve called them layers to distinguish the relationship between them from what we traditionally mean by levels of meaning. Levels usually lead to a unifying, bottom-line interpretation, as in the medieval fourfold method, or in our deep interpretation of Huck’s innocence (or his radicalism or his multicultural representativeness). By contrast, layers of meaning are mobile, shift shape like a kaleidoscope. It depends which way you turn them; and they are by definition always subject to another turn or series of turns. Thus what’s funny about West’s image of the laughing mortician (or about my my description of *Huckleberry Finn* as a “savagely funny obituary”) is that “mortician” (like “obituary”) is apocalyptic, the mark of an ending, whereas to laugh at something “funny” signals a different perspective on the matter: the possibility of another, different, and/or contradictory layer of interpretation.

That comic perspective follows from the *intentionality* of humor in *Huckleberry Finn* (as distinct from Mark Twain’s intention), and it turns our laughter against any form of systemic, bottom-line interpretation, *including deadpan*. For of course deadpan is itself a model of the systemic. We’re asked to get *the snapper*, *the realization* that explains (even as it undoes) everything that has come before. So the Levinasian joke (if I may call it so) is that the humor of *Huckleberry Finn* undoes the deadpan. Twain’s nubs and snappers remain the key to the fantastic artistry by which he takes us in; with which he then guides us, if we’re alert, to perceive the traps of culture, and through which he offers us the opportunity to have a good laugh at ourselves, good enough perhaps to blow history to rags and tatters. However, those nubs and snappers are dependent on the extraordinary creative power of Huck’s story-telling. They leave us, that is, within

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Schocken: New York, 1969), p. 102; that magic, writes Benjamin, leads back to “the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which history had placed upon its chest.” Twain’s distinctive use of deadpan is highlighted by comparison with the techniques of the Russian skaz: see for example Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. R. W. Rotsel (Ardis: New York, 1973)? pp.153–163 (the three types of skaz that are defined here correspond provocatively to the three layers of “funny” I describe) and Donald Fanger’s analysis of the skaz as a send-up of its readers (a monologue that “parodically mirrors the larger text of which it is a part, ” so that in laughing at the townspeople who listen to the story we laugh at “our own proxies”) in *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1979), pp. 102 if., 178. Still another rich source of comparison (and contrast) in this respect would be Huck Finn vis-à-vis the great monologue-figures of Sholem Aleichem.

the world of Huck's monologue—a world where Huck is alive and well, buoyant, on the go, enhanced (for us) by the satire we see *through* his straight-faced observations and nourished by the cheerful flow of jokes by which Twain ensnares us into wonder and belief. The dynamic this entails may be pictured as continuous, fluctuating, myth-making/myth-mocking negotiation between perceptions that tear meaning apart and protective revisions that build up meaning. It yields up a Huck we can't really know because we can't fix into categories: a Huck who's neither merely what he says he is nor merely a version of the American Boy we project nor (again) merely the butt of a Trickster's deadpan; who's therefore at least partly beyond our understanding or control, but to whose subjectivity we respond even though he's not *ours*—even though he gets us to laugh at our very urge to appropriate him. So interpreted, what's “finally” funny about *Huckleberry Finn* is that this Trickster's savage obituary to the traps of culture turns out to be a lifebuoy (a coffin-lifebuoy) keeping us in sight of the possibilities of an ethical life.



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What's Funny About *Huckleberry Finn*  
Winter 1999

New England Review (Middlebury, UK), Vol. 20, Iss. 1, (Winter 1999), pp. 8–28.  
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