
*from Banned in Concord:
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
and Classic American Literature*

By Myra Jehlen,
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I want to propose that dissonance is the message of *Huckleberry Finn*. On one level, this message is intentional or conscious and represents Mark Twain's understanding of the world of Hannibal, Missouri, and late-nineteenth-century America. Much of nineteenth-century literature projects a similar vision of contradictions in the national culture. But Twain's novel is not only about contradiction, it is itself radically contradictory - so dissonant, indeed, that it finally fails to represent the contradictions it means to address. At a deeper level than Twain controls, the great American novel is itself literally incoherent. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* sounds the contradictions of American culture so deeply that the novel drowns in them, collapsing at the end into embarrassing slapstick and bad writing.

This final collapse has received considerable critical attention, which we will look at shortly. But before considering the explanations that have been offered, let me point to just the experience of reading through *Huckleberry Finn* and into its drastic decline. While the plot ends comically, the degeneration of the work evokes in the reader, on the contrary, something on the order of tragedy. One feels oneself in the presence of an artistic fatality. And since it is the work in itself that ends tragically, there is no catharsis: having exposed contradiction to an ultimate clarity, *Huckleberry Finn* stands witness to the impossibility of any acceptable resolution. It is, I think, this experience of artistic fatality at the close of the novel, following on the brilliant life of the preceding pages, that has rendered Twain's classic the most widely compelling of American classics and at the same time the most frequently and harshly attacked. *Huckleberry Finn* has been throughout its history peculiarly unsettling for being itself so unsettled.

It is unsettled, of course, for good reason, over issues its readers can no more resolve than could Mark Twain, for at the core of the contradictions that finally rend *Huckleberry Finn* is the ideal of individual freedom. The conflict between this ideal, which is fundamental to the nation's founding philosophy, and the founders' tolerance, in some cases their endorsement, of slavery needs no explication. *Huckleberry Finn* is about that conflict. It was written, however, not while that conflict was still clearly inscribed in the law of the land but after two events had greatly obscured it. First, the Civil War legally emancipated the slaves and in the judgment of many redressed the founding error; then Reconstruction failed to establish the conditions that would realize this emancipation, so that the former slaves returned to a servitude from which it would require a different sort of intervention to free them than any declaration. This new intervention would have to be positive, not only

severing the bond of slavery but reconnecting the former slaves and masters in mutually responsible relations. Social responsibilities, however, tend, by the definition of self-reliant individualism, to come into conflict with both the theory and the practice of personal freedom. *Huckleberry Finn* is not only about slavery and the nation's compromised past but also, and in my view principally, about the contemporary dilemma of Reconstruction.

In a sentence, the two principal characters, Huck and Jim, represent the two sides of the dilemma: Huck strikes out for an absolute freedom, while Jim requires, in order to gain his own freedom, that Huck qualify his freedom by entering into the pursuit of Jim's. Signs that these two definitions of freedom pull the story in different directions are evident from the beginning, but their opposition becomes unmistakable at a fork in both the novel's plot and its physical terrain, as if the author had prefigured the trajectory of the work's own unfolding or were producing, along with his story, an allegory of its writing. The fork, of course, is the meeting of the Mississippi and the Ohio where, I will now try to show, individual freedom for Huck reveals itself to be as different from what it is for Jim as North differs from South.

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Very briefly, at the beginning of the story, freedom appears to be a single concept, in fact one that can unite individuals as different as black and white. And at this point, social engagement, defined globally as living inside society, is also a single concept that joins quite disparate persons in a generalized servitude. That civilization imprisons is not an unfamiliar theme in American literature, nor is the complementary theme of running away into nature. Escaping, Huck from family and Jim from society, they come together on the island and for the next six chapters forge an alliance of free individuals so without contradiction that it even recuperates the benefits of social engagement without its burdens. For in the first chapters, Jim and Huck have freedom in nature and live at home too. Forgotten are the tensions that had begun to emerge at the start of the story when Tom and Huck played practical tricks that shamed Jim. Instead, on an evening soon after they join forces on the island, with thunder rolling overhead and the rain coming down in sheets, Huck observes, "Jim this is nice, ... I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread." They have "got home all safe" (674)- The fork of the Mississippi and the Ohio in *Huckleberry Finn* represents an archetypal American choice between uncompromised individualism and responsible citizenship. Or more precisely, it forces the recognition that there is an absolute choice to be made between the two, that, contrary to some accounts of individualism at work for the improvement of society, one cannot be both. Huck's pursuit of individualism takes him into the deep South in the company of a runaway slave he has therefore failed to help free. The steamboat that smashes the raft at Cairo is headed right back to St. Petersburg. The pastoral idyll is over, and Jim and Huck are no longer bound on a common quest.

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Huckleberry Finn is Huck's book, not Jim's. It starts out as a comedy, an "As You Like It" with a hero drawn from the bottom of society rather than the top. But whereas the Forest of Arden is to be the setting for the reform of society, the world of the raft becomes an alternative to St. Petersburg, not its better self. While "As You Like It" implies, in the journey away from a corrupt court, a restorative return. *Huckleberry Finn* would imagine returning, either north or south, either toward freedom or slavery, only as defeat. Thus, it threatens to end as a tragedy. The ending, which returns Jim to slavery and Huck to the domesticity of the Phelps household and his role as Tom's sidekick, replaces a possible tragedy by a second version of the comedic beginning. This then concludes the same way as the first beginning, with Huck's escape and in fact Jim's as well. The circle overcomes the threatening line of the river plot, which can only lead in the south to tragedy and in the North to a social involvement that would be equally annihilative for Huck. Hemingway's praise for *Huckleberry Finn* extended only to the point of Jim's recapture; the rest, he thought, was "just cheating." It is cheating, in that Jim's prior emancipation obviates the thorny problem of freeing him in the south. It is also probably a failure of nerve and even a defeat, as Marx contends, in its abandonment of the challenge to racism. But through those very failures, the ending reaffirms the morality of an individual commitment to freedom in the face of society's entrapments and to transcendent truths against the world's inevitable duplicities.

Moreover, the ending is disturbing because it is all three: a cheat, a defeat, and an affirmation, and makes their connection too evident for philosophical comfort. Through this ending rather than despite it. *Huckleberry Finn* uncovers a contradiction that is not as visible in other major novels. It is not absolutely clear that Ahab has to drown the entire crew of the *Pequod* to fulfill his individual vision; and it is the less clear in that he is himself drowned. But the necessity of sacrificing Jim's freedom to Huck's independence is inscribed in the novel's very geography, in the river fork that heads one way to Jim's emancipation and the other to the continuation of Huck's outsider status. When in the end Jim too is freed, this further frees Huck, for Jim's reenslavement would have embroiled his friend in continuing guilt. Freed through no act either of his own or of Huck's, Jim embroils Huck in neither history nor future obligation.

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