“A White Man’s Inadequate Portrait of a Slave”:

Minstrel Shows and *Huckleberry Finn*

by

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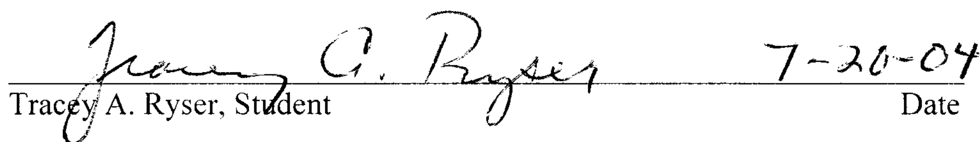

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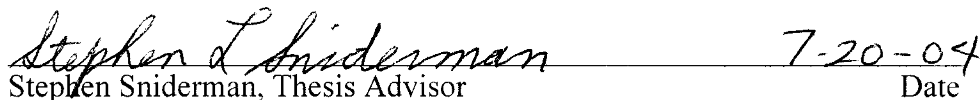

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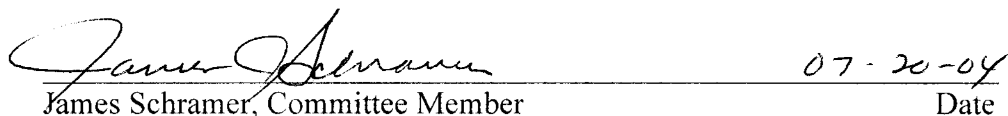

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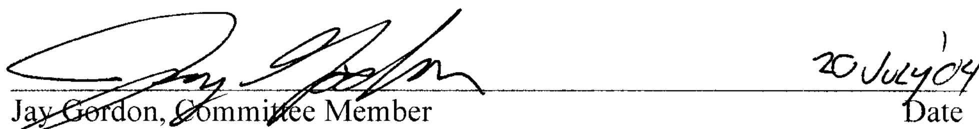

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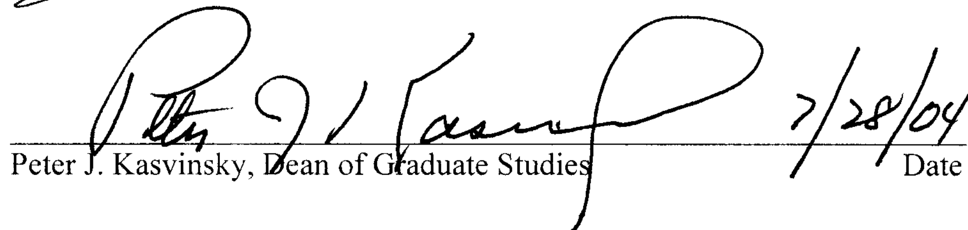

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ABSTRACT

In addition to the tall tale, Southwestern humor, and the picaresque tradition, Mark Twain was fascinated with and captivated by minstrel shows. He watched them as a boy growing up in Hannibal, Missouri; he saw them performed when he worked in California and even during the years when he was writing *Huckleberry Finn* from 1876 to 1884. Minstrel shows had a powerful and far-reaching impact on how white Americans viewed blacks in Twain's lifetime, and we can still see the traces of minstrelsy in our time as well in movies and in music. This thesis will examine to what extent antebellum minstrel shows influenced Mark Twain's "great American novel," and how he used elements from these shows to systematically undermine racist caricatures of African Americans.

In Chapter One, I explain the history of the minstrel show as well as Twain's experiences with and feelings about this entertainment form. I discuss the major stock characters found in minstrelsy and the originators of "burnt cork" comedy, and I offer excerpts from many of the most popular antebellum minstrel songs that Twain would have heard. I also explain how minstrelsy handled the subjects of race and slavery. In Chapter Two, I probe the multiple parallels between minstrelsy and *Huckleberry Finn* in order to demonstrate how deeply entrenched *Huck Finn* is in minstrelsy, focusing on how Twain adopts the minstrel show's tripartite structure, its comic dialogues, and some of its major themes. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I discuss Twain's anti-racist intentions for the novel by showing how Twain undermines negative minstrel show stereotyping throughout the text, focusing largely on Jim's role and how other characters treat him.

DEDICATION

There are many people that made it possible for me to complete this thesis. At the very top of this list is my husband Bill, who patiently listened to my ideas nearly every morning for several months. He encouraged me to find my own voice and my own beliefs about minstrel shows and *Huckleberry Finn.* Bill believed that I was capable of doing a thesis when I doubted it myself. He has been my best friend and greatest supporter, and without him, I would not have been able to finish this study. I would also like to thank my thesis chairman Dr. Stephen Sniderman, whose expertise about Mark Twain and *Huckleberry Finn* contributed immeasurably to my research and thesis development. I would also like to thank Dr. Jay Gordon and Dr. Jim Schramer who offered me a great deal of help in completing this as well. A thanks goes out to Dr. Tim Francisco who encouraged me to write this thesis and who talked to me about his own challenges when he was writing his dissertation. Finally, I would like to thank the African American community that I grew up with in Columbus, Georgia for helping me to understand the African American culture. As a white person living in a predominantly African American community, I learned first-hand about what racism meant to blacks living in America. This study is also a tribute to the slaves who were unjustly brought to our country and had the marks of inferiority cruelly branded on them. The slaves of yesteryear would be proud of how far their descendants have come in the course of the last fifty years. We still have some work to do as a nation, but I believe that one day Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of equality will be a reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Without the minstrel show there would have been no *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1950), no *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

—Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*

As many scholars have pointed out, *Huckleberry Finn* shows how Southwestern humor, the tall tale[1], and the picaresque tradition influenced Twain. In addition to these influences, antebellum minstrel shows also greatly influenced his production of *Huck Finn*[2], perhaps more than anything else. Ralph Ellison's seminal essay, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958), began the current scholarship about *Huck Finn's* racial discourse and Jim's questionable position in the novel. Ellison argues that Twain fitted Jim with a minstrel mask, and every now and then we find him peeping momentarily out from behind that burnt cork guise to show his humanity. But what is important to note, according to Ellison, is that Jim always retreats back behind the mask.[3] He writes, "I could imagine myself as Huck Finn…but not, though I racially identified with him, as Nigger Jim, who struck me as a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" (Ellison 112).

Ellison's essay has led me to ask whether there could have been more to Jim than just a minstrel show stereotype, for he most certainly does seem to mirror the earliest and most prevalent minstrel show stock character "Jim Crow" rather closely in so many parts of *Huck Finn*. But my research on the subject of minstrel shows has helped me to understand that Twain's use of Jim is far more complex than most critics have recognized. What this thesis seeks to demonstrate is that Twain uses

minstrel show caricatures in *Huckleberry Finn* and systematically undermines them in order to show his post-Reconstruction audience how foolish, inadequate, and unjust racist beliefs are.

The year that Twain began *Huckleberry Finn* in 1876 coincided with the end of the South's Reconstruction and, ironically, with America's Centennial celebration of the Declaration of Independence. Freedom for blacks had turned into a cruel joke by 1876 — a year in which white supremacy reigned in the South with pre-Civil War gusto. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out in *Was Huck Black?* (1993), this was also the year when the North and South reached a political compromise, when the "northern public would no longer support federal intervention in Southern affairs" (quoted in Fishkin 72). "The same summer," Fishkin says, "also brought some of the worst racial violence the country had ever seen" (Fishkin 72). The Northern white public "turned a deaf ear" to the South's virtual re-enslavement of blacks through the convict-lease system, lynching, and sharecropping (Fishkin 73). The South was teeming with terrorist-like racist groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the Knights of White Camelia, the White Brotherhood, and the Rifle Clubs of South Carolina. Their tactics included "intimidation, force, bribery at the polls, arson, and murder" (Fishkin 70). As Michael Egan points out in *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: Race, Class, and Society,* "racism and *de facto* slavery were back on the national agenda" (Egan 67). As Twain commenced his "boy's" book, he was very much aware of what was going on in the tumultuous South, and as Fishkin suggests, Twain either consciously or unconsciously infused *Huck Finn* with a protestation against the racial injustices that were happening in the South (Fishkin 69).

Examining Twain's masterpiece through the lens of the minstrel show will not only help us to understand the time period in which Twain was writing but also help us to grasp the sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious anti-racist dialectic Twain orchestrates within the text itself. One of the greatest hurdles that we as modern readers face is that the term "minstrel show" has been virtually wiped out, existing for the most part in the academic community. If we were to ask an average person today about minstrel shows, the response would likely be: "What's a minstrel show?" But in 1885, if we were to mention the words "minstrel show" to anyone walking down the street, he or she would know exactly what we were talking about. Stephen Foster's famous minstrel songs were on the lips of everyone in the mid-nineteenth century. Some of his songs, such as "O, Susanna!" and "Camptown Races," are still around, but their original link to minstrelsy is gone. Now, these songs are sung around campfires and in elementary school music classes.

Minstrelsy has always been a much-debated subject, even from its very beginnings in the late 1820s. Frederick Douglass was perhaps the first outspoken objector to blackface comedy. In an 1848 *North Star* article, Douglass went as far as to say that minstrel performers were the "filthy scum of white society, who stole from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their fellow white citizens" (quoted in Lott 15). In *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (1999), William J. Mahar argues that Twain foresaw this entertainment as compromising "the search for racial harmony that treated differences of race and status as subjects for ridicule" (Mahar 8). Mel Watkins aligns himself with Douglass in his *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy,*

arguing that minstrelsy had racist motivations, and minstrel performers strove to achieve those intentions through everything they enacted on the minstrel stage:[4]

> America's most popular entertainment form had become a forum in which white performers posing as blacks actively lobbied for the continuation of slavery by presenting degrading, consciously distorted comic stereotypes intended to "prove" that slavery and black subordination were justified, or even more insidiously, to demonstrate that blacks actually preferred serfdom. (Watkins, *On The Real Side,* 95)[5]

Considering blackface as a whole, I think that Watkins presents a common and incomplete view of minstrel shows. To be sure, whites were propping up the imagined image of black people (a powerless people who had no way of objecting to the outlandish stage productions of them) in order to entertain largely white audiences. As Eric Lott points out in *Love and Theft* (1993), working class whites in big northern cities needed to allay their fears about their own social inferiority by believing that another group of people (blacks) were even lower in status than they were. Although I cannot deny the negative racial implications presented in blackface comedy, I will discuss in chapter one how minstrelsy was far more complex than what it appears to be.

My curiosity about Twain's association with minstrel shows is not "uncharted territory." Jim as a minstrel "darky" has been brought up frequently over the past fifty years. Since Ellison's essay, scholarship about racism and minstrel show stereotyping has mushroomed. Flipping through any *Mark Twain Journal* between

1960 and 1996 will offer an abundance of race-related articles, and Jim sits in the middle of all the controversy: black, silent, and probably wondering why everyone keeps pointing the finger at him[6].

Egan argues that Twain treats Jim in a cruel and undignified manner in the "evasion" chapters, forcing Jim back into "stage-niggerdom" (Egan 31). In "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in *Huckleberry Finn,"* Peaches Henry accurately proclaims that Twain's "best-loved piece" has certainly not "escaped ambivalence about racial matters" (Henry 43) because the "ambiguities of the novel are multiple" (44). Writers like John H. Wallace and Julius Lester have explained why they despise *Huckleberry Finn.* In "The Case Against Huck Finn" Wallace declares, "The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* by Mark Twain, is the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (Wallace 16). Like Ellison, Lester also sees Jim as more of a minstrel character than a complete man. In "Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,"* Lester states that the novel is "immoral in its major premises, one of which demeans blacks and insults history" (Lester 201), and the repeated use of the word "nigger" doesn't help matters any for Lester with its derogatory and insulting connotations. He also believes that "Jim does not exist with an integrity of his own. He is a childlike person who, in attitude and character, is more like one of the boys in Tom Sawyer's gang than a grown man with a wife and children" (Lester 202).[7]

In "Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth-Century 'Liberality,'" Frederick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, like many recent critics, focus exclusively on Twain's use of Jim as a minstrel show stereotype, a buffoon "darky" that he uses

endlessly to entertain his audience at the expense of Jim and African Americans in general. They claim that Twain knew that "exaggerated antics of minstrelsy were overwhelming crowd pleasers," and they argue that Jim assumes the minstrel-like "stage role assigned to adult black males" (Woodard and MacCann 147).

As these anti-*Huck Finn* critics suggest, Jim is depicted as being sometimes ignorant, superstitious, and speaking entirely in the common "Negro" dialect. But Jim isn't alone. Except for a few minor characters, Standard English is rarely spoken by any of the characters in *Huck Finn*. Superstition and fear of ghosts are common to blacks *and* whites, and Tom and Huck certainly aren't depicted as being educated to any great extent. I submit that Twain believed that *all* human beings — black and white — were absurd and ridiculous, pretending to know more than they really do. In fact, if we consider what a minstrel mask is, virtually everyone in the novel is wearing one—not just Jim.

On the other hand, carrying the torch to pronounce Jim as more than a minstrel show character, Betty H. Jones argues in "Huck and Jim: A Reconsideration" that Jim is far more complex and noble than many give him credit for.[8] In her attempt to raise Jim up to the level of role model and father-figure to Huck and to exalt the relationship between the two characters, Jones admits the obstacle that she must overcome: "Jim's sometime role as minstrel-show buffoon, a role patently unacceptable to modern sensibilities, is a role people are likely to remember" (Jones 155).

I do not believe that critics have necessarily been wrong to probe *Huckleberry Finn* for "proof" that Jim is or is not a minstrel stock character, but I think that they

have been asking the wrong question. I think a better question is: What could have been Twain's intention for presenting Jim as a minstrel stock character sometimes and at other times presenting him as a full-fledged human being? By probing minstrel show history, I seek to provide insight concerning Twain's anti-racist positioning in *Huck Finn* by offering new observations about minstrelsy in the novel.

Using a dark-skinned character as a focal point to discuss racial ideologies is not new in literature. Shakespeare had his Othello[9] and Harriet Beecher Stowe had her Uncle Tom. In "Ebery Time I Wheel About I Jump Jim Crow": Cycles of Minstrel Transgression from Cool White to Vanilla Ice" (1996) W. T. Lhamon explains Stowe's reliance on minstrel tradition in her construction of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was a sponge of minstrel business, from Sam and Andy to Liza crossing the icy Ohio and Topsy turning somersaults. Contrary to the consensus, Stowe did not bequeath these images to the minstrel stage; rather, she palmed many of her most powerful images from it" (Lhamon 279). As Lhamon suggests, Uncle Tom and Topsy bear remarkable similarities to minstrel characters. Although Stowe conveniently operates with minstrel stereotypes, she was an abolitionist who wanted her readers to see how cruel and unjust slavery could be, working through the persuasive mode of sentimental romanticism.

Like Stowe, Twain also understood and recognized the stereotypical images of blacks presented on the minstrel stage. He understood that his readers had preconceived notions about human beings based largely on skin color. My analysis in this thesis rests upon the premise that Twain took advantage of racist ideology and took for granted that his audience was aware of what minstrel shows were and could

recognize racist images of blacks projected on the stage when they read about them in *Huck Finn.*

Lott explains that minstrel shows have been difficult to study because of their complex make-up and their diverse meanings:

> The minstrel show was an entertainment form that called in turn on a variety of elements: folklore, dance, jokes, songs, instrumental tunes, skits, mock oratory, satire, and racial and gender cross-dressing or impersonation…it impinged on a history of intense class, racial, national, and gender formation. (Lott 9)

Although blackface entertainment was not just negative stereotyping of blacks, critics of the minstrels shows are correct in pointing out that minstrelsy had a long-lasting impact on white Americans' concept of what it meant to be a black American. With the challenge before me, I have tried to do justice to minstrelsy's complexity as well as to its historical and cultural role in Twain's lifetime.

We cannot fully understand or appreciate Twain's novel unless we approach it with an understanding of the time period that Twain was writing in and for, and I devote Chapter One to outlining the history of the minstrel show and Twain's thoughts about and experiences with minstrel shows. In Chapter Two, I will examine the multiple parallels between minstrelsy and the novel in order to demonstrate how deeply entrenched *Huck Finn* is in the minstrel tradition. Chapter Three is the heart of this study. With a background in minstrel show history and an understanding about how minstrelsy in used in *Huck Finn,* I seek to demonstrate how Twain uses his audience's minstrel show stereotypes against them, to show how he systematically

presents the stereotypes and undermines them time and time again. I explain how Twain wanted his audience to *see* and *hear* how whites have been greatly influenced by the minstrel show's negative racial performances, and I focus some of this chapter on how characters in the novel look at and treat Jim as a minstrel stereotype, expecting him often to act like one of the characters on the minstrel stage.

Introduction Notes

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[1] Much like Mark Twain's literary tastes, minstrelsy used tall tales. In *Blacking Up,* Robert Toll points out that in "1848, one character bragged in song that he scratched out a panther's eyes with his toenails, bent a tree till it had a hump like a camel, and pulled a steamboat out of the water with a fishing pole" (Toll 41).

[2] The very creation of the book itself is intriguing. It was originally designed to be the sequel to *Tom Sawyer* when Twain broke ground on the novel in 1876 at the age of forty-one. Twain would then work on the novel until 1884, publishing it to an eager American public in 1885. *Huck Finn* would finally launch Twain into literary stardom, etching his figure in the American consciousness as the white-clad, white-bearded, cigar-smoking humorist.

[3] Mask wearing is an intriguing subject of study because of the liberating psychological benefits transferred to the wearer or bearer of that mask. The minstrel mask served as a unique American vehicle for consciously or unconsciously negotiating racial tensions, for introducing "black" entertainers to the stage (although they weren't black at first true blacks would take the stage after the Civil War), and for voicing "American" disdain for elitism and pretentiousness.

[4] For more information about minstrel shows, see Eileen Southern's *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (1997). She presents a similar view of minstrelsy that Mel Watkins does.

[5] To back up his assertion about the inherent racist end of blackface comedy, he presents a passage from "Old Dan Tucker," one of the most famous minstrel songs of the antebellum era:

> There is some folks called abolition,
> Want to mend de nigger condition,
> If dey would let the niggers alone,
> The niggers will always have a home. (quoted in Watkins 95)

[6] Oft-quoted scholars like Eric Lott, Bernard Bell, Betty Jones, Julius Lester, and Kenny J. Williams are just a few that have probed the "Jim as minstrel stereotype" question.

[7] According to Robert Toll's *Blacking Up,* to justify the caste system of the African American, minstrels depicted Negroes as submissive and child-like, needing the protection and guidance of the patriarchal, white father figure. Above all, minstrels were careful to never present African Americans as a threat or as sexually attractive (Toll 78).

[8] Ernest Hemingway proclaimed *Huck Finn* as the best American novel in *Green Hills of Africa,* and the pro-*Huck Finn* writers in the literary community used it as a much-needed crutch for legitimacy: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*... it's the best book we've had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since" (Hemingway 22). Granted, Hemingway wrote this passage in 1935, but even though it has been nearly seventy years since then, many critics still view *Huck Finn* as the quintessential American novel.

[9] Othello's tragedy is important because he is a black Moor and is able to rise to military greatness and power based exclusively on his genius and his expertise as a general. It is because of Iago's petty jealousy that a dark-skinned man has been given power above him that he exacts his revenge. Othello, strangely gullible for being a powerful general in charge of the Venetian fleet, falls quickly into the trap that Iago sets for him, tragically ruining himself and his innocent *white* wife.

CHAPTER ONE ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I provide a short history of minstrelsy and explain the impact of minstrel shows on the American white consciousness, and I discuss why these shows had a long-lasting impact on how whites viewed black people. As America's first indigenous entertainment form, minstrel show caricatures negatively portrayed African Americans and branded them as inferior to whites in virtually every way, from their physical appearance to their social practices. I explain the major stock characters found in the burnt cork routine like Jim Crow, Zip Coon, Banjo, and Bones. From make-up and costumes to the most popular minstrel songs, I aim at presenting a clear picture of what minstrelsy meant to America. I also probe how antebellum minstrelsy demonstrated ambivalence about slavery and how these shows mocked whites and blacks. I explain the tripartite structure of the minstrel show in depth, offering examples of comic dialogues and stump speeches. In the section "Twain and the Minstrel Show," I explain Twain's experiences with and feelings about blackface comedy and African American culture, which spanned from his boyhood days in Hannibal, Missouri through the time that he was writing *Huckleberry Finn.*

CHAPTER ONE

Mark Twain and Minstrelsy: "A Thoroughly Delightful Thing"

The real Negro show has been stone dead for thirty years. To my mind it was a thoroughly delightful thing and a most competent laughter-compeller and I am sorry it is gone.

--Mark Twain, *Autobiography*

In "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" Ellison makes an important point for my study about Twain and his relationship to minstrelsy: "Archetypes are timeless, novels are time-haunted" (Ellison 111). It is this notion of a novel being haunted by the time period in which it is written that underscores why so many modern readers cannot connect with the full meaning of the text. As modern readers and critics, we cannot gain a sufficient appreciation of what Twain accomplished or intended with *Huck Finn* until we understand the history of minstrelsy, its influence on Twain, and his experiences with it. Twain was writing to an audience that was well steeped in minstrelsy. They understood it. They watched blackface performers on stage, read about performers in the newspapers, and saw the playbills posted over the towns and cities; folks in small towns often saw minstrel parades making their grand approach to the theaters. Viewers often reenacted bits and pieces of these performances again in their homes for their own personal entertainment.

In an article printed in the *New York Tribune* on June 30, 1855, one critic exalts the minstrel show and speaks for the antebellum era's fascination and obsession with it since "Daddy" Rice brought it into vogue:

> It was at this epoch that Mr. T. D. Rice made his debut in a dramatic sketch entitled "Jim Crow"...Never was there such an excitement in the musical or dramatic world; nothing was talked of, nothing written of, and nothing dreamed of, but "Jim Crow"... It seemed as though the entire population had been bitten by a tarantula...Jim Crow monopolized public attention. It must have been a species of insanity, though of a gentle and pleasing kind, for it made hearts lighter, and merrier, and happier; it smoothed away frowns and wrinkles, and replaced them with smiles. ("The Black Opera")

As this passage indicates, the country was mad for minstrel shows. In 1844, the Ethiopian Serenaders made the first minstrel appearance at the White House; it wouldn't be the last such performance there (Toll 31). Presidents Tyler, Polk, Fillmore, and Pierce were given private performances in later years (Toll 31). In *Tambo and Bones,* Carl Wittke claims that even President Lincoln enjoyed minstrel shows and "reveled in [their] crude jokes and slap-stick comedy" (Wittke 209).[1] In his *Autobiography,* Twain tells us that by the mid-1850s minstrel shows were as "common in America as the Fourth of July" (61).[2] Like the country that fell under minstrelsy's spell, Twain loved the minstrel shows, and these shows had a profound influence on Twain's production of *Huckleberry Finn.*

A Short History of the Minstrel Show

Although critics frequently refer to the "minstrel tradition" when discussing Jim in *Huckleberry Finn,* they don't explain what that tradition really entailed, aside from

vague notions about whites marginalizing and negatively portraying blacks. The term "minstrel show" is a general term that we use today to refer to an entertainment form that spanned roughly from the late 1820s to the beginning of the twentieth century. White actors took burnt cork makeup (an amalgamation of burnt champagne corks and oil or water) and covered their faces with this black mixture. To make the mask complete, the minstrel would usually apply either white or red make-up to caricature African American features by making mouths, eyes, and noses that were substantially (and ridiculously) enlarged. In the process of "blacking up," these comedians would assume the role of stereotypical African Americans, usually of the plantation slave or the free Northern Black.

In addition to "blacking up," minstrel performers had to do many other things to be successful. One of the most important skills they had to possess was the ability speak with a Negro dialect. Twain recalls that the best minstrel troupes, like the Christy Minstrels, mastered the black dialect, using it "competently and with easy facility" which was "funny — delightfully and satisfyingly funny" (*Autobiography* 59). As Mahar explains, blackface comedians also had to sing well and usually play an instrument (both fundamental to the minstrel show itself). Finally, they had to possess acting skills and demonstrate an ability to maneuver between comedic and serious roles (Mahar 330).

The minstrel performers that Twain loved — Birch, Wambold, and Backus — were all pioneers of the minstrel show, but they weren't the originators. Like many other art and entertainment forms, there was a gradual transformation. As Lott points out, if we look at the very roots of minstrelsy, we see its parentage springing forth at the intersection of "slave culture and earlier blackface stage characters such as the harlequin

of the commedia dell'arte, the clown of English pantomime and the clown of the American circus, the burlesque tramp, perhaps the 'blackman' of English folk drama" (Lott 22). Most scholars credit Thomas Dartmouth Rice[3] as being the first official "blackface" comedian around 1829 — a man who was as famous in Twain's day as the most celebrated musician, movie god, or theatrical performer in our own time.[4] In *American Humor (*1931), Constance Rourke gives us the account accepted by most scholars concerning how Rice obtained his material: "Rice had heard an old crippled Negro hostler singing in a stableyard as he rubbed down the horses, and had seen him dancing an odd limping dance as he worked — "rocking de heel" (Rourke 80). Rice would perfect his comic spoof of the old, black laborer with the "curious shuffling step" and spark a national minstrel craze starting with the "Jim Crow" song and dance:

Figure 1. T. D. Rice Sheet Music Cover. 1848. Courtesy the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Houghton Library.

> First on de heel tap, den on de toe,
> Ebery time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow,
> Wheel about and turn about and do jis so,
> And every [sic] time I wheel about
> I jump Jim Crow. (quoted in Wittke 26)

As a result of this new, purely American entertainment, Rourke observes that "Rice enjoyed a popularity in the '30's and '40's which was said to be unmatched by that of any other American comedian of his time" (Rourke 80).[5]

Zip Coon was another stock character that developed alongside Jim Crow, as we see in one of the earliest minstrel show playbills for the famous George Washington

Dixon (see Figure 2). Acting as a contrast to the ragged and clumsy Jim Crow, Zip Coon, also called Dandy Jim, was a free black person trying to “put on airs” by attempting to copy the dress, social customs, and speech of upper class whites. Zip Coon became popular in the years prior to the Civil War when northern whites were particularly anxious about the notion of blacks achieving an equal status as whites. As Toll, Mahar, and Lott explain it, Zip Coon was a means by which white northerners could dispel their fears about blacks rising in America. Zip Coon could try to look and act white, but he would always look clumsy and sound unsophisticated (Toll 68). In Figure 2, we notice that he is wearing the top hat, skintight trousaloons, and genteel swallow-tail coat of Mark Twain’s period. In his left hand, he is holding a pair of spectacles, a symbol of the dignified and educated gentry, but he is spinning them around his finger. If we look carefully, we notice that Zip Coon also has four watches dangling from his pocket.

Figure 2. George Washington Dixon, “Zip Coon,” New York, [1830’s]. Harvard Theatre Collection.

Toll explains that Zip Coon minstrels would assume such names as Count Julius Mars Napolean Sinclair Brown, and these “aristocratic niggers” “preened and pranced across the minstrel stage on their way to...parties” (Toll 68).

Minstrel performers after Dixon would burlesque the free Northern black to an even greater extent. Twain explains that it was in fashion for white gentlemen to wear high standing collars, and “the minstrel appeared in a collar which engulfed and hid half of his head and projected so far forward that he could hardly see sideways over its points” (*Autobiography* 59). Twain also describes this “dandy” as wearing a coat with its

"swallowtail" hanging all the way to the floor, with huge, ridiculously oversized buttons. The shoes "were rusty and clumsy and cumbersome and five or six sizes too large for him" (59).

But there was more to Zip Coon's popularity than just racial lampooning; he was a major hit during this period because he personified the patent American distaste for those that pretended to be something that they were not, and he was commonly accepted as the embodiment of a person trying to distance himself or herself from the "democratic masses by establishing artificial social distinctions" (Mahar 227-228). Toll explains that Zip Coon minstrels also "lampooned frivolous whites who wasted their lives in unproductive dilletantism" (Toll 69). Consequently, both blacks *and* whites were mocked for trying to appear educated and pretending to know more than they really did to gain intellectual superiority over their opponent.

Imitators followed in Rice's and Dixon's wake quickly, and it was not long before the one-man act transformed into what is traditionally referred to as a minstrel show troupe of comedians. The Virginia Minstrels[6] quickly capitalized on burnt-cork popularity by introducing America to the first real minstrel show involving a minstrel ensemble or troupe in 1843. In *Blacking Up,* Robert Toll explains the Virginia Minstrel's original performance:

> They burst on the stage in make-up which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths. They dressed in ill-fitting, patchwork clothes, and spoke in heavy "nigger" dialects. Once on stage, they could not stay still for an instant. Even while sitting, they contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes, and twisted their outstretched legs. (Toll 36)

Exciting audiences everywhere they went with their wildly exuberant singing, dancing, and joking, the minstrels of this group achieved enormous fame in America. After July of 1843, the group disbanded, and the Christy Minstrels quickly took their place as the premier minstrel troupe of America, arguably becoming the most famous and most successful minstrel show of all time.

Minstrelsy matured and mushroomed in the growing urban centers of the north, in cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York (Toll 32). With its enormous and diverse population, New York City was the seat of the greatest minstrel activity, where "intense competition eliminated poor performers and forced innovations" (Toll 32). By 1850, there were ten major minstrel troupes performing in New York City's large theaters, and three of those were on Broadway. Minstrel shows came at a time when America was in a postcolonial lull and was eagerly anticipating original and refreshing entertainment that would bring the growing urban white masses together — masses that were largely immigrant Irish and German who flocked to America in great numbers during the first half of the nineteenth century. Blackface comedy also became popular at a time when the debate about slavery was beginning to grow, and northern whites were curious about blacks and were ethically, emotionally, and politically torn about issues concerning the "peculiar institution" (Toll 34).

Stereotypes projected on the minstrel stage gave white Northerners long-lasting, false beliefs about African Americans. In a recent interview, Mel Watkins laments the damage done by minstrel shows: "it affected all of society because those people who didn't know blacks…assumed that those characterizations, those depictions, those foolish characters on stage, were real black people" ("Stephen Foster").[7] Toll explains that

Northerners' gullibility arose because they had little exposure to African Americans, and minstrel comedians created "plausible black characters" (Toll 38). According to Twain's account, even his own mother was completely fooled by minstrel performers in St. Louis; she naively believed that she was watching African Americans (not white "corked up" actors) perform. Because the minstrel mask fooled audiences, minstrel sheet music began picturing blackface performers in and out of their costume (Lott 21).[8] Figure 3 is an 1844 songbook cover for the Virginia Serenaders, one of the early imitators of the Virginia Minstrels. On the top row, the blackface stars appear in stereotypical minstrel character. And on the bottom, the white performers show their "true colors," formally attired and dignified.

Figure 3. "Songs of the Virginia Serenaders," Boston, 1844, Harvard Theatre Collection.

Douglass's prediction about the long-lasting impact of minstrelsy would unfortunately prove to be accurate. According to Toll, the minstrel shows had by far the greatest impact on the Northern white public's images of blacks, even more than *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Toll 30). From its very beginning, minstrelsy branded African Americans as inferior to whites. Blacks were portrayed as being ignorant, foolish, and childish, as speaking a crude, nonstandard English, and as being highly superstitious (Toll 67). In minstrel show songs and on minstrel show advertisements, songbooks, and playbills,

minstrels depicted African Americans' bodies as being different from whites' and grossly mis-proportioned. Children were referred to with animal-like terms such as "darky cubs" (Toll 67). In minstrel songs, blacks didn't have hair; they had "wool," as we see in the following famous minstrel song "Uncle Ned":

> I once knew a darky and his name was
>
> Uncle Ned,
>
> O he died long ago,--long ago.
>
> He had no hair on the top of his head,
>
> The place where the wool ought to grow.
>
> ("Christy's Nigga Songster" 256)

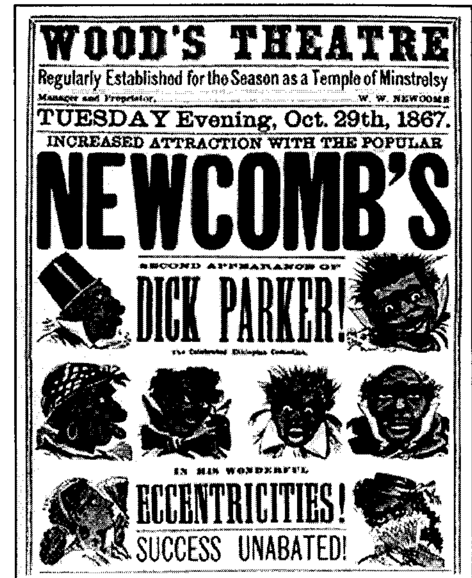

Figure 4. Early Minstrel Show Playbill for Newcomb's Minstrels, October 29, 1867.

In the 1867 playbill in Figure 4, we see a visual representation of the stereotypical black face, the epitome of what these minstrels were trying to achieve when they applied make-up. Minstrel playbills and advertisements show drawings of characters with bulging eyeballs, flat, wide noses, gaping mouths, and long, dangling lower lips. Making an observation about the Banjo and Bones minstrels, Twain relates the following: "Their lips were thickened and lengthened with bright red paint to such a degree that their mouths resembled slices cut in a ripe watermelon"

Figure 5: An Early Minstrel Show Songbook Cover.

(*Autobiography* 60). Their feet were shown as longer than normal, oftentimes with "flapping heels" (Toll 67). (As I will discuss in chapter three, Twain capitalizes on large feet when Jim is bitten on the foot by a rattlesnake.) Minstrel males preferred women with lips "as large as all out doors" with big feet that "covered up de whole sidewalk" (Toll 67). One popular song called "Dandy Jim of Caroline" typifies black caricature like that depicted in Figure 5:

> An ebery little nig she had,
>
> Was de berry image of de dad,
>
> Dar heels stick out three feet behind,
>
> Like Dandy Jim of Caroline. (quoted in Mahar 214)

In "Lucy Long," we learn that:

> Miss Lucy she is handsome,
>
> And Miss Lucy she is tall,
>
> And de way she spreads her ankles,
>
> Is death to the niggers all. (quoted in Wittke 180)

In the song "Sally, Come Up," Sally is stereotypically depicted as having a large nose:

> Sally has got a lubly nose,
>
> Flat across her face it grows,
>
> It sounds like t'under when it blows,
>
> Such a lubly nose has Sally. (quoted in Wittke 185)

Another song points out how blacks smell and look different from whites:

> Nigger's hair am berry short,
>
> White folks hair am longer,

White folks dey smell very strong,

Niggers dey smell stronger. (quoted in Wittke 186)

In virtually every way, African Americans were described as being inferior to whites. Although racial caricature was certainly a central component of blackface comedy, minstrel shows were a complex commercial and cultural entertainment industry that did not exclusively focus on racial and ethnic burlesque or the superiority of white people. The minstrel mask also served as a "safe" way in which to issue biting social criticism at white society and deal with a complex array of social issues. What was the rationale behind using the burnt-cork make-up, if not to simply lampoon African Americans or to keep their image controlled via the white performance? Why not simply parody social classes, politicians, public figures, and various ethnic groups outright? According to Toll, the answer lies in presenting a mask that would sufficiently disarm the audience so they would not be consciously or unconsciously "unruffled." Because of their inferior status, the idea of African Americans satirizing white society wasn't taken seriously and was considered simply funny (Toll 161).

Like Toll, Mahar points out that "blackface groups often turned from racist humor to mocking arrogance, imitativeness, and dim-wittedness of the upper classes…inserting where appropriate, allusions to public figures and controversies that set the democratic mass against the elite purveyors of high culture and salvation" (Mahar 40). We see upper and middle class whites being mocked in the following excerpt from the popular song "De Colored Fancy Ball":

See he offers a glass ob Ice cream

Wid a real silver spoon just stuck in it;

She takes it but surely I dream,

For by golly 'tis gone in a minute.

. . .

See dat Nigg in de blue satin vest.

Wid his heel sticking out feet sirs [sic];

Cutting such capers and doing his best,

To charm ev'ry gal dat he meet sirs.

. . .

Sich a darky as dat has not [sic] right at de ball,

Tell him to quit and be off;

He had two years in Sing Sing and came out last fall,

For picking up tings on de wharf. (quoted in Mahar 132)

If we read "De Colored Fancy Ball" superficially, it seems to verify how many critics view the content in minstrel shows as racially disparaging humor, where whites could gain a sense of superiority. Audiences would have delighted in imagining "darkies" suiting up in fancy clothes to go to a white person's ball, wearing "de blue satin vest" and dancing the waltz and the polka. Although blacks are described wearing fancy clothes, eating ice cream, flirting, appearing to look upper class, the main point is that "anybody can look silly in trying to attract a partner for a dance or for life" (Mahar 135). Minstrel shows also frequently mocked Americans who tried to adopt European dances such as the waltz, polka, mazurka, gallop, and schottisches in an attempt to *appear* to be refined, cultivated, and civilized (Mahar 133).

More surprisingly, minstrel shows from the 1840s to mid 1850s revealed a strong ambivalence about slavery (Toll 66). In a single show, the audience could be presented with the stereotypical happy Negro plantation slave, while in another act, blackface actors voiced opposition to slavery's very worst qualities. The following excerpt was taken from "Miss Lucy Neal" in an early 1840s minstrel song:

> Oh! Dar's de white man comin,
>
> To tear you from my side,
>
> Stan back! You white slave dealer,
>
> She is my betroth'd bride.
>
> Dis poor nigger's fate is hard,
>
> De white man's heart is stone,
>
> Dey part poor nigger fro his wife,
>
> And brake up dar happy home. (quoted in Mahar 303)

Although there is no evidence pointing to the possibility of equality between the races, Toll points out that "minstrels for a decade [mid-1840s through mid-1850s] were sensitive to charges that slavery was brutal, oppressive, and undemocratic at the same time that they were attracted to romanticized proslavery arguments" (Toll 66).[9] The ambivalent and subversive nature of early minstrel shows, as I will show, strongly influenced Twain as he was creating *Huckleberry Finn,* and these early shows lay the framework for Twain's attempt to undermine stereotyping and racism in the novel itself, which is the subject I take up in Chapter Three.

The Tripartite Structure

The Christy Minstrels, mentioned fondly by Twain in his *Autobiography*, are frequently credited as the first group to establish the tripartite structure of the minstrel show in the 1840s. In the first part of the minstrel show, the minstrel ensemble sang and danced onto the stage and arranged themselves into a semicircle. An interlocutor—the intelligent host for the show whose manners where those of a typical genteel white man — conducted the entire performance "blacked up" like the rest of the troupe. Twain recalls how impressed the "innocent" audience was with this highly polished "gentleman": "He was clothed in the faultless evening costume of the white society gentleman and used a stilted, courtly, artificial and painfully grammatical form of speech" (*Autobiography* 60). Twain's description of the host of the show is in keeping with modern scholars' ideas as well. This "proper" aristocratically-etched actor served as a sharp contrast to the two endmen, the "prime jokers" who capitalized on "whatever funniness was to be gotten out of paint and exaggerated clothing" (Twain, *Autobiography,* 60). Twain also notes that minstrels wore a "loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time" (59). What is important from Twain's remarks here is that he *recognized* that minstrelsy was an "exaggeration," that it was not an authentic representation of slaves.[10]

After T. D. Rice's Jim Crow, Tambo (or sometimes Banjo) and Bones (so named because of the instruments they played) replaced him as popular minstrel stock characters. These endmen sat on each of the two end flanks of the semicircle. Banjo and Bones were depicted as simple-minded "darky" buffoons, and the interlocutor's intelligence and proper speech served to highlight the social and intellectual distance

between the "high" and the "low" cultures. Twain describes the comedy at the beginning of the show as follows:

> [Interlocutor] "I hope, gentleman, I have the pleasure of seeing you in your accustomed good health and that everything has proceeded prosperously with you since last we had the good fortune to meet." "Bones" would reply for himself and go on and tell about something...but in the midst of it he would be interrupted by "Banjo," who would throw doubt upon his statement of the matter; then a delightful jangle of assertion and contradiction would break out between the two; the quarrel would gather greater emphasis, the voices would grow louder and louder and more energetic and vindictive, and the two would rise and approach each other, shaking fists and instruments and threatening bloodshed. (*Autobiography* 60)

Twain relates further that the Banjo and Bones comic dialogue would sometimes last up to five minutes, and the two characters would often be "in each other's faces with their noses not six inches apart" while the audience was "shrieking with laughter" (*Autobiography* 60).

After the interlocutor managed to coax Banjo and Bones back to their seats, he would then begin comic exchanges with the endmen (Toll 53). The humor would arise from the endmen misunderstanding the interlocutor. In his *Autobiography*, Twain relates one of the most popular minstrel show dialogues, which concerns Bones's account of a perilous storm while he was at sea:

> The storm lasted so long that in the course of time all provisions were consumed. Then the middleman would inquire anxiously how the people managed to survive. "Bones" would reply, "We lived on eggs." [Interlocutor] "You lived on eggs! Where did you get the eggs?" "Every day, when the storm was so bad, the Captain laid *to.*" (*Autobiography* 61)

Another example of the interlocutor-endman dialogue is from the nineteenth century minstrel show handbook *Minstrel Gags and End Men's Hand-book.* In the section "Bones in Love" by J. Harry Carleton, we see the following:

> *Interlocutor:* "I say, Bones, were you ever in love?"
>
> *Bones:* "I wasn't nothin' else, old hoss."
>
> *Interlocutor:* "What kind of girl was she?"
>
> *Bones:* "She was highly polished; yes, indeed. Her fadder was a varnish-maker, and, what's better still, she was devoted to her own sweet Pomp."
>
> *Interlocutor:* "What do you mean by that? She must have been a spicy girl."
>
> *Bones:* "Yes, dat's de reason she was so fond of me. She was a poickess, too."
>
> *Interlocutor:* "A poetess, you mean." (quoted in "Blackface Minstrelsy")

The above dialogue continues, and Bones relates a poem that he wrote to this lady:

> *Bones*: "You see, her fadder was a gardener, so I wrote what I call very appropriate lines: O you sweet and lubly Dinah! / Dare are nofin any finer; / Your tongue is sweeter than a parrot's. / Your hair hangs like a

> bunch of carrots, / And though of flattery I'm a hater, / I lubs you like a sweet potater!" (quoted in "Blackface Minstrelsy")

At the end of this first part, each member of the troupe would usually perform a solo dance or skit during what came to be known as the "walk-around," "cakewalk," or "hoedown" ("Minstrel Show"). Interestingly, Toll explains that small towns, like Twain's Hannibal, were the most receptive to minstrelsy's endmen, and everywhere the minstrels went, their puns, riddles, and jokes were cherished by small communities where entertainment was hard to come by (Toll 55).

The *olio,* or the second part, contained elements of a variety show, which would later become the vaudeville shows in the early twentieth century. Wittke explains that the *olio* contained songs and dances, magic specialties, Shakespearean burlesques, and acrobatics. In addition to playing music, popularized monologue "stump speeches" became the distinctive feature of this part of the show, usually occurring in the first act of the *olio* (Wittke 168). Issued in black dialect by the most talented actor, the subjects of stump speeches could vary greatly in their topics ranging from politics and society to celebrities, public affairs, science, and religion. According to Wittke, politics was the most "fruitful" field to use, and these orations were traditionally loaded with malapropisms, unintentional puns, and jokes. What is important to note is that despite the front of ignorant and incorrect English, social criticism was frequently at the heart of the speech, as we see in the following stump speech "On Patriotism":

> All we want am offis…we got in for de biggest of liberty-liberty to do nothin' as much as we like, an' get well paid for it…Our lub of country is 'bove eberything 'cept trade dollars…We belieb' in universal suff'rin, dat

> all men am free an' equal, 'cept Chinese washermen 'cause dey hab no vote. We lub de Irisher, Scotty, Englisher, Dutchy Greesers, Frenchy an' half Spanish, when dey wote as we say dey shall. We guv up hangin' de nigger 'cause ob his good 'Merican vote! (quoted in Wittke 170)

In this passage, although the stump speaker is using black dialect, we see various issues being discussed. The speaker is lampooning lazy, hypocritical politicians who say one thing and do another. People of various ethnic backgrounds are "lubbed" if they do as they are told. With a reference to lynching, the speaker explains that blacks are only spared so that they can be used to vote for the crooked politicians.

After the *olio* came the afterpiece, a "fitting close" to the show, and this part usually took place on a Southern plantation with a sequence of comical-musical dance numbers (an important similarity to *Huck Finn* that I will discuss in chapter two). After the mid-1850s, the Southern plantation backdrop became optional. As early as 1852, Henry Wood's Minstrels concentrated their afterpiece on lampooning currents events and staging humorous farces. According to Toll, "these nonplantation skits were...slapstick comedies, featuring Negro low-comedy types with their malaprop-laden dialect, and nearly always ending in a flurry of inflated bladders, bombardments of cream pies, or fireworks explosions that literally closed the show with a bang" (Toll 56-57). As I will discuss in chapter two, Twain fuses the Southern plantation backdrop and the slapstick comedy in his "evasion" section of the novel.

Twain and the Minstrel Show

In an age without electricity, cars, radio, telephones, movies, or television, minstrel shows monopolized the entertainment industry. As Lott makes clear for us,

Twain was well aware that the minstrel show was like a "Janus-faced figure for the cultural relationship of white to black in America" (Lott 30). Indeed, minstrelsy was always a hotbed of American racial negotiation and contradiction, and it had its opponents from its very beginnings. Many "distinguished" and "proper" citizens categorically denounced minstrel shows as being vulgar and unfit for viewing. Lhamon writes that "Minstrel shows served a class and a peer group, largely distinct, and it is no accident that middle-class mothers, like the mother of young Samuel Clemens, quite ineffectually forbade their boys to attend the shows" (Lhamon 279). Minstrel shows were not geared towards the upper classes. Needless to say, Twain's mother was unsuccessful at keeping her adventurous and curious son from watching these shows, so great was his fascination for them.

Lott discusses Twain's attraction to blackface performance and argues that *Huck Finn* has the markings of Twain's "celebration of black culture" (Lott 31).[11] Twain's admiration of African Americans and appreciation for their culture began in his home in Hannibal, Missouri, where he frequently interacted with slaves at his Uncle John Quarles's farm: "It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his [Uncle Dan'l's] race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities. This feeling and this estimate have stood the test of sixty years and more and have suffered no impairment. The black face is as welcome to me now as it was then" (*Autobiography* 6).[12] Lott also points out that Twain continues his celebration of black culture over ten years after *Huckleberry's Finn's* publication: "Indeed, in *Following the Equator* (1897) he [Twain] notes his love of beautiful black bodies and his disgust for white ones" (Lott 31). Lott also notes, "Figures such as Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, and Bayard Taylor were as attracted to

blackface performance as Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany were repelled by it" (Lott 4-5).

Like Lott, Fishkin asserts that African Americans affected Twain throughout his life (Fishkin 7). In the mid-1870s, African American "jubilee" groups became popular by singing black spiritual songs. According to Toll, these singing groups "were associated with minstrelsy, which up to that point had been the public's major interpreter of the plantation and of slave lore" (Toll 236). The Fisk Jubilee Singers[13] were arguably the most famous jubilee group in the 1870s, and their music had a profound impact on Twain only three years before he began work on *Huck Finn.* In 1873, Twain offered a publicity blurb about the Fisk Singers on their European Tour: "I do not know when anything has so moved me as did the plaintive melodies of the Jubilee Singers" (quoted in Fishkin 5-6). When Twain later entertained the Fisk Singers in his home in Switzerland in 1897, he wrote the following:

> Away back in the beginning — to my mind — their music made all other vocal music cheap; and that early notion is emphasized now. It is utterly beautiful, to me; and it moves me infinitely more than any other music can. I think that in the Jubilees and their songs America has produced the perfectest flower of the ages; and I wish it were a foreign product so that she would worship it and lavish money on it and go properly crazy over it. (quoted in Fishkin 5)

There are even a few documented accounts of Twain singing African American spirituals, during which time "Twain's bearing would become strangely transformed"

(Fishkin 6). During a dinner in 1874 at Twain's Hartford home, one author noted the following:

> After dinner, with a log fire blazing in the red-curtained drawing room, he sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Golden Slippers," "Go Down, Moses"...He swayed gently as he stood; his voice was low and soft, a whisper of wind in the trees; his eyes were closed, and he smiled strangely. Through the sadness and exultation of these songs which he had known through boyhood, he transported himself far from the circle of polite listeners and from the New England snowscape, and he found it difficult to go back. (quoted in Fishkin 7)

There is a continuous association between African American people and their culture and Twain's sense of being home. Fishkin points out that when Twain was farthest from home, he would sing black spiritual songs to bring him peace, such as in Liverpool in 1873, in Florence in 1904, and the night his wife, Livy, died (Fishkin 7). Even shortly before his death in 1910, his long-time friend William Dean Howells noted that Twain sang black spirituals with great "fervor" and "passion" (Fishkin 7).

Twain associated minstrel shows and their music-heavy content with the black culture that he grew up with and identified with. Adopting a writing style that is reminiscent of the reflective monologues of Old English manuscripts, Twain begins chapter twelve of his autobiography with a lamentation to the dead:[14] "Where now is Billy Rice? He was a joy to me and so were the other stars of the nigger show — Billy Birch, David Wambold, Backus and a delightful dozen of their brethren who made life a pleasure to me forty years ago and later" (*Autobiography* 58).

As Wittke points out, Twain's favorite minstrels — Charley Backus, Billy Birch, and David Wambold — worked together as a group called the San Francisco Minstrels and were one of the most celebrated minstrel favorites of the Pacific Coast (Wittke 77).[15] Originating in the 1850s, the group would eventually relocate to the populated urban center of New York in 1864. As Anthony J. Berret explains in "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Minstrel Show" (1986), "Mark Twain saw them in both places and must have appreciated their strict adherence to the pristine features of minstrelsy" (Berret 37).

As a young boy, Twain also saw minstrel troupes perform in Hannibal during the minstrel shows' earliest beginnings — shows like Spalding and Rogers' Floating Palace and Dan Rice's Circus (Berret 38). He recalls seeing his first minstrel show in Hannibal in the early 1840s when it "burst upon us as a glad and stunning surprise" (*Autobiography* 59). And as mentioned previously, Twain brought his mother to see the Christy Minstrels perform in St. Louis. As Twain phrases it, blackface comedy was "the show which to me had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience. We have the grand opera; and I have witnessed and greatly enjoyed the first act of everything which Wagner created, but...one act was quite sufficient"[16] (*Autobiography* 58-59).

Twain would take his enchantment with this first minstrel show and embed its impact on him into *Tom Sawyer* (1876). In that novel, after the minstrel troupe is done playing in St. Petersburg, Tom and his gang try to create a show of their own, which affords the boys great happiness for a couple of days. In *Huckleberry Finn,* Huck understands what minstrelsy is and, like his author, equates excitement and holidays in chapter XXVI with blackface comedy. He explains to the "hairlip" Joanna about how servants are mistreated in England: "Why, Hare-l — why, Joanna, they [servants] never

see a holiday from year's end to year's end; never go to the circus, nor theatre, nor nigger shows, nor nowheres"[17] (HF 294).

In addition to his boyhood and early adult experiences with minstrelsy, Twain also spent the spring of 1882 traveling up and down the Mississippi River. He traveled from St. Louis to New Orleans and then back up to St. Paul, gathering material for his *Life on the Mississippi.* On this riverboat excursion, he saw minstrel shows, and he observed and recorded black dialect and songs (Berret 38). While he was in New Orleans, Twain visited George Washington Cable and Joel Chandler Harris (two men who worked with black dialect during this time). Twain organized a lecture tour with Cable[18] for November of 1884, nicknaming the tour "a circus or menagerie" (Berret 38), and he introduced America to a few passages from *Huckleberry Finn,* like "King Sollermun," for the first time. What is interesting is that Cable and Twain played minstrel parts, both assuming a black persona using black dialects in their readings. Like a Banjo and Bones scenario, Berret explains that "Twain and Cable made a perfect comic-straight man team, opposing one another as tall and short, sloppy and neat, loose and strict. Twain was advertised as providing the humor, Cable the pathos" (Berret 38). According to Cable's manager Major James Pond, both Twain and Cable were "familiar with all the plantation songs and Mississippi chanties of the negro" (quoted in Hearn lvi). Therefore, during the production of *Huckleberry Finn,* spanning from 1876-1884, Twain was so well-acquainted with minstrelsy that he put on his own minstrel-like show with Cable to the great enjoyment of his audience and he was, intentionally or unintentionally, advertising *Huck Finn* as having a link to minstrelsy.

How could Twain love the minstrel shows yet produce an antiracist novel that undermines the very stereotypes that he enjoyed seeing enacted on the stage? Fishkin helps me in answering this question. While trying to probe the African American roots of *Huckleberry Finn,* she discusses the minstrel shows' impact on Twain in his formation of Jim. In her research, she points out that although Twain was attracted to minstrelsy — to the *white* performance and burlesque — she reveals that Twain understood that the burlesque on stage was inauthentic and it inaccurately portrayed *real* black people. She writes:

> J. L. Dillard has noted that "sensitive observers of Negro life in the United States have always been aware of the gap between the minstrel show and black reality." Mark Twain himself was one such "sensitive observer." In 1873…Twain expressed his skepticism about the accuracy of minstrel performances. "The so-called 'negro minstrels' simply mis-represent the thing," Twain had written. "I do not think they ever saw a plantation or heard a slave sing." (Fishkin 92)

Aside from the originators of the minstrel show, minstrel performers did not routinely gather material from firsthand observations of black culture. Twain recognized that minstrel shows were more about entertaining than about portraying truth. We cannot deny the fact that he enjoyed an entertainment form that negatively portrayed blacks. But what I want to suggest is that one of Twain's objectives for *Huck Finn* was to help American whites see that minstrel shows were inaccurate and inadequate portrayals of black people.

…

Twain dealt almost exclusively with the antebellum minstrel show in *Huckleberry Finn.* He was captivated with antebellum shows, not post-bellum ones. The Civil War marks a major changing point in minstrelsy. African Americans and even women began to take to the stage for the first time (still upholding the burnt cork tradition by blacking up), which gave blacks their first palpable opportunity to enter show business (Watkins, *Inside the Minstrel Mask,* x). Of these changes, Twain remarks: "The minstrel show was born in the early forties and it had a prosperous career for about thirty-five years; then it degenerated into a variety show and was nearly all variety show with a negro act or two thrown in incidentally. The real Negro show has been stone dead for thirty years"[19] (*Autobiography* 61). Scholars agree with Twain's assessment that the minstrel show declined in popularity, losing something magical that had previously captivated audiences and made troupes so prevalent. It is also possible that minstrel groups simply exhausted all of their material, and audiences became bored with the same old jokes and skits.[20]

Other factors contributed to the eventual demise of minstrel shows. Troupes began to increase in size, and the scenery progressively become more lavish and extravagant, making them less profitable. As Shawn-Marie Garrett points out in "Return of the Repressed" (2002), "At the end of the nineteenth century, white minstrels were obsolete and most of the best black professionals were performing outside the realm of minstrelsy" (Garrett 30).

Minstrel shows were racist at their core, and burnt-cork actors assumed the imagined image of the free and enslaved African Americans and used this fictitious guise to entertain audiences. Ventriloquist-like in nature, minstrels were able to define black

speech, behavior, and culture and were largely successful at convincing their audiences that their depictions of blacks were authentic. Besides the obvious racial foundation of minstrelsy, minstrel skits were a means by which mostly white, powerless groups in America dispelled their anxiety about the inherent hypocrisy of democracy, freedom, equality, and fairness in America. Because he lived in the South, Twain was able to temper what he saw on the minstrel stage with what he knew personally about African Americans. Twain would later infuse *Huckleberry Finn* with his unique knowledge about blacks and minstrel shows, as we will see in chapter two.

Chapter One Notes

[1] According to Wittke, within a year of the Civil War, Lincoln attended a performance of Rumsey and Newcomb's minstrels where he heard the famous song "Dixie" for the first time, and he "applauded violently, and shouted, 'Let's have it again! Let's have it again!'" (Wittke 209).

[2] Ironically, the white male, by imitating the "Jim Crow" dance, was both exalting the black male body while at the same time denouncing it.

[3] T. D. Rice was also called "Billy" Rice, "Daddy" Rice, and "Jim Crow" Rice. He more than likely took his blackface act from the circus, which was coming into vogue just slightly before he became famous. About the circus connection to minstrelsy, Lott notes that early minstrel performers like Rice probably tapped into an unseen vein, finding "under the big top a vital arena of minstrel performance" (Lott 24-25).

[4] I would go as far to say that T. D. Rice and his then-world-famous "Jump Jim Crow" dance" was just as well known as Michael Jackson and his "Billy Jean" moonwalk. Rice would achieve the kind of celebrity status previously unknown to any performer in America. If they could have mass-produced a doll to represent Rice, it would have been in virtually every working class home in America.

[5] Rice liked to work as a solo artist, either doing his blackface act in the intermissions as the highlight of a particular theatrical performance or simply touring as an independent performer.

[6] The performers of this group included Emmett, Bower, Whitlock, and Pelham.

[7] Mel Watkins also devotes enormous space to discussing the cultural ramifications of minstrelsy in his *On The Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock.*

[8] According to Toll, when black minstrel performers took to the stage after the Civil War, white Northerners were amazed that blacks were not all the coal-black color of the burnt cork make-up.

[9] What this suggests is that minstrel shows were a barometer for Northern audiences' feelings concerning slavery, and blackface comedy "reveals the evolution of American racial stereotypes better than any other source" (Toll 66).

[10] Twain would know the difference between burlesque and authenticity because he spent his early life playing with and listening to slaves on his Uncle John's farm.

[11] This view contrasts with Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann's where they argue "Twain's use of the minstrel tradition undercuts serious consideration of Jim's humanity beyond those qualities stereotypically attributed to the noble savage; and Jim is forever frozen within the convention of the minstrel darky" (142).

[12] Mark Twain himself admits that Tom was modeled after a young slave boy named Sandy. According to Twain, Sandy would fill the larger part of each day with "singing, whistling, yelling, whooping, [and] laughing" (*Autobiography* 6). Initially, the young Twain complained about this continual noise-making slave, but Twain grew to understand the importance of singing and merry-making as a necessary device to ward off sadness that Sandy might have felt by leaving all of his loved ones behind. As Twain's mother explained: "Poor thing, when he sings it shows that he is not remembering and that comforts me; but when he is still, I am afraid he is thinking and I cannot bear it. He will never see his mother again; if he can sing I must not hinder it, but be thankful for it" (7). Twain would go on to immortalize the "cheery spirit" Sandy, fixing him with a white mask: "I used Sandy once, also; it was in *Tom Sawyer.* I tried to get him to whitewash the fence but it did not work. I do not remember what name I called him by in the book" (7). By Mark Twain's account, the boy he could not remember is, without a doubt, the notorious Tom Sawyer

himself. And what is interesting is that the first time we meet Tom Sawyer (the whitewashed slave Sandy), he is *whitewashing* the fence.

[13] The Fisk Jubilee Singers" were a group of black students from Fisk University that began singing in 1871. By the mid 1870s, they had toured America and Europe widely (Toll 236). Twain heard them in 1873 on their European tour and was deeply moved by their soulful singing.

[14]"The Seafarer," contained in folios 81 verso 81 to 80 recto of the Exeter Book, is an evocative short poem in the elegiac tradition that begins: "I can narrate a true story about myself, / speak of the journey, how, in days of toil, I / often suffered a time of hardship. / Grievous heartfelt anxiety I have experienced, explored in a boat many places of sorrow" ("The Seafarer" 49). Another elegiac Old English poem comparable to "The Seafarer" is "The Wanderer." Twain is operating in this tradition at the beginning of his *Autobiography* as he laments the changes that have occurred to the minstrel show. After the Civil War, the minstrel show degenerated (as Twain and other scholars since him have remarked) into a variety show that would eventually lead into what became vaudeville in the 1920s. Twain speaks as if he is the *anhaga* (the solitary one) bereft of all worldly comforts, for minstrel shows instilled him with great happiness, happiness that is now gone forever. As Twain was writing his *Autobiography,* he had lost his daughter Susy and his wife Olivia. As Elaine Treharne remarks in *Old and Middle English: An Anthology,* the "loneliness of the solitary's position is emphasized by the nostalgic thoughts of previous days in the company of others" (Treharne 42).

[15] The completion of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869 brought many minstrel troupes to the West as well as to many towns along the way (Wittke 77).

[16] What makes Twain's account so intriguing and important is just how affected he was by these shows and how happy they made him. Twain unknowingly damned himself as a hopeless racist for some critics because of his professed love for the "nigger shows." For example, Bernard Bell asserts that "Twain never completely outgrew the racial prejudice and paternalism of his boyhood" (127), as he launches into his racist argument about *Huck Finn* in "Twain's 'Nigger' Jim: The Tragic Face Behind the Minstrel Mask."

[17] Although this study does not probe the potential freedom that minstrel shows offered subconsciously or consciously to its audiences, there seems a powerful connective force between the joy and freedom in minstrel shows and the sort of freedom Huck Finn represents symbolically.

[18] James Pond named the tour "The Twins of Genius." According to Michael Patrick Hearn, Cable actually "grated on Twain's nerves" because of his "cheapness and pious refusal to perform on Sundays" (Hearn lv). Twain even complained to his wife during the tour: "His body is small...but it is much too large for his soul. He is the pitifulest human louse I have ever known" (quoted in Hearn lv).

[19] It is ironic that Twain called antebellum minstrel shows the "real" ones, since these shows were composed of white men acting like imagined black men. Twain is more than likely referring to the entertainment *form* and is not considering the minstrel mask as being a true-to-life representation.

[20] Twain mentions this sort of rehashing of once-funny jokes in his *Autobiography.* "The middleman began. Presently he led up to that old joke...Everybody in the house except my novices had heard it a hundred times; a frozen and solemn and indignant silence settled down upon the sixteen hundred, and poor "Bones" sat there in that depressing atmosphere and went through with his joke" (63).

CHAPTER TWO ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I build on Anthony J. Berret's research and concentrate on textual evidence from *Huck Finn* to demonstrate how Twain mined the minstrel show's structure and themes in the development of his novel. In the section "The First Part of the Minstrel Show and Huck Finn," I explain how Twain models many of his comic dialogues from the Banjo-Bones-Interlocutor skits found in the minstrel show's first part, offering several examples of comic dialogue from the novel to illustrate the similarities. In the section "The Minstrel Show's *Olio* and *Huck Finn*," I probe the multiple parallels between the *olio* and the "middle" part of the novel, which spans roughly from Chapter XIX to the point where Huck decides that he will steal Jim back from the Phelps farm. In this section of the novel, we see many of the same elements that the minstrel show contained in its *olio*, such as a group of novelty performances, malapropistic 'stump speeches,' cross-dressed wench performances, and Shakespearean burlesque. In the section "The Minstrels Show's Third Part and *Huck Finn*" I explore the similarities between the "evasion" sequence of the novel and the third part of the traditional minstrel show. I focus primarily on the common use of a Southern plantation setting and on the use of comic skits. Finally, in the section "Minstrel Show Themes in *Huck Finn*," I examine how Twain utilizes the minstrel show themes of home and family in his portrayal of Jim.

CHAPTER TWO

"HUGE EYES AND GAPING MOUTHS": MINSTREL SHOW MINING

Although it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlies white racial dread to our own day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racist lampoon. Yet I am not so sure that this is the end of the story.

—Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*

Although Twain delighted in having children read *Huck Finn*, Hearn argues that Twain never intended the political and parody-packed novel for children (Hearn xcix). As Hearn points out, Twain did not even design *Tom Sawyer* for children. Regarding *Tom Sawyer,* Twain told Howells that it "is *not* a boy's book, at all. It will only be read by adults. It is only for adults" (quoted in Hearm xci). Even though Twain reluctantly agreed to market *Huck Finn* to young readers[1], he originally designed his novel for adults who would understand the novel's association with minstrelsy. Twain capitalized on the antebellum minstrel show's popularity, and he took for granted that his audiences would be bringing their understanding and enjoyment of the minstrel shows to the table when they read *Huck Finn* after its 1885 publication. Before explaining how Twain relied heavily on the minstrel show in order to undermine minstrel stereotyping, the aim of this chapter is to first demonstrate the many ways that *Huck Finn* is similar to the minstrel show. Although there is not the space to examine all of the ways the text and the show are similar, I will concentrate on a few of the most obvious parallels.

In "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Minstrel Show" (1986), Anthony J. Berret examines the deep-rooted link between Mark Twain, *Huck Finn,* and minstrel shows.[2]

He shows how the novel deals with the same sorts of topics popular in minstrelsy such as the pre-war South, the "peculiar institution's" controversies, issues concerning social status, and the nostalgia for the values of home and family in an age of change (Berret 38). In addition to treating these subjects, Berret also points out that Twain adopts the tripartite structure of the minstrel show (Berret 38). Most importantly, he explains how Twain employs Jim as the minstrel shows would have when they used "a black character or black persona as a mouthpiece for humor, social criticism and deep personal sentiment" (Berret 38). Because *Huckleberry Finn* was situated in "minstrelsy's boom period" (Lott 31), Berret argues that this fact accounts for the odd indebtedness of the novel's language, rhetorical strategies, and structure to blackface minstrelsy.

Although Berret offers an insightful examination about the connection between *Huck Finn* and minstrelsy, he concentrates heavily on minstrel show history and offers very little detail from the novel itself. He offers only one example of the many comic dialogues that occur in *Huck Finn;* he does not adequately offer evidence about how Twain mocks pretentiousness and hypocrisy; and he largely glosses over the importance of Shakespearean burlesque in the novel. Using Berret as a foundation and relying on minstrel show history, I will elaborate on Berret's research by probing the text more fully in an effort to provide greater insight about the multiple intersections between Twain's *Huck Finn* and antebellum minstrelsy.

The First Part of the Minstrel Show and *Huck Finn*

Twain mined the minstrel show structure by adopting the comic argument style between the interlocutor, Banjo, and Bones, found in the first part of the traditional

minstrel show. According to Berret, "the main features of the first part of the minstrel show, comic dialogue and sentimental song, and the themes expressed in them, have analogues in the first part of *Huckleberry Finn,* roughly chapters I to XIX" (Berret 43). The comic dialogues packed into the first part of *Huck Finn* are very similar to the interlocutor-endman skits in the first part of the minstrel shows, which relied so heavily on the personification of the white, powerful, elite (located in the body of the interlocutor) and the powerless and ignorant black man, who also represented the lower classes.

Berret points out that "when Huck is with Jim, Huck is the interlocutor. When he is with Tom Sawyer, Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, and the Grangerfords, he is the endman" (Berret 41). Although Berret, for the most part, accurately locates Huck's role in the comic dialogues, I think that he overestimates Twian's intentions with Huck. First of all, I want to argue that Twain never intended for Huck to be the interlocutor *per se* in any given scenario. Twain fully understood the roles of the interlocutor and endman, and I believe that Twain created Huck *and* Tom into hybrid minstrel show characters — part interlocutor and part endman — rarely slotted to assume just one role. Toll offers a concise explanation about the interlocutor:

> With a precise if somewhat pompous command of the language, an extensive vocabulary, and a resonant voice, the interlocutor personified dignity, which made the raucous comedy of the endmen even funnier. When the endmen mocked his pomposity, audiences could indulge their anti-intellectualism and antielitism by laughing at him. But when he

> patiently corrected the ignorant comedians…audiences could feel superior to stupid "niggers" and laugh with them. (Toll 53)

Along these lines, Berret points out that in the comic dialogues, the "audience had the luxury of siding now with the interlocutor and now with the endmen" (Berret 40). Throughout the novel, there are many situations where the audience can side with Huck or Jim, just as minstrel show audiences could side with the interlocutor sometimes or the endman at other times. Although Twain's readers may have had trouble identifying with Huck because of the less than "proper" things that he does (like stealing and lying), they are able to side with him frequently as he discovers the pretentiousness, cruelty, and inequality in the world around him (Berret 41). What is important is that when audiences identify with Huck, they are able to see things from his point of view, especially in the case of his maturing friendship with Jim.

Contrary to what Berret suggests, though, Huck cannot truly be an interlocutor because he cannot "act" aristocratic or elite. He hasn't the training, the money, or the language to do so. He is, after all, a vagabond, rag-tag, and lower class adolescent. Therefore, he can only aspire to act superior than he really is, placing him closer to a Zip Coon or an endman rather than the interlocutor. Tom, on the other hand, comes much closer than Huck to fulfilling the "host" role, but falls short of convincing readers that he is really superior to Huck.

Early in the novel, we encounter a typical minstrel dialogue when Huck and Tom disagree about the Don Quixote "enchantment." In chapter two, Tom rallies the gang to make a raid on a "crowd of Spaniards and A-rabs." Much to Huck's dismay, in place of camels, elephants, Arabs, and Spaniards, the boys stumble upon a Sunday school picnic.

Huck confronts Tom about the notable absence of treasure, exotic people, and animals, but Tom insists that they are there, nonetheless:

> I said, why couldn't we see them, then? He said if I warn't so ignorant, but had read a book called "Don Quixote," I would know without asking. He said it was all done by enchantment. He said there was hundreds of soldiers there, and elephants and treasure, and so on, but we had enemies which he called magicians, and they had turned the whole thing into an infant Sunday school. Just out of spite. I said, all right, then the thing for us to do was to go for the magicians. Tom Sawyer said I was a numskull. (HF 41)

In this passage, Tom tries to make Huck appear to be the more ignorant one because Huck has not read *Don Quixote* and cannot adequately relate to what Tom is saying. Although Tom is condescending towards Huck for his ignorance, Tom himself is ignorant of what actually happens in *Don Quixote*. In this "enchantment" episode, Tom is recalling chapter eighteen of Part I from Cervantes' novel. According to Michael Patrick Hearn's commentary, "the delusional don explains to his servant Sancho Panza, after they have been driven off by an irate herdsman, that his mortal enemy, a magician, has transformed an army of knights into a flock of sheep" (Hearn 42). Tom does not understand that Don Quixote is not rational when he is talking to Sancho. As Hearn points out, "Tom is a literalist: He reads only for story, so he cannot distinguish between burlesque and true romance" (Hearn 42). Tom believes that he fully understands *Don Quixote*, but in actuality, the reader knows that neither boy has a full grasp of what the "truth" is — a fact that makes this scene funny.

On a more serious level, Tom represents the elite who may try to take advantage of less educated people and intimidate them, and he throws out fancy words and titles of books. Unfortunately, since Huck has not read *Don Quixote,* he does not recognize Tom's misinterpretation of the book. Likewise, if the educated elite wanted to intimidate the lower classes with what they knew, the lower classes would have had no power to dispute what had been said to them. In this scenario, our allegiance lies with Huck. Huck rather deftly plays the middle ground between *both* his roles, and Tom frequently falters as a good interlocutor. Huck's and Tom's attempts to fill the interlocutor position are revealing nonetheless, because Twain is highlighting the American desire for upward mobility, and throughout much of his novel he is emphasizing and mocking pretentiousness.

An even better true-to-form example of the Banjo-Bones-Interlocutor argument model occurs when Jim and Huck discuss Jim's money "speculation" in chapter VIII:

> "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 ain' gwyne to resk no mo' money in stock. De cow up 'n' died on my han's." (HF 90)

In this conversation, Huck comes the closest he ever will to fulfilling the interlocutor role. We notice the obvious difference here in English grammar, and Huck is, for once, correct in his usage, which only highlights Jim's slave dialect all the more. Then we have

the difference in understanding the word "stock." The way Jim first uses the word makes Huck (and the general white audience) believe that he has speculated in some kind of business. What makes this scene funny is that when Huck asks him what kind of stock he invested in, he says "live stock."

In this same rapid-fire conversation, Jim goes on to discuss how he eventually only had ten cents left and decided to give it to a slave named Balum because he had a dream that Balum was going to be lucky. Balum decides to give ten cents to the poor because he hears a preacher say "dat whoever give to de po' len' to de Lord, en boun' to git his money back a hund'd times" (HF 91). Hearing this story, Huck sounds like an interlocutor when he asks, "Well, what did come of it, Jim?" Jim tells him that he was never able to see a cent of the money again: "Boun' to git yo' money back a hund'd times, de preacher says! Ef I could git de ten *cents* back, I'd call it squah, en be glad er de chanst" (HF 92). In this example, Jim comically shows his ignorance about the meaning of the ten cents "investment." He takes the preacher literally when the preacher says that a person will be rewarded a hundred times over for any donation and is, consequently, disappointed when he gets no monetary return on his "investment."

In another example of minstrel dialogue, Huck does to Jim what Tom did to Huck earlier: Huck tries to "put on airs" and display his superiority to the illiterate Jim in the "King Sollermun" dialogue. Although Huck is a less than perfect copy of the interlocutor in general, Berret explains that Huck "does consider himself superior to Jim because of his literacy" (Berret 39). When Jim calls King Solomon's wisdom into question, Huck emphasizes their social difference when he says: "Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self" (HF 139). Huck is just as

ignorant as Jim in this situation, but Huck tries to bolster his position by propping himself up with the widow, the symbol of the elite. Despite Huck's attempt to intimidate him, Jim disagrees with Huck: "...he *warn't* no wise man, nuther. He had some er de dad-fetchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chile dat he 'uz gwyne to chop in two?" (HF 139). Jim explains that chopping a child in two is as ludicrous as chopping a dollar bill in half:

> [Jim] "Now I want to ast you: what's de use er dat half a bill? — can't buy noth'n wid it. En what use is a half chile? I would'n give a dern for a million un um."
>
> [Huck] "But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point — blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile." (HF 139)

Jim elaborates his feelings about "Sollermun" further by explaining that the less someone has of something the more someone values it, and the more someone has of something, the less valued it becomes. Since King "Sollermun" had "'bout five million chillen," cutting a child or two in half "warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fetch him!" (HF 140). At first, readers may laugh at Jim's logic as he discusses children like they are objects or property. But what he says about human nature in this dialogue is not altogether illogical. Like the interlocutor in the minstrel show, Huck finally gives up trying to make his point clear to the obstinate Jim: "I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again. He was the most down on Solomon of any nigger I ever see" (HF). As Tom called Huck a "numbskull" before, Huck calls Jim the equivalent — a "nigger." Readers recognize that because Huck himself does not fully understand this biblical story, he cannot explain it to Jim, and he

cannot win the argument. Readers are invited to side with the endman Jim in this situation.

Just as the minstrel shows had back-to-back comic skits, after the "King Sollermun" disagreement, Huck turns the conversation to other comic things. The pair launch into another minstrel show argument concerning why Frenchmen speak French and not English. Huck again tries to play the interlocutor but becomes another endman because of his own ignorance. Huck explains that Frenchmen ask if someone speaks French by saying "Polly-voo-franzy," but Jim interprets this as a derogatory remark:

> [Huck] "Shucks, it ain't calling you anything. It's only saying do you know how to talk French."
>
> [Jim] "Well, den, why couldn't he *say* it?"
>
> "Why, he *is* a-saying it. That's a Frenchman's *way* of saying it."
>
> "Well, it's a blame' ridicklous way, en I doan' want to hear no mo' 'bout it. Dey ain' no sense in it." (HF 141)
>
> "Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?"
>
> "No, a cat don't."
>
> "Well, does a cow?"
>
> "No, a cow don't, nuther."
>
> . . .
>
> "Well, then, why ain't it natural and right for a *Frenchman* to talk different from us?" (HF 141-142)

Huck is both a pseudo-interlocutor and an endman in this argument, and readers can laugh at Jim's ignorance and at Huck's. Although Huck knows more than Jim does, he

doesn't know as much as he thinks he does. For example, Huck talks about Louis's "little boy the dolphin"; he clearly doesn't know how to speak French; and he is unable to successfully win the argument with Jim and gives up in frustration as he did before, saying "you can't learn a nigger to argue" (HF 142).

Although most of the comic dialogue occurs in the first part of the novel, there is another minstrel dialogue in chapter XXXVI between Huck, Jim, and Tom that demonstrates Tom's desire to appear to be the superior one in the group. Tom wants Jim to have a coat of arms to make his escape plan similar to other famous plans in romantic fiction:

> "Why, Mars Tom, I hain't got no coat o' arms; I hain't got nuffn but dish-yer ole shirt, en you knows I got to keep de journal on dat."
>
> "Oh, you don't understand, Jim; a coat of arms is very different."
>
> [Huck] "Well," I says, "Jim's right, anyway, when he says he hain't got no coat of arms, because he hain't."
>
> "I reckon *I* knowed that," Tom says, "but you bet he'll have one before he goes out of this — because he's going out *right,* and there ain't going to be no flaws in his record." (HF 399)

In this dialogue, Tom at first plays the pretentious and sophisticated interlocutor in trying to explain to Jim that he has misunderstood what a coat of arms really is. But Tom wants to do something absurd, which partly negates his role as interlocutor and slips him into an endman role. Using his usual bad English, Huck plays the interlocutor-endman here when he defends Jim and explains how Jim doesn't have a coat of arms, regardless of whether Jim understood or not. Tom then tries vainly to regain his interlocutor position

by claiming to have known that Jim didn't have a coat of arms to begin with. Twain here mocks Tom and all other pretentious whites, which is in keeping with the spirit of minstrelsy. As Wittke explains, "The point of many of them [minstrel shows] depended on that curious American trait which disdains even the appearance of too much intellectuality, and somehow, likes to see the triumph of the 'low brow' over what it chooses to call the 'high brow'" (Wittke 139).

The Minstrel Show's Olio and *Huck Finn*

The "olio" of *Huck Finn* spans roughly from Chapter XIX to the point where Huck decides that he will steal Jim back from the Phelps' farm. In this section of the novel, we see many of the same elements that the minstrel show contained in its olio, such as a group of novelty performances, malapropistic 'stump speeches,' cross-dressed 'wench' performances, and Shakespearean burlesque (Lott 5). Twain employs the king and the duke through much of this section with olio-like antics. The two con artists "claim a repertoire of temperance and phrenology lectures, revival sermons, faith healing services, fortune telling and legitimate theater" (Berret 43). While the king concocts schemes to steal people's money by fooling them into thinking he is a reformed pirate or a decent human being, the duke busies himself with his "authentic" Shakespearean plays.

In "Transgressing the Gender Divide: The Female Impersonator in Nineteenth-Century Blackface Minstrelsy," Annemarie Bean explains why Shakespearean burlesque was in demand: "Deeply rooted in American burlesque was a blatant ridicule for Shakespeare, and from that tradition and general anti-Enlightenment disdain were developed the beginnings of 'legitimate burlesque,'...which was often produced in the same houses as white minstrelsy" (Bean 247). Some of the most popular antebellum

Shakespearean burlesque plays, or "de Bird of Avon" plays,[3] included "Julius Sneezer," "Dars-de-Money," "Bad Breath, the Crane of Chowder," and "Hamlet the Dainty" (73 Lott). In "Dars-de-Money," the two blackface buffoons, Pete and Jake, arrive in rag-tag coats and mismatched boots and try to enact *Othello's* final scene in Desdemona's bedchamber where the Moor decides to smother his wife:

> They fetch two chairs, a sheet and a pillow for the bed, and Jake puts soap in his mouth to show rage. He approaches the bed with Pete in it as "Darsdemoney," and bellows, "It is the caws! Yet I'll not shed her blood! Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snoo, and smooth as monumental alabastrum.[4] (quoted in Berret 44)

In addition to hearing these minstrels fumble through the words in this climactic scene in *Othello,* audiences enjoyed seeing Pete's humorous attempt to mimic Othello's "foaming" madness.

Parody cannot succeed unless the audience knows what is being burlesqued (Hearn 243). Antebellum audiences were well schooled on this portion of the blackface repertoire (Lott 73), and Twain makes good use of Shakespearean burlesque in *Huck Finn.*[5] The first time we encounter their burlesque is when the king and the duke prepare for *Romeo and Juliet.* In classic parody fashion, the duke exaggerates the drama in a ridiculous way, concentrating on the most familiar elements of tragedy like sword-fights and soliloquies. Observing the duke in preparation, Huck says, he "got out his book and read the parts over in the most splendid spread-eagle way, prancing around and acting at the same time" (HF 228).

Figure 6. "The King as Juliet." E. W. Kemble, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 1885.

Twain even gives us a cross-dressed wench performance, which was immensely popular in minstrel shows, when the king is slotted to play Juliet. Parodying blackface minstrel cross-dressing, the king looks absurd in his Juliet costume, as we see in Figure 6. He asks, "'But if Juliet's such a young gal, Duke, my peeled head and my white whiskers is goin' to look oncommon odd on her, maybe'" (HF 228). The duke explains to him "'these country jakes won't ever think of that'" (HF 228). Imagining the duke as Juliet with a long beard and an old face, Twain designs this burlesque to make his audience laugh, conjuring up images of what minstrel performers did on stage. The duke gives a demonstration of how to conduct minstrel burlesque when he explains to the king how he should say "Romeo" in the play's famous nighttime window scene: "'you mustn't bellow out *Romeo!* that way, like a bull — you must say it soft, and sick, and languishy, so — R-o-o-meo! that is the idea; for Juliet's a dear sweet mere child of a girl, you know, and she don't bray like a jackass'" (HF 240).

Also, when the Duke practices his Hamlet soliloquy, he over-dramatizes all of the signs of emotional duress: "So he went to marching up and down, thinking, and frowning horrible every now and then; then he would hoist up his eye-brows; next he would squeeze his hand on his forehead and stagger back and kind of moan" (HF 241). Minstrel-like in his inability to properly quote Shakespeare, the duke practices his speech: "To be, or not to be; that is the bare bodkin / That makes calamity of so long life; / For who would fardels bear; till Birnum Wood do come to / Dunsinane…/ 'Tis a

consummation devoutly to be wished. But soft you, / the fair Ophelia: / Ope not thy ponderous and marble jaws, / But get thee to a nunnery — go!" (HF 242-243). His speech amounts to a conglomeration and a contortion of some of Shakespeare's most famous tragic scenes, names, and events. This warped monologue bears an interesting resemblance to the following excerpt from an 1840s minstrel show: "Oh! Tis consummation / Devoutly to be wished, / To end your heartache by a sleep; / When likely to be dished, / Shuffle off your mortal coil, / Do just so, / Wheel about and turn about / And jump Jim Crow" (Lott 73). This speech is just the sort of thing that T. D. Rice performed in the 1830s through the 1850s; he was famous for the "Jim Crow" dance and also for his Shakespearean burlesque, and he was still performing his burlesque *Otello* in 1852[6] (Lott 213).

Figure 7. "Hamlet's Soliloquy." E. W. Kemble, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, 1885.

Even though the cost is only twenty-five cents for the king's and the duke's Shakespearean revival (standard fare for a minstrel show), only about twelve people come to their performance. The duke ironically says that these "Arkansaw lunkheads" wanted "low comedy" — a reference to the popularity of minstrel shows. What makes this quote comic is that the duke actually believes that what they are producing is authentic, and he views minstrel show Shakespearean burlesque as inferior. Ironically, the king and duke have produced the very same "low comedy" that they sneer at. And judging from the low attendance, their show is even inferior to the well-attended original shows.

In addition to Shakespearean burlesque and the variety acts of the *olio* section, one of the most prominent parts of the *olio* was the "stump speech," which was usually laden with malapropisms and puns. The orator of the speech was usually one of the most prominent members of the minstrel troupe. Toll explains that "While some limited themselves to 'nonsense,' others used their ludicrous verbosity to express 'serious' social criticism" (Toll 56). Extracting the form of the stump speech but not the usual slave dialect, Twain delivers social criticism about mob mentality and lynching. After Colonel Sherburn shoots Boggs, the mob "swarmed up the street towards Sherburn's house" (HF 254). Sherburn literally gets on a stump by standing on the roof of his house and gives a speech about the general cowardice and low quality of most human beings: "The idea of *you* lynching anybody! It's amusing...Why, a *man's* safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind — as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him" (HF 255).

Sherburn also talks about the problem with the "democratic" system of law. Because judges are afraid to sentence a murderer to death for fear that vengeance will be taken, judges always acquit the criminal. Then a man "goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back, and lynches the rascal" (HF 255). Through Sherburn, Twain is able to assert his views about the inhumanity and cowardliness of lynching, about how lynch mobs choose to operate in the dark. Symbolically, we associate the darkness with evil and criminality (dark deeds), and Twain sheds light on how similar lynching is to this darkness.

As a self-professed writer for the masses, Twain has been dubbed "the people's author" (Hearn xxxv). As Wittke puts it: "it did not require a high degree of intelligence to comprehend the jokes used in the average minstrel show" (Wittke 139), and these

shows were geared towards the common citizen's understanding. Because Twain understood this, he designed *Huck Finn* using a lower-class adolescent who would be understood by his audience. Even if Huck does not impress people with his superb use of the English language, people can understand what he is saying. Therefore, his messages are accessible to all. Minstrel shows chose the same approach in their comedy, and since these shows were the cheapest sort of entertainment on the market, a vast number of Americans became familiar with the messages that were being conveyed.

Gearing his writing for the common man, Twain adopted the minstrel show's mode of social criticism beneath a comic veneer. We find the clearest example of the minstrel show theme of mocking pretentious and hypocritical whites in the Shepherdson-Grangerford feud section. Although Huck describes both families as being aristocratic, well-bred, courageous, and even pious (because they go to church on Sunday), these families actually represent the sort of aristocratic pretentiousness that many Americans and minstrel shows liked to criticize.

Huck gives a detailed account of the lavish furnishings on the inside of the Grangerford home — the home that serves as a complex metaphorical device representing the Grangerfords themselves. After describing the ornate clock with its "gaudy" parrots, Huck tells us about the fake fruit that looked better "and prettier than real ones," but he could see the white chalky substance underneath (HF 170).

Although the Grangerfords display a beautiful and expensive tablecloth with a "red and blue spread-eagle painted on it," (HF 170) symbolic of American freedom and democratic ideals, neither the Grangerfords nor the Shepherdsons truly value democracy because they continue to kill one another in their feud. As Michael Patrick Hearn points

out in his commentary, "Here live people who are not as noble as their wealth, manners, and ceremonies suggest" (Hearn 172). The Grangerfords have all the trappings of the upper class, including the unread books (symbolically important) such as "Friendship's Offering" and the Bible. Patriotic paintings cover their walls depicting George Washington, important Revolutionary War Battles, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Both families go to church and yet hypocritically bring their weapons, keeping them "handy" at all times. They hear a sermon about "brotherly love," and Huck relates that the Grangerfords talk quite a bit about "faith, and good works, and free grace" (HF 189), even though the families are engaged in a bitter, long-lasting hatred. Buck claims that everyone has forgotten what the quarrel was really about to begin with, and he even tries to kill Harney Shepherdson in a cowardly fashion from behind a bush. In arguably the only truly tragic and un-comic part in the novel, Huck narrowly escapes being killed in the climactic shooting spree. Through Buck's death, Twain is able to send a message about the foolishness of circumventing the law and about being undemocratic.

The Minstrel Show's Third Part and *Huck Finn*

Although Huck Finn doesn't follow the minstrel show structure perfectly, it is clear that blackface comedy dramatically influenced Twain as he constructed the novel. The third part of *Huck Finn,* commonly called the "evasion" sequence, is similar to the third part of the traditional minstrel show. In the minstrel show, this third part was usually a musical number that took place on a Southern plantation, containing dancing, music, and burlesque (Lott 6). As Berret explains, *Huckleberry Finn* combines the Southern plantation scene and the burlesque skits from Chapter XXXII to the end (Berret

44). Because of the vast number of minstrel show parallels in *Huck Finn,* Twain's audience would have guessed that Tom's schemes to free Jim would be filled with burlesque and ludicrous situations. Twain doesn't disappoint his readers.

As Huck makes his way towards the Phelps farm, we have a transition between the *olio* of the novel and the third part. As the curtain rises, Huck takes us back in time to the old South, the South of plantations and slavery. This is also in keeping with minstrelsy because sometimes minstrel shows "discarded burlesque comedy in favor of serious sentiment" (Berret 46). As we recall, Toll claims that before the mid-1850s, minstrel shows depicted both pro-slavery and anti-slavery stances about slavery to ambivalent and anxious northern audiences. As Huck approaches the Phelps house, it becomes clear that Twain is preparing us for a depiction of the negative side of slavery, not the post-1850s happy-plantation representation.[7] The plantation has the strong odor of death, decay, and misery, and Huck is filled with dread:

> 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 droning 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...As a general thing it makes a body wish *he* was dead, too, and done with it all. (HF 349)

The Phelps farm symbolizes the reality of the slave system. Twain wants his audience to arrive at the Phelps plantation feeling uncomfortable about the past, particularly in terms of the treatment of blacks.

Huck is soon welcomed into Aunt Sally's home with hugs and kisses, and when Tom Sawyer arrives dramatically on the scene, there are more hearty exchanges of affection. As Berret points out, "This scene contains all the elements that made the minstrel shows appealing to the urban and industrial audiences of the North: a happy home in the quiet and lazy past and people who still enjoy close family ties and free expressions of feeling" (Berret 44). What Berret fails to notice is that Huck is not there for a reunion; Huck has never met Aunt Sally or Uncle Silas, and the whole reunion is a farce. Huck is there to free Jim, and if he has to lie and pretend to be Tom Sawyer to do it, then he does it. Although Huck grows to like Aunt Sally and even to feel sorry for her as she worries about Tom at the end, he never really grows attached to her or develops a bond with her. He certainly has no intentions of staying with her when she voices her desire to adopt and "sivilize" him in the novel's final paragraph.

Besides the superficial similarity to the minstrel show setting, the "evasion" chapters are also full of the burlesque and comic skits that often occurred in the last part of the minstrel show. In the third part, minstrel shows frequently parodied popular and "sophisticated" literature of the time period. With true minstrel-like spirit, Tom busies himself with trying to devise romantic adventure escapes that mirror famous novels like *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Count of Monte Cristo.* "This combination of gaudy violence and exaggerated sentiment" says Berret, "ridicules the romantic values present in the Southern myth and in much of the fiction and drama that was considered high class

during the nineteenth century" (Berret 45). In fact, Twain once sarcastically remarked that a classic work of literature is "a book which people praise and don't read" (quoted in Hearn xiii).

Twain incorporates his disdain for classic literature when Tom lays out an array of must-do's for Jim that are ludicrous and unnecessarily tedious. He haughtily says to Huck: "Why, hain't you ever read any books at all? — Baron Trenck, nor Casanova, nor Benvenuto Chelleeny, nor Henry IV, nor none of them heroes?" (HF 375). Tom looks for plans that are "real mysterious, and troublesome, and good" as well as time consuming.[8] He contemplates digging a moat around Jim's cabin and even chopping Jim's leg off, simply because "some of the best authorities has done it" (HF 376). He wants to make a rope ladder for Jim, like the one that Edmond Dantes uses, even though Jim has a single-floor prison. He wants Jim to keep a journal on a shirt from the clothes-line using a pen made of the "hardest, toughest, troublesomest piece of old brass candlestick," using blood for ink, and writing on tin plates.

Huck, speaking with the voice of reason and common sense, continuously has to steer Tom back to what is both realistic and practical to do. For example, when Tom suggests that Tom keep a journal, Huck replies, "Journal your granny — *Jim* can't write" (HF 377). But Tom will not be reasoned with most of the time, and he is committed to pulling off his schemes no matter how preposterous they are. In fact, in chapter XXXVIII, Tom and Huck decide to push the grindstone into Jim's cabin to inscribe Jim's coat of arms onto it. The boys underestimate how heavy the stone is. As Huck explains, "We got her half way; and then we was plumb played out, and most drownded with sweat. We see it warn't no use, we got to go and fetch Jim. So he raised up his bed and

slid the chain off of the bed-leg" (HF 402). Between Huck and Jim, the two push the grindstone into the secret hole in the cabin. But, of course, although Jim, Huck, and Tom miss it, readers cannot help but see the absurdity inherent in this scene: although Jim still has the chain on him, he has been set free from the prison in order to push the grindstone.

Then there are the various little things that Tom forces on Jim like spiders, snakes, rats, and other insects. As if all of this were not enough, Tom increases their difficulty by writing a letter to the Phelps tipping them off that Jim will be stolen, just to make things more interesting for the boys. Some of the letter reads:

> Don't betray me, I wish to be your friend. There is a desprate gang of cutthroats from over in the Ingean Territory going to steal your runaway nigger to-night, and they have been trying to scare you so as you will stay in the house and not bother them. I am one of the gang, but have got religgion and wish to quit it and lead a honest life again, and will betray the helish design. (HF 413)

From start to finish, Tom's half-cocked romantic ideas not only prolong Jim's confinement but also land Tom with a bullet in his calf. As much as Tom is pleased to death about the whole drama, that bullet wound sobers Jim and Huck up considerably, and the whole charade takes on a more serious tone.

Minstrel Show Themes in *Huck Finn*

Berret argues that "Mark Twain seemed to notice the dilemmas of democracy that were projected in the minstrel show" in addition to adopting minstrelsy's tripartite structure (Berret 40). He also notes that "Although minstrels were tentative in their

support of freedom and equality — here mocking elitism and there aspiring to it — they paid unqualified tribute to the values of home, work, and family" (Berret 41). Stephen Foster, the most famous minstrel songwriter, wrote numerous songs that depicted the sadness of losing a loved one or the nostalgia for the past before people were "separated by death, social mobility, or economic forces" (Berret 42). Perhaps Americans could identify so strongly with these minstrel songs because the country was quickly becoming a land filled with immigrants and migrants who had left their previous homes to come to the alien landscape of the American city, where inadequate housing, poor living conditions, and disease awaited them (Toll 4).

Antebellum life in many cases proved to be difficult, and as Toll points out, many longed for the days when they were with their families in a familiar home. Antebellum city populations consisted mostly of immigrants and native-born Americans that left their rural homes for the rapidly industrializing cities. These new city people not only had to acclimate themselves to a hectic and different life, but many also had to deal with the intense social class differences and had to live by the clock instead of by the "natural calendar" (Toll 4). Toll makes note of the population growth: "Between 1820 and 1860, Philadelphia quadrupled in population; New York City mushroomed from 410,000 in 1840 to 910,000 in 1860; by 1850, eight American cities had more than a 100,000 residents" (Toll 4). The theatrical business capitalized on the growing number of large cities and the quickly improving modes of transportation in the antebellum period (Wittke 63).

Uprooted whites could identify strongly with songs that depicted slave families torn apart or songs that mythologized the happiness of the past. As I discussed in chapter

one, antebellum minstrel shows often projected conflicting images of slavery to the audience; in some shows, blacks were depicted as ignorant and happy to be plantation slaves. In other shows, songs focused on the cruelty of slavery in separating families from one another and the misery that many blacks had to endure when being away from loved ones. Along these lines, Berret points out that "they [minstrels] gave passionate expression to the values of home and family, especially when these values were being threatened or destroyed" (Berret 46).

Reading early blackface minstrel songs, we find many songs concerning the emotional tumult of family separation. Songs like "Oh! Susanna" and "Old Folks at Home" serve as popular antebellum examples of the emotionally distraught, yet gentle black male lamenting familial separation — a role that Jim fills in the novel to a large extent (Lott 33). One of the most long-lived minstrel songs is Stephen Foster's[9] "Oh Susanna," which relates the African American's hardships and woes and a strong desire to return to loved ones. Most modern audiences recognize the first verse:

> I come from Alabama with my Banjo on my knee
>
> I'se gwan to Lou'siana my true lub for to see,
>
> It rain'd all night de day I left, De wedder it was dry,
>
> De sun so hot, I froze to deff, Susanna don't you cry.

But few know the third verse, as follows:

> I soon will be in New Orleans
>
> And den I'll look all 'round,
>
> And when I find Susanna,
>
> I'll fall upon de ground.

But if I do not find her,

Dis darkey'll surely die,

And when I'm dead and buried

Susanna don't you cry. (Foster 31-36)

Another popular minstrel song that expresses the black man's lamentation about being separated from a loved one is "Cynthia Sue," a song about how the slave narrator has been sold and dearly misses his beloved Cynthia:

De darkey dealers buy me

Cynthia, sighin', come,

She twist her hands around me,

Like a grape vine round a gum.

And later in the song, the narrator sings:

Dey took me down ole Massisippi,

De flood was high its true,

But I made it five feet higher,

When I wept for Cynthia Sue. ("Christy's Nigga Songster" 93)

Twice in the novel, Jim expresses the same sort of sadness and desperation that the narrators in these songs do when faced with being torn from loved ones. The first time occurs in chapter XVI. When Huck and Jim think that they are approaching the free city of Cairo, Illinois, Jim becomes elated with the prospect of being a free man. He talks about his plan to save up enough money to buy his wife, and, together, the two of them could save enough to buy their two children. When Jim contemplates the possibility that their master would not sell the children, he argues "they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and

steal them" (HF 154). What is clear in this passage is that Jim is desperate to have his family together again, and he is willing to sacrifice for possibly years to earn enough to buy them. His back-up plan of stealing his children only accentuates the paternal bond he has with them.

The second time that we see Jim's desire to be reunited with his family occurs in chapter XXIII while Huck and Jim are on the raft with the king and duke. Huck wakes up towards daylight and sees Jim "setting there with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning to himself...He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick" (HF 269). This has a profound effect on Huck, who had probably never before witnessed an African American demonstrating this degree of sadness before: "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" (HF 269). What makes this scene all the more poignant is that Jim believes that he will never see his family again.

...

As much as critics want to focus on how Jim is the stereotypical "Jim Crow" minstrel character, he is also very much *un*-minstrel-like in many moments in the text — moments that show the unmistakable signs of Jim's humanity. Writing to an audience familiar with the minstrel show, Twain wanted the "Negro question" to take *center stage* in his novel. Although Twain published *Huck Finn* twenty years after black emancipation, blacks were hardly free. There were still the intangible racist chains that were just as real as the tangible ones used to be. Exactly how should white Americans look at blacks now that slavery was over? Were blacks like the minstrel caricatures seen

on the minstrel stage? Or were these images nothing more than projections of white fantasy? As we will see in the next chapter, Twain would devise a complex, unique, and controversial way in which to show his audience that stereotyping blacks was unfair, preposterous, illogical, and degrading. Readers would have to consider racist, minstrel-like views and juxtapose these views with Jim as he voyages with the adolescent Huck down the Mississippi River.

Chapter Two Notes

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[1] According to Hearn, Twain's publishers and his wife, Olivia, felt that the book would sell better if it were marketed for boys. So that his original purpose would not be lost, Twain states the following in his preface to *Huck Finn:* "Although my book is intended mainly for the entertainment of boys and girls, I hope it will not be shunned by men and women on that account..." (quoted in Hearn xcii).

[2] Even Eric Lott relies heavily on Berret's analysis in *Love and Theft.* Lott offers very little additional information about the connection between *Huck Finn* and minstrelsy outside of what Berret presents.

[3] Shakespeare was often referred to as "the bard of Avon" (Lott 73).

[4] In scene II, Act V of *Othello,* the Moor actually says the following: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul. / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars! / It is the cause. Yet, I'll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster. / Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men" (Shakespeare 5.2.1-6).

[5] In *Democracy in America* (1835), Alexis de Tocqueville writes that Shakespeare could be found "in the recesses of the forests of the New World. There is hardly a pioneer's hut that does not contain a few odd volumes of Shakespeare" (quoted in Hearn 243).

[6] T. D. Rice attracted crowds for over two decades because of his Jim Crow act as well as his Shakespearean burlesques. In 1848, during the time period when Twain lived in Hannibal, the Hannibal *Journal* wrote this negative response to Dan Rice's Shakespearean burlesque: "It is perfectly sickening to hear the most beautiful language and sublime ideas of the immortal 'Bard of Avon' prostituted and mingled up with the most common place [sic] dram-shop slang by the sacrilegious tongue of this brazen-faced traducer who, leper-like, turns everything he touches to moral filth and uncleanliness [sic]" (quoted in Hearn 244).

[7] Anthony Berret points out that "Only when slavery led to sections division and war did minstrels remove the anti-slavery sentiment from their shows and concentrate on the romantic view of the happy old plantations" (Berret 47). I want to suggest that northern audiences were becoming increasingly nervous that if blacks were freed, then they would move to the North and threaten the whites' way of life. Presenting happy blacks in the South would perhaps assuage whites' fears of blacks surging north.

[8] For example, it takes the Count of Monte Cristo nearly twenty years to finally make his escape from prison.

[9] According to Carl Wittke, "Even Stephen Foster's songs, generally regarded as saturated with the feeling of the Negro, were the creations of a composer who had never lived in the South except for a visit of a few days in Kentucky" (Wittke 174). Twain's favorite minstrel group, the Christy minstrels, would be the first troupe to bring Stephen Foster's songs to the public (Wittke 202).

CHAPTER THREE ABSTRACT

I seek to further research about the connections between *Huck Finn* and minstrelsy in this chapter by demonstrating that Twain uses stereotypical minstrel elements, in various ways, as an opportunity to undermine racial stereotyping largely associated with and perpetuated by the minstrel tradition. I argue that Twain tries to show the inadequacy of using color as a measuring stick for someone's human worth, and I show how Twain invites his audience to look past Jim as a minstrel character. In the first section "White and Black Minstrel Clowns," I explore how Twain portrays blacks and whites in similar ways throughout the novel. He uses various minstrel-like situations in order to point out how white people have unfairly used, controlled, and dominated blacks for their own purposes and how African Americans were negatively affected by slavery and by the racism that still persisted in the post-Reconstruction era. In the section "Pap as Symbol of Racism," I probe Pap Finn's symbolic place in the novel, his similarity to minstrelsy's Jim Crow, and how Twain uses him as a mouthpiece for racist Americans. In the section "Resisting the Minstrel Mask," I explain how Twain attempts to convince his readers about the unfairness of black stereotyping. I demonstrate how Jim resists having the minstrel mask placed on him and how Huck gradually sees Jim as a human being beneath the minstrel mask. I also discuss how virtually every character in the novel looks upon Jim as a minstrel show character, expecting him to "perform" in a typical minstrel-like way.

CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND THE MINSTREL MASK

I could imagine myself as Huck Finn (I so nicknamed my brother), but not, though I racially identified with him, as Nigger Jim. who struck me as a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave.

--Ralph Ellison

Was Jim only a minstrel stereotype and a predictable "darky" clown to be used as the butt of the comedy? Or did Twain have greater aspirations for Jim (who is the representative of all African Americans)? There are many situations in *Huck Finn* where Twain fits Jim problematically with the minstrel mask, and critics have pointed out these situations repeatedly for decades. What I argue in this chapter is that Twain uses stereotypical minstrel caricatures, in various ways, as an opportunity to undermine racist stereotyping largely associated with and perpetuated by minstrelsy. In this chapter I also closely examine the much-debated "evasion" sequence. These final chapters are filled with minstrel-like events that Tom initiates concerning Jim's "escape" that Jim, for the most part, goes along with.[1]

Lott and other pro-*Huck Finn* scholars argue that Twain was aiming at presenting the possibility of racial harmony in the novel.[2] In "*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn;* or, Mark Twain's Racial Ambiguity," Kenny J. Williams says, "Between them [Huck and Jim] a force of racial integration takes place" (Williams 233). Of course, they cannot live harmoniously on land. It is only on the river — a highly symbolic motif flowing through the novel — where Jim and Huck can have their friendship undisturbed by the forces of racism that are waiting for them on the shore. What some scholars have recognized, and

is important for my argument here, is that Twain intentionally wants his audience to see stereotypes so that he can better illustrate how racism violates blacks' inherent humanity. About Jim's potential humanity and his association with the minstrel tradition, Ellison argues:

> Writing at a time when the blackface minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity — and Twain's complexity — emerge. (Ellison 104)

Like Ellison, David L. Smith discusses Twain's complex use of the stereotypical minstrel mask. In "Huck, Jim, and Racial Discourse," Smith asserts that Twain does not use these stereotypes to assert the inherent inferiority and minstrel-like qualities of blacks. Twain, contrary to what some critics want to assert, is employing "subversion in his attack on race" (Smith 105). Smith argues that Twain "focuses on a number of commonplaces associated with 'the Negro' and then systematically dramatizes their inadequacy" (Smith 105). Echoing Smith's arguments, Everett Emerson asserts in *Mark Twain: A Literary Life* that while Huck is on the raft with Jim, his "racist beliefs, his prejudices, about African Americans simply do not correspond to his experiences with Jim" (Emerson 143). Through the course of the novel, Huck gradually reconsiders his stereotypical ideas about African Americans.

On the other hand, many critics view Twain's treatment of Jim as proof that the novel is racist, and many of these anti-*Huck Finn* scholars cite Twain's use of the word

"nigger" over two hundred times as evidence for his racism.[3] One of the most vehement charges comes from John H. Wallace. In "The Case Against Huck Finn," Wallace claims that the "book and racism feed on each other and have withstood the test of time because many Americans insist on preserving our racist heritage" (Wallace 23), and he further advises that this book only be used at the college level to study how racism is perpetrated and perpetuated (23). Many other critics accuse Twain of portraying Jim as stereotypically ignorant. In "Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth Century 'Liberality,'" Woodard and MacCann make the case that Twain portrays Jim without an "essential intelligence," which would be necessary to buttress any claims for his humanity (Woodard and MacCann 141). They find in Jim "a characterization imbued with the white supremacy myth of the time" (141).

In order to find our way out of the controversy, we have to go about solving the "Jim as minstrel" question by examining how other characters treat him throughout the novel, and we have to most importantly take a close look at how Huck himself treats and thinks about Jim.[4] Huck is the lens through which Twain wants us to see certain truths about racism and how to *look at* African Americans.

White and Black Minstrel Clowns

Although critics have different beliefs about Jim's role or purpose, most agree that Jim has at least some stereotypical minstrel show qualities that are hard to dispute. Throughout the novel, he is superstitious and is often depicted as being foolish and childish. For example, while on Jackson Island, Jim ritually follows folk superstitions, counting the food items for dinner, shaking the tablecloth after sundown, and telling bees

immediately if their keeper dies, just to name a few (HF 89). Additionally, Jim is always ready to make decisions about bad luck based on his superstition, and he places considerable faith in signs. However, Twain forces his audience to examine their stereotypical beliefs about African Americans by portraying whites and blacks acting in similar ways in several instances throughout the novel. He plays into his readers' beliefs about how blacks are like minstrel characters only to undermine those beliefs in another part of the novel.

Figure 8. "Jim and the Ghost." E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

When Huck first encounters Jim on Jackson Island, he finds Jim lying asleep with "a blanket around his head, and his head was nearly in the fire" (HF 85). As Hearn points out, this was considered to be a stereotypical slave behavior in the nineteenth century. According to the race theorist Samuel A. Cartwright in *Natural History of the Prognathous Species of Man* (1857), blacks "instinctively cover their head and faces with a blanket at night, and prefer lying with their heads to the fire instead of their feet" (quoted from Hearn's commentary 87). What happens next is a mini-minstrel show. Jim "bounce[s] up" and stares wildly at Huck and instantly believes that Huck is a ghost. As we see in Figure 8, Jim falls on his hands and knees, clasps his hands together, and says: "Doan' hurt me — don't! I hain't ever done no harm to a ghos.' I awluz liked dead people, and done all I could for 'em. You go en git in de river again, whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to Ole Jim, 'at 'uz awluz yo' fren'" (HF 85).

What no other scholar has pointed out is that Jim's response, as minstrel-like as it may seem at first, is very similar to Tom's reaction to Huck in chapter XXXIII when he sees Huck on the Phelps' farm. Tom, who like Jim assumes Huck to be killed earlier, thinks that he is seeing Huck's ghost. Tom says, "I hain't ever done you no harm. You know that. So then, what you want to come back and ha'nt me for?" Huck replies, "I hain't come back — I hain't been gone" (HF 358). Despite the fact that Huck is standing before him, Tom is still unconvinced: "Don't you play nothing on me, because I wouldn't on you. Honest Injun, now, you ain't a ghost?" (HF 358). It is not until Tom actually touches Huck that he is satisfied that he is not a ghost after all. If we look past the differences in dialect in the two scenes, Tom and Jim — two people of different colors — behave in the same way. Although Tom does not drop to his hands and knees and beg for mercy, he is just as afraid and uncertain as Jim is at first. In this parallel, Twain is forcing his audience to look past the minstrel stereotype, demonstrating that blacks and whites can appear equally foolish, superstitious, and frightened.

Another example of a black person and a white person appearing in similar situations is when Huck and Jim, in different sections of the novel, give their own minstrel wench performance, appearing in a female disguise. In chapter XL, Tom is shot in the calf during their great escape from the farm, and he needs a doctor. With Civil War amputations only twenty years in the past, Twain's audience would have understood the life-threatening situation that Tom is in here with a bullet wound.[5] Despite Tom's order for them to keep going, Jim and Huck stop to discuss what should be done. Taking center stage, Jim is cross-dressed as a wench minstrel character in Aunt Sally's calico

dress because Tom insisted that Jim try to pose as Jim's mother. In his ludicrous, female get-up, Jim says:

> "Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz *him* dat 'uz bein' sot free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, 'Go on en save me, nemmine 'bout a doctor f'r to save dis one? Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You *bet* he wouldn't! *Well,* den, is *Jim* gwyne to say it? No, sah — I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a *doctor;* not if it's forty year!" (HF 420)

Figure 9. "Jim Advises a Doctor." E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

After Jim stands his ground and asserts his feelings about what should be done with Tom, Huck says: "I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say" (HF 420). If we consider that earlier in chapter XIV, Huck says that Jim "had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (HF 137), Huck seems to be modifying his racist stance a bit. He has been schooled to believe that blacks are foolish and ignorant minstrel-like characters, and Jim has consistently violated this cultural belief.[6] The only way he knows how to deal with the contradiction between his recent experiences and his past beliefs is to make a new

Figure 10. An Early Minstrel Show Wench Character in a Minstrel Show Songbook. Clifton Waller Berrett Collection.

category for Jim. Now, Jim is black *and* white, and such a suggestion serves to highlight Twain's emphasis on the inadequacy of color to judge or measure someone's humanity with. What is even more important than how Huck now views Jim is how the audience views him. Like Huck, Twain's audience would have to decide on how to look at Jim and what to think about him as a person.

And if we take Huck's words about Jim's internal whiteness and juxtapose them with Jim's cross-dressed wench attire, what we have is a superficial minstrel skit. Looking at Figure 9, Jim is even depicted as *appearing* to be a minstrel character with wide eyes and a large, open mouth — an image that was produced on countless minstrel playbills. Of course, some could argue that Jim is still the stereotypical, loyal, Uncle Tom sort of slave. But the fact is that *Jim* is the one who is speaking for both himself and Huck, and he is the one who takes control of this situation: "No, sah—I doan' budge a step out'n dis place." As much as Jim plays into his blackface role in much of the "evasion" plan, he violates this minstrel-show stereotype by choosing to stay and help Tom — the person who has caused him to be in a potentially life-threatening situation in the first place. He is showing that he is not only a good friend to Tom but also that he is an honorable person capable of making an autonomous choice, despite being black.

As minstrel-like as Jim appears in this scene, Twain portrays Huck as even more absurd when Huck tries to pose as a girl in chapter X in order to gather information on the St. Petersburg shore. With Jim's help, Huck puts on the calico dress and bonnet and practices being a girl: "I practiced around all day to get the hang of things, and by-and-by I could do pretty well in them" (HF 108). Although Huck earnestly attempts to act like a girl, Twain's readers would not miss the minstrel wench performance occurring, as

we see in Kemble's illustration in Figure 11. Even though Huck is certain that he has mastered the art of female impersonation, Jim has to correct him: "Jim said I didn't walk like a girl; and he said I must quit pulling up my gown to get at my britches pocket" (HF 108).

Figure 11. "A Fair Fit." E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

As confident as Huck is that his attire and performance is enough to fool people, it does not take long for Judy Loftus to discern that Huck is a boy. While in Judy's house, Huck tries to find out what people are saying about his "murder." When he discovers that Jim is the main suspect, he becomes nervous and attempts to look casual by trying to thread a needle, but his hands were shaking, and he "made a bad job of it" (HF 113). Judy Loftus notices Huck's failed attempt with the needle. Suspecting the truth, she asks Huck to say his name again, but he cannot recall the name that he originally used. Judy Loftus sums up Huck's performance later on as follows:

> "You do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men, maybe. Bless you child, when you set out to thread a needle, hold the thread still and fetch the needle up to it...And when you throw at a rat or anything, hitch yourself up a tip-toe, and fetch your hand up over your head as awkward as you can, and miss your rat about six or seven foot...And mind you, when a girl tries to catch anything in her lap, she throws her knees apart; she don't clap them together." (HF 117)

Although Huck fails to offer a convincing female performance to Judy Loftus, he offers an entertaining and accurate minstrel wench performance for Twain's readers. Judy's lecture about how to properly act like a girl only highlights Huck's absurdity further, increasing the comic effect in this situation.

The most powerful example of how blacks and whites can act similarly is seen in the way Twain portrays Jim and Pap to be like T. D. Rice's Jim Crow character. In the process of depicting Jim at first as a minstrel stock character, he deftly guides us beyond Jim's stereotypical minstrel image to show Jim's complexity. But Twain's treatment of Pap shows readers the foolishness of using color as a means of judging someone's human worth because although Pap is white, he is depicted as symbolically *black* in multiple ways.

Twain plays into his readers' stereotypical beliefs about African Americans when Jim is bitten on the foot by a rattlesnake on Jackson Island after Huck mischievously places a dead snake at the foot of Jim's bed. (Jim predicts bad luck will happen because Huck touched a snake skin earlier in the novel, and it does come.) After being bitten by the dead snake's mate, Jim begins to jump up and down in pain. What no other scholar has observed is that this image of Jim jumping up and down because of the snake bite bears a remarkable resemblance to T. D. Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" dance. Even in 1885, Twain's audience was still steeped in the minstrel

Figure 12. "Jim and the Snake." E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

tradition, which was still popular in the 1880s. Therefore, Twain chooses to let Jim get bit on the foot rather than anywhere else on the body because he is aware that his audience will immediately associate Jim with "Jim Crow's" big feet. When Jim begins to jump up and down, he is mirroring "Daddy" Rice's "Jump Jim Crow" dance, which was one of the most hilarious aspects of minstrelsy in its formative years. To top the comparison off, Jim "sucked and sucked at the jug, and now and then he got out of his head and pitched around and yelled" (HF 106), which is similar to the "Jump Jim Crow" song: "Wheel about and turn about and do jus' so / Eb'ry time I wheel about I jump Jim Crow." Twain's audience would have made the connection, amplifying the comic effect going on in the novel. In chapter XVI, Jim will make another "Jim Crow"-like move by shouting: "We's safe, Huck, we's safe! Jump up and crack yo' heels, dat's de good old Cairo at las" (HF 154).

Figure 13. An Early 1830s T. D. Rice Playbill.

E. W. Kemble's original 1885 *Huck Finn* illustration (Figure 12) is also interesting for what it reveals about the similarity of the novel to the minstrel show. Looking at the picture closely, we notice that Huck plays the minstrel audience role, watching Jim's "darky" act. Jim, playing the burnt-cork comedian, proceeds to hop on one foot, pouring a jug of whiskey down his throat. As I mentioned in chapter one, minstrel show playbills and other advertisements showed minstrel blacks with "bulging eyeballs, flat, wide noses, gaping mouths with long, dangling lower lips" (Toll 67). Jim's

face bears a remarkable similarity to the traditional minstrel "darky" because his eyes are completely round and open, an effect that blackface actors used white greasepaint to achieve (See Figure 4, Chapter One). One last point is that both Huck and Jim appear to be on a stage, judging from the square platform that they are standing on, which further completes the *appearance* of a minstrel performance.[7]

As we recall, Rice is reputed to have borrowed the idea for his dance from observing a crippled slave hand. Therefore Rice turned something un-comedic at its core (a slave and his handicap) and manipulated it into the nineteenth century's most celebrated entertainment form. Likewise, Huck also takes advantage of Jim's vulnerability and powerlessness and plays a cruel trick on him for his own amusement. In the bigger "picture," Twain, the master puppeteer in this scheme, is demonstrating just how whites have unfairly used, controlled, and dominated blacks for their own purposes. Blacks could do nothing to prevent minstrel performers from degrading their image, and white audiences encouraged these presentations by their continued patronage of and demand for the shows.

It is through the audiences' laughter in this "jumping" scene where Twain "slips the yoke," as Ellison would say. If readers find the parallel between "Jim Crow" and Jim hilarious, their laughter must be tempered by the reality of what Huck has done to a friend. What is most important from Huck's response is that he feels badly about what he has done. As the symbolic representative of all whites, Huck conducts a boyish prank (with a locus of control embedded in the action) and causes Jim to become seriously injured. Twain wants us to notice that African Americans were physically, mentally, and

spiritually *hurt* by slavery and by the racism that still persisted in the post-Reconstruction time in which Twain was writing *Huck Finn.*

Pap as Symbol of Racism

What critics have not yet recognized is that Jim is not the only character who bears a strong resemblance to the "Jumping Jim Crow" character; Pap Finn is also a "Jim Crow" of sorts. Twain intentionally shows Pap as a "Jim Crow" blackfaced clown to show that whites can act similarly to blacks, thereby reducing the difference between the races. In a drunken frenzy, Pap Finn accidentally "went head over heels over the tub of salt pork, and barked both his shins" (HF 64). He begins to jump up and down "around the cabin considerable, first on one leg and then on the other" (HF 65), performing his own dance, as we see in Kemble's original illustration in Figure 14. As we examine both "jumping" situations, Pap Finn and Jim are similar in that they have both experienced physical pain, Jim's pain inflicted by Huck and Pap's inflicted by himself. Both characters are also associated with alcohol. But Jim drinks as a way to deaden the pain whereas Pap's drunken state is the root cause of his accident, and his alcoholism serves to highlight his deplorable internal and external condition. Both are jumping, but it is Pap that appears to be the more despicable of the two.

Figure 14. "Raising a Howl," E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

And what makes Pap's association with T. D. Rice and his "Jim Crow" persona complete is that Pap Finn is Irish and so was Rice (as were many other minstrel performers on the antebellum minstrel stage, like the Virginia Minstrels and the Christy Minstrels) (Lott 35). Although the stereotypes about the Irish have for the most part vanished from our modern culture (except the association between drinking and Irish pubs), Twain was playing with his audiences' common understanding that the Irish were considered the "blacks" of white society throughout the height of Irish immigration in the nineteenth century.[8] The Irish occupied the lowest rungs on the white social spectrum, which brought them dangerously close to being similar to blacks, who held the least amount of power and privilege in society in general. Of blacks in Twain's day, Mel Watkins remarks in *On the Real Side*: "Whether enslaved or free, blacks were the outcasts of American society; to many they were no more than freaks, like P. T. Barnum's freaks and bearded ladies" (86).[9]

Indeed, Pap is portrayed as freakish and repugnant, and in his *grotesquerie*, he has been called one of the most memorable characters in American literature. Twain seems to take the very worst qualities of the "damned human race" and coalesce them into one body — *one white body* that rivals Simon Legree in cruelty, racist ideology, and white scum-edness. As much as we want to laugh at his ignorance, his unkempt appearance, and his drunken escapades (laughing is sometimes unavoidable when Twain is involved), there is a subtle darkness surrounding Pap, a minstrel-madness. As

Figure 15. "Pap." E. W. Kemble, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* 1885.

Emerson points out, Pap's mistreatment of Huck is the catalyst for Huck's decision to flee: "Although there is a comic side to Pap, his attempt to kill Huck in a fit of delirium tremens is anything but funny" (Emerson 144). He is unclean (physically and morally); he is hypocritical and abusive; he is a kidnapper, a drunkard, and an antisocial leech who has no qualms about breaking the law.

Some critics view Pap as another example of how Twain was racist. After all, there sits the technically white Pap ranting and raving about blacks trying to behave above their station. I think it is closer to the truth that Twain intended to use Pap as an example of how absurd racism really is. As Hearn points out, although Pap is white, Twain makes it clear early on that color is a poor measuring stick for superiority (Hearn 53). When Huck first finds Pap in his bedroom in chapter V, he describes him as follows: "There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl — a tree toad white, a fish-belly white" (HF 53). If Twain's audience viewed blacks as plantation "darkies" with big feet and with toes that stick out of clumsy shoes and as people who wore rag-tag clothes, then they would have to recognize Pap's similarity to the stereotypical black man.

Pap is described as if he is in "Banjo" and "Bones" plantation slave get-up; his clothes are "just rags" with "busted" shoes that reveal his protruding toes. Huck also comments on Pap's hat: "His hat was laying on the floor; an old black slouch with the top caved in" (HF). What no one has observed before is that although Huck is calling his father's hat a "black slouch," the hat is actually a metaphorical representation of Pap himself. Therefore, Pap is the one who is the stereotypical *black* in this scene. Twain's

readers would have to deal with the cognitive dissonance that would arise out of the violation of their “black as minstrel character” mental schema.

Although Pap Finn does not occupy the same space in the novel as Jim, Twain uses him as the physical embodiment of all that is bad about white racist ideology in both the minstrel shows and in the white American consciousness. It is interesting that Pap, this “white trash” specimen, still looks down on black people who have achieved an education and are trying to improve their station in life in much the same way that “Zip Coon” minstrels were mocking African American attempts to act “white.” Emerson explains, “The existence of Africans Americans at the bottom rung of society gives poor white trash like Pap some sense of dignity” (Emerson 144). To act “white” is a codified expression in America that entails education, sophistication, dignity, power, and self-respect. To act “black” is the negation of “white” traits, and Pap is aligned with *blackness* in every way.

Twain associates Pap with blackness again in the scene where Pap launches into a diatribe about how terrible the “govment” is because it allows blacks in some states to act “white”: “Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter; most as white as a white man…they said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages…And that ain’t the wust. They said he could *vote*” (HF 64). Pap goes on to say, “And to see the cool way of that nigger — why, he wouldn’t a give me the road if I hadn’t shoved him out o’ the way” (HF 64). As Lott suggests, it is no coincidence that while Pap is making his racist case against black social mobility, he is completely covered in mud, after laying “in the gutter all night” (HF 63). As Lott points out, Twain

deftly constructs this scene so that Pap is actually "blacker than the hated 'mulatter' free man" (Lott 35), both literally and symbolically.

What is also intriguing about Pap's place in the novel is that his actions mimic what slavery did to African Americans. He kidnaps Huck from a loving home and forces him into slave-like servitude for him in his shanty. Pap's violent nature parallels the violence of slaveholding. As James Oakes points out in *Slavery and Freedom,* "slavery was distinguished by an inescapable reliance on highly personalized mechanisms of coercion. No slave society has ever existed without a degree of systematic, often ritualized violence" (Oakes 7). Because Pap physically abuses Huck and locks him in the cabin for extended periods of time (once for three days), Huck decides to run away forever. Likewise, Jim's fear of being sold "down the river," with the implied horrors of what that life would entail, is what also prompts him to escape from Miss Watson.

Resisting the Minstrel Mask

Pap's racist views about the inherent inferiority of African Americans, the backbone of slavery's legitimacy,[10] are not confined to him. Virtually everyone in the world of *Huck Finn* looks upon Jim and all other blacks as minstrel show characters, expecting them to "perform" in a typical minstrel-like way. Twain highlights these stereotypical, racist caricatures depicted in minstrel shows in order to undermine them, and he wants his readers to view how they treat and think about blacks in order to make those readers more aware of racist behaviors and beliefs.

Twain starts undermining racial/minstrel stereotyping at the novel's outset when Jim begins to resist his minstrel mask through the "witch incident." In this situation,

Tom is determined to "play something on" Jim despite Huck's protests, and he mischievously moves Jim's hat into the tree while he is sleeping (HF 28). When Jim wakes up, he claims "witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the state" (HF 28). Every time Jim tells the story, it becomes more and more grandiose until "by-and-by he said they rode him all over the world" (HF 29). In this example, Jim *seems* to be locking himself firmly in the minstrel tradition of exaggeration and showing the influence of the tall tale in minstrelsy. Jim even tells his story in the stereotypical way. As Huck explains, "Niggers is always talking about witches in the dark by the kitchen fire" (HF 29).

Woodard and MacCann are two of many who argue that the witch incident serves to highlight the "superstition-steeped minds" of Jim and the other slaves that give the "whole scene a minstrel flavor" (Woodard and MacCann 145). They also assert that this episode is another case of the "swaggering buffoonery of the minstrel clown" (145). The authors assert that Jim never successfully overcomes the traditional minstrel stereotype, that he is "usually either the total fool or the overgrown child," and if he occasionally seems wise, it comes across as an accident because of the preponderance of "head-scratching darky" scenes (145).

Despite Woodard and MacCann's objections, I am not convinced that Twain is simply interested in making people laugh at Jim's (and all other black's) expense. Huck describes Jim as being full of pride (even arrogance) over the witch tale, claiming that the five cent piece, which Huck leaves to pay for the candles taken that night, was "a charm the devil give to him…and told him he could cure anybody with it and fetch witches whenever he wanted to" (HF 29). In "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse,"

David L. Smith points out that although it is never made clear to us whether Jim actually believes in his own story or not, Jim does manage to take a humiliating trick and turn it around so that he is able to glean some social status out of the situation among his fellow slaves *and* among whites (Smith 109), thereby shaking off the shackles of the minstrel stereotype. Jim violates Huck's ideas about how blacks are supposed to behave and think by suggesting Jim's difference from the slaves who come from miles around to hear Jim's witch story: "Strange niggers would stand with their mouths open and look him all over" (HF 29). Thus we see the beginning of Huck's eventual capacity to see Jim beyond the minstrel "darky" image.

Butted up next to his minstrel-like peers, Jim commands their respect and admiration by suggesting that he can "cure anybody" by virtue of the magic token. In response to Jim's newfound pride in himself, Huck jealously remarks, "Jim was most ruined for a servant, because he got so stuck up" (HF 30). By allowing Jim to derive power in this situation, Jim transcends his minstrel mask and demonstrates that African Americans are capable of great ingenuity and creativeness in overcoming humiliating situations.[11]

The most important way that Twain shows his readers about the possibility of overcoming racism is through Huck. While journeying down the Mississippi River with Jim, Huck learns to look at Jim as a human being behind the minstrel mask. One of the ways that this happens is through the second trick that Huck plays on Jim in chapter XV. Because of the fog, Huck tries to tie the raft up on shore with the canoe in tow, but the current is so strong that the line is severed. The current quickly separates the two characters. After a while, Huck manages to locate Jim on the raft, finding him asleep

"with his head down between his knees" (HF 147). When Jim awakes, he is overjoyed to find that Huck has not been hurt or killed: "It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true. Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o' you. No, you ain' dead! You's back agin, 'live en soun', jis de same ole Huck — de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness!" (HF 148). But instead of reciprocating in their reunion, Huck tries to make Jim believe that he has imagined their whole separation, immediately asking him if he has been drinking. Jim replies, "Drinkin'? Has I ben drinkin'? Has I had a chance to be drinkin'? (HF 148). Jim, confused about what Huck is suggesting, asks Huck: "Huck — Huck Finn, you look me in de eye; look me in de eye. *Hain't* you ben gone away?" (HF 148).

Despite the formal plea for honesty (Jim uses Huck's full name), Huck lies to him and says that he hasn't been gone at all. Jim replies in the stereotypical "head scratching darkey" way: "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?" (HF 148). Huck manages to convince Jim that he dreamed the whole thing, and up to this point, the reader is led into Twain's trap and allowed to confirm the minstrel stereotype about ignorant blacks. But when the cloud cover lifts, Jim and Huck see the broken oar and the river trash on the raft — the undisputable proof of what has really occurred. Looking at Huck "steady, without ever smiling," Jim tells Huck frankly that while he was relieved to see Huck safe, Huck capitalized on how he could humiliate him: "Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (HF 150). Huck, here associated with white trash, recognizes finally that Jim is a human being with feelings and dignity, and looking inward, he discovers that he is ashamed of the way that he has been treating Jim. In one of the most often quoted lines of the book, he says, "It

was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger — but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (HF 150). Indeed, Huck's "humbling" episode triggers a change in him, making him question the legitimacy of his previously held racist views. It is because he sees Jim as a human being that he decides to help Jim escape from the Phelps farm later in the novel.

Huck is the only person in the novel that is capable of seeing Jim beyond his minstrel mask. The king and the duke certainly don't see Jim as a human being. He is little more than a minstrel character to them, and they treat him as if he is a satisfied, ignorant, and subservient plantation slave like Jim Crow, Banjo, and Bones. They show this most clearly in chapter XXIV. At the beginning of the chapter, we discover that every time Huck, the duke, and the king go on shore, they tie Jim up. Stepping from behind the minstrel mask, Jim expresses his dissatisfaction with being tied for hours "because it got mighty heavy and tiresome to him when he had to lay all day in the wigwam tied with the rope" (HF 273). Sidestepping and ignoring the inhumane treatment that Jim has been forced to endure, the duke's solution is to dress Jim up like King Lear with a "long curtain-calico gown, and a white horse-hair wig and whiskers." Then he "took his theatre-paint and painted Jim's face and hands and ears and neck all over a dead dull solid blue, like a man that's been drownded nine days" (HF 273).

To Huck, Jim looks like "the horriblest outrage I ever see" (HF 273). The duke then makes Jim hold a sign that reads: "*Sick Arab — but harmless when not out of his head*" (HF 273). The duke plays a whitefaced minstrel here and attempts to control the image of African Americans by stating that he is "harmless," an act that many (if not all) minstrel shows did. The words "when not out of his head" can be interpreted to mean

that as long as blacks perform the way that whites want them to, they will be considered "normal" and "safe." But the implied message here is that a black person who violates the pre-set minstrel image is *harmful* to society, specifically white society, which was an accepted cultural belief that still continues even today.

This scene is inexorably linked to stage performance and minstrelsy because Jim is dressed up to burlesque King Lear, the king who loses his mind and his kingdom. Jim is also linked with *Othello,* the tragic black Moor who is deceived by Iago and murders his wife in a jealous rage. Concerning the *Othello* link, Williams writes,

> There is a tendency to accept blackness when it can be given a foreign air...Twain's Duke and King are smart enough to know that a dark-skinned foreigner is acceptable in the world of the Mississippi Valley. Thus they dress Jim as a 'Sick Arab.' If he does not have to talk, then all of them are safe to travel on the raft during daylight hours. (Williams 235)

Taking the whole scene and its racial implications in, what we have is Jim being expected to play the role that has been assigned to him from the minstrel tradition, a tradition enacted by white "corked" comedians on the stage for audience pleasure. The more subtle point that Twain makes here is that Jim is *not a minstrel performer.* He is a human being who looks silly and outrageous fitted in this minstrel guise. As Huck points out later after seeing the duke and king tarred and feathered, "Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another" (HF 365). Of course, when the duke and the king are tarred, they are blackened and wear their own ludicrous costume of feathers.

Like the king and duke who paint Jim up absurdly in a minstrel guise, Tom is incapable of seeing Jim as anything but a minstrel stereotype, which is evident in the

"evasion" sequence. These final chapters have caused considerable debate in the literary community. Hemingway seemed to recognize this when he writes in *Green Hills of Africa:* "If you read it [*Huck Finn*] you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating" (Hemingway 22). Was Twain "just cheating"? Was he just trying to entertain his audience by placing the minstrel mask back on Jim permanently? Despite what many anti-*Huck Finn* scholars argue about the final chapters, I think that Twain does his finest work in demonstrating the evils of racism and minstrel stereotyping through how Tom treats Jim.

Interestingly, Tom, the boy-hero in *Tom Sawyer* who personifies the adventurous spirit of America, degenerates into one of the racist multitude in *Huck Finn* and is no longer in the running as the idyllic American fantasy figure. Tom is the only one who knows that Jim is free, and he could have prevented Jim from suffering in the shack-prison — a fact that Michael Egan closely examines. In Egan's view, by withholding the information about Jim's emancipation,[12] Tom takes on the role of a minstrel show stage producer and treats Jim as his blackface actor. He uses Jim as long as he can in order to assuage his own selfish desire for adventure and entertainment. But what is important for my purpose here is that while Tom concocts a myriad of schemes that mirror minstrelsy's comic skits, Jim very often objects to Tom's desire to see him perform in a stereotypical, minstrel-like way.

As I discussed in chapter two, Tom wants Jim's escape to mirror a host of famous escapes from classic novels. He tries to convince Jim to tame a rattlesnake in his prison: "A prisoner's *got* to have some kind of dumb pet, and if a rattlesnake hain't never been tried, why, there's more glory to be gained in your being the first to ever try it" (HF 403).

Tom tells Jim that he could tame the snake and get it to love him, and he even suggests that Jim could get to the point where he could place the snake's head in his mouth.

No matter how Tom tries to *reason* with him, Jim refuses to be forced into this situation: "Why, Mars Tom, I doan' *want* no sich glory. Snake take 'n bite Jim's chin off, den *whah* is de glory? No, sah, I doan' want no sich doin's" (HF 403). Jim then adds, "ef you en Huck fetches a rattlesnake in heah for me to tame, I's gwyne *leave,* dat's *shore"* (HF 403). In this situation, Jim stands up to Tom and refuses to back down and play into this minstrel-like scheme. Tom eventually gives in to Jim and abandons the rattlesnake idea. Then Tom tries to convince Jim to have rats in the prison with him. Again, Jim objects to being forced into this scenario: "Why, Mars Tom, I doan' *want* no rats. Dey's de dad-blamedest creturs to sturb a body, en rustle roun' over 'im, en bite his feet, when he's tryin' to sleep" (HF 404). Tom pushes his point about the rats further by arguing that "Prisoners ain't ever without rats. There ain't no instance of it. And they train them, and pet them, and learn them tricks, and they get to be as sociable as flies" (HF 404). Like earlier when Jim is bitten on the foot by a rattlesnake, I want to suggest that Twain intentionally uses the stereotypical notion of minstrel performers with big feet. Jim's feet in this instance would offer a large target for the rats to bite. While readers may see Jim as a minstrel character again, they have to acknowledge two things. First, readers must recognize the absurdity of Tom's request concerning rats in the first place, and, second, readers see that Jim breaks free of his prescribed role by objecting to Tom's desire to see him play in the "darky" act.

Another interesting point concerning Tom's desire to see Jim play a minstrel role is reflected when he encourages Jim to play music to the collection of animals and insects

in Jim's prison. He wants Jim to use his "juice-harp" and serenade them with "The Last Link is Broken": "you'll see all the rats, and the snakes, and spiders, and things begin to feel worried about you, and come. And they'll just fairly swarm over you, and have a noble good time" (HF 405). It is here where Twain makes the most compelling demonstration that Tom wants Jim to act like a minstrel, since music was central to every minstrel show. Written by William Clifton and published in 1840, "The Last Link is Broken" was a popular minstrel song about "noble resignation." An excerpt from the song is as follows:

> The last link is broken that bound me to thee,
>
> And the words I have spoken have rendered me
>
> free;
>
> That bright glance misleading on others may
>
> shine
>
> Those eyes smil'd unheeding when tears burst
>
> from mine,
>
> If my love was deem'd boldness that error is o'er;
>
> I've witnessed thy coldness and prize thee no
>
> more. (quoted in Hearn 181)

As Hearn points out, "The song was popular among the young people of Hannibal in the 1840s" (Hearn 181), and Twain felt that this song expressed a longing for the happiness and joy of the past that was now gone (Hearn 181). Jim is like the narrator in the song. He is enslaved again, and the carefree days on the raft with Huck are gone. Tom becomes the person in the song who "smil'd unheeding when tears burst from mine"

because he is contributing to Jim's misery by forcing him to do foolish and uncomfortable things. Additionally, he is doing these things *knowing* that Jim is free and that he should not have to endure this sort of turmoil. Tom even toys with the idea of severing Jim's leg at one point.[13] With this song, Twain's audience would have recognized that Tom is even crueler and more absurd because he is treating Jim like a "dumb pet," forcing him into a role that Jim wants no part of.

Like everyone else, the lynch mob, representing racist America, can see Jim only as a minstrel figure. Jim is brought back to the Phelps farm in wench attire. Because the mob seems to ignore Jim wearing a dress, it furthers my claim that they only see Jim as a minstrel character. Huck observes that the mob of angry whites periodically hit Jim on the head and continuously "cuss" at him, but Jim never says a word or indicates that he even knows Huck. In fact, Jim narrowly escapes being hanged. The only thing that saves Jim from the mob's violence is the sobering realization that they may have to pay Jim's owner for him, which "cooled them down a little" (HF 433). The mob chains Jim heavily and "said he warn't to have nothing but bread and water to eat" (HF 433).

Huck is upset about how his friend is being treated and temporarily finds hope when the doctor steps in to speak on Jim's behalf. At first, Twain leads us to believe that the doctor, who represents the educated and sophisticated white elite, is a "very nice, kind-looking old man" (HF 423). But although he is educated, he still cannot see Jim as fully human. Although readers have been prepared to see Jim as a man beneath the minstrel mask, the doctor is still locked into a racist view of him. As caring as Jim has been for Tom, the doctor sees Jim as a stereotypical plantation "darky," as a loyal,

trusting, and kind-hearted Uncle Tom-like figure originally based on minstrel depictions of blacks.

Observing how poorly Jim is being treated, the doctor says, "Don't be no rougher on him than you're obleeged to, because he ain't a bad nigger" (HF 433). The doctor sees Jim as a good "nigger" because he helped him treat the wounded Tom: "out crawls this nigger from somewheres, and says he'll help, and he done it too, and done it very well" (HF 434). The doctor also sees Jim as "good" because he seems to be the epitome of the minstrel plantation slave. The doctor says that Jim looked "all tired out, too, and I see plain enough he'd been worked main hard, lately. I liked the nigger for that" (HF 434). Finally, instead of valuing Jim as a human being, the doctor can only increase Jim's worth in terms of money, saying that "a nigger like that is worth a thousand dollars" (HF 434).

Twain's readers would have to choose whether to see Jim for his "white-like" courage or to value him strictly for money, as the doctor does. But to see Jim only for his monetary value at this late part in the novel is difficult to fathom. And it is here at the end where Twain achieves his ultimate success, triumphing over racism by deftly causing his audience to side with Jim, for whites to side with a black person over the other whites. Huck, now speaking as the mouthpiece for the reading audience, objects silently to Jim's abuse. "Then they [the mob] all agreed that Jim had acted very well, and was deserving to have some notice took of it, and reward. So every one of them promised, right out and hearty, that they wouldn't cuss him no more" (HF 434). This comes across as comic because the audience expects that Jim will now be *properly* rewarded with freedom and dignity, which does not happen. Huck hopes that they will remove "one or two of the

chains" and offer him "meat and greens with his bread and water; but they didn't think of it" (HF 435). When neither one of these things happens, Huck is deeply disturbed and saddened.

The abuse of Jim does not end until Tom reveals the truth: "They hain't no right to shut him up! *Shove*! — and don't you lose a minute. Turn him loose! he ain't no slave; he's as free as any cretur that walks this earth" (HF 438). It is here that Tom shows his own foolishness and cruelty, that he only forced Jim to endure through all of his schemes because he "wanted the *adventure* of it" (HF 438). More clearly than ever, Tom reveals his position as the stage producer of a minstrel show. The ugly reality is that although Jim gives us the entertainment, he is a human being who has been treated badly.

Our sense that Jim has been wronged is only compounded when Tom reveals his true plan, which was to keep Jim's freedom a secret until they had all had adventures "plumb to the mouth of the [Mississippi] river" (HF 442). Tom wanted to then bring Jim home in style and have a parade in his honor. Tom's idea of a street procession mirrors another feature of the early minstrel performances. Wittke explains that when "the minstrels came to town, their arrival was heralded by a street parade, in which the 'silver' or 'gold cornet band,' gorgeously attired in colorful coats and trousers, big brass buttons and striking hats, led the procession through the streets of the town to the theatre…What a day it was when the minstrels came to town!" (Wittke 145-146). More than likely, Tom is imagining a minstrel parade for Jim on his return to St. Petersburg. Such a magnificent parade with the whole town looking on would be just the sort of event that Tom desires. As we see in *Tom Sawyer,* he is the one constantly seeking notoriety and vying for the envy and attention of all. Although Tom's plan does not happen, he still

pays Jim forty dollars for playing his *role* so well by "being prisoner for us so patient" (HF 442), which is further evidence that he considered Jim as part of a minstrel act. [14]

...

At the end, we are left feeling what Jim *should feel:* betrayed, used, and cheated in this boyish prank times a thousand. Twain is reminding his readers that most whites *knew* that slavery was wrong prior to black emancipation, that there were inconsistencies between democracy and slavery, but that they simply chose to ignore the knowledge (or the strong suspicion) simply because it was convenient to do so. Twain is also trying to demonstrate why blacks should be treated like fellow human beings—as people with complexity, dignity, and intelligence. He helps his post-Reconstruction audience recognize that the stereotypical minstrel mask cannot adequately define African Americans and that someone's color is not an accurate indicator of their character. Perhaps more than anything else, Twain shows why minstrel show depictions of happy plantation "darkies" were mythologizing a world that was, in reality, full of cruelty and injustice.

Chapter Three Notes

[1] Michael Egan hotly criticizes Twain for how Jim is treated in the evasion chapters in his 1977 *Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn: Race, Class and Society.*

[2] It is interesting that Twain chooses an adolescent Huck and fits Jim into the very minstrel-like non-sexual "Uncle Dan'l" prototype guise.

[3] In a recent personal interview that I conducted with Mel Watkins, he and I discussed what Twain's intentions could have been with his profuse use of the word "nigger," a racially loaded word closely associated with minstrel stereotypes. Watkins admitted that he thought of *Huck Finn* as an anti-racist novel, and he said, "Twain used the 'n' word over and over again to show how ugly it was and how disgusting the whole thing [slavery and the dehumanization of blacks] was" (Watkins, Personal Interview). As readers hear the word "nigger," they have to continuously decide whether or not Jim fits the minstrel stereotypes closely associated with that word. Twain also challenges readers to consider what it means to be a "nigger."

[4] I would argue that Huck is himself the true personification of Twain, that Huck is Twain's mask. Getting into Huck's head is the key behind the mystery. Although my purpose here in this study does not involve psychoanalysis, it is important to address the fact that Twain saw himself in Huck, very much the young boy that Twain once was and would like to be again.

[5] During the Civil War, a bullet in the leg could easily lead to amputation of the damaged limb because of the threat of infection and gangrene. Penicillin was yet to be invented. Therefore, gangrene and other infections would have very likely killed Tom if he didn't seek immediate help.

[6] In psychology, Huck's belief system about blacks is called a *mental schema.* Through Huck's constant interaction with Jim, he discovers that Jim as a black man does not fit into this schema; he develops cognitive dissonance and must either reject the old schema or make a new category for Jim. Huck seems to place Jim in his own category of blackness and whiteness.

[7] The raft itself can also be viewed as a stage.

[8] For more information about the roots of conflicts between the Irish and African Americans, see Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995). He offers an insightful history of race and class relations between the Irish and African Americans beginning with the height of Irish immigration in the 1830s and 1840s, and he discusses how Irish were originally associated with blacks but adopted racism in order to become "white."

[9] Is it just coincidence that Pap Finn, the only man of Irish descent in the novel, is an outcast of the legitimate, "good" society? Watkins points out that Dan Emmett was described as a "backwoodsman of Irish descent who looked like a Yankee deacon" (quoted in Watkins, *On the Real Side,* 87).

[10] For more information about how slavery was justified in "democratic and free" America, see Chapter One of James Oakes' *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South.*

[11] Jim shows his ingenuity also by escaping to Jackson Island without being detected, and he courageously attempts to gain his freedom.

[12] We learn at the end that Miss Watson felt badly about being tempted to sell Jim "down the river," and she sets him free in her will.

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[13] Huck manages to convince Tom about the imprudence of such an act. Tom reluctantly agrees with him and says: "Jim's a nigger and wouldn't understand the reasons for it, and how it's the custom in Europe; so we'll let it go" (HF 376).

[14] Ironically, forty dollars is also the same amount that the king and the duke sold Jim for.

CONCLUSION

Being 'highly pigmented,' as the sociologists say, it was our Negro 'misfortune' to be caught up associatively in the negative side of this basic dualism of the white folk mind, and to be shackled to almost everything it would repress from conscience to consciousness. The physical hardships and indignities of slavery were benign compared with this continuing debasement of our image.

--Ralph Ellison

Twain's genius, his ability to incorporate his experiences and his beliefs about the world into this writing, was largely due to his zest for living and his extraordinary memory. In his introduction to Twain's *Autobiography,* Charles Neider remarks:

> Mark Twain's life was a long and rich one; it seemed to him an inexhaustible mine of recollection. The associations streamed out from it in a million directions and it was his quixotic hope to capture most of them with the irony and humor and storytelling gift which were his own way of regarding the human drama. (Neider xiv).[1]

Neider's words are interesting because they capture the very heart of who Twain was as a human being and as a writer. True to what Neider suggests, Twain admitted once that everything that he wrote about was based on what he experienced and observed in life.[2] Twain knew black culture. He grew up in the slave-holding state of Missouri where slaves were a part of his extended family. He knew minstrel shows. He watched them in Hannibal, when he worked in California, and when he returned to the east. He saw the very beginnings of the minstrel show starting with "Daddy" Rice, and he was saddened by the changes in minstrelsy after the Civil War — changes that would eventually lead to the extinction of the show in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Minstrelsy was America's first indigenous entertainment form, for better or for worse, where African Americans were branded as inferior to whites. Through the minstrel mask and through the countless playbills and advertisements that circulated throughout the nineteenth century, blacks were portrayed as being ignorant, superstitious, unintelligent, as having ridiculously oversized feet, lips, and teeth with eyes that were always open and round. In sum, minstrelsy crafted an image of blacks that still haunts them to this day. Blackface comedy exerted a powerful force on Mark Twain in his creation of *Huckleberry Finn.* We see the traces of minstrelsy in the many comic dialogues in the novel, where Banjo, Bones, and the interlocutor find counterparts in Jim, Huck, and Tom. Additionally, the structure of *Huck Finn* closely resembles the tripartite structure of the traditional minstrel show; and there are parallels between the themes in *Huck Finn* and those expressed in blackface comedy also.

But my research has helped me to see much more than superficial similarities between *Huck Finn* and minstrelsy. I learned that Twain cared a great deal about how African Americans were being treated in the post-Reconstruction era, and I am convinced that Twain had anti-racist intentions with *Huck Finn* and sought to undermine racist views of African Americans that the minstrel stage promoted. Through Huck's relationship with Jim, readers learn that racial harmony is a possibility. Although Jim has *some* stereotypical traits of African Americans, Twain shows his readers that Jim is not just a stereotype and that he is more than just a minstrel mask. In fact, Jim may be the most noble and decent character in the entire novel. He is a man who cares more about his friend Huck than he does about himself; he is a man who is ready to give up his freedom to save Tom's life; and he is a man who cares deeply about his family. Jim

bears hardship, cruelty, and oppression with a great deal of dignity. Through Jim, Twain shows his readers that color is not a useful tool in determining someone's human worth, despite what minstrel shows presented on the stage.

The greatest impediment for properly understanding Twain's masterpiece is the fact that minstrel shows have become a relic of the past, caked over with dust. Considering the racist overtones in "blackface" comedy, that's not necessarily a bad thing. But understanding minstrelsy is, unfortunately, one of the key ingredients to properly understanding important aspects of *Huck Finn*. Today, scholars view *Huck Finn* as an important document about American history. Even when it was published in 1885, it was already a historical novel (Hearn clxv). When Twain wrote his masterpiece, he was writing it for his time, *not ours*. He was writing it for an audience that still had the Civil War fresh on their minds, and many were unsure as to how they should look at newly emancipated slaves.

Without a doubt, minstrel shows had a profound and lasting impact on the white American consciousness and what that society thought blacks looked like and acted like. There is some disagreement in the scholarly community concerning to what degree minstrel shows were racist and to what degree audiences believed that what they were seeing were authentic depictions of Negro life. Mahar argues that the plantation backdrop was merely a convenient prop for singing and dancing. He argues that the "plantation burlesques were inspired by the same desire that motivated writers and composers to burlesque Shakespeare or borrow from already successful ventures and packages for a populist audience" (Mahar 333). He further contends that the use of the black dialect (or what white minstrels *thought* was their dialect) was simply proclaiming

that the blackface comedian was now "in character" (Mahar 334): "The idea of the plantation never changed, never developed into a 'real' place. It remained a convention where the 'make believe' southern slaves dwelt" (334). But Mahar tends to underestimate the far-reaching impacts of the "cheap racial caricatures" and rude stereotyping that occurred on the minstrel stage and the devastating impacts of racist minstrel caricatures on black Americans.

Minstrelized images were used as measuring sticks when white Americans came into contact with blacks. As Lott points out, the "minstrel show has been ubiquitous, cultural common coin; it has been so central to the lives of North Americans that we are hardly aware of its extraordinary influence" (Lott 4). Although the features, form, and material of the minstrel show would change over time, what stayed constant in the antebellum and early post-bellum period was the use of the African American blackface in order to provide comic entertainment to the masses, to make social commentary about social issues with impunity, and to give America its first indigenous entertainment form.

According to Lott, the development of blackface and minstrel show stock characters like Jim Crow and Zip Coon "offered a way to play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening — and male — Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them" (Lott 25). And as Ellison argues, blackface minstrelsy unconsciously or consciously tried to contain the "disorder and chaos." A white man putting on the black mask meant that whites were attempting to maintain cultural control over what blacks could be and to define the black body and the black man's possibility to raise himself up to the status of a white man. Although Twain, like so many other Americans, loved to watch burnt cork comedy, he understood how damaging minstrel

show characterizations were to the black image and how these shows perpetuated racism while they entertained mostly white audiences.

The very essence of what immortalizes *Huckleberry Finn* is taken from Twain's beloved "nigger shows." While Twain focuses our attention on minstrelized scenes, he also forces us, in various ways, to question the stereotypes presented on the minstrel stage. Twain — in portraying Jim sometimes as Jim Crow and sometimes as fully human — was trying to say that we are all capable of living up to stereotypical actions occasionally, but we are still quite human beneath the mask, regardless of color or ethnicity. As Ellison suggests, minstrel performers made their living by putting on masks:

> This mask, this willful stylization and modification of the natural face and hands, was imperative for the evocation of that atmosphere in which the fascination of blackness could be enjoyed, the comic catharsis achieved. The racial identity of the performer was unimportant, the mask was the thing (the 'thing' in more ways than one), and its function was to veil the humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask. (Ellison 103)

Twain focuses a great deal of energy in *Huckleberry Finn* on how whites tried to fit the minstrel mask on a whole race of people. He uses *Huckleberry Finn* as a tool for demonstrating how unfair racism is, how absurd it is to judge another person on his/her skin color. I think that Hearn best sums up what *Huck Finn* does for Americans:

"*Huckleberry Finn* continues to challenge readers for what it reveals about the American character, the good, the bad, and the ugly, and about the author himself" (Hearn clxv).

America is not the same country it was in 1885. As Hearn writes, "The customs, the language, the literature, the law, even the terrain have changed" (Hearn clxv). Twain's audience understood what minstrel shows were. Modern readers, both young and old alike, are approaching the novel with the eyes of an "outsider." As Mel Watkins and Eric Lott both suggest, minstrelsy has gone underground, has become interwoven in the very fabric of American society. We are largely unaware of this metamorphosis. Although it was not in the scope of my study to examine twentieth or twenty-first century America, my research has equipped me with a unique lens to better see the minstrel shows all around us — in the 1980's Beastie Boys, the 1990's Vanilla Ice, or the new millennium's Eminem. Examining modern music stars today, we see the traces of minstrelsy. Every time a white performer takes to the stage and acts "black," he or she is consciously or unconsciously resurrecting the minstrel show (Lott 5). Or when we hear Eddie Murphy speaking with the stereotypical African American Vernacular English in *Shrek*, then we know that the invisible tendrils of blackface entertainment are still with us, stretching through time with surprising strength and power.

Twain was well-suited to write an anti-racist novel because he intrinsically understood the white, racist mindset, and I believe that he intentionally designed *Huck Finn* with the hopes of making whites more powerfully aware of the racism which continued to shackle the "emancipated" post-Reconstruction blacks. What makes Twain's use of the minstrel show tradition even more intriguing is that, unlike most minstrel performers after the mid-1850s, Twain thoroughly understood black culture as

much as a white person could. Most of the blackface actors learned their skills from other minstrels before them, and they surprisingly had little contact with black people before they took their shows on the road. They were working with the stereotypical images already presented on the minstrel stage.[3]

Perhaps the most telling evidence that *Huck Finn* is an anti-racist novel occurs when Huck is trying to decide whether to steal Jim back from the Phelps farm. He wrestles the demons of his *white* conscience, and he declares, "All right, then, I'll *go* to hell." It is here where we find the most important irony in the novel. Society has made Huck believe that the right thing to do is to enslave Jim, to see him as a minstrel character, as happy to be in that condition and as *deserving* to be there as well. The fact that Huck is torn about what to do and fears being condemned to hell for making the *right* choice only furthers the point about the inherent evils of racism and slavery. Twenty-first century audiences, like many before, applaud Huck's choice to do the harder right over the easier wrong.

Conclusion Notes

[1] Twain himself seemed to understand that the very beginning of his life predicted his rise to fortune, fame, and importance. Of the day of his birth in Florida, Missouri, he remarks: "The village contained a hundred people and I increased the population by 1 percent. It is more than many of the best men in history could have done for a town. It may not be modest in me to refer to this but it is true. There is no record of a person doing as much—not even Shakespeare. But I did it for Florida and it shows that I could have done it for any place—even London, I suppose" (Autobiography 1).

[2] In *Mark Twain: A Literary Life,* Everett Emerson hints at the possibility of Mark Twain using Huck Finn's persona and voice as a means of masking his own true identity in order to safely return to the mode of writing, thinking, and examining the American cultural drama, much the same way that minstrel shows used the ignorant, black man façade to offer social criticism. According to Emerson: "Mark Twain's decision to adopt Huck as the narrator had important implications. Any discomfort, resistance, or resentment that Samuel Clemens felt from the 'civilizing' he had been undergoing could be easily expressed in Huck's attitude. Telling the story with Huck's voice released quantities of pent-up psychic energy" (Emerson 141). He adds that "[e]mploying Huckleberry Finn as a narrator permitted him to return to old values and attitudes: irreverence, skepticism, outspokenness" (141).

[3] Early blackface performers like Rice and E. P. Christy were some of the very few documented performers who actually watched slaves and free blacks in order to gather material for his show.

Illustrations

Figure 1. T. D. Rice Sheet Music Cover. 1848. The Harvard Theatre Collection of the Houghton Library. <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/minstrel/migallsof.html>.

Figure 2. George Washington Dixon's "Zip Coon." New York, n. d. [1830's]. Harvard Theatre Collection. "A Mini Minstrel Show." © 1998. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl2.html>.

Figure 3. Songs of the Virginia Serenaders. "A Mini Minstrel Show." © 1998. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl4.html>.

Figure 4. Early Minstrel Show Playbill for Newcomb's Minstrels, October 29, 1867. "A Mini Minstrel Show." © 1998. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl4.html>.

Figure 5. An 1879 James Bland Songbook Cover. "A Mini Minstrel Show." © 1998. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl8.html>.

Figure 6. The King as Juliet. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twah195.jpg>.

Figure 7. Hamlet's Soliloquy. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/conditions.html>.

Figure 8. Jim and the Ghost. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twahu65.jpg.>.

Figure 9. Jim Advises a Doctor. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twah411.jpg>.

Figure 10. An Early Minstrel Show Wench Character. Clifton Waller Barrett Collection. "Pre-1852 Minstrel Songs." Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture. Ed. Stephen Railton & the University of Virginia. 2004. <http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/utc/minstrel/misohp.html>.

Figure 11. A Fair Fit. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. < http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twahu85.jpg>.

Figure 12. Jim and the Snake. E. W. Kemble. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. < http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twahu82.jpg>.

Figure 13. "Jim Crow." An Early 1830s T. D. Rice Playbill. "A Mini Minstrel Show." © 1998. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/railton/enam358/minstrl1.html>.

Figure 14. Raising a Howl. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twahu44.jpg>.

Figure 15. Pap. E. W. Kemble. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. 1885. "The Illustrious *Huck.*" The University of Virginia Library Special Collections Department. ©1995. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/twain/twahu30b.jpg>.

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