HUCKLEBERRY FINN AND THE PROBLEM OF FREEDOM

By SANFORD PINSKER

"*. . . he ain't no slave; he's as free as any cretur that walks this earth.*"

—Tom Sawyer spilling the beans about Jim.

"*We're free . . . We're free . . .*"

Linda Loman at Willy's graveside.

Freedom is America's abiding subject, as well as its deepest problem. I realize full well that I am hardly the first person to ruminate about the yawning gap between our country's large promises and, its less-than-perfect practice, much less the first to comment on the ways in which 19th-century America struggled with the "peculiar institution" known as slavery. But I am convinced that the way these large topics find a local habitation in the pages of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is yet another instance in which George Orwell's prophetic words ring true: "It is the first duty of intelligent men to restate the obvious." What Twain means to test out in Huck's idiosyncratic telling of how he and Jim made their way down the river is nothing less than what freedom in America means, and does not mean.

Critics of Twain's novel generally shy away from what makes it simultaneously disturbing and important. So, let me offer the following proposition in the spirit of plain Orwellian speech: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel that does not blink about all that militates to keep genuine freedom under wraps and in control. Just as the book is as wide as the Mississippi on which many of its most memorable moments are set, it is also wide enough to take on the full range of American culture—from those elements out to elevate to

those which run the gamut from the lower-browed to the downright coarse.

At this point, a thumbnail sketch of how the novel has been read, and misread, may be helpful. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* began its long, complicated history as America's most controversial novel shortly after its publication in 1885, when the well-meaning members of the Concord (Mass.) Public Library committee decided to exclude the book from its shelves on the grounds that the story was, in their words, "trashy and vicious." The trouble with Mr. Clemens, they went on to say, was that he had "no reliable sense of propriety." They were, of course, right about this, even if their rightness rather resembles that of a busted watch that tells correct time twice a day. What they worried about, between the words of their carefully crafted objections, is that Twain's novel would corrupt the young—of Concord and, presumably points west and south. The charge is a very old one and has been leveled against those, from Socrates onward, who were regarded as corrupters of the young.

In Twain's case, what he did that so upset the moral arbiters of Concord is boldly announced in the novel's second sentence: "That book [*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*], Huck tells us by way of introduction] was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly." The operative word is *truth*, although we get a pretty good idea about who Huck is and what he stands for by way of his qualifying "mainly." I shall have more to say about the "mainly" later, but for the moment, let me concentrate on what it means to tell the truth and thus begin our journey down a long, complicated path. One should be aware, for example, that truth-telling, properly understood, is not always what Huck had in mind or what many of Twain's readers imagined when they went about separating lies from the truth. *Truth*, in short, is one of those words—slippery, troublesome, but nonetheless, of great importance. This is even truer, as it were, at a time when many thinkers positioned on theory's cutting edge confidently insist that "truth" be surrounded by sneer quotes and interrogated until all that remains are the easy certainties of nihilism. Twain would have found this brand of postmodernism very strange indeed, although I hasten to add that the "pursuit of truth" in his novel leads to darker conclusions than theory has yet dreamt of.

One way to explain the difference between versions of truth-telling is to sharply distinguish between small-t truths of the sort that conform to observable "facts" and the large-T Truths that philosophers worry about and writers explore in fiction and poetry. In this latter sense, to tell the truth about the world requires more than a careful attention to realistic detail, however much this was certainly part of Twain's aesthetic agenda. Rather, it is a matter of burning away the social conditioning that puts layers of fat around the soul and that covers the eyes with motes.

In the late 1940's Lionel Trilling, perhaps the most influential critic of his time, famously declared that Huck and Tom Sawyer may tell the lies of children but they do not, in Trilling's words, "tell the ultimate lie of adults: they do not lie to themselves." These characters, who (rightly) believe that "the world is in a conspiracy to lie to [them]," are thus swaddled, Trilling argues, in "moral sensitivity."

In general T.S. Eliot is right about the way that Huck, Twain's satiric persona, works, but there are moments when Huck is not quite all that Eliot claims on his behalf. Take, for example, the moment in which Colonel Sherburn beats back a potential lynch mob by standing up to bullies and taking their cowardly measure. Huck describes the last, tail-between-their-legs moments this way: "The crowd washed back sudden, and then broke all apart and went tearing off every which way, . . . I could a staid, if I'd a wanted to, but I didn't want to." Here, despite Eliot's large pronouncement, is a moment where Huck, in his own term, heaves off a "stretcher." In plainer language, he clearly lies to himself; moreover, we see his feeble rationalization as the sham it surely is.

Why, one wonders, would Twain so embarrass his otherwise savvy protagonist? My hunch is that he means to remind us that Huck is a very young, young boy, despite his sound heart and outbursts of good sense. He is, in short, given to back-sliding of the human sort. This often overlooked point deserves emphasis if only because so many readers, including quite intelligent ones, fall into fits of disappointment whenever Huck—or by extension, Twain—lets them down. This usually occurs when Tom Sawyer enters the scene and bullies poor Huck with his insider knowledge of romance novels, but it can also happen when such readers tire of satire, even of dark, uncom-

promising satire, and prefer that the novel head off to other, more morally soothing directions.

Eliot makes much the same point about Huck's honesty when he talks about his "vision." He sees the real world, Eliot argues, but "he does not judge it—he allows it to judge itself." Enter Leo Marx's "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn," a 1953 essay that attacks both critics as "tender-minded" because they substitute structural arguments (Eliot's paean to the mythic river) or easy platitudes (Trilling's magisterial assertions about Huck's honesty) for the more sober recognition that Twain's novel ends in shambles and failure.

At this point, let me drag in Huck's comment about Mr. Twain telling the truth, *mainly*. Huck is not especially bothered by this—certainly he is not as lathered up about it as Mr. Marx will be—because, as he puts it, "I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary." Everybody else is given to heaving in "stretchers"; as far as Huck is concerned, they come with the territory. What the novel dramatizes, however, is how dangerous, and indeed, how deadly, certain "stretchers" can become—especially if they are generated by the small-r romantic wish to make quotidian life more glamorous than it in fact is. That romanticism of the sort behind the blood-curdling oaths taken by would-be members of Tom Sawyer's gang is one thing; when it generates the ongoing feud of the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords, however, this is another matter altogether.

In much the same way that Twain, in *Life on the Mississippi*, argues that the novels of Sir Walter Scott were singularly responsible for the Civil War, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents one episode after another in which romance trumps his ignorant protagonist. For early generations of believers, Satan was the force to reckon with. He was cunning, shape-shifting, and always threatening to steal away with one's soul. Calvinists took his power seriously; no measures were too stern when it came to resisting the many forms his temptations took, whether it be packaged in a whiskey bottle or a pack of playing cards. Twain may have rather enjoyed kicking Christians in the slats when they refused to act as proper Christians or when their hypocrisy poked out like a sore thumb, but he did not

see Satan lurking around every corner. Rather, it was the endless versions of small-r romanticism that got Twain's dander up. They lied—not as simple "stretchers," but as *lies*. And the biggest lie of all is that *anyone*, black or white, could be genuinely free.

This is why the current obsession with Twain's failure to address the implications of slavery comes to half a loaf. Yes, slavery was the most visible manifestation of man's inhumanity to man—not just the shackles and the beatings, but also in the systematic way in which an entire people was reduced to chattel property. Jim's line about being a rich man if he owned himself cracks the heart, and I would add, goes a long way to counter those arguments in which Jim is reduced to minstrel clown. Granted, the tone drips out of Twain's pen, just as it does when Tom dramatically proclaims that Jim is as "free as any cretur that walks the earth." Attentive readers cannot help but ask themselves, given all that the book has demonstrated, "How *free* is this?"—for not only the newly freed Jim, but also for Huck, for Tom, for everyone on the Phelps plantation and for everybody back home.

Granted, no American writer can match Twain when it comes to giving vivid expression to the great abiding dream of being free:

> Soon as it was night, out we shoved; when we got her out to about the middle, we let her alone, and let her float wherever the current wanted her to; then we lit the pipes, and dangled our legs in the water and talked about all kinds of things—we was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us. . . . Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time . . . It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened.

The dream, alas, cannot last, however much it remains lodged in the head of every reader with an ear for the music that language at its most supple can make. As my grandfather used to say about the America he both loved and quarreled with, "You could live if they'll let you." No remark better sums up the history of the Jews, or, with a snip here a tuck there, the necessary fate of Huck and Jim. Huck's instinctive goodness turns out to be no match for Tom's book-learning and charisma. Indeed, how could it? After all, it is Tom, not

Huck, who knows how a proper "evasion" should be conducted, and how to give Jim the theatrical homecoming his protracted suffering deserves. Huck goes along with the former because, well, that is Huck's modus operandi, but he balks at the latter because he's had a bellyful of Tom foolishness. Granted, Twain knew full well that lighting out for the Territory would put Huck in harm's way, and that the lawlessness of the West was an exaggerated mirror of the more "sivilized" lawlessness of the East. Pursue it as Huck will, freedom remains an elusive promise, one that F. Scott Fitzgerald would later characterize as the boats that forever recede into the past no matter how hard one paddles.

Seen one way, Huck is a survivor, with an eye on a warm meal and a trundle bed; seen from another angle, he is the satiric lens through which we see the world's endless capacity for cruelty. That is why Huck's deadpan descriptions of, say, the Duke and the King are so effective. They know—or think they know—all that con men need to work a crowd—namely, that you can't cheat an honest man and, better yet, that there's a sucker born every minute. The same thing applies to Huck's account of the drunks who populate the shore towns and who take an enormous pleasure in setting dogs on fire. Freedom, for these folks, consists of inflicting as much cruelty as they can. Pap is squarely in their camp. He would vote for slavery if it were on all the ballots—that is, if he could stagger to the local polling place. He is, of course, not alone in this sentiment. Indeed, which voter in the world of Twain's novel felt otherwise?

Small wonder, then, that Leo Marx was so infuriated when he took Trilling and Eliot to task in the early 1950's or that Jane Smiley, a novelist of some reputation, recently argued that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is in every way superior to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Marx is a critic worth taking seriously. Smiley, unfortunately, is not. She sides with propaganda rather than with art, preferring a work that confirms her politically correct certainties rather than one which questions her unquestioned beliefs. For her, it is not enough that Huck *feels* a certain way toward Jim, he needs to act—and it is precisely on the level of action (or more precisely still, *non* action) that Twain's novel so badly fails in Smiley's opinion:

> To invest *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn with* "greatness" is to underwrite a very simplistic and evasive theory of what racism is and to promulgate it, philosophically, in schools and the media as well as in academic journals. Surely the discomfort of many readers, black and white, and the censorship battles that have dogged *Huck Finn* in the last twenty years are understandable in this context. No matter how often the critics "place in context" Huck's use of the word 'nigger,' they can never fully excuse or fully hide the deeper racism of the novel—the way Twain and Huck use Jim because they really don't care enough about his desire for freedom to let that desire change their plans.

Smiley much prefers *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is full of people acting against slavery, because it is, unashamedly, an Abolitionist manifesto. But after the Civil War resolved the matter at the end of the rifle barrel, after oceans of blood had been spilled, Stowe's novel no longer packed the same immediacy it once did. True enough, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* retains an importance as an historical novel, but not, I think, as a living (which is to say, disturbing) piece of literature.

As Americans, we bow to no one in our official regard for freedom, but we are also a country whose Pledge of Allegiance insists that, here, there will be "liberty and justice for all." School children mouth the words without every quite realizing that they are a contradiction, that if there is unbridled liberty there cannot be endless liberty. The contradiction also lies at the very heart of *Huckleberry Finn*. Twain wrote well before Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* explained the small-print costs, in repression, deferred gratification, and neurosis, that inevitably come with the clear benefits of civilization. Huck does not want to return to a world that will insist that what he calls "sivilization" be spelled with a *c*—and moreover that such people are expected to wear shoes and have clean fingernails.

Huck prefers freer space and a separate peace. In this sense, his dream of freedom is the antithesis of Linda Loman's painful recognition that the American Dream of a paid-off house does not, alas, make one "free and clear." Arthur Miller's play is an indictment of a life lived in noisy, manic-depressive desperation. Willy, alas, was a man who never knew who he was, a man who bought into a world where Success lies just around the corner and where "being well

liked" will eventually carry the day. But powerful as Miller's play clearly is, it does not limn freedom as darkly as Twain's novel does. For the problem of freedom in *Huckleberry Finn* so co-exists with its humor that readers forget just how broad the brush that Twain uses is. Jim's slavery and gradual movement toward freedom is at best only a small part of what the novel is about. Rather, it is Huck's understanding that, unlike Tom, he can never fit into society, added to our growing realization that he will never be free—even should he make it to the Territory and manage to survive—that makes Twain's novel so problematic. In short, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a deeply subversive book, not because it is peppered with the N-word or even because some see racism in what is the most anti-racist book ever written in America, but because it tells the Truth—not "mainly," but right down to the core.