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Effects of Slavery on Non-slaves

DAVID E.E. SLOANE

Stacey Margolis, in "Huckleberry Finn; or, Consequences," (PMLA 116:2 [Mar. 2001]: 329-43) argues persuasively that Twain's rejection of the "politics of good intentions" lies at the base of some critical attacks on the prominence of the novel. Twain himself powerfully supports her argument in two comments in his writings. Discussing the life of Hannibal, MO, in his childhood, for example, he denies that slavery was "evil," saying: "It is commonly believed that an infallible effect of slavery was to make such as lived in its midst hard-hearted. I think that it had no such effect—speaking in general terms. I think it stupefied everybody's humanity, as regarded the slave, but stopped there" (Mark Twain's *Hannibal, Huck & Tom*, ed. Walter Blair, [Berkeley: UCal P, 1969; p. 50]). His primary example was his mother, notable for her kind-heartedness to slaves and to animals.

Tom Sawyer at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is predictably stupid—"intellectual," he says; the yokels at the end of the novel are stupefied—those cases are easy to spot. Aunt Sally and Uncle Silas are also stupefied. Huck, too, is stupefied, acknowledging the Doctor who treats Tom as having "a good heart in him and was a good man" (Chap. 42). The Doctor, of course, using the classic code words of the segregated, discriminatory South, in commending Jim, says twice in the speech that Huck applauds, "he ain't a bad nigger." All the characters in this novel are stupefied to the humanity of the "nigger" because he is "a nigger." Twain's satire is unpalatable precisely because of its truthfulness about the blindness of his characters. As Twain pointed out in "A True Story," a decade before, whites and blacks have very different perceptions of black experience.

Twain's second comment on this topic occurred in a draft "Preface" for *A Connecticut Yankee* in 1888: "Human liberty—for white people—may fairly be said to be one hundred years old this year..." (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* [Berkeley: UCal P, 1977; p. 518]). Race is at the forefront of Twain's chronology. The real source of discontent is that readers feel that the determination of Huck to go to Hell for his friend Jim should be followed by a breaking out. The absence of such a breakout and Twain's immersion of his characters in stupefying burlesque and caricature is certainly what antagonized a reader like Ernest Hemingway and later scholarly critics who describe the ending of the novel as "flawed." Yet, the ending of *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* foreshadows such an outcome, where Huck, the only speaker to use the word "nigger" in the last several chapters, says he is willing to eat with Uncle Jake, whom Huck identifies as "a mighty good nigger," as long as it is not generally known.

Race and class issues are consciously, but unpleasantly, jumbled in Twain's satire, as they still are in American society; Twain's humor is confrontational and so it brings disquiet to readers who are not properly prepared by experience and by intrinsic insight, or good teaching.

Great works by many other authors can share this characteristic, as can easily be proven by the line of sincere college freshman readers who appear at my desk to ask if Swift really thought eating babies would solve the Irish hunger problem. Twain's challenge, and ours as Margolis suggests, is to get past our distress at having our "good intentions" exposed as hollow and actually accomplishing the social and economic conditions that make "human liberty" as Twain understood it-from absolutist authority and also from economic repression-an actuality. Until then, any accurate reader should be discontented with the conclusion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but as a work of fiction, it does its work brilliantly.
