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The N-Word and Beyond Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Political Correctness

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Abstract

The essay surveys the history of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s fraught relationship with the American literary establishment and reading public from the late nineteenth to the twenty-first century. It investigates how the dynamics of "political correctness" interact with issues such as race and class in the United States, and how literature can mirror the changes and contradictions in American society.

Keywords: Canon, *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, Politically correct, Race

> The impulse behind political correctness is a good one. But like every good impulse in America it has been grotesquely distorted beyond usefulness. (George Carlin)

> Literature aims at human complexity rather than critical reactiveness. […] literature is a bad place to look if one is shopping around to have specific notions about race, class, and gender ideology confirmed. Thus, those with a narrow political agenda should be prepared for disappointment (Sanford Pinsker)

1. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, censorship and political correctness*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has struggled with "morality" – initially in the form of censorship and subsequently in the guise of political correctness – since it was first published, and it has proven to be a controversial book for different and broad segments of American society in almost every decade since. As Harold Beaver notes, with some irony,

> In the late nineteenth century it offended the Northern bourgeoisie. By the early twentieth century it offended the white South. By the mid-twentieth century it offended Blacks everywhere, especially urban Blacks. By the late twentieth century it even offended urban Whites. There must, one cannot help thinking, be something right about a book that can offend quite so many diverse people, quite so many pressure groups, at various times. (1987, 40)

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn first caused controversy just one month after its publication when Concord Public Library banned the book and accused the author of lacking a "reliable sense of property", as the *Boston Evening Transcript* reported (see Champion 1991, 6), adding that

> one member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a sense of experiences not elevating, the whole book being more suited to the slum than to intelligent, respectable people. (13)

The Concord Public Library's attack on the book certainly did not come as a surprise to either Twain or his editor: in a letter to the latter, Twain even rejoiced at the extra publicity and predicted the ban would double the sales of the book. It could nowadays seem somewhat paradoxical that Concord, one of the birthplaces of American liberalism, would ban a book, and moreover a children's book. However, given Concord's standing as a bastion of high culture, it should not be totally unexpected that *Huckleberry Finn*, a book "animated by its defiance of high culture" (Jehlen 1995, 95), would be deemed unsuitable for respectable people. The Concord Public Library Committee's opprobrium was incurred by those very qualities which the majority of critics now praise: Twain's unconventional themes, the content of the story, and the context of Huck's adventures – the world of two Southern outcasts, a slave and a young tramp, and their journey in search of freedom in the years before the Civil War (a conflict which was still an open and raw wound at the time). Twain's stylistic and linguistic decision to make an uneducated young boy not only the protagonist of the book but also its narrator, was perhaps considered in an even harsher light. In fact, with all the story's events being filtered through Huck's gaze and told by his own voice, Twain effectively elevates (for the first time in American literature) an illiterate outcast to the status of "author", although, as Huck laments at the end, "if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (Twain 1998, 295-96).

The critical reevaluation of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* after Twain's death did not put an end to the controversies; rather, to some extent, it fueled them. T.S. Eliot's definition of the book as a "masterpiece" (quoted in Twain 1998, 348), Hemingway's assertion in *Green Hills of Africa* that "all American literature comes from a book called *Huckleberry Finn*" (1952, 22), and the acclaim from much of academia in the Forties and Fifties (Bernard DeVoto and Lionel Trilling among others were notable champions) helped the book to enter the literary canon. As a consequence, this subversive text came to be linked to the perspective the canon represented at that time – that is, the Fifties; its praises belonged to the elitist and white literary establishment, that had little consideration of minorities in general, and of African-Americans in particular. Whereas in Twain's time the target of criticism was Huck for his coarse language and rebellious attitude, from the Fifties onward, due to increasing awareness of the many facets of racial discrimination, the representation of Jim became the main source of controversy. The Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education (the Supreme Court case that legally ended public school segregation in 1954) and the increasingly diverse ethnic composition of school classes soon led to Huck's status in the English curricula of junior and senior high schools becoming increasingly

fraught, starting with the decision, in 1957, of the New York City Board of Education to have *Huck Finn* removed from the approved textbook lists of elementary and junior high schools, although it could be taught in high school and purchased for school libraries.

The act of defining what is and is not deemed appropriate in literature is at the core of both censorship and political correctness. Both often tell us more about the sensitivity of contemporary society than about the content of the text itself. This sensitivity changes over time and is conditioned by many parameters, from those encoded in the American society of the late 19th century, to the system of values that shaped middle-class response in the second half of the century, to the perhaps milder but no less pervasive ones of present times and these latter's worries for political correctness, that, as Thomas Tsakalakis points out,

> in the USA refers to a set of attitudes about discrimination, mainly in the fields of race and sex. It is politically incorrect to speak in any way that can be seen as differentiating between people in a way that could conceivably be detrimental to them. (2021, 85)

According to Geoffrey Hughes, "political correctness seeks […] to stress human commonality and correspondingly to downplay engrained differences and exclusivity, discouraging judgmental attitudes and outlawing demeaning language" (2010, 59). In *Huckleberry Finn*, the human commonality is stressed not in words but in deeds. The demeaning language we hear is the language of the law and the slavery system, while the "judgmental attitudes" are nonexistent in the novel as far as the narrator. As T.S. Eliot noted, Huck "does not judge [the world], but he allows it to judge itself" (1950, x). In a world where language is misleading, the world can judge itself only through the reader, because, as Karl Mannheim's paradox states, if every discourse is ideological, then its own exposition becomes impossible.

The insistence on political correctness in literary texts, regardless of when they were written, reflects another social urge of contemporary times: the need for absolutes in a shifting world, and the search for absolutes in the world of language. However, this insistence does not allow for the fact that no word is intrinsically offensive, but can become so through what Steven Pinker defined as the "euphemism treadmill" (1994), whereby a term can pass from neutral to malicious in a few decades. Political correctness in its most rigid forms (and with its subculture and economy) can result in a culture of oppression, not dissimilar to the one it seeks to oppose. At the same time, it also testifies to the oppression which still exists in society: the danger is, as has been argued, that political correctness works as a "cosmetic", a way to erase xenophobia, sexism, racism, and so forth solely on the linguistic level. When applied to literary texts, it also demonstrates the difficulty in separating reality from fiction and content from context; and, last but not least, social from literary discourses and strategies.

2. Huck, we have a problem: the race controversy

Not surprisingly, the endeavor to undo some past injustices or "level the playing fields", in the hope of improving social relations, at the core of politically correct ideology from the 1990s onward (Hughes 2010, 5) has focused mainly on race and its politics and has made *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the perfect arena for the collision of the multiple and multifaceted tensions within American society and its literature. Debates about race in *Huckleberry Finn* confirm the importance of context in the interpretation of the content and the dangers inherent in "imposing an agenda on the book rather than following the agenda in the book" (Graff and Phelan 1995, 480). However, reducing the controversy to the elitist white intelligentsia defending the novel vs. the black intellectuals blaming it for its alleged racism would be, at best, misleading.

While in the Fifties Twain's book was acclaimed and defended by a mainly white and male literary world, in the following decades African-American writers and critics began to publically discuss *Huckleberry Finn*. Many black intellectuals tried to place the "race issue" in a new perspective. From Ralph Ellison, who praised Twain's book for its contribution to African-American literature, albeit with some reservations, to Toni Morrison, who discussed it extensively in her *Playing in the Dark* (1992). Yet at the same time, criticism arrived from different sections of American society, including the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and various literary critics, the fiercest of whom, John H. Wallace, called it "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (1992, 16). Accusations of racism were engendered by Jim's representation and Huck's comments on race. When Jim first appears, in Chapter 2, and only his silhouette is visible in the kitchen door, he is identified by his voice and his broken English: "Say – who is you? Whar is you? Dog my cats ef I didn't hear sumf'n. Well, I knows what I's gwyne to do. I's gwiyne to set down here and listen tell I hears it agin" (Twain 1998, 18). In Huck's description, Jim is characterized by a superstitious and childlike attitude: when the slave finds out that his hat has been removed from his head while he was asleep, Jim "said the witches bewitched him and put him in a trance, and rode him all over the state, and then set him under the trees again and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it" (19). The negativity of the stereotypical depiction of Jim as a "minstrel show" figure at the beginning as well as at the end of the novel, when he becomes again the object of Tom's imaginative scheming (and mild sadism) is amplified by the fact that Jim is almost the only African-American character in the book – itself an anomaly in a novel set in the antebellum South. The black stereotype, it is worth underlining, is constructed through both Jim's and Huck's language: while Jim's markedly ungrammatical version of Black English has been described as "diminishing", criticism of Huck's language has underlined his extensive use of the N-Word, which is repeated over two hundred times in the novel – in sharp contrast with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, where the word appears only three times.

Since the N-Word is part of the language of oppression, reading *Huckleberry Finn* and advising people to read it constitutes, according to its detractors, a perpetuation of the racist performativity of the book. Charges of racial insensitivity and outright racism have also been laid against those who teach the book – a serious and dangerous accusation, not only in United States middle and secondary schools but also in the university system, where cases of students boycotting classes and suing teachers for what are perceived to be politically incorrect choices (including choices regarding syllabus content) have been very common in the last decades – to the point that the boundaries between PC language, students' intellectual freedom and professors' academic one have become the subject of debates and investigation (Nelson 2010).

Attempts to limit the circulation of *Huckleberry Finn* in schools have been only one of the strategies to meet the changing racial trends and sensitivities. The "taming" of the text has been another method used to contain the discomfort, in some cases anger, *Huckleberry Finn* has generated among specific groups of readers. The earliest efforts date back to 1963 when the Philadelphia Board of Education replaced the original text with an "adapted version" (see Henry 1995, 359-82). The latest case occurred in 2011 when scholar Alan Grubben decided to release the NewSouth Books version of *Huckleberry Finn* (in a single volume with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*) with the word "nigger" and the "In" word ("Injun") replaced respectively with "slave" and "Indian", so as not to offend African-American and Native-American readers. All these attempts have led, according to some educators and teachers, to the creation of "an elephant in the classroom" in the definition of Colin G. Brezicki, who wanders: "Are we protecting our kids or ourselves? Is this due diligence applied to safeguard the innocent or to make us feel good about being responsible teachers, parents, and regulators?" (2012, 16).

Debates over the issue of race in particular have generated a substantial bibliography on the matter, including the outstanding *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn* (Leonard *et al.* 1992), that examines African-American scholars' perspectives on race in Twain's masterpiece; Arnold Rampersad's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Afro-American Literature" (1994), which discusses how *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has contributed to African-American literature in terms of style and themes; and Shelley Fisher Fishkin's *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices* (1994), which documented the inspiration for Huck from a black boy Twain knew. Many critics have argued that, to use David Smith's words, "those who brand the book 'racist' generally do so without having considered the specific form of racial discourse to which the novel responds" (Smith 1984, 4). However, not all readers are aware (or can be made aware) of the nature of racial discourse in the antebellum South, and of the distance between that context and their own, especially if the readership includes also primary school children… and their worried families. Rather than (or beside) the content of the book then, in order to understand *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its struggle with morality, the focus should be shifted to what the text has represented in the last decade, its re-evaluation in American literature and its effect – that is, the dissemination of the text entering the canon entails.

3. Authority, the Canon, and Huckleberry Finn

Deciding what is appropriate or inappropriate always implies an "authority", and *Huckleberry Finn* is certainly remarkable in its attack on almost all forms of authority, including literary conventions – regarding such aspects as language, point of view, the status of the narrator or protagonist – and subject matter. The main storyline – a male friendship between a black adult and a white kid, one escaping slavery, the other running away from education and family – was, in its time and context, outstandingly unconventional. Meanwhile, the text itself mocks almost every form of authority with no leniency shown towards religion, politics, culture, and books. Religion is reduced to a "grumble a […] over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them" and learning "about Moses and the Bulrushers" (Twain 1998, 14). Culture and books are ruthlessly mocked in the Duke and the King's debasing treatment of Shakespearian art, culminating in the profanation of Hamlet's soliloquy (152); a challenge not mitigated by "Huck's lapses in authority" (Jehlen 1995, 95), but amplified by Huck's (and Twain's) indifference to prestigious literary sources of inspiration, and the fact that a lack of respectability, as critics noted, often leads to a lack of respect (96).

However, the American literary canon is replete with texts defying authority, and there are many works that treat gender, race, and minorities' issues far worse than Huck does, which raises the question as to why this work in particular has generated so much debate. What is so "right", to quote the aforementioned Beaver, about this book? There is not one single answer, but a series of answers, concerning both the content of the book, its popular and critical fortunes and misfortunes, and the dialectics between the two. *Huckleberry Finn* is such a source of debate and contention partly due to its troubled and troubling inclusion in the canon, and subsequently, to the readership the canon has generated. The book's unwillingness to belong to the canon, as can be inferred by its irreverent attitude towards high culture, is inherently problematic. As Myra Jehlen fittingly asked, "How does a work justly seen to reject the achievements and values of high culture come to be the high culture's favored self-representation?" (1995, 94)

This unwilling and inadvertent inclusion in the canon has meant the book has had to face the readership that membership *in* the canon entails – that is, its wide dissemination, most of

which has been generated by the inclusion in school syllabuses and university programs. Thus, the book's popularity has paradoxically come to be detrimental to the understanding of the book itself: its complexity has often defied readers, whose unawareness has often concerned the different strategies of social and literary discourses, the difference between addressing an issue and speaking through a literary mask: that is, the fictive nature of novels, especially those which relies heavily on mimetic effects, where the line separating the character and the author (and, especially in first-person narrative, their voices) is even more blurred.

According to Jonathan Arac, *Huckleberry Finn* suffers from a malady called "hypercanonization", that is, linking the book "to fundamental national historical experiences, but the link can be made only allegorically, that is, only through an aggressively active process of reader's interpretation, about which readers, in fact, differ very widely" (1992, 18). The result is an empty space between the novel's vast readership and its privileged place in the literary establishment,

> because Huck is so widely read, we find ourselves in a rather anomalous position: the novel has created a community of readers who have experienced its meanings without much shared sense of articulating those meanings – and even less notion about how the novel's meanings interact. (Donyo 1991, xv)

Arac and Donyo thus highlight the relationships between academic and nonacademic discourse about the novel, and in particular, the insufficient dialogue between the two worlds the texts inhabit – the common reader's and the scholar's, with the school system between them becoming an arena of conflict.

Little appears to have changed from 1957, when the New York City Board of Education decided to drop *Huckleberry Finn* from the list of approved textbooks for elementary and junior high schools to its removal from shelves in Accomack County (VA) in 2016. Scholarly research in academia has generated a better comprehension of both the book's genesis and its content, but critical accomplishments have neither helped solve the difficulties posed to an eight-year-old student by the complexity of the text nor mitigated the "emotional segregation" (Rush 2003, 305) it has generated in junior classes. As Peaches Henry points out, the reasons behind Twain's characterization of Jim are still problematic for scholars and are thus unlikely to be understood at the primary or secondary school level, where students lack sophisticated reading strategies (1995).

The disapproval and the bans punctuating the life of the book have been the result of the gulf between the vast readership the book has gained through its inclusion in the canon (and in syllabuses) and its complexity – part of which is due to Twain's stylistic and structural choices in his approach to his subject matter. Rather than discussing the issues which have fueled and polarized the debate, it is, therefore, important to examine the literary strategies employed by Twain in the hope of shedding some light on the relation between the author and the content (and contexts) of the book.

4. Whose voice? Huckleberry Finn *and perspective*

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn's message and meaning have caused so much controversy largely because neither the author nor the narrator seem willing to give the reader any clues about them. As the author declares in the "Notice" that opens the text, "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be persecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (Twain 1998, 4), anticipating the three main grounds for the objection raised against the text: meaning, moral, and what is perceived to be a disappointing and regressive ending to the story.

The "Notice" at the beginning of the novel reveals another important element in the discussion of political correctness: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is particularly hard to accept from a politically correct perspective because political correctness is not only about what is said, but also about who says it (and should be deemed responsible for the content) and how it is said. The "how" is indeed political: as Keith and Burridge remind us, "Whereas we generally use euphemism for the sake of social etiquette, in the political correctness arena it becomes a political gesture – in your-face euphemism with an attitude" (2009, 110-11).

Whose voice can be heard in this book? That of Samuel Clemens, a man from the South who had mixed feelings toward his own culture, and whose support for the Confederates lasted only for the first two weeks of the Civil War? That of Mark Twain, the author, who started writing this book ten years after the abolition of slavery, struggled with it for eight years, and published it twenty years after the end of the Civil War – with half of the country, the part of the country he belonged to, still among the ruins of the aftermath? Or is the voice belonging to the young outcast with neither education nor family, whose mind and language are the outcome of a culture forged by the South and slavery, as the author pretends?

An assumption that Huck's and the author's perspectives are one and the same is a denial of the fictional pact and its strategies, the most prominent of which in *Huckleberry Finn* is mimesis, a pervasive element in the whole book. As Horwitz points out,

> literary discipline does not teach 'doctrine', but cultivates competence in the indirection – shifting among context – that structures symbolization. Literature is the optimal course of study because it exemplifies this process. 'Representing life,' James Russell Lowell wrote, literature 'teaches, like life, by indirection, by […] nods and winks'. (2003, 279)

Entrusting the narrative entirely to Huck implies, for the sake of coherence, that Twain's message is necessarily indirect, with Huck's gaze and voice always deflecting it. As Horwitz underlines, "the indirection of Twain's writing, whereby words work against their conventional meanings, releases the interpreting self from its habitual identifications" (272).

In its emphasis on form, political correctness fails to take into account precisely this gap: the distance between what is said and what is meant, something which *Huckleberry Finn* heavily relies on. In addition to the abovementioned deflecting perspective and voice of the narrator, the use of irony adds further complexity. Successful irony requires the recognition of the discrepancy between word and meaning – a discrepancy that political correctness does not countenance. As Steven Mailloux points out,

> the ideological drama of HF relies for its success as much on the reader's participation as it does on Twain's script. The celebrated humor of the various narratives in the book – its histories, dreams, fictions, and elaborate lies – depends on the reader's perception of both the fictional speaker's purpose and the discrepancy between his tale and the 'truth' as the reader understands it. Similarly, the humor and often the ideological point of the novel's many staged arguments […] rely upon the reader's ability to recognize patterns of false argumentation, especially by identifying the dubious authorities to which the arguments appeal: superstition, clichéd romanticism, institutionalized morality, and ultimately racist ideology. (1995, 108)

In *Huckleberry Finn,* nothing is spared by the irreverent humor and irony, including the narrator himself. Huck's relation with authority and his use of irony are particularly important in the debate over racism. By taking into account one of the most controversial points, Huck's arrival (pretending to be Tom Saywer) at Phelps farm, and relating an (invented) accident on a boat to Mrs. Phelps, the reader can infer the multiple levels of irony Twain is employing:

[Mrs Phelps] 'Good gracious, anybody hurt?'
[Huck] 'No'm. Killed a nigger'
[Mrs Phelps] 'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt' (Twain 1998, 230)

The first element to be taken into account is that the target of irony is here Mrs. Phelps and not the nonexistent victim. Moreover, there are two other significant levels that question the literal truth – here Huck's alleged disdain for blacks: the first is related to the narrator, the second to the author. What has been often overlooked here is Huck's "what can be called a… ?". In this part of the novel, Huck has just arrived in an unknown place, "downriver", where slavery was supposed to be harsher, pretending to be the Tom Sawyer the couple is expecting. Huck's mimetic effort, at play whenever he reaches the shore and is far from the river, is here doubled: he is both adapting his speech to the new context *and* to his new identity (Tom, who is not an outcast like Huck is, but the representative of the small town and its values and mindset, including racism). Huck's words could even be at play at Huck's expense if we consider, as Fisher Fishkin did, this latter is "black inside" – that is, the character was inspired by a black boy. Huck's performance would then be a reverse minstrel disguise, the "signifying" Henry L. Gates (1988) theorized as one of the main strategies in African-American culture.

As for the author of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn,* with a text that investigates and questions the meanings and forms of freedom (individual and social), he is addressing a nation that is still culturally and politically divided: he speaks to the South, in its own language, about the right of a black man to be free; and to the culturally elitist North, to affirm a writer's right to use that language as the literary tool, without mediations.

Regarding the use of the specific term (already pejorative at the time), softening the language by using "black" instead of the N-Word would undermine not only the novel's realism (that is, Huck is telling his story to his contemporaries, and in his own perspective – that of an uneducated, poor white boy) but also Twain's anti-racist claims, that most critics, including black critics, have underlined. Here Twain is stressing the power of language, and the N-Word in particular, to objectify African-Americans. As David L. Smith notes, "a reader who objects to the word 'nigger' might still insist that Twain could have avoided using it. But it is difficult to imagine how Twain could have debunked a discourse without using the specific terms of this discourse" (1984, 6).

It is also difficult to imagine how Twain could have debunked a discourse over slavery from a disadvantaged perspective such as Huck without using not only Huck's language but also his irony. Huck's irony comes from his subaltern position as both character and narrator: as increasingly deterministic vision and forces emerge in the novel, Huck becomes less and less capable of action and is forced, as critics have underlined, to take on the unwilling role of spectator.

As Twain himself wrote in *Following the Equator*, "the secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow; there is no humor in heaven" (2000, 489). From his first successful story, "The Celebrated Jumping Frog", irony is the way for the disempowered to fight back, at least in words. Humor works against authority and contrapositions since it "doesn't deny or defend; it negotiates" (Schmitz 1995, 74) – a negotiation that political correctness refuses to engage with.

5. Take a step back, Huck honey: the author, the audience, and an undeliverable message

By entrusting the narrative completely to an illiterate Southern boy, with no external interference, no voice-over, comment, or judgment, Twain not only challenges literary conventions (that would require an omniscient or an "authoritative" first-person narrator) but also

apparently withholds any possible shortcut for the meaning to reach the reader, who has to navigate, on their own, the contradictions of the Southern world and mindset, including one of its creations – Huck himself.

Only apparently, however: one notable element in the intricate construction of the book is that, despite Huck's monopoly over the narrative, Twain is able to imply the gap between what is told and what is meant, mainly at Huck's expense. Huck's limits of vision and his interpretation of the world around him – on account of his youth and ignorance – are evident in many, often comic, situations, especially when he has to confront society, from its benevolent members, like his failed attempt to pass as a young lady, to its malevolent ones and their respective plots, as it happens with the Duke and the King's schemes.

As far as the protagonist's virtues are concerned, Huck has been praised – in the brief moments of respite from censure and accusations – for his "sound heart", which is basically an economy of affection based on connections rather than ideals. Perhaps even more importantly, in discussing political correctness, is the fact that ethics are not an absolute for Huck, but are empirical, and exist only in relation to others, as a connective matter. Huck is incapable of abstraction from individual to systemic choices and principles. For instance, he is afraid of black slaves escaping in order to be free, but he wants Jim to be free because of their friendship. Despite being white, poor, illiterate, an outcast by birth and not by choice, vulgar, ignorant, unwilling to submit to any "authority", and despite his use of what is, to our standards, racist language, he does the right thing, not only by recognizing Jim's humanity but also by defying society and God in order to help him. Twain depicts a character who is good "beyond" language – a language dictated by the social and historical context, and thus unreliable and tricky, as is made clear throughout the novel, and full of malapropisms, misunderstandings, linguistic and real deceits.

What, then, is the judgment and the message in *Huckleberry Finn*? Why is it so difficult to put into words and why does it pose so many problems for the politically correct agenda? According to Myra Jehlen, the dissonance is not only the problem of *Huckleberry Finn* and its unsatisfactory ending; in a total, mimetic effect, the dissonance is also *the message* of the text. Twain's text is dissonant because what resonates in its plot are the dissonances, the contradictions at the heart of the American society and culture of his (and probably our) time: the inconsistencies of the authorities, race and race relations, and individualism. The result is a novel "so dissonant that it finally fails to represent the contradictions it means to address" (Jehlen 1995, 96). Twain unveils, through the use of language, the short circuits of speaking to and about a culture from and within its margins, employing the language and the unspeakable nature of those margins. A masterpiece in mimesis, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* represents the contradictions and limits mimesis entails – the first limit being to show (and mirror), not to tell or teach.

Contemporary debates about the text and its appropriateness for school curricula testify to the longevity of these contradictions. According to Daniel Harris, political correctness is the consequence of the

> […] inadequate ways in which the majority of Americans, including the Left, have dealt psychologically with integration. Providing a salve instead of a solution for social complexities, the agenda of the pc is rooted in a typically middle-class response to the disorienting phenomenon of ethnic diversity: the innocuous panacea of reducing the relations between various antagonistic groups to a simple matter of etiquette. (2015, 476)

If the impulse behind political correctness derives from a recognition of disparities and an attempted accommodation of those who have traditionally been discriminated, against at

least on a linguistic ground, then *Huckleberry Finn* works as a mirror, casting back the image of what are hitherto the failings in our society – precisely what Peaches Henry underlined in his survey of literary criticism of Twain's book:

> The insolubility of the race question as regards *Huckleberry Finn* functions as a model of the fundamental racial ambiguity of the American mind-set. Active engagement with Twain's novel provides one method for students to confront their own deepest racial feelings and insecurities. Though the problems of racial perspective present in *Huckleberry Finn* may never be satisfactorily explained for censors or scholars, the consideration of them may have a practical, positive bearing on the manner in which America approaches race in the corning century. (1995, 382)

A final question remains: who are the outsiders, the discriminated, in the past and nowadays? Only those on the other side of the color line, as the debates about race and the novel suggest? Or could they be also the group the "politically incorrect" Huck represents? Those white, poor and uneducated that, for the sake of coherence, speak a coarse and vulgar language, but are given by Twain the right of the subaltern to speak, as Spivak would say?

Politically correct debates allow us to see what is *not* working in American society nowadays, and the emphasis on the racism the book allegedly endorses is a sign of its perpetuation, but also of other marginalities too ignored in the contemporary debate (and by the agenda of political correctness). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, precisely for its politically incorrect language, suggests where to investigate the origins, the roots, and the branches of discrimination and its longevity in contemporary times – in economic and social inequalities, affecting people on both sides of the color line, that cannot easily be swept beneath the carpet of synonyms and circumlocutions.

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