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**Say it ain't so, Huck; second thoughts on Mark Twain's "masterpiece."** ("The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn")(Cover Story) *Jane Smiley*.

**Abstract:** 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' does not deserve the high place it holds in the American literary canon because it fails to confront the greatest moral dilemma of the book: slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' is superior book and deserves greater acclaim.

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So I broke my leg. Doesn't matter how--since the accident I've heard plenty of broken-leg tales, and, I'm telling you, I didn't realize that walking down the stairs, walking down hills, dancing in high heels, or stamping your foot on the brake pedal could be so dangerous. At any rate, like numerous broken-legged intellectuals before me, I found the prospect of three months in bed in the dining room rather seductive from a book-reading point of view, and I eagerly got started. Great novels piled up on my table, and right at the top was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which, I'm embarrassed to admit, I hadn't read since junior high school. The novel took me a couple of days (it was longer than I had remembered), and I closed the cover stunned. Yes, stunned. Not, by any means, by the artistry of the book but by the notion that this is the novel all American literature grows out of, that this is a great novel, that this is even a serious novel.

Although Huck had his fans at publication, his real elevation into the pantheon was worked out early in the Propaganda Era, between 1948 and 1955, by Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Wood Krutch, and some lesser lights, in the introductions to American and British editions of the novel and in such journals as *Partisan Review* and *The New York Times Book Review*. The requirements of Huck's installation rapidly revealed themselves: the failure, of the last twelve chapters (in which Huck finds Jim imprisoned on the Phelps plantation and Tom Sawyer is reintroduced and elaborates a cruel and unnecessary scheme for Jim's liberation) had to be diminished, accounted for, or forgiven; after that, the novel's special qualities had to be placed in the context first of other American novels (to their detriment) and then of world literature. The best bets here seemed to be Twain's style and the river setting, and the critics invested accordingly: Eliot, who had never read the novel as a boy, traded on his own childhood beside the big river, elevating Huck to the Boy, and the Mississippi to the River God, therein finding the sort of mythic resonance that he admired. Trilling liked the river god idea, too, though he didn't bother to capitalize it. He also thought that Twain, through Huck's lying, told truths, one of them being (I kid you not) that "something . . . had gone out of American life after the [Civil War], some simplicity, some innocence, some peace." What Twain himself was proudest of in the novel--his style--Trilling was glad to dub "not less than definitive in American literature. The prose of *Huckleberry Finn* established for written prose the virtues of American colloquial speech.... He is the master of the style that escapes the fixity of the printed page, that sounds in our ears with the immediacy of the heard voice, the very voice of unpretentious truth." The last requirement was some quality that would link Huck to other, though "lesser," American novels such as Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, that would possess some profound insight into the American character. Leslie Fiedler obligingly provided it when he read homoerotic attraction into the relationship between Huck and Jim, pointing out the similarity of this to such other white man-dark man friendships as those between Ishmael and Queequeg in *Moby-Dick* and Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook in James Fenimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans*.

The canonization proceeded apace: great novel (Trilling, 1950), greatest novel (Eliot, 1950), world-class novel (Lauriat Lane Jr., 1955). Sensible naysayers, such as Leo Marx, were lost in the shuffle of propaganda. But, in fact, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has little to offer in the way of greatness. There is more to be learned about the American character from its canonization than through its canonization.

Let me hasten to point out that, like most others, I don't hold any grudges against Huck himself. He's just a boy trying to survive. The villain here is Mark Twain, who knew how to give Huck a voice but didn't know how to give him a novel. Twain was clearly aware of the story's difficulties. Not finished with having revisited his boyhood in Tom Sawyer, Twain conceived of a sequel and began composition while still working on Tom Sawyer's page proofs. Four hundred pages into it, having just passed Cairo and exhausted most of his memories of Hannibal and the upper Mississippi, Twain put the manuscript aside for three years. He was facing a problem every novelist is familiar with: his original conception was beginning to conflict with the implications of the actual story. It is at this point in the story that Huck and Jim realize two things: they have become close friends, and they have missed the Ohio River and drifted into what for Jim must be the most frightening territory of all--down the river, the very place Miss Watson was going to sell him to begin with. Jim's putative savior, Huck, has led him as far astray as a slave can go, and the farther they go, the worse it is going to be for him. Because the Ohio was not Twain's territory, the fulfillment of Jim's wish would necessarily lead the novel away from the artistic integrity that Twain certainly sensed his first four hundred pages possessed. He found himself writing not a boy's novel, like Tom Sawyer, but a man's novel, about real moral dilemmas and growth. The patina of nostalgia for a time and place, Missouri in the 1840s (not unlike former President Ronald Reagan's nostalgia for his own boyhood, when "Americans got along" , had been transformed into actual longing for a timeless place of friendship and freedom, safe and hidden, on the big river. But the raft had floated Huck and Jim, and their author with them, into the truly dark heart of the American soul and of American history: slave country.

Twain came back to the novel and worked on it twice again, once to rewrite the chapters containing the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, and later to introduce the Duke and the Dauphin. It is with the feud that the novel begins to fail, because from here on the episodes are mere distractions from the true subject of the work: Huck's affection for and responsibility to Jim. The signs of this failure are everywhere, as Jim is pushed to the side of the narrative, hiding on the raft and confined to it, while Huck follows the Duke and the Dauphin onshore to the scenes of much simpler and much less philosophically taxing moral dilemmas, such as fraud. Twain was by nature an improviser, and he was pleased enough with these improvisations to continue. When the Duke and the Dauphin finally betray Jim by selling him for forty dollars, Huck is shocked, but the fact is neither he nor Twain has come up with a plan that would have saved Jim in the end. Tom Sawyer does that.

Considerable critical ink has flowed over the years in an attempt to integrate the Tom Sawyer chapters with the rest of the book, but it has flowed in vain. As Leo Marx points out, and as most readers sense intuitively, once Tom reappears, "[m]ost of those traits which made [Huck] so appealing a hero now disappear.... It should be added at once that Jim doesn't mind too much. The fact is that he has undergone a similar transformation. On the raft he was an individual, man enough to denounce Huck when Huck made him the victim of a practical joke. In the closing episode, however, we lose sight of Jim in the maze of farcical invention." And the last twelve chapters are boring, a sure sign that an author has lost the battle between plot and theme and is just filling in the blanks.



As with all bad endings, the problem really lies at the beginning, and at the beginning of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* neither Huck nor Twain takes Jim's desire for freedom at all seriously; that is, they do not accord it the respect that a man's passion deserves. The sign of this is that not only do the two never cross the Mississippi to Illinois, a free state, but they hardly even consider it.



In both Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, the Jackson's Island scenes show that such a crossing, even in secret, is both possible and routine, and even though it would present legal difficulties for an escaped slave, these would certainly pose no more hardship than locating the mouth of the Ohio and then finding passage up it. It is true that there could have been slave catchers in pursuit (though the novel ostensibly takes place in the 1840s and the Fugitive Slave Act was not passed until 1850), but Twain's moral failure, once Huck and Jim link up, is never even to account for their choice to go

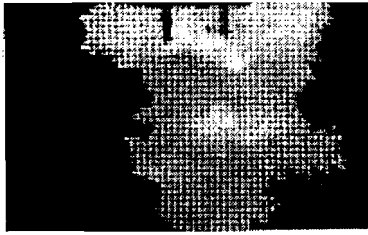
down the river rather than across it. What this reveals is that for all his lip service to real attachment between white boy and black man, Twain really saw Jim as no more than Huck's sidekick, homoerotic or otherwise. All the claims that are routinely made for the book's humanitarian power are, in the end, simply absurd. Jim is never autonomous, never has a vote, always finds his purposes subordinate to Huck's, and, like every good sidekick, he never minds. He grows ever more passive and also more affectionate as Huck and the Duke and the Dauphin and Tom (and Twain) make ever more use of him for their own purposes. But this use they make of him is not supplementary; it is integral to Twain's whole conception of the novel. Twain thinks that Huck's affection is a good enough reward for Jim.

The sort of meretricious critical reasoning that has raised Huck's paltry good intentions to a "strategy of subversion" (David L. Smith) and a "convincing indictment of slavery" (Eliot) precisely mirrors the same sort of meretricious reasoning that white people use to convince themselves that they are not "racist." If Huck feels positive toward Jim, and loves him, and thinks of him as a man, then that's enough. He doesn't actually have to act in accordance with his feelings. White Americans always think racism is a feeling, and they reject it or they embrace it. To most Americans, it seems more honorable and nicer to reject it, so they do, but they almost invariably fail to understand that how they feel means very little to black Americans, who understand racism as a way of structuring American culture, American politics, and the American economy. 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 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. And to give credit to Huck suggests that the only racial insight Americans of the nineteenth or twentieth century are capable of is a recognition of the obvious--that blacks, slave and free, are human.

Ernest Hemingway, thinking of himself, as always, once said that all American literature grew out of Huck Finn. It undoubtedly would have been better for American literature, and American culture, if our literature had grown out of one of the best-selling novels of all time, another American work of the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which for its portrayal of an array of thoughtful, autonomous, and passionate black characters leaves Huck Finn far behind. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1852, when Twain was seventeen, still living in Hannibal and contributing to his brother's newspapers, still sympathizing with the South, nine years before his abortive career in the Confederate Army. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was the most popular novel of its era, universally controversial. In 1863, when Harriet Beecher Stowe visited the White House, Abraham Lincoln condescended to remark to her, "So this is the little lady who made this great war."



The story, familiar to most nineteenth-century Americans, either through the novel or through the many stage adaptations that sentimentalized Stowe's work, may be sketched briefly: A Kentucky slave, Tom, is sold to pay off a debt to a slave trader, who takes him to New Orleans. On the boat trip downriver, Tom is purchased by the wealthy Augustine St. Clare at the behest of his daughter, Eva. After Eva's death, and then St. Clare's, Tom is sold again, this time to



Simon Legree, whose remote plantation is the site of every form of cruelty and degradation. The novel was immediately read and acclaimed by any number of excellent judges: Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, George Sand--the whole roster of nineteenth-century liberals whose work we read today and try to persuade ourselves that Huck Finn is equal to. English novelist and critic Charles Kingsley thought *Uncle Tom's Cabin* the best novel ever written. These writers honored Stowe's book for all its myriad

virtues. One of these was her adept characterization of a whole world of whites and blacks who find themselves gripped by slavery, many of whose names have entered the American language as expressions--not only Uncle Tom himself but Simon Legree and, to a lesser extent, little Eva and the black child Topsy. The characters appear, one after another, vivified by their attitudes, desires, and opinions as much as by their histories and their fates. Surely Augustine St. Clare, Tom's owner in New Orleans, is an exquisite portrayal of a humane but indecisive man, who knows what he is doing but not how to stop it. Surely Cassy, a fellow slave whom Tom meets on the Legree plantation, is one of the great angry women in all of literature--not only bitter, murderous, and nihilistic but also intelligent and enterprising. Surely the midlife spiritual journey of Ophelia St. Clare, Augustine's Yankee cousin, from self-confident ignorance to affectionate understanding is most convincing, as is Topsy's parallel journey from ignorance and self-hatred to humanity. The ineffectual Mr. Shelby and his submissive, and subversive, wife; the slave trader Haley; Tom's wife, Chloe; Augustine's wife, Marie; Legree's overseers, Sambo and Quimbo--good or evil, they all live.

As for Tom himself, we all know what an "Uncle Tom" is, except we don't. The popular Uncle Tom sucks up to the master and exhibits bovine patience. The real Uncle Tom is both a realist and a man of deep principle. When he is sold by Mr. Shelby in Kentucky, he knows enough of Shelby's affairs to know that what his master asserts is true: it's Tom who must go or the whole estate will be sold off for debt, including Tom's wife and three children. Later, on the Legree estate, his religious faith tells him that the greatest danger he finds there is not to his life but to his soul. His logic is impeccable. He holds fast to his soul, in the face of suffering, in a way that even nonbelievers like myself must respect. In fact, Tom's story eerily prefigures stories of spiritual solace through deep religious belief that have come out of both the Soviet Gulag and the Nazi concentration camp in the same way that the structure of power on Legree's plantation, and the suffering endured there, forecasts and duplicates many stories of recent genocides.

The power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is the power of brilliant analysis married to great wisdom of feeling. Stowe never forgets the logical end of any relationship in which one person is the subject and the other is the object. No matter how the two people feel, or what their intentions are, the logic of the relationship is inherently tragic and traps both parties until the false subject/object relationship is ended. Stowe's most oft-repeated and potent representation of this inexorable logic is the forcible separation of family members, especially of mothers from children. Eliza, faced with the sale of her child, Harry, escapes across the breaking ice of the Ohio River. Lucy, whose ten-month-old is sold behind her back, kills herself. Prue, who has been used for breeding, must listen to her last child cry itself to death because her mistress won't let her save it; she falls into alcoholism and thievery and is finally whipped to death. Cassy, prefiguring a choice made by one of the characters in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, kills her last child so that it won't grow up in slavery. All of these women have been promised something by their owners--love, education, the privilege and joy of raising their children--but, owing to slavery, all of these promises have been broken. The grief and despair these women display is no doubt what T. S. Eliot was thinking of when he superciliously labeled *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "sensationalist propaganda," but, in fact, few critics in the nineteenth century ever accused Stowe of making up or even exaggerating such stories. One group of former slaves who were asked to comment on Stowe's depiction of slave life said that she had failed to portray the very worst, and Stowe herself was afraid that if she told some of what she had heard from escaped slaves and other informants during her eighteen years in Cincinnati, the book would be too dark to find any readership at all.

Stowe's analysis does not stop with the slave owners and traders, or with the slaves themselves. She understands perfectly that slavery is an economic system embedded in America as a whole, and she comments ironically on Christian bankers in New York whose financial dealings result in the sale of slaves, on Northern politicians who promote the capture of escaped slaves for the sake of the public good, on ministers of churches who give the system a Christian stamp of approval. One of Stowe's most skillful techniques is her method of weaving a discussion of slavery into the dialogue of her characters. Especially interesting is a conversation Mark Twain could have paid attention to. Augustine St. Clare and his abolitionist cousin, Ophelia, are discussing his failure to act in accordance with his feelings of revulsion against slavery. After entertaining Ophelia's criticisms for a period, Augustine points out that Ophelia herself is personally disgusted by black people and doesn't like to come into contact with them. He says, "You would think no harm in a child's caressing a large dog, even if he was black ... custom with us does what Christianity ought to do--obliterates the feeling of personal prejudice." When Ophelia takes over the education of Topsy, a child who has suffered a most brutal previous upbringing, she discovers that she can do nothing with her until she takes her, literally, to her bosom. But personal relationships do not mitigate the evils of slavery; Ophelia makes sure to give Topsy her freedom.

Stowe also understands that the real root of slavery is that it is profitable as well as customary. Augustine and his brother live with slavery because it is the system they know and because they haven't the imagination to live without it. Simon Legree embraces slavery because he can make money from it and because it gives him even more absolute power over his workers than he could find in the North or in England.

The very heart of nineteenth-century American experience and literature, the nature and meaning of slavery, is finally what Twain cannot face in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Jim and Huck drift down Twain's beloved river, the author finds himself nearing what must have been a crucial personal nexus: how to reconcile the felt memory of boyhood with the cruel implications of the social system within which that boyhood was lived. He had avoided this problem for the most part in *Tom Sawyer*: slaves hardly impinge on the lives of Tom and the other boys. But once Twain allows Jim a voice, this voice must speak in counterpoint to Huck's voice and must raise issues that cannot easily be resolved, either personally or culturally. Harriet Beecher Stowe, New Englander, daughter of Puritans and thinkers, active in the abolitionist movement and in the effort to aid and educate escaped slaves, had no such personal conflict when she sat down to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nothing about slavery was attractive to her either as a New Englander or as a resident of Cincinnati for almost twenty years. Her lack of conflict is apparent in the clarity of both the style and substance of the novel.

Why, then, we may ask, did *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for all its power and popularity, fail to spawn American literature? Fail, even, to work as a model for how to draw passionate, autonomous, and interesting black literary characters? Fail to keep the focus of the American literary imagination on the central dilemma of the American experience: race? Part of the reason is certainly that the public conversation about race and slavery that had been a feature of antebellum American life fell silent after the Civil War. Perhaps the answer is to be found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: everyone opted for the ultimate distraction, lighting out for the territory. And the reason is to be found in Uncle Tom's Cabin: that's where the money was.

But so what? These are only authors, after all, and once a book is published the author can't be held accountable for its role in the culture. For that we have to blame the citizens themselves, or their teachers, or their teachers, the arbiters of critical taste. In "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors," the scholar Nina Baym has already detailed how the canonization of a very narrow range of white, Protestant, middle-class male authors (Twain, Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, etc.), has misrepresented our literary life--first by defining the only worthy American literary subject as "the struggle of the individual against society [in which] the essential quality of America comes to reside in its unsettled wilderness and the opportunities that such a wilderness offers to the individual as the medium on which he may inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature," and then by casting women, and

especially women writers (specialists in the "flagrantly bad best-seller," according to Leslie Fiedler), as the enemy. In such critical readings, all other themes and modes of literary expression fall out of consideration as "un-American." There goes Uncle Tom's Cabin, there goes Edith Wharton, there goes domestic life as a subject, there go almost all the best-selling novelists of the nineteenth century and their readers, who were mostly women. The real loss, though, is not to our literature but to our culture and ourselves, because we have lost the subject of how the various social groups who may not escape to the wilderness are to get along in society; and, in the case of Uncle Tom's Cabin, the hard-nosed, unsentimental dialogue about race that we should have been having since before the Civil War. Obviously, Uncle Tom's Cabin is no more the last word on race relations than The Brothers Karamazov or David Copperfield is on any number of characteristically Russian or English themes and social questions. Some of Stowe's ideas about inherent racial characteristics (whites: cold, heartless; blacks: naturally religious and warm) are bad and have been exploded. One of her solutions to the American racial conflicts that she foresaw, a colony 'tn Africa, she later repudiated. Nevertheless, her views about many issues were brilliant, and her heart was wise. She gained the respect and friendship ship of many men and women of goodwill, black and white, such as Frederick Douglass, the civil-rights activist Mary Church Terrill, the writer and social activist James Weldon Johnson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. What she did was find a way to talk about slavery and family, power and law, life and death, good and evil, North and South. She truly believed that all Americans together had to find a solution to the problem of slavery in which all were implicated. When her voice, a courageously public voice--as demonstrated by the public arguments about slavery that rage throughout Uncle Tom's Cabin--fell silent in our culture and was replaced by the secretive voice of Huck Finn, who acknowledges Jim only when they are alone on the raft together out in the middle of the big river, racism fell out of the public world and into the private one, where whites think it really is but blacks know it really isn't.



Should Huckleberry Finn be taught in the schools? The critics of the Propaganda Era laid the groundwork for the universal inclusion of the book in school curriculums by declaring it great. Although they predated the current generation of politicized English professors, this was clearly a political act, because the entry of Huck Finn into classrooms sets the terms of the discussion of racism and American history, and sets them very low: all you

have to do to be a hero is acknowledge that your poor sidekick is human; you don't actually have to act in the interests of his humanity. Arguments about censorship have been regularly turned into nonsense by appeals to Huck's "greatness." Moreover, so much critical thinking has gone into defending Huck so that he can be great, so that American literature can be found different from and maybe better than Russian or English or French literature, that the very integrity of the critical enterprise has been called into question. That most readers intuitively reject the last twelve chapters of the novel on the grounds of tedium or triviality is clear from the fact that so many critics have turned themselves inside out to defend them. Is it so mysterious that criticism has failed in our time after being so robust Ponly a generation ago? Those who cannot be persuaded that The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a great novel have to draw some conclusion.



I would rather my children read Uncle Tom's Cabin, even though it is far more vivid in its depiction of cruelty than 6Huck Finn, and this is because Stowe's novel is clearly and unmistakably a tragedy. No whitewash, no secrets, but evil, suffering, imagination, endurance, and redemption--just like life. Like little Eva, who eagerly but fearfully listens to the stories of the slaves that her family tries to keep from her, our children want to know what is going on, what has gone on, and what we intend to do about it. If "great" literature has any purpose, it is to help us face up to our responsibilities instead of enabling us to avoid them once again by lighting out for the territory.

Jane Smiley is the author of eight novels and novellas, including A Thousand Acres, which won



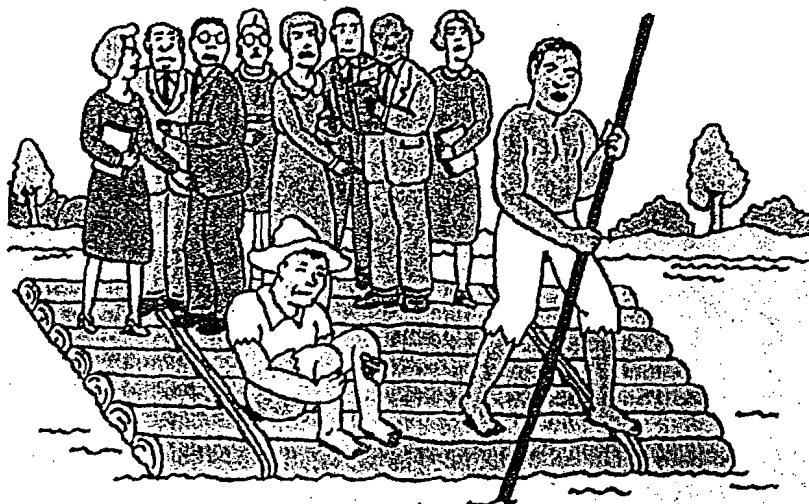
# Selling 'Huck Finn' Down the River

IN the January issue of Harper's Magazine, the novelist Jane Smiley writes that she's "stunned" by the notion that "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" "is a great novel ... even a serious novel." She attributes its canonization to a propaganda initiative by a small group of literary critics, among them Lionel Trilling and T. S. Eliot, soon after World War II. She sees this as part of a long-standing cultism that assigns a dominant position to "white, Protestant, middle-class male authors" — Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville, for example — while relegating women authors, especially authors of best-selling novels, to the kitchen middens of Parnassus. Citing Ernest Hemingway's famously unhesitating assertion that "all modern American literature" comes from "Huckleberry Finn," Ms. Smiley argues that American literature would have been better off if it had grown instead out of "Uncle Tom's Cabin," one of the few novels that may be said to have had a pronounced effect on events.

Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel portrays "thoughtful, autonomous and passionate black characters," Ms. Smiley writes, while Mark Twain's Jim is merely a sidekick for Huck, who, moreover, fails to take Jim's quest for freedom seriously. "Huckleberry Finn" promotes a "simplistic and evasive theory" of racism as a problem to be alleviated through feeling rather than action. A truly responsible writer, she seems to be saying, would not have been satisfied with Huck's recognition of Jim's humanity and dignity but would have evolved Huck into John Brown and Jim into Nat Turner, two people who, indeed, "did" something about racism instead of just having a feeling about it.

The issue here, in part, is whether you want certainty or conflict in the literature you value — closure or risk, instruction or exploration, right-mindedness or free-mindedness. Writing "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in 1850-51, a decade before the argument about slavery boiled over into the Civil War, Stowe was dealing with a clear and present evil for which, as she believed, abolition and an aroused public were the sole remedy. In "Huckleberry Finn," started in 1876, by which time slavery was no longer a present fact, Mark Twain was writing a historical, not a reformist, novel. Instead of being issue-driven, a cry for action, as Stowe's book was, his was autobiographical and nostalgic. Perhaps he had set out to do something not altogether possible, to meld a tenderly remembered boyhood with a profoundly troubled adult recognition that the same white, riverine society that allowed Huck his brief rafting idyll was also heartless and greedy, a league of swindlers, drunks, hypocrites, lunkheads, bounty hunters and trigger-happy psychopaths. To praise (as Ms. Smiley does) Stowe's reformist novel for its "clarity of both ... style and substance" while faulting Mark Twain's quite different sort of book for its conflictiveness and "secretive voice" is to sell stylistic innovation, humor and imaginative literature down the river.

Inevitably, given the rhetorical thrust and focus of much discussion these days, the issue comes down to one of "correctness," but even on this dismal level Ms. Smiley's praise of the one book to the virtual stigmatization of the other doesn't make much sense. "Huckleberry Finn" is in constant trouble with teachers, li-



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brarians and parents because of its iterations of "nigger," a word that has a pre-emptive force today that it did not have in Huck Finn's Mississippi Valley of the 1840's. As far as I can tell, there have been no comparable objections to the frequent use, again by black characters as well as whites, of the word in "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

For all its undisputed power, moral outrage and a literary brilliance too easily overshadowed by message, Stowe's novel comes with serious problems of attitude for contemporary readers: the same "deeper racism" Ms. Smiley finds in "Huckleberry Finn." This begins with the stereotypical portrayal of Uncle Tom presiding over a family evening in his cabin and affects lesser characters like Black Sam, so called from his being "three shades blacker than any other son of ebony on the place," and shown hitching up his pantaloons, "his regularly organized method of assisting his mental perplexities." Other problems that afflict this book are organic and structural, reflecting the belief, held by Stowe and other abolitionists, that blacks were genetically unadaptable to both the climate and the advanced society of the United States. Repatriation to a gentler haven far away appeared to be the only answer. Lucy, one of Stowe's black characters, commits suicide; Prue becomes a drunk and a thief; George Harris and Eliza leave for Liberia; Tom is beaten to death. This generalized hopelessness, in Stowe's vision representing the tragedy inherent not only in slavery as an institution but in blacks as an uprooted race, is alien to "Huckleberry Finn," where Jim's future as a free man reunited with his family at least remains an open question.

No other major American book has been so vigorously challenged, and over so many years, as "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." Yet it manages somehow, through its humor, lyricism and distinctive, even revolutionary narrative voice, not only to survive but to transcend its author's definition of a classic: "A book which people praise and don't read." Since it was first published in this country in 1885, "Huckleberry Finn" has been read in some 65 languages and almost a thousand editions. This spring Random House is publishing yet another edition, for which I have written an Introduction. This one incorporates material from Mark Twain's original manuscript, the first part of which, presumed lost or destroyed, was recovered in 1990 in a trunk in a California attic. For all its enduring popu-

larity, Mark Twain's novel is the book many Americans love to hate and wish had never happened, but we're now, as bonded to this nettlesome work as Brer Rabbit was to Tar-Baby. Like Huck, after Pap Finn "got too handy with his hick'ry," the book is "all over welts."

By now its early trials are almost as familiar as the story the novel tells. A month after publication, the trustees of the Concord (Mass.) Public Library expelled the book from its shelves. It was "trash and suitable only for the slums," they said. "It deals with a series of adventures of a very low grade of morality; it is couched in the language of a rough dialect, and all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of rough, coarse, inelegant expressions." Over the next quarter-century other libraries — in Denver, Omaha, Brooklyn and the New York State Reformatory — fell in line, claiming the book was "immoral and sacrilegious," put "wrong ideas in youngsters' heads" and set "a bad example." Within the bounds of pure literal-mindedness, the people making these judgments had a point. Son of the town drunkard, Mark Twain's hero-narrator steals, lies, consorts with swindlers and violates both the law and the prevailing social code by helping a slave to escape and recognizing him as an equal. Huck's story ridicules the work ethic, the Bible, prayer, "missionarying," preaching and pious sentiments in general — "tears and flappedoodle," "soul-butter and hogwash." Even Mark Twain's wife and daughters, the audience whose approval he most wanted for a book that came out of his deepest imperatives, acknowledged "dear old Huck" only as someone to be let in through the back door and fed in the kitchen.

IT'S no longer ethical and social transgressiveness that drives controversy but "racism," a mainly invisible issue in the book's earlier career. Mark Twain's characterization of Jim allegedly stereotypes black people as ignorant, superstitious, passive, indiscriminately affectionate and infantile. This ignores the fact that at crucial junctures Jim is Huck's adult guide and protector and throughout lives on a higher ethical level than anybody else in this book, including Huck.

John Wallace, a black educator who has long been on the warpath against "Huckleberry Finn," calls it "the most grotesque example of racist trash ever given our children to read. ... Any teacher caught trying to use that piece of trash with our children should be fired on the spot, for he or she is either racist, insensitive, naïve, incompetent or all of the above." The novel figures prominently on the American Library Association's list of books most frequently challenged in schools and libraries.

Here the attack on grounds of racism and "negative stereotypes" joins a more literary sort of objection to the last quarter of the book for reducing Jim to a prop for Tom Sawyer's boyish theatrical ingenuities. Even Hemingway told readers, "The rest is just cheating." "The last 12 chapters are boring," Ms. Smiley writes, "a sure sign that an author has lost the battle between plot and theme and is just filling in the blanks." I don't disagree with this, but at the same time I'm happy to settle for any novel that, like "Huckleberry Finn," may be only 75 percent great. (

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