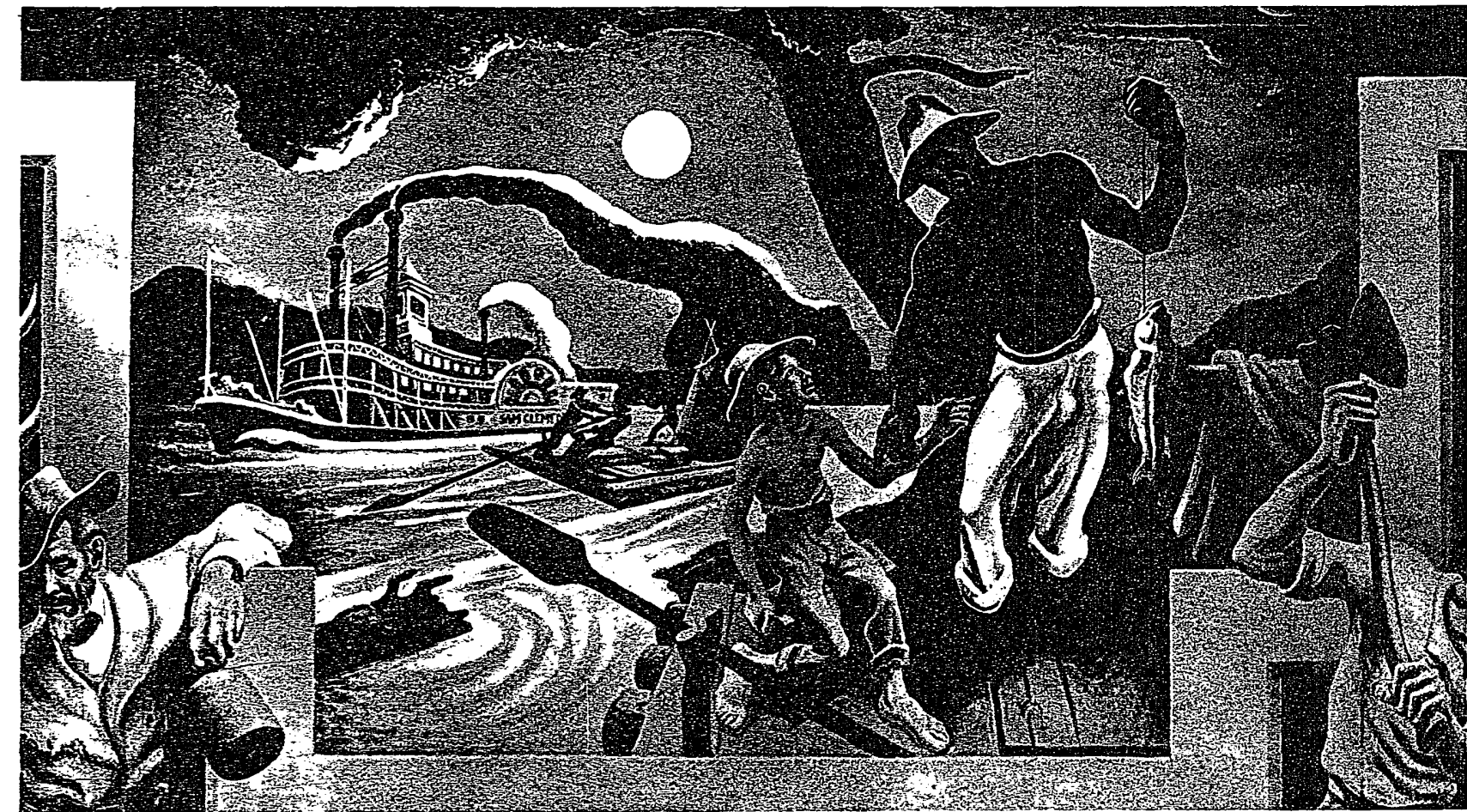


Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' and the Era He Lived In: Twain's Huckleberry Finn

By JAMES T. FARRELL
New York Times; Dec 12, 1943;
pg. BR6



Huck Finn and Jim.
From a Mural Painting by Thomas Hart Benton.

Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn' and the Era He Lived In

By JAMES T. FARRELL

MARK TWAIN has often been made the sport of critical fashions. During his own lifetime he was slow in gaining recognition, except as a humorist. His writing, especially because of his views on the institution of monarchy, disturbed some of the literary democrats of the Eastern seaboard. His masterpiece "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," was barred from some public libraries. In general, too much of the writing on Mark Twain has stressed his failures and limitations. His views on feudalism, and more generally on thirteen centuries of Christian civilization, have been misinterpreted, and he is sometimes pictured merely as the crass American frontiersman who could not rise to the level of appreciating the glories of European culture. It has been remarked that he might have corrected some of this *gaucherie* had he only known Henry Adams.

While it is true that he was unhistorical in his approach to European culture, it none the less remains that many of his critics have been equally unhistorical. And at the very least, there was in Twain a healthy sense of democratic feelings, a hatred of oppression and injustice, a deep-seated feeling that men were more important than the rags and cloth of the past, the trumpery, the show, the color, the glitter attached to outmoded historic institutions. His attacks on romanticism were literary necessities. In order to gain acceptance for what he wanted to write, he had to attack the unhealthy influence which this tradition exerted in America. As Bernard

De Voto has demonstrated in detail in "Mark Twain's America," Twain's source of inspiration was the frontier. He is the literary summation of pioneer America. And in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," he distilled and transmuted his material in terms of great writing.

Mark Twain was both a genuine democrat and a cynic. As a democrat he defended the Jacobins. Democratic ideas seemed to be part of his very blood and flesh. His individualism, and consequently, his sense of the worth of human beings, is a direct product of democratic ideas. And he expressed these magnificently when he made an unschooled boy and a runaway slave the heroes of what is truly an American odyssey. His cynicism is related to the many disillusioning observations of the failure of democratic ideas. In his most buoyant and productive periods, this cynicism is not sharply contradictory to his democratic feelings. Rather, it suggests something of the healthy cynicism of the *sansculottes*. In his latter days he witnessed the triumph of industrialism and the rapid expansion of American capitalism. His conscience was disturbed, as were the consciences of many writers and thinking people in both Europe and America. Then, he became a bleak determinist, somewhat on the order of the late Clarence Darrow. His cynicism concerning "the damned human race" became corrosive. He envisioned the individual man alone in a dreary waste of empty space. But his two boys, Tom and Huck,

rise above his discouragement, being his strongest expression of democratic hopes. Most particularly, Huck Finn is an ideal expression of Mark Twain.

IT is significant that they are boys rather than men, and thereby surrounded with an aura of optimism. Whereas the adults in their Mississippi village look down on Negro slaves as if they were not human beings. Tom and Huck tend even to envy them. Being less influenced by the village standards, they can associate more freely with Negroes than can adults. In consequence, Huck is able to come to grips with the moral problems posed by the very existence of the institution of chattel slavery. Huck lives like a pioneer, like a squatter in miniature. His respect for property rights is almost nil. To filch watermelons and other food, to "borrow" some one else's canoe, to ignore conventions and moral standards—all this does not trouble his conscience. But when it so happens that property rights involve another human being, then he faces a moral problem. This problem cuts into the heart of pre-Civil War America. And Huck resolves it by deciding that he will have to help the Negro, Jim, even at the risk of eternal damnation. Here we see Huck affirming the value of a live human being of the present, as against the claims justified in an institution of the past. And this affirmation is the very core of Mark Twain's own sense of the worth of human beings. To continue, Tom and Huck are shrewd, daring, ingenious. These are traits which Mark Twain admired. Tom Saw-

yer is the type of boy who could grow up to be a Pudd'nhead Wilson. The resourcefulness of Huck parallels that of the Connecticut Yankee. Thus, when Tom and Huck outwit adults, we must not interpret these passages merely as humor. Through his two unschooled boys, Twain forcefully emphasized his own attitudes and values.

"The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" is a boy's book. Its sequel, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is an adult's novel. However, the two books should not be separated. Tom and Huck are contrasts. Tom is a romantic; Huck is a realist. This temperamental difference seems at first paradoxical when we think of the circumstances of their lives. Tom lives a regular life. Cared for by his Aunt Polly, he is an accepted member of the community. He is sent to school, taken to church and Sunday school, and he goes on picnics with the other children whose parents also live orderly lives. He becomes the boyhood sweetheart of Becky Thatcher, whose father is one of the leading figures in the village. Tom seeks to escape from regularity by romanticism. He feeds on detective and adventure stories (in fact the very characterization of Tom constitutes a satire on this form of writing) and he strives to translate what he reads into the real world around him. Huck, on the contrary, is a realist living under romantic circumstances. There is no order in his life. He is the child of whim and impulse. He is heedless of authority and convention. The other boys are warned by their parents and their teacher not to associate with him. But Huck represents

common sense as opposed to romanticism. Since his problems are of a life and death character, he must be a realist in order to survive. Tom's reality problems are settled for him, so that he is then concerned with those of his imagination. Huck, equally adventurous, cannot afford the luxury of romanticism.

AS a result of these differences, Huck appears to be more mature than Tom, although they are of the same age. At the conclusion of "Huckleberry Finn," Tom seems to be the same charming boy that he was when we first met him, while Huck has developed and grown in character, having acquired a clearer and purer sense of moral values. It is this fact which explains the difference between the two books—revealed also in the humor, which is much more pointed in the second novel. Mark Twain seldom indulged in humor for its own sake! There was usually a devastating attack behind the playfulness. The extravaganza, the burlesque included in the saga of Huck Finn is pointed at the old South, cutting to the heart of a whole society. The most pointed humor in "Tom Sawyer" strikes less deeply; it is directed at adventure writing, and at the school system of the period. But taken together, both boys stand in contrast to "the damned human race."

The institution of chattel slavery always exists as the background against which these boys live. It forces itself into the very content of consciousness, not only of Tom and Huck, but of all the

(Continued on Page 37)

Twain's Huckleberry Finn

(Continued from Page 6)

members of their village. As Bernard De Voto has pointed out, the existence of slavery explains the role which superstition plays in the minds of Tom and Huck. Here Mark Twain made a neat social comment. He told us, in effect, that if you preserve the institution of slavery it will permeate your entire culture and become an important bar to progress. Just as it produces meanness and brutality, so does it perpetuate magic. Briefly, the backwardness of the slaves, treated as property rather than as human beings, will blunt the moral and intellectual development of the masters. Twain's penetrating revelation of the moral and social consequences of slavery is focused in the relationship between Huck and Jim, the runaway slave, for it is through intimate association with him that Huck's moral landscape is broadened. Huck must even learn that a Negro can love his family as tenderly as white folks do. Jim shines through the novel as a man with dignity, loyalty and courage. Drifting along the Mississippi, he assumes heroic proportions, revealing many of the white men surrounding him as cruel or foolish by contrast. This is most clearly drawn in the case of the King and the Duke, who are rascals, but who are also symbolic figures, representing the dead institutions of the past. And Huck makes the symbolism explicit when he tells Jim that they are not at all bad when one

considers what real kings and dukes have done in history.

It need not be stressed that Mark Twain re-created a full sense of life on the Mississippi. This is undisputed. He wrote with ease and buoyancy: there is humor, sensibility and beauty in his style. But there is real penetration too. He evokes an entire epoch, which takes on organic shape, form, solidity, depth.

Generations of Americans have read of these two boys. They have become part of the consciousness of most literate people in this country and one feels, on rereading their stories, as if one is again meeting old and imperishable friends. But they do not represent merely the idyllic times of boyhood. The world in which they lived was full of its own cruelties. One reason why they are so charming is that we see their unspoiled images flashed against the mirror of that world. Tom and Huck are symbols of the possibilities in human beings. Today they stand as a test not only of ourselves but of the whole of American society. They are, with all of their charm, like two accusing figures, with fingers pointing down the decades of American history. Their very characters seem to ask why, why has this promise not been realized? Why is it so rarely that the man becomes what the boy has promised? This is part of the their significance as enduring characters in American literature.