GABRIELLA VARRÓ

THE ADVENTURES OF THE MINSTREL SIGN IN MARK TWAIN'S *HUCKLEBERRY FINN*

> I remember the first negro musical show I ever saw. It must have been in the early forties. It was a new institution. In our village of Hannibal we had not heard of it before and it burst upon us as a glad and stunning surprise.
>
> The show remained a week and gave a performance every night. Church members didn't attend these performances, but all the worldlings flocked to them and were enchanted. Church members didn't attend shows out there in those days. The minstrels appeared with coal-black hands and faces and their clothing was a loud and extravagant burlesque of the clothing worn by the plantation slave of the time; not that the rags of the poor slave were burlesqued, for that would not have been possible; burlesque could have added nothing in the way of extravagance to the sorrowful accumulation of rags and patches which constituted his costume; it was the form and color of his dress that was burlesqued. [...] The minstrel used a very broad negro dialect; he used it competently and with easy facility and it was funny—delightfully and satisfyingly funny. (*Autobiography* 59)

Mark Twain was a great fan and admirer of the minstrel shows, and he himself attended many performances in and around Hannibal and St. Louis, Missouri. In his *Autobiography* he gave several accounts of the elevating experience provided by the shows, and his firm belief that blackface entertainment was one of the most perfect forms of humor remained his conviction throughout his life. Once he even persuaded his mother and aunt to accompany him to the theatre. He told them, however, that missionaries who had just returned from Africa were to lecture on African music. The respective section of the *Autobiography* reads as follows: "When the grotesque negroes came filing out on the stage in their extravagant costumes, the old ladies were almost speechless with astonishment. I explained to them that the missionaries always dressed like that in Africa. But Aunt Betsy said, reproachfully, 'But they're niggers'" (62).

The two previous citations from Twain's *Autobiography* are remarkable for several reasons. The first one demonstrates how, on the one hand, Twain is totally captivated by the humor of the minstrel show, and, on the other, the somewhat apologetic tone assumed in the name of the white performers for the not completely adequate parody exercised on the stage. The first quotation clearly proves that Twain describes the blackface act not as an outsider, but more as a professional humorist who lives within and becomes one with this strange, enigmatic and complex world that the show is. This explains why Twain understands blackface's rituals and strategies more than an average outsider would. Mixed into the account are feelings of uncertainty, guilt, admiration and ecstasy, which reflect ambiguities that are not exclusively the author's but inherent in the blackface act as well. The ambivalent psychological processes revealed in the passage also attest to complexities and ambivalences regarding the relationships between the minstrel performer and the object of his impersonation (the slaves), those between the spectators and the performance (the blackface act), the spectators and the black ethnic group, and finally the minstrel performers and their spectators. It can be thus hypothesized that Twain's own complex feelings indirectly reflect the underlying psychological processes of the blackface performance itself.

The point of interest in the second quotation is that in it Twain widens the scope of parody to include minstrel audiences along with the Negroes parodied on stage. Back in the 19th century there were many people who mistakenly identified the blackface stage entertainers with blacks, and likewise the contents, the narrative elements of the shows were often decoded as authentic features of black existence. In the scene described Twain is amused as much by the minstrel performers as by his relatives, especially as he witnesses their consternation at the sight of stage Negroes, whereas in real life the ladies were in daily contact with blacks. To the women the appearance of the Negro on stage is inappropriate and inadequate, this is not the "natural" environment where they should appear, and hence the shock. Comedy arises from the complete failure of previous expectations pertaining to the performance, the missionaries are replaced by "Negroes" (in the lady's interpretation at least), the Negroes are in reality white performers in blackface, and light-hearted entertainment is thus overridden by indignation. Twain's meditation about the scene, however, is not constructed along the authenticity-inauthenticity dichotomy—he is not interested in whether the audience is capable of recognizing the true identity of the performers—instead he is testing the reactions of white audiences with respect to the Negroes as incarnated through white impersonation.

In a sense the two quotations might very well be conceived as a summary of Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.* On the one hand, the novel charts the attraction-resistance dichotomy between blacks and whites, which also simulates the rhythmic shifts in the ambivalent psychology of blackface performance (see the quotation used as the epigraph). On the other hand, Twain is deeply interested in how typical the emotional and ethical responses of various social classes (upper, middle and lower) to blacks really are (cf. the second quotation). The latent question that seems to be formulated throughout the entire novel cycle is whether there is any development possible in inter-racial, inter-ethnic communication within certain social groups.[1]

Twain's curious attraction to the minstrel show can be explained in many ways, but first among these possible arguments is one closely tied to the author's aesthetic mission. Namely that Twain, being, among other things, an ardent promoter of a truly national vernacular, believed to have found the genuinely American cultural idiom and diction in the minstrel tradition, on the basis of which he considered the formation of national identity and consciousness feasible. It is a different matter, however, that this form of popular theatre appeared in a racist mould (where Negroes were deliberately humiliated and subjugated) at least according to traditional interpretations, similarly to the southwestern branch of national humor popularized by Twain, that also abounded in jokes at the black man's expense. Minstrel shows frequently used the elements of regional humor as their source material, and the genres of southwestern humor also oftentimes surfaced in minstrel programs. Among the characteristic features of southwestern humor were "incongruity, gross exaggeration, understatement, caricature, anecdotes" (Bell 129), tall tales and further elements, which came to be part of the aesthetic apparatus applied in the portrayal of black people when transferred into the minstrel shows. These facts by themselves, however, do not prove,—what is nonetheless affirmed by many critics—, that Twain turned to the minstrel tradition exclusively because of its racist charge. It is altogether more likely that Twain was driven to the blackface show primarily because it meant for him the first originally American popular tradition (irrespective of the image it drew of blacks), and this very well matched the writer's cultural mission. An additional factor worth mentioning here is that liberating, inter-ethnic aspect of the minstrel show which is being described in minstrelsy criticism only recently—and in its core also appearing in Twain's art—, and which might lead to reinterpretations regarding the former, exclusively condemnatory evaluations of the shows.

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[1] It is a surprising coincidence that current minstrelsy criticism (similarly to emphasis laid out by Twain's writings) is also intent on moving away from the authenticity-inauthenticity dilemma with respect to black representation, primarily since this has always been regarded as a politically sensitive issue, and secondly because this area of debate contains a multitude of subjective elements. Contemporary minstrelsy criticism also stresses the research of interrelations between the minstrel shows and various social classes, while underscoring the significance of political alliances across class and ethnic boundaries revealed in the contents of the shows.

The second element that may have played a part in Twain's patronage of the minstrel theatre throughout his life was his upbringing. In the *Autobiography* Twain mentions the fact that since in the region where he grew up there were no stories of atrocities involving slaves, he received no input from his immediate surroundings that could have suggested even in the smallest degree the necessary rejection of slavery. This paternalistic attitude and the similarly pseudo-benevolent attitude revealed on the minstrel stages with respect to the social position of blacks show many similarities. "[...] [T]here was nothing about the slavery of the Hannibal region to arouse one's dozing humane instincts to activity. It was the mild domestic slavery, not the brutal plantation article. Cruelties were very rare and exceedingly and wholesomely unpopular" —, writes Twain in his *Autobiography* (30). This might be the reason why, reflected through Huck Finn's great moral dilemmas regarding the acknowledgement of Jim's humanity and his natural right for freedom, we indeed witness Twain's innate humanism and his received paternalistic Southern perspective battling against each other.

In this brief analysis of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, I will attempt to find answers to the following questions. [1.] To what extent and at what points can we see the intervention of the minstrel tradition in Twain's authorial world? [2.] What is the result of the fact that Twain lived inside the world of the minstrel shows, and was familiar with the strategies, methods, and world view applied therein? [3.] Does Twain provide an evaluation or interpretation for the posterity with respect to this theatrical tradition that he knew so well? [4.] Does his interpretation ever reach the level of criticism, and if so, can he present it objectively?

Let us first take a closer look at those elements of blackface which are incorporated into the novel, and examine how Twain applies these in the construction of his tale. *Huck Finn*, which Twain wrote through almost a decade with intermissions, was published in 1884. This was the age when the "Negro" minstrel show reached the peak of its popularity in America. By the 1870s minstrel companies had achieved unequalled success, and were touring the entire country. "Meanwhile," as Eric Lott noted, "the new phenomenon of the "Tom show"—dramatic blackface productions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* [...]—was emerging to displace and reorient the minstrel tradition" (129). The entire American nation was captivated and spellbound by the minstrel shows. Thus it is no surprise that Twain's text is also interwoven by the expressions, social and cultural vision disseminated by the shows. Anthony Berret, for instance, interprets the novel's thematic layers, style and strategies as well as its entire structure as being affected by the minstrel influence. The hypothesis, namely that the novel is constructed along the tripartite arrangement of the classic minstrel show, will be demonstrated here partly following Berret's interpretation and argument, and partly through examples directly from the text.

It is a well known fact that the classic minstrel show was comprised of three easily distinguishable units, namely, the first part, the olio, and the closing number. These larger units could be subdivided into yet smaller segments. The first part, or *overture*, contained primarily comic dialogues and sentimental song and dance acts; the *olio* or variety section centered around the stump speech of the lead actor and a variety of acrobatic or circus numbers, and finally the *closing* was organized around a plantation skit or one or more burlesque numbers. This wide range of genres and themes belonging to the shows can also be found in Twain's work.

A recurring element of the tripartite minstrel performance was the humorous dialogue scene of the overture. In the original minstrel setting the parties involved in this scene were, on the one hand, the white-faced *Interlocutor*, who acted as Master of Ceremony throughout the performance, and the blackfaced darkies (*Mr Tambo* and *Mr. Bones*, otherwise also known as the *endmen*), who were seated at both ends of the semicircular stage-set along with the contributing dancers and musicians. These comic dialogues were exploiting the possibilities of verbal humor. Among the devices of verbal humor were the so-called *banter*, the teasing and mocking of each other, as well as the *repartee*, which built upon the practice of fast and ingenious remarks like in a verbal duel. The respective criticism often labels this kind of comic element as *end-man humor* (Starke 175), mostly because these fast exchanges were routinely exercised by the endmen.

The above stylistic features are as much perceptible in the humor and incongruity generating tricks and devices of the group called the Literary Comedians, who were Twain's contemporaries, as in the later Donald and Costello shows, or still later in Amos 'n Andy, as well as in the improvisational technique of the gag shows.

Similarly, *Huck Finn* also abounds in the possibly most popular comedy-generating technique of the minstrel shows, the *end-man humor*. Let us now take a look at some instances where this comic device can be unmistakably pinpointed as present in the book. The most striking example of the employment of the *end-man humor* probably is Chapter 14, where Jim and Huck first begin to talk about some very illustrious people, and then they exchange ideas about the wisdom of the Biblical King Solomon, and finally they debate about the strange language of French people:

> I read considerable to Jim about kings, and dukes, and earls, and such, and how gaudy they dressed, and how much style they put on, and called each other your majesty, and your grace, and your lordship, and so on, 'stead of mister; and Jim's eyes bugged out, and he was interested. He says:
> 'I didn' know dey was so many un um. I hain't hearn 'bout none un um, skasely, but ole King Sollermun, onless you counts dem kings dat's in a pack er k'yards. How much do a king get?'
> 'Get?' I says; 'why, they get a thousand dollars a month if they want it; they can have just as much as they want; everything belongs to them.'
> '*Ain'* dat gay? En what dey got to do, Huck?
> '*They* don't do nothing! Why how you talk. They just set around.'
> 'No—is dat so?'
> 'Of course it is. They just set around. Except maybe when there's a war; then they go to the war. But other times they just lazy around; or go hawking—just hawking and [...] and other times, when things is dull, they fuss with the parlyment; and if everybody don't go just so he whacks their heads of. But mostly they hang round the harem.' (84–85)

This is where the dialogue between Huck and Jim shifts to the wise King Solomon theme. We are informed that Solomon "had about a million wives" in his harem, and that the harem itself is a "bo'd'n-house," Jim claims, and it is rather noisy, mostly because "de wives quarrels considerable." Still Solomon is said to be the wisest man on earth, although he lived at such a noisy place. "I doan' take no stock in dat," says Jim, "Bekase why: would a wise man want to live in the mids' er sich a blimblammin' all de time?" (85)

> 'Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self.'
> 'I doan k'yer what de widder say, he *warn't* no wise man, nuther. He had some er de ded-fetchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chile dat he 'uz gwyne to chop in two?'
> *'Yes, the widow told me all about it.'*
> 'Well, *den! Warn' dat de beatenes' notion in de worl'? You jes' take en look at it a minute. [...]*

> 'But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile.'
> 'Who? Me? Go 'long. Doan' talk to *me* 'bout yo' pints. I reck'n I know sense when I sees it; en dey ain' no sense in sich doin's as dat. De 'spute warn't 'bout a half chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole child; en de man dat thinks he kin settle a 'spute 'bout a whole child wid half a chile, doan' know enough to come in out'n de rain. Doan' talk to me 'bout Sollermun, Huck, I knows him by de back.'
> 'But I tell you you don't get the point.'
> 'Blame de pint! I reck'n I knows what I knows. En mine you, de *real* pint is down furder—it's down deeper. It lays in de way Sollermun was raised. You take a man dat's got on'y one or two chillen; is dat man gwyne to be waseful o' chillen? No, he ain't; he can't 'ford it. *He* know how to value 'em. But you take a man 'dat's got 'bout five million chillen runnin' roun' de house, en it's diffunt. *He* as soon chop a chile in two as a cat. Dey's plenty mo'. A chile er two, mo' er less, warn't no consekens to Sollermun, dad fetch him!' (86–87)

Huck gives up the verbal duel, because he is not able to get the upper hand over Jim's humorously intensive ethical indignation. As he says immediately afterwards: "I never see such a nigger. If he got a notion in his head once, there warn't no getting it out again" (86). Huck then seeks a new theme for discussion, and they start to converse about Louis XVI, the French king who was executed, and his son, the heir, who stayed alive according to the legend and fled to America. But, asks Jim, what would a king do in America, where there are no sovereigns. "Well," says Huck, "I don't know. Some of them gets on the police, and some of them learns people how to talk French" (87). This is the point where Twain begins one of his best dialogues that reflects all the magic of oral improvisation. This section with its fast rhythm, cunning exchanges, and bizarre logic is a masterful verbal simulation of the end-man humor of the minstrel show.

> 'Why, Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?'
> '*No*, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word.'
> 'Well, now, I be ding-busted! How do dat come?'
> "I don't know; but it's so. I got some of their jabber out of a book. Spose a man was to come to you and say *Polly-voo-franzy*—what would you think?'

> ‘I wouldn’t think nuff’n; I’d take en bust him over de head. Dat is, if he warn’t white. I wouldn’t ‘low no nigger to call me dat.’
>
> ‘Sucks, it ain’t calling you anything. It’s only saying do you know how to talk French.
>
> ‘Well, den, why couldn’t he *say* it?’
>
> ‘Why, he *is* a-saying it. That’s a Frenchman’s *way* of saying do you know how to talk French.’
>
> ‘Well, it’s a blame’ ridicklous way, en I doan’ want to hear no mo’ ‘bout it. Dey ain’ no sense in it.’
>
> ‘Looky here, Jim; does a cat talk like we do?’
>
> ‘No, a cat don’t.’
>
> ‘Well, does a cow?’
>
> ‘No, a cow don’t, nuther.’
>
> ‘Does a cat talk like a cow, or a cow talk like a cat?’
>
> ‘No, dey don’t.’
>
> ‘It’s natural and right for ’em to talk different from each other, ain’t it?’
>
> ‘’Course.’
>
> ‘And ain’t it natural and right for a cat and a cow to talk different from *us*?’ […] Well, then, why ain’t it natural and right for a *Frenchman* to talk different from us? You answer me that.’
>
> ‘Is a cat a man, Huck?’
>
> ‘No.’
>
> ‘Well, den, dey ain’t no sense in a cat talkin’ like a man. Is a cow a man?—er is a cow a cat?’
>
> ‘No, she ain’t either of them’
>
> […] ‘Is a Frenchman a man?’
>
> ‘Yes.’
>
> ‘*Well*, den! Dad blame it, why doan he *talk* like a man? You answer me *dat*. (87–88)

According to Berret the section of the novel that matches the minstrel first part or overture are chapters 1 to 19. As can be seen from the examples cited above, Jim plays the role of the minstrel end-man here, while in the dialogues between Huck and Jim, Huck is acting as the Master of Ceremony, or the minstrel Interlocutor.[2] Befitting the minstrel tradition Jim is the comic end-man, who is characterized by his uneducated speech, he is inexperienced in the matters of life, and therefore can easily be cheated or tricked. In contrast to him, Huck attempts to speak in a more polished language, and at times we even have the feeling that he is showing off his knowledge. Still, as can also be witnessed in the minstrel dialogues, Jim, with his twisted logic, often gets the better of the "Interlocutor," i.e. Huck. Running short of counter-arguments the white boy has no choice but to retreat at the end of the verbal duel quoted above. As the end-man has the last words in the conversation, the "battle" is clearly decided in his favor.

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[2] In the conversations with others, however, like Miss Watson or the widow, Huck appears as the minstrel end-man (Berret 41).

Similarly to the minstrel show audiences, who depending on their class affiliations—the lower classes taking the part of the weaker characters—frequently changed loyalties, shifting from one to the other side in the respective debates, the reader's sympathies also tend to change. At times we feel for Jim, because we see that he is defenseless against Huck's pretentious intellectual superiority, and at other times we feel Huck's pseudo-scientific, yet, often self-contradictory and entangled arguments, providing a mixture of facts and details to be close to us. The same double-edged parody was also the source of the minstrel show's great popularity, where upper classes could freely laugh together with the Interlocutor (here impersonated by Huck) at the clumsiness of the Darkies, while the lower classes (especially the northern working class members of the audience) could delight themselves at their will at the expense of the occasional mistakes, or enforced rationalism of Mr. Interlocutor, who always failed in opposition to the resourceful folk wisdom of the Darkies.[3] As Berret puts it, "Like the best comic dialogues of the minstrel shows" the dialogues between Huck and Jim simultaneously parody and celebrate "a display of social superiority" (40). Thus Twain pillories the contradictory notions of his middle-class audience as well, who demanded "social equality and upward mobility" (Berret 40) under the same breath.[4]

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[3] It is very important that Huck is able to play the upper hand only with respect to Jim, whereas in his other relationships he is degraded to the level of the Darkies. This strikingly illustrates the contingency of social positions, as well as the fact that these social layers are by themselves meaningless without the support of true ethical contents.

[4] An additional note that should be included here is that while Twain was on a lecture tour of the country in 1882 in the company of George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and other established writers, he got the idea to give appearances in a minstrel style. At these occasions Twain played the end-man, and

Another favorite device of the minstrel overture besides the comic dialogues was the sentimental song cycle, which in the original minstrel shows served to introduce the stars of the company, who were later to return to the stage during the subsequent parts of the show. Although Berret cites the song of the Grangerford ladies, "The Last Link is Broken" to demonstrate the presence of sentimentalism in the novel, it can be added that the entire environment of the Grangerfords, the wall paintings, the poems of Emmeline, or the resigned reception of the unavoidability of the vendetta between the two families are also part of the same style. Moreover, the rhythmic separations and unions between Huck and Jim, probably capture the true emotional contents of sentimentalism more than any other element in the novel. A concrete example of the separation-union theme occurs when, in Chapter 15, Huck and Jim lose each other in the fog, and they shout to find one another through an entire day without any luck, only to be reunited finally and each overjoyed at the sight of the other. This section of the book is often cited, because it is in this scene that Huck suddenly becomes aware of Jim's deeply human emotions. When Huck attempts to fool Jim, stating that the latter only dreamt their separation, Jim is profoundly shattered, since Huck was the last person he thought would attempt to mock him so. Jim's humanity is probably at the highest peak at this point in the novel.[5]

In the section of the novel that matches the minstrel olio, there are a number of burlesque skits, parodies, and sensational happenings. This part is dominated by the stunts, pranks and solo numbers of the duke and the king, like the anecdotes of their noble origins, the stump sermon about temperance, the perfectly twisted Shakespeare monologue, or the Royal Nonesuch performance. In this variety

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Cable took the part of Mr. Interlocutor. It can thus be indirectly assumed that Twain felt closer to the Darky role, the traditionally lower class part, than to the pompous style of Mr. Interlocutor, who was usually despised by the masses. (Lott 134).

[5] Some critics claim that even in Chapter 15—and generally in the sections which narrate the unifications between Huck and Jim—Jim is unable to step out of the minstrel cliche. Woodward, for instance, argues that in these episodes Jim resembles a mammy stereotype, since his behavior is characterized by exaggerated feelings of caring and protectiveness (146).

section of the novel cliches referring to theatricality predominate, for instance, the Boggs and Sherburn duel in Chapter 21 seems perfectly choreographed, Jim is dressed up as King Lear not to be captured, moreover, in Chapter 22, Huck attends a real circus performance. Likewise, Huck's narrative on Henry VIII in Chapter 23 evokes the practice of minstrel stump speeches (applied as a central attraction of the minstrel olio), mixing up various historical facts, ages and personalities.

> "Ring Up Fair Rosamund." Fair Rosamund answers the bell. Next morning, "Chop off her head." And he made every one of them tell him a tale every night; and he kept that up till he had hogged a thousand and one tales that way, and then he put them all in a book, and called it Domesday Book—which was a good name and stated the case. [...] Well, Henry he takes a notion he wants to get up some trouble with this country. How does he go at it—give notice?—give the country a show? No. All of a sudden he heaves all the tea in Boston Harbor overload, and whacks out a declaration of independence, and dares them to come on. (169)

The underlying psychological tensions of blackface performance are strikingly evoked in this section as well. The most vivid example of this is the scene in which the duke dresses Jim up in King Lear's outfit, and paints his face in blue paint (chapter 24). Regarding Twain's image of blacks some critics draw the conclusion from this scene that here once again Jim plays the white man's clown, and triggers laughter from the audience by the humiliation of himself. It is more likely, however, that we gain an insider's look into the psychological process of the white blackface delineator here. The whole ritual is very much like a minstrel act in reverse, since this time it is the black man's face which is covered with paint, and the black paint of the minstrel stage is turned into a death mask. Yet, in Jim's blue face we recognize not the Negro's, but the blackface entertainer's deathly glance, who shatters the essence of his own identity behind the mask; his death being the curious resurrection of the black man. The spiritual torments of the masquerade are represented through Jim's prearranged mad outcries in the respective scene.

> Meanwhile Twain is talking both to and about his audiences. The snobbery of the masses is well illustrated by the fact that they automatically favor the upper classes as it is demonstrated in the

> plays staged by the duke and the king, or in the Wilks episode. By the time their doings are finally exposed, the two frauds have deceived the people who live along the Mississippi shore several times. Thus, while Twain follows the structural units apparently scripted by the minstrel show, he also exposes the larger culture, and those democratic ideals which are but empty poses. Interestingly, however, Jim's masquerade in blue and the episodes exposing snobbery reveal the same deeper social tension, identified by Twain as the curse of the entire American society: that is, the contradiction between democratic ideals and the actual social ideals realized.

The minstrel third part usually consisted of a short scene about the life of a Southern plantation, a one-act burlesque, or the parody of a well-known play. According to Berret, the third section of the novel from Chapter 32 to the end corresponds to the minstrel third part (44). Berret emphasizes the motifs of the peaceful, happy home, the undisturbed, quiet working days, and the cohesion within the family at the Phelps farm, as being characteristic minstrel cliches traditionally formulated by the average minstrel finale. As Berret claims, "[t]his scene contains all the elements that made the minstrel shows appealing to the urban and industrial audiences of the North [...]" (44), since their nostalgia towards the peace of country life gained free expression there. The true burlesque scene, however, comes when Huck and Tom persuade Jim to act out the escape from captivity. Many critics blamed Twain for the fact that after Jim's humanity gradually strengthened in the novel, it was most probably a mistake to annul this development with a single stroke of the pen. As the argument goes, in the scenes of the Phelps farm, Jim is once again the same naive, comical clown figure that he used to be at the very beginning of the story.

Since Twain wrote the novel through seven years, exactly between 1876 and 1883, some analysts suspected that the narrative reflected the changes that occurred during this period in the author's private life. More precisely, Twain's marriage to Olivia Langdon, and their moving to Hartford, Connecticut, might have been of serious consequence to the writer's thinking, especially because the relatives of the new wife, as well as her aristocratic circle of friends diverted Twain from his standard audiences, the lower and middle classes. In spite of this, it is not very likely that the concluding episodes and its burlesque Negro character fashioned after the minstrel tradition reflect the influence of the writer's new environment. It is altogether more believable that Twain intentionally takes his material through the structural stages of a minstrel show. If we read the novel in this fashion, the ending appears to be a confused parade of diverse motifs that correspond to the choreography of minstrel shows perfectly.

Twain thus seemingly adjusts his novel to the structure of the minstrel show. This, however, does not mean that he fails to draw upon other source materials in his narrative. In connection with *Huckleberry Finn* many critics identify, for instance, the presence of certain motifs from Afro-American folklore and oral tradition, and it was probably Shelley Fisher Fishkin who argued the case most persuasively.[6] The adaptation of the minstrel show frame in the novel, however, does not automatically lead to the distortion of Jim's personal character traits, for we cannot say that he is exclusively pictured as ridiculous, inferior, or having weaker intellectual faculties. Moreover, as can be seen from the examples above, Jim proves a worthy rival to Huck in their verbal duels, and he oftentimes turns the situations, originally meant to discredit him, to his own advantage. (In Chapter 2, for instance, Tom plays a trick on Jim, which is later turned by Jim into a great tale of having been bewitched, which he applies to evoke the appreciation and gain the esteem of the other blacks; power relations also visibly shift in the episodes of the fog.)

Huck Finn's minstrel ritual does not result in the stereotyped representation of blacks, although there were many critics who argued so (among them Guy Cardwell, Fredrick Woodard, Donnarae MacCann, etc.). I am inclined to share David L. Smith's views, who affirmed that Twain focuses on "a number of commonplaces associated with 'the Negro' and then systematically dramatizes their inadequacy" (qtd. in Fishkin 81). After all, the burlesque-like closing episodes spell out the bitter conclusion that the years after the Reconstruction merely brought about the parody of the hopes for freedom for former slaves (Fishkin 74). The relationship between Twain and the minstrel tradition is much more complex than that of any of his contemporaries. The writer in part indicates that given within this tradition is the possibility of freezing the black image into a cliche, but also the subversion of minstrel stereotypes. The consistent maintenance of the minstrel frame, and the presence of the motifs of black folklore therein, the social critique exercised within the adapted minstrel ritual, all prove that Twain identified the minstrel tradition as a mixed (white as well as black; upper as well as lower class; inter-racial), as well as radical (abolitionist) tradition. It is an entirely different matter, however, that by the 1880s, the time of the publication of the novel, out of the inner tensions and ambivalences which governed the shows, primarily not the liberating forces had proved viable with respect to blacks but rather the harmful stereotypes. This is why Ralph Ellison in his analysis of the novel could state: "Twain fitted Jim into the outlines of the minstrel tradition, and it is from behind this stereotype mask that we see Jim's dignity and human capacity—and Twain's complexity—emerge" (60).

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[6] Fishkin goes so far in the examination of African American traits in the novel as to state that even Huck's figure contains certain black influences. In Fishkin's reasoning Twain created Huck from the mixture of the personal traits of "a black child named Jimmy, a black teenager named Jerry, and a white child named Tom Blankenship" which, as the critic claimed, "involved a measure of racial alchemy unparalleled in American letters" (80).

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