



Mark Twain Circular

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In Praise of “Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn” by Ralph Wiley

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I write these comments on an unpublished (and perhaps never-to-be-published) script for an unproduced (and perhaps never-to-be-produced) film because (1) Wiley’s script strikes me as criticism in a genuinely new and innovative form—an interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* which deserves to enter the critical conversation around it, and (2) scenes from this script have transformed what happens in my classroom.

Published at *The Citadel*

Ralph Wiley has generously given me permission to publish three key scenes from his script in this article. Some of you may choose to test this material in your classes. If you do, both he and I would enjoy hearing about the response. We may be emailed at sfishkin@mail.utexas.edu and Ralphwiley@aol.com.

A bit of background.

In the summer of 1997, I received a letter out of the blue from Ralph Wiley, whom I had read but never met. I knew him as a mordant, hard-hitting black social critic and satirist based in Washington, D.C., author of *Dark Witness: When Black People Should Be Sacrificed (Again)*. Wiley had just

read *Lighting Out for the Territory* and wrote me because he felt we were kindred spirits. He was right. As he would put it in the correspondence that continued for months before we met, we both started out from very different points but ended up in much the same place. Wiley was not yet on e-mail then, so it was an old-fashioned snail-mail epistolary friendship that developed. We wrote each other about writing, about racism, about Mark Twain, about each other’s work. He read my earlier books and articles and I read his: *Serenity*, *Why Black People Tend to Shout: Cold Facts and Wry Views from a Black Man’s World*, *What Black People Should Do Now: Dispatches from Near the Vanguard*, and *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of The Making of Malcolm X* (the latter co-authored with Spike Lee.) We got to know each other and trust each other through our letters. When he heard I was coming to Washington for the ASA conven-

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Photo Credit: Michael Britto



Ralph Wiley

tion that fall, we agreed to meet. He had something he wanted to show me.

In the lobby of the convention hotel Wiley pulled out a screenplay. Its title was "Spike Lee's Huckleberry Finn." My heart sank. There had never been a good *Huckleberry Finn* film, and I suspected that there never could be. I knew I would hate the script. Too bad, I thought. This was a guaranteed way to ruin a friendship. He left it with me to read overnight. Tired from traveling and the hubbub of the convention, and glum about the prospects of being able to find anything positive or encouraging to say the next morning, I stole into a corner and began to read. Soon my trepidation faded to excitement. Wiley's script managed to translate the complexity of Twain's vision to the screen.

I had long believed that part of Twain's genius in this book is letting the reader see things that Huck doesn't see—making Huck an endearing and engaging but ultimately unreliable narrator. In Wiley's script, the juxtaposition of the visual message the viewer gets, on the one hand, and the comically limited version of that reality that Huck (the narrator) communicates, on the other, captured that dramatic irony.

Wiley had worked closely with Spike Lee on several projects, the most recent of which was the basketball memoir, *Best Seat in the House*, which he co-authored (and which served as the basis of the film "He Got Game"), and had written several screenplays before this one. He had been trying for close to a year to persuade Lee to consider making this film. He had given him copies of *Huck Finn*, and of *Lighting Out for the*

Territory (marked up and annotated). He had also given the same to Denzel Washington, then shooting "He Got Game," hoping to interest him in the project, as well. Wiley had begun the screenplay, in fact, when Denzel Washington had asked him "to write a script about slavery because some folks try to act like it never happened." Wiley "went through several possible subjects, hoping to encapsulate the absurdity, the great cosmic joke of slavery, and also have it be a vehicle for Mr. Washington," but everything he came up with fell short of his expectations. Until he turned to *Huck Finn* (a book he rereads every year). "I wasn't 20 pages in before I was saying to myself, 'My God.' For in breaking it down line by line in order to make it visual, the book was translating itself before my very eyes." Why did Wiley write this screenplay? The short answer is, "Because I had to." "I knew I had to do it, no matter what the consequences," Wiley says. "And I still think it might have been the greatest 3 to 6 months of my life, creatively, to have a chance, posthumously or not, to collaborate with this great writer."

At Wiley's request I sent Spike Lee a letter telling him what I thought of the script. A few weeks later, the three of us had a stimulating two-hour meeting about the project. Wiley and I were disappointed to learn several months later that Lee decided to make "Summer of Sam" next instead of "Spike Lee's Huckleberry Finn." But we were pleased that he had still not ruled out the possibility of making the film. The project, then, two years after that meeting, is in that curious no-man's land called "under consideration."

For a year after that meeting, neither Wiley nor I

Mark Twain Circle of America Sessions at the MLA in Chicago

Session #61: MARK TWAIN AND DIFFERENCE*

Monday, December 27th; 5:15-6:30 p.m., Columbian Room, Hyatt Regency Hotel

Chair: Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Univ. of Texas, Austin

Papers:

1. "You Could Hear Him in Illinois': Deafness, Laughter and Mark Twain," Christopher Krentz, Univ. of Virginia
2. "Concerning the Jews at One Hundred," Eliza Russi Lowen McGraw, Vanderbilt Univ.
3. "Following the Equator: Twain's Redescription of Civilization," Bong Eun Kim, Koisin Univ., Korea
4. "Understanding Mark Twain's Female Adolescents Through the Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir," Carla Anderson, Michigan State Univ.

**A sign language interpreter is scheduled for this session.*

Session #338. NEW DIRECTIONS IN MARK TWAIN STUDIES

Tuesday, December 28th 3:30-4:45 p.m., Atlanta Room, Hyatt Regency Hotel

Chair: Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, Coe Coll.

Papers:

1. "Mutual Influences: Mark Twain's and C.D. Warner's Views of Children in Their Early Work," Ryuichi Asayama, Soka Univ., Japan
2. "Back to the Future: Twain, Bellamy, and the Techno-utopian Impulse," Joel Dinerstein, Univ. of Texas, Austin
3. "The 'Circus Side' of Twain's 'Object Lesson in Democracy': A *Connecticut Yankee* and the Economy of Apocalyptic Spectacle," Charles Martin, Florida State Univ.
4. "Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* and the Influence of Slave Narratives," James O. Brecher, Univ. of South Florida

[61, 61A] From "Spike Lee's *Huckleberry Finn*" by Ralph Wiley

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61. EXT. RIVER RAFT. NIGHT. -- *Jim is "sitting there with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering oar. The other oar was smashed off. The raft was littered with leaves and branches and dirt. So she'd had a rough time." Huck paddles up silently, quietly, makes the canoe fast, boards the raft, lies down under Jim's nose, "and begun to gap, and stretched my fists out against Jim and says:"*

HUCK

Hello, Jim, have I been asleep? Why didn't you stir me up?

JIM

Huck? En you ain' dead—you ain' drowned? Lemme look at you, lemme see...

Jim touches Huck's shoulders and arms. Near tears with relief.

JIM

...no, you'se back, d'same ole Huck...thanks to goodness.

HUCK

What's the matter with you, Jim. You been a-drinking?

JIM

...Has I had a chance to be drinkin'?

HUCK

Well then, what makes you talk so wild?

JIM

How does I talk wild?

HUCK

How? Talkin' about me coming back and all that stuff, as if I'd been gone away?

JIM

Huck. Huck Finn. You look me in d'eye; *look me in d'eye;* Ain't you been gone away?

HUCK

Gone away? I hain't been gone anywheres. Where would I go to?

Jim pauses for a few seconds; decides to string along, affects a slightly stronger dialect.

JIM

Well...looky here, boss, dey's sumf'n wrong, dey is. Is I me, or who is I? Is I heah, or whah is I?

HUCK

Well, you're here plain enough, but I think you're a tangle-headed old fool, Jim.

JIM

(unamused) I is, is I? Didn't you tote out d'line in d'canoe fer to make fast to d'tow-head?

HUCK

Tow-head? What tow-head? I hain't seen no tow-head.

JIM

Didn' d' line pull loose, en de raf' go hummin' down d' river, en leave you en d'canoe behind in d'fog?

HUCK

What fog?

JIM

De fog. En didn' you whoop, en didn't I whoop? En didn' I bus' up agin a lot er dem islands en have a turrible time en mos' get drowned? Ain't dat so—boss?

HUCK

It's too many for me, Jim. I hain't seen no fog, nor no islands, nor no troubles, nor nothing. *You been dreaming.*

Jim "didn't say nothing for about five minutes, but he set there studying it over. Then he says:"

JIM

...Well, den...reck'n I *did* dream it, Huck...never had no dream b'fo' dat's tired me like dis one.

HUCK

That's all right, because a dream does tire a body like everything, sometimes. Tell me about it, Jim, about your dream.

Jim purses his lips, knits his brow, then eases his features and speaks:

JIM

What do dey stan' for? I's gon' tell you...When I got all wore out wid work, en wid callin' for you, my heart was most broke because you was los' en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en d'raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun'...en all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. (*points to detritus on the raft, speaks calmly, clearly*).**Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.**

Jim slowly rises and enters the wigwam. Huck watches him, then looks out over the river, as if he is too proud to care. But then, he looks down.

61a. INT. WIGWAM. NIGHT. -- *Jim sits, pensively. It seems Huck is no different from the "witches and devils" that have ridden him in his days of bondage. Huck enters wigwam. Jim recoils, but holds it in. Huck gets on his haunches, looks at Jim, looks down. Looks up.*

HUCK

Jim, I...(*inhales, exhales deeply*) I'm sorry, Jim.

And with that, a crack in Jim's soul is patched. Huck looks down again as Jim regards him with slightly knitted brows. His face softens. He reaches out with the flat palm of his hand—hesitates, then rubs the boy's bowed head. Huck looks up, so thankfully, his eyes shining wet.

referred to the screenplay in public. But this past year, Wiley has spoken about the project in public, and gave me permission to do the same. I write about it here because whether or not the film eventually gets made (by Spike Lee or perhaps by someone else) the script is an intriguing creative intervention into the debates about this novel that can enliven and enrich what goes on in our classrooms. I was pleased when he said I could share a few scenes from the script with my Twain class, and was delighted when he liked the idea of my circulating them to a broader group of teachers and scholars.

In Wiley's script, Jim shrewdly and consciously dons the minstrel mask as a strategic performance, playing a minstrel role when that is what a white person expects him to do. But it is a role, and that is key: he plays it out of self-interest. Wiley's Jim is smart, sensitive, savvy, self-aware, politically astute, generous, and stunningly altruistic, a compelling and intelligent father, and a slave seeking his freedom in a racist world determined to keep him enslaved. Because he sticks to Twain's text so closely, Wiley maintains that his view of Jim is Twain's, too. The fact that Huck has a more limited view of Jim should not lead us to mistake that view for the author's.

This view of Jim resonates with the views of a number of revisionist critics, myself included. The first critic to make a full-blown case for the idea that Jim manifests both agency and intelligence was David Lionel Smith in his groundbreaking essay, "Huck, Jim and American Racial Discourse" (1984). James Cox gestured in this direction in his essay "A Hard Book to Take" (1985) when he referred to "the role Jim plays, or is forced to play." That view was enriched by Forrest Robinson's important essay, "The Characterization of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*" (1988). I extended those arguments in Part III ("Jim") of *Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African American Voices* (1993). Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua further explored these issues in a book-length study, *The Jim Dilemma* (1998). And Emory Eliot eloquently developed this perspective in his 1999 introduction to the Oxford World Classics edition of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The argument is also made by David Bradley and Jim Miller in the WGBH film scheduled to air in January 2000 on PBS, "Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." In the film, for example, Bradley asserts that, "To me Jim has always been the hero of *Huckleberry Finn*." And Jim Miller maintains that "what Twain is doing is peeling away the minstrel mask and showing us the complex humanity behind the posture that Jim has adopted." All of these comments echo those of Sterling Brown in 1937. Readers interested in the critical underpinnings of Jim's characterization in

You are cordially invited...

The Mark Twain Circle cordially invites you to join us for wine, cheese, and Twain talk from 5:15-7:15 on Tuesday December 28th at the historic Palmer House Hotel in Chicago during the Modern Language Association convention. Our special guest will be Professor Marta L. Werner, Project Manager of the *Huckleberry Finn* CD-ROM project, who will bring us up to date on the current state of the *Huck Finn* CD-ROM, and who is eager to hear your thoughts on what else might be included

The Palmer House Hilton is located at 17 E. Monroe, seven blocks from the Hyatt Regency, the main convention hotel. (Unfortunately, this was where the MLA stuck us; but it will be worth the trek). Please pass the word among fellow Twainiacs in the Chicago area (it is not necessary to be registered for the convention—just come). We will not know the room number of the Mark Twain Suite (which is shared with the American Humor Studies Association) until the convention begins, but when you arrive at the Palmer House, ask the concierge for the room number or call Shelley Fishkin (MTCA) or David E.E. Sloane (AHSa) on the house phone and you will be connected with the Suite and given the room number. The phone number for Palmer House is 312-726-7500.

MARK THE DATE: DECEMBER 28th, 5:15-7:15

"Spike Lee's *Huckleberry Finn*" may consult these works (as well as R. Zalisk's forthcoming article on the WGBH film in *Humanities* and my forthcoming article on "New Perspectives on 'Jim' in the 1990s" in the *Mark Twain Review*).

While the earliest film versions of the book (reflecting Hollywood's insensitivity to racial stereotypes) reduced Twain's complex characters to minstrel-show stereotypes, the most recent version (Disney's) eviscerated Twain's story by making it hopelessly "nice"—eliminating racist epithets, not showing white racists as they are, cleaning up Jim's dialect, adding stuff Twain never put in, mangling Twain's plot. Wiley's script does none of the above.

As Ralph Ellison wrote in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," "Writing at a time when the blackfaced minstrel was still popular, and shortly after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro, 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." Critics have often focused on the first half of this statement, while ignoring the second, forgetting that Ellison refers to minstrelsy as a "mask" – and that he recognizes Jim's dignity and human capacity as emerging "from behind" this mask. As Eric Lott

[7, 7A, 8, 9] From *“Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn”* by Ralph Wiley

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7. EXT. WIDOW DOUGLAS HOME. REAR. NIGHT. —Huck scrambles out of the window onto the roof of attached shed. He jumps down and crawls back among the trees and underbrush behind the house and there is Tom, grinning. They tiptoe along a path among the trees. Passing the back of the corral, where Jim sits, using an awl on what appears to be a doll’s head. Huck steps on a dry branch and it snaps. At this sound, Jim surreptitiously puts away the doll-object and picks up a rack of tallow candles; his head comes up as he begins to snap them off.

JIM

Who dah?

The boys bend over, stock-still, grimacing, then hide behind separate trees. We can see that Jim catches a glimpse of them. Jim walks back into the foliage with two candles, and stops in a space between the two trees. Only a fool would not have seen the boys. So Jim pretends to be one.

JIM

Say—who is you? Whar is you? Well, I knows what I’s gon’ do. I’s gon’ set down heah...ahh!...and listen till I hears it agin.

Jim sits down on a natural seat under the tree. Huck is on the other side. Huck shuts his eyes tight. Jim settles into a comfortable position, puts his hat on the ground and sighs contentedly.

7a. EXT. MOON SHOT. SILVERY RIVER. NIGHT.

8. EXT. TREES. NIGHT. — Huck hears heavy breathing from the other side, begins to peer around the tree. We see Jim, eyes slitted open, obviously awake, feigning sleep, as he continues to make the sound of a man deep in slumber. Tom Sawyer’s cap begins to emerge from the other side of the opposite tree. Jim’s eyes close effortlessly. Tom makes a sign to Huck; he and Huck creep away on their hands and knees in opposite directions away from the trees.

9. EXT. MEDIUM SHOT. JIM UNDER TREE. NIGHT. —Through the foliage we can see Jim. Huck and Tom’s profiles enter from opposite sides of the shot, close-up. They look at each other, then back at Jim, then back to each other.

TOM

Let’s tie him to the tree.

HUCK

No, let’s don’t. S’pose he wakes up? It’s my bust, not yourn.

TOM

Go on ahead. I’ll happen to borrow some ‘a them candles from Jim.

Huck slips off.

NARRATOR

Nothing would do Tom but he must crawl to where Jim was, and play something on him. Tom didn’t borry the candles, he left Jim a nickel for them...he also slipped Jim’s hat on a limb.

Tom creeps up to Jim and picks up the candles and leaves a nickel, turns to go, but is unable to resist a trick. He picks up Jim’s hat and places it on the limb of a tree, and then, with a look of glee, races off to catch Huck. As he goes, Jim smiles and opens his eyes, looks down and smiles at the nickel even more affectionately. He palms the nickel; then calmly looks up and takes his hat off the limb of the tree, puts it on his head, and walks away, all action as Narrator says...

NARRATOR

Afterwards, Jim said witches bewitched him, put him in a trance and rode him all over the State, and then set him under the tree again and hung his hat on a limb to show who done it. Next time Jim told it, he said they rode him down to New Or-leans. Next time it was all the way ‘round the world. ~~Strange niggers came from miles away to hear~~ Jim talk about it. Jim, he was most ruined for a servant, he got so stuck up, on account of having seen the Devil...

10. EXT. HILLSIDE. NIGHT. — Seven boys, including Huck and Tom, run along the hillside, in the moonlight. Tom stops and ~~howls like a wolf at the silvery moon.~~

NARRATOR

...and been rode by witches.

[from 130] From *“Spike Lee’s Huckleberry Finn”* by Ralph Wiley

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130. INT. PHELPS HOUSE. PARLOR. —Huck is sitting in a split-bottom chair, looking around. Aunt Sally sits on a little low stool in front of him, and takes him by both of his hands.

AUNT SALLY

Let’s have a good look at you. What’s kep’ you? —boat get aground?

HUCK

Yes’m—she—

AUNT SALLY

Don’t say yes’m—say Aunt Sally. Where’d she get aground?

NARRATOR

I didn’t rightly know what to say, because I didn’t know whether the boat she was talking about would be coming up river or down.

HUCK

...it warn’t the grounding—that didn’t keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head.

AUNT SALLY

Good gracious! Anybody hurt?

HUCK

No’m...

has observed, "Jim's triumphs and Twain's ironies have to be as elaborately deciphered as Huck's future through Jim's hair ball..." Wiley's script provides a fascinating new episode in this "deciphering" process.

A number of critics (such as Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann) charge Twain himself with seeing Jim as a minstrel stereotype, eliding the fact that it is Huck's version of events, rather than the author's, that is being depicted. By scrupulous attention to what is on the page, in the text, and hidden in plain view for all to see, however, Ralph Wiley blasts through this argument.

Take the famous scene on the raft after the fog. When I told Wiley that his interpretation of what's going on is fresh, he was incredulous. He can't believe that critics generally assume that Jim is confused by Huck's insistence that the fog was really a dream. For Jim to be taken in by Huck's lie, Wiley maintains, he would have to be blind: physical signs of what the raft's been through are all around him. He would also have to be undergoing an out-of-body experience, for his arm is around what would have been an oar had it not been smashed and destroyed in the fog. Jim must be physically exhausted, Wiley maintains, and is completely aware of what has happened. The "full five minutes" that he is silent after Huck tells him that it is all a dream is not due to his stupefaction or bewilderment, Wiley argues. It is due to his

genuine doubt about what to do about this white boy he's been teaching, training, loving, raising, from whom he expected more. It is due to his disappointment at realizing that this white boy is just as bad as the rest—that he's learned nothing. It is due to his resignation in the face of hardness where he expected sensitivity, selfishness where he expected empathy. Wiley can hardly believe me when I tell him that critics have taken Jim's response at face value, faulting him (faulting Twain) for the minstrel-like nature of it. Because for Wiley any minstrelsy that is present is clearly "put on" for the occasion. And in his script, Jim accentuates the dialect, deepens it, emphasizes the performed nature of it. It is almost as if he says to himself, "OK, Huck. You want stupid darcy? You get stupid darcy! You get stupid darcy until it bores you out of your mind. And when you're finally tired of stupid darcy you get the truth." The truth Jim tells Huck—that he's behaved like trash—is a harsh one. And a bold one for a slave to tell a white person. That much the critics have grasped. But what they have not grasped, and what Wiley forces them to consider, is that Jim may be in charge of his performance at every step of the way.

Was this conscious on Twain's part? I won't go there. I can't go there. Neither can Wiley. That's beyond our ken. We don't need to go there. A critic can make a

Twain on PBS: "Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn"

CULTURE SHOCK, a four-part documentary series airing on PBS this winter, tells the stories of classic works of art—in literature, music, film, and painting—that have been controversial and explores their present-day relevance. Each program examines the cultural conditions, past and present, that lead artists to create and audiences to react. CULTURE SHOCK takes viewers into the heart of the debate about the role of the arts in society and explores the power of new forms of art to enthral and also challenge. The first film in the series focuses on *Huckleberry Finn*.

"Born to Trouble: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," a ninety-minute film produced by WGBH, will premiere on PBS on Wednesday, January 26, 2000 at 9 P.M. (check local listings). The documentary explores conflicts surrounding the book and the American social and political climate that shaped them. It includes comments from scholars, students, teachers and parents, and explores why the book continues to spark such passionate debate. The film is produced by Jill Janows, who also serves as the executive producer for the "Culture Shock" series. The writers are Jill Janows and Leslie Lee. Courtney B. Vance narrates.

[The January/February 2000 issue of *Humanities* will feature an article on "Born to Trouble" by Robert Zalik.]

Educational Outreach

To accompany the series, WGBH Educational Print & Outreach has developed a CULTURE SHOCK teacher's guide, a "Huck Finn" teaching guide, and a "Huck Finn" coursepack.

Teachers can obtain their free copies of one or both teacher's guides by writing to WGBH, Educational Print and Outreach, 125 Western Avenue, Boston, MA 02134 (please include grades and subjects taught). The CULTURE SHOCK Teacher's Guide is a free, forty-page guide providing discussion questions, activities, curriculum links, and resources for all four CULTURE SHOCK films. The "Huck Finn" teaching guide, "Huck Finn in Context: A Teaching Guide" explores the controversy surrounding the book, then and now, and provides a comprehensive curriculum that places the book within its historical, literary, and cultural contexts.

"Huck Finn" coursepacks include the "Huck Finn" teaching guide, the "Born to Trouble" video, and a copy of all companion readings cleared for classroom use. It can be ordered for \$8.75 plus \$4.75 for shipping and handling (total: \$13.50) by calling PBS Video at 1-800-344-3337. Please reference special item # HFIN111 "Huck Finn Coursepack."

case for an interpretation of a work of art without claiming that the artist had it consciously in mind from the start. But is this interpretation plausible given what's in the text? Absolutely. In fact, I have grave difficulty reading it any other way now. What it boils down to is: how much agency do we ascribe to Jim?

I often think of the optical illusion that appears to be two profiles if you look at it one way, and a wine glass if you look at it another way. That is one way of entertaining this new view of Jim without totally rejecting the old one. But as I think about this scene, the new interpretation edges the old one out insistently. I simply find Wiley's reading of it more compelling than all the others I have encountered.

How else can you view Jim?, Wiley asks me. When is he *not* a mature adult manipulating his environment, within grave constraints, to the best of his abilities to his own ends? I repeat the charge that critics have made: he seems to act like child, or a minstrel stereotype so often. Wiley is mystified by the confusion: "So what?" It's *always put on*, it's always a pose, he maintains. It's what Jim thinks people expect of him.

A similar logic informs Wiley's perspective on Huck's behavior at the Phelps Farm in what may well be the most famous exchange in the novel. Huck, he reminds us, has one thing on his mind: finding Jim, and freeing him. In Wiley's version of this scene, Huck enters into a conversation with Aunt Sally in part to gauge her feelings, to test her, to see whether she might by any remote possibility be an ally. He is disappointed by what he finds. I leave it to readers to gauge their own reactions. Suffice it to say that his interpretation of this scene is challenging, provocative, and

worth our serious consideration.

What particularly intrigues me is the extent to which Wiley's interpretations of these scenes are rooted in the text. Take scene #7, for example. Wiley offered this explication of it in a session at the 1999 American Literature Association convention in Baltimore:

In Chapter Two, Twain introduces us to Jim by having Tom Sawyer and Huck tiptoeing around him in the dark. Huck: "When we was passing by the kitchen I fell over a root and made a noise." Jim "was setting in the kitchen door; we could see him pretty clear...he got up...Then he says, "Who dah?... Say, who is you? Whar is you? I know what I's gwyne to do. I's gwyne to set down here and listen tell I hears it agin." Now who is Jim talking to? Himself? I don't think so. He's talking to the boys. Sure he saw them. Of course. How could a grown man not see these boys out here making all this noise? And Twain means for us to know Jim saw them. How? "I fell over a root and made a noise." So obviously Jim knows. Huck just doesn't know Jim knows. Then, Jim feigns sleep.....

In conversation, Wiley has observed that Jim would have to be a complete idiot to talk out loud about what he's hearing if, indeed, he had any uncertainty whatsoever about what—and who—he'd just heard; he would be silent. How refreshing—and how plausible—to read this scene as an adult humoring children intent on fooling him. It makes sense. (It is a performance with which any parent can identify). Wiley's scene elaborates on David Smith's brilliant reinterpretation of the ways in which Jim accrues rhetorical power to himself in the aftermath of this trick (turning the trick into cultural capital as well as a cover story to explain how he got that nickel.) The issue—as it

Calls for Papers — Mark Twain Circle

[Note new deadlines]

American Literature Association 2000 May 25–28, 2000, Long Beach, CA

1. Panel topic: Mark Twain on Race, Ethnicity, and Class. Send proposals to Joseph B. McCullough [joemcc@nevada.edu].
2. Panel topic: Mark Twain and Native Americans. Send proposals to Lauren Muller [lsmuller@uclink4.berkeley.edu].
3. Informal roundtable topic: Why I Work on Mark Twain. Send summary paragraphs to John Bird [birdj@access1.net].

DEADLINE FOR ALA PAPERS/PROPOSALS IS JANUARY 5, 2000

Modern Language Association 2000 December 27–30, Washington DC

1. Open panel topic: any aspect of Mark Twain's work/life.
2. Panel topic: "Mark Twain's Literary Daughters" Con any women writers who were influenced by Twain or whose fiction is implicitly or explicitly in conversation with Twain.

Send proposals (both sessions) to Shelley Fisher Fishkin [sfishkin@mail.utexas.edu].

DEADLINE FOR MLA PAPERS/PROPOSALS IS FEBRUARY 1, 2000

was in Smith's pioneering reinterpretation of what was really going on here—is one of agency. Is Jim a sentient, conscious, strategic actor? Someone aware of how to accrue power to himself? How to manipulate his environment? Wiley's answer is a resounding "yes."

As David Smith observes in his essay "Black Critics and Mark Twain," "Many African-American critics, for whatever reason, have been disinclined, or perhaps unable, to extend their appreciation of irony into their encounters with racist stereotypes. This constitutes a significant disadvantage in addressing the work of an ironist like Mark Twain." Perhaps Ralph Wiley can appreciate Twain's irony so deeply because he is such an accomplished ironist in his own right.

On October 26, 1999, I invited students in my Plan II Honors junior seminar on "Mark Twain and American Culture" to enact a dramatic reading of two of these scenes in class (They read [7, 7a, 8, 9] and [61, 61a]). Matt King played Jim, Bill Baird played Tom, Margaret Boren played Huck, Chris Glazner read Huck's voice-over narration, and Andy Crouch read the stage directions. The students stepped out of the classroom for ten minutes to rehearse. Then they came back into the classroom, pushed tables out of the way to make room for a makeshift performance space, and performed the scenes, after which a discussion ensued. I asked them to record some of their responses to these scenes before our next class meeting. Here's a sample of their comments:

Margaret, who found the process "eye-opening," "thought the scenes were really useful to

discuss and fun to perform, particularly after first having read and interpreted the novel in my own way."

Nathan wrote that watching the scenes was "a good exercise for understanding that the book is from a very limited point of view—Huck's," while Mark wrote that "it's easy to lose track of the separations between Huck as the narrator and Twain as the author, but these exercises help readers maintain it." Kristin observed that "this version of the scenes gives Jim an awareness that puts him on a mental level above Huck. The implications of this switch are far reaching." How many other occasions are there, she asks, "that Huck is not aware of (and by extension we are not aware of) [when Jim is] seeing more deeply than we realize and merely playing a role for Huck's sake?"

Paul wrote that at first he "was unimpressed by the new interpretation of Jim. I thought that the screenwriter had selectively ignored contradictory information concerning Jim's intelligence in order to fulfill the writer's own PC agenda. In hindsight, however, I have decided that the screenplay works, but requires a truly dramatic reinterpretation of Jim. Not only must we approach his character as one who is not stupid, but as perhaps the sharpest character in the book (i.e., he is smarter than the other characters, and additionally wily enough to play dumb in order to manipulate white people's prejudices to his own advantage)."

For Chris the screenplay underlined the impact that "different assumptions make on the way you view anything. It made me stop and re-evaluate how I view pretty much everything." Mark Twain would have liked that, I think. For getting us to "re-evaluate how [we] view pretty much everything" was his lifelong project as a writer.

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Dates to Circle

December 27-30, 1999. Modern Language Association; Chicago, IL. See "Mark Twain Circle of America Sessions at the MLA in Chicago" (p. 2) and "You are cordially invited..." (p. 4).

January 26, 2000. Twain on PBS: "Born to Trouble: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." 90 minutes. See article on p. 6.

May 25-28, 2000. American Literature Association; Long Beach, CA. See "Calls for Papers," p. 7.

December 27-30, 2000. Modern Language Association; Washington, DC. See "Calls for Papers," p. 7.

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ABOUT THE CIRCLE. The Mark Twain Circle of America was formed at an organizational meeting held at the 1986 Modern Language Association convention in New York; the membership has since grown to approximately 350. Current officers are displayed on p. 8. Past Presidents are Louis J. Budd, Alan Gribben, Pascal Covici, Jr., David E.E. Sloane, Victor A. Doyno, and Michael J. Kiskis. Past Executive Coordinators: Everett Emerson, James D. Wilson, Michael J. Kiskis, Laura Skandera-Trombley, and Joseph A. Alvarez. Although many members are academic specialists, the Circle also includes many non-academic Twain enthusiasts. The Circle is in communication with other Mark Twain organizations, including those associated with sites important in his life, and cooperates with them.



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