

“Twain’s Last Laugh”

In *Mark Twain and Philosophy*, edited by Alan H. Goldman, 52-64. Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2017.

I. Introduction

Novels naturally invite their readers to identify with their protagonists, and this invitation is especially compelling when the novel is narrated in the first person. Nabokov’s *Lolita* or Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground*, for example, are so challenging and controversial because they draw the reader to identify with someone whom the reader simultaneously finds to be loathsome and morally reprehensible. Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in contrast, has no doubt earned the honorific title of The Great American Novel in part because a certain kind of American reader identifies so readily and so warmly with the novel’s youthful protagonist and narrator, Huck.

What is it to “identify” with someone? It is to see oneself in the other person *and to see the other person in oneself* in a way that is a condition for the possibility of empathy. This idea of identification is adapted from the philosopher Arne Naess, who argued that “with sufficient comprehensive maturity, we cannot help but identify ourselves with all living things, beautiful or ugly, big or small, sentient or not.”¹ To support this radical claim, Naess tells a story about coming to identify with a creature very far removed indeed from the human form of life:

I was looking through an old-fashioned microscope at the dramatic meeting of two drops of different chemicals. At that moment, a flea jumped from a lemming that was strolling along the table. The insect landed in the middle of the acid chemicals. To save it was impossible. It took minutes for the flea to die. The tiny being’s movements were dreadfully expressive. Naturally, I felt a painful sense of compassion and empathy. But the empathy was *not* basic. Rather, it was a process of identification: I saw myself in the flea.²

We need not agree with Naess that true identification is possible even across the exo-endoskeletal divide, in order to believe that great works of literature *do* provide us with precisely the sort of experiences that make identification possible.³ To the extent that a reader identifies with a novel’s protagonist, the hero’s successes become the reader’s successes, his pains are her pains; his redemption (or lack thereof) becomes her own. But even though identification makes empathy possible, it does not always involve *sympathy*, or positive regard. We can identify with *Lolita*’s Humbert Humbert even while we find him horrifying. That is why in reading *Lolita* we are so discomfited by the ugly and disturbing qualities of the novel’s protagonist. We are upset to see ourselves in this human flea; but in the process of identifying with him we are forced to a different, more complicated, hopefully more honest view both of our own humanity, and that of a hopeless pedophile. Identification, then, amount to this: one sees oneself (even) in the flea.

I am going to assume for the purposes of this essay that Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* with a White, American, literate audience in mind. It is readers like this – readers like myself – to whom the novel issues its compelling invitation to identify with Huck. And its remarkable success with this audience makes the novel what it is, and gives it its place in American culture and history. And here, unlike with Humbert Humbert, the identification is welcome. Although of

course there are individual exceptions, by and large Huck strikes the novel's target audience as appealingly innocent and naïve, and utterly unpretentious; and though he is far from perfect he is generally kind and well-intentioned. He is remarkably persistent in the face of real trouble, and he triumphs over adversity when, at the novel's close, he is freed from Pap and, with his help, his beloved friend Jim is freed from slavery.

Above all, to the novel's target audience Huck personifies a critical moral struggle – and the eventual moral redemption – of the America both of his time, and of ours: namely, the struggle to overcome anti-Black racism and the poisonous legacy of American slavery. Thanks to his friendship with Jim, Huck seems gradually (if inarticulately) to overcome his socially inculcated racism, eventually coming to love Jim and learning to prioritize Jim's wellbeing. In the novel's climactic moment, Huck declares his willingness to “go to hell” rather than send Jim back into slavery, finally defying unequivocally the corrupt moral code of his society.⁴

To the target audience, this uplifting reading of Huck's moral progress represents and makes plausible a correspondingly hopeful and comforting narrative about American society at large. Like Huck's racism, American anti-Black racism is largely based in ignorance and is therefore largely inadvertent or innocent. And like Huck's racism, which cannot withstand Huck's relationship with Jim, American racism cannot withstand being confronted with the simple fact of the humanity of Black people. It will therefore inevitably be transcended in the course of American history, in a series of dramatic steps towards greater integrity (the Civil War, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights Movement, potentially the Black Lives Matter movement, etc.). In the process of identifying with Huck, the target reader thus finds reason to believe that “we” – Americans, America – are not to blame for missteps in our past; nor are we a lost cause when it comes to our future. The reader is glad to identify with this young hero; he elicits both sympathy and empathy.

II. Reading Huck Developmentally

Although it is still the dominant reading of the novel, this pat inspirational reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, and of Huck's character in particular, can be challenged in a number of ways. For instance, the triumphalist, optimistic parallel between Huck and American society presupposes that *America is White*, or that (archetypal) Americans are White. This supposition is quite hard to reconcile with the rosy vision of a colorblind America that has no further stake in White supremacy. It is also difficult to maintain the same cheerful view of Huck's moral progress if one attends realistically to the novel's depiction of its only major Black character, Jim. For as DonnaRae McCann and Fredrick Woodard have argued, in many ways (though not always), Jim instantiates a familiar, 19th-century racist caricature of an implausibly cheerful and willingly servile Black person.⁵ And even if the reader sees through this mask to some extent, Huck himself certainly does not. For this reason it can hardly be said that in Jim, Huck is confronted with a faithful, realistic, and entirely inoffensive portrait of Black humanity that teaches him to see Black people for the full equal persons that they really are. Finally, although Huck does come to love Jim, a more sophisticated conception of what racism is like shows that his affection for Jim is fully compatible with continued, and even strengthened racism on Huck's part. As Peaches Henry puts it, “There is no denying the rightness of Huck's decision to risk his soul for Jim. But there is no tangible reason to assume that the regard Huck acquires for Jim ... is generalized to encompass all blacks. ... His

emancipatory attitudes extend no further than his love for Jim. [W]ere he given the option of freeing other slaves, Huck would not necessarily choose manumission.”⁶

These challenges to the inspirational, ‘Great American Novel’ reading of Huck Finn are serious, and they deserve serious consideration. But in this essay I wish to explore a different sort of challenge; a challenge that the novel poses especially for readers inclined to identify warmly with Huck. The challenge is a *moral* challenge; a test of integrity. And it stems from the fact that the surface-level reading of Huck, according to which he personifies a successful American struggle with racism, is *ironic*. It is made available by the author precisely to lure the novel’s target audience into acting out a defining American self-deceit which the novel then mocks mercilessly.

To recognize the irony in the surface reading of *Huckleberry Finn*, we need to adopt what I have elsewhere called a *developmentally attuned* perspective on Huck’s character and his moral capacities.⁷ We can adopt such a perspective by first taking a cue from Aristotle, who emphasized the importance of upbringing to moral character. Then, with Aristotle’s views in mind, we can employ what the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch calls “just and loving” *attention* to arrive at a more faithful reading of Huck’s character, in both the literary and the moral sense of the word.⁸

Aristotle observed that we learn to be good people by first doing what is good under another’s guidance: “For the things we have to learn *before* we can do them, we learn *by* doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”⁹ Unfortunately, however, “it is from playing the lyre that both good *and* bad lyre-players are produced,”¹⁰ and the same is true of moral character. If a person practices injustice and cowardice from youth, for instance, they will grow up knowing how to be unjust and cowardly, and they will have no idea how to be just and brave even if they want to be. For this reason “it makes no small difference whether we form habits of one kind or of another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference.”¹¹

Now if we, as readers, wish to arrive at a fair and accurate estimation of Huck’s moral character and abilities as they are presented in the novel, then we need to know more than just that upbringing is *generally* important to character. We need in particular to become intimately familiar with Huckleberry Finn himself, the individual (fictional) person. And with both fictional and living persons, this is often not an easy thing to do. Nothing less than the demanding, morally challenging practice of paying just and loving attention to another, described by Iris Murdoch, is required in order to bring the reader into a more intimate, more just, and more compassionate relationship with Huck.

Murdoch introduces the idea of just and loving attention with the example of a mother-in-law who does not like or respect her daughter-in-law, but who suspects that her judgment may be clouded, and who says to herself, “Let me look again.” This mother-in-law is “an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention*” to something or someone that matters.¹² As this mother attends carefully to her daughter-in-law, she is “engaged in an internal struggle,” attempting “not just to see [her daughter-in-law] accurately but to see her justly and lovingly.” Exercising attention in this way can be a “struggle” in part because it is such a morally weighty act for the one who attends. It provides opportunities for humbleness or arrogance, self-deceit or self-reckoning, emotional openness or rigidity, and a range of related morally significant choices and actions. It is an intrinsically open-ended and fallible

activity; it is “essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. ... [one] is engaged in an endless task.”¹³

Now, what happens if the reader seeks to pay Huck the sort of just and loving attention that Murdoch here describes? When we attend to Huck in this way, we are forced to realize that his story is not the inspiring and comforting story of a young White man who triumphs over his own socially inculcated anti-Black racism. Instead, Huck’s story is the tale of a traumatized child whose upbringing has left him deeply damaged: he is largely bewildered about the difference between right and wrong, he is incapable of acting in ways that are consistent with his own choices and values, and he is just as racist as the other White members of his community.

The first thing to note is that Huck is still so young that he is – most appropriately – very morally immature, and not yet really able to have the kind of transformative, autonomous crisis of conscience that is so often attributed to him in connection with his decision to go to hell rather than betray Jim. We know he is prepubescent because he can convincingly pass for a girl, but his general lack of moral sophistication and deference to moral authority are also what we would expect from a child of his age. Huck tends not to distinguish easily between more and less serious infractions of moral laws, and he takes on the moral norms and restrictions of his elders and of society at large without any deep understanding of the reasons behind those rules. It does not occur to Huck, for example, that a moment when Jim truly feared that Huck was dead is no time for practical jokes. Huck needs to have this pointed out to him, just as children often need their parents to teach them when something is really serious and no laughing matter.¹⁴ And, although he chafes at the Widow’s and Aunt Sally’s attempts to “civilize” him, he does not question their view that the behaviors they seek to instill in him are, in fact, civil.¹⁵

And yet Huck’s difficulty making sense of his society’s moral code goes beyond what we would expect from a normal child of his age. There is no doubt that Huck’s upbringing was terribly abusive and neglectful – it is only when Pap actually tries to kill Huck in an episode of alcohol-induced psychosis that Huck finally runs away. But it often goes unnoticed that Huck consistently and realistically manifests the traumatic effects of such an upbringing. Huck is simultaneously passive and manipulative; constantly seeking to “lay low” and constantly telling lies. In these respects he is not like a normal, healthy preadolescent; he displays what contemporary psychologists would recognize as the post-traumatic behaviors associated with abuse and neglect. Abused children behave with an odd combination of passivity and manipulateness, both because they have not learned normal, positive, mutually trusting modes of social interaction, and because such behavior is best suited to keeping them safe under high-risk and totally unpredictable circumstances (such as one would encounter living with an abusive or neglectful parent). True to form, when Huck works himself up to telling Mary Jane the truth about the King and the Duke, he marvels at how “strange and irregular” it is that the truth in this instance is “better and actually *safer* than a lie.”¹⁶ On the other hand, there’s no question about how to deal with the King and the Duke themselves: “I never said nothing, never let on; kept to myself; it’s the best way; then you don’t have no quarrels, and don’t get into no trouble. ... If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way.”¹⁷

The finishing touch to Huck’s comprehensive moral miseducation lies in the fact that he is tragically well-socialized in one crucial respect: namely, he is an unquestioning racist whose background racism is not significantly altered by his relationship with Jim. It is true that Huck comes to love, trust, and even respect Jim, who is the only adult in the world of the novel who

empathizes with Huck and treats him with real kindness. And Huck himself is very kind and very responsive to kindness. But, as we have already noted, this does not automatically mean that Huck has renounced his standing, more general racist beliefs and attitudes.¹⁸ Sure enough, again and again Huck makes bizarre (but not unusual) *exceptions* for Jim. For example, though he hears – and emotionally comprehends – Jim grieving for his wife and children, left behind in slavery, Huck’s discovery of Jim’s humanity is the discovery of Jim’s surprising similarity to White people: “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n. It don’t seem natural, but I reckon it’s so.”¹⁹ At the last, when Jim risks lynching to save the feverish Tom, Huck concludes in a flush of pride, “I knowed he was White inside.”²⁰ This sort of exception-granting is a familiar and banal strategy for explaining away evidence that would otherwise systematically undermine one’s racism.

III. Twain’s Last Laugh

A developmentally attuned reading of Huckleberry Finn reveals a starkly different young person than the Huck of the dominant, inspiring reading: a child whose trauma, vulnerability, and racism are fundamental to what he does and what he believes. This child faces far more serious obstacles to both his own personal security and his own prospects for developing good character than the dominant reading of him recognizes. The difference is so stark in fact that it is natural to feel a sense of loss at the prospect of accepting this new reading of Huck. What happened to the intrepid, innocent boy contentedly hanging a line and one bare foot off the edge of a raft? But accepting the developmentally attuned reading of Huck does not require us to deny the innocent, kind, and adventuresome aspects of Huck’s character. Nor should it lead us to write him off as a lost cause, without any prospect of further growth or change. Though it is painfully at odds with the cheerful, adventuresome surface narrative of the text, the developmentally attuned reading honors Huck’s innocence by allowing the reader to see through his uncomplaining, un-self-aware rendition of things to the true circumstances under which he maintains such equanimity. This insight allows the reader to adopt a more just and more loving attitude towards a vulnerable, sadly unloved, morally lost and stunted child. The developmentally attuned reading is also compatible with continuing to see Huck as admirable for his doggedness, his childlike innocence, and his remarkable capacity for real kindness given its near-total absence in his world.

But if the developmentally attuned reading helps us to see Huck with a greater measure of justice and love, it is also the key to what is surely the novel’s greatest irony. For if this understanding of Huck Finn, the basically kind but morally and emotionally damaged child, is the most just and loving reading of his character, then where does this leave the reader who has identified so warmly and optimistically with Huck?

Let us imagine a reader who had succumbed to the novel’s invitation, and identified him- or herself with Huckleberry Finn. When this reader attends carefully to Huck and comes to see him with a greater measure of justice and love, what sorts of changes to her self-conception will ensue? If the reader continues to see herself in Huck, she is revealed as the child of a deeply immoral, self-deceiving, callous, and neglectful society, for one. She also now seems to be a person who remains significantly in the grip of racist ideology while congratulating herself on its opposite, who lacks moral maturity or a reliable, autonomous moral compass, and who is ultimately unable to stand up for what she believes in even when she finally makes up her mind about what that is.

Above all, the reader who naively identifies with Huck is revealed as someone who lacks self-knowledge where it matters most: namely, in her estimation of her own moral character.

The identification is no more favorable if Huck holds up a mirror to American society at large. Are Americans deluded about the continued extent and depth of our society's own anti-Black racism? Is the national moral character developmentally damaged by our cruelty-steeped past – perhaps irreversibly? Are we as a society less able to do the right thing in certain respects than we might have been had our nation not been founded in slavery and dedicated for so long to the proposition that some persons are more equal than others? Perhaps most frighteningly of all, are we, like the lost and vulnerable Huck, at great risk of failing altogether to develop into a mature, morally just society – precisely in the areas where we have been most harmed by our disturbed and disturbing past? There is no doubt in my mind that Mark Twain, at any rate, would answer these questions in the affirmative. His target audience is right to see themselves in Huck. The mistake is to be untroubled by that identification.

This is Twain's last laugh: a brilliant, *living* act of irony that is reiterated each time the novel is read, taught, or lauded in keeping with the surface narrative of Huck's triumphant moral overcoming. What is particularly stunning is that the irony in question is not contained entirely within the pages of the novel; it characterizes the *relationship* between the novel and a reader who commits a certain interpretive act. This is why I say that it is a "living" act of irony. By exploiting and encouraging the natural tendency of a reader to identify with a novel's protagonist, Twain skewers his presumptively White American readership, leading them to endorse their own blinkered perspective on reality and to misapprehend and mischaracterize it as a moral triumph. And since the reader may never be aware of this particular ironic aspect of the novel's structure, Twain's is a joke that may well be only ever on, and never for, the reader.

But things only get worse from here. For now suppose the reader, realizing the joke, recoils from his initial identification with Huck. Where, then, in the world of the novel, is the reader meant to place himself? Must he identify with Aunt Sally, the Widow? With *Pap*? (I assume that a novel which afforded *no* opportunities for identification would reveal next to nothing about the human condition, and would thus be far from "great" in its genre.) Here, it matters that, with the sole exception of Jim, the neglect and miseducation that Huck experiences at the hands of adults is utter and complete. It includes not just the horrible physical and emotional abuse heaped on him by his father, but also Miss Watson's terrifying warnings about the fiery Hell towards which Huck is bound, and the Widow's and Aunt Sally's kindly meant but deeply un-empathetic, emotionally and physically stifling attempts to "civilize" Huck. That is: it's not just the obvious villains – Pap and the King and the Duke – who perpetrate Huck's neglect, abuse, and moral miseducation. If anything, their treatment of Huck is *less* morally significant for our purposes, because Huck does not accept them as moral authorities; he tries only to limit their impact on his wellbeing. No, Huck's not being properly brought up also includes the broader social miseducation that he receives from all of the White adults in the novel: adults who are, in various ways, wholly indifferent to the suffering of Black persons and of all children. Even at the novel's close, Huck's plan to "light out for the Territory" lest Aunt Sally adopt and "civilize" him ensures that he will continue to wander in a moral wilderness in the company of indifferent adults straight through into his own adulthood.²¹ Thus the reader trying to see Huck with justice and love cannot escape the humbling implications for himself by seeking refuge in identification with the novel's unfeeling White adults.

What about Jim? Jim now emerges clearly as the only just, kind, and morally mature person in the world of the novel, in virtue of the simple fact that he is the only person who knows how to treat children properly.²² He is unfailingly gentle, kind, and patient with Huck. He protects him from experiences that children should not have to have – such as the sight of his murdered father’s body – and he firmly but kindly insists upon terms of mutual respect in their father-son relationship on the raft. He alone is tenderly, physically affectionate towards Huck. He is of course also the only person in the novel who dares to think that a Black man and his family should be free and treated as full autonomous persons. Surely, then, Jim is the person with whom the reader should most wish to identify.

But Twain’s portrayal of Jim, together with the actual social and psychological identity of the reader whose predicament we are discussing, combine to make this desirable identification, if not impossible, then all but impossible, and certainly inappropriate. To begin with, precisely in falling for the surface reading of Huck, the reader has shown herself to be *unlike* Jim in the most relevant respect: she has shown herself to be largely oblivious to Huck’s youthful vulnerability, his trauma, his moral confusion, and the other important things about Huck that Jim attends to with such care. What’s more, the reader is obliged to ask herself an uncomfortable question: if Jim is really so much wiser and more admirable, so much more worthy of emulation than all of the other characters in the novel, then why didn’t I instinctively identify with Jim all along?

Here, the reader may find to his dismay that latent racism figures to some extent in his failure to see both Huck and Jim with justice and love. It would seem to be latent racism, for example, that leads to Jim being so often characterized as Huck’s *equal*, not as his surrogate parent – Jim is usually described as Huck’s friend, Huck’s companion, Huck’s comrade, Huck’s ‘partner in crime’, etc.²³ By giving Jim the social and moral status of a child, such characterizations obscure Jim’s actual role in Huck’s life – namely, that of surrogate parent and guardian. The effect is to obscure Jim’s singular moral wisdom and disguise it as innocence, while simultaneously helping Huck’s all-too-real youth and moral immaturity to escape the reader’s notice.

But it is not only possible racism on the part of the reader that blocks identification with Jim; the racially fraught way in which Jim is presented bears some responsibility as well. Identifying with a character in a novel is a way of learning about oneself by seeing oneself in that character – seeing, that is, one’s shared humanity. And Jim, as we know, is not presented in a particularly humanizing way. He is demeaningly painted as gullible, superstitious, childlike, and subservient. Thus, even while he is the only mature, morally wise person in the novel, he is simultaneously depicted precisely as lacking the adult moral maturity and autonomy that the reader wants to identify with and emulate. And this poses a serious obstacle, not just to the target audience, but to *any* reader’s attempt to identify with Jim. Just as we couldn’t get away with seeing only what we want to see in Huck, we can’t pick and choose which aspects of Jim’s character we attend to.

It is a subject of debate whether Mark Twain meant the reader to see through the caricatured aspects of Jim’s character; to recognize them as Huck’s perception, and not as the author’s perception, of black male adulthood. But even if Twain’s portrayal of Jim is ironic, that in itself does not clear the way for his target audience to identify with Jim’s underlying positive qualities. We know that Jim’s reality must have been a life of terrible, suffocating oppression, of constant vulnerability to physical and emotional violence, and of the terrible pain of being unable to protect his loved ones from the same. That pain and suffering, however, is almost entirely invisible in the

novel's portrayal of Jim (unsurprisingly, since it was all but invisible to Huck). The fact that these aspects of Jim's human reality are hidden means that it would be *too easy* for the reader to identify with him as he is presented; the positive self-association would be too cheap. The reader doesn't have to bear the cost that Jim has had to bear, of preserving his integrity and his capacity to love and to empathize under his actual life circumstances. Part of coming to see Jim with justice and love, therefore, is coming to see that his story simply hasn't been told in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. That means that his humanity hasn't been fully expressed in this novel; it has been suppressed, even though he has been presented as a morally admirable figure. To attempt to identify with Jim, therefore, would be in some sense to accept a partial, less-than-fully-humanized character as an acceptable mirror for one's own humanity.

If racism and race are factors in the reader's having misconstrued both Huck and Jim, then that is bound to be a bitter pill for her to swallow, considering that she identified with Huck in the first place because he (supposedly) so bravely and sincerely overcame his own racism in response to Jim's humanity. But having once begun the fraught and humbling process of paying just and loving attention to Huck, the reader cannot now simply decide to ignore its less pleasant implications for her own character. In the end, the reader who said to herself, "let me look again" is forced to face up to the appropriateness of her original identification with Huck – who is, of course, now greatly altered. And here, I think, we have found the barb on the end of the hook with which Twain has snagged his reader. The reader *should* want to be like Jim with respect to his admirable moral qualities. The fact that this identification is so vexed by American racial realities as to be effectively blocked for Twain's target audience completes the novel's ironic gesture.

IV. Ethical Implications and the Status of the Novel

The reader who has used just and loving attention to arrive at this new understanding of *Huckleberry Finn* now finds himself in a challenging – but potentially rewarding – position. A reader who understands himself to be the butt of Twain's joke has shown himself to be, like Murdoch's mother-in-law, "a well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just *attention*" to Huck and Jim, even at his own expense. He has successfully identified with Huckleberry Finn, even when that identification turned out to reveal things about both himself and Huck that are less than sympathetic. In this respect, warranted identification with Huck is a mark of the moral and personal "maturity" that Arne Naess described. But at the same time, this reader has also shown himself to be selectively blind: capable of buying into a self-serving and therefore less-than-compassionate reading of one of his culture's defining works of literature. For this reason, while he is capable of becoming *less* blind to his own flaws (and thereby less flawed), it doesn't follow that he will ever become excellent in those places where he has the most work to do, just as Huck may never entirely overcome the miseducation of his youth. More probably, the habits he has acquired and practiced from youth will dog him, and he will have to be endlessly on guard against them.

What about *Huckleberry Finn*'s status as one of the great American novels? Certainly Huck's tale does not teach us to believe in and celebrate America's certain triumph over its own unjust past. If the novel can still be considered one of the great works of American literature, then its greatness is not triumphant or celebratory, but rather *Socratic*.

In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates tells the Athenian jurors, "I was attached to this city ... as upon a great and noble horse which was somewhat sluggish because of its size and needed to be stirred up by a kind of gadfly."²⁴ The Athenians were meant to be "stirred" by Socrates' relentless and often humiliating questioning for the good of their souls, to teach them to love virtue and to prioritize good character and good deeds above all else. But Socrates' sting was not entirely therapeutic: he provoked and humiliated his fellow Athenians not only for the good of their souls but also to amuse himself at their expense. Perhaps Socrates' fellow ironist, the American Mark Twain, has done much the same thing for his own society with this, his most scathing work.

But to say the novel is great and to say that it captures something definitively American is not to say that it is perfect; nor is it *complete* as a treatment of racial injustice in America. Socrates spoke his immortal words to an Athenian assembly of native-born, upper-class, politically enfranchised men, and most decidedly *not* to slaves, immigrants, or even his own wife and children (who were shuffled unceremoniously out of his presence in the final hours of his life). And as we have seen, Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* not just about but also most decidedly *for* the target readership whose struggles we have been discussing here. The novel shows us how slavery, racism, and general callousness towards those who are vulnerable all harm the person who enslaves, who is racist, and who is callous towards the vulnerable.²⁵ But this obviously does not amount to a complete reckoning with the relevant moral issues. The stories of those who are enslaved and those who are otherwise *oppressed* by racism, not corrupted by it – those stories have yet to be told, as far as this novel is concerned. For this reason, the novel does not speak to all Americans in the same way, and this fact must be weighed in discussions of the novel's status and stature.

We began by observing that novels characteristically invite their readers to identify with their protagonists; to dwell upon and become vulnerable to their shared humanity. There's nothing particularly subtle about the way in which a novel like *Lolita* or *Notes from Underground* exploits this tendency, however brilliant these works may be. The reader knows that they are being invited to find common human ground with a despicable, contemptible protagonist. One isn't really engaging seriously with literature like this – one doesn't become vulnerable to learning from it – unless one does a bit of soul-searching along the way. But the invitation is *explicit*.

In *Huck Finn*, on the other hand, the invitation to "look again" is buried so deep in irony that the reader may easily miss it entirely. But if it is once perceived, that irony allows the novel to make an extremely powerful moral and political argument. The irony is the mechanism by which the novel proves to certain readers that some soul-searching is called for, first luring them in with a surface reading and then showing them the character flaws in themselves and their society – the flaws that made that surface reading first seem reasonable. These readers are left engaged in the "endless task" of trying to see themselves, their country, and the character of Huckleberry Finn with a greater measure of justice and love.²⁶

¹ Arne Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *Ecology of Wisdom: Writings by Arne Naess*, edited by Alan Drengson and Bill Devall (Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2008), 81.

² Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," 84-5.

³ For one thing, in the absence of language, how could one ever tell the difference between true kinship, and mere projection of one's feelings onto the other being? In this connection, see

Thomas Nagel's famous essay, "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83 (4): 435-50.

⁴ Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (UK: Transatlantic Press, 2012), 246, Chapter 31. Note that I have included both chapter and page number in references to this work, following the practice of the editors of *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*.

⁵ Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, "Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth-Century 'Liberalism' in *Huckleberry Finn*," in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, edited by James S. Leonard et. al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). See also Woodard and MacCann's earlier essay on this topic, "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Traditions of Blackface Minstrelsy," in *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*, 2nd ed., ed. Donnarae MacCann and Gloria Woodard (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1985), 75-103; Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Random House, 1964); and the other essays in section three of *Satire or Evasion*.

⁶ Peaches Henry, "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in *Huckleberry Finn*," in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, edited by James S. Leonard et. al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 32.

⁷ "The Character of Huckleberry Finn," *Philosophy and Literature* 42 (2018) (listed as 'forthcoming' in published version of the present essay).

⁸ Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 33.

⁹ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 952, 1103a34-b2. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 952, 1103b9. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, 953, 1103b24-5.

¹² Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 17.

¹³ Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 22.

¹⁴ For the relevant passages see Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 103-104, Chapter 15. For full discussion of these passages and their significance in this context see the author's "The Character of Huckleberry Finn," cited above.

¹⁵ See for example Huck's musings at Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 20-21, Chapter 3.

¹⁶ Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 216, Chapter 28.

¹⁷ Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 147, Chapter 19.

¹⁸ Henry, "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in *Huckleberry Finn*," 32.

¹⁹ Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 180, Chapter 23.

²⁰ Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 314, Chapter 40.

²¹ Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 334, Chapter The Last (43).

²² This fundamental form of moral wisdom is demonstrated not only throughout Jim's relationship with Huck but also in a story he tells about unfairly punishing his own daughter (Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, 180-81, Chapter 23), and finally in his superlatively selfless actions towards Tom in Chapters 40-42, whose heartless and thoughtless behavior towards Jim surely gives Jim every reason to abandon him.

²³ See Bernard W. Bell, "Twain's 'Nigger' Jim: The Tragic Face Behind the Minstrel Mask," in *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*, edited by James S. Leonard et. al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992). The synopsis included with the Transatlantic press

edition of the novel that I have cited here, for example, refers to Jim and Huck as “the two absconders”.

²⁴ Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, translated by G.M.A. Grube and revised by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 30e2-5.

²⁵ This, too, is a very Socratic point: Socrates believed that “a good man cannot be harmed in life or in death,” because the only real harm that can come to a person is to be wicked, and whether a person is good or bad is up to no one but that person. Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 41d.

²⁶ The author would like to thank Amber Franklin, Geralyn Timler, and Paul Nichols for sustained discussion and suggestions which greatly benefited this paper.