

## Reconsidering Mark Twain's Literary "Offenses" in "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians"

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Since the publication in 1969 of "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" (c. 1884), scholars have sought to explain why Mark Twain failed to complete this sequel to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Critical consensus holds that Twain ultimately came to view the manuscript as irreparably flawed. Scholars such as Walter Blair, Wayne R. Kime, Axel Knoenagel, and Peter Stoneley variously contend that the fragment lacks thematic complexity, is devoid of any well-developed character, and wants a moral ethos consistent with the genteel sensibilities of Twain's nineteenth-century readership.<sup>1</sup> In this study, I reconsider these three areas of critical focus in order to offer a different interpretation of "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians," one that concentrates not on the faults of an unedited and unfinished novel, but on the strengths of a significant—albeit incomplete—literary work. In particular, I assert that Twain effectively blurs and subverts traditional boundaries of genre (parody/frank social commentary) and race (white/Indian) in this well-conceived tale of universal human iniquity.

Perhaps the most excoriating charge against "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" has been leveled by Walter Blair, who argues that Twain "never hits upon *any* significant theme" (Blair's emphasis). Blair insists that the fragment's parody of James Fenimore Cooper's "romantic" portrayal of Indians "is hardly a fitting theme for a long narrative,"<sup>2</sup> an opinion shared by Wayne R. Kime: "Pointing out the contrast between the Indians of sentimental legend and those of reality is . . . a slim foundation on which to build an entire novel."<sup>3</sup> In theory, these commentators are correct: a voluminous fiction which repeatedly harped upon the same thematic string would produce a dull melody indeed. Further, there is reason to believe that Twain's subject, because hackneyed, might have failed as mere parody in the first place. Critics for the influential *North American Review* had begun attacking "romantic" portrayals of Native Americans

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Blair, Introduction, "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians," *Mark Twain's Hannibal, Huck & Tom*, ed. Walter Blair (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 81–91; Wayne R. Kime, "Huck Among the Indians: Mark Twain and Richard Irving Dodge's *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants*," *Western American Literature* 24.4 (1990): 321–33; Axel Knoenagel, "Mark Twain's Further Use of Huck and Tom," *International Fiction Review* 19.2 (1992): 96–102; Peter Stoneley, *Mark Twain and the Feminine Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992) 115.

<sup>2</sup> Blair 90.

<sup>3</sup> Kime 330.

(by writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Thomas Campbell, and Lydia Sigourney<sup>4</sup>) in the 1820s and continued to do so in the 1830s.<sup>5</sup> For example, in an 1833 survey of Child's novels, *North American Review* commentator Grenville Mellen denounces the practice of imbuing Native American characters with "civilized" attributes. He deems ridiculous "the idea of Indian girls wearing 'mantles' instead of blankets, and Indian chiefs talking hexameters like Alexander Pope" and argues that the public, having been presented with such characterizations by "the score," have been "cheated" and "maltreated."<sup>6</sup> And Twain himself had already published at least two Indian parodies—an essay for *Galaxy* magazine entitled "The Noble Red Man" (1870) and chapter nineteen of *Roughing It* (1872)—before he had begun work on "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians."

But whatever the shortcomings of this theme, it is not the only—or even the central—motif of "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" as Blair and Kime assume. Nor is it a wholly self-contained theme; rather, Twain's parody of fictional Indians is but one element in a larger scheme. What Blair and Kime deem a facile parody that functions merely to subvert "sentimental" attitudes about Native Americans<sup>7</sup> does, in fact, evolve into a complex portrayal of universal human iniquity. The Indians who murder five members of the frontier-bound Mills family, kidnap their daughters, and abduct Jim are seemingly depicted as morally depraved and fearsomely savage "others." But as Brace Johnson, Huck Finn, and Tom Sawyer travel farther and farther west in pursuit of the captors, the white trio's behavior becomes incrementally less civil. Indeed, in several scenes their violent actions resemble those committed by the story's Indians.

In the first of these episodes, Brace kills one in a herd of antelopes (Huck, but not Brace, initially mistakes the herd for Indians—a foreshadowing, perhaps, of a revenge scene involving Brace that Twain intended to write but never did). The shooting is senseless since, according to Huck, they had killed "considerable

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<sup>4</sup> For nineteenth-century depictions of Native Americans, see Lydia Maria Child, *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times*, in *Hobomok and Other Writings on Indians*, ed. Carolyn L. Karcher (1824; New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992); Thomas Campbell, *Gertrude of Wyoming*, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell* (1809; New York: T.Y. Crowell, 1877); Lydia Howard Sigourney, *Traits of the Aborigines of America* (1822; Philadelphia: Hart, Carey, and Hart, 1854).

<sup>5</sup> For critical commentary denouncing positive depictions of Native Americans by Child, Campbell, Sigourney, and others, see Grenville Mellen, "Works of Mrs. Child," *North American Review* 37.80 (1833): 138–64; review of *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times*, by Lydia Maria Child, *North American Review* 19 (1824): 262–63; Jared Sparks, "Recent American Novels," *North American Review* 21.48 (1825): 78–104. For a scathing critique of an historical study of Native Americans upon which James Fenimore Cooper drew in fashioning his fictional Indians, see Lewis Cass, review of William Rawle, *A Vindication of the Reverend Mr. Heckewelder's "History of the Indian Nations,"* in *North American Review* 26.59 (1828): 366–403.

<sup>6</sup> Mellen 139–40.

<sup>7</sup> Blair 90 and Kime 330.

game" of late.<sup>8</sup> More important, the killing is likened to the slaughter of innocents, as the personified animal is imbued with delicate and highly refined sensibilities.<sup>9</sup> Subsequently, we witness Huck's irresponsible guardianship of an aimless wanderer whom Brace discovers while searching for Tom (who himself becomes lost in a dense fog). Brace charges Huck with the care of the half-starved and delirious stranger, admonishing the boy not to let the ravenous man overeat lest he perish from gluttony. But by and by Huck falls asleep. When he awakens, Huck is horrified to discover the corpse of his ward who, as predicted, has gorged himself to death. Shortly thereafter, Huck is cornered by two horse thieves whom he outwits with a clever lie, which results in their following him back to camp and into the clutches of Brace Johnson. Twain's skilled backwoodsman lassoes one of the thieves and drags him to death behind his horse; the other Brace kills with a pistol shot.

If by now readers of the narrative have not begun to associate the violent acts committed by Indians with the fierce conduct of their white pursuers, Huck's response to the killing of the thieves gives them cause to do so: "Well, we had two dead men on our hands, and I felt pretty crawly, and didn't like to look at them; but Brace allowed it warn't a very unpleasant sight, considering they tried to kill me" (132). Obviously Huck feels culpable for the deaths of these men; his words speak directly to this point, as does his turning away from the faces of the dead. Recalling the earlier antelope scene—wherein Brace cautions his companions against looking into the dying animal's "grieved eyes" because they would "never forget it" (119)—Huck's inability to gaze steadfastly upon the dead men suggests not only his guilt but also his empathy. Brace, however, quickly corrects Huck's misapplication of the woodsman's advice: the thieves, Brace implies, are not innocents to be pitied.

In thus complicating issues of culpability and justice, Twain adds moral ambiguity to his burgeoning violence motif. Can readers of the narrative definitively judge Huck and Brace not responsible for the trail of corpses, animal and human, that they leave in their wake? And further, is it possible to view the story's white characters as morally superior to the tale's Indians (as a simple parody might suggest)? The answer to both questions clearly is no, for at best the morally complicated Brace and Huck might be viewed as "innocent criminals,"<sup>10</sup> to borrow Susan Gillman's oxymoronic, yet apt, term.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Twain, "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians," *Mark Twain's Hannibal, Huck & Tom*, ed. Walter Blair (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969) 119. All subsequent references are to this text and will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>9</sup> Here, my reading of the antelope scene is informed by Paul DeLaney's "The Genteel Savage: A Western Link in the Development of Mark Twain's Transcendent Figure," *Mark Twain Journal* 21.3 (1983): 30–31.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Gillman, *Dark Twins: Imposture and Identity in Mark Twain's America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1989) 37. Gillman argues that Twain, by way of apology, presents himself as an innocent criminal (one

In addition to finding fault with the narrative's thematic emphases, Blair denounces "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" for its ostensibly weak characterization. Blair asserts that both Indians and whites are portrayed in stereotypical fashion, the former being represented as "wholly malicious and evil" and the latter as "paragons of virtue."<sup>11</sup> But in "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" the division of race categories along moral lines is not as distinct as Blair perceives it. On the surface, Twain's Indians may appear to act capriciously in bludgeoning and burning the Millses. However, as Paul DeLaney persuasively argues, the Indians who massacre the Mills family do so in response to the murder of one of their own tribe, and thus follow a "codified ritual of revenge,"<sup>12</sup> one made valid by cultural consensus. DeLaney further argues that Brace Johnson—who at one point declines an opportunity to rescue the captives because he has "other fish to fry" (118), plausibly revenge—is motivated by the same conviction that inspires the Indians to kill some members of the Mills family. For Brace, the critic avers, "justice is effected by the slaughter of members of an offender's race, whether or not those victims are innocent."<sup>13</sup> Seen in the light of DeLaney's interpretation, Twain's Indians are not wholly malicious and evil as Blair argues; and in view of the textual evidence cited in this essay, neither are the author's white characters simply paragons of virtue. In truth, Twain's characters, Indian and white, at times exhibit in common their moral complexity (which includes depravity) and social values (which are not always depicted as positive).<sup>14</sup>

Like Blair, Axel Knoenagel contends that the fragment's characters tend to flatness, asserting that the story deviates from the "successful model" of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a result. "Tom," Knoenagel states, "is reduced to a totally unimportant marginal figure, and Huck does little more than report the events, all of which have Brace Johnson at their center."<sup>15</sup> But Twain's attempt at fashioning a new literary paradigm is not necessarily less ambitious simply because the result strays from an already successful model. In fact, strict adherence to some literary blueprint could only produce another novel very much like the one it was first drawn to create, except that the reproduction would lack originality of conception. And given the complexity of Twain's violence motif, an intricate design that develops all of the story's central characters, Knoenagel's conclusions must remain open to question.

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who offends unconsciously) to those whom he insulted while delivering the infamous "Whittier Birthday Speech" (1877).

<sup>11</sup> Blair 90.

<sup>12</sup> DeLaney 30.

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<sup>14</sup> For scenes in which the moral character of the story's Indians is especially at issue, see Twain 93-96, 102-09, 115-17, 120-21, 138; for passages concerning the moral constitution of the tale's white characters, see Twain 94-95, 99-100, 102, 105, 119, 124, 130, 132-33.

<sup>15</sup> Knoenagel 97.

While Knoenagel deems Tom a minor player, I contend that his supporting role is highly significant. It is Tom who first persuades Huck and Jim to travel west, convincing them that Indians are not an “ornery lot” (93) but flawlessly noble and just human beings. Later, he recants, confessing that his knowledge of Indians came exclusively from “Cooper’s novels” (109). Tom’s perceptions are radically altered as a result of his experiences on the western frontier, and thus he serves to introduce one of the novel’s major themes: that of abstract conviction shattered by concrete experience. But Tom’s importance does not end here, for in the fog scene he continues to exemplify “civilized” man in his disillusionment. Brace prophesies that the “greeny,” bereft of food, water, and social intercourse, will soon “go crazy” (123), which Tom nearly does (and the wayward stranger certainly does) before being rescued by the expert tracker. Tom’s experience of being lost metaphorically illustrates the condition of the story’s west-bound characters. All—the Millses, Huck, the delirious stranger, and, of course, Tom himself—are neophytes who lack the ability to negotiate adequately the geographical, cultural, and psychological terrain of their new environment. By turns they are murdered, commit murder, plot revenge, and lose their sanity. Truly they are a “lost” bunch, whose condition Tom’s experience serves to underscore.

Neither should we diminish Huck’s importance, for he is hardly a disinterested reporter of the narrative’s facts. Huck is intimately involved in the story’s major events, and he plays a crucial role both in advancing its plot and furthering its thematic concerns. When Huck tells the Indians that Peggy Mills is expecting the imminent arrival of seven friends (whereas she truly awaits only Brace), his lie catalyzes a chain reaction of disastrous episodes: the Mills parents and their three sons are almost immediately killed by the Indians (who fear that soon they will be outnumbered), the Millses’ daughters and Jim are taken hostage, and seventeen-year-old Peggy Mills is probably subjected to gang rape and other tortures at the hands of her captors. In addition to his pivotal role in propelling the plot, Huck is the story’s moral arbiter (as when he deems inappropriate, though harmless, the Millses’ open affection for Peggy [99]); its conscience (as in the horse thief episode [130–32]); and its emotional core (as evidenced by his inability to call out to the lost Tom because his “heart was most broke” [123]).

Despite this evidence of Huck’s complexity and importance, critics such as Blair and Kime devalue him. Blair asserts that the Huck of Twain’s fragment is “never allowed to display his ingratiating human frailties” and thus exhibits an “angelic” one-dimensionality.<sup>16</sup> As I have noted above, however, Huck lies to the Indians and to the horse thieves (which results in the deaths of several people); and he fails to care for the wayward stranger, who dies as a direct consequence of Huck’s neglect. Twain’s protagonist may not be utterly depraved, but neither

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<sup>16</sup> Blair 90.

is he wholly virtuous. Echoing Blair's sentiments (although not his rationale), Kime calls Huck "a faint copy of the vivid boy of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" because Huck's emotional response to the likely rape of Peggy Mills is "a virtual blank."<sup>17</sup> Huck's apparent lack of emotion in this scene is curious, and even more so given that he does respond feelingly to other crises, but Twain may have had good reasons for rendering Huck mute. First, his silence serves to heighten the tension of the scene in ways that lugubrious exclamations never could. Second, his silence is quite appropriate given the context of the episode (the boys are trying to hide from Brace the fact that Peggy has been taken alive in order to spare his feelings). A third plausible explanation presents itself when we consider that by the time Huck discovers evidence of the rape—the bloody swatch of Peggy's dress, her slender shoeprint, and the four driven stakes—he has been an agent of or a witness to no less than eight horrific deaths. In light of this fact, it is possible that Twain meant to indicate Huck's desensitization to violence—a clear sign that this exemplar of natural-man-in-his-innocence has been dramatically transformed by his frontier experience. At any rate, ample evidence exists to support a strong case for the emotional and psychological complexity of this vital character.

The aesthetic merits of "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians" are several, yet the question of its incompleteness persists. In addition to emphasizing what they believe are the tale's deficiencies of theme and characterization, most scholars argue that Twain abandoned the novel for moral reasons. Blair submits that the author was "always prudish in his writings" and could not countenance "the fearful signs that Peggy Mills had been staked to the ground and raped."<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Kime speculates that Twain was "unable or unwilling . . . to address explicitly the subject of rape."<sup>19</sup> Knoenagel agrees that the author thought better of pursuing such an indelicate topic, stating that "such events [as the rape of virgins] could not very well be included in an American novel of the 1880s, and Mark Twain would have been the least likely person to attempt it."<sup>20</sup> To my knowledge, only Peter Stoneley has offered an alternative to these explanations: "Twain *was able* to entertain the idea of the act of rape, but not of the subsequent survival of the heroine as heroine. He cannot reintroduce the ruined woman any more than he can have his characters openly discuss the likelihood of what has happened to her" (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> Although Stoneley fails to offer it here, textual evidence does support the notion that Twain was not averse to portraying the rape. The violation of Peggy Mills is adumbrated early in chapter three (where we learn that the young woman possesses a knife for committing suicide should she fall "into the hands of the savages" [103]), and

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<sup>17</sup> Kime 330.

<sup>18</sup> Blair 91.

<sup>19</sup> Kime 330.

<sup>20</sup> Knoenagel 98.

<sup>21</sup> Stoneley 115.

thereafter the possibility of her rape becomes the central conflict of the tale—strong indications that Twain consciously intended to weave his plot line around Peggy’s brutalization. It seems unlikely that the author would begin to have misgivings about depicting the rape only after completing six chapters (chaps. 3 through 8) in which the assault was repeatedly prefigured.

I suspect that Twain may have faced a further moral dilemma which prevented him from completing the manuscript. In view of the narrative’s established pattern of white characters mimicking the murderous behavior of the tale’s Indian personages, the fulfillment of Twain’s thematic design would have necessitated that some non-Indian character or characters be implicated in a rape—or, at the very least, be shown capable of committing such a reprehensible act. One can only speculate as to precisely who might have become the agent of such debauchery; if precedent be an accurate predictor, the likely candidate is Brace, whose history has been to kill and then to justify his actions to Tom, Huck, or both. Moreover, it is from Brace that Huck and Tom first learn about the crime of rape. As their mentor, it is Brace’s fundamental mission to indoctrinate the boys into the adult sphere’s ghastly realms of murder and sexual assault. What other grim initiation scenes might have occurred to Twain cannot be known, but we can be fairly certain that the author would have refused to present to the public a novel in which his boy heroes come of age in such darkling fashion.

Undeniably, the unpolished and unfinished efforts of even the most talented writers will contain faults, and Twain’s tale is no exception. But surely it is not, as some suggest, a literary disaster. To the contrary, “Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer among the Indians” is an important and, at times, artfully rendered work; for in it race categories are exposed as sham markers of inherent difference, the ordinarily antithetical concepts of guilt and innocence are problematized, and humankind’s capacity—even propensity—to do evil is discomfitingly envisioned. The narrative’s complex themes and vivid characterizations certainly deserve further examination as they promise to offer additional insights concerning Twain’s code of ethics, his attitudes about racial difference, and his later (and darker) literary development.