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## ***Uncle Tom's Cabin vs. Huckleberry Finn: The Historians and the Critics***

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**Jonathan Arac**

This essay draws from my forthcoming book, "*Huckleberry Finn*" As *Idol and Target*, and extends the argument of my earlier essay on nationalism and hypercanonization.<sup>1</sup> The book joins my concerns as a citizen and as a scholar. As a scholar, I am concerned by bad arguments about an excellent and important book, *Huckleberry Finn*, and as a citizen, I am concerned because these arguments inform discussion in the public press on important matters—how we think about questions of race and how we understand the United States. The process by which *Huckleberry Finn* came to count as the greatest exemplar of the values of Americanness and antiracism involves two phases. In the later 1940s—above all, through Lionel Trilling's introduction to the first college edition of *Huckleberry Finn*—there began a

The author and journal wish to thank the University of Wisconsin Press for permission to publish this excerpt from "*Huckleberry Finn*" As *Idol and Target: The Functions of Criticism in Our Time*, forthcoming, fall 1997, in the Wisconsin Project on American Writers.

1. Jonathan Arac, "Nationalism, Hypercanonization and *Huckleberry Finn*," *boundary 2* 19, no. 1 (spring 1992): 14–33.

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process I call “hypercanonization.” That is, within the canon of American classics that was defined in the academy at this time, *Huckleberry Finn* was placed at the very top. Academic excess would not itself be important, but in this case, the academic judgments fueled newspaper and magazine articles when public controversy arose about the desirability of requiring *Huckleberry Finn* in junior high schools. The excessive media response in defense of *Huckleberry Finn* I call “idolatry.”

I do not want to ban *Huckleberry Finn*. I do want to see fairer, fuller, better-informed debates when *Huckleberry Finn* comes into question. To provide resources for such debates, my book works closely with historical detail from three distinct periods: the pre-Civil War decades of Huck’s fictional life; the later nineteenth century, when Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*; and the middle of the twentieth century, when academic hypercanonization occurred. Most chapters draw evidence from all three periods. I use writings by polemicists, novelists, critics, scholars, and journalists, as well as much work by historians, who, in the last several decades, have greatly deepened our knowledge of nineteenth-century American history, particularly the history of slavery and its aftermath.

Among my historical concerns, I care very much about the place of *Huckleberry Finn* in the history of prose fiction. Within the history of fiction in the United States, I argue that *Huckleberry Finn* participated in a nineteenth-century cultural conflict between two modes of prose fiction, what I call “literary” narrative and what I call “national” narrative.<sup>2</sup> *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, as a “national” narrative, gained great acclaim in the nineteenth century, but in a gradual process from the early years into the middle of the twentieth century, it came to be devalued as “protest” fiction, against which the value of Twain’s “literary” narrative was asserted.

In the late twentieth century, largely through critical work inspired by the women’s movement, the importance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has again been acknowledged, breaking dramatically from the academy into the public in a recent piece in *Harper’s* by the noted novelist Jane Smiley. After a scathing critique of *Huckleberry Finn*, Smiley brings forward *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the model that American literature should have followed. For the purposes of literary criticism, a crucial claim of Smiley’s is that *Huckleberry Finn* is weakened by virtue of Twain’s necessary and evident conflicts

2. This distinction is sketched in “Nationalism, Hypercanonization” and more fully elaborated in my contribution, “Narrative Forms,” to vol. 2 of the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

over racial issues, while Stowe's work is strengthened by "her lack of conflict," which makes for "the clarity of both the style and the substance of the novel."<sup>3</sup>

Here is where Smiley runs most sharply against the powerful critical premises that brought about the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn*, and she fails to recognize several features of the encounter. First, the major critics of this period, which she designates the "Propaganda Era," include not only those she names as "Lionel Trilling, Leslie Fiedler, T. S. Eliot, Joseph Wood Krutch, and some lesser lights" but also James Baldwin (powerfully negative on Stowe) and Ralph Ellison (powerfully positive on Twain),<sup>4</sup> so that her distinction—highly important to her overall argument—between what whites think and what blacks think runs aground. Second, the related distinctions she makes between public and private, between conflict and its absence, map onto founding premises of the most admired American criticism from the 1940s to the present, namely that a work of literature will be greater for containing, rather than excluding, conflict. This is what New Critics called "paradox" and what is still, via Bakhtin, valued as the "dialogic." For Trilling, in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), the book in which he reprinted his essay on *Huckleberry Finn*, it is a work's power to contain within itself the dialectic, the "yes" and "no" of a culture. In the instance of race, it is precisely what Gunnar Myrdal defined as the "American Dilemma" in his profoundly influential 1944 study.<sup>5</sup>

A work of literature, in this line of thought, enhances its chance for achieving a valuable complexity precisely by its privacy, by its freedom from direct politics, from what might be called propaganda (the critics of the "Propaganda Era" strongly reprobated anything they recognized as propaganda), but what was most specifically called the "protest novel."

Smiley, then, in setting *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* as opposites, precisely repeats a well-established gesture of what she calls the "Propaganda Era," except that by preferring *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she reverses the established evaluation. In its broadest terms, the distinction between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* is the difference I have mentioned earlier between "national" and "literary" narratives. In the middle

3. Jane Smiley, "Say It Ain't So, Huck: Second Thoughts on Mark Twain's 'Masterpiece,'" *Harper's* 292, no. 1748 (Jan. 1996): 61–66.

4. On Ellison, see my "Putting the River on New Maps: Race, Nation, and Beyond in Reading *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Literary History* 8, no. 1 (1996): 110–29.

5. Gunnar Myrdal, with the assistance of Richard Sterner and Arnold Rose, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

third of the twentieth century, this issue was phrased as a literary critique of “protest” fiction.

Lionel Trilling’s praise of *Huckleberry Finn* gained force from Trilling’s campaign, begun in the later 1930s and continuing even beyond the publication of *The Liberal Imagination*, against the widespread conventions shaping current fiction of social protest. Trilling was often in sympathy with the political goals of such novels, but he found them weak as literature, and, he argued, their weak sense of what human beings were like was itself politically damaging. *Stalinism* was the strongest name he gave to this tendency to reduce individual complexity on behalf of a collective cause. Appearing in *Partisan Review* in 1949, the year after Trilling had joined its masthead, James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel” takes Trilling’s critique an important step further, for Baldwin gives special attention to American protest fiction on racial issues.

Although Baldwin’s central pages are devoted to the genre as a whole, the two works he attacks in detail are *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, with which he begins, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), with which he ends. Baldwin’s first sentence lays *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as the “cornerstone of American social protest fiction.” The fundamental vice of this genre, for him, is “sentimentality,” which he characterizes in a bravura passage: “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.” Stowe’s inability to produce honest feeling, experience, and life comes from her being “not so much a novelist as an impassioned pamphleteer.”<sup>6</sup>

As a pamphleteer, Stowe is devoted to a “Cause” rather than to “truth.” For Baldwin, truth means “devotion to the human being, his freedom and fulfillment; freedom which cannot be legislated, fulfillment which cannot be charted.” In contrast to the unchartedness of “human being,” the Cause is all chart and legislation and science in the name of “Humanity,” the abstraction rather than the particular, the general rather than the specific. This inhumanity in the name of Humanity means that “Causes, as we know, are notoriously bloodthirsty.” In the late 1940s, the memory of

6. James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *The New Partisan Reader, 1945–1953*, ed. William Phillips and Philip Rahv (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 326–27. Subsequent quotations from Baldwin are from this essay and are cited parenthetically by page number only.

the Nazis and the pressure of the cold war assured this identification of Causes with mass murder. Baldwin names the crucial qualities of human being in the same terms that New Criticism was developing at this time to describe literature: “complexity, . . . ambiguity, paradox” (327). Despite its “good intentions,” protest fiction uses simplifying “categories” instead of inventing complicated human beings, but categorization must fail because “literature and sociology are not the same” (329–30). Current defenders of *Huckleberry Finn* still use these terms that emerged after World War II.

Baldwin brilliantly portrays the self-deluded goodwill he finds at the core of the problem. He writes that “an American liberal” once told him that “as long as such [protest] books are being published . . . everything will be all right” (330). That is, the continuing production of such works replaces the never attained solution of the problems they decry. The deadpan vernacular narration of *Huckleberry Finn*, in this postwar system of values shared by Baldwin and Trilling, stands for its honest engagement with life. Yet the liberal slogan Baldwin mocks just as well fits the current responses by public authorities to objections made against *Huckleberry Finn* in the schools: “As long as this book is being taught, everything will be all right.” And to turn the specific “human being” Huck into a national exemplar, as the hypercanonic critics do, is to reestablish “categories” in a way that I call “nationalizing literary narrative.”

The conjunction of Trilling’s praise of *Huckleberry Finn* and Baldwin’s demolition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* offers a point of departure for thinking more widely about the relation of these two novels, which in the last few years have begun to be sympathetically discussed together, but which for most of this century, when paired, were seen as opposites—as is still the case not only in Smiley’s essay but also in the letters *Harper’s* published in response, almost all of which took for granted a view of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* much like Baldwin’s.

Starting in the 1920s—that is, after the deaths of Twain, Howells, and almost everyone else who had known as adults the days of slavery—it became common to compare *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn*, to the detriment of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. One of the modes by which the hypercanonization of *Huckleberry Finn* proceeded was by competitively draining the prestige of Stowe’s work, which increasingly became a novel that everyone knew had been famous but that no one read any longer. In fact, in the 1940s, for the only time in its history, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* went out of print for a few years. In 1924, in one of the first issues of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, its editor, Henry Seidel Canby (b. 1878), a generation later an editor

of the *Literary History of the United States*, observed, in reviewing Twain's *Autobiography*, "The final condemnation of slavery is not in the abolitionist 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' but in the experiences of that convinced Southerner, 'Huckleberry Finn.'" <sup>7</sup> In his 1950 introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*, the mid-century's leading man of letters, T. S. Eliot, winner of the 1948 Nobel Prize, with characteristic emphasis on technique as the key to moral effect, claims that "the *style* of the book, which is the style of Huck, is what makes it a far more convincing indictment of slavery than the sensationalist propaganda of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*."<sup>8</sup> Despite Edmund Wilson's extended positive exploration of Stowe in *Patriotic Gore* and Ellen Moers's strong praise in *Literary Women*, this pattern began to change only in the 1980s, and it has not yet ended.

I became aware of this pattern in the late 1970s, when I began to introduce *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the syllabi of courses on antebellum American literature. In conversation with students during the first class, in which I discussed with them the reading list, I found that even though none or very few of them had read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, they believed that it had been a work of propaganda of no literary interest once slavery had been abolished, and that because *Huckleberry Finn* was not propaganda but instead a work of art, it was actually a far more powerful attack on slavery. The students were not acquainted with Baldwin's essay or with Eliot's introduction, and the comparison to *Huckleberry Finn* was not something that I introduced. I found that many of the students most eager to make this comparison did not conceive that it means something very different to say that each of the two novels condemns or indicts slavery. Even though the students clearly knew that the Civil War had brought about the end of slavery in the United States, and that *Huckleberry Finn* was written after the Civil War, it held a place in their minds as a work with the same contemporary relation to American slavery as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which appeared as a book in 1852. This mythicization of history, by which *Huckleberry Finn* gained the prestige of abolitionism despite its having been written at a time when slavery did not exist and was defended by no one, helped provoke me to write a book.

Twain and Stowe for many years were close neighbors in Connecti-

7. Henry Seidel Canby, "Mark Twain, Radical," *Saturday Review of Literature* 1 (1 Nov. 1924): 1.

8. T. S. Eliot, introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*, in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Sculley Bradley et al., 2d ed. (New York: Norton, 1977), 330.

cut, with warm personal relations. Yet during Twain's lifetime, their works were not thought of together. While *Huckleberry Finn* was predominantly thought of as a boy's book, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* continued to hold an important place in the critical consciousness of American literary history through Stowe's long lifetime (she died only in 1896) and on into the twentieth century. The example of Thomas Dixon (b. 1864) illustrates the continuing prestige and currency of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Dixon's racist and anti-Reconstruction works of fiction began with *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865–1900* (1902), written quite explicitly as a response, after fifty years, to Stowe. Stowe's Simon Legree reappears as the villain in Dixon's novel: "Rumors of his death proved a mistake. He had quit drink, and set his mind on greater vices"—that is, as an opportunistic carpetbagger.<sup>9</sup> Dixon himself went on to greater things, too. *The Clansman* (1905) became the basis for the film *The Birth of a Nation*, which Dixon's friend Woodrow Wilson screened in the White House and which, in turn, sparked the renewal of the KKK in the United States, spreading it, for the first time, to the North. More broadly, Kenneth Warren, in *Black and White Strangers*, has shown that in the late nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provoked critical reflections on the category of the "sentimental" (still working in strange ways in Baldwin's 1949 essay), which formed the basis for a new ideology of "discrimination." As I shall go on to show, those astute enough to distinguish realistic from sentimental fiction were also, it seemed, skilled at making social distinctions that would prevent the mingling of races or cultures.

*A Literary History of America* (1900) by Barrett Wendell (b. 1855) was mocked from its first appearance for its excessive focus on New England. Nonetheless, Wendell found *Huckleberry Finn* worth mention and praise. In discussing New England abolitionists of the 1830s and their concern with the dehumanizing effects of slavery, he quotes, as the briefest possible example of this dehumanization, Huck's famous lie to Aunt Sally about the steamboat explosion:

"Good gracious!" she exclaims, "anybody hurt?"

"No,'m. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."<sup>10</sup>

9. Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden, 1865–1900* (New York: Doubleday, 1902), 84.

10. Barrett Wendell, *A Literary History of America* (1900; reprint, New York: Greenwood, 1968), 342. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *LHA*.



In a vein that I expect will horrify anyone reading this essay, Wendell explains that “seventy years ago,” New Englanders might have been distressed at the callousness Huck enacts, but “modern ethnology” teaches that “Africans . . . linger far behind the social stage” achieved by Americans. The unenlightened “philanthropic people in 1830,” however, believed that any “distinction between Caucasians and Africans” was no more than “a question of complexion” (*LHA*, 342). Readers in the late twentieth century typically recognize in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* quite substantial differences between the races, characterized by George Frederickson (in *The Black Image in the White Mind*) as a “romantic racialism,” his term for distinctions—such as Stowe’s belief that people of African descent are more readily open to the message of Christianity—that are not meant as pejorative, even though to modern readers they seem so. Like Wendell, however, Charles Francis Adams—grandson of John Quincy Adams, son of Lincoln’s minister to Great Britain, and himself a combat soldier in the Civil War—by the early years of the twentieth century had come to see Stowe as a deluded racial egalitarian. In a much repeated oration on the centennial of Robert E. Lee (1907), Adams criticized Stowe’s “female and sentimentalist” view that “the only difference between the Ethiopian and the Caucasian is epidermal.”<sup>11</sup>

Wendell, in any case, had cited *Huckleberry Finn* not as an example of abolitionism but as an accurate representation of a particular way of feeling, once common only in the slave South but now shared in cultivated New England. Wendell also mentions *Huckleberry Finn* as the “masterpiece” among attempts “to reproduce the native dialects of the American people” and as thereby showing a rigorous “artistic conscience” (*LHA*, 477). This “amazing Odyssey of the Mississippi” is not only an important “picture of the Middle West” of an earlier era, but “in certain moods one is disposed for all its eccentricity to call [it] the most admirable work of literary art yet produced on this continent” (*LHA*, 503).

Wendell’s praise of Twain, strong as it is, does not fundamentally shape his book. I have quoted almost in full the three very brief and scattered mentions of *Huckleberry Finn*. And despite his inclination toward the new national culture of white supremacy, he still accords Stowe and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* an important place in his account, some five pages in a book of less than six hundred pages. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, even though it was “written carelessly” and is “full of crudities,” nonetheless, “even after forty-eight

11. Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 178.

years," still seems "a remarkable piece of fiction." And Wendell emphasizes that the "great popular success" of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and its relation to the "changing public opinion of her day" are no grounds to doubt Stowe's "power" as a writer, whether in the "pervasive vitality" of her characters, her "faithful" descriptions, or her "strong and vivid" style (*LHA*, 354).

William Dean Howells (b. 1837), the most important American-based reviewer during the years of Twain's adulthood, was deeply angered by Wendell's history, especially by its dismissive attitude toward abolitionism. In contrast to Wendell's emphasis on how much historical distance separated his readers of 1900 from the antebellum period, Howells, in challenging particular interpretations of Wendell's, discussed details from the 1850s as if they were of the utmost contemporary significance and vividness.<sup>12</sup> Howells, far more deeply than Wendell, held both Stowe and Twain in the highest esteem. In an 1897 essay entitled "My Favorite Novelist and His Best Book," in which he discussed many favorites, Howells made a claim that must seem outrageous now to readers schooled in Hawthorne and Melville but that closely echoes the earlier judgment of the Civil War hero and realist novelist J. W. De Forest in his 1868 *Nation* article, "The Great American Novel": "Until after the war we had no real novels in this country, except *Uncle Tom's Cabin*." But Stowe's novel was not just outstanding in an impoverished field: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is "one of the great novels of the world, and of all time." History had not diminished its appeal: "The fact that slavery was done away with does not matter; the interest in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will never pass, because the book is really . . . true to human nature."<sup>13</sup>

Despite Howells's close friendship with Twain and his strong commitment to social justice for people of all classes and races, which led him not only to call himself a socialist but also to participate in founding the NAACP in 1909, despite Howells's confidence that Twain was "entirely satisfied with the results of the Civil War" and "eager to have its facts and meanings brought out,"<sup>14</sup> and even despite his admiration for Huck's "spiritual struggle" in chapter 31 (in which Huck determines that he would rather

12. William Dean Howells, "Professor Barrett Wendell's Notions of American Literature" (1901), in *W. D. Howells as Critic*, ed. Edwin H. Cady (London: Routledge, 1973), 375.

13. William Dean Howells, "My Favorite Novelist and His Best Book," in *W. D. Howells as Critic*, 275.

14. William Dean Howells, "My Mark Twain" (1910), in *The Shock of Recognition: The Development of Literature in the United States Recorded by the Men Who Made It*, ed. Edmund Wilson (Garden City: Doubleday, 1943), 696.

“go to hell” than help return Jim to Miss Watson),<sup>15</sup> I have no grounds for believing that Howells thought of *Huckleberry Finn* as doing cultural work comparable to Stowe’s with regard to racial issues of the 1880s and beyond.

Perhaps the clearest instance of Howells’s evident separation of *Huckleberry Finn* into a sector of his mind unrelated to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* occurs in one of his monthly *Harper’s* “Editor’s Study” columns (September 1886). Howells discusses Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, contrasting the terrible social circumstances of czarist Russia with the better conditions of the United States. Notoriously, Howells concludes that American writers should not undertake Dostoyevskian themes but should “concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life,” because those are the “more American.”<sup>16</sup> Howells had not yet come to his socialist position, and so he argued that because in the United States the “wrong from class to class” is “almost inappreciable,” American writers should therefore seek the “universal” (the highest and proper goal of art) not in “social interests,” as might be appropriate for European writers, but rather in “the individual” (ES, 94).

This theoretical position perfectly anticipates the one adopted by a wide spectrum of major writers—among them Lionel Trilling, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Robert Penn Warren—in the 1940s as a response to the vogue of “protest fiction” associated with broadly socialist sympathies, often polemically construed as communist or Stalinist. Nonetheless, in the 1940s, at the time when this position was triumphant, Howells himself was largely put down as part of the “genteel tradition” that in so many ways he not only stood against but fought against. One might explain this misunderstanding by the fact that the writers of the 1940s saw the focus on the individual as the means to achieving “tragedy,” while Howells had associated it with the “smiling aspects” (which to the writers of the 1940s recalled the leftist optimism of the Popular Front).

In the same *Harper’s* column in which he made this notorious argument, Howells also reconsidered the matter. The “Editor’s Study” was meant to be reflective, a space for thought, not merely journalism, and yet it was also a review column, in which new books would be mentioned and discussed, as with Howells’s reporting on the newly available French translation of Dostoyevsky, who was still scarcely known in English. In the same

15. William Dean Howells, “Mark Twain: An Inquiry,” in *W. D. Howells as Critic*, 342.

16. “Editor’s Study,” in *Howells as Critic*, 94. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as ES.

column, he also takes notice of Sarah Bradford's biographical study of Harriet Tubman, the African American heroine who had become known as the "Moses of Her People" for her nineteen trips back into slaveholding territory, after her own escape, to lead out others. This part of the column was omitted in Howells's *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), the revised compilation from which most twentieth-century readers have read the "Editor's Study" pieces.

Howells turns to Bradford and Tubman by reflecting, "It is only now and then, when some dark shadow of our shameful past appears, that we can ever believe there was a tragic element in our prosperity." Even in this case, though, such a book "Affects us like a tale 'Of old, unhappy, far-off things, / And battles long ago'" (quoting from Wordsworth's poem "The Highland Reaper," the speaker's response to hearing the reaping woman sing in Gaelic, a language he does not understand). Howells emphasizes, "We cannot realize that most of the men and women now living were once commanded by the law of the land to turn and hunt . . . fugitives back into slavery; that those who abetted such outlaws were sometimes mulcted to the last dollar of their substance in fines." Howells concludes, "We can hardly imagine such things for the purposes of fiction" (ES, 95). This from the man who just two years earlier had done his friend Mark Twain the favor of scrupulously proofreading *Huckleberry Finn*!

Evidently, *Huckleberry Finn*, for Howells, was simply not part of the literature of slavery, and so he didn't think of it—even though to readers a century later the history Howells evokes of antebellum social and legal support for slavery seems exactly what *Huckleberry Finn* is about. So long, then, as abolitionism remained a powerful and valued concern of recent history, readers could prize both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* without thinking of them as rivals for mastery over the same literary terrain. As those who had lived through the Civil War yielded to a new generation, distinctions that were once very important blurred, and new alignments of literature took shape, in which, from the 1920s into the 1940s, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suffered both from its association with progressive racial views (however much others more recently have denied that!) and from its "feminine" technique of sentiment. Because of its masculinist system of characters and its deadpan narrative mode, *Huckleberry Finn* was preserved, it seemed, from the taint of sentiment (although it has recently become possible to revise that view) and so could be praised safely as a racial exemplar when that once again became a good thing to be.

In the late nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was not discussed

exclusively within literary circles. Major historians who wrote about the antebellum period paid significant attention to Stowe's work as a historical force. It is significant that, to my knowledge, no (nonliterary) historian has ever treated *Huckleberry Finn* with the kind of attention that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* long received, and to a lesser extent still does. The examples I will be discussing all come from 1892, a notable year in the history of blacks and whites in the United States because it was the year in which Homer Plessy tested the Louisiana law that prohibited whites and people of color from traveling in the same railway cars. When the Supreme Court upheld this law in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), it laid the basis for six decades of racial segregation on the basis of "separate but equal."

James Ford Rhodes, in the first volume (1892) of his massive history of the United States from the Compromise of 1850 through Reconstruction makes an extended comparison between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *La nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He finds them alike not only in the immediate impact they had on their cultures, extending far more deeply than mere popularity, but also in their slower, but decisive, political impact.<sup>17</sup> In his chapter on conditions in the South, Rhodes asserts the accuracy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, citing testimony from Frederick Douglass (a valued source drawn on frequently by Rhodes) concerning an African American he had known personally who equaled "Mrs. Stowe's Christian hero."<sup>18</sup> Rhodes also emphasized the way in which Stowe's work entered the political process even though much of its impact was on women, who could not vote and generally were excluded from political debate: "The cruelty of separating families . . . especially awakened the sympathy of Northern women, who counted for much in educating and influencing voters in a way that finally brought about the abolition of slavery."<sup>19</sup> The links between women's feelings, sentimental fiction, and political change seemed obvious to him.

Rhodes (b. 1848) was from Ohio; his family ties included abolitionists; and although his history won tremendous acclaim, he was not a professional historian but a retired businessman who turned to history after he had made his fortune. Woodrow Wilson (b. 1856), in contrast, was a Southerner by birth and connections, and he was one of the first to receive a Ph.D.

17. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850*, vol. 1, 1850–1854 (1892; reprint, New York: Harper, 1896), 278–85.

18. Rhodes, *History of the United States*, 363–65.

19. Rhodes, *History of the United States*, 318.

in history from Johns Hopkins, the first American university to grant the research doctorate. In *Division and Reunion* (1892), a survey of American history since 1829, published the same year as Rhodes's first volume, Wilson wrote of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with admiration for its "moving imaginative portrayal of the pathos, the humor, the tragedy, the terror of the slavery system."<sup>20</sup> However, as part of the professionalization of history, and perhaps also because of his more Southern perspective, he took quite a different view from Rhodes of the accuracy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Wilson acknowledged that it "unquestionably showed what *might* come out of the system" (my emphasis), but he insisted that its actual substance was "built upon wholly exceptional incidents." Because it "was a product of the sympathetic imagination" rather than of reliable and specific documentation, therefore "the historian must reject [it] as quite misleading."

Wilson's *Division and Reunion* is one of the first major histories of the United States that is distinctly oriented to Southern concerns, but as part of what is both a professional neutrality and a political aim of sectional reconciliation, Wilson is far more concerned with exculpating the South from guilt than with launching an attack on the North, either the North of the past or the present. Indeed, he held an interesting understanding of what a historian's professional neutrality meant. In a discussion of Southern history at an 1896 meeting of the American Historical Association, he was reported as claiming, "A man might as well quarrel with his own nature and that of his ancestors as for the true historian to find fault with the people he attempts to describe."<sup>21</sup>

Among the writers of the 1880s whose work brought a newly nostalgic view of the slave South, one of the most important was the Virginian Thomas Nelson Page (b. 1853), whose short stories appeared in the *Century* magazine during the same period in which it excerpted *Huckleberry Finn*. As long ago as 1937, in a Pulitzer Prize-winning book that shared in the renewed national support for the South that began in this post-Reconstruction period, the Harvard historian Paul Buck contrasted Page and Stowe in terms that are suggestive for Twain, too. Buck observed that in Stowe, "the sympathy of the reader is directed to the lowly slave"; in

20. Woodrow Wilson, *Division and Reunion: 1829-1889* (1892; reprint, New York: Collier Books, 1961), 154. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph come from the same page.

21. Laurence Veysey, "The Plural Organized Worlds of the Humanities," in *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860-1920*, ed. Alexandra Oleson and John Voss (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 78.

contrast, the postwar fiction about the slave South makes “the overthrown gentry” into the “recipients of a forgiving pity.” But in both cases, he astutely noted, “the Negro was primarily a device by which a white philosophy of race relations was advanced.”<sup>22</sup> In *Huckleberry Finn*, things are different from the way they are in Page; there is no appeal for readers’ sympathy to be extended to the slaveholders; and yet Jim, too, has been mostly read as a figure to make whites think in certain ways about racial issues.

Page also wrote full-length fiction and influential nonfiction. His collection of essays, *The Old South* (1892), takes virtually the same attitude toward the institution and practices of slavery as Wilson, but Page is much more critical of the prewar North, even as he seeks an alliance in the present between white men of the South and North to minimize social change that might otherwise arise from the activity of a free population of African Americans.

Page rates very highly the political significance of culture. He goes so far as to claim that the reason the South lost the Civil War was the “lack of a literature” with which to make its concerns and way of life compellingly known to outsiders.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the North had the power of literature on its side. As Page understands the course of history, “by arousing the general sentiment of the world against slavery,” *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* successfully “overruled the Supreme Court, and abrogated the Constitution,” both of which had offered protection to the way of life of the slave South (OS, 303). For Page, “literature” includes all valued forms of writing, so history, essays, and fiction are all part of what he is thinking of. In the absence of any extended and respected history that truly sets forth the South, “by the world at large we are held to have been . . . ignorant, illiterate, semi-barbarous . . . sunk in brutality and vice . . . a race of slave-drivers” (OS, 254). Any fair-minded person must agree, I think, that even if one detests the practice of slavery, life cannot have been like this for all people everywhere in the South, yet much of what Page describes here is the image that many admiring readers of *Huckleberry Finn* have proclaimed as its view of “the” South or “the” Southerner.

The power of the position for which Page spoke may be seen in a passage that is still remarkably relevant to debates going on now in the United States. He puts forward what he considers “to-day the most portentous as the most dangerous problem which confronts the American people.”

22. Paul H. Buck, *The Road to Reunion, 1865–1900* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1937), 210.

23. Thomas Nelson Page, *The Old South: Essays Social and Political* (1892; reprint, New York: Scribner, 1918), 50. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as OS.

And he notes that one sign of its danger and portent is that “even the terminology for it in the two sections varies irreconcilably.” In the North, it is simply understood as “the question of the civil equality of all citizens before the law.” But the South calls it “the question of negro domination.” The even more ideologically charged term by which this issue had been framed during Reconstruction was *Africanization*. Page proposes to diminish the split between sections by giving the problem a name by which it can be known “more accurately”: “it should be termed the race question” (*OS*, 280).

Page was not solely responsible for transforming the terms of debate and understanding. For example, the conservative French novelist Paul Bourget reported on his trip to the United States in 1894. One of the constant themes of this work is the importance of “the idea of Race”; race is the reality, while in the United States “class struggle is . . . only an appearance.”<sup>24</sup> As part, then, of a prestigious, intellectually advanced, international development of social Darwinism, Page’s work helped push along a shift of the utmost consequence.

Page gets away from what Wilson had criticized as “lawyer’s facts,”<sup>25</sup> lest the North challenge on constitutional grounds, including the newly established grounds of the Reconstruction amendments, the Southern restoration of white domination. If the North can be made to agree that it is a “race problem” rather than a problem of law or fairness or human rights, then long-existing, and deepening, cultural practices of racism can be brought to bear on the Southern white side, as Barrett Wendell’s literary history demonstrates. Page was right on the mark when he argued in his appeal to the North for understanding and shared commitment on this issue, “The only thing that stands to-day between the people of the North and the negro is the people of the South” (*OS*, 284). Within Page’s lifetime, the First World War brought the first great migration of some half-million African Americans from the South, and by the 1940s, the “race problem” was fully national.

Like Wilson, Page argues against sentiment, but he goes beyond Wilson in the role he accords to race. Page asserts: “Whatever a sentimental philanthropy may say; whatever a modern and misguided humanitarianism may declare, there underlies the whole matter the indubitable, potent, and mysterious principle of race quality” (*OS*, 313). *Quality* is historical, mysterious, organic, intuitive, as opposed to the simplistically self-evident *equality* of Enlightenment documents such as the Declaration of Independence. And

24. Paul Bourget, *Outre-Mer: Impressions of America*, translator not named (New York: Scribner, 1895), 4, 216.

25. Wilson, *Division and Reunion*, 178.



nowadays, a century after Page, American national consensus does agree that it is a “race problem,” and that this means that it is a matter of complex feelings rather than of simple justice. Speaking for the self-renewing Southern ruling class of his day, which was successfully putting forward the terms that would become hegemonic throughout the United States, Page urged, “Get politics out of it, and the problem will be more than half solved” (OS, 343). At the same time that Page was putting forward this view, Booker T. Washington—who praised Twain’s “deep sympathy” for Jim but misremembered Jim as “a poor, ignorant negro boy who accompanies the heroes of the story, Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, on a long journey down the Mississippi on a raft”<sup>26</sup>—was putting forward its African American complement. So long as the race problem could remain out of politics, it would be in the sphere of sentiment, and in that sphere, the South, which had seen the need to rearm, carried the day. One use for *Huckleberry Finn*, then, when civil rights began to return to the national agenda, was that it does effectively operate in the realm of sympathy, but without the overtly sentimental rhetoric that had been discredited in Stowe.

*Huckleberry Finn* is far more polemically hostile toward the South than is *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, yet it better fit the worldview that Page and Wilson were helping to form because it changed the model of action Stowe put forward in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Although Tom’s death comes through his nonviolent resistance rather than in armed battle, he is nonetheless an activist (although since the “New Negro” movement of the 1920s, many African Americans have devalued this personalistic, rather than political, mode of action). Throughout his protracted torture, he keeps information from Legree and assists the escape of fellow slaves. In his mode of Christian love, he is active, never just a spectator, and never represented clownishly. For both Huck and Jim, however, all the power of what they do is in their feelings, whether their powerful affection and loyalty toward each other, or Huck’s alienation from the system of slavery. The self-undoing plot of the novel prevents either Jim or Huck from effective action, and the mise-en-scène and language of the book carefully shield it from politics. Consequently, it was never understood to be competing with Stowe during the time that abolitionism maintained any prestige in the culture.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century, historiography ceased to emphasize slavery as shaping the history of the United States.

26. Booker T. Washington, “Tribute to Mark Twain,” *North American Review* 191, no. 655 (June 1910): 828–30. Cited in Stuart Hutchinson, ed., *Mark Twain: Critical Assessments* (Mountfield, England: Helm Information, 1993), 2:462–63.

The “progressive” history of Frederick Jackson Turner, Charles A. Beard, and Vernon Louis Parrington put economic issues in the center, and an offshoot from this analysis enabled the “revisionist” interpretation of the Civil War, which demonized, rather than ignored, abolitionism. This is the context in which *Huckleberry Finn* came to be understood as preferable to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a critique of slavery.

T. S. Eliot's introduction powerfully states the key terms: “Huck is passive and impassive, apparently always the victim of events; and yet, in his acceptance of the world, and what it does to him and them, he is more powerful than his world, because he is more *aware* than any other person in it.”<sup>27</sup> Even as Eliot writes of Twain's “indictment” of slavery, his emphasis on passivity rehearses an important motif in the racist turn away from the Civil War. It is by now well known that some 180,000 African Americans fought as soldiers in the Union Army, some 15 percent of the total Union force, many of them once enslaved men, some of whom had made their way to Union lines as “contrabands,” others who were part of the population in rebel areas overrun by Union troops. The eagerness of these black men to fight, and their successful record in combat, played a crucial part in moving Lincoln, and the American people more broadly, toward acknowledging the necessity of full emancipation by the war's end. But as part of the reaction against the war, a constant motif of Southern apologists was to emphasize the helplessness of (ex-)slaves who had, passively, been freed.

In 1901, the Boston-based *Atlantic Monthly*, from its founding closely associated with support for abolitionism and then Reconstruction, commissioned a set of articles to reassess Reconstruction twenty-five years after it had ended. In the spirit of achieved reconciliation, the authors included Northerners and Southerners, and not only whites, for W. E. B. Du Bois also contributed his important essay on the history of the Freedmen's Bureau. The essays by those with Southern sympathies very clearly demonstrate this emphasis on African American passivity. In the lead essay, Woodrow Wilson asserts, “The slaves had been freed by the force of arms,”<sup>28</sup> but with no mention that the arms had significantly included their own. Hilary A. Herbert had long served in Congress, representing Alabama, and then became Secretary of the Navy for Grover Cleveland. Herbert writes, “Not in all the imaginings of the Arabian nights is there any concept so startling

27. Eliot, introduction to *Huckleberry Finn*, 330.

28. Woodrow Wilson, “The Reconstruction of the Southern States,” in *Reconstruction in Retrospect: Views from the Turn of the Century*, ed. Richard Current (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 17.

as the sudden manumission of four millions of slaves, left unshackled to shift for themselves.”<sup>29</sup> The way in which Herbert defends laws restricting or forbidding African Americans the use of firearms is astonishing. He explains that “recollections of the negro insurrection headed by Nat Turner,” as well as “predictions long ago made by Mr. Calhoun, and frequently by others,” had produced in the South “a very general fear that . . . the suddenly emancipated slaves might attempt to repeat the massacres of San Domingo” (referring to the insurrection in the 1790s by which Haiti, in the spirit of the French Revolution, won its freedom from colonial rule to become the second independent state in the Western hemisphere).<sup>30</sup> Looking back to define a continuity with the distant 1790s and 1830s, Herbert omits the fact that in the rather more recent 1860s, many African American men in the South had served as Union combat soldiers, displaying discipline, training, and skill rather than murderous irrationality. However nightmarish it may have seemed to Southerners, this record was hardly something that Northerners could disavow, if it were recalled to the record.

This context of national discussion suggests an alternative political allegory for *Huckleberry Finn*. Some critics now understand *Huckleberry Finn* as criticizing the failure of Reconstruction, in its flawed attempt to win freedom for African Americans who were, by law, already free. But one might also link *Huckleberry Finn* to a long-standing inability to recognize the agency of African Americans in regard to their own liberation and advancement. Mark Twain’s letter committing himself financially to assist an African American student at Yale Law School has often been cited in the last dozen years as evidence for his racially progressive views. Yet in the letter, Twain asserts that whites owe blacks a debt of reparation because “we have ground the manhood out of them.”<sup>31</sup> A century after Twain’s wish to aid the helpless, Ronald Reagan remembered and honored *Huckleberry Finn* in similar terms. In a 1985 *Washington Post* article, subtitled “The President Defends the Values of an American Classic,” Reagan’s inaccurate summary of the book is, “Huck works hard to keep Jim free, and in the end he succeeds.”<sup>32</sup>

29. Hilary A. Herbert, “The Conditions of the Reconstruction Problem,” in Current, *Reconstruction in Retrospect*, 35.

30. Herbert, “The Conditions of the Reconstruction Problem,” 43–44.

31. Mark Twain, letter of 24 Dec. 1885, in Edwin McDowell, “From Twain, a Letter on Debt to the Blacks,” *New York Times*, 14 Mar. 1885, 1, 16.

32. The article is reprinted in Laurie Champion, ed., *The Critical Response to Mark Twain’s “Huckleberry Finn”* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1991), 156–57.

One way of evading the problem of African Americans' activity in armed self-liberation was by playing down the importance of slavery and its consequences and turning the attention of historians to other issues. Frederick Jackson Turner (b. 1861) was the historian most responsible for an understanding of American history that achieved this effect. Woodrow Wilson and Turner were close friends as young historians at Johns Hopkins, but Turner already offered quite a different view from Wilson's of the overall shape of American history. In "Problems in American History" (1892), Turner names the "fundamental, dominating fact of United States history": it is "the expansion of the United States from the Alleghenies to the Pacific."<sup>33</sup> Excessive "attention to slavery" may obscure this truth by overemphasizing what is, however important, still only an "incident." What Turner defines as the "real lines of American development" are found "in the history of westward expansion." This shift of attention away from slavery is, for Turner, associated with a larger geographical reorientation: "the true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast; it is the Mississippi Valley."

This piece was the preamble to Turner's essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" (1893), which for many decades shaped the whole understanding of American history from colonial times into the twentieth century, precisely by giving it a new point of view. Turner criticizes Rhodes for treating only as "incidental to the slavery struggle" the legislation that was "called out by the western advance." Turner flatly rebuts Rhodes: "This is a wrong perspective."<sup>34</sup> In contrast to the "sectional" character of slavery, in the Mississippi Valley, "on the tide of the Father of Waters," Americans lost their sectional character: "North and South met and mingled into a nation."<sup>35</sup> Turner's concern with expansion as the action and the Mississippi Valley as its scene defines the understanding of American history by which Bernard DeVoto, in *Mark Twain's America* (1932), made Twain into America's most fully representative writer (although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is no less a novel of the Mississippi Valley).

One need not impute base motives to Turner to find that his shifting of the perspective of American history away from the question of slavery to the question of continental expansion effectively responded to a widely

33. Frederick Jackson Turner, "Problems in American History," in *Frontier and Section*, ed. Ray Allen Billington (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1961), 28. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from pages 28 and 29.

34. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," in *Frontier*, 52.

35. Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 56.

shared wish that these terribly vexed and painful questions would go away, a wish to believe that some things had at last been resolved if not solved. At the moment in 1877 when Federal troops were withdrawn from the South, thus ending Reconstruction, the *Nation* editorialized, "The Negro . . . will disappear from the field of national politics." Punning on the title of the journal, the *Nation* concluded, "Henceforth, the nation, as a nation, will have nothing more to do with him."<sup>36</sup> A cartoon by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly*, from 1885, the year *Huckleberry Finn* was published, is entitled "A Dead Issue," and it shows a dignified plowman representing the "South" putting off a bent and greasy-looking representative of the Northern press: "I should like to oblige you by killing a few Negroes, Mr. Tribune, but I am too busy."<sup>37</sup> Other issues seized national attention. In 1877, the end of Reconstruction, there were bloody confrontations between labor and property, and Eric Foner directly links this turn in national politics to the abandonment of civil rights in the South, for the federal government built armories to house troops "not in the South to protect black citizens, but in the major cities of the North," so as never again to be caught shorthanded if industrial owners should feel threatened.<sup>38</sup>

*Huckleberry Finn* occupied a curious position. Insofar as slavery was past and the race issue in current politics was "dead," Twain's novel could function as a distraction. Like other forms of fiction that were popular in the decades after the Civil War among a wide, nonelite readership, such as the dime novel, Twain cast his book's conflicts in "the ideological dimensions of the 1830s and 1840s."<sup>39</sup> This is less a question of slavery as such than of what many modern critics have seen as the broader issue of "conflicts between fraternal egalitarianism on the one hand and social hierarchy and deference on the other"—that is, the authenticity and closeness of Huck and Jim, against the fraudulent claims of superiority by the king and duke. Twain's foregrounding of their transatlantic social and cultural pretensions, along with Tom Sawyer's "evasion," places *Huckleberry Finn* squarely in the

36. Quoted in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper, 1988), 582.

37. *Harper's Weekly* 29, no. 1497 (29 Aug. 1885): 576.

38. Foner, *Reconstruction*, 582.

39. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990), 330. Subsequent quotations in this paragraph also draw from this valuable discussion of dime novels (which does not mention Twain).

Jacksonian rhetoric of American equality struggling against “vestiges of the feudal past or alien intrusions.”

Yet this structure of values looked back to a vanished social and cultural order, and it distracted attention from “class divisions arising out of industrialization.”<sup>40</sup> *Huckleberry Finn's* America of WASPS and slaves could appear a welcome simplification compared to an America of the 1880s, in which immigration, increasingly of Catholics from southern, central, and eastern Europe, was becoming a politically sensitive concern. As Woodrow Wilson put it in his 1892 *Division and Reunion*, by the 1880s, immigration “had long since become a threat instead of a source of increased wealth and material strength” to the United States, for it brought “the pauperized and the discontented and disheartened of all lands” rather than the “hopeful and the sturdy classes of former days.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, even in those former days, the issue had been hot. With German and Irish immigrants coming in large numbers into Missouri in the 1840s and involving themselves in anti-slavery activity,<sup>42</sup> it becomes of some interest that Twain told the illustrator of *Huckleberry Finn* not to make Huck look too “Irishy.”<sup>43</sup>

Another tremendous new social and political concern at the time Twain was writing *Huckleberry Finn* was the figure known as the “tramp,” a sometimes pitied, and more often feared, image of men as migrant, casual labor or out of work, and with no home, newly filling the landscape and changing the self-understanding of the United States both for property owners and workers. To the extent that Huck and Jim matched this contemporary type, they were a source of discomfort to genteel opinion, but for many more readers, they presented a pair of mobile males of working age but without work, whose adventures could be followed with far less anxiety than those of their current counterparts.

Being read as a boy's book, then, was an important mode of currency for *Huckleberry Finn* during the first three or four decades of its existence, when, despite its concern with an escaped slave and the vacillations of a white boy's feelings about helping that slave, the novel was not understood

40. Saxton, *Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, 330.

41. Wilson, *Division and Reunion*, 243.

42. Kenneth M. Stampp, “The Fate of the Southern Antislavery Movement,” *Journal of Negro History* 28 (1943): 18–19.

43. Letter of 7 May 1884, quoted in Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer, vol. 8 of *The Works of Mark Twain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 450.

as existing in the same cultural space as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Since then, it has been read as an alternative to Stowe's work, which it is, insofar as both works make an appeal to the power of sentiment, but Stowe meant to change a reader's feeling about slavery, while Twain relies on his readers already condemning slavery.