

## ***huckleberry finn*** ***and the minstrel show***

anthony j. berret, s.j.

The original, the genuine, the extravagant minstrel show—“the show which to me had no peer and whose peer has not yet arrived, in my experience:” Mark Twain glorified the minstrel show in terms that echo the magniloquent bluster characteristic of the show itself. “We have the grand opera,” he said, but if the minstrel show came back “in its pristine purity and perfection I should have but little further use for opera.” For the elevated mind and the sensitive spirit he declared the minstrel show “a standard and a summit to whose rarefied altitude the other forms of musical art may not hope to reach.”<sup>1</sup> Although the music and drama critics of the time did not agree with his preference of minstrels to operas, they did treasure the minstrel show as an art form born in America. Writing for *Harper’s* magazine in 1889, scholar and critic Laurence Hutton called Negro minstrelsy the “only branch of the dramatic art . . . which has had its origin in this country, while the melody it has inspired is certainly our only approach to a national music.”<sup>2</sup>

Mark Twain summarized the history of Negro minstrelsy in a 1906 autobiographical dictation: “The minstrel show was born in the early forties and it had a prosperous career for about thirty-five years; then it degenerated into a variety show . . . with a Negro act or two thrown in incidentally.” Three of the showmen whom Mark Twain remembered—Billy Birch, Charley Backus, and David Wambold—belonged to the San Francisco Minstrels, a troupe which formed on the Pacific coast in the 1850s and moved to New York in 1864. Mark Twain saw them in both places and must have appreciated their strict adherence to the pristine features of minstrelsy. Earlier too, while he was growing up in Hannibal in

the 1840s, he saw minstrels in Spalding and Rogers' Floating Palace and Dan Rice's Circus, and once he brought his mother to see the Christy Minstrels in St. Louis, after assuring her that they were African missionaries and would provide entertainment that was sufficiently edifying for a church member. Later, he imagined his boy heroes, Tom Sawyer and Joe Harper, getting up a band of performers and putting on a show of their own when the minstrels came to town.<sup>3</sup>

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was composed and situated during the period when minstrel shows were enjoying the heyday of their prosperity. Over the eight years in which Mark Twain worked intermittently on it, memories of the old and new South occupied his mind. In the spring of 1882 he took a riverboat down the Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans, and after a short stay there he traveled back up the river all the way to St. Paul. He made this trip primarily to gather material for *Life on the Mississippi*, but along the way he also visited scenes and heard stories that he would incorporate into his novel. At one point he saw minstrels perform, and often during the trip he recorded samples of black dialect and song. In New Orleans he visited George Washington Cable and Joel Chandler Harris, both delineators of black character and dialect. With them, and including William Dean Howells and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, he planned a lecture tour which he called a circus or menagerie, but which might just as well have been called a minstrel show. As it happened, only he and Cable made the tour, but the minstrel qualities remained. Twain and Cable made a perfect comic-straight man team, opposing one another as tall and short, sloppy and neat, loose and strict. Twain was advertised as providing the humor, Cable the pathos; and both played roles of black persons in their readings. Cable even sang songs. It was during this tour in the fall of 1884 and spring of 1885 that Americans heard parts of *Huckleberry Finn* for the first time. The "King Sollermun" passage was a frequent and favorite reading, and amid the stories, songs and black impersonations, it must have seemed part of a unique minstrel show.<sup>4</sup>

Besides having minstrel influences during the years of its composition and in the circumstances that accompanied the earliest readings of its passages, *Huckleberry Finn* treats many of the same topics as the minstrel show: the pre-war South, the black slave and freeman, status and mobility in American society and nostalgia for the values of home and family in an age of change. It also adopts the chief strategy of the minstrel show, the use of a black character or black persona as a mouthpiece for humor, social criticism and deep personal sentiment. Finally, *Huckleberry Finn* appears to follow a three-part structure like that of the minstrel show. It opens with passages which resemble the comic dialogues and sentimental songs of the first part of the show, continues with an "olio" of novelty acts put on by the king and the duke and finishes with an elaborate and zany burlesque.

Robert C. Toll describes the standard structure that the minstrel show had developed by the 1850s.<sup>5</sup> It opened with perhaps a dozen performers in blackface sitting on the stage in a semicircle. They told jokes and stories from their places and rose individually or as a group for songs and dances.

According to Mark Twain's 1906 dictation, the main feature in the first part of the show was comic dialogue between a genteel interlocutor or middleman and two vernacular endmen. Huck's conversation with Jim in Chapter XIV of *Huckleberry Finn* may be viewed as a typical minstrel dialogue. Of course, Huck is nowhere near as elegant or pretentious as the usual interlocutor, but he does consider himself superior to Jim because of his literacy. He reads books to Jim "about kings and dukes and earls and such, and how gaudy they dressed, and how much style they put on," and Huck puts on intellectual airs of his own with stories about the million wives in Solomon's harem. Jim knows about kings from a pack of cards and recognizes a harem as a "bo'd'n house," but of Solomon's wisdom he says:

"I doan' take no stock in dat . . ."  
"Well, but he *was* the wisest man, anyway; because the widow she told me so, her own self."  
"I doan' k'yer what de widder say, he *warn't* no wise man, nuther. He had some er de dad-fetchedes' ways I ever see. Does you know 'bout dat chile dat he 'uz gwyne to chop in two?"

To demonstrate the stupidity of Solomon's judgment, Jim compares the child to a dollar bill being whacked in two:

"Now I want to ast you: what's de use er dat half a bill?—can't buy noth'n wid it. En what use is a half a chile? . . ."  
"But hang it, Jim, you've clean missed the point—blame it, you've missed it a thousand mile."  
"Who? Me? Go 'long. Doan' talk to *me* 'bout Yo' pints . . . De 'spute warn't 'bout half a chile, de 'spute was 'bout a whole chile; . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Among the critics who see influences of the minstrel show in the "King Sollermun" passage and in other dialogues between Huck and Jim, some accuse Twain of stooping to false and offensive racial stereotypes to court popular favor, while others cite the ironies and complexities of these passages as evidence for Twain's subtle partiality toward Jim despite the surface stereotypes. Ralph Ellison, for example, finds dignity, humanity and adulthood in the character of Jim, but admits that these qualities are hidden beneath the mask of a blackfaced minstrel.<sup>7</sup> Ellison's main critical contribution, however, is his recognition that the main purpose of a minstrel show was not the realistic portrayal or social humiliation of Negroes, but the use of Negro masks and dialect to project in symbolic form the inner fears and conflicts of the white population. By this process, the minstrel audience ritually identified itself with a blackfaced performer who, "like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, . . . prepares himself emotionally to perform a social role." And the inner conflict that Ellison finds most often projected in the minstrel show is that between the ideals and realities of democracy. He sees

the Negro stereotype as “a key figure in a magic rite by which the white American seeks to resolve the dilemma arising between his democratic beliefs and certain antidemocratic practices. . . .” Huck, for instance, has to choose between property rights and human rights, between industry and fraternity, when he is faced with the possibility of helping Jim to freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Mark Twain seemed to notice the dilemmas of democracy that were projected in the minstrel show. While the endmen were poor slaves who tried unsuccessfully and comically to dress and speak above their station, the interlocutor was an aristocrat who was “clothed in the faultless evening costume of the white society gentleman and used a stilted, courtly, artificial and painfully grammatical form of speech, which the innocent villagers took for the real thing as exhibited in high and citified society, and they vastly admired it. . . .”<sup>9</sup> In *Huckleberry Finn* the “King Sollermun” passage contrasts the primitive and uneducated reasoning of Jim with the pretentious and half-educated reasoning of Huck, who takes the Widow’s part and speaks for royalty, books and religion. When talking to Jim, Huck tries to be more correct in his speech, reducing the amount of slang and poor grammar. Like the best comic dialogues of the minstrel shows, this passage both parodies and celebrates a display of social superiority. It expresses a middle-class audience’s conflicting values of social equality and upward mobility. Michael Egan finds a creative tension through most of *Huckleberry Finn* between the early-bourgeois values of human equality and anti-slavery and the late-bourgeois traits of sentimentality and respectability. He shows how Twain expressed this tension by portraying different classes of people in his novel and by addressing two classes of readers, the petty-bourgeoisie which he belonged to while growing up in the South and the upper-bourgeoisie which he joined when he moved to Connecticut.<sup>10</sup>

One minstrel dialogue that illustrates this conflict in social values is John Rutledge’s “Bones on George Washington.” The interlocutor advises Bones to be like George Washington and always tell the truth. He recounts how young George admitted cutting down the cherry tree when he said, with tears in his eyes, “Father, I can’t tell a lie; it was I that did it with my little hatchet.” Then Bones tells a story about the George Washington *he* knew in school—George Washington Julius Caesar Andrew Jackson John Smith. The teacher had the habit of sleeping with his slippers off during recess, and George once played the practical joke of nailing them to the floor. When class resumed, there was a knock at the door. The teacher stepped into his slippers and rose from his desk, but when he tried to walk he fell on his face and broke his nose. In an awful rage he cried, “Who nailed my slippers to de flo’?” And George said, with tears in his eyes, “I can’t tell a lie; it was I that did it wid my little hatchet.”<sup>11</sup> This new setting of the story allows the audience to laugh at Bones’s cultural deprivation and at George’s delinquency, but at the same time to rebel with them against the gentility of the interlocutor and the teacher. During the minstrel dialogues the audience had the luxury of siding now with the interlocutor, now with the endmen. This exercise in double identification helped them objectify and dramatize their own complex predicament of

having to value both social equality and upward mobility, and the resulting laughter helped relieve the tensions involved in this predicament.<sup>12</sup>

Back and forth, question and answer, straight line and punch line, dialogues resembling those of the minstrel shows continue through *Huckleberry Finn*, and readers are invited constantly to change stances and shift identities, moving in and out of Jim, Huck and other characters. Huck leads the way in this by his own frequent role changes. While he plays interlocutor to Jim, he plays endman to Tom Sawyer, the Widow Douglas, Miss Watson and the Grangerfords. With these interlocutors he discusses Moses, the good place and the bad place, the respectable gang and Southern gentility, and his prickly comments deflate their highbrow notions and styles of talk. Although readers may shy away from total identification with Huck because of his lies, thefts, prejudices and superstitions, they share his discomfort with the bothers and falsehoods of civilization and gladly escape with him. The way they have to change their positions, laughing now *with* him and now *at* him, reflects their own shifting responses toward basic human nature on the one hand and cultural development on the other. They find in Huck, therefore, the same dramatization of their predicament and relief from it that the minstrel audiences found in identifying with the blackfaced endmen. Since Huck, however, plays endman most of the time, and since the interlocutors are always seen through his eyes, readers of *Huckleberry Finn* experience more than just a cathartic release of tensions. They become more and more disenchanted with civilization as they discover its shams and inequities from Huck's point of view, and they are powerfully drawn toward the values manifested in Huck's growing attachment to Jim, where original and direct experience belies conventional dogma, and where basic humanity and equality outweigh property and class.<sup>13</sup>

Although minstrels were tentative in their support of freedom and equality—here mocking elitism and there aspiring to it—they paid unqualified tribute to the values of home, work and family. These values were expressed in the sentimental songs which alternated with the comic dialogues in the first part of the show. In “Old Times Gone By,” Mr. Johnson, the interlocutor, says, “. . . we ain’t having those good old times as in days gone by, when the darkeys’ hearts were light and joyous upon the old plantation.” He asks Bones where he would like to be, and Bones replies, “. . . rowin’ a flat boat ‘up de Swanee Riber’ to see de ‘Old Folks at Home.’” Bones then sings:

All de world to me am dreary,  
Ebery wher I roam;  
Oh, darkeys, how my heart grows weary,  
Longin’ for de old folks at home.

Later, Pompey sings “Old Uncle Ned,” which tells of an old slave who dies and is mourned by his master and mistress, and the set ends with “Massa’s in de Cold, Cold Ground,” where all the slaves mourn the death of their master.<sup>14</sup> The composer of these songs, Stephen Foster, constantly

depicted happy homes and families of the past that have been separated by death, social mobility, or economic forces. In “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night” a family is split up and taken away from a small farm where work is mixed with sport and song to endure the hard labor of a sugar plantation. A lover sings “Farewell, My Lilly Dear” when he must leave his home and his sweetheart because “massa sends me roaming,” and the man who sings “Nelly was a Lady” cannot tote cotton any more after the death of his “dark Virginny bride.” Minstrel audiences saw the black impersonators who sang these songs as happy reminders of life on the old homestead and as victims like themselves of the threats that industry and urban life were imposing on the stability of work, home and family. They identified deeply with the nostalgic sentiments expressed in songs like Foster’s “Oh! Why Am I So Happy?”:

’Tis my father’s voice and brother’s smile  
My sister’s fond caress  
My mother’s gently pleading prayer  
Her little boy to bless.<sup>15</sup>

Sentimental songs appear also in *Huckleberry Finn*, along with pictures and poems that resemble them. Huck enjoys hearing the Grangerford ladies sing “The Last Link is Broken” to the accompaniment of a little old piano, and when he is feeling down and Emmeline’s pictures make him feel even worse, he goes off to read the sad verses in her scrap-book about suffering and death. But these passages are only parodies of sentiment. Closer in spirit to the minstrel songs, and treated more seriously by Twain, are the raft passages and the stories that Huck tells to escape from tight situations. These stories always concern families who are in trouble, or sick, or wiped out by death. Disguised as a girl, Huck tells Mrs. Loftus that his mother is sick and out of money and that he is on his way to find his uncle for help. When Mrs. Loftus sees through his disguise, he changes his story: “I told her my father and mother was dead, and the law had bound me out to a mean old farmer in the country . . .” (Chapter XI). He knows that these stories will get a sympathetic hearing, but he must also feel deeply about them himself. His witnessing the slaughter of the Grangerford family, especially of his friend Buck, brings tears to his eyes and sickness to his heart. This preoccupation with homes and families, particularly with those that have been broken or lost, allies Huck with Jim, who by escaping has left his family and must either steal his wife and children or work to buy them back. When Huck hears Jim moaning about his family, he is deeply touched: “He was thinking about his wife and his children way up yonder, and he was low and homesick; because he hadn’t ever been away from home before in his life; and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n” (Chapter XXIII).<sup>16</sup>

Matching these stories in emotional content are the raft passages. Chapters XII, XV, and XIX describe Huck and Jim floating lazily down the river mostly at night, watching the moon and the stars, looking for signs of daybreak and telling one another about their dreams. They enjoy

being free of the hazards in the towns and on the river, and whenever they avoid or survive these troubles, they rush back to the raft to celebrate a happy escape and reunion. One important aspect of these reunions is that Jim fills them with hugs, kisses and tears, while Huck asks him if he's been drinking or tells him to save it for breakfast. Jim is the demonstrative one, the one not afraid to show affection and emotion, and Huck must learn this from him. When Huck fools Jim after their separation in the fog, Jim complains that he cried and almost kissed Huck's foot when he saw him again. How, he wonders, could Huck play a trick on him after that? Huck then apologizes for this and almost kisses *Jim's* foot. Later, when Jim is captured, Huck cannot hold back the tears any longer. Like the white people, men especially, who could only vent their emotions vicariously by hearing white men sing sentimental songs in blackface, Huck learns to feel and to express his feeling by living with Jim on the raft.

Thus the main features of the first part of the minstrel show, comic dialogue and sentimental song, and the themes expressed in them, have analogues in the first part of *Huckleberry Finn*, roughly chapters I to XIX. Perhaps the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud can be considered a realistic and tragic counterpart to the wild breakdown group dance that often ended this part of the show. After the dance the curtains were closed, and the variety acts of the olio, the second part of the show, were performed out front. There were animal trainers, acrobats, comb and glass players, stump speakers, mesmerists and others. Usually a burlesque speech or sermon was part of the program. In one sermon, the Rev. Jacobus Snowball finds his text, "Hard Times," written on the faces of all, rich and poor: "'It's hard times,' tinks de merchant's lady, as she alights from her carriage, decked in a two thousand dollar set ob diamonds, thousand dollar set ob furs, hundred dollar dress, and delicate Opera cloak. It's Hard Times—husband couldn't afford no greater display, times am so berry hard.'" So the wages drop and "'de poor man and his family do all de sufferin' and de rich all de jawin.'" <sup>17</sup>

In Chapter XIX of *Huckleberry Finn* the king and the duke arrive on the scene and perform a variety of stunts and skits that make up the middle portion of the novel and resemble the olio of the minstrel show. They claim a repertoire of temperance and phrenology lectures, revival sermons, faith healing services, fortune telling and legitimate theater. While the king passes the basket after his fake conversion story, the duke prints up circulars advertising their motley program of Shakespeare scenes and speeches, adding later a low comedy farce to fill the house. Skits like these, especially the spoofs on Shakespeare, were common not only in the minstrel shows but also in the many jokebooks and songbooks that provided scripts for amateur minstrel performances. <sup>18</sup>

Like the comic dialogues in the first part of the show, the burlesques thrived on the complex humor aroused by social status and mobility. Although they ridiculed low-class types who pretended to be renowned tragedians, eminent statesmen, or ministers of the Word, they also presented images of class and style that upwardly mobile people could

aspire to. Minstrels clad in top hats, high stiff collars and long swallow-tail coats would strut across the stage spouting Shakespeare and claiming to be Edwin Forrest McKean Buchanan Davenport Booth. One minstrel burlesque, *Dar's De Money*, features two dandies, Pete and Jake, in tattered frock coats and boots that don't match, who try to put on the final scene from *Othello*. They fetch two chairs, a sheet and a pillow for the bed, and Jake puts soap in his mouth to show rage. He approaches the bed with Pete in it as "Darsdemoney," and bellows, "It is the caws! Yet I'll not shed her blood! Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snoo, and smooth as monumental alabastrum."<sup>19</sup> This typical minstrel routine of two buffoons trying to stage a serious play resembles the efforts of the king and the duke in *Huckleberry Finn*. The incompetence of these two imposters in the Shakespeare line receives its just derision, but the sob stories they tell about their religious conversions and aristocratic backgrounds get a sympathetic hearing. Their most ambitious scheme, defrauding the Wilks girls of a legacy, is camouflaged by the high-toned manners of English gentlemen, the pious tears and prayers at the funeral "orgies" and the fake charitable gesture of giving all the money to the girls. They are finally exposed, but not before they manage to fool almost a whole town. Their near success at this reveals how people with democratic ideals can still be duped by exhibitions of high-class status and sentimentality. The burlesques depended on this snob appeal and on farcical humor for their popularity. The second part of the minstrel show, therefore, as well as the middle section of Twain's novel, achieves the same complex humorous effect as the comic dialogues and sentimental songs of the first part.

After the olio, the curtains opened again on a stage set for the third part of the minstrel show, a short musical about life on a Southern plantation or a one-act burlesque of a classic drama or opera. *Huckleberry Finn* combines these two features in its final episode on the Phelps plantation, Chapter XXXII to the end.

When Huck arrives at the Phelps plantation, he experiences all the sentimental nostalgia of the Southern myth. The place is lonesome and mournful, as though everyone were dead and gone. It is so quiet that he can hear the buzzing of flies and the hum of a spinning wheel. In a sense, he has returned to the past, to a world that is gone. But this world comes alive when he wakes the sleeping hounds and a black woman and her children rush out to see who's there. Then a white woman and her children come running up to him. She hugs him and shakes him, and with tears in her eyes she searches his face for likenesses to her sister, whom she thinks is his mother, then introduces him to her children as Cousin Tom. Later, when Uncle Silas returns and the real Tom Sawyer shows up, there is more hugging and kissing. It is a family reunion and Huck feels born again. This scene contains all the elements that made the minstrel shows appealing to the urban and industrial audiences of the North: a happy home in the quiet and lazy past and people who still enjoy close family ties and free expressions of feeling.

But the Phelps episode is also a one-act burlesque. Tom Sawyer tries to



free Jim after the manner of *The Man in the Iron Mask* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. His outlandish vocabulary, plotting and disguises bring to the episode one more element of the Southern myth—romance—but here the romance is comic or crazy. The minstrels would call it grotesque. While Tom almost breaks down composing a mournful inscription and wants Jim to play “The Last Link is Broken” on a jew’s-harp, he also weighs the merits of sawing off Jim’s leg. He rejoices after achieving a successful and splendid escape, and is most happy about getting a bullet in the calf of his leg. And Jim comes close to being hanged. This combination of gaudy violence and exaggerated sentiment ridicules the romantic values present in the Southern myth and in much of the fiction and drama that was considered high-class during the nineteenth century. Minstrel shows satirized both the classic and popular literature that illustrated these values. In G. W. H. Griffin’s burlesque of *Camille*, two servants, Sam and Julius, decide to play Camille and “Army” Duval. Camille exclaims, “Army, I love you! devotedly! [Embrace] devoutly! [Embrace] madly! [Embrace] excruciatingly! [Embrace] spasmodically love you! [Embrace and Kiss].” Their dialogue is rendered idiotic by this verbal inflation and by the use of homely detail. In her death scene, after giving Army a cabbage from her headdress (instead of a camelia), Camille feels “every indication of a ‘swine,’ ” calls for Dr. Quack, and whispers, “Army, the jig is up—my mutton’s cooked—I’m a goner, Army—Army, I’m dying,” but when he turns his back, she clubs him. Griffin’s *Les Miserables* parodies the romantic cult of the poor. Jake and Rocks try to win a dinner invitation by letting rich patrons of a restaurant overhear such lines as: “If you don’t have something to eat every two or three months you are always grumbling . . . It was only a week ago that I gave you something to eat.” In *Jack Sheppard and Joe Blueskin, or Amateur Road Agents*, Jack advises Joe, “Steal something, kill somebody, have some style about you. Read dime novels and be a hero,” but Joe wants food more than style. This skit ends when Jack is shot by a detective and Joe is apprehended by a dog.<sup>20</sup>

These burlesques place minstrel shows in the broader context of nineteenth-century American drama. The earliest minstrels performed in interludes and afterpieces of full-length plays, and black characters who appeared in the plays often affected the mock aristocratic poses and verbal conundrums later used by the endmen. When minstrel shows became independent productions, they burlesqued the plays currently on stage, but they also carried themes and values similar to those in the full-length plays. Richard Moody has shown how the minstrel Negroes cut romantic figures comparable to the Indians, Moors, Barbary pirates, Italians and American frontiersmen who populated the nineteenth-century stages. Although rarely allowed to be heroic or villainous, the minstrels were foreign, primitive, gothic, flashy, sentimental and pathetic. They also represented, in a comic way, the natural and democratic values usually fostered by the Indian, the Yankee, or the frontiersman against artificiality and elitism.<sup>21</sup> Finally, like the heroines and young lovers in the plays, they gave passionate expression to the values of home and family, especially when

these values were being threatened or destroyed. The minstrel show and the romantic drama merged most intimately in the theater adaptations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The minstrel dances of little Harry and the pranks of Topsy were combined with the domestic perils of George and Eliza and the redemptive sufferings and lamentations of Tom and Little Eva.<sup>22</sup>

Minstrel finales sometimes discarded burlesque comedy in favor of serious sentiment. It has already been shown how *Huckleberry Finn* mixes the two in its final episode. Alongside the romantic travesties of Tom Sawyer are the images of home and family that make Huck feel born again at the Phelps farm. In Frank Dumont's *Happy Uncle Rufus*, Fanny, a white woman from the South who lost her husband in the Civil War, has moved to the North and is struggling with her son to make ends meet. When she pays a wandering black man to saw her wood, the hymn he sings while at work reminds her of her "once happy home in the Sunny South." Remembering that she saw him before somewhere "down South, where the mocking birds sang near a happy home on the banks of a river," she sings an old slave song and discovers that he is Uncle Rufus, who taught her the song when she was a child. Rufus mourns the deaths of her mother and father and tells how her brother, wounded in battle, died in his arms and left him a locket to give her. Like Rufus, the minstrel singers raised bittersweet memories of a real or mythical past when life was happier and when families and homes were more stable. *Uncle Eph's Dream*, by Charles White, concerns a former slave who returns to the ruins of his old plantation and reminisces about prosperity, respect, kind masters and generous handouts: "but it's all gone now! no birds sing, no white gemblem gib me silber; no, no, all gone—de war skeered dem all away; . . . we got no more massas now; de poor old slaves will hab to look out for demselves." His wife and children come back to him in a vision and almost squeeze him to death by their embraces. When he gives his son a banjo, the son plays "Home Sweet Home" and tells how the master and master's son were killed in the war and the master's daughter went insane after her sweetheart died.<sup>23</sup> *Huckleberry Finn* follows a similar pattern of family loss and imaginary restoration through the agency of a black person. While Huck is with a family, Jim is usually hidden or confined, but when Huck loses or flees the family, Jim returns as a companion in Huck's flight, as an image that broadens the significance of it, and as the promise and beginning of a more genuine family.

Although these nostalgic scenes about freed slaves who want to return to their masters and plantations in the South indicate a pro-slavery stance in the minstrel shows, Robert C. Toll proves that minstrels were as ambivalent on slavery as they were on social status, at least until the mid-1850s, when slavery became an explosive issue. Before the crisis came, minstrels depicted black characters as inferior to whites and as happier under the stable supervision of a master. The slaves loved and served their master, and he supported them as if they were children or elderly dependents. Freed slaves who went north and became urban dandies were the ones who bore most of the ridicule. However, minstrels also deplored

the cruelty of slavery, especially when it involved the separation of lovers or breakup of a family, and they teased the aristocrats by letting slaves play harmless tricks on their masters. Only when slavery led to sectional division and war did minstrels remove the anti-slavery sentiment from their shows and concentrate on the romantic view of the happy old plantation. As an example of a pre-crisis stance on slavery, the second stanza of “We’ll All Make a Laugh” mixes the thought of freedom with cheerfulness under slavery:

Some massas love dar darkies well,  
and gib ‘em what dey want—  
Except it is dar freedom—  
and *dat* I know dey won’t;  
Howeber, *we* am happy,  
and contented whar we am.

After emancipation, Zip Coon is unhappy despite his cigar and julep: “It’s mighty comfortable to be rich, to be sure, but it’s debblish tiresome to hab to keep up de dignity all de time. O, for one good old-fashioned breakdown, like we used to hab when massa run de old plantation for us, and all we had to do was play de banjo and loaf.”<sup>24</sup> Through all this it must also be kept in mind that the white audiences of the minstrel shows projected their own fears and dreams on the impersonated slaves. A common theme of the crusade against slavery was the break-up of the black family. This theme drew so many sympathizers, even among the non-militant, and it was expressed in so many sentimental ways, that it had to reflect the plight of more than just the black family. The whites who moved from farms into the cities feared for the security of their homes, families and jobs in the new environment, and this fear led them on the one hand to protest the break-up of families by the slave trade, and on the other to imagine the old plantation as a happy place where the family was still intact and work could still be done to the accompaniment of a song. This was also true after the Civil War when rising urban, industrial and social problems bred similar nostalgic longings for stable homes and close family ties.<sup>25</sup>

As a novel written after emancipation but set in a time before it, *Huckleberry Finn* spans two eras and reflects many of the ambiguities about slavery present in the minstrel shows. Jim runs away to avoid being sold down the river by Miss Watson, but his escape carries him down that same river into the deep South and eventual captivity. Tom Sawyer can afford to direct Jim’s escape with spectacular flair and still be respectable because he knows that Jim has already been freed, and Huck adds to the ambiguity by believing that it is a crime to free Jim, or as he puts it, to *steal* Jim, and he expects to go to hell for doing it. Finally, the readers of 1885 and after know that the slaves have been freed by law, but that full freedom has not been achieved in fact. Neil Schmitz argues that *Huckleberry Finn* describes the nullification of Reconstruction and the gradual disqualification of black people that took place after 1876. In the early part of the novel, Huck and Jim escape civilization and slavery, but when it becomes clear that Jim,

unlike Huck, wants to return to civilization as a free citizen and that such a return is impossible, Jim loses his powerful and distinct personality. When he emerges from captivity at the Phelps farm, he is “shorn of his subjective reality, . . . an iconic Jim, that black man trapped in the prison of the white man’s mind,” who must become the white European hero of Tom Sawyer’s fantasy in order to fit into American society.<sup>26</sup> Schmitz believes that even Mark Twain could not create a comfortable place for Jim without mythologizing him into a gentle and loyal helper who sacrifices his life to save Tom.

The minstrel shows rarely, if ever, passed beyond this mythologizing of black people, even with real black people as performers. A study of these shows, therefore, exposes both the fact and the various types of this mythologizing process, and it reveals subtleties and complexities that keep the process from being interpreted too facilely. Furthermore, when minstrel shows are studied in connection with a classic like *Huckleberry Finn*, the process is clarified to a greater degree because of the more conscious, unified and critical handling of it in the novel. The natural instinct and sound heart of Huck unmask for the readers the fantasies and conventions of the other characters, even when Huck himself is inactive or unaware of what is happening. In this way, the sharpened perception gained by reading the novel can lead also to a better understanding and appreciation of the minstrel show.

Conversely, familiarity with the minstrel show enhances the understanding of *Huckleberry Finn*. The three parts of the show fit rather easily into the plot progression of the novel, if they are not pressed too tightly. Perhaps the author, who threatened to shoot plot-finders, learned from the minstrels to employ a structure which permitted a wide range of improvisation. If the minstrel structure just reveals a shade more coherence in the novel, especially between the much debated Phelps episode and the rest of the story, its use as a tool for organization has been profitable. But it also helps the novel in another way. *Huckleberry Finn* draws part of its richness from the wide selection of sources and models, both popular and classical, that have been incorporated into it. As a source, the minstrel show bears along with its structure a set of themes and values. The ambivalent reactions to social status and mobility, the nostalgic longing for stable homes and satisfying work and the shifting identifications with oppressed black people as mouthpieces for social satire and emotional expression—these themes occupy the minstrel show, and through its perspective they can be found to exist also in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Saint Joseph’s University

## notes

1. Charles Neider, ed., *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* (New York, 1959), 58-59.
2. “The Negro on the Stage,” *Harper’s* LXXIX (June, 1889), 133.
3. Mark Twain, *Early Tales & Sketches*, eds. Edgar M. Branch and Robert H. Hirst (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981), I, 316, 412; Franklin Walker and G. Ezra Dane, eds. *Mark Twain’s Travels with Mr. Brown (New York, 1940), 176ff*; Dixon Wecter, *Sam Clemens of Hannibal* (Boston, 1952), 192; *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1982), 165.
4. Frederick Anderson, Lin Salamo, and Bernard L. Stein eds. *Mark Twain’s Notebooks and*

*Journals* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1975), II, 381, 493-495, 546-547, 552, 562-563; Frederick Lorch, *The Trouble Begins at Eight* (Ames, 1968), 164ff.

5. Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974), 51-57; see also Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones: A History of the American Minstrel Stage* (New York, 1968; first pub. 1930), 135-157.

6. Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, eds. Walter Blair and Victor Fischer (Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1985), 94-95.

7. Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (New York, 1972), 50. For the stress of offensive stereotypes, see Fredrick Woodard and Donnaræ MacCann, "'Huckleberry Finn' and the Traditions of Blackface Minstrelsy," *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* XV, Nos. 1 and 2 (January, 1984), 4-6; for other views, see "Black Writers on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* One Hundred Years Later," *Mark Twain Journal*, 22 (Fall, 1984): David L. Smith and Richard K. Barksdale see stereotypes used with anti-racist intent; Kenny J. Williams sees an ambivalent stance; Rhett S. Jones sees conflicting stances but final racism.

8. Ellison, "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity," *Shadow and Act*, 27-31; Toll also sees minstrel characters primarily as projections of white desires and conflicts, especially democratic conflicts, 51-53, 73.

9. *Autobiography*, 59-60.

10. Michael Egan, *Mark Twain's 'Huckleberry Finn': Race, Class, and Society* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1977), 52-65.

11. Orville Roorback, ed., *Minstrel Gags and End Men's Handbook* (Upper Saddle River, 1969; first pub. 1875), 16-17.

12. Toll discusses the shifts in identification, including anti-elitism and the elitism of considering Blacks different and inferior, 70-75; see also Gary D. Engle, *This Grotesque Essence: Plays from the American Minstrel Stage* (Baton Rouge, 1978), xxv-xxviii.

13. For the stress of vernacular and democratic values, see Ellison, "Twentieth-Century Fiction," 30-34, and Egan, 63-65, 74ff, 112ff, although Egan notes a loss of these values in the Phelps episode; among earlier critics, see Kenneth S. Lynn, *Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor* (Boston, 1959), and Henry Nash Smith, *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer* (Cambridge, 1962).

14. John F. Scott, ed., *Brudder Bones' Book of Stump Speeches and Burlesque Orations* (New York, 1968), 106-108.

15. Stephen Foster, *The Minstrel-Show Songs* (New York, 1980); see Toll for stress of family, and projection of urban fears, 75-82, 86, 180ff.

16. James Grove thinks that Twain was ambivalent but serious about family needs in "*Huckleberry Finn*": Mark Twain and the Endangered Family," *American Literature*, 57 (October, 1985), 390-392; Robert Shulman argues that Huck and Jim escape from diseased versions of individualism and society and try to form an authentic family of their own: "Fathers, Brothers, and 'the Diseased'; The Family, Individualism, and American Society in *Huck Finn*," in Robert Sattelmeyer and J. Donald Crowley eds., *One Hundred Years of 'Huckleberry Finn': The Boy, His book, and American Culture* (Columbia, 1985), 325-340.

17. *Minstrel Gags*, 18-19; see also "Tony Pastor's Great Union Speech," "Hun-ki-do-ri's Fourth of July Oration," and "Burlesque Lecture on Woman's Rights," in *Brudder Bones' Book*.

18. Ray B. Brown, "Shakespeare in American Vaudeville and Negro Minstrelsy," *American Quarterly*, 12 (Fall, 1960), 374-391; Charles Haywood, "Negro Minstrelsy and Shakespearean Burlesque," in Bruce Jackson, ed., *Folklore & Society: Essays in Honor of Benj. A. Botkin*, (Hatboro: Folklore Associates, 1966), 77-92; Lawrence W. Levine, "William Shakespeare and the American People: A Study in Cultural Transformation," *The American Historical Review*, 89 (February, 1984), 34-66; Levine stresses the class mixtures and conflicts prevalent in the nineteenth-century American theater.

19. For *Dar's De Money* and other minstrel burlesques, see *This Grotesque Essence*.

20. G. W. H. Griffin, *Camille: An Ethiopian Interlude* (New York: Happy Hours Co., n.d.), and *Les Miserables: An Ethiopian Farce* (New York: Samuel French, n.d.); *Jack Sheppard and Joe Blueskin, or Amateur Road Agents* (Chicago: Drama Publishing Co., 1897).

21. Richard Moody, *America Takes the Stage: Romanticism in American Drama and Theater, 1750-1900* (Bloomington, 1955), 28-31, 33-44, 199.

22. Moody, 69-73; some plays which treat the conflicts of democracy and sentiments of family and home (often by discovery of a long-lost relative) are: John Augustus Stone, *Metamora; or, The Last of the Wampanoags* (1829); James Kirk Paulding, *The Lion of the West* (1831); Louisa Medina, *Nick of the Woods* (1838); Anna Cora Mowatt, *Fashion; or, Life in New York* (1845).

23. Frank Dumont, *Happy Uncle Rufus* (Chicago and New York: De Witt, 1881); Charles White, *Uncle Eph's Dream* (Chicago, 1874).

24. Edwin P. Christy, *Christy's Panorama Songster* (New York, n.d.), 116; "Old Zip Coon," *This Grotesque Essence*, 51; Toll, ch. iii, especially 66, 72, 86.

25. On urban problems of money, labor immigration and family, see Toll, 180-187.

26. Neil Schmitz, "Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the Reconstruction," *American Studies*, 12 (Spring, 1971), 60; see also Schmitz, "The Paradox of Liberation in *Huckleberry Finn*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 13 (Spring, 1971), 125-136; for historical background and parallel contemporary literature, see Charles H. Nilon, "The Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*: 'Freeing the Free Negro,'" *Mark Twain Journal*, 22 (Fall, 1984), 21-27.