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Getting Past Black and White

By Stephen L. Carter

Mark Twain has been called the inventor of the American novel. It might even be fair to call him the inventor of the American short story. And he surely deserves an additional encomium: the man who popularized the sophisticated literary attack on racism.

I say sophisticated because antislavery fiction--some of it by former slaves--had been a staple of the years before the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is only the most famous example. These early stories dealt directly with slavery. With minor exceptions, Twain melded his attacks on slavery and prejudice into tales that were on the surface about something else entirely. He drew his readers into the argument by drawing them into the story.

Twain was born in Missouri, a slave state, and fought in the Civil War, however briefly, on the Confederate side. His father occasionally owned a slave, and some members of his family owned many more. But Twain emerged as a man whose racial attitudes were not what one might expect from someone of his background. Again and again, in the postwar years, he seemed compelled to tackle the challenge of race.

Consider the most controversial, at least today, of Twain's novels, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Only a few books, according to the American Library Association, have been kicked off the shelves as often as *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain's most widely read tale. Once upon a time, people hated the book because it struck them as coarse. Twain himself wrote that the book's banners considered the novel "trash and suitable only for the slums." More recently the book has been attacked because of the character Jim, the escaped slave whose adventures twine with Huck's, and its frequent use of the word nigger. (The term Nigger Jim, for which the novel is often excoriated, never appears in it.)

But the attacks were and are silly--and miss the point. The novel is profoundly antislavery. Jim's search through the slave states for the family from whom he has been forcibly parted is heroic. As the Twain scholar Jocelyn Chadwick has pointed out, the character of Jim was a first in American fiction--a recognition that the slave had two personalities, "the voice of survival within a white slave culture and the voice of the individual: Jim, the father and the man."

There is much more. Twain's mystery novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*--aside from being one of the earliest stories to hinge on the evidence of fingerprints--stood as a challenge to the racial convictions of even many of the liberals of his day. Written at a time when the accepted wisdom held Negroes to be inferior to whites, especially in intellect, Twain's tale revolved in part around two babies switched at birth. A

slave gave birth to her master's baby and, concerned lest the child be sold South, switched him in the crib for the master's baby by his wife. The slave's light-skinned child was taken to be white and grew up with both the attitudes and the education of the slaveholding class. The master's wife's baby was taken for black and grew up with the attitudes and intonations of the slave.

The thrust was difficult to miss: nurture, not nature, was the key to social status. The features of the black man that provided the stuff of prejudice--manner of speech, for example--were, to Twain, indicative of nothing other than the conditioning that slavery imposed on its victims. At the same time, he was well aware of the possibility that the oppressed might eke out moments of joy amid their sorrows. This was the subject matter of a sprightly little tale titled *A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It*, published in the 1870s. The narrator asks his 60-ish black servant, Aunt Rachel--who spent most of her life as a slave--why she is so happy all the time. The story is her answer, and I will not spoil it other than to suggest that Twain manages, in just a few pages, to lead us through the complexities of seeking happiness when your life is literally not your own.

If slavery was wrong, was it worth fighting a war to destroy it? Twain seems to have thought so. Indeed, his underappreciated short story *A Trial* may be viewed as a justification for the Civil War. *A Trial* tells of a ship's captain who dotes on his first mate, a black man. The ship docks at an island, where Bill Noakes, the self-proclaimed toughest man on the island, charges on board and demands to fight the captain, who promptly dumps him into the water. The next night, the same thing occurs. A week later, evidently enraged by his humiliation, Noakes murders the captain's beloved mate. The captain storms ashore and tells all the other captains that he means to hang Noakes for murder. They insist on a trial. The captain argues that none is necessary, since everyone agrees that Noakes is guilty, and then proposes to do the hanging before the trial. But in the end, the trial is held, Noakes is convicted, and the captain hangs him.

The analogy to the Civil War is clear. At first Noakes is merely an irritant whom the captain is satisfied merely to fight and hold at bay. Only after Noakes murders the Negro mate does the captain suddenly gird for battle, demanding an end to the man's life despite the objections of the other captains, who seem to want him to be treated more gently. It is by the captain's single-minded will that Noakes is brought to justice--much like Lincoln's single-minded will in fighting a war that began as a struggle over union and was transformed into a holy war against slavery.

Twain himself, of course, joined up on the Southern side. In his justifiably famous 1885 essay *The Private History of a Campaign That Failed*, he describes how he knocked about from one position on the war to another, evidently following in the footsteps of his buddies. One striking aspect of his tale is the groping inability of any of the several members of his ragtag militia to assign a reason for their struggle. The essay is in that sense better understood as a part of Twain's significant antiwar oeuvre, a category in which, for example, his essay *The War Prayer* also belongs. So does *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, in which we discover exactly where great generals rank.

Twain plainly thought war a foolish thing, and when, in *Private History*, he pulls his gun and kills a man riding through the woods, thinking him an enemy, we can feel for Twain and his young companions, standing there trembling in the darkness, wishing they could bring their victim back to life. After only two weeks' service, he resigned his commission. In his autobiography, Twain explains that he was "'incapacitated by fatigue' through persistent retreating."

Relations between blacks and whites were hardly the limits of Twain's concern over race. His essay *Disgraceful Persecution of a Boy* discusses a young man arrested in San Francisco for "stoning Chinamen." After laying out the many ways in which Chinese immigrants were persecuted in California, Twain expresses little surprise that the young man might have learned to say to himself, "Ah, there goes a Chinaman! God will not love me if I do not stone him." Twain's essay *About Smells* notes that in Heaven, one will meet people of all races--he lists a few--but not, alas, the "good Christian friend" who spends all his time complaining.

Twain's racial pitch was not perfect. One is left uneasy, for example, by the lengthy passage in his autobiography about how much he loved what were called "nigger shows" in his youth--these were minstrel shows, mostly with white men performing in blackface--and his delight in getting his prim mother to laugh at them. Yet there is no reason to think Twain saw the shows as representing reality. His frequent assaults on slavery and prejudice suggest his keen awareness that they did not. The shows were simply a form of entertainment popular all over the country in the 19th century, a part of the background against which he grew into his firm adult convictions.

Was Twain a racist? Asking the question in the 21st century is as sensible as asking the same of Lincoln. If we read the words and attitudes of the past through the pompous "wisdom" of the considered moral judgments of the present, we will find nothing but error. Lincoln, who believed the black man the inferior of the white, prosecuted and won a war to free him nevertheless. And Twain, raised in a slave state, briefly a member of a Confederate militia, and inventor of Jim, may have done more to rile the nation over racial injustice and rouse its collective conscience than any other novelist in the past century who has lifted a pen.

Or typed on a computer.

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