The Trickster Tricked: Huck Comes Out of the Fog in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Mark Twain's great novel *Huckleberry Finn* is a book brimming with tricks, trickery, and tricksters. Tom Sawyer, for instance, is obviously one of the latter; so are the Duke and the Dauphin; and so, to a lesser extent, is Huck himself. Tricks provide much of the hilarity we associate with this book, as when young Tom (pretending to be a newly arrived stranger), without warning or permission, suddenly and boldly kisses Sally Phelps, a much-older relative whom he has only just met: "he reached over and kissed aunt Sally right on the mouth, and then settled back again, in his chair, comfortable, and was going on talking, but she jumped up and wiped it off with the back of her hand, and says: 'You owdacious puppy!' " Tom, instead of apologizing in the face of the woman's now-ignited wrath, only digs the hole deeper by explaining, "I didn't mean no harm. I—I—thought you'd like it." When an exasperated Aunt Sally then calls him a "born fool" and picks up a nearby stick, Tom pushes the joke even further by explaining that he had been told by "everybody" that she would like to be kissed, but then he promises, "I won't ever do it again. Till you ask me." By this time Aunt Sally is about to explode: "Till I ask you! Well, I never see the beat of it in my born days! I lay you'll be the Methusalem-numbskull of creation before ever I ask you—or the likes of you!" (*HF* 287). Tom continues to push the gag further and further until he finally explains that he is in fact the young relative whose arrival she has long been expecting. When a now-joyful Aunt Sally rushes to embrace and kiss him, Tom gives the joke one last twist: "No, not till you've asked me, first" (*HF* 288).

Tricks of this sort help make *Huckleberry Finn* enormously funny, but sometimes the tricks have a darker and more disturbing effect. This is especially true of the tricks played on black characters, and it is particularly true of the trick played by Tom on Jim in the final chapters of the novel. Tom is the only person at the Phelps farm who knows that Jim has already been freed from slavery in the will of the now-dead Miss Watson, Jim's former owner, but Tom, instead of announcing Jim's liberty as soon as he arrives, instead contrives an elaborate and often dangerous plot to "free" Jim from the small shack in which he is now imprisoned. The closing chapters thus have the ironic effect of only helping to emphasize how far, in fact, Jim remains from true freedom, even after the details of Miss Watson's will are finally revealed. Tom's trick on Jim, like many of the tricks played by white characters on black characters in this book, leaves a bad taste in one's mouth, partly because the tricks remind us of how truly vulnerable the black characters are. Practical jokes between friends help highlight, affirm, and strengthen pre-existing friendships. Practical jokes played on persons with less power than oneself, however, can seem crude, thoughtless, demeaning, and even mean. Reading about such tricks can therefore be disturbing. Twain, in a sense, thus plays a massive trick on any reader who picks up *Huckleberry Finn* and expects it to be a book as full of innocence and lighthearted fun as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The story of Huck is a far more disconcerting, perplexing, and thought-provoking book than its predecessor, in part because so much of its trickery involves such dark overtones.

One of the best examples of Twain's crafty use of trickery occurs in Chapter 15, when Huck, in a canoe, becomes temporarily separated from Jim, who remains on their raft, as the two make their way down the Mississippi River. For a long time the two remain separated as their crafts speed along the swiftly moving water, enveloped by a thick fog. Huck becomes increasingly afraid, and at one point he tries to explain and justify his agitated emotions by directly
addressing the reader: "If you think it ain't dismal and lonesome out in the fog that way, by yourself, in the night, you try it once—you'll see" (HF 101). Huck appeals to the reader's sense of sympathy, suggesting that if we could only imagine ourselves in his place, we would understand and forgive his fears. He later mentions that after fighting the river for hours in search of Jim, he became exhausted and that, although he did not want to fall asleep, "I was so sleepy I couldn't help it" (HF 102). When he finally woke up to find that the fog had cleared, "I thought I was dreaming, and when things begun to come back to me, they seemed to come up dim out of last week" (HF 102). Fortunately, however, he now spots the raft and makes his way toward it.

When Huck arrives at the raft, he sees Jim "setting there with his head down between his knees, asleep, with his right arm hanging over the steering oar. The other oar was smashed off, and the raft was littered up with leaves and branches and dirt. So she'd had a rough time" (HF 102). Huck sees, in other words, an image of Jim that should instantly remind him (and the reader) of himself and of his own quite recent experiences in the canoe. Like Huck a few moments before, Jim is exhausted and now asleep; he is alone; and he is probably frightened. However, just when we might expect Huck to sympathize with Jim and embrace him joyfully, to treat Jim with the same kind of empathetic understanding that Huck himself had so recently sought from the reader, Twain plays a trick on us by having Huck play a trick on Jim. Without any warning or explanation, Huck immediately adopts the attitude and behavior of a trickster: "I made fast and laid down under Jim's nose on the raft, and began to gap, and stretch my fists out against Jim" (HF 103). Huck, that is, pretends to be awakening from sleep, and the practical joke on Jim has now begun. The novel seems, suddenly, to have reverted to an earlier, more light-hearted tone, and the dark, "dismal and lonesome" atmosphere of the past few pages seems about to evaporate and instead be replaced by some good fun at Jim's expense. Yet the joke, thanks to Twain the trickster, will soon be on both Huck and the reader.

The paragraphs that now follow are among the most famous and most important in the novel: They mark a significant moment of transformation, a crucial stage in Huck's moral maturation and in his development toward ethical adulthood. What begins as a trick on Jim, designed to make him look and feel foolish, soon evolves into an episode in which it is Huck who not only behaves like a fool but eventually feels far worse than one. The tone of the episode moves rapidly from apparently good-natured fun to something far more profound and serious, as Twain shows his capacity to move far beyond the lighthearted but somewhat meaningless high jinks of Tom Sawyer. Huck, in this episode, becomes the trickster tricked, but the trick is also partly played by Twain on the unassuming reader. Anyone who begins reading this episode by identifying with Huck's spirit of apparently innocent play ultimately has the rug pulled out from under him. Likewise, anyone who starts reading this passage by expecting that Jim, the supposedly foolish "darky," will be the object of hilarious laughter is soon disabused of that notion. Twain, in a splendid twist, manages to turn the admittedly superstitious Jim—the stereotypically naïve, ignorant, and untutored slave—into a figure of almost tragic dignity, a figure who seems far more worthy of our respect than anyone else in the novel. By the end of this chapter, it is Huck who feels foolish, as should any reader who may have shared Huck's assumptions about Jim. Huck, at least, has the excuse of youth to help explain his juvenile attitudes and thoughtless conduct in this chapter (he is only thirteen). The society surrounding Huck (and Twain), however, has no similar justification.

To read the conclusion of Chapter 15 for the first time is to feel a bit of a shock; to read it a second or third time is to experience a kind of revelation, as the double-edged subtleties and ironic implications of Twain's phrasing rise to the surface. For instance, the fact that Huck initially stretches his "fists out against Jim" seems at first to be merely a gesture of pretended awakening. It is possible to argue that there may be a hint of veiled or unconscious aggression in Huck's fisted gesture, but the fact that he does indeed touch Jim seems to be the most significant aspect of this detail. That touch symbolizes the level of intimacy that has developed between the two, a white boy and an older black man—a man who has now become a kind of
father figure to Huck. Although the mischievous Huck is about to injure the bond that is signified by that touch, the temporary damage done to their relationship will soon ironically result in an even stronger tie—a tie that might never have formed if Huck had not learned a valuable lesson through his trickery. Paradoxically, then, the trick that threatens to break Huck's ties with Jim actually strengthens them. At the beginning of this episode, Huck only pretends to awaken, but by the end of the chapter he will in fact have awakened in a far more serious and consequential sense.

Jim's deep delight that Huck has returned safely ("It's too good for true, honey, it's too good for true") should already begin to make the reader feel uncomfortable. Jim is so clearly a good, kind, and caring man that the idea of playing a trick on him (especially at this point of heightened emotion, when he feels so vulnerable) already seems unsettling. When Jim welcomes his young friend back as "de same ole Huck—de same ole Huck," we can already see that his phrasing is partly right and partly wrong. Huck, by beginning his deception, has indeed begun to behave like the "de same ole Huck" who has teased and tricked Jim in the past, but he is also departing from the "Huck" whom Jim thinks he knows intimately and can trust. Huck, for the sake of a cheap laugh, is in the process of violating the bond that has thus far developed between the two during their trip down the river. Thus, when Jim welcomes back "de same ole Huck, thanks to goodness" (HF 103), there is a darkly ironic undertone to his final word.

Huck, however, refuses—at least for now—to openly reciprocate the love Jim showers upon him. Instead, he pursues his trick, asking Jim if he has been drinking. Jim is incredulous: "Drinkin'? Has I ben a drinkin'? Has I had a chance to be a drinkin'?" (HF 103). Huck thus plays a trick on Jim by pretending to think that Jim must be inebriated, but Twain cleverly turns the trick on Huck by repeating the word "drinkin' " so insistently that the reader is inevitably reminded of an earlier episode in the book in which Jim actually was shown to be drinking. In this episode, memorably emphasized in the first edition of the book by an illustration drawn by E.W. Kemble (HF 64) in which a bug-eyed Jim is shown hopping up and down on one leg, draining a bottle of whiskey, Jim plays a trick on Jim that ends up being very dangerous. Readers will remember Huck, knowing Jim's fear of snakes, has killed a rattlesnake and "curled him up on the foot of Jim's blanket, ever so natural, thinking there'd be some fun when Jim found him there" (HF 64). Here again, Twain tricks the trickster. Unfortunately, Huck not only forgot about the snake, but he also forgot that "wherever you leave a dead snake, its mate always comes there and curls around it" (HF 64–65). Jim is therefore bitten by the dead snake's mate, and he grabs the whiskey to try to help alleviate his considerable pain. Thus, when Huck accuses Jim of having been drinking on the raft, it is hard not to recall this earlier episode when Jim was actually driven to drink as the result of Huck's own pranks. Huck has apparently failed to learn his lesson from his tricks in Chapter 10, and indeed he never admitted his responsibility for the dangerous situation, but in the aftermath of Huck's trick in Chapter 15, he matures considerably. As a result of Jim's reaction to the second trick, Huck begins to develop into a far more moral and ethically responsible person than he was in previous pages. Twain thus reminds us of the earlier episode partly to emphasize how much Huck has grown up by the end of his trickery in Chapter 15.

As the second episode of trickery unfolds, more and more ironies appear. Huck accuses Jim of talking "wild" (HF 103) when it is actually Huck, of course, who is doing so. Even more darkly ironic is the fact that twice in this episode Jim addresses Huck as "boss" (HF 103)—a word he never uses elsewhere in referring to his friend. "Boss," as it happens, is a word used only six times in the whole novel, and in two of those cases it is used to refer to Huck's abusive father and his domination of his son (HF 26, 29). By calling Huck "boss," Jim may be expressing thinly veiled sarcasm; perhaps he already suspects that he is being subjected to a trick. If that is the case, then his use of the word boss is itself a kind of retaliatory trick on Huck—an example of feigned and ultimately subverting deference. Jim's use of the word boss may imply that he realizes Huck is treating him not as a friend but as a subservient black man, and indeed Huck
does actually call Jim "a tangle-headed old fool" (HF 103), but by the end of this episode it is Huck who will appear (and feel) genuinely foolish.

Huck begins his trick on Jim by claiming that there never was a dangerous fog. By denying the literal fog, which had made it impossible for Huck and Jim to get their bearings, he tries to create a metaphorical fog that will trap Jim in Huck's deceit and prevent him from seeing the truth. The more Huck deliberately deceives Jim, however, the more Huck ironically enters into his own kind of moral fog. Indeed, Jim's description of the actual fog seems to parallel the symbolic situation in which he and Huck now find themselves: "we got mix' up ... en one un us got los' en t'other one was jis' as good as los', 'kase he didn' know whah he wuz... . Now ain' dat so, boss—a'in it so? You answer me dat" (HF 103). The touch of defiance in Jim's final words ("You answer me dat") suggests that Jim is not nearly as foolish, naïve, or compliant as Huck would like to believe. Only by brazenly and repeatedly lying to Jim does Huck finally succeed in making Jim believe him, using his friend's deep trust against him. It is only because Jim trusts Huck so deeply and feels such affection for him that he finally falls for Huck's trick. Indeed, only after Jim has begun to fall for Huck's trickery does he begin to refer to him by name again (rather than as "boss" [HF 104]), signifying the shift in his thinking.

Huck, of course, cannot accept a single victory. Instead, having convinced Jim that he dreamed the whole episode about being lost in the fog, he now encourages Jim to make an even bigger fool of himself by urging him to explain and interpret the dream. Jim, with all his defenses down, willingly obliges, and Huck is more than happy to sit and listen to Jim's explanations. Only after Jim finishes does Huck expose his trick and reveal the fool he has made of his friend. Appropriately, the sun has now come up, and so it is now possible for Jim to see clearly some "leaves and rubbish" and a "smashed oar" on the raft—all evidence that Jim had been right all along, that Huck has been lying, and that Jim has been deceived. It seems appropriate that all these revelations should coincide with daybreak, especially since a new day is figuratively about to dawn in the relationship between Jim and Huck. It also seems ironic, however, that day should rise just as the darkness of Huck's deceit becomes apparent.

Jim, in one of the most moving but also one of the most chilling speeches in the entire book, now offers a new interpretation—an interpretation of the "trash" Huck has just revealed. He reiterates the deep love he has come to feel for Huck. He explains how much he missed Huck during his absence, and he says that when he saw Huck again he felt so thankful that he could have gotten down on his knees and kissed Huck's foot. And then he concludes: "'En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout, wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed" (HF 105). Huck's attempt to make a fool of his friend thus boomerangs as Huck confesses that Jim's pained but dignified response makes Huck feel so "mean" (both hardhearted and low) that "I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back" (HF 105). It was, Huck says, "fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd knowed it would make him feel that way" (HF 105).

These final words (the concluding words of Chapter 15) are highly significant. They reveal just how far Huck has developed his moral character. In the snakebite trick of Chapter 10, Huck not only failed to confess to Jim his role in the event, but he more importantly failed to express any sense of real guilt or regret over his behavior and the suffering it caused. He called himself "a fool" (HF 64) for not remembering that a dead snake's mate comes looking for it, and he announced that "I made up my mind that I wouldn't ever take aholt of a snake-skin again with my hands" (HF 65), but never had he voiced any shame or remorse for causing Jim so much pain. (Indeed, in the Kemble drawing, Huck looks on with near fascination, rather than obvious guilt, as Jim jumps up and down with the jug of whiskey [HF 64].) In contrast, at the conclusion of Chapter 15, both Huck and the reader feel stunned by the pain Jim expresses, and Huck develops genuine feelings of remorse for his thoughtless actions.
Any reader who began Twain's novel assuming that Jim would simply serve as an object of uncomplicated humor has thus been unforgettably tricked by Twain. By the end of Chapter 15, Jim has already begun to emerge as the central moral character of the book—a characterization that becomes even more obvious when Twain tricks the reader again at the end of Chapter 23 with Jim's surprising self-condemnation for what he considers his own blameworthy behavior toward his small daughter. Ironically, Jim's painful confession there makes him seem an even more admirable figure than he was already. Twain continually surprises the reader with his depiction of Jim and the layers and depth he gives to a character who might have easily remained a mere stereotype. Ultimately, the greatest trickster in *Huckleberry Finn* is not Huck or Tom or the Duke or the Dauphin; the greatest trickster is and always remains Twain himself.

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