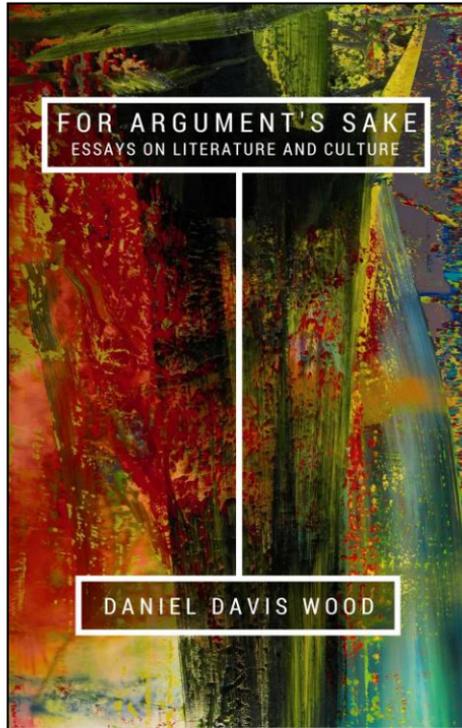


The following document is an extract from *For Argument's Sake: Essays on Literature and Culture* by Daniel Davis Wood, pages 35-40.

It appears here, in PDF format, exactly as it appears in print.



www.danieldaviswood.com

CHARACTER SYNTHESIS IN TWAIN'S
ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

This essay was peer reviewed and originally appeared in *The Explicator* 70.2 (June 2012): 83-86.

THE SO-CALLED 'EVASION' AT THE END OF MARK TWAIN'S *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most famously contentious narrative sequences in all of American literature. Having recognised the essential humanity of the slave Jim and deliberately broken the law to help Jim escape to freedom, Huck is reunited with his friend, Tom Sawyer, and then becomes willingly complicit in Tom's heartless plan to prolong Jim's enslavement simply for fun. With gleeful recklessness, the sequence violates the spirit and undermines the politics of everything that precedes it, and it has generated much critical discussion for that reason.¹ But with so much attention paid to the sequence itself, what remains under-examined is the way in which Huck's about-face is first made possible. The prevailing assumptions in the existing critical literature are that Huck experiences increasing sympathy for Jim as they escape together and that the 'evasion' entails the sudden, inexplicable collapse of that sympathy. But a closer look at their early interactions, as they set out together on the Mississippi River at the start of Chapter 9, reveals that Huck does not *feel sympathy* for Jim so much as he undergoes a sort of *synthesis with* Jim. The two of them are essentially fused into a single entity on the river and thereafter prised apart — beginning with the physical separation that befalls them when they leave the river and return to land in Chapter 17, and intensifying with the segregation that emerges when Huck encounters the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons and the King and the Duke — so that, in effect, the 'evasion' is more the *culmination* of this painstakingly protracted scission.

The foundations of Huck and Jim's synthesis are laid early when Huck's abusive father, Pap, re-enters the boy's life after a long absence. Forcibly seizing control of Huck, Pap soon claims official guardianship of his son in order to command Huck to work for him and make money for him (33), and he twice refers to himself not as

¹ For an overview of this discussion, see Marx; Gollin and Gollin; and Leonard, Tenney, and Davis.

Huck's father but as his "boss" (33, 36) before he kidnaps Huck and takes him into what is essentially slavery. It is true, of course, that Huck is not legally enslaved to his father in the same way that Jim is enslaved to his mistress.² Nevertheless, Huck's experience of pseudo-enslavement puts him on as close to equal footing with Jim as he is ever likely to be and thus prepares the ground on which his synthesis with Jim develops. The synthesis itself begins a little later, as Huck and Jim set off up the Mississippi River in their found canoe:

'Jim, this is nice,' I says. 'I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot ærn-bread.'

'Well, you wouldn't a ben here, 'f it hadn't a ben for Jim. You'd a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittin' mos' drowned, too, dat you would...'

The river went on raising and raising for ten or twelve days, till at last it was over the banks. The water was three or four foot deep on the island in the low places and on the Illinois bottom. On that side it was a good many miles wide; but on the Missouri side it was the same old distance across — a half a mile — because the Missouri shore was just a wall of high bluffs. (60-61)

The 'I' in the first paragraph, signifying Huck's first-person-singular narration, disappears as each paragraph in this passage gives way to the next. In the first paragraph, Huck speaks — meaning that, as the narrator of the novel, he affords himself a line of dialogue. In the second paragraph, Jim speaks — meaning that Huck, as narrator,

² The differences between Huck's enslavement and Jim's enslavement are of course irresolvable insofar as Huck and Jim occupy different and unalterable positions within a system of institutionalised race slavery. Still, Mark Twain does what he can to resolve these differences by having Huck occupy a position within that system that is relatively similar to Jim's position. "There warn't no color in [my father's] face," Huck remarks, before he goes on to specify: "[His skin] was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl — a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white" (31). In other words, just as a black man like Jim is enslaved to a white mistress, so Huck, a white boy, is enslaved to a fair-skinned master in whose presence he himself is comparatively dark-skinned.

allows Jim to speak; and, more importantly, he allows Jim to speak at greater length than he himself has just spoken, without interruption or correction, even though Jim's words amount to a rebuke of Huck. Then, in the third paragraph, neither Huck nor Jim speak at all: instead, a landscape is depicted without a single person located anywhere in it. In these three paragraphs, then, Huck first makes a statement and then allows Jim to reply with a more significant statement — thus hinting at his burgeoning egalitarianism, his willingness to allow Jim to speak for himself and to hear him out — before Huck induces his readers to retreat from his sphere of interaction with Jim and to pull back, as a camera pulls back in a movie, and admire the surrounding world as time passes by and they continue on their journey. However, upon returning from the glories of natural scenery to focus again on Huck and Jim, the reader discovers that things have changed:

We paddled all over the island. ... It was mighty cool and shady in the deep woods even if the sun was blazing outside. We went winding in and out amongst the trees; and sometimes the vines hung so thick we had to back away and go home some other way. (61)

The first-person-singular now is not only absent, but has been altogether replaced by the first-person-plural. No longer do Huck and Jim escape as *two* individuals side-by-side in a canoe. Instead, the emerging synthesis between them means that they escape as one: “*we* paddled,” “*we* went,” “*we* had to back away...” and, shortly thereafter, the synthesis is complete as the two of them not only *inhabit* the world in the second-person-plural, but now look out at the world through a single pair of eyes:

We could see saw-logs go by in the daylight, sometimes, but we let them go. ... [One] night... here comes a frame house. ... She was a two-story. ... [Day]light begun to come before we got [near it]. Then *we looked in* at the window. *We could make out* a bed, and a table, and two old chairs... (61, my emphasis)

Huck and Jim now are *one*, as Huck has assumed that Jim sees what he himself sees and that he can accurately detail what Jim sees simply by detailing what he too has just seen. And this synthesis persists beyond these few pages, right through to the end of Chapter 9 when Huck and Jim return to shore and Huck says: “We all got home safe” (62). By ‘safe,’ he does not simply mean ‘uninjured’: he means ‘safe’ in a way that encompasses the particularities of Jim’s situation as well as his own. He notes that they “hadn’t no accidents, and didn’t see nobody” (62). Not having any accidents is Huck’s own individual criterion for safety, but not seeing anybody — and not being seen in turn — is Jim’s criterion, since he can remain free only as long as he remains unseen by others who would re-enslave him. So, in saying “We all got home safe,” Huck recognises the mutual dependency that exists between Jim and himself despite their individual differences: if either one is endangered, both of them are.

Of course, as above, their synthesis does not survive past Chapter 17, when their departure from the river entails a separation that places each of them in company of other people, and their synthesis collapses entirely when Huck reunites with Tom Sawyer during the climactic ‘evasion’ sequence. But their synthesis itself is precisely what makes the evasion as troublesome as it is: their synthesis invests their relationship with overwhelming significance, but the evasion sequence is only able to undermine that relationship by first invoking the significance invested in it. Moreover, the evasion is all the more troublesome insofar as it undermines Huck and Jim’s synthesis by articulating a new synthesis in the very same terms in which the original synthesis developed. Beginning in Chapter 34, Huck again narrates the story in the second-person-plural — “We stopped talking,” he says, “and got to thinking” (241) — but this time, the other person implicated in the ‘we’ is not Jim; it is Tom. The synthesis of old has irrevocably collapsed, and a new one has emerged in its place.

Works Cited

- Leonard, James, Thomas Tenney, and Thadious Davis, eds. *Satire or Evasion? Black Perspectives on Huckleberry Finn*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992. Print.
- Gollin, Richard, and Rita Gollin. 'Huckleberry Finn and the Time of the Evasion.' *Modern Language Studies* 9.2 (Spring 1979): 5-15. Print.
- Marx, Leo. 'Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn.' *The American Scholar* 22 (1953): 423-440. Print.
- Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1884. Ed. Thomas Cooley. New York: Norton, 1999. Print.