The Southern Africanist Presence
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Although Mark Twain’s intentions for writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have been highly debated since its first publication, at the very least, his novel exposes controversial social issues of the mid-1800s. Many modern-day readers define Twain as a blatant racist, whereas others defend him and his “classic” by labeling it as an accurate representation of the time period in which it was written. Even if a growing number of scholars do not consider *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a literary classic, its value as a historical classic is indisputable. As a Postbellum novel set decades before the Civil War, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* accurately mirrors not only southern culture, but also the obvious internal conflict Twain personally battled as he wrote it. Most of all, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* unveils the American South’s reliance on African Americans to not only help create its literature, but also, more importantly, its identity as a whole.

Internationally acclaimed African American author Toni Morrison asserts that all American literature is “reflexive” of not only the author, but also the culture and context in which it was written. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison states, “the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (17). As a product of society, an individual naturally replicates the attitudes and mindsets of that society. Therefore, since culturally conscientious individuals create literature, their work also displays the conventions of the society in which it was written. The presence of African Americans has molded this nation, and in turn, shaped the literature she produced. According to Morrison, this “Africanist presence was crucial to [American’s] sense of Americanness,” and American literature such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is proof (6).

Morrison also claims that “[t]he fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” (Morrison 17). In other words, when Twain created this novel, Jim’s character served a much greater purpose than to simply give Huck a companion. His every word and action resulted from a conscious, thoughtful decision made by Twain. In this way, the inconsistencies displayed through Jim, Huck, and even the plot focus in general reflect an obvious uncertainty in the mind of its creator. Twain’s discrepancies indicate ambiguity and confusion, which are exactly what America experienced at the end of the 19th century as she adjusted to the liberation of millions of slaves. Considering all this, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* signifies how America was structured not only before, but also after the Civil War.

Even though many American authors deny the Africanist personae portrayed in their works, Morrison argues that even an absence—especially an absence—of African Americans in a work, or portion of a work, makes a statement not only about the author’s intent, but also especially the culture in which it was created. Numerous times throughout the novel, Twain conveniently removes Jim from the picture. For instance, Jim “disappears” directly after two “gentlemen,” who are looking for five runaway slaves, approach Huck and Jim on the river. When Huck struggles about whether or not to turn Jim in, he faces a conscious internal battle about what Jim is—a slave or a man. His decision to remain faithful to his fellow escapee and lie about seeing any Blacks along the river indicates his decision. Then the conditioning of culture, Huck’s and Twain’s, surfaces when Huck second-
guesses himself: “I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knewed very well I had done wrong” (89). Giving him the benefit of the doubt, Twain might have originally set out to dispute the South’s social acceptance of slavery, but the conditioning of his society, and possibly the success of his career, forced the audience-conscious entertainer in Twain to surface. Not knowing how to redeem himself after this controversial incident, Twain simply removes Jim from the plot long enough to recover his book, as well as his reputation as a humorist rather than a moralist.

The reentrance of Jim’s character offers no adequate explanation for Twain’s decision to remove him; his portrayal from this point until the end of the novel solidifies the Africanist personae already established. While Huck was “living it up” with the Grangerfords, never giving Jim a second thought, Jim was helplessly waiting and hoping for Huck to reappear. Twain’s passive portrayal of Jim pushes Huck to the front of the readers’ minds and, in turn, leaves only the back left for Jim. Subconsciously, Twain uses Jim’s character as a vehicle “to define the goals (. . .) of white characters,” meaning Twain had no other intention with Jim’s role than to highlight Huck’s escapades and satisfy his readers, or at least his original 19th century readers (Tyson 396). Either way, Twain’s treatment of Jim directly illustrates the general mindset of the South during the late 1800s: “Niggers” are subhuman and not nearly as significant as Whites; therefore, it is perfectly acceptable to use them and take advantage of them to benefit oneself.

Each of Twain’s characters symbolizes groups of people who lived in the 19th century South, which also exemplifies an Africanist persona. For example, Tom Sawyer’s treatment of Jim is an analogy of how Whites dominated Blacks during this historical period. According to Morrison, “It is not what Jim seems that warrants inquiry, but what Mark Twain, Huck, and Tom need from him that should solicit our attention” (57). Tom, the well-read white boy, commands respect and reverence from not only those “below” him, but also from his so-called peers. Jim’s response and blind obedience to Tom merely results from society’s conditioning of Blacks—and Whites—during the pre-Civil War era. Tom’s sophisticated education and civilization cause Huck to revere him and his opinions. Symbolizing the arrogant, educated, Southern white man, Tom uses his status for personal benefit and, in turn, reinstates the condition for the next generation.

Tom and Huck’s attempt to release Jim from prison, at least his physical prison, demonstrates Tom’s influence. His authority manifests when they decide how to free Jim. Tom insists on designing the plan after his “education,” and although Huck does not see the point in such a long, drawn out plan, without question, he agrees. Similarly, Jim does not even consider suggesting a different idea because he has been trained to assume “whites are indeed what they say they are, superior and adult” (Morrison 56). Neither Tom nor Huck consider Jim in their decision; instead, two white children toy with the freedom of one black man. If Jim had been a white character, even a convicted rapist or murderer, Twain would not have even conceived such a plot. The society Twain creates in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn fully permits two white children to humiliate a black man—once again portraying an Africanist presence not only in the novel, but also, more importantly, within the culture of its creator.

In a similar way, Twain reveals an Africanist presence through his satirical depiction of Christianity’s influence on the Southern way of life, especially concerning slavery. From the first chapter, Huck unashamedly proclaims his lack of interest for religion and all that comes with it. After Miss Watson tells him all about “the bad place,” he says, “I couldn’t see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn’t try for it” (4). Unbothered with the knowledge he will go to Hell someday, Huck runs to play with his friends. Symbolically, Huck chooses sin again when he purposely not only escapes with, but also befriends, Jim. Then, much later in the novel, Huck comes back to his certain entrance into Hell, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” he tells himself (206). Huck’s willful decision results from refusing to give up Jim a second time. Although Twain pokes fun at Huck’s perception of his sin’s consequences, sociologist Orlando Patterson explains the historical significance of Huck’s choice. He writes that “[T]he slave and ex-slave [have] always been the major symbol of sin in Christian theology. Christianity from its beginnings [has] identified the state of sin as one of enslavement to the flesh” (210). Intentionally or not, Twain’s representation of Huck’s mindset concerning his relationship with Jim parallels the attitudes of southern culture—once again, establishing an Africanist persona in the novel, as well as 19th century culture.

In spite of Twain’s initial objective, The
Adventures of Huckleberry Finn gives modern readers a glimpse of southern American life during a period of tremendous change. While some readers are disgusted with Twain's invocation of racist language and situations, his portrayal simply mirrors the Africanist presence alive in America during his life. Although never directly condemning slavery or the treatment of Blacks, Twain allows the roots of his society's issues to surface through his humorous portrayal. This novel's success rests on the character of a "nigger." This should not appall, or even surprise, modern readers. The South in its entirety was built on the backs of slaves; the literature she produced is no different.

Works Cited