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HUCKLEBERRY FINN: A CULTURE-CONFLICTED READING

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Abstract

Dominant readings of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) reveal the writer's seemingly anti-racist views, depiction of Jim as a character superior to the white characters in the novel and confirmation of the ideology of equality. However, the purpose of this study is a non-dominant or culture-conflicted reading of the novel in order to reveal the hidden layers of meaning in the language employed to represent Jim and therefore, conclude Twain as the product of the racist sentiments of his time viewing blacks as "other." As a cultural medium and the production of the web of certain discourses of an era, the novel is influential in confirming those discourses and establishing reality. Texts can create knowledge and reality, and each time a statement is repeated the author gains more authority in having it declared. *Huckleberry Finn* is a highly ideologically conflicted novel, and has aroused a variety of reactions from readers. Most of the reactions are concerned with the way Jim is represented. The novel introduces racism as an ideology as well as a cultural construction making Jim "other" or different. Jim is stereotyped as inferior, passive and dehumanized through language that has the power to construct reality. The language used to represent the black Jim by Twain as a subject of the racist ideologies of his time shapes the readers' way of looking at the black community and guarantees reliability for readers who take cultural texts as cultural worlds.

Keywords: Huckleberry Finn, Language, "Other", Jim, Ideology.

People make history (meaning) but not in conditions of their own choosing. (Karl Marx)

Truth of language is a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are. (Friedrich Nietzsche)

I. Introduction

The bulk of analytic readings of *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) is vast and diverse. The reason for such various reactions is that each reader is the subject of a certain culture and cultural ideologies that shape his attitudes. The novel seems highly ideologically-conflicted and readers cannot be sure whether Twain condemns the classicist ideologies of the time or reinforces them in the novel.

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As a cultural document as well as a written historical commentary, *Huck* became the center of a "public battle over [its] racial attitudes in 1957" (Camfield, 1991: 98) receiving considerable objections by many negro readers who took it as just a low comedy. As a product of the culture of the time and coming from a family who owned slaves, the humorist Twain threw dubious remarks concerning the weak, passive and stereotyped Jim representative of a minor black community. Twain represented Jim and the supposed superiority of the white through language while an at-face-value reading of the novel may confirm the dominant response of considering the novel as anti-racist.

Being set in a time when slavery was a prominent issue, the novel seems to defend racial equality, while a non-dominant reading of it can lead to the fact that the so-called reality is made through the medium of language, which then is circulated and read as truth. Accordingly this has led to many disputes over whether the novel should be taught in classes or not and this makes it a suitable work to be analyzed from a cultural-studies point of view which is the objective of the present study. As a matter of fact the main focus of this study is Jim's character, the way he is delivered by language, and the influence on the reader, and it will be argued that Twain's language in the racist culture of America, consciously or unconsciously, conformed to the defined hegemony of the time. Dominant ideological forces organize a Foucauldian web of certain forces that shape the writer's way of writing and the readers' way of reading a text. Thus, revelation of the text's unconscious will show the relationship between the text and the contemporary ideologies.

II. Discussion

For a close analysis of Twain's narrative, definitions of cultural studies and culture seem indispensable, for it is through the novel that Twain conveys some cultural effects that bear the capability to become internalized in readers. Cultural studies as a discourse interrogates the dominant culture and its practices. Hall defines the term as "a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (qtd. in Barker, 2003: 6). From Bennett's viewpoint the term is concerned with "all those practices, institutions and systems of *classification* [authors' italics] through which there are inculcated in a population particular values, beliefs ... and habitual forms of conduct" (ibid., 7).

Cultural studies is directly related to the social and discursive practices of one's culture which is, Hall argues, "the actual grounded train of practices, *representations, languages* [authors' italics] and customs of any specific society" and refers to "the contradictory forms of common sense" influential in "shap[ing] popular life" (ibid., 6). As the culture gives birth to certain ideologies—the racist ideology is at the core of American cultural identity—definitions of ideology and race would also be helpful to understanding Twain's novel in which cultural conventions are practiced. Ideology refers to "maps of meaning that, while they purport to be universal truths, are historically specific understandings that obscure and maintain power" (ibid., 10).

Twain's novel as a cultural medium, world and a reconstruction of America through language propagates related ideologies that are conducive to obscuring race divisions to which stereotyped black features are added. Althusser states that the role of ideology "to reproduce the society's existing relations of production" is "carried out in literary texts." Thus, he sees popular literature—here *Huck*—as "carrying the baggage of a culture's ideology" (Althusser, 1969: 233). Gradually, in the act of reading, subordination of the black race becomes articulated through consent, for "race" which in Gates' words means "difference between cultures" is "a social construction and not a universal or essential category of either biology or culture" (Gates, 1986: 4). Races do not exist outside of representation but are formed in and by it in a process of social and political power struggle" (Barker, 2003: 23). Ashcroft *et al.* believe that "race" is "a term for the classification of human beings" and argue that it "implies that the mental and moral

behavior of human beings, as well as individual personality, ideas and capacities, can be related to racial origin" (2007: 180).

Race is a feature of American life and a force of the Foucauldian web of discourses, and in each era certain discourses are ideologically shaped which are represented through a variety of media, and gradually by long usage are made natural to be taken as the norms of that particular society. As a cultural medium, the novel is influential in establishing reality, cultivating attitudes, and by dramatizing them, make them seem true. As an adaptation of folk art, the novel can be an indirect attempt to promote a set of ideas concerning, as instances, race and identity, and be influential in legitimizing those attitudes. Discussing the "ideology of race," Ashcroft *et al.* refer to the crucial process of "construction and naturalization of [...] unequal [...] relations" and define race as "a justification for the treatment of the slaved peoples after the development of the slave trade" (2007: 41). Such discourses are made and shaped in the language and represented through different media.

On the importance of media and language it is significant to notice that "linguistic ideology is not something that only takes place in the media," and change in "ways of speaking" can be one instance (qtd. in Johnson and Ensslin, 2007: 271). *Huck* has been canonized, is very popular throughout the world's academic centers, and is representative of America's historical realism as well as her cultural and national values that make it apt for a cultural analysis. Set in an age of African-American struggles, the novel has been called, by some critics like Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "African-American" (qtd. in Arac, 1996: 116) and highly classicist. It is said that Twain had relations with African Americans which affected his view of them, which is well disclosed in his brave statement: "the only very marked difference between the average civilized man and the average savage is, that the one is gilded, the other painted" (Pain, 1935: 89). Somewhere else he asserts his statement: "I can stand any society. All that I care to know is that a man is a human being, that is enough for me; he can't be any worse" (Pain, 1912: 832). Such a notion is inferred from the instinctive reaction of the white and black children in chapter 32, "and behind her comes her little white children, acting the same way the little niggers was going" (Twain, 2004: 311). Nonetheless, not being fully immune to the dominant discourses of the time—racial inequalities and the related discursive practices gone into othering blacks—Twain's novel can be read as a source from which indirect references to race can be inferred. Ipso facto, the novel introduces racism as an ideology that others the African Jim, a fact clearly illustrated in the language used by Twain. The images shaped within the language of the novel as a symbolic system can shape the readers' views concerning race, superiority, difference, weakness, passivity and backwardness.

In the 1800s when slavery was an acceptable morality of the society, abolitionists were not much favored among those who cared for economy only. Indeed, "America's past reveals the direct tracks of oppression in the treatment of slaves" the result of which they believe is "European notions of civilization and acculturation" held by America (Munn and Rajan, 1998: 385). Different cultural issues of any era appear in the media of the time the result of which is that "readers [...] contextualize characters' acts by drawing on historical knowledge of past cultural perspectives and models" (Galda and Beach, 2001: 67). One related example is the way Jim is treated by Huck, Tom and white masters which becomes "contextualized" by readers who draw on their knowledge of U. S. history and culture to interpret how cultural ideologies work. Reading provides the means for the readers to identify themselves with certain characters and styles of thought, and participate in the current socializations. This means that readers construct texts as "cultural worlds" and interpret actions "within larger frameworks of worlds or activity systems constituted by cultural or ideological forces" (ibid.). What is noteworthy here is the role of language in construction of what readers know to be truths and what in Nietzsche's words are no more than "illusions" (ibid., 47).

What seems significant here is that racism is a form of "othering" which, Tyson believes, is used to "subjugate" people, and therefore "other" must mean "different" and "inferior" (Tyson, 2006: 433). This is done through language which "we use carelessly [...] in such a way as to will

[...] sense of natural difference into our formulations" (Gates, 1986: 5) and bestows Jim with different characteristics compared with other white figures. This way what becomes 'other'ed seems to be devoid of full humanity and lack some unknown qualities. A crystal clear instance is felt in Sally's relief, hearing nobody, except a nigger, was hurt in the fabricated story of a cylinder-head explosion: "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people get hurt"(Twain, 2004: 312). Such an implication is made more lucid hither and thither throughout the novel, one of which emerges in chapter 35 wherein Tom and Huck discuss the way of releasing Jim, and Tom suggests cutting off Jim's leg, giving no clear-cut reason because "Jim's a nigger, and wouldn't understand the reasons for it, and how it's the custom in Europe"(Twain, 2004: 336). Texts as domains of signs are capable of shaping and being shaped. As Lewis and Jhally argue "the effects of texts come from their articulation or disarticulation with other prevailing stories circulating in the semiotics-cultural environment" (1994: 115). Edward Said also believes that "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" and this is precisely what Foucault means by discourse (Said, 1995: 94). Novel as a narrative names things and by naming shapes part of the history: "a discourse [...] names the grouping of various cultural practices around forms of discipline" (Williams, 1999: 519). As a terrain of different discourses at play, Twain's novel is open to different readings. The way Twain characterizes Jim together with all images and practices that appear in the text as a sign system generate sets of meanings that in the novel as a grand cultural text give birth to many little cultural texts. A possible culture-conflicted reading of the novel with a double emphasis on the way Jim is portrayed will focus on how Twain gradually separates him from the norm, giving him a different discourse. By doing so Twain, implicitly, provides certain ideas that marginalize Jim and are changed into truths. Little by little, descriptions of Jim work in a way to shape his identity and change into "maximum social agreement" represented as "truth," (qtd. in Barker, 2003: 27) and then become accepted by readers.

Edward Said in his influential and seminal *Orientalism* (1978) talks about the "impression of repetition and strength" and continues that each time a statement is "repeated," the "author of the statement gains a little more authority in having declared it" (1978: 72). As a lover of nigger jokes and shows, Twain seems to repeat certain characteristics that depict Jim much different from Huck, but "he [Huck] is a young boy who has known only one belief growing up, that is racism. However, not only does he not comply with those teachings, he defies what those teachings stand for"(Kleist, 2009: 261). Yet Twain, through language, uses the ideology of racism to "other" Jim in a sense that Toni Morrison finds "what [...] Twain, Huck, and especially Tom need from [Jim] disturbing" (1992: 57). Although antiracist the novel may appear, the message is not as strong and influential as the offensive uses of the word "nigger" that appears 213 times throughout the novel. Critics do agree that in Twain's time the word carried insulting connotations. As a signifier the word signifies a black man as submissive, degraded, humiliated and commodified." It is not too much of a "stretcher" for the reader to determine that the primary "moral" of Huckleberry Finn, despite Twain's admonition to the contrary, is the transformative power of the ability to adopt the perspective of the Other" (Zehr, 2009: 89). Indubitably Jim is not well-educated, hence more effortlessly he is compared with a watermelon and belongs to the so-called non-European black category. Tom and Huck speak of Jim as "a mighty good nigger" (Twain, 2004: 226) and "a nigger [who] wouldn't understand the reasons for it, and how it's the custom in Europe" (ibid., 336). Jim appears as the other in the novel and "the Other occupies the luminal status of those who are like 'us' and are not like 'us,' being stereotyped, dehumanized, diminished, inferior, odd, irrational, exoticized and evil; feared and desired at the same time" (qtd. in Johnson and Ensslin, 2007: 278). "Racial offensiveness" (Arac, 1996: 111) is conspicuous in chapter 24 of the novel: Huck says "if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race" (Twain, 2004: 235). The matter of race might seem European and not American as Victor Doyno argues that Tom is "enslaved by European notions" which is the cause of his "racial ... contempt for Jim" (qtd. in Arac, 1996: 115). However, what is of paramount importance is the way Jim is dehumanized as a member of the minority discourse in America. Jim as an African-American is

shown using an uneducated black dialect which as "one aspect of ... vernacular ... has fueled the most important and long-lived debate about the book, namely whether or not it is racist" (Camfield, 1996: 98). This indeed provides the readers with local color perceiving Jim as a cultural outsider—other—and a man of color caught in a racist society. As a slave, Jim is owned by Miss Watson—a white character through whom Jim is given his freedom—remains static, is unable to speak properly, is dehumanized to the level of commodity, and remains childlike, superstitious and simple to the end. Jim is not as articulate as Huck and Tom, and appears as a comic figure. Led by Huck, Jim is exposed to misunderstandings and without Huck his solidarity is under question. This signifies that Jim's identity seems to be lacking when considered away from Huck which poses this question in the mind of the reader that to what extent is Jim capable of representing the qualities of a man! Twain's depiction of Jim through language seems so realistic that the concept of a black man representative of the discourse of inferiority, passivity and lack of self-consciousness is constructed and made natural throughout the novel. What matters is not if the portrayal is realistic or fictional but the effect on reader whose mentality is shaped by what the text does: "discursive construction" (Barker, 2003: 11).

After so many tricks played on Jim, the writer of *Beloved* finds it astonishing to see how much love and respect "the black man has for his white friend and white masters" (Morrison, 1992: 56). She believes in the "interdependence of slavery and freedom of Huck's growth as well as Jim's serviceability within it" (*ibid.*, 55). Black submission and the oppression of the subordinate class—here represented in the character of Jim—are made internalized as a belief in superiority of the white and the blacks' constant need of the white the idea of which is articulated and circulated in the novel. Accordingly Jim is shown as the archetypal good nigger who does not object to what happens and who is willing to serve white masters, and is left alone at the end by a narrator no longer interested in what will happen to him. Therefore, the alert reader will see into Twain's failure at depicting Jim other than a stereotypical slave good for taking care of Huck only. Still, throughout chapters 36-39 wherein Huck and Jim dupe and victimize Aunt Sally to free Jim, a sort of moral confusion comes up in the characters' interactions upon which Twain leaves us with little basis to make any substantive judgment. There is no doubt Jim is changed into an unconscious resisting individual who has no voice to utter in a society dominated by white masters and producers of the discourse of slavery. Barker believes that "subordination is a matter not just of coercion but also of consent" (2003: 9). The ideology of white supremacy is planted in the black psyche to make it damaged enough to accept and normalize imposed ideologies—Munns and Rajan bring examples of damages done to the body and psyche of the dominated. Lois Tyson, discussing colonialist ideology and discourse, refers to the white assumption of its being superior and defining "native peoples" as "savage, backward, and undeveloped" (2006: 419). This is apparent in the novel's unconscious levels of meaning: Twain defines Jim and by defining establishes a set of conventions to be related to *tradition* and then be called *truth*. Although Twain, seemingly, portrays the destructive power of tradition, "conformist behavior," and "rules of the establishment" on individuals as Campbell believes (2000: 386); and although Huck utters Jim to be white inside; and although "Huck is often manipulated by Jim precisely because Jim can always hide behind the mask of stereotype created by whites for their own psychological protection" (qtd. in Camfield, 1991: 99); and although Twain shows sympathy toward Jim and fights "nobly, though futilely, against the customs and laws of white supremacy" as Bernard W. Bell believes (qtd. in Arac, 1996: 113); and although he "us[es] sentimentality to tell the reader to sympathize with the black man's humanity" (Camfield, 1991: 109) and shows hostility towards class structure wishing a classless society, Jim is shown as "a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" (Ellison, 1964: 72) as well as an "other"—Tyson calls the "practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human ... othering" (2006: 420). Moreover, these seemingly anti-racist points function as making the text more reliable and other racist statements more authentic. What adds to the negative portrayal of Jim is his relationship with Huck which sometimes turns to one resembling a mother—a feminine passive figure of little value—and a son, making Jim a feminine good black petting Huck. The whites are used to represent themselves "as the

embodiment of ... the proper 'self;' native peoples ... considered 'other,' different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human" (ibid.), hence no wonder throughout the novel, many instances exemplify the whites' ingratitude towards the black Jim's self-sacrifices, the quintessence of which emerges in chapter 42 wherein Jim benevolently jeopardizes his freedom for the sake of Tom's dire wound, but as Huck wholeheartedly affirms: "I hoped they was going to say he could have one or two of the chains took off ... but they didn't think of it"(Twain, 2004: 397-398). In the final chapters of the novel we lose track of Jim and his family—his *deaf* daughter—as if he is silenced and omitted from the mainstream culture since Huck does not seem very interested in what will happen to them. Huck, instead, "got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest," (Twain, 2004: 407) turning the novel into a coming-of-age one with a focus on the adventures of a white male protagonist, with Jim being treated like a plaything for their adventures. Therefore, the displaced Jim as a stage prop is reduced to the level of commodity belonging to nowhere—Tyson equals "enslavement" to "forced migration" (2006: 421)—and Twain gives place to Huck and Tom to continue.

III. Conclusion

The application of binary oppositions of white versus black and dominance versus subordination as a way of controlling racialized groups made so far, are established in the novel through the power of language, and are "said to 'guarantee' truth by excluding and devaluing the 'inferior' part of the binary" (Barker, 2003: 29). Gradually what was once an invention or imaginary construction establishes itself as truth because written material makes it more reliable as a true account, i. e., reality is made based on descriptions of the text which, to quote Said, yields "a greater authority and use" (1995: 93).

The descriptions and repetitions are woven into one another giving birth to a final picture of certain implications. Jim is represented as a dehumanized figure with stereotyped features. Tricks are played upon him and he is forgotten at the close of the novel by Huck who, sentimentally, recognizes African-Americans as human beings and "white inside!" Tom enjoys pulling Jim's leg making him a comic figure at his white presence. These, one can see, add to Jim's submissiveness when Huck decides how to treat him. Despite the fact that Tom knows Jim has been set free, he was "in earnest and was actually going to help steal that nigger out of slavery" (Twain, 2004: 328). Therefore, whether racist or not and with whatever cultural-political background, Twain by representing racist implications and touching the main points of difference through the text, produces a form of racial ideology which gradually becomes a piece of reality to be accepted by readers as truth and become internalized.

As far as a text with its cultural signs is concerned, certain cultural issues are produced which accordingly generate new related ideologies. This is the reason for so many debates over teaching *Huck* in different academic institutes. It is the agreement of such cultural signs and codes that shapes the underlying structure of the text. It should be added that readers of *Huck* do not necessarily share similar understandings of the text. As far as meaning is produced by language, and language is a system of free-playing signs, a fixed meaning of the text will remain an illusion and this means that proliferation in the act of reading is unavoidable. Perhaps one reason for different critical responses to the novel is the will to resist what seems to be the vogue or dominant form of the culture "as part and parcel of modern apparatuses of power" (Taylor and Winquist, 2004: 15). The more one's consciousness is, the more one's resistance to the dominant, and the will to a culture-conflicted reading will be.

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