SUPERSTITION IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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# Table of Contents

Chapter One  
page 1

Chapter Two  
29

Chapter Three  
44

Illustrations  
62

Bibliography  
75
Chapter One

In his introduction to the section on "folk-belief" in Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel, Alan Dundes discusses the folklorist's reluctance to examine a folk-group's belief in superstition and their hesitancy to share with the folklorist the meaning superstition holds for them. It has been a long-standing assumption among folklorists that superstition is a mark of ignorance and deprivation, that a superstitious person lacks the sophistication and "enlightened" attitude of a more rational human being who is the product of scientific principles and has outgrown the need for superstitious beliefs. Even when folklorists studied Negro culture, they sometimes hesitated to report that large body of Negro folklore, superstitions, since it was the stuff white stereotypes of Negro life were made of, and they did not want to promote the idea that the "fear" behind superstition was an inherent part of the Negro character. Dundes has one reply to this problem, allowing the folklorist to study superstition more comfortably and intelligently without the fear of reinforcing any stereotypes of the Negro: "Negroes are superstitious; so are whites; and so are all the peoples of the world. So long as there are unresolved sources of anxiety, there will be superstitions."1

Race, then, presents no barrier to the practice of superstition. In his Folk-Beliefs of the Southern Negro, Newbell Puckett says that most Negro superstitions are of European origin, and he suggests that whites usually abandoned any superstition once the Negro
adopted it. Furthermore, just as a person's race does not prevent him from believing in certain superstitions, the sex, ethnicity, and number of persons in a group do not necessarily hinder the transmission of superstitions. Occupational superstitions which help a person through his day can be found in the household among domestics, in the fields among farmers, or along coastlines where fishermen risk their equipment and their lives for the daily catch; in almost any job you can find a mixture of ages and backgrounds which dispels the theory that superstition only belongs to one race.

Dundes bases his argument of the universality of superstition on the fact that it is a direct result of anxiety, but this is not a new idea by any means. In his essay entitled "Magic, Science, and Religion," Bronislaw Malinowski argues for this anxiety ritual on the basis of his study of the Trobriand Islanders:

We have seen that all the instincts and emotions, all practical activities, lead man into impasses where gaps in his knowledge and the limitations of his early power of observation and reason betray him at a crucial moment. Human organism reacts to this in spontaneous outburst, in which rudimentary modes of behavior and rudimentary beliefs in their efficiency are engendered. Magic fixes upon these beliefs and rudimentary rites and standardizes them into permanent traditional forms. Thus magic supplies primitive man with a number of ready-made ritual acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical
situation. It enables man to carry out with confidence his important tasks, to maintain his poise and his mental integrity in fits of anger, in the throes of hate or unrequited love, of despair and anxiety. The function of anxiety is to ritualize man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear. (p.90)

If we accept this argument, superstition can thrive wherever anxiety is high, and the questions of race, sex, age, and number become less important. We cannot even question the intelligence of a superstitious person since anxiety works on the "advanced" as well as the "primitive" (think of the number of superstitions Dr. Johnson practiced which were triggered by the kind of cosmic despair some of us feel weighing upon our own shoulders).

Once we have established that many different kinds of people use superstitions to one degree or another, we have to go one step further and attempt to show their functions within the group that uses them. Dundes again provides some answers to one of many questions which he can state clearly and sensibly; this time he suggests an approach folklorists can use to determine the function of a superstition in what has become a standard definition of the functions of superstition.4 Using Puckett's study of Negative and Positive Omens as a starting point, Dundes offers three possible categories of superstitions based upon their structure: (1) the "sign," frequently a weather sign, predicting something that is to happen outside human control; (2) "magic superstitions" which often have more than one ritual involving belief and practice and thus allow the participant to have some control over the world; and (3)
"conversion superstitions" or "superstitions in which one or more of the preliminary conditions is a sign. A few conversion superstitions arise from the neutralizing or reversal of magic superstitions." Whereas sign superstitions only predict the future, magic and conversion superstitions make the future. The former requires only belief, the latter two belief and practice.

I tend to suspect any structural system which attempts to classify every bit of information no matter how neat and clear its divisions may seem since these superstructures often wrench a body of information out of its context in order to fit it into its own preconceived structure. Folklore is particularly susceptible to this danger because it cannot exist without its context, and it often becomes a sitting duck for those strategists and schemers who work behind a blind and take pot-shots in an attempt to down an entire flock with a few wild shots. Folklorists should ultimately be concerned with the particular instances and practices of a folk-belief and not with all-inclusive systems which promise intellectual security. But in all fairness to structural approaches, they can help us point out likenesses and differences between various groups of material in order to learn more about the individual cultures to which they belong.

Three years after Dundes' structural approach to superstitions appeared, Michael Jones attacked Dundes' system as a 'cul-de-sac' perpetuating "the earlier desultory collecting methods by stressing the importance of the belief nexus to the neglect of the full narrative context of an item..." after Dundes himself had based his article on a similar complaint against his predecessors. Jones does
have an argument, for if you attempt to classify all the superstitions Dundes collected in Brown County according to his system, many of them will cause some problem because they seem to fit into more than one class.8 Dundes' system breaks down because he fails to take into account all the possibilities of human action.

Jones prefers his own categories based upon his studies of agricultural superstitions which circulated among farmers in Kansas, and instead of Dundes' categories of sign, magic, and conversion superstitions, he comes up with his own trio: (1) "explicit activating beliefs," roughly paralleling Dundes' magic and conversion superstitions, prescribe a definite action to be taken once the condition is stated; (2) "implicit activating beliefs," akin to Dundes' sign superstitions, imply that some action needs to be taken without stating it explicitly in the belief; and (3) "passive beliefs" which prescribe no way of acting and do not suggest that action is even possible. Jones, at least, has taken into account a broader range of human activity, and since a superstition supposedly helps its believer control his world and make it more bearable, his system seems more in keeping with the spirit of superstition.

What are we supposed to learn from this controversy? It forces us to bear in mind the importance of the context of folklore and teaches us to be sensitive to the different functions of superstitions within a culture. But if we wish to talk specifically about some of these functions, it is always best to return to the area from which the superstitions were collected and see how they are being used. Jones states that the "passive belief," for example, was the least accepted and most disparaged superstition among
farmers in Kansas because it lacked the personal immediacy of the other classes by making no allowance for human action. A passive belief, in other words, is least plausible and requires an unflagging faith on the part of the person who accepts it.

The chiding Dundes receives from Jones also makes me wonder if literary critics are not also guilty of making generalizations about the purpose of certain elements within a text because they have not looked closely at how they are being used and are blinded by their own expectations as they read the work; this is particularly true of those critics who wish to study folklore in literature. A folklorist is primarily concerned with the context of his material while the literary critic pays more attention to his text, but this does not mean that within the literary work itself a certain context, a fictional one, is absent. How closely related are the disciplines of the folklorist and the critic?

Alan Dundes says that it isn't true folklorists must be either literary scholars or anthropologists since they use the same methodology whether they are studying folklore in literature or in a folk-group:

There are only two basic steps in the study of folklore in literature and in culture. The first step is objective and empirical; the second is subjective and speculative. The first might be termed identification and the second interpretation. Identification essentially consists of a search for similarities; interpretation depends upon delineation of differences. The first task in studying an item is to show how it is like previously reported items,
whereas the second is to show how it differs from previous reported items—and hopefully, why it differs. Just as the folklorist must identify and interpret all the material he collects during his field work to analyze fairly the group he is studying, so too must the critic identify the elements of folklore in a literary work and comment upon their function. A mere list of superstitions in a work will not illuminate it any more than a list of metaphors from Proust's novels will help us understand how he is using them.

The interpretation of superstitions in a work such as The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn creates some dangers for the literary critic, however, unless he realizes that when he speaks of folklore in literature, he is no longer dealing with "living" folklore but a highly sophisticated and complex rendering of these elements. Second, once he has identified superstitions, riddles, legends, or any other folk material in the text, he risks assuming too much about the author's knowledge and use of the material in his work unless he explicitly states his sources. How can the critic be sure an author is accurate in his use of folklore, and how does he know the writer is being faithful to its intent (i.e. not distorting it because of some bias) without over-romanticizing it or using it for some auxiliary literary effect? He probably can't tell, and all he can do is speculate and make some assumptions about the author's intentions which he would be hard pressed to prove. If something of the cultural context from which a novelist has taken his material is lost, the critic can at least say something about his general attitude towards it by examining its literary context.
Yet the oral and literary traditions do have something in common, for storytellers and novelists attempt to impose some kind of order upon the world about them and both give us an imaginative view of it. A person does not have to be a poet or a novelist to exercise his imagination and see symbolic relationships between man and nature, nor does he necessarily have to express these relationships in a realistic fashion. Although the oral tradition is usually more simple in form and more highly stylized, and even though it is not completely the product of an individual imagination (although a person can elaborate upon and embellish a story as he tells it), it still allows the storyteller to express an artistic view of the world.

I want to look at Twain's use of superstition in *Huck Finn* with the folklorist's understanding of its general function as Dundes and Jones have outlined it, but with the critic's concern for the text in order to show how Twain uses superstition thematically to develop the characters of Huck and Jim and establish a central conflict in the novel, that between the river and the shore. I hope this approach will also discredit the argument of those who feel Twain has stereotyped Jim as the fearful and superstitious child, a reaction that I feel does not come justifiably from the text, but perhaps from another source, the illustrations of the novel. The illustrated *Huck Finn* will be the object of my final chapter, for it provides some evidence for this argument and dignifies the old folk stereotype of the Negro as a "boy." Most people never suspect the accuracy of the illustrations of a book and unquestionably accept them as a just representation of the author's work. Before I begin any of this, however, I should say that just because we can argue that
superstition belongs to all races and that it serves a useful purpose by relieving a person of some of his anxiety, we must not assume that Twain necessarily sees it this way, nor can we vindicate him of the charge of racism simply because Dundes' field studies have shown that superstition can be used in a positive manner. We have to turn to the text for these answers.

The central issue in the debate between Stanley Hyman and Ralph Ellison about the role of the American Negro writer also raises the question of the values of folkloristic studies of literature. Hyman attempts to show how the tales of many different cultures can share the same archetypal pattern, and he uses the trickster figure as an example of how one character can have a cross-cultural appeal; Ellison, however, objects to such "archetype-hunting" which he says "leads to a critical game that ignores the specificity of literary works...and oversimplifies the American tradition." If a certain archetype reappears in various cultures, how then can we say that one such tale reflects an individual culture if it belongs to all cultures? Ellison is offended by Hyman's attempt to rob the American Negro male of his tradition, but he has a knee-jerk reaction which forces him into making the same kind of mistake for which he has faulted Hyman. It is because of whites' "Manichean fascination" with blackness that they have robbed the Negro of his individuality, Ellison says, and he uses Twain's portrayal of "Nigger Jim" as a literary example of how an author can rob a Negro of his manhood and tradition. Jim, Ellison continues, is cast in the role of the "darky entertainer," the black-faced minstrel who served as an outlet for a white man's anxiety about his own lack of tradition, and he is given a boy's status
because of this. But Ellison has committed the same mistake of failing to look at the text closely and has forgotten to make the fundamental distinction between the author and the narrator of the novel.

I think Ellison implies that part of the reason he thinks Jim is a "white man's inadequate portrait of a slave" is that he does believe in superstitions, and that Twain uses them as a way of stereotyping Jim, thus continuing the tradition of the "darky entertainer." Ellison, however, forgets that the story is told by an unreliable and naive boy, not by Twain himself. Some work has been done on Twain's use of folklore in _Huck Finn_, but it also has failed to make this separation between author and storyteller. Daniel Hoffman has come the closest to resolving this problem by using the superstitions in the novel as grounds for calling Jim a shaman and Huck his disciple, but he tends to look at superstitions generically without seeing what individual functions Twain assigns to them in the work. He also fails to conclude in an otherwise sympathetic treatment of superstition that there might be reasons other than Twain's failing memory which could explain why only those Ellison calls "boys and riffraff" actively believe in superstitions.

If we take Dundes's advice and look first at the different kinds of superstitions there are in the novel and more importantly how Twain uses them, we may gain a better understanding of Jim's character and a concrete example of how dangerous it can be to talk about folklore in literature. I also want to make clear the limitations of this brief study of Twain's novel since it deals with an individual work and a lone author, and any principles I might discover along the
way will be very broad and limited in their usefulness when applied to other works. What I can do is show Twain's use of folklore in *Huck Finn* and hope that a similar approach can be applied to other works containing a significant amount of folklore.

Finally, I will not try to prove that Twain was consciously using folklore to remove Jim from this tradition of the "dardy entertainer" in order to give him a man's dignity. First of all, I think it would be an impossible task unless someone were to find a lost manuscript in which Twain wrote that it was his purpose all along to use superstition in this fashion. Second, if we assume Ellison is right about Jim's lack of "manhood," we have to look at the text again to see how Twain portrays the adults and children in the novel. Are we to assume that Twain thinks a man necessarily has more dignity than a boy?

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a book about what actions a person can and cannot perform in a world full of rules, regulations, scriptures, taboos, and omens, and I have an overwhelming feeling every time I read the book that the entire journey Jim and Huck make constrains as well as frees them, and that life can be safely led only if one knows the limitations placed upon it. For those who see the trip down the river as an escape from the harsh and hypocritical rules of the shore and its shams and lies the river, they should be reminded, also has its own set of laws and rules which, if ignored or neglected by its passengers, can temporarily or even permanently disrupt their journey.

There is a difference in degree and quality, however, between the laws of the land and the river. The interdictions of the shore
protect its shallowness while the river gives its travelers some
warning of its vastness and amplitude; the shore promises too little,
the river too much, and Huck and Jim must make a quick adjustment
from a life which diminishes the importance of nature by ignoring it
to one which is diminished in size by its awesomeness. All in all,
the river's dangers are far more attractive than those of the
shore.

We can make even sharper distinctions between the jaws of those
two domains if we ask ourselves why they even exist. Although what
Miss Watson preaches to Huck cannot be called superstition, she sets
up certain conditions of behavior which, if lived up to by Huck,
promise him indefinable rewards. But seeing is believing for Huck
the pragmatist, and his thoughts rarely wander from those immediate
objects about him; when the widow promises him spiritual rewards
but gives him nothing he can use (Huck needs immediate gratification),
Huck remarks on her ways:

Then Miss Watson she took me in the closet and prayed,
but nothing come of it. She told me to pray every day,
and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so.
I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. I
tried for hooks three of four times, but somehow I
couldn't make it work. By and by, one day, I asked Miss
Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She
never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. (p.24)

The assumption, of course, is that proper behavior will be its own
reward and eventually will prevent a journey to Hell, and the Widow
tells Huck that if he doesn't scrunch up, slouch in his chair, or smoke his pipe, he might avoid a trip to the "bad place." Miss Watson's "magic," however, fails for Huck; it prescribes cures for its own ills, and Miss Watson's efforts to make Huck conform to her ways increase rather than decrease his anxiety—in fact they are the source of his anxiety. What she does, as do most of the people on shore, is provide solutions to those unnecessary problems of her own creation.

But we are not supposed to condemn Miss Watson simply because she has religion; to the contrary, religion works for her in her own way just as Jim's magic superstitions help relieve him of many of his apprehensions about the river. Religion can function in the same way as magic superstition and can create as well as dispel anxieties and doubts just as superstition can make an individual anxious with anticipation of something dreadful that is going to happen or calm him with the knowledge of precisely what is to take place and how it can be avoided.

What we should resent is Miss Watson's attempt to impose her religion upon Huck and make him conform to her ways while automatically rejecting his beliefs as necessarily ignorant and backwards. Both religion and superstition are capable of uniting people in a common belief, but in the context of this novel Miss Watson's religion divides people and sets them at odds and finally alienates Huck and Jim from the shore. Superstition in Huck Finn works quite differently in Huck Finn as we shall see, for it will be one way of watching Huck's affection and respect for Jim grow as he comes to accept Jim's beliefs. It encourages a kind of imaginative "telling" of how those
hidden powers of nature work regardless of how rational or reason-
able the individual superstitions may be. Jim's beliefs, unlike
Miss Watson's religion, allow him to participate in these powers
rather than exclude him from them in the way Miss Watson excludes
herself from more vengeful forces. It is not a problem with religion
itself, but with the people who practice it with all the cant but
none of the spirit of Christianity.

Miss Watson's laws are not right for Huck. They instill fear
and make him feel all the more lonesome and isolated from nature.
The different superstitions Jim teaches Huck, however, provide him
with some comfort once they are on the river and slowly help him
account for the power of the natural world. But first Huck must
escape the conventional morality of the shore before he can begin to
appreciate Jim's own understanding of the river and learn the
importance of his superstitions.

Daniel Hoffman has already noted how Huck first sees Jim
according to the way those on shore want Huck to see him,
as someone closer to the stereotyped "darky" Ellison is concerned
about, but we see him through Huck's eyes, not Twain's;
Hoffman has failed to take this into account. Rather than attribute
this initial image of Jim-in-bondage to Huck's imperfect view of
him, Hoffman argues that it is not Huck but the lower "quality"
of Jim's superstitions on shore that accounts for this:

When we first meet him, Jim is a slave. His superstitions,
like the hagiolatry of the ignorant peasants in The
Innocents Abroad, are the manacles upon his soul. Mark
Twain dramatizes his bondage by the quality of his beliefs. Far from controlling nature, Jim in slavery is helpless before the dark powers, a gullible prey to every chance or accident which befalls him.

How can one superstition be of a higher quality than another? What exactly does this mean? We are not talking about shoes, or handbags, or tobaccos. Hoffman has given us a good example of why we shouldn't see literature as a repository for folklore mainly because we ignore the context the author gives it. These "superstitions" in the early part of the novel have transfer value for Jim according to Hoffman, making him like the "ignorant peasants in The Innocents Abroad," when it should be the literary work which has the upper hand.

I can no more agree with what Hoffman has to say about the gullibility of Jim in those opening scenes. It is no accident that Tom and Huck try to make Jim look like a fool, nor is it chance that Huck should ask Jim to predict his superstitions for him. Jim's superstitions might look less meaningful while he is on shore, but not for the reasons Hoffman gives. They are more a portrayal of the early stages of the relationship between Jim and Huck. When the latter goes to Jim to seek counsel from Jim's hairball, Jim's reply is intentionally ambiguous partly because he cannot possibly know Huck's future:

Yo' ole father doan' know yit what he's a-gwyne to do.
Sometimes he spec he'll go 'way, en den ag'in he spec he'll stay...You gwyne to have considable trouble in yo' life, en considable joy. Sometimes you gwine to git hurt,
en sometimes you gwyne to git sick, but every time you's gwyne to git well agin...(p.32)

But Jim also cannot miss with an answer like this one and he knows it. Before he gives Huck the hairball's response, he asks for a little something for his trouble. Huck tells us

Jim got down on his knees, and put his ear against it and listened. But it warn't no use; he said it wouldn't talk. He said sometimes it wouldn't talk without money.

Is Huck to be outdone? He gives Jim a slug without telling him about the dollar he has in his pocket and thinks he has the better end of the deal—until Jim reminds him that a potato will remove the coin's tarnish and make it as good as new. Huck and Jim are testing each other in this scene by trying to best each other, and Jim has finally taken Huck (although Huck would never admit it). We know Jim doesn't believe in the magic he is practicing in this scene once we see through Huck's account of what has happened. Again, we have another example of how a blind refusal to see the context of folklore in a work can distort the book's meaning.

Even when Huck and Tom trick Jim into believing that witches rode him, Twain does not give Jim "Grade B" superstitions. Jim takes advantage of the fear everybody else feels for witches (including Huck and himself) to create a tall tale in which he figures as the hero. Huck says

Niggers would come from all around there and give Jim anything they had, just for a sight of the five-center
piece; but they wouldn't touch it, because the devil had
had his hands on it. Jim was most ruined for a servant,
because he got stuck up on account of having seen the
devil and been rode by witches.

How different is this from the stories Tom Sawyer tells and forces
the other boys to believe? He calls his friends "Tom Sawyer's Gang"
and makes them take an oath swearing an allegiance to his authority.
Jim's witch story simply gives him an opportunity to boast and put
himself above the other slaves, and it also shows us that Huck is
as superstitious as Jim even though he thinks Jim is "ruined."
Hoffman is looking for a difference between the superstitions on
shore and those Jim uses once he is on the river, but he looks for
it in the different "qualities" of the superstitions without
realizing that it is due to the quality of Huck's perception (or
in this case the lack of quality).

The Jim on shore does differ greatly from the Jim on the river,
however, and I would attribute this difference to Huck's changing
perceptions of Jim which accompany a change in his surroundings.
While Jim is on shore he is forced to be a shaman among the other
slaves if he wants to assert himself and to do so he has to play on
the gullibility of others (Hoffman may have been referring to some-
thing like this in his article). I might also argue that the "magic"
Jim practices on shore results from his confinement on shore since
it provides him with the only outlet as a slave to assert himself.
But I wouldn't hesitate to argue that while on shore he is not con-
trolling nature but other people, a less than admirable action in a
novel which later punishes those who prey upon the weaknesses of
others. There is a difference in the two Jims, but it is not due to
any change in the "quality" of his beliefs.

Huck, on the other hand, gives us a far more powerful expression
of the shore's oppressiveness and his superstitions come closer to
showing a need to master the loneliness he feels in the widow's house
than Jim's need to overcome his fears. In the opening chapters of
the book, Huck feels the weight of life around him; the widow's
scriptures and etiquette and all the marks of civility (a bed in its
own room and starched clothes) are all oppressive to him. But we feel
Huck's plight more than Jim's since Huck tells us how desperate he
feels, so desperate in fact that any attempt he makes to counteract
his bad luck loses out to his fears. In the next two scenes Huck
practices what Dundes would call "conversion superstitions," but all
his efforts to avoid the bad luck forecasted for him fall short of
reassuring him. First he steps on a spider and tells us of his
pessimism:

    I didn't need anybody to tell me that was an awful bad
    sign and would fetch me some bad luck, and I was so scared
    and most shook the clothes off of me. I got up and turned
    around in my tracks three times and crossed by breast
    every time; and then I tied up a little lock of my hair
    with a thread to keep witches away. But I hadn't no con-
    fidence.

Then he makes the irrevocable mistake of spilling salt at the widow's
table:
One morning I happened to turn over the salt-cellar at breakfast. I reached for some of it as quick as I could to throw over my left shoulder and keep off the bad luck, but Miss Watson was in ahead of me... The widow put in a good word for me, but that warn't going to keep off the bad luck, I knowed that well enough... There is ways to keep off some kinds of bad luck, but this wasn't one of them kind; so I never tried to do anything, but just poked along low-spirited and on the watch-out.

Huck believes that magic can sometimes ward off bad luck, but this time the Widow's magic is stronger than his own, and by preventing Huck from following through and scorning his magic the Widow has shown us her hypocrisy. Huck's efforts to avoid this bad luck are nullified while he is on shore, but they will help set in relief those superstitions he discovers on the river where there is a closer relationship between the individual and nature. Within the context of this novel, the closer the proximity of a character to his surroundings and the greater the control he thinks he has over them, the greater the credence he gives to his superstitions.

Hoffman correctly points out that there is a change in the nature of Jim's superstitions once he gives up the shore for the river, and yet he doesn't completely see the significance of that change. Both Huck and Jim have escaped the shore only to find themselves at the mercy of the river's awesomeness, but unlike the shore which fails to comfort those who suffer and worry because of problems of its own manufacturing, the river's forbidding strength offers some
solace to those who place faith in it. Compare the following two scenes, the first taking place in Huck's bedroom, the second alongside the river, to see the differences between a world seen through a bedroom window and a natural world which freely communicates with its inhabitants:

I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who whooing about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard the kind of sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood...

When it was dark I sat by my camp fire smoking, and feeling pretty satisfied; but by-and-by it got sort of lonesome, and so I went and sat on the bank and listened to the currents washing along, and counted the stars and drift-logs and rafts that come down, and then went to bed; there ain't no better way to put in time when you are lonesome; you can't stay so, you soon get over it.

Whereas the shore constrains and threatens, the river lulls and soothes. The former has its sounds and echos, but they are distant and far removed, unintelligible to Huck; the objects floating down the river can be counted and identified by Huck and rock him to sleep.
When Jim and Huck finally begin their trip down the river together, we see that Jim has some control over the river and over Huck as long as he neglects Jim's beliefs, but Jim's superstitions are more than navigational signs. Huck knows the river yet he is ignorant of the signs Jim recognizes along the river, and so they must represent knowledge of a different kind. If Jim's superstitions are more than navigational signs, what exactly is their nature and what effect do they have on Huck?

First of all, the "signs" Jim reads as they journey are tied in with the natural world and show Jim's superior knowledge of those natural objects about them. When Huck plays a trick on Jim by placing a dead snake in his blanket and unknowingly attracts its mate, Jim has a remedy and Huck, moreover, learns from his mistake:

Jim was laid up for four days and nights. Then the swelling was all gone and he was around again. I made up my mind I wouldn't ever take a-holt of a snake-skin again with my hands, now that I see what had come of it. Jim said he reckoned I would believe him next time. And he said that handling a snake-skin was such awful bad luck that maybe we hadn't got to the end of it yet.

Huck, however, doesn't say that he will listen to Jim the next time, but only that he will never touch another skin. He has yet to humble himself to Jim and he fails to tell Jim he placed the snake in his blanket in the first place. What impresses him more than Jim's knowledge of the river is the truthfulness of the superstition as it works before his very eyes. The same thing can be said about
Jim's rain prediction in chapter eight when he sees some young birds flying overhead and says they forecast rain. It is Jim who moves their gear to dry land in a cave on Jackson Island, but what does Huck say as he watches the storm through the cave's opening? "Pretty soon it darkened up, and began to thunder and lighten; so the birds was right about it (p.67)." Huck fails to mention the fact that Jim was also right about the birds and what they forecasted. Jim, however, does not let this continue for long, bringing to Huck's attention the neglect of his powers:

Well, you wouldn't 'a been here 'f it hadn't 'a 'ben for Jim. You'd 'a been down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittin' 'mos drowned, too; dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it's qwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile. (p.68)

Huck, of course, immediately turns his attention to the events of the next few days without commenting upon Jim's remarks.

Huck slowly begins to understand the importance of the "signs" along the river and sees that some actions can be taken to avoid hidden dangers, but he neglects to give Jim any credit and even tricks him again when he convinces Jim that their accident in the fog was part of Jim's dream (Hoffman doesn't say that this superstition is of a poorer quality). He fails at first to see that Jim has some power over the river, that rather than being a slave of his superstition he is to a certain extent a master of his surroundings. And although some of the signs do not specify that a particular action (the birds, for example, only warn Jim of something that is to happen
which is outside his control) is to be taken to avoid some danger. 
they can prophesize what is going to happen and allow Jim to 
anticipate some of the changes in the river.

Part of Huck's problem lies in his inability to deal with 
powers which he can not directly observe and an unwillingness to ex-
tend his imagination beyond those objects immediately before him. 
In an ambiguous scene following the discovery of a dead man in a 
frame house (ambiguous because we learn at the end of the novel that 
Jim knew the body was that of Huck's father but refuses to talk 
about it on the pretext that it is bad luck to talk about the dead), 
Huck speculates on the fate of the body:

After breakfast I wanted to talk about the dead man and 
guess how he come to be killed, but Jim didn't want to. 
He said it would fetch bad luck, and besides, he said, 
he might come and haint us; he said a man that warn't 
buried was more likely to go a-hanting around than one 
that was planted and comfortable. That sounded pretty 
reasonable. So I didn't say no more; but I couldn't keep 
from studying over it and wishing I knowed who shot the 
man, and what they done it for.

Jim never suggests that what he says is "reasonable," only that cer-
tain actions (or in this case inaction) will help avert certain 
catastrophes. But Huck can not understand that certain processes 
operate outside logic and that his direct observation of the river's 
snags, eddies, and currents represents only one kind of knowledge, 
that which is learned through experience. Jim, however, frequently
uses superstition as an exercise of the imagination in order to make the unfamiliar familiar and gain some control over those powers beyond his comprehension. Rather than believe that bad luck randomly chooses its victims and punishes them without cause, Jim believes some force is responsible for whatever happens to them but that it can only be known through "fictions" of the imagination.

A brief and unobtrusive scene in which Jim and Huck are both star-gazing while lying on the raft shows the difference in the way the two account for the unseen strength of nature as they discuss how the stars came about:

We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs an look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made or only just happened. Jim he allowed they was made, but I allowed they happened; I judged it would have took too long to make so many. Jim said the moon could 'a' laid them; well, that looked kind of reasonable, so I didn't say nothing against it, because I've seen a frog lay most as many, so of course it could be done. (p.147)

Two completely different views of the world are being expressed here, and although Jim's explanation of the creation of the stars is irrational and implausible, it certainly is more appealing than Huck's big-bang theory. Jim tries to account for the unaccountable by personifying nature and making it more immediate and comprehensible while Huck plies his reason to the riddle. But Huck finally comes around in this scene and begins to understand Jim's point of view.
by finding an analogy in nature, the frog laying its eggs, an almost
Blakean vision of the universe in a simple natural object. He
begins to see nature as more of a process and less an inescapable
happening.

Within the context of this novel, while Jim and Huck are
on the river, superstition is a sign of unity, not divisiveness, of
imaginative thinking and not ignorance, a recognition of the depth
and purposefulness of nature and the freedom it can provide and not
a symbol of superstitious enslavement. But I want to reemphasize
that Twain is responsible for giving it this significance, and it
is not because of any inherent goodness in superstition itself which
informs the novel with meaning. The control which the novel has
over superstition is evident in the final episodes on the Phelps
farm where once again Jim is imprisoned, this time for the amusement
of the overbearing Tom Sawyer. We have already seen enough of Tom
in this novel, enough to know that he represents a romanticism which
fits in less easily at the end of the novel than it does at the
beginning, but he does help remind Huck that he is back on shore
where Jim is locked up and used as a child's toy. This time Silas'
slave, Nat, is made to look foolish by Tom because of his belief in
witches, and Silas, like Miss Watson, refuses to let Nat believe
in them. The novel, in other words, has returned to its beginning
of intolerance and ridicule. I have to disagree with what Hoffman
says about these episodes for he suggests that Jim is "a far cry
from the chuckleheadedness of the slave who was ridden all over the
country by witches when Tom Sawyer lifted his hat," implying that
we have returned to a lower grade of superstition, belief in witches.
Once again, Hoffman doesn't see that superstition hasn't changed in quality; the only change has been in Huck's point-of-view. The way in which Tom makes Nat look ridiculous is no longer funny, nor is his insistence upon Jim's making a name for himself easily tolerated by Jim or myself.

I have attempted to show that at most there are some thematic ties between superstition and the trip down the river, but that it is impossible to talk about folklore in the novel without first distinguishing the narrator from the author and seeing superstition as another device in the novel. Superstition is generally used to personify powers which can not be seen or easily understood and it is when Jim and Huck are on the river that the superstitious are least ridiculed and scolded for their beliefs, not when they are on shore where we understand perfectly well who is in control and why. All of this does not necessarily free Twain of the charge of making Jim look like a boy, but if some find this true it can not be because he is superstitious. Jim figures less prominently in the novel than Huck because the latter is telling the story of his changing attitudes toward Jim, and to tell it otherwise would be to write a new book. But this is more a question of literature than folklore, and I want to examine this problem through a discussion of the debate between Ralph Ellison and Stanley Hyman.
Notes: Chapter One

1 Alan Dundes, *Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel* Prentice-Hall (1973), p. 357.

2 See the chapters "Positive Control Signs, Minor Charms and Cures" and "Negative Control Signs--Taboos" in Newbell Puckett's *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro*.


5 *ibid*, p. 32

6 At the end of his article on Brown County, Dundes lists some of the material he has collected but groups it according to subject matter, not on the basis of these categories he has established.


8 Jones discusses the difficulties involved in putting Dundes system to the test.


11 I hope to talk about why it is only the "boys and rifraff" are assigned superstition in my next chapter.
Huck relies upon his knowledge of the river most frequently in times of danger or confusion. The following paragraph shows how important it is to Huck to read it when he has lost Jim in the fog:

I just give up then. I knowed what the matter was. That cut bank was an island, and Jim had gone down t'other side of it. It wasn't no towhead that you could float by in ten minutes. It had the big timber of a regular island; it might be five or six miles long and more than half a mile. (c.15)
Chapter Two

In an exchange between Stanley Hyman and Ralph Ellison upon the relationship between Negro American literature and Negro American folklore, Ellison criticizes Hyman's archetypal approach to literature (among other things) because it leads "to a critical game that ignores the specificity of literary works." Ellison goes on to say that such an approach "causes him to blur the distinction between various archetypes and different currents of American folklore, and, generally, to oversimplify the American tradition." Implicit in Ellison's argument is the idea that archetypal approaches generally explain too much to explain anything at all, and in terms of Hyman's own essay on the "trickster" figure, to speak of the archetypal confidence man is to speak of all the American people, black or white, who are all strangers in their own land. Just as the Negroes became the object of those critics who argued that they have no part in the cultural or intellectual development of this country, so too does Ellison make the whites the children of a British, not an American culture, who ridicule the Negroes to repress their own anxiety due to their own want of a national identity.

This becomes no more apparent, says Ellison, than in the number of "darker entertainers" in this country during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, those black-faced minstrels, whites with the burnt-cork faces, who performed a "ritual of exorcism" for themselves and for their predominantly white audiences. According to Ellison, what was important about these entertainers was not their racial identity but the mask they wore; its function "was to veil the
humanity of Negroes thus reduced to a sign, and to repress the white audience's awareness of its moral identification with its own acts and with the human ambiguities pushed behind the mask." Thus the white minstrels who depict comic Negroes are projecting their own anxieties due to the lack of a true national identity; the Negro becomes the national scapegoat, and the white minstrel is a metaphor for "the profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself."²

American life, then, is most typically American when it is theatrical in a country where mask-wearing becomes the national idiom. What is distressing about Ellison's eloquent pronouncement against the lumping, mashing, and whipping action of the archetypal potato masher which can turn all literature into a gummy and starchy paste is his insistence upon the applicability of his own large (and highly believable) theory of repressed white anxiety in the minstrel show to Mark Twain in his creation of the character of "Nigger Jim."³ In Ellison's eyes, Twain becomes the victim of his era because he wrote during a time when the black-faced minstrel was popular "after a war which left even the abolitionists weary of those problems associated with the Negro."³ It is for these reasons that we see Jim's humanity only through the mask of the minstrel, and his complexity has to emerge through Twain's stereotyping.

Ellison goes into slightly more detail in order to justify his response to Jim as "a white man's inadequate portrait of a slave," but in so doing he implicates Huck Finn's character since it is not Twain's portrayal of Jim but his relationship with Huck that Ellison sees as robbing the Negro of his own identity. "Negro males," he
says, must be treated either as boys or 'uncles'--never as a man. Jim's friendship for Huck comes across as that of a boy for another boy rather than as the friendship of an adult for a junior...there is a violation of our conception of adult maleness."

I can not think of a more serious charge leveled at any book than one of stereotyping, a kind of masking, on the part of Mark Twain in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the great document of American culture whose power lies mainly in telling the truth and the way the truth is told. Twain, we are led to believe, no more escapes the charge of counterfeiting the black man's identity than the white minstrel who unknowingly symbolizes his own lack of tradition, his fear of the "blackness" of his own despair, by smearing charcoal on his face. How sincere can an author be, we might ask ourselves, when he talks of the innocence, of the simplicity, of the freedom and holiness of the river and those who recognize these qualities in nature when he does so at the expense of a slave?

Ellison is not alone in bringing this charge against Twain, for Daniel Hoffman, in his description of the folk-elements in Huck Finn, says "there remains the question of Mark Twain's accuracy in assigning folk belief to the black man." Hoffman's complaint comes from the folklorist's perspective, for he argues that the only whites who are superstitious in either Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer are young boys or riffraff like Pap, "the two categories of white folks who might have picked up the lore of the slave quarter." Hoffman more questionably attributes this to the failing memory of Twain while he worked among "the wealthy literati of the Nook Farm Colony in Hartford, Connecticut," and that by an oversight he forgot to dole out to the white adults
their share of superstitions and folk-beliefs. But how seriously can we take such a claim about a man who spent a great part of his life growing up on the river as a youth, traveling its waters as a riverboat captain, and capturing the dialects he heard about him as a novelist? If such a claim were true, could we label it evidence of a conflict between the poles of the eastern aristocrats and the roughshod westerners, an opposition many critics have found in his work?

Now is the time when the context of folklore becomes important in dealing with such serious charges, for we must hold Ellison to his claim that "if the symbols appearing in a novel link up with those of universal myth they do so by virtue of their emergence from the specific texture of a specific form of social reality." We need to examine further the folklore in *Huck Finn* and its implications for the novel (an activity both Ellison and Hoffman have neglected to varying degrees) in order to show Twain was aware of the nature of the relationship between Huck and Jim.

Lionel Trilling, in his essay "Reality in America," both criticizes and applauds V.L. Parrington for his work attempting to clarify some of the general strains of American thought. Central to the objections Trilling has of Parrington's work is the latter's insistence that in American literature reality is a fixed and immutable object, wholly external to the artist who simply has to let it pass through his brain and make its impression. The imagination, then, rather than being a creative force, is the passive acceptance of the natural objects around the transparent artist. The problem with this, Trilling continues to argue, is that it only admits one
kind of relationship between the artist and reality, and yet he says in the same breath that Parrington best represents American thought because he expresses "the chronic American belief that there exists an opposition between reality and mind." Such an imagination "is always reliable, is always sober-sided, even grim." And yet how appropriately the description of Parrington's own frame of mind applies to the tone of Twain's Huck Finn. It was Twain himself who once said "everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven."

By letting Huck tell the story in his own words, by refusing to use the gentleman's frame so common among the work of the Southwestern humorists who preceded him, Twain acknowledges both the beauty of Huck's dialect and the truthfulness of the immediacy of his impressions. Twain never steps in to translate for us the words of Jim and Huck because their language most accurately represents the reality of the world around them. In chapter seven, Huck has escaped his father and floats down the river in a canoe he has found. Lying on his back, he stares at the earth's ceiling and tells us

I was pretty tired, and the first thing I knowed, I was asleep. When I woke up I didn't know where I was for a minute. I set up and looked around, a little scared. Then I remembered. The river looked miles and miles across. The moon was so bright I could a counted the drift logs that went slipping along, black and still, hundreds of yards out from shore. Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and I don't
If Huck can't find the words, certainly none of the rest of us can; Twain wouldn't try. Huck's initial reaction is a little fearful of the size of the river and the sky, and his exaggerations (miles and miles; the moon so bright; hundreds of yards out) emphasize the power and the boundless reach of the natural world. But just as important is the way it is told. Even when we enter Huck's mind (although Huck supposedly is telling us his adventures, we have the feeling after awhile that we are listening in on his thoughts, further evidence of the immediacy of Huck's reporting), Twain still gives us Huck's dialect to prove to his readers that he cannot better Huck's response to the objects around him. We get the feeling when Huck describes the river that his senses are so glutted that he can do nothing more than report until their functions are confused; he can smell it is late, he is so attuned to the river's signals. And just as important as this is what Huck doesn't do. He doesn't, like an Ishmael, move from the particular to the metaphysical for the directness of his perception is its own transcendence. Only when the direct observation of nature has lost its appeal and its meaning do characters like Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas turn to their scabbed, abstract pieties, the hypocritical dicta of the conventional religion on shore.

Twain sees those on shore as inevitably corrupt because society corrupts, and his sympathies clearly lie with Huck's melancholic awe of and reverence for the river-god as he slips down the Mississippi. Yet the river, though revered by Huck as a god according to Trilling in his essay "Huck Finn," has that side to it which will undo
the traveler who does not understand its laws. Huck knows some of these laws from experience, but he doesn't know all of the signs Jim does, and as long as Huck continues to ignore and ridicule Jim's beliefs, he is more like those he left behind on shore: blind to his own faults and the limitations of his system of knowledge. But his growing respect for Jim's superstitions reveals his increasing admiration of Jim as a human being, as one who deserves the respect due to an adult. Unfortunately, both Ellison and Hoffman feel that Twain somehow slipped up when he assigned superstition only to Jim, thus robbing him of his "manliness" by giving him a boy's status. And yet this seems ironic. Hoffman himself says that superstition "is closer to the moral demands of life than is either the smug piety of Christian conformity or the avoidance of choice by escaping to fantasy or romance." (p.320). The folk-imagination, including the body of superstitions, is a kind of folk-art; to give the people on shore a set of folk-beliefs and superstitions would be to give them a sense of community which only Jim and Huck enjoy. We are to see the people living on shore working against each other, obeying different doctrines and grasping little. Huck tells us of a Bible session with Miss Watson

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a body's mouth water, but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see that there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if
Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. (p.11)

It is not Twain who makes Jim a trickster but society as long as he remains on shore. They are the ones who need someone to look down on, not Huck. Miss Watson never had a family and Widow Douglas has lost hers, a fact that further emphasizes their isolation and loneliness. Twain had to realize that it wasn't he but the people on shore who made Jim look like a fool on shore because this is the same distinction that separates life on the river from life in town.

Once on the river, Jim becomes the interpreter of Nature's warnings of danger—his superstition; it would not be accurate to call him a sorcerer and Huck his apprentice as Hoffman chooses to do. We can find nothing evil or sinister in Jim's transactions with Nature, and though his superstitions can not be rationally explained, their effect can be felt. Rather than being a sign of his ignorance or lowliness, Jim's superstition is a mark of an innocent and morally superior man, a sign of utter simplicity without life's meanness. Nor are his superstitions the arbitrary laws of nature; they have been received through family tradition and passed down to Jim. In chapter eight Huck tells us

Some young birds come along, flying a yard or two at a time and lighting. Jim said it was a sign when young chickens flew that way, and so he reckoned it was the same way when young birds done it. I was going to catch some of them, but Jim wouldn't let me. He said it was death,
He said his father laid mighty sick once, and some of them caught a bird, and his old granny said his father would die, and he died. (p.39)

At the opening of the book, Huck has the conventional morality of the shore and he has to get outside the context of the town to learn the sign's of Jim's natural religion. Even so, he still feels, while sitting in his room at the Widow Douglas' house, that nature informs man of the mystery of his past, present, and future:

I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whipporwill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. (p.5)

Still under the tutelage of Miss Watson, somewhat ignorant at this point of the river-lore and what Jim has to teach him about it, Huck cannot understand the wind. He is still seeing nature through a bedroom window in stiffly creased trousers with a head full of half-memorized multiplication tables. But in the short space of sixteen chapters, Huck has forgotten most of what he learned on shore, and unknowingly uncovers the gratuitous "folklore" of the shore with his first contact with the Grangerfords. This seemingly innocent passage describing the first exchange between Huck and
Buck Grangerford has an important function in the novel, for it is the first prolonged contact Huck has had with the shore since he escaped from Pap, and it becomes a foreboding of the hollowness of life in the Grangerford house:

When we got up stairs to his room he got me a coarse shirt and a roundabout and pants of his, and I put them on. While I was at it he asked me what my name was, but before I could tell him, he started to telling me about a blue-jay and a young rabbit he had caught in the woods day before yesterday, and he asked me where Moses was when the candle went out. I said I didn't know; I hadn't heard about it before, no way.

"Well, guess," he says.

"How'm I going to guess," says I, "when I never heard tell about it before?"

"But you can guess, can't you? It's just as easy."

"Which candle?" I says.

"Why, any candle," he says.

"I don't know where he was," says I; "Where was he?"

"Why he was in the dark! That's where he was!"

"Well, if you knowed where he was, what did you ask me for?"

"Why, blame it, it's a riddle, don't you see?" (pp. 83-4)

Fortunately for Huck, he fails this ritual of initiation; Buck's riddling-joke becomes an emblem for the superficiality and pointlessness of the tradition of the feud while faintly suggesting, with
Buck toting his gun and grinding his fist in his eye, the self-inflicted misery yet to be felt by the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. Jim's superstition, his own tradition, warns him of the river's hazards which he can anticipate and hopefully avoid. The feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, on the other hand, manufactures its own dangers, and it becomes a metaphor for the in-fighting on shore.

Huck's pose in that crucial scene with Buck might also tell us much about his relationship with Jim and counter some of the charges made against Twain's portrayal of "Nigger Jim." What we see is not the child's (Huck's) indulgence in joke-telling for its own sake, but a seriousness of mind and purpose which cannot comprehend anything that doesn't directly lead to a truthful portrayal of what is essential to life. Buck might as well have spoken French to Huck, for the terms of his joke confuse Huck and mislead him in his pursuit of the particular, of the concrete, and of the immediate. Buck's joke makes no more sense to Huck than a passage from the Widow's Bible (the joke, appropriately enough, is a Biblical one and perhaps is Buck's meagre attempt at fighting off his Sunday school learning) and has the characteristic ambiguity and inapplicability which so frustrated him as he fidgeted while Miss Watson promised him whatever he prayed for.

Ralph Ellison calls Huck's adventure with Jim a boy-to-boy relationship, and we might wonder exactly what he meant by that. Certainly at different points in the novel they both overstep the boundary of naivete into ignorance, but they also constitute the moral center of the novel; Twain could not have bestowed higher
praise upon them. Huck tells us he has the same age as Buck, but the
two have nothing more in common than the dry clothes Buck lends him
(clothing becomes a metaphor for the duplicity of the shore-dwellers).
In chapter twelve, having spied the prow of a steamboat between
intermittent bursts of lightning, Huck thinks about the impression the
storm has made upon him:

Well, it being away in the night, and stormy, and all so
mysterious-like, I felt just the way any other boy
would a felt when I see that wreck laying there so
mournful and lonesome in the middle of the river, I wanted
to get aboard of her and slink around a little, and see
what there was there. (p.57)

How many other thirteen year-old boys would respond so emotionally to
the power and awesomeness of the river? Huck wishes to "slink
around" and examine the contents of the paddler, but not for the sake
of the imaginative wish-fulfillment of a Tom Sawyer; the boat doesn't
rock with the footsteps of thieving pirates and it doesn't hold a
pirate's loot, nor does it make Huck fearful of its own mystery like
it might have scared so many other boys his age. The tone of this
passage, mournful and lonesome, is the tone of the entire novel, the
impression nature makes upon a consciousness which already has outpaced
that of the adult population on shore.

To make Jim an "adult" would implicate him in the hypocrisy, the
deceitfulness, and the double-dealings of the shore. In the context
of Twain's novel, "manliness" becomes the boy's will to condemn
intuitively although at times unknowingly those on shore who do not
have a sense of community. Twain raises the issue of boyishness and manliness when he said of *Tom Sawyer* "it is not a boy's book at all. It will be read only by adults. It is written only for adults."

Lionel Trilling's response to this statement lucidly answers some of Ellison's objections:

But this was only a manner of speaking, Mark Twain's way of asserting, with a discernible touch of irritation, the degree of truth he had achieved. It does not represent his usual view either of boys' books or of boys. No one, as he knew well, sets a higher value on truth than a boy. Truth is the whole of a boy's conscious demand upon the world of adults. He is likely to believe that the adult world is a conspiracy to lie to him, and it is this belief, by no means unfounded, that arouses Tom and Huck and all the boys to their moral sensitivity, their everlasting concern with justice, which they call fairness. At the same time it often makes them skillful and profound liars - in their own defense, yet they do not tell the ultimate lie of adults: they do not lie to themselves. That is why Mark Twain felt that it was impossible to carry Tom Sawyer beyond boyhood--in maturity he would lie just like all the other one-horse men of literature and the reader would conceive a hearty contempt for him.

Ellison, then, seems to have fallen prey to his own objections to large systems or theories which blunt the edges and nip the corners of the literary documents under examination, for he has failed to
see the implications of what he has said for his own argument, and he hasn't seen that Twain has fooled our normal expectations of adolescence and adulthood. Just as Jim cannot share his body of superstitions with those on shore, he cannot play the adult's role since he finds his spiritual counterpart, and so his equal, in Huck. Jim wears no mask, Jim tells no lies, and he never spites Miss Watson for planning to sell him down river and break up his family. Twain has removed Jim from the tradition of "darky" minstrels and has given him a dignity neither condescending nor obscure.

If some people still insist that Twain could not resist what Ellison calls "the Manichean fascination whites have with the symbol of blackness and whiteness," and in the court of Judeo-Christian morality would still be charged with projecting onto Jim his own inner conflict, his own frustration since Jim's rootlessness painfully reminds him of his own displacement, it will have to be on grounds other than a "primitiveness" of superstition. Twain has taken superstition and given to those who believe in it the dignity of an oral tradition which surpasses the double-edged book-learning on shore.
Notes: Chapter Two

1 Ralph Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in Mother Wit From the Laughing Barrel, ed. Alan Dundes (Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 57.

2 ibid, p. 61.

3 ibid, p. 59.

4 ibid, p. 60.

5 ibid, p. 63.

6 Lionel Trilling, "Huckleberry Finn," from The Liberal Imagination (Scribners, 1976), 104-118.


8 Lionel Trilling, "Huckleberry Finn," from The Liberal Imagination, p. 105.
Chapter Three

So far I have tried to show that folklore does not have a privileged status when it appears in literature, that it is subject to the same kind of close scrutiny in terms of its function within the text as are any other elements of the novel. Superstition is not an immutable and permanent fixture of the mind which has the same significance no matter where it turns up; it is a system of beliefs which, regardless of whether or not these beliefs are scientifically provable, elicits certain responses from its adherents and its skeptics. The attitude of various individuals toward the world about them is manifested in various ways, and superstition is simply one of many ways some people deal with the world's vagaries and unforseen happenings.

It is the critic's job, then, to keep in mind that folklore in literature is no longer "living" folklore once the artist gives it a permanent function and place in a literary work. Some critics, however, have failed to see this and have imposed their preconceived notions of what folklore is upon the text they are examining, and in the case of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn several literary critics have assumed that Jim must be a "davyk" because he is superstitious. In order to show how widespread this unfortunate practice is as well as to spread some of the blame around, I want to move away from the text for a moment and discuss Twain's novel as a cultural artifact.

There is yet another dimension to this book which has drawn little attention up to this point but has helped promote the mistaken idea
that Jim is a child; I am talking about the illustrated editions
of *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*. Very few books besides this
one which are considered classics by most critics have been
illustrated by so many different artists and have suffered as much
as *Huck Finn* has from inaccurate or highly romanticized and careless
renditions of itself. In most cases these illustrators evoke feelings
in us through their pictures which completely misrepresent the pur-
pose of the book, and because of this Twain's public image has
suffered from the heavily sugared pictorial versions of his text.
These pictures should not do the work of the imagination but they
do usually end up serving as mental crutches for the reader.

The question might come to mind, why does any novel as fast
moving and engaging and so full of adventure as *Huck Finn* need
illustrations? Pictures are always a welcome relief in a plodding
and impenetrable novel, but when any book evokes sights and sounds
through its language which have a lasting effect on the mind, the
need for illustrations becomes less justifiable and necessary.
Furthermore, the images which the book without pictures evokes
can often be destroyed or at least lose some of their hold on our
minds when challenged by the myopic eye of the illustrator.

*Huck Finn* has been especially subject to bad pictorial versions
of itself partly because it appeals to people of differing ages
and tastes. The book is popular among children and adults alike;
the young narrator with a boy's point-of-view particularly appeals
to children, and he never ceases to appeal to the adult who admires
Huck's irresponsibility and yearns after his freedom of movement.
But more often than not, the book is illustrated to suit a child's
taste just as his food is sweetened to his liking in order to
make him eat; oftentimes, the concessions made to a child's im-
patience and unsophisticated palate are self-defeating, and any
nutritional value the child should absorb is lost in the compromise of
force-feeding. Most people also consider The Adventures of Huckleberry
Finn to be a companion volume to The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and
so they believe it is of the same level of sophistication as the
latter. Their confusion of these two books adds to the general mis-
understanding of the book's purpose while making the question of
its intended audience all the more pressing. Although the book can
and should be read by children, much of the novel's irony passes
over a child's head and in this respect the book more properly
belongs to adults.

I have read Huck Finn since I was a boy as have most people
who feel compelled to talk about it with the passion of a life-
time's reading, but it wasn't until the last few years that I
realized how dramatically my understanding of the book has changed
from what it once was. This change was triggered, I think, by an   awareness of how large a role the illustrations played in my reading
of the book when I was a kid and how hard it has been for me to shake
off some of the impressions those pictures made on me. Back then
I never could have been expected to understand that the pictures might
not have been a just representation of the book and that one author
and one illustrator equalled two artists at work, not one. I always
assumed that those glossy prints or line drawings of a toothless and
grinning Huck were the way Huck would have appeared could he have
walked into my room as I read the book (but it is now that I know
Huck does not have nearly as much occasion to smile in the book as the illustrations would have us believe), the way Twain meant him to appear.

Over the years I have come to pay more attention to the illustrations to see how each illustrator is treating his subject as well as notice what scenes he has chosen to draw, and I have found that I must view these pictures as critically as I would an essay on the novel by Leslie Fiedler or James Cox, especially since the drawings probably have much more impact on the vast majority of readers of *Huck Finn* than those critics who will remain unknown to most non-academics. But I do not want to suggest that children under eighteen should be prevented from reading the book or that no one should be permitted to illustrate it; I do want to argue, however, that an understanding of some of the ironies of the book takes the perceptiveness of an experienced reader, and that as we grow older our tastes change and so should our appreciation of the book. We do have to set aside some of the romantic ideas we had about the book as children and try to forget some of those pictures which lorded over our imaginations.

The irony behind all of this is that Twain set the precedent for diluting the novel's impact by choosing an illustrator who would abide by his wishes and draw the characters in the novel in a way that would not offend the public. In *Huck Finn and Mark Twain*, Walter Blair gives a good account of the events surrounding the novel's publication and Twain's concern over making this work, unlike his previous ones, a financial success.¹ *The Prince and the Pauper* was hailed by critics as "a triumph of scholarship, refinement, morality,
and artistry," but it sold badly, and his *Life On the Mississippi* was a financial flop as well since Twain put up $50,000 of his own money to have the book published; it too sold badly. Twain needed at least 40,000 subscribers for his new novel just to have it published, and so he aimed that the novel should please everyone, or at least offend no one.

Twain was concerned that some of the passages in *Huck Finn* might offend some people, and it was through the illustrations of the first edition that he hoped to tone down some of the novel's violence and inappropriate material. As Walter Blair describes it in his book, Twain had secured E.W. Kemble, whose work he had seen previously in *Life* magazine, to draw the illustrations for the text, and he must have felt some confidence in these drawings since he had complete editorial control over them. But Twain was unhappy with Kemble's work at first, mainly because his pictures struck too close to home. Of the portrait of Huck for the front cover Twain said "all right and good, and will answer; although the boy's mouth is a trifle more Irishy than necessary," and concluded he had "an ugly, ill-drawn face." "Huck," he said, "is an exceedingly good-hearted boy and should carry a good and good-looking face."3

His criticisms became much harsher as the publication date approached, and Twain had nothing but disapproval for Kemble's first drawings. "The people are forbidding and repulsive," he said, even though he wanted the novel "illustrated after his own ideas."4 Twain continued "it's a rule (though not always) the people in these drawings are forbidding and repulsive. Reduction will modify them, but it can hardly make them look pleasant folk to look at. An artist
shouldn't follow a book too literally, perhaps—if this is the necessary result."

Kemble's drawings thus became softer and more agreeable, and the shift in the tone of his work is the subject of a brief article by Beverly David which sums up Twain's notions of what the illustrations should have done for his book. After examining some of Kemble's drawings for the first edition of *Huck Finn*, David makes the following conclusion:

Obviously, for Mark Twain, the purpose of the illustrations was to diminish the reality of his characters and not to represent their personality. Illustration, for Mark Twain, became a persuasive way of suppressing people. Pleasant drawings might convince the reader they were pleasant folk.

Twain's concern that these pictures be neither too offensive nor too faithful to the text unfortunately has set the standard for many of the ensuing illustrated versions of the text with one notable exception. Kemble's illustrations are still reproduced in many recent editions and are the drawings many adults know best, but within the last forty years more modern and popular artists such as Worth Brehm, Norman Rockwell, and Thomas Hart Benton (who is more modern but not necessarily more popular) have come out with their own versions of Huck's story. At any rate, Kemble has had a lasting effect upon the more recent illustrators of the text since many of his illustrations of the scenes he chose to draw (with Twain's approval, of course) have dominated the work of his successors and have
established a hierarchy over this more recent work that few have challenged. Beverly David has already discussed the overall effect of Kemble's work on the novel, and I would rather trace his influence on more recent work and discover any significance to the repetition of various scenes if any is to be found.

Perhaps the most pernicious side-effect of these more popular scenes is the way in which they lower Jim's stature to that of a child and transform him into Huck's subordinate. For the purposes of this study, I want to concentrate on those pictures which are the most condescending and endearing in their treatment of Jim. It seems to me quite possible that certain illustrations can disfigure the text and prevent a truer understanding of Jim's character based on a close reading of the text, and I want to distinguish the impressions the pictures make on us from the kind of reading I have provided in the previous chapters.

One of the more persistant stereotypes of Negro behavior is the belief in his inherent childishness, a view which like all other stereotypes is based upon an incomplete or imperfect understanding of some portion of the world. This particular stereotype was part of an oral and popular tradition long before it surfaced in literature, and was transmitted through tales, jokes, and anecdotes wherever there was a strong tradition of storytelling. But at no other place and time was this stereotype so dramatized as it was on stage during the early nineteenth century. There is perhaps no other single factor contributing to the misunderstanding of Negro culture than the minstrel show which still exists in certain remote corners of this country, for it was on the stage that the
minstrel acted out this stereotype before thousands of people every year for several decades.

In *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America*, Robert Toll argues that the belief in the Negro male's "childishness" originated in the anxieties most white Americans experienced over their uncertain role in a rapidly changing country which, because of the break-neck pace of its growth, constantly found itself redefining its social structures and values. There is no better way to trace these fears, Toll continues, than by following the evolution of the minstrel show and its growth in popularity until the mid-nineteenth century when the more elaborate and varied shows of the big promoters like P.T. Barnum squeezed out their competition. Since the minstrel show was a form of popular entertainment and depended upon its audience for its survival, it readily conformed to the tastes of a large and diverse audience and so became an accurate reflection of the public's mood. It was in the minstrel show, Toll concludes, that this idea of the Negro's "childishness" was repeated and firmly planted in the minds of most white Americans:

Again, minstrelsy's black characters served as projections for the fears, needs, and desires of Northern white audiences. By focusing on caricatures of frolicking Negroes in the idealized plantation family, minstrelsy created a state of perpetual childhood that audiences could vicariously participate in and feel superior to at the same time. It had to be a happy, carefree life; any cruelty or mistreatment had to be condemned or eliminated.
The portrayal of the Negro male as an "emotional child" was in part a nostalgic look at a less turbulent past which probably never existed when the "darky" sang in the fields and showed his selfless devotion to his "mastah." It was one way, according to Toll, the white male could reduce the threat the Negro posed to his status in society. Once the Negro was portrayed as the happy child, singing and jumping about, he was immediately subordinated to his white "superiors" where he could be viewed with condescending affection.

The minstrel show owed its success in part to its adaptability; in order to survive, it had to have a base broad enough that it could accommodate the tastes of a widely diversified audience. The public, then, played a large part in deciding what was to appear on stage and the performers generally obeyed their wishes. Most of all, the audience wanted to be entertained and not challenged, and for several decades the minstrel show served as a means of dispelling any doubts white Americans had about their role in society. If the audience did not like what it saw, it wouldn't hesitate to hoot and holler and barrage the stage with its ammo of rotten eggs and vegetables as well as dead animals.

In addition to the stereotype of the Negro's childishness, another belief whites imposed upon him in the most derogatory way possible was what they thought to be his inherently ignorant and superstitious nature; in fact, these characteristics went hand-in-hand whenever the Negro male was portrayed on stage. Most people thought it was more likely for a child to believe in witches and magic, and superstition thus became a symbol for a child's willingness to believe in the supernatural, something a respectable and intelligent adult
would never find himself doing. All of these "traits" were to appear in the minstrel's repertoire at one time or another.

It is here that I want to draw an analogy between the minstrel's response to public pressure and Twain's own realization that if he wanted to make Huckleberry Finn a financial success, he would have to consider the public's tastes. I am not suggesting that Twain had Kemble portray Jim as a child; to the contrary, Kemble's Jim looks more like an adult than most modern versions of him. I do think Twain asked Kemble to dilute some of the novel's violence in order to make the book more presentable to the general public, and as a consequence of this policy set the pattern for future illustrated editions of his book which have magnified any faults in Kemble's illustrations.

Kemble's drawings, then, did not do a great service to Twain's intentions in the novel even if they helped make the book famous. They served as more of a compromise between the author's intentions and the expectations of his audience. But however inaccurate we may find Kemble's illustrations and however unfaithful they are to the novel's tenor, they are not as bad as some of the versions of the book they have encouraged. Up to this point I have tried to emphasize that what Twain has described in his novel and what various illustrators have made of it are rarely in accordance, and we can do no better than look at several scenes the illustrators have repeatedly drawn over the years and show how they can mislead us and perpetuate some mistaken ideas about Jim's character.

I have already discussed how Twain's scene entitled "The Hairball Oracle" does not show that Jim believes in the magic he is
performing for Huck; rather, he is trying to make Huck his dupe. Most of the illustrators, however, are too literal-minded to realize this and portray Jim in a less than complimentary fashion—on his hands and knees with Huck looking over him (see figures 1-4). They would have us believe that Jim is seriously practicing magic in this scene and could easily lead us to conclude that Twain sees Jim as the superstitious "daky" that Ellison and other critics have accused him of creating.

This scene is a favorite among illustrators and appears in nearly every edition of the work, mainly because it allows them to subordinate Jim to Huck whether they are consciously doing so or not. This particular scene is a monument to their literal-mindedness and lack of perception, and shows how little concern they have for the text. They could have shown Jim watching the flock of young birds which he says forecast rain, but then they would no longer have the hairball, a more traditional and recognizable symbol of superstitious behavior, as a convenient means of stereotyping Jim's behavior.

The illustrators, however, are not satisfied with this scene alone, for they are as interested in reducing Jim to a child physically as well as psychologically, and they seize upon those episodes in which Jim's character is most liable to misinterpretation. Rarely can we find a picture of Jim standing next to Huck, making it impossible for us to tell if Jim is taller than his companion. It seems as if they are bent upon diminishing Jim in stature in order to reinforce the erroneous belief that Jim is somehow inferior to Huck. Almost every illustrator has chosen to show Jim on his knees,
prayerfully beseeching Huck not to harm him when Huck stumbles across Jim's fire on Jackson Island. Although the text states that Jim does drop to his knees before what he thinks is Huck's ghost, it certainly is not a crucial scene but has been given the importance of a climactic moment, a pivotal point in the novel, by its constant repetition in various illustrated editions (see figures 5-8). Such illustrations have an unfortunate influence upon our view of Jim's character by emphasizing a subserviency which isn't in the novel. Jim is on his knees in the novel for only a moment, but the illustrations have put him there for good.

There are instances, however, when Jim is again on his knees before Huck when the text doesn't suggest he is doing so. At one point in the novel Huck is preparing to go ashore and find out "what is going on," but to do this he needs a disguise to avoid any stares. Jim and Huck both decide that Huck should wear a dress to escape notice, but it is Jim who is on his knees behind Huck, helping him hitch up the dress (see figures 9-10). Most modern illustrators are apparently trying to avoid showing Jim standing next to Huck as if they are consciously refusing to show Jim's advantage in height, and such drawings can not help but convince us they are both boys. They are usually seen crouching next to each other (as they are in figures 11-12) in order to avoid the entire issue of Jim's "manliness."

In looking at some of these scenes which I feel have pictorially lowered Jim's stature in a way the text hasn't, I have not begun to mention what harm has been done to Huck and Jim by the physical portrayals of them in these pictures. Although we know from the
book that Jim is hairy (it is the hair on his arms which is going to bring him good luck) and considerably taller than Huck (who finds a wooden leg on the sinking paddlewheeler and discovers it is too long for him but not for Jim), very few artists are consistent with each other and with themselves in their depiction of these two characters. Kemble, for example, does give Jim a beard and makes him somewhat taller in the outset, but as it has already been pointed out by Beverly David, he shrinks in size by the end of the novel and is barely taller than Huck. The most culpable of all the illustrators are those who design the children's editions, for they have made Huck look like anything from a Victorian schoolboy to one of the Hardy Boys, and Jim scarcely appears to have any advantage in size or years. Such variations occur out of a carelessness and lack of concern for the text or a crudity of style which attempts to endear these characters to us or replace them with diminutives for the sake of a younger reader.

What I have complained about so far, the effort to tone down some of the novel's ugliness through pictures at the expense of Jim and Huck, has also affected other characters in the work, especially Pap, who is often made to look like Huck's kindly grandfather rather than a vicious and surly grandfather who tries to kill his son in a rage, and so it is not just Jim and Huck whose characters have been tampered with. In more recent times this issue has been taken up by the artists themselves as illustration has become a more respectable and legitimate profession. Thomas Hart Benton, unlike many of his fellow illustrators, took into account the text of *Huck Finn* as he prepared his drawings for the 1940 edition of the novel, and his
preface shows an awareness of his responsibility which few before him have demonstrated. Benton has these words about the problems involved in illustrating a text:

Story illustration is a highly popular art. There is a constant demand for it, and hundreds of artists have practiced it and made a living by it. Few, however, and especially in late years, have attained much distinction at the trade. Most modern practitioners tend to be too positive in the matter of characterization to make a good story-accompaniment. They tend to overwhelm the reader's imagination, and to take away from the suggestiveness of words with a too-bald literalness or representation. The current magazines are full of examples in which hard photographic depictions blare out against the stories they accompany. Even where the stories are good, these things are an offense.

The great illustrators, from the Japanese and Persian printmakers and illuminators to Cruickshank, were reticent. They knew the value of lightness, of the suggestive rather than the downright statement. They knew that the illustrator's characterizations should never be so insistent as to check the play of the reader's own visual imagination. Artists themselves, they respected the storyteller's art and the tendency of that art to suggest its own images to the sensitive reader.

Of Kemble Benton says he had "the true artist's sense of appropriateness," but adds that he was not much of a designer:
He knew nothing about the people along the river. He drew his Mississippi characters, with few exceptions, like Connecticut Yankees...The people of Huckleberry Finn are not mystic characters for which any symbol will do. They are highly realistic children of a specific environment; and, while it may be quaint to see them represented as Chinamen, it would be disturbing. It is just as disturbing for one who knows the river country to see them in the guise of Yankees.

Benton, unlike Kemble and so many others, has avoided this "bald-faced literalness" which has been the preoccupation of these other illustrators. He avoids the scene with the hairball and replaces it with a highly imaginative view of the witches which Jim says rode him across the country (see figure 13), thus replacing one of the more literal portrayals of this scene with one which belongs strictly to the imagination.

Benton also avoids the footsteps of those who have drawn a grateful but submissive Jim by allowing Jim to dominate more of the illustrations and giving him the features of an adult (fig. 14). When Huck discovers Jim on Jackson Island, we see Jim startled from his sleep and not falling to his knees before Huck (fig. 15), nor do we later see Jim on his knees hitching Huck's dress. Benton's Jim is consistently taller than Huck and has an adult's facial hair. But most important of all, he looks older than Huck and has an adult's size and features, and Huck looks like a fourteen year-old boy next to him. Even the rest of his illustrations have a more
sinister tone and are more in keeping with the effect of the book (Benton's Pap looks mean and would give a good fright should he crawl through my bedroom window—see figure 16).

Benton, however, is the exception to the rule because he is much more aware of the problems the illustrator faces as he attempts to draw scenes from another man's text, and he practiced his own beliefs as he illustrated Twain's novel. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is an amazingly subtle work, and it needs a gaudy frame no more than an etching by Degas needs a heavily ornate box around it. The book's beauty is its simplicity of language and its suggestiveness, and both the critic and the artist have imposed themselves upon the reader more than they should have.

The overall effect of these illustrations, then, has been to confuse the text with some wrongheaded notions of what the book is about and to give further sanction to some unfortunate stereotypes about Jim and his superstition. Ralph Ellison may be responding in part to the illustrations and not the text, but his approach is analogous to that of the illustrators who impose their views upon the work and force it into some prefabricated theory. Despite Ellison's attack upon Hyman's "archetype hunting," he has given into his own desire to promote a cause by forcing his evidence, and the burden of proof still remains upon his shoulders.
Notes: Chapter Three

1 Walter Blair, Mark Twain and Huck Finn (University of California, 1962), c. 24.

2 Kemble had drawn the scene of "the lecherous old rascal kissing the girl at the campmeeting" in Chapter 20, but Twain deleted it saying "it is powerful good, but it mustn't go in...Let's not make any pictures of the campmeeting. The subject won't bear illustrating. It is a disgusting thing and pictures are sure to tell the truth about it too plainly." See Samuel Webster's Mark Twain Businessman (New York: Harper Bros, 1912), p. 246 for a full discussion of this problem.


5 Ibid.


7 Thomas Hart Benton is much more aware of the problems of illustrating a text than most artists. A brief discussion of his work will follow.

8 See Roger D. Abrahams discussion of stereotyping in chapter one of his book Positively Black (Prentice-Hall, 1970)


10 Ibid, p. 86.
No two artists seem to agree on how Huck and Jim should be depicted in any one scene. In figures 1-4, Baldwin Hawes puts Huck in suspenders, Kemble and Rockwell put him in the clean clothes Miss Watson provided for him, and Donald McKay, the illustrator for the Illustrated Children's Edition, dresses Huck in permanent press clothes in case he soils his pants. Nor are these artists agreeing on whether or not Huck and Jim should be wearing shoes in this episode. We come to associate their "nakedness" with the relative freedom they enjoy on the river, but their clothing is a symbol of the restraint and respectability the shore expects of them. The shoes may appear to be an insignificant detail in most drawings, but they become more important when seen within the literary context. In order to see the variations in the way Jim is portrayed, compare his features in these four drawings and note the presence and absence of the beard in the drawings by McKay and Rockwell. In figures 11-12, Jim can not look more than a year or two older than Huck if that much. These are some general indications of the lack of consensus about how these various scenes and characters should be drawn.
Fig. 1  E. W. Kemble

Fig. 2  Donald McKay
Fig. 3 Baldwin Hawes
Jim got down on his knees, and put his ear against it and listened.

Fig. 4 Norman Rockwell
"Don't hurt me—don't!"

Fig. 5 E. W. Kemble

Fig. 6 Walter Hodges
Fig. 7
Donald McKay

Fig. 8
Worth Brehm

HE DROPS DOWN ON HIS KNEES AND Puts HIS HANDS TOGETHER
Jim hitched it behind, and it was a fair fit.

Fig. 9 Donald McKay
"A FAIR FIT."

Fig. 10 E.W. Kemble
HE HOWLED AND SPREAD AROUND AND SWELLED UP HIS CHEST AND JUST KNOCKED THE SPOTS OUT OF ANY ACTING I EVER SEE.

Fig. 11 Worth Brehm
"Your eyes is lookin' at this very moment on the pore disappeared Dauphin, Looy the Seventeen."

Fig. 12 Norman Rockwell
"...witches bewitched him...and rode him all over the state."

Fig. 13  Thomas Hart Benton
"... the most down on Solomon of any nigger I ever see."

Fig. 14 Thomas Hart Benton
"He bounced up and stared at me wild."

Fig. 15 Thomas Hart Benton
"When I lit my candle ... there sat pap ... his own self"

Fig. 16 Thomas Hart Benton
Bibliography

Blair, Walter, *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, University of California Press, 1962