

# Sounding the Depths: Wieck's Contextual Exploration of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Review Essay<sup>1</sup>

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Carl F. Wieck's *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn* is an admirable plea for a reading of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a political document, with an undercurrent of crafty didacticism which one would perhaps not ordinarily associate with Mark Twain. He of course, rarely passed up an opportunity for lashing out against organized religion and his pronounced skepticism of holier-than-thou respectability and the moralizing intrigues of various cultural elites is hard to miss. In eleven chapters, each of which might easily stand alone as an essay in its own right, Wieck focuses on a series of specific aspects of the novel from such critically ransacked subjects as race relations and the book's problematic ending, to less explored questions which take on crucial importance in the quest to discover new meaningful substrata in this American classic. Wieck's hermeneutical attention to the bottommost layers of meaning in the novel leads to suggestive explorations of such issues as Twain's open-ended use of the concepts of "right" and "rights" and the study ends with a chapter which investigates the complexity of meaning arising from the various ideas of "knowledge and knowing" applied in the book.

1. Wieck, Carl F. *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn*. Athens & London: The University of Georgia Press, 2000. 248 pp. ISBN: 0-8203-2238-5, \$40.00.

But although the interpretative search for new meaning in Twain's novel thus plays a role, Carl Wieck's main concern, a sustained attempt to account for the novel's celebrated impact and effect, falls within the general field of inquiry of poetics rather than hermeneutics. Wieck argues that an overarching concern in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is "the unifying sense of humanity and rationality that Mark Twain felt necessary to civilized social interaction, as well as the significance he accorded to an open-minded, unbiased perception of the wellsprings of the American spirit" (xiii). To the extent that the book may in fact be said to represent the refiguring of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that the title promises, Wieck's analyses and arguments, while taking their point of departure in the detailed scrutiny of both critical chestnuts and less prevalent facets of Twain's novel, tend to converge in an ongoing discussion of fundamental human values. In the preface, Wieck celebrates the "sustenance" that readers may find in a novel with a proven track record of nurturing "a vital human echo" (x), and it is this essential quality of the novel which leads him to focus his analysis on the "inescapable need for tolerance and ... Twain's struggle to help America develop into more than it had yet become" (xiii).

As a virtual catalog of the American society's moral failures so far, the novel's potent mixture of sharp satire and subtly ironic ethical drama often results in ambivalent reactions on the part of the reader. But as Wieck points out, "in that ambivalence may nevertheless be found a burgeoning of the tolerance that contributes so much to saving Twain and *Huckleberry Finn* from self-righteous preachments" (xiii). Far from identifying with attempts to accuse the novel and Twain himself of racism in various insidious forms and degrees, Wieck, in the course of the book, adduces a series of arguments and practical examples which point to the opposite conclusion. The author's approach is argued to represent an "ingenious subversion of racism" (124), and Wieck assembles a strong case for the view that *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is in fact the result of a wish "to write a novel in support of the free black in the post-Reconstruction South" (123).

An intriguing feature of Wieck's study is the reliance on biographical evidence and historical background information. Mark Twain's impetus to begin the novel early in July 1876 is thus concretely linked to his having attended the Centennial celebration in Philadelphia of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. On this basis Carl Wieck traces

textual evidence that Twain was highly sensitive to and conscious of the principles and ideals embraced in both the Declaration of Independence and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and argues that throughout the book the author consciously demonstrated "for Americans what their dreams, ideals and philosophies can boil down to in practice" (18). Wieck notes, for instance, that Twain's obvious enjoyment in playing with the possibilities offered by the theme of rebirth (to both freedom and a new identity) adds texture and depth to this underlying theme. A sustained and convincing case is provided for the view that Twain owes "a rather substantial debt to Frederick Douglass" (38). Wieck argues that the fact that Twain's novel "gives human dimensions to the humane ideals of Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln" (19) as well as to the "acute discontent that Douglass felt" (38) is a fundamental reason why *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has so often been considered uniquely American, and it is a feature of the novel which helps to explain why it has never ceased to speak a universally understood language.

Carl Wieck orchestrates a similar eye-opening re-contextualization of the novel in the light of the immediate historical reality surrounding its creation, when he points to the importance of the Supreme Court's 1883 decision to declare unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875 as a possible influence on Mark Twain's belatedly successful efforts to bring the novel to a close seven years after he started it. As Wieck infers, the problematical ending of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, while still at odds with the earlier portions, at least becomes more comprehensible when one develops "an awareness of the historical contexts during which the major parts of the book were created." Wieck makes a case for the view that when Mark Twain finally managed to overcome the problems he experienced in bringing the novel to a close, he did this in a manner that "harmonized well with the political mood prevailing in the United States in 1882 and 1883." There is, of course, ample irony in the fact that Mark Twain quite possibly shared the sense of renewed hope "that came with the liberation of whites from the legal constraints of the Reconstruction," and as Carl Wieck puts it, "the sad truth ... is that the mood of the country at that moment represented a distinct contrast with the one that had reigned in the land when work on the book was begun, and that the sense of inebriation so welcome to so many came at the expense of the desires and dreams of many others" (69).

In the final chapter of his book, Wieck shows, however, that at a deeper level the novel may serve as a subtle commentary on how knowledge is "acquired, effectively processed and applied, or dangerously restricted." Again and again, Huck finds himself surrounded by others who "believe they possess knowledge superior to his yet betray ignorance rooted in arrogance or self-erected barriers to learning or perception." Obviously the novel's narrator is far from immune to such common failings of humanity, and the reader is therefore continually forced to discover the hard way, along with Huck, that "tolerance toward external influences is the key to meaningful maturation" (171). From this perspective, Twain's complex uses of irony can be interpreted as a sharp blade wielded "to pierce bubbles of presumption that arise from the very human belief that the whole truth concerning 'reality' can be *known*" (xvi).

As a concrete example of this, Wieck observes that Twain tended to use the term "Negro" in the working notes for his novel, which leads him to argue that in a contemporary light, Mark Twain's "use of the familiar negative epithet 'nigger' and of gently humorous and of mildly stereotypical illustrations for his novel" seems to have been consciously designed to allow the deeper message of the novel to pass the formidable barriers of traditional prejudice and deep-seated fears (123). Wieck notes that although Twain's subtlety of style and method often appears to result in misinterpretations of his basic aim, one of the most exciting aspects of the novel is the possibility that "once it becomes plain what the author is up to, the reader may well experience the urge to exclaim along with Huck, 'Well, if I ever struck anything like it, I'm a nigger'" (124).

Carl Wieck's *Refiguring Huckleberry Finn* is a solid bid for a fresh consideration of what remains perhaps the greatest American novel. As such, the study joins a long-established line of critical works and Wieck methodically positions his readings and interpretations in relation to various landmarks in the diversity of existent exegeses of the novel. It is, however, the close attention that he pays to the original historical and personal contexts relevant to Mark Twain's conception of the novel that makes Wieck's study a significant step forward in the critical tradition pertaining to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For although the results of Carl Wieck's survey of available critical inroads to the novel are generally enlightening, they are not always unproblematic. The mixed atten-

tion to, on the one hand, an exploration of significant themes and meaningful effects and, on the other, the hermeneutic search for new interpretations tends, at times, to expose critical cul-de-sacs quite as much as it provides new insight into the workings of the novel. A long speculative chapter concerned with the implications of Twain's apparent partiality to the use of the numbers "two" and "forty" reveals, for instance, nothing so much as the general futility in literary studies of numerological exercises of this kind. Especially when dealing with a novel characterized at multiple levels by a prevailing sense of irresolution, the final answers instinctively sought and elegantly wrought from the fabric of the text by critics and readers alike can easily become detrimental to the kind of deeper, liminal understanding of both text and narrative which most of Wieck's suitably restrained analyses in fact do convey. The curious and highly stimulating non-finality of Mark Twain's American vision is something one needs to keep in mind, especially in a novel which, as Carl Wieck points out himself, represents "a major onslaught on the long-respected custom of pretending to deal frankly and truly with the reader" (146).

Such relatively minor points of contention should not keep the potential reader away. In the final analysis the book may not so much refigure as re-contextualize and hence re-present *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in an instructive, contemporary light. Wieck's study is in fact a commendably rounded appraisal of the novel's artistic and human strengths, its unimpeachable technical qualities, as well as its enduring moral lessons.