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Huck Finn’s Indian Complexion

Mark Twain’s sarcastic, and vigorously public, denigration of “Indians” in “The Noble Red Man” (1870) and Roughing It (1872) evolved into villainous Injun Joe in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876). Except for mentioning unrealistic Indians as one of “Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses” (1895), Twain never published another essay or novel about Indians during his lifetime. Since Native American “assimilation” was an issue of significant dispute during the last third of the 19th century, what explains this peculiar silence by such a loquacious public icon for the last 44 years of his life?

This essay suggests that after Native Americans destroyed George Custer’s Seventh Cavalry at the Little Big Horn River in 1876—-the same year Twain introduced Injun Joe in Tom Sawyer---a morally conflicted Twain moderated his condescending attitude toward “Indians.” In Twain’s next book, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885), vagrant, uncivilized Huck joins an intelligent but terribly oppressed black man, Jim, to escape from white captivity, as both characters resist white civilization. Although Twain doesn’t describe Huck’s skin color or actually call Huck an “Indian,” Huck depicts Native American traits that include resistance against white laws and legal hypocrisy, respect for nature, trickster survival skills, and a desire to “light out” for Injun Territory in the West as soon as his friend Jim is “free.” Before Custer’s defeat in 1876, Twain mocked Indians as filthy, lazy, despicable animals, negatively stereotyped in fictional Injun Joe; but after 1876, a morally ambivalent Twain split his Indian stereotypes between the negative Indian traits of Pap Finn and the positive Native American skills of Huck Finn. For personal and professional reasons, Twain didn’t label Pap and Huck as “Indians,” but they both combined their dark complexions with stereotypical Indian characteristics.
Participating in what Horace Greeley called “Manifest Destiny” for the westward expansion of white “civilization” and what Theodore Roosevelt later called the “winning of the West,” Samuel Clemens honed his literary identity and the pseudonym “Mark Twain” when he mined for gold and silver in Nevada and California from 1861 to 1864. He saw Indians, and before Custer’s catastrophe in 1876, Twain’s published comments about Native Americans were extremely negative. Helen Harris says that “Twain found it easier to be liberal toward the Blacks, the Chinese or any other relative newcomer to America than to be liberal toward the Indians” (504). Unlike blacks or Chinese, Twain feared Indians as wartime enemies. Twain writes in *Roughing It* that when he travelled near the scene of an Indian mail robbery and “massacre of 1856” (53), he “enjoyed great discomfort all the time” that he was in “hostile Indian country” (55). He met soldiers from Camp Floyd after their Indian battle the previous day (85). In a letter of 13 April 1862 from Esmeralda, Nevada to his brother Orion, Clemens wrote that “Wasson got here night before last, ‘from the wars’” with Digger Indians, that “the whites left their stone fort,” that a “large amount of provisions and ammunition... fell into the hands of the Indians,” and that “pitched battle with the savages” ended when troops finally arrived from Los Angeles (Clemens to OC). For young Twain, Indians were vicious enemies; and ridiculing Indians in essays and novels was Twain’s literary method of fighting them.

Injun Joe and Pap Finn represent negative Indian stereotypes Twain described in his 1870 essay on “The Noble Red Man.” He scorned the Indian as “a poor, filthy, naked scurvy vagabond, whom to exterminate were a charity to the Creator’s worthier insects and reptiles which he oppresses” (443) and whose “heart is a cesspool of falsehood” (444). Twain’s episodic novel *Roughing It* mocks the “Goshoot Indians” (actually the
Giuseute tribe) as “inferior to even the despised Digger Indians of California” and “inferior to all races of savages on our continent” (126). Twain describes the “savage” Goshoots as “small, lean, ‘scrawny’ creatures” whose “complexion” is “dull black like the ordinary American negro.” They eat “what a hog would decline.” These “indolent” and “prideless beggars” are “a thin, scattering race of almost naked black children” who “produce nothing at all” and “are manifestly descended from the self-same gorilla, or kangaroo, or Norway rat, whichever animal-Adam the Darwinians trace them to” (127). In *Tom Sawyer*, Huck learns that Injun Joe, disguised as a “deaf and dumb Spaniard,” intends to “attack” Widow Douglas for a public horse-whipping her husband gave him, and he threatens both Tom and Becky Thatcher in the cave. Kent Rasmussen claims of Injun Joe that “(e)ven when he is not present, his specter looms” (234). Besides attacking Huck physically and emotionally, Pap Finn’s indolent, prideless, and threatening specter, like Injun Joe, looms for Huck and the reader, even when Pap is not present.

Pap Finn looks and acts like Twain’s negative image of an Indian in “The Noble Red Man” and in *Roughing It*—a thieving, lying, cruel, angry, friendless, superstitious, animalistic outsider who “used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard” (*Huckleberry Finn* 10). Pap Finn, like Injun Joe, has black hair like “vines” that is “long and tangled and greasy” and a face that is “not like another man’s white” but “a white to make a body’s flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white” (23). In his 1870 essay on “The Noble Red Man,” Twain describes the “dirty” and “contemptible” Indian who “appears in public with one boot on and one shoe” and “a weather-beaten stove-pipe hat” with “the lid off and hanging by a thread or two” (443). Using nearly identical imagery to separate Pap’s negative Indian stereotypes from Huck’s positive Native American skills, Twain
styles Pap Finn in "rags," busted boots with holes, and "an old black slouch" hat "with the top caved in" (Huckleberry Finn 23). Twain’s “Noble” Red Man “waits patiently around a saloon till he gets a chance to strike a ‘swell’ attitude,” but this “base and treacherous” savage, who “never works himself,” is “a skulking coward and a windy braggart” (443-5). Like the “coarse-haired” and “pitiful” cayote in Roughing It, cowardly drunkard Pap Finn, a windy braggart, never works himself and he steals Huck's money. Like the Indian and the cayote, Pap is “always poor, out of luck, and friendless” (31).

What are Pap Finn’s racial complexion, ethnic identity, and cultural background? And who was Huck’s mother? What respectable 19th-century white woman would marry or willingly have sex with Pap Finn? Did Pap Finn rape an Indian woman or win one as a gambling debt? What happened to Huck’s mom? With an obvious lack of information, Twain invites the reader to speculate about Huck’s racial complexion and his ethnic identity. If Pap is a brownish “tree-toad white,” might Huck be an Indian or “half-breed” trickster who represents the good “Indian” qualities that eluded bad Injun Joe and mean Pap Finn? Since Twain doesn’t describe Huck’s skin color or race, why should a reader assume Huck is white like Tom Sawyer? Interestingly, Huck and Tom both are orphans who join together in similar antisocial behavior; but Tom is accepted into white society while Huck is not. Tom fits into white culture, but Huck remains an outcast. Might a difference of skin color, ethnic complexion, or cultural identity explain this anomaly?

In “The Noble Red Man” (1870) and in Roughing It (1872), both written before Custer’s battle at the Little Big Horn River in 1876, Twain mercilessly ridiculed Indians with various animal images that are similar to the negative traits of Injun Joe and Pap Finn. For example, Twain depicts the cayote in Roughing It as “a living, breathing
allegory of want" who is "always poor, out of luck and friendless" (31). Twain says a cayote "will eat anything in the world that his first cousins, the desert-frequenting tribes of Indians will," because the cayote and "his relations, the Indians," have a "blood kinship" where they "live together in the waste places of the earth" (33-4). And who forced Indians to live in those "waste places"?---not white Americans seeking Manifest Destiny, but providence. In Twain's texts written before 1876, "(p)rovidence" provides Indians a "proper place in Nature's economy: the ducks eat the flies---the flies eat the worms---the Indians eat all three---the wildcats eat the Indians---the white folks eat the wild-cats---and thus all things are lovely" (247). But after 1876, Twain balances the bad Indian traits of older (and now dead) Pap Finn against the good traits of his son Huck.

But if Twain moderated his older and extremely negative view of Indians to split his racial stereotypes between the positive Native American skills of Huck Finn and the negative, threatening buffoonery of drunkard Pap Finn, then why didn't Twain simply say that Pap and Huck were Indians or "half-breeds" like Injun Joe in Tom Sawyer? In other words, if Twain wasn't afraid to address racial stereotypes of black Jim, then why didn't he directly address Indian stereotypes in the same novel? Why the subterfuge?

Three reasons---professional market awareness, personal friendships, and cultural propriety---probably explain Twain's public silence about Indian assimilation after Custer's defeat in 1876 as well as his indirect portrayal of good Native American skills in Huck and negative Indian traits in Pap, without specifically describing either character as an Indian. First of all, Twain's book sales included Western readers and cavalrymen who fought with George Custer before the Little Big Horn battle as well as a significant number of people who believed in the Manifest Destiny of white control over
the West. Twain could have parodied white treatment of Indians in the character of Huck just as he parodied white treatment of black slaves in the character of Jim; but Indians, especially after Custer's defeat in 1876, represented a military threat, even after the Civil War, that former slaves did not represent. Black citizens were denied many rights during and after Reconstruction, but they were part of American society; while Indians were still segregated completely outside that society. For instance, Twain worked and lived with a few black Americans but not with Native Americans out West.

Second, besides his professional reluctance to introduce a positive Indian character into his novels or directly to present volatile and divisive issues of Native American assimilation to his readers, Twain faced a personal dilemma over Indian issues. Twain was torn between his respect for President Ulysses Grant, who publicly criticized Custer's foolish attack against Indians at the Little Big Horn, and his friendship with Libbie Custer, who lectured and wrote books defending her husband as a hero.

Although Samuel Clemens mostly retreated during his three weeks of military service with a local Missouri group of Confederate soldiers during the early days of the Civil War, he admired military men, especially General Ulysses Grant. Boasting to his wife Livy on 12 November 1879 about sharing the stage with General Grant, General Sherman, and other celebrities, Twain gushed "I think I never sat elbow-to-elbow with so many historic names before . . . What an iron man Grant is!" (Clemens to OLC). In a letter of 23 November 1884 to his daughter Susy, Clemens casually mentioned that he "called at Gen. Grant's the other morning, & when I saw all his swords, & medals, & collections of beautiful & rare things from Japan & China, I was so sorry I hadn't made Mamma go with me" (Huckleberry Finn, Preface). The two men became friends, and
Twain made more money publishing Grant’s *Personal Memoirs* in 1885, (the same year Twain published *Huckleberry Finn*), than Twain made selling his own books that year.

After defeating Confederate troops in the East, Union troops immediately turned their attention to the Indians out West in another “Civil War,” this time against Native Americans. George Armstrong Custer, who graduated last in the West Point class of 1861, became a hero at Bull Run, Antietam, and Gettysburg. Custer attended Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, and Custer took command in Austin, Texas immediately after the war. General Sherman, who cancelled his trip with Twain and other dignitaries for the *Quaker City* cruise to the Holy Land that Twain memorialized in *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), convinced a reluctant President Grant to appoint Custer in 1874 as commander of the Seventh Cavalry at Fort Lincoln in Mandan, North Dakota. After a court-martial for leaving his post and then testifying in Congress in 1876 at Secretary of War William Belknap’s narrow acquittal for cheating Indians at Fort Sill in Oklahoma, Custer and his troops left Mandan, where Sacajawea and the Sioux had saved Lewis and Clark from starving during a bitter winter, to confront Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, and the Indian warriors. Quoted in the *New York Herald* on September 2, 1876, Grant said “I regard Custer’s Massacre as a sacrifice of troops, brought on by Custer himself, that was wholly unnecessary – wholly unnecessary” (Barnett 540). Not everyone agreed.

Custer’s wife, Elizabeth Bacon “Libbie” Custer, worked to rehabilitate Custer’s reputation by publishing *Boots and Saddles, Life with General Custer in Dakota* (1885), (in the same year that Twain published *Huckleberry Finn*), *Tenting on the Plains* (1887), and *Following the Guidon* (1891). Twain offered to publish Libbie Custer’s work (Wert 357), and Twain and his wife Livy vacationed for several months in 1890 with Libbie
Custer and other guests at the Onteora Club in New York (Rasmussen 345). The Mark Twain Project at UC-Berkeley includes Libbie Custer’s correspondence with Twain in a series of letters from 1886 to 1909. Morally conflicted about Indian assimilation and torn between his professional contacts with General Grant, who adamantly criticized Custer, and his friendship with Libbie Custer, who defended her husband, Twain maintained a tactful, evasive, public silence about Native Americans for the last 44 years of his life.

A third reason for Twain’s portrayal of negative 19th-century Indian stereotypes in Pap Finn and positive Native American traits in Huck Finn without actually introducing either fictional character as an Indian might have been Twain’s discomfort in describing the graphic atrocity of Indians raping white women or white soldiers raping Indian women. Richard Irving Dodge created Dodge City, the town that became famous for wild gunslinging, Wyatt Earp, Bat Masterson, and Boot Hill cemetery. Dodge preceded George Custer as commander at Fort Dodge, Kansas, and Dodge served as personal assistant to General William Tecumseh Sherman from 1881 to 1882. Richard Irving Dodge wrote *Hunting Grounds of the Great West* (1877) and *Our Wild Indians* (1883), with an introduction by General Sherman, that Twain used, along with George Custer’s *My Life on the Plains* (1874), for his primary research about the Indian wars. Twain wrote nine chapters of an unfinished novel, “Huck and Tom Among the Indians,” while he finished *Huckleberry Finn*. After Custer’s defeat in 1876, Twain apparently felt that he couldn’t include Indian characters in his novels without realistic depictions of wartime cruelties. In fact, Twain wrote nine chapters of a companion book for *Huckleberry Finn* that he tentatively titled “Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians” (1884); but he stopped writing when Huck and Tom confront the issue of Indians gang-raping captive
teenager Peggy Mills. The plot ends when Huck and Tom discover four stakes in the ground and a bloody scrap of Peggy's dress in a recently abandoned Indian camp.

Wayne Kime has discovered that Twain made 375 annotations in his copy of Richard Irving Dodge's *Our Wild Indians* (1882), with particular focus on vivid details of Indian cruelty against female captives in that book and in Dodge's *The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants* (Kime 324). Although Carl Jung didn't use the noun “complex” to explain sexual repression until 1907 (OED), Twain seemed to have an emotional or psychological “complex” over the issue of Tom and Huck losing their sexual innocence as well as the image of Indians raping white girls and women. Twain fastidiously excluded sexual references from his books, and he viewed his own wife and daughters as pure angels. However, in Letter XI of “Letters from the Earth” (1909), which wasn’t published for more than 50 years after Twain’s death, Twain wrote about Indians raping white women in the Minnesota massacres of 1862. Twain tells how Indians nailed both “stark naked” parents to the wall, stripped four daughters “bare,” and “repeatedly ravished” them. After Indians cut off their noses and breasts, Twain says the Indians forced other “indignities so atrocious that the pen cannot write them” (50). What could be even more atrocious? And what did white soldiers do to Indians?

Twain didn’t label any fictional characters as Indians in his published novels after Custer’s defeat in 1876, and he didn’t travel with his readers when Huck “lit out” for Indian territory at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Yet, Huck Finn portrays positive, though stereotyped, talents of Native Americans while course-haired, brown-skinned Pap Finn embodies the looming threat of violence and vicious Indian traits.
Imagine “unsivilized” Huck as a “lonesome” Indian orphan, trying to evade cruel, white, religious hypocrites so that he can escape to nature and freedom in the West. He respects nature, he hunts animals in his canoe, he lives in a “wigwam” on a river raft, he swims naked in the river, he uses trickster tactics and creative lies to evade white captors, and he exposes the immoral sham of legal technicalities to help a black man escape from slavery. Huck, who portrays Native American resourcefulness, and Jim, who represents white treatment of black Americans, are oppressed and unassimilated with low social status when the book ends; but Jim lives on the fringe of white society while Huck still roams outside that society. Without changing any of Twain’s words, envisioning Huck Finn with an Indian complexion that he inherited from Pap Finn invigorates Huck’s character and connects the novel to the controversial issue of Indian assimilation. Most likely for professional, personal, and cultural reasons, Twain didn’t provoke readers by introducing Pap and Huck as “Indian” characters while Indians were still killing white soldiers out West; but after 1876, Twain expressed a grudging respect for Native Americans by balancing the good Indian traits of Huck Finn against the bad Indian traits of Pap Finn.

In conclusion, with his moral ambiguity about Indian assimilation, complicated by Custer’s defeat in 1876 and personal friendships with Custer’s critics and admirers, Twain focused the bad 19th-century Indian stereotypes from his earlier works like “The Noble Red Man” and Roughing It into the threatening characters of Injun Joe in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Pap Finn in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Despite his public silence for the issue of Indian assimilation, Twain also concentrated good traits of stereotypical 19th-century Native Americans in the character of Huck Finn.


--- . "SLC to William Dean Howells, 22 Feb 1877, Hartford, Conn. (UCCL 01533).” In <i>Mark Twain's Letters, 1876–80.</i> Edited by Michael B. Frank and Harriet


