

# Huckleberry finn and the war prayer by mark twain

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

It is well known that Mark Twain became increasingly misanthropic and angry as his life went on, and some of the idealism was lost, some of the wonder at the world even through Twain's famously acerbic satire. The War Prayer and Huckleberry Finn definitely show that difference. Huckleberry Finn exposes the brutality and cruelty of the slave system and of racism not by showing brutal beatings in the manner of *Roots*, which would be well enough, but by humanizing Nigger Jim, making it clear that this person is a man worthy of respect. Finn's relationship with the older man begins with Finn believing himself to be in a socially superior place: He's white, Jim's black. But the absurdity and inhumanity of this is whittled down until we see that Jim is an adult, a fully functioning human who has a lot to teach this (admittedly very kind and intelligent) child. " " Jim, this is nice," I says. " I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread." " Well, you wouldn't a ben here 'f it hadn't a ben for Jim. You'd a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittn' mos' drowned, too; dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it's gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile". Huck does know his way around the country, but he does not have the maturity, the experience, the wisdom of Jim. Reading Jim, I am almost reminded of a shaman, a medicine man, someone who has great wisdom granted by the spirits or by the land itself. But the mastery of Twain's work is that he avoids using this as an otherization, a " me big heap Injun" or bone-through-nose caricature however well meant, a noble savage narrative which, as many philosophers have noted, is fundamentally otherizing even as it is laudatory of the Other. Jim is not an Other: He is a real, flesh and blood person. We understand him,

and understand why he is the way he is: He's an adult, a fully-fledged person, leading a child. When Jim finds the dead man, he is able to deal with mortality: He throws the rags over the body. Huck's a kid, and Jim protects him from the horrible truth of mortality, which Huck is not ready for. Huck has become the audience's avatar, and Twain has pulled a cruel trick: Reminded us we are just as ignorant as Huck. The War Prayer, on the other hand, has no budding friendship between Huck and Jim, no improvement, no sign of hope for the future. In The War Prayer, people are praying for success in a war when a preacher says that their praying for victory has, among other consequences, the following implication: " For our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimages, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!" In response, " It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said". Twain is making an integral point about the fundamental contradiction of religiosity and violence. To pray for victory is to pray for all those things. A religious equivocator might argue, " Hold up, the people are just praying for their side to win". Yes, and that means praying for the other side to lose, and for the " thunder of the guns" to be drowned with the shrieks of the wounded. Like Swift, Twain (through his mouthpiece in the form of the preacher) is discussing militarism, but not historically: He is discussing it as a general consequence of humanity's innate cruelty. He is also offering no alternative: The people don't get it, and one presumes never will.