

ENSLAVEMENT AND EMANCIPATION

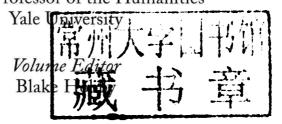
Edited and with an introduction by HAROLD BLOOM / Volume Editor: BLAKE HOBBY



Bloom's Literary Themes

ENSLAVEMENT AND EMANCIPATION

Edited and with an introduction by
Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities





Bloom's Literary Themes: Enslavement and Emancipation

Copyright © 2010 by Infobase Publishing Introduction © 2010 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Bloom's Literary Criticism An imprint of Infobase Publishing 132 West 31st Street New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bloom's literary themes. Enslavement and emancipation / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom ; volume editor, Blake Hobby.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-60413-441-4 (hc : alk. paper) 1. Slavery in literature. 2. Liberty in literature. I. Bloom, Harold. II. Hobby, Blake. III. Title: Enslavement and emancipation.

PN56.S5765B56 2010 809'.933552—dc22

Bloom's Literary Criticism books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Bloom's Literary Criticism on the World Wide Web at http://www.chelseahouse.com

Series design by Kerry Casey Cover design by Takeshi Takahashi Composition by IBT Global, Inc. Cover printed by IBT Global, Inc., Troy, NY Book printed and bound by IBT Global, Inc., Troy, NY Date printed: January 2010 Printed in the United States of America

10987654321

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All links and Web addresses were checked and verified to be correct at the time of publication. Because of the dynamic nature of the Web, some addresses and links may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

Series Introduction by Harold Bloom: « Themes and Metaphors

1. Topos and Trope

What we now call a theme or topic or subject initially was named a topos, ancient Greek for "place." Literary topoi are commonplaces, but also arguments or assertions. A topos can be regarded as literal when opposed to a trope or turning which is figurative and which can be a metaphor or some related departure from the literal: ironies, synecdoches (part for whole), metonymies (representations by contiguity) or hyperboles (overstatements). Themes and metaphors engender one another in all significant literary compositions.

As a theoretician of the relation between the matter and the rhetoric of high literature, I tend to define metaphor as a figure of desire rather than a figure of knowledge. We welcome literary metaphor because it enables fictions to persuade us of beautiful untrue things, as Oscar Wilde phrased it. Literary *topoi* can be regarded as places where we store information, in order to amplify the themes that interest us.

This series of volumes, *Bloom's Literary Themes*, offers students and general readers helpful essays on such perpetually crucial topics as the Hero's Journey, the Labyrinth, the Sublime, Death and Dying, the Taboo, the Trickster and many more. These subjects are chosen for their prevalence yet also for their centrality. They express the whole concern of human existence now in the twenty-first century of the Common Era. Some of the topics would have seemed odd at another time, another land: the American Dream, Enslavement and Emancipation, Civil Disobedience.

I suspect though that our current preoccupations would have existed always and everywhere, under other names. Tropes change across the centuries: the irony of one age is rarely the irony of another. But the themes of great literature, though immensely varied, undergo transmemberment and show up barely disguised in different contexts. The power of imaginative literature relies upon three constants: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom. These are not bound by societal constraints or resentments, and ultimately are universals, and so not culture-bound. Shakespeare, except for the world's scriptures, is the one universal author, whether he is read and played in Bulgaria or Indonesia or wherever. His supremacy at creating human beings breaks through even the barrier of language and puts everyone on his stage. This means that the matter of his work has migrated everywhere, reinforcing the common places we all inhabit in his themes.

2. Contest as both Theme and Trope

Great writing or the Sublime rarely emanates directly from themes since all authors are mediated by forerunners and by contemporary rivals. Nietzsche enhanced our awareness of the agonistic foundations of ancient Greek literature and culture, from Hesiod's contest with Homer on to the Hellenistic critic Longinus in his treatise *On the Sublime*. Even Shakespeare had to begin by overcoming Christopher Marlowe, only a few months his senior. William Faulkner stemmed from the Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad and our best living author of prose fiction, Philip Roth, is inconceivable without his descent from the major Jewish literary phenomenon of the twentieth century, Franz Kafka of Prague, who wrote the most lucid German since Goethe.

The contest with past achievement is the hidden theme of all major canonical literature in Western tradition. Literary influence is both an overwhelming metaphor for literature itself, and a common topic for all criticism, whether or not the critic knows her immersion in the incessant flood.

Every theme in this series touches upon a contest with anteriority, whether with the presence of death, the hero's quest, the overcoming of taboos, or all of the other concerns, volume by volume. From Monteverdi through Bach to Stravinsky, or from the Italian Renaissance through the agon of Matisse and Picasso, the history of all the arts demonstrates the same patterns as literature's thematic struggle with itself. Our country's great original art, jazz, is illuminated by what

the great creators called "cutting contests," from Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington on to the emergence of Charlie Parker's Bop or revisionist jazz.

A literary theme, however authentic, would come to nothing without rhetorical eloquence or mastery of metaphor. But to experience the study of the common places of invention is an apt training in the apprehension of aesthetic value in poetry and in prose.



Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom



As more than half this volume is devoted to the tragic history of Africa-American enslavement and its ongoing aftermath, any further commentary on this by me would be redundant. I turn instead to the second book of *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible, now commonly called Exodus.

The pattern of departure for the Promised Land—by Abraham and Moses alike—is the Yahwistic command: yetziat or "get up and go." It will be repeated in another mode as the Hebrew Bible ends, in Chronicles II, where Cyrus the Persian emperor urges the exiles in Babylon to "go up" to Jerusalem. The Old Testament, which is the Christian revision of Tanakh, ends deliberately with the latecomer, nameless prophet Malachi (whose name means "messenger") who warns that parents and children must turn to one another again, lest Yahweh come to smite the earth with a curse.

Exodus essentially is the story of Moses, the reluctant prophet compelled by Yahweh to a great career of triumphant suffering, or should we call it triumph? The heroes of *Tanakh*, when they bear the Blessing, have an oxymoronic destiny, since whatever their final sorrow, they remain chosen. There are tragic, cast-out figures, like the poignant King Saul, but Moses is a spiritual triumph, though a personal loser, since he is not permitted to enter Canaan.

Exodus, as much as Genesis, is Yahweh's book, and he can be regarded as the most troublesome of all literary characters ever. I devoted most of a book to him, *Jesus and Yahweh*, and remember crying out in that I did not trust him, did not like him, and wished he would go away—but he won't. Of all literary representations he is the most outrageous and the most sublime. Whether or not you care

for him, he is great art, unlike his involuntary parody who is the one blemish of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Exodus is the Hebrew epic, fully comparable to Homer, but surpassing all the disciples of Homer, from Virgil to James Joyce. Liberation movements to come will go on finding their model in it.

Or Contents

Series Introduction by Harold Bloom: Themes and Metaphors	xi
Volume Introduction by Harold Bloom	xv
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Mark Twain) "The Paradox of Liberation in Huckleberry Finn" by Neil Schmitz, in Texas Studies in Literature and Language (1971)	1
Beloved (Toni Morrison) "Beloved and the Transforming Power of the Word" by Louise Cowan, in Classic Texts and the Nature of Authority (1993)	15
"The Death of Ivan Ilych" (Leo Tolstoy) "The Death and Emancipation of Ivan Ilych" by Merritt Moseley	27
The Declaration of Independence (Thomas Jefferson) "Thomas Jefferson and the Great Declaration" by Moses Coit Tyler, in <i>The Literary History of the</i> American Revolution, 1763-1783 (1897)	37
The Book of Exodus "Exodus" by Allen Dwight Callahan, in <i>The Talking</i> Book: African Americans and the Bible (2006)	63

The Poetry of Langston Hughes "Racial Individuality': Enslavement and Emancipation in the Poetry of Langston Hughes" by Robert C. Evans	85
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (Harriet Jacobs) "Moral Experience in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Sarah Way Sherman, in NWSA Journal (1990)	93
The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (Olaudah Equiano) "Review of The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself" by Mary Wollstonecraft, in Analytical Review (1789)	117
"In the Penal Colony" (Franz Kafka) "Enslavement and Emancipation in Franz Kafka's 'In the Penal Colony'" by Lorena Russell	121
The Speeches of Abraham Lincoln "Lincoln the Literary Genius" by Jacques Barzun, in <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i> (1959)	133
A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, a Slave (Frederick Douglass) "The Slave" by Frederic May Holland, in Frederick Douglass: The Colored Orator (1891)	147
One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn) "Art isn't what you do, it's how you do it': Enslavement, Ideology, and Emancipation in Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" by John Becker	165
Robinson Crusoe (Daniel Defoe) "Enslavement and Emancipation in Robinson Crusoe" by Luca Prono	177

Contents ix

A Room of One's Own (Virginia Woolf)	185
"Images of Enslavement and Emancipation in Virginia Woolf's <i>A Room of One's Own</i> " by Deborah C.	
Solomon	
Siddhartha (Hermann Hesse)	197
"The Search for Emancipation in Herman Hesse's	177
Siddhartha" by H. Elizabeth Smith	
The Tempest (William Shakespeare)	209
" with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury / Do	
I take part': Enslavement and Emancipation in	
Shakespeare's <i>The Tempest</i> " by Robert C. Evans	
A Vindication of the Rights of Women and Woman in the Nin	eteenth
Century (Mary Wollstonecraft and Margaret Fuller)	221
"Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft" by George	
Eliot, in Leader (1855)	
Visions of the Daughters of Albion (William Blake)	229
"Blake's Vision of Slavery" by David Erdman, in	
Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes (1952)	
The Poetry of Phillis Wheatley	245
"Emancipating Phillis Wheatley" by Deborah James	
The Novels of Elie Wiesel	255
"Witness to the Absurd: Elie Wiesel and the French	
Existentialists" by Mary Jean Green, in <i>Renascence</i> (1977)	
Acknowledgments	275
Index	277

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN (MARK TWAIN)



"The Paradox of Liberation in Huckleberry Finn"

by Neil Schmitz, in Texas Studies in Literature and Language (1971)

Introduction

In his consideration of the ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Neil Schmitz explores the way Jim is represented, especially during all of the machinations Tom Sawyer dreams up to effect Jim's "escape," a horrific, brutal experience where Jim undergoes great suffering. For Schmitz, "Jim's situation at the end of *Huckleberry Finn* reflects that of the Negro in the Reconstruction, free at last and thoroughly impotent, the object of devious schemes and a hapless victim of constant brutality." Schmitz sees Jim and Huck's "liberation" as bitterly ironic, reflecting both the era in which the text was written and also Twain's sentimentalized vision of black identity. Thus, the central question for Schmitz "is not Jim's freedom per se, but whether he will seize it or be given it, and then, most horrifying of all—what

2 Mark Twain

is to be done with him in either case, this emancipated, alien black man?"

00

The perennial dispute over the ending of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, whether Mark Twain's ingenious resolution possesses a "formal aptness," as Lionel Trilling reads it, or is a "failure of nerve," as Leo Marx would have it, regularly invokes that crucial term freedom. It is, as Marx so capably argued, what the book is about, but his own judgment that freedom in *Huckleberry Finn* "specifically means freedom from society and its imperatives,"1 is far from satisfactory, if not simplistic, and the problem remains. Twain was rarely, if ever, a successful philosopher in his fiction. The aphorism was his mode of analysis and Pudd'nhead Wilson, an embittered crank, his notion of a radical theoretician. In Huckleberry Finn, where Twain restricts his tortured vision of the world to the consciousness of an urchin, this limitation is something of a dangerous virtue. Those large, potent abstractions—freedom, civilization, morality—are not dealt with conceptually, but rather issue their significance through the wrenching of Huck's psyche, through muted cries of pain. There is no Grand Inquisitor passage in the novel. Colonel Sherburn is the closest Twain comes to a raissoneur. We are instead made to feel the achievement and loss of freedom in the sensuous context of tight collars and loose rags, floating rafts and cramped sheds. Yet the forces engendering the calamities which pass before Huck's ingenuous gaze drag with them perplexing problems, the darkness of Twain's thought. That is the bewitching thing about Huckleberry Finn: it arouses such large and difficult ideas, and then gives us only feelings about those ideas. What Marx demanded some fifteen years ago was an ending to the novel that would elucidate those contorted lines of thought, a conclusion. Unfortunately we do not have it, but we do have, amid all the confusion and dead-ends, strokes of the imagination that cut, however clumsily, very near the bone of our experience.

"Our philosophical tradition," Hannah Arendt writes in *Between Past and Future*, "is almost unanimous in holding that freedom begins where men have left the realm of political life inhabited by the many, and that it is not experienced in association with others but in intercourse with one's self." She then proceeds to argue the contrary: that the only meaningful freedom men can possess must be won in the

sociopolitical realm. The notion that men can constitute an impregnable inner freedom within the self simply by taking themselves out of the social world, she argues, is essentially illusory, an escape from the responsibilities of action. Mrs. Arendt's critique of those who would separate freedom from politics, placing it either in the withdrawn self or in a mythicized state of nature, is useful to keep in mind when discussing the nature of freedom in Huckleberry Finn, if only because it makes us re-examine the idyllic life established on the river, that "free zone" cutting through the murderous world of politics. What student of the novel does not know that the Shore signifies constraint and the River freedom, or that the "free and easy" life on the raft affirms the sacred practice of brotherhood, specifically Huck's celebrated leap over the color bar? The word keeps bubbling up, often simply serving as a convenient heading for all those apolitical things that Huck and Jim desire. Yet Twain's understanding of what constitutes freedom in his book is largely intuitive, not systematic, and consequently does not fit into the libertarian categories that have been painstakingly constructed to hold it. Indeed, there is a kind of pathos in that criticism which neatly irons out all the contradictions in Huckleberry Finn, turning that sprawling, ambivalent narrative into a finely contrived Austenian novel. This approach constrains the most sensitive of Twain's critics. Huck "knows how he feels about Jim, but he also knows what he is expected to do about Jim. This division within his mind corresponds to the division of the novel's moral terrain into the areas represented by the raft on the one hand and society on the other."3 In short, there is a shared concept of freedom that Huck and Jim struggle to obtain, "their code," and a common understanding of the constrictive rules that society inflicts on its members. The novel's "moral terrain" is accordingly partitioned into precise districts. Only those who do not know the river with its hidden snags and treacherous undercurrents, Twain wrote in Life on the Mississippi, can see poetic harmonies in its devious flow.

Clearly Huck and Jim have different ideas of where they want to go and what their flight means, points of view that come increasingly into conflict in the first part of the novel. Faced with a symbolic *point d'appui* as Cairo loomed in his imagination, Twain had to deal with that paradox and found himself staring into the abyss of the Reconstruction. The question is not Jim's freedom per se, but whether he will seize it or be given it, and then, most horrifying of all—what is

4 Mark Twain

to be done with him in either case, this emancipated, alien black man? In these proceedings Huck's intentions are finally, though grudgingly, good, but Jim as citizen and dutiful breadwinner is not the Jim who primarily interests him. It is Jim as *magus*, uncomplicated and sensuous, immediate in his feelings, the dark tutor who helps unlock the "sound heart" imprisoned in Huck's breast, who is the cherished soulmate. At the very outset, once Jackson's Island is left behind, the slave and the child are journeying in different directions—Huck within to reassert his instinctual self, Jim outward into the world, toward Cairo and purposeful social activity. It was Twain's recognition of this impending crisis, I feel, that led him to abandon the novel in 1876, leaving Huck and Jim safely neutralized at the bottom of the Mississippi.

The freedom Huck strives to attain is his right to be a child, not an impertinent manikin like Tom Sawyer, but the unregenerate poetic child alive in his body and sensitive to the mystery of being in the world. Miss Watson correctly perceives the subversive nature of this desire, and she moves to suppress it with the conventional weaponry of dutiful elders: grisly textbooks, uncomfortable chairs, "smothery" clothes, and incomprehensible lessons pounded home from a dogmatic religiosity. Twain knew in what small measures and with what anxious solicitude the spirit of a child is curbed. The seductive powers of clean sheets and regular hours keep Tom Sawyer's prankish rebellion in bounds, and for a time in Huckleberry Finn almost snare Huck: "So the longer I went to school the easier it got to be. I was getting sort of used to the widow's ways, too, and they warn't so raspy on me" (p. 17).4 But the "old thing" remains, those rasping arbitrary forms into which the child squeezes his experience. Early in the novel, having been buttoned, buckled, and combed, Huck is driven to the table at the designated time. The dinner plate with its cut and segregated food appalls him. He prefers stew, the meal where "things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better" (p. 7). It is consciousness soaked in the flesh, the self as a fluent whole, that Huck seeks to sustain, and the stakes in that struggle, as Twain represents them, are indeed high. Huck's refusal to become "respectable," to bend his body and then his mind, enables him to keep operative the lucid stare that plumbs hypocrisies and pierces shams. It preserves him from the fate of young Buck Grangerford, who has lost that battle. "Do you like to comb up, Sundays," Huck is asked, "and all that kind of foolishness? You bet I don't, but ma she makes me. Confound these ole britches, I reckon I'd better put'em on, but I'd ruther not, it's so warm" (p. 81). Buck's acquiescence to that "foolishness" characterizes all the young Grangerfords. Each morning they consecrate themselves to "sir, and Madam," lifting cocktails to their father's rigid, maniacal face and pledging their filial "duty." The continuance of the feud, which ultimately consumes Buck, depends on this ritualistic obeisance, this tacit acceptance of parental madness. "I don't like that shooting from behind a bush," the Colonel reprimands Buck. "Why didn't you step into the road, my boy?" (p. 88). The enemy is sharply focused here. It is the cannibalistic parent or the surrogate Miss Watson "pecking at you all the time" (p. 24). The murderous look Pap Finn casts on Huck is at least undisguised.

Against his powerful elders the child seems to have as his only defense the instinct to be "lazy and jolly," which in Huckleberry Finn always figures as a kind of sanctifying grace. Tom Sawyer's antisocial fantasies, acted out in savage games, are "lies," what Huck scornfully calls "just pretending," and have finally all the "marks of a Sunday school" (p. 17). Huck's resistance to oppressive authority always begins at his skin. He chooses "rags and dirt," his tobacco, the good feel of artful "cussing," knowing that they mean an overt repudiation of Miss Watson's meticulous world. There is no posturing or bookish declamation in Huck's rebellion, no desire for the power of revenge. The substance of his challenge is his unwashed face and tattered shirt, that placid concern he manifests for the comfort of his body. Feeling "free and easy" is what he wants, and it is only on the river, cut off from the world of combs and clocks, hard chairs and tight clothes, that he can perfect this liberation. Only there does life become good to possess. When he returns to the raft after the Grangerford catastrophe, Buck's murdered face burning in his memory, his reclamation begins with a feast: "I hadn't had a bite to eat since yesterday; so Jim he got out some corn dodgers and buttermilk, and pork and cabbage, and greens—there ain't nothing in the world so good, when it's cooked right—and whilst I eat my supper we talked and had a good time" (p. 95). The fellowship that follows the feast is also "cooked" in natural juices: the raft is abandoned to the current, Huck and Jim are "always naked, day and night" (p. 97). Huck's description of this idyllic interlude is purely sensuous, redolent with smells and sounds, with the rapture of "listening to the stillness" (p. 96). The mythic imagination flourishes once more: "We used to watch the stars that fell, too, and

6 Mark Twain

see them streak down. Jim allowed they'd got spoiled and was hove out of the nest" (p. 97).

What lies coiled in the child is the aboriginal self, an effortless beauty that mocks the repressed, fiercely civilized adult. "This is the grace for which every society longs, irrespective of its beliefs, its political regime, its level of civilization," Claude Lévi-Strauss writes at the end of Tristes Tropiques. "It stands, in every case, for leisure, and recreation, and freedom, and peace of body and mind. On this opportunity, this chance of for once detaching oneself from the implacable process, life itself depends." Surely this is the vision Twain glimpsed in Huck's experience, Twain who responded to that "implacable process" with furious anguish all his life. Children were the only savages he knew. Twain rendered Huck "exactly" from his recollection of Tom Blankenship, the only "really independent person" in Hannibal. Ignorant and unwashed, free of parental supervision, Blankenship was "continuously happy" in this wild, unruly state of existence. Both in his fiction and on tour as a performer, Twain constantly impersonated the figure of Blankenship-Huck, the bad boy who fascinates the besieged children around him. There he was in all his colorful extravagance, speaking to staid frock-coated, tightly corseted audiences about the virtue of his vices, those cherished "bad habits" of drinking whisky, smoking cigars, and sleeping late. Then, as now, Twain's audience responded warmly to this pose, remembering their own childish insight into the fraudulence of the great world—in sum, the whole dimly understood drama of their preadolescence. It was the bad boy metamorphosed into the cantankerous uncle drawling blasphemies who reminded them of what they had lost and who brought to life again the villains of childhood, the nay-saying parent and authoritarian teacher. But in Huckleberry Finn this was only part of the drama.

What the Brazilian Indian is for Lévi-Strauss, the preceptor of "what our species has been and still is, beyond thought and beneath society," Jim in his blackness is for Twain, the dark guide who welcomes Huck back to the raft, whose presence relieves him of an aimless loneliness. On Jackson's Island Jim assumes almost immediately the role of interpreter. He understands the natural world, ciphers a certain flight of "little birds," takes Huck literally out of the rain, gives him a short course in reading signs, and in general sharpens Huck's sense of being in the woods, which, given the baneful moons and ominous snakeskins, is not all holiday loveliness. Daniel G.