

A Postcolonial Pragmatist Response to Cavell's Perfectionism

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Through his sensitive and meticulous examination of the portrayal of slavery and racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, Jeff Frank questions whether Stanley Cavell's perfectionism is sufficiently responsive to these issues to render it an appropriate educational philosophy. While I begin here by taking a sympathetic view toward what I take to be Cavell's purposes for the use of this particular work, I then turn to a more critical stance as I extend on the point Frank raises in his conclusion — that of canonicity. Like Frank, I find the absence of any works by authors of color to be a highly problematic omission if we are to consider adopting Cavell's moral perfectionism as an educational philosophy in a culture that is yet contending with the legacy of slavery. Further, I argue that the very blindness to these issues that we see repeatedly in proposals for humanist canons signals the Eurocentric and privileged assumptions that continue to infuse this ideological perspective.

As Frank demonstrates, Huck's decision-making process beautifully mirrors the larger Emersonian perfectionist perspective: the idea that the individual, like the nation, must risk acts that transgress against contemporary law and social practice to heed the call of the better self. Indeed, the wider canvas against which Huck's dilemma plays out leaves us with an even deeper understanding of the uneven and deeply contradictory social and cultural fabric of U.S. history: the drive toward individual freedom and achievement, accompanied by human greed, casual brutality, and religiosity coupled with deep hypocrisy. Even more critically from a perfectionist perspective, the reader might become aware that the pattern Frank has highlighted — the fact that Huck does not see in Jim a fully human companion and friend — is not as much a thing of the past as we might like to pretend. Eddie Glaude has argued that comforting ourselves with the assurance that the racist rhetoric emanating from the Tea Party is solely associated with a lunatic fringe, rather than vigorously condemning it, renders us complicit in the racism that still pervades our national culture and institutional systems.¹ The fact that in *Huck Finn* these deeply disturbing incidents are juxtaposed with high comedy and adventure can serve to engage and entertain us, drawing us into the story even as it administers a metaphoric slap in the face to call us to moral attention.²

At the same time, as Frank argues, to translate Cavell's proposed canon directly to classroom practice is to leave students with a portrayal of black masculinity and slavery that is limited to Jim. The average student in the average classroom may not be equipped to understand the complexities both Frank and I are able to see, and may instead be left with the idea that Jim is really not quite human in the way that you and I are. While this outcome is clearly far from Cavell's intended purpose in incorporating this work in his list, it is one that must be considered. Even if Cavell himself was not even thinking in terms of the systematic use of his list of perfectionist works at the classroom level, and even if the list itself is likely meant to be illustrative rather

than exhaustive, we need to consider its translation to an educational philosophy from an instrumental perspective. Further, as I now consider, there are serious problems with the creation of any canon.

Frank's suggestion that we might broaden Cavell's canon in search of greater representation is tremendously appealing — and it is a direction that I have explored myself. The promise of the great literature of the ages to connect us with the legacy of humanity across time and cultures is compelling. For example, Richard Rorty's notion that great and inspirational works of literature can “make people think there is more to this life than they ever imagined” is quite intuitive for many of us.³ The specific idea that literature can foment Solidarity and thus help to overcome cruelty and injustice through its ability to help us “see strange people as fellow sufferers” is enormously appealing.⁴ However, on closer examination, some cracks appear. Rorty himself seemed to consider race just another case of human cruelty with no particular need for specific consideration: while Rorty considers James Baldwin one of his great writers, he manages to gloss over the central concerns related to race and culture from which Baldwin writes, and instead focuses on Baldwin's constructive critique of the U.S.⁵

This is not just a problem with Cavell's and Rorty's approaches to the creation of a canon, but a symptom of the narrow cultural view that has historically pervaded humanist canons. Efforts toward the creation of new and more culturally inclusive canons still perpetuate a rather willful blindness to these problems on at least two levels. First, as Ilan Gur-Ze'ev has pointed out, attempts at the creation of multicultural and representative curricula generally can be highly problematic, as they are typically efforts by educators who are themselves a part of the elite to represent the reality of those who have traditionally been oppressed. Unfortunately, though, the very existence of these “inclusive” curricula can serve to mask ongoing colonialism and the privilege of their creators.⁶

From a Deweyan perspective, too, problems arise with any kind of aesthetic canon — literary or otherwise. There is inevitably the implication of “superior cultural status”⁷ conveyed through canonicity — a concern that anticipates Edward Said's later articulation of the “colonization of the imagination” accomplished by imperialist nations through the imposition of their humanist curricula on colonial school systems.⁸ Even more critically for those of us who find the notion of an expanded canon enormously appealing, there is the problem of relevance. Any work that has achieved the legitimation of being admitted to a canon in the first place is likely by that time to be so distant from a student's own experiences as to deny any possibility of aesthetic “undergoing” — the pleasure and reward that trigger the reflection that is the mark of a genuinely educative experience.⁹ This is not to say that John Dewey advocated for the wholesale elimination of any canonical works, but that their use must be evaluated instrumentally in terms of their effectiveness in creating the opportunity for educative experience.

Interestingly, in fact, Dewey was not even all that concerned with aesthetic quality. While he often found the contemporary popular arts to be quite crude from

a traditional aesthetic perspective, he argued that even immoral works are vital, since the function of the arts in a democratic society must be to “sap the moralistic timidity” that causes people to “shy away from some materials” and avoid admitting them to “the clear and purifying light of perceptive consciousness.”¹⁰ As Leonard Waks has pointed out, Dewey’s attention to the role of the contemporary popular arts as a medium of political communication is a vital and unusual aspect of his political philosophy.¹¹ I argue in this case that the legacy of slavery and racism as portrayed by noncanonical materials — including not only literary works but all aesthetic forms — is exactly the kind of topic Dewey had in mind.

I conclude these thoughts with an extended quote from Homi Bhabha — one that I think speaks deeply to my point, as well as to Dewey’s principles:

[I]t is from those who have suffered the sentence of history — subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement — that we learn our most enduring lessons for thriving and thinking.... [T]he affective experience of social marginality — as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms — transforms our critical strategies. It forces us to confront the concept of culture outside *objets d’art* or beyond the canonization of the “idea” of aesthetics, to engage with culture as an uneven, incomplete production of meaning and value, often composed of incommensurable demands and practices, produced in the act of social survival.¹²

1. Eddie Glaude, “Tea Party Epithets and the Habits of the American Heart,” *Huffington Post*, March 24, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eddie-glaude-jr-phd/tea-party-epithets-and-th_b_510183.html.

2. I am deeply indebted to my father, John Kelly (who is, like Cavell, a Wittgensteinian philosopher) for the foregoing analysis.

3. Richard Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works of Literature,” in *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 133.

4. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xvi.

5. Eddie S. Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

6. Ilan Gur-Ze’ev, “Aporia of Emancipatory Education: The Case of Multicultural Education,” in *Papers of the Conference* (Oxford: Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, 1996), http://construct.haifa.ac.il/*ilangz/aporia.htm [draft version].

7. John Dewey, “Art as Experience” (1934), in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 10, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008).

8. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

9. Dewey, “Art as Experience,” 14.

10. *Ibid.*, 193.

11. Leonard Waks, “Inquiry, Agency and Art: John Dewey’s Contribution to Pragmatic Cosmopolitanism,” *Education and Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009): 115–25.

12. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 173.