

Sterling Brown

Sterling Brown (1901–1989) was a poet and critic who published his first book of poetry, *Southern Road*, in 1932. The poems focused on poor blacks in the rural South. He made free use of dialect and treated his subjects' lives with dignity and respect. Five years later Brown published *The Negro in American Fiction*, the first book to examine from a black perspective black stereotypes and their broader significance. It also presents the first acknowledgment by a black writer of the care with which Mark Twain portrayed Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, and of the respect that Twain had for his character. (Booker T. Washington had attempted to say something similar in a tribute to Twain in the *North American Review* in 1910, but his misremembering of the novel's plot made his comments well-meaning but garbled.) Brown's characterization of Jim as "the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own," a figure who is "completely believable, whether arguing that Frenchman should talk like people, or doing most of the work on the raft, or forgiving Huck whose trick caused him to be bitten by a snake" prefigures analogous readings of the novel by a younger generation of black writers that includes Ralph Wiley and David Bradley. *The Negro in American Fiction* also paved the way for later examinations of black stereotypes in American fiction and their cultural import by black writers such as Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison. In 1984 the District of Columbia named Sterling Brown its first poet laureate.

FROM

The Negro in American Fiction

Mark Twain insisted that he was almost completely without race prejudice and that the color brown was "the most beautiful and satisfying of all the complexions vouchsafed to man." He loved the spirituals best among music. In his youth he grew up with slave boys as playmates; in his manhood he paid a Negro student's way through Yale, as "part of the reparation due from every white to every black man."

Twain's first treatment of Negroes in *The Gilded Age* (1873), however, is largely traditional, unlike "A True Story (Repeated Word For Word As I Heard It)" which is a bitter memory of cruelty and separation, contradicting Thomas Nelson Page's formula stories.

In *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) the callousness of the South to the Negro is indicated briefly, without preaching, but compellingly. Huck informs Aunt Sally that a steamboat blew out a cylinder head:

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky because sometimes people do get hurt . . ."

In this book Twain deepens the characterization of Jim, who, like Tom and Huck and the rest of that fine company, was drawn from life. He is no longer the simple-minded, mysterious guide in the ways of dead cats, doodle-bugs and signs of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Running away from old Miss Watson, who, though religious, "pecks on" him all the time, treats him "pooty rough" and wants a trader's eight hundred dollars for him, Jim joins Huck on the immortal journey down the Mississippi. His talks enlivens the voyage. He is at his comic best in detailing his experience with high finance—he once owned fourteen dollars. But the fun is brought up sharp by Jim's

Yes, en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars. I wisht I had de money, I wouldn't want no mo'.

But he did want more. He wanted to get to a free state and work and save money so he could buy his wife, and then they would both work to buy their children, or get an abolitionist to go steal them. Huck is "frozen at such thoughts;" torn between what he had been taught was moral and his friendliness for an underdog. Jim is the best example in nineteenth century fiction of the average Negro slave (not the tragic mulatto or the noble

savage), illiterate, superstitious, yet clinging to his hope for freedom, to his love for his own. And he is completely believable, whether arguing that Frenchman should talk like people, or doing most of the work on the raft, or forgiving Huck whose trick caused him to be bitten by a snake, or sympathizing with the poor little Dauphin, who, since America has no kings, "cain't git no situation." He tells of his little daughter, whom he had struck, not knowing she disobeyed because she had become deaf from scarlet fever:

. . . En all uv a sudden I says pow! jis' as loud as I could yell. She never budge! Oh, Huck, I bust out a-cryin' en grab her up in my arms, en say, "Oh, de po' little thing! De Lord God Almighty forgive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to forgive hisself as long's he live!" Oh, she was plumb deaf en dumb, Huck, plum deaf en dumb—en I'd been a-treatin' her so!

From the great tenderness and truth of this portrait *Pudd'n-head Wilson* (1894), Twain's last novel concerning Negroes, falls a great way. In violent, ugly Dawson's Landing a fantastic tale is set. Roxana, only one-sixteenth Negro, a handsome earthy Amazon, is the mother of a son, Valet de Chambre, fathered by a gentleman of the F. F. V's. This baby was born on the same day as her master's son, Thomas a Becket Driscoll, and looks exactly like him. In order to save the baby from slavery, Roxy exchanges the two. The boys grow up with their positions reversed; the false Valet is ruined by slavery, and Tom, ruined by pampering, becomes a liar, coward, gambler, thief and murderer. In desperate straits, he tricks his mother and sells her down the river. Although Tom's character could be attributed to a rigid caste system that granted excessive power to petty people, Twain leaves many readers believing that he agrees with Roxy who, astounded by her son's worthlessness, muttered: "Ain't nigger enough in him to show in his finger-nails, en dat takes mighty little, yit dey's enough to paint his soul." Twain has little good to say for slavery in this book. Roxy's terror of being sold "down the river," and her experiences there under a

vicious Yankee overseer are grimly realistic. Roxy is a first-rate preliminary sketch. By no means faultless, a petty thief and a liar, she is capable of sacrifice, and has intelligence, pride, and courage. If Twain had spent more time in developing her portrait, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* would have been a better novel.

1937