

The Inconvenient Secrets of Black Paternity: *Huckleberry Finn* and *Light in August*

劉彥良 Yen-Lian Liu

Abstract

“I think I got some nigger blood in me” (196)¹ is the one disquieting secret that, in William Faulkner’s *Light in August*, is passed down from the paternal line and has haunted Joe Christmas for his life. Like Christmas’s ceaseless self-reminding of a disorientating parentage, Huck, in Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is also driven away from home by his abusive biological father and further into a journey with an adult runaway slave, whose companionship functions as a black surrogate fatherhood in Huck’s life on the Mississippi River. What does it mean when a man’s father is revealed to be a foreign one? How does it influence a boy when his *white* paternity is “adulterated” with a *black* one, especially when the rigid racial demarcation is integral to the order of things playing in the dark?

Taking cues from Judith Butler’s notions of race and performance and Toni Morrison’s statement that “much of the novel’s genius lies in its quiescence” (154),² this paper attempts to show how the infiltration of blackness into Huck’s and Christmas’s imaginations of paternity functions as an inconvenient secret in their negotiations with the racial demarcation in the South. Such secrecy furthermore exposes the ideological and arbitrary power functioning in the gender and racial discourses of performing as a man. Whereas Twain is ambivalently complicit in the maintenance of racial line and white superiority in his depictions of Huck’s seemingly promising encounter with a caring “black father,” Faulkner reveals the fictional construction of racial and sexual boundaries as well as the potential transcendence of those boundaries through Christmas’s life-long encounter with the alleged “nigger blood” in him.

Keywords: paternity, blackness, performance, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Light in August*

¹ Faulkner, William. *Light in August*. 1932. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.

² Morrison, Toni. “Introduction.” 1996. *Huck Finn in Context Coursepack*. N.p.: International Creative Management, n.d. 153-60. Print.