

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: A Study on Racism and Slavery

Abstract

Mark Twain is a comic writer who often treats his subject satirically. It is almost automatically assumed in Twain's criticism that he is the satire of invective, of almost heavy-handed irony. This study aims to attempt the racism and slavery of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Hence, Racism in contemporary world affairs is disguised, and it is what some refer to as symbolic racism, modern racism or aversive racism. These eschew the old-fashioned, redneck ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority and instead espouse support for the ideals of equality in human affairs, ~~and~~ Slavery in the United States was the legal institution of human chattel enslavement, primarily of Africans and African Americans, that existed in the United States of America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Slavery had been practiced in British America from early colonial days, and was legal in all Thirteen Colonies at the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Certainly, much of ~~his~~ Mark Twain's canon is cast in that tone, particularly his diatribes against missionaries and other forms of foolish activity. But his best known work, *The Adventures of*

Comment [A1]:

18 *Huckleberry Finn*, is a major American satire which is not vindictive, not loaded with
19 invective, and not bitter. His targets, clearly defined, are made to look ridiculous but
the irony
20 is light and humor is strong. Thus, his most famous satirical novel vividly departs
from the 21 techniques most frequently associated with his satirical reputation.

22 **Keywords**-American satire, racism, ethnicity, slavery, realism

23

24 **Introduction**

25 Samuel Langhorne Clemens as called Mark Twain was born in the tiny crossroads of
26 Florida, Missouri, a few miles back from the Mississippi River, on March 10, 1835.
A depot

27 town and steamboat stop on the Mississippi River, Hannibal supplied the young
Samuel

28 Clemens with the scenery and characters that brought much of his later fiction to life.
Mark

29 Twain is a literary creation, developed over a period of eight to ten years by a small-
town

30 Missouri boy who had been a typesetter and riverboat pilot up to the time of the
outbreak of

31 the Civil War in 1861. Although it was common among critics from 1920 through
1970 to

32 more or less ignore Twain as a literary humorist; except in relation to the Southwest,
humor₂

33 specifically “American” humor₂ was the envelope that carried his message.

34 However, Race and racism are complex and disputed notions not only in the United

35 States but everywhere in the world. We do not intend, by the present research, to
place

36 emphasis on the historical stages of racism rather than to illuminate its darker side
and
37 complexity in the American society. Racism has existed throughout human history.
It may be
38 defined as the sentiment of hate of a person towards another either because of skin
color,
39 language, customs, or the feeling of supremacy and the belief that a particular race is
superior
40 to another. Although it is illegal in United States, racial inequality, however, remains
a
41 troubling issue in the American psyche and political landscape. Nothing prevents it
from 42 occurring because it is rooted in the makeup of the human nature.

43 Hence, Racism can occur systemically, as the result of policies, conditions and
44 practices that affect a broad group of people. For example, research shows that
systemic
45 racism can result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experiencing
poorer
46 outcomes in education, or job applicants without Anglo-Saxon names finding it
difficult to
47 gain job interviews. In its most serious form, racism is demonstrated in behaviors
and
48 activities that embody race hate, vilification, abuse and violence – particularly
experienced by
49 groups who are visibly different because of their cultural or religious dress, their
skin ~~colour~~color
50 or their physical appearance. Ultimately, racism is a tool to gain and maintain
power. It is
51 also inextricably linked with socio-economic factors, and frequently reflects
underlying 52 inequalities in a society.

53 Slavery was practiced throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th

54 centuries, and African slaves helped build the new nation into an economic
powerhouse

55 through the production of lucrative crops such as tobacco and cotton. By the mid-
19th

56 century, America's westward expansion and the abolition movement provoked a
great

57 debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody Civil War. Though
the

58 Union victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued
to

59 influence American history, from the Reconstruction era to the civil rights
movement that 60 emerged a century after emancipation.

61 Research Methodology

Comment [A2]: Inappropriate

62 In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain's main targets are the
institutions

63 of slavery, Christianity, government and politics, and family life. Running through
the 64 criticism of these forces is an attack on superstitions, especially those
associated with death.

65 In dealing with slavery, Twain does not castigate slave owners; he does not sing the
praises

66 of the downtrodden Blacks. His method is simply to show us slave owners and
slaves doing

67 things, thus emphasizing attitudes of white people. The scenes depicted are funny
and highly

68 ironic. Invariably, Jim turns out to conduct himself in ways we associate with
goodness. The

69 casual tone, a non-vitriolic point of view, and a light but dominant irony provide a
negative

70 criticism of slavery. The author's point of view does not intrude.

71 ~~It~~ *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* opens by familiarizing us with the events of
 72 the novel that preceded set in the town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, which lies on the
 banks of
 73 the Mississippi River. At the end of Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, a poor boy with
 a
 74 drunken bum for a father, and his friend Tom Sawyer, a middle-class boy with an
 75 imagination too active for his own good, found a robber's stash of gold. As a result
 of his
 76 adventure, Huck gained quite a bit of money, which the bank held for him in trust.
 Huck was
 77 adopted by the Widow Douglas, a kind but stifling woman who lives with her sister,
 the self
 78 righteous Miss Watson.

79 **Racism and Slavery in America**

80 Although Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation
 81 Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, America—and especially the South—
 was still
 82 struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. By the early 1880s,
 Reconstruction, the
 83 plan to put the United States back together after the war and integrate freed slaves
 into
 84 society, had hit shaky ground, although it had not yet failed outright. As Twain
 worked on his
 85 novel, race relations, which seemed to be on a positive path in the years following
 the Civil

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86 War, once again became strained.

87 The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of blacks in the South
88 in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to
oppress. The

89 new racism of the South, less institutionalized and monolithic, was also more
difficult to

90 combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when white Southerners enacted racist laws
or

91 91 policies under a professed motive of self-defense against newly freed blacks, far
fewer

92 people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it:

93 I set down again, a-shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for

94 the house was all as still as death now, and so the widow wouldn't know.

95 Well, after a long time I heard the clock away off in the town go boom—

96 boom—boom—twelve licks; and all still again—stiller than ever. Pretty

97 soon I heard a twig snap down in the dark amongst the trees—something

98 was a stirring. I set still and listened. Directly I could just barely hear a

99 “me-yow! me-yow!” down there. That was good! Says I, “me-yow! me-

100 yow!” as soft as I could, and then I put out the light and scrambled out of

101 the window on to the shed. Then I slipped down to the ground and crawled

102 in among the trees, and, sure enough, there was Tom Sawyer waiting for

103 me (4).

104

105 Although Twain wrote the novel after slavery was abolished, he set it several
decades

106 earlier, when slavery was still a fact of life. But even by Twain's time, things had
not

107 necessarily gotten much better for blacks in the South. In this light, we might read
Twain's

108 depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of the condition of blacks in the
United

109 States even *after* the abolition of slavery.

110 "That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know
111 nothing about it." (14)

112 Just as slavery places the noble and moral Jim under the control of white society, no
113 matter how degraded that white society may be, so too did the insidious racism that
arose 114 near the end of Reconstruction oppress black men for illogical and
hypocritical reasons.

115 "Jim said that bees won't sting idiots, but I didn't believe that, because I tried them lots
of

116 times myself and they wouldn't sting me." (25)

117

118 **Results and Discussion**

119 In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain, by exposing the hypocrisy of slavery, demonstrates
how

120 racism distorts the oppressors as much as it does those who are oppressed. The result
is a

121 world of moral confusion, in which seemingly "good" white people such as Miss
Watson and

122 Sally Phelps express no concern about the injustice of slavery or the cruelty of
separating Jim

123 from his family.

124 HUCK FINN states that:

125 I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I

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126 knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set
127 there thinking--thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to
128 being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip
 down
129 the river; and I see Jim before me all the time; in the day and in the night-time,
130 sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing
131 and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against
 him,
132 but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling
133 me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the
134 fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and
 such-
135 like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could
 think
136 of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by
 telling
137 the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend
138 old Jim ever had in the world, and the ONLY one he's got now; and then I happened to
139 look around and see that paper.
140 It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd
 got
141 to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knower it. I studied a minute, sort of holding
142 my breath, and then says to myself:
143 "All right, then, I'll GO to hell"--and tore it up."(56)
144 Twain has presented in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* several families and
 their
145 life styles. He has drawn each from a different strategy of society and has used them
 in the
146 telling of Huck's adventures to help emphasize the different values that each level of
 society 147 has. Jim's family life in the post-war South was the lowest of the lowly.
 A slave was not

148 considered to be a human being with feelings and, as a non-human, was sold apart from his
149 family. Jim did have a wife (or woman) and children. His main desire in life was to
become a

150 free man and brings his family together. His desire to get his children was so intense that he
151 knew he would achieve it even if he had to "get an Abolitionist to go and steal them"[72].

152 Huck's family life, if one can call it one, would be next on the social scale. He came
153 from a background of what many refer to as poor white trash. The characterization
of Pap

154 Finn in the novel is a prime example of people from this walk of life. No reference
is made to

155 Huck's mother; thus we must assume she is dead. Pap was as disreputable a father as
one

156 would ever see. He would leave Huck to fend for himself and be gone as long as a
year at a

157 time.

158 Pap was a "drunkard, a scoundrel and the disgrace of the town" [73]. He was spoken
159 of by the boys in the town as "a man who used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tan
yard"

160 [74]. Huck knew his father had returned to town before he actually saw him. He had
noticed

161 footprints in the snow around the widow's garden fence. He recognized them as
Pap's by the

162 "cross in the left boot-heel made with big nails, to keep off the devil" [75]. This is
symbolic

163 of the superstitions held by the more ignorant, lower class people. Huck and Pap
confront one

164 another in Huck's room at the widow's. He seemed to take a strange pride in his
ignorance, 165 filthiness and poverty, and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps.

Pap constantly badgered 166 Huck for money, having heard of the boy's fortune.

Conclusion

Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a major American satire which is not vindictive, not loaded with invective, and not bitter. ~~His~~The author's targets, clearly defined, are

made to look ridiculous but the irony is light and the humor is strong. Especially the Protagonist

Finn had faced many problems in this society; however, ~~how~~ Finn ~~has~~was able to ~~been~~ overcome all the

problems in that American society, by using his perception. However, this paper has been focused on how the American society ~~has to treat~~s the people ~~those who are~~ ~~came~~come from other countries.

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