

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

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

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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, humor
33 specifically “American” humor 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 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
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**

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.

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
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 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—

boom—boom—twelve licks; and all still again—stillier than ever. Pretty soon I heard a twig snap down in the dark amongst the trees—something was a stirring. I set still and listened. Directly I could just barely hear a “me-yow! me-yow!” down there. That was good! Says I, “me-yow! me-yow!” as soft as I could, and then I put out the light and scrambled out of the window on to the shed. Then I slipped down to the ground and crawled in among the trees, and, sure enough, there was Tom Sawyer waiting for me (4).

Although Twain wrote the novel after slavery was abolished, he set it several decades earlier, when slavery was still a fact of life. But even by Twain’s time, things had not necessarily gotten much better for blacks in the South. In this light, we might read Twain’s depiction of slavery as an allegorical representation of the condition of blacks in the United States even *after* the abolition of slavery.

“That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know nothing about it.” (14)

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

“Jim said that bees won’t sting idiots, but I didn’t believe that, because I tried them lots of times myself and they wouldn’t sting me.” (25)

Results and Discussion

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain, by exposing the hypocrisy of slavery, demonstrates how racism distorts the oppressors as much as it does those who are oppressed. The result is a 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
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.

167 Conclusion

168 Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a major American satire which
 169 is not vindictive, not loaded with invective, and not bitter. His targets, clearly defined, are
 170 made to look ridiculous but the irony is light and humor is strong. Especially the Protagonist
 171 Finn had faced many problems in this society however how Finn has been overcome all the
 172 problems in that American society by using his perception. However this paper has been

173 focused how the American society has to treat the people those who are came from other
 174 countries.

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