

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

Abstract

This paper aims to focus the racism and slavery in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, even though Mark Twain is a comic writer who often treats his subject satirically but *Huckleberry Finn* also discussing slavery and racial decimation from one character to others and some palaces. Racism in contemporary world affairs is disguised, and it is what some refer to as symbolic racism, modern racism or aversive racism. 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

Introduction

Mark Twain is also called as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, was born in the tiny crossroads of Florida, Missouri, a few miles back from the Mississippi River, on March 10, 1835. A depot town and steamboat stop on the Mississippi River, Hannibal supplied the young Samuel Clemens with the scenery and characters that brought much of his later fiction to life. Mark Twain is a literary creation, developed over a period of eight to ten years by a

23 small-town Missouri boy who had been a typesetter and riverboat pilot up to the time of the
24 outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Although it was common among critics from 1920
25 through 1970 to more or less ignore Twain as a literary humorist, except in relation to the
26 Southwest, humor specifically “American” humor was the envelope that carried his message.

27 However, Race and racism are complex and disputed notions not only in the United
28 States but everywhere in the world. We do not intend, by the present research, to place
29 emphasis on the historical stages of racism rather than to illuminate its darker side and
30 complexity in the American society. Racism existed throughout human history. It may be
31 defined as the sentiment of hate of a person towards another either because of skin colour,
32 language, customs, or the feeling of supremacy and the belief that a particular race is superior
33 to another. Although it is illegal in the United States, racial inequality, however, remains a
34 troubling issue in the American psyche and political landscape. Nothing prevents it from
35 occurring because it is rooted in the makeup of the human nature.

36 Hence, Racism can occur systemically, as the result of policies, conditions and
37 practices that affect a broad group of people. For example, research shows that systemic
38 racism can result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experiencing poorer
39 outcomes in education, or job applicants without Anglo-Saxon names finding it difficult to
40 gain job interviews. In its most serious form, racism is demonstrated in behaviours and
41 activities that embody race hate, vilification, abuse and violence – particularly experienced by
42 groups who are visibly different because of their cultural or religious dress, their skin colour
43 or their physical appearance. This disdain the old-fashioned, redneck ideology of white
44 supremacy and black inferiority and instead espouse support for the ideals of equality in
45 human affairs and Slavery in the United States was the legal institution of human chattel
46 enslavement, primarily of Africans and African Americans, that existed in the United States
47 of America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Slavery had been practised in British America

48 from early colonial days and was legal in all Thirteen Colonies at the time of the Declaration
49 of Independence in 1776. But, certainly, much of his canon is cast in that tone, particularly
50 his diatribes against missionaries and other forms of foolish activity. Ultimately, racism is a
51 tool to gain and maintain power. It is also inextricably linked with socio-economic factors,
52 and frequently reflects underlying inequalities in a society.

53 Slavery was practised 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 debate
57 over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody Civil War. Though the Union
58 victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence
59 American history, from the Reconstruction era to the civil rights movement that emerged a
60 century after emancipation.

61 **Research Methodology**

62 The Notice and Explanatory set the tone for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
63 through their mixing of humor and seriousness. In its declaration that anyone looking for
64 motive, plot, or moral will be prosecuted, banished, or shot, the Notice establishes a sense of
65 blustery comedy that pervades the rest of the novel. The Explanatory takes on a slightly
66 different tone, still full of a general good-naturalness but also brimming with authority. In the
67 final paragraph, Twain essentially dares the reader to believe that he might know or
68 understand more about the dialects of the South, and, by extension, the South itself. Twain's
69 good nature stems in part from his sense of assurance that, should anyone dare to challenge
70 him, Twain would certainly prove victorious.

71 Beyond tone, the Notice and Explanatory set the stage for the themes that the novel
72 explores later. Twain's coy statement about the lack of seriousness in *Huckleberry Finn*
73 actually alerts us that such seriousness does, in fact, exist in the text. At the same time,
74 Twain's refusal to make any straightforward claims for the seriousness of his work adds a
75 note of irony and charm. The Explanatory note from the Author concerns the use of dialect,
76 which Twain says has been reconstructed "painstakingly." Again, if *Huckleberry Finn* is not
77 meant to be a "serious" novel, the claim seems strange. But it is a serious novel, and Twain's
78 note on dialogue speaks for the authority and experience of the author and establishes the
79 novel's and romantic, realistic stance. In short, the Notice and Explanatory, which at first
80 glance appear to be disposable jokes, link the novel's sense of fun and lightheartedness with
81 its deeper moral concerns. This coupling continues throughout *Huckleberry Finn* and remains
82 one of its greatest triumphs

83 In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain's main targets are the institutions
84 of slavery, Christianity, government and politics, and family life. Running through the
85 criticism of these forces is an attack on superstitions, especially those associated with death.
86 In dealing with slavery, Twain does not castigate slave owners; he does not sing the praises
87 of the downtrodden Blacks. His method is simply to show us slave owners and slaves doing
88 things, thus emphasizing attitudes of white people. The scenes depicted are funny and highly
89 ironic. Invariably Jim turns out to conduct himself in ways we associate with goodness. The
90 casual tone, a non-vitriolic point of view, and a light but dominant irony provide a negative
91 criticism of slavery. The author's point of view does not intrude.

92 In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* opens by familiarizing us with the events of
93 the novel that preceded set in the town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, which lies on the banks of
94 the Mississippi River. At the end of Tom Sawyer, *Huckleberry Finn*, a poor boy with a
95 drunken bum for a father, and his friend Tom Sawyer, a middle-class boy with an

96 imagination too active for his own good, found a robber's stash of gold. As a result of his
97 adventure, Huck gained quite a bit of money, which the bank held for him in trust. Huck was
98 adopted by the Widow Douglas, a kind but stifling woman who lives with her sister, the self-
99 righteous Miss Watson.

100 **Racism and Slavery in America**

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

108 The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of blacks in the South
109 in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress. The
110 new racism of the South, less institutionalized and monolithic, was also more difficult to
111 combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when white Southerners enacted racist laws or
112 policies under a professed motive of self-defence against newly freed blacks, far fewer
113 people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it:

114 I set down again, a-shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for
115 the house was all as still as death now, and so the widow wouldn't know.
116 Well, after a long time I heard the clock away off in the town go boom—
117 boom—boom—twelve licks; and all still again—stillier than ever. Pretty
118 soon I heard a twig snap down in the dark amongst the trees—something
119 was a stirring. I set still and listened. Directly I could just barely hear a
120 “me-yow! me-yow!” down there. That was good! Says I, “me-yow! me-

121 yow!” as soft as I could, and then I put out the light and scrambled out of
122 the window on to the shed. Then I slipped down to the ground and crawled
123 in among the trees, and, sure enough, there was Tom Sawyer waiting for
124 me (4).

125

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

131 “That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don’t know
132 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.

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

138

139 **The injustice of Slavery and Separation**

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 Sally Phelps express no concern about the injustice of slavery or the cruelty of separating Jim from his family.

145 Huck states that:

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

147 knew I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set
148 there thinking--thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to
149 being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down
150 the river, and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and the night-time, sometimes
151 moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing.
152 But somehow I couldn't seem to strike any places to harden me against him, but only the
153 other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could
154 go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I
155 come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and
156 would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and
157 how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we
158 had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever
159 had in the world, and the ONLY one he's got now; and then I happened to look around
160 and see that paper.

161 It was a close place. I took it up and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling because I'd got
162 to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knower it. I studied a minute, holding my
163 breath, and then says to myself:

164 "All right, then, I'll GO to hell"--and tore it up."(56)

165 Notwithstanding, Twain has presented in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* several
166 families and their lifestyles. He has drawn each from a different strategy of society and has
167 used them in the telling of Huck's adventures to help emphasise the different values that each
168 level of society has. Jim's family life in the post-war South was the lowest of the lowly. A
169 slave was not considered to be a human being with feelings and, as a non-human, was sold
170 apart from his family. Jim did have a wife (or woman) and children. His main desire in life
171 was to become a free man and brings his family together. His desire to get his children was so
172 intense that he knew he would achieve it even if he had to "get an Abolitionist to go and steal
173 them"[72].

Huck's family life, if one can call it one, would be next on the social scale. He came from a background of what many refer to as poor white trash. The characterisation of Pap Finn in the novel is a prime example of people from this walk of life. No reference is made to Huck's mother; thus we must assume she is dead. Pap was as disreputable a father as one would ever see. He would leave Huck to fend for himself and be gone as long as a year at a time.

Pap was a "drunkard, a scoundrel and the disgrace of the town" [73]. He was spoken of by the boys in the town as "a man who used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard" [74]. Huck knew his father had returned to town before he saw him. He had noticed footprints in the snow around the widow's garden fence. He recognised them as Pap's by the "cross in the left boot-heel made with big nails, to keep off the devil" [75]. This is symbolic of the superstitions held by the more ignorant, lower class people. Huck and Pap confront one another in Huck's room at the widow's. He seemed to take a strange pride in his ignorance, filthiness and poverty and wanted his son to follow in his footsteps. Pap constantly badgered Huck for money, having heard of the boy's fortune.

Conclusion

Even 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 targets, clearly defined, are made to look ridiculous but the irony is light and humor is strong. Especially the Protagonist Finn had faced many problems in this society however how Finn has 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 the people those who are came from other countries.

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