

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

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## 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 humour 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

## 1. 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 small-town Missouri boy who had been a typesetter and riverboat pilot up to the time of the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861. Although it was common among critics from 1920 through 1970 to more or less ignore Twain as a literary humorist, except in relation to the Southwest, humour specifically

"American" humour was the envelope that carried his message. (1)

However, Race and racism are complex and disputed notions not only in the United States but everywhere in the world. We do not intend, by the present research, to place emphasis on the historical stages of racism rather than to illuminate its darker side and complexity in the American society. Racism existed throughout human history.(8) It may be defined as the sentiment of hate of a person towards another either because of skin colour, language, customs, or the feeling of supremacy and the belief that a particular race is superior to another. Although it is illegal in the United States, racial inequality, however, remains a troubling issue in the American psyche and political landscape.

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Nothing prevents it from occurring because it is rooted in the makeup of the human nature. (9)

Hence, Racism can occur systemically, as the result of policies, conditions and practices that affect a broad group of people. For example, research shows that systemic racism can result in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students experiencing poorer outcomes in education, or job applicants without Anglo-Saxon names finding it difficult to gain job interviews. In its most serious form, racism is demonstrated in behaviours and activities that embody race hate, vilification, abuse and violence – particularly experienced by groups who are visibly different because of their cultural or religious dress, their skin colour or their physical appearance.(2) This disdain 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.(4) Slavery had been practised in British America from early colonial days and was legal in all Thirteen Colonies at the time of the Declaration of Independence in 1776.(5) But, certainly, much of his canon is cast in that tone, particularly his diatribes against missionaries and other forms of foolish activity. Ultimately, racism is a tool to gain and maintain power. It is also inextricably linked with socio-economic factors, and frequently reflects underlying inequalities in a society.(3)

Slavery was practised throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and African slaves helped build the new nation into an economic powerhouse through the production of lucrative crops such as tobacco and cotton. By the mid-19th century, America's westward expansion and the abolition movement provoked a great debate over slavery that would tear the nation apart in the bloody Civil War. Though the Union victory freed the nation's four million slaves, the legacy of slavery continued to influence American history, from the Reconstruction era to the civil rights movement that emerged a century after emancipation.(15)

## 2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Notice and Explanatory set the tone for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through their mixing of humour and seriousness. In its declaration that anyone looking for motive, plot, or moral will be prosecuted, banished, or shot,

the Notice establishes a sense of blustery comedy that pervades the rest of the novel. The Explanatory takes on a slightly different tone, still full of a general good-naturalness but also brimming with authority.(6) In the final paragraph, Twain essentially dares the reader to believe that he might know or understand more about the dialects of the South, and, by extension, the South itself. Twain's good nature stems in part from his sense of assurance that, should anyone dare to challenge him, Twain would certainly prove victorious. (12)

Beyond tone, the Notice and Explanatory set the stage for the themes that the novel explores later. Twain's coy statement about the lack of seriousness in *Huckleberry Finn* actually alerts us that such seriousness does, in fact, exist in the text. At the same time,(11) Twain's refusal to make any straightforward claims for the seriousness of his work adds a note of irony and charm. The Explanatory note from the Author concerns the use of dialect, which Twain says has been reconstructed "painstakingly." Again, if *Huckleberry Finn* is not meant to be a "serious" novel, the claim seems strange. But it is a serious novel, and Twain's note on dialogue speaks for the authority and experience of the author and establishes the novel's and romantic, realistic stance. In short, the Notice and Explanatory, which at first glance appear to be disposable jokes, link the novel's sense of fun and lightheartedness with its deeper moral concerns. This coupling continues throughout *Huckleberry Finn* and remains one of its greatest triumphs.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain's main targets are the institutions of slavery, Christianity, government and politics, and family life. Running through the criticism of these forces is an attack on superstitions, especially those associated with death. In dealing with slavery, Twain does not castigate slave owners; he does not sing the praises of the downtrodden Blacks.(9) His method is simply to show us slave owners and slaves doing things, thus emphasising attitudes of white people. The scenes depicted are funny and highly ironic. Invariably Jim turns out to conduct himself in ways we associate with goodness. The casual tone, a non-vitriolic point of view, and light but dominant irony provide a negative criticism of slavery. The author's point of view does not intrude. (9)

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* opens by familiarising us with the events of the novel that

preceded set in the town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, which lies on the banks of the Mississippi River. At the end of Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, a poor boy with a drunken bum for a father, and his friend Tom Sawyer, a middle-class boy with an imagination too active for his good, found a robber's stash of gold. As a result of his adventure,(17) Huck gained quite a bit of money, which the bank held for him in trust. Huck was adopted by the Widow Douglas, a kind but stifling woman who lives with her sister, the self-righteous Miss Watson.

### 3. RACISM AND SLAVERY IN AMERICA

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

The imposition of Jim Crow laws, designed to limit the power of blacks in the South in a variety of indirect ways, brought the beginning of a new, insidious effort to oppress.(21) The new racism of the South, less institutionalised and monolithic, was also more difficult to combat. Slavery could be outlawed, but when white Southerners enacted racist laws or policies under a professed motive of self-defence against newly freed blacks, far fewer people, Northern or Southern, saw the act as immoral and rushed to combat it:

*I set down again, a-shaking all over, and got out my pipe for a smoke; for the house was all as still as death now, and so the widow wouldn't know. Well, after a long time I heard the clock away off in the town go boom—boom—boom—twelve licks; and all still again—stiller than ever.(12-13). 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 (1).*

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. (10)

"That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it." (16)

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." (8)

### 4. 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.

Huck states that:

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knew I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking--thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river, and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing.(13-15). But somehow I couldn't seem to strike any places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd

see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the ONLY one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.(17-19)

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

"All right, then, I'll GO to hell"--and tore it up."(16)

Notwithstanding, Twain has presented in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* several families and their lifestyles. He has drawn each from a different strategy of society and has used them in the telling of Huck's adventures to help emphasise the different values that each level of society has. Jim's family life in the post-war South was the lowest of the lowly. A slave was not considered to be a human being with feelings and, as a non-human, was sold apart from his family. Jim did have a wife (or woman) and children. His main desire in life was to become a free man and brings his family together. His desire to get his children was so intense that he knew he would achieve it even if he had to "get an Abolitionist to go and steal them"[20]. 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 characterization 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. (13)

Pap was a "drunkard, a scoundrel and the disgrace of the town" [11]. He was spoken of by the boys in the town as "a man who used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard" [15]. 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 recognized them as Pap's by the "cross in the left boot-heel made with big nails, to keep off the devil" [13]. 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.(21)

## 5. 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 humour 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.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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