



The Destructive Impact of Racism on African Americans in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the corrosive impact of racism on African Americans as depicted in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This paper seeks to uncover how the novel depicts the distorted belief in racial superiority, particularly in the evolving relationship between Huck and Jim. Furthermore, it explores what this depiction reveals about the historical experience of African Americans in America. Through analysis of key characters and passages, this paper aims to expose the negative portrayal of the corrosive impact of racism on individuals and the nation's character in Mark Twain's novel.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The most honored and also one of the most criticized works in American literature is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Mark Twain wrote his novel in a nation on the verge of civil war, addressing timeless themes such as morality and ethics, freedom and constraint, the rules of polite society, and the significant consequences of disregarding them. But those themes reverberate in the novel and with readers across the ages and around the world because they are basic human concerns. Yet, *Huck Finn* is also a remorseless and unflinching examination of the racism that was and is such a huge part of American life. Huck and Jim, an African American man escaping from slavery, travel together down the Mississippi River on a raft; Huck is running away from home; Jim is heading toward freedom. They face both physical and moral

trials as they move in and out of a series of episodes.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn centers on the complicated and developing relationship between Huck and Jim. This relationship serves as a microcosm of the racial tensions in American society. Jim is part of Huck's world in a way that the Jim Crow laws could only partially disguise. First, it must be acknowledged that Jim is not merely a Black man reduced to an inferior status by the society in which he and Huck live. Jim serves as more than just Huck's companion on their southward journey, just as any dog would not suffice as a runaway's companion. Rather, Jim is Huck's companion on a journey toward liberation. Initially, Huck maintains a view of Jim that almost all individuals would have held in recent times. In Huck's mind, while he and Jim might be in similar situations, Jim is fundamentally inferior to both Huck and any white person. But

as Jim and Huck move farther away from society and deeper into a 19th-century version of a society without borders, Huck comes to an understanding of Jim that transcends not only geographic boundaries but also centuries of racism, which have denied the humanity of people of African descent.

Thus, Twain's novel does not merely narrate the tale of two characters fleeing life's difficulties. It also recounts the extraordinary adventure they share as they journey down the mighty Mississippi River. This adventure narrative is, at its core, a grave condemnation of slavery and the vile evil of racism. Twain's purpose becomes clear when we scrutinize the thoughts and actions of his protagonist, particularly the judgments and decisions that define him and the story of *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck Finn must deal with a number of serious internal conflicts, particularly the serious one that arises when he helps Jim escape from slavery.

Twain uses a variety of literary techniques—satire, irony, and humor—to condemn racism, and Huck's naive perspective is a good vessel for exposing the absurdity and cruelty of racial stereotypes. Huck's journey in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is significant not because of any innate virtue but because it leads him away from the corrupting influence of the society that shaped him. Ultimately, Huck's path toward a moral awakening serves as a critique of a nation that claims to uphold justice and equality. However, that claim often appears to be a facade, masking the support and perpetuation of practices such as slavery and Jim Crow in its daily life.

This paper focuses on the representation of racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and its consequences for African Americans, particularly Jim. It seeks to identify and understand the developing bond between Jim and Huck, as it illuminates the core of the book's depiction of racism. This paper seeks to go further by connecting the book's portrayal of racism to contemporary conversations and issues in American society.

II. HUCK'S MORAL DILEMMA AND THE QUESTION OF RACISM

Huck's internal struggle over helping Jim is a central part of the plot and a key part of the book's message. It vividly illustrates the racism of Huck's society and its devastating impact on everyone. While not a committed racist, Huck is still grappling with the racist beliefs ingrained in him by his society. He believes he is damned for helping Jim—a belief born from the internalized notion of black inferiority pervasive in his society. The recurring themes in his thoughts and actions concerning helping Jim do not glorify righteousness; instead, they suggest that Huck is being forced into a kind of moral behavior against his will.

Huck's internal conflict is evident from the beginning of his journey with Jim. Huck is a product of a society where slavery is legal and racism is deeply entrenched. For most of his life, he has viewed people like Jim as mere property. In the early chapters, for instance, he refers to Jim as "Miss Watson's Jim," which, as we interpret it, attempts to obscure Jim's humanity (Twain 3). It also reflects the pre-Civil War South's dehumanizing view of African Americans.

However, Huck's moral development parallels the deepening of his relationship with Jim. One of the novel's most significant moments occurs when Huck chooses to help Jim escape to the North, despite knowing that their actions are illegal and that they risk being caught and punished. Many readers, particularly those of the era, and some characters perceive theft as a sinful act. Yet Jim is essentially taking a boat from those whose mistreatment he would be forced to implore them to stop were he to return to them—a return he would surely make if he were in the boat owner's position. The moment's significance lies in the transgression of that basic sin and in the exposure of both characters as, in effect, thieves. By having each character commit this act in their own way, Twain undermines not only societal law but also the moral codes that bind various sinners to different societal factions (Twain 206).

Huck's evolution from accepting racist ideologies to resisting them demonstrates Twain's exposure of the deep-seated racial

injustices of the era. By having Huck undergo a profound moral transformation, Twain underscores that racism is detrimental not only to its victims but also to its perpetrators. Huck is born into a society that indoctrinates him with racist beliefs. The moment he decides to help Jim escape marks his rejection of this ingrained ideology. This is not only a personal transformation for Huck; it is also a pivotal moment in the novel's plot and a key representation of the individual versus the collective, a prominent theme throughout the book (Baym et al. 387).

Huck's moral journey also highlights the psychological and emotional toll that racism exacts on individuals. Huck is fundamentally decent, but he exhibits some of the less admirable traits of his culture. He must engage in significant introspection before he can perceive himself and his society clearly enough to treat Jim as a human being. In this respect, his development resembles that of Morrison's Sethe from *Beloved*, who must remember and confront the painful history of slavery before the characters in her world can be liberated. Both characters emerge from their moral struggles relieved but also deeply disturbed (LeMaster and Wilson 142).

III. THE ROLE OF SOCIETY AND THE HYPOCRISY OF CIVILIZED CULTURE

Not only does Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* examine the effects of racism on individuals, but it also critiques the societal systems that perpetuate racist attitudes. The novel's main character, Huck, serves as a poignant factor for the author in exploring the "civilized" society that claims to uphold moral and ethical principles. However, many individuals within this society are deeply complicit in the institution of slavery and in forcing African Americans into oppressive situations. As for Huck, he often finds society's moral codes in direct conflict with his own.

Huck's interactions with the "civilized" world reveal one of the most striking instances of this hypocrisy. Huck has been raised to respect the principles of "civilization," such as religion, manners, and decorum. Yet he consistently finds these principles not only wanting but also

shallow and hypocritical. He is compelled to evaluate these principles based on his personal moral standards. In a key moment in the narrative, he reflects that, while helping Jim would be against the law, it certainly feels beneficial and right. Conversely, he recognizes that adhering to the law would feel like a betrayal of his personal conscience (Twain 199).

The critique of racism that the novel delivers is two-pronged. First, it illustrates how and at what levels racism takes hold and insidiously infiltrates laws and social structures. For example, it undermines the very human right to pursue happiness that the founders of America professed to value—particularly in Jim's case, a lie embodied in the very "document" that imposes "severe penalties" to maintain the "defending odds" necessary for upholding a "happy life." As a second aspect of the critique, the work highlights the absurdity of the entire system by having characters uphold obviously nonsensical and contradictory beliefs without a single character in the novel capable of justifying what is manifestly unjust (LeMaster and Wilson 130).

Twain employs satire to illuminate the contradictions within society's moral framework. For instance, the Duke and the Dauphin, two con men who join Huck and Jim on their journey, epitomize the moral decay of society. These characters personify greed and manipulation, which Twain suggests are far more prevalent in "civilized" society than the noble qualities it pretends to uphold. By placing these characters alongside Jim, who simply desires to be free, Twain starkly illustrates the moral corruption that enables racial prejudice and inequality to thrive within his society (Baym et al. 395).

Huck's final decision to "light out for the Territory" instead of returning to the confines of white "civilization" carries a profound irony that renders it a powerful statement. This decision leads Huck to experience the "civilized" world, revealing its realities: rampant racism, loathsome hypocrisy, and disastrous moral contradictions. We witness Huck artistically rejecting this world, and through Huck's journey, Twain makes a powerful statement about the failures of American society—about

how it falls short of its professed high ideals (Gates 22).

IV. CONCLUSION

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* transcends mere adventure narratives; it embodies a profound racism. As Huck travels down the Mississippi River, he not only makes a physical break from the confines of society but also undergoes an awakening. He is no longer a boy but not yet a man. He possesses a childlike innocence that allows him to escape the societal values that would have him remain a boy forever. At the heart of the novel lies the transformation from a society embracing what we now recognize as "hearts full of hate" to one that values quiet love and respect for humanity. As Twain portrays Huck's shift from superficially adhering to racist and bigoted societal values to embodying a Southern example of how a kind-hearted individual breaks not only the law but also the palpable conscience of his society, Twain makes a powerful statement about the true American South.

Nevertheless, Huck's choice to defy society's moral codes in order to help Jim is significant. This is not a trivial decision. Rather, society has elevated this moment, portraying Huckleberry Finn's decision to aid a slave not merely as childlike disobedience but as an adult's grasp of right and wrong. So, if the novel has a central theme, it lies in discerning what is truly right and what is truly wrong. If Huck's character evolves throughout this novel, he reaches a point where he personally deems it wrong to keep a person in bondage, and if a supposedly morally upright society dictates perpetuating that injustice, then he must side with the individual, such as Jim, even if it means breaking the law. Does this not constitute a genuine critique of an immoral society?

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is more than a depiction of life in the antebellum South. Indeed, the prejudices it portrays are not confined to that historical moment; they unfortunately remain relevant today. The novel's examination of how deeply held biases shape individual identities and societal structures serves as an important reminder that

the fight against racial injustice is still very much with people. Huck's individual rejection of racism and slavery appears in the novel, but it represents a limited victory when considering the broader context, where slavery and racism remain present and accepted by many.

In addition, Twain adds complexity to the novel's critique of racism by employing satire, humor, and irony to expose the absurdity of racist ideologies and the contradictions within "civilized" society. The Duke and the Dauphin present a misrepresentation of the elite for examination. They mock the aristocrats who lack the courage to be decent. Observing their actions—both in life and on the stage of the world—raises a pressing question: how are they any different from those who openly con people? Both groups exploit people while masquerading as something they are not.

In conclusion, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* powerfully condemns the 19th-century American social order and its pervasive racist attitudes. However, it transcends its historical context; its relevance today is profound, and it will remain significant in the future. Twain's classic urges people to critically and fearlessly confront the hidden and troublingly persistent racist elements within American social and cultural fabric. Huck Finn stands as America's greatest fictional character and undoubtedly the finest character ever created by Mark Twain.

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