

## Struggle for Civil Rights, Economic and Political Equality in Mark Twain's *The Huckleberry Finn*

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### **Abstract:**

There are few books in modern literature that have generated as much controversy as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It chronicles the journey of a white lad with a "sound heart but a distorted conscience" (Mark Twain) as he overcomes his southern upbringing and assists a runaway Negro slave in escaping to freedom. The author describes the novel as a "satire on the wretched human race." Twain had already addressed racism in *Tom Sawyer*, but it becomes a significant issue in *Huck Finn*.

Hemingway famously stated in 1935 that "all American literature stems from a single Mark Twain novel named *Huckleberry Finn*..." The book's extreme comments, whether supportive or critical, virtually often address the novel's primary subject, Huck's acceptance of his obligation to Jim, a "nigger." As a result, controversy over the book's racism has persisted since it was first published in 1883. It has always been a target of manners, morality, and misguided racial consciousness censors. The work, however, depicts America's inability to reconcile with itself and its own history. It makes a strong case for America and the American spirit. Restricting it is akin to assassinating the messenger who delivers terrible news. To demonstrate that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not a racist novel, but rather the polar opposite, is the purpose of this research study. The present paper focuses on the significant themes in the novels *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* of Mark Twain.

**Keywords:** Racism, slavery, Black people, civil rights, economic and political equality etc.,

## **Introduction**

Today, the majority of North America's black population resides in the United States. Almost all of these black people are descended from Africans transported to the New World by white colonists as slaves. Spain legalized African slavery in its colonies for the first time in 1501, and the United States prohibited the importing of new slaves in 1808. Whereas the Afro-American population in Latin America intermarried widely with other races, blacks in the United States remained socially distinct. On a cultural level, however, they fused African and European components to create an Afro-American culture that has had a profound effect on non-blacks. Additionally, black people have used linguistic and social skills necessary for survival in a white-dominated culture while retaining a sense of racial identity. The history of black people in North America is one of recurrent fights for civil rights, economic and political equality.

## **The era of slaves**

Slave labour began in the Spanish possessions of Central America. Sugar plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean provided the model for settlers of Europe in North America where native Indians and white servants could not meet agricultural labour demands. However, Africans served as troops during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Through their colonies, European nations derived much of their revenue from agricultural trade. To fill labour shortages, English immigrants gradually enslaved Africans. England did not start trading slaves until 1663, when the Royal African Company was founded. The first Africans to arrive in the English colonies after 1619 had the same status as white servants. As white workers' status improved, new rules were enacted to prevent Africans from gaining political and economic rights afforded to whites. The rules also outlawed interracial marriage and organized slave disobedience.

In the north, where plantations were not profitable, white attitudes continued to soften. Conversely, throughout the 18th century, the growth of cotton production supported an arch-conservative southern political structure founded on slave labour. The southern states sought to restore slaves on the same grounds as extradition of common criminals. The US Congress created the Fugitive Slave Laws in 1793 and 1850 to coordinate the recapture of escaped slaves

and legalize slave ownership. The new laws established the process of seizing possession of a slave who escaped from another state. Both laws sparked nationwide discontent. Northerners questioned the law's respect for civil liberties, while southerners claimed legal rebellion and growing public resistance to enforcement.

Slavery was gradually abolished in the north after free-state legislation defined citizenship. These early freedom laws also protected free blacks from slave catchers. They enraged slave owners. The 1850 statute made things worse for fleeing slaves. To address the issue, the statute appointed federal court commissioners to retrieve escaping slaves. Slave runaways escaped while in the custody of a marshal. Helping a slave escape carried a fine or a six-month prison sentence. By the 18th century, a small group of liberated blacks had begun to form social institutions and better race conditions. City dwellers had more freedom than rural dwellers, thus these efforts were concentrated there. Even black slaves had more freedom and access to information in cities than on estates. By the 18th century, Africans had established several African Methodist congregations. By 1830, black urban communities had established schools, self-help clubs, and political organizations. While literacy was still rare, the desire of black leaders to control their own future was evident in the earliest black newspapers like *Freedom's Journal*. In the 1830s, black leaders held annual national conventions to discuss racial improvement.

Throughout the nineteenth century, slave resistance was heavily influenced by ideals from the American and French revolutions, as well as Christian idealism and African cultural beliefs. While individuals and groups from all religious sects defended slavery, antislavery sentiments continued to grow. Many individuals who had strong antislavery views, on the other hand, were hesitant to discuss what many residents saw to be their rights. Blacks opposed enslavement from the time they were captured in Africa, but because they were outnumbered by whites, they were less likely to engage in significant rebellions than Brazilian or Caribbean slaves. More often than not, slave owners attempted to repress African culture, believing that it was easier to govern slaves who spoke English and relied on white-installed knowledge. These efforts were not always successful. English, Christianity, and other facets of Western civilization

were Africanized by slaves. Despite the constraints imposed by white owners, literacy and Christianity frequently became vehicles for individual and community resistance to both violent treatment and captivity. African-Americans petitioned state legislators for freedom, improved treatment, and repatriation to Africa. The black movement gained new strength in the 18th century as a result of the growing impact of democratic and equitable beliefs among whites. Numerous black leaders later disagreed with Garrison and severed ties with him. Rather than that, they emphasized the importance of aggressive opposition. Black groups demonstrated their growing militancy when they donated monies to defend Africans in the infamous Amistad case.

In the 1840s, black abolitionists devised a range of ways to end slavery. Many fought slavery by forming the Underground Railroad, a network of supporters who assisted slaves in escaping to free states. Numerous violent confrontations occurred as armed blacks attempted to rescue recaptured fugitives or safeguard escaping slaves. The Fugitive Slave Act exacerbated blacks' pessimism about the possibility of a peaceful abolition of slavery. Black Nationalism grew in popularity, and many militant black leaders decided that the only way for blacks to attain independence is to remain distinct from whites. As a result, they organized African exploration missions. Although these leaders were a minority within the black population, they embodied a strong belief that slavery was a fundamental component of the US political structure. Although the majority of northern whites did not anticipate the Civil War ending in the abolition of slavery, many blacks volunteered for the Union army with that goal in mind. Northern attitude toward black enrollment was initially hesitant, as President Lincoln desired to maintain the Union not abolishing slavery or eradicating racial discrimination in the north.

However, during their military service, black soldiers encountered racial treatment from white leaders and, when arrested, Confederate adversaries. Northern commanders even returned freed slaves to their masters during the early stages of the battle. However, by the war's end, the Union had become reliant on its almost 200,000 black soldiers. Additionally, there had been a substantial shift in the racial attitudes of northern officials, especially President Lincoln, which eventually resulted in the 13th Amendment's constitutional abolition of slavery.

### **The Book's Setting**

Following the war, the Freedman's Bureau provided ex-slaves with necessary supplies and medical care. Regardless of the Union victory, southern blacks faced significant limits on their liberties. Many hoped to be granted stolen properties and achieve economic independence, but white landowners quickly enacted "black codes" restricting black landownership and movement. Many blacks became sharecroppers, a system in which whites gave land, equipment, and seeds in exchange for their ongoing reliance on their former masters.

While they continued to live under economic conditions comparable to slavery, the Freedman's Bureau achieved its greatest success through literacy teaching. Improved education, on the other hand, was of little help to sharecroppers. Following the evacuation of northern soldiers from the south, widespread racial discrimination and deplorable economic conditions drove a large number of blacks out. During the 1890s, almost 1000 blacks were lynched to death. By the turn of the twentieth century, southern white politicians had begun the process of eradicating black voting rights through the use of poll taxes and literacy tests.

By 1875, tens of thousands of former slaves were travelling the country in search of work, food, shelter, and family members who had been sold. For many blacks, economic conditions were as severe as or worse than those experienced during slavery. Twain began writing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in this conflict-ridden environment, recreating an earlier, simpler time. During this period, while young Mark Twain was developing his ideals, several critical moral problems were discussed: political obedience, the abolition of slavery, and an individual's or state's right to disobey any law with which they disagreed. Clemens was forced to drop out of school at the age of eleven and work as a printer. Thus, he could read numerous articles on these subjects. His numerous vocations as a Mississippi pilot, journalist, and miner, as well as his existence on the frontier, exposed him to society on a variety of levels. These experiences, as well as his marriage into the abolitionist Langdon family, heightened his awareness of the issues of the day and aided in the transformation of his prior attitude about race. His personal experiences influenced his writing of *Huckleberry Finn*, which is widely regarded as his magnum opus.

Mark Twain purposefully chose the setting for his storey. He utilizes the raft and the river as metaphors for Huck and Jim's departure from society. The journey down the Mississippi river is symbolic of America's ever-changing society. Additionally, the trip embodies the great American values of liberty, independence, and brotherhood.

The novel is centred on the growth of Huck and Jim's relationship. Both are on the run and in pursuit of freedom ("They are after us", says Huck in chapter 11). Huck is fleeing a tyrannical society that is being impersonated by the citizens of St. Petersburg, particularly Mrs. Watson and Pap. Jim is on the run from a society that enslaved him. Huck and Jim, on the other hand, must have a slightly different definition of freedom: Huck seeks freedom from Pap's violence, from "civilization," from Tom's games; he wishes to "boss it all," but Jim defines freedom as being his own master. The raft embodies typical American values: Huck feels "mighty free and easy and content" aboard the raft (chapter 18). As long as they stay away from the coast (repressive society), everything is good; Jim and Huck can be friends regardless of their skin tone; racial tensions vanish. The raft serves as an anti-social environment in which Huck and Jim deviate from acceptable interracial behaviour: they strip naked, share meals, and freely converse, sing, and laugh together. On the other hand, as soon as they hit the shore, the equilibrium is quickly upset. Thus, the raft excursion acquires a symbolic component - the stark contrast between the possible tranquilly in their withdrawal from society (on the raft) and the reality of society (cruelty) is demonstrated.

While some commentators may disagree, Huck is unquestionably the book's hero. The plot revolves around an internal conflict in Huck's head. The tensions increase when he acknowledges his responsibility for Jim, the drama climaxes with his resolve to go to hell for Jim, and the action then slows until the book's conclusion, when he decides to head out to the Territory without regard for Jim. Mark Twain poses two fundamental questions throughout the novel to his hero Huck:

1. What is the best way to address the tension between society norms and individual conscience?
2. What recourse does an individual American have against group-enforced, socially sanctioned injustice?

Huck begins the story with typical infantile racism. He is bound by the social codes of the society in which he lives. The reader can now see the satirical use of the term "nigger." Twain employs this term to arouse the reader and demonstrate the pernicious effects of local thought, even on a good intellect like Huck's. He wishes to make Huck as inexperienced as possible in adult society. Huck is a naive misfit, not a representative of a particular social class, but a blend of young naturalness and moral integrity. He does not reject traditional belief; rather, he views his lack of it as evidence of his "ignorance, low-down, and ordinary" status.

Twain allows Huck to utter things like "You can't teach a nigger to argue" and therefore exaggerates racial stereotypes to the point where they become absurd and debatable. Thus, the author vehemently demonstrates the American and worldwide fault of his generation. To begin, Huck (along with Jim) is acutely aware of class and caste in the south. Their master-slave relationship, however, is quickly superseded by intense attachment. When they reunite following their separation in the fog, Huck wants to "lower myself to a nigger" (chapter 15). This is Huck's first admission that Jim is more than property. Huck's evolution throughout the novel is seen here: he becomes a defender of Jim against Mrs. Watson's St. Petersburg's "conscience." He progresses from colour codes to human codes. To begin, he is unable to overcome his guilty conscience as a result of having "taken" Jim. However, Huck's transformation is evident when he refuses to inform the slave hunters about Jim. The novel's conclusion, as well as Huck's development, is his decision to save Jim at the cost of going to hell (chapter 31). To begin, he writes Mrs. Watson a message informing her of Jim's whereabouts. He is then relieved. And then he tears up the message and declares, "All right, I'm going to hell..." This is also the book's emotional climax.

Huck's conflict is one of liberty vs authority. However, as his admiration for Jim builds, he solves this struggle by conquering his social upbringing. After all, Twain used irony once more when describing Huck's "crime" of "taking a poor old woman's nigger that had never done me any damage." Mrs. Watson was not a poor old woman, but "a lean old maid with goggles who made him feel constrained and worried him with her stories about hell," as the astute reader would recognize.



According to some critics, Huck is unable to embrace the equality of difference (Jim is "white on the inside"), but he is willing to overlook Jim's origins and build equality as the foundation of their friendship. Numerous critics, particularly black Americans, have expressed dissatisfaction with Jim's representation. However, Mark Twain employs a Negro-stereotype in order to irritate the reader with what it represents. Jim is a more or less passive hero throughout the story. Jim displays his humanity to the reader gradually but profoundly through his compassion for Huck and his guilt for his previous actions toward his daughter (chapter 24). Jim is then relegated to the status of a blue-painted "sick Arab" by the King and Duke. Jim is eventually taken out of action during the Wilks episode and becomes completely dependent on what others do with him. He is even absent when Tom Sawyer informs him of his liberation.

The book makes it apparent where Jim is fleeing from, but not so much where he is fleeing to. His future goals remain hazy and largely unknown to the reader. Jim achieves freedom in the end through Mrs. Watson's decision (and a second time through Tom's scheme), but not through his own deeds. He is set free as a result of a "deus ex machina" (Mrs. Watson). This could be read as the author's pessimistic view that no man's actions can obliterate the process of human history and that human determination is of little consequence.

The selfish King's final move culminates in Jim's recapture and Huck fulfilling his moral destiny of permanently freeing Jim. Both Huck and Jim, however, become passive while Tom assumes charge and concocts a fantasy-plan to release Jim. Huck is perplexed as to how the "well-bred" Tom assists in "stealing a nigger." However, Tom is already aware that Jim is free and that no genuine danger of conflict with society exists. Tom embodies the attitudes and learned authority of the middle class. Pap (racial authority), Miss Watson (religious), and the widow Douglas (religion) are all founded on learned authority. The middle class is extremely devout, but they hold slaves and believe they have fulfilled their Christian obligation by bringing the slaves in every evening for bible reading.

Huck is not the only character in the novel that demonstrates the powerful effect that society's racist preconceptions may have on even a "decent" mind - Mrs. Loftus (chapter 11), despite her benevolence, wishes to recapture the runaway slave but feels sorry for the runaway



(white) prentice. Additionally, the doctor (last chapter) succumbs to the corrupting influence of race at the time, valuing Jim in monetary terms: he is "worth a thousand dollars," relegating Jim to the status of property once more.

Mark Twain purposefully creates an environment of bigotry in the final chapter, following Jim's permanent release. The rhetoric eventually becomes racist again in the chapters preceding the last chapter. When asked if anyone was injured in the steamboat accident, Huck responds, "No, killed a nigger." When Jim expresses dissatisfaction with Tom's plan to free him, Huck observes that he "couldn't see any sense in the majority of it, but he allowed we were white guys and knew more than him." Jim's dying circumstances make no indication of a major shift in his status. He reverts to the role of the compliant Afro-American victim of white authority. He was only free on the raft, far off from society.

Here, the book returns to southern history, away from comfortable company, toward authoritarian control, repression, and racial injustice. According to historical accounts, Jim was released, stood briefly in the sun, and then returned to servitude. Together with Northern apathy, the emergence of Black Codes in the South, the sharecropping system, and rampant racism, the Reconstruction following 1876 was a failure. Almost immediately, white Southerners reasserted political, economic, and social authority over blacks.

Jim's last condition raises questions about the nature of black Americans' freedom following the Civil War. Jim is released with \$40, but he is left alone, eleven hundred miles from home, and even forgotten by Huck. Jim's genuine chances of earning enough money to purchase his wife and children were almost nothing. In the 1850s, a freedman who lingered in Arkansas for more than 180 days may face up to a year in prison. Twain utilizes Jim's sad predicament at the book's conclusion as a metaphor for the continued plight of many blacks following the liberation of slavery.

Since the book's initial publication in 1885, reactions to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have been polarizing. Attempts to have the book removed from high school mandated reading lists persist. Whereas the author's overall criticism of his society, particularly its religious

features, could be noticed immediately after publication, today's critical remarks on the book typically focus on the racial issue.

The author's critique of his present culture, with its pervasive racism and prejudice against blacks, was undoubtedly a factor in the book's first infamous ban from the Concord Library in Massachusetts. The publication is one of the few in the late nineteenth century to make reference to the book's slave dilemma. It does, however, quote Huck as saying that his conflict with his conscience regarding slavery is "very entertaining." As directed, his conscience informs him that assisting runaway slave Jim in escaping "is a monstrous offence that would undoubtedly lead him to the evil place." Huck's moral nature is "as serious as it is entertaining" to examine. However, the report concludes that these factors "...do not detract from the story's enjoyment," which appears to be the author's primary assessment of *Huck Finn*.

As the decades pass, the book's race theme gradually gains the attention of literary scholars. T. S. Eliot delicately incorporates that theme into his essay on the novel in 1950. He quotes Jim as saying that Huck is incomplete without him. Although Huck is a passive observer of men and circumstances, Jim is the victim of them, "...they are equal in dignity." Eliot considers the moment in which Huck and Jim are reunited after being separated in the fog to be the most significant element of the novel in this perspective. Here, "Jim's sadness and dignity" are evident, as is Huck's.

It is striking how little attention modern responses to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* devote to the book's treatment of race and slavery. While many critics of the time point out that *Huck Finn* is a significant literary advancement over *Tom Sawyer* and that Mark Twain establishes himself as a serious interpreter of human nature and American society, they overlook the topic's critical relationship to the post-Civil War society in which they live. However, the novel's emphasis on race and slavery does not become a legitimate target of criticism until the 1950s.

### **Contemporary Criticism**

Mark Twain frequently stated that *Huckleberry Finn* is not a children's book. Numerous recent opponents have questioned whether it is appropriate for religion to be taught in schools. Numerous high school teachers have complained that the book's usage of the term "nigger" is exceedingly difficult for black students to handle.

Wallace, a Chicago educator, stated in 1982 that the book is appropriate for college-aged students and older, "...where students can get insight into the use and production of satire and an unvarnished flavour of the times." He argues that Mark Twain's usage of the epithet "nigger" implies that black people are less honest, clever, and human than white people. This is, of course, sarcastic, but it also mocks black people. Thus, black parents have complained to their children's instructors for years that "this book is harmful to our children." Wallace is worried that reading *Huck Finn* in class instils a negative regard for black students and their race in them. Additionally, it fosters a lack of regard for blacks among white students. As Wallace points out, every black child is a victim of his or her race's past in America. From the moment he begins kindergarten, he bears an immeasurable load that no white youngster can fathom. When combined with the reading of a book such as *Huckleberry Finn*, the results could be horrific.

### **Huckleberry Finn - a Racist Novel**

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is still prohibited in a few of high schools and libraries, including a Fairfax/Virginia institution called Mark Twain Middle School. The debate over whether it is "racist garbage" or a profoundly moral novel has resulted in the omission of the terms "nigger" and "hell" from the edition. There was even one edition that omitted Jim entirely. The main argument was that the novel's ironic use of the word "nigger" (which occurs 206 times) was beyond the comprehension of American school students, particularly black students. To a certain extent, this is true. American students frequently lack a critical understanding of their own country's history, and hence are unable to deal with the irony described by Mark Twain.

Mark Twain was not a racist, however racist attitudes on society were prevalent during his lifetime, particularly in the southern states, as the author demonstrates in the novel's concluding chapters. Twain was a devotee of black culture. During his travels throughout

Europe, it is said that he frequently impressed his guests by singing Afro-American spiritual tunes. Unusual for his time, he financed the education of a black student in his later years by paying the tuition at Yale Law School.

The reader can sense the author's sympathy for black people when reading *Huck Finn*. This is evident in Huck's father's portrayal, who is extremely racist and complains about the liberties accorded to blacks. He rails against the government for allowing a black professor to vote, despite the fact that he is one of the most impoverished characters in American literature. Twain clearly condemns white racism by establishing such a stark social contrast. Huckleberry Finn, like Twain himself, matures from a little boy imbued with the racial biases of his society into a young man who views Jim as a friend rather than a master. The book demonstrates America's struggle with itself and its history. Tom's treatment to Jim exemplifies how society views its black residents. At the time the book was written, America made a concerted effort to reenslave black people who had been freed following the Civil War. In 1863 just prior to the publication of the book, the Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act which granted certain rights to black citizens, unconstitutional. Thus, banning *Huck Finn* is akin to assassinating the messenger who brings bad news. "Efforts to have the novel removed from classrooms perpetuate Jim's captivity through each generation of readers."

The novel's historical significance stems from its portrayal of white thought and social practise at the time of its publication, when "the average freedman had about as much chance as Jim at the Phelps Farm of realising any practical distinction between his current situation and his previous condition of servitude."

Mark Twain's voice is inextricably linked to who we are as Americans today. In *Huckleberry Finn*, he teaches his readers to see the irony of a society established on the principles of liberty and equality but continues to restrict liberty to a large proportion of its residents. He shows that even the most well-intentioned individuals can be extremely harmful when subjected to the constraints of a constrained society. The book's fundamental subject is timely - as evidenced by recent efforts to have it removed from high school reading lists - since racism in American society continues to this day, and not just toward black people. Jim's

liberation at the novel's conclusion is illusory. Until now, the struggle continues to be "Free at last!" as Martin Luther King expressed it in his 1963 March on Washington speech, about regaining the freedom granted by the emancipation proclamation over a century ago.

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