
The Dark Themes of American Slavery in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a Novel by Mark Twain

Mark Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, attempts to take the reader into the dark heart of American slavery, but by the end of the novel, the reader is following Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer's childish escapades. The novel follows the journey of a young boy growing up in southern society, directly before the impending American Civil War. Huckleberry and Jim, an escaped slave, develop a strong friendship as they travel down the Mississippi River together. Towards the end of the book, Jim is captured, and Huck makes the defining choice to rescue him. Tom Sawyer, the protagonist of Twain's previous novel, knows that Jim has already been freed by the last will of Jim's owner, but Tom convinces Huck to go through with elaborate schemes to "free" Jim, simply for the sake of adventure that Tom desperately craved. Even before Tom Sawyer's return, much of the story seemed to be a distraction from the relevant social issues Twain took on at the beginning of the novel. Many people believe that Twain seamlessly denounces racism through Huck's moral revelations. However, by the end of the novel, it's clear the issue of racism has been swept to the side as the plot is diverted to Tom Sawyer's invented adventures, and Huck's journey of character growth is left unfinished. Literary critic Jane Smiley explains, "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has little to offer in the way of greatness. There is more to be learned about the American character from its canonization than through its canonization" (Smiley). Basically, there is more to be learned from the fact that the novel is glorified, than the ideas it's being glorified for. Despite many commending *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for Twain's social commentary about the faults in 19th century southern society, the glorification of this novel says more about the American incomprehension of racism than Twain managed to.

At the beginning of the novel, Huck idolizes Tom Sawyer and is willing to do whatever Tom says. Even though Huck grows and changes a lot as a character, as soon as Tom is reintroduced into the novel, Huck reverts back to the sidekick he started out as. Jim, who had already begun to seem like Huck's sidekick, is pushed even further into the margins of the novel, despite how vital Jim's character is to the messages Twain attempted to convey. Proponents of the novel blame Tom's influence on Huck's character regression and the halt of meaningful plot progression. They point to the memorable scene where Jim is captured, because here, Huck is faced with the internal question of whether to stick his neck out and rescue Jim or to send word to Jim's owner of his whereabouts. Huck proceeds to tear up the note he intended to send to Jim's owner and says "All right, then, I'll go to hell" (Twain 228). The novel's defenders will claim that this shows significant character growth for a boy who had never had to look out for anyone but himself, who had been raised to believe that helping this

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slave escape would lead to his own eternal damnation in hell. If Twain had ended the book here, it would have been a fair conclusion to the novel. Instead, in the subsequent chapters, Twain undoes all that he had built up. No matter how impressive it was for Huck to make that decision, it means absolutely nothing if Huck takes no initiative to act on it. Huck caves as soon as Tom puts pressure on him. Even though Huck resolved earlier in the novel to not play any more pranks on Jim, Huck goes along with Tom, as Tom creates a series of unnecessary obstacles that draw out Jim's captivity, including making Jim live with spiders, snakes, and rats. If Huck is unable to speak up on Jim's behalf in front of his friend, he hasn't proved that he has learned anything at all. He knows what Tom is doing is a nuisance at best, but he stands passive, saying "So I let it go at that, though I couldn't see no advantage with Tom as he crafts his foolish plans" (Twain 256). Huck loses all of the qualities that had previously made him an admirable protagonist; he loses his compassion, his courage, and most importantly, his independence of thought. Huck is no longer the complex character that the reader had learned to root for. The heart of the problem of this obvious character regression lies with society's perception of the novel and the praise it receives for its denunciation of racism. If Huck going back on every promise he makes to Jim and folding to societal expectations as soon as someone else is watching, is supposed to convey the absurdities of racism to the reader, that does not speak highly of the American social situation. As Jane Smiley puts it, society thinks that "If Huck feels positive toward Jim, and loves him, and thinks of him as a man, then that's enough" (Smiley). The opposition thinks they can pat themselves on the back for a protagonist that can demonstrate basic human decency. Glorifying this novel ignores the underlying issues of racism and slavery, and enables the opposition to rationalize an oversimplified understanding of it.

Twain, unable to tackle the darker themes that he took on with Huck's story, not only negates the development of the plot, but also leaves Huck's journey of character growth unfinished. Much of Huck's growth comes from him disregarding the childish mentality of accepting what he's told and learning to make decisions for himself about what's right and wrong. Through Huck's friendship with Jim, Huck begins to untangle racism and other social issues in society. However, even though Huck begins to see Jim's humanity, by the end of the novel, Twain has not done enough to pull apart these issues and certainly doesn't deserve to be commended for denouncing racism. It is true that Huck learned to treat Jim with more respect and compassion, but it is clear Huck is heading in the wrong direction for a simple reason: Huck only learns to apply the concept of humanity to Jim and not to any other slaves or African Americans. When Jim talks about his family to Huck, Huck thinks "and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks do for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it so" (Twain 167). It is evident that Huck thinks Jim is an exception, that Jim is more like "white folks" than people of color, and that's what makes Jim more human. Huck doesn't learn to treat African Americans as humans, he learns to treat Jim like a white man. Even if Huck were to gain respect for all people of color, it would be invalidated by the fact that Huck thinks that he is a bad person for it;

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he thinks what he is doing by helping Jim is morally wrong. When Tom offers to help rescue Jim, Huck thinks less of Tom for it, saying "It was the most astonishing speech I ever heard- and I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a n***** stealer!" (Twain 240). Huck still has a long way to go before he can be one of the great literary protagonist figureheads for racial equality, but Twain doesn't insinuate any further learning after the novel's end. By cutting Huck's growth as a character short like this, Twain neglects to give the social issues that Huck had begun to explore any sort of meaningful conclusion, discrediting them as secondary plot devices. Those who praise the novel will point out that even though Huck doesn't triumph over racism, it doesn't mean the these social issues were not addressed. If the protagonist cannot wholly shake his upbringing, it's perhaps more significant and more representative of the time period. However, if Twain's intention with the ending was to have Huck surrender to the imperfections of southern American culture, Twain neglects to make clear that this dereliction of Huck's moral obligations was a failure at all. According to Smiley, "to give credit to Huck suggests that the only racial insight Americans of the nineteenth or twentieth century are capable of is a recognition of the obvious--that blacks, slave and free, are human" (Smiley). By the end of the novel, Huck doesn't even acknowledge this; he doesn't acknowledge that other slaves could be like Jim. Thus, to give reverence to this novel requires the reader to ignore how underdeveloped Twain's "revelations" are, and perpetuates an inaccurate perception of racism.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn's casual readers and critics alike romanticize Mark Twain's attempts to elucidate the deep rooted problems embedded in southern society. Yet, upon closer examination of Twain's novel, it is made apparent that behind any valid point that is made, there is a fundamental flaw that undermines it. Twain tries to invoke realizations about the absurdity of racism upon the reader through Huck's revelations and growth. However, Twain cannot expect the reader to take away these moral lessons from the novel if the ending reveals that Huck's character regression renders him incapable of using anything he learns. As the novel comes to a close, Huck still values what Tom thinks of him more than he values Jim's well-being, Huck still can only respect Jim if he thinks of Jim as more like a white man than an African American, and Huck still only needs to show a modicum of warmth towards Jim and treat him with a modicum of humanity for society to endlessly praise Huck's progressive social insight. Huck's simple human decency towards Jim should not be regarded as the pinnacle of what this country has to offer in response to the tragedy of American slavery. Twain's shortcomings in this novel are misrepresented as revelations, as solutions to the problems that plague society. Perhaps such a vast number of people's continued unwavering devotion to such a flawed novel, proves that despite advancements towards equality, the American mentality hasn't evolved from when the book was published in 1884.

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