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Huck's True Conscience

True self-reliance grows from independent thought. Those who personally contemplate their actions and decisions are better defined people, capable of adapting to their personal circumstances and free of the public's judgment. Huckleberry Finn challenges his society's stance on racism when he lives on the raft with Jim. Although he goes as far as befriending a runaway slave, in the end Huck regresses back to society's standards. However, as he is removed from the public, Huck escapes some of humanity's inequities and leaves behind his template life. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, satire and realism are Mark Twain's main tools in demonstrating Huck's descent from public morality into personal philosophy.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn has drawn considerable criticism for its use of racist language and ideology. Some critics accuse Twain of being prejudice based solely on his language. A critique of the language without examining his meaning only reviews half the evidence. David Smith argues that, "except for Melville's work, *Huckleberry Finn* is without peers among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly anti-racist stance" (Web). Twain utilizes elements of racism as satire, as its true purpose is to critique the slaveholders of his time. He questions his society's inequality that they seem to revolve around. Interpreting it in context as a nineteenth century novel, the satire attacking the infringement of human rights in Twain's work is apparent.

Twain's work is a defense of human dignity, especially the equality that should be present for all people, regardless of race. It may contain content contrary to this defense,

yet it is more of a critique on “socially constituted fictions,” including the concept of “the Negro” and exploitation (Smith, David Web). Twain ridicules society with Huck’s internal conflict regarding Jim’s freedom. Huck’s “conscience” tears him apart inside, so much so that he decides to write a letter turning Jim in to Miss Watson. Then he challenges society by thinking of Jim as a human, as a friend. After that, he tears the letter up, saying, “All right, then I’ll go to hell” (Twain 190-191). Huck’s convoluted conscience is mocking society’s. Twain laments the world’s sinful philosophy through Huck’s ironic actions, insisting that Huck is righteous. Not only playing along dark institutions such as racism, Twain’s irony provides comic relief in the midst of a novel filled with heavy truths.

The King and Duke are present as burlesque characters, as one of the first times Huck speaks with them, it is apparent they are fabricating almost everything they say (Twain 110-113). Twain creates them to further his critique on the “socially constituted fiction” of romanticism (Smith, David Web). He mocks those who refuse to be humble. Pap Finn, present only briefly, “ironically establishes the moral norm” as he complains about the “govment” and its supposed flaws (Carter Web, Twain 23-25). Pap Finn contributes nothing to the society which he detests, parodying the hypocritical ridicule of government. Twain implicitly states his ideal society through Pap’s protest, and furthers the realism of the nineteenth century environment in which Pap lives.

Racism serves a second, non-satirical purpose in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by accurately describing Huck’s southern society. Jim questions Tom as he tries to exaggerate a plan to escape the Phelps’ farm, yet he resigns to follow his orders (Twain 232-235). Jim thinks the plan is unnecessary, but believes white boys know better than

him. Huck sees the racist implications of Jim's resignation but does not question them ("Adventures," *American Web*). In Huck's society, African Americans are automatically labeled as inferior, which is why Twain portrayed it this way. Twain has been condemned for employing the N-word in his writing, yet it serves to paint a precise picture of the South at the time. Huck treats Jim as subhuman during an argument, stating that "you can't learn a nigger to argue" (Twain 72). Later, he humbles himself to Jim, proving he sees him as an equal, yet still uses the N-word when referring to Jim (Twain 78). Racist slang was commonplace in the South at the time. The N-word was used when referring to any African American, hatefully or not. The N-word merely fit into the larger picture of Southern dialect.

Nearly all the dialogue in Huck's story is infused with incorrect grammar and usage. Twain manipulates the characters' speech to mimic authentic Southern citizens. He used rural dialect to mask the "homely wisdom and rugged honesty" that was present in his characters (Smith, Henry Web). Huck's boyish speech furthers his role as the innocent narrator of his story profound for not so innocent lessons. Twain commands the characters' language to define them, as it is suitable that vernacular, the most apparent character trait, designates the "the values, the ethical and aesthetic assumptions, they represent" (Smith, Henry Web). The doctor, an Englishman trying to out the King and Duke, speaks proper English (Twain 152-153). Twain uses genuine dialect to portray his characters convincingly. The accurate speech patterns surrounding Huck make Huck's transformation of conscience authentic.

Throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck's "sound heart and "common sense" battle with the "shams under which America's greed and inhumanity

lurked” (Quirk Web). The novel is built around Huck’s development of an individual conscience. He grows to struggle with his society’s notion of African American inferiority. He bends under society’s imposing values when it takes him a whole fifteen minutes to simply apologize to Jim (Twain 78). However, not all hope is lost since Huck did apologize in the end, something society would deem unthinkable. Huck views Jim as a friend at this point. The Mississippi River is a retreat from civilization, allowing Huck to reflect upon himself. The river is the only reason Huck attempted to humble himself to a slave. When Huck is forced to leave the river and return to society, he sees a reset of his circumstances, and some of his newfound personality and thinking is lost.

Tom Sawyer is the driving force behind Huck’s regression. Soon after being reunited with Huck, he dictates how they will outrageously free Jim. Huck votes for common sense, yet he lets Tom roll over him (Twain 207-208). While on the river, Huck and Jim are on a “quest for freedom, trying to escape the rules of society” (“Adventures,” *Literary Web*). When Tom, as society, returns, Huck’s newfound will regresses. Twain demonstrates how societal constraints are the hardest chains to break. Huck makes progress towards an individual conscience, yet he still struggles when his opinions differ from society’s (“Adventures,” *Literary Web*). Huck’s reset, more than any other event in the story, effectively proves Twain’s point regarding individual conscience: without intentional effort to subvert it, society, whether or not it is contorted, will partly control its members. By blindly trusting public sentiment, members of society will simply be another subject of the public’s abuse.

Irony and authenticity support Twain’s reasoning on the need for individual conscience in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. He writes one way regarding racism,

yet underlying tones slide against textbook meaning to suggest a thoroughly anti-racist stance. Comedy serves as relief, while still instructing readers in how to lead a better life. The only reason Huck's metamorphosis was credible was due to Twain's operation of prejudice and accurate dialect that mimicked Southern society in the nineteenth century. Skin deep, the novel appeared to be the hearty story of Huck's adventures along the Mississippi River. Under the surface, Twain's true sentiment was heard shifting deep inside. He challenged ignorance, promoted justice, and pierced society's prejudiced side. Twain shocked critics too shallow to appreciate the true meaning of his work, yet gave deeper thinkers something to ponder: if one allows society to think for him or her, the true human experience is lost.