



Literary analysis: Controversial themes in Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain

by Gemma Marshall

When considering Mark Twain's attitude towards slavery, it is important to remember that Twain wrote *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* between 1876 and 1883, after the American Civil War, but the setting for the novel was pre-war. Although *Huckleberry Finn* is widely considered to be one of the greatest American works of art, it was condemned in terms of slavery by many reviewers in Twain's time as coarse and by many critics in our time as racist. In order to come to any conclusions on this matter one must look closely at the different perspectives of slavery that Twain presents the reader with throughout the novel, not only through the slaves themselves but also through society's treatment of slavery.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain portrays how Southern society accepts, unquestioningly the principle of slavery. Through the character of Huck and his internal debates, we see the conflict between what is morally right and what is legally enforced, and it is through the eyes of Huck that Twain presents the issue of slavery. At the beginning of the novel we see Huck oppressed by the Widow Douglas's expectations into conforming, and in some ways one might consider that Huck himself is a slave; to the ideals of society. We learn in the first chapter that Huck is lonely and seeks a less restrictive life through means of escape;

'she took me for her son and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied'.^[1]

It is also within this first chapter, that we are introduced to slaves as characters in the novel. Huck's description of Miss Watson's big nigger, named Jim,^[2] may imply a racist attitude towards Jim, however soon after he counteracts this by his obvious awe and one might argue; respect for Jim; ..he was more looked up to than any nigger in that country.'^[3] This obvious contradiction also sets a pattern for the rest of the novel, as we see the inner struggle Huck faces in order to either conform to society's expectations and treat black people in the socially accepted manner, or to follow his heart and treat all people the same; according to how well they earn his respect.

Huck and Jim, as unlikely a pair as they might seem, form a bond through the course of the novel that supersedes friendship, one might go so far as to say their relationship is almost that of father and son, which may have been the intention of the forward thinking Twain. For a black slave to be the father of a white son, is of course at this time impossible by society's standards, however by presenting the reader with such impossibility, he, at the same time shows how impossibilities can be overcome; does Jim not make for a far more suitable role model than the drunkard Pap? And so it gradually becomes clear that the two characters leave the constraints of society behind them and create their own world on the water- it is within this world that the influence of societal values are suppressed in favour of a more logical, practical system of values.

Throughout the novel we see how appearance and skin colour is the only criteria considered by society in determining who is afforded rights, it appears that regardless of how immoral a white man might be, he is still afforded more power than that of a highly moral black character like Jim. The fact that Pap is awarded custody of Huck illustrates this lack of logic in decisions made by society. The novel continuously presents the reader with these attitudes through the characters of Huck and Jim and their journeying relationship. Twain takes a calculated risk with the character of Jim, who is a runaway slave in search of

literal and figurative freedom from the constraints that society inflicts upon him as a slave, for Twain must have realised the potential power of his writing and still chose to create a character in Jim that breaks all the rules; he is presented as intelligent, analytical, highly moral and yet he is black.

Here one could argue that Twain's very willingness to portray such an integral character like Jim, whom the readers will sympathise with, presents an attitude that is undoubtedly anti- slavery, as Gray explains; The book is about the historical injustice of slavery, of course, and the social inequity of racism, the human use or denial of human beings.'[4]

However, the novel's attitude to slavery is at times ambiguous, mainly due to the fact that it is Huck's story, so we are only to learn his point of view, and are left to interpret the other characters' attitudes through Huck's descriptions of their actions. It appears at times that Huck is without prejudice towards his black friend in one instance, as we see in chapter 11 with Huck's anxiety to help keep Jim out of danger, 'Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain't a minute to lose. They're after us!'[5] However we also see another side to Huck's attitude, as he sometimes sees Jim as a slave, as property that should be returned.

Despite the revolutionary racial equality presented to the reader throughout the novel, it could be argued that racism still plays its part in the overall plot. As we can see when Jim and Huck are separated in the fog and Huck attempts to trick Jim into believing he had dreamt the whole thing, Jim is not happy when he realises what Huck has done and vocalises his displeasure;

Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes em ashamed' []It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back.

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger...'[6]

Written during a time in which racial inequality is the norm, these thoughts of Huck's are fully understandable, though because of Twain's presentation of Jim, the reader might well be shocked that Huck could appear so racist towards him. This displays the recurrent theme of Huck's uncertainty over what takes priority; on the one hand he has what his upbringing has ingrained within him in terms of the treatment of slaves, and yet on the other he feels that this is wrong and values Jim's friendship. One might suggest that this constant struggle within Huck is what gives the novel's attitudes against slavery such strength; the reader is presented with both right and wrong and although one may come to one's own conclusions at some point in the novel, Huck's constant change of opinion will undoubtedly cause questioning. At one point in the novel it even appears that Jim becomes an object to Huck; a piece of treasure, he almost acts as though he owns Jim. For example, when Huck and Tom refer to releasing Jim from Slavery later in the novel they do not see this as Jim's actual freedom; Tom Sawyer was in earnest and was actually going to help steal that nigger out of slavery.'[7] The use of the word 'steal' here highlights how even though Huck is in fact doing a good deed by Jim, he doesn't actually free him because he stole him, meaning in some small way that Jim is then Huck's property.

And so the argument may continue...but as a writer Twain holds a certain amount of responsibility in representing such a historic period in time factually, and in order to create a realistic representation he undoubtedly has to portray racism and slavery how it actually was and to romanticise the subject would not only be unrealistic in terms of story telling, but it would also be an injustice to American History and all those who suffered.

[1] Twain. M, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Penguin books, 2003) p.49

[2] Twain. M, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Penguin books, 2003) p.53

[3] Twain. M, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Penguin books, 2003) p.55

[4] Gray. R, A History of American Literature (Blackwell, 2004) p.254

[5] Twain. M, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Penguin, 2003) p.117

[6] Twain. M Huckleberry Finn (2003) p.143

[7] Twain. M The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (Penguin, 2003) p.304

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