

RACIAL TENSIONS IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA AS DEPICTED IN TWAIN'S WORKS

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Abstract

This study aims to provide an overview of 19th century life in the novel *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain from the conflict experienced by the main character. The researcher explored the relationship between characters and how it led to the issue of racial conflict as discussed in this study. The results of this study found that life in the 19th century as depicted in the novel *The Adventure Of Huckleberry Finn* shows the life of the people of the United States of America which is very full of racism and slavery of white people against black people.

Keywords: *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, Huck Finn, Racism, Slavery, Criticize, Conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn is a great American work of literature written by Mark Twain that was first published in England in December 10th, 1884 and in American in February 1885. The book is a sequel to another of adventure novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, originally published in 1876. Following straight from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, it continues the adventure of Huckleberry Finn, a poor boy with a drunken bum for a father, and his friend Tom Sawyer, a middle-class boy with an imagination too active for his own good, found a robber's stash of gold. Despite his father's mistreatment, Huck prefers life on his own terms rather than being confined or controlled by others. After Pap tries to take control of Huck and imprisons him, Huck escapes by arranging his own death and hiding out on Jackson Island in the Mississippi River. Huck, accompanied by Jim, an escaped slave seeking freedom, confronts moral quandaries in society, friendship, and the notion of freedom. Twain explores topics of racism, identity, morality, and the conflict between civilization and the natural environment. The work is nevertheless an effective commentary on the complexity of American society in the pre-Civil War South.

The narrative that Twain uses in this story is first person point of view, narrated by Huck Finn himself. The character of Huck illustrates the moral transformation from a child shackled by social norms to one who is able to listen to his conscience. This is clearly illustrated in Huck's decision to help Jim, even though he believes his actions will make him "go to hell". Twain uses

this conflict to explore element of racism between white people and black people, even white people and white people themselves, showing that the rules of society do not always reflect moral truth. As such, the novel is not just an adventure story, but also a deep reflection on the meaning of racism, morality and freedom reflected to Jim and Huck Finn characters.

DISCUSSION

Twain's aspect of the novel is mostly criticizing American society in the early 19th century, reflecting how the society at that time looked down on black people and the racism that was prevalent.

1. Historical Context

The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn contains a lot of historical context that is appropriate for the 19th century. Many social and political issues support the themes of the story, some of which are Slavery, Racial Tensions, Debates about Human Rights and Freedom. The following is an explanation of these issues:

- **Slavery**

One of the most profound issues of the 19th century in America was the issue of slavery. This issue was particularly strong in the south because the economy in the south was so small compared to the north. In the south, the economy was heavily dependent on agriculture such as cotton and tobacco. Many landowners used African people as slaves for labor. Meanwhile, in northern countries conflicts such as slavery have begun to subside. Their economy has also advanced compared to the south such as trade and industry. Tensions between the southern and northern states increased throughout the 19th century.

- **Racial Tensions**

In addition to slavery itself, racial tension was one of the factors supporting slavery in America in the 19th century. Most of the slaves used as labor by whites were Africans, they were treated very badly like property. Racial segregation that occurred in the southern states was very strong, the applicable laws did not support the rights of black people and upheld the rights of white people. Free African Americans in the north were still heavily discriminated against, because at that time many aspects of life such as employment, housing, and education were unequal which black people did not have the right to.

- **The Human Rights and Freedom Debate**

As awareness of human rights grew, many people began to fight for the freedom of black people from slavery and voice their rights. However, on the other hand, there are still many people who maintain this slavery and consider it their "lifestyle". This tension persisted until the advent of the American Civil War (1861-1865), which was caused by differences of opinion about slavery and the right of states to determine their own policies.

2. Mark Twain's Perspective and Criticism to Racism

Mark Twain, born Samuel Clemens in 1835, was raised in Missouri, a slave state, which shaped his perspectives on race and slavery. Born and raised in the South, it is unsurprising that the young Twain had no regard for Black people. If he had spoken out against these conventional

beliefs, he would almost certainly have clashed with his peers and parents.

Slavery was the way of life in his small village, but "everybody knew there could be freedom somewhere for lacks" He experienced slavery's terrible realities as well as the complicated social dynamics of the antebellum South. Twain's novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, set before the Civil War, was influenced by his personal experiences.

The Novel examines institutionalized racism through Huck's moral journey alongside Jim, a runaway slave. Twain's portrayal of Jim defies clichés, presenting him as a fully developed figure with feelings and intellect. This relationship demonstrates Twain's changing perspective on race, inspired by his abolitionist wife and experiences with African Americans.

3. Theme and Main Topic in *Huckleberry Finn*

- **Racism**

Racism is the belief that a person's identity and traits are determined by their race or anatomy rather than the quality of their intellect. Race is a categorization system based on physical attributes such as skin color and physical features (Hartley, 2016, p. 255). This method affects the judgment and respect of individuals based on their race, causes feelings of inferiority, and undermines identity. Differences in religion, ethnicity, skin color, and other factors are the basis of racism in the United States. White people are often perceived as having greater preferences.

- **Racism in *Huckleberry Finn***

Although slavery and social instability increased during the American civil war (1861-1865), which brought social changes as well as economic and technological advances, racism remained part of the law as late as 1965. The novel *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* depicts 19th-century American life filled with slavery and racism between white and black communities.

In this book, Hartley's (2016, p. 255) theory of racism describes racism as a system of categorization based on physical attributes, such as skin color. Huck and Jim's journey shows how Huck has to protect Jim, a black slave, from dangers coming from outside.

According to Hartley's (2016) theory of racism, the above quote reflects the structured racism that existed in society at the time. The use of abusive terms to refer to Jim shows how racial discrimination demeans people based on the color of their skin. This systematization resulted in humiliation and the perception that black people were merely goods that could be bought and sold. The bounty given for the capture of runaway slaves shows the financial value associated with human life in the slavery system. This quote shows how racism maintained power and control over individuals based on race, although it also shows the cruelty and injustice of the system. Twain strongly criticizes racism and slavery, highlighting the ill effects of seeing humans as objects based on their physical characteristics.

At the start of the story, Huck accepts racial stereotypes and even chastises himself for not turning Jim in for fleeing, despite having a societal and legal obligation to do so. Huck muses on his responsibilities to bring Jim in for fleeing, showing his internal turmoil, as shown in Chapter 8, Page 78:

"People will call me a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don't make no difference. I ain't a-going to tell, and I ain't a-going back there anyways."

This quote demonstrates Huck's awareness of societal norms vs his personal morality, as he understands the potential consequences of protecting Jim. Indeed, one of Huck's main internal problems is his "wicked" desire to consider Jim as more than just someone's property. Jim's escape is also inspired by Miss Watson's consideration of selling him to a slave trader, despite the fact that Jim has served her well and she is aware that such a move would separate Jim from his family. The researcher observed the different types of racism depicted in the literature *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

- **Morality and Conscience**

Huckleberry Finn's moral growth in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is characterized by a conflict between cultural conventions and personal conscience. Initially, Huck struggles with the morals established by Southern society, which sees helping Jim, an escaped slave, as wrong. However, when he builds a strong bond with Jim, Huck determines empathy over societal norms, culminating in his resolve to protect Jim despite his belief that it is sinful.

It all began with Huck's perception of how slaves and Black people had changed. He understood that Jim shared his humanity and had sentiments. After observing Jim, Huck made a statement that he would keep to himself.

"I know he's already white from the inside".
(Twain, 2013: Chapter 40, p. 278)

"I do believe [Jim] cared just as much for his people as white people do for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so."
(Twain, 2013: Chapter 23, p. 158)

Perhaps it sounds racist but Huck is an uneducated person who comes from the old south, according to Huck his remarks don't matter because this is actually a compliment about his friend. White people are seen by many of their race as kind and trustworthy. And black people are the opposite, the same people believe.

- **Dehumanization**

Dehumanization is a primary topic in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, representing antebellum Southern cultural values. Twain shows how characters, such as Jim, are viewed as property rather than humans. Huck's initial thoughts reflect this dehumanization, as he tries to connect his upbringing with his growing friendship with Jim. Despite societal norms that portray Black people as inferior, Huck's journey reveals his changing perception of Jim's humanity, which eventually leads him to prioritize personal loyalty over societal expectations. Huck's father, Pap, is strongly opposed to the government providing an educated professor the right to vote. He believes that he is superior to this professor just because of his skin tone. Pap's idea of racial superiority stems from his personal weakness, as he is a complete failure who seeks to compensate by racist others. It appears on page 29, Chapter 6:

"I'll never vote again as long as I live. And to see the cool way of that nigger- Why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way. I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?"

This quote illustrates that black people do not have the right to vote.

The final prominent examples of the white characters' indifference to the humanity of black characters comes when Huck, posing as Tom Sawyer, visits the Phelps home in Chapter 32. In an attempt to keep the boat he supposedly rode on afloat, Huck invents a technical issue while talking to Aunt Sally:

We blowed out a cylinder- head.' 'Good gracious! Anybody hurt?' 'No'm Killed a nigger.'
'Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.'
(Twain, 2013 : Chapter 32, p.223)

It's Twain's way to ironically view the bitter truth of the old South in which people did not care about the death of a black person. A black, for them, is a mere property.

4. Characters Analysis

- **Huck Finn**

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn's journey from racist to non-racist is crucial. At first, Huck sees Jim as nothing more than property, reflecting the racist sentiments of his day. But as a result of their shared experiences on the Mississippi River, Huck comes to appreciate Jim's moral value and humanity, which leads him to choose to assist Jim in escaping in defiance of social expectations. Huck's internal battle against the deeply rooted prejudice of his background is reflected in this shift, which finally leads him to reject these ideas and embrace Jim's worth as an equal and friend.

At the beginning of the story, Huck, like many others in the South during the pre-Civil War era, has entrenched racist beliefs in him from society. Huck's initial perspective of Jim is affected by being raised in a world where slavery is the standard and Black people are regarded as inferior. Huck is occasionally polite to Jim, but he still speaks to him in a humiliating manner and initially regards him as a mere slave. Huck even considers society's position that assisting Jim in his escape would be unethical because he is a slave.

As Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River together, their bond grows stronger, and Huck begins to see Jim as a human being rather than a slave. Through their shared experiences, Huck begins to appreciate Jim's virtues beyond the clichés of the time: Jim is kind, loyal, intellectual, and empathetic. They help each other get through numerous problems, and Huck starts to trust Jim, relying on his wisdom and judgment.

One of the most significant events in Huck's moral development happens when Jim expresses genuine concern for him. Jim informs Huck that he would sacrifice his own safety to protect him, indicating the depth of their bond. This personal connection causes Huck to reassess his previous ideas about Jim.

By deciding to follow his own moral compass instead of the racist laws and attitudes of his surroundings, he has transcended the racial prejudices he was exposed to growing up. The laws of a society that views Black people as property are now subordinated to Huck and

Jim's friendship.

- **Jim**

Mark Twain uses Jim's character to criticize the degrading effects of slavery and to break down common racial preconceptions about Black people in the nineteenth century. Jim's portrayal as a multifaceted, sensitive, and morally pure individual defies popular perceptions about Black people at the time, presenting him as a fully formed human being rather than a stereotype.

Jim is portrayed as one of the novel's most noble and altruistic characters. He is described as being genuinely sympathetic, particularly for Huck, whom he defends throughout their adventure. Jim is more than just a slave attempting to earn freedom; he is a loving father driven by a desire to reconcile with his family. This humanizing picture stands in stark contrast to the common perception of slaves as just property or servants in nineteenth-century American culture.

Jim also demonstrates moral judgment and loyalty throughout the narrative. Despite his yearning for independence, he continuously prioritizes Huck's well-being before his own. For example, Jim's refusal to tell Huck the truth about his father's death because he does not want Huck to be upset displays Jim's strong concern and protectiveness for Huck, whom he regards as a surrogate son. Jim's commitment and concern for Huck demonstrate his strong moral compass, suggesting that he is capable of profound ethical reasoning despite having had little formal schooling.

- **Pap Finn**

Huck's father, Pap Finn, is a potent symbol of a white, impoverished, prejudiced man in the antebellum South. Pap has deeply rooted racist beliefs that support his conviction that white people are superior to Black people, despite his own low social standing and lack of income. His persona is a critique of how racism stems from a sense of entitlement and superiority over African Americans, regardless of one's own circumstances, especially among the poorest sections of society.

Pap's attitudes are in stark contrast to his economic circumstances, demonstrating that race, rather than class, frequently determined one's position in the social order. During this time, even the poorest white person in the South may believe in white supremacy simply because he or she was white. This societal construct enabled even individuals with no income or influence to feel superior to Black people, and Pap's character exemplifies how race served as a type of social currency.

"I ain't got no money. It's just a small one, but if I'd a been able to do anything with it, I would a made a fight to get it. But I ain't, and I don't see no good in trying to do anything with it. You see, it's a shame to be poor; it's a mighty shame. And it ain't no more shame to be poor, if you just live right, than it is to be rich."

Pap's anger stems from his notion that Huck is being promoted above his social standing rather than fortune. He cannot accept the thought that a poor white child, who he believes should be in his place, is treated with more respect or given more possibilities than a white guy like himself. His bigotry is further evident when he condemns Black people for "getting

above themselves" or accomplishing any form of social mobility, despite the fact that his own poverty does not benefit him.

Pap's racism stems from a strong fear of Black people achieving equality. This fear of Black people rising above their "place" in society is an integral element of his personality. He perceives Black people's advancement as a direct challenge to his own apparent superiority, despite the fact that his life has been marked by failure and desperation.

"That's the way I got it all. It's the white man's burden. I got to look out for myself, and I don't care nothing about these niggers. I don't want them to be free."

This statement shows how Pap's ideas on race are linked to his sense of superiority and refusal to accept social developments that threaten the racial order. Even though Pap lacks genuine riches and power, he believes that as a white guy, he has a right to be in a position of superiority over Black people.

Twain uses Pap's character to demonstrate that racism is not limited to the wealthy and powerful—it pervades all levels of society, from the most privileged to the most impoverished. Pap represents the ignorance and moral rot created by slavery and systemic racism. He perpetuates a cycle of anger, self-loathing, and racial superiority in his son Huck.

5. Language and Symbolism

In the *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain uses his distinctive language style and symbolism to support the content of the novel, including:

- **Use of Dialect**

Mark Twain uses authentic dialect in *Huckleberry Finn* to reinforce the characters and their backgrounds. The use of dialect is not just to deepen the background and characters, but to give readers a clear picture of the differences in social class and ethnicity. However, Mark Twain was also controversial for his use of dialect, as Twain used racialized language in the character of Jim, a black slave who is Finn's friend. The dialect used by the character Jim reflects the racial stereotypes of the time, which were African American.

"Jim, he said, 'Don't look at his face — it's too ghastly. Don't look at his hands, they're too dreadful. And don't look at his feet, they're as big as a barn.'"

This quote shows that Twain used a distinctive dialect to distinguish the character's social background.

- **Symbolism: Mississippi River**

The Mississippi River in this novel serves as a symbol of freedom and escape. For Huck, the river is a place to escape to the freedom he dreams of, from his life full of rules and conflicts that exist in society such as the persecution he feels by his father and the moral pressure he faces. While for Jim, the river is a symbol of freedom because he wants freedom and escape from being a slave.

"We went tip toeing along a path amongst the trees back to the river, and we went aboard

the raft and sat down. it was lovely to live on a raft.”

This quote depicts the freedom that Huck and Jim dreamt of. On the river, they were not bound by any rules and they could live their lives freely and hopefully.

- **Irony**

Ironi dalam novel ini digunakan untuk menyoroti absurditas norma sosial yang berlaku, terutama dalam hal moralitas dan kepercayaan religius yang ada dalam karakternya. Salah satu contoh adalah saat Huck meluapkan rasa takutnya karna membantu Jim, ia takut akan “masuk neraka” namun seiringnya perjalanan ia merasa bahwa membantu Jim adalah perilaku yang benar walau bertentangan dengan hukum yang berlaku pada saat itu.

“All right then, I’ll go to hell! And I Tore it up.”

Kutipan ini menunjukkan bahwa Finn membiarkan hukum yang ada demi kepentingannya terhadap Jim.

6. Theoretical Framework

- **Racial Dynamics and Discrimination**

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is dominated by a careful examination of the prevailing racial dynamics and prejudices that shape character relationships. Mark Twain exposes the deeply embedded racism that penetrates society by bravely addressing the prevailing prejudices and disparaging views about African Americans in the antebellum South.

- **Slavery Legacy**

In Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain depicts the legacy of slavery and colonial attitudes on several levels, with Jim acting as a focal point of this critique. The degrading reasoning that supported slavery and racism after the Civil War is explicitly refuted by this portrayal.

- **Moral Journey**

The main conflict of the book centers on Huck's moral development, namely his conflict between his increasing awareness of Jim's humanity and society indoctrination. The strength and limitations of this social conditioning are demonstrated by Huck's decision to "go to hell" rather than betray Jim.

- **Criticize the Hipocrisy**

In order to expose the hypocrisy of "civilized" society, Twain uses clever satire. He focuses in particular on how Christian principles were perverted to support racism and slavery. The king and the duke are especially glaring illustrations of white society's moral decay, and the ostensibly civilized characters frequently act more barbarously than those they despise.

- **Racial Epithets**

Although the novel's use of racial epithets and period-appropriate vocabulary may offend contemporary readers, Twain intended to depict the harsh realities of racism honestly rather

than to sanitize it. This imaginative decision produces an uneasy tension that compels readers to interact with this history up close rather than passively.

CONCLUSION

The researcher found, based on the analysis of the previous chapter, that racism and slavery are elements that illustrate the conflict in Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*. depicts the life of American society in the 19th century through the conflict experienced by the main characters. Twain highlights the issues of slavery and racism that increased and legalized before the American Civil War.

The character of Jim, a slave, becomes the center of the story in this novel, which shows the cruelty and injustice of the slavery system. Jim and other slaves were ill-served like property. For example, Jim is considered private property and is referred to as "Miss Watson's big slave." In addition, Jim's story of his journey to freedom shows the strong desire of slaves to live free and reunite with their separated families.

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