

## LOCAL COLOR AND AMERICAN SLAVERY IN THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the use of local color and American slavery in Mark Twain's 'The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn'. The novel uses local color to create a real picture of life in the American South in the 19th century, through the use of local dialects, descriptions of scenery and environments, and local community habits. Huck Finn, as the main character in the novel, is young and innocent, and he does not enslave black people, which in 19th century South America still existed. His friendship with Jim, a slave trying to escape from being caught by slave hunters, is central to the story and social issues. Jim is not only Huck's friend and protector, but also a character who represents the injustice experienced by slaves. By combining the discussion of local color and American slavery, we as readers discover and reflect on the social and moral values of the time.

**Keywords:** Local color, American Slavery, Slave, Mark Twain, Huck Finn, Jim.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a picaresque adventure novel written by Mark Twain that was published in England on December 10, 1884 and in the United States on February 18, 1885. Mark Twain used adventure themes and incorporated social issues such as slavery that existed in 19th century America. As a writer who grew up in Missouri, Twain had first-hand experience with the culture, dialect, and customs of the American South. The novel tells the journey of Huck Finn, a young boy escaping a troubled life, and Jim a runaway slave seeking freedom. Through the story of Huck Finn and Jim's companionship along the river and their stops, Twain explores themes of friendship, morality, and the seemingly free society tainted by the reality of slavery.

Mark Twain's use of local color is one of the important aspects of the story that strengthens his critique of slavery. By adding regional details such as the typical southern dialect and customs of the people, Mark Twain not only gives a real picture of life in the south, but also exposes how slavery occurred and permeated the culture and social values of the people. The language and dialect used by characters like Jim and Huck reflect the social realities and views on slavery, highlighting the status differences and injustices faced by slaves. Through his descriptions of life in the South, Twain highlights the conditions of a society that upholds freedom, yet still enslaves its fellow human beings.

This paper will discuss how Mark Twain's use of local color and the discussion of American slavery in Huckleberry Finn, by analyzing specific examples of dialect and cultural references in the novel, the discussion in this paper will reveal how Twain's work functions as a sharp critique of slavery. "Twain's use of local color not only lends authenticity to the narrative but

also reveals the illusion of freedom in a society still shackled by the chains of slavery.” (Gordon 1984). By combining local color and American slavery, it shows that slavery and the moral challenges faced by society at the time.

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, where the data collected is presented in the form of words or images instead of numerical values. The findings are supported by direct quotations, which are included in the written report to enhance clarity and strengthen the discussion. Qualitative research emphasizes descriptive analysis, aiming to evaluate the relevance and suitability of the data and findings for interpretation.

### Data Collection

The writer used two sources for this study. original sources that are drawn from the book itself next, secondary sources obtained from journals and articles, books.

### Data Analysis

The author adopted a sociological approach to delve deeper into the social conditions of Black individuals during their enslavement. By examining the sociological context of the slavery era and the cultural aspects of Black communities, the study explores the reasons behind their subjugation as slaves.

## DISCUSSION

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain presents some points that are quite common in American literature. Of the many points, the points that are highlighted include local color and American Slavery. This section will explore the local color and American Slavery in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain.

### 1. Local Color

#### a. Language and Dialect

In the process of reading the novel, there are several languages and dialects that are found to be different from modern English. This can be found in the conversation between Huckleberry and James (Miss Watson's Nigger) or more familiarly called Jim.

In chapter two, when Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer made a little noise in their attempt to escape from Widow Douglas' house at midnight, Jim was on watch and said,

*“Say, who is you? Whar is you? Dog my cats ef I didn’ hear sum f’n. Well, I know what I’s gwyne to do: I’s gwyne to set down here and listen tell I hears it agin.”* (page 5) (Twain, 2004)

And so in chapter four, Huck Finn helped Jim to talk to his hair-ball by giving his old slick counterfeit quarter and made the hair-ball tell his fortune. The hair-ball talked to Jim, and Jim told it to Huck Finn. He says:

*“Yo’ ole father doan’ know yit what he’s a-gwyne to do. Sometimes he spec he’ll go ‘way, en den agin he spec he’ll stay. De bes’ way is to res’ easy en let de ole man take his own way. Dey’s two angels hov going to be. There is ways to keep off some kinds of bad luck, but this wasn’t one of them kind; so I never tried to do anything, but just poked along low-spirited and on the watch-out.”* (page 17) (Twain, 2004)

This language and dialect goes along when Huck Finn and Jim met in Jackson’s Island and started their journey to freedom together. In chapter eight, Huck Finn greeted Jim and made him bounce up because he was so surprised by his presence. Jim says:

*"Doan' hurt me—don't! I hain't ever done no harm to a ghos'. I alwuz liked dead people, en done all I could for 'em. You go en git in de river agin, whah you b'longs, en doan' do nuffn to Ole Jim, 'at 'uz awluz yo' fren'." (page 44) (Twain, 2004)*

In chapter fourteen, it is showed the differences knowledge of niggers and white people when Huck Finn and Jim talked about French people.

*"Why, Huck, doan' de French people talk de same way we does?" (Jim)*

*"No, Jim; you couldn't understand a word they said—not a single word." (Huck Finn) (page 82) (Twain, 2004)*

Jim's (niggers) thinking is very limited due to the lack of education he received. Meanwhile, Huck, who is white, goes to school and has a good level of knowledge. And it shows the local color of the novel of how African-American communicate using their language and dialect.

## b. Environment Description

The Mississippi River, the longest in North America and a prominent feature of the United States, has played a significant role in American literature. Many literary works are set along, inspired by, or centered around this river. Among them is a novel by Mark Twain, which prominently incorporates the river into its narrative.

From the beginning, it is told that the setting of the story focuses on the Mississippi River. This can be seen from several scenes of Huck and Jim sailing on their canoe. Such as in chapter fifteen, Huck Finn describes the condition of the Mississippi River.

*It was a monstrous big river here, with the tallest and the thickest kind of timber on both banks; just a solid wall, as well as I could see by the stars. (page 86) (Twain, 2004)*

It goes along in chapter sixteen, when Huck Finn and Jim were going through the river at night.

*We went drifting down into a big bend, and the night clouded up and got hot. The river was very wide, and was walled with solid timber on both sides; you couldn't see a break in it hardly ever, or a light. (page 90) (Twain, 2004)*

In chapter nineteen, Huck describes the view of the river in the morning, he's depicting how calm and beautiful it is.

*The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line—that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black any more, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away—trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks—rafts; sometimes you could hear a sweep screaming; or jumbled up voices, it was so still, and sounds come so far; and by and by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there's a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way; and you see the mist curl up off of the water, and the east reddens up, and the river, and you make out a log-cabin in the edge of the woods, away on the bank on t'other side of the river, being a woodyard, likely, and piled by them cheats so you can throw a dog through it anywheres; then the nice breeze*

*springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh and sweet to smell on account of the woods and the flow ers; but sometimes not that way, because they've left dead fish laying around, gars and such, and they do get pretty rank; and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song birds just going it! (page 120) (Twain, 2004)*

### c. Tradition and Habits

In the context of local color, "tradition and habits" refer to the customs, practices, and everyday behaviors that are characteristic of a specific culture or community. These elements help create a sense of place and authenticity in literature.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain is widely regarded as a classic of American literature, not only for its engaging narrative but also for its vivid portrayal of the traditions, customs, and societal norms of the mid-19th century American South. The novel provides a rich and detailed snapshot of the time, reflecting the cultural context in which it is set, while also exploring the unique habits and characteristics of its central character, Huck Finn. These traditions and habits are deeply interwoven into the fabric of the story, shaping both the plot and the development of its themes.

In chapter twenty six, Huck Finn saw a funeral of Peter Wilks that kind of unique and new to him.

*Towards the middle of the day the undertaker come with his man, and they set the coffin in the middle of the room on a couple of chairs, and then set all our chairs in rows, and borrowed more from the neighbors till the hall and the parlor and the dining-room was full. I see the coffin lid was the way it was before, but I dasn't go to look in under it, with folks around. Then the people begun to flock in, and the beats and the girls took seats in the front row at the head of the coffin, and for a half an hour the people filed around slow, in single rank, and looked down at the dead man's face a minute, and some dropped in a tear, and it was all very still and solemn, only the girls and the beats holding handker chiefs to their eyes and keeping their heads bent, and sobbing a little. There warn't no other sound but the scraping of the feet on the floor and blowing noses—because people always blows them more at a funeral than they do at other places except church. (page 181) (Twain, 2004)*

### d. Diverse Character

Diverse character refers to a character that represents a range of backgrounds, experiences, and identities, reflecting the variety found in real life. This can include differences in race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, ability, and cultural background.

Creating diverse characters enriches storytelling by providing multiple perspectives, promoting inclusivity, and fostering understanding of different cultures and experiences. It helps readers connect with the narrative on a deeper level and reflects the complexity of the world we live in.

In the process of reading the novel, there are lots of characters that were found from each chapter. Different characters have their own characteristics, such as in chapter one, it is known that Miss Watson (sister of Widow Douglas) liked to scold Huck Finn,

*Miss Watson would say, "Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry;" and "Don't scrunch up like that, Huckleberry—set up straight;" and pretty soon she would say,*

*"Don't gap and stretch like that, Huckleberry—why don't you try to behave?"* (page 3) (Twain, 2004)

In chapter five, it was seen that Pap (Huck Finn's father) is abusing him and is a rough person.

*He took it and bit it to see if it was good, and then he said he was going down town to get some whisky; said he hadn't had a drink all day. When he had got out on the shed he put his head in again, and cussed me for putting on frills and trying to be better than him; and when I reckoned he was gone he come back and put his head in again, and told me to mind about that school, because he was going to lay for me and lick me if I didn't drop that.* (page 22) (Twain, 2004)

In chapter nineteen when the two liars called themselves as a king and duke, Huck Finn found they were liars.

*It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds.* (page 127) (Twain, 2004)

## 2. American Slavery

Slavery in the United States began in the early 17th century and lasted for 250 years in the colonies and states. Slaves, mostly from Africa, worked on tobacco plantations and later on cotton plantations. With the invention of the cotton gin in 1793 and the growing demand for cotton from Europe, the use of slaves in the South became crucial to the region's economy. The abolition movement began to grow in the North in the late 18th century, causing the country to split due to tensions between the North and South. In 1857, the Supreme Court issued a decision known as the 'Dred Scott decision', which stated that black people (referring to the African race at the time) were not citizens and had no right to become citizens. As such, people who fled to free countries were still considered the property of their owners and had to be returned. This decision sparked outrage among many Northerners and gave new impetus to the previously failed abolition movement (Kolchin, 2003).

Slavery has existed in many cultures since before recorded history. A person can become a slave by being born, captured, or bought. A slave cannot freely terminate their status or work for pay. Slavery is divided into four categories, namely personal servitude, bonded labour, forced labour, and serfdom (Evans, 2022).

In 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', Mark Twain primarily critiques institutions like slavery, religion, government, and family dynamics. Interwoven with these criticisms is a focus on superstitions, particularly those related to death. Rather than outright condemning slave owners or idealizing enslaved people, Twain's approach is observational—he portrays both groups in their everyday actions, highlighting the attitudes of white individuals. The scenes he describes are often humorous and steeped in irony. Jim consistently demonstrates qualities associated with goodness, while Twain maintains a casual tone and a light, ironic perspective that offers implicit criticism of slavery. His viewpoint remains unobtrusive throughout the narrative (Lettis Richard, 1962).

Though Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the conclusion of the Civil War, America particularly the South was still grappling with racism and the lingering impacts of slavery. By the early 1880s, Reconstruction, the effort to reunite the country post-war and assimilate freed slaves into society, was on unstable ground, though it had not completely collapsed. As Twain crafted his novel, race relations, which had appeared to be improving in the aftermath of the Civil War, again became strained (Menaka and Sankar, 2018).

The introduction of Jim Crow laws aimed to undermine the rights of black individuals in the South through various indirect means, marking the onset of a new, subtle form of oppression (Sankar G, Jaya K., 2016). This emerging racism was less institutionalized and monolithic, making it more challenging to challenge. While slavery could be abolished, the actions of white Southerners enacting racist laws under the guise of self-defense against newly freed blacks were viewed by fewer individuals both Northern and Southern as immoral, leading to less urgency in addressing the situation.

Though Twain wrote the novel after the abolition of slavery, he set it a few decades earlier when slavery was still prevalent. However, by Twain's time, conditions for Black people in the South hadn't significantly improved. Thus, we can interpret Twain's portrayal of slavery as a metaphor for the ongoing plight of Black individuals in the United States, even after slavery had officially ended ( Marks Barry A. Ed., 1959).

Just as slavery subjugates the virtuous and ethical Jim to the authority of a morally compromised white society, so did the pervasive racism that emerged towards the end of Reconstruction unjustly constrain black men for irrational and hypocritical reasons (Menaka and Sankar, 2018).

In 'Huckleberry Finn', Twain reveals the hypocrisy of slavery, illustrating how racism corrupts both the oppressors and the oppressed. This leads to a morally ambiguous world, where ostensibly "good" white individuals like Miss Watson and Sally Phelps show no regard for the injustice of slavery or the harshness of tearing Jim away from his family (Menaka and Sankar, 2018).

Nevertheless, in 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', Twain portrays various families and their ways of life, each reflecting a distinct social class. He uses these families to highlight the differing values across society as Huck embarks on his journey. Jim's family life in the post-war South represents the lowest tier of society. As a slave, he was viewed as less than human, stripped of the dignity and rights to stay with his family. Jim did have a partner and children, and his greatest aspiration was to gain his freedom and reunite with his loved ones. His longing to be with his children was so profound that he was determined to achieve it, even if it meant enlisting an Abolitionist to help him "steal" them (Stallman RW, Arthur Waldhom., 1961).

The examples of slavery in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn novel:

*"The widow she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was a gentle, kind of a thing."* (page 12, Gramedia: English Classics version)

This illustrates the societal attitudes towards slavery and the notion of "civilizing" others.

*"All right, then, I'll go to hell."* (page 320, Gramedia: English Classics version)

This quote reflects Huck's moral struggle regarding helping Jim, a runaway slave. It highlights his internal conflict between societal norms and his own sense of right.

*"Jim, this is nice."* (page 82, Gramedia: English Classics version)

This line signifies a moment of camaraderie and highlights the human connection between Huck and Jim, challenging the dehumanizing views of slavery.

*"With WHO? Why, the runaway nigger, of course. Who'd you reckon?"* (page 427, Gramedia: English Classics version)

This statement reveals the harsh realities of racial attitudes during Huck's time, illustrating how society views Jim merely as property.

*"Jim said that bees won't sting idiots, but I didn't believe that, because I tried them lots of times myself and they wouldn't sting me."* (page 76-77, Gramedia: English Classics version)

In that line Huck's statement reflects his understanding of superstition and his perspective on race and intelligence. Jim, who is enslaved, often shares folk wisdom, and Huck's humorous twist suggests a deeper commentary on the way society views both intelligence and race. The idea that "bees won't sting idiots" can be interpreted as a way to highlight the irrational beliefs that surround both slavery and race. It subtly critiques the stereotypes that label Black individuals as less intelligent or capable. Huck's playful disbelief indicates his growing awareness and challenges the simplistic views of intelligence imposed by society.

## CONCLUSION

In 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn', Mark Twain masterfully weaves together themes of local color and the institution of American slavery to provide a rich, nuanced critique of 19th-century society. Through the use of diverse dialects and vivid environmental descriptions, Twain captures the essence of life along the Mississippi River, reflecting the complexities of regional culture. The characters, particularly Huck and Jim, serve as conduits for exploring the moral dilemmas surrounding slavery and racism, illustrating how societal norms corrupt individual ethics.

Twain's portrayal of Jim as a deeply human character, alongside the often hypocritical attitudes of white characters, exposes the absurdities and injustices inherent in slavery. The novel's setting during a time of racial strife, despite the formal abolition of slavery, emphasizes that the struggle for dignity and rights for Black individuals persisted long after emancipation. Ultimately, Twain's work remains a powerful commentary on the enduring legacy of racism and the moral ambiguity of human relationships, inviting readers to reflect on their own values and the societal constructs that shape them. Through Huck's journey of self-discovery and moral awakening, Twain challenges us to confront the complexities of justice, freedom, and humanity in a divided society.

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