

ESSAY ON HUCKLEBERRY FINN

In the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain discusses facets of past southern society, namely slavery and racism. By writing in the first person through the eyes of a boy of the south, the reader can see a first-hand view of life in the south. In the novel, there are several instances where the main character, Huckleberry Finn, personify Twain's view of the flaws of white society. Through the eyes of Huckleberry Finn, Twain develops his thoughts of past society and its endorsement of slavery and the oppression of an entire race.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain significantly develops his views of slavery and racism in his analysis of southern white society. "The Widow Douglas, 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." (Page 1). A reader who is not aware of the rest of the book would likely take this for a relatively innocuous statement, as it simply states that Huck did not enjoy living in a "sivilized" environment; that is, one in which he wore nice, clean clothes and slept in a bed. However, as Twain makes additional references to other aspects of white society, this statement is the first sign of Huck's breaking away from the social ways of the south, primarily slavery. Granted, Huck had not yet developed his conscience so early in the book, but Twain's view about slavery is clearly present. Pap, Huck's father, is presented relatively early in the novel as well. "Well, I'll learn you how to meddle. And looky hear—you drop that school, you hear? I'll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better'n what *he* is." (Page 19). In his statement, Pap is basically chastising Huck for trying to become something more than his father. Pap is a symbol of the worst members of white society; he is ignorant, uneducated, an alcoholic and profoundly racist. He often rants about how the "govment" has done him wrong. The latter is ironic, as Pap is actually an ideal representation of the United States' government at the time. In that, the government shared many of the qualities that Pap did; to elaborate, the government was, like Pap, profoundly racist as it endorsed slavery and its members were, for the most part, ignorant in their view of slaves. Twain also shows how hypocritical white society is in reference to the treatment and opinions of slavery. Miss Watson and the Widow

Douglass, portrayed as kind, virtuous and benevolent persons, try to tell Huck what is wrong and what is right, and that the eyes of God are always upon him. By instilling these beliefs, Huck is led to believe that slavery is right and that he would go to hell if he were to help a slave escape. This is obviously hypocritical, as the devaluing of human life is by no means virtuous as Miss Watson and society as a whole believes it is. Thus, Huck resents civilization and allows him to justify embarking on a quest with the runaway slave, Jim—who Miss Watson planned to sell—along the Mississippi for freedom. Leaving with Jim on the raft also shows Huck's departure from white society, a quest not only for a man's freedom, but also a quest for Huck to find and establish his conscience.

Twain points out how black people are essentially no different than white people through Huckleberry Finn's epiphanies that he has while en route to Cairo with Jim. A prime example of Huck's stepping away from white society is his experience with Jim on the raft in chapter sixteen—"I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. There warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft." (Page 117) In this statement, Huck shows his feeling of security with Jim—a black person. Hence, Huck no longer judges the integrity and "value" of a person based on their race; he views Jim as an equal to himself. After many months on the raft with Jim, Huck hears and observes Jim's emotional response to his predicament. "...I believed (Jim) cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so. ... He was a mighty good (slave), Jim was," stated Huck (page 157). This statement shows how society Huck's society thinks of slaves as being lesser, both emotionally and socially. In this realization, Huck realizes that society is wrong and that black people have the same emotional capacity and response to events as white people do. All of these events led to the ethical climax of the novel—"I took (the letter to Miss Watson) and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll go to hell'—and tore it up. It was awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming." (Page 215). These words of Huck Finn

represent his final exodus from white society. Huck had, in his mind, sold his soul to the devil for a slave; he no longer thought of himself as superior. This is perhaps Twain's most prominent statement of his views toward racism and slavery, clearly revealing his stance on the matter.

The mentioned incidences in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* imply that Twain was against slavery. Twain used a derogatory term for slaver repeatedly throughout the novel. Some would consider this an example of his endorsement of slavery. Nothing could be further from the truth; using the term shows how white society demoralized and dehumanized the blacks of the south. Moreover, Twain wrote this at a time when slavery was indeed a largely controversial issue—twenty years after the end of the civil war. His decision to publish an antislavery novel was incredibly bold and brave, as the atmosphere of the country was largely that slavery should remain a part of the country's laws. Nonetheless, the novel was a critical piece in the attempt to integrate blacks into society as whites still viewed blacks as inferior, despite the abolition of slavery. In his many criticisms of society—beginning with the ruling of a new judge that Huck must remain in the custody of his father—Twain boldly shows the flaws of white society. In that, Twain shows how whites had custody—to put it softly—over blacks; the relationship between Pap and Huck symbolizes the relationship between white oppressors and black slaves. Thus, though slavery was the modus operandi of southern society, Twain's attitude is palpably shown in his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in that he is completely opposed to slavery in all forms.

Through the great paradigm of American literature that is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain pointed out the flaws that ran deep in southern society. His influence through his works no doubt helped in the push for equality for all and social change. Twain was indeed the spearhead for a great literary movement that celebrated change in society. Perhaps if Huck had seen the way that his nation turned out—with the complete abolition of slavery and social acceptance based not on race—he would not be so prompt in resisting its influence to “civilize” him.