

Racism in "the adventures of huckleberry finn" by mark twain term paper

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Huckleberry Finn is a novel written by Mark Twain, which was published in 1888 (Wieck 23). Since then, the book has been a topic of controversial debates because of its dominant theme of racism. It has received a lot of criticism because of challenging authority, making fun at the concept of religion, and offering misleading advice to children. The novel has been banned in many schools because of the theme of racism. The author uses the word " nigger" so many times that the readers get the feeling that Twain is promoting racism (Wieck 43).

In today's world, the word has been replaced by the phrase " African American." In the media, the word is usually censored or replaced with the phrase " the N-word." Throughout the novel, Twain uses characters and certain events to explore the theme of racism. The book is considered as one of the greatest works in the genre of literature.

For that reason, it has been reprinted by certain publishing houses that have replaced the offensive word with ' slave." The book was published before the Civil War when racism was rampant in the American society. Other critics have argued that the novel is not racist but appears so because many readers have little or no understanding of Twain's use of language.

Due to repetition of the word " nigger" in the novel, many schools have banned the book and certain libraries have censored it. The reason for censoring and banning the novel is the theme of racism, which is explored through characters such as Jim and Huck. Jim is a black slave who escapes from the custody of his owner Miss Watson. Throughout the book, the author

makes certain descriptions and characterizations that many critics describe as racist.

Critics who endorse the novel argue that censoring the book is a sign of ignorance because many readers do not read between the lines in order to understand the author's message (Wieck 46). They argue that people who criticize the book possess superficial understanding of Twain's literary style. The first description of Jim in the book is negative. He is described as illiterate, highly superstitious, and of low intelligence. Huck's racist parents influenced him into developing negative attitudes towards black people.

The reason for Jim's situation is understandable. He was not allowed to go to school and was mistreated and abused. Twain depicts slavery as it happened during his times because slaves were mistreated, abused, and barred from attending school (Wieck 48). He uses the character of Huck to express his opposition to slavery and racism. He uses the characters of Huck and other white people such as Miss Watson to demonstrate the absurdity of racism.

The character of Pap is used to advance the theme of racism in the book. On one incident, he is angered by the realization that certain states allow black people to vote (Wrobel 6). He cites the case of a college professor. Even though the professor is more educated and has a better lifestyle than him, Pap decides to refrain from voting in future because the professor has the right to vote. He thus says,

Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was ' lection day, and I was just about to go and vote myself if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they

told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I'll never vote agin. (Twain 28-29)

Pap knows that he is financially, intellectually, and socially inferior to the professor. Therefore, it is ironical for him to despise the professor simply because he is of a different race. Unlike Pap who does not have a job and is a drunkard, the professor has a job and lives a good life. Pap believes that he is above the professor because he is white.

He believes that nothing can make an African American better than a white person. It is evident that Huck was raised in a racist environment (Wrobel 6). However, throughout the book, he gradually changes his perception about African Americans.

In chapter 15, Huck is angered by the fact that he has to apologize to a black person. Even though he hates it, he apologizes anyway. His apology does not mitigate the severity of Twain's advancement of racism in the book. Huck is a little different from other racist characters. Even though he is racist, he acts in a way that shows his little respect for black people (Wrobel 6). Maybe Twain uses Huck to show the differences in people's perception of race. Huck says,

It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way. (Twain 89)

Literary critics argue that the author created the character of Huck to show that even though many white people were racist, some of them respected black people. Such incidents reveal Twain's feelings regarding racism.

In chapter 16, Huck talks ill of Jim. He says that it is stupid of Jim to come back with the intention of stealing his own children. Huck further says Jim's notion that he can free his children has resulted from his own weakness. He then contradicts himself by saying that Jim wants to steal children that belong to a man that he does not know. Huck quotes an offensive saying that advances the theme of racism in the novel. He says,

Just see what a difference it made in him the minute he judged he was about free. It was according to the old saying, " Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell." Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger, which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. (Twain 92)

Twain narrates an incident involving Jim and Huck in order to express the absurdity of racism. After meeting Jim in the Island, Huck decides not to report him to Miss Watson. He is confused because he is unable to decide whether to obey the force of society that describes Jim as a slave or the force of their friendship that sees him as an equal human being (Wrobel 7). In the closing chapters of the book, Huck and Tom come to the realization that Jim is not property but a human being who is their equal.

Many instances are presented in the book in which Huck fails to understand why his friend Jim is a slave. Twain uses Huck to express society's attitude towards slavery and racism. To show the evil nature of racism, the author gradually transforms the character of Jim throughout the book (Wrobel 7). At the end, the reader is challenged to modify the description of Jim given at the beginning of the book.

The voice of society is represented by Huck. However, Twain uses other characters to refute the ideas presented by Huck with regard to racism.

Another character that advances the theme of racism is Duke. In chapter 26, Duke says that black people are thieves. He says that it is impossible for the black man who is responsible for cleaning to refrain from stealing money.

Twain uses the word "borrow" instead of "steal." Duke says that,

Because Mary Jane 'll be in mourning from this out; and first you know the nigger that does up the rooms will get an order to box these duds up and put 'em away; and do you reckon a nigger can run across money and not borrow some of it? (Twain 181)

In the book, Duke is depicted as a thief. Therefore, it is hypocritical of him to say that all black people are thieves. Duke has a similar attitude to other white characters in the book that welcome white strangers into their homes but lock up black strangers (Wieck 53). This shows that they are racist. The skin color of black strangers is not a good enough reason to lock them up. Their actions show that they do not like black people.

In the novel, African Americans are depicted as slaves and unworthy human beings. This is evident from the character of Huck at the beginning of the book. According to Huck, black people are slaves and white people are superiors. However, this perception changes after a friendship develops between him and Jim. He comes to the realization that Jim was like him. He learns this from observing Jim's personality and actions.

The realization shows that it is naive and hypocritical of Huck to consider black people as slaves because of their skin color (Wrobel 9). For instance, Jim cries when he fails to find Huck. After he shows up, Jim hugs him affectionately. Jim's actions change Huck's perception of black people.

He realizes that they are human beings who possess feelings just like white people. Twain satirizes the value of black people through the character of Huck. For instance, Huck describes a riverboat accident that delayed him as he made his way to Aunt Sally's home. In the accident, no one dies but a black person (Wieck 55). To Huck, the life of an African American is not precious.

Before the end of the novel, the author uses the character of Tom to show that race is a trite issue because all human beings are equal. The character of Jim depicts African Americans as intellectually inferior because in several instances throughout the book, it is difficult for Jim to express himself clearly because he is illiterate. However, Twain smashes this notion before the last chapter. Tom says that,

They hain't no RIGHT to shut him up! SHOVE!—and don't you lose a minute. Turn him loose! He ain't no slave; he's as free as any cretur that walks this earth! (Twain 291).

From this excerpt, it is evident that the writer expresses his opinion regarding racism. He closes the book by stating that all human beings are equal regardless of their race. This is evident from the actions of Miss Watson who set Jim free after declining to sell him. Not all characters had change of heart with regard to racism.

Within the context of the aforementioned excerpt, Tom argues with Aunt Sally who is happy about Jim's recapture. Tom vows to set Jim free even if everyone in the room disliked the idea (Wrobel 18). Even though he wants to set Jim free, he convinces him to stay locked up for his personal amusement.

Huckleberry Finn has received critical reviews because of its dominant theme of racism. The character of Jim and Huck are used to advance the theme. In the initial chapters, Huck considers black people as slaves and white people as superior. He despises them. His attitude is largely due to the racist environment in which he grew in. his dad, Pap, is a drunkard and jobless man who is also racist. Twain's goal of writing the novel was to show the absurdity of racism and slavery especially in the South.

However, over the years, many people have misunderstood his motive. Before the end of the book, Twain uses the character of Tom to show that all human beings are equal regardless of their race. Tom vows to set Jim free because according to him, all human being are equal and should be free. The

transformation of Huck's attitude towards Jim is proof enough that Twain authored the novel to show that he detested racism.

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