

Children reading shakespeare: twain's use of unreliable narration

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The ending of *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain leaves many readers confused, to say in the least. Throughout the novel, Huck's moral progression is clear and leads many to believe that he will overcome his racist views, ultimately revealing Twain's explicit criticism of racism. However, this is not the case. The real ending is blunt and morally lacking. Jim takes money as a form of an apology and is ignorantly happy. Tom Sawyer and Huck are no different. Because this is the case, some argue that *Huckleberry Finn* is actually a racist novel and therefore should not be upheld as an American classic. I believe that Twain actually purposefully constructed a "bad" ending by making Huck an unreliable narrator, to emphasize his criticism of racism. By making Huck an unreliable narrator by being a child and therefore misunderstanding of the severity of racism, while also being easily influenced by Tom and the "respectable" south, Twain criticizes the ironic and romantic racism of southern society throughout the end of the novel.

Huck is an unreliable narrator because he is a child and sees through innocent eyes, which causes him to misunderstand the implications of racism, revealing Twain's satire of the ironic casualty towards racism in the south. After playing an immature prank on Jim, it took Huck time to "humble [himself] to a n—r", but said he would not have done it if he knew it would "make him feel that way" (65). The prank displays Huck's childishness, but calling Jim a 'n—r' while also caring about his feelings implies that Huck does not understand the meaning of such derogatory language: Jim is black and therefore not a person with feelings and, as Smith observes, will always be "constrained by social relations"(374). Even though Huck cares about Jim

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as a person, it is ingrained in him that Jim is sub-human, highlighting the irony of racism. The irony continues when the duke and king are punished for their scams and Huck remarks that “ human beings can be awful cruel to one another” (174).

Huck is a child and cannot make the connection that whites are even more ‘ awful cruel’ to blacks, yet adults are also unable to make a similar connection, revealing Twain’s satire that southern adults treat racism as immaturely as a child. This mirroring continues when Tom compensates Jim with “ forty dollars for being prisoner for [them] so patient”(220). ‘ Forty dollars’ is clearly not adequate to repay Jim, but the adults and Huck seem to think so as they do not object. Although Smiley believes the money is evidence that “.. neither Huck nor Twain takes Jim’s desire for freedom at all seriously”(357), Twain is actually satirizing that the adults are mirroring the naive mindset of children when regarding racism, though they hold no excuses like a child may.

Through Huck’s unreliable outlook, Twain satirizes the inappropriate casualty southern society holds with racism. Huck is also an unreliable narrator because he is so easily influenced by Tom who represents the southern gentility, revealing Twain’s satire of the romantic and racist south. After Tom agrees to help free Jim, Huck feels that Tom “ fell, considerable” for being a “ n—r stealer!” (170). “ fell” implies Huck believes that Tom, who according to Smith “ represents a kind of solid respectability”(372), should not associate with such liberating activity even though it is the moral thing to do, revealing Twain’s message that Huck is overly influenced by the southern gentility.

Huck's morality is influenced again when he accepts Tom's irrational plan to save Jim because it was "worth fifteen of [his], for style... and maybe get [them] all killed besides" (176).

Huck's original plan was sensible, yet because of Tom's respectability, Huck assumes Tom's overly-romanticised way is better even though it risks Jim's freedom and could get them 'killed'. Jim also sees the stupidity of Tom's plans but "allowed [they] was white folks and knowed better than him" so "would do just as Tom said"(188). Tom's 'respectability' as a young southern gentleman again bypasses Huck and Tom's rationales, which Smiley believes are "distractions from the true subject of the work: Huck's affection for and responsibility to Jim"(356). However, Smiley fails to recognize that these 'distractions' from Huck's relationship with Jim are purposefully placed to satirize Tom's strong hand over the two. Tom's ideas are dramatic and wrongly-interpreted, yet still 'better' than Huck's and Jim's because he is considered respectable in southern society.

Tom's unjust influence over Huck reveals Twain's deeper satire of the romantic and racist south that contributes to the novel's attack on racism.