

# Literary criticism on adventures of huckleberry finn essay

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The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, which was first published in 1885, by Mark Twain is regarded by most people as one of the important American works of fiction ever written because of its artistry and evocation of major themes within the United States of America. The book received praises because of its ability to teach crucial lessons as well as entertain its readers. Through the use of satire, the touching and exciting adventures depicted in the novel portray significant themes that are of essence in the American society. On the other hand, the book is also the subject of major controversies. Since its publication, the work of fiction has been criticized and banned from libraries because of its alleged offenses to propriety. Nonetheless, the popularity of the book has not been affected by these controversies. This essay discusses some of the novel's critical interpretations.

Most detractors of the novel have labeled Mark Twain to be a “ racist writer.” John H. Wallace's essay, “ The Case against Huck Finn,” established the tone for the critical reception of the nineteenth century novel. He says, “ The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain, is the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written” (Leonard, 16).

In the essay, Wallace examines the racism in the novel in a bid to protect the African Americans from “ mental cruelty and harassment depicted in the novel. Wallace has been one of the prominent critics of Mark Twain and the essay is a return to the objections he has made about the novel's historical significance elsewhere. His criticisms mainly points at the racial slurs Mark Twain uses in the novel.

Wallace argues that Mark Twain's style of writing is offensive to African American readers, especially the young ones. Since it represents a perpetuation of cheap slave-era stereotypes, he claims that it should not be studied in schools. Wallace claims that the representation of the character Jim, who stands for the Blacks in Mark Twain's text, has a racial inclination. As the story starts, Jim is presented as someone who believes in superstition.

In addition, he does not articulate his grievances and is content in his role as a hardworking slave. When he discovers that his owner, Miss Watson, wanted to sell him to other people in the south, he escapes and travels with Huck along the river. Wallace posits that Jim is portrayed as a model of the stereotypes that were connected with the Black minority in the nineteenth century racist discourse.

Mark Twain presents him as rather ' subhuman,' feeble-minded, wicked, and indolent, which shows that he is inferior to the white people. For example, the statement, " Miss Watson's nigger, Jim, had a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the fourth stomach of an ox, and he used to magic with it"( Twain, 17), depicts the subordinate status of Jim. The negative portrayal of Jim by the author is the main reason why Wallace campaigned for the banning of the book from institutions of learning.

Wallace concludes his essay by promoting his own adapted version of the novel " which no longer depicts blacks as inhuman, dishonest, or unintelligent" (Leonard, 24). Moreover, pointing to his own adapted version, he recommends, " this book should not be used with children (Leonard, 24).

Forrest G. Robinson and James Cox also asserted a critical attitude towards the novel. The former claimed that “ Jim eventually reverts to a two dimensional character, gullible and superstitious” while the latter “ never actually asserts a strong position on the character of Jim, placing him in ambiguity” (Wrobel, 4).

However, it is important to note that the critics did not look at Mark Twain’s ironic representation of the situation. Wallace’s adaptation of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, undercuts the irony that Twain has intended to use to attack the institution of slavery during the nineteenth century.

His softening of the white bigotry can make people to conclude that the blacks were not treated cruelly and people can also forget the reasons why they were enslaved, to start with. If the novel was out rightly racist, then it could not have been a story about a white boy (Huck) and an African-American (Jim). Although during that time blacks were treated inhumanly, Huck and Jim related well with one another and found pleasure in carrying out common activities.

During the times of slavery, the two races were very different and the whites were thought to be superior. Sharing of common things was unheard of. However, in the novel, Mark Twain points out that one can share common interests with another regardless of his or her racial background. “ People would 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" (Twain, 50). These words were spoken by Huck. He was telling Jim that he won't tell anybody about his escape from slavery. If the novel were racist, Huck could not have even attempted to assist his friend in escaping from the yolk of slavery.

The language of the book has also been a subject of criticism. Notable, is the fact that the word " nigger" has been repeated in the novel more than two hundred times. Langston Hughes, in his autobiography comments that " the word nigger to colored people of high and low degree is like a red rag to a bull.

Used rightly or wrongly, ironically or seriously, of necessity for the sake of realism, or impishly for the sake of comedy, it doesn't matter (Webb, para. 15). Since the African-Americans do not like the word, that is why some of them have heavily criticized Twain for using the word so many times in the book. Allan B. Ballard is one of the critics of the language used in the novel.

He says, " The presentation of the novel as an " American classic" serves as an official endorsement of a term uttered by the most prejudiced racial bigots to an age group eager to experiment with any language of shock value" (Webb, para. 9). For instance, " I see it warn't no use wasting words- you can't learn a nigger to argue."(Twain, 78). Ballard argues that such instances where the word has been used tend to stereotype Jim as a stupid nigger who is incapable of comprehending anything.

Interestingly, in those days when the novel was written, the use of the word " nigger" was not so much debatable as it is now. Writers could use the

language even when addressing African-American without much contention. However, just a few years ago did people start criticizing Twain for his use of the word. And the use of the “ n word” has made critics to label the work of fiction as racist. Critics, like Ballard, have asserted that Jim is only a stereotype in the story.

He cannot think for himself. Therefore, he merely follows the suggestions of Huck (and later Tom) in performing tasks. All through the book, different characters put him down. And at one time, Huck even feels guilty of assisting him in his quest for freedom. Maybe, the critics' strongest assertion is that he is not a conventional slave of the nineteenth century. This is because slaves received much worse treatment than the one depicted in the story.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that Mark Twain was just trying to represent the real situation as it was during his time. We are separated from the events in the story by close to one hundred and fifty years so we need to understand the novel in that context. The word “ nigger” was used frequently during that time. More so, individuals used to despise the ones who were slaves and the novel is an attempt to depict this situation. The author of the novel seems to be condemning this practice in his sly manner.

Martin Holz claims that although Mark Twain succeeded in using a narrator who speaks vernacular, there are two contradictory voices in the language used. He criticizes the language of the novel by saying that “ Hick Finn conveys all kinds of sentiments and perceptions in the language he has at

his disposal to articulate his spontaneous reactions to them and in a more or less random order rather than a logical structure”(Holz, 5).

This makes Huck to act like a transmitter instead of a narrator in the story and makes him to seem to have no visual perception of the time. Holz argues that instead of saying general statements or definitive personal opinions, the narrator most of the time does not go beyond giving a mere narration of the things he encounters, and the language he employs in the process makes him to be a less sophisticated narrator having a constrained perspective about his surroundings.

Concerning the second contradictory voice, Holz says that “ the second voice emerges in the novel as the first voice with his heavy use of vernacular is replaced by a narrator who used regional lingo only occasionally, thus offering a different outlook on the characters and events in the novel” (5). Although Twain is one of the writers to use this technique in writing, the two contradictory voices used in the novel complicates the process of narration as a reader can fail to understand what is taking place.

In conclusion, despite the critical reception of the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, it is important in directing attention to some issues that the American society has not taken seriously. The themes that are portrayed in the novel are invaluable and to totally discredit the book cannot be a move in the right direction.

This is because readers would not get the advantage of the much needed knowledge and growth that they can reap after going through the humor-

filled book. Therefore, the critical look at the novel should also encompass the major themes that it portrays.

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