

Racism and
huckleberry finn: a
look below the
surface essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

“ I see it warn’t no use wasting words—you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit. ” Says Huckleberry Finn, the central character Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 78). This casually racist comment—which, in itself, embodies several of the racism-based arguments for the censorship of Twain’s 1884 novel—is one of many that pervades the forty-three chapters of the classic American work. However, the portrayal of racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, though it has not gone uncontested by critics and readers alike, is one that should not simply be disregarded as an insensitive depiction of antebellum race relations.

In fact, under the guise of a boy’s adventure story, Twain’s satirical account of the pre-Civil War South, through which he also satirizes the Southern mentality that persisted long after the Confederacy’s surrender in 1865, succeeds in making several very strong statements about the race relations that existed, and even continue to exist, in society. Though on the surface Twain’s novel may appear to be an example of the “ racist trash” that some critics have cited it as, it is clear that if one takes a closer look, he or she will realize that Twain is merely holding a mirror to the racist society of the past and perhaps even of the present.

Through Huck Finn’s mischievous escapades with Jim, the admirable runaway slave with whom Huck travels down the Mississippi River, Twain uses various elements of satire to explore numerous characters and situations that serve to highlight and condemn the hypocritically racist customs, offhandedly racist attitudes, and contradictably racist beliefs in white superiority and African-American stereotypes held by the society in which Huck lives.

Thus, despite the numerous attempts of critics who have tried to remove the novel from high school curricula, it is clear that the novel should not be removed from high school American literature classes because these satirical condemnations provide a reflection of racist society that, when presented in the correct context, may be both eye-opening and beneficial to all readers. From the novel's opening chapter, the reader is introduced to the first way in which Twain uses satire to criticize racism in Southern white society: his ironic portrayal of racist customs held by those whom Huck encounters.

The first instance of this can be found in chapter one, when Huck observes that the slaves on Miss Watson's property are invited inside before bedtime to join their masters in prayer (Twain 5). Through Huck's observation of this occurrence, Twain makes clear from the beginning that the "good intentions" of such customs are overshadowed by prevailing racism and hypocrisy. Furthermore, religion, as is soon learned, is one of several underlying themes that succeed in highlighting the novel's portrayal of racism.

Gilded by an air of Christian nobility, these slaveholding characters, as Twain seeks to point out, fail to realize the insincerity of their actions as they proclaim that all men are equal under God but continue to treat the Blacks as their inferiors and own them as property. Perhaps more importantly, another custom that Twain brings under critical scrutiny in the novel is the practice of slavery as a whole.

The attitudes towards slavery of the society in which Huck lives are unquestioning—no character, with the exception of Huck, ever questions the

place slavery holds in his or her society, choosing instead to accept the institution without a second thought. Hypocrisy and religion again play a role in the criticism of this particular custom, as most of the slaveholding characters in the novel are otherwise portrayed as “ good Christians.

Through the description of such customs, Twain succeeds in using irony to satirize the society’s complacency with the existing state of affairs. Although some critics may mention such aspects of the novel as examples of Twain’s own racism, it is evident that Twain’s descriptions of such customs are not, in themselves, racist, but are simply necessary to aid in his portrayal of the complacently racist society that he is satirizing. This ignorant acceptance of the Southern status quo ties directly into the second way in which Twain conveys his views on race.

Again with a strong use of satire, Twain effectively illustrates the offhandedly racist attitudes of many characters that Huck encounters on his journey down the Mississippi. Even Huck, himself, on numerous occasions displays such an attitude in his relationship with the loveable runaway, Jim, at one point claiming that he “ knowed he [Jim] was white inside...” when Jim insists that Tom Sawyer see a doctor after being shot in the leg despite the fact that he is risking his freedom by doing so (Twain 264).

This comment embodies the complexity of the relationship between the two characters. On the one hand, the pair’s journey down the Mississippi breaks down many of Huck’s misconceptions about Jim and Jim’s race. This becomes clear when, after hearing Jim lament his separation from his family and his mistreatment of his young daughter, ‘ Lizabeth, Huck says, “ ... I do believe

he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It doesn't seem natural, but I reckon it's so. (Twain 150)

It becomes clear again when Huck decides that he is willing to go to Hell for helping Jim escape from slavery, claiming, " I couldn't strike no places to harden me against him...[he] would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was... I studied for a minute, and then says to myself: ' All right, then, I'll go to hell! '" (Twain 206). On the other hand, however, there is also evidence that Huck is never able to fully overcome the racist attitudes that have been instilled in him by society, however hard he has tried to separate himself from it.

This fact is made apparent in the last quarter of the novel, after Tom Sawyer makes his reappearance. Despite all of Huck's development up to this point, his newfound tolerance is essentially reversed once Tom Sawyer returns. At this point, Huck again becomes a mere follower of Tom's ideas, and he simply goes along with Tom's blatantly impractical and subtly racist viewpoints at the expense of Jim's freedom and overall wellbeing.

Despite this contradiction, however, one Twain scholar, Nat Hentoff, describes the pair's relationship in a solely positive light, claiming that Huck's ability to see beyond the barriers of Jim's color is a prominent force throughout the novel: " Look at Huck Finn. Reared in racism, like all the white kids in his town. And then, on the river, on the raft with Jim, shucking off that blind ignorance because [he learns] this runaway slave is the most honest, perceptive, fair minded man this white boy has ever known. (qtd. in Henry)

Another important instance in which Twain illustrates the offhandedly racist attitudes of the characters in the novel occurs when Huck learns that Jim has been sold to the owner of the Phelps Farm. Upon his arrival on the property, Huck lies to Sally Phelps about a steamboat cylinder-head explosion that hurt no one but “killed a nigger,” to which Aunt Sally responds with relief, “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt” (Twain 213).

Despite the arguments of critics who claim that such a nonchalant display of racism on both Sally’s and Huck’s part is one that, once again, displays Twain’s own indifference when it comes to racist outlooks and attitudes, it continues to be unquestionable that the opposite is true. By describing such unemotional displays of racial prejudice, Twain seeks to convey that racism is something so deeply rooted in the Southern society in which the story is set that the characters simply do not realize its insulting immorality.

Far from being an expression of Twain’s own apathetic views on casual racism, Twain’s portrayals of such indifferent attitudes, instead, intend to shock the reader and compel him or her to question the mindset of the characters in the novel and take a step back in order to realize the flaws in these characters’ reasoning. The final way in which the novel satirically portrays racism in the antebellum South is through Twain’s depictions of characters’ beliefs in white supremacy and African-American stereotypes.

Two notable ways in which Twain uses satire to make his points on such issues are through his development of Pap’s views on African-Americans and his overall portrayal of Jim and other African-Americans in the story. Pap, Huckleberry Finn’s abusive, uneducated, drunken father, epitomizes the filth

of Southern white society. Though it may seem as though such a figure should rest at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the contradiction lies in the fact that Pap still believes himself to be more valuable to society than even the most educated, well-brought-up Black man.

There was a free nigger there from Ohio...They said he was a p'fessor in a college and could talk all kinds of languages and knowed everything... They said he could VOTE when he was at home. Thinks I, what is this country coming to? ... I drawed out. I says I'll never vote again. " rages Pap about the supposed injustice of a government that legally allows a Black man to vote in a northern free state (Twain 27). Pap's supremacist viewpoints, however racist they may be, highlight the clash between the perceived and actual reality of social classifications in the South.

Although Pap is clearly the less respectable character in many cases, he believes himself to be superior simply because he is not of color. The importance of this is that, through white supremacists such as drunken, bumbling Pap, Twain seeks to point out the absurdity of such race-based social classifications. The portrayal of Jim and other African-Americans in the novel is also contradictory in nature. Here, the contradiction lies in the inconsistency with which Twain portrays those of color.

Although the overall message of the story urges readers to see past the barriers of race, Twain's depiction of Jim and other Blacks is still largely guided by the racial stereotypes of the day. For example, on many occasions, both Jim and Nat, the slave attendant at the Phelps Farm, are characterized as very superstitious. Furthermore, it is questionable as to why

Jim, who on the raft proves his humanity and capability of complex emotions, is reduced at the end of the novel to the stereotypical representation of African-American ignorance and subservience.

Though, by the end of the novel, Twain's portrayal of Jim and other African-Americans becomes essentially farcical in nature, these contradictory depictions again seek to reflect the deeply embedded and unshakable racist convictions of the society in which *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set. Such depictions are intended with a certain level of shock value that is meant to make readers uncomfortable and trigger feelings of disapproval toward the Southern mentality that compels such viewpoints.

In a high school classroom setting, it is understandable why the inclusion of such a novel in the curriculum may be a matter of great controversy. From the Southern dialect's use of the "n" word to the controversially racist themes of the novel, many critics have opposed the novel's inclusion, claiming that it has a negative effect on the racial pride of African-American students and the overall mentality of high school students in general. However, those who argue these points fail to realize the implications of such themes and dialect.

One writer, Michiko Kakutani, agrees in his article "Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You" that such justification for the censorship or removal of the novel from high school curriculums on the basis of the "n" word is flawed. He states that, "Nigger, which appears in the book more than 200 times, was a common racial epithet in the antebellum South, used by Twain as part of his characters' vernacular speech and as a reflection of mid-19th-

century social attitudes along the Mississippi River... To censor or redact books on school reading lists is a form of denial: shutting the door on harsh historical realities. (Kakutani)

According to Kakutani, the “ racist” aspects of the book are simply representations of a common regional patois and history itself – both of which are representations that help readers remember the past and allow them to better assess the present. In addition to this, the overriding themes in the novel, those that condemn the hypocrisy and immorality of racism, provide valuable lessons to the reader.

With this in mind, it is clear that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a teachable book and should be included in high school American literature curriculums because, with proper instruction on the novel’s allegorical nature, its themes and dialects can help high school students see past the barriers of race that continue to exist today and put Twain’s satirical messages to use for the better.

To the superficial eye, Twain’s descriptions of the customs, attitudes, and viewpoints that prevailed in the antebellum South may provide a false initial representation of the novel’s implications and message. Although the portrayal of racism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one that may ostensibly appear to distinguish the novel as racist altogether, if a reader looks below the surface, he or she will realize that Twain is simply seeking to alert his readers to the injustice of the racism that already existed in the society about which he chose to write.

Through the compelling tale of Huckleberry Finn, readers are reminded of the many aspects of racism that have been overcome, but they are also reminded of the novel's relevance today and how far American society must still go to achieve true equality. Regardless of the challenges that the novel has had to overcome, it remains unarguable that its complexity and rich satire have allowed it to remain a contentious subject of analysis into the 21st century. For these reasons, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is truly a timeless American classic.