

Free term paper on the american ideal

Literature, Russian Literature



Define and discuss the author's comic critique of unrealized American ideals and inequitable American realities as regards class and race in Huckleberry Finn

Introduction:

Huckleberry Finn is the archetypical American novel written by the enigmatic Mark Twain and which sheds considerable light on American society as a whole. It tells the story of the son of a town's vagrant who leaves his son in rags and tatters and who is very much at the mercy of the elements throughout. The boy is a lovable young kid who does not have much going for him but who is essentially good and although he is shunned by society, he still is quite positive and outgoing in his life. Eventually he meets a runaway slave called Tom who becomes his best friend and their friendship helps them move on to greater things and achievements accordingly.

Twain's sarcasm on the ignorance of American society is very much reflected in the attitudes which were pervasive at the time especially with regard to slavery and other similar issues where blacks were seen as being something evil and without much hope for betterment.

American society is built fundamentally on the power to better oneself rather in the Calvinist mode and the character of Huckleberry Finn certainly bears testament to this. Although he is shunned and reviled by society, he still is someone who from the dregs of life manages to make something out of himself. His attachment to Tom is instructive as here is a person who is suffering similarly without much hope of bettering himself or escaping certain death since that was essentially the fate of all runaway slaves if these were captured.

Huck's upbringing is also an issue as it is clear that his father abuses him and treats him very badly, another penchant of American society where the father figure is treated as some sort of domineering force. The rules of the South where vagrants and the homeless are treated as vermin who should be eliminated is reflected in the considerable prejudice against Huck which permeates proceedings from first page to last. Twain is in effect quite a subtle commentator who demonstrates a wily knack at touching the raw nerves which are so prevalent in the close minded Southern mentality. This is demonstrated time and time again as things turn out differently for Huck when he meets the runaway slave Tom and the South's prejudice is further exacerbated.

Twain's description of Huckleberry Finn makes for intriguing reading indeed and has to tug at any of our heart strings with its painful sense of reality: "idle, and lawless, and vulgar, and bad," all are adjectives which convey a certain sense of evil and doom.

Additionally Huck is described as such: "he was fluttering with rags." He has a torn broken hat and his trousers are supported with only one suspender" 1.

The prejudices of the South were so great that Huck actually believed that he would be going to hell if he helped his friend Tom free himself from the shackles of slavery as this was an institution which was blessed by God according to Southern mentality. This type of approach was readily and regularly mocked by Twain in his narrative which obviously finds a lot to be desired in the American perception of such things.

Slavery as an institution and how it is perceived in Huckleberry Finn

Twain was a known anti-slavery crusader and in Huckleberry Finn he focuses essentially on several points which make sense although in those times, slavery being the controversial subject at that it was remained pretty much taboo.

Reconstruction after the Civil War was an important aspect of the American nation coming to terms with the end of slavery. Twain is again very detailed about this period and provides some insightful analysis into all of the proceedings. However there are some aspects with which I do not agree especially as he seems to be arguing that reconstruction was a bit hard on whites in the Deep South due to the fact that they were deprived of their principal form of labour. This was actually not the case as the black people could now offer their services but had to be paid according to what they did which was probably only fair but which was something which the white people seemed unable to understand.

Reconstruction was also important for former slaves as it also gave them the first taste of politics where they even held office in the US Senate for a time. Twain subtly argues that this was made possible by the understanding that slaves were no longer sub human individuals but were also individual beings possessed of a mind of their own and who could contribute to life in general even on a social basis. This obviously brought about considerable opposition from the white minority in the South who could not bring themselves to be ruled by blacks. This is an aspect which may be afforded much discussion but which at the end of the day is also an important moot point for those who wish to understand the deep rooted effects of slavery on American

society in general and how this is continually relevant today even in the context of a liberalized society. The character of Tom is also imbued with a certain sense of nobility and although this poor chap is suffering greatly, he has an incredibly positive attitude to life which makes everything worthwhile and shows up slavery for what it is, a horrible and cruel institution.

Slavery remains a topic which arouses much controversy both amongst Americans and also throughout the world when discussing the past and its effects on society in general. One has to take into account the fact that slavery remains ingrained in certain societies although the American institution also persisted for several decades after it supposedly ended through the system of sharecropping and other forms of indentured labour. To sum up, Twain provides an interestingly different analysis of proceedings regarding slavery which are not always given their due or their importance.

The book's conclusion is also intriguing as espoused in the first chapter:

“ Now the way that the book winds up is this: Tom and me found the money that the robbers hid in the cave, and it made us rich. We got six thousand dollars apiece -- all gold. It was an awful sight of money when it was piled up” 2.

Controversy courted and created by Twain's book

In a closed society so preoccupied with moral issues such as the American one, it was to be expected that the novel Huckleberry Finn would cause controversy and create problems for several editors and influential opinion writers. First and foremost it was the New York Public Library in Brooklyn which banned the book and this elicited a fierce response from Twain

Intrinsically this means that the book was intended for adults, which is quite far from the truth. One has to remember that American society was quite hypocritical and protected its young in an almost obsessive way which however did not bear fruit. The sarcasm in Twain's reply is deeply felt and is almost comparable to an indictment against those who wish to preach when they themselves are corrupted and without morals. He felt that upholding an amount of nostalgia for the institution of slavery was nothing short of heinous and was something which should have definitely been condemned accordingly.

However one has to argue that Twain's views on the South and its peculiar prejudices were bound to cause a stir. The nostalgia for the past and slavery as a major part of that past were surely anathema to Twain's being and self. He felt that he could not acquaint himself with such blatant prejudice where there was actually no hope of improving one's life chances accordingly and this also meant that he could not accept what was morally wrong either. His avid descriptions of Tom and his troubles also demonstrate a certain empathy which was undoubtedly lacking amongst those who held racial mixing with disdain and downright disgust so the book was a further attack on their self-imposed system in this regard.

Huck's perception of women and their perception of him is also crucially important. Women were very much involved in the slavery question especially on the abolitionist side. In the North, women formed societies to assist runaway slaves and to help educate them and all this led to a general outcry against slavery which culminated in the Civil War. Slave women were themselves affected by all this as most of them now found a new

independence in their ways and customs which could not be expressed whilst they were suppressed into slavery. Naturally enough, there were women, especially those from the Southern states who resisted all efforts to end slavery as they were comfortable enough in their own cosy situations with their slaves helping them live the life of queens. However American women eventually played a hugely important role in the slavery question and were also instrumental in the efforts to end it completely. Slavery as a scourge was always there and women played a huge part in making this disappear for ever.

The Industrial revolution brought about a huge and not inconsiderable change in women's conditions in the middle of the 19th century. First of all, the women moved out of the house and into the workplace, making a huge and substantial contribution to the workforce although in rather horrific working conditions. Obviously women in poor classes had to work to survive and these were sent out to tackle some very physical jobs thus completely changing their mindset and their opinion on life. However it also found them a new form of independence and a will to attain new goals. The middle classes were also affected in the sense that they began gaining a certain amount of independence by observing their peers in the world of work and slowly but surely they began infiltrating the male dominated professions. Wealthier women also had access to more material goods and travel was also a factor which brought them to new ideas and different lifestyles. The Industrial revolution was a melting pot of sorts and this affected women in a significant manner even in the relationship between husband and wife and this is clearly shown in the novel Huckleberry Finn.