

Huck finn: oh, the irony of society!

Literature



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Satirizing America: The Purpose of Irony in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

In 1884, Mark Twain published the sequel to his successful novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. With the sequel, Twain took a different approach rather than the comical, boyish tone of *Tom Sawyer*. He used it as an opportunity to expose the problems he had seen with society using one of the most powerful methods available to a writer: irony. The technique gave Mark Twain much flexibility in his writing. It was a subtle yet powerful way of expression; critical social commentary enveloped in whimsical humor. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* amuses the reader while expressing a powerful message about society.

Using Irony

Twain has created an entire novel that satirizes the foolishness he noticed about society. One wrong he saw with society was that man could be so cruel and inhumane to his fellow man. Take the irony that surrounds the situation at the Phelps farm. The Phelps were good-natured Christians whom were taught by society that slavery was morally right. Therefore, Jim is treated accordingly and locked up in a shed for running away. One subtle part of the irony is that the cruelest person to Jim was not the Phelps, who locked him in the shed, nor the king, who sold Jim to the Phelps. Instead the most cruel person happens to be Tom Sawyer. Tom needlessly put Jim through arduous conditions: first, for knowing that Jim was already a free man, and secondly, such measures were not necessary for the simple task of freeing Jim. Accordingly, they actually allowed Jim out to help them push the grindstone towards the shed: " We see it warn't no use; we got to go and

fetch Jim. So he raised up his bed and slid the chain of the bed-leg" (196). Furthermore, after they placed the grindstone where it needed to be, Tom and Huck helped him fix his chain back on the bed-leg" (197). In addition, after Tom and Huck finally set Jim free, he was still treated with cruelty even though he had stayed to help Tom when he was shot. Jim risked his freedom and yet the kind treatment the doctors suggested was the promise of ending the cursing and placing him back in his shed (215). Slavery, to Mark Twain, was another form of cruelty as illustrated by the conversation Huck had with Joanna at the Wilks home where Huck is trying to conjure up a plausible story about his background in England:

- How is servants treated in England? Do they treat 'em better 'n we treat our niggers?
- No! A servant ain't nobody there. They treat them worse than dogs.

One must realize that slaves in the United States were also treated worse than dogs, another social criticism Mark Twain illusively placed without losing fluidity.

Mark Twain also used irony to satirize the notion that whites adhered to: superiority over blacks. The prime example of this kind of irony would be the comment Aunt Polly made when Huck had fabricated the story about the cylinder-head accident:

- It warn't the grounding - that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head. [Huck said]
- Good gracious! anybody hurt? [asked Aunt Polly].

- No'm. Killed a nigger.
- Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt (167).

The criticism depicted here is self-evident; Aunt Polly does not consider a black man to be human. Another situation in which irony is employed is when Pap, Huck's father, is expressing his derision towards black people. Whether he admits to it or not, Pap is everything that he despises about them. He is a filthy, shameless drunkard, with an ingrained contempt for black people. He compares his clothes that ain't fitten for a hog to those of a free, wealthy mulatto (20). Moreover, he refuses to vote now that he has found out that blacks in other states had the right to vote. By refusing to vote, he further characterizes himself as the black man he despises so much. The feuding predisposition of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons is also an example of irony. These families continue to fight a feud albeit no one was able to recall the exact cause. The church sermon the two families attended add to the irony for the topic was brotherly love. A third example are the two conniving con-artists, the king and the duke. Throughout the course of the adventure, the deceptive pair had continuously swindled a countless number of people into willingly give them money. Even when fair justice was served and the king and duke were tarred and feathered, Huck still thought the punishment was severe: Human beings can be awful cruel to one another (174). On two other occasions, Huck praised Jim for having characteristics that blacks usually were not supposed to possess. Once, Huck praised Jim for he had an uncommon level head for a nigger because Jim realized that Miss Watson would sell him if he were ever captured (57). The second time was when Jim stayed behind when Tom was shot in the leg; this time, Huck

knowed he was white inside, ; an insult considering some of the white characters in the story (207).

Finally, religion is another target Mark Twain satirized through irony in Huck Finn. The first example is a situation already mentioned: the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. After the church sermon about brotherly love, everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home, and had such a powerful lot to say yet ironically, they were not at all affected by the sermon, having no intentions of ending their feud with the Grangerfords (83). Here, Mark Twain connects religion with hypocrisy. There was also the time when Huck decided to steal Jim from the Phelps. For Huck, religion was a burden on his conscience that almost stopped him from doing what was right and freeing Jim. He still considered Jim as property owned by Miss Watson and felt like he was committing a sin, but he chose friendship over religion and decided that he would go to Hell if necessary. Lastly, the naivete of the camp meeting congregation seems to be showing how religion can shroud over people's common sense. In addition, it was the only scam that was successful and in which the conned never realized what they had just done.

With *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain authored a whimsical, satirical book filled with irony. The language used in *Huck Finn* employs humorous situations that contained serious issues Mark Twain saw in his time: the need for humanitarianism, the confrontation of racism, and the significance of religion or the lack thereof. Clearly concerned and unsatisfied with the condition of society, Mark Twain seamlessly knitted his own views into his work. Amusing yet serious, subtle yet powerful, *The Adventures of*

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Huckleberry Finn is a novel that will hopefully be remembered for its literary articulateness and not for its misunderstood racial content.