

The Moral Bankruptcy of Whiteness in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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ABSTRACT

Many critics focus on the prejudice of the slavery system and its negative impact on the American society after the Civil War in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, while at the same time overlook the moral corruption of the white community that oppressed and mistreated not only the blacks but also the powerless whites. The child Huck suffers from abuse and inhumane treatment at the hands of his violent father that makes him form an alliance with the runaway slave, Jim, and search for illumination and freedom on a raft down the Mississippi River. This implies that violence was an emblem of the whole nation that was not only practiced against blacks but also against the helpless children. The white community in the novel takes advantage of the insecure status of Huck and Jim, as a child and a runaway slave, respectively, that presents whites as frauds and murderers.

Keywords: moral bankruptcy, white, black, slavery, violence.

Introduction

Mark Twain's novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was first published in 1884, less than twenty years after the abolition of slavery in America, and it represents realistic account of the horrible events that were practiced during the time of slavery fifty years prior to the publication. Kristin Luehr (2007: 57) reads violence in Twain's novel as a manipulation of the tradition of Southwestern humor, "one of the most well-known literary traits of Southwestern humor is an exhibition of violence, something that can be found in abundance throughout Twain's masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*". Other critics like Alex Pitofsky (2006: 55) emphasize the social problems in America at the time through focusing on the character Pap, "Pap's toxic mix of racism, alcoholism, and child abuse functions as the novel's overture, introducing an array of social problems". Daniel Traber (2000: 26) examines the character Huck as a "non-conformist" individual who refuses to accept the social norms of his society, "the image of the non-conformist subject transcending the social order's limitations and narrowness, ever capable of overcoming the constraints of history and culture, and with the agency to reject all constrictive (and constructive) restrictions through physical separation is vital to understanding the novel's position in the national consciousness". Joseph Coulombe (2001: 261) "investigate[s] the effect of cultural influences on the structure and content of *Huckleberry Finn*". This paper studies the moral bankruptcy of white characters in the novel that claim righteousness and superiority over other races while in fact they are corrupt, robbers and murderers.

Twain refers throughout his narrative to slavery as a dark stain in the history of the United States before the abolition of the institution of slavery. Even though the condition of black Americans took long time to improve after the emancipation of slave individuals after the Civil War in 1865, Twain set his novel at a time when slavery was legal and supported by the constitution. Mason Lowance and Jan Pilditch (2008: 67) refer to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 as a new law that "rendered the escaping slave a fugitive and subjected him or her to capture and return regardless of the status of the State in which he or she was found". This implies that the new law left runaway slaves insecure and unprotected by the federal laws that support slavery even if they escape to Northern Free State. Twain presents himself

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as a white abolitionist through drawing attention to the cruelties of the slave system that oppresses blacks, suggesting that all men are created equal and have human rights.

The novel begins with the boy Huck, the narrator of the story, satirizing the corruption of his white society by declaring that he has never seen honest people throughout his life. Huck says: "I never seen anybody but lied one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary" (3)¹. The fact that the innocent Huck lives among corrupt individuals makes him susceptible to violence and moral callousness of society. It would be clear to note that any evil action in the novel is associated with whiteness while goodness and innocence are associated with black characters. The white Huck rebels against the corruption and violence of his Southern society by suggesting that reformation is necessary. However, Huck arrives at this fact only when he interacts with slaves like Jim, who Twain presents in the novel as part of the American community and that excluding blacks from being active participants in society hinders the development of the country. Therefore, what makes Huck achieve heroism is the fact that he is different from other white characters in the novel. Lionel Trilling (1950: 111-112) writes that Huck "becomes an heroic character when, on the urging of affection, [he] discards the moral code he has always taken for granted and resolves to help Jim in his escape from slavery". The moral and intellectual growth of Huck throughout the novel can only be read through his contact with humane black characters like Jim. Therefore, the journey of Huck and Jim down the Mississippi River represents an escape from the moral callousness of white society and search for freedom.

The character Pap, the father of Huck, represents an example of the sadistic white community at the time that plays a turning point in the life of Huck. Twain satirizes the prejudice of his white contemporaries through the character of the alcoholic and brutal Pap. The arrival of the aggressive Pap in St. Petersburg demanding the money of Huck and the failure of the legal system to protect the son from his abusive father leads Huck to question the values that he has been taught by his society. Pap endangers the life of Huck by abducting him in a cabin in the Illinois woods where he treats him as a property that has no human rights. Pap speaks to Huck in rage,

Call this a govment! why, just look at it and see what it's like. Here's the law a-standing ready to take a man's son away from him – a man's own son, which he has had all the trouble and all the anxiety and all the expense of raising. Yes, just as that man has got that son raised at last, and ready to go to work and begin to do suthin' for *him* and give him a rest, the law up and goes for him. And they call *that* govment! That ain't all, nuther. The law backs that old Judge Thatcher up and helps him to keep me out o' my property. (25-26)

The fact that the judicial system does not protect Huck from his violent father represents the corruption of that system that leaves the son helpless. Michael Hoffman (1986: 39) proposes "that the forces of society are stronger than the individual's will" in the novel. Twain parodies the corruption of his Southern society where brutality is an emblem of the whole nation. Huck recounts the excessive violence Pap practiced against him, "he'd cowhide me till I was black and blue if I didn't raise some money for him" (21). This implies that violence was not only practiced against slaves during and after the American Civil War as some critics like Victor Doyno claim that violence and lynching were used by whites to terrify and control black people. Doyno (2004: 77) writes, "In Southern communities, lynching rituals could become horrific, designed to intimidate the slaves and, later, in the 1870s and 1880s, to frighten and control recently-freed slaves. Citizens used terror as a useful tactic for keeping freed slaves intimidated after Emancipation". This implies that white citizens in the South continued to treat African Americans as slaves even after the ending of slavery. Twain suggests through the character of Huck that violence is part of everyday life of the morally bankrupt Southern community. Huck suffers from child abuse and torture at the hands of his father that leaves him vulnerable to the unjust forces of society.

Twain parodies the corruption of his contemporary white society by presenting two contrasting images of the brutal and uneducated Pap and the African American professor who visits St. Petersburg. Pap becomes angry when he remembers seeing the sophisticated and elegant mixed-race man in town,

¹ All quotations from the primary text are to the same edition. See full documentation in references.

There was a free nigger there from Ohio—a mulatter ... They said he was a p’fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain’t the wust. They said he could vote when he was at home. Well, that let me out ... I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold?—that’s what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn’t be sold till he’d been in the State six months, and he hadn’t been there that long yet. (26)

Twain implies that education has nothing to do with the color of the skin through presenting the character of the educated mixed-race professor, while at the same time, derides the ignorant Pap who refuses to acknowledge the humanity of black people. Historically speaking, this refers to a time when the American institutions in the nineteenth century were corrupt by refusing to protect black people. Rhett Jones (1992: 175) writes, “the maltreatment of blacks ... was publicly endorsed by every major institution in the nation as the churches found biblical justifications for it, the courts repeatedly ruled that African Americans were not entitled to the protection of the Constitution, and businesses refused to employ blacks in any but the most menial capacities”. This suggests that slavery in nineteenth century America was the chief moral issue of the day and the intention of abolitionist literature was to draw attention to the unjust laws of the slave system. This reminds us with the rebellious Huck who decides to “go to hell” (193) by refusing to believe in the teaching of his society. Therefore, Huck does not only rebel against the brutality of his father, but also against the corruption and hypocrisy of his society.

The adventure of Huck with his “surrogate father” (Luehr 2007: 58), Jim, down the Mississippi River on a raft does not only represent search for freedom, but also an escape from the morally corrupt white society. Both Huck and Jim attempt to escape the injustice and brutality of the society by living desolate life through floating down the River. Huck wants to run a way from his violent father and Jim runs from Miss Watson who wants to sell him down the River where he will be away from his family. Huck describes how content and happy he is on the raft as follows:

I never felt easy till the raft was two mile below there and out in the middle of the Mississippi. Then we hung up our signal lantern, and judged that we was free and safe once more. I hadn’t had a bite to eat since yesterday, so Jim he got out some corn-dodgers and buttermilk, and pork and cabbage and greens ... We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft. (107)

Huck and Jim seem to be content with the little food they eat on the raft because they have already decided that freedom is more important than the absurd life their society was leading. Lawrence Berkove (2003: 19) reads Huck and Jim as “nonconformists” who attain freedom through their life on the raft, “our attention ... must turn to Huck and Jim, the two nonconformists of the book, the only individuals in the novel who seem to stand a chance of attaining real freedom – and this by virtue of their leaving society for an isolated and apparently Utopian existence on the raft”. Therefore, “freedom in this book specifically means freedom from society and its imperative” (Marx 1953: 436). Twain does not only describe the oppression of the blacks in the nineteenth century, but also the corruption of Southern community that mistreated and victimized the helpless whites.

Twain satirizes the irrationality of white people who think that violence and murder are acts of heroism. The feuding Shepherdsons and Grangerfords attend the same church carrying their guns while they listen to a religious talk about “brotherly love” (101). The word “feud” is described in the novel as follows: “A feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man’s brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in—and by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow, and takes a long time” (99). This speech implies that brutality seems to be part of everyday life and that the white community finds violence entertaining. The cold-blooded murder of Boggs by Colonel Sherburn is another cruel episode that presents Sherburn as a heroic figure. Sherburn reprimands the mob that has gathered to lynch him for their cowardice and criticizes the justice system that cannot protect the powerless. Sherburn addresses the mob,

Do I know you? I know you clear through was born and raised in the South, and I’ve lived in the North; so I know the average all around. The average man’s a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and

goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men in the daytime, and robbed the lot. Your newspapers call you a brave people so much that you think you are braver than any other people – whereas you're just as brave, and no braver. Why don't your juries hang murderers? Because they're afraid the man's friends will shoot them in the back, in the dark—and it's just what they would do.

It would be important to note here that despite the veracity of the words, they come from the mouth of someone who has just killed a defenseless man. The murder of Boggs by Sherburn and even the Shepherdson/Grangerford feud represent “incidents of the rough old life of the South-Western states” (Matthew 1971: 123). The episode of lynching can be related to the childhood of Twain himself who writes, “when I was a small boy I saw a brave gentleman deride and insult a mob and drive it away” (Twain, “Lyncherdom” 1991: 677) where he criticizes the practice of lynching in the South as an “assassin tak[ing] the law into his own hands” and “usurping the law's prerogative” (674). This explains the negative impact of the absence of law at the time on society and the fact that people transform into murderers. Twain presents a boy courageous enough to reject the accepted moral conventions of his society by searching for freedom with a runaway slave away from the so-called civilization.

The selfless Jim has positive influence on the maturity and moral development of Huck. Jim justifies the reason of running off from Miss Watson is the possibility that she would sell him down to Orleans where she separates him from his wife and children. No doubt that nineteenth century slavery could be seen as an economic institution that benefited slave owners, who were attempting to maintain slavery and resist anti-slavery laws. Huck recounts the plan of Jim when he gets to a free State,

Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them. (82)

The fact that Jim endangers his life as a runaway slave to save his family would have a profound effect on Huck that reminded him with his abusive father who treated him as a property. The goodness and selflessness of Jim could be the reasons that made Huck form an alliance with him compared to the evil and selfish white people that he met through his life. Joseph Coulombe (2001: 273) argues, “there is nothing absurd or ridiculous about Huck's connection to Jim. Quite simply, he resembles Jim more than anyone else in the novel”. This resemblance refers to the fact that they are different from all other characters in the novel in the sense that they are honest, emotional and good. This refutes the belief of some critics like Daniel Traber (2000: 30) who claims that Huck “differentiates himself from Jim as being intrinsically superior because of his race” and Laurel Bollinger (2002: 34) who states, “Huck cannot recognize Jim as an equal or a friend”. In fact, Huck never treats Jim as inferior because of his blackness, but rather feels ashamed of his white race. Huck humbles himself to Jim and announces that he “warn't ever sorry for it afterwards” (80). This explains that Huck treats Jim as a true friend who shares the same fate and rejects the conventions of the white community.

The troubles that Huck and Jim witness in the river towns they visit explain how corrupt white society is and the need for change. The meeting of Huck and Jim with the frauds who claim to be the Duke and the Dauphin proves that immorality and evil are associated with whites rather than blacks. The con artists take advantage of the insecure status of Huck and Jim, as a child and a runaway slave, respectively. Huck says: “It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble” (115). This implies that the con artists are criminals who can cause trouble to Huck and Jim because they are free white men. These evil white men run their scams in different towns ignoring all the moral values that their white community claims to hold. Paul Quigley (2013: 516) refers to a moment of American history when “slave-owners ... dominated society and politics within their individual states”. This suggests that slaveholders in Pre-Civil War nineteenth century America benefited materially from maintaining the institution of slavery and that the emancipation of slaves meant

social equality and incorporation into the political life. Twain criticizes the use of religion to satisfy personal interest when the Dauphin claims in a town that he is a pirate that has reformed after the religious meeting and that he would become a missionary to help other pirates. Huck describes the story of the Dauphin as follows,

He [the Dauphin] told them he was a pirate—been a pirate for thirty years out in the Indian Ocean—and his crew was thinned out considerable last spring in a fight, and he was home now to take out some fresh men, and thanks to goodness he'd been robbed last night and put ashore off of a steamboat without a cent, and he was glad of it; it was the blessedest thing that ever happened to him, because he was a changed man now, and happy for the first time in his life; and, poor as he was, he was going to start right off and work his way back to the Indian Ocean, and put in the rest of his life trying to turn the pirates into the true path. (121)

The Dauphin succeeds in running his scam at the meeting that makes the gathering collect money for him. However, Huck expresses his disgust of the evil actions of the frauds when he says: "It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race" (148). Twain attempts to describe the contemporary problems of society by recounting the story of the con artists that "reflect[s] the harsh reality of the United States after the Civil War" (Coulombe 2001: 261). This implies that the absence of the justice system leads to chaos and empowers criminals. Twain suggests by tarring and feathering the con artists that the practices of criminals need to be stopped through the enforcement of law.

Twain proposes throughout the novel that freedom and individuality cannot be achieved without sacrifice. As rebellious individuals, Huck and Jim suffer through their adventures the constant immoral practices of the evil white characters they meet. Huck and Jim become victims of the romantic ideas of Tom at the end of the novel when Huck seeks the help of Tom to free Jim from captivity after getting sold by the Dauphin. Despite the fact that Tom knows that Miss Watson has already freed Jim before her death, he looks for fun through putting the life of Jim in danger by inventing difficult plan to help Jim escape captivity because he claims, "there's more honor in getting him out through a lot of difficulties and dangers" (214). The role of Tom in hindering the escape of Jim was very disturbing to many readers. Brander Matthews (1971: 124) writes, "The romantic side of Tom Sawyer is shown in most delightfully humorous fashion in the account of his difficult devices to aid in the easy escape of Jim". Kevin Scott (2005: 187) also argues, "Tom, a representative of romanticized Southern society, is responsible for subjugating Huck and subjecting Jim to farcically inhumane treatment". It would be important to note here that violence before the American Civil War was a means of asserting social power and the supremacy of white race. However, the fact that Miss Watson frees the slave Jim before her death refers to the need of American society to abolish slavery. Quigley (2013: 527) points out, "the most important result of the [Civil] War was the emancipation of four million slaves" who were granted citizenship and human rights. Twain punishes Tom for the torture of Jim by getting wounded in the leg during the escape process and emphasizes the humanity of Jim, who sacrifices his freedom to help the wounded Tom. This implies that Twain presents the black Jim as a glorious hero and condemns the white characters for their immoral actions.

In conclusion, Mark Twain presents the helpless Huck and Jim, as a child and a black man, respectively, as victims of the moral callousness of white community and proposes that violence was a hallmark of Southern society after the American Civil War that was practiced not only against blacks but also against the powerless whites. Huck experiences moral and mental growth through his adventure with the selfless Jim and realizes that evil is associated with whiteness rather than blackness. This leads Huck to reject the accepted social conventions about blacks by suggesting that it would be more honorable for the white community to forsake the old beliefs about white supremacy. The fact that white characters perform criminal and immoral acts in the novel makes Huck escape the corruption of his community and search for illumination and freedom on a raft down the Mississippi River with the black Jim.

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الإفلاس الأخلاقي للعرق الأبيض في رواية مارك توين مغامرات هكلبيرري فين

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ملخص

يركز العديد من النقاد على تحيز نظام العبودية وتأثيره السلبي على المجتمع الأمريكي بعد الحرب الأهلية في رواية مارك توين مغامرات هكلبيرري فين ولكن في نفس الوقت يتم إغفال الفساد الأخلاقي لمجتمع العرق الأبيض الذي اضطهد وأساء معاملة ليس فقط السود وإنما أيضاً الضعفاء البيض، ويعاني الطفل هناك من التعسف والمعاملة غير الإنسانية على يد والده العنيف الذي يدفعه للتحالف مع العبد الهارب جيم، ويقوم بالبحث عن التتوير والحرية على طوافة في نهر المسيسيبي؛ وهذا يدل على أن العنف كان شعاراً للدولة كاملة الذي كان يمارس ليس فقط ضد السود وإنما ضد الأطفال الضعفاء أيضاً، ويستغل المجتمع الأبيض في الرواية الوضع غير الآمن لهاك وجيم كطفل وعبد هارب الذي يصور العرق الأبيض بوصفهم مخادعين وقتلة.

الكلمات الدالة: الإفلاس الأخلاقي، أبيض، أسود، عبودية، عنف.

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