

Adventures of Huck Finn: A Portrait of Slavery

At the surface, Mark Twain's famed novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is a thrilling narrative told by a 13-year-old boy who embarks on a perilous journey down the formidable Mississippi River aboard a tiny wooden raft. The story's sensationalism sometimes makes Huck's journey seem unbelievable. Underneath, however, lies an authentic portrait of the institution of slavery in America during the 1850s.

Although born and raised in Missouri, Twain vehemently opposed slavery. He witnessed the inhumane treatment of blacks and openly criticized the barbaric institution of slavery. In an 1885 letter sent to Francis Wayland, dean of Yale University Law School, which was publicized in the *New York Times*, Twain sought reparations for former slaves: "We have ground the manhood out of them, and the shame is ours, not theirs, and we should pay for it." Twain was an early pioneer in this movement as the debate over compensating former slaves continues to rage into the 21st Century.

Much of Twain's writing identifies him as a humorist. However, he reveals his pessimistic side as a satirist in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which was published 20 years after the Civil War. Through the innocence of Huck's narrative, Twain attacks slavery, racism, hypocrisy, and injustice during one of the most shameful and embarrassing periods in American history. Several main characters throughout the novel epitomize typical slave owners and their attitudes toward the bondage of another human being. They are racists who portray the worst of what society has to offer. Twain frequently satires these characters and their treatment of slaves through the use of irony and ridiculing their paradoxical behavior and ostentatious lifestyles. Slaves had no control over their own destiny and were often sold several times throughout their life. This severed family bonds, causing disintegration of identity and culture among blacks. Huck lives among racists. Miss Watson, the sister of Huck's guardian, the Widow Douglas, is a slave

owner. Miss Watson fosters the cruelty of a typical slave owner when she treats her slave Jim as a commodity rather than a human being. First, she tears Jim away from his family after buying him from a local farm. Later, Jim's hope of reuniting with his family evaporates when Miss Watson sells him to a trader in the deep South. Upon learning his fate, Jim escapes to nearby Jackson Island on the Mississippi River and unites with Huck, who is also on the lam in a quest for freedom. Although milder than her sister, the Widow Douglas preaches a moral paradox. She dictates a strict moral doctrine by force-feeding Huck lessons in "sivilized ways." Meanwhile, she fails to recognize the obvious inhumanity of slavery right in front of her and goes along with the status quo. As Huck and Jim head into the deep South, they encounter people from all walks of life. The Grangerford and Shepherdson families represent the aristocrats. Twain portrays them as the best of what society has to offer in the slave states. Ironically, they are hate-loving, trigger-happy killers embroiled in an eternal feud against each other. Since both families are very wealthy, they own hundreds of slaves to work their sprawling plantations. Every member of the Grangerford family-even the children-have their own personal slave to serve them in a demeaning, undignified manner. Buck Grangerford, whom Huck befriended, orders his slave to do menial tasks all day long. Although he gets his very own slave, Huck feels awkward having someone wait on him, so he takes care of himself.

In an act of cold-hearted greed, Twain shows the typical breakup of a slave family. Con artists, the Duke and the King, pose as heirs to the deceased Peter Wilks and take charge of his estate. Just two days after the funeral, the Duke and the King send the family of slaves to opposite ends of the river-the mother went to New Orleans while her two boys went to Memphis. They were sold separately, which was often the case among traders to achieve maximum profit. Some well-meaning, conforming white characters share a myopic view toward slavery due to a warped value system enveloping their society.

Whenever a slave escaped, slave laws ordered their return to slavery. Sally and Silas Phelps, Tom Sawyer's aunt and uncle, believe they are upholding their "civic duty" when they lock up Jim on their farm until his rightful owner can be found. Twain reveals how horribly slaves were treated on large plantations through the ignorance of Mary Jane Wilks, the daughter of the deceased George Wilks. Incredibly, she believes that her slaves are happy and treated kindly. With sincerity, she tells Huck how her family's slaves are fortunate because they are given off every Sunday and holidays. On a deeper level, however, this demonstrates how poorly slaves were treated, even by the kindest of slave owners. If Mary Jane represents the best of slave owners, then it is easy to imagine the atrocities of cruel masters who whipped their slaves, forcing them to pick crops in the hot sun from dawn til dusk seven days a week. Although in a juvenile, unintentional way, even the mischievous Tom Sawyer mistreats Jim. Despite being well aware that Miss Watson set Jim free in her will after she died, Tom has fun at Jim's expense. Upon arriving at his uncle's farm, Tom never reveals that Jim is a free man. Instead, in a letter sent to his aunt and uncle, he conjures up a story about a band of "pirates" coming to free Jim. Unfortunately for Jim, he languishes in slavery longer than necessary and narrowly escapes being killed during a botched "rescue attempt." Twain demonstrates ignorance among whites in slave states through irony. In a conversation with Huck, Pap Finn tells how whites are superior to blacks while embarrassing himself: "There was this free nigger from Ohio...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." Pap Finn epitomes the backward thinking shared by many whites in slave states who believed that blacks were incapable of intelligence or the right to vote. Sadly, this attitude and denying blacks the right to vote and an education lingered for a hundred years after the Civil War in southern states until the civil rights movement removed its Jim Crow laws.

In addition to a cast of characters, Twain uncovers the cultural horrors embedded in 1850s' Missouri and antebellum South. Incredibly, racism existed in religion, presumably the most sacred institution in any society. Although Christianity is the predominant religion in the Bible Belt, it is shown as an extension of racism and hate. Its service to all men is a moral conundrum. Although the church preached love thy neighbor and do to others as you would want done to you, it excluded blacks. Christianity in slave states emphasized duty to God rather than brotherhood for their black neighbors who are forced into slavery. Unlike Christians in the North, the majority of southern Christians during slavery failed to see the blatant injustice tainting their moral doctrine and stood by idly while another human being suffered. This contradictory moral doctrine is seen several times throughout the novel. The Widow Douglas and Miss Watson browbeat Huck with Christianity to civilize him. Ironically, Huck is more civilized than his adult counterparts because he sympathizes with the plight of slaves and helps Jim escape. In an almost surrealistic scene, the Shepherdons and Grangerfords bring their feud to church. Instead of praying, the families sit in pews glaring at each other with a shotgun in one hand and a Bible in the other.

Twain accurately illustrates how the justice system worked for blacks in slave states before and for many decades after the Civil War; they were guilty until proven innocent. When Huck feigns his murder to escape from his abusive father, everyone assumes Jim was the killer, since he is also missing. If Jim was white, his absence would have been considered a coincidence. However, Jim was tried, convicted, and had a 00 bounty placed on his head without ever stepping inside a courtroom.

The economy of slave states was predominantly agricultural. The backbone of the workforce, slaves provided plantation owners with free labor. Slaves often toiled all day long picking cotton, the South's most profitable crop. Although Jim served as Miss Watson's slave in Missouri, his life was

better than most slaves who toiled on large plantations in the deep South. If he had not run away, it is likely Jim would have endured incredible hardships harvesting crops for a cruel master.

One of the most notorious themes repeated throughout the novel is the state of lawlessness in America. Twain paints a picture of anarchy with a blend of the Old West and antebellum South as Huck and Jim travel down the Mississippi River. There are the King and the Duke, who run a scam operation and go unopposed in every town they dock. In the whiskey-sodden town in Arkansas, Colonel Sherburn guns down drunken, old Boggs in broad daylight and goes unpunished. Then there are the Grangerford and Shepherdson families constantly feuding and annihilating each other, but no law enforcement agencies bother intervening. And finally there are people who take justice into their own hands, as evidenced by the Phelps family who arm themselves to confront Tom Sawyer's "pirates." Twain accurately uncovers the awful truth about the strongest laws of 1850s' Missouri and the antebellum South as its cruel, immoral slave laws. First there was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 that authorized the arrest and seizure of slaves fleeing North. This law was loosely enforced and generally ignored by northerners. As opposition to slavery intensified and to force northerners to abide with slavery laws, southerners legislated for and passed the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. These new laws mandated the return of runaway slaves regardless of where in the Union they might be situated at the time of their discovery or capture. This is the case when Jim escapes from Miss Watson. Readers may wonder why Huck and Jim head downriver instead of going directly to Illinois. It seems logical that once Jim steps inside northern territory, he becomes a free man. However, it was not that simple. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 allowed bounty hunters to roam freely into northern territory in search of runaway slaves. Bounty hunters were sometimes indiscriminate and sent free blacks into slavery, which infuriated many northerners.

Rather than venturing into territory where bounty hunters were likely combing the landscape for Jim, Huck aims south in search of Cairo, Illinois, a junction point on the underground railroad. It is here that Jim hopes to connect with abolitionists and head far into northern territory on the Ohio River. However, Jim's hopes dim when Huck misses their destination in the dark night and the pair float downriver, hopelessly bound for the deep South. Bounty hunters found profit returning slaves to their owners. Inevitably, Huck and Jim encounter bounty hunters one night who are scanning the banks of Missouri and Illinois sides of the river for runaway slaves. Armed with shotguns, they demand to board Huck's raft and check for runaway slaves. Huck sends the bounty hunters away when he says that his "family" is on board afflicted with smallpox. If caught harboring Jim, Huck would have likely been imprisoned for failure to obey the fugitive slave laws. Twain shows how fugitive slave laws were enforced as Huck and Jim enter the deep South. In an act of betrayal, the Duke and the King sell Jim to the Phelps for 0 when their money runs out. Afterward, the Phelps comply with the law and search for Jim's rightful owner.

The novel ends on a happy note when Miss Watson sets Jim free in her will after she dies. However, it is conceivable that Jim's freedom was short-lived. In 1857, the Dred Scott Decision upheld the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Born into slavery in Virginia, Dred Scott lived in the North as a free man for 11 years and later returned to slavery upon re-entering the South. The United States Supreme Court determined that slaves were personal property and could never be free. It is conceivable that Jim suffered the same fate as Dred Scott and returned to slavery despite Miss Watson's will.

by Anonymous Student

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