

# *Realism, Race, and Identity of the Late Nineteenth Century: Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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**The** second half of the nineteenth century in America was a time of explosive development and growth, leading America into an era of unprecedented urbanization and industrialization. Progress on the front of social issues was less rapid, however; Americans were rigidly identified by their place in the social hierarchy and African Americans, though free from the bonds of slavery, were hardly viewed as equal citizens. Writers of the late nineteenth century often wrote about these pressing cultural issues by employing realism. The literary movement of realism was a straightforward approach to what is typical and average, or as Paul Lauter and Richard Yarborough define it, “a matter of faithfulness to the surfaces of American life” (1329). One quintessential American writer of the nineteenth century, Mark Twain, employs the use of realism in his book the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to portray the late nineteenth century issues of race, identity, and social status.

Though African Americans had officially been freed from slavery several decades before, they were still far from being treated as equal citizens. Since they were no longer viewed as “property” to be owned, they had become an anomaly of American society, restricted by intense racism and ignorance. Many writers of the time addressed this issue of race, as Mark Twain does in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Though slavery was outlawed at the time when Twain published the novel, he

chose to set it in the earlier half of the century when slavery was still in practice in an effort to make a statement about how the situation for African Americans did not really improve. Twain immediately establishes the view of slavery in the earlier half of the nineteenth century as simply a fact of life, with even the upstanding Christian widow Douglas, someone described as “dismal regular and decent... in all her ways” (3), owning slaves. Characters do not question aloud whether slavery is immoral or cruel, as African Americans aren’t seen as an equal to whites. Huckleberry Finn even feels “wicked and low-down and ornery” (192) for not turning in the runaway Jim. His cultural upbringing taught him that it is moral and right to own slaves: “There was the Sunday school, you could a gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about [Jim’s escape] .... goes to everlasting fire” (192). This mentality carried over into the latter half of the nineteenth century, preventing African Americans from receiving their full rights as American citizens and making them a target for intense racism.



Figure 6 Raft Scene, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884)/Project Gutenberg

Huck Finn’s father holds this same mentality as he questions “what is the country a-coming to?” (26) during a drunken rant about a free black man having the ability to vote. His blatant racism leads him to the conclusion that he can protest this by declaring that he will “never vote agin as long as I live” (26). This reasoning is so

backwards and faulty that Twain is clearly making fun of it. He puts special emphasis on describing how physically disgusting Huck's father is, "hair... long and tangled and greasy," with skin that was "not like another man's white, but... a white to make a body's flesh crawl" (19). This description, combined with the fact that Twain makes this character a socially outcast drunk, discredits him and therefore the validity of his argument, especially in contrast to the upstanding free black man who "was a p'fessor in a college" and dressed so well that even Huck's father admits there "ain't a man in that town... got as fine clothes as what he had" (26). Twain doesn't stop there, however. Huck's father continues his drunken rant, complaining that "[h]ere's a govment that calls itself a govment, and lets onto be a govment, and thinks it is a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take ahold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free [black]" (26). Here Twain makes it evident to the reader just how defective Huck's father's point of view is by highlighting his ignorance about a culturally progressive America, thus making a direct statement about the continued belittling treatment of African Americans in his own time. As Twain expresses through his realism, those that oppose the progress of African Americans receiving their due rights as human beings and who see them as objects rather than people are ignorant and hypocritical, akin to the drunken outcast that is Huck's father.

While Huck sidesteps the morality of his father's view, he does go through his own moral battle over the concept of slavery and whether it is right or wrong. Because of his upbringing, Huck has been taught to believe that slaves are less than people; they are simply objects to be owned. Twain's realism makes a direct effort to address this sort of obtuse reasoning by revealing this child's internal debate as he struggles to reconcile his notion of Jim as a person with the inhuman logic he has been raised to believe is right. Huck's personal struggle with this issue relates to the shared mentality that many Americans still held after the end of slavery, a mentality that prevented them from understanding that black Americans were just as much people as whites were. Huck's

journey with Jim causes him to reevaluate his understanding of slaves and to determine that Jim has the ability to care for his family: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (141-142). And once Huck actually finds himself feeling guilty for tricking the kind-hearted and gullible Jim, Huck makes the important realization that he "warn't ever sorry for it afterwards neither" (80) when he explains that "[i]t was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a [slave] but I done it" (80). Here, Twain is making the distinction that even this Southern-bred child, who has spent a lifetime viewing African Americans as objects, can see that they have human qualities. This lends hope that even those opposed to giving African Americans their civil and human rights in Twain's time would have the potential to see the African American race as human if they could have the open-mindedness of a child.

The issues of intense racism and ignorance of the late nineteenth century relate back to the American fixation with knowing everyone's place and identity. Living within a culture so avidly fixated on knowing where everyone belonged, Twain addresses this concern in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, not just through his commentary on race, but also through his commentary on the strict, and often hypocritical, social standards that everyone is expected to maintain. From the nineteenth century perspective the only true Americans were white, educated, and civilized, like the Widow Douglas who attempts to "civilize" Huck as well. Because Huck "hated the school" (16) and couldn't stand the thought of someone "going to... sivilize" (262) him, he is considered less of an American than someone such as Widow Douglas or the honorable Judge Thatcher. But when Huck truly begins to learn and become more "civilized" or "more American," his father comes back into the picture and accuses him "a-swelling yourself up" for knowing how to "read and write" (20, 19). Because he can't read and Huck's "mother couldn't read... None of the family couldn't, before *they* died" (20), Huck's father determines that Huck has no place to learn, that he is

attempting to step out of his social standing and become better than his family. Because of this fixation with everyone's place within the social hierarchy, Huck's attempt to better himself, even by just learning how to read and write, is a huge societal taboo.

Twain also points out the hypocrisy of the American view of identity and social hierarchy through the character of Jim. Arguably the most noble and compassionate character of the book, Jim isn't even considered an American because he is a slave. From the nineteenth-century perspective, he is the lowest of the low, not even fully a human being. The fact that Jim is at the mercy of almost every other character in the book, such as the thieving King and Duke and even Huck's drunkard of a father, makes a direct commentary on the backwards societal hierarchy that was established in America during his time. Even when Huck faces the dilemma of whether or not to help Jim out of slavery, he cannot "seem to strike no places to harden [himself] against him, but only the other kind" (193), finding himself reflecting on all that Jim has done for him, when he "would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was" (193). The kindest and most truly "American"

character of the book is subject to the backwards societal dictates of identity and place, preventing him from exercising all of the rights he has truly earned as a decent human being.

While complicated with satire to emphasize the hypocrisy of American society on race and identity, Mark Twain's realism accurately depicts American life during the late nineteenth century in its exploration of racial issues and personal identity. Twain starkly depicts the societal issues of his time through the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and captures the unique American spirit of being able to overcome corrupt societal beliefs and find truth.

#### Works Cited

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