

## The Appreciation of Literacy Charm of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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**Abstract:** As one of the outstanding representatives of American critical realists, Mark Twain presents to the readers a true and vivid picture of American society before American Civil War in his *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which criticizes the crimes of slavery and racial discrimination, satirizes the hypocrisy of the so-called “civilized society”, and reflects the writer’s democratic ideologies. The combination of realism and romanticism, the usage of vivid language, the lifelike images of characters, and the fine psychological descriptions make *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* become one of the greatest masterpieces in American literature.

**Key words:** Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain, appreciation, figure, artistic style

### Introduction

Mark Twain, the prominent realistic writer in America, published one of his most successful novels *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1884, which gain him immense popularity at his time. The classical literacy charm of the novel didn’t fade way with the passing time. The exquisite artistic techniques, the unique realistic narration, the graceful romantic lyric, the vivid features, the clearly-shown democratic idea and the humorous remarks, etc., all of them are of uncommon artistic significance nowadays, and the novel is regarded as “the best novel” in American literature.

Since the publication of the novel, it has become a beloved topic for literacy critics and scholars. Ernest Hemingway (as cited in YU, 2000, p114) once noted in his *The Green Hills of Africa* in 1935 that “Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the source

of American literature, and there is none can be compared with it.” The notable American painter Baldwin Hass, who drew the illustrations for the novel, said: “If I was allowed to read one novel in my lifetime, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* would be my only choice.” ( as cited in Li, 2000, p16 )

## **The appreciation of the background of time and the story plot**

### ***The appreciation of the background of time***

The background of time of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is before the American civil war. With his magic imagination and humorous description, Mark Twain not only delineates the cruelty of slavery sustained in the south of America, but also describes black slaves’ wishes of being independent physically and mentally. Slaves led miserable lives in the south even though they were asked to be liberated by the law. They were under severe persecution and racial prejudice, which was well reflected in Twain’s masterpiece. Therefore, we could summarize that one of the themes is to against slavery and racial discrimination and the novel is for sure of magnificent historical meanings and realistic significance. The novel compels readers to ponder over the serious ethical and social problems existing in America at that time. As commented by Bai & Cai (2000), the American humour is presented to readers home and abroad to illustrate the American’s humorous and optimistic qualities shown in American Westward Movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### ***The appreciation of the story plot***

The novel tells us a story about Huck’s and Jim’s pursuits of freedom respectively. Huck escapes from his house, with an aim to find a place without secular bondages. On his way to freedom, he meets Jim, a black slave who runs away from his master. Despite of lots of mentally conflicts, Huck decides to help Jim to run for his physically freedom, and Huck finally grows mental maturity. The novel inherits the tradition of picaresque narration in Western Europe. The story adopts a clue of Huck’s wandering along the Mississippi River

and tries to reflect the sharp contradictions between childhood and adulthood, trueness and hypocrisy, disengaged Mississippi and shackled onshore lives, etc., attacking the hideous reality in American society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the story, the author shows readers a distressed and uncultured picture of urban and rural areas along the Mississippi: shabby houses, dilapidated walls, muddy paths, country folks leading boring, empty, meaningless, aimless and hopeless lives whose favorite way of killing time is to rile dogs to bite pig or to watch dogs fighting. A rebellious young man Huck who is always against orthodoxy and a black slave Jim who is virtuous and righteous begin their wonderful adventures along the Mississippi, leading a different life from that in a society full of primeval rudeness and smudgy violence. Huck wants to escape from Widow Douglas and his father who are on behalf of the typical figures in semi feudalization and semi capitalization society, while Jim longs for freedom far from bondage and exploitation of the slavery. Both of them expect to flee to an ideal state “Carlo” which is an imaginary place full of freedom and happiness. At the end of the story, they, of course, didn’t achieve the ideal state “Carlo” despite of difficulties and drawbacks, but Jim became a liberated black man and Huck was on his way to seek his own freedom again.

The story happens along/on the Mississippi River, an incarnation of freedom, while both the shores are the “civilized society of America” where floods with kinds of sins, and the innocent folks were cheated or insulted by a gang of “the King” “the Duke” and “the Captain”. With the development of the story, Huck’s unrestrained raft, the peaceful Mississippi, the ideal state “Carlo”, the true friendship between Huck and Jim, are used by Twain to fustigate the hypocritical society in the novel, and Mark Twain also successfully expresses his desire of being racial equal and real civilized in the novel.

### ***The appreciation of classical figures***

Huck comes as the first classical figure. By a thorough portray of a 14 year old young man, Mark Twain, by humorous and amusing description, shapes a figure who can represent American spirit. Huck is regarded as a rebel against orthodoxy at that time. He detests the so called fusty canons of civilization, he bids defiance to the behavior criteria required by the Sunday school which restrains the development of students’ optimistic and progressive

nature, he sometimes questions the efficacy of praying, and he longs for freedom and unconstraint, casts off the fetter of what's called "civilized society". The enduring artistic values are shown in the following three aspects.

First, Huck is rebellious against the American educational system. In Chapter I, Huck said: "The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would civilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out."<sup>[4]</sup> And at the end of the story, Mrs. Phelps wants to civilize Huck, and he runs away again. All in all, the existing life style and educational system severely restrict a young man's desire for vitality and freedom. Feeling helpless, the young man chooses to flee away. We should say that Mark Twain is so brave that he dares to say "No" to the old-maiden educational system in 19<sup>th</sup> century in the voice of Huck.

Second, Huck is rebellious against the religious system. Religion is the reflection of ideology. For Huck, he shows his realistic preference. Huck revolts against the dull way of life and disingenuous formulae. He refuses to go to church or to dress decently or to learn from "the civilized", which are all against the grain of the temporal social canons. It is because of his away from the so called "civilization" and the sophistic philosophy of life that Huck is able to make his own judgment upon right or wrong based on a child's peculiar instinct of keenness and curiosity. For example, Huck expresses his doubts in Chapter III: "I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it. I say to myself, if a body can get anything they pray for, why doesn't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuffbox that was stolen? Why can't Miss Watson fat up? No, say I to myself, there isn't nothing in it."<sup>[4]</sup> Only can an innocent child feel doubtful about the religious credendum.

Third, Huck's rebellious meditation against slavery is clearly demonstrated. Mark Twain describes Huck's devious experience of helping Jim escape from slavery in detail. The zigzag story which tells Huck's mentally growing-up from innocence to maturity is the main part of the novel. On one hand, Huck is inevitably influenced by the moral standards commonly accepted by the society. On the other hand, he makes his own judgment based on his peculiar childlike observation and personal feelings. Actually, he does not obey the

accepted social moral standards to stop Jim from escaping, but follow his internal feeling to help the black slave flee away from slavery. We should say it is the complicated course that Mark Twain ponders over the liberation of slaves. The whole story develops in three levels. In the first level, Huck feels sympathy, looks down upon, sometimes makes fun of Jim; in the second level, by getting along with Jim, Huck realizes that Jim is a righteous, kind-hearted and responsible man; in the third level, he is deeply moved by Jim's unselfishness and decides to help him gain freedom regardless of "...hell is hell..." (Mark Twain, 1978). The three levels develop step by step which reflects the disenchantment of the author's recognition about the current society and slavery.

Jim, the black slave, is the second typical figure in the novel. The main role Jim plays in the story is a helper to help Huck become mentally mature. Different from other submissive black slaves, Jim yearns for freedom and independence, loves his families, helps his friends, even risks his life to take good care of sick Huck. His bravery, adamancy, fidelity and selflessness convince Huck to believe "he is a good man" and then to assist him to obtain independence despite of the earthly moral standards. Mark Twain fashions a fugitive slave into a noble man like a hero. Jim is much more preferable than the hypocrites on shores. The novel expresses Twain's sharp satire and profound criticism of the American society.

What Huck and Jim experience in the novel is a successful abscondence. Huck wants to be free from the "civilized society", while Jim wants to be independent in an idea state free of slavery. Both of them share happiness and miseries on their way to Carlo, the idea state. They establish a profound friendship regardless of the forbidding limits of race and social status.

### ***The appreciation of artistic style***

Mark Twain is a famous American writer, one of the outstanding critical writers for realistic literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the masterpiece of him, and it is as well a great piece in the history of American literature. There are three points accounting for the glory: realistic narration and romantic lyricism are skillfully applied in the novel, with the two influencing each other now and then; apparent

realistic criticism is greatly lightened by humorous tone; and the characters of distinct personalities are getting more vivified by exquisite psychological delineation.

First of all, the writer combines realistic narration and romantic lyric together. The poverty and barbarism of the urban and rural areas along the Mississippi are faithfully depicted, but with intense romantic lyric when picture the character's mood or the beautiful scenery. For example, in Chapter VIII "The sun was up so high when I waked that I judged it was after eight o'clock. I laid there in the grass and the cool shade thinking about things, and feeling rested and rather comfortable and satisfied. I could see the sun out at one or two holes, but mostly it was big trees all about, and gloomy in there amongst them. There were freckled places on the ground where the light sifted down through the leaves, and the freckled places swapped about a little, showing there was a little breeze up there. A couple of squirrels set on a limb and jabbered at me very friendly...I was powerful lazy and comfortable..."<sup>[4]</sup> In Chapter I, Huck reckons that "...then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it wasn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars were shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me, and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers un over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on it's mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave, and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared I did wish I had some company." (Mark Twain, 1978)

Second, humorous quick-witted writing style is applied to satirize the brutal reality of society. Mark Twain successfully expresses his peculiar humor to observe and understand life via a 14-year-old young boy's eyes. For instance, the King mistakes the "Duke Bridgewater" as "Duke Bilge-water". If we appreciate the skillful use of language here, we would thoroughly understand the writer's humor. "Bridgewater" refers to the clear and fresh water flowing under the bridge while "Bilge-water" is the dirty and odorous water within the

boat cabin. The two looks like the same but actually totally different. And of course, the Duke Bilge-water is the embodiment of greed, hypocrisy, delusion and impudicity.

At last, the characters become more lifelike and vivid in the light of the delicate and exquisite psychological descriptions. In the development of the story, Mark Twain prefers to depict the characters' complicated mental process through what they say or do in order to highlight their respective personalities. In this novel, Twain skillfully describes Huck's complex mental activities about his attitude toward Jim. For example, when Jim approaches freedom, little Huck becomes more uneasy, because Huck is inevitably influenced by racial discrimination regardless of their profound friendship. For one part, from the angle of being a friend, it is Huck's sincere hope to help Jim to be liberated. For another, from the angle of being a member of the public, it is unacceptable for a white boy to help a black slave. Therefore, Huck becomes puzzled by his inner struggles and then decides to write a letter to inform others Jim's whereabouts. But in the end, he thinks about their days spent together and their friendship, so he picks up the letter and tears it up. Just as Mark Twain once said: "...a sound mind and deformity of consciousness clashed, deformity imposition of consciousness..." (as cited in Huang, 1999: 346) The sound mind refers to Twain's democratic idea, while deformity of consciousness equals to racial prejudice, etc.

## Summary

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is Mark Twain's magnum opus in 1880s. As Huang (1999) remark, the realistic description reflects romantic lyrics here and there; the keen and profound exposure, humorous and sharp satire and romantic narration are meld together. More than one hundred year passed, the novel wins the readers' hearts home and abroad by its lively language, humorous writing style and vivid characters.

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