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MARK TWAIN'S : THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY IN THE LIGHT OF Formalism, Mythological Criticism and Feminism

The following entry provides criticism on Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

INTRODUCTION

Long considered Mark Twain's masterwork as well as a classic of American literature, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) was the first important American work to depart from European literary models. It used frontier humor, vernacular speech, and an uneducated young narrator to portray life in America. Although at first the novel was roundly denounced as inappropriate for genteel readers, it eventually found a prominent place in the canon of American literature. *Huckleberry Finn*, wrote Ernest Hemingway, is the novel from which "all modern American literature comes. ... There has been nothing as good since."

Plot and Major Characters

Begun as a sequel to Twain's successful children's book *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follows a similar picaresque form as its predecessor, but has a much more serious intent. Narrated by the title character, the story begins with Huck under the protection of the kindly Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. Fearing that his alcoholic father, Pap, will attempt to claim the fortune that he and Tom had found (in *Tom Sawyer*), Huck transfers the money to Judge Thatcher. Undaunted, Pap kidnaps Huck and imprisons him in a lonely cabin. Huck escapes, leaving a trail of pig's blood to make it appear he has been killed, and he finds his way to Jackson's Island, where he encounters Miss Watson's runaway slave, Jim. One night Huck, disguised as a girl, goes ashore, where he learns that people believe that Jim killed Huck, and that there is a reward for Jim's capture. The two set out on a raft down the Mississippi River but are separated when the raft is struck by a steamboat. Swimming ashore, Huck is taken in by the Grangerford family, who are engaged in a blood feud with the Shepherdsons. In time Huck finds Jim and the two set out on the raft again, eventually offering refuge to two con artists, the Duke, and the King. These two perpetrate various frauds on unsuspecting people, claiming to be

descendants of royalty or, at other times, famous actors, evangelists, or temperance lecturers. Learning of the death of the well-to-do Peter Wilks, the Duke and the King descend upon the family, claiming their inheritance as long-lost brothers. Huck helps to foil their plans, and he and Jim attempt to slip away without the Duke and the King, but the rogues catch up with them and the four set out together. When they come ashore in one town, Jim is captured, and Huck is shocked to learn that the King has turned him in for the reward. After a battle with his conscience, Huck decides to help Jim escape. He goes to the Phelps farm where Jim is being held and is mistaken for Tom Sawyer, who is the nephew of the Phelpses. Huck decides to impersonate Tom. When the real Tom arrives, he joins in the deception by posing as his brother, Sid. He concocts an elaborate plan to rescue Jim, during the execution of which Tom is accidentally shot, and Jim is recaptured. From his sickbed, Tom announces that Miss Watson has died, setting Jim free in her will. He got involved the "rescue," he says, simply for the "adventure of it." Jim then reveals that Huck's father is dead, that he had found the body in an abandoned boat. Aunt Sally Phelps suggests that she might adopt Huck, but the peripatetic Huck cannot foresee living in "sivilization" and resolves to "light out for the territory."

Major Themes

Twain once described *Huckleberry Finn* as a book in which "a sound heart & a deformed conscience come into collision & conscience suffers a defeat," and the novel traces Huck's moral development as he encounters a seemingly haphazard array of people and situations. During his journey down the river, with its series of encounters, he undergoes a rite of passage from unthinking acceptance of received knowledge and values to an independently achieved understanding of what is right. In his decision to free Jim, Huck overcomes his "conscience," which, formed by a racist society, tells him this act is wrong, to reach a higher morality. Twain skillfully plays upon the irony of that moment as he describes the conflicts between what Huck has been taught and what he gradually acknowledges to be right. Another dominant theme in the story is the contrast between the constricting life on shore and the freedom offered by the river. Huck and Jim's journey is widely regarded as a symbolic statement on the corruption of society and a condemnation of a "sivilization" which encourages greed and deception, destroys innocence, and enslaves human beings. Whether the novel speaks to a typically "American" theme of unlimited mobility and broader horizons is a question still being asked by readers and literary critics.

Critical Reception

When *Huckleberry Finn* was first published in the United States in 1885, critical response was mixed, and a few libraries banned the book for its perceived offenses to propriety. Such controversies, however, did not affect

the book's popularity, and it has remained the best selling of all of Twain's works. After Twain's death his works gradually became elevated as national treasures, but following World War I commentators such as William Faulkner and Van Wyck Brooks cast doubt on the greatness of *Huckleberry Finn*. Hemingway's comments on the novel, along with the centenary of Twain's birth in 1935 and favorable comments by Lionel Trilling and T. S. Eliot in the late 1940s and early 1950s, revived the book's reputation. Later critics gave it nearly universal acclaim, praising its artistry and its evocation of important American themes. A recurrent critical concern was the role of Jim, who was variously called only a foil for Huck's exploits, a possible homosexual partner, or a father figure. Others critiqued Jim's role as a racial stereotype, while Twain defenders said he was used to expose the hypocrisy and bigotry of southern separatism. During the 1950s a number of critics such as Bernard DeVoto and Leo Marx raised objections to the abruptness of the book's ending, but by the 1960s Twain was again being lauded by such scholars as Walter Blair and Henry Nash Smith. The hundredth anniversary of the American publication of the novel in 1985 sparked new editions, bibliographies, and critical appraisals. Around this time, more and more questions were being raised about the racial slurs in *Huckleberry Finn*, and a number of public schools sought to ban the book from their required reading lists. In addition, African American critics and others continued to challenge the book's reputation as a classic of American literature. That controversy goes on, even as criticism of the novel has taken new directions. Since the 1990s some scholars have continued to do close textual readings, and others have emphasized the novel as a cultural product. The question of literary canonization has been addressed by critics such as Jonathan Arac and Elaine and Harry Mensch. Other commentators, including Shelley Fisher Fishkin and Jocelyn Chadwick-Joshua, have noted the importance of the confluence of white and Black cultures in the story. Several new editions, especially the annotated edition published in 2001 by the Mark Twain Foundation, have encouraged further scholarship. Critical interest in *Huckleberry Finn*, then, shows no signs of waning, and debates over its stature and reputation, and the issues the novel raises, appear certain to continue.