

# Entertainment and Reflect: Mark Twain's Humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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## ABSTRACT

As a famous American realistic novelist, Mark Twain's masterpiece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* presents the vivid picture of American society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The novel takes it as a clue to describe the adventures along Mississippi of Huck and Jim. In this study, it has analyzed different characters of various heroes at the beginning, which can help readers understand what kind of heroes would be like in the novel. Moreover, it also contributes to reveal the major theme of the whole story. Besides, it also analyzed the characteristics of the language use, which included methods of realizing humorous effect used by Twain, such as exaggeration and irony. Just as entertainment and reflection, he has expressed his own thoughts and expectations by means of this kind of "absurd" ending.

**Keywords:** *Mark Twain's humor, spirit of rebellion, consciousness, conflict*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain, formerly known as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, honored as "the American literary giant" [1], is a noted writer of American realism literature. He grew up in Mississippi and once he worked as a pilot of a Mississippi riverboat. His pen name "Mark Twain" just came from those riverboat days when measuring the depth of the water, which was called "marking the twain" [2]. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a famous work of Twain and is regarded as one of the greatest literary works of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Besides, the work was also honored as "all modern American literature comes from one book: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" noted by American famous writer Ernest Hemingway.

The plots of this story described in the novel happened before the American Civil War. There were numerous social problems in America of that time such as the corrupt political life, the deepening labor conflicts, the hypocritical churches and the deteriorating conditions of people's lives day by day. However, the most urgent and serious problem was the existence of slavery and racial discrimination. Although slavery had been abolished from the law, black slaves were just free nominally and were still slaved, even persecuted as before prevalently in the society. The blacks still tried hard to survive with an extremely low social status. Facing all of these unfair and annoying phenomena, Twain showed a tough attitude and meantime expressed a warm sympathy and support for the large groups of blacks. Based on these social backgrounds, he wrote the novel about Huck and Jim

sharing the touching adventure down the Mississippi on a raft.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE HEROES' CHARACTERS

### A. Huck

Huck is the central character in the novel. He is just a little boy aged thirteen or fourteen years old. But he impressed us deeply with his outstanding characters such as bravery, rebellion, honesty and kindness. Those are among the qualities that makes Huck one of the great characters in American fiction. At that time, whoever escaping with a runaway slave calls for great courage, let alone helping a slave to obtain freedom. But as it shows in the novel, Huck does it bravely. He helps Jim in every way along their escape and treats Jim as a friend. What's more, Huck shows great courage in the acknowledgement of his mistake. One day, with the darkness approaching and the intense fog covering the surface of the lake, Huck and Jim get separated and float in different directions. Huck tries hard to row back to look for Jim but he loses the sense of direction. After a spell time of floating alone, Huck finally met Jim who has fallen asleep on the raft. Jim gets so excited as soon as he meets Huck alive that he speaks to Huck with a trembled voiced. We can see that Jim is very concerned about Huck. But Huck figures out a plan and means to make fun of Jim. He is to talk Jim into the belief that their separation is just a dream made by him. Huck convinces Jim but soon Jim realizes that he has been fooled at the sight of the gathered chips and branches. At the thought of his worry about Huck after their separation, Jim gets mad. There is no doubt that Huck has hurt Jim. Nevertheless, Huck is kind and brave,

however he realizes what he has done is wrong by saying, "It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed his feet to get him to take it back" [3]. Afterwards, Huck makes an apology to Jim, a slave, who is regarded as inferior to whites in the society.

What distinguishes Huck from others most is his rebellion. Huck is homeless after his father died and never receives modern education. He doesn't like to go to church and is tired of wearing decent clothes. What he goes for is freedom and personality. During the period of time of being adopted by the warm-hearted widow Douglas, Huck feels depressed with boring and mechanical etiquettes and doctrines. He would retire to a quiet and remote place rather than struggle in the so-called "civilized society" [4], which doesn't belong to him from the day he was born. Besides, he helps Jim escape, which is the biggest rebellion in that time.

During the journey down the Mississippi, Huck and Jim come across a variety of people and things. Among them are two frauds, the "King" and the "Duke" [5]. The two of them cheat people of their money all along the way. Especially, they try to get those three pathetic girls of their treasure by pretending to be their uncles, whom the girls are waiting for. Their brass and greed drive Huck so mad this time that he resolves to take actions to prevent them cheating the money rather than acts as an onlooker upon their ugly trick. Then Huck steal the money which is cheated from the girls by the "King" and the "Duke" and give it back to Miss Mary and tells the truth. Miss Mary is very thankful to Huck. Reading here, we can't be too proud of our hero Huck's honesty and kindness.

#### *B. Jim*

Mark Twain made a difference of people's attitude to black slaves by successfully creating the character of Jim. Ignorant and superstitious as Jim is, he has many such good qualities as purity, integrity, honesty and bravery. Besides, he is also independent in mind and a strong spirit of rebellion. During their escape, Jim takes care of Huck in every possible way like father to son. One night, it's time for Huck to take shifts but Huck then sleeps tight. Jim is so kind that he cannot bear to wake Huck up. Thus, it's naturally that Huck thinks of Jim as a good person, even more than a good person. For another instance, when the story develops near the end where Tom gets shot on his leg and Huck goes ashore to send for a doctor, Jim comes out of his shelter with the risk of being found and captured to look after the wounded Tom in spite of his thirsty for freedom. Jim is such a good man worthy of our respect and learning.

Jim wants to reach a free state where he can get rid of slavery and enjoy freedom, start a new life. Like every black slave, Jim hates slavery bitterly, because of which he cannot steer his own life and even stay with

his families. But Jim never shrinks back and he has a plan for future. When he comes to a free state he will make every effort to make money so as to buy his wife and children out. If he fails, he will send to steal them out. Reading between the words, we can see Jim has made a firm resolution to alter his fate. However, the majority of black slaves then consider that is nearly possible to gain freedom, also some of them even lose the heart to think of freedom. Jim's independent mind and rebellion is what that society calls for, especially for the world of the black slaves. His ignorance is mainly shown in his belief in ghost. He would turn to ghost-theory whenever something goes beyond the range of his understanding. One day, Jim sleeps tight under a tree and Tom plans to play a trick on him by hanging his hat on the tree. After a while Jim wakes up but he does not somehow work out how could hang his hat run up to the tree. Then he thinks that there must be a devil riding him around the world while he was sleeping. It's ridiculous indeed whom believes that catching a bird causes the death of man and his father died because someone did that; Counting as preparing a dinner and shaking desk cloth will bring unluckiness.

### **III. THEMES OF THE NOVEL**

#### *A. Escape*

Through the analysis of the main plot of the story, we can find "escape" is one of the important themes. Huck is to escape from the "civilized society". Jim is to flee the slave state, heading for a free state. At the beginning of the story, Huck living with the widow Douglas in the riverside town of St. Peter Fort, the widow tries to "civilize" him. But Huck develops a disgusting attitude towards traditional civilization enlightenment and religion consciousness, longing for a boundless life. For that Huck has no choice but to flee. With the development of the story, we see that Huck is forced to escape from the society. Huck is always on the way to freedom. During the journey, the raft, the river and the nature are a symbol of freedom to Huck, which give him a ray of hope whenever he is frustrated on the way, especially on the "shore". Only when Huck stays with Jim on the river, does he feel safe and comfortable. "Life on the raft is nice", which is a kind of spiritual experience resulted from the different lives "on the river" and "on the shore" [6]. Whenever Huck goes ashore, he will run into danger, trouble, and fraud. The people on the shore are hypocritical and corrupt so that Huck is compelled to tell lies to deal with them. What he sees on the shore are cruelty, deceit, corruption and revenge killings. In chapter 18, when Huck gets rid of the family hatred between Grangerford and Robertson, he remarks "there weren'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" [7]. By making a

comparison between "the shore" and "the river", author criticized ironically American "civilized" society.

Jim escapes for a dual freedom of body and spirit. Though he is just a slave, he has an independent mind, which is of great importance. On the notice that he will be sold to a remote place away from his wife and children, he resists it for freedom by means of escape, even with the knowledge that a runaway slave is to be executed.

#### *B. Consciousness*

Walking through the whole story, we can find that Huck has experienced several mental conflicts. With the inner conflicts, the level of Huck's morality and consciousness are improved step by step. Finally, he becomes a real man with an independent, matured, healthy mind. In chapter 16, Huck's first inner conflict is shown. When Huck and Jim sees lights on the shore, Jim thinks that they have arrived Cairo. So he becomes very excited and says that once he gets to the state of freedom, he will try hard to buy his families out. However, what Jim says makes Huck feel uneasy and uncomfortable on the grounds that Huck has been exposure to the influence of the conception of slavery for a long time. Huck is inclined to change his mind and says to himself as if it is a great sin to steal slaves from their rightful owners. Huck drops in deep inner conflict. On the one hand, Huck wants to shrink his responsibility of helping slave Jim and he assures himself "I weren't to blame, because I didn't run Jim off from his rightful owner" [8]. At the thought of this, Huck becomes more uncomfortable and guiltier. Finally, Huck decides to denounce Jim. After the resolution he made, Huck describes his feelings as "I felt easy, and happy, and light as a feather, right off ... All my troubles were gone" [8]. This shows that though Huck views Jim as a nice person and a good friend, his traditional notion defeats the forming healthy mind because of the conception of slavery taking deep root in him. When we read the point where two men are chasing their five runaway slaves. They come close to the raft and ask Huck whether the person lying on the raft is a black or not. With the question floating around his mind, he thinks of how kind Jim is to him. After the mental conflict, Huck resolves to protect Jim and tells the two men the man lying on the raft is his father affected with smallpox. Afraid of being infected, the two men run away. Obviously, Huck makes a difference to his mind compared with that in his first conflict. He begins to think and determine out of his conscience, which means that he has made a great progress in the development of his consciousness.

In chapter 31, plots are developed to an important stage, in which Huck's consciousness is rapidly improved and his attitude is also altered to Jim and slavery. The plot has it that "the King" and "the Duke"

sell Jim for money and Jim gets under the control of the whites. When Huck finds Jim is not on the raft he realizes what has happened to Jim and is very anxious. However, Huck once again perplexes for a long time. For one thing, like before, with the profound effect of racial prejudice from the family and the society to blacks, Huck feels guilty and even thinks he should return Jim back to his owner. So he writes a letter to Miss Watson to tell her where Jim is. After he finishes the letter, he talks to himself "I felt good and washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knew I could pray now" [8]. This shows that he considers he is doing the only "correct" thing, which is not true obviously. For another, Huck may not help thinking of Jim who is kind and loyal to him. He also recalls those good old days they spent. "We afloat along, talking and singing and laughing" [9], for all what Huck thinks of about Jim makes the difference to his mind. So far, Huck's healthy mind and heart defeats his twist conscience formed in the social surroundings thoroughly.

### **IV. LANGUAGE OF THE NOVEL**

#### *A. Exaggeration*

Mark Twain's sense of humor is conveyed first through extremely exaggerated language. Twain likes using exaggerated words to create a kind of disharmony between the subjective impression and the objective facts, from which the sense of humor comes out. For example, the novel has a monologue of Huck as "I felt so lonesome. I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who whooling about somebody that was dead ... 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 made cold shivers run over me"[10]. The author uses the monologue to describe how scared Huck is about the night and loneliness with exaggeration vividly.

#### *B. Irony*

Mark Twain abandoned the conception of creation of general writers, which aimed at making people laugh but lacked for real ideological content. He combined humor and satire skillfully and hid profound meaning in his funny narration to be discovered by the readers. In Chapter 23, Twain described an ugly and ridiculous performance made by "the king" and "the Duke" for money. They claim that they are to perform "The world-renowned tragedians". However, we see "the king come a-prancing out on all fours, naked; and he was painted all over, ring-streaked-and-striped, all sorts of colors, as splendid as a rainbow". Mark Twain wrote here in a sarcastic tone "Well, it would make a cow laugh to see the shines that old idiot cut" [11]. It's through description of funny characters that we enjoy a

thick sense of humor. But after a careful thought, we come to realize the humor is mixed with certain tragic factors, which provides an access to something meaningful implied in it. Mark Twain is the first to make the tragic laughter happen in American literature.

Besides, Twain applied irony to satirize some social realities. It also produces a sense of humor. The description of the mental activities after Huck helping those three trapped scoundrels on the sinking boat is a good example. "I was feeling rather comfortable on accounts of taking all this trouble for that gang. I wished the widow knew about it. I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rascallions, because rascallions and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people takes the most interest in" [12]. It shows that the widow Douglas is not a kind-hearted person as she is on the surface but a snobbish and hypocritical woman. She just helps those scoundrels as she did to Huck who then had a big fortune.

### C. Use of first narrator

In the story, Mark Twain used first person to let Huck narrate what he experienced during the journey, which enhances the authenticity and readability of the story successfully. With the guide of naive and honest Huck, we follow the steps of his down the Mississippi to share his pains and pleasures. It makes us more convinced of what he experienced, what he felt, what he yearned for, etc. Such Twain provides us a best perspective to look at the whole story and the social realities in that time.

### D. Oral language in description

Mark Twain made use of personalized oral language of the characters in the novel, creating a new style of American literature. It's a great contribution he made. The distinctive style of language in the novel set a good example to other novelists. That kind of plain, vivid and vibrant language coming from the public made Mark Twain stand out and get rid of the boring literary shackles of that time. For instance, in the novel Huck describes his father as "He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. There weren't no color in his face ... as for his clothes-just rags, that was all" [13]. Despite his father's appearances are described with simple and oral words, we can picture what his father is like right away.

## V. COMMENTS ON ENDING OF THE STORY

### A. The way of Tom's redemption

As to Tom's type of rescue, many people consider that it is a flaw of the whole story. They hold the belief that Tom still carries out an adventure to rescue Jim on

the condition that he has known Jim has been free according to Miss Watson's will. It's absurd and unrealistic. In fact, Mark Twain made use of the absurd Tom-style rescue to criticize the education of America and satirize the romantic style of writing. Tom lives in the upper class of whites and receives a formal education. He is mechanical and unrealistic with the worship for romantic classics. When Tom learns Jim has been free, which is not known to Huck, he conceals the news to be able to experience the thrilling adventure. On the methods of rescuing, Huck thinks what they need to do is to steal the key to open the door and let Jim escape on the raft. Whereas, Tom considers that the method is too simple and is of little interest. He wants a more complicated plan. Thereof, Tom turns a serious rescue action into an adventurous game selfishly, digging the tunnel with a dragger, using bedspread-made rope ladder, keeping a diary with blood and writing anonymous letters, etc. It not only makes Jim suffer but also makes a mess of Aunt Sally's. What's more, Tom nearly loses his life with a shot on his leg.

### B. The way of Jim's gaining freedom

Jim obtains freedom through the gift of his owner by will rather than their strength, which is viewed as a failure of the novel by many reader and critics. As a matter of fact, Twain made such arrangement about Jim on purpose to put forward his own thought or solution to the problem of slavery — the reform and improvement of the society itself. As we all know, Miss Watson is a representative of the slave-owning class. In the end of the story, she is endowed with new moral qualities by Twain. She becomes more human and humane and liberates Jim by her will. Miss Watson's behavior is the very microcosm of the social self-reform and improvement, which is also Twain's social expectation.

## VI. CONCLUSION

From the surface, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* describes an adventurous journey down Mississippi. Actually, the novel is far from juvenile adventurous novel. The novel touches on the most sensitive racial system of slavery and other problems like education, religion, etc. With the narration of Huck, Twain expressed his own thoughts and expectations about that society. Moreover, the story compels us to think about some important social issues either in the story or in reality, in the past or present. The novel is worthy of being read and researched in depth and still makes good sense to modern society. It has analyzed the characters of the heroes, themes and the language in expression for different descriptions, which also made comments on the ending. Finally, the relations between entertainment and reflection for the features of Mark Twain's humor in the story of *The Adventures of*

*Huckleberry Finn* that could be provided, for showing an access to the study of the work and master Mark Twain for readers but it is far from enough for one to have a comprehensive and profound command of the novel. Therefore, it would be make further researches for searching out even more valuable finding on the characters of Mark Twain's humor in his creations.

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