

# *An Analysis of the Multi-roles the Mississippi River Plays in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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**Abstract**—The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the peak of the Mississippi series composed by Mark Twain. The story both begins and ends on the Mississippi, which reflects the writer's special attachment to the childhood familiar river. The Mississippi, soul of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, plays multi roles 'in the whole novel. This paper especially analyzes the river's roles as composing source, thread, elements of conflict, paradise for rebirth and ecological ideology, and hopefully provides a new insight into the novel from an angle of the Mississippi river.

**Keywords**—the Mississippi river, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, roles

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi River represents the heart and soul of the United States, both geographically and culturally, for it has witnessed the history and culture of the United States and played an important role in the formation of national character and economic development. The mysterious and fertile Mississippi River has bred the unique national character and local culture of the United States. Mark Twain, who grew up on the Mississippi River, has a special feeling for the river. So far it is only Mark Twain who has successfully captured the soul of the Mississippi River among the American writers[1]. With the Mississippi River as the source of creation, Mark Twain put the great river into the background of his "river book" series, leaving the world a valuable literary heritage. Among them, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a story of a little boy down the river, has inspired the Americans to seek freedom and nature for generations. The novel vividly depicts the culture, life and ideological state of Americans living on both sides of the Mississippi River before the civil war, giving the Mississippi River a number of symbolic meanings, including freedom, adventure, change, and hope. Therefore, the analysis of the roles of the Mississippi River in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is expected to help readers to deeply understand and discover the literary significance of Mark Twain's masterpiece.

## II. ANALYSIS OF THE MULTI ROLES

### A. *The Role as the Source of Mark Twain's Literary Creation*

The Mississippi River is the unswerving hero of many of the works of Mark Twain, which is derived from the special experience of the Mississippi River and the profound feelings of the great river. Mark Twain had lived in the town of Hannibal along the Mississippi River from the age of four. In

the eyes of young Mark Twain, the river was a God, its power incomparable, mysterious and dominant. He was in awe of it. In the novel, the river became a mysterious force that controlled Huck and Jim and the dictated the raft and the steamer, which prevented them from going ashore in the town of Cairo, where Jim could have been free; it was the river that mysteriously lost them and made them encounter the Grangerfords in an unexpected way. These are the reactions of Mark Twain to the Mississippi River in his childhood. The unsatisfactory experiences in his young age made him wish that he were "still a happy and carefree sailor", as he wrote in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when Huck and Jim are frustrated or dismayed on the Mississippi River, they always go back to the river, "there warn'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." [2]

The biggest symbolic significance of the Mississippi River in the novel lies in "freedom", which is the reflection of Mark Twain's life experiences and ideological pursuit. Mark Twain entered the society when he was a teenager, engaged in a lot of career and rich social experience. He experienced the racial discrimination on the Mississippi River and sympathized with the miserable life of the low-class people, which also reflects another theme of the novel, racial discrimination and the emancipation of the black. All the adventures began on the Mississippi River and ended on this river. The ideas, plots, and customs in the novel are largely related to the life experience of Mark Twain. The Mississippi River is a source of the creation of the novel.

### B. *The Role as a Clue throughout the Whole Novel*

The Mississippi River, the natural background of the novel, plays the role of organizing the full text in the whole novel. It is the Mississippi River, as a magnet, that generally draws the characters and plots of the novel to the river, and the events that occur on the river bank and the river, so that the novel is scattered and mixed in structure but orderly in logic. The Mississippi River is the road Huck escapes from the shackles of the real society. It is also the road on which he knows various kinds of people in the world, makes self redemption and grows up. The river also leads the escape of the black slave Jim on the road of liberation. The flow and change of the river echoes the reality and ugliness, comedy and horror of the society, forming the theme of the novel and the effect of conflicts. In the whole novel, the great river, as an important

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environmental role, has always been involved in Huck's activities. The river's almightiness and Huck's adventures let the reader feel a sense of affinity. The story begins with the boring and shackles of the river life, and then turns to the adventure, the excitement and the freedom of the river life, and interspersed with suffering and disappointing experience, and finally it goes back to the riverbank. Huck declined the adoption of Aunt Sally, determined to go to the Indian "territory" to continue the adventures of the "civilized society", and the experiences on the Mississippi River helped Huck overcome himself as he reached maturity and consciously confronted civilized society.

### C. *The Role as a Constituent Element of the Contradiction of the Novel*

In nature, the river and the bank are a unified integrity, and the two depend on each other. However, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Mississippi River and the land have become contradictory poles. The two scenes alternately appear, which organically unites Huck's adventures, and also increases the leap, mobility and dramatic effects of the novel. One of the main purposes of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is to expose some of the drawbacks of the civilized society at that time. Land represents a civilized society, and it is interesting that Huck is not much interested in such a civilization because he always thinks about leaving the land of this civilization and returning to the embrace of nature. To Huck, the so-called civilized society on shore is filled with deceit, cruelty, violence, and ridiculous, inhuman and restraint limitations of self-development.

The main part of the novel is the adventures on the Mississippi River, but the author uses six chapters to describe the life on the shore. The hypocrisy and shackles of the adult world, the cruelty of the society, the cultural shackles of Widow Douglas, the control of the father's violence and so on are in sharp contrast to the freedom, purity, hope and vitality of the river. In Huck's eyes, life on land is always ugly and vulgar, and is no good for real self, "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"[2] But life on the river is quite different," It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day, smoking and fishing, and no books nor study." [2] After meeting Jim, the days were better. After being far away from the false and cruel reality society, the mystical Mississippi River gave Huck and Jim the infinite power to pursue freedom and ideals. The river was the paradise in their heart, and the river was a pure land where people could get new life. In the novel, Huck and Jim go ashore off and on. In the eleventh chapter they first go ashore and are told by a woman that her husband has gone out to find a boat and a gun to catch Jim for a just \$300 reward. In the seventeenth chapter, Huck is on the shore again and sees the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords fight for a feud caused by a small incident. In the nineteenth and thirty-second chapters, Huck was forced to take part in the deception of the big swindlers "King" and "Duke" and finally came forward to reveal their tricks. Evidently, Huck and Jim always meet disheartening and startling things on the shore, with fraudulent, violent, false and other ugly happenings everywhere. Every time on the shore Huck feels nervous and

has to use pseudo names and stories as their masks. When they return to the Mississippi River and lay on the raft, they feel relieved. The river and shore appear frequently throughout the text. The "fouling" on the shore is strongly contrasted with "purity" on the river. The confrontation and contradiction between the river and the bank reveals all kinds of ugly phenomena in the early industrial revolution. At the same time, by shaping the honest Huck, the reader sees the hope and confidence on Huck, while seeing the ugly phenomenon of the society at the time. Huck's "independent spirit and adventurous life is an indispensable part of American spirit." [3]

### D. *The Role as the Paradise for Huck's Rebirth*

To Huck, the Mississippi River is the almighty God that symbolizes the mysteries of life and rebirth. Huck and Jim have been cared by the river like mother to kids while robbers and devils punished by it. The river plays an important role in their spiritual world, leading them to pursue their dreams, freedom and spiritual comfort.

His father's beating and abusing is the external direct cause of Huck's escape from the Mississippi River. To escape the violence of the father and the so-called social civilization, Huck forged a murder scene and successfully deceived the people in the real world, handing his fate to the Mississippi river truly for the first time.

Huck was born and got the free life on the river. From this moment, he is a new kid on the Mississippi River, and the Mississippi River is like an ideal father, accompanying the growth of Huck. The river raised Huck, providing him the material and spiritual wealth. Huck left behind all the ugly things such as violence, dictatorship, oppression and so on, and returned to the true self who dares to think and act, be free and admire the hero. The pure land on the Mississippi River brought Huck new life. Huck, who had been reborn, was always content with and cherishing the new life on the river. At this time, the Mississippi River is Huck's paradise, "I laid there, and had a good rest and a smoke out of my pipe, looking away into the sky; not a cloud in it. The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knowed it before...we ain't going nowhere but here" Huck's first rebirth, the surface meaning of the novel, can be regarded as the physical and mental freedom. It is the profound theme that Huck grew up spiritually, from naive innocence to maturity, from the blind worship to the discovery of self and the identity of self. So Huck had to undergo a rebirth of ideological recognition, and this time, the Mississippi River also gave him the chance.

Huck's second rebirth occurs when their raft is knocked over by a freighter. Huck and Jim sink into the bottom of the river. In order to avoid the damage of the propeller, he stays in the water for a minute and a half, and he comes out when he is suffocating, but finds Jim gone. This survival is a turning point in the novel, and is also the starting point for Huck's sublime. Before that, Huck took Jim as a companion in a journey. He had never regarded Jim as an equal friend. For in the law and education of the time, Huck suffered such a torment not to report an escaped slave that he almost informed Jim's black slave identity. However, after the second rebirth, Huck finally

realized the dirty, false and evil so-called civilized world and the upper society.

In the United States of the 1930s and 1940s, the white people lived in what they called civilization, elegance and devotion. They spoke "standard English", and they were all gorgeous and complex. They were faithful believers in God and the Bible; they were dressed in bright clothes to public occasions, talking about "civilization" and creating "civilization". [4] After contact with these "civilized" whites, Huck found that "whether a man is ugly or good, despicable or noble is not judged by his language and appearance." [5] He recognized and remembered more of Jim's kindness, loyalty, and friendliness, so he decided to hide Jim at any cost and to protect him from the difficulties and dangers. This decision was a strong and spontaneous resistance to the "civilized society" that legalized the slavery system after his serious thinking about the society seen on the river bank.. The second rebirth of Huck was the spiritual baptism given by the Mississippi River, which washed away racial discrimination in his bones and led him to the path of resistance to the adult world.

#### *E. The Role as the Source of the Ecological Thought of the Novel*

At present, the global environmental crisis is becoming increasingly serious, people come to be more and more aware that only the transformation of human centered ecological concept can fundamentally alleviate the current crisis. Under this background, literary ecological criticism arises. From the relationship between "man and nature", "man and man" and "man and self", literary ecological criticism explores how the three aspects of natural ecology, social ecology and spiritual ecology in literary works are arranged, expressed and described, excavating and revealing the historical and cultural roots of the ecological crisis and promoting the transformation of the human ecological concept. [6] With the participation of the natural ecological environment of the Mississippi River, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* revealed the idea of ecotology, that is, the human desire to stay away from modern civilization, to return to nature, and to reconstruct the harmonious symbiosis between man and nature, revealing the unbalance of the spiritual ecology caused by the infinite expansion of human desire in industrial society.

Firstly, in the ecological relationship between "man and nature", from the seventh chapter, Mark Twain showed the natural ecological beauty of the Mississippi River to readers many times. The river always opened his hug to Huck and Jim and offered them an ecologic paradise. On the Mississippi River, human beings became part of nature instead of the center of the universe. Human beings and nature are interdependent and integrated, forming a complete ecosystem. The river in the novel is the symbol of life returning to nature, and it contrasts with the material desire of the people on the shore, which reflects the author's desire to return to nature. [7]. However, this seemingly perfect ecology is trampled and destroyed by the civilization of industrial society. Every day many steamboats pass through the Mississippi River, ignoring the raft on the river and polluting the river outrageously.

Secondly, in the ecological relationship of "man and man" and "man and self", the Mississippi River provides a harmonious ecological place for the ecological balance of spirit and ecology. Huck grew in the south, and the education in civilized society reminded him that slavery was undoubtedly legal, and helping the escape of the slaves was severely punished. Obviously, such a view is contrary to the natural elements and ecological view of harmony between man and man. In the drifting, Huck often joked about Jim's feelings. First, he put the dead snake on Jim's bed to allure a living snake to bite Jim; then, when they were reunited, he fooled Jim by saying that their lost in the mist was just Jim's dream. But on the road of escape, Huck and Jim grew up together with the development of the story on the river and shore, and Huck gradually understood and knew the real Jim. In the harmonious natural homeland of the Mississippi River, on the raft symbolizing nature, the line of race and skin color gradually melted into the endless river. Huck finally broke the yoke of racial prejudice and bravely established a deep friendship with black Jim. Huck finally got the balance of spiritual ecology on the inclusive and tolerant river.

### III. CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis above, we may be likely to find that Mark Twain's childhood and youth life are integrated into the Mississippi River which is the soul of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For Huck, "riverbank" is the boundary between freedom and restriction. When he comes to the villages and towns on the shore, he will be on guard and return to the river to enjoy his freedom. [8] The river, as the background of the story, runs through all the plots. The broad, tranquil and beautiful river symbolizes the freedom and hope of Huck and Jim, pacifying the persistent fugitives like a mother and accusing all the evil of the civilized society at that time. The profound understanding of Mississippi River helps comprehending Mark Twain's literary thoughts in his novels.

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