

The Archetypal American Quest for Identity in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

**السعي النموذجي الأمريكي عن الهوية في رواية مغامرات هكبيرين
للكاتب الأمريكي مارك توين**

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Abstract

The present paper consists of some orienting reflections of the archetypal American quest for identity in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. The novel tends to be a matter of its language overcoming problems despite the fact that it is considered the archetypal American tradition. It could also face up to most problematic cases because of its complicated history and controversial diction. It seeks a great deal of a new social identity of America, thus it is so important for understanding the ambiguous relationship as well as its understatement among fictional personas. It weaves and understates a complicated plot, diction and theme. The main goal of the novel is particularly interesting for constructing identity. It is not an attempt to force racial identity because of a regardless of skin colour. The fact that this novel may read is a damning indictment of racial identity of America. It is stunning, and for a long time engrossing all valuable charisma.

Introduction

Webster (1995:1140) digs up from a great past that Mark Twain is Pseudonym of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (b. 1835, Florida Mo. U.S.– d. 1910, Redding, Conn.) American humorist, writer, and lecturer who won a worldwide audience for his stories of youthful adventures, especially Tom Sawyer (1876), Life on Mississippi (1883).

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) generally regarded as Clemens's greatest work, his third novel commands as much attention from students and scholars as all his other works combine. It is certified as an American "classic" and is often called a "masterpiece", even the

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great American novel. Despite its elevation to such eminence, however, Clemens himself did not regard it as exceptional. He placed the first version of these stories in a mid-19th-century Missouri setting in the Gilded Age.

Huckleberry Finn's importance lies in both its content and its construction. Essentially the coming-of-age story of a young white boy helping a slave to escape servitude in the pre-Civil War South, the novel, is simultaneously a children's story, a humorous adult novel and a profound sociological document. In this latter regard, it explores such universal themes as freedom and bondage, race relations, conscience, greed, and vice. Clemens invested considerable humor in the book, but one of its overriding themes is human cruelty and callousness. Huck begins his journey by escaping from a brutal captivity imposed by his father, then travels down the river and witnesses brawls, murders, lynch mobs, a pointless bloody feud, and greedy chicanery. With such horrors as a backdrop, Huck is consumed with guilt over his promise to help Jim escape a promise that has led him to steal the property of Jim's owner, Miss Watson, thereby flouting the legal and social conventions of his society. Sure that he will go to hell for this sin, he writes a letter to Miss Watson revealing where Jim is, but suddenly decides he would rather go to hell than betray his friend. Few novels have more poignant moments. (R. Kent Rasmussen, 2007: Ps. 179-180)

Clemens offers no definite answers in his novel. He suggests an approach, that of recognizing the multifaceted quality of life and human nature and of attempting to see the essential worth of a situation or person. Huck and Jim are each more aware of the ambiguity of civilized life after their trip and each values the other more as a human being. In the end, Huck seeks escape from civilization, and Fishkin wonders, ". . . How can a society that debases human lives on a mass scale consider itself civilized?" Huck, however, demonstrates the compassion of which people are capable. At the circus, as the audience laughs at the man pretending to be drunk, Huck thinks, "It warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger" (chapter 22); that the man is actually in no danger only emphasizes Huck's concern for his fellow creatures. The contrast between his feelings for a stranger and Tom's treatment of Jim is deep. (R. Kent Rasmussen, 2007: P. 211)

America, Whitman claims, is "the accretion and growth of every dialect, race, and range of time," and its language is the syncretic incorporation of the contribution of many peoples and languages. As in

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the ideal democracy, also in language “final decisions are made by the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea.” (Portelli, Alessandro 1994 P. 161)

Whitman, deeply immersed in the culture of his day, engages issues of authenticity, identity, and commoditization and uses a model that allows him to explore the relationship between objects, knowledge, and the authenticity of that knowledge.

Like Whitman, Twain was also engrossed in the events of his day, but particularly in commerce and production. In chapter 3,

“... But I couldn’t see no profit in it. One time Tom sent a boy to run about town with a blazing stick, which he called a slogon (which was the sign for the Gang to get together), and then he said he had got secret news by his spies that next day a whole parcel of Spanish merchants and rich Arabs was going to camp in Cave Hollow with two hundred elephants, and six hundred camels, and over a thousand “sumter” mules, all loaded down with di’monds, and they didn’t have only a guard of four hundred soldiers, and so we would lay in ambuscade, as he called it, and kill the lot and scoop the things. He said we must slick up our swords and guns, and get ready. He never could go after even a turnip-cart but he must have the swords and guns all scoured up for it, though they was only lath and broom-sticks, and you might scour at them till you rotted, and then they warn’t worth a mouthful of ashes more than what they was before. I didn’t believe we could lick such a crowd of Spaniards and Arabs, but I wanted to see the camels and elephants, so I was on hand next day, Saturday, in the ambuscade; and when we got the word we rushed out of the woods and down the hill. But there warn’t no Spaniards and Arabs, and there warn’t no camels nor no elephants. It warn’t anything but a Sunday-school picnic, and only a primer- class at that. We busted it up, and chased the children up the hollow; but we never got anything but some doughnuts and jam, though Ben Rogers got a rag doll, and Jo Harper got a hymn-book and a tract; and then the teacher charged in, and made us drop everything and

cut. I didn't see no di'monds, and I told Tom Sawyer so. He said there was loads of them there, anyway; and he said there was Arabs there, too, and elephants and things..."

"Discourses of commoditization and authenticity in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*," I consider the way Twain invokes the twin discourses of commoditization and authenticity to examine the potential commoditization of the self, especially through Huck's repeated acts of self-creation. (Balkun, Mary McAleer, 2006: 15)

While analysis of Twain's masterpiece has frequently turned to its complex language structures his use of dialect, the origins of Huck's language in African American speech patterns, or the ways in which the various voices that appear in the text, including Twain's, collide and intersect to create meaning there is another kind of "language" or discourse system that permeates the novel. This is the discourse of commoditization, which is not only concerned with objects and ownership but also with knowledge and power, thus engaging the related discourse of authenticity. Twain's (or Huck's) tale is filled with objects and people that appear to be real but eventually prove to be inauthentic: quarters, hair balls, plaster fruit, kings and dukes, and even slaves who are no longer slaves. (Balkun, Mary McAleer, 2006: 44)

Overview of Critical Perspectives

By any objective measure, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a remarkable book. During the century and a quarter since its first publication, it has remained in print continuously, has been translated into more than 100 different languages including Arabic.

In addition to being one of the most widely assigned novels in American schools, *Huckleberry Finn* has also been one of America's most frequently banned books. Since it first appeared in the United States in early 1885, calls for its removal from libraries and classrooms have repeatedly popped up. What makes the book's long history of censorship interesting, however, is not so much the frequency of banning calls as the variety of reasons that have been advanced for expelling the book from libraries and classrooms. These reasons include the book's coarse language, its failure to condemn slavery explicitly, its low moral standards, and its white racist point of view. By contrast, defenders of the novel cite its powerful moral lessons, the richness and authenticity of its language, and the power of its implicit condemnation of slavery and racism. The breadth of the divide between *Huckleberry Finn*'s critics and

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its defenders should make it evident that it is not an easy book to assess. However, that is not the only difficulty that stands between the book and its readers. (R. Kent Rasmussen, 2007: Ps. 198-199)

There is significant debate among scholars about whether the Hawaii novel was completed. In a January 24, 1884, letter to Mrs. Fairbanks, Twain wrote: “this book is not humorous, but a serious book, & may damn me, tho’ Livy says No. I do wish you would come and read it in the MS & judge it before it goes to the printers. Will you?” Mark Twain letter to Mrs. Fairbanks, 24 Jan 1884, repr. in Mark Twain to Mrs. Fairbanks, ed. Dixon Wechter (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1949), 255. This letter suggests that the novel was finished and lost, or perhaps, as scholars such as Day and Fred Lorch have suggested, the material was incorporated into Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* and even his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (McBride, Christopher Mark, 2004:72)

From Twain’s use of “race” when writing about Hawaii, we can better uncover his strategies in these major works. As a result, the inconsistency and struggle that highlight Twain’s treatment of race in his Hawaiian writing reveal that the islands were a crucial literary starting point for him. Moreover, for his audience, the discussion of race beyond America allowed exploration of central issues facing the country at home during Reconstruction. Hietala explains: “The expansion to the Pacific was not primarily an expression of American confidence. Anxiety, not optimism, generally lay behind the quest for land, ports, and markets.”¹¹ Part of this apprehension over savagery, politics, labor, and race is addressed by Twain in his Hawaii letters. He confidently assures America that Hawaii will not corrupt them with cannibalism, that they need not worry about newly freed slaves participating in government, and that labor problems can be solved with the Other as compliant worker. As a result of his letters, Twain not only announced himself to the literary world, he opened Hawaii as an imperial, capitalist, and imaginative space for the developing nation.

(McBride, Christopher Mark, 2004:125)

Among other obstacles to understanding *Huckleberry Finn* are the claims that it is one of the greatest American novels ever written. As early as 1913, the eminent literary critic H. L. Mencken called *Huckleberry Finn* “one of the great masterpieces of the world . . . the full equal of *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe* . . .” In 1941, V. S. Pritchett called *Huckleberry Finn* “America’s first truly indigenous masterpiece,”

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and nine years later, critic Lionel Trilling called it “one of the world’s great books and one of the central documents of American culture.” The Nobel Prize–winning poet T. S. Eliot grew up in Missouri, in which *Huckleberry Finn* is partly set, but did not read the book until he was an adult because his parents had steered him away from it during his childhood, perhaps out of fear that it might corrupt him. He later recalled that his parents regarded the book as unsuitable for boys, so he grew up thinking it must be a book suitable only for boys. When he finally read the book as an adult, he discovered that it was, in fact, eminently suitable for adults, and he added his voice to those who called it a masterpiece. All this is extravagant praise for any book and more especially for one that early critics dismissed as the “veriest trash” and that went on to inspire repeated calls for censorship. It is therefore not surprising that readers who approach the book hoping to find one of the greatest novels ever written may instead come away confused and fail to notice the book’s true merits, many of which are so subtle that they may appear, on first reading, to be flaws rather than virtues. In this regard, it may be worthwhile to look a little more deeply at the issue of the book’s greatness. The idea that *Huckleberry Finn* is the Great American Novel may well have originated with a remark that the 20th-century American writer Ernest Hemingway made in *Green Hills of Africa* in 1935 a year that happened to coincide with the centenary of Samuel Clemens’s birth.

Much time and energy have gone into trying to understand what Hemingway meant by those words. Although he appears to say that *Huckleberry Finn* is the greatest American novel, he does not explain what makes it so. Moreover, if one reads his remarks about the book in their entirety, his praise is accompanied by a serious criticism:

"All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*. If you read it you must stop where the Nigger Jim is stolen from the boys. That is the real end. The rest is just cheating. But it’s the best book we’ve had. All American writing comes from that. There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since."

(R. Kent Rasmussen, 2007: P.199)

The Issue of Slavery and the Evidence of American Identity

Slavery is one of the primary states of existence in *Huck Finn* as well as one of the principal forms of commoditization (slaves are, of course, diverted to commodity status by theft, at least originally). Slavery also

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comes in a variety of forms: characters are enslaved to their belief systems, by their social status, and by wealth or the lack of it. Kopytoff observes that while Western society tends to differentiate between people and things, this is not necessarily true in practice: "People can be and have been commoditized again and again, in innumerable societies throughout history, by way of those widespread institutions known under the blanket term 'slavery'". He argues that the perception of slavery has changed over the years so that it is now "seen not as a fixed and unitary status, but as a process of social transformation that involves a succession of phases and changes in status, some of which merge with other statuses (for example, that of adoptee) that we in the West consider far removed from slavery." While the slave state "begins with capture or sale, when the individual is stripped of his previous social identity and becomes a nonperson, indeed an object and an actual or potential commodity," it continues as the slave is made part of the "host group, within which he is resocialized and rehumanized by being given a new social identity. The commodity-slave becomes in effect reindividualized by acquiring new statuses (by no means always lowly ones) and a unique configuration of personal relationships." Thus, the slave changes from commodity to "singular individual occupying a particular social and personal niche. But the slave usually remains a potential commodity: he or she continues to have a potential exchange value that may be realized by resale. In many societies, this was also true of the 'free,' who were subject to sale under certain defined circumstances". The trajectory of the slave described here parallels Jim's course throughout the novel: from commodity to individual back to potential commodity, since in antebellum America there is always the chance that the freed Jim will find himself enslaved again. (The pattern Kopytoff describes also applies to all those others in Twain's text who are "enslaved.") (Balkun, Mary McAleer, 2006: 48-49)

Huck's role as a narrator also serves to strengthen the novel in other, more subtle ways. One of the strongest objections that has been made to *Huckleberry Finn* is that it fails to condemn slavery explicitly. There is some validity to that charge. As the novel's narrator, Huck not only never condemns slavery, but he also frequently expresses views that support the notion that slaves are the rightful property of their owners. One such moment occurs in Chapter Sixteen, in which Jim expresses his hopes for the future and says that if he and his wife cannot buy the freedom of their children, "they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them." When Huck hears those words, he is shocked and regrets helping Jim to escape:

"Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children-children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm."

(The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn 92)

Passages such as that appear to support the view that Huckleberry Finn fails to condemn slavery. However, it is through Huck's actions, rather than his words, that slavery is condemned. Trained to believe that slavery is condoned by Christianity, he believes he is sinning by helping Jim. Eventually, he decides to purge himself of sin by writing a letter to Jim's rightful owner, Miss Watson, to tell her where she can find her slave (chapter 31). For a moment, he feels "good and all washed clean of sin for the first time." However, as he thinks about what a good friend Jim is, his heart softens, and he relents. He then concludes "All right, then, I'll go to hell" and tears up the letter. One of the ironies of the novel is that Huck usually does the right thing, while thinking that he is doing the wrong thing. That is a point of view that can only be sustained by having him narrate his story.

(R. Kent Rasmussen, 2007: P.201)

The critical difference between Tom and Huck is captured in a scene near the end of the novel as they work to help Jim escape. Tom, obsessed with following the "rules" of the fictional accounts he has read, has finally agreed to dig him out with picks and pretend they are using case knives. Huck, who simply wants to see Jim free as soon as possible, responds: "Now you're talking!" I says; 'your head gets leveler and leveler all the time, Tom Sawyer,' I says. 'Picks is the thing, moral or no moral; and as for me, I don't care shucks for the morality of it, nohow. When I start in to steal a nigger, or a water-melon, or a Sunday-school book, I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What I want is my nigger; or what I want is my watermelon; or what I want is my Sunday- school book; and if a pick's the handiest thing, that's the thing I'm a going to dig that nigger or that watermelon or that Sunday-school book out with; and I don't give a dead rat what the authorities thinks about it nuther" (The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn 248)

While some critics have used this moment to criticize Huck for equating Jim with objects, the reference to a watermelon and a Sunday school book also resonates with earlier object driven episodes, such as the gang's raid on the Sunday school picnic and the foods Huck and Jim

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decide to “borrow.” This is not to suggest that Huck does not objectify Jim throughout most of their time together, but I contend that this attitude in effect, Huck’s entire attitude toward objects changes by the end of the novel.

Huck’s faith in the exchange value of objects and their cultural significance is essential to understanding his relationship with Jim, whose status as slave is fundamental to his identity for Huck. For much of their time together, Huck makes no distinction between the person of Jim and Jim as an object owned by Miss Watson. This is immediately evident in both his early references to Jim, whom he identifies first and foremost as property:

“Miss Watson’s big nigger” and “Miss Watson’s nigger, Jim”

As a nonperson, Jim can be the butt of jokes, he can be cheated without remorse, and he can be an absurd example of pride:

“Huck observes that he was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches”

(The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn 5-17)

But all this starts to change once Jim has been “diverted” from his object position, first by himself when he runs away and then by Huck, who helps him; the latter spends the rest of their time together trying to figure out ways to return Jim to the status of commodity. (Balkun, Mary McAleer, 2006 Ps. 47-48)

According to R. Kent Rasmussen(2007), of the many charges made against Huckleberry Finn, perhaps the most contentious is the claim that the novel reflects white racist views. Among the evidence amassed in support of that charge, Exhibit A is the book’s generous use of the word nigger. In 1957, when the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People sought to have the book banned from New York public schools, it cited the novel’s “excessive use of ‘nigger.’ ” It is true that the novel does use that word frequently (more than 200 times), but does that fact alone make the book “racist”? The first thing to keep in mind is that the narrative is told, not in Clemens’s voice, but in Huck’s. Clemens uses the word nigger only when he puts it in the mouths of his characters. In Huckleberry Finn, every word of the narrative comes through the voice of Huck. In the only nonnarrative portions of the text, the brief prefatory notes, the only allusion to African Americans uses the term negro. In Tom Sawyer, Clemens’s only Tom and Huck story that is not narrated by Huck, the word nigger appears nine times, but only in its characters’ dialogue. When Clemens speaks in the voice of that novel’s anonymous narrator, he uses only negro and colored to refer to African Americans

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that appears to be disrespectful occurs at the end of the wonderful passage in chapter fourteen in which he argues with Jim about the biblical king Solomon. That chapter concludes with Huck's remarking, "you can't learn a nigger to argue." However, even that remark can scarcely be construed as a reflection of the author's racist attitude, as the remark is ironic. Huck's attempt to best Jim in an argument is entirely unsuccessful, as Jim outargues him on every point. Instead of recognizing that he has been defeated by a black man whom he describes elsewhere in the same chapter as having "an uncommon level head, for a nigger" Huck incorrectly concludes that black people cannot argue properly. To perceptive readers, however, it is clear that the novel is, in fact, demonstrating that a black person is perfectly capable of exercising logic superior to that of a white person. Indeed, in this passage and in many others, the strongest message that the novel conveys is that no one race is superior to any other. As in all chapters of the novel, here is tremendous verbal energy here, the sort of energy often released when White writers avail themselves of Black languages and dialects. Mark Twain was right to include great black people dialects.

(Rosenwald, Lawrence 2008:66)

Twain's novel so badly fails in Smiley's opinion: "to invest *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with "greatness" is to underwrite a very simplistic and evasive theory of what racism is and to promulgate it, philosophically, in schools and the media as well as in academic journals. Surely the discomfort of many readers, black and white, and the censorship battles that have dogged *Huck Finn* in the last twenty years are understandable in this context. no matter how often the critics "place in context" Huck's use of the word "nigger," they can never fully excuse or fully hide the deeper racism of the novel the way twain and Huck use Jim because they really don't care enough about his desire for freedom to let that desire change their plans."

Smiley much prefers *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because it is full of people acting against slavery, because it is, unashamedly, an abolitionist manifesto. But after the Civil War resolved the matter at the end of the rifle barrel, after oceans of blood had been spilled, Stowe's novel no longer packed the same immediacy it once did. True enough, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* retains an importance as an historical novel, but not, I think, as a living (which is to say, disturbing) piece of literature. (Bloom, Harold, 2009 Ps.7-8)

Twain offers a brilliantly detailed satirical picture of the Old South: poor whites like Pap Finn and the people of Bricksville, middle-class farmers like the Phelps family, wealthy planters like the Grangerfords

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and, of course, the slaves. Huckleberry Finn is an unremitting comic assault on the human capacity to substitute 'style' for substance, social illusion for experiential fact. But it is also a satire on one particular kind of social 'style' that Twain knew only too well. It is a tragic account of what, generally, happens when people stop seeing and testing things for themselves, as individual human beings. But it is also a very American tragedy, about a moment in American history when a sense of humanity and individuality was lost, with terrible consequences for the nation. (Gray, Richard J, 2004 Ps.254-255)

Twain's satiric target here is the self-delusive paradox of identitarian moral norms, which are a matter of both choice and blood a paradox that enables the majority to see itself simultaneously as morally upright and as naturally determined. One of the sharpest pricks of Twain's satire lies in his depiction of the unconscious and unblinking acceptance of the code as nature by such diverse and intelligent characters as Roxy and Wilson. That neither recognizes the fact that the code cannot be nature if outsiders like themselves can exemplify it suggests Twain's skepticism about any hope for an escape from the false consciousness of identity.

(Crane, D. Gregg,2004 p.177)

As *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* ends, Huckleberry Finn sets out for the uncharted new Territory. As Twain does not specify what this new land will be like, we can only speculate about this place to which Huck yearns to go, and about his reasons for leaving "civilization." Arguing that Huck's decision to separate from American society is an indictment of the American dream of freedom, Sanford Pinsker shows how Twain's novel transcends our traditional understanding of the American Dream. For Pinsker, Huck's decision to light out for the Territory indicates a dark understanding of our desire for a free society. While Pinsker acknowledges that Jim's "gradual movement toward freedom" marks a sub-text in the novel, Pinsker claims that Huck ultimately realizes that he can never be a part of American society and can never be free, "even should he make it to the Territory and manage to survive." Thus, Pinsker concludes that, despite the novel's many comic episodes, Twain remains skeptical about the possibility of ever attaining freedom in a flawed society built upon the impossible dream of "freedom and justice for all."

...he ain't no slave; he's as free as any cretur that walks this earth." "

tom Sawyer spilling the beans about Jim

"We're free . . . We're free . . ."

Linda Loman at Willy's graveside. (Bloom, Harold, 2009 Ps.1-2)

ملخص البحث:

درس البحث بالعرض والتحليل في السعي النموذجي الأمريكي عن الهوية في رواية مغامرات هكلبيرفن للكاتب الأمريكية مارك توين الذي واجه فيها تحديات ونقدا شديدا للهجة غير موضوعي. واجهت الرواية عدة ميول ونزعات معقدة بسبب لغتها لكنها في الواقع تعتبر موروثا أمريكيا نموذجيا على المستوى الثقافي والاجتماعي. قابلت الرواية اتهامات وحالات جدلية معقدة واثارت إشكاليات نقدية بسبب تاريخها الملتهب ولغتها المثيرة للجدل، لذلك سعت الرواية الى إثبات الهوية الاجتماعية الجديدة للولايات المتحدة الأمريكية، فمن المهم جدا فهم العلاقة المبهمة وسير الاحداث ولغة وموضوع الرواية لكي تجذر بناء الهوية الأمريكية وهي ليست محاولة في اثاره الهوية العنصرية. بسبب تهكم وهجاء الكاتب لقضايا المجتمع الأمريكي لذلك نقد الكاتب وعمله الادبي عدة تقييمات مختلفة.

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