

Is Mark Twain a "racist"?

—An Analysis by Criticism Theory

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马克吐温是否为一个种族主义论作家

——用批评理论分析

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[Abstract] One of the great writers of American literature, Twain is admired for capturing typical American experiences in a language which is realistic and charming. Howells was one of Twain's early admirers, and he wrote the following on Twain's style: "So far as I know, Mr. Clemens is the first writer to use in extended writing the fashion we all use in thinking, and to set down the thing that comes into his mind without fear or favor of the thing that went before or the thing that may be about to follow." Most of the critical attention has been given to Huck Finn, Clemens' greatest achievement. This book concerns itself with a number of themes, among them the quest for freedom, the transition from adolescence into adulthood, alienation and initiation, criticism of pre-Civil War southern life. A remarkable achievement of the book is Clemens' use of American humor, folklore, slang, and dialects. There is critical debate, however, concerning the ending of the book – some call it weak and ineffective, others feel it is appropriate and effective. But is it a book written by a racist? We need to do some research and find an answer to it.

[Key words] Mark Twain; Criticism; Huckleberry Finn; Racist.

0 Introduction

Huckleberry Finn is a wonderful book that captures the heart of the reader in its brilliance and innocence. Despite many critics have attacked its racist perspective; the piece merely represents a reality that occurred during antebellum America, the setting of the novel. Twain's literary devices in capturing the focal of excitement, adventure, and human sympathy is a wonderful novel that should be recognized, not for bigotry, but that it is the candid viewpoint of a boy that grew up in that era. And even then, the protagonist does overcome some social prejudices of slavery because he is concerned with the well-being of his runaway slave friend Jim. That the mockery of the slave race in the end allowed by Huck is more about fulfilling the awes of Huck towards Tom. The novel is a success because it does not fail to capture the one singular point of growing up for Huck: boyhood.

Mark Twain definitely characterizes the protagonist, the intelligent and sympathetic Huckleberry Finn, by the direct candid manner of writing as though through the actual voice of Huck. Every word, thought, and speech by Huck is so precise it reflects even the racism and black stereotypes typical of the era. And this has led to many conflicting battles by various readers since the first print of the novel, though inspiring some. Says John H. Wallace, outraged by Twain's constant use of the degrading and white supremacist word 'nigger', "[The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is] the most grotesque example of racist trash ever written" (Mark Twain Journal by Thadious Davis, Fall 1984 and Spring 1985). Yet, again to counter that is a quote by the great American writer Ernest Hemingway, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn...it's the best book we've had...There has been nothing as good since" (The Green Hills of Africa [Scribner's. 1953] 22). The controversy behind the novel has been and will always remain the crux of any readers is still truly racism. Twain surely does use the word 'nigger' often, both as a referral to the slave Jim and any African-American that Huck comes across and as the epitome of insult and inferiority. However, the reader must also not fail to recognize that this style of racism, this malicious treatment of African-Americans, this degrading attitude towards them is all stylized of the pre-Civil War tradition. Racism is only mentioned in the novel as an object of natural course and a precision to the actual views of the setting then. Huckleberry Finn still stands as a powerful portrayal of experience

through the newfound eyes of an innocent boy. Huck only says and treats the African-American culture accordingly with the society that he was raised in. To say anything different would truly be out of place and setting of the era. Twain's literary style in capturing the novel, Huck's casual attitude and candid position, and Jim's undoubted acceptance of the oppression by the names all signifies this.

The thesis has three chapters. Chapter one is introduction of the whole work. Chapter two give some information about the criticism literature. Chapter three give a deep look at the research about the racial problems in the book Huck Finn. Chapter four is the conclusion part.

1 Literature Review

Literary criticism is an attempt to evaluate and understand the creative writing, the literature of an author. Literature includes plays, essays, novels, poetry, and short stories. Literary criticism is a description, analysis, evaluation, or interpretation of a particular literary work or an author's writings as a whole. Literary criticism is usually expressed in the form of a critical essay. In-depth book reviews are also sometimes viewed as literary criticism.

Controversial in death as he was in life, Mark Twain has been seriously accused by some of being a "racist writer," whose writing is offensive to black readers, perpetuates cheap slave-era stereotypes, and deserves no place on today's bookshelves.

To those of us who have drunk gratefully of Twain's wisdom and humanity, such accusations are ludicrous. But for some people they clearly touch a raw nerve, and for that reason they deserve a serious answer. Let's look at the book that is most commonly singled out for this criticism, the novel that Ernest Hemingway identified as the source of all American literature: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

For Twain's critics, the novel is racist on the face of it, and for the most obvious reason: many characters use the word "nigger" throughout. But since the action of the book takes place in the south twenty years before the Civil War, it would be amazing if they didn't use that word.

A closer reading also reveals Twain's serious satiric intent. In one scene, Aunt Sally hears of a steamboat explosion.

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?" she asks.

"No'm," comes the answer. "Killed a nigger."

But anyone who imagines that Mark Twain meant this literally is

missing the point. Rather, Twain is using this casual dialogue ironically, as a way to underscore the chilling truth about the old south, that it was a society where perfectly "nice" people didn't consider the death of a black person worth their notice. To drive the point home, Twain has the lady continue:

"Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt."

That's a small case in point. But what is the book really about? It's about nothing less than freedom and the quest for freedom. It's about a slave who breaks the law and risks his life to win his freedom and be reunited with his family, and a white boy who becomes his friend and helps him escape.

Because of his upbringing, the boy starts out believing that slavery is part of the natural order; but as the story unfolds he wrestles with his conscience, and when the crucial moment comes he decides he will be damned to the flames of hell rather than betray his black friend. And Jim, as Twain presents him, is hardly a caricature. Rather, he is the moral center of the book, a man of courage and nobility, who risks his freedom -- risks his life -- for the sake of his friend Huck.

Note, too, that it is not just white critics who make this point. Booker T. Washington noted how Twain "succeeded in making his readers feel a genuine respect for 'Jim,'" and pointed out that Twain, in creating Jim's character, had "exhibited his sympathy and interest in the masses of the negro people."

The great black novelist Ralph Ellison, too, noted how Twain allows Jim's "dignity and human capacity" to emerge in the novel.

"Huckleberry Finn knew, as did Mark Twain [Ellison wrote], that Jim was not only a slave but a human being [and] a symbol of humanity . . . and in freeing Jim, Huck makes a bid to free himself of the conventionalized evil taken for civilization by the town" -- in other words, of the abomination of slavery itself.

In fact, you can search through all of Twain's writings, not just the thirty-plus volumes of novels, stories, essays, and letters, but also his private correspondence, his posthumous autobiography and his intimate journals, and you'll be hard put to find a derogatory remark about the black race -- and this at a time when crude racial stereotypes were the basic coin of popular fiction, stage comedy, and popular songs.

What you find in Twain is the opposite: a lively affection and admiration for black Americans that began when he was still a boy and grew steadily through the years. In a widely praised post-Civil War sketch titled "A True Story," for example, he wrenchingly evoked the pain of an ex-slave as she recalls being separated from her young son on the auction block, and her joy at discovering him in a black regiment at war's end.

And on those occasions when Twain does venture to compare blacks and whites, the comparison is not conspicuously flattering to the whites. Things like:

● "One of my theories is that the hearts of men are about alike, all over the world, whatever their skin-complexions may be."

● "Nearly all black and brown skins are beautiful, but a beautiful white skin is rare."

● "There are many humorous things in the world; among them is the white man's notion that he is less savage than all the other savages."

2 Methods/ Research Design

The null hypothesis for this research is that half of the university students study literature will think that there are racial discrimination in the book Huck Finn and others won't. 1000 students in their third and fourth years of university will be the subject. They must never see the book or the movie of Huck Finn. They come from both big cities and rural area. They are divided into four groups. The first two groups (each has 250 students) include the students from big cities, part of them dealing with the questionnaires, and others dealing with the interviews. The same as the first two groups, but the rest two groups include the

students from rural areas.

Group number	Students from big cities	Students from rural areas
questionnaire	No.1	No.3
interview	No.2	No.4

First, all of them will hear the story of Huck Finn. Then they will answer relevant questions about the images of Huck Finn in the questionnaires and during the interviews. The questions are about the using method of language, the plot design and the thinking of Huck, etc. Finally, the movie of Huck Finn will be shown. Students will describe the image of Huck and their views about racial problems in this book. According to their answers, different answers will be divided into different groups. After these works, comes the analyses of the statistics and data. After comparing the answers of the four groups, gives the conclusion whether literary students from big cities and from rural areas have the same opinion of the racial discrimination in this book. As expected, half of them will have the same opinion and half of them won't.

3 Anticipated Results

3.1 Time-Table

My studies will last more than two years. I decide to spend about 50 hours per month on my studies. I plan to spend the first six months developing my proposal and methodology and completing the literature review. During this period, I will also attend some relevant courses about reader's response theory. Then I will spend about six months in questionnaires and interviews. After that, I plan to spend eight months in analyzing the statistics and data. Finally, four month will be used mainly on the thesis.

February 2008 - Aug. 2008

* Develop proposal and methodology and complete the literature review

* Attend some relevant courses about reader's response theory

Aug. 2008 - Feb.2009

* Design the questionnaires Collection of official and unofficial statistic

Feb.2009- October 2009

* INTERVIEWS

October 2009 - Feb.2008

* Analysis the statistics and data

* Mainly work on the thesis

3.2 Anticipated result

University students from different countries will have different opinion on the same thing. As expected, half of them will have the same opinion and half of them won't. However, if the result doesn't support my anticipated result, I will try to find the weakness of my research design, and improve it. Then do the research again and again. If I also can not get the anticipated result, I will accept the result with a scientific attitude. 科

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