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Intellectual Freedom Challenge

Uncovering Twain’s True Intent

When Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was first published, the public library of Concord, Massachusetts, deemed it “trash of the veriest sort,” believing the novel a conduit for advancing racism, and thus scolded Twain’s “condescending” portrayal of Jim. However, these skeptical critics failed to notice Twain’s bitter irony as he highlights the bigotry that haunted, and still haunts, society. Although *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is viewed as a racist book even now, the novel is a prototypical commentary on racism that is inadvertently ingrained in society, and precisely because of its controversiality, we must continue to study it.

The novel begins with Huck, the ordinary picaro, intoxicated by the virulent racism around him, openly disdaining African Americans like “Miss Watson's big n—,,” Jim (Twain 18). When the reader first meets him, Jim is fervently whispering to his magical, omniscient hairball, attempting to answer a question for Huck. While this event initially appears to be an African American foolishly clinging to superstition, Twain instead uses this instance to highlight both Jim’s self-reliance and intelligence, denoting that superstition is merely Jim’s attempt at bringing order to a chaotic and incomprehensible world. Unlike most men, Jim is unsatisfied with religion, finding it inadequate to quell fear and suffice reason, and in Jim’s devotion to superstition, Twain portrays him as an independent intellectual who is struggling to pioneer his own understanding of the world. Twain repeatedly presents instances like this one, underscoring the skill and intelligence inherent in the everyday actions of African Americans, emphasizing how the runaway slave, in evading his captors, is sagacious and creative, how African Americans’ dedication to their families is more moral than the selfish greed of slave owners, and
how race does not define an individual. In doing so, Twain forces his readers to examine the
wisdom and perspective of African Americans, consciously garnering sympathy and admiration
for their plights.

As the novel progresses, Huck and Jim are drawn closer together, bonded by the shared
plight of the fugitive, and in this ever-strengthening friendship, Twain debunks the idea of
African American inferiority, first identifying the racist views of Huck and then revealing how
he overcomes them. On their journey, Jim verbalizes his plans to buy his wife and children as a
freeman, stating that if the master refused to sell them, he would simply steal them. Although he
knows Jim intends to “steal his children,” Huck unintentionally lapses into the accepted views of
the time, exclaiming that Jim’s children truly belong to their white master, an idea which Twain
uses to display the undeniable racial inequality and stress the need for immediate change (Twain
111). After detailing and subtly chastising such racist beliefs, Twain then champions humanity
over prejudice and hatred, using his young and naïve narrator to display a path of righteousness
amidst injustice. After discovering that Jim had been captured, Huck is unsure of how to
proceed, but reflecting upon Jim’s selflessness, affection, concern, and their undeniable
friendship, Huck realizes that he would rather “go to hell” than abandon Jim, overcoming his
racial prejudices out of loyalty, regardless of race (Twain 223). In this bold revelation, Twain
provides a glimmer of hope amidst seemingly insuperable racial differences, showing that if
those like Huck, ingrained with prejudice, can realize one race is no less human than another,
they can begin to thaw the glacial inequality.

In the evolution of Huck and Jim’s relationship, the reader sees Twain’s unabashed
support of the anti-slavery movement, yet critics remain skeptical, troubled by the frequent use
of the n-word and the ending of the novel, maintaining that Jim is reduced to the comic buffoon.
While the ending is not quite as enterprising as the rest of the novel, Twain still champions African Americans and valiantly challenges the racial prejudices of the time, capturing the irony and duplicity in racism. Likewise, Twain uses the n-word not out of extreme hatred of African Americans, but merely because it was a societal convention. In choosing his narrator to be a young, rebellious picaro, Twain knowingly adopted this voice, and thus only channels the inequality, the prejudice, and the appalling racism of Huck’s time.

However, without seeing firsthand this vivid hatred and poisonous condescension, we cannot hope to improve our own society, which is now crippled with xenophobia, sexism, and bigotry reminiscent of Twain’s time. It is imperative that we follow Twain’s model, discerning and combatting prejudice in our daily lives, so that Huck’s earthshattering revelation—that character trumps race, sexual orientation, and class—is not a rarity, but a norm.
Works Cited
