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EXTENDED ESSAY

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**Research Question:** To what extent is the issue of racism and slavery demonstrated in the novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" by Mark Twain in regard to the views of the main characters, the prejudices of the society and the usage of language?

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## **Abstract**

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain is one of the most renowned works of the American literature. As the two main characters of the novel, Huckleberry Finn and Jim, embark on a journey throughout the Mississippi River, the readers explore the idea of racism and slavery among the people of southern United States of America.

Aim of this study is to analyse the question:

**To what extent is the issue of racism and slavery demonstrated in the novel “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain in regard to the views of the main characters, the prejudices of the society and the usage of language?**

The research question is analysed in three main parts, which are “The Views Of The Main Characters”, “The Views Of The Society” and “The Usage of Language”. First of all, the way Huckleberry Finn and Jim are influenced by the ideas of racism and slavery is analysed in two separate sections. Then it is demonstrated how the ideas of Huckleberry and Jim are affected by the prejudices which are generated within the society. Finally, the language of the novel is examined in order to express the ideas of racism and slavery.

In conclusion, it is observed that the ideas of racism and slavery are accepted as normal facts among the southern American society of 1880s. In addition, it is proved that the Mark Twain protests these ideas, contrary to the public opinion of 1880s. Mark Twain also suggests that in order to terminate the ideas of racism and slavery, these ideas must be eradicated from the minds of the youth.

Word Count: 267

*“Discrimination is a hellhound that gnaws at Negroes  
in every waking moment of their lives to remind them  
that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in  
the society dominating them.”*

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

## **I. Introduction**

On 12<sup>th</sup> April 1861, a civil war broke out in United States of America between the southern and northern sides of the country which were the Confederate and the Union. The war went on for five years and concluded with Union victory. However, there were thousands of deaths from both sides. The issue of slavery also played an essential role on the reasons of the war. (The Great Republic, 432-486)

Missouri delta which is between the Confederate and the Union states, was also the home of Samuel Langhorne Clemens which is commonly known by his pen name: Mark Twain. Missouri was counted as neither northern nor southern but it did allow slavery. When the war broke out he did not support a specific side. He joined the Confederate for a very short time before his unit was disbanded. After that he reflected his true, Unionist side in his literary works. (Twain, VII)

Mark Twain based his novels on the life in the Missouri delta where slavery is accepted as a common fact of social life. He has shown that he supports antislavery and racial equality in his literary works. One of those works is “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn”. (Twain, VI)

“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” is about a fourteen-year-old white boy from Missouri who escapes from his home and starts his journey across the Mississippi along with a companion named Jim, a slave with a black skin who runs away for his freedom. Through the eyes of these young individuals from different ethnic backgrounds, Mark Twain criticizes the civil society because of the popular idea of racism and slavery they adopt, the lack of moral values, the education system in the society and hypocrisy of the people. Experiencing the civil war at the border of two sides and being a boat machinist at the Mississippi river,

Mark Twain had great knowledge upon the people of Missouri which he used as a basis for his novels. Because of the realistic way of expressing his ideas, he implied his criticism rather than writing them directly. His style caused some to regard him as racist but both his great ability to reflect the facts of the American society and raise the issues of prejudice and hope made his novel be considered as the great American novel. (Twain, VI)

This essay aims to investigate: To what extent is the issue of racism and slavery demonstrated in the novel “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” by Mark Twain in regard to the views of the main characters, the prejudices of the society and the language of the novel? It is observed that the idea of racism and slavery has influenced the majority of the society in the novel as well as the protagonists. However when the actions of Jim and Huckleberry are observed, it is seen that they start to set themselves free from prejudices, which is the evidence that proves that in order to eliminate the prejudices utterly, it has to be eliminated from the minds of the youth first.

## II. The Views of the Main Characters

### a) Huckleberry Finn

Huckleberry Finn is the protagonist and the narrator of the novel. He is a thirteen-year-old boy from the town St. Petersburg of Missouri. He is raised by his drunken father who constantly abuses him physically. He is not taught about manners and he resists Widow Douglas who tries to educate him. To escape from his dad he fakes his death and starts his journey on Mississippi River with a black companion called Jim.

It is seen that he is a young boy who cannot have prejudices yet he is affected by his father and people around him during his youth. He considers all the black people as underlings. *“Well, he was right, he was always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger”* (Twain, 75) As seen in this excerpt, Huckleberry tries to appreciate Jim but he also humiliates black people, implying they can never be better than white people. When they are talking about how French is different from English, Jim finds French is ridiculous as he lacks education. Instead of trying to change Jim’s mind, Huckleberry says *“I see it warn’t no use wasting words-you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quit”* (Twain, 78) which shows us he already accepts that educating black people is a waste of time. When Jim puts a good idea forward, Huckleberry says *“I knowed he was white inside...”* and implies that black people cannot have a working mind as white people do.

Even though he sees black people lower than his own race, he is aware of black people’s sufferings. *“...for if he didn’t get saved, he would get drowned; and if he get saved, whoever saved him would send him back home so as to get the reward, and then Miss Watson would sell him South, sure.”*(Twain, 78) The excerpt demonstrates Huckleberry understands the dilemma of slavery and death Jim experiences. By witnessing his agony and seeing that

Jim considers Huckleberry as his friend despite their racial difference, Huckleberry starts to question his own prejudices but his bias always affects him somehow until the end of the novel.

One of the main proofs for his prejudice is his guilt of travelling with Jim. When the two reach near a town called Memphis, Huckleberry starts to see himself as guilty due to turning a blind eye to Jim's getaway. He thinks that Miss Watson, Jim's owner, is an innocent woman who has not done anything to Huckleberry except for trying to educate him which is for his own sake. He said he should have turned Jim in at the first time they met. (Twain, 86) While Huckleberry was thinking quietly, Jim was talking about his dreams. He wanted to buy his wife and children and if their owner would not sell them, he would steal them. (Twain, 86) He was thinking about reuniting his family but this idea freaked out Huckleberry. *"It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before... 'Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell'... saying he would steal his children-children that belonged to a man I didn't know, a man that hadn't ever done me no harm."* (Twain, 86-87) Considering the excerpt, Huckleberry thinks that Jim had gone too far. Jim's desire to take back his children does not seem right to Huckleberry as he thinks that rightful owner of the children is not their father. He even blames himself for letting Jim's escape as he will steal slaves of another man that had not done any harm to Huckleberry. He is so biased that he does not accept family bonds over slavery attachments.

When Huckleberry decides to tell Miss Watson about Jim, he thinks that when Miss Watson learns about it all, she will sell Jim or mistreat him and the people also will disgrace Huckleberry for his assistance to Jim. (Twain, 202) As Jim is a slave, he has never been treated nicely before so nothing would change. Huckleberry and the society approve how they behave toward black people. They think they aid black people by providing them with



food and shelter. Because of this idea, Huckleberry accepts mistreatment as a punishment but Jim never counts mistreatment as a punishment as he is used to it. He only thinks about getting sold which is a real punishment for him.

Even though it is not seen often, Huckleberry shows acts of sympathy toward black people, putting his bias aside. “*All right then, I’ll go the hell’- and tore it up.*” (Twain, 203) In the excerpt, Huckleberry tears up the letter which he wrote for Miss Watson about Jim because he finds Jim has not done any harm to him as stated “*...I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind.*” (Twain, 203) In the novel, it is indicated that he grows a compassion for the black people, for example, in the excerpt, “*It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger-but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither.*” (Twain, 84) It is seen that Huckleberry still considers it unusual to treat a black person in that way but he also does not mind it, which shows us that his personal feelings start to overcome his racial prejudices. Another example would be the part when Huckleberry accuses the black people of stealing the King’s money, which Huckleberry himself actually stole from the King who stole it from the townsfolk. As the King cannot tell anybody about the money he stole, he could not chase after the black people so Huckleberry was happy because he “*worked it all off on to the niggers, and yet hadn’t done the niggers no harm by it.*”(Twain, 176) A regular character from the novel would not be interested whether the black people are harmed or not but Huckleberry enjoys that he has not caused any harm which illustrates again he started to see them as human beings with feelings.

Combination of Huckleberry’s mixed up prejudices generated by his environment and his open-minded child soul has caused his actions to be complicated. He builds a personal

relationship with a black person but he holds himself back, puts a distance between Jim and himself because he believes that they cannot be equal in any way.

## **b) Jim**

Jim is a black person who escapes from his owner Miss Watson. After he hears that Miss Watson wants to sell him, he runs away and starts to go to the north of the Mississippi. He comes across Huckleberry Finn, who he met before when Huckleberry was taking classes from Miss Watson, and then they decide to travel together.

Jim's biggest fear is to be sold to South where black people are treated harsher than his current owner treats him as stated "*She pecks on me all de time, en treats me pooty rough...*" (Twain, 44) It is seen that Jim chooses bad treatment over the unknown. He thinks his next owner will be meaner to him and is scared of the idea of being sold, not even considering his new owner would be nicer.

Not only white people but also Jim sees himself as a property rather than a human being. After his escape, he says "*...I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's wuth eight hund'd dollars.*" (Twain, 47) His words show us that even though he is free, he does not understand the concept of freedom. He thinks he is still a property which he owns now and considers he is rich as he is worth 800 dollars. This situation demonstrates that black people are strangers to the idea of free will.

When there is a chance to invest in a bank among black people, Jim says: "*Well, all de niggers went in, but dey didn' have much. I wuz de on'y one dat had much.*" (Twain, 46) The excerpt shows us that black people have economic problems and Jim thinks he is different from them as he refers to them as "*all de niggers*" even though he is a "*nigger*" too. It is because he is the slave of Miss Watson. He considers himself richer and higher in social

value because he is somehow connected with the white people. This situation demonstrates black people are also affected by the prejudices.

As Jim grows up as a slave, he accepts class distinction between white people and black people as a fact. He sees white people are smarter than him, so he believes the ideas of white people are better than his own and he always does whatever they say as stated “*Jim couldn't see no sense in the most of it, but he allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied, and said he would do it all just as Tom said.*” (Twain, 237) The excerpt “*I'd take en bust him over de head. Dad is, if he warn't white. I wouldn't 'low no nigger to call me dat.*” (Twain, 78) demonstrates Jim is afraid of white people and has no respect for black people, his own kind. This is due to the environment which he grows up in.

The most obvious difference between black and white people is to be open-minded. Both Huckleberry and Jim are affected by the unbiased environment around them, acknowledging that black and white people are not equal. However, Jim can see Huckleberry as a friend: “*...Huck; you's de bes' fren' Jim's ever had; en you's de only fren' ole Jim's got now.*” (Twain, 87) whereas Huckleberry considers Jim as “*...the only nigger I had in the world...*” (Twain, 205) The excerpt can be the evidence for the fact that Jim's feelings overcome his prejudices more than Huckleberry's do. As black people do not see themselves superior like white people, they are more eager to break the bias that exists.

As a runaway slave, the main motivation of Jim is fear which is generated by his and society's prejudices. He grew up in an environment where discrimination is a fact so he is affected by it too. During the journey which he makes for his freedom, he still accepts he is inferior like all black people and does not stop seeing himself as a property.

### III. The Prejudices of the Society

The actions and ideas of the minor characters are also an aspect to illustrate the idea of discrimination and slavery. The author created characters from different cultural and economic parts of the society to show that this idea is supported by the majority of public at that time. The minor characters are also effective on the ideas of the main characters.

Huckleberry's father is a drunken man who abuses his child. He did not get a proper education and he does not want Jim to get one too. Even though Huckleberry is a child and does not have strong ideas about life, he is affected by the ideas of his father. Huckleberry's father is a racist man who thinks black people cannot be equal to white people no matter what happens. There is a monologue in which he says he will not vote again because he has learnt that a state in the north lets "free niggers" vote and he says it is wrong. He thinks "free niggers" should be sold as well but the laws do not allow it, so he denigrates the government and accuses it of releasing criminals which are black people (Twain, 28). The monologue shows that Huckleberry's father sees black people as slaves and nothing more. He thinks if they are free, they will harm the society. In addition to that he sees his own government as an enemy because he thinks it protects black people.

During his journey, Huckleberry goes to a town in undercover to get news about his fake murder. He meets a woman who tells him what she hears from Huckleberry's town. She tells Huckleberry that at first, everybody suspects his father but after Jim escapes at the same night, everybody thinks Jim is the murderer. Finally, she says if they catch Jim, "*they can scare it out of him*" (Twain, 57-58) As she talks it is seen that most of the people suspect a black person because he runs away at the same night of the murder and they stop searching for the previous suspect, Huckleberry's father even though he is known for beating Huckleberry many times. The reward for Jim being greater and the quick change of mind of

people show that society does not trust black people and can easily accuse them. The words “scare it out of him” are also evidence that black people can be physically abused to make them give false testimonies.

Another example of distrustfulness towards black people would be the words: “...*do you reckon a nigger can run across money and not to borrow some of it?*” (Twain, 168) The duke’s words show that he does not trust black people and implies every black person is greedy.

The general idea of the society is that the black people are not actually free beings, they are properties of white people; they can be treated harsh and be humiliated. There are many examples in the novel which support this statement.

“ - *How is servants treated in England? Do they treat ‘em better’n we treat our niggers?*”

- *No! A servant ain’t nobody there. They treat them worse than dogs.*”  
(Twain, 164-165)

In the dialogue between Huckleberry and Joanna, Huckleberry pretends to be a servant of an English man and says that a servant is treated worse than dogs in England and not better than black people. It is seen from the excerpt, the black people are treated worse than servants, even dogs.

When the Duke and the King are planning about a show, they make the price list as “-*ten cents a head, children and niggers are free-*” (Twain, 116) This price order demonstrates black people are regarded as children no matter how old they are.

Black people are regarded as objects. They are signs of wealth and every rich person has to have one as it is seen from the extract “*Each person had their own nigger to wait on*

*them... The old gentleman owned a lot of farms, and over a hundred niggers”* (Twain, 103) Regarding black people as properties is constantly illustrated in the novel. Another example would be *“well, blamed if the king didn’t bill the house and the niggers and all the property for auction straight off...”* (Twain, 173) Concerning the extract, it is seen the black people are considered as tradable goods that can put up in an auction sale.

Niggers are more than just properties but they are also sources of income for white people. Run-away niggers create a new branch of work for white people. As the black people often run away for their freedom and there are rewards on their heads, bounty hunting becomes an ordinary income opportunity as stated *“If you see any runaway niggers, you get help and nab them, and you can make some money by it”*. (Twain, 89)

As white people in the novel do not have any kind of emotional attachment to black people they are not concerned about black peoples’ lives. *“...some of them wanted to hang Jim, for an example to all other niggers around there, so they wouldn’t be trying to run away...”* (Twain, 270) The excerpt demonstrates how the white people do not mind sacrificing one slave, making him a scapegoat to prevent other slaves from running away, to secure their assets. *“But the others said, don’t do it, it wouldn’t answer at all, he ain’t our nigger, and his owner would turn up and make us pay for him, sure”* (Twain, 270) It is seen that even the ones who oppose the idea of hanging Jim, oppose it because of monetary reasons, not emotional reasons.

The most obvious example, showing white people do not consider black people as their equals, is the part of a dialogue between Huckleberry and Aunt Sally:

-... *We blowed out a cylinder-head.*

- *Good gracious! anybody hurt?*

- *No'm. Killed a nigger.*

- *Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt* (Twain, 210)

It is seen that white people, Huckleberry too, do not regard black people as even “people”.

Finally, while white people are acting like this, they also tend to see their actions right and believe they are acting fairly towards the black people. For example, the duke says that black people have a histrionic talent (Twain, 175). A histrionic talent is a personality disorder which is a condition of being very emotional and dramatic in order to get attention (Livesley, 173). As black people have to obey white people without objection, it is unjust to say that they have “a histrionic talent”. Another example would be the time when white people decide to award Jim for his actions. Jim assists a doctor even though he risks his freedom, so the townsfolk decide Jim should be awarded and the award is not “cuss” at Jim (Twain, 271). It is seen that although Jim saves a white person while risking his freedom for it, his reward is just not to be “cussed” at and it is clearly unfair.

Regarding all the examples above, it can be said there is an obvious racist idea which influenced the society illustrated in the novel. This idea is effective on minor characters as well as major characters.

#### IV. The Usage of Language

The ideas of racism and slavery are also reflected through the language in the novel. The author adopts a style which helps to express discrimination and humiliation of black people.

Initially, there are few people in the novel who can talk English properly. It is observed that especially Jim and other black people use a fragmented language with full of grammar and spelling mistakes due to their lack of education.

The humiliation of black people is also seen as there are “nigger names” which are mostly simple and monosyllabic like Bob or Jim (Twain, 47). It is so usual that the narrator has to clarify that a woman who called Betsy is a black person as it is not a common black person’s name (Twain, 95).

The author also uses the word “nigger” constantly in the novel in order to indicate the idea of racism. The word “nigger” is used to refer to a person with an African origin. However when the novel was written, it was used to emphasize racial inequality.

Finally, when Huckleberry decides to rescue Jim from slavery, he says: “*I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again...*” (Twain, 203) He uses the verb “to steal” instead of “to rescue” or “to set free” which indicates again Jim is not considered as a person but rather an object that can be stolen.



## **V. Conclusion**

Raising the immortal issues of today's world, Mark Twain attempts to reflect the problem of racism and slavery through the eyes of a-fourteen-year-old child named Huckleberry Finn. With the setting and characters he creates, he demonstrates the problems of both the Southern society and the whole United States in a realistic style.

During the analysis of the novel, it is seen that general idea upon racism and slavery are solid in the minds of the people. The idea of racism affects everyone, even the children like Huckleberry Finn. When the main characters, Huckleberry and Jim are investigated, it is found out that they find racism as a natural part of life even though they do not know the reason behind the idea. It is shown that they are just performing what the adults around tell them to say and become more like them even though they do not do this on purpose.

When the society is investigated, it can be seen that the reasons of racism and slavery are based on economic reasons. Southern people, whose economic power depends on slave power, do not want slaves to have rights. This situation has gone so long that they accept it as a truth, which is, no black person can have rights to be a citizen. They teach this "fact" to their and black people's offsprings so that the next generations will follow the tradition.

In the essay, the investigation is based on the author's views about racism and slavery. As the novel is written in a realistic style, the author does not interfere with the plot. He tries to create a plot which will emphasize his point of view. The language he uses demonstrates his disapproval of racial inequality, contrary to the popular idea of people of his time that he is a racist and a vulgar person.

Finally, even though the story demonstrates that adult people with prejudices do not change, it is seen that a boy without a solid prejudice can change and form a friendship with a

black person. Mark Twain thinks that if the children are set free from prejudices, disputes of racism and slavery will come to an end.

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