

Mark Twain's Reflections of Humanity throughout *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Throughout *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain creates an intricate and detailed story with his use of various literary devices, including elaborate imagery, irony, and characterization. Yet Mark Twain further incorporates elements of legitimate literary criteria, as established in two tertiary sources, including William Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and Henry James' "The Art of Fiction." Specifically, these sources focus on the concept of language and its contributions to the entire work, as well as incorporate discussions regarding experience, personal revelations, and the significance of literature's faithfulness to represent reality. By applying the standards established within these two tertiary sources, readers begin to view Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as not only a story of adventure, but one that exemplifies the contributions of language and dialect within a piece a literature, as well as illustrates the importance of reality and experience in learning important lessons regarding morality, honesty, conscience, loyalty, and humanity.

In the "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*," William Wordsworth proclaims that his goal within writing is "to bring [his] language near to the language of men" (653). This concept is often misinterpreted by many readers, because they seem to think that this notion is an undermining of their intelligence levels, as well as the particular poet or author's attempt to simplify or weaken the prose. Henry James further explains and clarifies the significance of language within literature in his essay entitled "The Art of Fiction" by stating that "every word and every punctuation-point contribute[s] directly to

the expression” (866). The characters of Twain’s novel, especially Huckleberry Finn and Jim, have very distinct dialects that are not only native to their specific culture, educational background, and hometown location, but this language also provides the readers with a more personal, intimate, and thorough description of the characters and their personalities, which, in turn, helps the readers to fully grasp the characters’ relationships to one another as well as understand their individual contributions and relevance within the plot.

Incorporating specific dialects for each character also encourages readers to extract particular moral beliefs, lessons, and examples set forth by that particular character. For example, when Huckleberry Finn tricks Jim by trying to make him believe that he was hallucinating or dreaming as they travel down the river, Jim responds to Huckleberry Finn by explaining to him,

“En when I wake up and fine you back again, all safe en soun’, de tears come and en I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin ‘bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed.” (Twain 95)

Jim’s broken grammar and slang dialect gives readers an indication of his educational background, but by incorporating this particular dialect, and specifically referring to these careless, inconsiderate individuals as *trash*, Jim is attempting to teach Huckleberry Finn a lesson about morality and thinking about how his particular actions will make other people feel, which also portrays Jim as a kind and considerate individual with an empathic disposition. This character then not only becomes a role model for Huckleberry

Finn to attempt to exemplify, but encourages readers to emphasize their own beliefs regarding their treatment of other people as well.

William Wordsworth also states that by “speaking in a language somewhat more appropriate, it is to follow the fluxes and refluxes of the mind when agitated by the great and simple affections of our nature” (651). An instance in the novel that illustrates this particular concept is when Huckleberry Finn and Jim discover each other on the island and Huckleberry Finn promises not to report Jim’s escape. He says, ““Well, I did. I said I wouldn’t, and I’ll stick to it. Honest *injun* I will. People would call me a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell...”” (Twain 55). Huckleberry Finn is promising Jim that he will remain true to his word, despite what other people might say and how they might act towards him in the future, because he views Jim as a friend and is even relieved and happy when he discovers that Jim is on the island with him. Despite the possibility of receiving a disapproving reputation from the townspeople, Huckleberry Finn follows his instinct and does what he perceives is the right thing to do, which suggests that Huckleberry Finn is learning lessons and beginning to formulate his own viewpoints regarding loyalty, personal character and consideration for others.

Likewise, just as language can indicate a character’s personality traits and moral stances, some very similar notions are stated within Henry James’ essay entitled “The Art of Fiction.” One point that James makes within this essay is that “[t]he only reason for the existence of a novel is that it does attempt to represent life” (856). William Wordsworth also makes a similar connection between literature and reality in his statement that is the responsibility of the writer to “consider man in his own nature and in

his ordinary life as contemplating this with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge, with certain convictions, intuitions, and deductions which by habit become the nature of intuitions..." (657). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates examples of these concepts throughout the novel, not only by employing actual dialect and vocabulary as a form of characterization, but to make the characters and their situations a reality for readers so that they are better able to analyze them individually, make connections between that particular character and the other characters throughout the novel, and clearly distinguish the various situations' contributions to the plot of the story, how they affect all of the characters involved, and how they are relevant to real life as well.

More specifically, along with James' declaration that successful writing must seek to imitate reality, he also states that "[h]umanity is immense, and reality has a myriad of forms" (860). Within *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the reader experiences reality in many different forms, depending upon that particular character's perception of reality. Furthermore, James affirms that attaining this sense of reality within writing is most successfully achieved when the writer writes from experience, for "[e]xperience is never limited....It is the very atmosphere of the mind...it takes itself to the faintest hints of life, it coverts the very pulses of the air into revelations" (860).

Upon the widow Douglas' attempt to "sivilize" Huckleberry Finn, he ironically proclaims that "it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out" (Twain 13). Huckleberry Finn does not necessarily take the widow's graciousness and hospitality for granted, but rather, he does not see the necessity in living this type of lifestyle, which includes manners, education, dressing in nice, clean clothes, and learning

about religion. He perceives that these daily routines present no benefit for him, and he clearly expresses his desire to escape this particular reality and create his own reality, where he can be “free and satisfied” (Twain 13).

However, later in novel, after Huckleberry Finn escapes from the widow Douglas’s house and establishes his own satisfactory reality, he begins to ponder many aspects of morality, religion, and humanity, based upon his experiences. For example, when Huckleberry Finn debates whether or not to report Jim’s location, he ponders the issue of personal integrity and responsibility for one’s actions by asserting that, “That’s just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don’t want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain’t no disgrace” (Twain 222). Upon further thinking about this situation, Huckleberry Finn then says, “And at last, when it hit me all of a sudden that here was the plain hand of Providence slapping me in the face and letting me know my wickedness was being watched all the time from up there in heaven...” (Twain 222). This particular instance illustrates Wordsworth’s notion of “contemplating this [idea] with a certain quantity of immediate knowledge,” (657) because Huckleberry Finn knows basic religious facts, but does not seem to comprehend their place or significance within his life. But when he makes this connection between his own knowledge and combines it with his experience, this realization leads him to then proclaim, “And I about made up my mind to pray; and see if I couldn’t try to quit being the kind of a boy I was, and be better,” (Twain 222) which is an example of Wordsworth’s idea of these habits “[becoming] the nature of intuitions” (657) and perhaps more specifically, a clearer, better awareness of the human conscience.

Ironically, when the widow Douglas and Miss Watson previously attempt to educate Huckleberry Finn about religion and the Bible, he takes no interest in it because he “don’t take no stock in dead people,” (Twain 15) nor does he see any “advantage in going where [Miss Watson] was going” (Twain 16). However, when he begins to actually experience these concepts in reality, as opposed to reading about them in a book, Huckleberry Finn begins to learn more about righteousness, honesty, conscience, and personal virtue than he ever learned from these teachings and strict daily regimens. Huckleberry Finn seems to disregard these teachings until he perceives how they apply to him personally as well as apply to the experience of “real life” situations, illustrating James’ concept of reality and experience leading to “revelations” (860) as well as Wordsworth’s notion of “man and the objects that surround him as acting and re-acting upon each other” (657).

In addition, when Huckleberry Finn witnesses the Royal Nonesuch rascallions looking “like a couple of monstrous big soldier-plumes” (Twain 239), he begins to realize another important lesson as a result of reality and experience. Despite the wrongdoings and the deceitful, fraudulent, and dishonest dispositions of the two men, Huckleberry Finn then declares, “Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was ever sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn’t ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another” (Twain 239). With this particular observation, Huckleberry Finn learns a lesson about humanity and compassion by looking past these two individuals’ negative qualities. Henry James makes a similar statement within “The Art of Fiction” by encouraging writers to “not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of

life itself' (869). Despite Huckleberry Finn's disagreement with their choices, way of life, and social class status, he learns to regard them respectfully as individuals and ultimately, as living, breathing *human people*.

Although *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* appears to be a surface-level story of a young boy's adventures, upon further intellectual analysis, it is not merely a source of entertainment, but a model of how Mark Twain exemplifies various ideas previously established by William Wordsworth from "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" and Henry James from "The Art of Fiction" to contribute to underlying principles and messages within the novel. By employing vernacular diction and individual dialect to each of the characters at various instances within the plot, along with establishing a sense of reality based upon experience, readers are encouraged to interact with the characters on a personal and intimate level to extract that particular characters' significance to the piece as a whole. Moreover, by exploiting reality and experience through the perspective and struggles of young Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain provides fundamental lessons through these experiences that result in many realizations and exemplify messages of morality, integrity, and disposition, which ultimately result in *the* ultimate human experience of independent thought, intellect, and concern for *all* of humanity.

Works Cited

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