

## Mark Twain's the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as a great American Novel

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### Abstract:

Mark Twain outlived nineteenth century by the wake of his novels. He is known as the father of American literature. His novel "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" can be considered to be the great American novel. The term is first used in an 1868 essay by American Civil War novelist John William De Forest. Critics like Lionel Trilling, T.S.Eliot and Henry Nash Smith gave different opinion with regard to the novel. "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" is the great American novel. Its greatness lies in its Americanism, language, and culture, its power of telling the truth and in its themes. American attitudes are well reflected in the characters. Seven types of American dialects are used in the novel. Its themes include slavery, humanitarianism, illusion and reality, fight with the corrupting and the baneful influence of civilization, parenthood, love and compassion.

*Keywords*— Americanism, Dialect, Slavery, Picaresque.

### I. Introduction

The term 'Great American Novel' implies a novel of high literary merit which shows the culture of the United States at a specific time in the country's history. The novel is written by an American author, Mark Twain, who is knowledgeable about the state, culture, and perspective of the common American citizen. Twain uses the literary work to identify and exhibit the language used by the American people of the time and to capture the unique American experience, especially as it is perceived for the time. In historical terms, it is sometimes equated as being the American response to the national epic.

Twain came to be known as the father of American literature because of his originality in writing. He poses to be a role model for all American writers. He introduces a new trend in American literature. He is the one to picture the American culture, language and attitude in

his works. While fiction was written in colonial America as early as the seventeenth century, it was not until a distinct American identity developed in the eighteenth century that works classified as American literature began. America's identity as a nation was reflected alongside the development of its literature. The term 'Great American Novel' derives directly from the title of an 1868 essay by American Civil War novelist John William De Forest.

In modern usage, the term is often figurative and represents a canonical writing, making it a literary benchmark emblematic of what defines American literature in a given era. Aspiring writers of all ages, but especially students, are often said to be driven to write the Great American Novel. Theoretically, such a work would be the greatest American book on American culture which could ever be written. Thus, the great American novel is a metaphor for identity, a Platonic ideal that is not

achieved in any specific texts, but whose aim writers strive to mirror in their work.

Some of the works in nineteenth century came to be known as The Great American Novel. It includes James Fennimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884).

The novel is a portrait of the American life with its cruelties, backwardness and ignorance retaining its peace and simplicity without being tarnished by the disillusionment caused by capitalism. The greatness of *Huckleberry Finn* lies in the power of telling the truth. But the novel tells the truth; a boy narrating the story is interested in giving truth.

It is observed that truth is the whole of a boy's conscious demand upon the world of adults. He is likely to believe that the adult world is in a conspiracy to lie to him, and it is this belief, by no means unfounded, that arouses Tom and Huck and all boys to their moral sensitivity, their everlasting concern with justice which they call fairness. The novel has raised the truth of the moral passion, the virtues and the vices also.

The truth of *Huckleberry Finn* is of a different kind from that of *Tom Sawyer*. It is a more intense truth, fiercer and more complex. *Tom Sawyer* has the truth of honesty-what it says about things and feelings are never false and always both adequate and beautiful. *Huckleberry Finn* has this kind of truth too, but it has also the truth of moral passion; it deals directly with the virtue and depravity of man's heart.

Also Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is regarded as 'The Great American Novel' for it deals with the Americanism, pre-war life and truth in the Southern America, their language, humor and satire, delineation of the problem of slavery and delineation of characters. The Greatness of the novel is also owing to its universal appeal, it's simple and charming narration and an experiment with a prose style.

*Huckleberry Finn* is a pen-portrait of certain serious problems which baffled solution in America. The chief merit of this novel consists not in boyish pranks of Tom and Huck's deceptions represented in the novel, but in its delineation of the conflict between conscience and law. Huck has got away from the corrupting influence of the widow Douglas, Miss Watson, and Pap, and Jim also has escaped from slavery for fear of being sold away.

Huck befriends Jim and a white boy whose conscience has been influenced by the white morality of the South, becomes the benefactor of the runaway slave Jim. Huck's act is against the law, against the white conscience. He feels a sense of guilt in helping the boy and thinks that he has been doing something illegal. The boy is confronted with a dilemma whether to help Jim or hand him over to the slave-hunter. The feeling of humanitarianism triumphs over his sense of guilt and he becomes Jim's savior.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is great because it renders a truthful account of pre-war life in the Southern America, the moral codes of the people, their narrow view of religion, their customs and superstitions, their feuds, roguery, their institution of slavery, the spirit of adventure among boys and love of freedom, the greed for wealth and the charlatanism of the unscrupulous, their drunkenness and criminality. Thus the

novel blends local color with universal themes. The charm of the book has been enhanced by its unique juxtaposition of the interests of mankind with those of the people in the Southern part.

The greatness of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* lies in its Americanism. Twain is the first writer of genius who has not looked to Europe for his sources of inspiration and for the efflorescence of his latent creative power. He is deep rooted in the soil of America and has glorified the life of the Frontier and the Mississippi in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, vivid picture of the Southern society, its ways, superstitions and the customs have been photographed in a detached manner. The life of freedom epitomized in the adventures of Huck and Jim throws light on the spirit of adventure among young children and how the life of the steamboat on the river contributes to it.

Much more complex is the revelation of basic American attitudes in the overall structure of the book. The narrative begins in the near farcical mood of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, acquires a rich symbolic meaning as Huck's and Jim's quest for freedom becomes the narrative focus, moves towards the tragic recognition that freedom cannot be attained in this or any world, then suddenly veers back towards farce in Tom Sawyer's arrangement for Jim's evasion-which proves in the end to be merely a gigantic hoax. Mark Twain takes refuge from tragedy in a joke by doing so he is conforming to a notorious American habit.

Lastly, the greatness of the novel lies in the delineation of Huck and other characters like Tom and Jim. The hero has not been idealized and like a rogue adventure of the picaresque novels, is a lover of freedom and belongs to a very

low class of society. Huck Finn resembles the great characters of Hamlet, Odysseus, Faust and Don Juan. He is confronted with serious question of conscience whether he should help Jim in his liberty or not. Twain has delineated his moral growth and maturity. Huck, a realistic portrait has autobiographical element. Twain has written in his autobiography that in *Huckleberry Finn* he has drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed.

## II. Conclusion

The novel also deals with the themes which are purely American like slavery, question of death and birth, fight with the corrupting and the baneful influence of civilization, escape from the civilized society, illusion and reality. The author uses American dialects which are seven in numbers throughout the novel. The novel has its merits of realism, humor, satire, theme, artistry and characterization. It has created a new vogue of the prose style which influenced many American writers. It is the best novel of Mark Twain, representing the regional characteristics, with themes of local interest and universal significance. On considering the existence of all these qualities *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be eluded to be the Great American novel in American literature.

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