

Huck Finn As A Jocular Hero

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In Mark Twain's **The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** (1884) we meet two travelers - travelers in their native land and also in the geography of their souls. Huck Finn and his companion Nigger Jim speak to us through both Huck's slangy, idiomatic, frequently vulgar speech and also in terms that lift us from the merely picturesque to that of a sensitive and insightful criticism of American life. Mark Twain preserved a view of frontier American life that could, in its exact and moving details, be found only in his work. After his death, his friend William Dean Howells wrote of him: Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.

Unfortunately the humor Twain used brilliantly as a weapon against the prevailing "Jim Crow" beliefs became a two edged sword. His coarse Southwestern humor blinded many readers obscuring **Huck Finn's** strongest theme.

The book, to begin with, is a fine comic novel. Huck Finn is rich in incident, varied in characterization, and meaningful in its entirety. The story is narrated by Huck, a "natural" whose language is both a reflection and a criticism of his schooling and his times. Fundamentally this is the story of a quest - an adventure story in the age-old pattern of a boy making his way in a corrupt adult world. An outcast, to all intents without family and friends, Huck flees the restraints of the riverbank society which would make him its victim, and journeys down the river in search of freedom and understanding. The adults he and Jim encounter regard Huck as a rogue, a ne'er-do-well whose career consists of one scrape after another; but the extent to which he is constantly embroiled with authority is exactly the index of his independence.

Huck is a total realist, with an acute and instinctive register of mind which enables him to penetrate sham and pretense - qualities which, the more he travels through the adult world, the more he sees as being "normal." Through his self-imposed "rules of the game," he acquires a code of ethics and a standard of value against which he measures mankind - including, mercilessly, himself. Reflected against his "game code" he recognizes many people and things - not riverbank society, however - that are authentic; there are many more that are "phony."

Huck, the consummate gamesplayer, does not understand the world, but he knows how one should behave in it. The comic irony that gives the novel its characteristic intellectual slant is provided by the judgements of this young realist on the false ideals and romanticized versions of life.

In **Huck Finn** we see a literary depiction of social history. Fiction, in this instance, tells a greater truth than history. Fiction becomes the direct transcription of personal experience. **Huck Finn** is less a record of right conduct and judgement, than of felt life. This great novel is life standing still to be looked at. By the same token, science is a way of observing life from a distance, 'objectively' as the "white smockers" say, recording its incessant facts without any preference as to which are set down. For my purposes, however, a novel (with its fictional games) is science, theory, and experience all at once. This is true because a novel is a metaphor, a way of catching, fixing the unstoppable current of life-as-experience.

Is this to speak in riddles? No. It is to speak in language, and as Fred Inglis argues, language has the power of a game to shape a way of life. Following David Vanderwerken, I

argue that while philosophers debate whether play and games are creative or destructive, writers of fiction seem to have settled the matter earlier. Of course, American writers are notoriously unphilosophic, their imaginative energies intuitively heading for where the action is, where life is most intense, where human possibility - in all its splendor and folly - is most open. No wonder, then, that so many of our best writers follow Mark Twain's path and are drawn to forms of play. It's as natural as young Samuel Clemens going skinny dipping.

But Twain's use of games and contests is also subtle. He dramatizes the conflict between his two heroes and river bank society. This episodic contest gives form to the story. And the form of **Huck Finn** is the way it is told; the action the form of this story means to understand **how** it is told as well as **what** it tells. Alert readers may note how particular scenes are dominated by games and their crafty players.

These contests give each scene an exuberant, comic gaiety while at other times imparting a violent and threatening somberness. At first these activities seem to be a boy's way of having fun. But it is far more than a casual use of leisure time. In each episode, Huck and the slave Jim are fighting local beliefs that invariably prove to be vicious and inhumane. Nigger Jim against outright slavery while Huck fights slavery cloaked as "civilized" behavior.

In **Huck Finn** Twain used humor both as a weapon and as a means of exploring life and of discovering truth. He wished to confront each reader with his or her own personal set of "Jim Crow" laws and beliefs. Pointedly, Twain, whose books were and are censored, made sport of hide-bound critics lurking behind self-serving codes of conduct which they conveniently labeled - "proper. "