

**"HUCKLEBERRY FINN" - SALIENT ASPECTS - APPRECIATION : A WORK OF
MANY MERITS**

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Abstract

Huckleberry Finn is a work of outstanding literary qualities and Mark Twain owes his permanence and universal popularity to this masterpiece. It is an adventure story, like most other novels of Twain, realistically and satirically portraying frontier days in the Mississippi Valley, its feuds and superstitions and folkways, and displaying Twain's typical "Western" humour of exaggeration and roguery, particularly in the sequences devoted to the Duke and the Dauphin. But it is much more than that. Through the delightfully unpretentious character of Huck Finn and the tale of his voyage down the River with the runaway slave Jim, we get a thorough-going indictment of the moral basis of society. Though the book is filled with dramatic illustrations of man's inhumanity to man and of the hypocrisy of his professed virtues, *Huckleberry Finn* is infused with the resilient spirit of Huck's untutored impulses and with the growth of a genuine friendship between Huck and Jim. Ernest Hemingway, in *The Green Hills of Africa* (1935), declared, "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*"; William Faulkner said to Twain, "All of us are his heirs"; and T.S. Eliot has summed up the debt of the modern writers when he said, "Twain discovered a new way of writing, a "language based on American colloquial speech." In more ways than one, it is a classic and is still read and enjoyed on both sides of the Atlantic.

Key Words :- *Huckleberry Finn*, Outstanding literary qualities, Mark Twain, Masterpiece, Adventure story, Moral basis, Hypocrisy, Classic

Mark Twain is one of the greatest of the American novelists and his masterpiece *Huckleberry Finn* is a great world-book. In his own times, he was a controversial figure and was severely criticised by a number of critics. When a school boy, T.S. Eliot's parents advised him not to go through Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. His works were condemned by journals as funny, journalistic efforts. G.C. Holl regarded him as a "mere fun-maker of ephemeral popularity." John Nicoll wrote "Twain is master of degenerate style," one who has

done perhaps more than any other living writer to lower the literary tone of English speaking people. But soon Mark Twain's genius got recognition and he was hailed as a great genius.

Mark Twain was a superb-teller. This enabled him to hold his readers enthralled and to entertain audiences in their homes and in public auditoriums with equal facility. Mark Twain was an adept at carefully leading his readers and audiences through calculated affects and contrived suspense to effective climaxes. He was a consummate master of the "tell tale" as is proved by his stories about the jumping frog and the blue jay. These along with "The Man that Corrupted Handleburg" are imperishable narratives of American literature. Beginning with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain has used the device of the first person narrative with telling effect.

Skill in characterization is the supreme test of a novelist's success, and in this field Mark Twain is eminently successful. He has created a number of living, breathing real human beings who are among the immortals of literature. His portrait-gallery is a crowded one and includes such memorable figures as Town Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, the runaway negro Jim, Colonel Sellers and Roxy. He is a remarkable analyser of characters.

Mark Twain achieved in *Huckleberry Finn* and other novels a prose style suited to the American ethos. In his hands comic jargon and dialect became a finished literary weapon, unemphatic, visual and deceptively simple, sounding like speech and yet not quite the same. His basic reliance on colloquial idiom encouraged many later writers who, but for his example, would not have dared to deviate from the literary style of his contemporaries.

Always on the side of the underdog, he had a deeply ingrained faith in the equality of man and a hatred of all injustice and oppression. He began his literary career as a disciple of Artemus Ward and other popular humorists. Seeing life from the viewpoint of an untutored but perceptive frontier America, he developed into a satirist of human wickedness and folly in all their manifestations. Writing for a popular audience, he evolved a prose style that was always simple and smooth-flowing, filled with concrete imagery and close to the spoken language. He was more successful than any previous American writer in breaking away from the English literary tradition and modelling his style on American speech. This made him a most stimulating influence on the novelists of the twentieth century.

His three great : novels are really parts of one masterwork, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) bring to literary life his own boyhood. Taken separately, they vary greatly : the first is almost wholly narrative - a story written for boys full of the horrors and joys of childhood, following apparently on the surface of experience, the second is a collection of sketches and impressions of the great river, taken partly from memory and partly from fresh observation; the third is the "sequel" which knits the whole group together, the story of a boy but no longer a story only for boys. It is a folk epic, for by now the mighty river has become a symbol of that with which man is forever contend but in which he can put his only faith. In the perspective of this third, all three books have an unsuspected depth and a further meaning.

Giving an estimate of the greatness of Mark Twain as a novelist, Wagenknecht writes, "Mark Twain is so incomparably the dominating personality in American literature, the mightiest figure in our American literary mythology, that one who would write about him as novelist merely must inevitably feel somewhat cabined, cribbed, confined." There is the same difficulty in being dispassionate about him as in being dispassionate about Lincoln, and when Howells called him *The Lincoln of our Literature*, he struck out of the most telling and illuminating phrase concerning him that has yet been coined. He was the product of the same Mid-western frontier, that produced Lincoln; indeed, he himself was that frontier in literature unmistakably as Lincoln was that frontier in world statesmanship.

Huckleberry Finn is a complex work of art and as such a number of themes and ideas stand out of it. The work admit of different interpretations. Read on a superficial level it may be taken to be a picaresque tale which narrates the adventures of a picaro, Huck. But it much more than that. According to Richard P.Adams, the central theme of the novel is Huck's growth from a boy into manhood and his final acceptance of adult and moral responsibilities. In the opinion of Gilbert M. Rubenstien the major theme of the novel is compassion and love-love between Sophia and Harvey, between Huck and Jim, between the black and the white. The central theme of the novel, according to Alexaner J. Butraya, is Huck's fight with the corrupting and baneful influence of civilization. It is also a scathing criticism of contemporary American society, a passionate plea for justice for the negro slaves, a plea for their emancipation.

There is both cruelty and love in the novel An important theme in the book is the conflict between romance and realism. This opposition out clearly in the contrast between Huck and Tom. Tom is an imaginative boy, who must invest the most porsaic facts of life with a glamorous aura and who never does anything in a simple way when there is a more complicated method available which appeals to his romantic fancy. Huck is just the reverse- to him a spade is always a spade. Of course, Twain prefers Huck's mature, forthright directness to Tom's day-dreaming, which results in unintentional cruelty to Jim. This distinction between the two boys explains the nature of the overlong conclusion of the novel, but the distinction is applied to other persons and situations throughout the book, in perhaps more meaningful ways.

The whole idea of monarchy, in the person of the Duke and Dauphin and in the very funny colloquy between Huck and Jim about king Solomon's wisdom, is satirized as a cruel romantic delusion; the colloquy is the funnier because for once Huck himself has been trapped by the romantic lore he has picked from up from Tom. Also the cruelty is inherent in the concept of chivalry and aristocracy, as embodied by the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, it is exposed as being the inevitable result of the senseless romantic tradition of duelling and feuding. Most important of all, the notion of face superiority, the whole code of white supremacy, is revealed as romantic nonsense. We see this idea not only in the story of Huck and Jim, but also in the anti-Negro ranting of Pap Finn, earlier in the book, a superb example of know-Nothingism. The spirit of democracy, according to Mark Twain, is not to be found in the romantic myths of clan or racial superiority. Human beings are superior to one another only in the goodness of their hearts and their lover for other people.

Huckleberry Finn can be read and interpreted on several levels. Both characters and incidents are symbolic and its action admits of an allegorical interpretation. Allegory and symbolism run through the novel from beginning to end. Huck's journey is symbolic of soul's journey to heaven, the raft is the symbol of peace. Huck's death is also symbolic. The river Mississippi, like the Ganges and the Nile, stands for a distinct culture, " the river represents a deity, a force and moral idea and Huck is a real devotee of that goddess. He is aware of the supernatural and the divine powers of the river. He praises the charms of the river. In his journey through the river he comes disgusted from the real world of misery to the peaceful

water and eulogizes the beauties and glories of the river, its power and inscrutable mystery. This river god is generally benign but at times, it may become malign too. The fogs created by the river, mysterious echoes, the dangerous sandbars and its swollen waters may cause serious havoc. The river goddess inculcates goodness in those who appreciate its beauties and its charms. The river is symbolic and Huck himself is a symbolic figure like Odysseus, Don Juan, Don Quixote and Dr. Faust.

The river Mississippi in particular is a powerful and all pervasive symbol. The river Mississippi is a God and the novel is a great book because it is about a God, that is a power which seems to have a mind and will of its own and which to men of moral imagination, appears to embody a great moral idea. Huck's own attitude towards the river is that of a devotee. The world he inhabits is perfectly equipped to accommodate a deity, for it is full of presence and meanings which it conveys by natural signs and also by preternatural omens and taboos; to look at the moon over the left shoulder, to shake the table-cloth after sundown, to handle a snake-skin are ways of offending the obscure and ever-present spirits. Huck is at odds, on moral and aesthetic grounds, with the only form of Christianity he knows, and his very intense moral life may be said to derive from his love of the river. He lives in perpetual adoration of the Mississippi's power and charm. Huck, of course, always expresses himself better than he can know, but nothing draws out his gift to speech like his response to his deity. After every sally into the social life of the shore, he returns to the river with relief and thanks-giving, and at each return, regular and explicit as a chorus in a Greek tragedy, there is hymn of praise to the God's beauty, mystery and strength and to his noble grandeur in contrast with the pettiness of men.

The sense of the danger of the river is what saves the book from the touch of sentimentality and moral ineptitude of most works of imagination which contrast the life of nature with the life of society. It is the river which has given form to the novel. But for the river the book might be only a sequence of adventures with a happy ending. The river, a very big and powerful river, is the only natural force that can wholly determine the course of human peregrinations. At sea, the wanderer may sail or be carried by winds and current in one direction or another; a change of wind or tide may determine fortune. In the prairie, the direction of movement is more or less at the choice of the caravan among mountains there

will often be an alternative guess at the most likely pass. But the river with its strong, swift current is the dictator to the raft or to the steamboat.

The river can be more easily treated allegorically, than any other object of nature. Huck's movements take on at least the external form of basic symbolic pattern. Implicit in this pattern is the suggestion that the river journey can have a distinctly metaphysical quality, that it can be in fact a journey of the soul as well as of the body. This suggestion is not all arbitrary. Of all forms of physical progression, that of drifting downstream in a boat, or on a raft, is the most passive one possible. the mind under such conditions is lulled, as Huck's mind is, into the illusion that it has lost all contact with reality and is drifting bodilessly through a world of sleep and of dreams. Thus, the nakedness of Huck and Jim when they are alone on the raft, becomes symbol of the real world and their clothes have come as close as possible to the world of the spirit.

To conclude, Mark Twain is a buoyant story-teller, the delineator of character and the master of idiomatic prose. Optimist and pessimist, dupe of his own emotions or coerced by his audience, Mark Twain does not appear to the American reader as a man of letters imprisoned by the demands of his vocation but rather as a free spirit to whom one turns in order to breathe the virile, joyous, healthy atmosphere of an American. He survives as the evocator of a unique phase of American experience. There is an understanding between him and his public, just as there was during his life time. He continues to have an almost seductive charm for his readers. The reasons for his success are sentimental. America sees him with real affection as the first of her writers to draw from the American soil the material for an original and lasting work.

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