

## Slaves and Slavery in the Select novels of Mark Twain

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### Abstract

Mark Twain deals with the problems of slaves and slavery during his period. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, primarily, he shows that blacks can be good human beings, lovable and loving. He tries to advocate that they should be treated as human beings and not as some sub-human species. Jim, a black slave has been shown to be a father figure to Huck, the young hero of the novel. He is also very concerned for Tom, the friend of Huck and the hero of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.

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### 1. Introduction

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* there is a reference to slaves but by and large it echoes the prevalent attitude of the whites for the blacks. Only Uncle Jake, a nigger slave, is shown to have soft heart for Huck, a vagabond. But in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a slave and the conditions of slaves, before the Civil War, have been portrayed in detail. *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*, an anti-slavery novel was written by an American author Harriet Beecher Stowe. The novel was published in 1852 and had deep effect on the attitude towards the African Americans and slavery in America. It is said to have helped in laying the groundwork for the Civil War. But it was also banned and badly criticized by those in favour of slavery as the horrors of slavery is its central theme and Tom, a slave, is its central character. Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* became very popular and was praised even though it also tries to change the attitude of the Americans towards slaves and slavery. Here Jim is not the central character and Huck, the hero of the novel, who is white, gradually changes his views about the blacks. Freedom and liberty is a major theme of the novel but is has been taken in a variety of ways. The novel is so entertaining that Twain appears to be following the views of Sir Philip Sidney in teaching through an engrossing story. Sidney says that the writer "cometh unto you, with a tale which holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney-corner: and, pretending no more, doth intend the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue;" (*An Apology For Poetry*, p. 208)

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Jim is a fully developed character who has not been properly studied by critics. T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to the novel pointed out that "Jim is as notable a character as Huck" (T. S. Eliot, Introduction, p. 26) Through Jim, Mark Twain has taken up at some length one of the burning social issues of that time, that is slavery and the place of slaves in the American society. In America at that time the slaves were rarely treated like human beings as they were considered to be a sub-human species. They were considered to be the property of their owners and could be bought and sold like animals.

But voices had started rising in their favor and some laws were passed – they could be made free if their masters freed them like Miss Watson frees Jim in her will. Mark Twain was a rebel and also endorsed labor unions and supported the Russian Revolution. He felt that slavery was a barbarously inhumane crime but as a child he did not have any aversion to slavery. This is the kind of change or maturity that is found in the character of Huck and this imparts a clear message of equality and brotherhood to the readers. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* both Huck and Tom appear to have a poor opinion of the black slaves. As they are very young they appear to be presenting the belief of the grownups. Huck calls them niggers and Tom says that they all lie "I never see a nigger that *wouldn't* lie." (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, p. 53) Huck, who has nobody to look after him gets things to eat from slaves and also eats with them but feels so ashamed that he does not want anyone to know about it.

"I tote water for Uncle Jake whenever he wants me to, and any time I ask him he gives me a little something to eat if he can spare it. That's a mighty good nigger, Tom. He likes me, becuz I don't ever act as if I was above him. Sometimes I've set right down and eat *with* him. But you needn't tell that. A body's got to do things when he is awful hungry he wouldn't want to do as a steady thing." (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, p.195)

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Jim becomes the symbol of slavery. At the outset of the novel Jim appears to Huck and the readers as a fear-ridden slave but gradually he develops into a likable character. The novelist has taken great care in developing the personality of Jim and one cannot help but admire this noble character and love him as much as Huck does. Mark Twain never intended to preach or to teach but his works have moral instructions. He, like a teacher, tries to improve the attitude of the society to which he belonged. His novel points out the gross error of the people in assuming that surface differences among men such as language, manners, the color of the skin should serve as a justification for characterizing those people who are '*different*' as being subhuman or of a different species. The first thing that Huck realizes is that Jim is a human

being with human feelings and emotions and can be hurt as badly as any human being.

Mark Twain does not soft pedal the ignorance, superstitions or shortcomings of his black characters but he puts the blame for these shortcomings to where it belongs, slavery. Jim is primitive, superstitious and ignorant but it is because he is a slave and has been a slave all his life. He overhears that his owner Miss Watson is selling him to a New Orleans trader for eight hundred dollars. He is not only terrified of his future but is also unhappy that he will not be able to see his wife and children. He, therefore, runs away to the Jackson's Island, where he meets Huck, his would-be liberator. He lives on the island in constant fear of being captured and sent back and sold.

Mark Twain has mentioned in his *Autobiography* that the original of Jim was Uncle Dau'l, a middle-aged slave on the farm of Mrs. Clemens' brother, John Quarles. Uncle Dau'l was a favorite of the children as he was a good story teller and his favorite story was a ghost story. Jim also has a wonderful knowledge of ghosts, witches, omens and signs. Jim and Huck both have faith in the significance of the supernatural world and the prognostics of the future. In both the novels *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain has made negroes and children the bearers of superstitions and blind beliefs. Daniel G. Hoffman in his article 'Black Magic – and White in *Huckleberry Finn*' says that Jim has such a firm belief in omens that "His superstitions ... are the manacles upon his soul. ... Mark Twain dramatizes his bondage by his beliefs. Far from controlling nature, Jim in slavery is helpless before the dark powers, a gullible prey to every chance or accident which befalls him." (p.102) Anything unusual that happens to him is considered by him to be an act of the witches.

But Jim knows all kinds of signs that predict the weather and on the Jackson's Island he instructs Huck in the slave's folk wisdom, in the lore of weather, in the omens of good luck or bad luck and in the signs of death. D. G. Hoffman summarizes Jim's views very nicely: "seeing young birds skip along means rain, catching one brings death, You must tell the bees when their owner dies or they will weaken and perish.... don't shake the tablecloth after sundown, or count the things you cook for dinner, or look at the moon over your left shoulder – these bring bad luck." (Black Magic - and White – in *Huckleberry Finn*, p.103) When Huck says that he is telling him only about signs of bad luck, Jim very sensibly asks him why he wants to know when good luck is going to come, does he want to keep it off. In the Preface to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain writes: "The odd superstitions touched upon were all prevalent among children and slaves in the West at the period of this story – that is to say, thirty or forty years ago." (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, p. 8) In both the novels the only white people who are superstitious are either young boys or riff-raff like Pap and they could have picked up the stories from the slave quarters. Mark Twain's usual assumption is that white people of status higher than Pap have little knowledge of, and no belief in superstitions. The only superstitious belief followed by the white people in the two novels is the belief in the power of bread and quicksilver to discover a drowned corpse.

But Jim's prediction about rain on the Jackson's island proves to be absolutely correct and saves him and Huck from great trouble. "Some young birds come along, flying a yard or two at a time and lighting. Jim said it was a sign it

was going to rain." (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 98) So Jim says that they should put their things up in the cavern where it would be safe from rain. Huck doesn't believe him but helps Jim in carrying the luggage to the cavern. Very soon it becomes dark and a regular summer storm starts and it rains 'like all fury.' Huck enjoys the sight immensely from the safety of the cavern while eating a hot meal.

Jim gradually slips into the role of a father to the young Huck. They find a two-storied house floating by in the Mississippi river during the flood. They go to ransack it for anything useful. Jim finds a man lying there dead and realizes that it is the father of Huck; so he does not allow Huck to take a look at the dead body. It is only at the end of the novel that Jim tells Huck about his father's death.

But young Huck still goes on playing pranks on Jim. In the cavern Huck kills a rattlesnake and curls it up on the foot of Jim's blanket thinking it would be fun when Jim finds it there. But when Jim lies down on the blanket to sleep he is bitten by the 'snake's mate'. But Jim has a folk cure – eating a piece of the snake's body roasted, tying the rattles around his wrist and drinking whisky and his cure works. Huck feels angry with himself for being such a fool as not to remember that the mate of a dead snake always comes and curls around its body and quietly throws away the snakes so that Jim does not come to know about what he has done. Huck starts feeling protective towards Jim. Finding that men are going to come to the island on which they are hiding to make a search for the runaway Jim, as three hundred dollars are offered for his capture, he decides to leave with Jim. Throughout the novel Huck does all he can to save Jim from being captured and becoming a slave again.

Huck realizes that Jim not only has deep feelings that can be badly hurt but that he also has an innate dignity which cannot be trifled with specially by one who calls himself a friend. When Huck and Jim are separated from each other in the fog, Huck first tries to convince Jim that they had been together on the raft all along and that Jim had only dreamt their separation. When Jim is convinced Huck shows him the debris on the raft telling him that everything had happened in reality. This hurts Jim badly as he realizes that Huck, whom he loves so much, is making a fool of him thinking to be a great fool. Pointing at the trash on the raft Jim says:

'What do dey stan' for? I's gwyne to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back again', all safe en soun', de tears come 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 with a lie. Dat trck dah is trash; en trash is what people is that puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed. (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 143)

This long speech is impressive in its dignity and strong feelings and shows Jim's "staunch adherence to the code of simple decency by which good people must live." (*Form and Fable in American Fiction*, p. 105) The words and the way Jim has spoken these words makes Huck feel mean and so ashamed of himself that he 'could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back. It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger – but I done it, and I wasn't sorry for it afterwards, neither.' (*Huckleberry Finn*, p.143) Huck is so overpowered by the

mental suffering of Jim that he decides never to play any trick on him in the future.

Jim is very gentle, loving and emotional by nature and slavery has made him fearful. He cannot bear violence. When he encounters the cut-throats on the wreck of *Walter-Scott*, he runs back in great fear and almost deserts Huck. What keeps with Huck is the fact that the boat on which they are hiding breaks loose from the wreck, otherwise he is so terrified that he has no strength left. He shows great fear and jumps into the river when the slave hunters approach their raft. But he bears his state with notable fortitude. He is full of a longing for freedom but he never shows any restlessness. He takes a great risk at the end of the novel and chooses to give himself up for the sake of his friends Huck and Tom.

Jim loves his family, his wife and children, very much, he also remembers his father with love. He runs away from Miss Watson because he was to be sold by her and he did not want to be separated from his wife and children. Huck, to his surprise realizes how much love a black man can have for his people when he talks to him about his family. Huck says: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folk does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so." (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 218) These words show that Huck has imbibed the belief of the white people that blacks are like animals, a different species and therefore they do not have the feelings that a white man, that is a human being, has. Many times Huck finds him remembering his children and often moaning and mourning at night when he thinks that Huck is asleep saying: "Po' little 'Lizabeth! Po' little Johnny! Its mighty hard; I spec' I ain,t ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo'!" (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 218-19) This makes Huck say that Jim was a mighty good nigger and makes him determined to help Jim get his freedom no matter what. When the king and the duke sell the niggers of the Wilks girls and separate the mother and her two sons he again feels very bad for their sufferings and when he finds the three Wilks girls sharing the sorrow of the black family he feels their goodness of heart and decides that he will not let them be duped by the king and the duke, come what may. "I can't ever get it out of my memory, the sight of them poor miserable girls and niggers hanging around each other's necks and crying." (*Huckleberry Finn* p. 248) Mark Twain shows that even the people have learnt to sympathize with such feelings of the niggers:

The thing made a big stir in the town, too, and a good many came out flatfooted and said it was scandalous to separate the mother and the children that way. It injured the frauds some" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 248)

Jim has a fatherly affection for the young Huck. A great irony of the novel is that while it appears that Huck is protecting Jim, it is seen that Jim is also taking care of Huck all along. Jim's folk wisdom saves Huck from the rain and storm on the island, he makes the wigwam on the raft and makes a soft bed for Huck to lie on. Jim starts acting like Huck's father and Huck, too, protects Jim as a son might do his father. Very often Jim allows Huck to sleep on and takes his watch on himself. Jim also proves to be Huck's spiritual father in two ways. First, he teaches Huck the folk lore in

which he is well versed, he teaches him about the life of the birds, and also makes him learn the values of love, humanity and selflessness. Secondly, Huck has learnt practically nothing from his father's conduct, it is Jim who imparts to him the standards of behavior. In a way Huck's moral growth has been rendered possible because of his companionship with Jim.

At the end of the novel the protective spirit of Jim is seen at its best. Tom has suffered a bullet wound and the Doctor who has been brought by Huck needs help. Jim who is hiding comes out and helps the doctor and helps him so well that the doctor is impressed. Jim does not care that he will be caught and imprisoned again in his concern for Tom. Even the doctor praises him saying;

I never see a nigger that was a better nuss or faithfuller, and yet he was resking his freedom to do it, and was all tired out, too, and I see plain enough he'd been worked main hard, lately. I liked the nigger for that; I tell you, gentlemen, a nigger like that is worth a thousand dollars – and kind treatment, too. (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 361)

Jim also tries to save Huck from the blame of helping him escape by telling the men who capture him that he does not know the boy thinking that Huck too, might be punished. Here Jim proves to be a great soul and comes out as the savior of both the boys. He emerges as a magnificent character at the close of the novel when he voluntarily offers, in the swamp, to help the doctor cure and then nurse Tom and readily sacrifices his freedom for the sake of his friend. This selflessness of his deserves praise. His concern for his friend is again seen when he refuses to recognize Huck when he is captured and is surrounded by an angry mob.

These noble qualities of the character of Jim prove that he acts as the conscience of the novel. In fact, Jim is the spiritual yardstick of the novel by which all men are measured. The fear ridden slave that Jim was at the beginning of the novel turns out to be an admirable character at the close of the novel. Mark Twain has taken great care in developing the character of Jim in the novel and has been successful in creating sympathy in the mind of his readers for Jim. There is an element of pathos in the speechless suffering of Jim. He undergoes humiliation and disrespect at the hands of the white men. Even Miss Watson, who is good enough to free him in her will does not treat him nicely, as Jim says that "she pecks on me all de time, en treats me pooty rough." (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 96) Admiration and sympathy for one black man go a long way in changing the attitude of the readers towards all black slaves. One cannot escape sympathizing with and admiring this noble character no matter from which point of view he is considered.

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