Reading Between the Banks: Utopia, Another Invention of Ours, Just A Word Without Any Meaning

Since its publication in eighteen eighty-four, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been challenged and removed from library shelves on countless occasions. From language, to lewd content, to being dubbed "racist trash," this novel has secured itself a high-ranking spot on the list of top banned books in literary history. Due to its tumultuous past, oftentimes the controversies become the topic of discussion as opposed to the story beneath Twain's words.

One extremist category of reasoning for banning *Huckleberry Finn*, is that of the idea that Mark Twain wrote the raft and river as a representation of a utopia; this, supposedly, providing its readers with an example of "perfection" which can lead to dissatisfaction with the current government and society. This claim is ignorance at its finest and most literal as it "ignores" a crucial and fundamental belief held by Twain, that we are a "dammed human race" lacking even the potential for perfection. Mark Twain did not find humans capable of a Utopian society, believing them to be innately corrupted, greedy, and selfish. His renowned work, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, parallels this belief of his, displaying the figurative "nature" of the human race through literal "nature", in terms of the Mississippi River.

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* follows Huck and Jim as they travel the mighty Mississippi in an attempt to escape to Cairo. Through their travels they encounter much along the lines of the horrific and disheartening: robbers, family feuds, the

grotesque, decomposing body of a man, swindlers, greed, and racism. However, it is only their time spent on land, which holds such terror, thus, the raft, has been interpreted as, "a fragile island of freedom between two shores of society" (Hechinger, 2). Critics have argued that Huck, attempting to run from the society that confuses him, and Jim, attempting to run from the society that denies him, both "escape" to the raft, searching for a society that holds *their* beliefs and truths. "Huck and Jim live on their raft because they are on a run from a nightmare society driven by bigotry, violence, exploitation, greed, ignorance, and a sort of pandemic depravity" (Hechinger 2). The negative image of American society painted by Mark Twain is far from inaccurate; Twain set out to cast light on much of society's flaws by having Huck and Jim feel the need to run from them. It also cannot be ignored that Twain wished to cause questioning on the part of the reader, yes, however, using this as an argument for banning the book is, at best, absurd. "The censors undoubtedly worry that children might understand this [the horrors of society] and, like Huck and Jim, seek a more perfect union" (Hechinger 2).

To worry that children may garner an understanding of the negative aspects of society is relative and bona fide as any source of power fears the education of the masses. Give the people truth and they may react as a force united under knowledge. However, with writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain had no intention of over-throwing the populace, nor of encouraging his dominant reader-base of young boys to do so, rejecting what they know in a violent attempt at a more perfect society. He set out to achieve the exposition of the problems of society, how they related to the basics of human nature, and how this brought about the moral turmoil Huck often found himself in. "Huck and Jim are simply too good for us, too truthful, too loyal, too passionate and too

moral" (Hechinger 2). This argument is false to its core; Twain hardly believed "goodness" possible in relation to humans, let alone the concept of being "too good." Huck and Jim were not written as ideal characters, but rather as pawns of society, each trying desperately to grasp humanity and the horrors it has brought about.

The subject of human nature is one, which Mark Twain has spoken to endlessly. It is a theme that pervades all of his works, growing increasingly pessimistic as his personal life unfolds. At the time of the first recorded mention of *Huckleberry Finn*, August 9, 1876, Mark Twain found himself living in Hartford, Connecticut, his life and family intact, this predating the tragic deaths of his daughters to come (Quirk 104). His literary career flourished with the recent publication of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Life on the Mississippi* were both in the works and soon to follow in Tom Sawyer's legacy. All in all a successful and optimistic time period in Mark Twain's existence. But even in such hopeful times, Mark Twain continued to contemplate and struggle with the concept of human nature.

Within his correspondence with W.D. Howells, Twain states that he feels, ultimately, that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, will become kindling or, at best, an unpublished tale. He speaks to his inability, "to comprehend the crude and vengeful aristocratic mentality," asking, "what is there in human nature that would permit, even encourage, people to embark on and to sustain such hurtful practices" (Quirk 105)? His debate at the time permeated his writing, bringing about the characters of Huck and Jim, both seeking an answer to Twain's most burning questions. While he is still far from the Twain of *Letters to the Earth* and *The Man Who Corrupted Hadleyburg* in the late 1800s, he, nonetheless, believes in the cruel and greedy nature of humans at this time in his life,

projecting this onto characters such as the Duke and the Dauphin, Pap, and the robbers upon the *Walter Scott*. He may not yet be questioning the damnation, which he will ultimately dispel upon humanity, but his internal debates with slavery, greed, and deception play a crucial role in the tale. Beyond, possibly even his conscious knowledge, Mark Twain wrote the story of a boy questioning society, a story, "later praised as, 'a subversive book' – subversive of human hypocrisies and cruelties" (Hechinger 1).

To study the true "nature" of humanity one must separate a human from any and all outside forces. Cultural norms, societal allowances, and religious doctrines are among the acting entities, which sway behavior and choice in terms of human conduct. Thus, to produce an accurate and unaffected experiment a vacuum, devoid of altering forces, is necessary. At the turn of the 19th century, exposés into the lives of feral children began with Roger Shattuck's discussion of the "Wild Boy of Aveyron." "The appearance of a child who had somehow grown up outside the constraints or freedoms accorded socialized beings provided the opportunity for naturalists and philosophers… to draw broader conclusions about human nature in general" (Quirk 108). In this reasoning, it is argued that Mark Twain wrote the character of Huckleberry Finn loosely as an exercise of this, "forbidden experiment," explored in Shattuck's work.

There is no record that Mark Twain explored the specific case Shattuck speaks to, however, there is ample historical evidence cataloging both his fascination and friendship with Helen Keller, and his interest with the castaway Alexander Selkirk. While neither were feral from birth, each experienced the same sense of living beyond the boundaries of socialized constraints: Ms. Keller by literally "living in darkness," and Mr. Selkirk by having found himself marooned, alone, for four years on a deserted island (Quirk 109).

Similarly, the character of Huck is not "feral" per say, having had a mother, and a father of sorts in Pap. However, he *has* been trusted to run his own life, resulting in a severe lack of guidance from adults and influence from societal norms, thus making him an acceptable subject for the study as well. "By choosing to narrate his story from the point of view of a child who had not been extensively shaped by cultural influences… Twain outfitted himself with the means to inquire into some portion of human nature" (Quirk 111).

Interestingly, following the idea that Huck was written as an experiment into the unbiased nature of humanity, Twain ends the novel not with him being the essence of cruelty, but rather with that of ambiguity. Perhaps humans have failed to earn the title of damned just yet, Twain settling, instead, on morally indistinct. Instances throughout the novel write Huck as a dynamic character capable of both good and bad. Many examples of his negative activity can be justified by the concept of self-preservation; at the end of the day, Huck is on the run from his drunken and murderous father and trying his best to safely bring Jim to Cairo and the impending freedom that awaits him there. However, two specifically contrasting scenes speak critically to his character and its most basic of human principles.

"I killed him [a rattlesnake], and curled him up on the foot of Jim's blanket, ever so natural, thinking there'd be some fun when Jim found him there" (Adventures 63). "I warn't ever sorry for it [apologizing to Jim] afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't have done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way" (Adventures 95). Both instances occur in scenes involving only Jim and Huck, thus eliminating the factor that Huck is acting in any means of self-preservation. During

the first trick played at Jim's expense, Huck fails to understand the cruelty in his deed. He does not think of the consequences of his actions, nor does he contemplate the severity of his "joke" after Jim has been bitten. Instead, the scene moves on quickly in the moral sense, Huck stating matter-of-factly how Jim is incapacitated for four days because of Huck's dangerous and cruel decision to scare him. Several chapters later, however, we see a moral change in Huck after the completion of his second joke played on Jim. With the realization that he has scared and hurt his friend, Huck humbly apologizes, thus creating the moral dichotomy of his character.

Twain would argue, even at this point in his life, where his pessimism is significantly less prevalent, that humans are incapable of a utopia. Even when devoid of societal constructions and influences humans remain morally ambiguous at best. However, the idea of the utopia is not one which is new with this critical take on *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, nor is it one which Twain ignored. As stated previously, the concept of human nature is a theme which can be found throughout Twain's works, and just the same, references to Adam, Eve, and Eden, the ultimate utopia, are woven into numerous of Twain's writings as well.

Mark Twain's, *Extracts from Adam's Diary* begins as Adam encounters the fruit of his rib, Eve, and follows the two characters through the "fall" and the original discovery of human nature. Adam, having "just been" before Eve's arrival, is confused and conflicted by the humanistic traits this woman has brought out in the garden and him. Twain characterizes Eve as ambiguously selfish, curious at times to the point of cruelty, arrogant, presumptuous, and greedy. When Eve wants to eat the apple, she does, regardless and with no care to the consequences of her actions. The fatal bite introduces

death to the garden, symbolically showing that humans are the basis of killing and the evils it holds.

Further into the diary, Eve returns to Adam with a baby, a character symbolically representing the "birth" of human nature. "She thinks more about it than she does of any other animals, but is not able to explain why" (Extracts 57). Through the introduction of the child, Eve's nurturing and protective-based egotism is also brought about, displaying her motherly instincts in conjunction, and at times contrast, with her human ones. Adam understands that the human race is inherently nurturing of their own, and can sometimes use this in order to empathize, however, in the end, they will always protect their own. At the work's end Adam looks upon the baby, ultimately named Cain, and considers its existence; "I pity the poor noisy little animal, but there is nothing I can do to make it happy" (Extracts 73). Twain concludes humans to be insatiably greedy, cruel, and incapable of happiness or perfection due to their inherent nature.

Eden, even in Mark Twain's eyes is seen as perfection, but he watches as mankind ruins the utopian possibilities it once held. This idea that man ruins the chance for perfection holds true for the representation of nature in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The Mississippi River encompasses much that Twain loves and writes of throughout his career, however, although naturally biased, he does *not* fail to depict the dangers of its waters. Although much of the humanistic greed and cruelty featured in Huck's novel takes place off of the raft, the river too reflects literally and figuratively the human nature of the shoreline. "The world of the river in *Huckleberry Finn* is violent, populous and mechanized" (Raban 30). It is easy to think of instances with Pap or the tar and feathering of the Duke and Dauphin when asked to recall cruel scenes, but much of

the violence, and arguably the *most* horrific, of the novel occurs within the water itself: the discovery of the body, the close annihilation of both Jim and Huck as their raft is smashed beyond recognition. While the raft and river do represent the only space Jim and Huck are able to coexist without the application of societal rules, this in no way makes for the natural current to be devoid of human nature, tragedy, or horror.

Upon the river's surface move steamboats, altering the waters below. "Their splendidly ornate upper-decks conceal a mysterious and dangerous interior of engines, smoke, and noise: the potency of their destructive force" (Raban 31). The steamboat acts as a functional representation of man; as a race we are greedy and materialistic, obsessed with our outward appearance. This vanity, however, superficially shrouds the natural tendencies of our kind. Inside, beneath the cunning smiles and latest fashion, lies our darkness, human nature. The cruel thoughts and unending greed kept in check by the guidelines society has forced us to follow, a current of sorts. We are the spoilers of the world, both natural and symbolic. "The raft is torn into by one of these ferocious technological monsters" (Raban 31). Huck and Jim have found success in cohabitating, but in mere seconds all they have worked for is destroyed, humanity, once again, the culprit. Segregation, greed, and racism: "the society of the Mississippi in *Huckleberry Finn* turns out to be an exact symbol of the social flux of mid-century America" (Raban, 34).

The river as a utopia is a farce for with the involvement of humanity comes the elimination of the possibility for perfection. Mark Twain does not exclude himself from the horrors of being human though; "he is willing to admit that he himself rests under this self-pronounced condemnation" (Wagenknecht 117). Ultimately, Twain believes that

while the base of human beings are cruel and terrible, some may be able to fight their instincts, garnering them the reputation of being kind and genuine. "The capacities of mankind in general were contemptible, yet as late as the time of the autobiographical dictations, he [Twain] declared it to be his experience in life that there were few hardhearted persons… It might be a contemptible race, but even a contemptible creature must be cared for when he is in need" (Wagenknecht, 118). Most attempt to make the best, break away from their inherent nature just as a steamboat captain will risk the cut-throughs to quicken the trip, however, ultimately, everyone makes their way back to the same waters they started in. Humans are inherently flawed, that is a fact Mark Twain felt no need, nor possible, to change, but he did wish to make humans aware of this fact.

"'Of course, people always love to get up and shout about things they don't really know anything about. That's human nature, and as long as there are people on the earth there are always going to be esoteric discussions about the beauties of peace'" (Scharnhorst 583). Mark Twain says it best, humans, while deeply dark, strive to falsify goodness and knowledge by speaking of them frequently and loudly. What even is a utopia, and what can such a word mean when created by a race unable to achieve it? It is easy to falsify a utopia in the Missippi's waves, but down below lies the ignorance, the fear of the educated, and the injustice of banning books which work constantly to propel forward humanity and the "splendid" shell its inherited.

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