



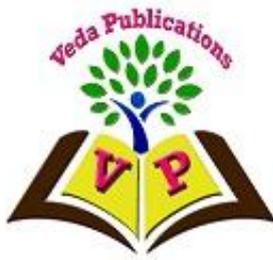
MARK TWAIN'S MESMERISING MISSISSIPPI

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ABSTRACT



Samuel Longhorn Clemens is not so well known to the world as the beloved Mark Twain, author of such American classics as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Innocents Abroad*, *The Prince and The Pauper*, *Life on the Mississippi* and so on. Twain as a boy, young pilot and as a writer has spent his greater part of life on the river Mississippi. The river enthralled and mesmerized Mark Twain to the extent, that he even has got his pen name from the river depth measuring terminology. People all over the world love and revere him as the greatest American novelist, but this great man adores the river like anything. This phenomenon can be seen in many of his novels, travelogues and short stories. In his master piece *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the river is endowed with all the faculties of a powerful character. This fact has been beautifully observed by Mrs. Mary, S. David as "one who peruses the novel feels that it would not be quite wrong to say that the Mississippi river is one of the major characters of the novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." [1]

Keywords: *Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Mississippi river.*

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Mark Twain wrote his, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a mere sequel to his beloved work *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and always maintained that it was not quite as good as the first novel. But the better judgment of Mark Twain's contemporaries and of posterity has declared *Huckleberry Finn* the greatest of his books and one of the two or three acknowledged masterpieces of American literature. Hemmingway even went to the extent of saying that all American modern literature comes from *Huckleberry Finn*.

Mark Twain began his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a comic story, but before the novel was finished, it developed great deal of seriousness and even tragic implications, that violate the nature of comedy. In technique and structure and characterization *Huckleberry Finn* is far ahead of *Tom Sawyer*. Huck's narration of the story in the vernacular is something that has rendered the book vital and significant. Unfortunately the book has been misunderstood. The Concord Library Committee felt that the book was rough and coarse. An American reviewer could not check his exasperation and regarded *Huckleberry Finn* as, "An incarnation of the better side of the ruffianism that is one of the results of the independence of American." [2] Even then, this novel has a compactness and unity, with a dominant central factor holding the different pieces together. One who peruses the novel feels that the Mississippi River is the central factor, the thread that ties the various parts of the novel holding it together, preventing it from falling to pieces.

Mark Twain once said, "I will spend 2 months on the river Mississippi and take notes and I take notes and I bet you, I will make a standard work." [3] Such is the faith that Mark Twain has on his river God which is literally a literary capital for him. That is why, the world that has been painted in his novels, is the world which Twain has seen and experienced. In his works, he recreates not only his boyhood period, but also the scene, characters and events are either from his boyhood or from his youth. About this fact Mark Twain himself once has remarked, "I confined myself to life with which I am familiar, when pretending to portray life. But I confined myself to the boys life on the Mississippi because that had a peculiar charm for me and not

because I was not familiar with other phases of life..." [4]

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* there are three major elements. The most important of these is Huck's flight from the camping, restraining "civilizing" attempts of Miss Watson and the cruelty of his father. This soon becomes something more dynamic as it blends with Jim's flight from the fetters of slavery to the dazzling prospects of freedom. At a certain point very early in the novel Huck's flight and Jim's get interwoven and become one theme, inseparable. The second element in the novel "Huckleberry Finn" is the keen social satire through which Mark Twain exposes the hypocrisy blood thirstiness and moral decadence of the various parts of the United States. Now, these places he has chosen are the places enshrined in the river Mississippi, that Huck and Jim are likely to stop at while drifting on their raft to the towns along the river. The third major element is the shaping of Huck's character. We see how in all these three elements the Mississippi is an integral part, functioning as something indispensable to each. Thus the river is an important character in the novel. The author, Mark Twain almost shaped it as a Guardian or a God to protect the fugitives, Huck and Jim. This fact was well appraised by T.S. Eliot when he puts it about the river as "I do not know much about gods, but I think that the river is a strong brown god in the Twain's novel." [5]

The Mississippi aids and affects the escape of Huck and Jim. It dramatizes the disappearance of Huck by providing for an elaborate search by such eminent personalities as Judge Thatcher and Widow Douglas. The cannon fired over the water, the ferry boat playing to and fro in an attempt to find the dead body of Huck contrasts striking with the calm refuge that Huck has sought on Jackson Island that stands out in the middle of the Mississippi river. Here in an effort to find out Huck, Widow Douglas sends a loaf of bread keeping quick silver on it. It was the superstition of the day. Surprisingly the loaf reaches Huck and Huck funnily says, "and I wasn't disappointed. A big double loaf come along, and I must got it with a long stick... I reckon the widow or the parson or somebody prayed that this bread loaf would find me, and here it has gone and done it." [6]



Later, discovering the impending danger Jim and Huck decide to resort to flight down the river. They build a raft and set sail, thus beginning a saga of adventure along the river. Throughout the story, the river looms large, befriending the fugitives, abetting them mostly and now and then erecting problems as and when the fog came and Huck lost sight of Jim, or when the two men in the chance want to have a look at Huck's raft or when the steamboat comes crashing into their raft. But always one is made to feel the river as a personage sympathizing with Huck and Jim and never entirely hostile. But for expansiveness and the protectiveness of the river Huck and Jim would not have drifted freedom at last.

The second element in the novel, as has already been pointed out is social satire. Here again the river is significant. Mark Twain has taken a cross section of America and exposed it relentlessly to criticism. The towns along the river are thus brought into the searching flash light of the novelist's satire. The shallowness, the feud that thrives on blood-shed, the lack of charity and good will and the narrow mindedness that Mark Twain wanted to criticize are all brought to our notice slowly as the raft of Huck and Jim is drifting along the river, stopping occasionally.

The moral values accepted by the towns are contrasted sharply with the native innocence and purity of Huck. Jim too seem to be drawn as a 'relief' to the town's people, for he is a soul tuned to the harmony of nature symbolized by the flowing river. As a critic of Mark Twain, Daniel G. Hoffman has pointed out "Jim's powers have their mysterious source in the river, partaking of its inscrutable might. For if the river is a God, Jim is its priest. The river God is indifferent to humanity. He runs on uncontaminated by the evils along his shores, asserting now and then in dominance and power over damned human race. Only when Jim is alone with Huck on the river island or drifting on the current is he so free from the corruption of civilization that he can partake of the river god's dark power. Jim responds on a primitive level to that power through which he can interpret the signs that are older than Christianity." [7] The river affords the idyllic background for the charming comradeship of

Jim and Huck which has been called by some enthusiastic, critic, a community of saints.

Mark Twain as a boy as well as a writer has a queer charm for the river Mississippi. He loves and likes to that extent, he makes the river a beautiful dwelling place for his socially boycotted and mentally lacerated characters. This fact is well observed by L. Bettaman, and Van Wyck Brooks when they compliment on the importance of the river in Twain's works as, "a focus of national mind, as Washington earlier made the Hudson; on a scale incomparably larger and richer than Irving's. Through him the second greatest of the American rivers became a dwelling place of light, one of the enchanted countries of the imagination, a world un-colonized hitherto, where the mind has never been at home and where henceforth it was always to rest." [8]

Mark Twain always tries to empower his godly character, the Mississippi to have a hand in shaping the character of Huck. The boy who sets sail with Jim undergoes a number of crisis down the river that transform his personality, making him throw overboard many notions of right and wrong that he has gathered while rubbing shoulders with the civilized people around him.

The Mississippi with its wild power and weird charm fascinated the boy. His own soul feels at home on the river and he deems it the height of bliss to be allowed to live a free life out in the bosom of nature with Jim. Some of the finest passages in the book that appear lyrical are Huck's descriptions of the river.

"It was a monstrous big river down there sometimes a mile and half wide; we run and laid up and hid day times; soon as night was most gone, we stopped navigating and tied up nearly always in the water under a towhead... It's lovely to live on a raft. We had the sky up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them and discuss about whether they was (sic) made or only just happened." [9]

The river thus provides the novel with idyllic charm and the book gives us pictures of the river in its various moods, alternating with the scenes depicting the evil of the men who live on its banks.



Instead on the river, the life is peaceful and calm. People who have failed utterly to accommodate and acclimatize on the shore, have formed a community of peace and sainthood. This phenomena has been beautifully expressed by Lionel Trilling when he aptly remarks it as.” The boy (Huck) and Negro (Jim), a slave form a family of a primitive community and it is a community of saints.” [10]

It would not be quite wrong to say that the Mississippi river is one of the major characters of the novel *Huckleberry Finn*. So predominantly does it figure in the book and so captivating is the portrait that Mark Twain has given us of it. He has endowed this river with personality, making it vibrant, mysterious and powerful. Enchanted himself by the Mississippi and the magic of the steamboats, Mark Twain has succeeded in conveying to his readers something of the strange appeal of the river. In *Huckleberry Finn* the river is an active participant in the events, one of the vital characters. Thus Mark Twain has made the Mississippi a literary capital for the future generations and to his successive literary figures like William Faulkner, Herman Melville, Forde Grofe, Johnny Cash, and Memphis Ninnie MC Coy and many others. Who have also immortalized the river Mississippi. This fact has been well emulated by Fred W. Lorch, when he puts it as “Twain’s river experience became in a particular way literary capital to many American writers.” [11]

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