
THE RIVER MISSISSIPPI – THE LITERARY CAPITAL OF MARK TWAIN

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Abstract:

"I am persuaded that the future historian of America will find Mark Twain's works as indefensible to him as a French historian finds the political tracts of Voltaire."¹ Thus George Bernard Shaw beautifully complimented about Mark Twain. This great novel maestro who's real name is Sir Langhorne Clemens saw his first sun in Florida, Missouri on 30th November 1935. 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. 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. The moral values accepted by the towns are contrasted sharply with the native innocence and purity of Huck. Jim too seems 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. 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 of the river, 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.

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"I am persuaded that the future historian of America will find Mark Twain's works as indefensible to him as a French historian finds the political tracts of Voltaire."¹ Thus George Bernard Shaw beautifully complimented about Mark Twain. This great novel maestro who's real name is Sir Langhorne Clemens saw his first sun in Florida, Missouri on 30th November 1935. He is one of the most famous novelists of American. He wrote many novels, travelogues, and short stories. Amongst all his literary characters, the river Mississippi is the most important and a magical one. In his famous novel the adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the river plays a vital role, as the two runaway fugitives use the river Mississippi as their only escape route for freedom. Mark Twain wrote him, "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 a 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. 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.

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. But I confined myself to the boys living 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 fight 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 bloodthirstiness 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 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 contrast striking with the calm refuge that Huck has sought on Jackson Island that stands out in the middle of the Mississippi River. Here is an effort to find out Huck, Widow Douglas sends a loaf of bread keeping quicksilver on it. It was the superstition of the day.

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 a 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 flashlight of the novelist's satire. The shallowness, the feud that thrives on bloodshed, the lack of charity and good will and the narrow mindedness that Mark Twain wanted to criticize are all these brought to our notice slowly as the raft of Huck and Jim 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 seems 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. 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. Bettman, 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 passages 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 daytimes; 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 whether they were (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 of the river, 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 phenomenon 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

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