Individual V Society Essay, Research Paper

Forged in the fire of revolution and defined by manifest destiny, America has always been the land of the individual. Although the American dream has not always been coherent, (married with 2.5 kids, 2 cars, a dog and a satisfying job), the spirit of innovation, individuality and progress remains unchanged. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was born in era of racial turbulence and literary genius. Mark Twain, a famous American writer-satirist wrote many books highly acclaimed throughout the world. For his masterpiece, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, he was recognized by the literary establishment as one of the greatest writers America has ever produced. Mark Twain definitely has a style of his own that depicts a realism in the novel that is reminiscent with society in antebellum America. Through various literary devices, he characterizes the protagonist, the intelligent and sympathetic Huckleberry Finn, by the direct candid manner of writing as though through the actual voice of Huck himself. Every word and every thought expressed by Huck is so precise it reflects even the racism and black stereotypes typical of the era. And this has lead to many conflicting battles by various readers since the first print of the novel. Some are outraged by the incessant use of the degrading and white supremacist word ?nigger.? Others feel this novel sets the basis for all modern literature, earning its place among the many great American classics. The controversy behind the novel has been and will always be racism. Twain surely does use the word ?nigger? often, both as a referral to the slave Jim and any African-American that Huck comes across and as the epitome of insult and inferiority. However, the reader must also not fail to recognize that this style of racism, this malicious treatment of African-Americans, this degrading attitude towards them is all stylized of the pre-Civil War tradition. Racism is only mentioned in the novel as an object of natural course and a precision to the actual views of the setting then. Huckleberry Finn still stands as a powerful portrayal of experience through the newfound eyes of an innocent boy. Huck only says and treats the African-American culture accordingly with the society that he was raised in. To say anything different would truly be out of place and setting of the era. This amalgamation of fiction with non-fiction invites the reader to take a realistic viewpoint of the novel. The self-evident realism of the satire is rendered in such a manner that the book takes on a much more serious tone as opposed to its predecessor, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Instead of the just writing an adventure story, he decided to address more serious issues concerning racial equality, freedom, bondage, and society?s problematic institutions (i.e. slavery).

The underlying theme of Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn is that the ideas of society can greatly influence the individual, and sometimes the individual must break off from the accepted values of society to determine the ultimate truth for himself. In Huckleberry Finn’s world, society has corrupted justice and morality to fit the needs of the people of the nation at that time. Basically, Americans were justifying slavery, through whatever social or religious ways that they deemed necessary during this time.

The conflict between society and Huckleberry Finn results from Huck’s non-conformist attitude. This attitude is a result of his separation from society at an early age. With a highly abusive drunkard for a father, Huckleberry Finn is forced from childhood to rely solely on himself. As a result of this, he effectively alienates himself from the rest of society. Society continues to try to “reform” him, but Huckleberry Finn shows his lack of appreciation in that effort from the very beginning of the story when he says, “The Widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me I got into my old rags and my sugar hogshead again, and was free and satisfied.” His actions are based on instinct and his own experience, rather than conventional conscience. As a result, he makes up the rules for himself as he goes along, forming a conscience that is keenly aware of society’s prejudices but actions based on that which he has experienced.

Ironically, often his own instincts hold him to a higher moral standard than those of society. His decision to help free Jim, a slave, is an example of one such instance. Huckleberry Finn recognizes Jim as a human being, but is fighting the beliefs bestowed upon him by a society that believes slaves should not be free. However, it is important to realize that although Huckleberry Finn’s decisions create the conflict between society and himself (and that this conflict forms the theme of the novel), Huck is oblivious to the justice, the righteousness, and even the heroism of his own actions; they are simply in accordance with his own conscience. At many times, his innate sense of what is right and wrong holds him to a higher moral standard than those of society.

Throughout a large portion of the novel Huckleberry Finn feels as though society is right, and he is wrong. At first, he begins to write a letter to Miss Watson to return Jim, but then ends up destroying the letter and deciding to help free Jim. Specifically, in the novel, Huck says, “All right, then I’ll go to hell,” right as he tore up the letter. This indicates that he believes himself to be evil, and that which society believes to be right is right. He makes a morally admirable choice when he decides to follow his own ideas of what is right, but he is oblivious to this, and his decision to free Jim stems primarily out of his own interests. Huckleberry Finn acts as a much greater person when he is not confined by the hypocrisies of society.

On a symbolic level, Huck represents all Southerners who thought of black people as property and did not think twice them unless forced to do so. Huck?s gradual acceptance and understanding of Jim as a human being is a call for all people to recognize that the color of skin should not determine an individual?s value.

Twain ardent style of writing makes a mockery of slavery through its satirical plot and amusing dialogue. The story is written in first person and although suggested very subtly the voice of Huck is truly that of Mark Twain himself. His literary style is that of a natural southern dialect intermingled with other dialects to represent the various attitudes of the Mississippian region; he does not intend to overtly suggest Negro inferiority. Had Twain intended racial bigotry, he would not have written about the sympathies of Huck towards Jim. This can easily be deciphered though Huck?s action, at various points in the book, for example how he recognizes Jim to be a white equivalent at times. Huck tells the reader, when he realizes that Jim misses his own family and children, ?I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their?n? (150). In order for Huck to relate his experiences in a way that seems natural for a boy of his age, education, and situation, Twain also employs realistic language, including the use of the word ?nigger,? which first appears in Chapter 1. Huck uses this word matter-of-factly to refer to slaves. Twain uses the word to emphasize that the society around Huck, the society that influences how Huck speaks and thinks, despite his seeming separateness from it, is corrupt and racist. By placing the word ?nigger? in the mouth of this innocent child, Twain condemns both the use of the word and the institution of slavery, further developing and reinforcing some of the major themes of the novel.

Mark Twain wrote this great American classic during the Reconstruction, the political program designed to reintegrate the defeated South into the Union as non-slave states, which consequently began to fail in the 1880s. The South became aggrieved by the harsh measures being implemented by the victorious North to suppress slavery. Worried about upholding supremacy in their own regions, Southern states and individuals attempted to restrain black men and women that the war had previously liberated. Although it was published in 1884, the book was set in 1860-1861, antebellum America. The entire plot of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is rooted on intolerance between different social groups. Without prejudice and intolerance The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn would not have any of the antagonism or intercourse, which makes the recital great.