Ideology and the Problem of Race in 
*Huckleberry Finn*

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**Abstract**

Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, in its appearance of humor and light-heartedness, displays the serious problem of ideology/false consciousness and racism. Through the picaresque hero Huck is exposed a society permeated in a strong prejudice and misled by its sense of superiority.

The first section of this paper aims to explore the circumstances of a racist society, as revealed in Twain's characterizing the majority of the white, and the contradiction between the superior white and its hard-striving ideals of humanity and equality. And the second part will mainly focus on Huck as an alienated character and his potentiality to set social conventions at defiance as a subversive hero. Huck's ostensible "subversion" unravels the problematic ideology of the racist white and gives an insight on the absurdity of an over-reaching pride and prejudice.

Key words: *race, ideology, consciousness, Huckleberry Finn*
I reckon I had better black my face, for in these Eastern States niggers are [judged] considerably better than white people.

---S. L. Clemens to Jane Lampton
Clemens, August 24, 1853

Mark Twain, just like his anti-conventional hero Huck, ventures to present the public with one of the toughest but somewhat elusive problems, that is, the complex between the black and the white. Despite the end of Civil War (1861-65) and the emancipation of the niggers, the New Continent still has a long way to go for reaching the ideals of humanity and equality, as Lincoln asserted in his Gettysburg Address (1863): "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" (47). Written after the Civil War, *Huckleberry Finn* has been impressing upon the modern reader the ingrained prejudice of the white. In the consciousness of the white, the "Declaration of Independence has been narrowed to read": mocked in one of Twain's unpublished essay on anti-imperialism, "'All white men are born free and equal" (Hawkins 33). Niggers, a term "that a Southern boy like Huck would automatically use" (Railton 394), are apparently excluded in the white's assumption that all men are created equal. The ideology of white supremacy proves to be a never-easily crushed fortress of ideas and it does not collapse along with the abolition of the slavery system. In Twain's *Huck Finn*, we see that the problem of race arises or even deteriorates as the white continue to "share an attitude that works," says Steven Mailloux, "to maintain a purely arbitrary superiority of all whites over all blacks" (110). As such an attitude grows to be something "naturally true and valid," the mode of white/black interaction—the superior/inferior relationship, though essentially fallacious and problematic, is also taken to be a natural phenomenon.

When referring to the racial problem in *Huck Finn*, we have to notice the shared ideology of white supremacy and how it has long dominated the thought and action of the white. In a broader sense, man can hardly live without being overwhelmed by ideology, but what role is man playing within the formation of ideology: an active creator,
a passive obeyer, or something in between? First of all, we need to have a basic understanding of ideology. In Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature*, we have at least three common versions, which are difficult to distinguish one from another:

(i) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group;

(ii) a system of illusory beliefs--false ideas or false consciousness--which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge;

(iii) the general process of the production of meanings and ideas. (55)

In the case of racial discrimination, the beliefs/false consciousness in the white "superiority complex," no matter how false it seems to be, characterize the particular position of the white people and rationalize the ensuing maltreatment of the black; in other words, the ideology of prejudice helps to generate and reproduce the deprecating ideas on the black. As Rhett S. Jones has pointed out in his article on white double-consciousness:

White people have long viewed Afro-Americans in two different ways. From the beginnings of slavery in North America, it was to the economic advantage of Euro-Americans to define persons of African descent, if not as animals, then at least as *less than full members of the human race*--a perspective that enabled whites to barter and sell human beings in both Africa and America without serious pangs of conscience. (173-74)

There is only one single assumption in this white double-consciousness; that is, blacks remain "an alien, menial, and dangerous class' properly subjugated to perpetual white authority" (Mailloux 112). In *Huck Finn*, the white characters except Huck represent the typical attitude of the white (especially the southerners) toward niggers, as revealed in Jones' words. Pap's complaint against the government provides an obvious example for us to detect the white consciousness/ideology:

"Oh, yes, this is a wonderful government, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; . . . . And what do you think? they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote, . . . when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote,

I drawed out. I says I'll never vote again. . . . I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?--that's what I want to
know." (27)

Just as the words like cat or dog are used to classify, so the term "nigger" is used to indicate that the black are an inferior kind. They are one of the white's belongings, which "should" be put up and sold at auction as a kind of investment or property. Similar ideas are revealed in the words of the white man, who is taking his gun and running after the runaway niggers as he said to Huck, "If you see any runaway niggers, you get help and nab them, and you can make some money by it" (75). Ironically, however, when the white people, like pap and the anonymous white man, perform as passive followers of the social conventions, they are at the same time reinforcing the concentration of such "a system of illusory beliefs" (Williams 55). The double roles--both a passive follower and an active prosecutor--performed by the white fail them as a critical role upon the issue of racism.

Ideology remains dominating over the white's mind but never a single-sided consciousness. As Jones remarks in his article about white double-consciousness, on the one hand, the black are treated as animals, but on the other hand, as "David Walker observed that in spite of all the racist rhetoric of whites, 'there is a secret monitor in their hearts which tells them' blacks are human" (174). Jones stresses that "[whites] have never been able to escape knowledge of black humanity but, given their hegemony, have been able to create a corpus of racist thought which defines blacks as inferior" (174). Twain's anti-conventional hero Huck has rightly represented the double-consciousness of the white. The characterization of Huck provides the hero with an appropriate ideological basis of opposition to the social conventions: Huck tends to live by heart, and he often makes ironical comments on biblical or social credos. He says that

Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try to not to do it any more. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. (8)

Through the anti-conventional rogue is conveyed "the irreverence of Twain's humor" (Mailloux 108); this humorous rhetoric is itself a form (also a strategy) of subversion, which attempts to provoke people's awareness that there might be something wrong with conventional beliefs. Similar patterns of Huck as a subversive role are repeated in his contact with the widow, Mrs. Watson, the Bible (about Moses and Heaven) and also his best friend Tom Sawyer. Throughout the novel, Tom is preoccu-
pied with an idea, which is almost like a prejudice, that what is written in the books is accurate and unchallenged, as he told his companions: "I've seen it in the books; and so of course that's what we've got to do" (13). Huck not just verbally challenges Tom's knowledge from the books; after he fails to make the genies appear by rubbing an old tin and an iron ring, as told by Tom, he makes a critical conclusion:

So then I judged that all that stuff was only just one of Tom's lies. I reckoned he believed in the Arabs and the elephants, but as for me I think different. (17)

Huck is realistic and always experiences and comments upon things empirically with a detached manner, whose identity provides him with self-reflexive and critical character and also foreshadows his later treatment upon the problem of Jim. From here we see that those children episodes are "more than just entertainment," as Mailloux points out; they also serve as "part of the reader's rhetorical training" in order that the readers are able to recognize the false arguments among the various narratives in the novel (113). The relationship between Twain and Huck is well-connected in Stephen Raiton's comment: "Behind Mark Twain's decision to let Huck tell his story in his own words lay precisely the desire to expose the linguistic conventions by which people distort reality, deceive themselves and exploit others" (395). Through Huck's humorous understatement and pragmatic vision is exposed the falsity hidden behind the so-called "reality" or, as some name it, "truth."

To the society, Huck appears as a marginal figure but never totally alienated from the huge artificial construction (normally we simply call it society). He must share part of the social beliefs, false or not, and that becomes the cause of his uneasiness and inner conflict when he tries to make serious decisions which are incompatible with the conventions. Huck's use of the term "nigger" proves that he must be conditioned under the force of collective consciousness to a certain degree. Social mores, when coming to the problem of race, become far more predominant and influential upon Huck, as we see in Chapter XVI Huck's inner state when Jim asks Huck for help to the free town Cairo:

Conscience says to me, "What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? (73)
Huck's reaction towards the nigger testifies to the fact that, in Gregg Camfield's remarks, since "[Huck] is a social animal, his feelings are often stimulated by his desire to look good in the eyes of those who have taught him" (173). But, Huck's reflections on "setting a nigger free" might suggest that human conscience manifests itself as one of the many possible ideological constructions. Such a mean doing as freeing the nigger, however, is just one side of Huck's consciousness.

Despite the normalizing power of social regulations, the empirical feelings Huck is experiencing provides him with a pretext for helping Jim. Later in Chapter XVI, Huck expresses what he has truly felt as he resolves to give Jim a hand:

... feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; ... Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on,--s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up; would you feel better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad--I'd feel just the same way I do now. (76)

In this episode, we see that the society's establishment to manipulate Huck as unstoppable shadow though he has eventually chosen to follow his own heart. The other side of Huck's consciousness--his heart--shows a clearer picture until in Chapter XXXI when Huck must decide what to do after the King and the Duke sell Jim back into slavery. The long-shared collective ideology still haunts within, so Huck decides to write to Miss Watson and asks her to get back her slave: "Once I said to myself it would be a thousand times better for Jim to be a slave at home where his family was, as long as he's got to be a slave . . ." (166). Unlike the other whites around him, Huck proves more complicated and compassionate in his encounter with the racial problem. Hence he must undergo a stream of confusions and conflicts since he cannot, as Camfield states, "distinguish between the emotional compulsion of trained morality, what Clemens in his lecture introduction calls 'conscience,' and the emotional compulsion of felt experience, what he calls, . . . 'heart'" (1992: 174). Huck must make choice about whether leaving behind his conscience, which is socially constructed, or facing his heart.

It is the power of Huck's heart, the other side of his consciousness, that supports him to set Jim free even though he has to, in Huck's own words, "go to hell" for this. Life on the raft gives Huck a chance to experience life with a black pal and also to lead a life based on personal experience instead of moral precepts. Thus Jim's humanities, the same as the white's, are revealed through Huck:
And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was then I come back out of the fog....(167)

Jim, to Huck, should not only be a slave, but a friend. But this kind of friendship is purely personal; it cannot change the distorted values of the culture. Though, inevitably, the force of a prejudiced society remains, Huck's personal experience already demonstrates that the black should live as freely as the white instead of being categorized as belonging to an inferior class. It manifests the truth that people are not merely passive obeyers of the social beliefs, but active parameters in the formation of ideological mode.

What will be the black's ideology as they are forced to live under such a ruling white authority? Perhaps the characterization of Jim could satisfy our interest in it. In our attempt to explore the black ideology, we have to notice that Jim is living in the white-dominated society. The white values must inevitably impose upon him to some degree despite the black consciousness he was born with. He is just like what Du Bois reveals in his book *The Souls of Black Folks*:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Jones 173)

In the eye of the white master, Jim has to be, willingly or not, an inferior and submissive slave. Under such a prejudice-overwhelmed society, Jim never had real communication with his white masters in their everyday master/slave contacts. The black slaves can be either like a dumb or like a robot-like yes-man in front of their white masters. Though Jim could be, as Huck said, "mostrous proud" among the niggers, silence will always be the best policy in the white-dominated world. A nigger thus becomes a si-
lenced object under the "only" authoritative voice of the white. In order to survive, they must either learn to "agree" with the idea of white superiority or disguise "in forms which ensure subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" (Althusser 133). Running away, as Jim chooses to do, is merely one of the ways for survival; it is never a conscious reaction against the "ruling ideology" in Jim's case. Only in life on the raft can we hear Jim's desire for freedom. Being a free nigger is the most eager thing in Jim's consciousness: "[Jim] said he'd be mighty sure to see it, because he'd be a free man the minute he seen it, but if he missed it he'd be in the slave country again and no more show for freedom" (72). Such kind of thought really bids defiance to the white consciousness, so it amazes Huck: "It most froze me to hear such talk. He wouldn't ever dared to talk such talk in his life before" (73). Huck's response implies that Jim, being a nigger, can never dare to speak out his true mind even if it is a basic need—a fundamental right of equality. In the position of the oppressed, the black consciousness, as revealed in Jim's case, is thus formed upon both the white ideology and their own conventions and needs.

Through Huck's personal betrayal of social prejudices and Jim's emancipation, Twain exposes the falsity of a society which claims its justification, points out one possible way for the society to improve, and displays his concern for the black. The problem of race, as Twain suggests in his work, arises not out of the natural color; the complex between the black and the white is constructed upon specific profits and an over-expanding ambition. It deteriorates through the process of rationalization and the solidification of such a system. But works like "The Scarlet Letter, Moby-Dick, and Huckleberry Finn," in Arac's words, produce "not the answers but the problems" (15). The emancipation of Jim in the end of the book can help little with racial discrimination because emancipation here indicates only the "freedom" of human body instead of a dismissal of white ideology. The deconstruction of such ideology and, above all, the reconstruction of human mind cannot rely on one single book. Huckleberry Finn, nevertheless, remains a note-worthy attempt to level racial tensions and inspire the public to see their blindness, but as History has already proved, the problem of race continues, through the 19th century, and remains unsolved even now.
Notes

1: This passage is quoted from Steven Mailloux's essay, whose argument aims to locate *Huckleberry Finn* within the debates over racism around the 1880s.

2: Here Mailloux cites the phrase from George Washington Cable's essay, "The Freedman's Case in Equity," written in the early 1880s.

3: As Mailloux points out in his essay, "the celebrated humor of the various narratives in the book *Huck Finn*--its histories, dreams, fictions, and elaborate lies--depend on the reader's perception of both the fictional speaker's purpose and the discrepancy between his tale and the truth as the reader understands it" (108).
Works Cited


從馬克吐溫的《頑童歷險記》探種族問題和意識形態的糾葛

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摘要

馬克吐溫的《頑童歷險記》展現了作者一貫的幽默、詼諧的敘述風格。在其輕鬆的文字中，卻暴露了嚴肅的種族歧視和不當意識形態充斥的社會問題。透過宛如流浪者角色的主人翁哈克，讀者不難理解種族間的偏見之形成、傳遞、默守的動機與危機。

本文第一部份藉由作者描繪的白色族群的思考和行為模式背後所承載的偏見，進一步探討美國立國精神中標榜的『平等』原則和其執著的『白種優越』之間的矛盾。第二部份則將重心於於哈克一角，他和社會的疏離及其得以遊離社會規範的”特權”，”使他成了”顛覆”偏見的良知。透過哈克的人道情懷，我們對於人心的良善和偏執會有更深的體會和反省。

關鍵字：種族、意識形態、意識、頑童歷險記