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Mark Twain's View of Society, Specifically as Shown in The Adventures of Huckleberry

Finn

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines society as “a community, nation, or broad grouping of people having common traditions, institutions, and collective activities and interests”, throughout the novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn the author Mark Twain, an American himself, presents society, specifically American society, through the eyes of a young, but mature boy. The novel takes place in the pre Civil War South, beginning in St. Petersburg, Missouri and ending up around Greenville, Mississippi. The story follows a young boy name Huckleberry (Huck) Finn on his adventure. Huck starts off living civilized, but is soon captured by his father, whom he escapes from. He then meets a runaway slave, named Jim, whom he helps throughout the novel to make it down the Mississippi river. The two of them encounter two con men who pull off cons through out the journey down river. The con men eventually sell Jim to a family (the Phelps) who are relatives of Tom Sawyer, and Huck resolves to free him, posing as Tom. Tom shows up, poses as his little brother and decides to help Huck free Jim. After a very tedious and unnecessarily complicated escape Tom announces that Jim has been free all along. Aunt Polly shows up and identifies the boys for who they really are, and Aunt Sally offers to adopt Huck who in response says he is going to run to the west. Throughout this adventure Twain exposes society for the ugly thing which he believes it to be.

The first and most major aspect of the ugliness of society which Twain exposes is its hypocrisy. The first instance in which this hypocrisy can be seen is during one of Pap

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Finn's drunken rants. He is talking about a Black man whom he had heard of who was a college professor and is literate in multiple languages, he goes on to say "and that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote* when he was at home. Well, that let me out." (27; ch. 6). This action by Pap Finn (an uneducated man) shows the basic hypocrisy of a society where, an uneducated dirty Whiteman is supposed to be higher than a highly educated Blackman. The next major instance of hypocrisy in the novel is that involved with the feud between the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords, who are two large families who are locked in a family feud with a will to kill each other whenever possible. At one point they go to church, and Huck says "The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Shepherdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching---all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomes; but everybody said it was a good sermon" (109; ch. 18). This is laughable hypocrisy, a bunch of people gathering to talk about brotherly love, while carrying their guns with them to shoot each other. Another instance of hypocrisy occurs primarily within Huck's head, and is a moral dilemma for him throughout the novel; this is whether or not to turn in Jim. This dilemma culminates in chapter 31 when Huck has written a letter to Mrs. Watson (Jim's owner) telling her where he is. Huck then begins to think how great Jim has been to him, thinking "and he would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was" (213; ch. 31); he then concludes "All right, then, I'll go to hell---and tore [the letter] up" (214; ch. 31). This shows the hypocrisy which Huck feels he is supposed to follow, while Jim has been nice to him and treated him wonderfully; it is considered a damnation to hell to help him escape. The final major instance of hypocrisy is that of the doctor's view of Jim. While

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escaping and running from a mob of farmers Tom is shot, they make it onto the raft and are otherwise safe; Huck goes to get a doctor to tend to Tom, and Huck is unable to go back to the raft with the doctor. The doctor treats Tom using Jim's (who reveals himself) help to save Tom, then waiting till some men can come to capture Jim. He then (after having Jim taken into custody) talks about what Jim did, concluding with "He ain't no bad nigger, gentlemen; that's what I think about him." (285; ch. 42). The doctor's actions and words contradict themselves, that while Jim was helpful and saved Tom, the doctor is still certain that he must be tied up. This line of hypocritical acts throughout the novel, adds to Twain's opinion that society is in essence bad.

The second major way in which Twain shows the ugliness of society is through people's treatment of their fellow man throughout the novel. The first instance of this poor treatment of people's fellow man, is expressed through pap fin, when Huck is living with him in the woods, Huck says that he "got to handy with his hick'ry, and I couldn't stand it. I was all over welts." (24; ch. 6). This comment by Huck shows that he is getting beat rather badly. The next major instance of poor treatment of people's fellow man is the abovementioned feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons. During a rather large battle between the two families, Huck is in a tree watching the two sides shoot at each other, Buck (Huck's friend) and one of his cousins get wounded and go for the river, with men coming behind them "singing out 'Kill them, kill them!'" Huck says in reaction "It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree" (114; ch. 18). This simple brutality of killing of children which disgusts Huck, shows the violence and disrespect for human life which exists within society. The next major incident of poor treatment of fellow men is the shooting of Boggs by Colonel Sherburn. Boggs an old drunk who one man says "don't

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mean nothing; he's always a-caryin' on like that when he's drunk. He's the best-naturedest old fool in Arkansas" (141; ch. 21), goes about calling out Colonel Sherburn, because he is drunk. Colonel Sherburn proceeds to shoot Boggs, Huck says "both barrels cocked, Boggs throws up both of his hands and says, 'O Lord, don't shoot!' Bang! Goes the first shot, and he staggers back, clawing at the air---bang! Goes the second one, and he tumble backwards onto the ground" (143; ch. 21). The fact that Sherburn kills Boggs when everyone knows he means no harm is just another instance in which the ugly condition of society is shown. The final major instance of this poor treatment of ones fellow man occurs after the two con men perform their first act of the Royal Nonesuch. One of them gets up on the stage naked with paint on, and essentially rips of the crowd, which decides it wants to beat them. A man then steps up and says "We are sold---mighty badly sold. But we don't want to be the laughing-stock of this whole town, I reckon, and never hear the last of this thing as long as we live. *No*. What we want is to go out of here quiet, and talk this show up, and sell the res of the town! Then we'll all be n the same boat." (151; ch. 23), everyone agrees that this solution is best. The willingness of the townspeople to fool the others in the town, just to make everyone equally idiotic shows, the method in which people in society do not treat their fellow man well. Throughout the novel, the ways in which Twain shows the poor treatment which people give their fellow man, contributes to his general feeling that society is an ugly thing.

The final way which twain shows the ugliness of society is through greed and general corruption within it. This greed and corruption pertains heavily to the two con men, who are constantly ripping people off, the first major instance of which is when one feigns to be a pirate at a spiritual revival, who is going to go be a missionary to other

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pirates, during his speech someone yells out “Take up a collection for him, take up a collection!” (132; ch. 20). The con man then goes on to collect a large sum of money and steal a jug of whiskey. This greediness to take from the people who mean good, and deceive them, adds to Twain's view of an ugly society. The next major showing of corruption is shown by the loafers in one of the towns along the river, about whom Huck says “there was empty dry goods boxes under the awnings, and loafers roosting on them all day long, whittling them with their Barlow knives; and chewing tobacco, and gaping and yawning and stretching” (139; ch. 21). This general laying around of the lower class of society shows how low and corrupted society is. The final major instance of greed and corruption within the novel is the conmen's attempts to steal from the Wilks family. Huck describes their actions as “enough to make a body ashamed of the human race” (162; ch. 24). Their actions stealing from three, now parentless girls, is the quintessence of self serving greed.

In the end, Mark Twain shows throughout the novel that he sees society as being a grotesque entity, in which we live. He shows this through many examples, using the eyes of Huck, who sees things as they really are, whilst everyone else sees things as they wish to. This ability to see society for what it is allows the realization of its horror.