

# A Free Land is Hard to Find: On Huckleberry Finn's Escaping from Civilization

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**Abstract:** “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” is Mark Twain’s representative novel, in which the black slave Jim’s personal liberty has been the focus of critical attention. However, the white boy Huckleberry Finn’s freedom is taken for granted and therefore seldom mentioned. It can be argued that Huck can neither find real freedom in the seemingly civilized society nor at its opposite side. This thesis divides Huck’s adventure process into three parts, tracing his escaping from his father’s and the widow Douglas’ parenting patterns, his drifting journey down the Mississippi River on the raft and to the island as well as his vagrancy in mob-ruled communities. By doing so, it attempts to demonstrate the infeasibility of gaining individual freedom, the freedom of life and the civil freedom accordingly.

**Keywords:** The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn; Huck’s freedom; Civilization

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## 1. Introduction

“While one may escape from legal bondage, there is no escape from the cruelties of this ‘civilization’...There is no promised land where one may enjoy absolute personal freedom...Indeed, the novel suggests that real individual freedom, this land of the free, cannot be found. American ‘civilization’ enslaves and exploits rather than liberates”<sup>[1]</sup>. Previous studies have discussed the impossibility of the black slave Jim’s acquiring the real freedom in the novel, as is argued by David L. Smith that “this land of the free, cannot be found”<sup>[1]</sup>. Their focus is on Jim’s personal liberty; while another protagonist, the white boy Huckleberry Finn’s (hereafter referred to as Huck) freedom is taken for granted and therefore seldom mentioned. However, it seems that Smith’s unfortunate but somehow reasonable conclusion should apply equally to the uncivilized boy who is unwillingly restricted and bounded to a seemingly civilized country. Presumably, he can never find real freedom at the civilized side. Worse still, even his drifting journey down the Mississippi River on the raft is not necessarily synonymous with “freedom”, despite all the effort he and Jim have made. With regard to such an abstract, vague notion of “freedom”, they two have their own interpretations in its simplest and most modest way. Jim dreams of “I own myself,”<sup>[2]</sup> such kind of fantasy has been proved by David L. Smith as being impossible, considering the ideology of the extreme racial discrimination, even though Jim was legally free at the end of the story. While it seems that Huck’s freedom is easy to confirm, only if he figures out a way to escape from the so-called “civilized” society so as to get rid of all the dismal social norms. Nevertheless, it can be argued that what is opposite from civilization cannot be verified as real freedom.

## **2. Genteel or barbarian adulthood: denial of individual freedom**

At the very beginning of the story, Huck appears to be extremely uncomfortable with the idea of getting “civilized” and the dreadful biblical stories penetrated with death images widow Douglas imposes on him. Clean clothes, good manners and decent language and whatever belongs to the civilization side are merely bondage for such an unbridled and even innocent boy. He seems to be allergic to anything related to civilization, to the genteel culture of adulthood. But this does not mean Huck should deservedly fit in with its ultimate opposition: the barbarian life style of adulthood represented by his father. Violence, anti-education opinions, alcoholism, impiety and some other corrupted actions against the enterprising spirit of America, against Puritanism also force him to flee his father’s domain and try to find another way out. Therefore, it can be concluded that both the genteel and the Barbarian parenting modes and the lifestyle of adulthood is essentially suffocating Huck’s individual freedom.

He then fakes his own death, which explicitly indicates the denial of his social position of being someone’s son and the renouncement of his socially-constructed identity. Such metaphoric action also resonates with his constant employments of various pseudonyms in his following travel. Will he manage to be free from the fetters of social relations since the boy named Huck has been legally declared dead? Well, to “keep pap and the widow from trying to follow me”<sup>[2]</sup>, to escape from these two opposing grown-up life patterns in the civilized side, a drifting journey for freedom officially starts.

Nevertheless, the river and what it stands for also appear to be incomprehensible for Huck.

## **3. The river, raft and the island: a threat to life freedom**

The Mississippi River, at first glance, appears to be in contrast with what the offshore civilization stands for. It offers a tranquil landscape of nature, as is depicted in the novel, “Not a sound, anywhere—perfectly still—just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bull-frogs a-cluttering, maybe”<sup>[2]</sup>. In this sense, the undisturbed and unexploited river is in stark contrast with all the adulthood violence Huck has suffered before, let alone the nonsensical feuds and chaos of the mobs he will witness or experience later on land. Since the river is traditionally interpreted as an embodiment of nature, perhaps it is only through the purest child-like perspective, the beauty of river, of nature can be appreciated. Untutored as Huck is, he can also depict the nature with a poetic tone: “the nice breeze springs up, and comes fanning you from over there, so cool and fresh, and sweet to smell, on account of the woods and the flowers”<sup>[2]</sup>. Here the river serves as a harbor, nurturing as well as refreshing life. As Henry David Thoreau believes, living by the river can refresh and “renew thyself completely each day,” and he himself is used to “getting up early and bath in the pond”<sup>[3]</sup>. For the water always symbolizes the power of purification, offering a kind of “Katharsis,” as is first recorded by Plato in “Poetics”<sup>[4]</sup>.

However, such tranquility is transitory and doomed to be broken. Arguably, no one can escape from the curse of an old saying: “no man is an island”. Even the recluse Thoreau had had to leave temporarily his Walden, either for mundane trifles like shoes-repairing or civil duty. Though, Thoreau did struggle for what he understood as freedom by living in seclusion in order to “live deliberately”, as he put it. Or by refusing paying tax, if only he would not be put into jail. It is clear that an educated adult’s fighting against civilization and fighting for freedom is so hopeless, let alone an unsophisticated child’s battle against the secular world of civilization.

Both the prestigious critics Lionel Trilling and T.S. Eliot argue that there exists a river of god in the novel. Though it is neither benignant nor bad, it does have a kind of humanity, pushing the plot forward and leading the protagonist towards goodness. At this point, it is true. Readers are continually reminded of the river’s power and its capriciousness, as well. But still, its moral function remains obscure. Civilized society has its complexity, so does nature. The river also demonstrates its dangerous aspect. There are dead bodies floating by. And a steamboat once threatens to destroy the raft. It is also the turbulent currency and

unexpected fog that separate the two companions. "...Away we went, a sliding down the river, and it did seem so good to be free again and all by ourselves on the big river and nobody to bother us" [2].

Unfortunately, far from being the embodiment of the freedom, the river is depicted to be a real threat to individual's life, a threat to Huck's chasing freedom. It is much ironic: What Jim has feared before their journey ultimately comes true, owing to the unmeant malevolence of the river. He is being sold down the river, for missing the steamboat to Cairo. Instead of fleeing to the free states northward, Jim and Huck travel deeper and deeper into the heart of the south, the heart of the darkness for slave. And it is exactly the river that sends them bounty hunters and lets the uninvited guest "the King" and "the Dauphin" join them, with whose company Jim suffers a lot as a mean slave and Huck is actually reduced to an oppressed subject, as well.

Then, how about their transport? "We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" [2]. What the widow's or his father's house cannot grant him, say, a sense of freedom, is found exactly on the raft. In addition, it is the raft that offers a chance for Huck to look at the starry firmament and even to contemplate upon certain philosophical questions. "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 made or only just happened" [2]. Given this, the raft serves as a medium, a channel, through which Huck is invited or at least lured to communicate with a somehow higher being, who actually evokes a sense of sublime. As Immanuel Kant puts it: "Two things fill me with constantly increasing admiration and awe, the longer and more earnestly I reflect on them: the starry heavens without and the moral law within [5]." Nature, with its embodiments like starry sky, has been mystified, romanticized and even deified. In this sense, the god of star, the god of river, along with the god of raft, or any other gods derived from nature, overwhelming human beings with awe or at least with curiosity. So, can Huck find real freedom from them?

Since the sky is beyond human beings' reach, how about the raft? It is still difficult to jump to the conclusion that the raft stands for real freedom. For it is the raft that drives Huck out of a paradise-like island at the beginning of his adventure, where Huck says to Jim that the raft is nice and he would not want to be anywhere else. Huck and Jim do feel transiently free on the raft while it in return restricts freedom. The fact is, the raft cannot guarantee their security on the river. Compared with the magnificence of the Mississippi River, both their transport and themselves are too insignificant.

The island which leaves Huck good impression cannot be counted as a free land, either. On the contrary, it is much problematic. Firstly, it is highly possible that Huck's finding of the island indicates a subtle intertextuality with Peter Pan's looking for Never Never Land (Peter Pan, the imaginary character written by Scottish playwright and novelist J. M. Barrie. He is a mischievous little boy who can fly and would not grow up starts his adventures on the Never Never Land). The similarity lies in the protagonists Huck and Pan's childish innocence, with which they can hardly see through the sophistication of adulthood. But once they withdraw from the island, they have to encounter with the adulthood world. Peter Pan has chosen to be a child the whole life, while Huck is driven to leave the island, by certain mysterious, ineffable forces which he cannot escape from [6]. Second, the island was once inhabited by someone else, who occupied there and left his living traces or more exactly, his remains of civilization. Huck, in other words, should merely be regarded as a visitor or even an invader who comes from the opposite side of the civilization. Most importantly, the location of the island is too close to the civilized side, to what Huck is trying to escape.

#### **4. Other communities of mobocracy: abusing of civil freedom**

Since Huck cannot find real freedom near his hometown, what if he leaves far away from his family of origin and starts a brand-new life in another human community? It is not likely that Huck will not be disappointed after seeing various darkness within human beings. Instead, the side of civilization makes him

experience a kind of disillusionment. Murders, killings, feuds, frauds and lynchings fill his journey. Huck is exposed to so many human-made tragedies that a juvenile is not supposed to witness. Strangely, he does not become misanthropic but maintains innocent, performing even like an angel. For instance, after seeing “the King” and “the Dauphin” are caught and tarred and feathered, he is definitely not pleased. Even they have abused him and sold Jim. I am not willing to judge him from a moral high ground or accuse him as being “Tom Sue”—an Internet Buzzword used to describe the male characters who lose normal moral values like “praising virtue and punishing vice,” whose female counterpart is “Mary Sue”. Now that he is able to summon sympathy for the evil side, how can he allow Jim to suffer a lot? How can the protagonist Huck be reduced to a supporting role, to a sidekick of Tom Sawyer again? In this regard, this thesis agrees with Jane Smiley, in that Huck’s performance fails to prove “his affection for and responsibility to Jim” [7]. Therefore, his monologue verifies that the characterization of Huck is not out of character. On the contrary, it shows his unsophistication again: he is too naïve to believe in Tom or other people’s authority.

Furthermore, it reveals something so insightful that forces adults to meditate and rethink the rationality of the already-established social constitution and some other relevant questions such as the boundary of civil freedom. And these eternal questions on individuals’ happiness and the welfare of a state have long puzzled numerous philosophers. “Well, it made me sick to see I,” says Huck, “and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals it seemed like couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another” [2]. To some degree, the cruelty of lynch, of the multitude echoes with Colonel Sherburn’s thought-provoking speech when people were shouting to avenge Bogg’s death. Sherburn scorns at the mass, saying: “You don’t like trouble and danger. But if only half a man—there—shouts ‘Lynch him, lynch him!’ ... afraid you’ll be found out to be what you are—cowards... The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that’s what an army is—a mob; they don’t fight with courage that’s born in them, but with courage that’s borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any ‘man’ at the head of it, is ‘beneath’ pitifulness” [2]. It makes sense: the mob blindly follow certain leader, some authority or opinions of the majority lest their disagreement or non-conformity will drive them out of the mainstream society. In the novel, obviously, Huck stands for the minority of non-conformists who dare to deny the value recognition of the majority. But unfortunately, he is influenced by the community and cannot escape from its ideology such as authority worship or racism discourse, the latter has been proved by David Smith. Again, Huck will never find his own human agency, let alone freedom in such a mob society.

Moreover, Bogg’s suffering also reflects a common situation backing at that time. It was a society in which average people lose their voice. Being “the best naturedest old fool in Arkansaw—never hurt nobody, drunk nor sober” [2], Bogg’s expressing of ideas in public causes disaster of being killed by an unqualified embodiment of authority. It must be Twain’s satire on American democracy, which fails to meet expectations of numerous intellectuals. Taken Mark Twain’s contemporary John Stuart Mill for example. Mill stresses the ultimate of liberalism, insisting on individual liberty. In his masterpiece “On liberty” [8], he claims that people share “the freedom of opinion,” “of the expression of opinion” and the power of coercion is illegitimate. Unluckily, what happens in the novel exactly betrays it. Instead of encouraging civil freedom, the society of seeming democracy but essential mobocracy is suffocating it.

## 5. Conclusion

Fortunately, Huck’s adventure results in neither a comedy nor tragedy, but somehow a sense of uncertainty. “I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and civilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before” [5]. Huck realizes that he has to escape again and have to seek out a new region in which to feel free. His failure seems to indicate a fatal destiny no one can escape from. No one can find a land of freedom. Hopefully, there still exists some hope, hoping Huck can

find his way out, some day in the future.

But still, it is not so explicit. What if such kind of uncertainty is virtually leading to a much blur, gloomy destination? It remains a mystery whether the white boy can find his freedom in Territory, with the appearance as “the other” image, a probably unwelcomed intruder in an Indian domain. Given that, the thesis disagrees with Eliot’s claim, that “Mark Twain is a native, and the River God is his God. It is as a native that he accepts the River God, and it is the subjection of Man that gives to Man his dignity” [9]. How can it be the river of the white? How absurd it is to regard white people as natives on the American continent and see the river as their own god. For the continent is not inhabited primarily by white people and the name of Mississippi was originally derived from the real Native Americans, that is, from the Indians. By far, it can be concluded that a free land is hard to find.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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