

# On Huck's Establishment of Identity in *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* from the Perspective of Initiation Theme

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The *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* written by Mark Twain is considered as representative novel with initiation theme in American literary circle. It has taken the fancy of the readers throughout the whole world since it was frequently printed and widely translated. In the story, Mark created an image of a boy named Huck who had an unexpected adventure by sailing a raft down the Mississippi River with his friend, Jim. After experiencing the adventure, Huck finally became mature. The present paper gives a brief introduction of the story. Then, the paper mainly explores how Huck established his identity from the following aspects: his disapproval to slavery and his consciousness of moral development and obligation.

**Keywords:** establishment of identity, initiation theme, moral development, obligation

## Introduction

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be viewed as a mythology about a boy who undergoes growth from adolescence into young adulthood. In the novel, Mark makes an exploration upon the process of growth and maturity deeply by portraying an image of a boy adventurer—Huckleberry Finn, who run away from his cold family by sailing a raft down the Mississippi River. He was anything but lonely because his friend Jim was accompanying him. Jim was a runaway as well from his master or he would be sold to another white family. After they came across, they took adventure together to see the outside world which could enrich the life experiences and even help them establish the identity. The two boys struck a bond of friendship that took them through dangerous events and excited adventures. In the story, Huck sets a good example for the explanation of initiation theme by his unusual experiences. “In 1940s, the study on the initiation theme in literary works sprung up in America” (Hutchinson, 1993, p. 75). Since then, initiation has become a literary theme full of novelty and vitality. Many critics think that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is not only a story which describes the adventure of a little boy but also reveals his growth and maturity after he broadens his worldview so that the story has a typical initiation theme. Initiation theme has been explained by many writers in the western literary history which describes the growth of a teenager by undergoing some life experiences and even adventures. “The great initiation stories teach young adults and teenagers how to survive in the complicated circumstances” (Louis, 1985, p. 58). At first, those who have experienced the growth are quite unaware of its meaning and significance

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subconsciously. Day after day, they would suddenly indulge into insight learning and come to understand the importance of the experience which can help them become mature spiritually. The confusion and fear are mixed with the desire and curiosity, the inexpressible shocks followed by the subtle physiological changes add an atmosphere of mystery and shyness to the stage of initiation. The paper discusses how Huck establishes his identity from the perspectives of initiation theme, his disapproval to slavery and his consciousness of moral development and obligation so as to show the process of his growth and maturity.

### **Initiation Theme and Huck's Establishment of Identity**

One of the most outstanding characteristics of *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* is its combination of adventure story with initiation theme. The main difference between adventure story and initiation novel is their different emphasis. An adventure story emphasizes on the exciting feeling, unusual and strange things met in the adventures. Its success lies on actions of adventure and exciting, astonishing, or awing feeling on the nerves of readers. Initiation novels do not pay too much attention to the telling of an interesting story, but to showing the experiences and feelings of the protagonists in the process of socialization. Initiation novels focus on the growth of protagonists in the social environment and personal recognition and contemplation. Protagonists in initiation story don't have to leave their home to be on the road of adventure. The protagonists experience the epiphany and get the deeper recognition which will guide and even determine their future life. *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* takes the adventure as the turning point of growth and adds some dangerous and exciting elements to the story, making readers anxious about the safety of the protagonist. However, the dangerous scenes are just used as a kind of method. The main purpose is to make the protagonist get his own recognition and become mature.

The second characteristic is that the attention on humanity is an important part of growing process. Louis J. Budd points out that

people not only are restricted by the cultural context where they live, but also can creatively produce rich individual patterns of living; the living pattern of an individual person may be superior or inferior to that of his species. (Louis, 1985, p.37)

Finally, Huck tore the letter he had written into pieces—the humanity in the Huck's heart came to awakening, his action showed the oppression of the Southern culture to humanity. Huck's growth and deep understanding humanity would gradually be transmitted to sensitive young adults.

The third characteristic is exhibiting the South-American culture through the initiation novel. The purpose of the ancient initiation rituals is to make children get the rules and beliefs of community through serious ordeals in order to fuse into the society. From it, we know people's culture is an important part for children's growth. It is a rich soil providing the sufficient nutrition for people's growth, especially for children. Huck is a typical American boy, his growth can not be cut from his understanding of social culture. People's culture is also a dynamic one. It should change by following the pace of the change of time. The establishment of Huck's identity is based on his changing attitude toward understanding of American social culture. South American culture is obviously different before and after the adventure in Huck's mind.

### **Huck's Disapproval to Slavery**

Establishment of identity can be viewed as an essential characteristic of initiation novels. Allen Marjorie,

the author of *One Hundred Years of Children's Books in America* said "Before young adults can successfully abandon the security of childhood dependence on others, they must have some idea of who they are, where they are going and what possibilities there are to go there" (Allen, 1996, p. 178). Young people must develop a sense of identity. Erik H. Erikson pointed out that "A person experienced some kind of psychological crisis or spiritual crisis in his growing process and then got a complete and healthy personality about the relationship between self and society" (Erik, 1995, p. 105). Without clear identity, we can not say a person gets mature completely. The process of establishment of identity and the influencing factors are important elements in initiation novels. After the little hero Huck in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* had a new understanding of nature and culture, he began to establish his own identity which was based on his adventure in the wilderness. His conception about slavery, moral development, and obligation had got a future step, which attributed to his growth and maturity

One must be greatly influenced by the era that he is living in. Many domestic and social elements are combined to serve as incentives to forge the development of an individual. Among them, social system is always considered as a leading element to the growth of a person. It is necessary to have a clear understanding about time to form other recognitions about the surrounding world before taking a right action. With a clear understanding to the system of a society can a child expand his worldview so as to become mature. Thus, the way to understand the social system can be viewed as a proof to show how a child comes mature mentally and spiritually so as to establish his personal identity.

Huck, young as he was, had already experienced a period from unclear to clear recognition of slavery. The novel describes the life at the time of pre-civil war. Huck's childhood life in southern America was a slavery lifestyle, which gave much influence upon Huck's outlook. In those days, people there, white slave masters, took slavery for granted, thus they did not feel guilty to enslave the blacks by compelling them doing excessive formwork in the plantations and even selling them or killing them. Moreover, he thought the blacks were savages, uncivilized, and stupid and "to plant cotton with crude tools was the most suitable for slaves" (Mark, 1994, p. 62) so that they belonged to an inferior race. Many whites "although they were not fortunate enough to possess assets, after all had souls, so they would never debase themselves to labor with the awful slave side by side. They never did so and would not forever" (Beaver, 2001, p. 49). Their emancipation from physical work was good to the balance of the moral scale of the southerner.

At first, Huck had no difference from others as to the slaves and slavery because he was totally soaked to the traditional slavery culture. However, in the process of adventure, especially after he encountered a black boy, Jim, and developed their friendship rapidly, Huck was roused by humanity himself. After he found the black boy was always helpful to him and even saved his life, Huck came to abandon his deep-rooted prejudices against the blacks. At the end of the story, Huck pleasantly accepted the coming of modern times and new social atmosphere towards slavery. Without careful thinking about the disadvantages of slavery, Huck would fail to deny its existence. Without the encounter with Jim, Huck would fail to learn by an example that all men were created equal. Just because Huck cast the old conception away, he finally recognized the slavery should no longer exist. Hence, he took out the first step to establish his personal identity from boyhood to early adulthood.

### **Huck's Consciousness of Moral Development and Obligation**

"Huck's initiation into adulthood was shown in his developing relationship with Jim" (Susan, 2002, p. 138).

It can be well understood that Huck was a young boy who had never known anything but a society with prevailing slavery in which black people were considered to be inhuman pieces of property. From beginning to the end, Huck was painfully aware of prevailing social attitude and believed them to be right. He never considered that the social system would be wrong, and even at last was dismayed that Tom Sawyer so readily joined him in his illegal plan to free Jim, Miss Watson's property. The great irony was that Huck always believed that it was his moral conscience that told him that protecting Jim from returning to slavery was "wrong" and that "right" and "moral" thing to do would be to see that Jim returned to his owner's house. Subsequently, he labeled himself as an immoral and hopeless sinner when he remembered that he had not done anything to return Miss Watson's property. At that time, due to the limitation of his thought, Huck never doubted about the "right" existence of social morals and system.

Through the way drifting on Mississippi river, Huck went through a lot so that his thought was enriched by the experiences. He thought he should establish his own moral standards rather than changing himself according to changing circumstances. The first challenge was his suspicion on the existed social morals, the rights and wrongs. Once Jim was attacked by other whites, he would resolve to defy society to protect him. He thought that it was wrong to look on black people as the property of whites so that he began to treat Jim as an independent individual human being. As Jim and Huck went down the river together, Huck remained burdened and troubled with his original view of morality—Jim was born to be the property of a white family and he existed for the white man's amusement. But as Huck and Jim relationship became more intimate, these views concerning Jim became complicated and modified in Huck's mind. While Huck tried to teach Jim a garbled version of history and literature, primarily from the books they had found, Jim began to instruct Huck further in folk ways, common sense, and most of all, human decency. As Huck was greatly impressed by Jim's concern and genuine affection for him, he seemed to look to Jim for the guidance that he would have had. Ideally, Huck writes that Jim "was most always right" (Mark, 1994, p. 72).

Though Huck seemingly failed to discard the basic philosophical and social ideas held in his society, he did make a change himself. In becoming an independent adult, he dramatically shifted his moral view, coming to embrace Jim as a friend and father figuring for whom he was ready to go to hell. From suspicion to abandon to existed social morals, his moral standards developed through the journey of initiation, to some extent, such a change was a typical element as an incentive to help him establish personal identity.

#### Initiation is thought

to become integrated as part of a group and realize one's role in that society. After young adults experience a series of events, they must gradually develop a philosophy of life and establish a set of guiding moral beliefs and standards. (Louis, 1985, p. 96)

Every society is formed by individual and individual must fuse into a society to take his part of obligation to make his contribution to it. According to research results given by some anthropologists, specific rituals prevail among many ancient people for young adults to enter the adulthood. Young adults experience a series of ordeals in the rituals. When they come back and get into the society, they seemly become the new people and have ability to carry out the duty and obligation bestowed by the community. Consciousness of obligation is an important mark of maturity. Just as what we have mentioned above, Huck got benefits from the adventure. He had entered

the household of maturity from childhood to early adulthood. What he experienced woke up his sense of obligation. Undoubtedly, as a young adult in pre-civil war period, Huck was given the obligation to interpret the significance of equity by Mark. He was a symbol that the American young adults at his time came to realize the importance of equality and disadvantages of racial discrimination.

### Conclusion

Industrial society demands its citizens to have high technology and organization and law consciousness, so children need a long time to study and grow. Adolescence becomes an independent phase to grow from child to youth. Adolescence is a crucial phase for people to develop their thoughts, morals, and psychology. It is a serious challenge for children to melt into the complex and conflicts-filled society. Young readers can experience the growth of psychology with protagonists in the novel by reading initiation novels. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is generally acknowledged as a classic initiation story in American literature. As for most of young adults, they hardly have a chance to get to the adventure like Huck. What happened to Huck evokes the contemplation of young adults. Young adults regard the novel as a mirror and evaluate themselves through comparison with protagonists. The good qualities reflected by protagonists set a good example for them. Huck finally established his personal identity because he changed his attitudes towards slavery, social morals, and obligation. He abandoned the long-rooted prejudices against slaves and developed his pioneering standards for the social morals and strengthened his strong sense of obligation. As a classic American initiation story, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* both embodies the common experiences of human beings' initiation and possesses typical American features.

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