Mark Twain Racist Or Realist Essay, Research Paper

Mark Twain, Racist or Realist?

Introduction

This paper examines Mark Twain’s work to determine whether or not he was racist. Racism is defined by The American Heritage Dictionary as “the belief that one race is superior to others.” Unfortunately the issue of race isn’t black or white. There are many shades of gray in racism and even the most progressive thoughts of old seems conservative as progress enlightens new levels of thought. During his time, Twain was a forward thinking author who championed many causes, one of them being fair treatment of the downtrodden and oppressed.

The only example of potential racism is his treatment of the Goshoot Indians in Roughing It. The main body of his work points to innovative anti-racist themes. Even if one admits that Twain fosters some derogatory stereotypes labeling his work “scabrous, unassimiable, and perhaps unteachable to our own time” is shortsighted and revisionist. Even if Twain was racist the process of learning is supposed to combat backwards teaching from our past through exposition and discussion (Wonham 40). I even learned from Mein Kampf and objections to Mark Twain’s potential racism pale in comparison to Hitler’s crimes against humanity. Mark Twain certainly wasn’t as politically correct as contemporary newsmen or politicians but his primary occupation was as a satirist. Even today successful comedians, from “Saturday Night Live” to “The Tonight Show,” use techniques similar to Twain’s irony, satire and burlesque.

Every serious Twain scholar knows of Twain’s reputation as a burlesque humorist/satirist as well as his anti-imperialist and anti-religious tendencies. The scholar must be careful when labeling or categorizing Twain’s work because of his frequent use of sarcasm but Twain definitely liked blacks and abhorred slavery. His treatment of Natives and the Chinese was questionable when looked at apart from his work as a whole, but he slammed the white race more mercilessly than he ever condemned any other race. Sadly, the cynical and sarcastic Mark Twain can never be fully understood because only he knew what thoughts he was trying to convey.

Twain often used burlesques to get a point across by showing the ignorant how ignorant they actually are. In Huck Finn, Twain linked religion and slavery by showing how the former can pervert knowledge and cause acceptance of the latter over objections of conscience. When Huck is “’born again’, he forgets his vow to aid Jim, and his euphoria as being ‘born again’ resembles the feeling of being ‘light as a feather’ that he experiences after deciding to turn Jim over to the slave-catchers (Fulton 83).” This commentary is as much about the sorry state of slavery as it is about slavery’s Biblical foundation.

James L. Johnson dedicated Mark Twain and the Limits of Power to outlining how, like Emerson, Twain’s “solipsism is a fundamental ingredient in much of [his] best work (Johnson 8).” Twain’s characters had or wanted “an extraordinary ability to dominate the worlds in which they find themselves (Johnson 1).” Twain had little faith in a Christian God so he put more faith in the self. Johnson also thought Twain’s bitterness increased as he unearthed that “the larger and more masterful the Self became, the less benevolent he was likely to be (Johnson 7).” Although Twain’s life was common because it had limits he “envisioned a character who might not have to make those accommodations, a hero who might break out of the prison of limitations into a brighter life (Johnson 187).” Frustration with the world, hence a caustic temperament, arose as time wore on but Twain never lost sight and hoped for “mastery over it and freedom (Johnson 189).”

In 1907 Bernard Shaw remarked to Archibald Henderson that, “Mark Twain and I find ourselves in the same position. We have to make people, who would otherwise hang us, believe that we are joking (Clemens 5).” This point is well illustrated by the fearless Twain in this excerpt from Mark Twain’s Jest Book:

In the spring of 1899, I was one of a crowd of some 1200 who attended at the Waldorf-Astoria in New York to hear a lecture on his adventures in the South Africa War given by a Lieutenant of Huzzars, one Winston Churchill – and the chair was occupied by Mark Twain. I remember it so well, and the deafening applause which greeted the old gentlemen when he rose to make his introductory speech. When, a long last, silence reigned, his opening sentence staggered me. He began like this:

“Fellow thieves and robbers!” and when the roars of astonished laughter subsided, he continued,

“I take it that this audience consists of English people and Americans, so I commence my remarks, fellow thieves and robbers – the Americans in the Philippines and the English in South Africa.” And more laughter followed when he said “But never mind, we’re kith and kin in war and sin.”

-Cyril Clemens (Clemens 15)

Carl Van Doren discusses Mark Twain and Bernard Shaw in the March 1925 issue of Century Magazine. He writes, “Mr. Shaw makes dramas out of the Lamarckian hypothesis, and Mark Twain out of the Darwinian (Budd 70).” Further differences are illustrated by “Mr. Shaw can no more dispense with the free will than Mark Twain can confidently use it (Budd 70).” Doren talks about how they brought humor to new limits because they “find so much to laugh at they must now and again or explode (Budd 71).” Although Twain was extremely open with most of his friends he “took pains to put on more formal robes when he came before the world (Budd 66).” Doren suggestion, “It may have been that he lived in a time and place which would not tolerate him at his most candid” rings true even today (Budd 66). The candid Mark Twain won’t be widely publicized even today because his religious beliefs, like his innovative racial beliefs, are not “likely to be adapted into an attraction at Disneyland (Baetzhold 0).”

In his autobiography Twain wrote, “All the negroes were friends of ours, and with those of our own age we were in face comrades (Neider 5).” He tempered this broad statement with, “color and condition imposed a subtle line which both parties were conscious of and which rendered complete fusion impossible (Neider 5).” During Twain’s childhood the institution of slavery was accepted by his parents, the pulpit, and promoted as part of American History. There was little violence associated with slavery because the slaves were part of the family. Although he commented on the history of slavery Twain never attempted to justify it. While discussing his childhood he talked about a slave named Uncle Dan’l, “whose heart was honest and simple and knew no guile (Neider 6).” Uncle Dan’l, Twain mentioned, is the basis for Jim (Adventures of Huckelberry Finn) and many other characters.

Twain rose above the beliefs of his time because of the compassion and admiration for the underdog instilled by a mother who “was the natural ally and friend of the friendless (Neider 26).” He wrote that his mother even prayed for Satan. He held a deep reverence for his mother but recognized that “she was not conscious that slavery was a bald, grotesque, and unwarrantable usurpation (Neider 30).” Some scholars focus on comments by Twain such as, “It was on the farm that I got my appreciation for his race and certain of its fine qualities (Neder 6).” They seek to interpret this ambiguous statement as patronizing blacks by claiming the entire race only has “certain” fine qualities. That argument reaches a too far.

More objectionable is the allegation that in the Louis Budd version of Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays Twain “picked up the ugly habit of depicting the corrupt American as ‘colored’ or ‘slavish’ in the 1880’s (Ladd 101).” Although this type of speech was in vogue within the ‘eastern literary establishment’ of that time Twain’s adoption of their terminology is unsuitable for contemporary dialog. I cannot defend those statements effectively without the ability to read them in context but Twain could’ve been alluding to the colored politicians who had no real power in the white dominated Congress.

In Twain’s Concerning the Jews (1899) he seriously composed, “I am quite sure that (bar one) I have no race prejudices and I think that I have no color prejudices nor caste prejudices nor creed prejudices (Budd, Tales 355).” Concerning the Jews is a long work defending the Jews and together with Newhouse’s Jew Story and Randall’s Jew Story there seems to have been a concerted effort on Twain’s part to actively combat anti-Semitism (Tuckley 279-89). Twain joked in Concerning the Jews, “All I care to know is that a man is a human being – that is enough for me; he can’t be any worse (Budd, Tales 355).” He continued by stating that he even feels no prejudice towards Satan and that he might “lean a little his way, on account of him not having a fair show (Budd, Tales 355).”

Three years later in 1902 Twain wrote an even more provocative piece. Does the Race of Man Love a Lord? discusses how all of humanity are alike in many respects. He suggests that “Emperors, kings, artisans, peasants, big people, little people – at the bottom we are all alike and all the same; all alike on the inside and when our clothes are off, nobody can tell which of us is which (Budd, Tales 516).” This work effectively compares all members of the human race in a way that could be accepted at the turn of the century. Twain never explicitly said that blacks, Chinese, or Natives Americans deserved to be treated as people but preaching wasn’t his style, chicanery was.

The old adage about bringing a horse to water is true because you can’t force somebody to learn if they’re not disposed to. Twain must’ve known that making someone learn something means you must let them discover it for themselves rather than trying to ram it down their throats. I wish Twain had written a letter about what the policy should be toward the Natives, Chinese, or former slaves but his work insinuates that it would be similar in content to Concerning the Jews.

Eric Lott, author of Love and Theft: Black Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, repeatedly attacks Twain for his use of blackface minstrelsy stereotyping. Twain did mention in his autobiography that, “if I could have the nigger show back again in its pristine quality and perfection that I should have but little further use for the opera (Neider 59, Wonham 30).” The reasoning behind Twain’s admiration for the blackface performance might stem from his extreme progressiveness as well as his hankering for revival from the past. It was miraculous for a white male born in the South during 1835 to think as progressively as Twain did. The influence of his unintellectual yet strongly compassionate mother could be the cause of his growth.

In his autobiography, Twain penned the story of Sandy, another slave known early in his life. He remarked on one incident in which Sandy bothered him so much with his constant singing that he pleaded with him mother to shut the slave up. With sorrow in her voice Mrs. Clemens responded that she “cannot bear it” when Sandy is quiet because she fears he’s thinking. She continued by informing Twain that Sandy will never see his mother again (Neider 7). In the next paragraph Twain mentioned that he also used Sandy in Tom Sawyer. He blithely wrote, “I tried to get him to whitewash the fence . . . I don’t remember what name I called him (Neider 7).”

Lott further writes that, “Ralph Ellison [Author of Invisible Man] observed that Huckelberry Finn’s Jim rarely emerges from behind the minstrel mask (Wonham 33).” Twain’s patronage of the minstrel show only circumstantially indites him through association. Many of those who enjoyed the performances of whites acting like stereotypical blacks could’ve been racist but we do not condemn everybody who enjoys the Jeff Foxworthy’s redneck jokes as racist. Humor consists of showing an ironic situation in a way that people enjoy. Many people watch America’s Funniest Home Videos (or an earlier version in the Three Stooges), which contains painful looking physical comedy. Do we dub these people as masochists?

The minstrel blackface musicals consisted of mainly slapstick humor and standard jokes that are the precursor to today’s standup comedy. Condemning Twain for ‘cheapening’ the legacy of slavery by enjoying Minstrel Theater is similar to accusing those who enjoyed Jim Cameron’s version of the Titanic disaster of ‘insensitivity’ to the true victims of Titanic because the movie Titanic focuses on the unrealistic fictitious characters rather than the truly deserving deceased. When only narrowly considering small portions a Twain’s work one will get a limited picture of his philosophy. Ralph Ellison’s character in the Invisible Man learned to “direct pain into laughter and to contain the electricity in that way (Lott 136).” Twain’s sense of humor grows darker as the tragedies befalling him pile up but he continued, in his own way, to write cathartic and satirically groundbreaking material.

The basis for the passion and repetition of Twain’s slave era works is most likely came from his desire to counter the ‘Contented Negro on the Plantation’ themed novels circulating during reconstruction. In the book Mark Twain’s Ethical Realism, Joe B. Fulton writes, “Twain goes out of his way in his writings to get the dialects right (Fulton 5).” Fulton believes that “Twain’s desire for an artistic authenticity is itself an ethically oriented endeavor (Fulton 5).” If Fulton is correct than Twain didn’t just pull his characters strings like a Sambo doll, he crafted characters (from Prince and the Pauper to Tom Sawyer) to speak as people of their status would. It would’ve been unethical and unbecoming for Twain to make his characters talk more eloquent than they should have just for the sake of promoting the idea that blacks were intelligent. I don’t have room to expound on the content of Fulton’s book but he strongly supports Twain’s writings as realistic rather than romantic.

Twain couldn’t scathingly attack racist ideas as effectively as ex-slaves like Frederick Douglass could. Men like Douglass, then Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, and finally Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were much more effective at broadside attacks on racism. Twain wondered if “any body of human beings existed who were able to look upon his fiery ideas without blinking (Budd 66).” We don’t see prominent male feminists so why should we expect a white man to come to the forefront of racial issues? Twain didn’t want to get “hanged” because dead men can spread their ethos no further. Twain was obviously concerned with his legacy considering the sheer amount of work he produced. The fact that he held back many works until after his death testifies to his dedication to his family because his later radical ideas could tarnish his name’s sterling reputation. He opened up a dialog on miscegenation with pioneering works such as Pudd’nhead Wilson and the Adventures of Huckelberry Finn but he does it subtly.

In Nationalism and the Color Line in Cable, Mark Twain, and Faulkner, Barbara Ladd calls Pudd’nhead Wilson “a complex example of the use of black and white, foreign and domestic, northern and southern social bodies to examine the myths of racial purity, national unity, and individual autonomy (Ladd 130).” She continues by stating that he is “more conduit than originator” because as author of Wilson, Twain refered to the Italian twins as master (Ladd 133, 131). A racist man wouldn’t have referred to his foreign characters as master. Ellison once said, “When the white man steps from behind the mask of the Trickster, he is not simply mining a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will in fact that which he intends only to symbolize (84 Fulton).” Maybe Twain only wished to step behind the mask for a short while and noticed that when he came out from behind the mask he had taken on new qualities.

Twain allegorically represented America and the fallacy of slavery’s end. Cushing Strout notes in Making American Tradition that “The Supreme Court of the United States was well on its way to emasculating by racist interpretation the three Civil War amendments that promised new freedoms to the blacks (Strout 156).” This makes Tom’s plan in Huck Finn to free the already free Jim, with the subsequent wound, analogous to America’s predicament. Blacks are already supposed to be free and thankful for their ‘freedom’ but in many cases they (and whites also) are worse off than before because of the old system must be modified. The allegation that Twain assaulted corrupt politicians by calling them colored could be another allegory indicating colored politicians’ ineffectiveness within the Reconstructed South. To be a colored politician after reconstruction was to be only temporary figurehead that served no purpose. That wasn’t Twain’s fault although if he had his way no politician would have power.

Another allegory is the allegory in Tom Sawyer. Twain appeared to make Injun Joe out to be a bad guy but Joe doesn’t die the typical good-trumps-bad death. Although he is to be hung, Joe starved to death after being trapped by the “Judge” in the cave (Gerber 219). This is ironic because the long and white hand of the law ends up killing the Indian while ostensibly only trying to protect and look after the town’s citizens. That series of events was happening in America. The Natives got locked up in reservations and starved by the white man looking to protect his own interests. Notice that the white children, lead by Tom, find the treasure that was in Injun Joe’s possession. This is akin to the U.S. and the prosperity that it is now enjoying although many natives languish in poverty.

Twain did feel like he didn’t belong because as William Faulkner wrote he was, “the first truly American writer, and all of us since are his heirs (152 Strout).” Twain sarcastically remarked at the 1881 meeting of the New England Society of Philadelphia, that “The first slave brought into New England out of Africa by your progenitors was an ancestor of mine (Ladd 96).” Ladd mentions that scholars usually “posit[s] a humane and sympathetic Mark Twain gently arguing . . . (from a paternal distance) . . . for black rights or an exploitative Mark Twain appropriating black voices for his own profit (Ladd 137).” Ladd decides that Twain’s true intentions fell somewhere in the middle of those two extremes. All evidence I’ve seen points to a Twain seeking to attack racist bourgeoisie values as much as he can through his most effective medium, humor.

Since Twain’s comments on his ancestor’s being black elicits laughter he knows that racism is still alive and ready to be attacked. Only when the joke loses punch is the issue of racism pushed back down a degree. Twain had Aristocratic blood that he could’ve used as a claim to fame but he chose to live as a commoner and joke about being descended from slaves (Neider 28). Twain did profit from his use of black characters but only as he was writing about the things that he knows and his experiences with slavery. If a woman is raped, then makes a successful career writing and lecturing on rape prevention do we accuse her of denigrating the crime?

Race, Rape, and Lynching by Sandra Gunning offers the only no holds barred attack on Mark Twain in the UNLV library. She writes “even Mark Twain abided by certain tenets of white supremacy” without backing it with facts or citations (Gunning 12). Gunning feels that Twain possesses a “need to silence female utterance both black and white (Gunning 13).” This statement tends to make Twain out to be sexist more than racist. Gunning might benefit from researching Twain’s Why Not Abolish It in which Twain called for prison terms for the fathers of bastards (Budd Tales 552). The rest of her case consists of “Twain reaches for metaphors of malignant blackness similar to those subsequently developed and exploited by Thomas Dixon (Gunning 14).” This segues perfectly into this:

When Mark Twain was living in Hartford, Conneticut, where Dr. Doane, was rector of an Episcopal Church, he went to hear the Clergyman’s best sermon. After it was over Mark approached the Doctor and said politely:

“I have enjoyed your sermon this morning. I welcome it as I would an old friend. I have a book at home in my library that contains every word of it.”

“Why, that can’t be, Mr. Clemens,” replied the rector.

“All the same, it is so,” insisted Mark.

“Well, I certainly should like to see that book,” rejoined the rector with dignity.

“All right,” replied Twain, “you shall have it,” and the next morning Doctor Doane received with Mark Twain’s compliments a copy of Webster’s ‘Unabridged Dictionary!

-Cyril Clemens (Clemens 16)

Moral of this anecdote; it’s not the actual words, but their arrangement that matters.

I suspect Gunning might also believe that the inventor of the pistol is liable for all handgun murders because they created a mechanism for exploitation. Later in the book she does admit that Pudd’nhead Wilson, the book she’s critiquing, is “anti-racist” abet with problems because Twain used racist terminology (Gunning 52). Gunning does include mention that in 1901 Twain wrote The United States of Lyncherdom, wherein he called lynching “this epidemic of bloody inanities (Gunning 52).”

The United States of Lyncherdom was Twain’s mouthpiece to vent his frustration with the state of humanity. He scribed that the “right hearted and compassionate . . . would attend [a lynching], and let on be pleased with it, if public approval seemed to require it (Budd, Tales 482).” Twain remarked that “each man is afraid of his neighbors disapproval [which is] more dreaded than wounds and death (Budd Tales, 482).” Our modern concerns of public apathy was alive and well in 1901. History repeating itself is an oxymoron because people have been saying it for so very long. Unfortunately the only suggestion given by Twain on how to fix the sorry state of affairs was to bring back our missionaries from China because “nothing but the martyr spirit can brave a lynching mob (Budd, Tales 485).”

Twain wrote some seemingly racist comments about the Goshoot Indians in Roughing It. “From what could see and all we could learn, they are very considerably inferior to even the despised Digger Indians of California; inferior to all races of savages on our continent (Hill 166).” This statement makes Twain out to be racist if it implied that some races are superior or inferior to others. Twain did write that the first murder he witnesses in ‘Indian country’ is perpetrated by white outlaws and he makes fun of the exaggeration of people injured in an Indian attack (Hill 97-102).

There is more solace in the realization that the chapter seems intended more to attack James Fenimore Cooper and his romantic image of the “Noble Red Man” than to attack Natives rights or support white supremacy. Twain always tried to dispel myths and Cooper’s “Noble Red Man” image obviously chaffed him as evidenced by Fenimore Cooper’s Literary Offences (Quirk 377). He worked so hard at dispelling this myth that he likens the coyote, vulture, and Indian by claiming that they go about “hating all other creatures (Hill 79).” If you read Twain’s commentary on other races you will realize that without a few jokes at their expense the Indians would be left out and might be seen as superior to the other races. That would be racism.

Twain also used his satire of the Goshoots to sustain other attacks one on the Baltimore and Washington railroad companies and another on religion. I think that an intelligent critic will notice Twain’s curious call for us to “find it in our hearts to give these poor naked creatures our Christian sympathy and compassion (Hill 169).” Twain thought little of what he considered oppressive and contradictory religious teaching so he was obviously joking. Although he claimed the Goshoots are extremely uncivilized The United States of Lyncherdom calls on Missionaries in China to return because “The Chinese are univerally considered to be excellent people, honest, honorable, industrious, trustworthy, kind-hearted . . . and besides, almost every convert runs the risk of catching our civilization (Budd Tales 484).” He didn’t highly value civilization so calling them uncivilized is a compliment.

“It was curious to see how quickly the paint and tinsel fell away from him and left him treacherous, filthy and repulsive” also seems racist on the surface (Hill 168-9). Twain seemed to take a shot at Natives although it’s more of an attack on Cooper for painting and tinseling them up whenever Cooper needs either an eloquent speech or a trail followed. Twain felt that Cooper was being unfair in depicting the Indians as he did rather than how they really were. He continued with “wherever one finds an Indian tribe he has only found Goshoots more or less modified by circumstances and surroundings (Hill 168-9).” Searching deeper one realizes that we are all the same, more or less modified by circumstances and surrounding. I could comically write that I met the most uncivilized group of creatures in a trailer park in Los Angeles. Would that be racist or is would it only be considered racist if the inhabitants were non-white?

I wish I could see Twain’s notes on the Goshoot Indians to shed light on the true meaning of Twain’s opinion of them. The Dervish and the Stranger while satiric, indicates that he knew of the injustice caused to the Natives. The character of the Dervish believes that there is such a thing as a good deed. The Offensive Stranger, arguing with the Dervish, prophesies that “from every impulse, whether good or evil, flows two streams; the one carried health, the other poison (Budd, Tales 547).” As an example he shows a white Chief telling his people how their “heaven blest industry” allowed them to dam the river which helps them become “prosperous and happy (Budd Tales 548).” The next paragraph contains an Indian Chief lamenting that “The white American has dammed our river . . . and turned our field into a desert, wherefore we starve (Budd Tales 548).” Those thoughts seem more progressive than America’s modern high school textbooks.

The Offensive Stranger further proves his case with Columbus. Columbus “gave to the plodding poor and the landless of Europe farms and breathing-space and plenty of happiness (Budd Tales 548).” But the Europeans “hunted and harried the original owners of the soul, and robbed them, beggared them, drove them from their homes, and exterminated them (Budd Tales 548).” This tit for tat doesn’t condemn nor support the persecution of the Natives but it at least acknowledges it. This was a very liberal step at the time. I noticed that the rest of the examples in The Dervish and the Stranger, the Philippines, Boer War, and U.S. missionaries in China are all explicitly condemned by Twain later in other speeches. Twain might have been too timid (or realistic) to try to wage too many full out wars at once in the arena of public opinion.

Conclusion

I believe that one must look at a wide selection of writing to even scratch the surface of Mark Twain’s thoughts. I hope that I’ve succeeded in enlightening even the more knowledgeable reader about Twain’s racial feelings. There are those who suggest that the use of the word “nigger” is enough to make a writer racist. That would condemn writers such as Ralph Ellison to the dubious distinction of racist for his casual use of the word commonly used to refer to blacks during his time. Depicting the actual state of affairs, then making fun of them, was Twain’s hallmark. If that is racism then everyone who ever laughed at an ironic or racially allegorical situation is racist.

Never did Mark Twain attempt to state that the white race or any other races are either superior or inferior to others. He wrote that all humans are equally bad (or good) and that the only differences are titles and clothing. Bitterness, thus his capacity to attack the status quo, grew as his friends and family died but that is to be expected. He rooted for the underdog and championed the cause of Jews, blacks, and Chinese. His treatment of the Indians is less clear cut but it is obvious that he knows America treats the Indians like they treated the Phillipinos (the same as the British treated the Boers.)

Twain developed from a writer who attempted to instill compassion in American’s less privileged classes. Near the end of his life he seemed to have given up on mankind after recognizing cyclical trends in history. During the last ten to fifteen years a melancholy Twain condemned, yet called for compassion, all of mankind, which he saw stuck in a terrible and unsolvable predicament. He realized that the white slave master was stuck in the system that the black slave was and that the Civil War created more problems then it solved. At the very end he wished for release. He called death “the gift that makes all other gifts mean and poor (Neider 375).” He resigned himself to the vision of a heaven full of unrecognized heroes and colored angels (McCullough 129-188). This is not the vision of a racist, but one of an eminent, open-minded, and remarkable human.