The Reception of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* at Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University

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Abstract:

In Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* two themes predominate—slavery and racism. Yet, students at Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University seem oblivious to both themes; focusing instead on the moral degeneracy of certain characters, namely, pap Finn. Their reception of the text differs greatly from their Western counterparts who display a hostile reader-response to the novel on account of its reductive treatment of the black man. This study investigates the reasons behind Saudi students' disregard for social and historical issues in the novel which have led to its banning in most schools in the West. It achieves this through the employment of reception theory, a form of reader-response criticism proposed by the German theorist, Hans Robert Jauss. The study further employs the philosophies of literary critic Louise Rosenblatt, advanced in her highly acclaimed classic work, *Literature as Exploration*. Rosenblatt's unique theories prove highly influential in their ways of dealing with the literary text in general, the student of literature in particular.

Keywords: Reader-response, reception theory, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, social and historical issues, Al Imam University.

Introduction

On the surface, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* appears to be a bitter-sweet coming of age story about a young boy, Huck Finn, who runs away for two reasons; to liberate himself from the restrictions of his society, and, to escape the cruelty of his drunken father. In the process, he encounters Jim, a runaway slave, who, like Huck, is also in pursuit of freedom, however, in Jim's case, it is from slavery. The two embark on an adventure-filled journey down the Mississippi River and encounter a plethora of colourful characters, namely, the gang of robbers and cutthroats, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, Colonel Sherburn, the "king" and "duke," the Phelpses, and many others. Although Twain's action-packed novel introduces a number of richly varied characters and a multitude of events, still, the novel's underlying themes appear to be slavery and racism. To begin with, it is set in the American antebellum South at a time when slavery was a legal institution. Moreover, the novel focuses on the plight of a runaway slave, Jim, and in the process paints a not so flattering picture of him. Jim is hunted like an animal, chained twice, painted, fed like a dog when captured, and ridiculed on numerous occasions by most of the white characters in the novel. Even Huck, Jim's supposed friend and companion, teases and taunts him when bored and in desperate need of entertainment. Julius Lester in "Morality and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*" acknowledges this point. He attacks Twain's portrayal of Jim by angrily asserting that, "Jim does not exist with an integrity of his own. He is a childlike person who,

in attitude and character, is more like one of the boys in Tom Sawyer's gang than a grown man with a wife and children, an important fact we do not learn until much later" (203).

In a book that is described as "American literature's most eloquent indictment of racism," one finds "racial jokes" throughout the novel (Guerin 284). Detractors such as Julius Lester call *Huckleberry Finn* a "dangerous" book which "demeans blacks and insults history," Twain "does not take Jim or black people at all seriously" (Lester 205, 206). Jim is a plaything, "an excuse for 'the *adventure* of it,' to be used as it suits the fancies of the white folk. . . . What Jim clearly is not is a human being, and this is emphasized by the fact that Miss Watson's will frees Jim but makes no mention of his wife and children" (Lester 205). Still, supporters such as Justin Kaplan see it differently arguing that "it is a bitter irony that the book has been called racist" (Kaplan 355).

Level two Master's students enrolled in the "Studies in American Literature" course at Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University are first introduced to the novel through an excerpt selected from chapter four, where Huck, in a desperate attempt to find out the whereabouts of his drunken, degenerate father, goes to Jim to have his fortune read. Jim, pleased that someone has sought his council, produces a hair-ball extracted from the stomach of an ox, and begins to work his magic:

Yo' ole father doan' know, yit, what he's a-gwyne to do.

Sometimes he spec he'll go 'way, en den agin he spec he'll
stay. De bes' way is to res' easy en let de ole man take his
own way. Dey's two angels hoverin' roun' 'bout him. One uv
'em is white en shiny, en t'other one is black. De white one
gits him to go right, a little while, den de black one sail in en
bust it all up. . . . Dey's two gals flyin' 'bout you in yo' life.
One uv 'em's light en t'other one is dark. One is rich en
t'other is po'. You's gwyne to marry de po' one fust en de
rich one by-en-by. You want to keep 'way fum de water as
much as you kin, en don't run no resk, 'kase it's down in de
bills dat you's gwyne to git hung. (Twain 26-27)

When students are asked to take turns reading the excerpt aloud, excessive giggling followed by much laughter occurs. Not one student is able to do so successfully. "Negro dialect," according to the students, is difficult to decipher. This is understandable since, "writing in a frontier dialect, Twain was trying . . . to capture in both pronunciation and vocabulary the spirit of the times from

the lips of contemporary people" (Guerin 43). Hence, Jim's utterances, although incomprehensible to Saudi students/readers, provide an accurate rendition of nineteenth century African American colloquial speech. Still, as the class progresses, and, the novel is introduced in its entirety, the reading of certain passages becomes only one aspect of *Huckleberry Finn* which students find problematic. Another aspect is the corruption of certain characters. The excessive drinking, the swearing, the smoking, the lying, and the stealing which Twain's characters indulge in frequently prove highly offensive to Saudi students who perceive such vices as anti-Islamic. Huck's argument with Jim over kings and their social function further offends, as does the dressing of Jim as a "Sick Arab," "*harmless when not out of his head*" (Twain 24.156).

Surprisingly, the two main themes in the novel, slavery and racism, are never touched upon by the students. There is a notable disregard for both themes. Jim, a runaway slave in constant fear for his life has no effect upon the students. Worse still, his portrayal as a superstitious simpleton (although supporters of the novel may think otherwise), does not evoke a reaction. Students do not question the numerous prejudices and assumptions about Negros made by Twain, not even the way in which he casts slaves as stock characters. Slaves are exploited, mocked, and ridiculed throughout *Huckleberry Finn*. An example can easily be witnessed in Huck's description of the "nigger that fed Jim" when captured and locked in a hut by Silas Phelps. Huck says of the man:

This nigger had a good-natured, chuckle-headed face, and
his wool was all tied up in little bunches with thread. That
was to keep witches off. He said the witches was pestering
him awful, these nights, and making him see all kinds of
strange things, and hear all kinds of strange words and
noises, and he didn't believe he was ever witched so long,
before, in his life. He got so worked up, and got to running
on so about his troubles, he forgot all about what he'd been
agoing to do. (Twain 34.228)

This reductive image of the black man runs from beginning to end of *Huckleberry Finn*. The black characters are illiterate, superstitious, childish, ignorant, gullible, and simple to the point of stupidity. However, students fail to acknowledge such prejudices focusing instead on the moral degeneracy of certain characters.

Whereas students at Al Imam University object mainly to the moral aspect of the novel insisting that it promotes anti-Islamic behaviour, their Western counterparts object to an altogether different aspect; the novel's racism. The use of the derogatory term "nigger," as well as the depiction of African Americans as inferior,

proves most offensive to students, particularly African Americans. Peaches Henry in "The Struggle for Tolerance: Race and Censorship in *Huckleberry Finn*" elaborates:

> Twain's apparent perpetuation of racial stereotypes through his portrayal of Jim and other blacks in *Huck Finn* bears relation to his use of "nigger" and has fostered vociferous criticism from anti-*Huck Finn* forces. Like the concept "nigger," Twain's depiction of blacks, particularly Jim, represents the tendency of the dominant white culture to saddle blacks with traits that deny their humanity and mark them as inferior. Critics disparage scenes that depict blacks as childish, inherently less intelligent than whites, superstitious beyond reason and common sense, and grossly ignorant of standard English. Further, they charge that in order to entertain his white audience, Twain relied upon the stock conventions of "black minstrelsy," which "drew upon

European traditions of using the mask of blackness to mock

individuals or social forces. (366)

The mounting protest over the content of *Huckleberry Finn* ultimately led to its banning in most schools in America. Wilfred L. Guerin in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* confirms this point when he declares: "The book has been banned in a number of school districts" (284). Adding:

[*Huckleberry Finn*] became the target of harsh . . . criticism

on the grounds that it contained racial slurs in the form of

epithets like 'nigger' and demeaning portraits of Negroes.

Schools were in some instances required to remove the book

from curriculums or reading lists of approved books and in

extreme cases from library shelves. (361)

Lester, being a person of color himself, speaks with much vehemence with regards to the novel as a whole:

I am grateful that among the many indignities inflicted on

me in childhood, I escaped *Huckleberry Finn.* As a black

parent, however, I sympathize with those who want the book
banned, or at least removed from required reading lists in
schools. While I am opposed to book banning, I know that
my children's education will be enhanced by not reading
Huckleberry Finn. (200)

Interestingly, both East and West responses to *Huckleberry Finn* correspond with reader-response theory in general which centres primarily on "the relationship between text and reader and reader and text, with the emphasis on the different ways in which a reader participates in the course of reading a text and the different perspectives which arise in the relationship" (Cuddon 770). Nevertheless, since so many divergent theories exist with regards to this particular approach to literature, only the German reader-response critic, Hans Robert Jauss' "reception theory," will be employed here since the theory "recognizes that readers in different historical periods are not likely to interpret or judge a given work in precisely the same way and that as literary fashions and interests change, the characteristics that find favor in one century may be disparaged in the next" (Dobie 133).

An important aspect of Jauss' reception theory is the "horizon of expectations," a term coined by Jauss to suggest the criteria by which readers use to evaluate literary pieces in any

given period, the term, "designates the shared set of assumptions which can be attributed to any given generation of readers" (Cuddon 415). What is important to note, however, is that "horizons of expectations" change. They differ from period to period. Consequently, a literary piece highly valued in one age, could well be disregarded in another, since the opinions of one age "do not necessarily establish the meaning and value" of the literary piece definitively (Cuddon 416). This implies that meaning and value of a literary piece are never fixed, because the horizon of expectations of each age will change. Jauss explains this best in his celebrated text, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, when he stresses:

> A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and
> which offers the same view to each reader in each period. It
> is not a monument that monologically reveals its timeless
> essence. It is much more like an orchestration that strikes
> ever new resonances among its readers and that frees the
> text from the material of the words and brings it to
> contemporary existence. (21)

Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates what Jauss means. Upon its publication in 1884, nineteenth century readers objected to the

novel and asked that it be banned on account that "it would encourage juvenile delinquency, smoking, and irreligion" (Guerin 284). Nowadays, with so many social changes occurring, namely, the election of an African American as president, the text has been banned in most schools on account of "its racism" (Guerin 284). The overuse of the word "nigger" (mentioned two hundred and fifteen times), and the portrayal of African Americans as simpletons, are grounds for much hostility. Justin Kaplan in "Born to Trouble: One Hundred Years of *Huckleberry Finn*" sums up the whole *Huckleberry Finn* controversy in one paragraph:

> In the long controversy that has been *Huckleberry Finn's* history, the novel has been criticized, censored, and banned for an array of perceived failings, including obscenity, atheism, bad grammar, coarse manners, low moral tone, and antisouthernism. Every bit as diverse as the reasons for attacking the novel, *Huck Finn's* detractors encompass parents, critics, authors, religious fundamentalists, rightwing politicians, and even librarians. (357)

Reception Theory

Reception theory's prime interest is not on the response of an individual reader, but rather on the changing responses of the general reading public over a period of time. J. A. Cuddon supports this point by explaining that the theory is "concerned with the general response to literature in terms of reception-aesthetics rather than the individual's response" (777). The aim of the theory is to produce a new kind of literary history – one centred not on authors, influences and literary trends, but on literature as defined and interpreted by its various moments of historical reception by the general reading public (Eagleton 64). The theory examines the reader's role in literature and raises him to the status of the author.

Jauss advanced reception theory after he was influenced by the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, who states in his central study on the meaning of literary texts, *Truth and Method* (1960), "the meaning of a literary work is never exhausted by the intentions of its author; as the work passes from one cultural or historical context to another, new meanings may be culled from it which were perhaps never anticipated by its author or contemporary audience." Gadamer goes on to add, "all interpretation is situational, shaped and constrained by the historically relative criteria of a particular culture; there is no possibility of knowing the literary text 'as it is'" (qtd. in Eagleton 61-62). The meaning of a literary work, then, depends on the historical situation of the reader. Thus, Jauss, in true Gadamerian fashion "seeks to situate a literary work within its historical

'horizon,' the context of cultural meanings within which it was produced, and then explores the shifting relations between this and the changing 'horizons' of its historical readers" (Eagleton 72).

When employing reception theory the critic's role becomes one of examining the literary work in terms of its impact on its contemporary audience since each age reinterprets literature in the light of its own knowledge and experience, its own cultural environment (Cuddon 416). Accordingly, students at Al Imam University individually arrive at the same interpretations and conclusions of *Huckleberry Finn* because they all analyse the text from their personal worldview. This is mainly due to the fact that all the students share similar, if not identical, cultural and religious backgrounds and therefore interpret the text in similar ways. Their "horizons of expectations" prove identical.

The Reception of *Huckleberry Finn* at Al Imam University

Huckleberry Finn was relevant to the "Studies in American Literature" course because it exemplified realistic fiction as opposed to the "romances" of works by Twain's predecessors, Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville (Abrams 146). To a class comprised of ten "white" Master's students, two weeks were assigned for the reading of *Huckleberry Finn*. Although most would consider the time span too long for postgraduate students, still, it was reasonable on account of the language Twain uses. Moreover, Saudi readers in general take far longer to read than their Western counterparts since

English is not their first language; a point which must be considered when teaching Arab students in general.

Students were instructed to read the text very carefully and return with their feedback in a fortnight. Although, it was hoped that their reception of the text would be individualized rather than generalized since subjective reader-response critics such as David Bleich and Norman Holland assert that readers "shape and find [their] self-identities in the reading process," still, this seemed unlikely (Bressler 67). Saudi female students at an all-female Islamic university share the same set of beliefs, experiences, culture, values, and religion. As a result, their responses to literary texts in general are seldom particularized. It was anticipated though, that students would take note of Twain's treatment of slavery and racism in the novel since both themes predominate.

When it was time to discuss the novel, however, the outcome proved the reverse of what had been anticipated. Slavery and racism were never raised by the students. Instead, it was pap Finn's alcoholism which the students took turns discussing. They disapproved of the fact that "Every time he [pap Finn] got money he got drunk," and that he "traded fish and game for whisky and fetched it home and got drunk"
(Twain 6.31-32). Students also objected to the little one-horse town in Arkansaw Huck visits with the two scoundrels, the "king" and "duke" since "There was considerable whisky-drinking going on" (Twain 21.141). The scene with "old Boggs," the town drunk, was also raised by a number of students who found Boggs detestable.

The general consensus in the classroom had been that he deserved to be shot, therefore, missing Twain's point completely regarding man's inhumanity to man. Some students had gone as far as counting the number of times Twain uses words associated with alcohol such as: "whisky" (fifteen), "drunk" (twenty-three), "the jug" (twice),"the bottle" (four), and "liquor" (once)! Thus demonstrating the strong influence of culture, society, and, most importantly, religion on their responses to a literary text.

Huck's "smoking" and "cussing" which Huck explains, he "took to it again because pap hadn't no objection," was also brought up by the students as exemplar of "bad" behavior (Twain 6.32). The scene with the "king" "come a-prancing out on all fours naked; and . . . painted all over," also offended the students on the grounds that it was an inappropriate scene for Muslim girls to read and visualize (Twain 23.150). More offence was taken with regards to Huck and Jim's discussion over kings. The students experienced much outrage at Huck's assertion that "all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out" and him saying, "You don't know kings, Jim, but I know them; and this old rip of ourn is one of the cleanest I've struck in history" (Twain 23.152, 153). This last utterance by Huck had been extremely distasteful in the opinion of the students. Consequently, they took turns declaring that in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia such talk about kings was simply unacceptable. Students could not separate the novel from their day-to-day lives. They had to be reminded constantly that the novel reflects American, rather than Saudi, history. This had been in

accord with Louise Rosenblatt's assertion that "we must not view in isolation any detail of behaviour in our own or any other society but must study it against the background of the motives and emotions institutionalized in that culture" (*Literature as Exploration* 145).

Slavery and racism were never touched upon by the students. None mentioned the reasons behind Jim's flight from Miss Watson, his separation from his family, his nightmarish journey down the Mississippi river in pursuit of freedom, and his solitary confinement in a little hut fit only for dogs after being bought by Silas Phelps. Twain's reductive treatment of blacks in general was also dismissed. Moreover, the use of the derogatory term, "nigger," was never mentioned, although students in the West, black and white, "found it offensive" (Starke 7).

Social and historical considerations were completely dismissed by the students. This had been cause for great concern as a text's social history sometimes can be of immense importance in illuminating thoughts of the day. Rosenblatt shares this view. In *Literature as Exploration* she states that "facts about the social, economic, and intellectual history of the age in which literary works were written" are important if "they demonstrably help to clarify or enrich individual experiences of specific novels, poems, or plays" (27). Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, "is a living panorama of a country at a given time in history" (Guerin 51). Social, cultural, and political factors play a pivotal role in the novel and, as a result, should not be ignored, or as Guerin puts it, "instead of insisting

upon literature's autonomy, we must resume relating it to life and ideas" (123).

With this in mind, it became necessary to comment in class since the way in which slavery had been revealed in the development of intellectual and critical thoughts of the day needed much clarification. James R. Squire in *The Responses of Adolescents While Reading Four Short Stories* declares, "for the teacher of English, the study of literature must involve not only consideration of the literary work itself, but also concern for the way in which students respond to a literary work'" (1). This had also been in accord with what Rosenblatt advises; that although it is important to consider the students' points of view, still, "this does not mean that the teacher abdicates his duty to attempt to instill sound habits of reading or sound critical attitudes. Nor does this imply that historical and biographical background material will be neglected" (*Literature as Exploration* 63). Even reader-response critics, who place much emphasis on the reader and consider him/her "an active participant along with the text in creating meaning," agree that not "all interpretations are valid or of equal importance" (Bressler 61, 63). Thus, confirming the necessity to enlighten novice students/readers.

An elaboration into the nature of slavery seemed highly relevant to the "Studies in American Literature" course since students appeared to know nothing of the special cultural factors influencing Twain's novel. They did not know that Africans were torn away from their native homeland and transported to colonial

America in order to become slaves; that children of slave mothers became slaves themselves; that from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, "an estimated 12 million Africans were shipped as slaves to the Americas. . . . Of these, an estimated 645,000 were brought to what is now the United States" (Kolchin 73). Students were also unaware of the fact that slavery was excused on account of the conviction that "blacks" were "members of an inferior race" and "whites . . . a superior one" (Starke 6). Slave owners, students were told, "using observable skin color differences along with Old Testament pronouncements about the children of Ham as symbolic referents, insisted on the concept of black inferiority to justify, in defiance of Christian ethic, the economically profitable use of slave labor and the emotional gratification of presumed superiority" (Starke 6). Excerpts from Catherine Juanita Starke's *Black Portraiture in American Fiction* were read aloud in class in order to provide students with further insight into the background of slavery. Students were requested to listen attentively as their peers read what Starke had to say with regards to the institution.

Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* had been another text referred to and quoted in class since it provided students with insightful facts about the institution. According to Brown, supporters perceived slavery as a "benevolent guardianship, necessary for a childish people's transition from heathendom to Christianity" (18). Slavery was further supported by Southern physiologists who proved that "by an unknown law of nature none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun" and as a

result, were the most fit to clear the forests, lay the roads, and labour on the tobacco, rice, indigo, and cotton plantations (Brown 18). Furthermore, "theologians defended slavery as having Biblical support since Ham was cursed by God"(Brown 18).

Blacks in general were perceived as nonentities. Advocates of slavery declared them as "beastly" and "non-human" and therefore in need of reforming via slavery (Berghahn 7). The association of blacks with animals, according to Winthrop D. Jordan in *White over Black*, was:

> reinforced by the fact that man-apes and Africans were discovered by Europeans in about the same place at about the same time. They were struck by the similarity between chimpanzees and humans in general and by the black skin which Africans and apes had in common. Reports even appeared of alleged sexual intercourse between African women and monkeys. All this seemed to support the argument that Africans, though not directly of the same species, were at least akin to apes. (28)

Students were told that many unfair stereotypes existed with regards to this association between blacks and apes, some still present to this day, an example is "the myth of the extraordinary sexual prowess of blacks" (Berghahn 7). Two other stereotypes, "Sambo" and "The Brute," also evolved in relation to the black man (Berghahn12). The former, had been a term used to describe the typical plantation slave who was naive, gullible, and "his behavior was full of infantile silliness and his talk inflated with childish exaggeration (Elkins 82). This image of the black man meant that he was unfit to be free since he lacked character and consequently needed to be controlled by the white master. "Sambo" had been one stereotype. The other, was "The Brute," the polar opposite. He was perceived as the embodiment of the ape-man. Berghahn describes him as:

> equal to the "Savage African," supposedly a primitive creature given to fits of violence and powerful sexual impulses. Anatomy and mentality show him to be a kind of "superior" ape, a bloodthirsty being driven by unpredictable and primitive instincts. These qualities were again linked to his origin in Africa-the continent of war, cannibalism, murder, promiscuity and superstition. In these circumstances slavery was argued to have been an act of

mercy, liberating the Africans from barbarism and "domesticating" them. Only the firm hand of the slave-

master was said to guarantee that the slave developed into a

happy, pacific, and docile being. (14)

Upon stating these facts, students gradually began to associate Jim with the image of "Sambo." According to their logic, the expressions Jim uses throughout the novel, his simple-minded gullibility, and his superstitious beliefs had all been projections of this image. When asked to provide examples, students were quick to do so. Their first, had been the scene in chapter two where Tom Sawyer plays a trick on Jim while he naps by hanging his hat on a branch above his head, when he awakens, he is convinced that witches "rode him all over the world, and tired him most to death, and his back was all over saddle-boils" (Twain 2.15). Jim's use of a hair-ball extracted from an ox's stomach to conjure up spirits and to foretell the future had been another example provided by the students, as was, his fixation with the snake-skin evident in his saying, "I awluz 'spected dat rattlesnake skin warn't done wid its work" (Twain 16.96), and his seeing bad omens everywhere.

Jim's naivety had also been acknowledged by the students who referred to his story about trying to invest his money and losing it all to "dat one-laigged nigger" as exemplar (Twain 8.53). Jim's argument with Huck over the wisdom of Solomon and the "blame' ridicklous way" that Frenchmen talk was brought up by the

students as further proof of his child-like naivety (Twain 14.83). And, the way he wholeheartedly believes the "king" and "duke" to be real royalties leading Huck to comment: "What was the use to tell Jim these warn't real kings and dukes? It wouldn't a done no good" (Twain 23.154). A noteworthy point is that the students' association of Jim with "Sambo" is supported by Starke who writes: "Mark Twain assigns Jim a role that is woefully reminiscent of the submissive slave prototype, the kind of character who patiently endures any indignity" (177). Lester agrees. He refers to the scene in chapter forty-two where Jim emerges out of hiding in order to aid a wounded Tom Sawyer with much fervour:

> This depiction of a black “hero” is familiar by now since it has been repeated in countless novels and films. It is a picture of the only kind of black that whites have ever truly liked—faithful, tending sick whites, not speaking, not causing trouble, and totally passive. He is the archetypal “good nigger,” who lacks self-respect, dignity, and a sense of self separate from the one whites want him to have. A century of white readers have accepted this characterization

because it permits their own “humanity” to shine with more

luster. (205)

Students' ability to identify instances in the novel which point to the reductive image of the black man prompted a continuation of the discussion about slavery in order to encourage further comments. Thus, through citing Wilbert Ellis Moore's *American Negro Slavery and Abolition: A Sociological Study*, it was pointed out that to supporters of slavery this was an ideal institution for both "Sambo" and "The Brute." Nonetheless, in order for both types to adjust, they had to undergo much physical and emotional torment at the hands of their masters. Some were whipped, others executed, burnt, beaten, mutilated, or imprisoned, and women, repeatedly raped. "Punishment was most often meted in response to disobedience or perceived infractions, but sometimes abuse was carried out simply to re-assert the dominance of the master or overseer over the slave" (Moore 114). Slaves were also denied an education, "to protect against their forming aspirations that could lead to escape or rebellion" (Moore 115). Slave owners sought to make their slaves completely submissive and dependent on them. Moreover, a slave hierarchy was established in order to keep slaves divided. Hence the obedient "good slave," so to speak, would gain favours from his master by becoming a privileged house slave. By contrast, the disobedient, "bad slave," would work the fields. Slaves, however, were permitted by their owners to

marry and raise large families but nonetheless, their owners, did not hesitate to divide slave families by sale or removal (Brown 5, 19).

The outcome of providing such insight into slavery had been fruitful indeed. Students were soon able to identify the many instances in the novel which point to the aforementioned historical facts. For example, Jim running away from Miss Watson on account that she was going to sell him down the river, into the Deep South, where instead of working as a house servant, he will no doubt become a plantation slave. Furthermore, Jim's separation from his family, according to the students, had been in accord with the brutality some slaves faced in the South. Students were even able to identify a similar separation in chapter twenty-seven where the king and duke decide to sell the slaves like cattle and separate the mother from her children; a scene which traumatizes Huck, who admits, "I can't ever get it out of my memory" (Twain 180).

Returning to the discussion about slavery, students were informed that not all slaves were docile. Slave revolts did occur, namely, Nat Turner's rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831. Turner and his seventy-five black followers were estimated to have killed nearly sixty whites in two days before being captured and subdued by the militia. The incident, led advocates of slavery to point to Turner's rebellion as proof of the wickedness of the black man (Foner 406-7). Consequently, an institution such as slavery was seen by supporters as a necessity to discipline blacks. "Planters whipped hundreds of innocent slaves to quell resistance" (Foner 406). The brutality of slavery thus continued until the end of

the Civil War in 1865. On December 6, 1865, "all slaves became officially free" (Kolchin 81). The end of slavery, nevertheless, did not mean the end of racism. The latter persisted beyond the Civil War. "Sambo" and "The Brute" did not die with the abolition of the slave system. The protagonists of slavery used these stereotypes "to warn against further change" (Berghahn13).

When the issue of racism was raised in the classroom, students did not hesitate to indicate that slavery and racism were interconnected in the novel. They then proceeded to refer to instances in *Huckleberry Finn* which dealt exclusively with racial discrimination. Their first example had been pap Finn's outrage that a black professor was allowed to vote instead of "put up at auction and sold" (Twain 6.35). Other examples included, Huck's assertion that "it warn't no use wasting words-you can't learn a nigger to argue," and his saying, "Give a nigger an inch and he'll take an ell" in response to Jim telling him his plans to save money and buy his wife and children from their owners (Twain 14.84, 16.92). Huck's realisation that Jim was capable of feeling for his family the way a white man feels for his, evident in him saying, "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" had also been pointed out by students as an example of a racial slur (Twain 23.154). A further indicator of racism, according to the students, occurs in chapter fifteen, where Huck, having survived thick fog and strong currents, manages to get back on board and convince a distraught Jim that the whole event had been a dream, leading Jim to blindly believe

the white boy, "Well, den, I reck'n I did dream it, Huck; but dog my cats ef it ain't de powerfullest dream I ever see. En I hain't ever had no dream b'fo' dat's tired me like dis one" (Twain 14.89). The treatment of the black man as subhuman was further alluded to by students through a reference to chapter thirty-two, where Huck pretending to be Tom Sawyer, informs the kindly Mrs. Phelps that he had been detained on account of an explosion of a cylinder-head, prompting her to ask if anyone got hurt, to which Huck replies: "No'm. Killed a nigger." Relieved, Mrs. Phelps says: "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt" (Twain 32.215).

Interestingly, the racial slurs pointed out by the students corresponded with what detractors of the novel regarded as such. For example, "racial objectors isolate [the scene with Mrs. Phelps] as one of the most visible and detrimental slurs of the novel" (Henry 365). The only difference, though, had been the quick dismissal by Saudi students of the derogatory term "nigger," as just another word, as opposed to what detractors thought with regards to Twain's liberal use of the term. The latter had argued that the word causes extreme discomfort to African-Americans since "nigger," "signifies a concept. It conjures centuries of specifically black degradation and humiliation during which the family was disintegrated, education was denied, manhood was trapped within a forced perpetual puerilism, and womanhood was destroyed by concubinage" (Henry 364). On the other hand, for Saudi students, the term had been devoid of meaning. This was primarily due to the fact that the epithet was foreign; unfamiliar. Therefore, linguistic

barriers rather than neglect or indifference justified students' failure to identify the epithet as a racist slur.

Rosenblatt in *Literature as Exploration* recognizes that "students' reactions [to literary pieces] will inevitably be in terms of their own temperaments and backgrounds" (50). The literary theorist proves fully aware of the fact that "personal factors will inevitably affect the equation represented by book plus reader" (75). In some cases, these things will contribute to a full and balanced reaction to the work. In other cases, they will limit or distort (75). Rosenblatt goes on to warn that if an individual is raised in a limited social setting, or if "he is aware only of the most generally accepted standards," then he will be in danger of "too narrow a view" (147). Such had been the case in the "Studies in American Literature" course. Students' neglect of major social and historical issues no doubt distorted their interpretation of the novel. Their reception of *Huckleberry Finn* had been solely based on accepted social and religious standards. They reacted to the novel in terms of their own present-day lives. Nonetheless, they were able to develop sounder literary appreciation, when led to recognize literature as a potential means of developing social understanding. Thus, after creating "a situation in which the student becomes aware of possible alternative interpretations and responses and is led to examine further both his own reaction and the text itself," students proved no longer fixated on trivialities such as the number of times the author uses words such as "alcohol" and "tobacco" in the novel (Rosenblatt 214). Instead, they began to perceive such

vices as part of the characterization process. Pap Finn had to be a drunk and a heavy smoker in order to justify Huck's desire to flee "the lowest common denominator of social authority" (Guerin 138).

Conclusion

Saudi students' "horizon of expectations" to use Jauss' term, led them to look for themes in *Huckleberry Finn* which they related to their everyday lives. They allowed their culture, religious beliefs, and society to dominate their thoughts about the novel. As a result, what they valued and looked for in the novel made them miss the bigger picture. And, although this had been in concurrence with reader- response theory in general which centres on the reader, including his world view, nonetheless, in the words of Rosenblatt, "The student still needs to acquire mental habits that will lead to literary insight, critical judgment, and ethical and social understanding" (71).

World politics, the power structures of societies, racism, Marxism, and imperialism are issues often overlooked in the literature classroom at Al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University. Students rarely question inequalities, gender differences, and class struggles. When it comes to a literary text, students in the West are encouraged to partake in class discussions. Yet, students at Al Imam University prove passive participants. Helping students understand the interrelationships between race, gender, popular culture, the media, and literature should be the primary goal of literature instructors at the university, since, in the words of Rosenblatt, "these new technical, personal, and social insights may ultimately lead to a revision of [the student's] original interpretation and judgment and may improve his equipment for future response to literature" (215). The fact that students at Al

Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud Islamic University began to consider themes such as slavery and racism in *Huckleberry Finn*, proves Rosenblatt correct. Furthermore, it demonstrates that with a convincing argument, it is possible to alter students' reception of any given text—a point which adds to reception theory in general, more importantly, a point worthy of further research.

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التلقّي الأدبي في جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية لرواية مغامرات هاكلبري فن للروائي الأمريكي مارك توين

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الملخص:

تناولت رواية مغامرات هاكلبري فن لمارك توين موضوعي العبودية و التمييز العنصري بشكل رئيسي. إلاّ أن الطالبات في جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية تجاهلن هاذين الموضوعين، و عوضاً عن ذلك انصب اهتمامهن على الانحلال الأخلاقي في شخصيات معينة و بالتحديد في شخصية باب فن. تلقّي طالبات جامعة الإمام للنص يختلف اختلافاً جذرياً عن تلقي أقرانهم الغربيين الذين كانت ردة فعلهم مستهجنة و مستنكرة بسبب تصوير الكاتب للرجل الأسود كشخص وضيع. هذه الدراسة تستقصي الأسباب الكامنة وراء تجاهل الطالبات السعوديات للقضايا الاجتماعية والتاريخية في الرواية و التي أدت إلى حظرها في معظم المدارس في الغرب. أُنجزت هذه الدراسة عبر تطبيق نظرية التلقي التي ظهرت على يد المنظّر الألماني هانز روبرت جوس وهي شكل من أشكال نقد ردة فعل القارئ. كما تم تطبيق فلسفات الناقدة الأدبية لويس روزنبلات التي قدمتها في كتابها الكلاسيكي الذي نال استحساناً كبيراً الأدب عملية استكشاف. تثبت نظريات روزنبلات الفريدة فعالية طرقها في التعامل مع النص الأدبي بوجه عام و طلاب الأدب الإنجليزي بشكل خاص.

الكلمات الدلالية المهمة : ردة فعل القارئ، نظرية التلقي، رواية مغامرات هاكلبري فن، القضايا الاجتماعية و التاريخية، جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود.