



# Cultural and Natural Conflict in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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## Abstract

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the main works that show Mark Twain's culture-nature philosophy, but few scholars have explored the culture-nature conflict in this novel. This paper illustrates the Mark Twainesque culture-nature conflict based on a close reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the context of the culture-nature theories.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain, Culture, Nature

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## 1. Introduction

Mark Twain grew up in the town of Hannibal, Missouri, near the Mississippi River, and his childhood adventures in the river woods and on small islands gave him an intimate connection with nature. Because of the untimely death of his father, he dropped out of school at the age of twelve and began earning a living. He was apprenticed to a printer, a wandering printer, a silver miner, a ship's pilot on the Mississippi River, and a reporter on the Nevada-California border. In the early 1830s the abolitionist movement of American history was beginning to take hold in the North, and the state of Missouri, which was a slave state in the Confederacy, was an important source of the racial motifs that would later dominate his fiction. With the final victory, the North enjoyed dominance in the administration of the country, most slaves were emancipated, and the slave-based economic prosperity of the defeated South was rendered baseless, all of which provided a great deal of material for the creation of *The Adventures of Huckle-*

*berry Finn.*

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as Mark Twain's masterpiece, takes freedom and equality as its theme, uses Mark Twain's own hometown as its background, takes himself and people in his hometown as its prototypes, and describes every aspect of people's daily life, which is full of rich local flavour. The story is about Huckleberry, who escapes from his alcoholic father to a deserted island along the Mississippi River after the Civil War in the 1850s, and finds Jim, a runaway slave, and drifts with him. The novel takes adventure as its clue and tells the story of Huckleberry, a white child who yearns for freedom, and Jim, a black slave who tries to escape from the slave trade. They travel down the Mississippi River through all kinds of trials and tribulations, in the hope of arriving at the land of freedom. This novel highlights Mark Twain's unique style in terms of writing structure, theme, characterisation and language, showing his spirit of freedom from constraints, pursuit of freedom and yearning for nature.

Although there are plenty of studies on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in domestic and foreign academic circles, not many of them study this novel from a philosophical aspect, and even fewer of them relate *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the philosophical theories of culture and nature. This paper intends to combine the philosophical theories of culture and nature, based on a close reading of the novel, to explain the Mark Twainesque conflict between culture and nature embodied in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

## 2. Culture in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

### 2.1. Culture

What exactly is culture? The American anthropologists Alfred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn listed 164 definitions of culture, a work that continues today.

Etymologically, the word "culture" has evolved in at least three stages. First, it appeared around the middle of the 16th century, and is said to have come from the Middle French "culture", meaning "to cultivate". The other is that it comes from the Late Latin "cultura", meaning "a kind of cultivated agriculture". Secondly, it was extended to mean "to care for, to carve out, to honor", and around 1600, it was further extended to mean "to indoctrinate". In 1805, "the intellectual aspect of civilization" was gradually introduced. Thirdly, in 1867, the term was further extended to mean "the collective customs and achievements of a people".

Paris in the 18th century, the center of intellectual and cultural activity in the world, attracted many young people like Rousseau and Diderot, who came from far and wide to show their ambition and gain fame in this cultural capital. As a young man, Rousseau saw the French capital as a place where he could fulfill his dream of becoming a member of the upper echelons of society. However, the longer he stayed in France, the more Rousseau realized the shortcomings of the development of France at that time, "in Paris and in London people must be warmly and comfortably housed" (Rousseau, 2017) [1]. With the development of the arts, the standards, such as manners, customs and beauty, were being

strengthened and perfected, and the fields of theatre, opera, literature and painting were making great progress, but the political, social and moral progress was stagnant and not able to match these advances. “From this we may infer that a similar gradation is observable generally, in the same direction, from the Equator to the Pole” (Rousseau, 2017) [1], culture is fading at a rate evident and visible.

Many scholars classify Rousseau as a naturalist, believing that Rousseau only respects the state of nature, but in fact, in his eyes, culture and civilized society is not useless, it also has the right to exist. Rousseau is “regarded as the greatest French political theorist and philosopher of education” (Cambridge University Press, 2001) [2]. He believes that the imprint that culture imposes on the human body and mind will not be removed, and that human beings are born and grow up in coexistence with culture and in learning from it.

## 2.2. Culture in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the symbols of culture can be divided into three categories. Firstly, they are embodied in the cultural imprints reflected on the behavior of the characters. The Widow Douglas, Miss Watson and Aunt Polly’s constraints on Huckleberry’s behavior, habits and thoughts, Huckleberry and Jim’s behavior under the restriction of the slavery system, the superstitions of the black people, “niggers would come miles to hear Jim tell about it” (Twain, 2003). [3]

*“I was going to catch some of them, but Jim wouldn’t let me. He said it was death. He said his father laid mighty sick once, and some of them caught a bird, and his old granny said his father would die. He said his father laid mighty sick once, and some of them caught a bird, and his old granny said his father would die, and he did.”* (Twain, 2003) [3]

The ignorance of the blacks in the novel can be seen everywhere. Influenced by the slaveholding system at that time, the blacks lacked basic education and preferred superstitious ways of dealing with problems. Tom’s dogmatic action is also a significant sign.

Secondly, they are reflected in the shackles left by the culture in people’s minds, such as Huckleberry’s inner struggle to assist in freeing the black slaves, Jim’s fear of all kinds of customs, etc.

Thirdly, they are the imprints of the hidden culture in the social system, the influence of slavery on the society of all kinds of explicit and implicit rules and regulations, the social customs along the Mississippi River, the family feuds which are insignificant but have been accumulated for a long time, and all kinds of lynchings encountered along the way.

Mark Twain, “as an American icon” (Cambridge University Press, 1995) [4], apparently believes that Huckleberry is still a long way from the ideal state of nature, which required culture and civilized society to give him layers of trials. The whole novel is actually the story of Huckleberry’s growth through repeated encounters in civilized society. It’s not hard to see Huckleberry’s point of view

about nature in Mark Twain, for his writing habits are “talk only about the thing which interests you for the moment” (University of California Press, 2013) [5].

### 3. Nature in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

#### 3.1. Nature

Philosophers have been studying nature and topics related to it since the ancient Greek period. At first nature was the study of the nature of matter, and then people turned to the study of nature and the natural environment. As it developed, nature encompassed the meanings of “natural landscape” and “natural environment” as opposed to “human society”. Rousseau expressed his love for nature to his readers without mincing words in several works, and nature brought pleasure to Rousseau’s mind, which became just like a charging station for Rousseau. “The problems he raised have since become even more acute and the search for a solution increasingly desirable” (Cambridge University Press, 2010) [6].

Rousseau associated nature with the scenery of the island of St. Pierre, and used a lot of ink to describe the island’s fascinating scenery: the island’s terrain is rich and varied, sitting on the sand dunes, you can not only see the lakeshore and the nearby mountains, but also see the fertile plains and the blue mountains. The use of rhetorical devices also makes this description more vivid and makes the book more interesting. In addition, Rousseau also reveled in the various plants on the island, such as sumac, nettles, anemones, and so on. Obviously, the nature in Rousseau’s eyes is very fascinating and gives people the enjoyment of beauty.

Rousseau has not been accepted by the society and scholars at that time because his thoughts were too forward thinking. After hitting the wall countless times, “it is useless to ask what is the source of natural inequality” (Oxford University Press, USA, 1999) [7], he was tired of the human society and longed for an isolated life, which coincided with the characteristics of St. Pierre Island. Rousseau banished himself and chose to live in isolation. In Rousseau’s view, the shores of Lake Bienne are more primitive and romantic than those of Lake Geneva, even the most remote place on the island, in Rousseau’s writing is also the most cozy and enjoyable. He often lies on the lake for half a day, and doesn’t like other people to disturb his divine communion with nature (Rousseau, 1992) [8].

#### 3.2. Nature in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

The connection between *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and nature can be discussed in depth in terms of both form and content. In terms of form, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is about Huckleberry Finn’s semi-detached adventure of escaping civilized life and defecting to the banks of the Mississippi River, where he joins Jim the Negro on a raft downstream. Huckleberry has three choices to return to nature throughout the novel. The first is at the beginning of the novel, when Tom and Huckleberry return from their expedition, be-

*ing unable* to bear the constraints of his widow, he wants to escape civilization and return to his own self, “I got into my old rags and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied” (Twain, 2003) [3]. The second time is after he is captured by his father, being unable to bear the torment of his father, he escapes to nature represented by the Mississippi River. The third time is at the end of the novel, instead of accepting Aunt Tom’s offer to adopt him, he chooses to go to the West, living in the wilderness and a future of freedom. Because “Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before” (Twain, 2003) [3].

In terms of content, Huckleberry, in the process, realizes the beauty of unrestrained life in nature and, together with the black man Jim, deludes himself into escaping the grip of slavery and pursuing a state of physical and mental freedom. The scenery along the way and the inner philosophizing project Huckleberry’s inner state of nature. The key of natural sense lies in the natural man in the comfortable natural state which is full of peace. Huckleberry in the whole adventure process is continuously with drawing from civilized society with the pursuit of the natural state. At the end of the novel, he helps the black Jim to get free, and he himself also chooses to go to the West.

## **4. Cultural and Natural Conflict in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

### **4.1. Cultural and Natural Conflict**

Culture and nature are in conflict and coexist. Rousseau, throughout his life, was a natural man hovering on the edge of civilized society, but in fact he did not completely abandon civilized society and rationality; on the contrary, what he had always advocated was to enjoy the dividends of civilized society to the greatest extent possible and at the same time to regain innocence and nature (Rousseau, 2017) [1].

Kant had more than once openly called Rousseau “the Newton of the moral world” (Kant, 1991) [9]. Newton discovered the order and law of the universe, while Rousseau, by observing the behavior of human beings, perceived the secret law that proved the nature of human beings. Human beings are in fact being transformed step by step from natural man to new natural man through the refinement of civilization. The natural man is not the “savage” of primitive society, who drinks blood, but he is the future of mankind, and throughout the journey of life we are constantly striving toward that goal (Rousseau, 2017) [1].

Rousseau, according to Lanson, did not exclude the civilized society, did not want us to forcibly abandon the many conveniences of the civilized society and return to the primitive state of nature; rather, he kept exploring how to move towards the shore of the bright state of nature of human beings through the rationality of civilized human beings (Lanson, 1912) [10]. In this process, the role of reason and morality should be constantly emphasized, so as to be able to perceive the hidden law that proves the nature of human beings, and to explore

the most sublime science of the soul.

However, these actually highlight the shortcomings of Rousseau's philosophy of culture and nature, because he himself was a man who escapes from civilization to seek the state of nature, so his knowledge of culture and civilized society is actually incomplete. Culture and nature are in themselves opposite, and although he also strongly advocates absorbing the essence of civilized society, he is ambiguous as to how this would work.

The long-standing dichotomy between culture and nature in the academic world has had a great impact on later generations, and the two categories are often in a contradictory and antagonistic relationship in the mainstream of Western academia. Many scholars tend to understand culture and nature as two opposites, but in fact they interact and influence each other.

#### **4.2. Cultural and Natural Conflict in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

The Rousseauian clash between nature and culture is a conflict in which development and evolution are sought. Huckleberry, throughout his adventures, has been crawling through civilised society, falling down and rising up again. Under the guidance of morality and the inhibition of reason, step by step, he carries out the scientific cultivation of the soul and then grows up. This is exactly what Rousseau sees as the most rational evolutionary process when nature and culture collide in conflict and the natural man progresses towards the new natural man.

From the beginning, Huckleberry escapes from the shackles of civilization and returns to nature, experiencing the infinite joys of nature, and walks into the state of nature from the civilized society, which is the first firefight between nature and culture in the whole book. Later, he meets Jim, a black slave, and becomes a companion, generating a deep revolutionary friendship. Then he wants to assist Jim to get rid of the shackles of slavery in the civilized society, in the middle of which he has struggled. This is actually the externalization of the conflict between nature and culture in his heart. In the end, he seems to have overcome the pressure of slavery environment, and decides to help Jim to return to the nature, which is the second time.

When they meet two dregs of civilized society, the "Duke" and the "King", what can be seen in them seems to be the opposite of civilized culture, however, they are the two obvious symbols of culture in the whole book, and in the process of fighting with them, nature and culture collide violently once again. Huckleberry grows again, for the third time.

Negro Jim is imprisoned, and Huckleberry goes back to civilization, trying to rescue him. In the process Huckleberry also meets Tom Sawyer by chance, who is another typical spokesman for culture. He seems to have a belly full of culture with what the book says. However, during the rescue, Tom keeps adding to the confusion, vetoing Huck and Jim's easy way out and opting for the most complicated rescue plan taught in the books. This is another clash of culture and nature.

And the last firefight takes place at the end of the novel, Jim seems to have regained his freedom, but in that society where slavery was rampant, there is no place for him. How could he really be a natural man in a civilized society? Huckleberry's great success and decision to plunge into the mangled world of the West are echoes of the beginning, his initial flight from civilized society.

## 5. Conclusion

Theories of culture and nature have a profound effect on Mark Twain, both in form and content. Throughout the novel, the clash between culture and nature abounds everywhere. In fact, Mark Twain did not solve the problem of the conflict between culture and nature. It is actually not a problem that can be solved quickly, but something full of space for discussion. He only shares with the readers the status of modern human beings chasing nature while being locked up by culture.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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## Appendix (Abstract and Keywords in Chinese)

### 《哈克贝利·费恩历险记》中文化与自然的冲突

**摘要：**《哈克贝利·费恩历险记》是展现马克·吐温文化与自然观念的主要著作，然而学界却鲜少有人深入探讨作品中文化与自然的冲突。本文拟结合文化与自然相关理论，在文本细读的基础上，展开阐释《哈克贝利·费恩历险记》中所体现的马克·吐温式的文化与自然冲突。

**关键词：**《哈克贝利·费恩历险记》，马克·吐温，文化，自然