Aspects of the American Dream in the novel
“The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” –
Does Huck decide consciously for freedom and equality?

Facharbeit im Fach Englisch

Von

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 3
2. The author Mark Twain 4
3. The history and the ideals of the American Dream 4
4. Summary of the novel 6
5. Analysis 7
  5.1 Characterization of the main characters 7
  5.2 The development of the relationship between Huck and Jim 8
  5.3 Chapter 31 – the key scene and its consequences: Huck’s decision for Jim 9
6. Result 12
7. Bibliography 14
1. Introduction

This term paper deals with Mark Twain’s novel “The adventures of Huckleberry Finn”. The novel is about a boy, Huckleberry Finn, who is an outsider of the American society in the 19th century. He decides against the values of the Southern States and for the friendship with the slave Jim. Together they escape from society on a raft along the Mississippi River.

In the following I will try to answer the question, whether Huck decides consciously for Jim and also for freedom and equality, which are considered as important moral values of the American Dream.

The term paper has the following structure:
At first information about Mark Twain, the ideas of the American Dream and a summary will be provided.
In the analysis I will concentrate on the characters of the novel, especially on the relationship between Huck and Jim. The common escape and development of Huck’s personality will also be an elementary part of the analysis.
Referring to the key scene chapter 31, I will go into details and examine different interpretations, before finally answering the thesis of the term paper in the result.
I decided to write about this topic, because I learned about the American Dream in the English lessons and because I was interested in reading a famous American book like Huckleberry Finn. Therefore I wanted to examine whether aspects of the American Dream could be found in the novel.
As supporting sources I resorted inter alia to Tom Quirk’s monograph “Coming to Grips with Huckleberry Finn” (1993) and to several essays in Laurie Champion’s “The Critical Response to Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn” (1991).
2. The author Mark Twain

Mark Twain, born in Missouri in 1835, was one of the most famous and important authors in the USA. His real name was Samuel Langhorne Clemens. At the beginning of the career as a writer in 1863 he started to use the pseudonym Mark Twain. ¹

He spent his childhood in Hannibal, Missouri, nearby the Mississippi River. Twain’s family lived in poverty and kept a slave whom they had to sell, since they were not longer able to keep their social status. In Missouri area it was allowed to keep slaves and people took it for granted.

Mark Twain`s attitude against slavery changed at the latest, when he lived in New York after the civil war 1867. He became a “moral man”² and “one troubled by a pained conscience”³, because of the fact that his family kept a slave as well. He intervened on their behalves and made friends with them. Moreover he criticized the American Dream trying to show the negative parts of it, but still he wanted to be a part of the American Dream. His aspirations to fame and fortune contrasted to his confession being a representative of the American realism.⁴

Twain died in April 1910.

3. The history and the ideals of the American Dream

The term “American Dream” was coined in 1931 by the historian James Truslow Adams who tried to explain America’s attraction on immigrants from all nations. In 1620 the Pilgrims left Europe because of religious persecution and political

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³ Ibid.
⁴ Cf. ibid.
oppression. They dreamed of equality, self-fulfillment, happiness and wealth and hoped to find tolerance and religious freedom in America.

As they arrived in Massachusetts, they signed the Mayflower Compact and founded Plymouth Colony. Owing to that the Pilgrims are also known as the first, early settlers in America. Their hopes are the basic components of beliefs and values in the definition of the American Dream.\(^5\)

For most Americans the hope for a life in peace, harmony and freedom is as important as values like individualism, independence and self-sufficiency. Likewise familiar is the thought that you have to work hard to realize your ideal of a happy and successful life.

Trying to live the American Dream means to fulfil personal dreams and to live a better life. This may comprise striving for material wealth or patriotism, equality and solidarity.\(^6\) Important historical milestones in the development of the American Dream as a central, American ideal are the Declaration of Independence (1789), the Bill of Rights (1791) and the Westward Movement (1790-1890).

The Declaration of Independence emphasizes “that all men are created equal […] with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”\(^7\). The Bill of Rights established the American democracy and assured basic rights to the citizens, which helped to realize the ideal of freedom and equality. The strong belief in progress and the optimism regarding the future can be recognized in the Westward Movement in the 19\(^{th}\) century, when the Americans civilized the continent moving westwards.\(^8\) Twain’s novel “The adventures of Huckleberry Finn” is set in the frontier area between civilization and wilderness and discusses the rough living environment in this area.

\(^6\) Ibid.
\(^7\) The Declaration of Independence (1776), quoted in: N.N.: The American Dream then and now, (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag 2006), p. 1.
4. Summary of the novel

The novel is set some years before the civil war at the Mississippi River. The story is famous for its realistic view on the living circumstances in the American south of that time and the author’s strong criticism of the injustice of racism and slavery. The central theme is the striving for happiness. Therefore the novel is regarded as a classical embodiment of the American Dream, which also criticizes its realization during that time.

The novel deals with a 14 years old boy, Huckleberry Finn, who is a white outsider of the American society.

In the beginning of the novel Huck stays at the widow Douglas and her sister Miss Watson who would like to civilize him. Huck does not feel queasy about that but tries to get used to it. Nevertheless he misses his freedom and being out of the streets. While his friend Tom Sawyer, a boy of the prosperous, white society, appears with whom Huck has gone through many adventures in the past he decides to slip away from Miss Watson’s house. Tom founds an unsuccessful gang to persuade Huck to stay with Miss Watson.

Huck’s life fundamentally changes when his alcoholic father suddenly appears to look after his son himself. In fact he is only interested in getting hold of the money Huck got as a reward for a case he and Tom solved in one of their adventures. Huck is able to convince his father that he is not any longer in receipt of the money. Henceforth he has to live with his father who calls him arrogant because he has learned reading. In addition he hits his son and holds him captive in a hut while he gets drunk in the city. Eventually Huck escapes and feigns his dead so that his father does not search for him. He meets Jim, the slave of Miss Watson, who has escaped as well, because he had found out that Miss Watson wants to sell him. Together they sail down the Mississippi River and experience a lot of adventures. Along the way into freedom they become friends and meet two confidence men. Those are not successful with their swindle and sell Jim to get some money.
By chance the family who bought Jim expects their nephew Tom Sawyer, so Huck passes off himself as Tom to free Jim. When Tom appears he pretends to be his own brother to help Huck with his plan. They manage to free Jim, but Tom is wounded during their adventure.

Huck gets a doctor for Tom and Jim helps to operate him instead of escaping. Therefore Jim is taken prisoner once more, but fortunately it comes to light that Miss Watson gave Jim his liberty before she died. Although Tom has known of Jim’s release he remained silence in anticipation of an adventure. As compensation Jim receives a reward from Tom so that he can live as a rich man in freedom. Huck and Tom decide living in wilderness to have new adventures.

5. Analysis

5.1 Characterization of the main characters

‘The adventures of Huckleberry Finn’ evokes the question whether everyone can experience the American Dream and what it means to live it.

Huck Finn, an orphan boy, lives with the widow Douglas who “took [him] for her son”⁹. The boy is an extreme outsider of the society like his father who was on the edge of society because of his alcoholism. The widow gives him the chance to reforge a new identity to become a valuable member of the American society. Mrs. Douglas would like to “sivilize” ¹⁰ him by giving him decent clothes and the ability of school education.

But Huck has difficulties being subordinated to the social constraints. The widow and her sister personify the ideal of the American Dream which Huck would like to realize himself, but he does not live up to the standard. In spite of his guilty conscience he decides to escape the sisters’ care and the civilized life. By his escape he gets the help of Tom Sawyer.

⁹ Huckleberry Finn, p. 11.
¹⁰ Ibid.
Tom comes from a good and respected family. From time to time he suffers from the social pressure and then he escapes into his fantasy world and searches for adventures. For Huck Tom personifies his ideas of the American Dream because of his social position and his intellectual abilities. Besides he admires him for his imaginativeness. At the end of the story Tom plays an important role.

Although Huck would like to be a valuable part of the society, his idea of freedom which is also included in the American Dream is different to that of the white, valuable society. For most of them freedom means to realize their financial goals. But this also implies renunciation of personal freedom. Because of his social background and his education Huck has a different idea of freedom. That is why he does not manage to subordinate to the social constraints and finally escapes.

5.2 The development of the relationship between Huck and Jim

During his escape Huck meets the slave Jim who has escaped as well. Together they sail on a raft down the Mississippi. The journey stands for Huck’s personal progress and his change of awareness.

At the beginning of their journey Huck feels superior to Jim, because slaves are recognized as worthless and stupid in Huck’s living environment. Initially Jim reacts as expected and Huck feels confirmed: “I see it warn’t no use wasting words- you can’t learn a nigger to argue. So I quiet.”

In this the moral concepts of the Southern States are reflected. This is also made clear in a conversation between Huck and Tom’s aunt: “…’anybody hurt?’ ´No’m. Killed a nigger.’ ´Well, it’s lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt.’”

As time goes by Huck recognized that Jim has human traits and that he is able to have feelings like friendship and disappointment.

Nevertheless it is very difficult for Huck to learn “how to respond to Jim’s affection and care”13. After he played a joke on Jim by leading him to believe that he has only

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11 Ibid., p.84.
12 Ibid., p.215.
13 Coming to Grips, p. 22.
dreamed Huck falling from the raft, Jim is happy and disappointed at the same time: “It’s too good for true […] thanks to goodness”\(^\text{14}\), he states and continues: “… my heart wuz mos’ broke bekase you woze los […] I could a got down on my knees en kiss’ yo’ foot […] en all you wuz thinkin’ ’bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie”\(^\text{15}\).

It is the first time that Huck is ashamed of his behavior towards Jim and he thinks: “… I could almost kiss *his* foot to get him to take it back.”\(^\text{16}\) He is especially impressed by Jim’s worry about his family and his homesickness. He has to accept that Jim feels like a white human, although he does not understand it.\(^\text{17}\)

When Jim is sold by the swindlers they meet on their journey, Huck has to decide whether he still feels obliged to the social values or whether he helps Jim escaping. He decides for the latter, which is an important step in his personal moral development.

5.3 Chapter 31 – the key scene and its consequences: Huck’s decision for Jim

The central point of Huck’s moral conflict is represented by the letter he begins to write to Miss Watson. On the basis of this letter he becomes aware of his personal decision which has already been made.

First he does not dare to disregard the social standards and is afraid of the possible consequences. He is ashamed, decides to change for better and begins to pray. But he is not able to pray, “because [his] heart warn’t right […] because [he] was playing double”\(^\text{18}\). He recognizes that “you can’t pray a lie”\(^\text{19}\) and due to that he gets afraid of his own thoughts and writes the letter. After writing Miss Watson where she can find Jim, Huck “[feels] good and all washed clean of sin”\(^\text{20}\). He is happy that he can pray now and does not have to go to hell.

\(^\text{14}\) Huckleberry Finn, p. 87.
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., p. 89f.
\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., p. 90.
\(^\text{17}\) Cf. ibid., p. 154.
\(^\text{18}\) Ibid., p. 207.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., p. 207.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., p. 208.
However, thinking of his friend Jim he realizes that he cannot pray. He remembers Jim and him having a lot of fun together. In addition he recognizes “how good he always was” and he tears the letter into pieces. Eventually he gives up: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell.”

It is often said, that this “line affirms Huck’s fundamental rightness”: Mark Twain once commented on the key scene, that this was the situation “where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat.”

But you can also interpret Twain’s statement critically: Does Huck’s decision to free Jim really show that he sees through the hypocritical values of the river society? Another interpretation could be that he simply concentrates on his friendship to Jim without thinking about any general values: “Huck never defeats his deformed conscience – it is we as readers who do that – he simply ignores it in relation to Jim.”

In fact, in Huck’s statement it also becomes clear that he still thinks that it is a malodorous crime to help a slave escaping, but he justifies this by avowing himself to his existence as an outsider.

As an outsider he is able to disregard the standards of the white society. Huck can only free himself from society because he has nothing to lose. So he and Jim are able to found their own society in which they can live their own moral concept. This shows that Huck “hasn’t totally learnt his lesson, that […] the smooth flow of moral development contains more rough water than first appeared.”

On this precondition it is not comprehensible to Huck that Tom assists with Jim’s escape. Tom is for Huck an idol personifying the norms of the social community to

21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
24 Twain, Mark, quoted in: Coming to Grips, p. 91.
25 Kolb, Harold H. Jr., quoted in: Coming to Grips, p.91.
which Huck does not belong any longer. He does not know that Tom only helps, because he already knows that the widow Douglas left Jim vacant before dying two months ago. Tom only assists due to his thirst for adventure. Owing to his social status he would never question the social standards of the Southern States, whereas Huck summarizes in chapter 33, when the two confidence men who sold Jim are killed by furious citizens: “Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.”

Nevertheless it remains doubtful, whether Huck “actually understands exactly what he is saying” and whether he has achieved “a conscious moral identity.” It is more likely, that he somehow feels the value of friendship, freedom and equality and that they are superior to the inhuman rules of a self-centered society. But Huck is not able to decide consciously for these values which are often considered as central ideals of the American Dream. Due to his lack of education he cannot express the motives for his actions and his friendship towards Jim: “Huck himself has never formulated the generalizations his story has implied. His condemnation takes the form of a characteristic concrete action.”

The proof that Huck does not decide consciously for freedom is shown in the long journey along the river. Although freedom could be within their grasp by crossing over the river to be in wilderness and so out of reach of the laws of slavery, they sail along the river for weeks and put themselves at risk to be arrested. This makes clear that Huck is still rooted in the river society and thinks that his decision is morally reprehensible.

Last but not least it has to be noticed, that Huck and Jim are only able to live a new life as outsiders in happiness because they have their rewards. Often it is only possible to realize the moral values of the American Dream if one has enough financial resources.

27 Cf. Huckleberry Finn, p. 226.
28 Ibid., p. 224.
29 Trachtenberg, Critical Response, p. 92.
30 Ibid., p. 96.
6. Result

In the analysis it became clear that Huck does not decide consciously for freedom and equality.

However, referring to Huck’s decisions and personal development the author Mark Twain criticized the contemporary American society. In a society which approves of slavery the moral values of the American Dream cannot be realized.

It seems possible, that Twain assimilated his own troubled conscience because of his experiences as a son of a slave keeper writing the story.

Likely Twain denounced in his book that the Americans made the same mistakes as their European forebears.\(^{32}\) They left Europe because of persecution and oppression and hoped for a better life in America. But in America they took the role of their oppressors and discriminated the Afro Americans and the weaker persons of the society. They neglected the moral values of the American Dream and concentrated themselves on the material ones.

In Twain’s America most of the members of the white society were only concerned about their own advantages and did not show consideration for each other. This does not correspond to the hopes of the early American settlers which were decelerated in John Winthrop’s famous sermon “A model of Christian Charity” in 1630. It consists the line: “… like a city upon the hill […] the eyes of all people are upon us”\(^{33}\) which is often quoted in relation with the American Dream and means that the Americans should stand together in the new country as one man.

Huck lives this ideal relying on his feelings without really understanding it. In contrast to the white Americans in the Mississippi society friendship and adventures are more important to him than material wealth.

Twain describes the life in the Southern States of his time from a realistic point of view without glossing over any details. Due to that Twain has always been

\(^{32}\) Cf. Ibid p.345.

celebrated for his social criticism and Huckleberry Finn has often been considered as world literature, for example by the famous American author Ernest Hemingway: “... all modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called Huckleberry Finn ... There was nothing before. There has been nothing as good since”\textsuperscript{34}.

\textsuperscript{34} Hemingway, Ernest in: Huckleberry Finn, p.2
7. **Bibliography**

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Erklärung

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst habe und keine anderen als die im Literatur- und Quellenverzeichnis angegebenen Hilfsmittel verwendet habe.


Düren, 22.03.2012