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A Brief History of Institutional Racism and its Role In Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*

Over 150 years ago, writer Mark Twain attempted to expose and right the wrongs of his generation by creating the journey and subsequent friendship of Huck and Jim—a young boy whose conscience had been warped by a corrupt society and a runaway slave tasting the joy of freedom for the first time. Twain’s narrative resonates deeply to today’s readers, who unfortunately live in a society where corruption, prejudice, and near daily eruptions of violent hatred have become the new normal. Examination of the traumatic depths of slavery, and the dehumanizing laws of Jim Crow to the current tensions between the African American community and law enforcement, reveals a continuing epidemic of racism within American ideology, culture, and politics.

1. The institution of slavery dehumanized and scarred multiple generations of African Americans; the implications of slavery continue to fuel anti-black sentiments in the South today.

i. “Enslaved people lived with the perpetual possibility of separation through the sale of one or more family members” (Williams).

1. “Abolitionists such as Douglass and Stowe argued that slavery was immoral on many grounds, and the destruction of families was one of them” (Williams).
2. “Both white and black writers and abolitionists agreed that the “spectre of separation” was one of the cruelest practices of slavery carrying the most profound consequences for families and individuals’ identities” (Williams).
3. Both the Reconstruction and Depression-era American society was besieged by poverty, racism, and the rise of Jim Crow.
4. ”In the former Confederacy and neighboring states, local governments constructed a legal system aimed at re-establishing a society based on white supremacy. African American men were largely barred from voting. Legislation known as Jim Crow laws separated people of color from whites in schools, housing, jobs, and public gathering places” (“Separate is Not Equal”).
5. “It was a way of life. Under Jim Crow, African Americans were relegated to the status of second class citizens. Jim Crow represented the legitimization of anti-black racism” (Pilgrim).
6. “Jim Crow states passed statutes severely regulating social interactions between the races. Jim Crow signs were placed above water fountains, door entrances and exits, and in front of public facilities. There were separate hospitals for blacks and whites, separate prisons, separate public and private schools, separate churches, separate cemeteries, separate public restrooms, and separate public accommodations. In most instances, the black facilities were grossly inferior -- generally, older, less-well-kept. In other cases, there were no black facilities -- no Colored public restroom, no public beach, no place to sit or eat” (Pilgrim).
7. Despite the end of slavery nearly 150 years ago, the prejudice and racism that made it possible, is alive and well today. It is particularly apparent within the former slavery strongholds of the Southern United States.
8. “Residents of these former slavery strongholds are also more likely to identify as Republican and to express opposition to race-related policies such as affirmative action” (“Legacy of Slavery”).
9. While slavery fails to explain all forms of racism, “data clearly demonstrates that the legacy of the plantation economy and its reliance on the forced labor of African Americans continues to exacerbate racial bias in the Deep South” (“Legacy of Slavery”).
10. “Although he acknowledged ‘a racist virus in the American bloodstream,’ and noted three centuries of ‘unimaginable mistreatment,’ Moynihan blamed what he saw as the disintegration of poor, urban black families squarely on slavery “(Williams).
11. “The common impulse of whites, then and now, was to blame blacks for pathologies that whites played a central role in creating. Criminologist Charles Silberman wrote in 1978 that ‘it would be hard to imagine an environment better calculated to evoke violence than the one in which black Americans have lived.’ Pretending black crime is a black-created problem is like pretending New Orleans never got hit by a hurricane” (Chapman).
12. Mark Twain satirizes this violent, ignorant, and corrupt society through the episodic journey and friendship of Huck and Jim. He shows the common and pervasive thinking of the time through Pap and shows an emerging and radical thinking about equality through the evolution of Huck.
13. “ ‘When they told me there was a State in this country where they’d let that nigger vote, I drawed out. I says I’ll never vote again…I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold?’” (Twain 78).
14. “ ‘People will call me a low down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell, and I ain’t agoing back there anyways’” (Twain 110).
15. “ ‘It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger—but I done it, and I warn’t ever sorry for it afterwards, neither’” (Twain 168).
16. “ ‘I do believe [Jim] 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’” (Twain 205).