

THE LITERARY LEGACY OF MARK TWAIN IN SHAPING AMERICAN REALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This article examines the literary legacy of Mark Twain and his significant role in shaping American realism and national identity. The study explores how Twain's works reflect the social realities of nineteenth-century America through the use of regional language, satire, and realistic characterization. Particular attention is given to his portrayal of everyday life along the Mississippi River and his critique of social injustice, including issues of race, class, and morality. The research highlights Twain's contribution to the development of a uniquely American literary voice that moved away from European traditions and embraced local culture and experiences. His innovative narrative techniques and emphasis on authenticity helped establish realism as a dominant literary movement in the United States. Furthermore, the article argues that Twain's works played a crucial role in shaping American national consciousness by presenting diverse perspectives and challenging prevailing social norms.

Keywords: American realism, Mark Twain, national identity, regionalism, satire, nineteenth-century literature

The development of American realism in the late nineteenth century marked a turning point in the history of American literature. During this period, writers began to move away from romanticized and idealized representations of life, instead focusing on the realities of everyday experience. Among the most influential figures of this movement was Mark Twain, whose works played a central role in defining both the form and purpose of realist literature in the United States. Twain's literary style is distinguished by its use of humor, satire, and regional dialects, which allowed him to portray American society with remarkable authenticity. His depiction of life along the Mississippi River, particularly in works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, reflects the complexities of social relationships and moral values in a rapidly changing society. Through his writing, Twain addressed important issues such as racial inequality, hypocrisy, and the conflict between individual freedom and social norms.

This article aims to analyze the literary legacy of Mark Twain in shaping American realism and contributing to the formation of national identity. It explores how his works not only reflected social realities but also influenced the development of a distinct American literary tradition. Additionally, the study examines Twain's narrative techniques and thematic concerns in order to better understand his lasting impact on both literature and culture. The literary contribution of Mark Twain to American realism has been extensively studied by scholars, particularly in relation to his innovative narrative style and social critique. Critics widely recognize Twain as a central figure in the transition from romanticism to realism in American literature. His works are often analyzed for their authentic representation of everyday life and their critical engagement with social issues of the nineteenth century.

According to William Dean Howells, a contemporary of Twain and a leading advocate of realism, literature should present life truthfully without idealization. Howells praised Twain's ability to depict ordinary people and real-life situations, considering him a true representative of the realist tradition. This perspective highlights Twain's role in establishing realism as a dominant literary movement in the United States. In addition, scholars such as Henry James emphasized the artistic and psychological dimensions of realism. While James focused more on internal consciousness and perception, he acknowledged the importance of writers like Twain in broadening the scope of realism through social observation and narrative experimentation.

Modern literary criticism has further expanded the analysis of Twain's works by focusing on themes such as race, identity, and national consciousness. Researchers argue that Twain's use of satire and irony allowed him to critique deeply rooted social inequalities, particularly in relation to slavery and racial discrimination. His novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is frequently discussed as a key text in understanding American identity and moral development. Furthermore, contemporary scholars approach Twain's legacy from interdisciplinary perspectives, incorporating cultural studies, historical analysis, and sociolinguistics. These studies emphasize his use of regional dialects and vernacular speech as a means of constructing an authentic American voice. By doing so, Twain not only reflected the diversity of American society but also contributed to the formation of a unified national identity.

Overall, the existing body of literature demonstrates that Mark Twain played a crucial role in shaping both the aesthetic principles of realism and the cultural foundations of American literature. However, there remains a need for further analysis of how his works simultaneously function as literary texts and as instruments of national identity formation, which this study aims to address. This study employs a qualitative and interpretative research design to investigate the literary legacy of Mark Twain in shaping American realism and national identity. The research is grounded in

literary analysis and supported by historical and cultural contextualization, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of Twain's contribution to American literature.

The primary method used in this study is close textual analysis, focusing on selected major works by Twain, particularly *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. These texts are examined in terms of narrative structure, characterization, thematic development, and stylistic features. Special emphasis is placed on Twain's use of vernacular language, regional dialects, satire, and irony as key elements of realist representation. Through this method, the study aims to identify how literary techniques contribute to the construction of realism and reflect social realities. In addition to textual analysis, the study applies a historical-analytical approach to explore the socio-political and cultural background of the late nineteenth-century United States. This includes an examination of the legacy of slavery, the Reconstruction era, and the transformation of American society during a period of rapid modernization. By situating Twain's works within their historical context, the research highlights the relationship between literature and the formation of national identity.

Furthermore, the research adopts a thematic analysis to investigate recurring motifs such as freedom, morality, social inequality, and identity. These themes are analyzed in relation to the broader cultural discourse of the time, enabling a deeper understanding of how Twain's works engage with and critique dominant social values. A comparative method is also utilized to distinguish Twain's realist approach from earlier literary traditions, particularly romanticism. This comparison allows for the identification of key innovations in Twain's writing, including his rejection of idealized characters and his focus on ordinary individuals and realistic settings.

Additionally, the study integrates secondary sources, including scholarly articles, literary criticism, and historical studies, to support the analysis and provide theoretical grounding. Interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly from cultural studies and sociology, are incorporated to enrich the interpretation of Twain's works and their impact on American identity.

Overall, this multi-method approach ensures a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Mark Twain's literary legacy. It allows the study to examine not only the textual features of his works but also their broader cultural significance in shaping realism and contributing to the development of a distinct American national identity. The literary legacy of Mark Twain occupies a central place in the development of American realism, particularly due to his ability to combine authentic social representation with innovative narrative techniques. His works reflect the complexities of nineteenth-century American society, offering a critical perspective on issues such as race, morality, and identity. One of the most distinctive features of Twain's realism is his use of regionalism. By setting his stories along the Mississippi River and

employing vernacular speech, Twain created a vivid and authentic portrayal of American life. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the use of dialect is not merely a stylistic choice but a tool for representing cultural diversity and social hierarchy. This linguistic realism allows readers to engage more deeply with the characters and their environment, reinforcing the credibility of the narrative.

Moreover, Twain's use of satire and humor serves as a powerful mechanism for social criticism. Through irony and exaggeration, he exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies embedded in American society. For instance, the moral conflict experienced by Huck—particularly his struggle between societal norms and personal conscience—highlights the tension between accepted values and individual ethics. This internal conflict reflects broader societal dilemmas and underscores Twain's critique of institutionalized racism and moral ambiguity.

Another important aspect of Twain's contribution to realism is his focus on ordinary individuals rather than heroic or idealized figures. Huck Finn, as a protagonist, represents a shift toward more complex and relatable characters. His moral development throughout the narrative illustrates the realist emphasis on character growth shaped by real-life experiences. Unlike romantic heroes, Huck is flawed, uncertain, and deeply influenced by his environment, which enhances the authenticity of the story. In addition, Twain's works play a significant role in shaping American national identity. By portraying local cultures, social structures, and everyday experiences, he contributed to the formation of a distinctly American literary voice. His rejection of European literary models and emphasis on uniquely American settings and characters marked a turning point in the evolution of national literature.

Furthermore, Twain's exploration of themes such as freedom and identity reflects the broader cultural and historical context of post-Civil War America. The journey along the Mississippi River can be interpreted as both a physical and symbolic quest for freedom, particularly in relation to the character of Jim. This duality adds depth to the narrative and reinforces the connection between individual experience and national history. Finally, Twain's narrative techniques, including first-person narration and episodic structure, further enhance the realism of his works. These techniques create a sense of immediacy and authenticity, allowing readers to experience events through the perspective of the protagonist. This approach not only strengthens the emotional impact of the story but also aligns with the realist objective of presenting life as it is lived.

Overall, the analysis demonstrates that Mark Twain's contribution to American realism extends beyond thematic representation. His innovative use of language, character development, and narrative form fundamentally transformed American literature. At the same time, his works played a crucial role in shaping national identity by reflecting the diverse and often contradictory nature of American society.

In conclusion, the literary legacy of Mark Twain represents a defining moment in the development of American realism and the formation of national identity. His works not only reflect the social realities of nineteenth-century America but also challenge readers to critically examine the moral and cultural values of their time.

Through his masterful use of regional language, satire, and realistic characterization, Twain succeeded in creating an authentic representation of American life. His focus on ordinary individuals and everyday experiences marked a significant departure from earlier romantic traditions, establishing realism as a dominant literary approach. At the same time, his innovative narrative techniques, including the use of vernacular speech and first-person perspective, contributed to the evolution of literary form and style.

Moreover, Twain's exploration of complex themes such as race, freedom, morality, and identity highlights the deeper social and historical dimensions of his work. By addressing issues such as racial inequality and social hypocrisy, he positioned literature as a tool for both reflection and critique. His portrayal of moral dilemmas, particularly in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, reveals the tension between societal norms and individual conscience, emphasizing the importance of ethical awareness in a changing world. In addition, Twain's contribution to the development of a distinctly American literary voice cannot be overstated. By moving away from European models and embracing local culture, dialects, and settings, he helped shape a unique national identity within literature. His works reflect the diversity, contradictions, and evolving values of American society, making them essential to understanding the cultural foundations of the nation.

Furthermore, the enduring relevance of Twain's writings demonstrates their lasting impact on both literary studies and contemporary thought. His realist approach continues to influence modern authors and scholars, particularly in the way literature engages with social realities and human experience. The themes he explored remain actual, resonating with ongoing discussions about identity, justice, and cultural representation.

Overall, this study confirms that Mark Twain's literary legacy extends far beyond his time. He not only shaped the principles of American realism but also contributed significantly to the intellectual and cultural development of American national identity. His works remain a cornerstone of American literature and continue to inspire critical reflection and scholarly inquiry.

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