



Addressing Fatherhood Responsibility in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*

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Abstract

This paper is devoted to father's greatest responsibility in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It addresses how child education constitutes parents' most preoccupying challenge. Many parents' irresponsibility towards this challenge is equally highlighted. Through the lens of Reader-response theory, the paper focuses on father's role in child's education by considering *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, two classics of *Bildungsroman*. It has two parts: after addressing parental irresponsibility in child education, it advocates for parents' investment in child's upbringing through analysis of father-child relationships in both works.

Résumé

Cet article porte sur la plus grande responsabilité du père dans *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* de Mark Twain et *To Kill a Mockingbird* de Harper Lee. Il traite de la manière dont l'éducation des enfants constitue le défi le plus préoccupant des parents. L'irresponsabilité de beaucoup de parents face à ce défi est également soulignée. À travers le prisme de la théorie de la réception, l'article se focalise sur le rôle du père dans l'éducation de son enfant en examinant *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* et *To Kill a Mockingbird*, deux classiques de *Bildungsroman*. Il comporte deux parties : après avoir abordé l'irresponsabilité des parents dans l'éducation des enfants, il invite à l'investissement de ces parents dans l'éducation de leurs enfants en analysant les relations père-enfant dans les deux ouvrages.

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Introduction

Critics claim *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to be the most popular work in American literary canon. For M. Thomas Inge (vi),

Among those novels which would qualify as contenders for the title of the ‘Great American Novel,’ surely *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, or Samuel L Clemens, would be a strong candidate. It is probably the most frequently printed, widely translated, and commonly read novel in American literary history.

In the same vein, Louis J. Budd (1) states: “More so today, people who pay any mind to books get used to hearing *Huckleberry Finn* called the great American novel, a masterpiece, a classic, and even a world classic.” Probably, there is no corner in the world where this novel has not reached. Its popularity is sometimes compared to Lee’s *Mockingbird* which equally fits best as a great American novel. Susan Arpajian Jolley (34) apostrophizes: “O *Mockingbird, Mockingbird!* Wherefore art thou so popular? [...] So popular, in fact, that the mayor of Chicago would exhort his denizens to read and discuss you *en masse*? So popular that more than 30 million copies of you have been sold since your publication in 1960.” Claudia Durst Johnson (xi) declares: “*To Kill a Mockingbird* is unquestionably one of the most widely read, best-selling, and influential books in American literature. It has made a significant difference in the lives of individuals and in the culture as a whole.” Furthermore, Joseph Crespino (10) confirms:

It is estimated that by 1982 *To Kill a Mockingbird* had sold over fifteen million copies, and a 1991 American ‘Survey of Lifetime Reading Habits’ by the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Library of Congress revealed that next to the Bible the book was ‘most often cited in making a difference’ in people’s lives.

In clear, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are put on the shelf of classics in American literature, making Twain and Lee American top-flight writers. Despite their differences, the two works share many features in common, which this essay addresses. Both are *Bildungsromans* with a single parent, a widower, and his interactions with his child/ren. *Bildungsroman* is regarded as a “novel of ‘formation,’ ‘cultivation,’ or ‘development.’” (Austen 214). A German genre of literature, it was first defined by Karl Morgenstern in his 1819 lecture called “Über das Wesen des Bildungsromans” (“On the Nature of the *Bildungsroman*”). Thus, the term refers to “any novel that focuses on the development of a young protagonist” (Morgenstern et al. 647). Besides, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* address racist issues in different contexts in American history. Further, the story in both works is told from a child voice. Through the critical lens of Reader-response theory, this essay addresses the *Bildungsroman* aspect

of both literary works. But what is Reader-response theory? According to Dr Vanlalchami Z.D. Lalmangaihzaiva (348),

Reader response criticism is a school of literary theory that focuses primarily on the reader's experience of literary works as opposed to various other schools and theories that focus attention on the author or the content and form. Reader-response criticism encompasses various approaches to literature that explore and seek to explain the diversity of readers' responses to literary works. Reader-response theory recognizes the reader as an active agent who imparts "real existence" to the work and completes its meaning through interpretation. Reader-response criticism argues that literature should be viewed as a performing art in which each reader creates his or her own, possibly unique, text-related performance.

This theory emerged as a reaction against new criticism, advocating that "a text gains meaning by the purposeful act of a reader's reading and interpreting it" (Davi 417). It values the relationship between reader and text, as Davi (417) further argues: "The relationship between reader and text is highly valued; text does not exist without a reader." This is the reason why it is instrumental in addressing child education issues in this paper.

Indeed, based on Reader-response theory, this paper makes a comparative analysis of both novels and argues that Twain and Lee are conveying the same message in different styles. While the former indirectly advocates for fatherhood responsibility by drawing readers' attention to Pap Finn's irresponsibility towards his son Huck Finn, the latter goes straight with Atticus Finch who stands as a role model for his kids Jem and Scout. Structured around two parts, the paper tracks fatherhood irresponsibility in child education in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, in the first place; and, then, it highlights a model of fatherhood responsibility in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Definitely, the paper compares and contrasts Twain's styles with those of Lee in their addressing of fatherhood responsibility.

1. Fatherhood Irresponsibility in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a great classic of *Bildungsroman* in America (Thamarana 22). It is a novel of education with a focus on the central character's development. James M. Cox argues that the entire novel is about "Huck's initiation into a respectable society" (Inge 145). This initiation confers all the responsibility on the father, given the boy is a maternal orphan with no brother or sister. However, Twain creates a father, named Pap Finn, who plays no positive role in the development of his son. This makes such a father a typical irresponsible parent in the genre of *Bildungsroman*.

As mentioned earlier, *Bildungsroman* refers to a novel of education. In the wake of David H. Miles, Marianne H. Gottfried (122) defines it as "a novel

that ‘educates’ by portraying an education.” Admittedly, it is a genre of literature that depicts the central character’s intellectual or moral growth from immaturity to maturity. The argument that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a sample of this genre of literature is corroborated by Daniel S. Traber (30): “the novel seems to function as a *Bildungsroman*, a ‘boy’s tale,’ in which Huck is meant to experience mental and moral growth throughout the text.” It is granted that Huck reaches a certain level of mental and moral growth by the end the novel. However, a critical analysis of father-child relationships between him and Pap Finn, his father, speaks volume about the latter’s failure in the process. This essay argues him as an irresponsible father by formulating five allegations against him.

First allegation: Pap does not send his child to school. In Petersburg, the fictional society of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, every child goes to school. Their parents see the necessity to give them formal education. Not only do they educate their kids at home, but they school them as well. Pap Finn goes neither for home education, nor for school education. Worse, he opposes the child’s school education, as he boldly expresses: “If I catch you about that school I’ll tan good.”¹ Indeed, it is sheer irresponsibility for a father not to school his child. Having a child is not what matters much in human society, but investing in both his home and school education should be the main preoccupation of every single parent. Thus, Pap’s indifference to his son’s upbringing is a big infringement of the latter’s right to education. From a Reader-response standpoint, this essay argues him as a prototype of parents who believe in the nature to take care of their child. Such parents ignore their task in making their child a human being and useful person in society.

Secondly, Pap objects to anyone’s investment in his child’s education. Indeed, many a time do we see Pap Finn threatening those who attempt to school Huck. The case of Widow Douglass is illustrative in these conversations (*TAOHF* 18):

[Pap]: who told you you might meddle with such hilaful’n foolishness, hey?-who told you could?

[Huck]: the widow. She told me.

[Pap]: the widow, hey? –and who told the widow she could put in her shovel about a thing that ain’t none of her business?

[Huck]: nobody told her

[Pap]: well, I’ll learn her how to meddle.

The foregoing underscores the bitterness overwhelming Pap’s heart

¹ Mark Twain. (2012). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. New Delhi: UBS Publishers’ Distributors Pvt. Ltd, p. 19. All subsequent references to this novel will be abbreviated as *TAOHF* followed by the page number.

when someone volunteers to educate his child. Indeed, thanks to Widow Douglass, Huck is able to read and write, as he confesses: “I had been to school all the time, and could spell, and read, and write just a little” (*TAOHF* 14). Instead of rejoicing over this, Pap threatens to sue the Widow. He erroneously thinks education will spoil his child and make him disobedient. As an illiterate man, he fears to lose Huck from his grip. Understandably, he objects to his son’s being better than him, a wicked attitude which explains his irresponsibility as a father. One wonders how Pap would be if he were a literate person. Would he exhibit different attitudes? Whatever the case, a good father wishes to see his child better than himself. Such a father endeavors to push his child to a higher level in life. The contrary, as in the case of Pap Finn, is wickedness and irresponsibility. His next angry words are: “I’ll learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better’n what he is” (*TAOHF* 18). No doubt, Pap Finn is an irresponsible father.

Another allegation against Pap Finn in fatherhood position is his indifference to Huck’s uncleanness and bad manners. Pap fails to inculcate in Huck good behaviors, being himself an uncultured old man. The boy is dirty all the time and behaves in uncivilized manners. This pushes Widow Douglass to act as Huck’s surrogate parent: “The Widow Douglass, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me” (*TAOHF*: 3-4). Importantly, this widow does not only teach Huck reading and writing, as previously mentioned, but she nurtures him and teaches him good conducts as well. Her attention to Huck is clarified in the opening chapter of the novel: “After supper, she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers [...]. Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me. But she wouldn’t. She said it was a mean practice and wasn’t clean and I must try not to do it any more” (*TAOHF* 3-4). Huck is that boy in scruffy dresses, suffering from deficiency in manners in line with social expectations. He has become a pariah, an outcast who does not know where he belongs. The novel is replete with instances of his ill-behaviors. As bad companions ruin good characters, parents refuse Huck’s company with their kids. This social exclusion unveils his father’s fatherhood irresponsibility.

The next point uncovering Pap’s fatherhood irresponsibility is his drunkenness. From the time he appears in the novel to the moment a rumor of his death circulates, Pap Finn has been addicted to alcoholism. Twain

reveals how he gets drunk every day and disturbs the town: “Next day he was drunk” (TAOHF 19); “pap took it and got drunk” (TAOHF 20); “Every time he got money he got drunk; and when he got drunk he raised Cain around town” (TAOHF 21); “He had been drunk over in town, and laid in the gutter all night [...] he was just all mud” (TAOHF 24). Actually, these excerpts expose Pap’s irresponsible life to every informed reader. Such a reader fathoms how his drunkenness would bear heavy impact on Huck. As it goes, like father, like son. Thus, Huck is in danger of becoming a drunkard.

The last allegation against Pap in his role as a father is his abuse of Huck. Indeed, child abuse is a strong infringement on a child’s right. However, it is uncommon to see Pap physically and verbally abusing his son. He mercilessly beats the boy to the extent that he “was all over welts” (TAOHF 22). Besides, he usually locks him in his cabin to prevent him from going to school (TAOHF 22):

We lived in that old cabin, and he always locked the door and put the key under his head, nights. [...]. Every little while he locked me in and went down to the store, three miles, to the ferry, and traded fish and game for whisky and fetched it home and got drunk and had a good time, and licked me.”

It is an irresponsible attitude, even a crime, to treat one’s own child as in the foregoing. Pap has, to be honest, imprisoned his son. His harsh words to the latter explain his verbal abuse: ‘I’ll take you down a peg before I get down with you’ (TAOHF 18). The defiant tone in his voice, as in the following, petrifies Huck with fear: “You lemme catch you fooling around that school again, you hear?” (TAOHF 18). Indeed, Huck has suffered all forms of abuse from his father, characterizing the latter as an irresponsible man, ignorant of fatherhood responsibility. One more instance to witness (TAOHF 26):

By-and-by he rolled out and jumped up on his feet looking wild and he see me and went. He chased me round and round the place, with a clasp-knife, calling me the Angel of Death and saying he would kill me [...] he laughed such a screechy laugh, and roared and cussed, and kept on chasing me.”

Like Pap in the foregoing, many parents go the extra mile to curse their children and fall in the trap of fatherhood irresponsibility.

Definitely, Pap Finn embodies an irresponsible father in *The Adventures*

of *Huckleberry Finn*. He fails to formally and informally educate his son. Being indifferent to Huck's unworthy and contagious life, a source of contempt from the whole townspeople, he opposes anyone's desire to educate the boy. Moreover, he extremely tortures his son by physically and verbally abusing him throughout the story. Thus, though *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel of education, Pap Finn is an unworthy educator. Every inch of his act towards Huck, his son, is an act of fatherhood irresponsibility.

Readers might wonder why Twain creates such an irresponsible father in the book which has become one of his greatest classics. From readerly perspective where reader's role "is to become involved in the making of meaning" (Olyan & Culley 151), this essay argues that Twain's construction of such a father is his artistic style to approach fatherhood issues. He is not inviting readers to emulate Pap in father-child relationships. Instead, he is calling them to draw meaning from Pap's irresponsibility and better assume their fatherhood responsibility.

2. A Model Father in *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Ernest Hemingway (22) remarked: "All modern American literature comes from one book by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." This remark makes sense with Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as it does not only have historical connection with Twain's masterpiece but equally shares a thematic tone with it. Indeed, like Twain, Lee addresses issues relating to fatherhood responsibility, but in a reverse way. Contrary to Twain who focuses on Pap Finn's irresponsibility to convey his message on child education, Lee depicts a father who, no doubt, stands as a role model for any father seeking to well assume his fatherhood roles. Jeff Frank (54) does not only claim that "Atticus does his best to be a good father" but he equally tags him as "a sagacious father" (Frank 47). No reader would gainsay him as a responsible father.

Atticus is a father of two kids, Jem and Scout, and like Pap in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he is a widower. His wife died when Jem and Scout were respectively six and two years old, as the latter informs: "Our mother died when I was two."² His worth comes to the fore when, though a single parent, he endeavors to train his children on the right path. He has well

² Harper Lee. (2006). *To Kill a Mockingbird*. London: Arrow Books, p. 6. All subsequent references to this novel will be abbreviated as *TKAM* followed by the page number.

assumed his responsibility toward Jem and his younger sister, Scout, which this essay purports to highlight. Taking Atticus as a model, this part is inviting every father to be conscious of his fatherhood responsibilities and to emulate qualities which the study pinpoints in Atticus.

Firstly, Atticus Finch sends his children to school. Contrary to Pap in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Atticus comprehends the importance of school for his kids. He allows them from their early age to get formal education: “Jem condescended to take me to school the first day, a job usually done by one’s parents, but Atticus had said Jem would be delighted to show me where my room was” (TKAM 17). From the foregoing, Jem, Atticus’ first kid who has been sent to school earlier, is happy that the father allows his sister to join him. Both kids’ school education and their gradual growth in knowledge and intelligence is one of the central themes in the novel, the praise of which comes to Atticus. He fathoms his role to school his children. Not only has he sent them to school, but he equally teaches them at home. Contrary to many parents who let the entire task to teachers, Atticus helps his children in reading and writing. He always questions them about what they have learned at school and makes sure they understand, as in the following words: “he was full of questions about school” (TKAM 31). More, the narrator states: “After supper, Atticus sat down with the paper and called, ‘Scout, ready to read?’” (TKAM 17). He has this habit to always make his kids read under his eyes, an attitude every parent should emulate in their children’s education.

Secondly, Atticus takes care to teach his kids moral values. It is incumbent on parents to teach their children values that can build them as morally upright persons. In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus inculcates in Jem and Scout virtue ethics. He teaches them civil ways to behave in the society. For instance, when the kids are peeping at Mr Radley and talking to him through a window, Atticus reacts immediately: “the civil way to communicate with another being was by the front door instead of a side window” (TKAM 55). He advises them “not to play an asinine game [...] or make fun of anybody” (TKAM 55). Like Atticus in this quote, every parent should make it a duty to watch over how their kid treats other people. His instructions in the foregoing serve as civic and moral education. Hence, he is a good father, conscious of his fatherhood responsibility.

Another instance underlining his concern to instill moral values in his children is during Scout’s sulking when her aunt Alexandra refuses her to go

to church with Calpurnia, their housemaid. Immediately when Atticus orders: “Apologize to your aunt” (TKAM 150), Scout executes despite her unwillingness: “I’m sorry, Auntie” (TKAM 150). Thus, throughout the novel, Atticus stands as a moral guide for Jem and Scout, teaching them cardinal values like justice, integrity, kindness, and temperance. The reader can appreciate his deterring the kids from racism. Unlike many racist parents, he reprimands Scout when the latter calls Blacks ‘niggers,’ knowing the term ‘nigger’ is an insult to black people. He kindly reacts: “Don’t say nigger, Scout. That’s common” (TKAM 82). It is a great quality for a parent to teach his children from their early age not to discriminate against people. Unlike Pap Finn who has a condescending view on black people in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and refers to Jim as “nigger”, Atticus teaches his children to see everyone as equal. He is not a racist, because, as Frank (2015 54) states, he “always attempts to see the best in everyone.” Naturally, he instructs his children to raise their status above the vulgarity of nigger.

The third quality in Atticus making him a conscious and responsible father is his acts and actions. Indeed, readers must agree that Atticus Finch incarnates values in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. His social behavior patterns are source of inspiration for his children. From his relationships with the black community, his kids change their preconceived ideas on Blacks. When Scout inquisitively asks, “You aren’t really a nigger-lover, [...] are you?” (TKAM 120), he answers: “I certainly am. I do my best to love everybody” (TKAM 120). Actually, he endeavors to be good and kind to everyone, without discrimination. This makes him a strong source of inspiration for Jem and Scout.

Every act from Atticus is a lesson for his children. A shocking decision that becomes an indelible mark on his children’s mind is his accepting to be a lawyer of Tom Robinson, a black man charged with rape on a white girl. His support to Robinson raises much polemic and hatred from white people who call him “a nigger-lover.” It is worth mentioning that through Robinson’s case, Atticus teaches his children to abide by their conscience and not the majority rule, as he states: “The one thing that doesn’t abide by majority rule is a person’s conscience” (TKAM 116). Here is his confession to Scout: “This case, Tom Robinson’s case, is something that goes to the essence of a man’s conscience—Scout, I couldn’t go to church and worship God if I didn’t try to help that man” (TKAM 116). Understandably, Atticus sets a model to his kids

by living a life based on his moral conscience. Throughout the novel, he exhibits values of love, hard work, discipline, sobriety, peace, courage, empathy, compassion, and all the likes. Contrary to Pap in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, he positively impacts his children's life through his behavior patterns. The Harvard Law Review Association (2004, 1686) tags him the "moral conscience of the moral conscience of the novel." In the same vein, Jeff Frank (54) depicts him as "a character worthy of our respect", which Joseph Crespino (10) corroborates: he "remains a touchstone figure of decency and respect." In short, Atticus Finch is a role model for his children.

Finally, Atticus loves his children and spends time with them. His love for Jem and Scout transpires through his acts of love and care for them. As witness, Scout posits: "he often woke up during the night, checked on us" (TKAM 62). It is an act of love for a parent to wake up at night and make sure that his kids are sleeping well. Furthermore, Scout informs readers of how his father takes care of her during a snow night: "Before I went to sleep, Atticus put more coal on the fire in my room. He said the thermometer registered sixteen, that it was the coldest night in his memory [...] Minutes later, it seemed, I was awakened by someone shaking me. Atticus's overcoat was spread across me" (TKAM 75). Thus, Atticus gains tribute for taking this responsibility out of love to check on his children every night. He makes a happy family with his kids as the novel is replete with instances where he lovingly plays and chats with them. For instance, the reader witnesses a happy scene when Atticus comes from work and is warmly welcomed by the kids: "Jem [...] ran with me to meet him. Jem seized his briefcase and bag, I jumped into his arms, felt his vague dry kiss and said 'd you bring me a book?'" (TKAM 141). The foregoing informs Atticus's love for his children. Amanda C. Osheim (201) encapsulates:

Through Scout we experience Atticus as a loving father. It is into his lap that she climbs at the end of long days; he has insight into the children's emotional and mental states; he plays and reads with Jem and Scout, and they race to meet him on his way home from work. Atticus is an affectionate and firm parent. His authority is built upon his children's trust rather than corporal reinforcement; conversely, neither Jem nor Scout wish to compromise Atticus's trust in them. Throughout the novel he is quite present to the children, and conscientiously promotes their moral development.

In sum, Atticus is a good parent, worthy of imitation. Jeff Frank (54) concurs: “Atticus does his best to be a good father, he does his best to be a good lawyer, and he does his best to be a good member of his community.” Thus, every parent, seeking welfare of his children and his society, must endeavor to develop parenthood qualities found in Atticus.

Conclusion

Education is the richest heritage a parent can leave to his children. However, many parents are failing in this role, as they remain unconscious of their parenthood responsibilities. This paper addressed fatherhood responsibility in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, inviting parents to be conscious of their role in child education. To reach this goal, the paper portrayed Pap Finn as an irresponsible father in the first novel and Atticus Finch as a responsible one in the second. On the one hand, the study showed how Pap failed to school Huck Finn, his only son, and threatened anyone willing to help educate the boy. Moreover, the paper traced Pap’s immoral conducts which left bad impacts upon his child and, most importantly, his torturing of the latter. This sufficiently proved that Pap is an irresponsible parent who ignores his fatherhood responsibility. On the other hand, the paper depicted Atticus as a model parent, anxious about his children’s education. It highlighted how this father not only sends his kids to school, but equally takes time to teach them at home and makes sure they understand what they learn at school. The paper emphasized his love for the kids, his inculcating in them ethical values, and his setting a role model for them through his responsible behaviors. With all these highlights, the paper argued Atticus as a good and responsible parent and invited every parent to be Atticus Finch, and not Pap Finn.

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