



Literary Studies

Rural Life in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

Nadia Hulwa¹, Ferdinal²^{1,2} English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Andalas University, Padang, Indonesia

SUBMISSION TRACK

Received: May 5, 2021
 Final Revision: August 3, 2022
 Available Online: Desember 12, 2022

KEYWORD

Rural life, settings, formalist approach, Mississippi River

CORRESPONDENCE

E-mail: nadahulwa.student.sasingunand@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research studies rural life as the setting in Mark Twain's masterpiece, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This research investigates rural life employed by Mark Twain as the setting in the novel. Besides, it highlights the kinds of rural settings intertwined in the story. Finally, this research also investigates how far the settings function to deliver the theme of the novel. In analyzing the work, the study applies a formalist approach that focuses on the text's intrinsic elements, in this case, the settings. It also utilizes the qualitative method and library research as the method of the study. Finally, it is found that the settings of place are the most dominant setting that carries the novel's rural aspect compared to the time and social settings. Mississippi River and the villages as the settings of place also play an essential role in delivering one of the story's themes, the conflict between natural life and civilized life.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rural settings are not just about the things such as cows, grass, and barns that can be seen. However, they also hold some principles that modern American readers would refer to as spiritual values (Kenney, 1966:39). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, published in 1884, is among American masterpieces of fiction set in rural areas. The novel, which shows that rural Americans still believe in myths in the mid-nineteenth century, uses local dialects and benefits from the description of some places such as bushes, villages, tan-yards, woods, et cetera. The Mississippi Valley's residents, Jim the slave, and Huckleberry Finn's rural life are all depicted in the book.

The longest river in North America is the Mississippi, which borders the United States of America. The river has a role in the development of American literature. There are several American literary works¹ that are set in, about, or near the Mississippi River. This novel by Mark Twain is among some American novels that use the

existence of the river extensively. The story follows Huckleberry Finn's travels up the Ohio River and through Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania after leaving Cairo, Illinois, along the Mississippi River (Tackach, 2004:216). According to Jackson (2002), this excursion resembles Mark Twain's boyhood steamboat tour.

According to Sherman (1938: 67), the genuine emergence of American rural life may have started around 1910. Only three novels, which are regarded as the first studies of rural life, were written before the 1900s, she continues. Despite not being one of those three, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain is a masterwork of American literature set alongside the Mississippi River. According to Messent (2007), the book is one of the best-known writings in American literature. Mark Twain describes some rural settings along the river in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* precisely, and some are not explicitly depicted. However, some locations might have implied or symbolic meanings. Therefore, this study investigates the novel's rural settings using the formalist approach. The emphasis is on examining how Mark Twain

uses country life as the setting for his story. It also makes clear the kind of rural scenes that the book contains. Finally, it looks at how well the settings support the main topic of the narrative.

The general description of the setting of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the scenes in the book, their influence on Huckleberry Finn in forging his self-identity, and the potential messages readers can learn concerning Huck's self-identity were all examined by Simamora (2002), who served as the inspiration for this research. The tale is set before the outbreak of the Civil War, according to Simamora. It happens along the Mississippi River, its banks, and in communities along the river. She contends that specific contexts impact Huckleberry's sense of self. First, it examines how Mark Twain employs rural life as the setting for the novel and the different types of rural settings that are portrayed in the text. With the help of these inquiries, the study will determine how Mark Twain utilized the historical context and country lifestyle in the previous novel. After that, it will be determined to what extent the physical and spiritual surroundings of the book serve to convey the story's topic.

Last but not least, it exposes the more precise locales described by Mark Twain, including the farms, the homes, and the Mississippi River. Hopefully, the analysis of the subsequent relevant studies will benefit from using this research as a reference. Additionally, it can be a useful resource for those about to read or already have read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to help them better grasp the novel, particularly the social and geographic location.

II. THEORY AND METHOD

This research uses an intrinsic approach. According to Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* (1954), interpreting and analyzing work is the natural starting point (139). Then, a close reading, which according to Schilb (2017), is central to literary studies, will be applied. Therefore, the combination of the ideas by Wellek, Warren, and Schilb is essential in analyzing a work. The formalist approach is among the strategies that study the intrinsic elements of literary works. This study will investigate rural life as the context by closely reading the text using the formalist method

in Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Selden (2005) argues that formalism is an approach that emphasizes "the close reading of texts" (29). In applying a formalist analysis, one does not pay any attention to the text's social, historical, cultural, and political realities—one studies the text itself. Klarer (2004) stresses that the formalist approach tries to ignore the aspects of history, sociology, biography, or psychology when reading literature. One should determine the form, structure, and devices used in examining a text through formalism

Kenney (1966:38) states that a setting is where a story occurs and when it occurs. If one looks at it more broadly, setting refers to the story's condition or the whole environment in which it is told. The setting is vital in a literary work. Therefore, the setting is beneficial in analyzing literature. Abrams (1999) explains that a literary work's settings, whether narrative or dramatic, include public places, historical times, and social events where the story occurs (284). Hence, the setting is about the time and place where the action happens and in what circumstances it appears. In brief, there are three kinds of settings that condition such happening: setting of place (geographical location), setting of time (temporal setting), and social setting.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn reveals rural life as the setting. To depict the lives of the white and the black people along the Mississippi River, Mark Twain employs rural life as the background for his book. As it is generally found in adventure writing, the story moves from one place to another, from time to time, and from one kind of society to another type of community. Picturing rural areas, Mark Twain writes that all happenings occur in such areas with their rural society despite many movements. For example, Huckleberry Finn and Jim move from a village in St. Petersburg to some other villages along the Mississippi River. In describing Finn's adventures, Mark Twain defines and elaborates on rural life fairly by telling both the good sides and the wrong sides of the rural life set in the South, especially the social setting.

Types of Setting

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn employs three types of settings: place, time, and social setting. It uses the three types of settings, which Ferdinal

et al. (2020) argue to have fulfilled the contexts of place, time, and social environment. Mark Twain sets the story between the land and the river. He uses the two types of places to tell of Huckleberry Finn's adventures to help Jim move along the Mississippi River and some villages they visit. The story starts in St. Petersburg, an old log hut on the Illinois shore, Jackson's Island, Mississippi River, the Grangerfords' house, a camp, "Arkansaw," and ends in Pikesville. In the beginning, Mark Twain writes that the story's scene occurs in the Mississippi Valley. The journey of Huck and Jim starts on Jackson's Island. They then plan to float on a raft to the South, specifically Cairo, Illinois, as their destination because Cairo is a "free state." Unfortunately, their plan does not run well. Instead of getting to Cairo, they pass it. The story ends up on a plantation in a village called Pikesville. The places they visit are all rural areas with rural specialties. For instance, in St. Petersburg, there are caves, tan-yards, et cetera; in Pikesville, there are plantations; and the Mississippi River's banks with woods and mountains.

As for the setting of time, the exact time the story takes place is not included in the novel. However, Mark Twain states at the outset of the book that the narrative takes place "forty to fifty years ago," which suggests that it may be set around the 1830s or 1840s (forty to fifty years before the novel was published). Mark Twain uses various terms to describe the time when some scenes occur. However, there are some phrases that he uses quite frequently. For instance, to explain that a scene takes place in the morning, Twain tends to express it after breakfast, before breakfast, sun-up, in the morning, during the morning, or next morning, forenoon," et cetera. Mark Twain also explains the daylight and the afternoon scene in various ways. For example, "The sun was up so high," "daylight," "day times," "the middle of the afternoon," "that afternoon," et cetera. As for the night times, he used "dark," "after dinner," "night," and so on.

In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the setting is not only about where a story takes place and when it occurs but also the work's other setting that focuses on the social circumstances in which it takes place. For example, almost all the people Huckleberry Finn and Jim meet in the village are farmers. Therefore, the social context is a society that relies on their life

in the farming sector. Such a novel's setting also indicates a religious and civilized society. They are good Christians. Some include Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, the Grangerfords, the Wilks, and the Phelps. The lower-class people, mainly enslaved people like Jim, believed in myths and superstitions. Besides, the novel also shows slavery as one of its central themes. Mark Twain describes the life of some lower-class people, including slaves who suffer in the community. He makes use of Jim to represent the enslaved people. He shows some traits of the suffering groups by mentioning specific aspects, such as the black language. Mark Twain even uses the n-word more than two hundred times. In the book, slaves speak differently. Then he shows that high-class characters also own and treat them as property. Sometimes masters treat their slaves inhumanely. The white looked down on the enslaved people, and they felt better than the enslaved people. Although some abolitionists (white persons) did not do it to the enslaved people and tried to set them free, the white considered them to show low-down behavior.

Neutral and Typical Settings

As set in rural areas, the settings of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are typical, especially the places it uses. "Pastoral Settings" (Child 2006) is possibly an appropriate term to call the settings in the story. For instance, in St. Petersburg, the scenes occur in a tan-yard and a cave. These typical rural areas are described as having fewer houses. He even describes an area where there is only one house. The old log house where Pap kidnaps Huck is the only house in the area. The Grangerfords' and the Phelps' double log houses are also placed quite far from other homes since plantations surround the sites. Thick woods and timbers are also found alongside the Mississippi River's bank during Huck Finn and Jim's journey (132).

Anachronism

Anachronism, which according to Baldick (2001:9), is the misplacing of any person, thing, custom, or event outside its real historical time, is also seeable in the story. Mark Twain takes advantage of it to "prevent something being "hated"" (Cuddon, 1998). He might be a careful writer. For example, he writes the state "Arkansas" as "Arkansaw" even though he wrote it in 1884 when "Arkansaw" had

been changed to “Arkansas.” He realizes that the novel’s setting was in the middle of the nineteenth century when “Arkansas” was spelled “Arkansaw.” Therefore, there are few anachronistic traits in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some settings of place in the novel are not based on reality, while most are real places. For instance, Huck’s hometown, St. Petersburg, is imaginative. Another imaginative place in the story is Pikesville, where the Phelps lives.

Functions of Settings

One of many themes of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is the clash between civilization life and natural life. The novel’s environment, particularly the geographical and social settings, has an impact on this theme. The Mississippi River is the central setting that makes Huckleberry Finn fall in love with nature. Every time he is on the river, he feels free and safe. On the other hand, Widow Douglas’ house does not make Huck feel comfortable enough, even though the widow and her sister Miss Watson try to civilize him. It turns out that Huck does not want to be civilized. He prefers to live on the river freely. However, he cannot leave the house because the widow is kind to him. The house causes conflict in Huck’s mind about whether to stay and live the civilized life or live freely in natural life. Therefore, the Widow Douglas’ house and the Mississippi River deliver the clash between civilization life and natural life.

The Mississippi River is a setting of place and a metaphor for freedom. The massive Mississippi River represents Huckleberry Finn’s and Jim’s freedom to do whatever they want and go wherever they wish without civilization. Moreover, the river also functions as their transportation to reach the destination of freedom. It makes them more comfortable reaching their destination without worrying too much about getting caught. On the contrary, the villages represent cruelty and a lack of freedom. From St. Petersburg, Huckleberry Finn feels that civilization does not suit him. Then, Huck is abused by his drunken father in the old-log house. On Jackson’s Island, the citizens are after Jim, so the places are unsafe. In the Grangerfords’, he witnesses a feud and thinks about how cruel humans can be. Next, in the Arkansaw, he notices a man being killed. In the Wilks’, he knows that the Duke and the King are frauds. Yet he does not

have the freedom to tell anyone about it. Finally, on the Phelps’ plantation, Huck cannot do whatever he plans because Tom Sawyer thinks he is superior to him. Therefore, the Mississippi River is the safest place, with less cruelty and more freedom. On the Mississippi River, the atmosphere is sometimes bright and peaceful. In chapter seven, Twain states, “... *looking away into the sky; not a cloud in it*” (61). Despite its peacefulness, the river’s atmosphere is tense and sometimes caused by major storms. Twain writes, “*We had a big storm after midnight, with a power of thunder and lightning...*” (106). In some settings, there are some lonesome atmospheres. For instance, Huck is all alone on Jackson’s Island before bumping into Jim. He says:

“... *and feeling pretty well satisfied, but by and by it got sort of lonesome, and I went and set on the bank and listened to the current swashing along, and counted the stars and drift logs and rafts that come down and went to bed; ...*”(68).

Huck’s activities indicate that he feels lonesome and bored.

The use of some places in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* foregrounds rural life. Mark Twain highlights specific sites that are related to rural areas. For instance, most villages are described as having plantations and farms. Mark Twain describes that some regions are distant from one another—Pap’s old log house, the Grangerford’s house, the Phelps’ house—one of a rural area’s characterizations. Besides, Mark Twain describes the Mississippi River banks that Huckleberry Finn and Jim pass by as places full of thick timber and tall woods (132). Mark Twain describes timbers and woods, but he also adds caves in some places, such as in St. Petersburg and Jackson’s Island. Therefore, we might say that the novel’s location serves as a foregrounding device to demonstrate that the action takes place in a rural environment.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain conveys the challenges of rural places with their particularities by utilizing the settings of place, time, and social context. A thorough examination of the novel’s historical and social

contexts shows certain essential factors. First, the country and the river make up most of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*'s setting. The land includes places like St. Petersburg, the dilapidated log cabin on the shore of Illinois, Jackson's Island, the Grangerford's home, the camp, Arkansaw, and Pikesville. Only the Mississippi River appears in the river scenes. Second, there is no information about the time period in which the book takes place. But according to Mark Twain's descriptions, the narrative may have occurred in the 1830s or 1840s. Third, for the socioeconomic setting, the majority of the characters in the novel are farmers or plantation owners. As a result, ruralism is depicted in the book. Formal religion is typically practiced in upper society; in this instance, it is Christianity. Fourth, despite paying less attention to the period and social context, Mark Twain demonstrates that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* takes place in rural areas. He mentions the tan-yard, plantations, communities, etc., among other things. Regarding the time setting, no details regarding rural life are found. There is evidence that, in terms of social situations, the society is made up of farmers. The information is still not as extensive as the environment of the location. Fifth, the central locations of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* impact the narrative, particularly the growth of Huck Finn's personality. The novel's standard settings demonstrate that the action occurs in rural

surroundings, with specific locations including farms, a cave, dense woodlands, and timber. He more authentically weaves the setting of the place into the nuances of rural life.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn demonstrates how meticulous Mark Twain was with his writing. He did an excellent job of incorporating location-specific information and local flavor into his book while still conveying the concepts of the book. The contrast between natural and modern life is one of the topics. Villages and the Mississippi River both contribute to the setting of the topic. The land depicts brutality and a lack of freedom, whereas the Mississippi River serves as a metaphor for liberation. The atmosphere in settings has a further purpose. The atmosphere varies as much as the settings do. On the river, it can be sunny and serene at times, but it can also be tense. On the land or in the river, a different atmosphere is one of loneliness. The novel's geographic locations also demonstrate that the place's setting emphasizes ruralism in the plot the most. By focusing more on the settings of the location to depict rural life in the book, Mark Twain explicitly uses rural life as the setting. The dichotomy between natural and civilized life was resolved by weaving together the social and geographic surroundings to demonstrate that the novel is situated in a rural environment, particularly around the Mississippi River and the villages.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, M. H. 1999. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle.
- Baldick, Chris. 2001. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Child, Peter and Roger Fowler. 2006. *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Cuddon, J.A. 1998. *English Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin Group.
- Ferdinal, et al. 2020. *Introduction to Literary Studies*. Padang: Panawa Jemboan.
- Jackson, Robert. 2002. "The Emergence of Mark Twain's Missouri: Regional Theory and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*". *The Southern Literary Journal*. Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 47-69.
- Kenney, William P. 1966. *How to Analyze Fiction*. New York: Monarch Publisher.
- Klarer, Mario. 2004. *An Introduction to Literary Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Messent, Peter. 2007. *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schilb, John, and John Clifford. 2017. *A Brief Guide to Arguing about Literature*. New York: Bedford.
- Selden, Raman, et al. 2005. *A Readers Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Great Britain: Longman.

- Sherman, Caroline B. 1938. "The Development of American Rural Fiction." *Agricultural History*, Vol. 12, No.1, pp. 67-76.
- Simamora, Delmi. 2002. *The Influence of Setting on Huckleberry Finn in Achieving His Self-identity as Seen in Mark Twain's "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn."* Diploma Thesis. Universitas Sanata Dharma.
- Tackach, James. 2004. "Why Jim Does Not Escape to Illinois in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*." *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*. Vol. 97, No. 3, pp. 216-225.
- Twain, Mark. 1954. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2018.
- Wellek, Rene, and Austin Warren. *Theory of Literature*. London: Jonathan Cape.