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*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *Barn Burning* by William Faulkner are works that tell the story of two young boys, Huck Finn and Sarty Snopes, who experience their “coming of age” in societies where slavery had an extremely strong presence. Huck Finn is set in pre-civil war America, when slavery was legal in the Southern states and starting to become illegal in a few of the Northern states. Barn Burning is set in post-civil war America, when African-Americans were first starting to slowly get accepted into society after being completely freed from slavery. The two boys have racist, violent, close-minded fathers that negatively affect their children’s lives.

Both of the boys in the novels have an awareness developed from their tragic relationships with their fathers that gives the boys a type of wisdom and maturity that aids them in making the right decisions. However, they are still young and easily influenced by society and their families, so they both struggle in making the right decisions. Huck Finn must decide if he should follow the rules that society has made for him, or if he should act on his own individual feelings. Sarty is engaged in a moral battle between being loyal to his family and being loyal to justice.

The two stories treat race and hatred in America as a defense for the weak and insecure. The racist characters in both stories experience tragic ends due to their behavior while the characters that overcome their upbringing grow and prevail. Twain and Faulkner show readers that racism is extremely close-minded and that people should embrace change with a positive attitude and strive to do what is right. The authors use the characteristics of the two fathers, Pap Finn and Abner Snope, to explain the roots of racism and why it is wrong and they use the actions of Huck and Sarty to show the benefits of overcoming society and family to do the right thing.

Pap Finn and Abner Snopes are angry, hateful, and violent fathers. Their racism is developed from their feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Pap is an alcoholic who has lost custody of Huck due to his condition. He is uneducated, unsuccessful, and just an all around horrible human being. When Pap is first introduced in the novel, he reveals his lack of confidence when he says to Huck, “You’re educated, too, they say; can read and write. You think you’re better better’n your father, now, don’t you, because he can’t? I’ll take it out of you.” (Twain 142). Pap is threatened by his son’s achievements and is worried that Huck will be more successful than him. Most fathers would be proud of their sons, but Pap is too ashamed of himself to show compassion and pride in his son. Later in the story, when Pap learns that blacks now have the right to vote, he is outraged and claims he will never vote again. When blacks had no rights and were seen as just slaves, Pap felt superior to them because he had no one else to feel superior to. When he starts to feel inferior to them, his world collapses and he uses anger and hatred to deal with it.

Abner Snopes experiences the same feelings of shame and insecurity, but in a slightly different setting. In his society, slaves were freed and blacks were being accepted into society for the first time ever. Snopes cannot deal with this major change in his life because his lack of self worth will not allow him to. As a coping mechanism, Snopes burns down the homes of people who make him feel inferior. Snopes literally has nothing to offer to society to prove that he is an important human being, so he resorts to arson in attempt to have an effect on the people that make him feel insecure. When the Snopes family arrives at the de Spain household to work, a black man asks them to wipe their feet before entering the house. Snopes makes a racially charged remark and furiously stomps through the house, leaving his muddy footprints everywhere. He is extremely upset because a person that he views as being beneath him his telling him what to do, so he acts out in an immature and hateful manner.

Pap and Snope’s behaviors are one of the ways that the author’s illustrate their idea that racism is wrong and acting out of hate doesn’t solve anything. The characteristics that the two fathers share cast a negative light on racism by showing that insecurity, fear, and hatred cause racism to exist. The authors convey the message that we should respect others and ourselves and embrace change with a positive, open attitude.

Another way the authors treat race and hatred in America as a defense for the weak is by showing the readers the journeys Huck and Sarty had to take to break away from their negative upbringings and make better decisions than their fathers. Huck becomes engaged in an internal battle between his instincts and what society has taught him whenever he helps Jim, a runaway slave. During Huck’s time, it was illegal to assist runaway slaves and society taught Huck that the right thing to do would be to turn Jim in. However, Huck genuinely likes Jim and knows that Jim has a family and needs to escape slavery to be with them. At times Huck feels as if he is doing the wrong thing by helping Jim. He feels like God might punish him for not following the law. When the dauphin sells Jim back into slavery, Huck is devastated. His first instinct is to tell Miss Watson, but he knows that will just keep Jim in slavery. Huck has a difficult time deciding if he should do what society wants and let Jim remain a slave or if he should try to rescue Jim. His feelings for Jim ultimately surpass the lessons he’s learned from society and he sets off to go save him. It took a lot of strength and courage for Huck to reject society’s ideas of right and wrong and do what he felt was right. This highlights the connection between the weak and racism. Huck has learned to be compassionate and loving, two traits his father did not possess.

Sarty struggles to figure out if he should be loyal to his family or loyal to justice/the law. His father is an arsonist, and his actions put Sarty in a constant state of fear and anxiety. Sarty knows what his father does is wrong, but his father manipulates him into keeping quiet by emphasizing the importance of loyalty to family. At the end of the story, Sarty realizes that he needs to be respectful to himself, and he can achieve this by being truthful and doing the right thing. When his father attempts to burn down the de Spain’s barn, Sarty warns the de Spain family and runs away. His father is killed and the barn is saved. While Sarty is escaping, Faulkner describes his change of emotions: “…the grief and despair now no longer terror and fear but just grief and despair” (Faulkner 812). Sarty can finally experience the feelings of self-worth and respect that his father lacked. He suddenly has a future and the freedom to do what he wants. The end of the story is hopeful and leaves the readers with an optimistic feeling that everything is going to work out for Sarty.

Huck and Sarty’s internal conflicts are a great example of how doing good things for others can help achieve feelings of worth and happiness. Twain and Faulkner used these characters to inspire readers to forget society’s past opinions and to treat everyone with respect and kindness. This reinforces their beliefs that we should move on from the past and that racism is unacceptable.

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Barn Burning* were truly innovative for their time. The authors successfully displayed the negative effects of racism and hatred by exploring and illustrating the roots and effects of racism. The decisions the two boys make encourage readers to adopt an open attitude and be more compassionate towards others. Huck and Sarty are an inspiration to anyone who questions the morals of their society, family, etcetera.

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