

THE HAIRBALL IN THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN: A MARXIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn portrays clear social class problems, which become a central concern in Marxist theory, and continues to arise in present times. Therefore, this study aims at examining the symbolism of the hairball in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through a Marxist lens. It reveals the significance of hairball as a reflection of class struggle and power dynamics. The analysis is done qualitatively by using textual analysis. The findings demonstrate how the hairball represents materialism which is shown in false consciousness. The hairball's demand for payment in exchange for its predictions emphasizes common capitalist ideals. Furthermore, the hairball's symbolism reflects contemporary issues such as economic inequality and exploitation for people in low economic status. This analysis shows that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* serves as a critique of the social world and reflects situations that continue to be relevant today.

Keywords: hairball, Huckleberry, Marxist, bourgeoisie, proletariat

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INTRODUCTION

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a classic American novel written by Mark Twain. It is about a teenager named Huckleberry Finn who has a journey down the Mississippi River with a runaway slave named Jim. Beyond the story of adventurous activities, the novel explores complex themes that explore social constructs and racial dynamics in the American South during the mid-19th century. The novel addresses morality and conscience, especially in Huck's relationship with Jim, a runaway slave. The character of Jim challenges stereotypes and promotes understanding of race and identity (Kulshreshtha et al., 2024).

These themes are further explored through the lens of initiation, as argued by Xi and Li-li (2015). Their analysis of plot, character, and social context suggests that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a story of initiation from teenage years to becoming grown-ups, and that it reflects the universal growth

from innocence to experience (Xi & Li-li, 2015). Davis Wood (2012) also argues that as they travel down the river together, Huck and Jim become deeply connected and they are inseparable (Davis Wood, 2012).

The terminology used to describe characters and the interactions between them reveal the racial divisions. For example, the terminology used to describe Jim, along with the content of the conversations expose the strong prejudices and social hierarchies. As Kulshreshtha et al. (2024) mention, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a very important work in American literature. It is the initiator of the use of regional dialects to capture the specific local colour and social context. Similarly, Manuel and Herrera (2014) mention that the novel used a specific dialect for Jim to reflect his African American identity and the social context of the time (Manuel & Herrera, 2014).

The interactions between Huck and Jim often happen in events which include some objects. The objects sometimes function as symbolic things. However, while existing studies on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have explored its themes (Kulshreshtha et al., 2024; Xi and Li-li, 2015), characters (Davis Wood, 2012), and language (Manuel & Herrera, 2014), the rich symbolism in the novel has not been thoroughly examined. One attractive symbol is the hairball which is told in Chapter 4 of the novel. Hairball is a superstitious object that Jim believes to predict the future. Previous studies have focused on representation of Jim's African heritage which sometimes show irrationality in society. For example, the study by Phiri (2011) suggests that Jim's superstitions and reliance on folk beliefs are rooted in his African heritage. Then those beliefs are reflected in his life. However, the symbolic potential of the hairball, particularly its function within the exploration of class and power in the novel, has received limited critical attention (Phiri, 2011).

Therefore, this research aims to analyse how the hairball in the Adventures of Huckleberry Finn reflects the class struggle within the power dynamics of the novel, especially between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Through a Marxist point of view, the hairball emerges as a powerful symbol of how superstition and belief systems can function as both coping mechanism and tools for the marginalized in a society in which economic inequality existed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main theory used in this study is Marxist criticism developed by Karl Marx. Marxist criticism examines literature by focusing on how class and ideas about class are portrayed (Alem & Guadu, 2023). According to Marx, there are two primary classes in capitalist society, namely bourgeoisie and proletariat (Marx & Engels, 1848). The capitalist class who own the means of production, such as factories and machines is called the bourgeoisie. Bourgeoisie have control on the working class and receive most of the profits from their labour. Meanwhile, the working class who produce goods for the bourgeoisie are named the proletariat, who naturally lack the means of production. They can only sell their labour. Proletariat are also subject to the fluctuations of the market and competition. The proletariat goes through various stages of development in their struggle against the bourgeoisie, starting from individual labourers to organized movements (Marx & Engels, 1848).

Departing from the concept of bourgeoisie and proletariat, an element to highlight in Marxist theory is false consciousness. It is when people who are experiencing the oppressions are tricked and are made to believe in the ideas of the people who are oppressing them. For example, poor people are convinced that they are poor and it is because they are lazy or not smart enough. They are not given any ideas like tax breaks for the rich and built-in advantages for the wealthy which can be the reasons they are struggling or living in poor condition (Shafer, 2018).

This understanding of class and false consciousness is central in the study of Pleasants (2022). The study explored Marx's views on capitalism and justice. It was argued that Marx's critique of capitalism was not primarily based on moral or justice-based arguments. Instead, it stemmed from his theory of historical materialism. This theory suggested that a society's economic structure fundamentally shaped its social, political, and intellectual domains, including moral and political beliefs (Pleasants, 2022). As Barry (2017) noted, the materialist philosophy focused on the real world and social structures and rejected supernatural explanations (Barry, 2017). Pleasants (2022) also further argued that

the dominant ideas people had in society give benefits to those who are wealthy and powerful. For example, in terms of economic structure, people who owned things had the power to subjectively determine what was considered fair (Pleasants, 2022).

Studies that discuss class or economic inequality in the novel also provide a foundation for this analysis. The study conducted by Vranken (2018) revealed that economic context of slavery had been included in the story since the novel was serialized in *The Century* magazine, even though the magazine's content primarily focused on property rights, business transactions, and economic activities (Vranken, 2018). In addition, Nainggolan et al. (2023) further explored the connection between slavery and economic inequality. The study highlighted that slaves were considered property and were traded as commodities. Slaves also had a lack of rights and they were forced to work without compensation. This was shown in the story when Miss Watson planned to sell Jim. It also showed how slaves were treated as economic assets that could be exchanged for financial gain (Nainggolan et al., 2023).

Beyond the studies about slavery, there are other studies which illuminated the psychological and social impacts of economic inequality. For instance, Wang et al. (2020) showed how economic stress led to conditions where people felt dissatisfaction, unfairness, and isolation. Then the aforementioned conditions influenced financial behaviour (Wang et al., 2020). This was in line with Rosadi (2025) who conducted a study that revealed that online loans in Indonesia led to mechanisms of economic exploitation and social control. The study showed the negative impacts of online loans on vulnerable groups. It also highlighted how financial systems, including those which were presented as innovative solutions, could perpetuate and worsen existing inequalities (Rosadi et al., 2025). This vulnerability also manifested in other ways. For example, the work of Chóliz et al., 2022 explored how the accessibility of gambling, especially online, could worsen gambling-related problems, particularly among vulnerable groups like young people and those under economic pressure (Chóliz et al., 2021).

In addition, Lee et al. (2023) demonstrated the psychological and cognitive consequences of digital inequality, particularly for low-income individuals who

had high risk of predatory lending practices. The study described that having encounters with payday loan ads could generate psychological reactions among lower-income individuals. They would have changes in the future-oriented and negative emotional words because of the stress they had. These effects were more seen lower-income individuals who lacked social support systems. Despite this condition, it was also revealed that online payday loan ads still targeted people who were struggling financially (Lee et al., 2023).

Lastly, a study conducted by Mosbey et al. (2024) highlighted how financial desperation led individuals to risky or damaging solutions. The study also demonstrated that levels of problem gambling and the fear of missing out were strong indicators of financial hardship. For example, many aspects of cryptocurrency speculation were related to gambling (Mosbey et al., 2024).

METHOD

This research employs a Marxist literary criticism approach through textual analysis of Chapter 4 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Textual analysis is a research technique that involves the in-depth interpretation of communication, including written, verbal, and visual forms. This process goes beyond simple description to explore the complex structures and relationships within the text. This includes analyzing, understanding, and interpreting the text in relation to its sociocultural, historical, and political framework, with a focus on identifying the most likely interpretations (McKee, 2003).

The selection of Chapter 4 is due to its prominent portrayal of the hairball and its symbolic function within the narrative, particularly in relation to the characters of Jim and Huck, who represent contrasting social classes. The data was gained by identifying and systematically examining key passages, dialogues, and descriptions related to the hairball, focusing on their representation of class dynamics, specifically the relationship between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. This analysis was then conducted using the framework of Marxist theory, which focuses on these two primary classes in capitalist society.

To enrich the analysis and provide context, references, including literary studies and critical analyses, especially those that talked about economic problems

and exploitation are included. These sources helped contextualize the novel and provided insights into the application of Marxist theory. Analytical validity was maintained through careful attention to textual evidence, consistent application of Marxist principles, and consideration of alternative interpretations.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was chosen because of, first, its status as a landmark in American literature (Kulshreshtha et al., 2024). The novel also ensured its continued relevance and cultural significance which portrayed characters and social contexts. Third, and most importantly for this research, the hairball in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* served as an important symbol. Beyond its function as a fortune-telling device, the hairball captured the anxieties and vulnerabilities of those living within a system of economic inequality. The hairball showed the need of further exploration of the class struggle reflected in the characters. Furthermore, despite being an older novel, the themes of economic hardship, exploitation, and power dynamics remained relevant to the current situations where many people are struggling economically.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In chapter 4 of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Huck was troubled by the reappearance of his abusive father, Pap. Then he went to see Jim, Miss Watson's slave. Jim possessed a hairball that he claimed was inhabited by a spirit. Therefore, the hairball was capable of knowing everything. Huck's urgent question to the hairball was whether Pap intended to stay or leave the area.

Excerpt 1:

"Miss Watson's nigger, Jim, had a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the fourth stomach of an ox, and he used to do magic with it. He said there was a spirit inside of it, and it knowed everything. So I went to him that night and told him pap was here again, for I found his tracks in the snow. What I wanted to know was, what he was going to do, and was he going to stay?"

After Huck told Jim about his problem, Jim performed the procedure to ask questions to the hairball. However, Jim stated that the hairball was unable to talk and answer the questions. Then Jim explained the situation as the hairball did not talk without any payments.

Excerpt 2:

"Jim got out his hair-ball and said something over it, and then he held it up and dropped it on the floor. It fell pretty solid, and only rolled about an inch. Jim tried it again, and

then another time, and it acted just the same. Jim got down on his knees and put his ear against it and listened. But it warn't no use; he said it wouldn't talk. He said sometimes it wouldn't talk without money."

Huck then offered a counterfeit quarter. He admitted that it was not so good because of the visible brass and the oily texture. However, he didn't tell Jim about the dollar he got from the judge.

Excerpt 3:

"I told him I had an old slick counterfeit quarter that warn't no good because the brass showed through the silver a little, and it wouldn't pass nohow, even if the brass didn't show, because it was so slick it felt greasy, and so that would tell on it every time. (I reckoned I wouldn't say nothing about the dollar I got from the judge.)"

Jim explained that he intended to clean the quarter by sticking it in a potato overnight. He claimed this will remove the brass and the greasiness. He believed that the hairball would think that the coin was real.

Excerpt 4:

"Jim smelt it and bit it and rubbed it, and said he would manage so the hair-ball would think it was good. He said he would split open a raw Irish potato and stick the quarter in between and keep it there all night, and next morning you couldn't see no brass, and it wouldn't feel greasy no more, and so anybody in town would take it in a minute, let alone a hair-ball."

After positioning a quarter under the hairball and listening closely, Jim declared it had become communicative. Therefore, he acted as the hairball's interpreter. Jim predicted a life of mixed fortunes for Huck, including both hardship and recovery. Sometimes he would leave and sometimes he would stay. Jim said that there were two angels influencing Pap, one white and good, the other black and bad, and it was uncertain which would win in the end. He then told Huck that he would have both trouble and joy in his life, sickness and recovery. He also foretold that two girls would be part of Huck's future, one light and rich, the other dark and poor, and Huck would marry the poor one first and the rich one later. Lastly, Jim warned Huck to stay away from water, which he claimed was tied to Huck's fate of being hanged.

Discussion

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the hairball demonstrates economic exploitation and the manipulation of people's beliefs. Studies about the novel show that during that era, money and slavery were important themes

(Vranken, 2018). Jim makes money by telling fortunes with the hairball, which shows how even beliefs can be bought and sold. This fits with how, in the setting, slaves were treated like things to be bought and sold, as shown when Miss Watson plans to sell Jim (Nainggolan et al., 2023).

Furthermore, within the capitalist framework portrayed in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the hairball has functioned as a significant symbol of exploitation and false consciousness. It reflects class struggle and power dynamics within the novel, particularly between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Further, the hairball is also a symbol with the contemporary issues which also highlight the novel's lasting relevance.

Firstly, the hairball functions as a materialistic object due to its role as a fortune-telling device that requires payment to reveal its knowledge. This directly links it to the capitalist emphasis on monetary value. Jim believes that the hairball possesses a spirit that can predict the future. This might be related to the representation of Jim's beliefs which are rooted in his African heritage, and it is reflected in his life (Phiri, 2011). However, the fact that the spirit only offers its services in exchange for money shows that the hairball can be a subject of economic exchange. The need for payment reflects how everything becomes subject to economic exchange in a capitalist society.

The idea that people are treated as commodities aligns with the Marxist idea of false consciousness. As noted by Shafer (2018), this occurs when those who are oppressed are led to adopt the beliefs of those who oppress them. The hairball in this context can be interpreted as a symbol of this false consciousness. Jim is a slave who values the hairball's ability to predict the future. As a member of the working class, he accepts the idea that the hairball needs money to operate. This illustrates that even the most exploited members of society can adopt and maintain the values of the system that oppresses them.

The concept of false consciousness remains relevant in modern society. In the study conducted by Rosadi (2025), the evidence of the continued relevance of the Marxist concept can be seen where the working class struggles to recognize their own exploitation. The research, by analysing the negative impacts of online loans on those in vulnerable positions, demonstrates how financial systems,

despite being presented as advancements, can contribute to and worsen existing inequalities.

Second, the hairball in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* serves as a strong symbol which reflects class struggle and power dynamics between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The symbol even resonates with nowadays issues. Huck represents the bourgeoisie, while the proletariat is represented by Jim. In the story, Huck is categorized as a bourgeoisie who owns the money who can afford to offer the hairball a counterfeit quarter. It is in line with Marx theory that the bourgeoisie is the capitalist class who own the means of production, and they control the working class. In contrast, Jim is a runaway slave. He is the proletariat, who is in the working class who produce goods for the bourgeoisie. Proletariats lack production and are forced to sell their labour. As a slave, Jim is considered a property and a person who is lack of rights and forced labour economic assets that could be exchanged for financial gain (Nainggolan et al., 2023). Therefore, when the hairball needs money to tell fortunes, it really highlights how the wealthy class holds onto all the power. As a slave, Jim expected the hairball, to give him some power in the society where he was powerless. This condition shows that people who have no economic power may turn to believe in superstition or other things that help them gain some control and power.

The money-oriented characteristic of hairball in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* highlights numerous contemporary issues in the society. In the novel, as Jim gambled on the hairball's predictions, he must have hoped for a better future. Similarly, nowadays people have started to have confidence in the idea that they can make money by buying and selling cryptocurrencies, as highlighted by Mosbey et al. (2024). The drive to believe in cryptocurrency speculation and Jim's dependence on the hairball both are rooted from the need to feel in control when facing economic challenges. This idea aligns with the Marxist concept of the evolution of the working class in their fight against the ruling class. It started from isolated workers to collective organizations (Marx & Engels, 1848).

The findings are further supported by the study conducted by Wang et al. (2020). The study reveals that easy-access loans offer a framework for

understanding the psychological impact of economic and social pressures on individuals. This study shows how financial strain causes dissatisfaction, unfairness, and isolation. Then, it eventually shapes financial behaviors. Similarly, Marxist analysis, the strains experienced by the proletariat under capitalism, such as economic exploitation and social alienation can be seen as the main factors influencing their actions and consciousness (Wang et al., 2020).

Equally, research on the psychological consequences of digital inequality and predatory lending parallels the exploitation inherent in Jim's situation (Lee et al., 2023). It demonstrates that lower-income individuals are more psychologically vulnerable to payday loan ads, leading to increased stress and altered smartphone usage. This parallels Jim's situation, where he is vulnerable to exploitation due to his social and economic status. The hairball, like predatory loans, offers a false sense of control and potential relief from financial hardship, but ultimately perpetuates a cycle of dependence and vulnerability.

Lastly, the easy access to gambling, especially online, is related to Jim's gambling behaviour, which is driven by his lack of economic control. This can worsen his existing vulnerabilities (Chóliz et al., 2021). People who have the gambling habit are just like what is described in the story. In the story, Jim, who was the slave, had used the hairball for gambling and it led him to make decisions based on false hopes. Therefore, the gambling offers people false hope and leads them to poor decisions.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, through Marxist analysis, this reserach has demonstrated how the symbolism of the hairball in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* reflects the class struggle within the power dynamics of the novel, particularly between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. Within the capitalist framework portrayed in the novel, the hairball functions as a significant symbol of exploitation and false consciousness. It highlights the anxieties and vulnerabilities of those living within a system of economic inequality. Even though *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an old novel, it remains relevant because its themes of economic hardship and power dynamics, such as those seen in online gambling, crypto predictions, and online loans, are related to issues in contemporary society.

Analyzing *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* highlights that literature can serve not only as entertainment but also as a powerful critique of the social world, reflecting situations people continue to face today. Therefore, future research could explore different points of view and other forms of marginalization, such as race, gender, or immigration status, in contemporary literature. Furthermore, future literary studies can expand beyond a Marxist lens and benefit from the application of other theories.

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