



Crises Alongside the River: An Ecological Interpretation of Huck's Rebellion in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract— *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, one of Mark Twain's "Mississippi Trilogy", can be acclaimed as an ecological novel as far as its rich ecological thoughts and insightful reflection on ecological crises are concerned. Based on Lu Shu-yuan's "Ecological Trichotomy", this essay is about to excavate ecological ideas manifested in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from three dimensions of Lu's trichotomic ecology, namely natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology, and examine the internal connections between *Huckleberry Finn*'s rebellion against society and ecological thoughts contained in this novel.

Keywords— *Ecocriticism, Ecological Trichotomy, Rebellion, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism has gained a growing importance in contemporary literary criticism since modern environmentalism began from 1960s when Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published, in which the author poignantly criticizes the destruction of natural environment brought about by modern science and technology. In *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Glotfelty and Harold give a definition of ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Harold, 1996). They argue that the subject of ecocriticism is to examine the interrelationship between nature and human culture and oppose the anthropocentric and dualistic idea that human being, to whom natural environment is submitted, is at the center of the world. Following such a reconsideration of human-nature relationship and a criticism of anthropocentrism, Chinese scholar Lu Shu-yuan added spiritual dimension to his

ecology and put forward an "ecological trichotomy", arguing that "while the natural ecosystem has been severely damaged, people's mental state has also deteriorated" (Lu, 2007). Lu divided ecological studies into three aspects: natural ecology, which "studies the relatively independent natural world"; social ecology, "which studies political and economical life of human society"; and spiritual ecology, "which is the internal study on the emotional and spiritual life of human beings" (Lu, 2000). In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the author shows readers ecological crises in terms of natural world, mankind's social and spiritual life through the protagonist little Huck's journey on the Mississippi River with the runaway slave Jim.

II. ECOLOGICAL CRISES IN THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN

2.1 Natural Ecological Crisis

In Lu's ecological trichotomy, nature contains all non-human things on the earth. According to him, the word "nature" in English "refers to the material world that is inartificial and naturally formed, existing in time and space outside of mankind" (Lu, 2009), thereupon his natural ecological study focuses on the human-nature and human-nonhuman relationship. The novel was set in the 19th century when America was experiencing an upsurging economy and a rapidly growing social and technical development. It was also the time that the contradiction between human and nature began to appear with anthropocentrism taking its dominance in human-nature relationship and that many American scholars like Emerson and Thoreau began to reflect on the consequence of scientific and technological development – the destruction of natural world.

In the novel, following Huck's journey readers can have a general vision of the deterioration of human-nature relationship in which human's unscrupulous plunder of natural resources has brought great destruction to nature and other forms of lives like animals are being disregarded and mutilated. When Huck was in his father's captivity in the thick woods along the Mississippi River, the branches and chunks of wood floating down the upper reaches of the river he saw in the morning were evidence of human's excessive deforestation and waste of resources:

I noticed some pieces of limbs and such things floating down, and a sprinkling of bark; so I knowed the river had begun to rise. I reckoned I would have great times, now, if I was over at the town. The June rise used to be always luck for me; because as soon as that rise begins, here comes cord-wood floating down, and pieces of log rafts – sometimes a dozen logs together; so all you have to do is to catch them and sell them to the wood yards and the sawmill. (55)

What is a good luck for a child who acts spontaneously is a disaster for local environment and people who live by the river because human's overcutting of trees has destroyed the ecological system, giving rise to serious soil erosion

alongside the banks. People who live there either choose to leave their houses, which are about to be flooded by the river, or risk living there as "[s]ometimes a belt of land a quarter of a mile deep will start in and cave along and cave along till it all caves into the river in one summer" and a riverside town "has to be always moving back, and back, because the river's always gnawing at it" (144). Apart from plants, animals have also been conquered and played with by human beings. Overfishing of people and water pollution make Huck's enjoyment of the fresh and sweet nature impeded "because they've left dead fish laying around, gars, and such, and they do get pretty rank" (125). Townspeople play with animals to fill their dull and monotonous lives. They enjoy prompting dogs to bite pigs, watching and laughing dogs fight, and "putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or trying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death" (144). The disregard for animal life perfectly shows the self-righteousness and arrogance of human in the face of non-humans.

In the middle of the 19th century, the United States experienced the rapid development of industrial civilization after the Westward Movement, and its ambition to conquer the natural world became increasingly strong. Even the influence of anthropocentrism can be seen in Huck, the little boy, who took the island where he met Jim as his own territory – "I was boss of it; it all belonged to me" – even though he claimed to "put in the time" (62). A childish joke of proclaiming territory suffices to prove the prevalence of anthropocentrism because Huck is always following his instincts as a child before his awareness of consciousness in making his own decision to let Jim free. Twain shows in the novel the natural ecological crisis of American society in 19th century by describing human's destruction of natural ecology, mutilation of other lives and nature's revenge on human society, indicating that humans have to reflect on the self-righteous anthropocentrism and reconsider the human-nature relationship unless the crisis incurred by them will finally destroy humans themselves.

2.2 Social Ecological Crisis

Lu argues that "in contrast to the natural ecosystem, the ecosystem formed between social people and their environment is defined as the social ecosystem, of which

the study is called social ecology” (Lu, 2009). The object of social ecological study is the relationship between people under certain “economic relation, social institutions, political system and ideology” (Lu, 2009). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, though written after the Civil War, was set before the abolition of slavery when it was still legal in southern American and remained the economic foundation and the most important social practice of the American South. Social relations in this novel are corroded by slavery, and the relationship between people was worsened by money and interests, all of which contribute to the social ecological crisis of the South.

The first aspect of the social ecological crisis demonstrated in the novel is the deterioration of family relation. Huck's relation with his only family, his father, is deteriorated and even antagonized by his father's atrocious treatment of Huck. His father is a vicious, greedy, and tyrannical drunk and racist and often imposes domestic violence on Huckleberry. He claims that he is “Huck Finn's boss” (49) and treats Huck as his own property. Huck's father appears in this novel is because he returns to find Huck after hearing that Huck has got a lot of money. His attitude toward Huck is more like that of a slaveowner toward his slaves than that of a father toward his child. He regards Huck as his own property, considers everything Huck has as his, and envies Huck's better dress and life than his. Although Huck suffers from his father's violence and torture, the law fails to support Judge Thatcher and Widow Douglas's suing for dissolving Huck's father's paternity because it is made for maintaining a patriarchal society based on slavery in the Southern states. Such a social system brings up the absolute rule of patriarchy in the family, which leads to the deterioration of family relations.

The second aspect is directly related to slavery, that is, the commonsense racism to the enslaved black people, which leaves an almost irreparable rift in the relationship between white and black Americans. Although slavery and racism are not the focus of the novel, as an inescapable topic in American literature, especially for those who write about southern America, racism is generally involved in their writings. Huck's father is a stubborn racism, and, in his words, he claims that he will never vote when he learns that “there was a State in this country where they'd let that

nigger vote” (52). Slavery has not only made many white people like Huck's father cynical and envious, but also stereotyped the image of black people. Huck's father degrades a black from Ohio, who lives in a free state as a college professor, as a “prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger” (53), and complains out of envy about government for its failure to sell him. Huck at first also falls into the trap of slavery in his friendship with Jim, the runaway slave. When Jim said to Huck that he would buy or steal his children after he was free, Huck could not shake off the shackle of slavery yet and thought “it was such a lowering of him” (102). It was not until Jim is secretly sold by the two swindlers that Huck can break the barrier of a slavery mind and realize that Jim is a good man as well as his friend.

The third one is the prevalence of money-worship in the American society. In the 19th century, the American society made great progress after industrialization, while people at the same time became more and more greedy and unscrupulous and impersonal relationships based on money and interest became hypocritical and frail. The novel has introduced Huck's greedy father, who neglects family and morality for money, and a gang of men that Huck and Jim meet in a wrecked steamboat, two of whom are conspiring to murder the another because of benefit distribution. Besides, the two swindlers of duke and king build their friendship immediately based on the common pursuit of money, even if they are strangers to each other. While they unscrupulously cooperate to cheat others' money, they are at the same time in a mutual suspicion out of a fear that their own interests are damaged.

2.3 Spiritual Ecological Crisis

In another book, Lu argues that “ecological researchers should be aware that humans are not only natural and social beings, but also spiritual beings. Therefore, in addition to natural and social ecology, there should be also the existence of ‘spiritual ecology’” (Lu, 2006). If the natural and social ecology respectively focus on human's relations with nature and society, then spiritual ecology studies the relation between human and self, or between “the subject of spiritual being (mainly human) and its living environment (including natural, social, and cultural environment)” (Lu, 2009). Spiritual ecological crisis in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is represented by

people's spiritual emptiness and Huck's existential estrangement from others.

Mark Twain depicts the townspeople's spiritual emptiness and their boring and meaningless life as Huck's journey proceeds. When Huck was in a town near the river, he saw on the street the boring life of local townspeople: "There was empty dry-goods boxes under the awnings, and loafers roosting on them all day long, whittling them with their Barlow knives; and chawing tobacco, and gaping and yawning and stretching – a mighty ornery lot" (142). They enjoy a lazy and meaningless life like a hedonist and idle all day away, looking for something that "wake them up all over and make them happy all over" (144). When a drunk man called Boggs was swearing another man, Sherburn, the whole townspeople on the street came to watch the bustling scene of their fight. Even after Boggs is shot by Sherburn to death, what townspeople really care about is that whether they have seen their fight with their own eyes:

Say, now, you've looked enough, you fellows; 'taint right and 'taint fair, for you to stay thar all the time, and never give nobody a chance; other folks has their rights as well as you. [...] The street was full, and everybody was excited. Everybody that seen the shooting was telling how it happened, and there was a big crowd packed around each one of these fellows, stretching their necks and listening. (146-147)

For the townspeople, the death of a man adds a bit of fun to their dull life because the emptiness of spirit and the numbness of life make them forget the respect of life and the fear and awe of death. Through describing the emptiness of people's spiritual life, Mark Twain is in fact warning people that industrialization and social progress bring not only destruction and pollution to the natural environment, but also the "spiritual pollution".

Huck's existential estrangement from others means that he appears from the beginning to the end of the novel as an outsider of society and does not get himself involved in others' social life, although he is helped and loved by them. When Huck and Jim are separated by the collision between the giant steamboat and their raft, Huck is taken into hospitality by an aristocratic family, the Grangerfords, which are in an absurdly pointless and devastating feud

with a rival family, the Shepherdsons. However, he chooses to conceal the elopement of a Grangerford girl with a Shepherdson boy even if he is friendly treated by the Grangerfords. Finally, the feud escalates into a mad bloodshed when their elopement is exposed to both families. The same thing also happens to other people that Huck does not choose to reveal the fraud of the duke and king even though he knows that they are swindlers. Huck's existential estrangement from others can be attributed to his family in which he suffers from his father's violence on the one hand and receives influence from his father on the other. Influenced by his father, Huck gets used to lie to others and lack of love from a civilized family makes him hardly accustom himself to the conventional social life, neither does he want to get involved in others' lives.

III. OUT OF CRISES: HUCK'S REBELLION AND RETURN

Mark Twain in the novel not only exposes the ecological crises of the 19th America, but also reflects and explores the way out of these crises by depicting the image of a social rebel, the protagonist Huckleberry Finn. Huck's rebellion against society is also a return to nature, humanity and self-consciousness as well.

3.1 Huck's Return to Nature

In the face of the severe crisis in their natural ecosystem, people "have to reexamine the relationship between humans and nature that has taken place, and that has been established" (Lu, 2007). As a response to the opposite relation between human and nature in an era of industrialization, Mark Twain characterizes Huck as a rebellious figure who escapes from civilized society to non-human natural world.

As shown in the beginning of the novel, Huck is incompatible with societal life. He often plays truant or even runs away from home because he cannot stand the daily boring life of civilized society. Huck does not like to wear decent clothes but prefer his "old rags" (32). When he is asked to wear new clothes by the widow, he "couldn't do nothing but sweat and sweat, and fell all cramped up" (32). He is also very resistant to civilized behaviors and often scolded by the widow's sister, Miss Watson, for his irregular sitting and slouching posture. When Watson tells him about the horrible scene of hell, he is not afraid to go

to hell for disobeying social rules but says he would rather go to the hell and is excited to continue to be together with Tom Sayer in hell. In contrast to his resistance to society, even in his father's captivity, Huck thinks "It was pretty good times up in the woods there, take it all around" (50). After he has escaped from his father's imprisonment, Huck "laid there in the grass and the cool shade, thinking about things and feeling rested and ruther comfortable and satisfied" (60). The relation between Huck and nature is intentionally strengthened by the author, by which Twain manifests the presence of natural world in this novel. The spider that appears in the first chapter in Huck's eye is "an awful bad sign" (34) and prophesies his father's return for his money and the snake is taken by Huck and Jim as an ominous harbinger. Besides, whenever they are in danger after landing, they can always head off it by escaping to their raft on the Mississippi River, indicating that people can only by returning to nature save themselves from dangers in society.

3.2 Huck's Return to Humanity

As discussed before, slavery and racism have brought severe social ecological crisis to American society. A morbid social ecosystem was built based on slavery in the South, in which both white and black people were dehumanized. Given the historical setting of the novel, Huck's escape and adventuring with the runaway slave Jim is no doubt a rebellion against laws and social conventions at that time. While rebelling against slavery, Huck also experiences a process of returning to humanity after his realization that Jim is a kind and sincere friend to him.

Huck's attitude toward Jim experiences a struggling change before and after his decision of tearing the letter written to Miss Watson, Jim's master. He at first just regards Jim as a runaway slave and does not expose Jim to Miss Watson out of his adventurous nature. But Huck knows clearly that his concealment of the slave's escape is against Southern laws and social conventions – "People would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum" (65) – for which he often blames himself. After his adventures with Jim, Huck gradually begins to shift his attention from Jim's identity as a slave to his humanity as a human being. When Huck sees Jim's sad face missing his wife and children in the middle of the night, he does "believe he cared just as much for his

people as white folks does for their'n" (155). Due to his recognition of Jim's virtues like kindness and sincerity as a friend and his knowledge of hypocritical people during their rafting journey on the river, Huck is struggling to make his decision on whether telling Miss Watson the truth or stealing Jim out of slavery when Jim is secretly sold by the king, one of the two swindlers. But finally, the past memory reminds Huck of his friendship with Jim and their happy days on the raft, and humanity overcomes his mindset of slavery. Huck chooses to rebel against slavery, the foundation of American Southern society before the Civil War, and decides to help Jim out of slavery – "All right, then, I'll go to hell' – and tore it [the letter] up" (202).

3.3 Huck's Return to Self-consciousness

Huck's return to self-consciousness is Mark Twain's reaction to the spiritual ecological crisis of American people who lead empty, numb, and unchanging lives at the mercy of their instincts in the 19th century. In this sense, Huck's rebellion against social life indicates his return to self-consciousness, that is, his ability to make life decisions out of his own consciousness, not driven by his instinct.

In the novel, Huck does not make a conscious decision until he chooses to debunk the king and duke's fraud to Mary Jane, the daughter and successor of Peter Wilks. All decisions before that are made spontaneously out of instinct. Without the appearance of his father, he would not have chosen to rebel against human society because he has got used to and "liked the new ones, too, a little bit" although he still "liked the old ways best" (43). Before Huck makes up his mind to help Jim get freed from slavery, his adventures on the Mississippi River are merely aimless drifts for the sake of adventure. When he is trapped in troublesome affairs on the land, Huck chooses to be an outsider instead of getting himself involved in them, which he claims to be learned from his father: "If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way" (131). Therefore, in order to protect himself from being harmed by the duke and king, Huck at first chooses to help them conceal their fraud. But later he is deeply moved by Mary, the beautiful and kind girl, and makes the first conscious decision in the novel – revealing

the two swindlers' fraud to her. This decision is an important transition of Huck because for the first time he has a definite purpose of his action, rather than making choices out of his adventurous instinct. It also sows the seed for his later conscious decisions of helping Jim out of slavery and "light[ing] out for the Territory ahead of the rest" (265), and signals his return to self-consciousness.

IV. CONCLUSION

Huckleberry is more than a rebellious boy in this novel. On the one hand, Mark Twain describes the ecological crises of nature, society, and people's spirit in the 19th-century America to readers through Huck's escape from society and adventures on the Mississippi River; on the other hand, Twain hopes to alert American people and arouse their reflection on the ecological problems through Huck's rebellion. The internal connections between Huck's rebellion against society and ecological crises are revealed in the novel: firstly, his rebellion is Twain's appeal for people to attach importance to environmental pollution and reconsider the relation between human and nature; then it is his complaint and reflection on the racial problems left by slavery in the United State after the Civil War; finally, it is his deep concern about the destruction and pollution of American people's spiritual independence caused by capitalist industrialization and social progress. Lu argues that ecological research in literature and art should "realize the reconciliation and harmony between nature, humanity, society and art on the basis of acknowledging the existence of nature, respecting the intrinsic value of nature and admitting the homogeneity between human and nature" (Lu, 2009). Thus, what ecocriticism seeks for in literary studies are not only the criticism of anthropocentrism and the harmonious relation between human beings and nature, but also should be the harmony between human and nature, interpersonal relationships within a society, and humans and their selves altogether. Although idealized by Mark Twain's characterization, Huck's rebellion, to some extent, has realized such a harmony, which has a seminal inspiring significance in contemporary time more than 100 years later when the global ecological problems are becoming more and more serious.

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