

Apr 6th, 2:50 PM - 3:10 PM

## Huckleberry Finn and the Picaresque as Lens Against Debt Peonage

Cory Dahlstrom  
*University of Northern Iowa*

*Let us know how access to this document benefits you*

Copyright © 2016 Cory Dahlstrom

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/agss>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

---

Dahlstrom, Cory, "Huckleberry Finn and the Picaresque as Lens Against Debt Peonage" (2016). *Annual Graduate Student Symposium*. 32.

<https://scholarworks.uni.edu/agss/2016/all/32>

This Open Access Oral Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Annual Graduate Student Symposium by an authorized administrator of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@uni.edu](mailto:scholarworks@uni.edu).

**Offensive Materials Statement:** Materials located in UNI ScholarWorks come from a broad range of sources and time periods. Some of these materials may contain offensive stereotypes, ideas, visuals, or language.

Cory James Dahlstrom

9th Annual Graduate Symposium

University of Northern Iowa

6 April 2016

***Huckleberry Finn* and the Picaresque as Lens Against Debt Peonage**

The following presentation is a brief overview of one chapter of my graduate thesis, which is an explorative undertaking of the American picaresque, and very much a current work in progress. The chapter I've chosen to share with you, analyses America's most well-known picaresque novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. The novel has a long history of controversy and censorship that earns it the title of all-time-most-banned-book. Most of modernday controversy centers around the prolific use of the n-word, and it has been both praised and denigrated for its depiction of race from both white and black critics. Despite the censure, most argue that the protagonist and the tenor of the book are actually anti-racist and support Twain's earlier held abolitionist views. However, the perceived failure and anticlimactic ending leaves readers questioning the novel's message. The ending could also be read as symbolic of society's failures of ending slavery and bringing about equality; in which case, the picaresque is a genre that requires a close reading between the lines and imparts more than one heuristic lesson.

Although published in 1884, the story takes place prior to the Civil War and the abolishment of slavery. The protagonist, is a young white boy named Huck Finn who decides to run away from his abusive, alcoholic, and racist father. Additionally, Huck is depicted as uneducated and rebellious youth who resists being made civilized by the Christian Widow

Douglas and her sister Miss Watson. From the start of his journey, he encounters Jim, a runaway slave, whom he promises to help get to freedom. The duo float down the Mississippi on a raft in an adventurous tale of a moral bildungsroman development. As they travel, the two become friends and Huck's view of Jim as mere property is replaced with love and respect for him as a fellow human being. When a couple of con men sell Jim down river to a small cotton farm, Huck rushes to save him. Once on the farm, he discovers that Jim is being held in a small locked cabin as a captured runaway slave. The plot is further complicated when Tom Sawyer, Huck's former boyhood companion, reappears in the novel and convinces Huck to an overly-complicated, and lengthy rescue of Jim. Despite simply stealing keys or breaking a window to free Jim, Tom imagines a dramatic escape of fictional proportions, all the while knowing that Jim is in actuality a free man given the death of his former owner. The plot to free Jim is intended to take weeks, months, or even years all for the amusement of Tom, who argues that if Jim would play along, "[they] would keep it up all the rest of [their] lives and leave Jim to [their] children to get out" (345) believing Jim would come to like his new enslavement "better and better the more he got used to it" (Twain 345). The entire escapade becomes a burlesque of Tom's romanticism for fiction and the Christian codes that had justified slavery in the south, but the prison-break game greatly jeopardizes Jim's real freedom. In addition to this, Jim's character is once again reduced to a minstrel darky who, as Huck says, "couldn't see no sense in most of it, but . . . allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him" (Twain 344).

For many readers, Tom's elaborate prank and Huck's willingness to delay Jim's freedom greatly undermines the morality of the novel. The entire adventure on the Mississippi becomes obsolete in terms of Jim's escape from slavery. However, such inconsistencies, irony, and satire

are congruent to picaresque genre and furthermore demonstrates a social commentary regarding a postbellum era of continued enslavement of freed African-Americans by means of elaborate schemes and trickery. In other words, Twain recognized the continuation of slavery despite a so-called equality and freedom.

To begin this discussion, I first need to clarify a few key terms: picaresque and debt peonage. Interestingly, both terms are Spanish in origin, and deal significantly with low and impoverished individuals. The picaresque novel is “usually autobiographical, presenting the life story of a rascal of low degree . . . making his living more through his wits than his industry” (Harmon and Holman 381). It is known as the rogue’s tale and often told in episodic manner without structure. The rogue, or picaro as he is called, relies upon trickery and delinquency for survival in a world presented as hostile and hypocritical. Likewise, it is told as an adventure story marked with realism and “affords the author an opportunity for satire of the social classes [of the real world]” (Harmon and Holman 381) Confidence men and tricksters are frequent character types. The genre is most widely known by *Don Quixote*, *Guzman de Alfarache*, *Gil Blas*, *Moll Flanders*, *Catcher and the Rye*, *Breakfast of Champions*, and *Huckleberry Finn*.

Not related to the literary genre, is the term *debt peonage*. Whereas chattel slavery represents the most people’s understanding of slavery: a slave being the personal possession or property of another, debt peonage represents a “modern day” slavery by restricting freedoms and forcing labor or services to repay debt. The indebtedness ensuring peonage can pass from generation to generation, often taking advantage of individuals with limited resources and capital. Following emancipation, former slaves often had little or no property, wealth, or literacy, which indebted them to whites who took advantage of the situation and laws.

Although debt peonage is more specifically related to sharecropping, which kept blacks tied to the land they worked, I'll also argue that the peonage Twain is criticizing includes any form of keeping black men and women in legal bondage and oppression. This includes the convict lease system, vagrancy laws, Black Codes, Jim Crow, and sharecropping. Following the Civil War, the southern states faced tremendous economic problems that were further complicated with the abuses of poor whites, immigrants, and former slaves. In many places it was illegal for blacks to own land and couldn't receive bank loans. Meanwhile, white landowners could no longer afford to pay for the needed labor; therefore, sharecropping became the established solution for both parties.

With sharecropping, a white landowner would provide portions of his land for black families to live and work in exchange for some of the crop's yield. However, this system quickly dissolved into another form of slavery. White landowners held a monopoly on the banking and market for local farmers, which in turn meant many black farmers had to purchase supplies directly from the white landowners. With no other options for credit and supplies, black farmers used future crop yields as collateral to finance loans. Between limited markets and dependency upon the income of future crops, many farmers focused on growing cash crops such as cotton rather than food production; therefore, black farmers borrowed more money on collateral just to feed themselves, and a cycle of continuous debt kept the worker bound to the land.

In an effort to enforce the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, Congress passed the Peonage Act of 1867, defining peonage as the "voluntary or involuntary service or labor of any persons . . . in liquidation of any debt or obligation" and thus outlawing the practice.

However, peonage and slavery continued to be problematic considering another loophole of congressional ruling. The Thirteenth Amendment reads:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

Because of the words, “except as a punishment for a crime” many minority individuals faced continual forced labor as long as it was justified they were “criminal”. Black Codes and harsh vagrancy laws made it increasingly easy for white authorities to put undesirables behind bars. In addition, the criminal justice system and jury selection remained predominantly white until the early Twentieth Century making it increasingly difficult for fair representation.

All the combined problems I have outlined can be summarized in a simple tale of a former slave being held prisoner while his white caretakers play a “game” promising to someday give him his already earned freedom. Thus, the episode of Jim’s confinement and Tom and Huck’s schemes to prolong his captivity under the guise of freeing him represents the elaborate and lasting failures of progressive reconstruction. Twain employed the picaresque because of the qualities of satire and bottom-up storytelling that gives voice to the low classes and marginalized figures of society. The picaresque world is one where authority is hypocritical of its own ethical code and the picaro is unwillingly both victim and perpetrator of the hostilities he wishes to escape. In this respect, I believe Twain understood his own role of being part of the oppressive class even though he sympathized for the people whom his society continued to deny privilege. Picaresque scholar, Christopher Jones says “lies are not merely acts committed immorally by an individual but something that a society perpetuates unawares and dangerously” (111). In this

remark, he describes what Twain called the “deformed conscience” where even the most honest and good natured individual could be corrupted by the society in which he lives. Although tragic in ending, the conclusion of *Huckleberry Finn* is a stark reminder of the hostile and corrupt world that promised freedom but instead only provided more bondage.

Works Cited

Harmon, William, and C. Hugh. Holman. *A Handbook to Literature*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996. Print.

Jones, Christopher Walter. "A Falsifying World: Picaresque Lies, Disloyalties, and Misreading In America." *Dissertation Abstracts International* 56.1 (1995): 191A. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 19 Oct. 2015.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1884. New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1992. Print.