

FILM

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)

Mark Twain

(1835-1910)

adaptation by James Lee (1960)

ANALYSIS

This is a cute Disneylike “family entertainment” that dispenses with nearly all the literary qualities of the classic. It was originally intended to be a musical and retains that look. Jim plays the banjo and sings and Pap Finn is cleanshaven. The adaptation of *Huckleberry Finn* made in 1939 starring Mickey Rooney remains the best of multiple attempts over the years.

This picture was filmed on the Sacramento River with a cast of popular character actors and technicolor artifice. The boy who plays Huck is adequate but stagey like the movie as a whole, but Jim is well portrayed by the former world light heavyweight boxing champion Archie Moore, whose acting is understated, natural and moving. He makes the production a success in dramatizing the affection of the black man and the white boy for each other, transcending race.

Otherwise, the classic is trivialized. Twain’s focus on Huck’s moral transformation through his relationship with Jim is replaced by a “wandering mood”—“We all got it!” Huck is not going to hell for Jim, he is going to New Orleans for adventure. As if Huck were Tom Sawyer. In fact, here Huck is given a selfish motive for helping Jim to escape--fear that Jim might reveal that Huck is not dead. In this story, Huck remains the same throughout, with no moral development.

The movie omits Tom Sawyer, who is essential to the novel as the embodiment of convention and romanticism in contrast to Huck. Consequently Twain’s satire of convention and romanticism is replaced by expression of it. Hollywood Tom Sawyers made this movie. All the humor of the book is lost except in the farcical scenes of the Duke and the King. All the irony, allegory and moral outrage--all lost. Occasional lines are quoted from the novel but most of the dialogue is invented, a plot is added, motives are changed, and episodes are rearranged in ways that lose their meanings.

Jim as portrayed in this movie is politically correct, a slave yet strong, clever, assertive--especially when protecting Huck from seeing his dead Pap--and not above playing a trick on him. At one point he tells Huck he has an “uncommon level head for a white boy.” The word *nigger* occurs only once in the movie, and the word *nigra* once.

Michael Curtiz directed *Casablanca*, perhaps the best screenplay ever written, but his direction in this movie seems hurried and inept at times, as with Jim’s confession that he once mistakenly punished his deaf little daughter Lizabeth. This is the most emotionally powerful scene in the book. A later speech by Moore displays that he was capable of a greater performance in the first scene than Curtiz elicits.

Michael Hollister (2015)