

**The Magic Lamp in American Fiction:
An Archetypal Approach to Mark Twain and Kurt Vonnegut**
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Abstract: This paper examines the symbolism of the magic lamp in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Kurt Vonnegut's *Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp* (1957). This study, which uses an archetypal approach to the texts, demonstrates how the American authors use the literary source of the magic lamp image from the Middle Eastern folktale collection of the Arabian Nights, where the lamp essentially represents Aladdin's dream and a quick route to success. Furthermore, the two authors aim to transform this image into the motif of the American dream in its modern contexts. These two literary works likewise made an effort to use the picture as a vehicle for the issues of slavery, racial prejudice, and class inequality. Additionally, the characters' desire to escape their social and economic constraints is, contrary to what they anticipate, frustrated because of their use of the lamp. Moreover, the wishes of the characters in both texts to escape from their social and economic restraints are, contrary to their expectations, thwarted as a result of their use of the lamp. This negative outcome renders the function of the lamp the opposite to its original function in the literary sources of the texts.

Keywords: Huckleberry Finn, Kurt Vonnegut, magic lamp, Mark Twain

**Whoever rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom
becomes himself a servant.**

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

1. Introduction

The earliest known source of the image of the magic lamp is "The Story of Aladdin, or the Wonderful Lamp" in *The Thousand and One Nights*, also known as *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, a collection of Oriental tales of uncertain date and authorship whose narratives have captured the imagination of readers, thinkers, and writers of the Western world. The story tells the fortunes of a lad named Aladdin, who lives with his poor widow mother. He is approached by a mysterious stranger who poses as his uncle and persuades him to enter an enchanted cave to fetch an old oil lamp. The boy gains access to the cave and finds a treasure trove inside. He retrieves the lamp but refuses to hand it over to the stranger, who turns out to be a magician. The latter grows furious and shuts Aladdin in the cave to perish.

Unawares, Aladdin summons the genie of a ring and is helped out of the cave. As the plot unravels, Aladdin accidentally rubs the lamp he has brought home with him, and another and more powerful genie appears. He asks the genie to grant him a number of wishes, including his wish to marry Badroulboudour, the sultan's daughter, and his wish to have a golden palace built for her. All his wishes are granted by the genie, and the married couple lives happily ever after (Mack 1995:325-360).

The notion of the magic lamp is inseparable from that of the genie or jinni (Caraccioli 1988:28). The figure of the genie is generally defined as "one of a class of supernatural beings" (Coon 1951:355). In Arabic, the word "jinni" is the singular form of "jinn," which refers to demons and spirits collectively (Ferm 1945:396). It particularly denotes a

spirit or demon endowed with supernatural power. In ancient belief, the jinn were associated with the destructive forces of nature. In Islamic tradition, they were corporeal spirits similar to men in appearance but having certain supernatural powers, especially those of changing in size and shape. Capable of both good and evil, the jinn were popular in the literatures of the Middle East, notably in the stories of the Thousand and One Nights ("The Columbia Encyclopedia" 2004)

In Islamic demonology, the jinn comprise "an order of spirits lower than the angels with the power to appear in human or animal forms, and to exercise supernatural influence" (Ferm 1945: 396). Since the jinn are presented in pre-Islamic and Islamic culture as unforgiving and able to cause harm if injured, humans are therefore advised to "be careful not to offend the *jinn*" (Eliseev 1963:52).

Although the word "jinni" is the etymology of "genie," a distinction is often made between the two in American English. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, "genie" and "jinni" can be used interchangeably, but the former word also has the added sense of a "supernatural creature who does one's bidding when summoned" ("American Heritage Dictionary", 2000).

The symbolism of the magic lamp in the tale of Aladdin derives partly from the general significance of the world portrayed in *The Arabian Nights* as a realm of wonder, enchantment, pleasure, adventure, richness, lusciousness, and fulfillment. It helps the protagonist construct "a magnificent palace ... without parallel in the world" (Horta 2017: 50). It is an Eastern realm that is often believed to stand in contrast to reality. *The Arabian Nights*, therefore, offer an alternative imaginary environment where enchanted caves, magic lamps, magic rings, and magic carpets make human existence easier and man's dreams realizable. The image of the magic lamp would hence evoke these associations, remind one of this contrast, and bring to mind man's mundane and futile existence. It has been noted that the story of Aladdin has "contributed more to the amusement and delight of every succeeding generation...than all the works which the industry and the imagination of the Europeans have provided" (Caraccioli 1988: 1).

On the other hand, the effortless shift from the hand-to-mouth existence led by Aladdin and his mother to a life of luxury and ready-made money lies at the core of the symbolic attribute of the lamp as an undemanding agent of man's wish fulfillment. The magic lamp, "which had only to be rubbed to evoke the Jinn bearing chests of gold," represents the human desire to escape hardships and return to a prelapsarian state of bliss in which man did not have to work (Porter, Davis and Maurice 1931: 380). It is, therefore, in a sense, an existence sought by those who cling to their pipe dreams and are unwilling to face such hardships. It further represents the human wish to transform one's environment rather than make an effort to adapt to it. The meaning of the verb "aladdinize," which first appeared in English in 1861 (Shipley 1945: 244), is to transform an object through the power of magic rather than through hard work. As Tagore (1961:258) points out, the quest for a magic lamp is only embarked upon by those who are consumed with delusion, greed and sloth:

With this deadening of the mind, delusion comes easy and any promise of an Aladdin's lamp makes the greedladen heart throb. It must be admitted that there is nothing to beat Aladdin's lamp, if only we could have it. However, the man whose greed is great and capacity feeble would not admit this. A mere promise of the lamp would rouse him to eager exertion; and to point out the futility of his hopes would make him yell hard, as though he were being robbed of all his property.

The absence of toil, the abundance of wealth, and the life of ease and luxury that the owner of the magic lamp can enjoy strip the tale of Aladdin and his magic lamp of poetic justice and render the protagonist too imperfect for a hero. Tatar (1987:87) observes that Aladdin represents "the prototype of the undeserving hero who succeeds in living happily ever after, begins his rise to wealth and power under less than auspicious circumstances."

Applying these archetypal attributes to American society, McKenzie (1997:113) believes that "the future for most Americans may not match the world of Aladdin" and that those Americans who try to become as fortunate as Aladdin are merely engaged in "economic dreaming". He recommends hard work and perseverance, rather than magic and wishful thinking, as a means of achieving one's objectives.

Life is simply not simple when opportunities abound, and it can be made extraordinarily complex when opportunities suddenly expand, an observation that can make for a nontrivial sense of unease or fear – and, maybe, of wishful thinking that a simpler life were possible. The genie of vast and expanding opportunities, however, is out of the magic lamp ... this genie offers untold wishes that people around the globe, Americans included, must consider very carefully. Results will not be achieved by magic. Rather they will emerge from a lot of effort, even many failures (McKenzie 1997:229)

Furthermore, the abrupt shift in the fortune of the lamp's owner indicates a lack of maturity, experience, and development, all of which are fundamental requirements for the natural and full development of an individual. Likewise, countries that swiftly leap, rather than slowly develop, into large nations can be said to lack these characteristics. Porter (1910:194-95) maintains that this is what has happened in America. The sudden rise in American industry and American economy left American citizens undeveloped and only partially mature. Porter has aptly stated that by the following sentences:

A nation in a day is our record. We were born into cities, governments, laws, comforts, pleasures and schools. Aladdin's lamp has never accomplished anything so wonderful, and we rubbed our eyes and were amazed because everything had been prepared for us. This very munificence has hampered us. We have not had that development as individuals and as a people that would best fit us to grapple with each succeeding obstacle. Therefore, we must patiently though painfully start from the beginning and travel over the same road that each race has traveled, because individuals and races develop alike, and the same conditions that attach to the growth of one race, attach to that of all others.

For the reasons outlined above, the prolific nineteenth-century Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) underlines the hazardous paradox involved in the possession of the magic lamp. He states that "whoever rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom becomes himself a servant" (as cited in Swenson 1941:57).

On the archetypal plane, Palumbo (1986:12) regards the tale of the magic lamp as one among several tales in *The Arabian Nights* that exemplify "symbolic deaths and rebirths". Thus, while symbolic death is clear when the enraged magician entombs Aladdin after the latter descends into the subterranean dark cave and refuses to surrender the lamp, rebirth is discerned in Aladdin's emergence from the cave.

Although the diffusion of the influence of *The Arabian Nights* in Western culture has mainly been the contribution of translators, credit should also be given to travelers, moralists, mythographers, folklorists, men of letters, critics, painters, illustrators, and, recently, filmmakers (Caraccioli 1988: xvi).

The Arabian Nights was introduced in Europe by Antoine Galland (1646-1715), a French Orientalist, whose French translation of the original Arabic work appeared between 1704 and 1717 (Mack 1995: xiii.). Ever since, the work has been a major source of inspiration and delight in the Western world (Allen 2000:4). Galland's French translation of the Arabic work was "enjoyed and imitated by generations of readers in England and America" (Mack 1995:1).

The tale of Aladdin and his magic lamp was also retold by the Brothers Grimm with very slight variations, as in the change of the sultan's daughter's name to Halima (Grimm and W. Grimm 2014: 508).

2. The magic lamp in Twain and Vonnegut's fiction

The presentation of the magic lamp as a symbol in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) by Mark Twain (1835-1910) is in line with the themes of slavery, freedom, and democracy that are discussed in the novel.

Since the novel is a sequel to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), it begins with an account of the incidents that led to the current situation. Huck, the reader is told, managed to run away from his tyrannical father and was given to Widow Douglas to be raised as her own son. She is living with her sister, Miss Watson, who has a black slave named Jim. The three main characters – Huck, Jim, and Tom – engage in various adventures that end with Jim gaining his liberty and Huck overcoming conventional racial prejudices.

The magic lamp episode in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is related in the third chapter of the novel. As Huck is sitting in his room at Widow Douglas's house, he hears Tom's voice outside and sneaks out the window to meet him. Tom is organizing a new robber band, and he takes Huck to a cave at the edge of a hilltop where they join other lads and play robbers: "We hadn't robbed nobody, hadn't killed any people, but only just pretended" (Twain 1918:17). Tom tells the boys that a caravan of Arabs and Spaniards with camels and elephants bearing diamonds and poorly guarded will be camping nearby, and their task is to lie in hiding for them and then, armed with broomsticks and laths, rob them. When the boys ran down the hill to commit the robbery, they found no caravan. They only saw schoolchildren enjoying their picnic (Twain 1918:17-18). When Huck tells Tom that he did not see any Arabs or camels, Tom says that certain magicians have made the caravan look like a school picnic. When Huck suggests that they should have attacked the magicians instead, Tom calls him a "numskull" (Twain 1918:19) and says that the magicians would summon genies to kill them all. Huck asks if there is a way to get the genies on their side, and Tom tells him that the only way to do that is to use a magic lamp and summon the genie inside it. The genie of the lamp would be a slave to the lamp owner and would grant all the owner's wishes (Twain 1918:19). Huck is attracted to this idea and decides to try it out for himself. He managed to get an old tin lamp and kept rubbing it, but no genie came out. Only then did he realize that Tom was lying to him about the lamp and about the caravan (Twain 1918:20). For this reason, the magic lamp here clearly stands for Huck's desire to have his material wishes fulfilled and retains its original symbolism in *The Arabian Nights*. This symbolic aspect is confirmed by Mark Twain's reference to the lamp elsewhere. At a time when Twain worked as a newspaper correspondent, he fell in love with Olivia Langdon and wished to marry her. He felt he could not support a family on his meagre income, particularly because Olivia came from a well-to-do family. With these problems in mind, he wrote to Mrs. Fairbanks, telling her jokingly that he could not possibly marry Olivia, saying, "I can't turn an inkstand into Aladdin's lamp" (as cited in Camfield 1994: 89).

Moreover, the magic lamp episode in the novel also sheds light on the difference between Tom and Huck. Although Tom is already familiar with the idea of the magic lamp, he does not test it, perhaps because he knows it would not work.

He does not want to face the truth that fact differs from fiction. Matthews (1991:23) observes that since Tom is “given to books,” he “lets his imagination run on robbers and pirates and genies, with a perfect understanding with himself that, if you want to get fun out of this life, you must never hesitate to make believe very hard”. Like Don Quixote, whom Tom refers to, he would rather live in a world of fantasy than submit to the plain and bare facts of life (Twain 1918:18). Huck, on the other hand, is an empiricist by nature. He never hesitates to verify others’ premises. When Tom tells him a genie can be made to appear if a lamp is rubbed, he tries it out on a real lamp. When no genie appears, he concludes that Tom is lying. Huck’s way of thinking is therefore logical and experimental.

The magic lamp episode also reveals Huck’s quest for a reliable source of reward for his pains, especially after discovering that the efforts he exerted at the requests of Miss Watson and Tom proved fruitless. When Miss Watson, for example, instructs Huck on his prayers, she tells him that if he prays daily, he will get anything he wishes. He, therefore, begins to pray every day to get a hook for his fishing line, but is disappointed to find that his prayers are not answered and to hear Miss Watson call him a fool (Twain 1918:15). Huck is left baffled by Miss Watson’s refusal to explain why. The only conclusion a boy of his age could arrive at on his own is that Miss Watson is not honest with him: “No, says I [sic] to myself, there ain’t nothing in it” (Twain 1918:15). Neither Miss Watson nor her sister explained to him the nature and the way of Providence. This confuses him further (Twain 1918:16). The magic lamp, then, comes as another attempt at finding certainty and honesty amidst a world of lies and make-believe. Unfortunately, it too turns into another lie.

The magic lamp is also associated with the theme of slavery in the novel. Huck rejects the idea of the genie’s submission to his master. When Tom tells him that the owner of the lamp can have its genie construct a palace for him, Huck replies,

Well ... I think they are a pack of flatheads for not keeping the palace themselves 'stead of fooling them away like that. And what's more – if I was one of them I would see a man in Jericho before I would drop my business and come to him for the rubbing of an old tin lamp (Twain 1918:19-20)

Both Huck and Tom, as Leary (1960:29) puts it, are “natural men enslaved.” Huck is shackled by the American social system and the values of civilization which “finally make ... culprits of all men” (Leary 1960:29). Twain satirizes the American institution through both characters. Huck and Tom are “two accusing fingers pointing down the decades of America’s history” (Leary 1960: 43-44). Huck’s objection to the genie’s blind obedience reveals Twain’s use of the magic lamp to satirize the double standards of democracy and its backfiring effect on the individual. The whole novel is an expression of “the inescapable dilemma of democracy” (Leary 1960: 28).

Huck’s identification with the genie of the lamp is rooted in his own wish for freedom. If he stays with his scapegrace father, Pap Finn, he has to suffer his brutal beatings, sadism, despicable behavior, and drunken rages, which breed fratricidal

wishes in the boy's mind. When a dead body was found floating in the river, Huck wished it was his father's and was disappointed when he later realized it was an old woman. The idea that his missing father is still alive inspires in Huck the fear of returning to the former beatings and torture: "I judged the old man would turn up again by and by, though I wished he wouldn't" (Twain 1918:16-17). This wish for freedom is cherished by Jim as well, and it is part of the theme of the American dream in the novel¹. Nichols (1992:211) states that "Huck Finn and Jim in their flight from Pap and Miss Watson are seeking the American dream". Williams (1992:228) likewise associates this wish with the American dream and the themes of hypocrisy, racism, and false democracy that Twain exposed in this novel and which are "of value in understanding American civilization".

Huck's fears of his father's reappearance do not indicate that his present situation with Widow Douglas and her sister is any better. He has to endure their insistence on propriety and respectability, which has turned him into a social rebel against such social values. He tells the reader that "it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal, regular and decent the widow was in all her ways" (Twain 1918:2). In fact, it was so hard to endure the two women that he wished to die and go to hell for a change. His intention to go to hell after death was reinforced after hearing that Miss Watson was planning to go to heaven. He did not wish to be with her in the same place: "I couldn't see no advantage in going where she was going, so I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it" (Twain 1918:3). For this reason, Huck finds in Jim a fellow sufferer. When he discovers that Miss Watson intends to sell Jim, he tries to help him move to the free states, where slavery is prohibited. Ironically, the only thing that gives Jim his freedom, at last, is Miss Watson's death. The probability that Huck could have been an African American himself could account for his desire to liberate Jim and his objection to the blind obedience of the genie².

Another American novelist and short story writer who adopted the image of the magic lamp is Kurt Vonnegut (1922-2007). The lamp is the main symbol in his short story "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp," which was written in June 1957 and appeared in the collection *Canary in a Cathouse* (1961). As a symbol, the magic lamp undergoes a metamorphosis in the story. While at the beginning it stands for the protagonist's hopes and dreams, at the end it turns to symbolize disillusion, death, suppression, and racial discrimination.

Vonnegut starts the story by introducing the protagonist, Hal Irwin, who works at a brokerage company. Although Hal had accumulated a fortune as a stockbroker by trading stocks and bonds for others and by taking advantage of the price fluctuations to buy and sell stocks, he stashed his wealth and never told anyone about it. "Not even his wife," Mary, who is ten years his junior, was in the know (Vonnegut 1961: 282). Instead of telling Mary the truth, he made her believe that the money he earned was hardly enough and that they were as "poor as Job's turkey" (Vonnegut 1961: 282). For this reason, they had to live modestly "in a shotgun house down in all the soot at Seventeenth and Illinois Street" (Vonnegut 1961: 282). Moreover, despite the fact that their marriage is two years old, he only took her out six times.

The narrator, however, assures the reader that Hal was not “stingy” (Vonnegut 1961: 282). He chose to hoard this fortune because he intended it to be a surprise for his wife: “He was saving up to buy her all the happiness a girl could ever ask for, and he was going to hand it to her in one fell swoop” (Vonnegut 1961:282). The method that Hal devised to break this happy news to Mary is both interesting and ingenious. He planned to return home from work one day and claim that he had just found a magic lamp like the one the fictional character Aladdin once possessed. He would then rub the lamp, and a genie would appear. The couple would then make their wishes, which the genie of the lamp would obediently fulfill, to the astonishment of Hal’s wife. With this aim in mind, Hal

built his magic lamp in his basement in Indianapolis in the summer of 1929. It was supposed to look like Aladdin’s lamp. It was an old tin teapot with a piece of cotton stuck in the spout for a wick. Hal bored a hole in it for a doorbell button, which he hooked up to two flash-light batteries and a buzzer inside ... You’d rub the teapot as if it were a magic lamp, and you’d push the button on the side. The buzzer’d go off, and a servant, if you had one, would come and ask you what you wished. (Vonnegut 1961: 282)

To achieve this, Hal needed a person to play the part of a genie, preferably a person with a dark complexion to make the trick more plausible. It happened that a friend of his had a black servant named Ella Rice, who was in desperate need of extra money. She was expecting and had no other financial support. Besides, she did not find the job that Hal offered quite tiring:

All she had to do was put on a turban when the time came, when Hal showed Mary his magic lamp, and rubbed it and ran its buzzer. Then she would say, “I am the jinni. What do you want?” His first wish would be for a Marmon town car. It would already be parked out front. Every time he made a wish, starting with that one, Ella Rice would say, “You got it.” (Vonnegut 1961: 283)

Hal had already bought a Marmon town car and planned to park it outside the house on the day assigned. He also ordered a fancy French chateau to be constructed on the fashionable North Meridian Street. He intended it to be his second wish. The choice of a house and a car as initial wishes is meant by the author to “debunk dreams of happiness found in the domestic Utopias of the fully-gadged house and car in the trendiest suburb” (Reed 1997:148). Contrary to Hal’s expectations, however, things do not turn out well. Instead of improving the couple’s life, the appearance of the lamp and its genie destroys it. Although Mary credulously falls for the trick, she begins to realize her husband’s materialism and inconsideration of others’ needs and well-being. Her initial excitement about the magic lamp soon turns into disappointment. What Hal never realizes about his wife is her intolerance of racial discrimination. She feels that her husband is exhausting and exploiting the pregnant black genie. She sympathizes with Ella, whom she regards as “a human being in awful trouble” (Vonnegut 1961:284). Mary’s childless marriage draws her

close to Ella's plight and her unborn baby, particularly when Ella goes into labor right before Mary's eyes. What Mary "was really upset about was the humiliating use he was making of her new friend Ella" (Vonnegut 1961: 285).

For this reason, Mary tries to dissuade Ella from granting any further wishes. When her husband, for example, rubs the lamp and wishes for a new house, Mary interrupts and tells Ella, "You don't have to do this. Don't answer him" (Vonnegut 1961: 285). Even when Mary sees him having one of his wishes granted, she addresses her words of gratitude "to Ella, not to Hal" (Vonnegut 1961:285). Hal expected his wife to treat Ella as a magic lamp's owner would treat a serving genie, but his expectations fell short when he noticed that the "two women, one white, one black, stayed in the living room and talked about their lives instead" (Vonnegut 1961: 284).

Another personality trait of Mary's that Hal is ignorant of is her indifference to wealth. This has been a major case of misunderstanding between them. Hal always thinks that his wife "wanted to be rich" despite the fact that she "did her best to convince him that wasn't true" (Vonnegut 1961: 282). By placing a higher value on spiritual and emotional matters, she stands as the exact foil to her materialistic husband, and, like several of Vonnegut's fictional characters, she is used by Vonnegut "to strike a major blow against capitalist ideology" (Marvin 2002:111).

For this reason, the Irwins' rapid move from rags to riches does not fill her life with joy. She rather regards it as an embarrassment: "She hated the new house so much, and the gigantic car, which embarrassed her, that she couldn't even like Hal anymore" (Vonnegut 1961:286). For her, love, understanding, and piety rank above affluence. Being a philanthropist, she constantly reminds her husband of "the poor millions of folks ... who didn't have a roof over their heads or anything to eat" (Vonnegut 1961:282). She, therefore, renounces the magic lamp for causing this disappointment and wishes it out of her life: "Mary said that she wouldn't want it, that Hal could throw his magic lamp out the window, as far as she was concerned" (Vonnegut 1961: 285).

Hal's situation also alters for the worse after the arrival of the magic lamp. He soon goes out of business as stock prices plummet, leaving him penniless. His debts grow "more than everything he owned" (Vonnegut 1961:287). Thus, Mary's wish that all previous wishes be revoked is the last wish in the story and is eventually materialized. Hal sinks into despair and finally goes "out a seventh-story window without a parachute." It was the period of the Great Depression in America and, as Vonnegut puts it, "All over the country, unloved men in his [Hal's] line of work were going out windows without parachutes" (Vonnegut 1961: 287). This euphemistic rendering of the serious and fatal act of suicide is typical of Vonnegut's black humor for which he is well known (Nilsen and D. Nilson 2000:124). It is also a reflection of the author's own pessimism and disillusionment with the contemporary social, economic, and political conditions in America and of his personal and domestic tragedies. He

witnessed the wrecking of the American economy and his own family's normal functioning by the Great Depression, the

suicide of his mother, the chaos of war, and the nightmarish
incineration of Dresden (Reed 2000: 71)

Such painful experience has also lent his fiction a sense of melancholy, which Hume (1998:221) attributes to the fact that Vonnegut is “pessimistic about government and social organization”. Andrew Hicks (2021) refers to Vonnegut’s belief that “Humans can commit suicide because the conscious system can interfere with the organic system. But the autopoietic system of consciousness cannot think of death as the last autopoietic element” (206). In other words, it is when individual expectations are thwarted by social restrictions that humans contemplate suicide as the last resort in an attempt to seek a resolution to this dilemma.

After her husband’s death, Mary moves to her father’s farmhouse in the suburbs of Crawfordsville. Ella goes to the “black church” (Vonnegut 1961:287), the only place where she is given food and lodging and where her son can be baptized. Mary visits her and feels sorry for the black people’s lot. She asks her father back at the farm about the fate of “the homeless people in the black church” (Vonnegut 1961: 287). The only reply her father could make, with which Vonnegut closes his story, is, “The poor take care of the poor” (Vonnegut 1961:287), meaning that in a capitalist and industrialist society, the poor have nowhere to go and no one to turn to for help but their kind.

The role that the magic lamp plays in Vonnegut’s story reverses that found in the original Oriental tale of Aladdin. While in the original, the lamp eventually improves the couple’s life emotionally and financially, in the American story, it emotionally detaches the husband from his wife and ironically causes a financial disaster and death.

This irony of circumstance likewise applies to Ella, the genie of the lamp. In Vonnegut’s story, the lamp’s genie is no longer the wish master, capable of making all human dreams come true and always willing to assist the lamp’s owner. The author presents the genie as a figure who desperately needs medical assistance and financial support. The master-servant relationship in Aladdin’s tale is reversed, for it is Hal and Mary who pay Ella and have to take her to the city hospital, “the only one that admitted black people” (Vonnegut 1961: 285).

The fact that the lamp’s genie is a black woman is a significant comment on racism and sexism. Hal preferred to hire a black woman to play the genie because he “was scared of black men” (Vonnegut 1961: 284). Hal did not even attend with his wife the christening ceremony of Ella’s baby boy at the black church, even though Ella chose to name her son Irwin after Hal’s family name. It is worth noting that the story was written at a time when racial segregation was reaching a peak in American history. As Marvin (2002:132) states, the 1960s were times of change in America, for racial issues were questioned by African Americans more than before. The decade began with peaceful protests that soon turned into riots that spread over many cities. Furthermore, Ella’s child was the fruit of an illicit relation with a boyfriend who “had beaten her up when he found she was pregnant” (Vonnegut 1961: 284). The circumstances of her pregnancy thus shed important light on the abuse of women in Vonnegut’s time.

The rebirth motif in the original tale from *The Arabian Nights* discussed earlier is absent in Vonnegut's adaptation. While Aladdin's entombment is followed by salvation and financial, social and matrimonial success, Hal's death marks the end of Vonnegut's story. This departure from the original tale reveals Vonnegut's message in "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp" – namely that there could be no hope of salvation and success in a society which is governed by the values of materialism, capitalism, sexism and racism. In this respect, the magic lamp becomes a symbol of the American dream, providing the dreamers with an initial hope of success only to lead them to disillusion³. Reed (1997:57) observes that "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp" is a work that

explodes the notion that the buying of a dream can suddenly create happiness and fulfillment. This story gains much greater significance, however, from the time of its setting. It effectively comments on the widely-held belief of the 1920s that dreams could be bought.

3. Conclusion

Although three-quarters of a century stand between Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Kurt Vonnegut's "Hal Irwin's Magic Lamp," the symbolic attributes of the magic lamp in both narratives are alike. In both, there is a credulous belief on the part of the characters not only in the historicity of the legend but also in the possibility of its recurrence in America. Furthermore, both authors manipulate the image of the magic lamp to express themes of slavery, racial discrimination, and class distinction. Huck and the Irwin alike are initially excited about their magic lamp, the wonder lamp, but soon come to realize that, unlike Aladdin's lamp, it only piles on their agony as none of their wishes could actually be granted. Huck wants to be free of his abusive father, who goes so far as to literally imprison him in a cabin. He yearns for freedom so that he can think independently and do what his heart tells him to do, but he fails. On the other hand, the failure is so clear with Hall, who tells his wife that he is building her a magic house as his wife likes Jeanie instead of him. Both fail to be servants instead of being the Lord's spirit. They are complete losers, unlike Aladdin, who, by rubbing the magic lamp of freedom, becomes himself a spirit of the Lord. Finally, the test of the magic lamp in both stories is motivated by the characters' desire to escape from social and economic restraints, but it eventually results in their failure and disappointment.

Endnotes

¹ For the theme of the American dream in the novel, see Mensh, Harry and Elaine Mensh. (2000). *Black, White, and Huckleberry Finn: Re-Imagining the American Dream*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

² For the view that Huck was black, see Fishkin, Shelley Fisher (Autum 1996). 'Huck's black voice'. *The Wilson Quarterly*, 20 (4): 81-86. For the

view that Huck was a “white boy,” see Conroy, Pat.(November 1999). 'A Muddied Mississippi misadventure'. *The American Enterprise*,10 (6): 70.

³ For the American dream in American literature, see Carpenter, Frederic I. (1955). *American Literature and the Dream*. New York: Philosophical Library.

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