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Sociology, Slavery



Brendan Long Woldendorp D Period 5/6 11. 27. 12 Huck Finn Essay:
Overcoming Society's Influence People develop into individuals due to many outside influences. The most significant influence on people is society itself. However, while society influences opinions and ideas of people, the most important morals that people have remain intact despite the disparaging effects of society. Mark Twain demonstrates through the character "Huck" in "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" that society corrupts the beliefs and opinions of people, but fails to overshadow their fundamental morals and principles. The effects of society on individuals are clear in the presence of racism in Huck Finn. Huck is a young boy, whose opinions are all based on what society has taught him. He grew up practically an orphan, with a nomadic, drunk father, so his ideas have been instilled on him by his friends, and society, rather than by his family. Society's dehumanization of the slaves is shown in a conversation between Huck and Aunt Sally. The two converse over if anyone was hurt on the boat, and Huck tells Aunt Sally, "No'm. Killed a n****r" (232). Huck's statement signifies that a slave had died, however, Aunt Sally replies, "Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt" (232). This statement so blatantly dehumanizes black people that it shows how white society treats black people as lesser beings. Aunt Sally shows how white society overlooks black struggle and even death, in its selfish, Darwinist view of the world. This dehumanization also causes the slaves to become easy targets as the reason for problems in white society. In "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn", the townspeople originally blame Jim for the "death" of Huck. This shows the persecution of the slaves, because not only are they viewed as less than human, they also are blamed for

everything that goes wrong. This is easy to do for the whites, because the slaves have almost no rights and thus are easy to blame when fault cannot be placed anywhere else. Huck's society is undeniably racist and the novel shows that societal racism has helped to shape Huck's own beliefs when he says to himself, " It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a n****r" (97). In this situation, the fact that he cannot simply " humble himself" to a slave shows the same racist mindset that is omnipresent in Huck's society. He views slaves quite clearly as lesser, and as a result feels guilty about granting them any respect. Society has corrupted Huck and has had a negative effect on his behavior as made clear by the racism that Huck has learned. All in all, racism is a clear negative ideal that is all-pervading force in Huck's society, which unconsciously impacts affects Huck's character. The spread of racism shows the negative impact that the society has on Huck, but many predicaments are created as a result of decisions Huck is forced to make during the plot of the story. These decisions show Huck's ability to have his internal morals persevere despite the destructive impact of society. First, there is a situation on the river where Huck is told that he must let them search his raft and debates between protecting his friend and following the law by turning him in. Rather than doing the right thing legally by turning in Jim, he decides to cover for Jim by saying " I wish you would, because it's pap that's there, and maybe you'd help me tow the raft ashore where the light is. He's sick-and so is mam and Mary Ann. " (100-1). The men then leave Huck alone, fearing smallpox, and give him a twenty dollar gold piece for his voyage. This lie shows that Huck values relationships over blindly following the law, and shows how he acts

with his heart and disregards the ideals of society when they affect those whom he is close to. Another decision must be made when Jim is sold by the Dauphin for only forty dollars. Huck decides to go and rescue Jim, saying " I don't want to blow on nobody; and I ain't got no time to blow, nohow; I got to turn out and find my n****r" (228). This shows the fact that Huck has gone from treating Jim as an inhuman slave to valuing him as a friend. Originally, society had set Huck's opinion of Jim, but now, his morals have caused him to be loyal to the man that has become his friend. Huck has turned from disregarding the slave, Jim, to being legitimate friends with the man, Jim. This idea of Huck's morals overcoming the negative ideas of society is also present in situations not related to slavery. For example, when Huck is with the Duke and Dauphin, and he has seen them con countless people, they come to the situation involving the Wilks. The Duke and Dauphin have taken advantage of grieving people and conned them out of their money. For Huck, this is where they cross the line. Huck then resolves to " steal [the money] and hide it; and by and by, when I'm away down the river I'll write a letter and tell Mary Jane where it's hid" (186). Huck could easily have continued to live a lie, and travelled with the Duke and Dauphin while benefitting from their stolen money, but his inherent ethics led him to do the right thing and return the money. This proves that Huck thinks for himself and is not completely directed by what other people tell him to do. He shows his individuality in his decision making and shows that while society shapes decisions, it does not make them. Mark Twain presents through " The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" that society strongly influences the beliefs and opinions, but fails to dictate people's basic underlying morals, as shown

in this story through the character " Huck". Society causes Huck to think a certain way is right and creates moral dilemmas on what is socially valued versus what Huck himself believes. Huck Finn exhibits that if one makes decisions based on what they personally believe in, they can overcome the detrimental influences of society and be a true individual. Works Cited Twain, Mark. Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. New York: Signet Classic, 2008. Print.