

A collision of conscience and morality

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Huckleberry Finn is a young boy who struggles with complex issues such as empathy, guilt, fear, and morality in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. There are two different sides to Huck. One is the subordinate, easily influenced boy whom he becomes when under the "guide" of the racist and immoral Tom Sawyer. His other persona surfaces when he is on his own, thinking of his friendship with Jim and agonizing over which to trust: his heart or his conscience. When Huck's ongoing inner struggle with his own duality forces him to make difficult and controversial choices, the reader sees a boy in the throes of moral development. And it is, indeed, a struggle. For, although Huck believes in the rules of the rigidly racist and provincial society in which he lives, a deeper and sounder part of him keeps making decisions that break those very same rules. Due to the society in which Huck was brought up, his racist mindset is apparent throughout the novel. Huck makes many derogatory statements towards Jim, and even though he doesn't realize what he's saying is wrong, Huck's words leave the reader with a strong impression of his socially embedded racism. Towards the end of the novel, when Jim risks his freedom to get Tom to a doctor, Huck describes Jim as being "white inside" (207). This statement, although intended as a compliment, in fact reveals Huck's deeply entrenched beliefs about blacks' inferiority. Jim is not the only slave that Huck thinks of as lower than whites. When Jim is telling Huck about how he plans on stealing his children back once he becomes free, Huck expresses his horror: It most froze me to hear such talk...Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children – children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me

no harm (67). Huck's words prove that he thinks of slaves only as property. When he thinks of Jim's family members, he does not associate them with his idea of what a white family is; he only views them as a legally broken-up group of "bought and paid for" relatives. Besides viewing slaves as property, Huck shows in one brief conversation with his Aunt Sally that he doesn't even see blacks as real people. Late in the novel, when Huck tells his aunt that his boat ran aground, she jumps in, saying "' Good gracious! Anybody hurt?'" Huck responds with "' No'm. Killed a nigger,'" to which Aunt Sally replies "' Well, it's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt'" (167). Not only does this exchange show Huck's racism, but also that of the society in which he lives. Huck's racism is not only apparent in his words, but also in his actions, which a reader sees in the form of tricks played on Jim. In the beginning of the novel, when Huck and Tom are sneaking out, Huck agrees to play a trick on Jim by hanging Jim's hat above him on a tree branch. When Jim discovers it there, he makes up all kind of stories about witches that carried him all over the land. Huck never says a word to Jim about what really happened. The important thing to realize about this practical joke is that it was not Huck's idea, nor was Huck involved in the actual carrying out of the trick. Huck blindly follows behind Tom and never utters one word of remorse about the joke. When Huck is away from Tom, Huck responds quite differently to the playing of a practical joke on Jim. Huck tricks Jim when they are on Jackson's island together. When Jim gets bitten by a rattlesnake after Huck puts the snake's dead mate on Jim's bed, Huck feels quite guilty. He quietly throws the two snakes away, saying, " I warn't going to let Jim find out it was my fault, not if I could help it." (40). In this instance, Huck is on his

own, without the influence of Tom, and so the outcome of this circumstance is that Huck feels remorse for his actions. This scene lets the reader have a peek at Huck's morality and sound heart. The next trick Huck plays on Jim creates a lot of genuine fear and tension for Jim. It is right after Huck and Jim have gotten lost in the fog and Huck finds and climbs onto the raft while Jim is sleeping. Jim is so relieved to find Huck back safe and sound that he hugs and squeezes him for a long time until Huck tells him that they were never separated. Jim believes this until he sees the evidence that they were, and then he reprimands Huck: . . . my heart wuz most broke bekase you wuz los'...and all you wuz thinkin' about wuz how you could make a fool out uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's and makes 'em ashamed (65). This amazing speech came from a slave, a supposed inferior to Huck. Nonetheless, Huck feels terrible and says, " It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger – but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (65). This is the first time that Huck ever apologizes to or shows empathy towards Jim. In his previous tricks, he either didn't care at all, or just felt guilty, but here he shows that he is actually concerned about Jim's feelings. This progression in Huck shows that his morals are developing along with his friendship with Jim. As Huck and Jim's friendship develops, so does Huck's empathy for Jim. When Huck encounters the two men on the river who ask if Huck's friend is white or black, Huck silently struggles between following his conscience by turning Jim in, or trusting his loyal heart. Huck knows what will happen to Jim if he turns him in. With Jim's fate on his hands, Huck decides to " give up tryin" (68), and so tells the men that his

companion is white. This shows Huck's incredible loyalty and also his ability to put himself in Jim's shoes. What would Jim do if the situation were turned around? This question causes Huck to empathize with Jim once again. However, it is the first time that Huck's empathy makes him commit to keeping Jim safe, which shows another step in his moral development. The time in the novel where the reader no longer doubts Huck's morality comes at the climax. Huck has an incredibly important decision to make: turning Jim in or rescuing him from the Phelps'. He stands there, holding the letter, faced with the decision between deciding whom to save. If he sends the letter to Miss Watson, he will be free from "sin," whereas if he helps Jim escape, he has to "be ready to get down and lick (anyone's) boots for shame" (160). Simultaneously, Huck sees the punishment of Jim in his own mind, he sees how happy Jim could be, and he recognizes his power to give Jim something which Jim has desired his entire life. Huck's empathy is so strong at this point, that combined with his loyalty and true heart, it causes him to rip up the letter with the astounding exclamation, "'All right, then I'll go to Hell'" (162). The fact that Huck believes he is giving up his soul for Jim's freedom leaves no doubt in a reader's mind that Huck's morality has truly developed over the course of the novel. One last example of Huck empathizing with Jim comes when Jim is so homesick that he is crying and moaning to himself about his far-away children. Huck sees him in this pitiful state and says, "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their'n. It don't seem natural but I reckon it's so. He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was" (117). Huck feels bad for Jim when he sees how horrible it is for Jim to be so far away from home. He even tries to make Jim feel better by

talking to him about his family. The moment Huck does this, it is clear that Huck wants to help – Huck puts himself in Jim’s position, recognizes why Jim feels the way he does, and tries to comfort his distraught friend. In all three of these examples, Huck is shown to be empathizing with Jim. His empathy supports the belief that although Huck is racist, he still possesses an enormous capacity to see Jim as a fellow human being– the very quality that is needed to start breaking free of racist thought. Despite Huck’s decisions that help so many times in leading Jim closer to freedom, Huck forgets all about the right thing to do when Tom is re-introduced into his life. It is clear that Huck sees Tom as his superior with every word spoken. Tom is never wrong according to Huck, and at one point Huck even says, “ If I had Tom Sawyer’s head, I wouldn’t trade it off to be a duke, nor a mate of a steamboat, nor clown in a circus, nor nothing I can think of” (176). Because Huck feels this way about Tom, he never questions Tom’s outrageous and highly impractical ways of setting Jim free. This is the part of the novel where Huck’s empathy and morality fail him, just like they do at the beginning of the book, with the first trick Huck and Tom play on Jim. Huck is easily molded, changing his beliefs to agree with Tom without a second thought. The only times Huck’s morality and loyalty ring clear are when he is making his decisions alone, with nothing but the river to guide him, nothing but his heart to show him the way. When reflecting on Huck’s character after he finished writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain wrote that “ Huck Finn is a book of mine where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat.” This is the truest statement of Huck’s complicated and seemingly contradictory moral nature.

Yes, Huck views slavery as the right way to live, and yes, Huck thinks of Jim as a slave. But these thoughts are no match for the deeper feelings that arise as the truer expression of his moral nature. For, when slavery is no longer just an idea he has always taken for granted, but instead shows up in the form of his friend, Jim, Huck makes the decisions which demonstrate that not only does he possess morals, he possesses incredible ones.