

Conflict with society's expectations

Literature, American Literature



Written in 1884, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a tale about a young boy's journey to freedom from society, and his struggle with his conscience during a time in the past when slavery was the norm for society. Huck, a rebellious boy, escapes from Pap, his abusive father, and embarks on a journey along the Mississippi River with Jim, a runaway slave who yearns for freedom in the North. Throughout their journey Huck and Jim encounter various personalities, but each person's opinion of African Americans is the same. Slaves were considered property, not actual human beings. Unlike the rest of society, Huck's struggle with his conscience portrays civil disobedience by not adhering to societal expectations. To act in civil disobedience means to disobey accepted laws or standards. Civil disobedience should not be mistaken with law defying acts of crime based on selfishness because "...any act of civil disobedience is rooted in a prior act of obedience to individual conscience" (Evans). People who act in civil disobedience are "Persons who choose to disobey the laws of their lands or the moral teachings of their culture do so because they feel an obligation to higher kinds of law or to superior sort of ethics..." (Evans). Twain utilizes the actions of Huck Finn as an example of civil disobedience in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to display how defying the standards of society can be morally correct.

Huck's journey is dangerous due to the crime he was committing by traveling with Jim, the runaway slave. In order to ensure fugitive slaves were being returned to their rightful owners, The Fugitive Slave Act was passed. This was controversial because "The Fugitive Slave Law challenged opponents of slavery and kept them torn between helping slaves escape and

being obedient" (Johnson 156). Disobeying this law meant punishment such as fines, imprisonment, and even execution. It is clear to see how twisted society is before the Civil War that "to help steal a horse or a cow was a low crime, but to help a hunted slave, or feed him or shelter him, in his troubles, his terrors, his despair, or hesitate to promptly to betray him to the slave catcher when opportunity offered was a much baser crime, & carried with it a stain, a moral smirch which nothing could wipe away..." (Stocks). It is absurd that the consequences from helping a slave run away to freedom were so harsh. Huck is trapped in a society which frowns upon showing compassion and kindness to a man whose skin is darker than theirs. Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia states "...Mark Twain repudiates the moral blindness of the respectable slave-holding society whose decaying social order is portrayed so vividly throughout the novel." To emphasize Huck's civil disobedience, Twain uses other characters to represent the corrupt morals of society.

Pap, Huck's drunken and abusive father, is an example of a prejudiced individual commonly found in the mid-nineteenth century society. In the beginning of the novel, Pap demands for the custody of Huck after discovering Huck has money which he can use for himself to buy alcohol. When Pap is denied his request for Huck, he angrily says, "Call this a govment! Why, just look at it and see what it's like. Here's the law a-standing ready to take a man's son away from him- a man's own son which he has had all the trouble and all the anxiety and all the expense of raising... And they call that govment!.. The law backs old Judge Thatcher up and helps him to keep me out o' my property" (Twain 34). Although Pap protests

against the government, he is not an example of civil disobedience because he talks about Huck as if he is his property, much like a slave-owner and his slave. With Pap's outburst, " One might assume that any attack on governmental authority is a text-book example of at least potential civil disobedience, but Twain makes it clear that Pap is motivated not by any claims of selfless conscience but by pure and naked self-interest" (Evans). Unlike Huck, Pap does not possess the qualities of one who acts in civil disobedience because of his selfishness.

Tom Sawyer, Huck's friend, plays an important role in freeing Jim by creating a complex escape plan. When Huck first asks Tom to assist him in saving Jim, he is surprised that Tom would agree to break the law with such a taboo crime. He exclaims, " I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell considerable in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger-stealer!" (Twain 218). Tom's cooperation with Huck is unbelievable to Huck because of how much danger they would be in if they were caught. At first, it seems Tom truly cares for Jim's freedom, but it is later obvious that Tom only participates for the thrill in this adventure he has created, " Tom begins concocting his elaborate, self-centered, and therefore bogus plan for civil disobedience" (Evans). Tom's plan to free Jim is not an example of civil disobedience because it was a selfish desire for adventure, not an admirable act. When it is later revealed that Jim was already freed before their plan is executed, Huck questions Tom's motives, " Then what on earth did you want to set him free for seeing he was already free?" (Twain 276). In which Tom replies, " Why, I wanted the adventure of it" (Twain 276). Since Tom's

elaborate plan was for his own benefit more than for Huck and Jim's, he does not possess true civil disobedience.

Amongst the other characters in ...Huckleberry Finn, Huck is the only one who acts in pure civil disobedience. As Huck's adventure down the Mississippi River progresses, he can see Jim is no different than white people. As he learns more about Jim, Huck begins to sympathize for him because Jim is "...a man that hadn't ever done me no harm. I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him. My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever..." (Twain 92). Since Huck is a rebellious boy, " He is willing to break the law in order to obey a higher, contradictory law, though he is not aware that it is a higher law" (Johnson 123). The main conflict of the novel is about Huck contemplating if he should send Jim back to slavery or help free him. His dilemma is centered on his uncertainty of which set of morals he should follow, the one taught by society or the one dictated by his conscience. Huck thinks helping Jim would mean damnation because it is as if he is stealing property, " One of the major thematic strands in ... Huckleberry Finn is Huck's struggle with his conscience and his decision " to go to hell" rather than to assist in returning Jim to servitude" (Yates). Upon making the decision to help Jim, he cries, "' All right, then, I'll go to hell'... It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said" (Twain 207). It is apparent " Huck is not some irresponsible wandered through adolescence; he has a conscience. He knows it is illegal to be harboring a runaway slave, but his friendship with Jim makes him defy the law" (Cyclopedia). Since Huck listens to his own conscience, " We realize that by violating the laws and teaching of his society, Huck is actually doing the right thing. We understand

that by transgressing against the kind of 'conscience' society has tried to instill in him, he is actually obeying a higher kind of conscience" (Evans). Huck's decision and ability to use his own conscience for selfless purposes proves he is a true example of civil disobedience.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain uses Huck's actions to show legitimate civil disobedience where one disobeys societal laws, and follows their own conscience. A person who acts in civil disobedience can be defined as one who's "chief commitment is not to himself, but to someone or something more important, such as God, other persons, or an ethical idea" (Evans). Unlike the novel's other characters, Huck is different because "his code of boyhood rebels at oppression, injustice, and hypocrisy" (Cyclopedia). With these qualities, Huck chooses to turn against what he has been taught, and listens to his own conscience, even though he believes he is sinning. By doing so, Huck rises above prejudice and racism, and works selflessly, proving himself as one who acts in genuine civil disobedience.