

Huck finn's coming of age

Literature, American Literature



With his novel about a young adolescent's journeys and struggles with the trials and questions associated with Huck's maturation, Mark Twain examines societal standards and the influence of adults that one experiences during childhood. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn have been condemned since its publication, usually focusing, especially in modern times, on its use of the word "nigger." While this could be a valid argument had the author portrayed Jim negatively, I find another reason to argue against the novel, especially by school boards and parents groups: because it subverts the ideals that many parents wish to instill in their impressionable youth.

Reading this book for the first time since high school and my departure from my parents three years ago, watching Huck live without parental controls made me realize how impressionable one is to the values instilled by his constant role models. Without being forced to conform to societal standards, Huck is allowed to use his own logic to realize what is good and bad, rather than blindly following his elders' "wisdom." At the beginning of the novel, Huck shows his skepticism of the values that society imposes when the Widow Douglas attempts to civilize him, running away to his freedom until his friends threaten to expunge him from the gang. Given the option of loneliness or independence, Huck chooses to return. When his father returns and takes custody of him again, Huck is deprived of his friends against his own will. Locked alone in the cabin, Huck is given plenty of time to consider his options. If he remains in the cabin, he will continue to be powerless to the will of his father. If he escapes and returns to town, he will only be returned to his drunken father, who will certainly beat him. He realizes that escape is his only solution. By staging his own murder, Huck kills himself to society's

influences and enables his own uninhibited personal growth. Now free of society's rules and standards, Huck is able to approach life in a way that most adolescents wish were possible. He is fortunate enough to have Jim along for companionship, removing the loneliness that prevented his earlier flight from society. Unfortunately, this friendship has already been tarnished by society's influence on Huck. Fortunately, free of society's rules and standards, Huck is allowed to begin to undo his misperceptions of slaves and begins the slow realization that Jim is just as human as he is. During the first few chapters that they are together, Twain quickly shows the beneficial effect that the two have on each other. Jim's contribution to Huck is an adult presence, one that while expressing a life's experience, is not overbearing, due to Jim's inferior status. In addition, Jim provides protection for Huck from both physical and emotional pains. Twain quickly gives examples of both forms of protection in Chapter 9. Within a few days of their union, Jim's life experiences enable the pair to prepare for the torrential storm that hits the island, which Jim forecasts. Had it not been for Jim and his ability to notice the change in animal behavior, Huck may have been caught on the river when the storm began, and possibly drown. Following the storm, Jim, as we learn at the end of the novel, postpones Huck's knowledge of his father's death until it is necessary. While it is true that Huck's father beat him and inhibited his development as a normal member of society, the fact remains that any child, especially at an impressionable age, is usually severely affected by the loss of a parent. Even if news of his death would not affect Huck, actually viewing a disfigured corpse is something that most people would prefer to be protected from experiencing. Continuing with Huck's

realization of the problems in society that are better understood from outside of it, the experience he has with the Shepherdsons and the Grangerfords opens his eyes to the problems of blindly following tradition. As we have seen, many people have tried to persuade Huck to follow this path, rather than allow him to make logical decisions for himself. We witnessed it when his father reprimanded him for learning to read and write, arguing that no one in their family was literate, so why should Huck. This experience with the feuding families exemplifies why people should not blindly follow tradition like sheep. At this point, we meet Buck, a representative of an adolescent mind destroyed by adults. Though the same age as the protagonist, Buck's judgment has been destroyed by his family's ongoing feud with the Shepherdsons. He admits to Huck that the feud began because of a lawsuit between people who died long ago. Through generations of teaching the young children hatred towards the other clan, both families demonstrate an extreme of what can happen by following blindly. For this refusal to rationalize logically, they are all killed for nothing. Whether consciously or not, Huck realizes his fortune in that he has been relieved of many of the preconceived notions that society would have forced on him, as they had on his dead friend. For this reason he cries as he covers the face of the boy who was not given the opportunity to realize the error of his ways. Huck's next encounter with society and its values furthers his cynical realizations, as he and Jim meet the Duke and the King. Huck soon realizes that these men are frauds, not only to the people that they con, but also to their companions. They represent the lowest morals in society, which interestingly Huck already attributes to leaders. This is why he does not convey this knowledge

to Jim, even though he knows that they are lying about their positions. During the two men's tenure on the raft, we are given glimpses of how morality, when left unchecked, can quickly spiral downward, especially when greed is involved. At first, the men simply con entire towns out of small change, charging a small admission to see the men poorly perform scenes from a Shakespeare. Desiring more and seeing how easy it is, though they already have prior experiences, they advance to charging more for an even less entertaining show, The Royal Nonesuch, exhibiting how easily people are swayed by advertising. In their final two acts of inhumanity, the royal duo seem to abandon all sense of decency and attempt to steal all of the inheritance money from three girls who are in mourning, then sell Jim back into slavery after that plan is foiled by the men they are impersonating. Even though they succeeded in their earlier ventures, Twain causes these ones to backfire. With regards to the inheritance, Huck steals the money, which the real family finds in the coffin, and the con men barely escape punishment. They do not learn, though, and when they choose to make \$40 more important than Jim, they are finally punished, as he informs Mr. Phelps of the scam and the men are tarred and feathered and run out on a rail. This is one of Twain's most striking blows against slavery, for the men are punished, even though they do what society was teaching at the time: that slaves are property to be bought and sold. After Jim is captured, Huck comes to the conscious realization that many of society's rules are to be broken. Left alone, away from the distraction of society and the misdirection that it gives, he is given time to think on his own, reflecting upon what he has learned throughout his experience on the outside of civilization. He thinks back to all

of the people that he has encountered in his life. In retrospect, he can not find another person who is kinder to him than Jim, no one who is more representative of the good portion of the human race than his friend, a man that society does not even deem a man. He knows that he has been taught that slaves are property, and essentially that freeing Jim is stealing from someone else, but he realizes the greater evil, one that only his experiences away from mankind's influence could make him see. For this reason, in the climax of the novel, he chooses to free Jim from slavery. Tom's return to Huck's life provides complication for his goal, though, as Tom, as Huck's friend, is allowed to reanimate many of the notions that Huck was able to overcome during his freedom. Tom, unlike Huck, views Jim as sub-human. For this reason, he does not tell Huck or his family that Jim is now a free man, but rather goes along with helping Huck "free" him so that he can have an adventure. Had Jim not been a free man, we can even question whether or not Tom would have helped Huck. Huck certainly does when Tom agrees, as he can not understand how a boy from a family respected by society could help steal a slave. By making Jim free when Tom helps, Twain shows us that Tom is just another member of society, blinded by tradition. The final chapter sums up the book well, clearly finalizing many of the lessons that Twain previously informed us in the books' Notice are not in the book. Huck is completely freed of the fear of his father, as Jim realizes that it is time that he learns the truth about his death. Jim is now a free man, showing that Miss Watson realized the error of her ways right before death. Most importantly, Huck realizes how his life has changed throughout this experience and chooses that the society that he was born into is in many

ways corrupted by the people within it. Fortunately, because of the money and lack of legal control, he has the ability to retire from it, as he plans to “light out for the Territory ahead of the rest” (296) before mainstream society has the ability to come and ruin it with the misguided traditions and beliefs.