

Huck and jim's places in society

Literature, American Literature



The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn correlates extremely well with novels like *The Catcher in the Rye* in that it illustrates the profound, omnipresent difficulties, with which characters like Huck and Holden must struggle as they are growing up. In Huck's particular instance, he seems, from the very beginning, to be conflicted as to whether he should conform to social norms or live according to his own preferences: "The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me...so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out...and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer, he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back to the widow and be respectable. So I went back" (70-71). As revealed by this quote, Huck has already made that critical decision to separate himself from the corruptions he sees in society (e. g. Pap's abusive alcoholism and excessive racism); he thus sets out on the Mississippi River, hoping to leave behind (perhaps permanently) those societal flaws he had discerned and deemed unacceptable. Unfortunately, no matter how fervent and earnest these efforts of non-conformity may actually be, the basest filth and shortcomings of society (the very kinds Huck is trying so desperately to avoid) always seem to succeed in catching up with him. The optimistic reader can argue that Huck does mature throughout his stay on the raft with Jim, making changes to the racist, prejudiced views and behavior that had been bred into him by society. However, it always ends up that society prevails and Huck's efforts are therefore proven to have been useless and in vain. In the first few days that Huck spends with Jim on the raft, the reader can observe that he still displays certain tendencies that society has bred within him. He reflects the traits instilled in him by Tom when he plays

several pranks on Jim. For example, he places the corpse of a snake in Jim's blanket " and curled him up on the foot of Jim's blanket, ever so natural, thinking there'd be some fun when Jim found him there" (115). That night, the dead snake's mate arrives at Jim's blanket and bites Jim's heel, almost killing him. On another occasion, Huck decides, in the model of Tom Sawyer, to board the *Walter Scott* and bring some criminals to justice, again endangering his own life as well as that of Jim when they are almost caught and killed. On one of many occasions, demonstrating the influence that Pap has had on Huck, he " slipped into corn fields and borrowed a watermelon, or a mushmelon, or a punkin, or some new corn, or things of that kind. Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime" (125). Eventually, Huck does come to show signs of change as time passes. He comes to admitting that Jim " was most always right; he had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (134). Even though this statement still stings with a good deal of prejudice, it represents the fact that there has indeed been some progress and change in Huck's opinion of Jim. In another instance, the reader is able to witness a greater change. Huck and Jim had been separated by fog for a night, but Huck decides to deceive Jim into thinking that it had all been a dream. When he finds out about the prank, Jim feels extremely hurt, saying that he had been sincerely concerned about Huck's well-being. Huck perceives his error and actually apologizes to Jim: " It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger-but I done it...I didn't do him no more mean tricks" (142). Once again, Huck's statement illustrates that he is still not yet rid of his inbred racism; the apology, however, shows that Huck does acknowledge Jim

as a fellow human being, something that any other white in his position would have found quite difficult to do. On yet another occurrence, when Huck observes that Jim is reminiscing and regretting the fact that he had unknowingly beaten his deaf daughter. Huck thinks to himself, " 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" (210). In this two-faceted statement, Huck once again has not been able to get rid of his in-bred racism; he does recognize that Jim is a good father to his children, a worthy quality that many white men themselves lack (Pap, for one, could never be able to match Jim in his ability to care for and love his children). Finally, towards the end of the book, when Jim is willing to risk his very freedom so that Tom can see a doctor for his wounded leg, Huck affirms, " I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he'd say what he did say" (305). This final observation about Jim shows that Huck can't come to accept that Jim can be a real man as he is-a black man; instead, Huck acknowledges that Jim is a real man but, in effect, changes Jim into a white man in order to explain Jim's actual ability to be an ideal man. This action, in itself, can be observed as negating all the effort Huck and Jim have put into their flight from society. By turning Jim white to validate his ability to be a " man", Huck is just like all the other white racists from whom he had run-unable to recognize that a black can actually be a human being. The reader can also observe that escape from white society for both Huck and Jim is, for the most part, impossible. Even though Huck and Jim have their own raft and are traveling peacefully down the Mississippi River, they oftentimes find it necessary to make contact and even interact with abominable white society (e. g. for provisions/supplies or

guidance/instructions). However, Huck and Jim are actually affected by white society to a much greater effect. White society is still able to extend its chains of corruption in the form of the "king" and the "duke", who board the raft and completely dominate Huck and Jim simply owing to the fact that they are white men, the power-wielding figures in their society. Thus, they basically transform the raft, Huck and Jim's "refuge", into a new extension of white society. These two white men then use the raft as a tool for their fraudulent schemes, effectively holding Huck and Jim as their prisoners on the raft (especially Jim, who must be bound and gagged to feign the image of a caught run-away slave), whom they exploit at their own pleasure. After many unsuccessful schemes, these men do come to actually selling Jim as a run-away slave. After Huck is finally able to rid himself of the king and the duke in search of the now-imprisoned Jim, white society binds Jim and him down even more, through the form of Tom Sawyer, the epitome of white culture. Even though Tom knows perfectly well that Jim has been freed by the deceased Ms. Watson, he fails to notify anyone about this critical fact so that he can amuse himself "freeing" Jim, whom he plans to pay afterwards for all his "troubles." Furthermore, even though Tom's plans are ridiculously long and excessive, neither Huck nor Jim dare to speak a word against Tom because Tom, a representative of white society, has read the white novels and knows how to help Jim "escape" the "proper way." Through Tom's great plans, the three of them are almost shot; Jim ends up being caught and nearly lynched. Even after Jim's freedom has been established and acknowledged, the three of them plan to go into "Injun Territory", where Tom will be able to exploit yet another vulnerable people, the Native

Americans. Huck and Jim's blind obedience to Tom's "authority" illustrates how far Huck and Jim's troubles on the raft have brought them: the exact place and roles in which they had been before fleeing. Thus, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* illustrates in fine detail the great difficulty, with which a child like Huck faced in growing up—the question of values, societal expectations, and interaction with other members of society. In Huck's individual case, he chooses to separate himself from the wrongs he witnesses in society; he does this by traveling on the raft with Jim, hoping to leave behind that society which he despised. On the raft, Huck appears to be "maturing", somewhat changing his outlook on African Americans. However, in his fundamental statement that Jim deserved to be white because he was a good man shows how much Huck has really matured in respect to his views on blacks. Furthermore, even on the raft, Huck and Jim are constantly haunted by white society, especially by the king and the duke, who eventually hand Jim over to Tom Sawyer. The unfortunate story concludes with Huck, Jim, and Tom in about the exact same places in which they had been in the beginning of the novel. From the nineteenth century, Twain gives us this story perhaps, not as an answer to a problem, but simply something to actually make us aware that such a problem exists. He knew that the first step is recognition of a problem and that only after recognizing a problem can we actually come to solving that problem.