

Huck finns voyage of moral self-discovery research paper sample

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The Compassionate Morality of a Perfect Sap-head

First published in 1884, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was seen as a wildly adventurous novel for children until the pioneering critical work of the American scholar, Lionel Trilling, who saw it for what it is: a bildungsroman that charted the moral and emotional growth to maturity of a young boy exposed to an evil and corrupt society. Throughout the novel Huck's innocence and especially his naïve, innocent voice constantly subvert the values he observes in the society he comes into contact with on his and Jim's epic voyage down the Mississippi. The novel's use of offensive racist epithets still has the power to offend and upset: and yet the novel is profoundly anti-racist and in the key turning point of the novel (Chapter 16), Huck rejects the racist values of his society, and, from that point on, he becomes more and more critical of the society around him: this independence of mind leads to his full emotional and moral maturity. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a realistic novel uncovering how a boy's moral views clash with society. At the start of the novel when the Widow Douglas takes Huck in "and allowed she would civilize me" (Twain, 185), Huck comments that it was "rough living in the house all the time considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways and so when I couldn't stand it no longer I lit out" (Twain, 185). Huck puts his old clothes on and lives in his sugar hogshead and felt "free and satisfied" (Twain, 185). Much of the novel can be seen as Huck's attempt to gain true freedom from civilisation, and this has a bearing on his moral development because he depicts Southern society as corrupt, restraining and evil. Part of his desire is for physical freedom, and his attempt to help Jim reach the free states is symbolic of this:

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however, they miss Cairo in the fog and because Huck has been too busy in his preoccupation of tricking Jim, and one of the deepest ironies of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is that their journey southwards along the Mississippi takes them deeper and deeper into states where racism and slavery thrive.

We can also see Huck's own desire for social and cultural freedom. He rejects the conventional rules of society: going to school, religion, and rules about personal cleanliness – in the clothes he is made to wear at the Widow's he feels “ all cramped up” (Twain, 185). At the start of the novel he runs away from the Widow Douglas, and he repeats this gesture at the end by lighting out for the territory rather than being brought up by Tom's Aunt Sally. He comments: “ other places do seem so cramped up and smothering, but a raft don't” (Twain, 264). On the raft at certain moments and for certain periods, he achieves freedom, although Twain does not romanticize life on the river, making it clear that it is dangerous and that it can bring death. Most importantly, in terms of his moral development, Huck achieves a mental liberation on the raft as we shall see in the discussion of Chapter 16. Suffice it to say here that Huck's own personal predilection for freedom allows him in chapter 16 follow his conscience and to do what he thinks is morally right, rather than doing what he knows to be legally and socially correct and acceptable.

Huck's essential honesty is in sharp contrast to the fraudulent society he lives in, and he is aware of this. Twain presents the Christian religion as a discredited of belief system in Huck's eyes. At the start of the novel when the Widow Douglas takes Huck in, Miss Watson, her sister, attempts to instil

in him a belief in heaven and hell which he simply does not understand: “ I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go” (Twain, 194) . Because Huck is so rooted in the present and in direct experience he simply cannot understand why the Widow is so obsessed with the story of Moses at the same time as stopping Huck smoking: “ Here she was a-bothering about Moses, which was no kin to her and no use to anybody, being gone, you see, yet finding a power of fault with me for doing a thing that had some good in it” (Twain, 185). Similarly, the feud between the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords involves illegal murder and violence on both sides, but neither family is able to see the deep irony of their going to church, and then praising a sermon which has been all about brotherly love. The revival meeting put on by the King and the Duke shows how gullible and easily manipulated ordinary citizens are by religious rhetoric. Christianity, as seen through Huck's eyes, is fraudulent or is used by fraudsters. The King and the Duke exploit and defraud everyone they meet, and their presence on the raft immediately disrupts the harmony and friendliness that Huck and Jim have achieved together. Huck demonstrates his own morality when, faced with their plan to defraud the three Wilkes' girls, he deliberately intervenes to prevent the girls from being exploited. The attempts of the King and the Duke to sell Jim is also indicative of their lack of morality. Ironically, in order to survive in this false and fraudulent society, Huck himself frequently resorts to disguise or to lies in order to avoid identification, to protect Jim, and, increasingly, from a natural wariness to tell the complete truth to total strangers – since most of the strangers that Huck meets are untrustworthy and self-obsessed money-grabbers. Huck soon learns that it is wise to avoid

contact with the communities on the banks of the river “ where the selfishness and malice and violence and injustice of white people find their perfect target in poor Jim” (Robinson, 1). There is, however, an honesty and integrity between Huck and Jim when they are alone together on the raft, and this friendship, even the possibility of Huck's friendship with an escaped slave, is an important part of Huck's moral development. Their language is simple and direct; they often do not bother to wear clothes; in short, on the raft there is a sense that they have escaped the false society around them. Although money can hardly be termed a theme, it certainly recurs as a motif throughout the novel, and Huck's attitude to it differs remarkably from the society around him. Twain presents Southern society as being obsessed with money and getting money by any means possible. We should not forget that Huck himself is very wealthy, but he observes on the opening page that to exist on just a dollar a day is “ more than a body could tell what to do with” (Twain, 185). Huck's new-found wealth entices his abusive father back and his father's drunken violence leads Huck to escape to Jackson's Island. Jim has a value of \$800 and Miss Watson's intention to sell him prompts him to run away. Much later in the novel Jim is sold by the King and the Duke for \$40 – which equals the sum that Tom Sawyer gives Jim at the end of the novel in compensation, as it were, for his willing participation in the ridiculous plan to free Jim: ridiculous because Tom Sawyer knows that Jim has already been freed by Miss Watson. The King and the Duke spend all their time trying to trick people out of money whether it is through fraudulent religious meetings or, putting on cheap shows, or betraying Huck by selling Jim. Even Mrs Loftus, who sees smoke on Jackson's Island, decides

to search for Jim in order to claim the reward money. Huck's attitude to money is a complete contrast to almost everyone else in the society presented in the novel, and in a sense it does not contribute to his development, because he knows at the start of the novel that money cannot bring happiness. For example, the Grangerfords are relatively wealthy, but they are not happy; the King and the Duke swindle large sums of money from the people they trick, but they too cannot be described as happy. Huck takes pleasure in things that money cannot buy such as freedom, watching the sunrise over the Mississippi and his growing friendship with Jim. His decision at the end of the novel to light out for the territory ahead of the rest is a rejection of many things, but it is also a rejection of money.

The picaresque structure of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* allows Twain to engineer many encounters between Huck and the communities that exist on the banks of the Mississippi. The picture that emerges is of an evil, corrupt and violent society in which murder, sloth, the abuse of alcohol, and casual violence are commonplace: “ Again and again, through the course of his journey down the Mississippi, Huck Finn encounters frauds whose addiction to outmoded “ style” has led to complete abandonment of common sense – and often things much worse” (Bell, 1985, 44).

Huck's own kindness and honesty stand in contrast to the actions of the people he observes. The populace are shown to be gullible and credulous followers of rabble-rousers, charlatans and confidence tricksters which is why the King and the Duke have some success in their successive scams. The code of behaviour that the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons adhere to is an empty, deluded sham – in Huck's honest, all-seeing eyes. Huck's first

impression of the Grangerford household is one of admiration: “ I hadn’t seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style” (Twain, 270), but Huck’s innocent eye soon discovers the flaw, the deluded sham that lies behind this style: there is a plate on the Grangerford’s table filled with china or porcelain fruit and at first sight it looks impressive, but Huck notes “ they warn’t real because you could see where pieces had got chipped off and showed the white chalk, or whatever it was, underneath” (Twain, 270). Huck does not have the vocabulary to describe it, but he has discovered “ a whole society built on games, tricks and illusions” (Poirier, 181). Twain never lets us forget either – thanks to Jim’s presence on the raft – that real cruelty and genuine ignorance lie at the very heart of this society, because it only exists because of the system of slavery and the racist attitudes that underlie it: “ The major achievements of Huck Finn are its realistic and humorous portrayal of life along the Mississippi River and its satirical attack on slavery” (Bell, 1992, 125). Huck rejects through common-sense and through experience – his friendship and companionship with Jim on the raft – the very notion that it is all right for one human being to own another.

Trilling was the first critic to realize and argue that the turning point of the novel is Chapter 16. Twain prepares the reader for Huck’s moral dilemma in Chapter 15 in which he plays a trick on Jim which causes him hurt. Jim says, “ Trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey frien’s en makes ’em ashamed” (Twain, 258). Huck is so ashamed of his own behavior that he feels compelled to go against the rules of his society and apologize to Jim because he values Jim’s friendship and because he has realized that Jim is a

human being with feelings. Huck says: “ I didn’t do him no more mean tricks, I wouldn’t done that if I’d a knowed it would make him feel that way” (Twain, 258) and, showing his own clash with his society, forces himself to “ humble [himself] to a nigger” (Twain, 258). In Chapter 16 Huck is more and more worried about missing Cairo and so leaves the raft to find out where they are. As he reflects on Jim’s plan to head north from Cairo, Huck realizes that he is in a moral dilemma: he is helping a runaway slave escape. Twain writes a long passage of introspection, showing Huck’s conflicting thoughts: “ Conscience says to me, “ What had poor miss Watson done to you that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mena?”” (Twain, 259 - 260). Huck leaves the raft, determined to inform whoever he meets about Jim’s presence on the raft. However, as he prepares to leave, Twain gives Jim a very important speech:

I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it. Jim won’t ever forgit you, huck; you’d the bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’s de only fren’ ole Jim’s got now. Dah you goes, de ole true Huck; do on’y white genlman dat ever kep’ his promise to ole Jim. (Twain, 261)

In the event Huck invents a story about a his parents and his sister who are sick on the raft, because when it comes to handing Jim over “ the words wouldn’t come” (Twain, 261) and Huck’s acting so convinces the men, who are on the look-out for runaway slaves, that they assume his ‘ family’ have small pox. What is most interesting is Huck’s reaction when he returns to the raft. He feels guilty at what he has done: “ I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong” (Twain, 262 – 263) –

but, of course, he has only done wrong in terms of the society he lives in. He goes on to reason and says to himself, “ Hold on – s’pose you’d a done right and give Jim up; would you feel better than what you do now? No, says I, I’d feel bad – I’d feel just the same way I do now” (Twain, 263). He concludes by saying “ I was stuck. So I reckoned I wouldn’t bother about it no more” (Twain, 263).

It is important to note that “ Huck never arrives at a rational repudiation of the idea of slavery: when he tries to think logically society’s moral imperatives invade his mind” (Tanner, 1965, 168), but when he acts spontaneously and instinctively he does the right thing. It is equally vital not to underestimate the importance of Huck’s decision not to turn Jim in: “ Huck is an unfettered, naïve child who creates a new moral structure almost ex nihilo. Out of his love for Jim, he transcends his culture, and creates a new value” (Wolfson, 56). Poirier calls this chapter and the chapter that precedes it the “ reversal scenes” which “ reverse his [Huck’s] efforts to belong imaginatively to society” (Poirier, 178). After these chapters “ throughout the rest of the book Huck must move about in various disguises, tell lies, play roles even more than he has before” (Poirier, 195). Ironically, his society is so gullible and credulous that no matter how elaborate Huck’s deceptions are – consider the extended and inventive adventures and terrible fates that ‘ George Jackson’ invents for his supposed extended family that Huck tells the Grangerfords – everyone is keen and eager to believe him.

This chapter and Huck’s actions reveal an important part of his character that is at odds with the society that surrounds him: he has what Tanner (1965) terms “ an instinctive compassion” (168). Tanner (1965) goes on to

write:

His compassion strays out all over the world: it takes in not only Jim, but a drunk at the circus (while others laugh), murderers, animals, the misguided victims of the feud, the victims of the Duke and King's swindle, and then – marvellously – the swindlers themselves when they get their deserts. (169) When the King and the Duke are tarred and feathered and run out of town, Huck comments: “ Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be so awful cruel to each other” (Twain, 382). This quality of compassion is notably lacking in the society Twain presents in the novel and, although Huck does not have the vocabulary to express this as a clash with his own society, he “ continually feels ashamed of the human race because to the uncorrupted eye it appears all too often as a shameful thing” (Tanner, 169). The violence, greed and deceit which characterize so many of the people and the communities that Huck comes into contact with, show that he is totally at odds with his own society – because it lacks Huck's instinctive compassion for suffering.

Twain's choice of the first-person vernacular is vital to the development of Huck's moral position and it epitomizes his clash with society. His language is sparse and unadorned, simple and honest, and he rejects the tricks with language at which other characters in the novel are so adept. Even at the beginning of the novel, when he has reluctantly returned to the Widow Douglas's in order to be a member of Tom Sawyer's gang, Huck's language is subversive and common-sense – as opposed to Tom's high rhetoric drawn

from the world of adventures and boys' books. Disappointed at the gang's escapade against "Spaniards and A-rabs", Huck comments that "I didn't see no di'monds, and I told Tom Sawyer so" (Twain, 195). Tom's response is to appeal the world of books (Don Quixote specifically) and to condemn Huck as a "numskull" (Twain, 195) and a "perfect sap-head" (Twain, 196), but Huck concludes "I judged all that stuff was only just one of Tom Sawyer's lies. I reckoned he believed in the A-rabs and the elephants, but as for me I think different. It had all the marks of a Sunday school" (Twain, 196). Such comments are used by Twain "to deflate the romantic discourse by which "Tom Sawyer's lies" claim to legitimize themselves" (Bell, 1985, 44).

Towards the end of the novel Tom's ludicrous desire for adventures allows the whole charade of the complex plans to free Jim (whom, Tom knows, it turns out, has already been freed by Miss Watson) – plans which cause a lot of unnecessary suffering all round and, in particular, prolong Jim's own suffering – just for Tom's selfish amusement and warped sense of what is right. Even in the final chapter Tom reveals what he has been planning all along: to free Jim, return up the river to St Petersburg and receive a triumphant home-coming, culminating in "a torchlight procession and a brass band, and then he would be a hero, and so would we" (Twain, 434). Huck, however, comments – "But I reckoned it was about as well the way it was" (Twain, 434) – and with this comment he finally frees himself from the delusional world of Tom Sawyer which with its lies is as fraudulent, grandiloquent and selfish as the world of the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, the world of the King and the Duke, the whole of society in Huck's eyes. Huck has finally come to see that there exists "an essential

solidarity between Tom's world and the world of the Widow's" (Poirier, 184). Both appeal to books as their authorities (the Bible and Don Quixote) and "Tom's world is dominated by games and fantasies imitated from literature, just as hers [the Widow Douglas's] is based on illusions derived from religion and the Bible" (Poirier, 184). Of course, in such a fraudulent society "to both adults and companion he sounds like a numbskull because he takes them at their word and finds that he is thereby taken in" (Poirier, 180), but actually that is a tribute to Huck's honesty and plain dealing.

The ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is celebratory and deeply sad at the same time. It is a celebration of freedom because it can be seen as the only way to preserve his personal integrity and honesty, and it is "an intuitive move to hold onto some basic innocence and integrity, Huck gives up language and makes for a mythical wordless West (Tanner, 1971, 28). At the same time it is a sad defeat. Huck's comment about not writing another book should not be seen as a sign of his ignorance: rather it is a realization that language can be used to deceive. Through his direct experience of all the people who have lied to him or tried to exploit him and Jim, Huck has discovered "the actual self-interest or self-delusion behind their language" (Poirier, 180). Furthermore, the Territory that Huck is heading for, by 1884 when the novel was first published, was settled and the process of closing the frontier was already almost complete: there is no place in normal society for someone as honest and plain-speaking as Huck, there is nowhere for Huck to escape the corrupt influence of human beings – and that is bound to make the reader feel sadness, as well as losing the company of the "perfect sap-head" who can feel compassion for any suffering and who instinctively

does the right thing – consistently – although it may be against all the elaborate social mores he has been brought up to respect.

Trilling (1950) comments that in Huck's journey down the river, he has seen "the virtue and depravity of man's heart" (102) and that he has acquired a "profound and bitter knowledge of man's depravity" (104), but Huck's compassion "never prevents him from being a friend to man" (104), so that he remains able to feel compassion for any suffering being. Huck tells his story with "the truth of moral passion" (Trilling, 102) and his lighting out for the Territory is an escape from society, from words and from inhumanity.

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