

The Authentic American Boy - Huckleberry Finn

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Mark Twain's monumental novel, "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" provides the reader with entertainment and education at every turn of the river its young hero drifts around. Society has not tamed or tainted Huck. Flitting on the fringes of civilization for most of his young life, he starts his venture knowing a hard life but little about the world beyond his small community, abusive father, and friends. On his journey southward on the Mississippi River, he is armed with a good heart and encounters situations and people that force him to make moral choices. In the process of working solutions out, Twain presents the reader with an archetype of an authentic person in Finn. He is both good and bad, selfish and selfless. Huckleberry Finn is not presented as better or worse than the people around him. He is put forward as unconstrained by worry, guilt, fear, or jealousy. Huck takes each day and each situation as it comes, does his best, and moves on.

Almost every vignette in the novel presents Huckleberry with a moral dilemma and a choice to make. Three stand out as ways for Twain to show the genuine boy that can live in all of us; Huck's thoughts on prayer, dealing with the thieves on the stranded riverboat, and the critical moral conflict of the story, freeing Jim.

In the opening chapters of the book, we learn that Huck is back living with the Widow Douglas because Tom Sawyer 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" (15-16). In his innocence, thirst for adventure, and desire for comradery, Huck sees nothing wrong with joining the gang. After returning and getting into trouble for ruining his new clothes, Miss Watson prayed with him. Huck relates, "She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it" (28). This sets up a deep philosophical internal debate in Huckleberry on the nature of prayer. As the narrator, he shares that "I set down one time back in the woods, and had a long think about it" (28). Through the ponderings of a child, Twain delves into one of the great moral questions of the ages and explores the two views of Christian theology — the widow's kind afterlife "to make a body's mouth water" (29) and Miss Watson's punishing eternal retribution where a person would discover "there warn't no help for him any more" (29).

Finn eventually develops his own response to prayer: "I couldn't see no advantage about it except for the other people; so at last I reckoned I wouldn't worry about it any more, but just let it go" (29). In the same paragraph, he also chooses the widow's version of heaven, but only if god would take him. He donuts he can make it in, because "I was so ignorant, and so kind of low-down and ornery" (29). Through this process, Huck accepted that prayer would not lead to divine intervention and that his actions would keep him from paradise. Most importantly, he was fine with both observations. This is a vision of the new, enlightened American who was free from the constraints of religious doctrine, embraced free will, and accepted where they were on their journey.

Moving from religious to life-and-death moral dilemmas, Huckleberry Finn and

Jim encounter a sinking steamboat. When they search the ship for supplies, they find a band of thieves. Their conversation reveals that the thieves plan to kill one of their party by leaving him on the boat to drown when the boat breaks up. They argue that this is better than shooting him because "He'll be drowned, and won't have nobody to blame for it but his own self. I reckon that's a considerable sight better'n killin' of him" (101). In his first attempt to do what is right, Huck suggests if they "find their boat we can put all of 'em in a bad fix -for the sheriff 'II get 'em" (102). He sees that these thieves need to be brought to justice and decides to take action to make it happen.

After taking the boat and getting away, Huckleberry contemplates his situation. "I begun to think how dreadful it was, even for murderers, to be in such a fix. I says to myself, there ain't no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself yet, and then how would I like it?" (104). In his simple way, Huck tackles the moral dilemma of saving bad people. And he concludes that by not trying to save them, he would be just like them and that he does not want to become a murderer. After using an elaborate lie to get a ferry captain to go to the wreck, he fantasizes about getting the widow's approval because, "I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rascallions, because rascallions and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people takes the most interest in" (108). This again reinforces his growing acceptance that helping others, no matter how bad they are, is the right thing to do.

When Huckleberry learns that the ship sank and the thieves probably did not make it off, he shares, "I felt a little bit heavy-hearted about the gang, but not much, for I

reckoned if they could stand it I could" (108). Twain uses this statement to show a practical, if fatalistic, approach to viewing the world. Huckleberry tries to save them, but in the end, they receive what they had planned for their fellow gang member. Huck did the right thing and then didn't agonize over things when they did not work out as planned. Twain underscores this sensible approach to life by sharing that Huck and Jim "slept like dead people" (109).

The most significant moral choice Twain has Finn face is if he should help free Jim. Jim is introduced early on in the novel and is an appealing character, although presented with a heavily racist stereotype. When Huck realizes that Jim has run away, he shows his belief that it was wrong to help runaway slaves when he says, "People would call me a lowdown Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum" (69). Huck only deals with keeping his word at this point but expresses how he thinks helping slaves escape is wrong.

Huckleberry faces the dilemma again when, after the fog, they try to find a place to land and ask how far away Cairo is. While looking for lights, Huck becomes nervous, and "It got to troubling me so I couldn't rest" (125). He then asks himself, "What had poor Miss Watson done to you that you could see her n----- 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 mean?" (125). Huckleberry is still not considering Jim's freedom as something Jim deserves, and is instead conflicted by his treatment of Jim's owner. Huck finally decides the right thing to do is "paddle ashore at the first light and tell" (126).

Before he gets to shore, and in an encounter that would stretch the credibility of most authors, Huck runs into a skiff full of men hunting for runaway slaves. Faced with the perfect opportunity to hand Jim over, he instead makes up a lie implying that his family is on the raft and they have smallpox. When he returns to the raft, he confronts his decision. "s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up, would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad - I'd feel, just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it" (130). Here Huckleberry is moving beyond protecting Jim only because he promised to and accepting the reality of the pain he would feel if he turned Jim in.

As they drift down the river, Huckleberry wrestles with the decision a few more times. Most notably, when the duke and king join them, Huck makes up another elaborate lie to protect Jim. To underscore the point, he stated, "Goodness sakes! would a runaway n----- run south?" (172). This is one of many examples where the character Twain has created never hesitates to lie completely in service of a higher goal.

The issue comes to a head when Tom Sawyer enters the story. After catching up on other items, Huck admits that "there's a n----- here that I'm a-trying to steal out of slavery, and his name is Jim - old Miss Watson's Jim" (293). Although Huckleberry has fully committed to freeing Jim, he assumes Tom will not want to and is stunned when his friend says he wants to help. Although Tom Sawyer makes an elaborate game out of

freeing Jim, they are both fully engaged in the effort.

When they get to the raft after escaping, Huck shows no regret when he tells Jim, "Now, old Jim, you're a free man again, and I bet you won't ever be a slave no more" (352). In this sentence, Twain shows that Huck is acknowledging his friendship with Jim and that being free is a good thing. This is in contrast to the guilt he felt in the past when thinking about how he was helping a slave escape.

Unfortunately, we never get a full explanation of Huckleberry's feelings about freeing Jim. Instead, Twain reveals that Jim had been freed when the widow died, and Tom had approved of freeing Jim because Jim was already free. It is unfortunate that Twain decided to remove any guilt Huck might feel for freeing a slave by establishing that he was already free. And, just as in the sinking steamboat, Huckleberry accepts that he did the right thing, regardless of the outcome.

Twain has presented a character that is neither morally overconstrained nor paralyzed by cynicism or doubt in human character. He ponders solutions to the ethical challenges he faces, works his way to a solution, and then moves on with his life. Huck encounters plenty who are selfish or make bad decisions. Twain has given readers, young and old, a genuine person who tries to do the right thing but also accepts the world as it comes to him. Traits that we can learn from today.

Works Cited.

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https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Writings_of_Mark_Twain_The_adventure/fWU4AAAAIAAJ