Moral Development and Change in Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Introduction

Mark Twain’s novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (2006a, pp.1-504), first published in 1884, starts out in a small fictional town of St. Petersburg in Missouri situated close to the Mississippi River, and is set a few decades before the outbreak of the American Civil War. The story is narrated by the protagonist, Huck, and follows his journey wherein he is faced with a number of moral choices, which subsequently lead him to question the morality and supposedly ‘civilised’ nature of society, outgrowing his own instincts of self-preservation and moral deviancy in the process.

Using Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76), this essay will analyse how and why Huck begins to take responsibility for his own moral choices, rejecting the prescribed morality of some of the authority figures in his life and accepting that of others, thus demonstrating how life experiences of kindness and cruelty can affect the development of an individual’s mortality.

Huck’s Initial Absence of Morality

At the opening of the novel, the reader finds Huck feeling restricted after being placed in the guardianship of Widow Douglas and her sister, Miss Watson. This occurs after he has come into possession of a large sum of money as a result of his earlier adventures with friend, Tom Sawyer – who, of course, features alongside Huck in Twain’s earlier text, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (2006b, pp.1-375) – and is placed under the widow’s guardianship by a judge who hopes she can “sivilize” him (Twain, 2006a, p.7) by teaching him the Christian faith.

Huck is keen to demonstrate that her attempts have been unsuccessful, describing his desire to join up with Tom’s gang of thieves rather than being trapped in such a respectable household, feeling cramped and sweaty in the new clothes she makes him wear, and being frustrated at not being allowed to smoke, curse or slouch (Twain, 2006a, pp.7-9). He is dismissive of the morality contained within the religious teachings that the widow offers him, noting that he has no interest in the dead are they are “no good to anybody, being gone” (Twain, 2006a, p.9), and even goes so far as to tell the widow that he would prefer to go to Hell rather than Heaven, because he could “see no advantage in going where she was going” (Twain, 2006a, p.9). He is similarly pleased to hear that the widow believes Tom Sawyer will go to Hell (Twain, 2006a, p.10), as that means they will be together, showing his flippant approach to serious issues (Blair, 1973, p.138). He also demonstrates his tendency to lie (Twain, 2006a, p.53), steal (Twain, 2006a, p.32), and exhibit his prejudices, such as can be seen in his initial
stereotyping of the black slave, Jim, who Huck repeatedly disregards as a simple “nigger” (Twain, 2006a, p.22).

Huck’s morality at this point corresponds well with the ‘pre-conventional’ (otherwise known as the ‘pre-moral’) stage identified in Kohlberg’s theory of moral development (1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76), wherein the individual’s behaviour is dictated by self-interest and self-preservation. His avoidance of further arguments with the widow regarding Heaven and Hell, for instance, is not a mark of respect for the woman trying to raise him as her son, but rather a recognition that pursuing his point would “only make trouble” for himself (Twain, 2006a, p.9). His response is dictated by the possibility of punishment or gain, rather than by a moral sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76). This is also demonstrated by Huck’s adherence to superstitious behaviour and beliefs, such as his worry that burning a spider will bring him bad luck, his use of horseshoes to frighten bad spirits, and the binding of his hair to ward off witches (Twain, 2006a, p.10).

However, it is important to note the distinct lack of authority figures in Huck’s life that would have provided him with moral guidance and ensured his beliefs did not become confused during his early childhood. Bloom (2005, n.p.) supports this by stating that “Huck is an impoverished and uneducated orphan who [has to] raise himself in a corrupt and bigoted world”. Little information is supplied about Huck’s mother, but Huck reveals that he was regularly beaten by his father (Twain, 2006a, p.23) and thus reacts to Pap Finn’s unannounced return with fear and suspicion (Twain, 2006a, p.25), concerned that his father is after his fortune. Although Widow Douglas treats him with kindness, he is initially resistant to the love and lessons of morality she offers him. Altschuler (1989, p.31) notes that Huck’s early experiences are the reason why he cannot accept Widow Douglas as a substitute mother figure at this stage. Altschuler (1989, p.31) observes that his moral development would likely have been stunted during early childhood, as “motherless children... have great difficulty developing into moral human beings”. Viewed in regard to child attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988, cited in Waters et al, 2005, pp.80-84), Huck’s comments regarding the non-importance of moral lessons given by those who are “[long] gone” (Twain, 2006a, p.9) and his subsequent trust issues are particularly pertinent, as they suggest Huck’s ability to form paternal attachments has become disorientated (Ainsworth et al., 1978, p.282).

Huck’s ‘Bad’ Morality, Personal Sympathy and Dilemma of Conscience

After being placed in the custody of his father and moved to an isolated cabin, Huck fakes his own death in elaborate fashion (Twain, 2006a, pp.35-36) before escaping down-river to Jackson’s Island. He appears to feel no remorse for doing so. It is here that Huck re-encounters Jim, the black slave of Miss Watson, who Huck discovers has also run away (Twain, 2006a, p.43). It is at this point that the protagonist is faced with the first of the series of moral questions which serve to define his character as the novel progresses.
Huck initially agrees to help Jim escape to freedom, although he recognises that by keeping his promise to not inform the authorities, he would be thought of by others as a “low-down Abolitionist and despised” (Twain, 2006a, p.44) – an idea which he is clearly affected by later, as he decides to betray his friend and turn him over to the authorities. It is anticipation of their arrival in ‘free’ country that sparks Huck’s intended betrayal – he realises that he will be considered an accomplice of Jim’s because, although he did not actually help Jim with his initial escape, he has remained silent since (Twain, 2006a, pp.79-80). As can be seen in the passage outlined below, Huck’s conscience is very much orientated towards a white, middle-classed conception of morality wherein the concepts of ownership, law and order are valued much more highly than a slave’s right to freedom:

‘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 mean?’” (Twain, 2006a, p.80).

Huck is even more horrified to learn that Jim intends to free his family one way or the other, and is prepared to ‘steal’ them away in order to ensure their safety. He is unable to view Jim’s family as anything other than another man’s property, and feels compelled to turn him in as soon as he is able:

‘Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn’t even know; a man that hadn’t ever done me no harm... My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it: ...‘I’ll paddle ashore at first light, and tell.’” (Twain, 2006a, p.81).

In terms of moral development, this passage (and subsequent events) sees Huck entering into the second stage identified by Kohlberg (1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76), which is known as the ‘conventional’ stage of morality. Although Huck has begun to accept some form of morality (i.e. by trying to determine what is the ‘right’ thing to do), he judges his actions only in relation to society’s views and expectations, rather than relying on his own personal judgment. In rural Missouri during the period leading up to the American Civil War, slave ownership was widely accepted as a legitimate form of possession and was not subjected to critical pressure – subsequently, Huck views turning Jim in to the authorities as being the ‘right’ thing to do, despite the fact that Jim has shown him only friendship, and Miss Watson (and the ‘civilised’ society she represents) has mainly offered him criticism, chastisement and cruelty. According to Bennett (1974, p.127), this is a typical example of ‘bad’ morality, meaning the principles upon which a moral code is based have become somewhat skewed and require re-examination. One of the ways this can occur is when emphasis is placed in an individual’s mind upon what is legally, rather than morally, right (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76).
However, Huck experiences a change of heart when he paddles away from Jim intending to turn him in, and Jim calls out that Huck is "de bes' fren' Jim's ever had, en... de only fren' ole Jim's got now" (Twain, 2006a, p.81). Huck loses his nerve, and lies to the authorities when asked the skin colour of his companion (Twain, 2006a, p.82). It is important to note here that some critics would argue that this does not constitute a sufficient moral shift, as Huck's change of heart is not initiated by a realisation of the inhumanity of slavery, but rather his reluctance to betray a friend in his time of need – thus, the black struggle is reduced to a motif no more powerful than Huck's imprisonment at the hands of his father which, although awful, cannot compare to the horror that was enslavement (Lester, 1999, p.201).

Huck does begin to show a level of remorse for his pranks and jests as well though, as can be seen when Jim reprimands him for making him think that he dreamt up the fog that separated them briefly and made Jim so anxious. Jim tells Huck that:

'My heart wuzmos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn't k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin', all safe ensoun', de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss' yo' foot I's so thankful. En all you wuzthinkin 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head erdeyfren'sen makes 'em feel ashamed' (Twain, 2006a, p.79).

As Trilling (1960, p.195) notes, the sense of shame and humility that this sparks in Huck leads him to be compelled to apologise for his behaviour, stating that after "fifteen minutes... [of] work[ing] [him]self up to go and humble [him]self to a black person... [he] done it, and... warn't ...sorry for it afterward" (Twain, 2006a, p.79). Though, again, this passage has been criticised for portraying Jim as being something less than human (Lester, 1999, p.202), it does indicate that the distance between the two characters is closing in Huck's mind.

Huck's Increased Morality in the Face of Hypocrisy, Cruelty and Deception

Once separated from Jim in Kentucky, Huck is offered shelter with the aristocratic Grangerford family (Twain, 2006a, p.87) after confirming he has no connection with the Shepherdsons, a family who – despite attending the same church and subscribing to a religion that teaches "brotherly love" (Twain, 2006a, p.97) – have been locked into a blood feud with the Grangerfords for the last thirty years. The irony of a religious community that accepts feuding as part of everyday life and allows the carrying of guns in church is not lost on Huck who, despite his age, has begun to recognise the hypocrisies existing within the supposedly 'civilised' society (Tucker, 1990, p.17).

After unwittingly helping Miss Sophia elope with a member of the Shepherdson family by passing a message hidden in a Bible, Huck witnesses the ambush and murder of various male members of the Grangerford family, including his young friend Buck (Twain, 2006a, pp.101-102), in an act of retaliation by the Shepherdsons. Huck is
subsequently left questioning the validity of the community’s customs-based morality. According to Kohlberg (1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76), this signals that Huck has entered into the final stage of moral development, which is known as the ‘post-conventional’ level. Here, an individual is able to examine the laws, traditions and customs of a community and evaluate whether or not these promote its general welfare (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76). Where laws and customs are not found to promote the ‘greatest good’ for the greatest number of people, they can be abandoned accordingly (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76).

Subsequently, Huck shows increased sympathy for ‘outcasts’ like himself and Jim – who, after the murders of Grangerfords, he is reunited with (Twain, 2006a, p.102) – and behaves in a more charitable manner. When he and Jim come across the “Duke” and the “King” fleeing an angry mob (Twain, 2006a, pp.106-108), Huck decides to help them without any real hesitation or wariness (Carrington, 1976, p.76), although he comes to regret this later. The two men commit a number of money-making scams which Huck finds amusing at first, such as the Royal Nonesuch show swindles, but later, when they become caught up in an inheritance fraud in which the two crooks try and imitate the Wilks’ brothers, Huck has a change of heart and informs the niece of the deceased that the Duke and the King are, in fact, common criminals (Twain, 2006a, p.162). Despite the fact that he made his fortune through theft and mischief, he sees the error in the two criminal’s actions and wants to see justice done – a clear indication of his shifting morality.

Another notable moral development comes in the form of Huck’s decision to rescue Jim from the Phelps’ farm, after learning that the Duke and the King have resold Jim into slavery and he is to be returned to his original home with Miss Watson (Twain, 2006a, pp.179-180). Despite Huck’s initial intention to write to Tom Sawyer and let him know Jim’s location, to thus allow Miss Watson to retrieve her ‘property’, this decision conflicts with Huck’s increasing sense of individual morality and responsibility. Although some of the worries he expresses are selfish, such as the shame he would experience if anyone knew he “helped a nigger to get his freedom” (Twain, 2006a, p.180), he is equally distressed that Jim has been condemned to live as a slave amongst strangers for “dirty” money (Twain, 2006a, p.180). Consequently, he tears up the letter, stating he is willing to go to Hell for his actions:

‘I took [the letter] up, and held it in my hand. I was a trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things…. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” – and tore it up’ (Twain, 2006a, p.182)

Although this statement mirrors his earlier sentiments regarding going to Hell, this time there is no flippancy to his comment. As his conscience and sense of morality has developed, Huck has abandoned superstitions in favour of prayer and adherence to religious morals, and so the decision to go against the moral norms of civilised society and selflessly embrace his punishment for helping his friend represent a significant shift in his principles. Trites (2012, n.p.) argues that Huck’s recognition of Jim’s right to
freedom demonstrates his whole-hearted rejection of the conventional morality of Southern racism, but Lester (1999, p.201) disputes this, arguing that Huck is only able to justify his fondness of Jim by stating “he was white inside” (Twain, 2006a, p.232), thus demonstrating Huck’s inability to “relinquish whiteness as a badge of superiority” (Lester, 1999, p.201).

Huck enlists Tom’s help to set Jim free when, by pure coincidence, it turns out that Tom is the nephew of the Phelps’ and is expected to visit. The two boys undertake an elaborate ploy involving secret messages, a hidden tunnel, a rope ladder sent in Jim’s food, and other elements from adventure books Tom has read, including an anonymous note to the Phelps warning them of the whole scheme (Twain, 2006a, pp.202-210). It is later revealed that Jim is actually already free – a fact which Tom Sawyer was already in possession of, but failed to mention – as his owner died and freed him in her will (Twain, 2006a, p.243). Tom’s thoughtless and reckless behaviour is demonstrative of the self-serving ‘pre-morality’ which also defined Huck in the opening stage of the novel (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76). Huck, though, has evolved to the ‘post-conventional’ stage of morality (Kohlberg, 1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76), wherein laws are valid only insofar as they are grounded in justice, and a commitment to justice carries with it an obligation to disobey unjust laws. He acted under the belief that he would be punished for his actions, with Jim’s best interests at heart, rather than his own. For many critics, the juxtaposition of these two characters’ attitudes serves as a “silent but eloquent comment” regarding the ability of a “sound heart” to correct a “deformed” conscience (Twain, 1985, cited in Hutchinson, 2001, p.xvii; Blair, 1973, p.343).

Huck also demonstrates a sense of Christian compassion when, at last, the Duke and the King are captured by the wronged townsfolk and the two men are subsequently tarred, feathered and ridden out of town on a rail (Twain, 2006a, p.447). Instead feeling a sense of pleasure in this revenge, Huck instead feels pity and reflects on how cruel human beings can be to one another:

‘They had the king and the duke astraddle of a rail... Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another’ (Twain, 2006a, pp.447-448).

Gone is the prankster who enjoyed the downfall of those who wronged him – Huck is, in contrast to his earlier character, compassionate and uninfluenced by the opinions of the other townsfolk. Kohlberg (1981, cited in Gibbs, 2003, pp.57-76) and other literary critics (Chadwick-Josua, 1998, p.116) would argue that Huck is no longer restricted by what society believes he ought to think, as he has completed all three stages of his moral development.
Conclusion

As has been demonstrated in the essay above, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 2006a, p.1-504) is a tale about how society tends to corrupt true morality, freedom and justice, and how individuals like Huck must follow their own conscience and establish their own principles based on a ‘post-conventional’ concept of morality. Though Huck undoubtedly undergoes a moral transformation, there is considerable debate over whether racial prejudice still exists at the end of the novel. However, despite this, Twain’s novel remains a prominent and frequently referred-to example of how an individual’s morality can develop in response to life experiences, even when that individual is hindered by a pre-existing sense of a ‘bad’ morality. In the end, Twain believes that a sound heart will win out against a deformed conscience and, after reading this text, it is not difficult to share in that hope.

Bibliography


