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“I’ll Go to Hell”: Morality in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract

Mark Twain had a complicated relationship with God and organized religion because of the contradictions he saw in what Christians preached and how they acted. However, Twain wasn’t against Christianity as a whole, and, in fact, he was surrounded by it all his life. His wife was religious, and his best friend, Joseph Twichell, was a Congregational preacher for whom he had great respect. Twain criticized religion in his works in an effort to point out the hypocrisy of its followers that ran rampant throughout America. In his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain uses Huck, a blank slate in regard to Christianity, as a means to explore and criticize the contradictory behaviors of Christians during the 1830s. On top of this, Twain chose the 1830s as his setting to compare the hypocrisy of then to his own time, the 1880s. He paralleled slavery with Jim Crow laws; most people during his time were happy slavery was over, but most would do nothing to stop Jim Crow. Despite believing his actions will condemn him to Hell, Huck demonstrates Christianity without hypocrisy when compared to the majority of Christian characters found in the novel. While never accepting religion for himself, Huck’s active support of Jim, his willingness to forgive the King and the Duke, and his selfless drive to help those in need portray the sort of Christianity that even a skeptic like Twain could support.

Keywords: Hypocrisy, Mark Twain, Morality, Religion

There is a quote often thrown around to criticize contradictory behavior found in many Christians today who do not actually practice what they preach: “There is no hate quite like Christian love.” This is apparent with many of the characters found in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; they claim to follow the teachings of Christ yet blatantly perform actions that go against what his teachings call for. By the end of the novel, the title character, Huck, has rejected the traditional Christianity of his time in favor of doing what he feels is morally right. His relationship with Jim, a runaway slave, as well as his recognition of the contradictory behavior among the Christians he meets along his physical journey down the river, takes Huck on a spiritual journey in which he comes to terms with his beliefs, values, and relationships, all of which are in direct conflict with what is seen as the traditional values and beliefs of Christianity during this time. The Christian characters, who should show values of empathy, love, respect, forgiveness, and kindness toward all people, instead mostly showcase cruelty, hatred, and hypocrisy. Throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck—despite believing his actions will condemn him to Hell—demonstrates a purer form of Christianity, without hypocrisy, than the majority of the nominally Christian characters found in the novel do.

Twain was the pioneer of Literary Realism, which includes, but is not limited to, the following qualities: “...it is concerned with quotidian events or ‘ordinary life,’ including ordinary people; the events are plausible given the assumptions of the audience; the narrative reveals aspects of social life that are normally not known, confronted, or represented in artistic works” (Shumway, 184). *Huck Finn* is a Realist work because it tells a plausible story that reveals the behaviors and beliefs of the general public of the time by portraying the everyday lives of ordinary people. Simultaneously, it exposes those people and their behaviors for their contradictory, outdated, and immoral natures. The aspects of social life that are being exposed are the hypocrisy of Christians during this time with their owning of slaves and open and blatant racism. The reason many of these characters are written this way is because Twain is portraying how common and accepted this behavior and rationale was during this time. This mindset was the norm for young and old, men and women, and it is seen with the characters throughout the novel.

The setting of *Huck Finn*—Missouri in the 1830s—was chosen very deliberately by Twain. This was during the time of slavery, when the majority of white Americans in the South saw African Americans as property rather than as equal human beings. Enslaved families were often split up and sold separately—a situation Jim found himself in due to Mrs. Watson very early on in the novel—because there was no regard for their humanity. Not even allowed citizenship, African Americans during this time had no rights, were looked down upon for simply existing, and were subject to mental and physical abuse daily. Twain wrote the novel in the 1880s yet chose the 1830’s as the story’s setting to parallel the thoughts and feelings of white Americans during the time of slavery and during his own time. Twain’s era was dominated by Jim Crow laws, which were named after a white stage performer who acted in blackface, and, fittingly, they were meant to undermine African Americans by restricting their ways of living. Jim Crow laws accomplished this in many ways, including enforcing voting restrictions through literacy

tests, segregated seating, the blocking of elected positions, and unfair poll taxes. Many people during the 1880's were happy that slavery was over, and some were even keen to mock their 1830's counterparts, but many more turned a blind eye to the unfair and cruel legislation that came after Emancipation. The hypocrisy among Christians, both in the 1830's and 1880's, is a key theme throughout the book, and Twain manages to expose both groups by comparing their beliefs to one another.

Before we discuss examples of Christianity and its values found in the novel, it is important to look at Mark Twain's own relationship with religion so that we better understand his motivations for writing these characters the way he did. Twain was surrounded by religion all his life; his wife was a Christian herself, his best friend, Joseph Twichell, was a congregationalist clergyman for whom he had great respect, and both his parents were religious. Jeanne Campbell Reesman notes that Twain noticed through his mother's Calvinistic Christianity, "the judgmental God of the Old Testament, His tendency to damn sinners, His earthly punishments, His strict (but impossible) expectations of his followers, especially little boys with their imaginations running loose on the frontier" (114). Twain found hypocrisy within the church and from people who claimed to follow Christ, which contrasted with the description of God he was taught as a child and ultimately pushed him away from following the religion himself. That being said, Twain was not angry with God, nor did he think religion was nonsense; he knew and respected people who were committed to the church. Reesman described Twain as "clearly in a constant conflict about God and faith, and [he] never could just leave it alone and move on. He wanted God, but he wanted a better God. He wanted God to do something better with the world than what existed" (114). Twain wanted to write a character who embodied the good values taught by God and Christianity, but also one who was not a hypocrite who cherry-picked those values, like most of the Christian characters we see in *Huckleberry Finn* who owned slaves and were blatantly racist. Huck works as a foil to those characters, and by examining their actions and contrasting them with Huck's own, we are able to gauge who more closely upholds traditional Christian values.

Tom Sawyer is a friend of Huck who is like him in many ways. However, Tom was born and raised in the comfort of a "civilized" household. Tom was an avid reader of adventure/romance novels, and because of this he always followed the strict structure of these stories in his own adventures. Tom always stuck to the rules and structure of what white Christian society had taught him, unlike Huck who was mostly raised uncivilized and without religious teachings. Huck is seen questioning authority and thinking for himself throughout the novel by lying to adults and aiding Jim in his escape. At the beginning of the book, Huck's morality is closer to Tom's, as seen by his following Tom's gang and his willingness to steal from innocents. At the end of the book, Huck is still following Tom's adventure-book plan, but his morals have grown significantly from his experiences with Jim, the Grangerfords, and the Duke and King. He was constantly questioning Tom as they worked on their plan to free Jim, and he was constantly frustrated they would not use the simple plan to get Jim out quickly. Tom, raised by a Christian woman and supposedly civilized and kind in his actions, instead tortures Jim with

rats and snakes and spiders, makes him endure this torture for days on end, steals from his own aunt and uncle, and lies about the situation to both Jim and Huck so that he himself can have more fun. Tom is oblivious to how his actions affect others, as seen by his scaring of Uncle Silas and Aunt Sally and his plan culminating in Jim being recaptured; Tom is on track to become another self-centered, inconsiderate white man who abuses his privilege for his own gain. Huck, on the other hand, is incredibly selfless, declaring the classic line, “All right then, I’ll go to hell” (Twain, 238) as he makes his decision to save Jim—going against what society has taught Huck his whole life—because he refuses to believe his *friend* is subhuman and not worth the compassion.

The beginning of the novel has Huck living under the Widow Douglass and Miss Watson’s care, and in their household, Huck is “civilized” by the two and taught the rules of proper Christian society. They both want Huck to be schooled, learn the teachings of the Bible, and attend church, but they both have different attitudes about how he should be taught. Huck says, “Sometimes the widow would take me to one side and talk about Providence in a manner that would make my mouth water; but maybe the next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again” (Twain, 13). The Widow Douglass is kinder to Huck and more accepting of his uncivilized upbringing and attitude, but Miss Watson is hypocritical in her teachings and behavior. Rather than being a spiritual guide for Huck, she instead judges him for what he says, what he thinks, and even for how he dresses. Later, she lies to him about how prayer works in a misguided effort to get him to pray. Huck states, “She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn’t so” (Twain, 12). When Huck confronts her about this, instead of owning up to her mistake, she instead calls him a fool. Furthermore, unlike the Widow Douglass, who is gentle with her approach to teaching Huck religion, Miss Watson resorts to scare tactics to get Huck to obey, telling him that unless he changes his ways and conforms to how she and the Widow Douglass want him to act, he will go to Hell. To top it all off, Miss Watson owns slaves, much like many of the other Christians in the book, and she was willing to sell Jim and separate him from his family. Miss Watson is not the morally sound person she thinks she is. Instead, with her lying, harsh judgment, and willingness to own and separate slaves from their families, she is a prime example of the hypocrisy exhibited by many Christians.

Continuing the theme of morally unsound characters, the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons is one of the most ironic sections of the book. One of the tenets of Christianity is “love thy neighbor as thyself,” but these families are unable to see past their feud, and nobody even remembers how it started. To make matters worse, Marvin LaHood points out that both families attend the same Church, meaning they have heard this exact sermon before, yet they are still unable to apply it to their own lives (Twain, 13). Once again, the theme of contradictory beliefs and actions appears, and it is also exemplified by the treatment of Huck when he first met the Grangerfords. First, they held a gun to his face and had dogs ready to attack, but they quickly shifted to gentility and hospitality once found out he was not a Shepherdson. Mr. Grangerfords’ hospitality towards Huck should speak of fine Christian values,

but like Miss Watson and Uncle Silas, he still owned slaves—over 100 in fact—and he and his family were ready to kill the Shepherdsons, Huck, and anyone deemed an “other” for a reason they cannot remember. So, his kindness is contradicted by this evil. The feud between the two families ultimately results in the death of many people on both sides, breaking the fifth commandment “Thou shalt not kill.” The Grangerfords' hypocritical actions, and the death of Buck, cause Huck to question morality for himself, for this is yet another case of Christians in his life contradicting themselves and causing harm to others because of it.

Despite his hypocritical actions, one of the few characters Huck had admiration for was Uncle Silas. Kaine Ezell, an English professor whose studies include an emphasis on Twain and his works, claims, “Twain establishes Uncle Silas—though his appearances are few and brief—as a rare positive religious figure in his works” (99). Silas was kind to his slaves in a world where it was common to be cruel, but his kindness did not excuse how he held Jim captive in the conditions he did. He visited Jim every day to feed him, so he would have seen the snakes and spiders and rats that had infested his cell and done nothing about it. What makes matters worse is that Silas is not just a follower of Christ, he is actually a preacher, making his hypocrisy even more ironic than it already is. Huck does note Silas as a “mighty nice old man,” but that is only because he is comparing his hypocrisy to the hypocrisy of everyone else he has met throughout the novel. While Silas still owns slaves and keeps them in inhumane conditions, most of the people Huck met before him did worse things on top of that. Silas’ wife is not much better, and this can be seen with her response to Huck telling her that a steamboat explosion killed a man. When he tells her it was a black man who died, she replies, “Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt” (Twain, 246). She does not even consider the life of a man who had died equal to hers based solely on his skin color. Huck, on the other hand, is willing to go to Hell for Jim, his good dear friend. Huck goes against everything he knows and everything he has been told by society and by people who, by the traditional Christian standard, are supposed to have better morals than he.

Compared to the other characters found in the novel, Huck Finn displays better morality that more closely aligns with the teachings of Christ. When he and Jim stole the robbers’ boat, he felt bad that they were stranding them—even though the robbers were planning on killing one of their own—so he alerted the sheriff so that they might be saved. Huck could have turned Jim in at any point in the book, and even considered it a time or two, but ultimately never chose to do so because he saw the same humanity in Jim as he did in himself, unlike the vast majority of the other characters in the novel. In his travels with the Duke and the King, Huck saw them steal, lie, and cheat many different people out of money, and he grew unable to bear it any longer, leading him to expose the two to Mary Jane. Despite knowing firsthand the evil of the duo, Huck still felt sorry for the pair upon seeing them tarred, feathered, and run out of town, stating, “I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals...It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another” (Twain, 257). Huck also sold his small fortune—worth thousands of dollars—to Judge Thatcher for a single dollar. Huck did not care about money, much like how Christ taught his followers to be. Although he is still a flawed product of his time, Huck

Finn's morals and values are more Christ-like than the nominally Christian characters found in the book.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a book that exhibits the contradiction of many Christians during the time of the story's setting between the values they should practice and the values they actually perform. Throughout it all, Huckleberry Finn, while never accepting religion for himself, manages to emerge as the least hypocritical character in the novel. His skepticism towards Christianity after seeing its contradictions in many of the characters found within the story leads Huck to follow his gut instinct on whether something is morally just or not. This in turn guides him to make decisions that help those less fortunate than himself and forgive those who have wronged him—both actions which more closely align with Christianity's teachings than the other characters' actions throughout the novel. Twain did this to showcase the reality of the culture of the time, proposing that an "uncivilized" boy shows better moral judgment and character than what society itself sees as its paragons of virtue and goodness.

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