

# ***I'll Go to Hell: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

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In America's mid-to-late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the word "moral" was essentially synonymous with "religious," an association that few dared to question. But in 1885, Mark Twain published the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which proceeded to shake the very foundation of the relationship referenced above, along with that of many other previously untouchable beliefs. In the selected passage, the main character, Huck, mulls over his complex decision of whether to return his black-skinned companion, Jim, to slavery, after aiding his escape. While Huck initially falls into believing the predetermined notion that religion and morality are one and the same, Twain later illustrates this belief's falsehood through the ironic inversion of intuitive morality given the context of the rest of the novel. Through the evolution of Huck's thought process, Twain suggests that morality can be achieved independent of religion, even going so far as to say that the attempt to retain piety can interfere with one's ability to make morally correct decisions.

Twain first illustrates Huck's confusion in his equation of moral correctness with religious purity. Sparked by his desire to "be better," Huck decides to "kneel down," implying that the way to make oneself a more moral person is by increasing one's piety. Moreover, he refers to his heart as not being "right," because he was "playing double"—the "double" referring to his desire to be cleansed of sin without handing Jim over, again associating his lack of moral clarity with his inability to overcome sin, and therefore religion. Furthermore, by claiming that his heart is not "right," Huck paints morality as a polarized realm, consisting solely of right and wrong, just as his religion is a dichotomy between heaven and hell. Hence, through their parallel separations into two opposing divisions, religion and morality again take on a mirrored equal-

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ity; for right leads to heaven and wrong to hell. However, Twain goes on to show that Huck fails to be entirely fooled by this false relationship.

Despite Huck's initial association between religion and morality, Twain offers the context of Huck's relationship with Jim as a means of ironically inverting these divisions, and scrutinizing Huck's initial thought process. After Huck allegedly rights himself through prayer, he turns to memories of himself and Jim "talking, singing, and laughing," three actions that are exclusive to human behavior, and thereby highlight Jim's humanity. By showing Huck's inability to "harden" himself against Jim, Twain conveys that one requires a rigid disassociation with humanity in order to justify sending a moral human back to slavery. Hence, he engenders a form of situational irony dependent on the reader's empathy for Jim, which Twain has cultivated throughout the novel. The fact that Jim is portrayed as a moral character while Jim's skin color makes him the subject of unquestioned Christian judgment sets up a situation in which Twain can counter Huck's initial conviction that religion is the only path to morality.

Through descriptions of Jim and a detailed illustration of Huck's ultimately redeeming decision, Twain suggests the revolutionary notion that morality can be cultivated independent of religion, and that adhering to a religious doctrine can lead one to make immoral decisions in certain situations. At the end of the passage, Huck employs the adjective "good" in reference to Jim's moral highness outside the context of Christian religion, for he makes clear at the beginning of the novel that Jim has faith in superstition, not Christianity, thereby making Jim the first character to achieve morality independently. Huck proves his own religious-moral disconnect in claiming, as he tears up the letter, "All right, then, I'll go to hell." Here, Twain illustrates that in order to make the truly humane and moral decision of not betraying Jim, Huck must altogether sacrifice his own religious standing. More importantly, Huck's need to oppose religion in order to make a moral decision suggests Twain's belief that the strictly religious construction of morality can be wrong on some occasions, and therefore that religion fails to be the perfect guiding light that many so often make it. As seen by Huck's quote, Twain uses this passage to set up a situation, employing inver-

sion and irony, in which he can confirm his belief that religion is simply one of many ways to achieve true morality, and an ill-considered one at that.

In questioning the long-standing acceptance of religion as morality, Twain proposes a revolutionary idea of skepticism towards blindly accepted beliefs. Only by shattering these conventional beliefs could Twain dream of writing a novel so influential that it would play a part in truly freeing the slaves; while his message may have been unpopular and even blasphemous, it was vital in undermining previously untouched beliefs regarding slavery. ●

### Bibliography

Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Thomas Cooley. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999. 3-296. Print.