Huck Finn's Moral Growth--Do The Psychologists Have Anything to Say?

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In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Huck's moral judgment to "go to hell" rather than send the negro slave Jim back to his owner Miss Watson is perhaps one of the most psychologically rich moments in all of American Literature. Critics, however, disagree over the relevance of Huck's decision. Some claim that, in rejecting the law on slavery and even his own conscience, he attains a moral triumph of the highest order. Others say Huck's action is really the gesture of an adolescent, a profound but temporary blow for freedom; later in the novel, under the spell of Tom Sawyer, he regresses morally, taking on the oppressive values of the society he had earlier rejected.

In our century, psychologists Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg have done significant studies on cognitive and moral development in children and adults. Piaget thinks mental growth comes through the dissonance between what one knows and what he experiences anew (Pulaski 6-12). Kohlberg, building on Piaget, posits six levels through which a person passes in developing moral stature (Lickona 34-5). It is possible to see Huck's dilemma regarding Jim as a culminating of a series of dissonances where he may have reached Kohlberg's highest level of morality (postconventional). On the other hand, the act may be that of a rebellious child, one not really applicable to the adult world. Some say Twain was using Huck to say something he could not accomplish in his own adult life (Lettis 291).

No one has applied the findings of these psychologists
to Huck's case, though Twain's talent lies precisely in how he recreates the wide-eyed perspective of a boy and writes in that boy's very language. Twain also structures the novel so that, as Huck goes down the river, his various encounters challenge his mental capabilities, making the journey a natural one for tracing his moral growth. In a recent study, Kohlberg points out that Piaget's patterns, as well as his own, center around the adolescent reaching maturity, whether this happens at age twelve, or years later, so that these stages are relevant to any study of moral maturation (Kohl. and Kramer, 93-97). Huck's actions, then, though those of a boy, need not be limited to boyhood, if indeed Huck does reach the top of the moral ladders outlined by Kohlberg and Piaget.

Critics of *Huck Finn* view his moral growth in opposite ways. In early Twain criticism Van Wyck Brooks sees in Huck the recovery of the value of freedom in our culture. Lionel Trilling expands the moral implications of Huck's acceptance of Jim, showing how he overcomes even his Christian conscience to do the right thing. More recently, Cleanth Brooks says Huck's human consciousness transcends his conscience so that justice may prevail. In his study of Huck's evolving moral self, Richard Adams concludes that the boy's actions throughout the novel are consistent and represent an overall rejection of the pseudo-aristocratic values he finds along the river.

Such observations, however, have to be qualified. Van Wyck Brooks thinks the novel as a whole fails because commercial and Puritan values ultimately prevail. Even Trilling
thinks Huck's main act is still that of a boy. Leo Marx claims that, if Huck chooses honesty over respectability, he later regresses, as does Jim, so that the ending is a farce, quite removed from the main theme of a moral quest for freedom and equality. William O'Connor details Huck's insensitivity and indifference to Jim late in the novel as inconsistent with his earlier moral growth. And James Cox says the character of Huck simply dissolves, ending with his moral compromise with an immoral society.¹

Piaget and Kohlberg speak to this dilemma. For Piaget, as a child reaches adolescence he is capable of passing from concrete to formal operations, that is, he can abstract and deal with hypothetical possibilities in making decisions (Piaget 63-4).² To get to this point he moves through three stages. While a child (ages 5-7), he is largely obedient to authority. Then, during middle childhood (ages 8-10), he develops a sense of fairness based on equality. Here his relations to others tend to supersede parental ties. Finally, as he reaches adolescence (ages 11-13), equity and justice become paramount; now he weighs all relationships and circumstances, regardless of particular affections (Duska 17-41). For Piaget, formal operations come in late adolescence when he can make determinations that go beyond immediate experience.

Kohlberg divides moral growth into six stages. In the preconventional stages a person chooses for selfish motives, such as to avoid punishment (stage 1) or gain an advantage (stage 2). In the conventional stages one acts to maintain
expectations—to please a parent (stage 3) or keep the rules of society (stage 4). The final postconventional stages represent an effort to define moral principles according to one's own personal values, quite apart from any group, and in the light of some larger view. The emphasis in stage 5 is on individual rights, as in the Bill of Rights, where the legal and moral may be separate. Stage 6 is even higher because it involves ethical principles that are seen as universal, and human dignity is primary (K. and Gilligan 1066-72). Postconventional judgments parallel Piaget's movement to formal operational thinking, for they are based on abstract and universal determinations.

How, then, do these stages translate into Huck's river journey? Early in the novel, Huck is simply Piaget's child. He obeys Miss Watson, who keeps "pecking at him" (Twain 3) and runs Pap's errands out of fear for his life. Moreover, the reasons for which he finally rejects his elders are preconventional. He flees Miss Watson to get away from her harassment, and fakes his own death to avoid more welts from his father (stage 1). But there is also a hedonism in his motives. In reflecting on the widow's view of religion, he says she wants him "to help other people...and never think about myself" (10), after which he concludes: "...I couldn't see no advantage about it except for other people" (stage 2). Ironically, the journey down the river will, in Piaget's terms, challenge his mental structures, causing him considerable dissonance, and forcing him to profoundly
rearrange his thoughts on what it means—in the the widow's words—"to help other people."

On Jackson's Island Huck meets Jim, and after they explain to each other how they both escaped oppressive situations, Huck promises not to tell that Jim "run off," even though there is an $800 reward, and though "people would call me a low-down Abolitionist" (40). Here Huck, not concerned about money or risk to himself, is moving beyond preconventional morality. For Piaget he is in middle childhood, where concern about what others think is less important than equality of some sort. Indeed, Huck and Jim are in the same boat—running away from authority. For Kohlberg the movement to conventional morality is characterized by concern for others' feeling and perhaps a verbal contract. Huck may act here to save his own skin, but his words indicate a commitment to Jim. Indeed, Jim's testimony "I owns myself" (44) is Huck's dream too, and in their common fate they seem to form a kind of conventional, though primitive, moral bond.

As the two proceed downriver, Huck examines his conflicting bonds with old and new societies. Though, as a member of the old society, he thinks of Jim as a superstitious "nigger" who "can't learn. . .to argue" (75), he constantly gains respect for Jim (his new society). After the two have left the wrecked ship that Huck insisted on boarding for the sake of adventure, Jim denounces such acts, saying that when they lost their raft in the process he thought he was lost—either to be drowned or sold back to Miss Watson. Huck
agrees with Jim, saying he has "an uncommon head for a nigger" (71). It may be Jim is taking place of Huck's father, substituting reasonableness for pap's tirades on government and education. In that case, Huck's response is conventional, as though to a parent (level 3). On the other hand, though Huck's new society conflicts with the old (where Jim is the illiterate "nigger"), it still has its own code of loyalty and this Huck does not want to break (level 4).

But Huck is also ready for fundamental change. After being lost in the fog in a canoe, he tries to trick Jim by pretending he hasn't been gone at all, whereupon Jim castigates him for trying to "make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie" (80). Huck then takes fifteen minutes before he is able to "humble himself to a nigger." Here Huck transcends conventional morality, for he begins to see Jim as a fellow human being. In their study of Kohlberg, Joan and Henry Timm posit a transitional step to posconventional thinking--stage 4½--where systems become relative and people primary (13-15). This is now Huck's case, and for the first time he sees Jim on Piaget's level of equity, as one due human respect, even though he is a slave; for Huck this is the beginning of formal operational moral thought.

In Kohlberg's schema, however, it's always possible to be half in and half out of a particular stage (K. and Gilligan 1068). As the raft approaches Cairo, Huck realizes that Jim is almost a free man and he begins to think about this. Himself a product of Southern society, Huck reflects on the
fact that Jim is stolen property, that in effect he has robbed Miss Watson, who hadn't done anything but "learn you manners" (82). Moreover, when Jim threatens to have his two children stolen for him by an Abolitionist, Huck is horrified at this additional theft, which involves robbing somebody he "didn't even know." Here, as he argues with himself (his conscience), Huck is back on the 4th conventional level where laws are meant to protect people's property as well as to control people. Huck, not aware that for him Jim and his family are now chattel, simply objects to stealing as something morally disruptive to society.

But at the instant Huck has the chance to turn Jim over to two men on a skiff seeking "runaway niggers," he lies, saying the man on the raft is his white pap who has smallpox. Ironically, he now moves to postconventional morality, where the rules of society are less important than the rights of its members. Huck knows this instinctively, and though he kicks himself for protecting Jim--"I warn't man enough" (84), he says--on a deeper level he does choose Jim over the commercial morality of the South; this is Kohlberg's 5th stage. Jim, of course, influences Huck's decision. Just before the incident Jim says to Huck (and this is the Jim that rebuked Huck the night before for his human betrayal), "... I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn'e ben for Huck: Huck done it. Jim won't ever forgit you, Huck" (83). Here Jim raises the very issues of freedom, and Huck responds. It is a case where morality and legality are not the same,
and Huck opts for Jim over the demands of the system.

It's then that the raft is upset by a steamboat and Huck and Jim are separated intermittently. During this time Huck encounters the aristocratic Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, as well as the fake royalty of the Duke and Dauphin, after which he "told Jim everything" (195)—another gesture of equality where one friend shares with another. This sets up the climax of Huck's moral growth where he decides to "go to hell" rather than betray Jim. Richard Adams, who argues forcefully for Huck's moral consistency, says the only major difference between his decision on the raft near Cairo and the one here (Chapter 31) is that now Huck acts in a religious context—salvation and damnation are part of the picture (Malks 92).

Actually, Huck's action here is more complex than this, and a distinction between Kohlberg's 5th and 6th stages is helpful. Joan and Henry Timm, in describing the 6th stage, say that it is characterized by three concepts—reversibility, priority, and universality (19-22). Reversibility means that one considers all the possibilities and acts without undue pressure. On the raft Huck knew what he wanted to do (give up Jim), and says he has "got to do it" (83), but then he is suddenly interrupted by the skiff, whereupon he lies about Jim. In Chapter 31, by contrast, he carefully weighs both sides—Miss Watson's as owner and Jim's as his friend. He is truly in a dilemma; this is reversibility.

Priority, also part of stage 6, means to select the
greater claim, now more important than the identity of anyone involved. On the raft near Cairo Huck was greatly influenced by Jim's moving statements that Huck was his "bes fren" and "de on'y white genlman dat ever kep' his promise to ole Jim." (83). In Chapter 31, on the other hand, Jim is not there at all. Huck has come back to the raft to discover that the Royalty must have taken him. So Huck not only weighs both sides, but objectively commits himself to saving Jim, though he be damned. This is priority; undoubtedly the seeds of this decision were sown back when he first met Jim, and solidified instinctively when he lied to save Jim on the raft, but now there is no doubt where Huck stands.

Finally, a universal act is one true for all; it affirms someone's dignity over the needs of a system. On the raft Huck chooses Jim, but then he tells himself he simply "hadn't the spunk of a rabbit," and rationalizes that he was brought up "to do wrong" (84-5). By contrast, in Chapter 31 he reviews both sides quite apart from Jim, and then just before the decision he sees "Jim before me all the time; in the day and in the night-time. . .talking and singing and laughing" and yet "I couldn't. . .strike no places to harden me against him." (200). This full review allows Huck to choose on the sheer basis of love and dignity that transcend all codes. It is true this choice now has a religious aspect, but it is also a new level of morality. What's ironic about religion here is not so much that he is willing to be damned, but that he affirms the widow's idea of religion--
to do all he could to "help other people." This is precisely stage 6, and it is at this peak that Huck has now arrived.

Still, many do not accept Huck's moral maturation overall. Some say he is inconsistent, often losing his moral sensivity to Jim, as during the Grangerford-Shepherdson and Duke-Dauphin episodes, where he forgets about or seems indifferent to Jim's fate. Others claim that after Chapter 31 Huck reverts to form, as when he replies to Mrs. Phelps' asking whether anyone was hurt in the steamboat incident: "No'm. Killed a nigger" (210), as though a "nigger" were not human. Then there are those who see the dissolution of Huck's character when he takes part in Tom Sawyer's grotesque plan to free Jim (who is already free)—something that is hard to imagine from one who has reached moral heights. In this context, the novel's ending, like the beginning, is an escape from civilization, rather than an effort to grow morally by continuing to confront society's materialism, as Huck did when he tore up the letter to Miss Watson. ³

Continuing to apply Piaget-Kohlberg, however, Huck's growth appears steady, and the ending may be a testimony to his maturity. Both psychologists claim that one needs to go through one stage to reach another, not that a person cannot go back to a lower stage (K. and Gilligan 1069-75). Recent research shows that most adults, who may challenge society in their adolescent zeal, later on tend to "sette in" to stage 4, where society's laws and customs are primary (K. and Kramer 106). By contrast, Huck's development is steadily
upward, something we can see in his changing attitude, not only toward Jim, but toward what Twain calls "adventures."

From the beginning Huck is enamored by Tom's imaginative escapades, which parallel those of the aristocrats and royalty throughout the novel. All are morally preconventional—

Tom as robber, the Grangerfords as family killers, the
Royalty as professional con men, all of these as promoters of slavery. Tom's romanticism, of course, seems harmless, but even at an early stage, Huck grows impatient with Tom's A-rabs and elephants, which to him have "all the marks of a Sunday-school" (13). For Huck, life is more than games.

Then Huck begins to see himself in these games. On the raft, Huck imitates Tom's adventurous ways in boarding the wrecked boat. He might later feel sorry for the murderers and send help (conventional morality), but when Jim says that deed almost cost him his freedom, Huck acknowledges Jim's plight. In considering Jim's freedom, and maybe the very issue of slavery, Huck nears postconventional thought in the context of so-called "adventures." Later, when he witnesses the death of Buck, and the tarring of the King and Duke, he sees the effects of "adventurous" living in a larger sense. It is not that Huck objects to style or flare; it's what happens to people in the process. Late in the novel, Tom's arrival at the Phelpses in a considerable "amount of style" (213) is juxtaposed with Huck's witnessing the humiliation of his royal friends (216); now he feels for those hurt by a society as blind as its victims and carrying on in
much the same way, though now in the name of justice. Now Huck's conscience, which he thinks is wrong, creates in him a personal blame for society's "adventurous ways." The boy at this point is on Kohlberg's 5th level.

Finally, though glad to take part in Tom's elaborate plan to free Jim on the Phelpses' farm--"it was worth fifteen of mine for style" (218), he says--Huck now knows the difference between style and content. After he's had enough of it, he says to Tom: "I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What I want is my nigger" (230). When faced with the real issue, Huck opts unequivocally for Jim's freedom, much as he did in Chapter 31, and now as then he is on the 6th stage of Kohlberg's ladder. Some argue that the more absurd the manner in which Jim is "freed," the greater the commentary on the immoral "adventurous" society in which Huck lives (Barry 93). This may be true, but more important from the Piaget-Kohlberg vantage point is Huck's perception of this absurdity. He is part of society, for he speaks its language and plays its games. But he also sees through subterfuge, and his questioning of Tom's plan at the end, as he did his games in the beginning, shows he is still growing.

Huck is not the only one, of course, that grows morally. So does Jim; in fact, they grow together, and that double growth is important for understanding Huck at the end. When the two first meet, Jim's superstition is dominant, and on Jackson's Island he is afraid for his life (preconventional), but Huck's decision not to betray him binds the two together
in their escape (conventional). His calling Huck on his lies after the fog incident shows his trust in Huck as a friend and equal—a gesture that goes beyond conventional categories, and spurs Huck to new levels. After Huck lies to protect Jim on the raft, Jim tells Huck, "I's a free man, en I couldn't ever ben free ef it hadn't ben for Huck" (83). Here Jim is not acting to save himself, or please Huck. As one who already thinks the system is evil—he'd get "an Ab'litionist" (82) to steal his daughters—he now believes someone has defended his human rights. This is Piaget's moral equity and Kohlberg's stage of universal priniciple.

Jim, of course, also goes back and forth from higher to lower stages. He submits to being tied up by the Duke so the public won't think he's free, but at the same time he constantly warns Huck about the phoniness of the royalty, as when he says of the Duke: "...dis one do smell so like de nation, Huck" (145). In the end Jim—who like Huck goes along with Tom's scheme on the Phelps's farm (for Piaget childish, and for Kohlberg preconventional)—is not fooled by the whole process, for he says humorously: "...dey ain't nobody kin get up a plan dat's mo mixed up en splendid den what dat one wuz" (257). But what's more important is that Jim is thinking, not about himself, but about Tom, who was shot and needs the help of a doctor. Huck even thinks Jim is "white inside" (257); Jim is far from white, physically or morally; he's simply reached a high level of morality, and amidst all his oppression it continues to surface.
This leads us to the always-controversial ending. If Huck lights out into the territory to avoid being civilized as he does in the beginning, then the novel is repetitious and he remains a boy--on the same childish, preconventional level as he started. In this context the ending is an escape from the values which--in spite of heroic moments on the river--he has compromised with all along, but especially in his final collaboration with Tom. In a recent study, Fritz Oehlschlaeger says that in the end Huck finds himself so much a part of a corrupt society that there is no freedom anywhere (120-27). On the other hand, if Huck has reached postconventional heights and, though he at times talks and acts in conventional ways, still thinks postconventionally, and acts this way when pressed (as he does when he questions Tom's plan), then the ending has different implications.

In the last chapter, after Huck gets Tom in private for the first time, and asks him why he delayed Jim's freedom, Tom says he wanted to prolong even more the drama of freeing Jim. This time Huck doesn't challenge Tom, but he is disappointed with him. It reminds us of Huck's discovery that the Duke and Dauphin are "humbugs and frauds," whereupon he says to himself: "If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get along with this kind of people is to let them have their own way" (117). In both cases Huck is unhappy, but he feels he cannot change others by confronting them. Then Huck finds out from Jim that his own father is dead. Jim, Huck's surrogate father, and the
main context for his moral growth—indeed they have grown together—will now be gone, free pursue his own children's freedom, and Huck will be alone. This means that if Huck is to continue to grow he needs new contexts—new issues, new "nigger Jims," if you will—to provide what Kohlberg calls "continued experience of conflict" even after reaching a high moral stage (K. and Kramer 118). The ending of *Huck Finn* provides for that conflict and Huck's further development.

The nature of that conflict and the direction of that development after *Huck Finn* cannot be considered in this short essay, but they are indicated by the boy's moral growth in this novel. That growth is steady, and his decision to leave civilization again comes from a new moral height. In the beginning Huck rejects Tom and Miss Watson and pap to pursue his own (preconventional) desires. He then forms his own society with Jim, which brings him into conflict with (conventional) society at large. Finally, he painfully discovers what (postconventional) rights and freedom and love are all about. Though at times he goes along with the Duke, and toward the end with Tom, he never loses sight of these values; rather—as Piaget would have it—he continues to build them into his thoughts and actions. In the end neither the fraudulent acts of society, nor the fabrications of Tom satisfy him, though he lets individuals "have their own way." Still, he needs society, if only to become more consistent and sure of himself. He needs yet to distinguish between his wrong conscience in Chapter 31, which he thought was right
and rejected in favor of Jim, and his right conscience in Chapter 33, which he said "ain't got no sense" (217), but which stirred in him a feeling of responsibility for the dehumanizing actions of a society of which he now knows he is a part. "The territory" simply leaves open the possibility for that new consciousness and moral growth.
NOTES

1 Barry Marks has collected the views of these critics on Huck's moral growth; Cleath Brooks' comments appear in American Literature, p. 1082.

2 Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Oppen discuss different cases of adolescents coming into formal operational thinking, pp. 178-204.

3 Both Marks and Richard Lettis et. al. include critics with negative positions toward Huck's growth in the novel. Among them are William O'Connor, Leo Marx, and James Cox.

4 The sequels to Huck Finn, such as Tom Sawyer Abroad and Tom Sawyer Detective, are filled with preconventional moral actions. In Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians, however, which was written soon after Huck Finn, Huck is involved in a moral dilemma of considerable consequence.

5 In "The Adolescent as Philosopher" Kohlberg says the goal of teaching literature is to develop levels of judgment about the moral or philosophic meaning of life (p. 1084), something that is not accomplished, as he says in The Philosophy of Moral Development, by moralizing or imposing the majority's opinions on adolescents (p. 298). Huck Finn resists such tactics and his continued search for meaning is indicative of how those new levels of judgment are developed.
WORKS CITED


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