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Moral Change through Conformity in *Huckleberry Finn*

It seems that the average American is relentlessly striving to be unique but nearly everyone's morals change as each conforms to society and to today's acceptance of what is right and wrong. The majority decides what is correct by reflecting upon what each individual is daily fed through the media, work, friends, and social occurrences. Today's average person knows, from a young age, unmistakably what is right from wrong yet, still conformity is ruling over personal morals and beliefs. The change of one's personal morals through conformity is noticeably exposed by a character in Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this book Huck Finn, the main character, is being raised by a proper woman who is publicly accepted and he begins to acknowledge school and manners as something that is morally correct to him. His behavior changes for the worse as he is in the authority of his father, Pap, the reject of society. Lastly, Huckleberry Finn breaks free from conformity of society's cruel outlooks when running away with a kind-hearted slave, Jim.

Huck Finn is brought up by Mrs. Watson and starts to agree to go to school and acquire manners. Before living with Mrs. Watson, Huck believed it was fine not to attend school or even to behave within any distinct boundaries. After living with her for a while he abides by her rules which are looked up to by everyone. Huck even admits, "I liked the old ways best, but I was getting so I liked the new ones, too, a little bit" (15). He changes his old habits and accepts this new approach to life. Frequently conformity is fueled by the fear of rejection. Through Huck

changing his morals to meet the standards of Mrs. Watson he becomes “very satisfactory” (15) and “she warn’t ashamed” (15) of him anymore. Huck finds acceptance through conforming to her principles and is motivated to continue in her lifestyle.

Huck’s father, Pap, forces Huck into his authority by taking Huck from Mrs. Watson’s house to his cabin up the river. Pap is the outcome of rejection in society. He drinks, shows violence, and has no compassion for his own son. The only reason Pap is even taking Huck into his home is to get the money that Huck is willed to. After two months of living with new customs Huck says, “My clothes got to be all rags and dirt, and I didn’t see how I’d ever got to like it so well at the widow’s” (24). Being around bad influences sets off old thoughts of rebellion and Huck subconsciously rearranges his morals. He later adds, “I had stopped cussing, because the widow didn’t like it; but now I took to it again because Pap hadn’t no objections” (24). Huck effortlessly conforms to this different influence. As a result, all the morals he subsequently believed in when he lived within the public’s manners were entirely turned around and forgotten.

Throughout the novel Huck adheres to the values of Jim, the runaway slave, and loses the influence of authority. Huck was being taught racist perspectives by society and everyone who was in authority over him. Jim and Huck ran away and, for awhile, they were on their own with only each other to relate to. Huck only knows that Jim is a slave and to everyone slaves had no feelings or intelligence. Huck plays a trick on Jim when it is foggy. Jim cannot find Huck and is concerned for his life. Huck sneaks back and pretends he was there the entire time, telling Jim he must have been dreaming, making Jim feel ashamed. Jim sticks up for himself saying “when I wake up en fine you back agin’, all safe en soun’, de tears come en I coulda got down on my knees en kiss’ yo foot I’s so thankful” (86). Huck, for the first time, sees Jim as an equal

with feelings and finds it in his heart to apologize. Being around Jim and away from society shapes Huck's fluctuating morals by finally seeking truth and legitimacy in another person. Jim, without even trying, alters Huck's thinking and outlook on situations by offering a wholesome, decent, figure to look to and strive to become. Huck is taken away from society and no longer conforms to his authorities but to his self and he understands Jim as a person. There is a point in the story where Huck remembers his upbringing; being taught that slaves are property, and decides the right thing to do in the eyes of the majority is to turn Jim in. He begins to do so but Jim starts declaring how appreciative he is for Huck and that he is "de bes' fren' Jim's ever had" (90). Huck changes his mentality and is drawn in by Jim's attitude, gratefulness, and friendship. Huck has his morals set in place not according to what everyone supposes is truthful but to what he knows is right in his heart and Jim's genuine personality, opposed to the public's harsh views, helped this develop. Huck conforms for the better and learns to be tolerant. At the end of the book Huck makes a powerful statement about Jim, "I knowed he was white inside" (276). Through this announcement Huck shows that he has grown to the ways of Jim and has accepted him even though everyone in the community believes it is wrong. At the same time he reveals that he is still under the power of the majority by saying he is white on the inside and not completely accepting Jim for who he truly is. Jim, through all of this, manages to help Huck realize he can set standards for himself rather than rest on what the mainstream accepts as true.

Conforming to society and allowing it to reform personal morals is repetitively demonstrated throughout *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Huck is first exposed to the polite, mannered, and socially expected influence of Mrs. Watson and he begins to rearrange former priorities to meet the public's standards in life. When Huck is taken from an ambiance of good conduct and thrown into his father's authority he quickly acquires rejected values without

hesitation. Huck then is in an atmosphere of his own thoughts, surrounded by the kind heart of Jim, and attains the ability to begin to think for his self, but is overtaken by what he has been bounded by his whole life. Morals are effortlessly modified by what others believe and withhold the freedom that one has to subject their own beliefs.