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Moral Growth and the use of Deception in Huckleberry Finn

The difference between right and wrong has always been argued and debated. There has always been a gray area between what is considered honest and what is considered dishonest. It is hard to decide where to draw the line between just and unjust, moral and immoral, and honest and dishonest. Many make numerous mistakes and face many hardships before they can find the perfect balance that is right for them. In the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, Huck's adventure to free Jim helps him realize the differences between right and wrong, which ultimately shapes his personality and morals.

In this novel, Mark Twain shows us that right and wrong depend on the situation. In the beginning of Huck's narration, Huck is a young, mischievous adolescent who loves to play with his roguish friend, Tom Sawyer. Huck's family background and naive disposition show his ignorance to justice and honesty. He is still dependent upon other's opinions and beliefs and hasn't developed his own morals. As a child, Huck was taught that there "warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime..." (65). Huck's own father has taught him that he can be dishonest and immoral as long as he has the intentions of someday becoming moral and just. He has not been taught true honesty and integrity and must discover morality and decency for himself.

Huck uses deception and lies to obtain everything he desires and to escape from any trouble or punishment. He tricks slave catchers into believing his family has smallpox in order to save Jim. He knows that deceiving white men is wrong; however he believes it is all right to lie in order to save his friend, Jim. The idea of doing wrong for a good cause baffles Huck throughout his narration. He cannot understand why it is wrong to lie, but he feels it is right to help Jim. After one of his lies to save Jim, Huck states, “what’s the use you learning to do right when its troublesome to do right, and ain’t no trouble to do wrong...I couldn’t answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn’t bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.” (92). Huck rationalizes his deception because he sees no reward in telling the truth. It just causes more problems and heartache. Huck decides that he will do whichever comes easier at the time.

During the course of the journey, Huck meets the King and the Duke, who show Huck what the wrong types of lies and deception are. The King and Duke show Huck how deception can be used to not only get ahead and gain an advantage, but also harm others. They deceive communities and trick innocent people. At first, Huck rationalizes the King and Duke’s evil ways by telling Jim,

... all kings is mostly rascallions, as fur an I can make out... You don’t know, Kings, Jim, but I know them; and this old rip of ourn is one of the cleanest I’ve struck in history... kings is kings, and you got to make allowances. Take them all around, they’re a mighty ornery lot. It’s the way they’re raised... We can’t help the way a king smells; history don’t tell no way. (155-156)

Huck knows that both the King and Duke are not real royalty, but “what was the use to tell Jim these warn’t real kings and dukes? It wouldn’t a done no good; and besides. It

was just as I said; you couldn't tell them from the real kind." (156). It is much easier for Huck to play along with the King and Duke, rather than trying to do the right thing. With the King and the Duke there, they are providing food and money and making life easier and more adventurous for Huck. If Huck were to do the right thing and tell Jim that the King and Duke were not true monarchs, then he would have to admit that the stealing and deception was wrong. By believing that their new friends are royalty, Huck is able to give Jim, and himself, a rational excuse for their terrible conduct.

Huck begins to realize difference between wrong deception and right deception when the King and Duke begin to steal from the Wilks girls. It is at this point when Huck first witnesses the outcome of their deception and lies. Huck sees the innocence, honesty, and sincerity within the Wilk's girls and their community. He watches as the community "sympathized with them, and said all sorts of kind things to them, and carried their carpet-bags up the hill for them, and let them lean on them and cry... Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race." (164) Huck begins to realize how fraudulent and dishonest the King and Duke are to others. He notices that their deception and lies are used solely for the purpose of gaining an advantage over society and harm everyone else around them. He suddenly becomes disgusted with their behavior and wants nothing to do with it.

Huck's true turning point from wrong to right occurs after Mary- Jane and Susan scold Hare-lip for calling Huck a liar. Huck's conscience gets the better of him as he watches the girls lay "themselves out to make me feel at home and know I was amongst friends. I felt so ornery and low down and mean, that I says to myself, My mind's made

up; I'll give that money for them or bust." (177) With his decision to steal back the money, Huck is acting on his own convictions and morals rather than his desires and wishes. Although it may be easier to just go along with the King and Duke because it would be less conflict and more benefits for himself, his conscience and his morals will not allow him to hurt the poor girls. He breaks free from all authority and influence at this moment and is now making his own decisions. Huck later confesses the entire con to Mary-Jane and decides that "a body that ups and tells the truth when he is in a tight place, is taking a considerable many resks, though I ain't had no experience, and can't say for certain; but it looks to me, anyway; and yet here's a case where I'm blest if it don't look to me like the truth is better, and actually *safer*, than a lie... I never see nothing like it ..." (188) Huck is discovering that the truth is better than a lie in some cases. He chooses to tell the truth to Mary-Jane "though it does seem most like setting down a kag of powder and touching it off just to see where you'll go..." (188) Although Huck has no experience with telling the truth and knows it is going to make life much more difficult, he chooses honesty anyway.

During his adventure to free Jim, Huck learns the difference between right and wrong and has a tremendous moral growth and change in character. Huck has made the ultimate decision to become a moral, sincere and honest person, despite the difficulty that may come. Although he still uses deception to save Jim, he has made a distinct line between ethical lies and debauched deception. He keeps away from deception when it is morally wrong, but still lets a few lies slide when they are necessary, like any decent and ethical human would.