

Mr. Bronkar

English CP 3

25 January 2004

At the Risk of Being Shot:

An Analysis of Moral Development in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn

"In religion and politics people's beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination." Mark Twain.

In the above quote, Twain states his belief that the majority of the population does not think for themselves. This conviction would put most of society at Level II in Kohlberg's six stages of moral development. Level II in Kohlberg's model states, "Moral values reside in performing the right role, in maintaining the conventional order and expectancies of others." In Huckleberry Finn, the main character, Huck, goes through the range of Kohlberg's moral stages; from Level I, which is based on the childish ego, to Level III, stage six, which is based on individual principles and internalized ideals. Human behavior does not fit in tight little boxes, however, and the reader watches this young boy vacillate back and forth through Kohlberg's model as he has many experiences that cause him to question the 'facts' which society has taught him.

Huck starts out immature in his thinking (Level I), but as he travels farther down the river with Jim his preconceptions battle his inner conscience, which causes an inconsistent climb in moral development as he acquires the ability to trust his own judgment, at Kohlberg's level III. At the start of novel, Huckleberry fits into Level I and Level II of Kohlberg's model. He bases his actions on how they will directly affect him; whether he will be punished, displease his friend Tom Sawyer, or have anything to gain. In Chapter II, Huck steals off into the night with Tom

Sawyer, and his actions are mostly those of a follower. Huck does as Tom wants him to do, joins a gang of make-believe 'robbers' and he offers Miss Watson's life as collateral for his silence (8). This type of behavior fits into Level I stage 1 (trouble avoidance) because Huck is deferring to the superior power of Tom to gain his acceptance.

The next day Huck discusses the futility of prayer. Huck says to himself, "If a body can get anything they pray for, why don't Deacon Winn get back the money he lost on pork? Why can't the widow get back her silver snuff box that was stole? No, says I to myself, there ain't nothing in it" (11). The previous statement shows a thought process at Kohlberg's Level I stage 2 (Orientation to exchange and reciprocity). Huck stays on with the women for a while. He narrates his pride that he has been going to school (most days) and has learned to "spell, and read, and write just a little and say the multiplication table up to six time seven" (15). Huck adds here, "I was coming along slow, but sure and doing very satisfactory. She said she warn't ashamed of me" (ibid). At this point Huckleberry is at a Level II of Kohlberg's model, conforming to stereotypical images and regarding the expectations of others.

Huck's life and decision making process begins to get more complicated, however, beginning with the incident of his kidnapping. Huck's moral development gets a jump-start at the event of his kidnapping and it is at this point that he begins to bounce between Levels I, II and III of Kohlberg's model. Starting with his imprisonment by Pap, Huck must take care of himself. Society has failed to protect him, and he must make his own decisions based on his logic and what he has been taught. Huck ingeniously escapes from Pap and sets off down the river. When he first meets up with Jim, Huck is still childish and fanciful. He thoughtlessly plays a trick on Jim by putting a dead rattlesnake on Jim's blanket (). Another rattlesnake is drawn to Jim's bed due to the dead one Huck put there as a trick, and when Jim comes to bed, he is bitten on the heel

(). Jim becomes very sick, and Huck does not even admit that he is to blame. This incident puts Huck at Level I, stage 1 because he is only concerned with how his admission will affect him. Huckleberry does struggle with this lack of judgment, however, which hints that he is starting to think about his actions.

Huck's struggle between Levels I and II of Kohlberg's model can also be seen when he rationalizes stealing chickens and fruit (66-67). Huck states "Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it"(65). With this statement, Huck is acknowledging Level III stage 5 (Norms of right and wrong are defined in terms of laws or rules which seem to have a rational basis); that he is indeed stealing. Comically, on the next page, Huck reverts back to rationalizing his behavior. He and Jim decide that it is okay to steal just a few types of fruit, as long as they knock some off the list: Huck says, "I was glad the way it come out, too, because crabapples ain't ever good, and the p'simmons wouldn't be ripe for two or three months yet" (66). This statement is definitely Level I stage 2, where actions satisfy the individual's needs.

As the days go on, Huckleberry and Jim develop a close relationship; they are dependent on each other for survival and have come to know and trust each other. This relationship has a profound maturing effect on Huck's moral development as he begins to doubt the southern way of thinking. In serious inner conflict, Huck struggles to decide what he should do about Jim, and he argues with his own conscience: "I tried to make out to myself that I warn't to blame, because I didn't run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn't no use, conscience up and says every time But you knowed he was running for his freedom" (88). Huck cannot make sense of his inner turmoil. Somewhere inside, he knows that Jim is a man he needs to protect,(Level

III, stage 6, the conscience as a directing agent) but he is so ingrained by southern culture that he feels guilty about not adhering to the law (Level II, stage 4, authority and social order maintaining orientation). In this instance, Huck comes through with Level III, stage 6 judgment he adheres to his own set of values by lying to protect Jim (91).

From the arrival of the Duke and the King through the end of the book, Huck continues to struggle with his moral decisions, yet although he vacillates the range of Kohlberg's model, he has acquired the tools he needs to ultimately follow his own heart at the highest stage of moral development. Huck continues to admire Jim and subconsciously starts to see Jim as a man that needs to reunite with his family: "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks doe for their'n" (157). However, with the duke and king on the raft Jim and Huck are in a sticky situation; they must conform to these villains or risk being turned in. Both Jim and Huck go along with the con men because of this, and it gives Huck a lot to ponder. Huck witnesses the shenanigans go from mildly unlawful to evil, and he is sucked into their deeds without resisting. Conforming to the con men puts Huck back to Level I stage 2, because he is compromising himself for mutual gain. It is not until the men try to auction off the inheritance of the Wilkes girls that Huck is really disgusted. It is at this point that Huck raises himself to Level III and lets his conscience direct him to expose the duke and king as frauds (188). Later, when they are out on the raft again, Huck and Jim become more suspicious of the two con men and resolve to ditch them in the next town. Unfortunately, they do not get their chance because the men trick Huck and sell Jim to a farmer for forty dollars.

Jim's capture pushes Huck into making the decision about Jim: should he write to Miss Watson, and put Jim back into slavery (Level II stage 4: social order maintaining orientation) or should he rescue Jim from the farm to return Jim to freedom? (Level III stage 6: conscience as a

directing agent). Huck chooses to free Jim even though he feels the decision will send him to hell. Huck says, "It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said and I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming" (215). Huck acknowledges that he has gone against the laws of society, but he is resolved to stick by what he believes.

Huck slips a bit when Tom Sawyer arrives and comes up with a ridiculous method of rescuing Jim. Huck knows that Tom is mainly looking for adventure and does not care about Jim, but Huck regresses to the role of the follower and goes along with Tom's plan. "I never said nothing, because I warn't expecting nothing different; but I knowed mighty well that whenever he got his plan ready it wouldn't have none of them objections to it" (234). At this point, Huck is back to Level II stage 3 as the follower, oriented towards approval, not thinking of the effect on Jim, yet at the same time his tone is a bit resentful (Level III stage 6: and thinking for himself). Later, Tom Sawyer reveals that he has known all along that Jim was freed (289). Huck questions Tom about this and Tom responds with another fantastic plan full of adventures. Although he doesn't respond to Tom, Huck is now able to think for himself when he narrates, "I reckoned it was about as well the way it was" (292).

Skeptical of society norms and constraints, Huck has acquired the necessary insight to question the majority around him. The last statement of the book reveals that Huck has decided to make his own decisions. At Level III, stage 6 Huck rejects the expectations of others and plans to avoid adoption when he says, "I can't stand it. I been there before" (293).

In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck starts out at Kohlberg's level I, and gradually progresses towards Level III, where he uses his own experience and insight to make decisions. Huck's moral development does not advance in a straight line, and he struggles to reconcile what he has been taught and what he feels inside. Although he has become skeptical of societal

conventions, Huck is still vulnerable to outside pressures. Human behavior is much too complex to fit into Kohlberg's neat little boxes, and in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain gives us a realistic view of a boy learning how to make choices.