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American Literature Honors

14th October 2011

Huckleberry Finn: The Essentiality of a Bildungsroman Narrator

Huckleberry Finn, the main protagonist of Mark Twain’s novel, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, is the ideal narrator for this bildungsroman (coming of age) story set in the mid nineteenth century. With the use of an uneducated thirteen year old boy, Twain is free to teach us lessons of human morality as Huck learns them himself. We see Huck’s development through his decisions and actions via his own voice but are free to interpret the development in our own way. The American society in the Pre-Civil War era was divided between supporters and opposers of slavery. Through Huck Finn, Twain is able to satirize the society’s beliefs and actions better than he would have been able to with the use of an older storyteller. This outsider to the “sivilized” world is in the stage of life when one begins to define their actions as moral or immoral. It is Huck’s coming of age that is essential for portraying a satirical view of society’s religion and its sensitivity to popular belief.

For example, Huck Finn’s unique experience of the society forces him to develop his moral mindset and rank higher in Kohlberg’s scale of moral development as he comes of age. Initially, the young Huck Finn abides by social norms and is forced into responding to authority. As he later ponders, “…I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead f the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can’t stand it. I been there before” (Twain, 294). Huck Finn remembers his pre-teen years as a phase of his life when his freedom was restricted and was forced to follow directions ordered upon him by the Widow
Douglass and Ms. Watson. His life revolved around following orders and responding to the greater authorities in an attempt to improve and “sivilize” himself. His stage of moral development was at the lowest, 1. Later on, the more mature Huck Finn begins to take into account the intentions of others in their actions. Huck instantly recognizes the ‘Duke’ and the “Dauphin’ as scammers but restricts himself from telling Jim, “If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn’t no objections...; and it warn’t use to tell Jim, so I didn’t tell him... I learnt that best way to get along with [this] kind of people is to let them have it their own way” (Twain 125). In spite of having known the Duke and King’s scam, Huck constrains himself from telling Jim because he recognizes their intentions. Their negligence of society’s laws and order is overlooked by Huck as he is able to identify with their point of view; he simply sees them as two poor vagabonds in the desire for wealth and comfort. His own desire for freedom enables him to sympathize with their efforts, despite their unlawfulness. This ability of Huck to see another’s point of view promotes him to rank 3 in Kohlberg’s scale of moral development. Lastly, Huck ponders over the decision to part from the scammers, “This was the most awful trouble and most dangersome. I ever was in; and I was kinder stunned; everything was going so different from what I had allowed for…” (Twain 203). Huck’s decision to part from the two artists is based on his instinct to not value relationships over ethics and not be guided by peer pressure. He has developed a belief in justice and therefore, since he cannot restrict their actions, he refrains from partaking in the deeds considered immoral by him. He has undergone a change in development; he fights himself internally to prove that his decision is right by taking law and order of society into account. The act of blowing a whistle on friends portrays that he has grown to stage 4 in Kohlberg’s scale of moral development as rules are considered nonpareil to relationships. Huck Finn’s journey on the Mississippi River and his encounters with the various people of the society have forced him to develop morally from stage 1 to stage 4. His coming of age and desire to justify his
actions have made him a superior human being who has in himself a better perspective of society than most educated adults.

In addition, Huck’s coming of age enables Twain to explore the satirical nature of social beliefs in the 19th century. The difference between Hell and Heaven is constantly explored by a maturing Huck. At first, he fantasizes about the “bad place” explained by Ms. Watson, “I said I wished I was there…but I didn’t mean no harm. All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change” (Twain 2). Huck regards Hell as an escape from society; he seeks freedom from the society’s attempts to educate him. Twain, a self-proclaimed atheist, uses the viewpoint of a 13 year old boy to satirize the society’s desire to please God and perform good tasks for the sole purpose of going to the “good place” after death. Furthermore, when faced with the moral decision to unveil Jim’s captivity at the Phelps’ house to Ms. Watson, Huck is convinced that the aftermath of his life will not be affected, as even though he is breaking his current moral code, he is already predestined to go to Hell:

I took . . . up the letter and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself: “All right then, I’ll go to hell”—and tore it up. It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. (Twain 213)

Huck does not hold much faith in religion and Christianity, when faced with a moral decision, he follows the more sensible and morally developed instinct rather than thinking about his life after death. He develops from a level 4 to 6 on Kohlberg’s scale of moral development as he is guided by ethical principles and what he deems right rather than the society’s legal obligations. Again, Twain uses the viewpoint of a young boy in the state of
bildungsroman to satirize the power of religious beliefs in jeopardizing one’s thought process. He considers religion a drawback to morally correct thinking.

Furthermore, with the use of a 13 year old boy in a society divided by opposing views on slavery, Twain can express his own anti-slavery standpoint by portraying its injustice through the standpoint of a morally developing teen. Jim, the stereotypical black slave, is portrayed as a man with as much emotion as any other human being when he expresses the separation his feels from his family, “… Jis’ as loud as I could yell. She never budge! Oh, Huck. I bust out a-cryin en grab her up in my arms, en say, ‘oh, de po’ little thing’De Lord God Almighty forgive po’ ole Jim” (Twain 156). Jim is able to express his grievances in a life filed with prejudice and oppression. Jim has developed a relationship with the young Huck and realizes his moral and ethical development and the functioning of the world from an unprejudiced point of view. He can express these emotions to Huck better than he could to an educated white man due to his pre-determined and unalterable prejudices. This lets Twain portray slavery as a brutal suppression and lets the reader explore the issue through their own eyes as Huck experiences them; Huck, free from preconceptions has an open mind and is able to realize that a mere difference in skin color does not make one more superior to another, “I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n” (Twain 156). It is only through a character like Huck Finn that Twain can depict the harmful effect of the institution of slavery in the United States.

Huck’s current stage of life, the bildungsroman stage, and his encounters with various different people enable him to explore the justification of his actions and decisions. He develops from a stage 1 human being to a more mentally developed stage 6; making him a superior human being who has in himself a better perspective of the human society than most adults. He has developed from a person who minimally followed authority to a more mature
human being who is guided by ethical values rather than legal instructions. Huck’s
development also enables Twain to explore the satirical nature of the people of the society
from a religious and sensitivity to common belief standpoint. As Huck himself explores the
injustice of slavery, Twain is free to teach us lessons as Huck himself learns them. We are
able to interpret the society from an unbiased viewpoint that enables us to see every aspect of
human life: The biases and the justifications for their beliefs.