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6 December 2012

American Literature

Mr. Baker

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Cognitive Dissonance of Huckleberry Finn

In the thirty-fifth chapter of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck learns that although he believes it to be immoral, lying to oneself (or, "letting on" to oneself) is sometimes necessary to live out certain fantasies. The novel continually encounters situations of moral dilemma including the narrative's discussion/inclusion of lying. In fact, the novel opens up saying that the previous story (Twain's *Tom Sawyer)* was "mainly" true, but that as one should expect, *Tom Sawyer* has "some stretchers" (32). Lying is suggested to be commonplace at the outset of the novel, and this conception shades the remainder of the novel with doubts of accuracy in everything asserted to be true. Lying to oneself is indeed a portion of the overall theme of deception, and this lack of connection between the way one perceives reality and the way one chooses to remember that reality is especially evident in the latter portions of the story.

In the novel, Huck tends to not explicitly voice his opinion on pressing issues, nor does he offer specific and explicit judgment on ethical decisions. Instead, Twain tends to present the impasse and allow Huck to comment on his perception of other's opinions, but Huck rarely states a clear decision in an ethically questionable situation. Rather, Huck simply feels as though something is not right in either the situation or in his decision: "It made me shiver. And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I couldn't try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better. So I kneeled down. But the words wouldn't come. [...] It was because my heart warn't right; it was because I warn't square; it was because I was playing double" (200). Huck's previously expressed feeling is the moral compass -- the conscience -- that drives his decisions throughout the book. It is this feeling that Huck seeks to evade; if Huck evades feeling as though his "heart warn't right" (200), he can evaluate his actions as in line with this conscience.

Faced with many moral dilemmas, Huck is in a state of moral confusion and ultimately develops the tendency to lie to himself; this self-deception negates his feeling of inner-morality (i.e. what he feels is "right") and is perhaps a coping mechanism for avoiding the ethical question. Earlier in the book, Huck asserted, "Pap always said it warn't no harm to borrow things if you was meaning to pay them back some time; but the widow said it warn't anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it" (83). Huck does not subscribe to Pap's belief, which is made clear when Huck and Jim "say we wouldn't borrow [things] any more" (83). Although not explicitly said, it can be concluded in this section that Huck feels that stealing as wrong. This indication of Huck's stance on the aforementioned moral quandary is the axiom of Huck's morality upon which his latter cognitive dissonance can be judged.

Unlike some of the more unclear moral predicaments Huck finds himself in, his feelings on stealing, as demonstrated in this instance, are clearly presented. In the thirty-fifth chapter, far later in the narrative chronology, Huck harkens back to Pap's words but his sentiment is divergent from his previous moral revelation that stealing is wrong; Huck has a new desire to disobey what he had previously expressed to be morally right. Huck is the character to use the word in the way Pap does and explains his reasoning: "I called it borrowing, because that was what Pap always called it" (223). Instead of deciding against "borrowing" as he did prior, in chapter thirty-five, Huck instead "borrow[s] a sheet and a white shirt off of the clothes-line" (223). Not only indicative of a swift change in Huck's moral bearing, this decision is a datum that can be compared against Huck's previously established decision that "borrowing" (effectively, stealing) from others is morally wrong. Huck is able to convince himself (perhaps with the help of Tom Sawyer, although Huck has proven to be resilient to "Tom Sawyer's lies" (42) in the past) that his decision to steal clothes is not morally reprehensible. In fact, Tom insists that what they were doing "was stealing" (223), and Huck's attempt to convince himself otherwise stems from his need to do things that he believes to be morally correct.

Beyond subtly convincing himself of ethical rectitude, Huck's dissonance in the section evolves to the point where he discovers that explicitly lying, both to others and to oneself, is the reasonable course of action in certain scenarios. Tom Sawyer joins Huck in his attempt to free Jim from his current captor, and they discuss the nature of Jim's rescue at length. Huck's inclination towards pragmatism conflicts with Tom's fondness for grandiose and literary escapes which causes much disagreement on the issue of how to rescue Jim. Tom believes the best course of action is tunneling through the ground to Jim using case knives, despite having access to far more efficient tools such as "picks and shovels" (224), of which Huck advocates the use. Huck's pragmatism causes Tom to somewhat acquiesce; Tom suggests, "that we really dig in, as quick as we can; and after that, we can let on, to ourselves, that we was at it thirty-seven years. Then we can snatch him out and rush him away the first time there's an alarm" (225). In response to Tom's suggestion to "let on" things to themselves, Huck says, "letting on don't cost nothing; letting on ain't no trouble; and if it's any object, I don't mind letting on we was at it a hundred and fifty year. It wouldn't strain me none, after I got my hand in. So I'll mosey along now, and smouch a couple of case-knives" (225). Because of Huck's aversion to lying at the outset of the book, his acceptance that lying to oneself as a reasonable form of action suggests that perhaps lying to oneself is pragmatically necessary.

The salient aspect of Huck's acceptance that self-foolery that is indicative of his cognitive dissonance (i.e. his attempt to separate what he feels is right from what he does) is the fact that this acceptance that lying to oneself is a reasonable form of action is a change from his earlier beliefs. His earlier beliefs are expressed in the beginning of the book, when Huck had attributed the persona of an obsessive liar to Tom due to Tom's continued stories. These stories tell of things that do not exist in the opinion of Huck when he refers to them as "only just one of Tom Sawyer's lies" (42), nor do they exist in the opinions of other boys. However, the extent of Tom's belief in these "lies" is unclear, and although the narration places doubt on the verity of Tom's statements, one is unable to conclusively discern the true reality, nor is one able to absolutely conclude that Tom disbelieves his statements himself. Huck himself says, "I reckoned he believed in the A-rabs and the elephants, but as for me I think different" (43). Tom's childlike nature makes it difficult to prove or disprove the nature of Tom's intent, but Huck's opinion on Tom's exorbitant lying is clearer. In the thirty-fifth, Huck unequivocally admits to Tom: "It ain't right, and it ain't moral, and I wouldn't like it to get out; but there ain't only just the one way: we got to dig him out with the picks, and let on it's case-knives" (226). In one of his rare moments of ethical clarity, Huck admits that Tom's plan to deceive themselves is not "right," nor is it "moral." Despite this admission, Huck claims this plan to be the finest one, and the duo attempt to bring this morally unjust plan of letting on and cognitive dissonance to fruition.

The *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* serves in large part to present the reader with moral dilemmas, often made issue by Twain's oppressive depiction of societal influence, and these dilemmas are manifested in Huck's attempts to discern the morally just decision. In the barrage of morally difficult decisions from Twain's narrative, Huck discovers that "letting on" falsehoods to himself and others allows him to be a victim of his conscience without violating it. This pragmatic attitude towards lying and letting on persists throughout the book and it aligns with Twain's Voltairian cynicism to the point where the argument for the necessity of self-deception is well-defined. This stance towards ignoring moral issues when it is pragmatic to do so is perhaps echoed George Orwell's similarly sarcastic attitude, when cries of "IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH" reverberate through the streets.