



Mark Twain

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

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One of the cultural boundaries a 21st century post-modern American has in understanding the world of Mark Twain is the embedded sense of spirituality. Christianity does not play a huge role in the foreground of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but it illuminates the background of the text in a way that can be hard for a contemporary post-Christian reader to understand. To live in a modern world of assumed Christian spirituality is a foreign experience for anyone born after 1964. Through this work of fiction a person can spend time in a very different world with different spiritual, ethical, and moral expectations.

From the very first chapter Huck is cast against the background of religion. Aunt Polly and Miss Watson work to teach Huck the Bible and we learn that even though Huck indicates that Hell sounds like more fun than heaven he is afraid of burning in Hell. Throughout most of the book, Huck's motivation to act ethically is based on a fear of hell.

Through the character of Miss Watson, Twain attempts to show the hypocrisy of the educated, self-proclaimed religious, middle class. Miss Watson, while claiming to live by a Christian ethic is herself a slave owner. She felt that slavery was an acceptable practice because slaves were not considered eligible to have the same rights and privileges that her religion allowed others to enjoy. A circular logical loop if ever there was one. In this way Miss Watson is able to justify breaking up Jim's family by selling away his wife and children.

The morality of Miss Watson seems to have been well impressed upon Huck. Toward the end of the book Huck is considered whether it is morally acceptable for him to help Jim escape to freedom. Huck has learned that stealing is a sin. This is moral progress for Huck since he started the book believing (as his father had taught him) that if you took something but intended to return it, it was only borrowing and therefore morally acceptable. Huck fears that aiding Jim's escape will condemn him hell prompting the famous line, "All right, then, I'll GO to Hell." Twain used Huck as a vicious commentary against those who used religion to support slavery.

Twain further derides the religious establishment of his day through an incident with The King. The King, a con man, convinces a tent meeting to give him money so that he can convert his “pirate friends” to Christianity. Of course The King has no pirate friends to convert. Twain seems to be mocking the backwoods gullibility of the religious people in small town America. To this day many consider rural religion an acceptable thing to mock.

Throughout the book there is a consistent focus on the superstitious spirituality of the slave culture. Twain presents these superstitions as being more plausible than much of Christianity. Huck’s spilling of the salt is what seems to bring his father back to the cabin at an unexpected time. Huck’s breaking of a taboo results in Jim being bitten by a rattlesnake. The superstitious spirituality of the slave culture seems to be an odd mix of Christianity, Voodoo, and other legends. Twain seems to be using this spirituality to bring out the immaturity of Huck, Jim, Tom, and the other superstitions characters. It makes them seem quite childlike despite their more adult edges.

Huckleberry Finn lived in a Christian culture. The values, morals, and ethics of Christianity had a dramatic affect on the actions of our main character. That is not to say that Huck acted in, what we would term, a Christian manner. Rather, Huck attempted to live by Christianity as he understood it. In our day and age *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can serve as a reminder that we need to teach our children, not the rules and regulations of Christianity, but the love and compassion of Christianity. Did fearing Hell serve Huck well in this story? No. If Huck had been instructed on the nature of Christ rather than the facts of Christianity he may have been better able to live out a moral existence.