Individual Morality Vs. Flawed Social Morality In “Huck Finn” Essay, Research Paper

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Throughout the tale of Huckleberry Finn, morality plays a very prominent role. Specifically; it is social morality that plays such an important role, social morality being the prevailing social morality of the general population. Huck is unique in that he does not fit in with the “civilized” society. In fact, it could be understood that Huck is somewhat of and outsider. Huck’s own morality is often at odds with that of society, while at the same time the reader is apt to view Huck’s morality as more sound. It is this recurring situation which Twain uses to show how flawed social morality can be. More specifically, Huck is used by Twain to show the overall importance of the individual over society.

One of the earlier major moral dilemmas Huck faces is whether or not to turn Jim in. Huck suddenly realizes that he is essentially aiding the escape of a slave by assisting Jim. The social morality of the time dictated that slaves were property, and of course helping one to escape was akin to stealing. Huck realizes this, and is faced with said dilemma. Huck, buckling under the pressure of the social morality, decides he must write a letter and turn Jim in. He nearly carries through his plan until he realizes that Jim is his friend, and he tears up the letter and abandons the plan to turn Jim in. At the same time, he proclaims that if Hell was the price he was going to pay for aiding a runaway slave, then he was prepared to accept that punishment. The scene shows Huck rejecting the social morality, and more specifically, to a degree, the institutional morality of slavery. The interesting dichotomy of this situation is that Huck is regarded by society as an outsider, while at the same time its obvious to the reader that Huck’s morality is superior to that of society. It is this situation which is used by Twain to show the flaws of social morality. Slavery was of course at the time an established institution, yet Huck, the individual, is able to distinguish himself morally from the masses.

A second an equally compelling scene involves Huck and the Grangerfords, a family who had taken him in for a short while. The Grangerfords were engaged in a blood feud with the Shepardson family. It was a feud that had lasted several generations for both families, and neither family could remember why they were fighting. This situation acts as a metaphor for social morality and its flaws. While both families engaged in this blood feud, and both thought it a perfectly valid activity, the outsider looking in can see the illogical and immoral nature of it. At the end of Huck’s interaction with the Grangerfords, Huck watches as a boy Grangerford and another boy he had befriended are chased into the river by some Sherpardsons and murdered. After he witnesses this, and finds their bodies on shore, Huck goes on to tell the reader how terrible it was, and how he continues to dream about it. The importance of this is that Huck is clearly condemning this blood feud, which acted as the metaphor for an institution society deemed morally acceptable. Huck, the outsider, finds himself morally at odds with society, and more specifically, an institution. Again, Huck as the individual is able to distinguish his own morality from that of a flawed social morality.

Another occurring recurrence throughout Huck Finn is the desire of Huck’s caregivers to “civilize” him. It begins with Miss Watson, who tries vehemently to civilize Huck. She dresses him in starched and pressed clothes, makes him sleep indoors, and of course sends him off to school. Throughout the book Huck encounters others who in some way would like to shape Huck to be more like the masses, to “civilize” him. When Huck stumbles upon the Grangerfords, they dress him up in nice clothes, and he is urged to take on some of the niceties of the Grangerford lifestyle. Then of course there is Aunt Sally, who would yet again try to civilize Huck if he had not decided to head out to the western territories. To these people, civilize meant to alter Huck’s appearance and behavior to fit in with the rest of supposed civilized people. The important thing about all of this is that while these people claim to be civilized, and have a hold of moral superiority, they all in fact demonstrate moral hypocracy. From either being slave owners like Miss Watson or murderers like the Grangerfords, these people preach about civilization and morality, yet at the same time partake in these clearly immoral acts. Huck flatly rejects all of the attempts to civilize him, and always returns to his own individuality. This is in fact one of the most significant and precise symbols Twain uses to further the theme of the individual, and individual morality over flawed social morality.

The themes of individuality and the flaws of social morality are very important and central in the tale of Huck Finn. Throughout the book Huck struggles with rejecting the morals of the society in which he dwells. In fact its safe to say Huck rejects society as a whole, as evidenced his final decision to travel into the western wilderness, away from civilization. Huck decides that his individuality is more important than trying to conform, letting people try to bring him into civilization. It is my assertion that Twain uses Huck’s moral conflicts, and Huck’s rejection of a civilization which embraces hypocritical morality, to convey the important theme of social and moral individuality.