

The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn

Gwyneth Evans



Illustration by Achille Sirouy, Hennuyer, Paris, 1886. From Wikimedia Commons

The cry of the individual conscience, asserting itself in voice and action against the oppressive rule of custom and the law, echoes throughout the literature of the Western world. Sophocles' *Antigone* defies the power of the state to give her brothers' bodies a decent burial. When, in Ibsen's *A Doll House*, Nora's husband tells her that "before all else you are a wife and a mother," she cries "I don't believe that anymore. I believe that above all else I am a human being, or at least I want to learn to become one," and she leaves home, slamming the

door behind her. *Jane Eyre* leaves security and home twice, as she walks away from a hypocritical and tyrannical aunt and later from her duplicitous fiancé Mr. Rochester, to assert her independence and right to self-respect.

When the laws of institutions such as the state and the family conflict with an individual's sense of what is right and important, we are drawn – in literature, at least – to respect and admire the conscience of the individual.

But in a very different nineteenth century novel, Mark Twain's *Adventures of*

Huckleberry Finn, conscience plays a very different role. With grim irony, Twain reveals Huck's "conscience," or what Huck thinks of as his conscience, to be the internalization of the rules and attitudes which society is attempting (rather unsuccessfully) to inculcate in him. It is only by ignoring both conscience and the law that Huck keeps the love of his friend and of his readers.

In pre-Civil War Missouri, Huck's friendly acquaintance with Jim, a black slave, is typical of his disreputable behaviour. Huck, whose voice narrates the novel, is the son of the town drunkard, and has been taken in by the ill-natured Miss Watson in order to "civ'lize" him, which she attempts by constantly scolding and punishing him, and threatening him with greater punishment by the law and by the hell-fires of her religion. Huck is relatively impervious to her opinions and threats, and does more or less what he wants to, but she and the rest of the respectable townfolk do succeed in giving Huck a sense of unease about some of his transgressions against their code of right behaviour.

The greatest transgression comes when he joins Jim in running away on a raft, floating down the Mississippi towards the town of Cairo, Illinois, and the safest point where Jim can claim his freedom. Huck is running away from his wicked old "Pap," who has reclaimed and is abusing him; Jim has discovered that Miss Watson is planning to sell him to a slave trader from New Orleans who will take him to far worse conditions of indenture in the Deep South. One of the most powerful and memorable scenes in the novel comes when Jim talks to Huck about his excitement and joy at the prospect of reaching Cairo and freedom:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free – and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn't get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way. . . . Conscience says to me, 'What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that

you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. That's what she done.'

I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead. . . .

Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free State he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife, which was owned on a farm close to where Miss Watson lived; and then they would both work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them.

It most froze me to hear such talk. . . . Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children – children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm.

I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him. My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it, 'Let up on me – it ain't too late, yet – I'll paddle ashore at the first light, and tell.' I felt easy and happy, and light as a feather, right off.

By using Huck's voice to tell the story, Twain is able to develop a powerful irony for the readers. Jim's intense feelings for his wife and children are universally comprehensible. To these feelings are contrasted Huck's naïve adherence to what he has been taught: people – black people, that is – can be owned, bought and sold at their owners' whim, and have no rights to relationship with their partner or their children. By speaking in the voice of Huck's education and conscience, Twain avoids expressing in his own words the inhumanity of slavery, but

makes us feel it through Huck's unspoken reaction to Jim's words.

Urged by his conscience, Huck leaves the raft in his canoe, ostensibly to find out how near they are to Cairo, but planning to tell whoever he meets that an escaped slave is on the raft. However, he can't do it. Instead, in one of the improvised lies at which Huck excels, he asks some men in a boat who are hunting for escaped slaves to come to his raft and help his ailing father. Huck's cleverly-crafted evasions lead them to believe that the father has smallpox, and the men hastily row away, assuaging their consciences by leaving Huck some money.

Huck's craft reflects that of his creator, Mark Twain. In pleading with the men to come to the raft, Huck manages to keep them away from it; in Huck's horror at Jim's longing and plans to be with his family, and his own conscience-stricken determination to do the right thing and betray his friend, Twain gets us to see the cruelty of the system which inculcates belief in slavery. While what he calls his conscience has directed Huck to give Jim up to the authorities, other feelings, of loyalty and kindness, overrule it.

They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right . . . Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on " 's'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up, would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad – I'd feel just the same way I do now. Well, then, says I, what's the use you learning to do right, when it's troublesome to do right and ain't no trouble to do wrong, and the wages is just the same? I was stuck. I couldn't answer that. So I reckoned I wouldn't bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.

Huck's pragmatic decision to stop worrying about his conscience is humorous, and a relief for the reader who feels for Jim. Conscience troubles Huck again later in the novel, but it is this episode when the slave-hunters approach the raft which has remained most vivid and memorable. In his public readings of

Huckleberry Finn, Twain often added further comments about Huck's struggle with his conscience and prefaced one series of readings of this episode by commenting that in it "a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat."

Other remarks of Twain in various writings contrast the "conscience" inculcated by society and religion to the natural "heart" of a person. In *Chapters from my Autobiography*, he explains that "Mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience, and knew but one duty – to hunt and harry its slave upon all pretexts and on all occasions . . .," and notes elsewhere that "All consciences I ever heard of were nagging, badgering, fault-finding, execrable savages!" In Huck's case, his sense of loyalty to Jim and unspoken response to Jim's kindness to him, and Jim's repeated (and unreciprocated) declarations of gratitude and love for Huck, overrule his sense of obligation to the law, and rules of his society. But because what Huck identifies as his conscience demands obedience to those rules, he (the voice of the novel) has no term for the force within him which leads him to defy his "conscience" and do what in the terms of the novel is obviously "the right thing."

What do we mean by "conscience," and where does a "conscience" come from? Is it, as Twain believes, a sense of proper behaviour inculcated in childhood from the morals and behavioural rules of our family, school, church and society? And if so, what is the name for an inner urge to actions which are not self-serving but conflict with this view of conscience – what Twain referred to as "a sound heart"? These are questions for treatises in philosophy and psychology, while *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel; as it demonstrates, however, a great novel can lead the reader to think, feel and question, through creating scenes which stay in our minds for the rest of our lives. •

Gwyneth Evans taught English Literature and Liberal Studies at several Canadian universities. She now works as a harpist and helps with the editing of *Humanist Perspectives*.