

Human Civilization: The Cruel Society in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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An African American girl is guided to school as she deals with the hate of the people around her in Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With*. On the left and right sides of this painting four men are shown walking in uniform. Each of these men have a badge on their jackets symbolizing their roles as authority figures. In the middle of the painting an African American girl is shown walking to school while being guided by the men around her. Behind the girl the word "Nigger" can be seen painted on the wall. On this wall and on the ground tomatoes are shown in pieces. The girl and the men around her seem to be ignoring the tomatoes being thrown at them as they continue facing forward. The tomatoes and the word "Nigger" in this painting represent the cruelest and most evil parts of society. These cruel parts of society are what hurts the people that live around them. In similarity to this painting, Mark Twain demonstrates how cruel society can be using character's experiences from his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain reveals that a person is better off following their own paths and beliefs rather than those of the society in which they live.

Mark Twain believed in breaking social norms and individuality. This breaking of social norms is most greatly demonstrated through *Huckleberry Finn*. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck Finn breaks away from his society as he begins a long journey with a runaway slave named Jim. After Huck and Jim begin their journey down the Mississippi river, Huck begins to

debate whether he should follow what society has taught him and turn Jim in or follow his heart and help Jim escape slavery to be with his family. Huck states, "But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind... he would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper... then I says to myself; 'All right then I'll go to hell' and tore it up"(Twain 214). Huck has a battle in his mind between doing what he knows society would want him to do or doing what he knows is right for Jim. He realizes that there is nothing Jim has done to deserve to be sent back to slavery. This quote reveals how hard it is for Huck to go against society and help save Jim. This relates back to the painting *The Problem We All Live With* because both Huck and the men protecting the girl in the painting are doing what they know is right no matter how much society judges them for it.

Mark Twain demonstrates how society is broken and unjust. As Huck and Jim continue their journey down the river they run into two men; one of which says that he is a duke and the other is a king. These men are con artists that devise a plan to steal money from a family by pretending to be related to their recently passed father. Huck sees that what these men are trying to do is wrong so he tries to take back the families money and hide it. The fake duke and king then begin to worry that one of the slaves is going to steal the money from them. The duke states, "First you know the nigger that does up the rooms will get in order to box these duds up and put em away and do you reckon a nigger can run across money and not borrow some of it"(Twain 178). The duke assumes that a slave will steal the money because that is what society has taught him to believe. This is hypocritical because of the fact that the duke and the king were actually the real thieves. Society teaches that black men are more likely to steal than white men. This is unjust as every man has an equal possibility of being a thief, no matter their color or race.

Mark Twain shows that society does not serve as a good example of how a person should be. Society wants everyone to be the same in order to control them. Huck Finn deals with this through the entire novel as everyone that he runs across wants him to be how they picture he needs to be in order to benefit themselves. The first example of this is when Miss Watson tries to civilize Huck in the beginning of the novel. This fails as it only leads to Huck wanting to start a new life somewhere else. Another example of society wanting to control Huck is when the two thieves try to make Huck into a thief like them in order to make them more money. Mark Twain gives a final example of this when he intentionally ends the novel with Aunt Sally planning to try and civilize Huck. Huck states, "But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of 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). Even though Huck followed his heart throughout the entire novel and helps people in many ways like stopping a family from getting swindled or helping Jim be with his family again, society still wants Huck to act differently. This relates back to the painting *The Problem We All Live With* because just like society wants to control the little girl and keep her away from the school, it also wants to control Huck and make him someone that he is not.

It might appear as if people are better off following the paths and beliefs that their society gives them, however this only causes people to become blind of the truth. Aunt Sally serves as a perfect example of this type of person. She is apart of a society that does not even see african americans

as actual people, but only as property. When Aunt Sally is first brought into the novel she is depicted as a nice considerate lady. After Huck pretends to be Tom Sawyer after he finds Aunt Sally, she begins to ask him how he got there. He tells her that he got there on a boat that had crashed and only a “nigger” was killed. Aunt Sally responds with little concern for the black man. Aunt Sally states, “Well it’s lucky because sometimes people do get hurt. Two years ago last Christmas your Uncle Silas was coming up from New Orleans on the old Lally Rook and she blowed out a cylinder head and crippled a man. And I think he died afterwards. He was a Baptist” (Twain 221). Aunt Sally has learned from society that blacks should not even be thought of as real people. After Huck tells her that a black person was killed on the boat instead of asking about the man she changes the subject to be about a baptist that she heard also died on a boat. Aunt Sally is blind to the fact that both the white baptist and the black man are equal people of importance.

Four men protected an African American girl as she moved to a new all white school. The girl and the men protecting her ignored the judgment of the society around them and continued to do what they believed they should be doing. Just like the experiences of this little girl, Huck Finn from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also had to experience mistreatment from his own society while beginning to follow his own path. Huck Finn, Jim, and Aunt Sally each had their own unique experiences with society based on if they let society control them or not. In today’s society many people are beginning to let their own voices be heard instead of just following what other people believe. Just like the characters in the novel it is up for the person to decide whether or not they want to follow their own path.