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American Lit. II

Mrs. Pittman

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States of Nature: Locke and Hobbes in *Huckleberry Finn*

Mark Twain is renowned for his witty criticism of society. Almost invariably his nonchalant quips, when pondered, tear deep into the (t)issues of religion, morality, and humanity. Other times, however, he takes a slower, less overt and less lively tack to make his points. One such instance occurs in his book *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In this book, the main protagonist, a young Huckleberry Finn, journeys down the Mississippi River and into adulthood. Throughout his odyssey, Huck encounters many situations conducive for direct and humorous criticism, but woven into his trek as a whole is a more elaborate development of his person, specifically his conscience. Twain himself described *Huckleberry Finn* as “a book of [his] where a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers a defeat” (qtd. in Levy 383). As he drifts, Huck is presented with opportunities that force him to choose between two competing consciences, his innate, visceral conscience and an intellectual conscience established by society and religion. As the book progresses, we see him deliberate between these two options before eventually surrendering to his gut. In doing so, Huck proves himself to be governed by markedly Lockean principles. Pap, on the other hand, contrasts with Huck by presenting himself as a product of Hobbes. By using the sociopolitical lenses of Locke and Hobbes to view the *self*-government of Twain’s characters, we can see a clearer image of how their consciences contrast with each other and society.

Before we can compare Huck's struggle of consciences, we first must characterize the two sources of conviction and trace his interaction with them. Huck's "sound heart" can be seen cropping up often in the novel, either subtly emerging without him realizing it, as in the case of his aiding Jim to escape, or more thunderously in response to something he finds repulsive on a gut-level, like the community's tar-and-feathering of the duke and the dauphin. Though society sees him as a lost boy in need of educating, Huck's visceral conscience is much less primal than some would think (Levy 383). He is a very thoughtful boy who often goes "out in the woods and [turns things] over in [his] mind a long time" (Twain 137). This pensive predisposition harkens strongly back to the second chapter of Locke's *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*.

In his *Second Treatise*, Locke describes what he believes humanity would have been like before it founded society. This philosophical concept is known as a "state of nature," and many other thinkers have proposed variations of it. In Locke's version, pre-societal men were in a "state of perfect freedom," and in this state they were kept civil by a natural law, reason, which "teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that...no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions" (Sec. 4, 6). It is this reason that we see Huck embracing in his natural moments of introspection. The woods into which Huck thoughtfully wanders give rise to many of his more potent insights and are the nursery in which he fosters the heart that is destined to guide him, regardless of external pressures. It is to these external pressures and a chronicle of Huck's resistance to them which we now turn.

After being relatively feral for the bulk of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck has been captured by a society that is trying to forcibly "sivilize" him (Twain 131). Beyond the usual societal pressures of the time, such as that to accept slavery, Huck's "sivilization" is also being accomplished by religious indoctrination. This can be clearly seen when Miss Watson feeds

Huck overly simplistic theology, saying that he will get whatever he wants if he prays for it every day. Huck attempts what she said, and finds it to be false. Thinking he had done something wrong, he requests that she pray for his fish hooks. Instead of offering Huck deeper, more truthful theology, she dismisses him as a “fool” and “never told [him] why” (Twain 137). It is in opposition to such indoctrination that Huck begins to embrace his own personal conscience.

In addition to discussing the rights and behaviors of humans in a state of nature, Locke extends his theory into what they would have been like once society was established. Though Locke paints a rosy picture of a state of nature, he admits “that civil government is the proper remedy for [its] inconveniencies” (Sec. 13). In an attempt to smooth out the “inconveniencies” of Huck’s natural state, society and religion, through their “sivilizing,” attempt to imprint their own conscience onto him, forcing him either to resist or forfeit his gut’s beliefs.

Initially, Huck pays little attention to Miss Watson’s lessons about Christianity, the societal religion of the time. He superficially, and perhaps instinctively, resists the ideas she tries to instill in him. After she tells him of the “bad place” and the “good place,” Huck, though a naturally thoughtful person, flippantly brushes the concept off, opting to be wherever Tom Sawyer is and Miss Watson is not (Twain 132). Soon, however, the natural law of reason pushes Huck to first try the merits of this foreign conscience before rejecting it. Thus he begins to view Miss Watson’s religion as something he should seriously consider. He begins experimenting with it and questions his findings. Even after the unfortunate trial run of prayer mentioned before, Huck still ponders prayer and theorizes as to why it doesn’t work for him. This can be seen when he ponders over how the widow had undoubtedly prayed for the bread to find him when he was hiding. When it does, he decides that “there ain’t no doubt but there is something in” prayer (Twain 153).

Given the religious references throughout his works, it is clear that Locke was heavily influenced by Christian doctrine. It should come as no surprise then to learn that, as Huck dabbles in Christianity, he is not repulsed by the fact that many traditional Christian values are in accordance with his personal bent. Repeatedly we see Huck naturally disgusted by things that the polite Christian society would also condemn. Notable is Huck's encounter with the senseless violence of the feud he finds in an isolated pocket of society. Upon seeing the rival families begin to kill each other, Huck says he felt "sick" and that he often had nightmares about what he saw (Twain 201). This disgust is further accounted for by the fact that Locke directly points out that such scenarios are a drawback to a state of nature. He says that in such a state, though "every man hath a right to punish [an] offender," it is possible that "ill nature, passion and revenge will carry them too far" in this punishment (Locke Sec. 8, 13). Thus we see Huck, an apparent model of Lockean ideals, disgusted by the perpetuation of a violent feud by families who do not even remember why it started.

Huck also finds the duke and the dauphin's conning "sickening," and it is this aversion to their "rot and slush" that indicates how closely his conscience mirrors the teachings of the staple religion of the society (Twain 231). Locke says that even in a state of nature, when every man is left to govern himself, no man ought to "take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, the liberty, health, limb, or goods of another" (Sec. 6). This is precisely what the duke and the dauphin did in all of their swindling.

Even though he is opposed to their actions, Huck is disturbed when he sees the duke and the dolphin get tar-and-feathered. He looks on them pitifully and remarks that "[h]uman beings *can* be awful cruel to one another" (Twain 272). He refers to both parties here. The con men have, of course, treated others cruelly, but the townsmen have exacted a punishment that is both

unusual and minimally helpful. Locke says that when punishing a wrong-doer, the punisher must “only to retribute...him, so far as calm reason and conscience dictate, what is proportionate to his transgression, which is so much as may serve for reparation and restraint” (Sec. 8). Huck might see tar-and-feathering as a punishment formed too much in the heat of passion. Additionally, though this punishment might restrain, or deter further commission of crime, it does nothing to repay the families from which the duke and dauphin had stolen. Huck would rather have seen a more reasonable punishment. These similarities between Huck’s Lockean conscience and Christianity make it easier for Huck to slide into a partial belief in Christianity’s moral teachings, but not everything society accepts sits right with him.

As the book progresses, however, more instances arrive where readers see Huck becoming disillusioned with the society’s ethics and repulsed by things others accept. The most heavily inspected of these occurrences is, of course, when Huck finds his conscience at odds with slavery. One of the first places we see this side of him emerge is when he has to watch the duke and the dauphin separate the Wilks’s family of slaves when they sell them to different plantations. Huck is obviously moved by the scene, somberly saying he “can’t ever get the sight of it out of [his] memory” (Twain 243). This movement holds true to Locke, if we are to take him literally when he says that “all men are naturally in...a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit...without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man (Sec. 4). Slavery directly denies the natural “equality of men” that gives rise to the “obligation to mutual love amongst men” (Locke Sec. 5). This breach of humanity strikes Huck and sticks with him.

Twenty pages later, Huck’s frustration with how society expects him to interact with slavery comes to a head. His societal conscience smothers him with guilt for having passively

aided in Jim's escape by not turning him in. He is convinced that his natural actions are the epitome of anti-Christian. He says that if he had just gone to Sunday school, "they'd a learnt [him], there, that people that acts as [he'd] been acting about the nigger goes to everlasting fire" (Twain 261). When his guilt makes him unable to even pray for forgiveness, he writes a note giving Jim up. Just when Huck is about to cave in to what society has brainwashed him into believing is right and turn Jim in as a runaway, he realizes that he can't. Fully thinking he will be damned for the decision, Huck chooses to protect his friend instead of doing what society and religion would have him do. By doing protecting his friend, he is essentially rebelling against the powers that be.

Locke defines tyranny as "the exercise of power beyond right" (Sec. 199). By this definition, the society which has been trying to "sivilize" Huck is a tyrant. The church sits idly by and allows the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud to cycle on, killing off the family members that usually fill its pews. Worse still, society refuses to allow slaves their natural right to life. The church fails to govern where it ought, and society violates man's inherent rights. This failure and abuse pushes Huck to attempt the "dissolution" of the tyrant (Locke Sec. 211). To do this, Huck says that he will "take up [what society deems] wickedness again," that he will "steal Jim out of slavery again" if it comes to it, and that "if [he] [can] think of anything worse, [he will] do that, too" (Twain 262). Essentially he vows to do all he can to oppose what he sees as a crooked, tyrannical society, but in doing so and following his heart instead, he feels he will be damned. This sense of necessary self-condemnation sticks with him throughout the book.

When he hears that his esteemed Tom Sawyer is willing to help him steal Jim back, he is forced to admit that Tom "fell, considerable, in [his] estimation" for it (Twain 269). In spite of these residual effects, Huck has learned his lesson when it comes to having society's ideals

forced upon him. After Jim has been unnecessarily jailbroken and everything is settled, Huck says that he's "got to light out for the Territory...because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt [him] and sivilize [him] and [he] can't stand it" (Twain 309). By opting to go west to the Territory, Huck is deciding to physically cut ties with the society he has already parted ways with morally. Like Locke, he is thinking of how "much better it is in the state of nature, wherein men are not bound to submit to the unjust will of another" (Sec. 13). Thus, after having society's conscience induced in him for a time, he is ready to return to his visceral conscience, his gut, his heart. As for "sivilization," he's "been there before," and knows better (Twain 309).

It seems evident that Huck prefers the blissful and idealistic natural state of Locke, but there are other characters who adhere to other philosophical states of nature that are less optimistic. Pap subscribes more to the camp of Hobbes. In his *Leviathan*, Hobbes's state of nature portrays a more selfish humanity in the absence of society. He asserts that "if any two men desire the same thing, which neverthelesse they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies" (Hobbes). The violence that results from everyone selfishly trying to gain the their wants and needs leads to rough and miserable lives, a type of life that readily lends itself to a description of Pap. Living in a remote cabin only able to be accessed by boat, Pap definitely qualifies as being outside the influence of society. He spends his life either trying to manipulate his way into more money for alcohol or drunkenly beating Huck. His lifestyle, in conjunction with his death early on in the book, shows Pap to be a great example of Hobbes's state of nature—"solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." This is the polar opposite of the sense we get from Huck in his state of nature.

When trying to sound the reason for Twain's depictions of Huck and Pap, it is helpful to first compare Huck's innate, thoughtful conscience against society and then compare him to Pap.



Twain usually satirically critiques society and religion with witty snaps, but in this case his critique method is much more protracted and less humorous. Bennet writes that “the only [principles Huck] has encountered...are those of rural Missouri” (125). Though Huck has had limited exposure to different moral ideas, he uses his head and heart to forge his own path. Twain, keenly critical of the group mentality so easily produced by society, is reminding his audience of the importance of thinking for oneself. Bertolini agrees when he says, “*Huckleberry Finn*...is a great American novel because it addresses the key concept of American sociopolitical culture--liberal individualism” (qtd in Bollinger 47). It is humorous that Bertolini points out that *Huckleberry Finn* appeals to the American masses because it extolls the mindful individual—by ironically contrasting the mindful individual with the masses. The very popularity of Twain’s book criticizing the populus seems in itself satirical.

Pap is also countercultural, but it is obvious that he is not to be admired. Locke believes that any reasonable being should be able to adhere to basic precepts of morality, such as the fact that stealing is wrong. Pap proves that this is not the case, illuminating another evil. In contrast with blind subservience and Huck’s thoughtful rebellion, Pap represents a thoughtless rebellion. Twain wants people to make their own choices instead of simply doing what they’re told, but he also wants them to behave in a reasonable and rational manner.

Throughout *Huckleberry Finn*, two sources of conscience vie for Huck and Pap’s allegiances, and they respond in two drastically different ways that remarkably parallel Locke and Hobbes’s states of nature, respectively. Understanding how these parallels work helps illuminate the general trends of conscience in *Huckleberry Finn* and in so doing helps us better understand another layer of Twain’s always-insightful criticism. In contrast to Twain’s typical straight-forward and biting satire which usually pertains to very specific things, this more

complex criticism seems to advocate something much more general—a spirit of free thought, with an emphasis on the thought. Twain contrasts a thoughtful, conscience-plagued country boy with his self-serving thoughtless father in an effort to illustrate the importance of thoroughly thinking through one's morality. After all, “a person's conscience ain't got no sense” (Twain 272).

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