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ENG 442 – Survey of American Literature II

Huck's Moral Growth

– One traditional way of reading *Huck Finn* is through his picaresque flight: his physical journey parallels the metaphorical journal he undergoes

Huck's growth is largely reflected in his attitudes toward others, specifically when it comes to thievery (virtually every major episode contains some theft – this is one way that Twain plots Huck's moral depth and awareness)

1. The imaginary theft in the early Tom episodes, for instance in chapter 2
 - There are no moral consequences
 - Tom relies on “authorities” as a guide to behavior
2. The petty theft along the river, for instance in chapter 12
 - “Borrowing” items as he and Jim need them
 - Huck tries to rationalize thievery, but realizes there are some moral implications (such as a farmer's loss of product)
3. The scene on the *Walter Scott*
 - Robbers attempt to rationalize murder, chapter 12
 - Huck worries about the robbers and later feels good about having helped them, chapter 13
 - Huck learns from murderous men how not to act
4. The Royal Nonesuch, chapter 23
 - After experiences at the revival, Huck's growing dislike of the King and the Duke
 - Huck's description of the Nonesuch reveals the bare ridiculousness underlying this “tragedy”
5. Stealing from the Wilkses
 - It deprives family of its livelihood
 - Huck is in a bind, for if he betrays the King and Duke he risks losing Jim
 - Huck's disgust – “it was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race,” chapter 24
 - Huck devises a plan to “steal,” chapter 26 – this is highly ironic, for Huck steals the money in order to learn about the *sheer gravity* of stealing

- Huck learns moral lesson inversely, learning through the negative actions of the King and Duke

6. Stealing Jim

- The most significant episode in Huck's growing moral awareness
- The implications of stealing a slave are *very serious*
 - For the southern states, the slave is a commodity
 - For the free states, the slave is a free individual
 - If Huck helps Jim, he'll be aligning himself with abolitionists...is he ready for that?
- Huck's conscience bothering him
 - His decisions in chapters 16 and 31, two of the most significant moments in the novel
 - In chapter 31, going to hell is the worst thing for a boy of Huck's sensibility (he may not be religious, but he believes in hell...consider his abundant superstitious beliefs!)
 - Contrast this to his behavior in chapter 1
- Tom's game, stealing Jim back, and Huck's reaction to this in chapter 33...does Huck morally "backslide," or does he strategically play along with Tom only as a matter of eventually freeing Jim?
- Tom as yardstick by which to measure Huck's moral growth:

<u>Tom</u>	<u>Huck</u>
Static	Dynamic
Romantic	Realist
Absolute	Relative
Principled	Pragmatic

- See, for instance, chapter 35 on stealing a watermelon

Huck's Two Big Moral Tests

1. Huck deciding not to give up Jim to the slave hunters, chapter 16
2. Huck deciding to go to Hell instead of betraying Jim, chapter 31