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Say it, Jim : The Morality of Connection in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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The American literary tradition has often been defined by its moments of radical autonomy—Thoreau at his pond, Ishmael offering his apostrophe to “landlessness,” Huck “light[ing] out for the Territory ahead of the rest” (Twain 1995, 265). In fact, Twain’s novel is often taught as the text that epitomizes this tradition, with Huck held up as its exemplar: a boy courageous enough to stand against the moral conventions of his society, to risk Hell itself rather than conform to the “civilizing” process of communities he rejects.¹

Yet such a focus belies an alternate strand in the tradition: moments of radical *connection* that call into question not just the value but even the possibility of autonomy. The passage from which my title is drawn illustrates this point. At the very moment Jim’s freedom seems most in crisis, when Tom’s injury puts the escape on hold while Huck goes for the doctor, the two characters speak as one

through Jim's voice. Knowing Jim will say what they both think, Huck asks Jim to say it: "'No, sah—I doan' budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a *doctor*, not if it's forty year!'" (1995, 251). While the moment certainly contains troubling elements, we must acknowledge the profound, almost telepathic connection between characters in this encounter.²

That the connection involves a moral choice is particularly appropriate in this novel that hinges on such moments. This particular decision reveals the two major threads of morality examined in the novel. Emerging from a set of assumptions most readers (and teachers) of the novel probably expect, Jim's argument prevails: he claims that the risk to Tom's life trumps his own need for freedom, that the doctor must be fetched even if it means Jim stays where he is—a slave—for "forty year." This proposed timeframe brings Jim to the moment of Twain's composition, representing Jim's willingness to extend his slavery not just past an historical end Jim cannot foresee but quite possibly for the remainder of his life. In his mouth, the words become a willing sacrifice—one Huck cannot offer on his behalf.

Yet Huck's reticence to speak isn't simple courtesy, nor, certainly, a test of Jim, who has already proven himself a morally admirable figure. Huck's silence reveals an alternate moral code that has, in fact, driven him through the novel: a code based on the maintenance of relationships, not on an abstract hierarchy of values. Huck never moves into the realm of "abstract" morality; he never asserts a conviction that when two moral principles come into conflict, one will have priority because of the nature of the moral principle itself. Instead, he acts strictly through his sense of commitment to his friends—and in the moment when Tom is shot, Huck finds himself on the horns of a dilemma. Both friends have powerful and immediate claims upon him. Yet Huck has no recourse to abstract assumptions to establish that preserving Tom's life is the highest moral obligation at that moment—or even the reverse, that Jim's need for freedom takes priority over the arguably small risk to Tom's life (or perhaps only to limb, as he's been shot in the leg rather than in a more vital region). My point is not that one value or another *should* have priority but rather that Huck's decisions are not based on abstract moral reasoning. His loyalty to both friends means that, in the face of their conflicting needs, Huck is paralyzed. Huck needs Jim to say what must be done because if Huck says it himself, the demand for a doctor betrays Jim's need for freedom—and so betrays Huck's relationship with Jim. Only after Jim insists on the doctor can Huck act: "[S]o it was all right, now, and I told Tom I was a'going for a doctor" (1995, 251). The key is "*now*": only after Jim has said "it," acknowledging the demand Tom's injury places on them, does the moral hierarchy become "all right," releasing Huck to respond accordingly. The hierarchy of values Jim describes—that liberty must give way when a

life is at stake—doesn't free Huck to act. The principle Jim articulates is considerably less compelling for Huck than is Jim's implicit assurance that Huck's actions will not compromise their friendship.

This interpretation of such a pivotal moment makes more pressing a question that continues to plague us as readers and teachers of the novel. If Huck's relationship to Jim really is the centerpiece of the text, a friendship demanding that Huck step outside the conventional morality of his era, how can we account for its trivialization during the evasion sequence at Phelps' farm? In other words, how can we make sense of the ending? Even if we don't simply take "The Weak Ending of *Huckleberry Finn*" as a given, as Richard Hill suggests most modern critics do (1991, 492-93), any reader interested in Huck and Jim must see that allowing Tom to dictate the terms of the escape—complete with his boyish, bookish ideas on how such an escape ought to play out—violates not just the profound connection of "Say it, Jim," but of any friendship based on mutual respect. Huck cannot recognize Jim as an equal or a friend and yet allow Tom to amuse himself at Jim's expense. For reasons ranging from a concern with Huck's moral growth to the reassertion of racism implied by Jim's treatment and voicelessness in the escape sequence, any number of critics have considered the ending what Leo Marx labeled "a failure of nerve" on Twain's part, an evasion of the very direction the novel seemed to be taking (1986, 19).³ The novel is often taught this way too, for suggesting that Twain has "got it wrong" by the end eases our discomfort with the painful elements of the novel's conclusion. I would argue, however, that a morality of connection functions throughout the text, and—paradoxically—that the problematic ending emerges not from a shift in that ethic, but from its very consistency. To see this ethic at work in the novel also demands that we reconsider the book's status as an icon of individualism, recognizing the deeper connectiveness underlying Huck's character and, with him, the novel as a whole. Such reconsideration also has implications for our teaching of other icons of autonomy, and perhaps for further consideration of the mythic status of American individualism.

A Morality of Connection

Recognizing the conflicting patterns of moral behavior within the novel may be aided by reviewing modern research on moral development by Lawrence Kohlberg (1983) and Carol Gilligan (1982), especially as illustrated through their analysis of the moral reasoning of eleven- and twelve-year olds presented with the Heinz dilemma. The Heinz dilemma has Heinz's wife terminally ill. She can only be helped by a drug sold by the pharmacist who developed it at a price too high for Heinz to afford. The pharmacist will

not lower his price. After presenting the situation, the researcher asks the participants a question: should Heinz steal the drug?

Kohlberg expected that at an appropriate level of development for an eleven- or twelve-year-old, the answer will be yes, Heinz should steal the drug, and furthermore, should do so because the right to life outweighs the right to property or profit making. Kohlberg sought to identify the logic behind the decision rather than looking strictly for the answer, arguing that “mature” moral reasoning will see the Heinz dilemma as a matter of competing rights, with the moral agent responsible for determining which of the competing rights must take priority. Kohlberg’s schema assumes that, at the pinnacle of moral development, individuals develop a set of universal hierarchical moral principles, applicable to any set of circumstance or participants, which may or may not accord with the values of the society as a whole. Kohlberg’s ideas echo Kant’s Categorical Imperative: a moral person chooses actions that could serve as universal human law.⁴

The problem emerged when Kohlberg interviewed girls. In his six-level system, he ranked boys’ yes answers as somewhere in the fourth or fifth level. Girls frequently ranked much lower, often never achieving the “higher” levels of morality at all, leading Kohlberg to question girls’ abilities at moral reasoning. But in listening to the girls’ actual answers, Carol Gilligan (originally Kohlberg’s student) detected a pattern: rather than providing Kohlberg with the “yes” he was listening for, the girls refused the underlying assumptions of the dilemma. Talk to the pharmacist, they tended to say. Perhaps something can be worked out.

As Gilligan theorizes from these answers, Kohlberg failed to recognize what Gilligan at first considered a specifically feminine pattern of moral reasoning. The girls articulate a different set of concerns than the boys—not a lesser level of moral understanding. Rather than seeing moral decisions as predicated on universal moral rules, the girls particularize the response, seeing the problem as occurring between *this* pharmacist and *this* husband. They construct the issue as one involving a breakdown in the relationship, resolved not by the imposition of abstract principles but by mending the rupture between people. Rather than talking about fairness issues—which assume a hierarchy of competing rights—the girls implicitly define moral acts as occurring within a web of connections. For them, moral decisions must meet the very particular needs of each person in the relationship, contextualized within the specific situation. Gilligan calls this an ethic of care, wherein the highest goal becomes maintaining connections between specific people and mediating between the conflicting demands of those particular relationships, as opposed to an ethic of justice, wherein the highest goal becomes acting on

the basis of universal principles whereby conflicts between competing rights could be adjudicated.⁵

Furthermore, subsequent research breaks down the exclusively gendered quality of the categories. Gilligan suggests that while in their first consideration of the dilemma the gendered patterns prevail, when pushed, both boys and girls seem able to shift moral perspectives, although in general it appears easier for girls to take on a justice pattern than for boys to move into an ethic of care (Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor, 1988). Moreover, expanding the research beyond middle-class white children reveals that an ethic of care predominates among inner-city children of both genders (Bardige and Ward 1988). Faced with challenges to their very survival, the inner-city children tended consider the affect of their moral actions on those close to them, upon whom they depend more heavily (or recognize that dependence more fully) than would economically privileged children in other settings. What we see then, as Gilligan has described it, are two separate languages through which moral concerns can be articulated. While gender plays a role in defining which language any particular person may prefer, it is not the only factor. Justice remains the language of the powerful, while care seems to be preferred by the less powerful, however power may be constructed.

In discussing Gilligan's contributions to moral philosophy, Lawrence Blum offers additional clarification about the distinction between the moral codes of care and justice. He offers as an example that the general obligation to "protect one's children from harm" does not adequately address the specifics of that obligation, and the principle of fairness (as one abstract moral stance), taken on its face, may not always accomplish this goal. He considers a situation in which "a father has to decide whether and how to deal with a situation in which his daughter has hit her younger brother" (1993, 60). To reach a morally adequate solution, he will have to consider his specific relationship with each child, not simply an impartial consideration of the circumstance itself. The father,

must take into account what various actions, coming from himself in particular, would mean. . . . Would his intervention serve to undermine (either of) his children's ability to work out problems between themselves? Would punishing his daughter contribute to a pattern of seeming favoritism toward the son which she has complained of recently? How might each of the children's self-esteem and moral development be affected by the various options of action open to him? (Blum 1993, 60)

The care for and attentiveness to each child's individual needs—along with the very recognition that one must know each child that closely—constitutes a moral stance within Gilligan's schema. As Blum explains, such morality demands that both the moral agent and the recipient of moral action be "rad-

ically particularized,” with “morality . . . founded in a sense of concrete connection and direct response between persons, a direct sense of connection which exists prior to moral beliefs about what is right or wrong or which principles to accept. Moral action is meant to express and to sustain those connections to particular other people” (52–53). In other words, within an ethic of care, even were the father to opt for a solution in accord with a justice framework, he would do so *because it is in the best interests of both specific children*, not because the solution was “right” or “fair” in absolute terms. Were the father to subscribe simply to an ethic of justice, he might opt for a “fair” punishment and hope (or even assume) that the needs of each child would best be served by that choice, but the principle of fairness would govern him more than it would in the particularized ethic of care Gilligan defines. Within a justice system, principles of care might be valued, but are secondary to fairness itself. Within the care system, the values of justice—when implemented at all—are secondary to the relationship and the individuals in it.

Gilligan’s contribution to moral philosophy is to suggest that rather than being adjunctive to universalist concerns with justice, care constitutes a legitimate and significant moral stance, one that in a mature moral philosophy might well be integrated with justice—but as an equivalent, not subordinate, moral concern. Gilligan’s work illustrates a new way of examining moral behavior, and in as much as literary works reflect human behavior, this larger awareness also applies to our teaching of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Moral Choice in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

In his 1895 lecture tour, Twain described *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as containing a two-pronged moral conflict in which “a sound heart” collides with “a deformed conscience.” Scholars have suggested that Twain himself saw this dichotomy in terms suggested by W. E. H. Lecky’s *History of European Morals* (1869): “intuitive” morality, which argues that humans are naturally able to distinguish between right and wrong, and “utilitarian” morality, which claims instead that observation of one’s social environment and the quest for personal gratification shape moral behavior (Camfield 1992, Cummings 1988). These scholars claim that Twain, although initially attracted to the intuitionist position, gradually shifted to the utilitarian mode, in part to reconcile his perception that the adults of his childhood were good to the fact that they practiced slavery (Cummings 1988, 59, 150). In this schema, *Huckleberry Finn* basically advocates the intuitionist position, showing “heart” defeating the more socially constructed “conscience,” with the novel presenting a sustained argument between the two definitions of morality. Yet in mediating between those two options, Twain, we now see, posits an alternate set of moral considerations, quite different from Lecky’s system. For

“heart” and “conscience” apply equally well to the moral languages Gilligan establishes, articulating not simply how morality arises but what constitutes the centerpoint of that moral understanding, with “heart” representing care and “conscience” as justice.

Huck speaks in the language of care. The style of Huck’s narration, the very grammatical imprecision that originally got the book banned in Boston, reveals that the voice with which he speaks—and so implicitly his moral stance—is not the dominant voice of the society in which he lives. Indeed, Twain’s construction of Huck as functionally powerless within St. Petersburg sets him up to have readier access to an ethic of care, just as had the girls or the economically disadvantaged urban children in Gilligan’s studies. Huck’s outsider position in each of the other communities separates him still further from their socially dominant moral language.

Certainly the observation that Huck’s outsider status provides him with special moral insight is nothing new. Much has been written arguing that Twain’s antebellum setting serves to call into question the morality of society at large, perhaps implying that only an outsider can see with moral clarity into Huck’s particular world. Daniel Wright, examining the novel’s smaller communities (the boys’ gang, aristocratic families, mobs), suggests that Twain’s skepticism of the value of “civilized” morality leads him (and the novel) to conclude that only in utter isolation can one find moral integrity—communities, no matter how small, “nurture a moral apathy that anesthetizes the more acute and responsive individual conscience” (1991, 89). I would suggest, however, that rather than privileging individual conscience, Twain’s construction of Huck places him in a different moral community—a community of the disenfranchised, perhaps including some women but certainly including Jim as a representative of the slave community, where moral decisions are reached based on a very different set of criteria than those established by the dominant codes.⁶ If in teaching the novel we want to present Huck as a moral exemplar, then we want to see him go beyond the dominant moral language, to make the “right” decisions for the “right” reasons, to recognize the wrongness of the antebellum communities that would enslave Jim. And like the early researchers into moral development who were deaf to the real moral issues the girls were articulating, before we recognize an ethic of care we may not hear what Huck is actually saying instead.

Huck’s moral stance becomes clearest when we look at his specific moral decisions. One of the more comic of these decisions (and thus least fraught with readerly tension) occurs on the raft, where Huck and Jim consider the morality of stealing. Huck remembers the moral codes he has been taught:

Pap always said it warn’t no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back, sometime; but the widow said it warn’t anything but a soft

name for stealing, and no decent body would do it. Jim said he reckoned the widow was partly right and pap was partly right; so the best way would be for us to pick out two or three things from the list and say we wouldn't borrow them any more—then he reckoned it wouldn't be no harm to borrow the others. . . . [T]owards daylight we got it all settled satisfactory, and concluded to drop crabapples and p'simmons. We warn't feeling just right, before that, but it was all comfortable now. (Twain 1995, 83)

Part of the humor of the scene must surely be our recognition of how far from moral reasoning these characters are—indeed, rationalization seems the more appropriate term. Their discussion of morality is wholly self-serving; they plan to keep stealing, but want some satisfactory justification for their behavior. This becomes clearest when Huck notes how much better they *feel* given their new-found moral code.⁷ Kantian ethics do not recognize the moral imperative of “feeling just right”; Kant is emphatic that even otherwise praiseworthy activity cannot be considered truly moral if undertaken strictly because the individual takes pleasure in it (1898, 14–15). How much less so, then, can *immoral* behavior be justified on the grounds of feeling?

Yet the sequence does share elements with the “Say it, Jim” moment. In both scenes, Huck and Jim recognize that to be effective, their decision must satisfy them both, and the logic of relationship—rather than abstraction—prevails. The ostensible topic of their discussion, theft, is only nominally the moral issue. As Jim will say later about King Solomon's moral behavior, “de real pint is down fuder—it's down deeper” (Twain 1995, 94). The “real pint” is that Huck is faced with two competing moral codes: the ideas of the widow, whose words represent conventional morality,⁸ and those of Pap, who speaks for a kind of hedonism. To embrace one code essentially means to value one person over the other. By offering a way to reconcile the two conflicting positions, Jim helps Huck avoid making an irrevocable decision about which morality—and with it, which relationship—he will prefer. Clearly, Huck and Jim both know the language of conventional morality; their discussion takes place within its framework, however much they seek to evade its claims. But their goal is wholly other: after all, they have no real motivation to resist behavior both desirable and to some degree necessary for their mutual survival, and, moreover, they have no intention of stopping, even though their conversation seems to suggest they might. Instead, their moral concerns center on establishing and maintaining emotional ties to each other and to the significant figures in Huck's life.⁹ As Lawrence Blum puts it, moral action exists “to express and to sustain . . . connections to particular other people,” with that concern preceding any abstract assumptions about “right and wrong” (1993, 52–3).

Only when relationships come into conflict does Huck's moral reasoning become problematic. In the famous scenes where Huck agonizes over whether or not to help Jim find freedom—both when he and Jim near Cairo, and later when he tears up the letter to Miss Watson—it is not the greater wrong of slavery that motivates him. However much our students and we want it to be so, Huck has not reached what Kohlberg would define as the highest stage of moral development, the post-conventional level where one sees beyond culturally specific values to universal ethical principles. There are any number of other slaves in the novel whose status does not concern Huck in the slightest. He bases his decision to help Jim strictly on their friendship; the particularity of their relationship means that, although Huck clearly upholds slavery as morally acceptable, he knows that it is not acceptable to Jim. Huck's dilemma emerges from competing issues of care.

On the river, listening to Jim's enthusiasm for his impending escape, Huck feels the "pinch" of conscience because of his connection to Miss Watson. She has treated him decently; as he says, 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" (Twain 1995, 101), and her care for him constitutes a moral claim. Rather than seeing Jim's need for freedom as more significant than Miss Watson's right to hold Jim as property, Huck feels guilty that he has not stopped Jim's escape. Huck frames his consideration of Jim's wife and children in similar terms; the man who owns Jim's children has done Huck "no harm." Huck's particular sense of their relationship (or lack thereof) specifies that he should behave in at least a morally neutral fashion; he ought not contribute to the theft of the man's property (102). Here is a "universal" judgment coming into play, yet I suspect most readers see it as a failure of Huck's moral nerve rather than as a higher level of morality. One of the significant elements of Gilligan's description of an ethic of care is that it is not hierarchical, and as such does not offer a clear way to decide between conflicting needs of individuals with whom one is in relation. Gilligan notes that "when responsibilities conflict and decision entails the sacrifice of somebody's needs, then [the person practicing an ethic of care] confronts the seemingly impossible task of choosing the victim" (1982, 80). Miss Watson's claim on Huck is a genuine one, and without principles of abstraction Huck is faced with an ethical dilemma—he cannot satisfy both figures, but his moral language does not provide him with ready means to choose between them.

Theft as a moral issue only "pinches" in situations where the lines of relationship suggest it ought; Huck never does anything to help the many people the Duke and King bilk until he finds his relationship with Mary Jane supersedes his (admittedly unwilling) relationship with the men—a relationship he reaffirms in his desire not to see the men tarred and feathered once

he reaches the Phelps's farm. But even when Jim is the "property" at stake, Huck must consider the matter in terms of the relationships involved, not the abstract principles of theft or slavery. So his decision to help Jim is couched in the language of feeling; he decides he has acted correctly because he would "feel just the same way" whether he turned Jim in or not (Twain 1995, 104). Both moral languages have their claim over him, but his closer relationship with Jim becomes the deciding factor (especially, we might note, in Miss Watson's absence).

The same moral reasoning takes place in the famous scene where Huck tears up the letter to Miss Watson, deciding to "go to hell" instead (Twain 1995, 202).¹⁰ Throughout this passage, Huck acts on the basis of relationship not abstract principles.¹¹ He writes the letter from this context; he has not decided that helping Jim was wrong, but that "it would be a thousand times better for Jim to be a slave at home where his family was, as long as he'd *got* to be a slave" (201). In other words, his behavior emerges from his specific knowledge of Jim's love for his family. The conflict within Huck in this sequence has been read in many ways—a fight between conventional religion and "absolute" right, between the discourse of racism and white double-consciousness—but the language in which the discussion plays out clearly depends on a conflict between universal principles (the language of justice, however unjust the specific claim of slavery seems to us now and to Twain writing in the 1880s), and relationship, particularized to Huck's understanding of Jim's needs (the language of care). The deciding factor is not principle or the wrongness of slavery in general, but his memory of Jim's claim on their friendship, echoing back to the earlier decision Huck made to help Jim escape: Jim "said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now" (202). Connection, not abstract reasoning, proves the basis for the decision, as it has for Huck throughout the novel.

All of which leads us to the apparent moral bad faith of the ending, where Huck seems to betray his relationship with Jim. The moral failure is too clear to require much rehearsal here:¹² Huck, finding Jim in a cabin too dark for growing flowers, chained to a bed, with only the occasional, functional visits of Nat for company, makes no effort—not even of a provisional, unobtrusive sort—to ameliorate his condition. We might exonerate him for that, since Jim himself (doubtless aware of the much harsher treatment a fugitive slave might expect) notes that Uncle Silas and Aunt Sally are both "as kind as they could be" (Twain 1995, 230), but Huck fails more egregiously in the evasion sequence itself. Faced with Tom's proposal for an elaborate escape plan, Huck makes only the most tentative protests against Tom's plan to house snakes, spiders, and mice in Jim's cabin, even standing by as Tom contemplates cutting off Jim's leg, only (fortunately!) to think better of it on

his own, recognizing that “there ain’t necessity enough for it” (223). To be sure, Huck speaks out in favor of pragmatism at any number of points—applauding Tom’s decision to “let on” they’re using case-knives while employing the more effective pick-axes, reminding Tom that stealing the slave-girl’s dress will cause trouble “because of course she prob’bly hain’t got any but that one” (228, 246)—but he never voices any concern with the premise itself; never says, “Look, Tom, Jim is my friend and you can’t treat him this way.” And that, it seems, is something he ought to say even within an ethic of justice—and we might suppose the demand to be all the greater within an ethic of care.

But again and again Huck has proven himself incapable of mastering the language of justice. For modern readers, one frustration with the novel lies in the degree to which Huck fails to abstract general principles from specific examples, to move from “it is wrong for Jim to be a slave” to “slavery is wrong”; or even from “Jim cares ‘just as much for his people as white folks does for their’n’; Jim is ‘white inside’” (Twain 1995, 155, 251) to “Jim is like me; racism is wrong.” But Huck never makes these leaps. Even his attitude toward Jim never seems wholly to recognize Jim’s humanity; in the Grangerford episode, Huck considers his servant “my nigger,” and only a few pages later thinks of “my Jim” in the same fashion (116, 120)—and this well into their idyllic river voyage and well before the “failed ending” where we might expect such textual difficulties.

Yet for Huck to refuse Tom’s escape plan would demand just such a level of abstraction, and, paradoxically, a move out of the ethic of care itself. Just as in the earlier episodes, Huck has a relationship with both figures—and his relationship to Tom might have greater claim on him as being the prior commitment. Even setting that aside, what happens at the end of the novel is simply the logical extension of Huck’s moral reasoning. An ethic of care provides Huck no hierarchies whatsoever—no way to adjudicate between the conflicting needs of his two friends. The ethic of care demands he do precisely what he does: he makes sure that the needs do not conflict. From an ethic of justice, we may dismiss Tom’s need for amusement as clearly beneath Jim’s need for freedom—but in so doing, we might also jeopardize the relationship with Tom (a relationship, we might add, based on amusement). Rather than risk the friendship, Huck doesn’t evaluate the merits of Tom’s needs—he doesn’t establish a hierarchy between Tom and Jim, or their conflicting needs. So long as both needs are being met, Huck intervenes with the language of necessity when he must (as in the case-knives and servant-girl moments already noted), but otherwise he simply works to mediate between the two figures so that both Jim and Tom will be satisfied. Huck’s insertions

of the language of necessity (his pragmatism) becomes one facet of that mediation; his apparent willingness to sacrifice Jim's dignity is another.

Huck's moral problem is exacerbated by the fact that Tom speaks the language of justice (hence Huck's shock that Tom would help him "steal" Jim in the first place, and his grudging acceptance of Tom's word that they must act according to the "regulations" of Tom's books [Twain 1995, 212, 223]). Tom recognizes a hierarchy of values (at least when it serves his interests), as we see when Tom rationalizes the theft of the sheets or the knives on the basis that "'it ain't no crime in a prisoner to steal the thing he needs to get away with . . . it's his right'" (225). Like the boys in Kohlberg's interviews, Tom establishes an abstract principle regarding theft, one he derives from the principle that freedom is of higher value than property. This hierarchy takes precedence over any concern for Aunt Sally's well-being, for example, who is tormented by the boys throughout the sequence in a clear violation of the ethic of care. Tom, running the show, considers abstractions before individuals.

Throughout the evasion sequence, Huck's immersion in an ethic of care leads him to defer to Tom's language of justice. When Tom assures Jim and Huck both that they "'would see [Jim] got away, *sure*'" (Twain 1995, 230), his words constitute a promise within the relationship that Huck and Jim accept.¹³ For Huck, no abstraction—be it Tom's "regulations" or a principle of fairness to Jim—is as compelling as the need to work within each relationship as best he can. To assert either abstraction would be to reject the moral logic that has defined Huck throughout the novel. If Tom represents the dangers of taking justice to the point of absurdity, Huck shows us that care taken to extreme offers its own—equivalent—risks.

The Ending

NOTICE:

PERSONS attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR
Per G.G., CHIEF OF ORDNANCE.

More honored in the breach than the observance, few instructions regarding textual interpretation have been the subject of more discussion. Absent from Twain's other "boy's books," the Notice suggests both the danger and the necessity of considering just those elements Twain proscribes: motive, moral, and plot. Twain's list connects the very acts the Notice would criminalize, suggesting that our narrative performances are both intentional

and bound up with morality.¹⁴ Gilligan's insights into a language of care help us to see with greater precision just how the sense-making and moral-making functions are connected within Twain's novel, becoming most problematic in the ending.

The girls' response to the Heinz dilemma reveals two elements in their moral thinking: the formulation of relationships and the construction of narrative. Kohlberg's dissatisfaction with the girls' response occurs in part because they do not provide a decisive statement of moral value. Their answer depends upon a relationship forming between the pharmacist and the husband, and begins a sequence of events with no strong certainty of a positive resolution. In other words, the response begins a story, and the dilemma becomes not "a math problem with humans but a narrative of relationships that extends over time" (Gilligan 1982, 28). The girls recognize that the story must continue for a morally adequate solution to be found; Gilligan cites one girl in the study worrying that if Heinz were arrested, his wife might get sick again and then there would be no way for him to help her. The girl's concern reveals that any moral gesture is the beginning, not the end, of the tale.

Twain's warning at the outset of the novel reveals something similar. In the language of conventional morality, a "moral" and a "plot" share a significant similarity: both are decisive gestures, arguing for a finality that real life rarely offers us. "A moral" becomes *the* statement of a story's "meaning"—the moral at the end of an Aesop's fable, for example. Similarly, in narratological terms, a "plot" is a structured ordering of events that leads to a conclusion, or, in its non-technical use, something planned and (ideally) accomplished—that is, finished. In that sense, "motive" and "plot" too become connected, for a "plot" is a plan to accomplish something—clearly in writing *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, Stowe had a "motive," a specific course of action she assumed the novel would help produce. Twain's recognition that moral events are rarely finished in the sense that plot or moral imply reveals his novel's embeddedness in the realities of the major moral questions of the Reconstruction Era.

For Twain, as Christine MacLeod (1995) convincingly argues, was very much a product of the Reconstruction Era, and insofar as his novel may be about race, he surely recognized the impossibility of considering his era to have reached any finality in race relations. Here he shares Gilligan's adolescent girls' suspicion of the moral gesture—for as Twain knew, the decisive moral gesture of the Civil War was not, in fact, the end of the story of race relations in the United States. In the absence of Lincoln's clear intent of reconciliation, of caring for the defeated and the liberated both, Northerners hungry to punish defeated Southerners implemented punitive measures, including a military government for the region. Reconstruction started from

lofty “care” principles, like Senator Thad Stevens’s “forty acres and a mule” proposal, but degenerated into issues of rules, rights, and justice as the proponents of care stood helplessly by. And so, the nation turned its collective interest exactly where Huck himself does—to the West, to the “territories” Huck envisions as the solution to his moral problems. It was—and continues to be—easier to consider a moral problem solved through the fiat of justice than to recognize the profound and on-going demands an ethic of care places upon an individual or a people.

Twain’s novel not only reflects the harsh moral realities of its era, but works toward incorporating simultaneously the possibility of success alongside significant failure within the very moral terms it explores. As we’ve long recognized, Twain’s ending slides away from the realism of the Reconstruction Era and into a romanticization of the antebellum era in which the novel is set. He gives the novel’s most significant slaveholder the major moral gesture of the text in Miss Watson’s deathbed liberation of Jim, despite the fact that Jim is not only a fugitive slave but also widely believed to have killed Huck (and as Julius Lester puts it, “[w]hite people may want to believe such fairy tales about themselves, but blacks know better” [1992, 203]). Beyond that, Twain imagines Huck “light[ing] out for the Territories ahead of the rest” (1995, 265)—a possibility for the young Samuel Clemens, or for the antebellum hero he wants to create in Huck, but from the perspective of Twain writing in the 1880s, more a fantasy than a realistic option. Twain published the novel in 1885, only five years before the census would declare the frontier closed—meaning that, while Twain wrote, there was precious little “Territory” left for Huck to explore that had not already been at least touched by the very “sivilization” he hopes to reject.

And this very gesture remains most problematic if we see Huck operating within an ethic of care. At one level, we could perhaps accept the ending as successful in moral terms. The society in which Huck lives is so defined by the dominant code of justice that Huck must leave these communities to find a space to develop the alternate moral code of care he has envisioned. Although he does not explicitly repudiate Tom’s assertion that they should go to the Territories together, Huck does stress that he must go “ahead of the rest”—that only by extricating himself from the code of justice Tom (and the whole of his “sivilization”) demands can Huck learn to be the fully moral figure we as readers want him to become.

An ethic of care doesn’t permit this fantasy of autonomy—yet that is precisely what Twain embraces. Read in terms of care, the moral failure in the novel is not Huck’s acquiescence to Tom’s cruelty but—ironically—Huck’s failure to continue the novel. Even the (unfinished) sequel won’t do; we need to see the continuation of Huck’s connection to Jim. About this, the

ending tells us nothing. Most contemporary readers are dissatisfied with Jim's apparent pleasure at the forty dollars and the novel's absolute silence on the matter of his wife and children—feeding into claims such as Lester's that "Twain did not take slavery, and therefore black people, seriously" (1992, 201). Huck's failure to be concerned with the particular needs of Jim for that family is a violation of the ethic of care that has motivated him—as is more generally his end gesture of "light[ing] out for the Territory." Indeed, rather than his acquiescence in Tom's cruelty, this may be his least moral act, for in his desire to separate himself completely from everyone, friend and enemy, Huck rejects completely the notion of connectivity as a moral stance.

The gesture emerges out of the same moral problem with which we have been concerned—not, as Wright suggests (1991), that any community will suck us into moral apathy, but that moral dilemmas exist only through and in our relations to each other. Morality is itself a profoundly connective matter, and Huck can only avoid the sorts of problems that shape the end of the novel—or misshape it, if we find Tom's re-emergence troubling—by rejecting friendship altogether. And he cannot do it within the terms of Realism. His interior self has already been structured by the connections he has forged; his moral "self" is not autonomous, but connective. To say more, to write the second book that he rejects, would be to unmask the fiction of that autonomy, and the end gesture of the novel is to embrace fictionality—ironically, at the very moment Huck rejects the continuation of the narrative. The failure of Reconstruction suggests how fully Americans had bought into the assumption that moral gestures were enough; that declaring an end to slavery really was sufficient. It wasn't, any more than Jim's freedom is a sufficient conclusion for the novel. And in that, Julius Lester is right to see that "Twain's failure is that he does not care until it hurts" (1992, 206), for surely within an ethic of care the worst transgression against moral behavior must be to abandon the relationship.¹⁵ Ending the novel with Huck's desire to leave all of the other characters behind is just such an abandonment.

Conclusion

Huck's ethic of care reveals the flaw in considering moral judgments as final and absolute; and like the Civil War, which rested on principles of justice but could not resolve the larger issues of care the elimination of slavery demanded, Huck's moral vision produces a narrative not a solution. If the ending of that narrative becomes the moral failure I've posited, then all narrative to some extent violates an ethic of care in that all narrative posits the end of the relationship—between reader and characters, if not among the characters themselves. And thus to tell stories we may need to integrate both moral voices, to pull together concerns for justice and care—as Huck would

have needed to do for the evasion sequence not to be morally problematic.¹⁶ Extremes of either moral stance, justice or care, are ultimately equally destructive. Indeed, to speak wholly in either moral voice is to miss the urgencies of morality itself. But to hear only the dominant voice, the language of justice that critics have listened for and failed to find in the evasion sequence, is also to misunderstand the nature of the moral self Twain has constructed in Huck, a self fundamentally connected to the very notion of community Huck ostensibly rejects. Our recognition of this connected moral self will not erase our students' or our own discomfort with the novel's ending—and perhaps it should not; perhaps we must learn to accept discomfort in our moral discourse rather than settling for the too-easy comfort the language of justice sometimes permits. But if *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* isn't really a novel that glorifies individualism, then perhaps we must also learn to listen more closely for the voice of connection speaking from the interstices of our other fictions as well, telling us about the urgent connectivity of our real lives.

Notes

¹ An emphasis on autonomy in *Huckleberry Finn* is sometimes offered as proof of the same trend in the culture at large; for instance, Bertolini, in an essay about Hobbes and Locke, asserts that "Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, therefore, is a great American novel because it addresses the key concept of American socio-political culture—liberal individualism" (1994, 459).

² Holland describes "Say it, Jim" as the moment when "Huck and Jim are as close in rapport as they have ever been," noting that they speak "in utter reciprocity" (1982, 68–9). We might also note the degree to which the experience conforms to one of Twain's abiding interests in the 1880s and beyond—what we might call telepathy, although he described it as "mental telegraphy," a process he held in large measure responsible for his creative processes. He wrote about "mental telegraphy" in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* in 1884, shortly after finishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Robinson 1995, 366).

³ See, for example Hoffman (1986) on the issue of Huck's (lack of) moral development, and several of the essays in Leonard and Tenney (1992) for more telling indictments of racism in the ending.

⁴ For a useful overview of Kohlberg's basic concept, see Rich and Devitis (1985). For Kohlberg's own writings (including a response to Gilligan), see Kohlberg, Levine and Hewer (1983). For a series of essays debating the two positions (although leaning toward Gilligan's findings), and including a thorough bibliography, see Larrabee (1993).

⁵ See Gilligan (1982) for the original statement regarding this system of ethics, although her students and other researchers in the area have subsequently generated a considerable literature on the topic. Her work offers interesting implications for the study of literature, although it has been used only once in the discussion of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Feather 1986). Feather's conclusions differ substan-

tially from my own, although this may be due in part to the fact that Gilligan's work has been on-going and Feather did not have access to some of the more recent developments.

⁶ Wilson argues that Jim becomes Huck's moral teacher, helping him to recognize "the necessity of abandoning abstract, codified ideals and [instead] clings to the enduring values of love, compassion, and self-sacrifice—values which can meaningfully emerge only from concrete human relationships" (1974, 80). While I agree with Wilson's distinctions between abstract and contextualized moralities, I cannot agree with his conclusion that the ending, "while perhaps unnecessarily drawn out," is necessary to show Huck's moral growth in moving away from his teacher (92). The essay is also marred by some sloppy reading, especially in conflating Miss Watson with the Widow Douglas as "old maids" and condemning the Widow—not Miss Watson—as Jim's hypocritical owner. For more on the question of women's moral voice in the novel, see note 8.

⁷ For more on the way in which "feeling" functions as an ostensible (if false) morality within the novel, see Mitchell (1985). He too argues that the terms of moral decision are consistent throughout the novel, but (as a side note to his other interests in the novel) emphasizes Huck's lack of abstract reasoning rather than accounting for the logic Huck uses in its place—a logic of relationship rather than abstraction. In fact, as Lawrence Blum has argued, within an ethic of care, "feeling" and emotion play a much stronger role than in traditional ethics (1993, 52)—although not precisely in the way Huck wants to use "feeling just right" in this specific example.

⁸ In describing the widow, we should distinguish her from the novel's other major voice for conventional morality: Miss Watson. Nancy Walker (1985) persuasively argues that the two women function very differently within Huck's moral landscape: Miss Watson remains the stereotype of the spinster, speaking the dominant morality (and a bleak Calvinism) in a way that only alienates Huck, while the Widow Douglas has been softened from traditional stereotypes of widows to offer an image of moral responsibility and kindness (even to the extent of self-sacrifice) that Huck will emulate in his behavior with Jim. I would argue that the Widow represents the ethic of care, while Miss Watson offers up the voice of justice. As Gilligan reminds us, words like "responsibility" and "obligation" may occur in both moral languages with different meanings (1982, 173 and *passim*); individuals may speak the dominant language of justice to accomplish aims that are primarily care-oriented, for example. Both the widow's and Miss Watson's expression of moral issues correspond to the social role established for women through much of the nineteenth century, where whatever their preferred mode of morality, women framed their moral discussions within the language of the prevailing moral codes (much, one might imagine, like the girls who were able to provide Kohlberg with the moral logic he was expecting). The Widow Douglas seems to perform just such a binary role in her dealings with Huck; she speaks justice while practicing care.

⁹ In fact, Gilligan's research into urban youth also suggests the possibility of an additional moral logic: a language of necessity (Bardige and Ward 1988). In this novel in which Huck is the protagonist, Huck remains quite clearly the "subject" of moral development, for which Jim remains largely an "object." Otherwise, we might

expand this discussion into the language of necessity, which as a slave Jim must surely have mastered. His placating Huck's sense of morality may work into the often-noted possibility that Jim is manipulating Huck, tricking him into providing assistance to escape slavery (as he does by failing to tell Huck that Pap is dead, knowledge of which would eliminate Huck's need to travel down the river). It is interesting to note, however, that even functioning as little more than a sounding-board within a language of necessity, Jim depends upon a language of connection—not only does he help Huck maintain his sense of relationship with both the Widow and Pap, he also works to sustain the relationship between Huck and himself.

¹⁰ Derwin offers a useful corrective here in pointing out the self-congratulatory nature of Huck's memory of the friendship; Huck figures himself as Jim's savior, and remembers strictly "the pleasure Huck derives from being the center of Jim's affections and the recipient of his gratitude" (1993, 446). Similarly, Quirk reminds us "as for deciding to go to hell, we know from the very first page of the novel that [Huck] wasn't much interested in playing the harp anyway" (1994, 196). Yet my goal isn't to recanonize Huck's morality, but rather to suggest the ways in which his moral language differs from the one I suspect we as readers were expecting to hear.

¹¹ French makes a similar point about Huck's moral reasoning, using an Aristotelian model to clarify Huck's behavior. French describes Aristotle's concerns as embracing "the 'ultimate particulars'" of relationship (1998, 169), and so in that sense echoes what Gilligan finds implicit in an ethic of care. French himself argues that "the elitism that marks aspects of the Aristotelian ethical tradition" cannot fully account for so "quintessentially American" a book; Gilligan may offer us a way of getting at an ethics of relationship that does not depend upon elitism in any way.

¹² I find overly optimistic Jehlen's comment that "the political offensiveness of Jim's enslavement on the Phelps farm . . . must have made unpleasant reading at any time" (1995, 100). Besides evidence that Twain regularly read the sequence aloud for its humor, even contemporary scholars continue to defend the episode as comedic, or at least pleasurable to those retaining "the best features and truest perceptions of childhood," as Hill suggests (1991, 509). Hill claims that elements in the sequence "demonstrate beautifully the wide gulf between how old women and young boys view the natural world" (496), but if insensitivity to the pain of others is one of the "best features" of young boys, many adult readers might be just as glad to be classed with the old women.

¹³ I am indebted to Hill for pointing out the "sacred guarantee" of Tom's "*sure*" (1991, 502), but of course Tom already knows that Jim is free, making Tom's behavior more reprehensible.

¹⁴ See Derwin 1993 for a discussion of this very problem.

¹⁵ The question of abandoning relationship is taken up by Gilligan (1988) where she suggests that friction within the family unit will be met differently by boys and girls: boys tend to leave (either physically or emotionally), terminating the relationship, while girls engage in back-talk—in voicing their concerns—precisely to sustain the relationship. In this, if Huck and Jim have actually formed the family critics like Shulman (1985) and Wilson (1974) describe, Huck may indeed be asserting the "masculine" self critics have long claimed such a move to autonomy suggests—Huck

chooses the "exit" option rather than staying to face the complexities of the family relationship and thus to continue the narration. Within the ethic of care that has defined him, this is quite clearly a moral failure.

¹⁶ Gilligan frequently argues for just such an integration of moral voices, ending *In a Different Voice* by stressing that "these languages articulate with one another in critical ways. Just as the language of responsibilities [care] provides a weblike imagery of relationships to replace a hierarchical ordering that dissolves with the coming of equality, so the language of rights [justice] underlines the importance of including in the network of care not only the other but also the self" (1982, 173).

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