Huck's Struggle with Conscience

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On The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain
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From: Mark Twain, Bloom's Major Novelists.

One of the major thematic strands in Huckleberry Finn is Huck's struggle with his conscience and his decision "to go to hell" rather than to assist in returning Jim to servitude. The part played by these events in Mark Twain's castigation of a society both pious and proslavery has been emphasized in a general way. Yet the manner in which Huck's inner conflict dramatizes the specifically religious elements in that society has been little more than mentioned. A recent commentator suggests a parallel between the "language of the official culture" in which Huck's conscience addresses him and the language of "preachers and politicians." Few students of the novel have said even this much about the part religion plays in Huck's struggle and decision.

An intensive study of Huck's moments of moral crisis concerning Jim leads one to see that Huck, whatever else he may be, is in a number of important particulars a sinner struggling for conversion; it leads further to the suggestion that he is indeed "converted"—in reverse; he undergoes a "counter-conversion" to "wickedness" which is in part an ironic consequence of his religious training. In this paper a discussion of typical conversion patterns, of counter-conversion, and of Mark Twain's interest in changes of faith will be followed by an analysis of the climactic moments in Huck's battle with his conscience. Special emphasis will be laid on the religious aspects of that conflict. Attention will then be called to certain ironies, hitherto little noticed, that are revealed by this analysis.

Psychologists of religion have found that many conversion processes include the following elements:

1. A "sense of sin."
2. Attainment of inner unity, or "integration."
3. "An improved attitude toward others."
4. An inextricable mingling of conscious and unconscious mental operations. The unconscious self is manifested chiefly through habit-formation; the conscious self by the will.

It will be seen that Huck's change of view includes all of these elements in some degree. In addition, his conversion is typical in that it takes place during late childhood or early adolescence. Finally, it resembles a number of recorded conversions out of or away from a religious life—in short, it is a counter-conversion.

The expulsion of his brother Orion Clemens from the Presbyterian church in Keokuk, Iowa, for unorthodoxy may have sharpened Mark Twain's memories of his own early orientation. This expulsion took place in May, 1879, at a time when Mark Twain had probably composed the first eighteen chapters of Huckleberry Finn, including Huck's first crisis of conscience but not the second. And Mark Twain's interest in both conversion and counter-conversion, though under
different labels, cannot be doubted. As a young man he had made mild jokes of his own falling away from Presbyterian orthodoxy; furthermore, in a paper read before the "Monday Evening Club" of Hartford in February, 1883, about a year before the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*, he included a discussion, later rewritten for *What Is Man?*, that indicated a keen interest in both conversion and counter-conversion.

A person may be converted many times, and Huck is converted, or counter-converted, twice. In Chapter XVI he decides not to tell two white men that Jim is a runaway slave. In Chapter XXXI he writes a letter to Miss Watson which will inform her that Jim is being held by Mr. Phelps. However, he declares his willingness to go to hell and tears the letter up. In his willingness lies his permanent "conversion" into "unregeneracy."

Huck's changes of moral attitude are foreshadowed in several earlier passages. In the first chapter he is attracted by Miss Watson's description of "the bad place," but her account of heaven, "the good place," leaves him cold. In Chapter III Huck decides that there are "two Providences" and that he prefers the widow's, but as he sees the matter, Providence in any form is that of a slaveholding society and heaven belongs to the respectable. Because Huck is not respectable he finds it easy to believe later on that he is shut out from heaven. Foreshadowing of the ironic sort occurs in Chapter V when Pap Finn, having scolded Huck for going to school, says, "First you know you'll get religion too." Of course Huck already has "got religion" in the sense that he is a believer in heaven and hell, and he never ceases to believe in them or in slavery as an institution. But Huck's ultimate decision to turn against the Fugitive Slave Law would have been an offense to Pap Finn as well as to the proslavery churchgoers of the Mississippi valley.

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