

Sam Marshall

08 March 2021

Break Out the Boat, It's a Morality Trip Downriver:

Civilization, Morality, and Personal Growth in *Heart of Darkness* and *Huckleberry Finn*

Whether it's Narcissus or a dozing fisherman, a river might wake-up or destroy a person if they stare into it for too long. Beyond self-absorption or carelessness, it may be a person's quest for freedom or enlightenment that leads to their understanding or demise. In Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), both Huck and Marlow leave their respective societies to travel down a river in hopes of finding something. Huck yearns for freedom away from a rigid society, and Marlow hopes that he can find Kurtz, a beacon of civilization, deep in the Congolese wilderness. In Twain's novel, the river allows Huck and Jim the freedom to explore themselves without societal pressure. This journey helps them develop as people and deal with the problems they face on shore. *Heart of Darkness*, however, creates a journey without the idyllic freedom experienced in *Huckleberry Finn*. The cruelty of society follows Marlow into the rainforest jungle, and he must contend with challenges from the natives, and the destruction of Kurtz. Marlow cannot escape his society on this African river he travels. Instead, he must face its brutality, and its corrosive effects on his character.

Huck wants to escape the confining society introduced by Widow Douglas. He's forced to sleep in a bed, told to stop smoking and cursing, and urged to attend church and pray. Civilized society isn't something Huck was born into, it's something he must learn. This gives Huck a unique perspective into American middle class society in the 1840s, and what is considered "normal" and "decent".

The main forces trying to civilize Huck are embodied in the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Both of these women want Huck to become a gentleman, and go to church. In his essay, "Society and Conscience in *Huckleberry Finn*," Leo B. Levy argues that Huck is almost indoctrinated into society, before his father interrupts and takes him away. Ironically, in regards to the intentions of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, this is his gateway into the freedom of the river, once he escapes his father's violence:

Without the intervention of Pap, Huck apparently would have made the adjustment to school and village... The dirt, brutality, and degeneracy of the father become not only the means of Huck's departure from civilization; they remain abiding characteristics of the experiences that follow his plunge into the "freedom" that is antithetical to the social restraints he has cast off (Levy 384).

Huck's father acts as the violent catalyst for his escape to freedom. There is a stark contrast between Huck's barbaric father and the genteel Widow Douglas. Huck is caught between the two. He is not fully civilized, but he is also not fully feral. He has minimal societal expectations to conform to, and he isn't scared of Jim. Huck can essentially be himself on the river, without anyone to follow him. When Huck looks at the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson he sees rigidity and structure; although they seem kind and obviously care about him. Huck's father, however, offers life the way it used to be: lazy, free, and without rules, but this life also subjects Huck to his father's violence.

Ultimately, Huck cannot stand his father's brutality and he makes his escape. This pivotal moment shows Huck by himself, away from the influence of his father, and the Widow Douglas: "I knowed I was all right now. Nobody else would come a-hunting after me" (Twain 1300). On the river Huck can express himself for himself, and no one else. He didn't fit in with the Widow

Douglas, though he tried, and he doesn't fit in with his father. As Levy states, Huck's place in society was almost fixed before his father stole him and reminded him of what a wilder life might offer. Huck may have enjoyed it if his father wasn't so cruel. Now, Huck must navigate life by himself again. His sense of peace—"I knowed I was all right now"—highlights his freedom as he floats on the river. Huck can get away from the society that stifled him, and the negligent parent who brutalized him.

Huck escapes with Jim, a runaway slave, to Jackson Island. Since Huck faked his death, he is no longer part of society, and becomes an outcast once more. Jim, however, is a different outcast than Huck. Levy defines these differences and their potentials in relationship building:

Jim, as a slave, is a social outcast in a sense that Pap and Huck are not; the supreme test of Huck's humanity that Jim's situation provides accordingly has a primarily social meaning. Nothing in the novel seems more inevitable than the gradual envelopment of Huck and Jim in fellowship and trust—a bond at once so strong and yet so delicate (Levy 385).

The bond between Huck and Jim starts to develop as soon as they share their island retreat. Upon seeing Jim for the first time, Huck does not start scheming how to turn him in, but says: "I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome, now" (Twain 1302). Huck is more concerned with the fact that he has company than the fact that Jim broke the law and ran away. Huck is still scandalized that Jim ran away, but he is more preoccupied with the fact that he has a companion. They can be outcasts of the same society together, because each of them understands what it means. In his essay, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Tilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," Leo Marx uses the theories of T.S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling to inform his view of *Huckleberry Finn*, especially the

controversial ending of the novel. However, Marx does talk about the society from which Huck and Jim flee. According to Marx, Miss Watson

pronounces the polite lies of civilization that suffocate Huck's spirit. The freedom which Jim seeks, and which Huck and Jim temporarily enjoy aboard the raft, is accordingly freedom from everything for which Miss Watson stands. Indeed, the very intensity of the novel derives from the discordance between the aspirations of the fugitives and the respectable code for which she is a spokesman (Marx 427).

Miss Watson harps on both Huck and Jim, and it makes both of them worse for wear. Huck and Jim are free from Miss Watson—and society at large—on the river. They are free to make their own choices and develop their own ideas; “indeed, the very intensity of the novel derives from the discordance between the aspirations of the fugitives and the respectable code for which she is a spokesman” (Marx 427). The split from Miss Watson allows Huck and Jim the freedom to embrace life on the river. They can dictate their own schedule, and as they float down the river they begin to discover themselves as individuals outside the rigidity of Miss Watson and respectable Southern society. The river lets them feel the exhilarating current of freedom.

Despite missing their landing at Cairo, Huck and Jim eventually learn that Jim is a free man. In their essay, “*Huckleberry Finn* and The Time of The Evasion,” Richard and Rita Gollin analyze the ending episode of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the responses of several literary critics. Some critics remark that “the Phelps plantation episode is irrelevant to Huck's moral development, and indeed masks ‘Clemens’ failure to resolve the complex moral and political issues he raised’ in the novel” (Gollin 6). A more generous reading might suggest that while Twain did not fix the complex issues in the novel, America did not fix the complex problems of racism and discrimination. In any case, the ending does nothing for Huck’s moral character

development. All the humane insight he gained on the river washes away once he is among people with white Southern values. Jim and Huck have a delicate and complex relationship that gets erased during the Phelps farce. Huck goes along with Tom's harebrained scheme for an escape attempt, instead of easily freeing Jim: "Jim is free, as we eventually learn; but we see him subject to more arbitrary tyranny, and more helplessly dependent upon white good will, than when he was the docile and unquestioned property of Miss Watson" (Gollin 10). The scenes at the Phelps place harshly reinstate those very notions of misguided society that Jim and Huck fled in the first place. Jim is a runaway slave, and as such, the full brunt of an unkind society bears down on him. The Phelps, like Miss Watson, could be considered spokespeople for the rigid values of Southern society. Huck knows that this treatment of Jim is wrong, but goes along with Tom's plan to "bust him out." This final episode detracts from the moral development Huck experienced during the course of the novel.

Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* does not allow the characters to grow in the same way as Twain's story. Instead, Conrad's characters are trapped by a river that seems to flow with human cruelty. Unlike Huck, Marlow does not grow morally, but instead he suffers in this inescapable heart of darkness. In her essay, "Colonizers, Cannibals, and the Horror of Good Intentions in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Carola M. Kaplan dives into understanding Marlow's self, and the distinctions that Conrad makes in *Heart of Darkness*. Kaplan tries to examine Marlow's self by looking at how his world view is shaped by the Congo river he navigates, and how his rigid binary of thought continues to wash away as he ventures further into the jungle:

The gang of virtue is indistinguishable from the gang of greed, the illusions of women merely echo the illusions of men, and there is no clear distinction between lies and truth.

Most importantly, the fundamental difference between the Self and the Other disappears, and, with it, the unbridgeable gulf between men and women and between savage and civilized that sustains the power structure of western civilization (Kaplan 323).

The longer Marlow is in the wilderness of the Congo the more the structure of society breaks down. This happens for Huck and Jim on their respective journey, but for Marlow this is not enlightening; this is terrifying. Though his view of society was not elevated to begin with—calling a city a “whited sepulcher” (Conrad 9)—in the Congo none of that matters. As Kaplan highlights the arbitrary distinction between the Self and Other, we also find that “truth” and “lies” are arbitrary. There are no societal rules out in the Congo, no need for that kind of distinction. Without it, however, Marlow’s frame of mind starts to deteriorate: “the narrative stipulates that what it arbitrarily equates with darkness is in fact universal—an ineradicable core of evil in all human beings, whatever their culture of origin” (Kaplan 333). This realization happens for Marlow over the course of the journey, becoming fully manifest when he meets Kurtz. The manager of the Inner Station succumbed to his madness in the wilderness without the laws of European society to keep him in check. The one thing that keeps Marlow’s sanity is the thought of talking with Kurtz: “I flung one shoe overboard, and became aware that that was exactly what I have been looking forward—a talk with Kurtz ... of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk” (Conrad 48). Marlow’s mind conjures this ideal version of Kurtz represented by his voice. His way with words is described as “the pulsating stream of light, or the deceitful flow from the heart of an impenetrable darkness” (Conrad 48). Kurtz’s language, and Marlow’s imagined ideal of Kurtz is like a double edged sword. Marlow wants Kurtz to give him some refreshing sliver of European society in an enlightening conversation with the station manager, but all he finds upon arriving is

this emaciated husk of a broken man. As the boundaries between the self and the other vanish Marlow contemplates the similarities between him and the natives: “They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces, but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours— the thought of your remote kinship with this wide and passionate uproar” (Conrad 36-37). This kinship that Marlow feels with the natives trying to scare away their boat helps him on his journey. As he left European society behind he’s confronted with the Congolese natives, and the brutality they face at the hands of the Belgians. In her essay “The Ultimate Meaning of *Heart of Darkness*” Florence H. Ridley talks about the relationship between Kurtz and Marlow, analyzing different critics, and offering her own perspective. She states that

Both men are subjected to a moral test; by means of their reaction the resemblance and the basic difference between them are made clear. Forced by the wilderness to recognition of his kinship with primitive man, and granted the opportunity to gratify his primitive lusts to their absolute full, Kurtz succumbs completely. Forced to the same recognition, “what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar,” and granted something of the same opportunity, Marlow does precisely the opposite, does not succumb, does not “go ashore for a dance and a howl.” When he finds Kurtz fled away from the boat, gone to rejoin the native orgies, he feels a “moral shock . . . as if something altogether monstrous, intolerable to thought and odious to soul, had been thrust upon me unexpectedly.” The intensity of Marlow's revulsion in this scene may well be the result of recognizing the overwhelming pull of savagery—which could pull him into similar excesses—for in Kurtz's action he sees what is possible (Ridley 46).

Marlow undergoes a moral dilemma when faced with joining Kurtz in the heart of darkness. He ultimately denies that kinship with the passionate uproar, and clings to those European ideals, whose cruelty followed him to the Congo. But to see Kurtz—the supposed voice of reason, and keeper of Marlow’s sanity—embrace the wilderness, takes Marlow farther than he wants to admit. Kurtz succumbed to the wilderness, and so he is no longer the model of society. Instead, he crossed the line, joining the Other in that “wild and passionate uproar” (Conrad 37). Marlow is taken aback at seeing this dramatic example of “gone native.” Kurtz’s humanity is what held him together for the duration of the trip, and seeing this insane man rattles Marlow to his core. Kurtz shirked the rules of European society that Marlow brought back down the river.

Marlow’s conceived notion of Kurtz is shattered by the real man. Kurtz does not follow the rules of society Marlow cherishes. In his essay, “‘Self-Reliance’ in *Heart of Darkness*,” Daniel V. Fraustino examines the impact of Romantic era writers upon Conrad’s novel, focusing on Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance.” Fraustino makes the connection between “Self-Reliance” and *Heart of Darkness*’ in terms of their contrasting use of nature:

In the wilderness, Conrad does not find “reason and faith” as does Emerson, nor would Conrad agree with the tenets in “Self-Reliance” that the “universe” is “full of good” (II, 46), that an “Almighty effort” advances “on Chaos and the dark” (II, 47), or that “each of us represents” a “divine idea” (II, 47). Instead *Heart of Darkness* explicitly states that nature is “inscrutable,” “accursed” (95), and unchanged from “the night of first ages” (96); that man is at best “hollow at the core” (131), or worse, a “vast grave full of unspeakable secrets” (Faustino 138).

When Marlow finds Kurtz to be this strawman of his former self, the narrator does not know what to do. Kurtz is comforted by the surrounding wilderness, but Marlow only sees what

happens to men in a perceived wasteland—they turn hollow at the core (Conrad). This trip into the Congo did nothing for Marlow's sense of self and morality, except to make it worse. When greeted with a primordial world that looks untouched, by time but lacks the purity of Eden, all Marlow has to do is reflect on himself, on Kurtz, and on the world around him. The rules of European society defined Marlow, and he could not let go of them as Kurtz could. Marlow stared at this heart of darkness and realized that the “apparently ‘tranquil waterway’ of modern European history lead ‘into the heart of an immense darkness’ (158), located not only in the outposts of empire, but always already within the human breast” (Kaplan 333). Marlow's journey into this pristine wilderness is tainted by a darkness, he cannot escape it once he enters, and he does not have the pleasure of taking Kurtz back to European society since he dies before Marlow has the chance. Marlow doesn't even get his long sought-after conversation. He must contend with “the horror” (Conrad) of whatever Kurtz saw that Marlow did not.

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* both take characters down rivers to search for themselves, but the similarities end there. Huck builds a delicate, but complex bond with Jim, and finds himself outside of the expectations of Southern society. While Huck grows on the river, the Phelps episode detracts from his matured character, and he goes along with Tom's cruel plan to break Jim out. Twain did not provide resolution for Huck's character, but he shows how a thirteen-year-old boy can come to see the cruelties of the antebellum South. Huck matures on his trip down river. Marlow, however, is brutally confronted with the complexity of humanity, and the darkness that permeates the colonial empire. Huck and Jim free themselves from the shackles of their oppressive society, but Marlow takes his societal rules down the river with him. In the context of the Congo, these rules just bring a startling contrast that Marlow cannot accept. Once the narrator finds himself in front of the legendary

Kurtz, he hopes to engage him in an enlightening conversation. He hopes that Kurtz can bring a sliver of European humanity into this dense jungle. Instead, Marlow is confronted with what happens when a man of principle embraces the wild made wilder by European cruelty and conquest. Marlow does not get his conversation with Kurtz, only a harrowing first-hand account of the destruction of Western civilization played out in this African jungle untouched by time.

Works Cited

- Fraustino, Daniel V. "'Self-Reliance' in *Heart of Darkness*." *Conradiana*, Spring 1995, vol. 27, no. 1, pp.74-80. *JSTOR* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24634810>
- Gollin, Richard and Rita Gollin. "*Huckleberry Finn* and The Time of The Evasion." *Modern Language Studies*, Spring 1979, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 5-15. *JSTOR* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3194583>
- Kaplan, Carola M. "Colonizers, Cannibals, and the Horror of Good Intentions in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*." *Studies in Short Fiction*, Summer 1997, vol.34, no.3, pp. 323-333. *EBSCOhost*, <https://ezproxy.wou.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=2791865&site=ehost-live>
- Levy, Leo B. "Society and Conscience in *Huckleberry Finn*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Mar., 1964, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 383-391. *JSTOR* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932732>
- Marx, Leo. "Mr. Elot, Mr. Tilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*." *The American Scholar*, Autumn 1953, vol. 22, no. 4, pp. 423-440. *JSTOR* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41207689>
- Ridley, Florence H. "The Ultimate Meaning of *Heart of Darkness*." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Jun. 1963, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 43-53. *JSTOR* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2932333>