

Huckleberry Finn and Sister Carrie about Civilization, Money, Right, and Wrong

[Both begin by reading the book. **H** is at the first sentence of the book, and **C** is at the middle.

H is the first to look up, and begin conversation.]

H You must be Sister Carrie!

C [immediately surprised] Yes, and you are Huckleberry Finn?

H Well yeah, um no, actually my name's uh er, George.

C [looking at book and at Huck's clothes] Your accent and your clothes give you away.

[**H** quickly tucks in shirt--sits up straight.]

C I can tell [faces book toward **H** and points to it] that this is you. So how did you know who I was?

H Well, the very first page of this book here says that you have an alligator-skin satchel [**H** picks it up from the floor or somewhere else].

C [takes it from him and puts it back down] Yes, I still have it after all these years. I've always thought it was quite unique. [Still looking surprised at Huck's clothes] I see you must have taken the time to read my book--

H Well, I've only read the first page.

C I see.

H You're very rich, aren't you?

C Can you not tell?

H I guess so--your purse looks so expensive, and your clothes look expensive too.

C As a matter of fact, this is the latest style in Chicago where I've finally returned to live. This is what I have to wear. It is decent and fashionable--oh, I just thought--this necklace was twenty dollars, and these earrings here cost fifteen. [Turns to the side for a moment to reposition her necklace]

H Why do you care so much about your clothing? What's so important? Your clothes don't say anything about you.

C You must be the most disrespectful, ill-mannered person I have ever come across. You have six thousand dollars according to this book, and yet you wear rags. Why don't you buy some new rags to wear?

H Clothes don't matter to me. I only wear what I need. You paid all that money for that necklace? I "borrowed" this shirt for free from somebody who didn't need it.

C Civilized people wear civilized clothing, and that is the truth. If you cannot dress appropriately, you cannot be accepted by society.

H Well, all the people I come across accept me tell me good morning, good day, and good evening just fine, you know. Your society must be a lot different than mine. Nobody ever cares what I have on. Why should they? [**H** starts looking back down at the book, as if trying to read more.]

C Because people are supposed to care. [Reaches over and presses book flat on the table, or pushes it anywhere out of Huck's view] I'd like to save you some time in reading my book. Let me see--somewhere near the middle here [flips the book open and points to any page] I realized that when I moved to Chicago from Columbia City, my clothes were bland compared to those of higher-classed women. Sooner or later, you begin to notice that you look out of place.

H [stares at **C** after she makes that last statement, somewhat under his breath:] That's for sure. [Carrie looks stunned, but says nothing.]

H So what does all that have to do with me?

C I know that it isn't in my place to tell you this, but I think someone should. You look absolutely terrible, do you know that? Your clothes smell as if they haven't been washed in months! [Hold nose] My goodness! Do you have any sense of smell?

H Well--uh--you smell like a heap of dead flowers! [Carrie is nearly outraged, Huck pauses.] But everything you have on smells all starchy and brand new. Aren't you uncomfortable?

C Well, aren't you? [**C** happens to stare downwards at Huck's feet.] You're not even wearing shoes!

H Nope--good for my feet.

C Don't you have anything else to wear?

H Nope--only need these.

C If I may say!--you certainly are not a civilized boy.

H [looks puzzled for a moment] Civilized? You know, Miss Watson who takes care of me now, she always wants me to act civilized. She told me that a thousand hundred times, but I never wanted to make her angry by asking what being civilized was. What's it mean?

C I am civilization.

[Pause.]

H Oh. [Pause.] I thought it meant someone who was stuck up, too stylish and dignified, and everything else--that seems [speaking carefreely] kind of like you.

C [By this time, infuriated] I see no reason to continue this conversation any further! [Stands up to leave.]

H [quickly] Wait! Come back! [She stops.] I didn't mean all that. I didn't think I would upset you. I'm sorry. Let's talk. There's a lot more that I'd like to know about you, since I didn't get far in reading your book.

Tell me about your life. I've been trying to read this book [holds it up to her view], but you can tell I haven't gotten too far. I never paid attention when Miss Watson tried to teach me how to read, so-- [pause] now, she's sent me to school and I've only been there for a few days.

C Well, tell me why--

H Well. . .

C Well, come on! Hurry and say it, now.

H I--uh--I skipped most of it.

C [shakes her head sarcastically] I see. Well, for you to be civilized, you must first go to school. Skipping does not, and I repeat, it does not count as going to school. I think you must really need to understand that.

H I try to learn, but it's just too hard. There's a great many things I'd rather be doing than sitting back in that hard bottom seat for the whole morning. [**H** leans back as if getting tired or uncomfortable.] What's school like where you come from?

C I don't remember much about when I went to school--that was such a long time ago--but one thing I remember learning is manners toward someone who is speaking. [**H** immediately sits up and straightens himself in the seat. **C** looks pleased.] I also learned reading, writing, and arithmetic.

H Well, what would I need all that for? You told me yourself that you don't even remember what you were taught at school anyhow. I can count money, I can read signs, and I can write good letters when I have to.

C Never mind [dismayed]. What else now would you like to know about me?

H How much money do you have?

C At the moment now, I believe I'm making seventy-five dollars a week. I'm still an actress, but I couldn't get the quality of the job I once had when I lived in Chicago earlier. All my auditioners say that I've lost my characteristic spunk, as if I did not look as lively as before. [Pause.] Anyhow, I have enough money to do just about anything I want.

H Well I can do anything I want, but without money. It's all free.

C Exactly what can you do out here on the Mississippi River? How can you be happy without using money?

H All the fun things don't cost anything at all. My friend Tom Sawyer and I—we go swimming, hunting, rafting, and fishing all the time, all day long. We don't have to worry about anything at all.

C Everything that I want to do requires money. For example, I want to go shopping. I want to go to the theater. I want to socialize with members of upper-level society, and I want to go out to dinner. All these things that I want to do requires money. My conclusion is that [slowly] happiness depends on money.

H Oh. Well, how do you know you wouldn't be without money?

C Okay, to tell you about my miserable past, I have been without money several times in my life and allow me to tell you from personal experience--it is not pleasurable. Now I live in Chicago, but I have lived in a great many places. I was raised in Columbia City, Ohio, but I've been as far as Canada in my ventures.

H [childishly amazed] Canada?

C And it cost money. In Chicago, everything costs money. When I first moved to Chicago, I had to live at my sister Minnie's house because I had no money. I couldn't do anything but sit around the house like an old maid.

H That was bad.

C But in Columbia City, I could afford to live with less money. All I did was go to school and work around the house--Hmmm. . . [thinks for a moment] Life was easier there in Columbia City, now that I recall it better--it was so much less stressful.

H Well, if life was so much less stressful in Columbia City when you lived with less money, then how could you be happy with a lot of money in Chicago?

C I don't know, but I am happier with a lot of money, I think. When I moved to Chicago and had only a bit of money, life was difficult. I couldn't afford to pay rent and buy clothes at the same time, much less find something to eat.

H Well, out here where I live, I don't have to worry about rent. I'm satisfied with what I have on now, but if I lose my clothes, I can always borrow some from somebody else. And all the food around here is free, too--all you have to do is borrow it.

C That's stealing!

H Not if you need it! At least that's what my friend Tom Sawyer and my pap says.

C Listen to me. Huckleberry Finn, to be civilized, you can't steal anything. Making a living is a matter of hard work. I can tell you that money does not come easily, but when you have plenty of it, life is so much better.

H Well, the less money I have, the better my life gets. Before, I had to give my pap three dollars every time I saw him so he could get drunk and leave me alone. Then, if I didn't have to worry about how much money I have, I'd have more time to do other things.

C That is fine if you do not want to worry about money, but just do not steal. It is not proper.

H Okay. [Takes something and hides it out of view from both Carrie and the audience. Carrie looks as if she might say something.] I won't.

C Put it back! [Looking dismayed, since Huck does not put whatever he stole back where he found it.] You're hopeless, do you know that? You are a hopeless boy to talk to about the finer arts of living.

H Well [meekly], I try. A while ago before my pap came and took me and I left to free Jim and everything else--well, you know--I was living again with Miss Watson. All she ever did was tell me, "Huck, don't squirm, Huck, sit straight, Huck, mind your manners at the dinner table," and all the while I just couldn't understand whatever I was doing wrong.

C I can tell you exactly what it is.

H What?

C You aren't trying hard enough.

H I do! Every time someone tells me I'm doing something wrong, I try to figure out what it is. But I never know what it is I did wrong in the first place.

C So you have a problem with right and wrong?

H I don't know, I guess so.

C Okay. [Takes a deep breath, because this is going to be a long one. . .] Well, doing right means that you do what society interprets as proper. Doing wrong means that you do something that is improper and inappropriate, like stealing.

H Okay [now, **H** puts whatever he stole back wherever he found it], I understand that.

C Improper and inappropriate mean anything that an average, refined person like me wouldn't do. That means you must learn good table manners. . .

H I don't eat at the table.

C You must go to school. . .

H But I don't learn anything except how to deal with a sore behind.

C And [noticeably loudly], you must, absolutely must, spend some money to get yourself some new clothes!

H But I don't need any. These clothes fit just fine.

C [with an extremely tired expression:] You can't see yourself from another person's point of view, can you? No wonder you are constantly getting into trouble! For every statement I've said, you've had something or another to say against it!

H Well [slowly and innocently], it's the truth.

C [sighs] I suppose it is.

[Both pause for a moment.]

H [after looking at Carrie's expression, thinking of how he had offended her again and trying to make amends] So you say that to be civilized, you need money?

C Yes. Exactly. Money is the essence of all civilization.

H [smiles] Okay, so if you need money to be happy, and you need money to be civilized, then that means you have to be civilized to be happy.

C That's correct.

H Well, I'm not civilized, and I'm happy.

C You wouldn't know how to feel otherwise. But how can you be happy when you're always getting into trouble?

H Don't you get into trouble sometimes?

C Yes, but not as much as you do.

H Well, you're still happy, aren't you?

C Yes--[less decisively]--I think so.

H Well, I'm happy too. But I'd rather not offend people if I could help it. It really bothers me when I can't do anything right.

C Listen, Huck. There is no way you're going to do anything right if you're not civilized. If you're civilized, you can appreciate the value of understanding right and wrong. Right and wrong--that is what you're uncertain about, right?

H Wrong.

C So you're uncertain about wrong?

H Right.

C Okay [smiles--she realizes the word game], I know what you're doing. Just answer me straightforwardly.

H See, that's it right there! I don't know when I'm doing something wrong! I wasn't trying to play any games with you, I was just trying to tell the truth.

C [nods understandingly] Okay, so you can't tell when you're doing something wrong.

[**H** is about to speak, but doesn't--he shakes his head yes instead.]

C There--[she points]--you caught yourself just then, about to do something wrong. That's how you can tell when you're doing something right or if you're doing something wrong.

H Oh.

C [reminiscing] I'm just thinking about my past. I don't know, but remembering when I first left home at eighteen for Chicago, I think that most of the things I thought were right were actually wrong, well no--they were right. At the time they were right, and they must still be right, but something feels amiss about my life. I could be a lot happier.

H I thought you were already happy. You said yourself, you were civilized, had lots of money. . .

C Yes, but I've been so many places and done so many things, and yet I still do not feel right.

H But why, though? Since you first looked up from your book, you've said more words to me about my uncivilized manners than my pap, Miss Watson, or Tom Sawyer had ever done! I thought you were a mighty happy person.

C [looks at Huck's apparent innocence--something gives:] I don't know! I've always thought I was happy, but I wasn't happy when I married Hurstwood, I wasn't happy when I left my friend Drouet, I wasn't even happy when I moved to Chicago in the first place. I wasn't satisfied with the dresses I already

had so I bought more, and if I saw one other person with a prettier dress on than mine I had to look better, spend more money, go to more places, only because that was what everyone around me did! What about me! Everything that I did, that I thought would make me happy, was all wrong! It wasn't right! It was all wrong!

[H is silent until she finishes.]

H [just thinking] Oh! I have an idea. Why don't you try living like me for a while and see if it brings you happiness.

C What??

H Well, seeing as I've already tried your way of living and haven't liked it much, maybe you should try mine.

[Pause until Carrie pays attention.]

C Why would you think that I would be happy living on a raft in the wilderness?

H I'm not living on the raft anymore. If you had finished reading the book about me, you'd have noticed that Miss Watson's taking care of me again.

C I'm sorry, Huck, but why would I want to live out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do? Wouldn't I get bored?

H There's plenty to do. In fact, you could join our secret club and come with me and Tom Sawyer on adventures. I'm sure my friend Tom wouldn't worry about how old you were.

C Well, thanks.

H And if you miss living indoors, you could always go talk to Miss Watson--she's kind of civilized like you.

C How would I support myself?

H Well, if you really wanted to support yourself, you could act for the town, like the King and the Duke I once knew, except for that your acting would be really good and people would like it. And if you didn't want to support yourself, you can sit around all day and let me and Tom wait on you.

C [smiles] Do you, really, think I would be happier?

H Why not try it? If it doesn't work out, I'm sure you could get your old job back in Chicago again since you're such a good actress.

C Well, thanks, but. . . Hmmm. . .

H You'll never know if it will work if you don't try it. Who knows? You might actually be happier!

C [slowly] Well, let me think about it. -[Think]- The truth is, no matter what I did, who I knew, or how much money I had, I don't think I was ever truly happy in Chicago. My life in Chicago as an actress is so stressful. There are so many things to worry about there, but your life seems so much simpler than my own. Life could be easier.

H I'm sure it would be easier. [Pause.] So, are you going to try living out here in the country for a while? Tom Sawyer and I'll help build you your own raft to go floating down the Mississippi on.

[Now would be a good time to stand up if we're not already standing to get ready to run out the door.]

[Oh, and be sure we take our books and that one of us takes the alligator satchel before we leave.]

C [after a moment's thought:] Well, . . . yes! I would!

H [excited]--I agree with you! Oh look, I see Tom standing right over there by the river! [Points to the door, and shouts, and waves] Hey, Tom! Look who came!

[Huck leans forward a bit as if to hear Tom's reply, then looks at Carrie to make sure she's ready to go. Don't run yet.]

H Well, you heard Tom--let's get going! [Bow to the camera first, then run!]

The End

Performed by Aaron Bednar and Dahl Clark on the last day of school for the AP Language/Composition final exam, June 6th, 1997. Thank you.