

Suspension of the Ethical

Huckleberry Finn's internal struggle about saving Jim from slavery is a classic American literary example of a suspension of the ethical. Here is a relevant passage from the novel, midway through Chapter XVI, after Huck first starts out to turn Jim in, doesn't, then redirects some slave hunters away:

They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knowed very well I had done wrong, and I see it warn't no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don't get STARTED right when he's little ain't got no show--when the pinch comes there ain't nothing to back him up and keep him to his work, and so he gets beat. Then I thought a minute, and says to myself, hold on; s'pose you'd a done right and give Jim up, would you felt better than what you do now? No, says I, I'd feel bad--I'd feel just the same way I do now.

Here is the climactic passage in Chapter XXXI after Huck writes a letter telling Jim's owner Mrs. Watson where her runaway is:

I took it up, and held it [the letter betraying Jim] in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll GO to hell"--and tore it up.

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming.