

Huckleberry finn: self-reliance or self-contempt ?

Experience, Self Reliance



The hero in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in many ways embodies the self-reliant characteristics advocated by Ralph Waldo Emerson. Huckleberry Finn acts without consideration for his society's morality, and without concern for others' perception of him. However, contrary to Emersonian philosophy, Huck feels guilt over his actions that he believes are wrong in the eyes of society and has a very low opinion of himself; both traits that would certainly not be viewed by Emerson as "self-reliant." Huckleberry Finn is a foster child; brought up by a drunkard father and usually homeless, he is accustomed to dressing in rags and sleeping outside amongst animals. While this is the life with which he is comfortable, and does not enjoy leading a "civilized" life, he still believes that the latter is what is "regular and decent" (Twain 9). Huck thus accepts his place at the bottom rung of the social ladder. While he is happiest when free to do as he wishes, without the restrictions of church or school or parental guidance; he nevertheless recognizes his inferiority to those who adhere to such conventions. Specifically, he admires Tom Sawyer, an unworthy idol, and constantly praises Tom's intelligence, creativity, and even moral values. Huck Finn's self-degradation, and belief that his own preferred lifestyle is not what is "regular and decent" is inconsistent with the beliefs of Emerson, who demands that all men believe, "the only right is what is after my constitution, the only wrong what is against it" (Emerson 22). Huck's rearing by an impoverished and abusive father has left him with an ingrained sense of self-disdain that leads him to believe that he is wrong and that the moral values of civilization are correct. Although Huck recognizes the moral beliefs of society, he does not necessarily adhere to them. Throughout the novel,

Huck's actions show his selflessness. The most important example of this quality is his decision not to give up Jim. Although Huck has no qualms about the institution of slavery, and believes that he is stealing Miss Watson's property in allowing Jim to escape, he nevertheless remains faithful to his friend. Huck believes that what he is doing is wrong to the extent that he even writes a letter to Miss Watson, informing her of Jim's location.

Ultimately, however, Huck does not give up his friend; he tears up the letter exclaiming, " All right, then, I'll go to hell" (Twain 228). This action is evidence of Huck's placing his own deductions based on his own experience over the values of society, and it is certainly self-reliant. Huck is not deterred by thoughts of what others might think of him—indeed, he is already a social outcast. This trait is certainly one that Emerson would have praised; he claimed that a self-reliant individual is not concerned with " what the people think" (Emerson 23). However, Huck's lack of conviction in the rightness of his own actions is antithetical to self-reliance. Indeed Huck cannot believe that Tom Sawyer, a boy raised in a respectable family agrees to help him in freeing Jim; he tries to convince him otherwise. Huck says: " Here was a boy that was respectable, and well brung up; and had a character to lose...and yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody" (Twain 247-8). Huck thinks it acceptable that a low-class person like himself would deviate from social morals, but cannot accept that someone who was raised " sivilized" would do the same. Despite being raised on the fringe of civilized society, Huck has not been unaffected by its supposed morality. While he does not always adhere to social rules, he does

not necessarily question them, but is inclined to believe that he is in the wrong. Thus Huck's independent-mindedness is limited. He certainly cares for Jim, but nevertheless sees him as inherently inferior because of his race. When Huck tricks Jim into thinking that they were never separated in the fog, he regrets it when he sees that he hurt Jim's feelings but still he hesitates in apologizing, saying, " It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a n-ger" (Twain 98). While Huck is positioned in the lowest level of white society, he still sees himself as superior to Jim, a black slave. Huck's inability to see past racial boundaries, despite his friendship with Jim, demonstrates that he is unable to completely cast off cultural propriety. While Huckleberry Finn demonstrates selflessness, he is not a model of Emerson's philosophy of " self-reliance". Indeed, selflessness is not a component of self-reliance; Emerson claims, "" I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius calls me" (Emerson 22). Huck displays neither such selfishness nor such confidence in his own genius. Indeed, while his actions often stray from social norms, he does not think that he is in the right, but deems it acceptable for him to act " immorally' because of his feeling of inferiority to civilized people. While his indifference to people's perceptions of him is certainly a self-reliant trait, his self-contempt is not. Thus while Huck may be selfless, loyal, and kind-hearted, he is not self-reliant.