

Transcendentalism as perceived in the adventures of huckleberry finn

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In the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain illustrates the injustice and ignorance of the antebellum south through the eyes of a young boy named Huck and his journey with an escaped slave. Twains critiques Romantic theories of the time as an untrue and dangerous way to view society. Instead, Twains critique of southern society is primarily influenced by transcendentalist philosophies.

Through the character of Tom Sawyer, Twain reveals his distaste for Romantic philosophies and literature during the nineteenth century. Tom is an affluent boy who derives most of his knowledge out of pirate-books and robber-books (8). Toms inspiration from these books leads him to make an unnecessarily dangerous plan to free Jim from captivity, even when he knows that Jim is already legally free. Tom refuses Hucks much simpler plan because its too blame simple(233). Tom doesnt really care about freeing Jim, he wants to live out his whims of adventure and danger from the books he reads. Toms inspiration from Romantic novels leads to his dramatic and careless actions.

Twain uses Toms actions to show that the very idea of the adventure itself is skewed. Romantic scenarios like rivalries, murder, and risky rescues are only enjoyable and exciting within books. In reality, they are devastating to the people involved. The novel itself is, in fact, an adventure. Huck and Jim encounter a number of dramatic and seemingly unlikely scenarios, such as murder, Huck miraculously stumbling upon Toms aunt and uncles house, and Huck escaping a number of life-threatening experiences. One could argue, that due to these events, Twains novel is actually very Romantic. Twain,

however, does this on purpose. The events that occur in the novel do not appear as grand adventures with heroes and villains. Instead, Twain chooses to present the antebellum south as he sees it. As a place where foolish family rivalries turn deadly and people gather in mobs to carry out lynchings. Twain shows that to the victims of violence and ignorance, life is anything but an adventure. Twain depicts society as corrupt and cruel, whenever Huck and Jim step from the raft into society, they meet trouble.

As the novel develops, the audience begins to see Jim for who he is as a person—a humble and extremely tender man. However, when Huck and Jim step into society, Twain reminds his audience of the sharp contrast between who Jim is and how society sees him. When Huck lies to Toms' aunt by telling her that his raft crashed and killed a slave in the process, she expresses relief, as sometimes people do get hurt (221). Twain's depiction of Jim as a person, capable of complex thoughts and emotions, falls in line with his transcendentalist philosophies. Similar to Twain, transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau called for men to cease to hold slaves (Civil Disobedience). Huck and Jim also watch a man named Colonel Sherburn shoot and kill the town drunk for insulting him. A mob then marches up to Sherburn's house in the hopes of lynching him. Sherburn laughs at the mob and tells them that they are cowards incapable of lynching a man as long as it's daytime and [they're] not behind him (146). Sherburn delivers a scathing critique of southern society. Unfortunately, even he, cannot escape corruption and violence. In contrast to the evils of society, Twain depicts nature as a sanctuary for Huck and Jim. They are both outsiders, and they find solace in

nature and in each other's company. They love being outside in the cool and fresh breeze and in everything smiling in the sun (118).

Huck and Jim express joy in the wild delight [of] the presence of nature an emotion shared by Ralf Waldo Emerson, a notable transcendentalist (Nature). According to Emersons, nature is what separate[s] between him and vulgar things. This separation from society allows Huck to see that Jim is mighty good and cares as much for his people as white folks does for theirn (155). Twain argues that this isolation that Emerson describes, is the only way for Huck to perceive Jim in a true way (Nature). The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn are not so much an endorsement of transcendentalism, as they are a lens into which the audience sees society and human relationships. Twain presents society as being permeated by a kind of ruthless carelessness.