

Individualism



The main characters of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Color Purple* begin their stories as lonely and confined individuals battling between their own thought versus the pressures and expectations of society. They strive to be self-reliant and free but lack the means and confidence to find it within themselves. Huck and Celie ultimately undertake on adventures to gain their own individuality and discover themselves.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huckleberry Finn has great difficulty transitioning from an easily influenced person to being independent. In the beginning of the novel the widow and Miss Watson attempt to instill a “dogmatic and technically morality” in Huck while he is living with them (Boone 3). He is also a follower, a loyal friend and follower of Tom Sawyer, willing to follow him into almost all dangerous and adventurous situations because of Tom’s confidence. “Everybody was willing, we’ll start this band of robbers and call it Tom Sawyer’s gang” (Twain 9). In this gang, their business is “Nothing only robbery and murder” (Twain 11). Tom is assured that Huck, without confidence in himself at this point, wouldn’t make his own decisions and would follow whatever Tom said, even taking it to the extremes of robbery and murder. In the beginning, Huck is also demandingly treated by his father, whose relationship with Huck is almost like a slave or indentured servant. At one point in the novel, Huck’s own father tries to cheat and steal money from him claiming “all the trouble and all the anxiety and all the expense of raising Huck” (Twain 35). Huck’s father only wants the money in reality to buy alcohol and not care about life. These attempts fail and instead, Huck’s father treats Huck horribly, abusing and trapping him in his home. Huck doesn’t realize this major issue regarding his father at first,

but he eventually tries to get back at his father. " I didn't want to go to school much before, but I reckoned I'd go now to spite Pap" (Twain 31). Despite the stress of his father, Huck " lights out for the Territory ahead of the rest", and changes can be immediately seen (Bollinger 1). First, Huck makes the decision by himself to abandon his father and sail the river freely by himself without help. Huck feels special on the raft, " other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft doesn't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (Twain 155). This shows that Huck's mind has opened up and is now making his own opinions and decisions.

At this point, he has started to discover his place in the world. As Huck travels further with Jim, he gains respect for him and looks past the racial differences to form a great friendship. He has developed a moral " code" based off of the maintenance of friendship and not the hierarchy of values that has been forced upon him in society (Bollinger 1). Towards the end of the novel, Huck has gained enough mental strength and confidence in order to convince Tom to follow his own plan instead of the other way around. Huck convinces Tom to help steal Jim from slavery. He says " one thing was dead sure...Tom Sawyer was in earnest, and was actually going to help steal...out of slavery" (Twain 310). Then with the success of stealing Jim out of slavery, Huck builds onto this achievement and discovers everything inside of himself that has been built up inside of him for years while suppressed by his father and surrounding society. Huck's journey on the Mississippi River gives him the confidence to become independent and make decisions for himself. Although this trip may seem isolated and that Huck is hermetically sealed from others, he stays open to the people he encounters.

“ Only through this openness is Huck able to successfully navigate the muddy moral waters in which he finds himself” (Boone 2). His moral “ pinches” on his adventure, the situations where he has to decide the right thing to do, help him develop as a person and stand up for himself versus the pressures of society and his prior education (Bollinger 4). By the end of the novel, Huck is a boy “ courageous enough to stand against the moral conventions of his society, to risk Hell itself rather than conform to the “ civilizing process” (Bollinger 2).

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker addresses the dual horrors of racism and sexism through the character development of Celie who transforms from a poor girl lacking in self-confidence to a proud and powerful individual (“ Alice Walker”). Celie’s search for freedom and independence differs greatly from Huck’s. Huck is able to flee his familiar surroundings of society, but Celie is forced to remain in a horrible situation until much later into her life because she doesn’t realize she can do anything else, but she is determined to survive and overcome the oppression of her and other African-American women (Dixon 1). For most of her life, she simply believes that since she is a woman, abused and beaten by men since she was young, this is the only type of life she will live and doesn’t try to change it. This abuse causes Celie to retreat into a numb state where she doesn’t react to anything and “ drastically curtails her emotional life” (Dixon 4). She develops quietly, honing the ability to judge the type of person people are around her, being unable to do anything in her house where women are thought to be silent. She observes things like “ Harpo nearly big as his daddy. He strong in body but weak in will” (Walker 35). Celie successfully observes the people around her

but neglects to take the time to think about her own situation and how poorly she is treated in the household. She even says “ I don’t know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive” (Walker 26). Celie slowly begins to figure herself out when she becomes close friends with Shug Avery, who eventually becomes her lover and sees Harpo’s wife Sofia take to control her own life, not allowing any man to tell her what to do or say. Shug asks Celie the question of why she allows men to control her and her actions and take advantage of her. At this point in the novel, Celie surpasses her degrading circumstances and starts her transformation (“ Alice Walker”). She realizes the horrible life she has been living with her husband’s constant cruelty, from holding her sister’s letters from her to not actually being her actual father to having her children living in Africa (Walker 225). Because of this, Celie’s individuality begins to shine through. It takes Celie much longer than Huck to break through from societal expectations and pressure, but she eventually does. Celie is able to sustain herself with her skills and actually forgives her husband for what he has done to her in the past. Celie realizes at this stage that lasting hate is pointless and wastes too much time in the time she has left. Walker demonstrates in this novel that men’s violent, abusive and sadistic behavior intended to control women in certain situations, often can instead and ironically contribute to a women’s growth and individual development, much like Celie developing as an individual after many years of harsh treatment by men. In the end, Celie displays herself honestly to the world without regret because of the confidence she gained through the course of the novel, much like Huck’s individuality coming out during the course of his adventure down the river.

Through depictions of the main character's transformations, Alice Walker and Mark Twain demonstrate the struggle there is to show individuality and make independent decisions. The authors showed how unhappy the characters are when they didn't have the freedom to do what they wanted. Huck and Celie, who diversely represent individuals in America, eventually showed their true selves as they developed throughout the course of the novels.