The Concept of Self-Reliance in Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Juzbašić, Ana

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and German Language and Literature

Ana Juzbašić

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Filozofski fakultet Osijek

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Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti
Znanstveno polje: filologija
Znanstvena grana: anglistika

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Osijek, 2018.

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Abstract

American literature of the nineteenth century provided an abundance of literary icons. Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of the Transcendentalist movement, and novelist and satirist Mark Twain are undoubtedly among the most prominent representatives of the period. Both Emerson and Twain tried to portray what it really meant to be an American, and the unique identity they shaped in their texts has remained in American national consciousness to this day. Seemingly different – Emerson being a transcendentalist and Twain being a realist – the two authors shared similar principles regarding the position of an individual in society. The Transcendentalists put focus on non-conformity and *self-reliance*, i.e. they emphasized the primacy of the individual over the collective and the national. Mark Twain's texts delivered the same message, though with a pinch of irony. In his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) Twain used Emerson's transcendentalist concepts as a framework in shaping the micro universe of the main character, a thirteen-year-old orphan, Huckleberry Finn. Even though his protagonist in many ways demonstrates Emerson's concept of *self-reliance*, which is one the foundations of the American Dream, Twain also challenged this concept by showing its shortcomings. He introduced the character of a runaway slave to demonstrate that *self-reliance* can be achieved only in ideal conditions and that not everyone has the same rights when it comes to fulfilling the American Dream. This paper attempts to reveal both the merits and the downsides of the concept of *self-reliance* through a comparative reading of Emerson and Twain, as well as through an analysis of different types of characters from Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Its main aim is to juxtapose the two authors' view on the question: Can a man be both *self-reliant* and a part of society, or is social isolation a prerequisite for *self-reliance*?.

Keywords: Ralph Waldo Emerson, *self-reliance*, Transcendentalism, Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Introduction

Both Mark Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of *self-reliance* celebrate individualism. Twain provided a fictional model for the concept of *self-reliance* through the character of Huckleberry Finn. This paper analyzes how Mark Twain combines transcendentalist ideas and principles with his own narrative voice typical of American realism. Twain uses Emerson's general concept of individualism and puts it in action in the local color fiction – the setting being the Mississippi River and the language a vernacular rich in colloquialisms.

The first chapter of this paper explains the concept of *self-reliance* and describes the two major antipodes – the self-reliant individual, on the one hand, and society on the other. The second chapter demonstrates the connection between Mark Twain and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and shows in which ways they are the towering figures in the nineteenth-century American literary world and how they shaped Americans' sense of self. The third chapter discusses the clash between Huckleberry Finn, who embodies Emerson's boyhood, and "sivilization," as well as the clash between the character of Colonel Sherburn, who embodies Emerson's vision of a *true man*, and the *mob*. Chapter four discusses the differences between Huckleberry Finn's characterization and Emerson's concept of the *true man.*

1. The Concept of *Self-Reliance*

In many of his literary works, Emerson emphasized the importance of individual strength. One of his most important works are "Nature," *Society and Solitude*, "The American Scholar," and, of course, his essay "Self-Reliance."

For Emerson, a *self-reliant* individual is the one who thinks and acts independently, who instead of abiding by the laws of society creates and follows his/her own laws. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson provides numerous examples of *the true man*, including Socrates, Jesus, Luther, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, to show that even great men were misunderstood for having an independent mind. Being misunderstood can be interpreted as having new ideas ahead of one's time that oppose socially ingrained beliefs and concepts ("Self-Reliance" 58). To be misunderstood often precedes greatness, improvement, and growth. According to Emerson, to be self-reliant means to trust what is within you and not to identify with the crowd, which is the biggest enemy, as well as the biggest challenge for an individual. The crowd adores institutions, laws, and customs, and therefore it is a symbol of conformity ("Self-Reliance" 69). A *self-reliant* and *true man* should defy conformity:

> Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs. ("Self-Reliance" 52)

Besides conformity, consistency is also an obstacle which prevents an individual on the path of self-reliance. Emerson argues: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do" ("Self-Reliance" 57). Consistency and conformity drive us to follow the patterns of others, instead the ones of our own, out of fear to be denounced by others for our decisions and actions: "For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure" ("Self-Reliance" 56). *The true man* must learn how to ignore the opinions of the ones around him, just like children do it. Emerson argues that adults should be more like children – nonchalant and independent, not relying on anyone's opinion. Perhaps he uses children as an example because they are still close to nature and do not have the suffocating codes of society

ingrained in them. With this in mind, Emerson emphasizes the importance of nature and returning to the essential. In his essay "Nature," he argues: "To go into solitude, a man needs to retire as much from his chamber as from society" ("Nature" 9). This assertion could be interpreted in the following way: if a person wants to find their inner self, he/she must do that outside of his/her home, and especially outside the society.

In "Self-Reliance," Emerson demonstrates how nature itself is self-reliant: "The genesis and maturation of a planet, its poise and orbit, the bended tree recovering itself from the strong wind, the vital resources of every animal and vegetable, are demonstrations of the self-sufficing, and therefore self-relying soul" (67). The driving forces in nature are intellect, intuition, and instinct – the traits that, according to Emerson, society has lost:

> Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given, something is taken, Society acquires new arts, and loses old instincts. ("Self-Reliance" 77)

Emerson's assertion that society never advances is perhaps best shown in his parable on a New Zealander versus an educated man of the nineteenth century:

> What a contrast between the well-clad, reading, writing, thinking American, with a watch, a pencil, and a bill of exchange in his pocket, and the naked New Zealander, whose property is a club, a spear, a mat, and an undivided twentieth of a shed to sleep under! But compare the health of the two men, and you shall see that the white man has lost his aboriginal strength. If the traveller tell [sic] us truly, strike the savage with a broad axe, and in a day or two the flesh shall unite and heal as if you struck the blow into soft pitch, and the same blow shall send the white to his grave. ("Self-Reliance" 77)

Emerson implies that a civilized man has gotten comfortable, meaning that he has the technology to to aid him in life, so he has forgotten to do things on his own: "The civilized man has built a coach, but has lost the use of his feet. He is supported on crutches, but lacks so much support of muscle" ("Self-Reliance" 77).

Finally, an important component of *self-reliance*, according to Emerson, is originality. He emphasizes the importance of being original by saying: "The Scipionism of Scipio is

precisely that part he could not borrow" ("Self-Reliance" 76). This could be interpreted in the following way: the thing that differentiates a person from everyone else is exactly what makes an individual individual, and imitating is something that destroys individuality.

To conclude, by developing the concept of *self-reliance*, Emerson emphasizes the importance of trusting one's own instincts and believing in oneself instead of conforming to society. Therefore, Emerson advises us to look for answers in life within ourselves and nature.

2. Emerson and Twain: Inventors of American (Literary) Identity

As Mark Twain put it, "An Englishman is a person who does things because they have been done before. An American is a person who does things because they haven't been done before" (Harnsberger 7). This premise fits perfectly both to the rugged individualism represented by the character of Huckleberry Finn and to the concept of *self-reliance* introduced by Ralph Waldo Emerson. The same ideas are discussed in Emerson's speech "The American Scholar": "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame" (45). The message which Emerson wanted to put across with his speech, delivered to Phi Beta Kappa Society, is that American authors need to find their unique and distinctive voice instead of following the rules and patterns of European literature. The Transcendentalist movement, of which Emerson was the leader, promoted the same idea. According to Van Spanckeren, the Transcendentalists never issued a manifesto, therefore insisting on individual differences and pushing the radical individualism to the extreme. As a result, they "saw themselves as lonely explorers outside society and convention" (27).

Similarly, as Teresa Kieniewicz points out, Twain rejected "the established patterns and conventions of English literature that shaped American writing up to the Civil War," and "turned to his native land, seeking to explore its resources in the realm of subject matter and language" (39). Moreover, he used the nineteenth century realism not merely as a literary technique but also as a way of speaking the truth and exploiting worn-out conventions (Polley 48). Choosing the Mississippi River as a setting, and elevating it almost to the national symbol, along with using a vernacular filled with colloquialisms instead of standard English, Twain wanted to detach himself from the previous period of romanticism, which showed the old South as a place ruled by Southern gentlemen and beautiful women. Twain's detachment from the prevailing norms can also be seen in his shaping the characters in his novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in line with Emerson's concept of *self-reliance*.

Huckleberry's quest, be it the first time the reader meets the character in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, at the beginning of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when he is off to Jackson's island, or at the end of the novel, when he is headed for the Indian Territory, can be read as an example of radical individualism: *"*. . . Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will . . . he did not have to go to school or to church, or call any being a master or obey

anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose. . .” (*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* 67). The character of Huckleberry Finn is an Adamic hero, who “becomes a solitary figure, a misfit or outsider, and [embodies] the myth not only one of individualism but also of marginality” (García 61). Although taken to the extreme, this kind of individualism lies at the core of being an American. Huck manages to fulfill the role of a character typical of frontier days: “I can stop anywhere I want to. Jackson’s Island is good enough for me; I know that island pretty well, and nobody ever comes there. And then I can paddle over to town nights, and slink around and pick up things I want” (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 7). In other words, Huckleberry Finn is a character that completely embodies Emerson’s non-conformity by going against the grain and having his own set of morals.

Going against the grain is often connected with the idea of the American Dream. Emerson’s philosophy can easily be incorporated within the set of ideals that the American Dream represents, such as freedom and pursuing one’s own happiness. Emerson believed that if one relied on yourself, your talents and intuition, one would succeed as an individual in life. Izaguirre suggests that Emerson believed that the American Dream was attainable for a self-reliant person “because each individual was born with the resources for success within him or herself” (22).

On the one hand, Emerson’s optimistic belief lies at the core of the American Dream; on the other hand, however, it does not take into consideration the outside factors that shape one’s identity and steer one’s development. Mark Twain demonstrates this through a mixture of realism and satire, showing us that the concept of *self-reliance* can be hampered by certain social and cultural barriers that an individual cannot overcome. He reveals that Emerson’s motto “Thrust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string” (“Self-Reliance” 50) did not apply to non-white individuals living in antebellum South. Twain illustrates this through the character of a runaway slave Jim, pointing to the fact that equal opportunity and achieving success was not attainable for black people at the time. Twain, unlike Emerson, included the outside factors into the equation. As an African-American, Jim does not have any rights in a slavery system, let alone the freedom to follow the “thrust thyself” motto. It is easy for Huck to be self-reliant because he is not on the receiving end of racism in a system that harbors inequality. Twain’s portrayal of Jim thus begs the question: How can one be a self-reliant individual when that person is not even considered a person, but rather a property? Accordingly, Emerson’s principle may be correct in theory, but it often fails in practice. This

can also be seen through the symbolism of the raft in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The raft is in many ways a perfect bubble to which Emerson's principles apply. Jim has the right to be equal to Huck and self-reliant on the raft, but as soon as he comes back to the civilization, he, metaphorically speaking, transforms from being an individual and human into a slave and property.

3. *Self-Reliance* vs. "Sivilization"

In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson exemplifies the concept of individualism:

> A boy is in the parlour what the pit is in the playhouse; independent, irresponsible, looking out from his corner on such people and facts as pass by, he tries and sentences them on their merits, in the swift, summary way of boys, as good, bad, interesting, silly eloquent, troublesome. He cumbers himself never about consequences, about interests; he gives an independent, genuine verdict. ("Self-Reliance" 51)

Here Emerson talks about boyhood in general, but the reader can easily imagine the character of Huckleberry Finn fulfilling this role. Apart from being the embodiment of Emerson's *boyhood*, Huck serves as an amazing observer. According to Hoffman, "Huck fulfills a later nineteenth-century ideal as the detached observer who sees everything and lets the facts speak" (309). Twain used the fact that Huck is an orphan in the best possible way. Being an orphan means that Huck was not exposed to any institutions, be it family or society, therefore having an independent mind. Being an orphan also means that Huck is placed at the margins of society. This indicates that he belongs to the category of Adamic heroes, who run away from civilization because of the unbridgeable gap between society and them. Even at the beginning of the novel, Huck worships nature and solitude more than any benefit which society has to offer: "Living in a house and sleeping in a bed pulled on me pretty tight mostly, but before the cold weather I used to slide out and sleep in the woods sometimes, and so that was a rest to me" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 4). Finally, at the end of the novel, he chooses to permanently escape and refuses to get *sivilized.*

To make Huck's individualism stand out even more, Twain creates characters who are his antagonists. The most important character that serves as a contrast to Huck is his friend, Tom Sawyer. Tom Sawyer is the embodiment of society and rules, which Mark Twain despises so much. With his behavior, Tom Sawyer fulfills the role of being a boy, living in a make-believe world, and partaking in adventures. As Hoffman notes, "All of Tom's behavior follows either a social or literary model – which is exactly how society wants it. . . . Spontaneity is unpredictable, and neither society nor its representative Tom Sawyer, can tolerate the spontaneity of Huck" (310). This is especially notable in chapter 35, when Tom

talks about his so-called principles and wants to do everything by the book: "It don't make no difference how foolish it is, it's the right way—and it's the regular way. And there ain't no other way, that ever I heard of, and I've read all the books that gives any information about these things" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 35). This kind of behavior is condemned not only by Twain but also by Emerson, who states in "The American Scholar": *"*Books are written on it by thinkers, not by Man Thinking; by men of talent, that is, who start wrong, who set out from accepted dogmas, not from their own sight of principles" (26). It could be argued that Huck is in this case the Man Thinking, and Tom Sawyer the exact opposite. Also, worth mentioning is T.S. Eliot's statement that "we look at Tom as the smiling adult does: Huck we do not look at—we see the world through his eyes. The two boys are not merely different types; they were brought into existence by different processes" (34). This is the main reason why this novel cannot be looked at merely as a children's book because Huck is not a typical child: "Huck has not imagination, in the sense in which Tom has it: he has, instead, vision. He sees the real world; and he does not judge it—he allows it to judge itself" (Eliot 34). Another difference between the two boys is that Tom has the environment into which he fits, while Huck is a misfit. On the other hand, Huck is more powerful than the world surrounding him because he is more aware than any other person in it (Eliot 34).

Besides Tom Sawyer, who is Huck's peer, Twain also uses adults to show how rotten the society really is. For example, the Grangerfords represent everything that is wrong in the antebellum South. Although Huck says: "I hadn't seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 17), Twain seems to be ironical here. He shapes Grangerfords as a prototypical family of the antebellum South, living in a house with huge pillars and an enormous porch. Yet, all this wealth does not differentiate them much from the Frontier. Frank Baldanza argues that the Grangerfords' world "is a society in which high civilization only fitfully shines through the brutality and crudity of a raw living arrangement" (115). Underneath all of that aristocracy lies a blood feud, the absurdity of which is best represented when Buck Grangerford talks about it: ". . . but they don't know now what the row was about in the first place" (*The Adventures of Huckeberry Finn* 18). Diane Hope Polley remarks that those who represent the antebellum world seem to have a tendency towards self-destruction (32). The self-destruction of the Sheperdsons and Grangerfords stands in a stark contrast with Huck's prominent self-reliance. The blood feud is represented as one of the self-destructing institutions. Similarly, Emerson

points out that people easily "capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions" ("Self-Reliance" 53).

Alongside with blood feuds, slave-owning was also a part of everyday life in the South, which can be seen on the example of the character of Miss Watson. Even though she is a very pious Christian woman, Miss Watson owns slaves, believes that slavery is a just institution, and even decides to sell Jim to a plantation in a distant state, thus separating him from his family. Miss Watson's behavior demonstrates what Emerson described as housekeeping that is mendicant, reflecting the fact that everything, including our occupations, marriages, religion, the society has chosen for us ("Self-Reliance" 70). Just because Miss Watson does not lynch and shoot black people does not mean that she does not indirectly contribute to the slavery system. In contrast to Miss Watson, who devoutly follows the Southern moral code, Huck shows his non-conformity by not accepting other people's views or common customs:

> [M]oral or no moral; and as for me, I don't care shucks for the morality of it, no how. When I start in to steal a nigger, or a watermelon, or a Sunday-school book, I ain't no ways particular how it's done so it's done. What I want is my nigger; or what I want is my watermelon; or what I want is my Sunday-school book; and if a pick's the handiest thing, that's the thing I'm a-going to dig that nigger or that watermelon or that Sunday-school book out with; and I don't give a dead rat what the authorities thinks about it nuther. (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 36)

Yet, Twain also introduces characters who complement Huck's individualism. Just like Huck, who epitomizes Emerson's boyhood, Colonel Sherburn is an embodiment of Emerson's *true man*. Whereas Huck has individual antagonists, the character of Colonel Sherburn has a collective antagonist, i.e. the mob. He delivers a speech, criticizing the herd-like mentality of the townspeople, who come in front of his house, after he shot Boggs, the town's drunk. By doing so, Sherburn exposes the Southern mentality and proves that one self-reliant individual can withstand a mass of people. It is noticeable that Sherburn in many ways echoes Emerson's principles:

> The pitifullest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is—a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any man at the head of it is beneath pitifulness. Now the thing for you to do is to droop your tails and

> go home and crawl in a hole. If any real lynching's going to be done it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion; and when they come they'll bring their masks, and fetch a man along. (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 22)

To conclude, Mark Twain uses primarily Huckleberry Finn to show the virtues of a boy – he is independent and abides to none but his own laws. On the other hand, to portray a *true man* Twain uses the character of Colonel Sherburn, who even "in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" ("Self-Reliance" 55).

4. Is Huck a True *True Man*?

The previously mentioned statement from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" – "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude" (55) – may also be used as a filter for Huck's actions to demonstrate that Huck sometimes does not fit Emerson's concept of *self-reliance*. Although he spent a good portion of his childhood far away from the typical Southern antebellum family, and therefore maintained his raw instincts, he got exposed to the "Southern state of mind" to some extent. This can be noticed when he lets his Southern conscience overpower him: ". . . but something inside of me kept saying, 'There was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you'd a done it they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire'" (*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* 1). According to Hoffman, "Huck knows, without realizing the irony, that had he gone to Sunday School more often, he would have had the social code ingrained in him, with little possibility of his making a mistake or becoming involved in problems of conscience" (311). The master of socially ingrained code is definitely Tom, who, alongside with society's norms, affects Huck's decisions. As Hoffman suggests, "Huck is never completely his own man, and he never shakes the behavioral model of Tom Sawyer. The only difference on the raft is Tom's absence" (318). This poses a question: How much is Huck Finn resistant to the outside factors?. It appears that Huck does not have a problem doing the right thing as long as he is alone with Jim on the raft, which could be understood as a neutral territory, but as soon as he is confronted with some part of the Southern society, he encounters difficulties and finds himself in a moral dilemma.

However, it must be remarked that Huck is just a child, and a thirteen-year-old Tom Sawyer, with all his adventures, is an idol to him. Huck's behavior can be justified with Emerson's belief that a person's voyage is like "zigzag line of hundred tacks," and if you see the line from a sufficient distance that line "straightens itself to the average tendency" ("Self-Reliance" 59). In other words, Huck may be falling under the influence of Tom Sawyer and sometimes let his Southern conscience overpower him, but at his core he is a good person. However, Eliot makes an interesting point:

> For Huckleberry Finn, neither a tragic nor a happy ending would be suitable.

> No worldly success or social satisfaction, no domestic consummation would be worthy of him; a tragic end also would reduce him to the level of those whom we pity. Huck Finn must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere. His is not the independence of the typical or symbolic "American Pioneer," but the independence of the vagabond. (Eliot 40)

Likewise, Kieniewicz asserts that Twain was too well aware that the American society of his time could not have accommodated the ideal relation existing between Huck and Jim nor could it have accepted Huck's self-consciousness. The only solution was to send Huck "ahead of the rest" (40). The ending of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, thus, seems to suggest that the only way to preserve one's instincts, morality, and *self-reliance* is to remove oneself from society. Twain does the exact thing by sending Huck to explore the Territory because he knew that an individual, no matter how self-reliant he or she was, would have to make a certain amount of compromises in order to live in society. According to Hoffman, Twain has shown that society will almost always impose a certain role to an individual. Furthermore, Hoffman notices that Twain had two options when it comes to shaping the character of Huckleberry Finn, either to let him be destroyed by the civilization or to make him an ironic outcast (321). T.S. Eliot compares the character of Huck with the novel's dominant symbol – the Mississippi River:

> In a busy world, he represents the loafer; in an acquisitive and competitive world, he insists on living from hand to mouth. . . . He belongs neither to the Sunday School nor to the Reformatory. He has no beginning and no end. Hence, he can only disappear; and his disappearance can only be accomplished by bringing forward another performer to obscure the disappearance in a cloud of whimsicalities. Like Huckleberry Finn, the River itself has no beginning or end. In its beginning, it is not yet the River; in its end, it is no longer the River. What we call its headwaters is only a selection from among the innumerable sources which flow together to compose it. (Eliot 40)

To conclude, Huckleberry Finn definitely shows traits of a *self-reliant* individual. However, the fact that he sometimes falls under the influence of external factors makes him a bit ambiguous character. The question that poses itself is why does Huck fall under Tom's influence, and is he self-reliant just because of his origin, i.e. the lack of it. If he had been

raised in the same house as Tom, perhaps he would have been just like him. On the other hand, Huck's character can be seen as the epitome of those individuals who are just ahead of their time. Perhaps nineteenth-century society was not yet ready for Huckleberry Finn.

Conclusion

What Emerson offered through his theory of *self-reliance* and his opinions about society, nature, and an individual, Mark Twain has enlivened through his work of fiction. Twain provided a different outlook on community, class, and the position of the individual in the nineteenth century America. He wrote about what he knew, and he shaped his characters after real people he encountered in his daily life. Both Emerson and Twain were forming the American national consciousness through their literature – Emerson by establishing the concept of *self-reliance*, and Twain by writing about people standing on the margins of society and the institution that marked America forever, the institution of slavery. Through actions and traits of characters who differ from nineteenth-century Southern society, namely Huck and Colonel Sherburn, Twain presents the concept of Emerson's *boyhood* and *manhood*. Equally important is Jim's character, on whose example Twain shows that sometimes being a self-reliant man is not enough because of the outside factors, in this case the existence of slavery. Ultimately, Twain showed that the society of his time was not ready for an individual such as Huckleberry Finn, so he sent him *ahead of the rest*.

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