Transcendentalism vs. Civilization

Mark Twain, in his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, contrasts transcendentalism and civilization. In this novel he creates a river that is seen as the middle ground between society and nature, as well as the middle ground between what is right and wrong. Here there are no rules to govern, and no enslavement to the hypocrisy that is seen in society. In the beginning of chapter 19, Twain uses Huck’s description of life on the raft to show Huck’s true nature, as well as his freedom from the restraints of society while floating on the river. Critics further argue that on the river, catalysts for Huck’s freedom from society are presented in order to cement his removal from their agendas. The river and Jim are in stark contrast with the values of society. Elements that openly differ from society, on the river are the markings of time passing, the ideas of what home is, general rules of conduct, and the value of learning. Furthermore, these differences increase Huck’s ability to pilot his own life and create a new world for himself within the bounds of the river.

Bennett Kravitz, in his article "Reinventing The World And Reinventing The Self In Huck Finn," states that “[a] romantic quest like self-fashioning is only possible in an environment in which time stands still, much like Twain's portrayal of the Mississippi River in antebellum America” (9). When Huck is living with the widow in chapter 1, he says how his day went along with phrases like, “the widow rung a bell for supper,” or Miss Watson “worked me middling hard for about an hour” (2), measured by the clock in the town that goes “boom – boom – boom” (3). Yet, on the river, Huck measures time by the “sparks” in the windows of the houses along the shoreline as they flicker on or off, saying, “the first one that showed up again, meant morning was coming” (90). Otherwise, Huck and Jim looked to whether the sun was shining to know what time of day it was. By doing this, their time is not measured in hours. In fact, it is not
truly measured at all. Instead, their days are spent looking at when they can travel, and when they need to tie up their raft. Huck is further “disturbed by "Tom's civilized practice of ‘always seeing what time it is’” (Kravitz 9). This idea that time governs everything and is something that needs to be a part of their lives is furthermore instilled by society and is locked into the minds of its inhabitants. These restraints in time management that were in place in society are no longer relevant to the basic needs of Huck, and it frees him by allowing Huck to live by necessity.

Huck tells in chapter 19 that “there warn’t no home like a raft, after all” (88). He says this in comparison with his life with the widow. He states in chapter one, “it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways” (1). When Huck runs away, the river and the raft become the best home that he could have asked for. The walls that kept him from nature under the widow’s care are removed and allow Huck to be fully integrated into nature. N. S. Boone, in his article "Openness to contingency: Huckleberry Finn and the morality of phronesis," commented that “[o]nly through this openness is Huck able to successfully navigate the muddy moral waters in which he finds himself” (31.2). In the “cramped up” spaces of the widow Douglass’ home, it is impossible for Huck to gain an open-minded perspective of the world around him. Furthermore, he cannot “navigate,” as Boone put it, the moral grounds that have been integrated into him by society. Only through the open landscape of the river and the raft, can Huck gain an intellectual high ground above the morality of civilization.

On the river, Huck is able to escape from the rules placed on him by Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, and Aunt Sally. The Widow Douglas “put [Huck] in new clothes again, and [he] couldn’t do nothing but sweat and sweat, and feel all cramped up” (1). Yet, Huck comments that “other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and
easy and comfortable on a raft” (88). In fact, Huck and Jim “was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitos would let [them]” (90), showing that they are directly opposing the social cues and customs of society and trading them for life on the raft. Daniel L Wright, in his article "Flawed Communities and the Problem of Moral Choice in the Fiction of Mark Twain," commented that “like the uncomfortable clothes of its inhabitants, patterns of community do not fit humanity in this society either. The Christian rituals have become empty of meaning, trivializing the moral sense instead of informing it […]” (89). N.S. Boone further comments, saying that it is a “rather repressive environment in which Huck finds himself at the beginning of the novel. The widow and Miss Watson attempt to instill in Huck a dogmatic and technical morality and mythology” (31.2). This “technical morality” is the thing that I think Huck is fighting the most against, a cookie-cutter mold of life and how it should be. The freedom from the shackles of society allows him control, which has been stifled by the widow Douglass and Miss Watson. Only through his removal of the dogma proposed by the widow and Miss Watson, can Huck truly gain freedom and “self-fashion” his life.

Huck rejects the bonds of society’s influence and acknowledges the freedom that can be obtained through nature. Even further, Twain has created characters that obtain enlightenment on the river instead of in society. Instead of listening to Miss Watson drone on about the views that she has about religion and conduct, Huck “put[s] in the day, lazying around, listening to the stillness” on the river, and then at night discusses topics with Jim like “whether [stars] was made, or only just happened” (90). This brings back the idea of transcendentalism, which is a coming to nature in order to receive enlightenment. Huck gets “tiresome and lonesome” in his lectures from Miss Watson. However, we see Jim and him discussing enlightened subjects, and coming to
conclusions based on their own beliefs and ideas. Being in nature allows Huck freedom of mind as well as freedom of action.

Huck runs from the idea of conformity and social responsibility both at the beginning and end of the novel. He introduces this idea when he mentions, “It was rough living in the house all the time…and so when I couldn’t stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again, and was free and satisfied” (1). Even in the end, Huck claims, “But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she’s going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can’t stand it. I been there before” (220). Huck was able to live in a place where he didn’t have to be what Miss Watson or the widow wanted him to be, but got to live how he wanted. After seeing both sides of the situation, after seeing civilization and transcendentalism, he is unable to return to the life that he had with the widow at the start of this story. A life constrained by being “sivilized.”

Betina Entzminger, in her article titled "Come back to the Raft Ag'in, Ed Gentry,” looks into the argument that a prominent critic, Leslie Fiedler, posed in 1948 about Adventures of Huckleberry Finn being an example of the archetypal American experience. Within the article, Betina addresses the idea of isolation being causal for love in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, saying “In Huckleberry Finn, Jim represents not only an enslaved African American, but also a part of Huck that has heretofore been socially unacceptable and repressed” (106). We can see here that there is a necessity for the raft in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Without the raft, Jim would never be the catalyst for Huck that was needed in order to further eradicate the ideas instilled by society. In his “self-fashioning,” Huck is in need of Jim to break down the walls society created that are currently suppressing him.
Craig Taylor, in his article "Huck Finn, Moral Reasons and Sympathy," claims that Huck Finn should be revered as a hero based on his decision to help Jim despite his conscience. I disagree. I do not think that Huck is a hero for this reason. I believe that he does it because of his conscience. Furthermore, I think that Huck is a hero for his decision to be freed from society, to pilot his own life and decide what he will do according to the dictates of his own conscience. I further believe that Huck is allowed to act in this way, and be thought of as a kind of hero, because he is in the state of “in between” while he is floating down the river on his raft. Here, the political pressures and guidelines that would restrict his actions to befriend Jim and rescue Jim, do not confine him and he is free to act as he pleases. Matthew Hurt, in his article entitled "Twain's 'Adventures of Huckleberry Finn'," argues the relationship of Huck and Jim and the effects of Jim on Huck’s conscience. Furthermore, Hurt offers that Huck morally “backslides,” that his conscience is inconsistent at best. He argues in the article with another paper written by David L. Smith titled, “Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse,” concluding that “Smith[‘s] claims that[…] ‘[w]e already know that Huck's relationship to Jim has already invalidated for him such obtuse racial notions’ (106), [is] a claim that the counternarrative of moral backsliding renders dubious at best.” This is a defining feature of the novel. The river is a catalyst, along with Jim, for the moral development that Huck is in need of. In this state of in-between, the befriending of Jim allows distancing from the society that is mentally and physically stifling to Huck. The limitations presented within the boundaries of society are removed, and Huck is free in a transcendent environment.

In living on a raft with such differing values to that of society, Huck achieves his freedom. Tuire Valkeakari, in his critical response to Adventures of Huckleberry Finn entitled. "Huck, Twain, and the Freedman's Shackles: Struggling with Huckleberry Finn Today," states
that Twain “deconstructs” Huck’s ideas instilled by society as he and Jim travel down the river (28.2). In the “deconstruction” of these moral ties and beliefs, Huck can “self-fashion” his new world freed from society and all that that entails – measured time, rules, and practiced doctrine. Kravitz states that “everything that we have learned about Huck has come from his efforts at being the ‘author’ of his own identity”’ (9). This is extremely true. All that we know of Huck and his transformation comes from the desire to be free and pilot his own destiny and life, freed from the restraints of society and civilization. Huck is finally allowed to ignore the shackles that civilization creates, and accept nature’s true freedom. He indeed rebels against the societal norms that he has been surrounded by, and reverts back to a connection with nature in his travels with Jim. Huck describes what civility is in the first chapter of the novel with words and phrases like “dismal regular” (1), “do nothing but sweat and sweat” (1), “deadly dull” (2), and “tiresome and lonesome” (2). Society is everything that Huck is not. Proper, clean, organized, and practiced. Civilizing Huck is an attempt to change his nature. He, however, is nature personified. Huck is the river. Lively, dirty, without time restraints, and content. Huck belongs in nature, and, in nature, he obtains pure freedom, allowing him to be who he is and who he wants to be without forcing the conformity and bondage of society. Civilization, in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, is shown for all of its flaws, while nature is shown idyllically as a state of “in-between” – a place where Huck can be free.

Daniel S. Traber, in his article entitled "Hegemony and the Politics of Twain's Protagonist/Narrator Division in 'Huckleberry Finn'," addresses mainly the non-conformist individualism that Mark Twain seems to integrate into Adventures of Huckleberry Finn through Huckleberry Finn, and the Marxist interpretation that he believes it to be. However, Traber further argues that Twain does not allow Huck to be completely freed from the relationship that
he has to societal values and conditioning, saying that “Huck is restrained by his social-conditioning” and even that “Twain is pessimistic about the subject's ability to be entirely freed from this relations” to society (25). Although Huck is unable to completely disconnect himself from the society he lived in at first, he is able to in the end eliminate the morals that have been forced on him by the widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Unlike Traber, I believe that Huck is able to achieve a form of individualism, enabled by the influence of Jim and the setting of the raft as a middle-ground.

Huck addresses other’s desires to civilize him at the beginning and end of the book, while the entire middle of the book is how great nature is and how he simply wants to float the river where there are no rules and no nonsensical ideas or customs. By doing this, Huck shows that society always is there. People can have adventures, and sail as far away as they please, but society always waits for them on the shore that they will inevitably have to dock upon. Even freedom has its own restraints. Total freedom would be anarchy. The river can be seen as the middle ground in this novel, where there is no right or wrong, no rules to govern, and no enslavement to the hypocrisy that surrounds Huck in society. Yet, civilization means two different things to the travelers that are Huck and Jim. Both are trying to run from society for their lives. Jim figuratively, in that he desires the right to live his own life with his family in freedom, and Huck literally because his father wants his fortune. In either case, society does not quite fit their needs and enslaves them instead of freeing them. Both at the beginning and end of the novel, when Huck is starting to be pulled into civilization, he runs from the idea of conformity and social responsibility.
These Elements of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, though at first not seen, add a great deal to the meaning of the work as a whole. Huck is at first a one dimensional character, only wanting to seek after the “fun” things in life, seemingly uninterested in the ideas that society has to offer, and, furthermore, disrespectful to his elders (such as Miss Watson). We even see Huck as a character who is not fully aware of the situation that surrounds him. However, after further reading into Huck’s story, we see that his a round character who experiences conflict and is changed by it. Time after time we see the elements of an adventure novel come into play, but after closer inspection it is a much deeper novel than that of Tom Sawyer, simply because it addresses a societal issue that was prevalent at the time for Twain.

The ideas presented in the novel are offset by the main idea of the novel. That is, the idea that if we were to separate ourselves from the influence of society and allow ourselves to be ruled by our conscience, we would be all the better for it. This novel, argues the existence of right and wrong. It argues that there are things which society instills in us, that we don’t bother to question and we should. Twain illustrates the idea of being free from the shackles of society’s influence through Huck and his decision to ultimately befriend Jim and later rescue him from slavery.

Mark Twain risks open ridicule in his novel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through his constant contrast between transcendentalism and civilization. Huck experiences life on the run in this novel, trying to hide from his past and pursue a better future. Arguably, it can be seen that the commentary presented in this novel through the contrast of nature and society allows a reader to notice the shackles that civilization creates, while nature presents true freedom. Through
placement of civilization and detail of the character’s lives and desires, Twain rejects the restraints of society and acknowledges the freedom that can be obtained through nature.


