“I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knewed it”

Moral Dilemmas in Mark Twain’s
The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn
In the Light of R. W. Emerson’s
“Self-Reliance”
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1. Introduction

Huckleberry Finn has become one of those characters in literary history that most people tend to be familiar with, at least to some extent. Many are those who have followed the young boy and his friend in their adventure on the Mississippi River but even people who have not actually read Mark Twain’s book often know of it, or of its predecessor from 1876, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Huck, who appeared merely as Tom’s friend in the first novel, got a sequel of his own in 1884, i.e. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Gottesman and Krupat 214). In this novel Huck tells his own story which is the story of his adventures and friendship with the runaway slave Jim.

Apart from the special friendship between Huck and Jim, one of the pre-eminent themes in the book is that of personal morals in contrast to society’s general expectations of behavior and beliefs. Throughout the story Huck follows his conscience and acts according to his heart when forced to make difficult decisions; he does so although he is quite aware of the possible consequences. After considerable reflection and hesitation, Huck often dismisses the conventional and socially accepted option; instead, he does what the inmost depths of his heart tell him to do.

I find most fascinating the way in which Twain uses irony in order to bring forth social critique through Huck’s adventures and decisions. In effect, he has managed to create a personage in Huck who, by doing what he believes to be wrong, in fact does what most people probably would consider to be the “right thing”. Huck follows his conscience and therefore ends up acting quite differently to what authorities at that time considered as morally “right”. When he helps Jim, Huck goes against the late nineteenth-century southern American social norms and rules of society; for, in the slave states, a black man “was not a citizen” (Henry and Walker Bergström 330) at the time, but merely considered as property.

In analogy with how Huck listens to his conscience, the notion of self-reliance encourages the principle of trusting one’s own thoughts and moral instincts. This concept was established in the Transcendentalist essay *Self-Reliance* by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1841 and through repeated exhortations, the text encourages man to trust his own ability to make accurate judgments. Huck’s inclination to follow his conscience, as it is presented in the novel, seems to me to be in agreement with the concept that is brought forth in Emerson’s essay. Despite the fact that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Self-Reliance* in reality

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1 Mark Twain was one of the pseudonyms used by Samuel Langhorne Clemens in his writing (Gottesman and Krupat 212).
belong to two different genres – the novel is pure fiction whereas Emerson’s essay is based on philosophical arguments – there still may be a link between the two: It appears as if Twain’s young protagonist is actually following Emerson’s beliefs without being aware of it. Yet, although Huck as a character is unaware of this, it is not probable that Mark Twain himself was. As a matter of fact, he and Emerson were contemporaries, and they even met in person (Asselineau 217-18), so a certain influence is quite possible.

Due to the striking resemblance in philosophical reasoning between the dilemma Huck faces in the novel and the exhortations in *Self-Reliance*, I believe that a deeper investigation of the likeness is well-founded. However, the two works are indeed of different genres and Emerson was an author, an actual person, who strongly believed in the ideas he developed in the essay, whereas Huck is “merely” a fictional character in a novel. Although, one should not assume that the speaking voice in *Self-Reliance* is Emerson himself, a legitimate question still comes to mind: Can one really compare an author (or a persona) of an essay with a protagonist in a novel? Can one do so when the idea in the novel is engendered through irony and the idea in the essay is generated through serious philosophical reasoning? Well, no actually, one cannot. One cannot do so for Emerson and Huck are two completely different persons; one represents a real person, the other a fictitious one, and apart from their link to self-reliant characteristics, they do not seem to have any connection at all. Nevertheless, although this complication deserves to be mentioned, it will *not* affect this study in any way. I will not compare Emerson the author (or the persona in *Self-Reliance*) with Huck the character at all, but merely discuss the actual *notion* of self-reliance as represented through the juxtaposition of the two texts.

### 2. Aim and Approach

Hence, this essay will investigate whether or not Huck, although unaware of it, could be considered as an advocate of this particular Emersonian doctrine. Is there a possible link between Emerson’s ideal of the self-reliant man and Huck’s line of action that is brought forth through moral deliberation? Can Huck’s way of corresponding to a moral dilemma be linked to how Emerson views the issue? If one disregards the ethical problems that may or may not arise in this, the theoretical issues at stake in *Self-Reliance* can be said to be put in a “real” situation in Twain’s novel. Therefore, what I intend to do is to investigate whether or not Huck solves his own moral problems according to the way Emerson felt they *should* be
resolved. Thus, it is by studying certain passages and extracts in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in closer detail and by juxtaposing them to the ideas conveyed in *Self-Reliance* that I shall try to pin down, or rule out, the parallel in question.

When Huck faces difficult decisions in which his own feelings and instincts clash with the socially accepted and imposed ways to act, he struggles with the dilemma of whether or not he ought to obey his conscience or do what he has been brought up to believe is the right thing to do. These recurring moral dilemmas are the actual focus of the essay and I will approach the problem by looking deeper into textual evidence from the two texts. I shall also set about by studying secondary critical sources dealing with Huck’s moral decisions, as well as consulting articles on the concept of self-reliance. I will consider how others have regarded the issue and try to connect their results to my thesis. Hopefully, this method will shed some light on the matter and also present evidence in order to reach the goal at hand.

3. **Scope**

In this essay I will mention nothing concerning the debate on racism that tends to accompany *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, nor will I analyze any possible overall message conveyed by the text. Also, no aspect dealing with the works and ideas of other Transcendentalists will be treated (the possible connection one may draw to Thoreau’s “Civil Disobedience”, for example). In addition, I will not treat the friendship between Huck and Jim as a theme; only as a rationale and as a means of explication concerning the issue of Huck’s thinking process. The focus shall remain as narrow as hitherto described, without digression.

In addition to this, I feel it should be mentioned that whenever self-reliance as a concept is discussed it will be written normally, whereas Emerson’s *Self-Reliance* will be referred to in italics. Also, I will refer to the character Huckleberry Finn merely as Huck, in order to avoid any mix-up with the title of the novel, which will always be mentioned in italics: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

4. **Material**

In this essay, I will be referring to Penguin Popular Classics’ edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* published in 1994, and all references to *Self-Reliance*
originate in the essay that can be found in its entirety in the book *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* published by Modern Library College in 1950.

It may be of additional interest to the reader that many scholars have shown an interest in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* over the years, a fact which probably has to do with its worldwide success and the acknowledged distinction often associated with the novel. Some scholars have even linked the book to a Transcendalistical concept as far as nature is concerned, comparing Huck’s reverence of the Mississippi landscape and river to Emerson’s, Whitman’s and Thoreau’s praise of nature. In effect, Roger Asselineau has published the very interesting article “A Transcendentalist Poet Named Huckleberry Finn” in which he describes and gives textual evidence that “Twain, besides, was as much aware as any Transcendentalist of the presence of imponderable elements at the heart of things in nature” (218). Nature, as a common denominator between Mark Twain’s oeuvre and the Transcendentalist philosophers’ ideas, is also clearly demonstrated in Micheal Hobbs’ article “Mark Twain’s Infernal Transcendentalism: The Lake Episodes in Roughing It”. Hobbs compares “Twain’s encounters with lakes, each of which takes on a sort of transcendental quality similar to what we might find in Emerson or Thoreau” (14).

Despite a certain resemblance between some aspects in Twain’s way of writing and the Transcendental beliefs, I have failed to find an actual study dealing with the possible connection between a Twain novel (whether it be *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or another) and the notion of self-reliance. Previous research has of course been carried out concerning Huck’s decision-making dilemma – Leo Levy’s article “Society and Conscience in *Huckleberry Finn*”, to mention one of the most interesting ones – but never, to my knowledge, has the issue been juxtaposed to this specific Emersonian doctrine. In his article Levy argues that scholars have focused too much on the evident metaphors in the novel, and that there is also much social critique and symbolism to be found in, for example, “the role played by pap” (384). Levy looks deeper into the parts of the novel often considered as clear-cut symbols of society and morals. He also comments on the important decisions Huck has to make, a subject of major interest to my study.

Other articles dealing with the theme of morality, society and conscience in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are those written by Carol Freedman, James Kastely, and Bennett Kravitz. Freedman argues why Huck’s decision to help Jim is a “moral judgement, even though it is also a case of acting from compassion and love” (102), a fact which, she explains, actually contradicts Immanuel Kant’s theory “that any decision motivated by compassion or love is not a case of moral judgement” (102). Kastely, on the other hand,
considers the significance of the King and Duke episodes, and the relation these passages have with Huck’s crucial moments of moral dilemma, whereas Kravitz explains why he believes that the novel is Twain’s way of casting “great doubt on humanity’s ability to transcend the pettiness of human existence” (23).

Furthermore, critical articles also exist on Self-Reliance. For example, Cyrus Patell investigates the connection between Emerson’s ideas, particularly those brought forth in Self-Reliance, and the notion of individualism. In his article “Emersonian Strategies: Negative Liberty, Self-Reliance and Democratic Individuality”, numerous interesting points are conveyed concerning personal morals in contrast to society. In addition, the article sheds more light on the very ideas Emerson may have had in writing the essay, and Patell also discusses any potential ethical flaws it may contain.

Moreover, David Jacobson brings up fascinating interpretations of the essay in his article “Vision’s Imperative: ‘Self-Reliance’ and the Command to See Things As They Are”. Jacobson clarifies the contrasts between Emerson’s philosophy and that of Kant or Descartes, and he also links the concept of self-reliance itself with the intention “to see things as they are”, or as he puts it: “The act of self-reliance consists of a fundamental trust in one’s vision” (563).

Finally, another article that has dealt with the ideas in Emerson’s essay in a thought-provoking manner is “Emersonian Self-Reliance and Self-Deception Theory” by Kenneth Harris. He has chosen to look at the “selfishness and the selflessness that are both implicit in [Emerson’s] doctrine of self-reliance” (287).

Although other secondary sources will be used as well, it is by the aid of these articles in particular that I shall try to get to the heart of the problem. The articles have all been chosen due to their content of highly interesting viewpoints and theories, each concerning at least parts of the thesis in this paper. Even though no source deals with the actual question at issue – linking Huck’s moral decisions to the notion of self-reliance – they all shed additional light upon the different pieces in the very puzzle which is this essay; a puzzle I eventually hope to complete thanks to these sources.
5. Analysis

First of all, before the actual analysis, the ideas in *Self-Reliance* must be explained in order to present the reader with a means to understand the arguments and the descriptions given later on.

5.1. *Emerson and the Idea of Self-Reliance*

Ralph Waldo Emerson was a minister in Boston who in 1832 gave up his pulpit in order to teach his true beliefs through lectures and in writing. He is often referred to as the founder of Transcendentalism, a movement in which the members “were individualists who stressed intuition and freedom (as opposed to the reason and logic of the Enlightenment)” (Henry and Walker Bergström 308). Emerson had specific philosophical ways to consider what he thought of as a bond between nature, spirituality and human beings: “Emerson felt that people should transcend the idea that ‘the Supreme Being’ (or God), Nature and humanity are separate entities. Instead, we should understand that we are a part of a universal whole that includes all three” (Henry and Walker Bergström 308). His specific philosophical ideas soon made Ralph Waldo Emerson a quite well-known man in mid-nineteenth-century North America.

These original thoughts shortly gave birth to the notion of “universal sense”, a concept Emerson strongly exhorts in *Self-Reliance*. As far as this is concerned, the authors of *Text and Events: Cultural Narratives of Britain and the United States* explicitly explain the message conveyed in the essay: “To obey the laws of secular governments, Emerson points out, is not the same as doing what is morally right” (309). A. Henry and C. Walker Bergström also tell us that due to their strong conviction, the Transcendentalists were against capitalism, materialism and industrialisation and that they condemned slavery, perhaps mostly because the Constitution did not. In addition to this, we learn that Emerson, despite being one of the founders of the movement, was not militant or radical in any way and chose to stay in the shadows and lead his own comfortable life. Apparently, Henry David Thoreau was one of the Transcendentalists who actually practised what he preached, whereas Emerson may be considered as more of a provocative lecturer than an activist (Henry and Walker Bergström 309). Or, as Tremaine McDowell puts it in the foreword of *The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*: “Emerson was from the 1830’s to the Civil War the most urbane deviser of intellectual bombshells in the United States” (McDowell in Emerson x).
Evidently, one of these many bombshells was *Self-Reliance*. The reader is told at the very beginning of the essay what the next twenty-odd pages will reveal: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men – that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense” (Emerson 145). Throughout the essay, Emerson encourages the principle of trusting one’s own thoughts and moral instincts and he heartens man to trust his own ability to make right decisions. And in fact, this is where *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* comes to mind, for it is indeed a novel that deals with exactly that, doing what is morally “right” in spite of social conventions.

5.2. *Huck’s First Moral Dilemma*

The first episode to be investigated deeper is when Huck and Jim, in chapter sixteen, think their raft journey has finally brought them to the river town of Cairo. The civil obligation to report run-away slaves weighs heavily on Huck’s conscience: “It made me all over trembly and feverish […] I begun to get it through my head that he was most free – and who was to blame for it? *Why me*” (91). The notion that slaves are mere possessions of their owners has been instilled into his mind since birth; therefore, informing on Jim represents the only right and honest thing to do: “Conscience says to me, ‘What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one single word?’” (91). Therefore, Huck decides to paddle into Cairo beforehand and reveal Jim’s whereabouts to the townspeople. Yet, he cannot bring himself to betray his friend when two approaching men ask him about the people who occupy his raft: “I didn’t answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn’t come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn’t man enough – hadn’t the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says – ‘He’s white’” (93).

It seems to me that just as flagrant as Huck’s choice of action is in this passage, so is Emerson’s display of the idea of complying with one’s conscience in *Self-Reliance*: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages” (Emerson 145). Of course, I am well aware that some people would think of this “gleam of light” that Emerson speaks of merely as symbolizing “intellect”, since a light suddenly emerging within a person tends to be connected with the naissance of a bright idea. It is, after all, quite related to the standard image of a light bulb being switched on. Nonetheless, I argue that the “gleam of light”
referred to in *Self-Reliance* can also be interpreted as to correspond roughly to what traverses Huck’s mind as the moral decision has to be made. In this sense, Huck’s “gleam of light” would instead be a *feeling*, or an *intuition*, that starts to flow inside him, and as it reaches his conscience, this particular “light” actually *causes* the “weakening” he experiences. Emerson says that one should “learn to watch” one’s own “light” instead of that of “bards and sages”. Hence, one should learn to follow one’s own ideas, instead of listening to the beliefs and rules imposed on us by the authorities. Yet, self-reliance is very much a universal philosophy; therefore it is possible and even likely that Emerson would speak not only of *ideas* but of *feelings* and *intuitions* as well. In the end, it all comes down to personal interpretation, since Emerson gives little explanation for his statements in the essay. Personally, however, I have no doubt that the “gleam of light” that one ought to follow according to him, stands in fact for *all* types of individual thoughts and feelings.

So, the fact that Huck, almost in true self-reliant fashion, actually “watches” and then acts according to this “gleam of light” specific to him, seems to be the very reason why he cannot “brace up and out with it” and why he ends up lying to the two men. It is thus Huck’s own intuition “from within” that makes him disregard what he had decided to do. This whole passage dealing with Huck’s first moral dilemma is of major importance to the novel and according to Leo Levy, Twain may even have had a specific idea he wanted to expose through these crucial moments in the novel:

_Huck, after heroic struggles with the internalized form of society, his conscience, flowers as the perfectly natural being whose decency and humanity guide him through the circles of hell that make up the evils and terrors of organized society. This apparently is what Twain means […].* (388)

Although the important choice Huck makes is mostly thought of as a result of his moral sense tacitly telling him how to react, Carol Freedman is of the opinion that this inner voice of Huck’s in fact *is* “the internalized form of society” that Levy speaks of. She feels that Huck’s conscience mirrors the ideals of his childhood authorities and that “his choice […] does not express *his* sense that helping Jim is the immoral thing to do. It attests, rather, to his fear that he will be punished, and that fear traces to what he imagines they (Miss Watson or the Church) tell him” (103-104).

Further on in the same passage mentioned above, Levy claims that “what Huck violates is not conscience, but those demands of society that oppose it” (389). Hence, he
disagrees with Freedman who asserts that it is in fact “compassion [that] triumphs over conscience” (103). According to her, Huck’s conscience could be seen as the part of him that wants to do what he believes is “the right thing” – turn Jim over to the authorities – and as Freedman sees it, it is therefore the love he has for Jim that makes Huck tell a lie (103). The argument she brings forth in her article “The Morality of Huck Finn” is that although Huck knows Jim to be someone’s property, in reality the actual idea of him being merely an “object” clashes with their friendship: “[Huck] appears to be detecting an inconsistency in [his rules of moral salience] […] Friends that he loves like Jim cannot be property […] Jim is a person. And persons, like Jim ought not be treated as mere means – or slaves […] By detecting [this inconsistency] […] Huck realizes that turning Jim in is morally questionable” (107-8).

Apparently, certain textual evidence in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn underscores the point Freedman wants to make. For example, the very first time that Jim and Huck are in danger of being caught, Huck is actually far away talking to Mrs. Loftus who is telling him that her husband is going over to Jackson’s Island because “like as not that nigger’s hiding over there” (63). Huck could of course just let them hunt Jim down and go about his own business; instead, he panics and all he can think of is leaving Mrs. Loftus to get to Jim. When he finally does, his compassion for Jim becomes rather obvious: “Git up and hump yourself, Jim! There ain’t a minute to lose. They’re after us!” (68). Of course, they are only after Jim, but a bond has been established between them and Huck never considers leaving his friend behind.

Whether or not Huck finally decides to lie to the men out of love for Jim (Freedman) or because his conscience tells him to do so (Levy), either such decision would not be discordant with the ideas in Self-Reliance. On the contrary, Emerson acquiesces in using feelings as guidelines when it comes to following one’s intuition. In fact, he seems to be of the opinion that one should not bother with “men as do not belong to me and to whom I do not belong” (149) and that one should only care for those whom one considers close (see further below, 13). Interestingly, but somewhat beside the point, the passage that covers this in Self-Reliance tells us much about Emerson himself: “Never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off” (148). Nevertheless, as this study does not treat Emerson as a person at all, any further conclusion one might draw of his character shall be ignored and instead we continue with the actual issue at hand:
As I have already mentioned, Huck does conform to this “gleam of light […]” from within” that is spoken of in *Self-Reliance* since it represents his feeling or intuition of what is the “right” thing to do. Yet, although Huck actually ends up “following” this light, he can hardly be seen as a person who would fondly believe that his inner thoughts are more accurate than those “of bards and sages”. Huck himself believes strongly in the contemporary authorities and to him the outcome is in reality nothing but a proof of his “weakening” and lack of “spunk.” Hence, following his conscience – or his “compassion” as Freedman would put it – represents more of a craven act to him than a step in the correct, self-reliant path. He does not believe he has done what is right; on the contrary, Huck is convinced he has made the wrong choice. According to Cyrus Patell, “to be self-reliant is to trust in your own individuality, in the validity of your own ‘instincts’ and ‘intuitions’” (449), but Huck has absolutely no faith in the “validity” of his decision, although it has been made by personal “intuition”. His notion of “validity” actually resides elsewhere. He believes in the very conventions of society to which he is subdued, he just can’t bring himself to abide by them.

Despite the fact that Huck, by lying to the men, ironically enough *does* do what people today (and most likely some in the late nineteenth century as well) probably would consider as the “right thing”, a clear distinction with *Self-Reliance* still exists concerning how one should regard one’s proper inner thoughts: “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men” (Emerson 145). In this particular case it becomes rather clear that the Emersonian exhortations to rely on one’s own conscience, rather than on the urging of the thoughts of others, does not imply the slightest doubt about the suitability of doing so. Hence, a self-reliant man has no doubts about the accuracy of his decisions. Huck, on the other hand is absolutely certain that he has made the wrong choice. Therefore, although one can interpret Huck’s choice of action as if he was in fact “speaking his latent conviction,” it is rather obvious that he would not consider it to be the “universal sense”, nor the right thing to do.

This line of reasoning can be looked at from another angle as well. For instance, one must not forget that Huck feels extremely bad for having lied and that he is *convinced* he has done something terribly improper: “They went off and I got aboard the raft, feeling bad and low, because I knewed very well I had done wrong” (95). A true adherent to the self-reliant beliefs would not feel bad for having lied, as he would be convinced that the right path to take is always the one he chooses: “Another sort of false prayer are our regrets. Discontent is the want of self-reliance: it is infirmity of will” (Emerson 163). In this case, Huck’s feelings of guilt, even if they are dismissed later on, alienate him quite far from the Emersonian
philosophy. Besides, Huck is also completely unaware of the fact that, in doing what he believes to be a mistake, he is in reality either following his conscience (if one is to agree with Levy), or his feelings for Jim (if one chooses to go with Freedman’s argument concerning the issue). According to Huck, he merely takes the least painful way out of the situation: “What’s the use you learning to do right, when it’s troublesome to do right and ain’t no trouble doing wrong, and the wages is just the same” (95). So, in a way, he doesn’t follow any personal moral conviction, at least not at a conscious level, but only does what weighs least on his conscience at the time. Huck chooses what works best for him at that particular moment, since it is obvious to him that either option would be equally painful.

David Jacobson explains the near relation that exists between self-reliance and skepticism: “The vigor and life – the transcendent virtue – of self-reliance can […] be seen to consist […] of the activity of living skeptically in the world” (558). Indeed, Emerson’s essay clearly commands the reader to criticize all external information:

[...] you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after your own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (Emerson 150)

This extract not only hints at Emerson wishing for people to be critical of what they see and hear, but it is also a good example of the difference between the two works analyzed in this essay. To me, this extract clearly shows the romantic traits at times embedded in Emerson’s rhetorical way of writing. The idea of a man standing “in the midst of the crowd [who] keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” is exceedingly romantic and the phrase perfectly decorates the image of individuality that Emerson wanted to convey. With fancy words and phrases, he tries to lure the reader into adhering to his beliefs. We are, indeed, quite far from the world of fiction and the humoristic, ironic mode of storytelling in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Mark Twain does not speak directly to the reader in order to get a certain idea across. Huck himself is the narrator of his own adventures, and at no times can his way of recounting be mistaken for anything resembling the kind of persuasiveness that Self-Reliance is based on. Irony is the weapon in Twain’s novel, not rhetoric.

Nevertheless, despite the difference in recounting technique, the skepticism Emerson refers to is clearly of the same nature as the one Huck listens to when he “keeps the independence of solitude” and defies “those who think they know what [his duty is]”. In
Huck’s case, “those” are of course the puritan society and the “stern guardians of authority, Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas” (Levy 387). There seems to be clear evidence of a connection between how Emerson’s ideas exhort distrust and suspicion in authorities with how Huck’s actions in the novel manifest the very same critical thinking. A certain skepticism concerning slavery is after all embedded in Huck’s choice and therefore Twain manages to reach an Emersonian conclusion: Huck defies society and acts on his own directives and moral decisions. In addition to this resemblance as far as Twain and Emerson are concerned, it is also worth mentioning that, according to Roger Asselineau, Mark Twain, “unknown to himself […] was a crypto-Transcendentalist” (218). Although Asselineau made this statement while considering the connection between the relationship Twain’s novels have with nature with the Transcendentalist’s praise of the same, it still underscores a certain similarity in thought.

Furthermore, it is interesting to see how Huck manages to keep his childish innocence throughout the novel. He is completely unaware of the bigger questions that surround the way in which he makes his moral decisions. In the beginning of Self-Reliance, there is a small passage in which Emerson talks of “youth” by using the symbol of a young boy. He applies this metaphor when wanting to manifest his ideas that individuality is independent of age. This particular passage is discussed by Jacobson in his article “Vision's Imperative: 'Self-Reliance' and the Command to See Things as They Are”, when he considers Emerson’s fictitious boy and describes him in his own rather romantic way. This is intriguing because when reading it, one could easily mistake Jacobson and think that he is in fact talking about Huck: “The boy is neither a critic nor a believer, his back is turned on the conditions of criticism and belief, and he stands, like the skeptic, as an ‘innocent’ observer in the midst of the world” (560). Ironically, if one is to agree with Jacobson’s interpretation of Emerson’s boy, it would seem as if the protagonist in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn had a predecessor embedded within Self-Reliance.

5.3. Huck’s Second Moral Dilemma

Huck seems to advance little and to learn nothing from his first major conflict, and the episodes that occur between Huck’s first and second choices do not seem to connect these choices in any meaningful way. (Kastely 412)
James Kastely has looked deeper into the meaning of the in-between passages and I recommend his article “The Ethics of Self-Interest: Narrative Logic in Huckleberry Finn” for additional reading. Yet, since these episodes “do not develop Huck’s moral dilemma and are in fact a digression from it” (Kastely 413), we now move along to the second crucial passage of interest in this essay. It occurs at the end of the novel, in chapter thirty-one, when Huck again has to face the problem of whether or not he should tell on Jim. He has written a letter to Jim’s owner, Miss Watson, to inform her about the whereabouts of her absconded property. Yet once more, he cannot bring himself to denounce Jim by sending the letter:

I took it up and held it in my hand. I was trembling, because I’d got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knew it. I studied it a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:

“Alright, then, I’ll go to hell” – and tore it up.
It was awful thoughts, and awful words, but they was said. (208)

Huck realizes that in tearing up the letter he commits a dishonest act, but the friendship means far too much to him to break his given promise of loyalty to Jim. The act itself can be seen as a gesture of discarding “everything that he has accepted of the laws, prescriptions, and codes that govern society” (Levy 388). He is aware that this ultimate, life-time decision will probably have awful consequences, yet his conscience prefers “going to hell” than being obliged to live with the heavy burden of betrayal. In like manner, Emerson recounts a personal experience, which took place sometime during his youth, a discussion he once held with a man of the clergy:

On my saying, “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” my friend suggested – “But these impulses may be from below, not from above.” I replied, “They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.” No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. (Emerson 148)

These two extracts admittedly show a striking resemblance. The concept of giving precedence to personal morals and principles, rather than following external directives, is evident in both texts. Huck could very well be seen as a spokesperson of the Emersonian rhetorical guideline in this particular case, as he too is willing to “live from the Devil” if it is the price he must pay for being true to his friend. In their own ways, both extracts, respectively, associate the criterion of doing what one believes is right with the devil and
“impulses from below,” and still the two protagonists choose to adhere to their intuitions. Huck is indeed torn “betwixt two things” and has a difficult time deciding what to do. Yet according to Cyrus Patell, if we are to look at Huck’s situation through an Emersonian light, the dilemma itself can only make him stronger as an individual:

For Emerson, the fact that the individual exists in a contradictory subject position, pulled in different directions by a variety of belief systems, does not vitiate individualism; instead, it attests to the power of the individual, who can transmute contradiction into a unified subjectivity. (459)

In effect, Huck is trapped in a “contradictory subject position” each time he must make an important moral decision. He is torn between his own intuition and society’s imposed conventions, two “belief systems” naturally of major significance to him. Still, if we choose to agree with Patell’s interpretation of Emerson’s ideas concerning this matter, this uncertainty of which system one should go with will only empower the person subjected to it. However, although such a situation may make Huck stronger at an unconscious level, it seems rather unlikely that Huck would “transmute contradiction into a unified subjectivity”. There is nothing unified about his final decision at all; rather, he feels awful since he is convinced that his choice is the wrong one.

Moreover, Huck strongly believes that the decision to tear up the letter will result in his downfall and hardly regards it the way Emerson probably would; i.e. as a personal and moral victory: “It is only as a man puts off all foreign support and stands alone that I see him to be strong and to prevail […] He knows that power is inborn” (Emerson 169). The inborn power Emerson speaks of is of a quite different character than the one Huck considers he has been “brung up” to follow. The self-reliant force within is something very positive, whereas Huck regards his “inborn power” as an extremely negative and unfortunate gift to be born with. He is torn between his intuition and the authoritarian norms: “[…] the words wouldn’t come […] I knowed very well why they wouldn’t come. It was because my heart warn’t right; it was because I warn’t square; it was because I was playing double” (207). Furthermore, the fact that the decision to actually write the letter to Miss Watson in the first place is taken as Huck feels embarrassed about his actions is not in agreement with the self-reliance doctrine that “what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think” (Emerson 150). On the contrary, Huck worries deeply what people would think of him if they knew he had supported Jim in his escape: “It would get all around that Huck Finn helped a
When Huck then decides not to turn Jim over to the proper authorities – Miss Watson – he “[gives] priority to the dictates of his conscience over the law Church and State wanted to impose on him […] Like the Transcendentalists, he virtually [becomes] an abolitionist” (Asselineau 223). In effect, Huck does decide to help a runaway slave escape, and one of the reasons why this decision is made could be because he considers Jim to be “white inside” (265). In his article “Reinventing the World and Reinventing the Self”, Bennett Kravitz explains how the statement, often thought of as highly racist, actually undermines the prejudices against the slaves since it is used to describe Jim when he acts nobly and humanely towards other people. Due to the fact that the whites in the novel are Jim’s opposites as far as kindness and loyalty are concerned, the statement clearly shows Twain’s sense of irony: “In the novel the superiority of white men’s values is reduced to the absurd. White people engage in murder, mayhem, debauchery, thievery, and stupidity, so that ‘white inside’ is doubly ironic” (Kravitz 13). Hence, the novel seems to bring forth a certain praise of the goodness and consideration that may be considered by some as innate in some human beings – black as much as white (for Huck is after all white) – and a condemnation of the contemporary notions concerning slaves and former-slaves. When Tom gets shot in the end, Huck and Jim discuss what to do:

Well, den, dis is de way it look to me, Huck. Ef it wuz him dat ‘uz bein’ set free, en one er de boys wuz to git shot, would he say, ‘Go on en save me, nemmine ‘bout a doctor f’r to save dis one’? Is dat like Mars Tom Sawyer? Would he say dat? You bet he wouldn’t! Well, den, is Jim gwyne to say it? No, sah – I doan’ budge a step out’n dis place, ‘dout a doctor; not if it’s forty year!

I knowed he was white inside, and I reckoned he’d say what he did say – so it was all right now, and I told Tom I was agoing for a doctor. (264-5)

This reverence for humane traits so strongly brought forth by Twain does not harmonize well with the ideas in Self-Reliance. Emerson apparently felt that “the self has an a priori existence independent of society” (Patell 450) and it would seem that, in some ways, he was not a humane person at all, despite being an abolitionist. Indeed, Emerson’s philosophy is quite selfish and at times even inhumane:
Then again, do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor? I tell thee, thou foolish philanthropist, that I grudge the dollar, the dime, the cent I give to such men [...] your miscellaneous popular charities; the education at college of fools; [...] alms to sots [...] though I confess with shame I sometimes succumb and give a dollar, it is a wicked dollar, which by and by I shall have the manhood to withhold.

(Emerson 149)

Evidently, this passage, which reveals that “self-control, or self-reliance, would in this case mean adopting at least apparently inhumane feelings and actions (withholding sympathy and charity)” (Harris 292), shows a different ideal than the benign ethics praised in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. One of the reasons for this grand difference may be because Emerson apparently believed quite strongly in white male supremacy: “Despite his abolitionist sentiments and his public opposition to Indian Removal, Emerson cannot think of other races [than the white one] as capable of the kind of self-reliance for which he calls” (Patell 462). Nonetheless, whatever the reason, a tangible dissimilarity between the goodness praised in the novel and the selfishness expressed in the essay is evident.

Ironically enough though, Self-Reliance is grounded in the idea of always relying on the ultimate goodness within: “Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it” (Emerson 148). Hence, Emerson believes that the ultimate truth can always be found within (even if this goodness in his case is exceedingly selfish and selective); hence, a person should not “[look] for good out of him or elsewhere” (169).

During both moral dilemmas, Huck, on the other hand, is convinced that he is a wicked boy who will never stop being sinful and immoral: “And I see it warn’t no use for me to try to learn to do right; a body that don’t get started right when he’s little, ain’t got no show” (95). Huck destroys the letter he has written to Miss Watson because he knows that sending it would make him feel bad. Hence, he may as well destroy it, surrender and conform to the wickedness within; vileness from which, in any case, he could never escape: “I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it [...] and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog” (208-9).

Throughout his essay, Emerson repetitively refers to a general and ultimate principle, on which one should rely at all times. Still, the last written words of the work could very well summon up its general message: “Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.
Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles” (Emerson 169). But when something troubles Huck, he instinctively tries to find the best way to calm his inner anxiety and his instilled expectations of behavior are in constant conflict with the way he finally decides to act. Fortunately, “moral decision independent of the workings of conscience is possible” (Levy 390) and therefore, the outcome could definitely be regarded as a victory of Huck’s own principles, yet all the same a failure of the ones he wishes to live up to. Twain shows this ambiguity through irony: “Now I was feeling pretty comfortable all down one side, and pretty uncomfortable all up the other” (217). As his conscience fights a symbolic battle of survival, Huck is indeed the only one who is able to restore peace within it. In other words, the “triumph of principles” either is, or is not, concordant in *Self-Reliance* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as this aspect depends entirely on personal interpretation.

6. Conclusion

It seems to me that by looking at Huck’s inner moral battlefield through the notion of self-reliance, a new way in which to consider these very dilemmas is introduced. We are presented with an idea that gives philosophical ground to what goes on inside the boy’s conscience. As far as Emerson’s doctrine is concerned, it definitely appears to be rather clear-cut as he describes in detail how one should react in certain situations. He basically presents us with a distinct guideline to follow. Still, self-reliance is a theoretical ideal and as Huck is placed in similar situations as those mentioned in the essay, “theory” can be said to meet “reality”. However, the fact that Emerson’s beliefs are transposed into “real” situations is of course a rather controversial statement. Evidently, the circumstances are nothing but pure fiction since *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a novel, quite a different genre from the essay. In addition to this, the mood in *Self-Reliance* is *rhetorical*, and at times also rather romanticized; whereas Mark Twain’s major tools in bringing forth his fictive story (and a tangible social critique) are humour and irony. In this essay, I have chosen to disregard these problems in applying Emersonian philosophy to Huck’s moral dilemmas. By doing so, I may have made more than one reader frown with disapproval, but more importantly, I have satisfied my personal curiosity and interest.

So where has this journey taken me? Well, I strongly feel that through Huck’s emotional experience in the situations treated here, it becomes evident that the philosophy Emerson declares one should live up to is not so easy to comply with in practice. In “reality”
problems may occur that Emerson completely seems to disregard; problems related to human feelings and emotions. After all, it is rather difficult for a person to stay entirely unaffected by social norms and conventions. Due to this fact, if Huck were the self-reliant boy Emerson “foresees” in the essay, these doubts of his would never present themselves. He would immediately feel within himself what decision is the correct one and stick with that. He would not change his mind and never would he feel bad about having made the “wrong” choice. Whatever Huck decided would automatically be the accurate thing to do, despite the ideas others might try to indoctrinate him with.

Obviously, this is not the case at all. In effect, when regarding Huck’s moral decisions through the notion of self-reliance, there seems to be a rather obvious resemblance at first. After all, Huck does follow his conscience just the way the Emersonian philosophy exhorts man to do and therefore there is definitely a link between Emerson’s ideal of the self-reliant man and Huck’s line of action. Often, Huck’s reasoning even seems to be taken out of the essay itself. Yet, it appears to me that this façade can easily be penetrated and broken down if one takes the comparison a step further and the actual reason behind Huck’s decisions is analyzed. It seems to be rather clear that Huck cannot be considered an advocate of the self-reliance doctrine due to the simple fact that although the actions themselves may be of the same nature as Emerson’s principles, the reasons and feelings behind them are not. Hence, even though Huck reaches an Emersonian result by going against the rules and norms of society, he does not resolve the problems the way a self-reliant person should. The result may be the same, yet Huck does not act in line with the guidelines in Self-Reliance. In fact, although Huck can be said to rely on his emotions when forced to make these difficult decisions, he never relies on them in a “universal sense”, nor does he ever believe that his final choice is the “correct” one.

Therefore, to conclude my argument, a certain parallel between Huck’s line of reasoning and Emerson’s philosophy certainly exists, although it is not strong enough to make Huck a self-reliant character in the Emersonian sense. By pinning down this connection, I have discovered many thought-provoking aspects in which to consider the novel and the study has given me a glimpse of what the self-reliance theory may actually amount to in a “real” situation. As in Huck’s case, the moral dilemmas can at times even “overpower” the philosophy, when personal morals and feelings clash with the way the theoretical doctrine encourages one to act. Therefore, although the journey has been somewhat controversial, it has been extremely interesting and, I must confess, highly illuminating.
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