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Civilization versus Freedom

As with most books, *Huck Finn* has many themes developed around a central plot to create a story. In this case it is the story of a young child, Huck, and an escaped slave, Jim. It is about their ethical, moral, and character development during a journey down the Mississippi River that brings them unto many conflicts with greater society. What both Huck and Jim seek is freedom, and this freedom is sharply contrasted with the existing civilization along the great river. If Civilization versus Freedom is the overall theme of the book, then it is illustrated in many subjective ways throughout the novel, for example Tom's romanticism versus Huck's realism.

The Romantic literary movement began in the late eighteenth century and prospered into the nineteenth century. Described as a revolt against the rationalism that had defined the Neo-Classical movement (dominate during the seventeenth and early eighteenth century), Romanticism placed heavy emphasis on imagination, emotion, and sensibility. Heroic feats, dangerous adventures, and inflated prose marked the resulting literature, which exalted the senses and emotion over intellect and reason.

Representing the Romantic movement, which happened by the late 1870s, Tom pulls the logical Huck into his big schemes and adventures. When all the boys come together at the beginning of the novel to create a band of robbers, Tom tells the gang that if anyone spills their secrets, the boy and his entire family will be killed.

The exaggerated purpose of the gang is very comical by itself. The gang succeeds in raiding a Sunday school picnic party. The more Tom tries to convince Huck and the rest of the boys that they are stealing jewelry from Arabs and Spaniards, the funnier and the more comical the situation of the relationship between Huck and Tom becomes. After all the boys in the group manage to steal turnips and Tom labels them as jewelry, Huck finally decides to resign because he could see no profit in it.

Because Huck is characterized by realism, he finally decides that the so called adventures of Tom Sawyer are nothing but a bunch of lies. Huck cannot see the purpose and aim behind Tom's reasoning and imagination.

The imagination of Tom symbolizes also the constructed idealism of civilization, and its contrast to Jim's right to freedom from slavery is all the more evident towards the end of the text. In this manner, the wrongful belief that nineteenth-century American society, especially in the south, had overcome its racial prejudice and hatred is as ludicrous as Tom's extravagant and unrealistic plan to save the slave, Jim, from the Phelps farm.

On the contrary, Huck questions the validity and the degree of reality of the society around him, including its religious teachings and social laws. But, because Huck believes that Tom's education and upbringing make his judgment sound, correct and reliable, Huck feels that he is destined for hell for all his wrongful decisions.

The contrast between Huck's realism and Tom's romanticism is believed to be a condemnation on Mark Twain's part, of a society that was still divided, incoherent and unequal, without unified freedom, even after the Emancipation Proclamation.