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An Analysis of Ben Franklin’s as American Adam Figure

The American character has been consistently represented throughout American history as well as in American literature. R.W.B Lewis develops and discusses three central traits of an American figure within *The American Adam.* These same characteristics can be seen within Benjamin Franklin’s Autobiography. By exploring the scenes and experiences in *The Autobiography* the foremost American traits such as fundamental innocence, self-reliance, and a disregard of the past can be viewed.

In describing the key trait of fundamental innocence, Lewis states, “his moral position was prior to experience, and his very newness he was fundamentally innocent.” (5). This virtuous nature of Americans is re-illustrated in Franklin’s autobiography as seen when he is discussing a loan that he provided to a friend who, unfortunately for Franklin, has yet to be repaid. Franklin discusses this incident noting, “This made a Breach between us, and when he return’d again to London, he let me know he thought I had cancel’d all the Obligations he had been under to me. So I found I was never to expect his Repying me what I lent to him or advanc’d for him” (276). Franklin’s profound innocence comes through, as he believes that his friend would, in fact, reimburse him, however, to his shock and dismay this is not the case.

Likewise, Franklin’s inherent innocence and purity can be seen when looking at his experience at Newport where he met two young women. Although it initially appeared that the women were amicable characters, this was quickly shown to untrue. A “sensible Matron-like Quaker-Woman with her Attendants” counsels Franklin and warns,

“Young Man, I am concern’d for thee, as thou has no Friend with thee, and seems not to know much of the World, or of the Snares Youth is expos’d to; depend upon it those are very bad Women, I can see it in all their Actions, and if thee art not upon thy Guard, they will draw thee into some Danger: they are Strangers to thee, and I advise thee in a friendly Concern for thy Welfare, to have no Acquaintance with them” (267).

Franklin seeming almost childlike in his ignorance of the women’s true intention looks towards this wise older woman for guidance, promising to follow her advice. Finally arriving at their destination, it is revealed that the young women are in fact prostitutes, “ When we arriv’d at New York, they liv’d and invented me to come and see them” (268), however, Franklin takes the old Quaker woman’s advice, “but I avoided. And it was well I did” (268). His inexperience and naivety are prominent throughout his many encounters.

Another instance of Franklin’s fundamental innocence occurs when he mentions his resolve of maintaining a vegetarian diet. He contemplates the morality of consuming meat, in particular, fish, as he notes that “taking every Fish as a kind of unprovok’d Murder, since none of them had or ever could do us any Inquiry that might justify the Slaughter” (270). By this Franklin is pondering the ethics of consuming fish something that by most would be considered inconsequential and tedious. However, this deliberating is quickly halted, “But I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish, and when this came hot out of the Frying Pan, it smelt admirably well. I balance’d some time between Principles and Inclination” (270). In failing to maintain his short-lived moral inquiry Franklin illustrates his profound innocence something that although perhaps endearing serves as potentially detrimental or unconstructive attribute.

Additionally, a prominent trait of Americans discussed in *The American Adam* is self-reliance. Lewis describes this as, “an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). During his youth, Franklin’s self-reliance is especially prominent. One of his most well-known accomplishments was the establishment of the Library Company of Philadelphia which allowed members and non-members alike to collect, share, and read books. Franklin recalls a period when he had to sacrifice books, something that has a great deal of value to him, “So I sold some of my Books to raise a little Money, […] a Boy of but 17, without the least Recommendation to or Knowledge of any Person in the Place, and with very little Money in my Pocket” (261). This illustrated *The American Adam* trait of self-sufficiency as Franklin relinquished something that he cherished so that he could financially support himself. This showed the practicality and self-reliance that Lewis stresses in *The American Adam*.

Similarly, as a young child, Franklin’s independence can be seen in his judgment as he interacts with other children. In one particular instance, Franklin and his friends propose to build a wharf, which they intended to construct out of, “a large Heap of Stones which were intended for a new House near the Marsh” (253). Although a mischievous act by children, the motive was based on an attempt to be resourceful and self-reliant. Franklin ends this experience saying, “we were discovered and complain’d of; several of us were corrected by our Fathers; and tho’ I pleaded the Usefulness of the Work”(253).

Lewis’s describes the final trait of an American Adam as “An individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race”(5). This refusal to acknowledge the past can be viewed in Franklin’s Autobiography as he recalls considering leaving Boston,

“When he found I would leave him, he took care to prevent my getting Employment in any other Printing-House of the Town, by going round and speaking to every Master, who accordingly refus’d to give me Work. I then thought of going to New York as the nearest Place where there was a Printer: and I was rather inclin’d to leave Boston” (261).

In this scene, Franklin is referring to his brother’s irritation over him deciding to branch out on his own. Nevertheless, Franklin’s clear lack of interest in remaining home in the company of his family, simultaneously also epitomizes a lack of interest in the past. Franklin is living his life in the present with points in time where he is also future driven, notably demonstrating one of Lewis’s American Adam character traits.

Franklin’s refusal to acknowledge the past can also be seen when he prepared to be sent to the West Indies, “I now took leave of Printing, as I thought for ever, and I was daily employ’d in my new Business; going about with Mr. Denham among the Tradesmen, to purchase various Articles, and see them pack’d up, doing Errands, calling upon Workmen to dispatch, etc.” (279). This especially illustrated a way of moving from the past when he notes; “I was grown tired of London”(279). Franklin no longer aspires to live in London as that represents the past; instead, he finds excitement and pleasure in chasing after the future.

R.W.B. Lewis’s *The American Adam* established three prominent traits, fundamental innocence, self-reliance, and a disregard of the past, which are emulated within Benjamin Franklin. By exploring Franklin’s experiences in *The Autobiography* we can observe traces of these three American characteristics as he grows from childhood to adulthood.

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“I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.”