TEARS AND FLAPDOODLE:
SENTIMENTALITY IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

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Mark Twain's boyhood home of Hannibal in the 1840s, for all its frontier violence and oppressive slavery, was a typical middle-class town in the heart of the country. Situated on the mighty Mississippi—the central commercial artery, natural wonder, and mythic symbol of this continent—the Hannibal of Twain's youth was a meeting place of South, West, and Northeast. Docking steamboats and pioneers passing westward kept everyone posted on the latest faiths, fads, and fashions concocted by the sentimental mass culture of the East. As a boy Twain loved to watch white men, faces blackened with burnt cork, play Bones and Banjo, jump Jim Crow, and sing Stephen Foster spirituals. He heard spread-eagle speechifying and knew about ventriloquism, phrenology, animal magnetism, mesmerism, quack cures, mind science, gift book versifying, Jenny Lind warbling, and the Millerites' celestial expectations. Thanks to his mother he became a lifelong convert to the genteel faith that the feminine mission was to refine away the profane crudities of masculine clay.

When in the presence of ladies or touched by grief, Twain always affected the toplofty diction of sentimentality. Here is an excerpt, for example, from the letter he wrote home when Henry died:

Long before this reaches you, my poor Henry, my darling, my pride, my glory, my all, will have finished his blameless career; and the light of my life will have gone out in utter darkness. 0, God! this is hard to bear. Hardened, hopeless—aye, lost—lost—lost and ruined sinner as I am—I, even I, have humbled myself to the ground and prayed as never man prayed before that the great God might let this cup pass from me, that he would strike me to the earth but spare my brother, that he would pour out the fulness of his just wrath upon my wicked head but have mercy, mercy, mercy upon that unoffending boy. (Selected Letters 22)

The insidious effects of sentimental conventions are apparent here, taking over the language and twisting the author's authentic grief into narcissistic self-dramatizations. Genuine emotion is lost in the thrill of raising the verbal ante. These stultifying mannerisms stayed with Twain all his life, as any reader of Joan of Arc or his love letters to his wife Livy can testify. Indeed, Bret Harte once remarked that at heart Twain was "really sentimental" (qtd. in Kaplan 72). Yet the fact that Twain, at the height of his powers, managed to invent and sustain a vernacular voice capable of satirizing and deflating his own and his culture's addiction to sentimental posturings is, beyond doubt, one of the most remarkable triumphs of Huckleberry Finn.
To appreciate how skillfully Twain caught and mocked the delusions of his time, it is necessary to remind ourselves how pervasive and pernicious mass culture can be. In nineteenth-century America, Sentimentality, as Ann Douglas has shown, was the product of an all-too-holy alliance between liberal ministers and genteel matrons, both compensating for a loss of public role with effusive panegyrics to the private virtues of hearth, home, and hymnbook. Reversing the old hierarchies of the Great Chain of Being, they celebrated emotion over reason, the lowly over the haughty, the child over the adult, and feelings over facts. While unleashed economic forces were building factories, seizing land, driving slaves, and destroying Indians, American culture was celebrating a perpetual Children’s Hour and Mother’s Day, which claimed to cherish precisely those values that capitalist activity denied. Thus sentimentality served to rationalize the economic order, providing a convenient means of self-evasion for “a society both committed to laissez-faire industrial expansion and disturbed by its consequences” (12).

Nowhere is the Sentimental Revolution more apparent than in the realm of religion. In place of the Calvinist God of Wrath and man’s innate depravity, the sentimentals posited a benevolent deity committed to the salvation of everybody. As theology yielded to religiosity and dogma was superseded by saccharine simplicities, religion became, in William Ellery Channing’s phrase, “the adoration of goodness” and the sanctification of man. A belief in perfectionism engendered messianic visions and millennial cults: robed Millerites teetered on their roofs and bearded Mormons trudged into the desert; the Fox sisters talked to spirits, tables tap-danced, strange tongues were spoken and utopian schemes attempted. Emerson overflowed with Orphic utterances, and a sensible man like Henry James, Sr., felt he had better hang on to the huckleberry bushes to keep from being transported posthaste into the Oversoul.

In literature what Hawthorne termed “a damned mob of scribbling women” wrote lugubrious novels whose secret doctrine was that one must be baptized in tears and that salvation came not by a suffering Christ but by the angelic ministrations of a sorrowing maiden whose purity was proof against Satan’s wiles. Even our most serious novelists, as Leslie Fiedler has shown, paid homage to this subversive creed. As for poetry, Mrs. Hemans, critics agreed, was superior to Milton and Homer because she knew the beauty of heart pangs and home life. Almost as admired was Lydia Sigourney, the sweet singer of Hartford, who wrote sappy eulogies to dear, departed “flowerets,” starved canaries, and a poor lad who “drowned in a barrel of swine food” (qtd. in Branch 137). The beauty of pathos was the theme and a pale young thing, preferably in the lingering process of dying a sainted death, the ideal heroine and reader.

“It is a cloud-cuckoo-land of the heart that these books describe,” Douglas Branch states, “a world of sentiment purely for sentiment’s sake. Rousseau, hanging his head over the cliff’s edge to experience, together, the thrill of falling and the comfort of safety, is the spiritual antecedent” (140). Thus Sentimentality is a self-satisfied basking in
vicarious emotions, copious weeping for no good reason, pseudo-feelings replacing real ones, and a consequent loss of touch with life's authentic tragedies. All of this is illustrated by the ersatz world of melodrama, where a poor but honest working girl, with the timely aid of her dashing beau, can elude the clutches of the dastardly viper in the top hat. Vice is punished, virtue vindicated, and everyone enjoys a good sob.

On the one hand, Sentimentality tries to refine actuality out of existence in favor of some feeble lily-gilding idealization—hence women disguised as tea coizes, the “limbs” of pianofortes enveloped in frilled pantalettes, and the zany plan to whitewash the Hudson River Palisades in order to effect the moral uplift of Yonkers (Branch 151). On the other hand, Sentimentality degenerates into sheer sensation-seeking. No one knew better how to whet the national appetite for the outlandish, and to capitalize on a credulous people's inexhaustible need for new prodigies and wonders, than P. T. Barnum, the Prince of Humbug. Who else could offer a Fejee Mermaid, an Anatomical Venus, General Tom Thumb, The Last Supper, The Intemperate Family, an Armless Sharpshooter, and Santa Anna's Leg all at once and simultaneously, step right up, for one small fee? Given Barnum's enormous success, it is no surprise that the period has been called “a pother of grandiloquent banality... The age of magnificent bathos... A childish age, filled with fabulous marvels” (Minnigerode 245-6, 260).

By the end of the 1840s sentimental language and assumptions permeated American life, not merely providing a superficial diversion from the harsh work of conquering a continent, but profoundly warping the crucial issues of the period. Far from harmless, sentimental cliches had a powerful impact on political thought and helped precipitate the Civil War. As the selfish and centrifugal tendencies of capitalist individualism undercut consensus and preempted the actual functions of the home, patriots relied heavily on the emotive language of family and fireside to win and preserve allegiance for the fragile Union. At the same time sentimental biographers like Parson Weems and a host of imitators extolled the ideals of the Founding Fathers at the expense of the custodial duties of the inheriting sons. Unfortunately, such reliance on nostalgic notions encouraged politicians to regress to childhood fantasies of filial rivalry for the father's approval.

Within this context George Forgie has argued that Abraham Lincoln's ambition (which his law partner Herndon described as “a little engine that knew no rest”) drove him to find and defeat a “bad son” (Stephen A. Douglas) and thus play the heroic role of saving the Founding Father's patrimony. Lincoln, like other leaders of his generation, consistently used melodramatic language to describe the danger of dividing the house of Union. These metaphors served to polarize the debate over slavery and secession and undermine the tradition of compromise, pitting heroes against villains, virtue against vice, and instilling the unquestioned assumption that war was inevitable if the sacred house of Union were desecrated. The resulting sentimental confusions meant that “as the crisis grew more serious its seriousness grew more difficult to measure,” yet step by step “symbolic fratricide
edged over into the real thing... there is a straight line from the melodrama of the house divided to the tragedy of the house divided” (268, 281).

Sentimentality played at least as significant a role in the conduct of the South. Mark Twain once advanced the “wild proposition” that Sir Walter Scott’s novels were “in great measure responsible” for the Civil War, blaming his “sham grandeur, sham gauds, and sham chivalries” for the South’s infatuation with rank, caste, and the inflated style of a jejune romanticism (Life on the Mississippi 347-9). Certainly sentimental literature did influence antebellum attitudes. The stereotypes of Yankee and Cavalier, which were created to chastise Northern acquisitiveness and celebrate the Southern gentlemen’s plantation manner, eventually convinced the popular mind that the two regions were so distinct and different, their life-styles so diametrically opposed, that dialogue and compromise were out of the question (Taylor, passim). Southerners came to have a vested interest in propagating this mythology which juxtaposed a noble code of honor with the North’s crass and hypocritical greed. To protect this self-serving myth from the glaring truth the South withdrew into a rigid parochialism and stifled dissent.

Although Scott can hardly bear all the blame, mawkish and romantic notions did seduce the Southern mind and fortify the region’s intransigence: “Imagination there was in plenty in this land with so much blood of the dreamy Celt and its warm sun, but it spent itself on puerilities, on cant and twisted logic, in rodomontade and thereckless vaporings of sentimentality” (Cash 97). As the crisis deepened, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s sentimental attack on slavery was met with an even more sentimental defense: the peculiar institution was praised for its benevolence, and any criticism of the South was taken as a personal insult to pure Southern womanhood which must needs be avenged on a field of honor. So strong was the sway of this cult to white femininity, W. J. Cash believes, that when the war began “the ranks of the Confederacy went rolling into battle in the misty conviction that it was wholly for her that they fought” (86).

In Twain’s home state, Missouri, all of the South’s sentimental sanctions were employed in defense of racial bondage. Noting the sad faces of slaves waiting to be sold down the river, Twain, like everyone else in town, felt no moral qualms. Even his mother, a paragon of compassion, was unaware that slavery was wrong, since “the wise and the good and the holy” of the community, Twain recalled, “were unanimous in the conviction that slavery was right, righteous, sacred, the peculiar pet of the Deity and a condition which the slave himself ought to be daily and nightly thankful for” (Autobiography 30). With the wisdom of hindsight, Twain brooded about the town’s moral blindness. Was conscience merely acculturation to the biased mores of a botched society, and if so how could a person recognize and resist the tacit evils of his time and place? “The corruption of the best is worst,” Aristotle avowed, and throughout Huckleberry Finn the bitterest ironies are reserved for all the “good” people who mindlessly condone the abomination in their midst.
Although Hannibal was essentially a mid-American, middle-class democratic town, class lines existed and “the aristocratic taint” was undeniably there. Like Jefferson, Twain wanted an America led by a natural aristocracy based on innate abilities, not family and fortune. Twain’s proud, austere father never forgot he was gentility, but status distinctions always goaded and galled Twain by turns. In later years, when he wasn’t flaunting his mansion and hobnobbing with kings and counselors, Twain wished for the day when all the thrones of Europe would be sold for scrap iron. Like the Founding Fathers he feared not only the usurpations of a greedy elite but also the unchecked passion of the mob. His own aspirations spurred him to become a steamboat potentate and a white-suited celebrity, but his democratic sentiments also enabled him to know every strata of Mississippi society, from the dandies, promoters, and plutocrats to the con men, crib girls, and river rats. Twain said he could recognize any authentic human type in fiction because he had already met its equivalent on the river.

Twain's greatest asset as a writer was his vast experience, and the insights it gave him into the human condition. His multiple careers as printer, pilot, prospector, reporter, lecturer, and author were an ongoing education in tangible realities. He seems to have been everywhere, done everything, and recorded it all with inimitable humor. But Twain's greatest liability, as numerous critics have noted, was his own split personality, his inability to distinguish the wheat from the chaff, the sensible from the sentimental, in his own opinions. A child of the Gilded Age, he was immersed and implicated in all that was best and worst in his period and became one of its harshest critics and biggest suckers. He was a pessimist who believed in Progress and an optimist who despised the Human Race. Only within a certain kind of deadpan voice does Twain's humor work to its full effect, only when he adopts a certain kind of persona, like Huck, can he save himself from his own contradictions and affectations and speak an irreverent idiom which strips away the sentimental veneer and exposes the tragic actualities of American life.

The key to Twain's artistry is not to be found in his simplistic comments on fiction, contending that “the writing of books...was merely billiards to me” (Autobiography 291), but rather in his sophisticated remarks about deadpan humor and audience psychology. The word “art” for Twain usually had connotations of lying, stealing, tricking, or deceiving. The art of the deadpan comic is to impersonate a garrulous, straight-faced storyteller who piles up improbables with such consummate skill that the gulled audience hangs enchanted on every drawled pause and modulation of what appears to be a pointless and impromptu tale. In the end, if the timing had been perfect, the performer has the audience in the palm of his hand and can move them to tears or laughter at whim.

Twain's comments on deadpan humor always stress how painstakingly he polished his performances, attuning his keen ear to the subtle pitch and pace of human speech. “I amend dialect stuff,” Twain said, “by talking and talking and talking it till it sounds right” (Selected Letters 84). On stage he could use his virtuoso skill with the American vernacu-
lar to great effect, playing with "the pause as other children play with a toy" (Autobiography 182) and leading his listeners a long way before they suspected that he was "laying a tragedy trap" (qtd. in Ferguson 278). "I disseminate my true views," Twain confessed late in his career, "by a series of apparently humorous and mendacious stories" (qtd. in Kaplan 347). And he added on another occasion that "Humorists of the 'mere' sort cannot survive. Humor must not professedly teach and it must not professedly preach, but it must do both if it would live forever. By forever, I mean thirty years" (Autobiography 273).

Mark Twain's deadpan duplicity is displayed at the very start of Huckleberry Finn, where his famous "Notice" warns: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot" (55).1 This apparent disavowal of any serious artistic intent is paired on the same page with an "Explanatory" which states that the novel contains seven distinct dialects and mocks the inability of most readers to recognize such subtle shadings of voices. In the "Notice" Twain suggests that his book is only an entertainment, but characteristically he is playing a wily game of hide-and-seek, scoffing at both stolid readers and thesis-ridden critics while celebrating his craft and daring us to appreciate his mastery.

Possibly disoriented by Twain's "Notice," many critics have overestimated the novel's moral, underestimated its plot, and ignored the more elusive aspects of its motive. The failure to value the plot of Huckleberry Finn stems from a profound misunderstanding of the picaresque. Everyone places the novel in the picaresque tradition, but few seem to know what the picaresque, at its best, was. Lionel Trilling, for example, speaks of "the simplest of all novel-forms, the so-called picaresque, or novel of the road" (110-111). Such a definition is hardly adequate to describe the artistic complexity, structural coherence, and philosophic content of the first, and possibly the best, example of the genre—Lazarillo de Tormes.

Published anonymously in 1554, the novel gives a first-person account of a boy who leaves his indigent parents, submits himself to a series of suspect masters, and learns the ways of the world. A blind man "enlightens" him on the need to be sharper than the Devil, a stingy priest teaches him to worship baker's bread, a vain gentleman at the mercy of the finical dictates of honor persuades him to prefer facts to fantasy, and a sly pardoner, who sells phony papal indulgences by conning the credulous, instructs him in the art of praying in profile with one hand while picking pockets with the other. Lazarillo learns that in a world of hard knocks, gnawing hunger, and six-fingered greed you must deceive to thrive (medrar burlando). In the process Spanish society is subjected to an unrelenting satire of its fake piety, misplaced honor, sentimental gullibility, meretricious hypocrisy, and general corruption. Indeed, so pervasive is the author's skepticism, as conveyed through the unwittingly ironic eyes of Lazarillo, that social conventions, ethical

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1All quotations from the novel are from The Annotated Huckleberry Finn.
imperatives, and reality itself are called into question. We are left in a subjective world with no permanent truths, only flawed, perishable lives. What we see depends on our point of view.² (See Rico)

Like Lazarillo, Huck submits to several teachers who try to impose their values on him, but while Lazarillo "learns his lesson" and adjusts to a perverted world (thereby doing wrong when he thinks he is doing right), Huck rejects such an accommodation (thereby doing right when he thinks he is doing wrong). Like its predecessor, Twain's book is a masterpiece of ironic insight which leaves no facet of society unscorched by caustic wit. The mythopoetic power and psychological depth which Twain lavished on Huck were not, as Howells suggested, a transcending of its picaresque genre; rather they were, with brilliant innovations and occasional lapses, a return to its origins.

Three value systems, representing variations of Southern sentimentality, compete for Huck's allegiance during the novel's opening chapters. Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas, who combine to inflict their insipid sanctity on Huck, represent the deterioration of Protestant doctrine into fundamentalist literalism and sentimental liberalism. Ultimate questions and public concerns have been reduced to the petty conventions of the domestic sphere. While the Widow calls Huck a "poor lost lamb," croons to him about "spiritual gifts," and insists that cleanliness really is next to godliness, Miss Watson literally prays in the closet and goes into detail about celestial life-styles.

Tom Sawyer, who lives in a book-fed blaze of fantasy and who lets his overheated imagination consume the humdrum facts of life, uses his showboat style to entertain, and gain ascendancy over his friends. Tom seems to be just another day-dreaming boy, but his high jinks have a more serious implication, for these boys at play exhibit some of the disturbing traits of men; Tom's robber band has historical relevance. The boys in the cave swearing their fell oath and vowing bloody deeds recall John Murrell and his dread confederacy of thieves who terrorized the lower Mississippi valley in the early nineteenth century; but Twain, no doubt, is also thinking about Southern character and the causes of the Civil War.

W. J. Cash has defined the antebellum Southerner as a "child-man," a romantic and a hedonist with little "capacity for the real":

he is inevitably driven back upon imagination....[H]is world-construction is bound to be mainly a product of fantasy...his credulity is limited only by his capacity for conjuring up the unbelievable....He likes to play, to expand his ego...to perform with a high, histrionic flourish, and to strive for celebrity as the dashing blade (45, 51).

From Tom Sawyer, who displays all these traits in abundance, there is a straight line to Pickett and his perfumed curls, Stuart's derring-do, and

²My comments on the picaresque are also indebted to my wife, Roser Caminals Heath.
Lee's reliance on the awesome spectacle of the frontal assault over Longstreet's more cautious strategy. Twain's own mock-heroic Missouri campaign involved serving with a "mongrel child of philology," whom Twain described as "young, ignorant, good-natured, well-meaning, trivial, full of romance, and given to reading chivalric novels and singing forlorn love-ditties. He had some pathetic little nickel-plated aristocratic instincts" ("Private History" 7-8). We never learn what happened to "the Marion Rangers," that real-life outgrowth of Tom Sawyer's Gang, because Twain made a separate peace and headed west, but chances are they either were assimilated by the Confederate army or degenerated into the marauding banditry epitomized by Quantrill's gang of Bushwhackers.

That Tom Sawyer's deluded romanticism is the complement to Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas' enervated sentimentality is made apparent by the novel's juxtaposition of scenes. Although Huck would rather answer Tom's catcall and get his clothes "all greased up and clayey" playing robbers in the cave than "set up straight" and heed Miss Watson's stricture, Tom, too, wants Huck to be "respectable"; his make-believe world proves to be as "dismal regular" as the Widow's mannerly one, and the rules of the gang reveal an absurd morality where the "line of business" is "robbery and murder" and what's considered "high-toned" and "best" is killing people. Huck tries both ways, fails to find any "profit" in them (since both had "all the marks of a Sunday School") and gets called a "fool" by Miss Watson and a "numskull" and a "sap-head" by Tom for his troubles.

If Miss Watson and Tom condescend to Huck because they think he's dumb, Pap attacks him for being smart and trying to better himself: "you stop that putting on frills. I won't have it. I'll lay for you, smarty; and if I catch you about that school I'll tan you good. First you know you'll get religion, too. I never see such a son" (83). Pap's value system, if we may call it that, appears to be the exact opposite of the Widow's and the ugly underside of Tom's: Pap is against church, school, and state; he sees no point in etiquette or ambition; he prefers mud and rags, stealing and swearing, and having enough liquor always on hand for "two drunks and one delirium tremens" (92). Pap is anarchy merged with entropy; he saves his hottest cussing for "the nigger and the government" and sinks into such sloth that "a body would a thought he was Adam, he was just all mud" (89).

But what does Pap's barbarism have in common with the Widow's sentimental and Tom's romantic versions of "civilization"? Each worships the almighty dollar and accepts without question the evils of slavery. And each uses a form of sentimentality to justify his or her complicity in the money-bags morality of the cash nexus and the manifold wrongs of racist exploitation. Whether the Widow prays with her slaves, or Tom plays a prank on Jim, or Pap shoves a black man off the sidewalk, each is a willing participant in an unjust system. If Huck has a deformed conscience, it is thanks to his "teachers" and the perverted values they support.
Pap’s ability to retain custody of Huck and the community’s inability to “reform” Pap dramatize the absurdities of the sentimental perspective. A new judge refuses to award guardianship of Huck to the Widow or Judge Thatcher because “he druther not take a child away from its father” (84)—thus idealizing away the blatant problems with this particular father. The new judge’s effort to redeem Pap from drink, one of the great comic set pieces of the book, captures the era’s perfectionist impulse in all its misty-eyed indiscriminate silliness:

the new judge said he was going to make a man of him.... And after supper he talked to him about temperance and such things till the old man cried, and said he’d been a fool, and fooled away his life.... The judge said he could hug him for them words; so he cried, and his wife she cried again; Pap said he’d been a man that had always been misunderstood before, and the judge said he believed it. The old man said that what a man wanted that was down was sympathy; and the judge said it was so; so they cried again. And when it was bedtime, the old man rose up and held out his hand, and says:

"Look at it, gentlemen, and ladies all; take ahold of it; shake it. There’s a hand that was the hand of a hog; but it ain’t so no more; it’s the hand of a man that’s started in on a new life.... It’s a clean hand now; shake it—don’t be afeared."

So they shook it, one after the other, all around, and cried. The judge’s wife she kissed it. Then the old man he signed a pledge—made his mark. The judge said it was the holiest time on record, or something like that. (84-85)

Clearly these people believe Pap because they want to; an age in which Ten Nights in a Bar-Room was a best-seller and The Drunkard; or, The Fallen Saved was a popular melodrama had a naive faith that the simple signing of the teetotal pledge, or a Temperance lady’s wielding of a righteous axe, could redeem the sodden from their grappling with the serpent and usher in a whiskeyless millennium. Pap is able to play on their emotions because their smug complacency, their wish to bask in their own goodness, is so near the surface; their sentimental notion that they were witnessing “the holiest time on record” blinds them to human nature, as Pap’s subsequent “forty-rodd” fall from grace demonstrates.

Pap may be able to con these fatuous do-gooders, but he himself is at the mercy of a set of degenerate emotions. Shingled in rags and soused with “rotgut,” Pap, with his sickly-white skin, snarly hair, scurrilous mouth, and surly manner, is a caricature of poor white trash—on the clay-eating Juke and Kallikak side. He is Democratic Man sunk to the lowest common denominator, and his boast that “the country may rot for all me” (90) is more true than he imagines. Although he
owes his shiftless squalor to a slave system in which he plays no part, Pap prides himself on his superiority of blood and blames the blacks for his troubles. Huck, who has been infected by a less virulent strain of his father’s racism, quickly reverts, after Pap kidnaps him, to his old life of lethargy; but Pap’s abuse of the hickory and his drunken rages, chasing Huck with a clasp-knife and calling him “the Angel of Death,” show the sinister side of the anarchist impulse and compel Huck to run away.

Beginning with the Grangerford-Shepherdson sequence, Twain shifts his focus from individuals to the larger social scene, but the influences, and the value systems, of the Widow, Tom, and Pap are not left behind. Rather, the novel dramatizes intricate variations on the relationships among sentimentality, aristocracy, slavery, decadence, and violence already established. Twain juxtaposes two chapters, one of which shows us the Grangerford’s cultural pretensions and the other their blood-thirsty acts, leaving it to us to perceive the crucial connections. The deadpan manner works to perfection here, as Huck is overwhelmed by the whitewashed style of this “handsome lot of quality” (175), while his vernacular voice unwittingly exposes their fraudulence. The Grangerford’s parlor, with its gaudy parrot, garish wild turkey-wing fans, squeaky crockery dog, and chipped chalk fruit, displays the tawdry imposture of their imported pomp. The family’s pride and joy, however, is Emmeline’s painting and poetry, which Huck naively admires; but the vivid precision of his description exposes Emmeline’s ineptitude. The novel’s intricate counterpointing of sentimental and realistic modes is especially evident there, as Huck’s earthy rendering of “arm-pit,” “bulges like a cabbage,” “scoop-shovel bonnet,” “chisel,” “chair-back,” and “heels up” (168) completely undercuts the alassing maid in wee black slippers leaning pensive on a tombstone under a weeping willow. Similarly, Emmeline’s maudlin doggerel, with its jangling Bots-shots-spots-knots rhymes, juxtaposes the ludicrously specific—“They got him out and emptied him”—with the vacuously vague—“His spirit was gone for to sport aloft / In the realms of the good and great” (169).

Twain’s satire on this sadful, spidery stuff is one of the novel’s delights, but it is not merely a harmless diversion providing comic relief to the feud, as some critics have supposed (Smith 76, Adams 350). Nor should we assume that Emmeline’s eyes are on the graveyard because of the slaughter that rages around her, as others have suggested (Egan 23). The key point about Emmeline’s “art” is that it has nothing to do with the ugly realities of her world. She writes about death because that was the lachrymose convention for lady poesia at that time, a luxurious head-in-the-sand immersion in self-pitying affectation. Emmeline’s sentimentality, and the family’s enshrinement of its mendacious illusions, are the saccharine side of Grangerford sadism.

The Grangerfords, with their military titles, white linen clothes, and punctilious manners, see themselves as “high-toned, and well born, and rich and grand,” chivalrously serving the ideals of noblesse and honor. But who are they really? As W. J. Cash has pointed out, real Cavaliers “almost never” headed for the Southern frontier with its cutthroat competition and wildcat speculation; rather, wealth and power
were acquired by "the strong, the pushing, and ambitious, among the old coon-hunting population of the backcountry" (14). The aristocracy of the Old South, then, were far more likely to be rough and ruthless men like Faulkner's Thomas Sutpen, who wrestled with his slaves, than scented dandies who preferred a pinch of snuff. What these self-styled aristocrats demonstrate is a profound dislocation of sensibility: the sentimental ideals they profess enable them to excuse the horrors they practice.

The feud, of course, gives the show away. An acute historian of antebellum mores, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, traces the origins of feuding back to Celtic and Germanic tribes and argues that the concept of primal honor shaped Southern behavior, accounting for the touchy pride, arrogant manner, and frequent resort to violence: "to die in defense of kinsmen or to humiliate in vengeance an enemy was to win eternal glory" (42). Twain shows us how Buck has become acculturated to this bloody code of honor (which recalls the moral blindness of Tom Sawyerism), identifying his manliness with guns and killing and physical courage. When Buck dies, the authentic emotion of Huck's succinct eulogy—"I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me" (183)—puts all the Grangerford's sadism and sentimentality to shame.

Twain's larger aim to dissect the essential flaws in Southern society in particular and human nature in general is brilliantly reinforced when the duke and king arrive on the scene. But why is the presence of these two "low-down humbugs and frauds" with their ratty carpetbags, chameleon roles, and spurious titles so important to this most American of novels? Gary Lindberg has suggested that the confidence man is our national covert hero, for in a land lacking the traditional hierarchies of class, patterns of manners, sanctions of religion, and standards of evaluation, each person is on his own, striving to create a self and contriving to make others believe in it. In such a world, you are who you pretend to be—provided you can persuade enough people to have faith and confidence in your claims (3-10).

The first few hours of the con men on the raft present a kind of parable of how frauds use sentimental appeals and preposterous lies to gain selfish advantage over their fellow men—and each other. Between the duke's bump-fingerling and lecture-slinging and the king's "layin' on o' hands" and "missionaryin' around," the two humbugs perform enough protean roles to lick the platter clean. Always their opening gambit is a blatant bid to the sentiments: "Alas!" the duke sighs when he initiates his ploy, and soon we are swamped in sentimental cliches designed to win sympathy:

I am the rightful Duke of Bridgewater; and here am I, forlorn, torn from my high estate, hunted of men, despised by the cold world, ragged, worn, heartbroken, and degraded to the companionship of felons on a raft. (192)
The king, of course, immediately ups the ante and regains the advantage over "Bilgewater": "Yes, gentlemen, you see before you, in blue jeans and misery, the wanderin', exiled, trampled-on, and sufferin' rightful King of France" (193). And who could say that he is not, despite his "premature balditude," when he "cried and took on so"? Thus the two charlatans exemplify the king's motto to "make the best o' things the way you find 'em" (195); or, as Captain Simon Suggs advised, "it is good to be shiftly in a new country" (Hooper 8); or, as Melville warned, "in new countries, where the wolves are killed off, the foxes increase" (Ch. 1).

When the duke and king "lay out a campaign" (198) to dupe the yokels in the one-horse towns along the river; they pitch their con games to the people's hunger for sentiment and sensation. At the camp meeting we see the fervent democratic masses, "crowds of people," surging around the preaching sheds in a tumult of evangelical ecstasy: "The people woke up more and more... You couldn't make out what the preacher said, any more, on account of the shouting and crying...[T]hey sung, and shouted, and flung themselves down on the straw, just crazy and wild" (200-01). Given such fits and barks and jerks of pentecostal frenzy, the king has no trouble putting over his own counterfeit tale (laced with references to his lack of cash) of divine transformation from pirate to preacher; he swabs his eyes, blesses everybody, kisses all the pretty girls, and clears eighty-seven dollars and seventy-five cents. By playing on the people's need for simple faith and emotional exercise, the king enjoys his best day yet in "the missionary line," while Twain has begun a sequence of scenes which demonstrate mankind's limitless gullibility and the rampant dangers of mobocracy.

Twain's chapters on Bricksville are the centerpiece of his satire on mobocracy. In the space of two days we see the jaded townspeople gawking and raving over a murder and its imitation, an attempted lynching, a circus, a burlesque of Shakespeare, and a lewd farce. During each of these events the crowd is at the mercy of their unleashed emotions, raging or laughing at the whim of whoever is manipulating them. The misnamed town itself is "most all old shackly dried-up frame concerns" (208) set up on stilts beside the gnawing river. Although the houses have gardens, all they "raise" in them are weeds and garbage; and all the people do is hang around in a lethargic trance waiting for something exciting to happen:

There couldn't anything wake them up all over; and make them happy all over, like a dog-fight—unless it might be putting turpentine on a stray dog and setting fire to him, or tying a tin pan to his tail and see him run himself to death." (211)

What Twain has presented us with is the souring of the democratic ideal, the blighting of its hope and the backwash of its ambition. Jefferson's belief in a stalwart yeomanry of small independent farmers
who valued human life, treasured their liberty, and pursued both their private happiness and the public welfare has met its entropic *reductio ad absurdum*. The federal republic has become a pigsty, thanks to the greed of a rapacious pseudo-aristocracy, the avid sensation-seekings of a degraded mobocracy, and the ubiquitous presence of a sentimentality which blurs all distinctions. In Bricksville we see how, in William Carlos Williams' phrase, "the pure products of America / go crazy," sinking into filth like hogs in the muck.

The shooting of Boggs, whose drunken excesses the tetchy Sherburn finds insufferable, dramatizes once more the lethal edge of Southern honor and exposes the code duello as the cold-blooded killing it often was. But of more interest to Twain was the response of the crowd, pushing and shoving to gape and gloat over the death agonies of the poor old man. Perhaps the novel's ultimate ironic icon to the relationship between sentimentality and sadism is the picture of the huge family Bible spread open on the dying man's bullet-riddled chest, adding its cruel weight to his final respirations. This scene, which had haunted Twain since his boyhood, illustrates how an unctuous appearance can obscure an ugly reality: "We are curiously made," Twain recalled in his autobiography, "in all the throng...there was not one with common sense enough to perceive that an anvil would have been in better taste there than the Bible...and swifter in its atrocious work" (41). The crowd's need to feed on the sufferings of others and their inability to distinguish image from reality is swiftly reinforced by their enthusiasm for the man with the crooked-handled cane who mimics the tragedy, turning it into instant street theatre, by playing the parts of killer and victim both.

The vulgar imitation only serves to excite the crowd more, as they rush to Sherburn's house to lynch him. Twain was so disturbed by the spread of mob violence in the South that he violated the deadpan distance of Huck's point of view to deliver, through the mouth of Sherburn a diatribe in his own voice. The thesis of the speech, that "the average man's a coward" and therefore "the pitiful thing out is a mob" (217), is a simplistic explanation of a complex phenomenon; and to see Sherburn, who has murdered with impunity, suddenly wax righteous jars our moral sensibility. Although Twain has his insights (it is human nature to copy and conform, and moral courage is indeed a rarer commodity than physical daring), the causes of lynching, as Wyatt-Brown has demonstrated, go deeper:

lynch law...conferred upon ordinary men the prerogative of ensuring that community values held ultimate sovereignty....The lynching rite was socially efficacious....The mingling of justice with bacchanalia, centering about the scapegoat, whether a lowly black or an unpopular member of the ruling class, released social tensions in spectacle....Each man sought his own interests and feared, like Sherburn's mob in Twain's story, to be caught isolated and vulnerable
outside the bonds of “brave” men. Honor was thus locally defined as conformity, not individuality… Sometimes a victim’s bold demeanor, a willingness to die game, could modify crowd resolve, precisely because such behavior exemplified conventional ideals… the heart of the matter was the primal ethic. Until the code of honor was itself destroyed such practices were bound to persist as the means of moral enforcement. (436-60)

Thus Twain’s assumption that a few moral men “known to be splendidly brave” (Lyncherdom” 156) could face down any mob and put an end to lynching underestimates the communal importance of “the primal ethic,” and it ignores what his own fiction has demonstrated: the Bricksville mob’s addiction to sentimentality and sadism, their outright enjoyment of cruel spectacle—a factor which Twain later called “impossible of belief” (155). Clearly, Twain the novelist was wiser than Twain the philosopher; Huck’s vision is more profound than Mark’s version.

Immediately after the aborted lynching, everybody settles for a circus, whose drunken rider, aloof ringmaster, and guffawing crowd farcically recapitulate the Boggs incident, and whose insistent clothes imagery stresses how easily people are taken in by outward show. The “Shakespeare Revival,” with the seventy-year-old king dressed up as the thirteen-year-old Juliet, continues the play on costuming, but the dozen “country jakes” who attend don’t walk out for aesthetic reasons. During the 1840s audiences flocked to see Signor Nano “embody the Gnome! the Baboon!! the Fly!!! a Man!!!! (Minnigerode 150) or to watch the Bateman Sisters, ages six and four, put on the following mismash:

Monday evening will be performed the prelude of The Man and the Tiger, to be followed by the Fifth Act of Richard III—Richard, Miss Ellen Bateman, Richmond, Miss Kate Bateman… to be followed by The Spoiled Child—Little Pickle, Miss Kate Bateman, Tag, Miss Ellen Bateman. (Minnigerode 221)

The 1840s were the period of the Astor Place riots in New York, when 134 rioters were killed while seeking vengeance on William Macready, an uppity British tragedian. It was also at this time that a visitor to Cincinnati saw, during a performance of Hamlet, “a ruffian from the gallery” throw onto the stage “the half of the raw carcass of a sheep” (Minnigerode 188). In sum, the duke is right when he concludes that “these Arkansaw lunkheads couldn’t come up to Shakespeare; what they wanted was low comedy—and maybe something rather worse than low comedy, he reckoned. He said he could size their style” (220).

“The Royal Nonesuch” proves to be the duke and king’s most lucrative swindle, exemplifying the con man’s ability to analyze human nature, appeal to the baser instincts, and keep one step ahead of the suckers. Twain, by not revealing the sordid details of the travesty,
teases us the way the duke and king play with the prurient interests and vulgar cravings of their audience, which "roared and clapped and stormed and haw-hawed" (224) themselves into a state of gibbering idiocy. So skillfully do the duke and king pull the strings on these provincial puppets that we are left to wonder if maybe you can fool all of the people all of the time.

The Wilks episode is the grand finale of the duke and king's impostures. They begin with their familiar cue ("Alas, alas! our poor brother—gone... oh, it's too, too hard!") (234) and then proceed to hit all the right sentimental notes to "work" the crowd. Huck's dry-eyed reporting of these "damp" ceremonies shows that he is beginning to outgrow his deadpan perspective, for he is not at all taken in by the hoax and has no qualms about voicing his disgust:

I never see two men leak the way they done....[It] worked the crowd like you never see anything like it, and so everybody broke down and went to sobbing right out loud....

Well, by-and-by the king... slobbers out a speech, all full of tears and flapdoodle about its being a sore trial... but it's a trial that's sweetened and sanctified to us by this dear sympathy and these holy tears... and all that kind of rot and slush, till it was just sickening; and then he blubbers out a pious goody-goody Amen, and turns himself loose and goes to crying fit to bust. (236-37)

After feeding the crowd so much "soul-butter and hogwash" and putting them through their emotional paces, the two con men have effectively blunted whatever common sense the people originally had. Now the trick is to pull one "boss dodge" after another that will "lay 'em out" until the "funeral orgies" are over and the duke and king can grab the money and run.

We see here how sentimentality takes what is best in human beings—their sensitivity, sympathy, and genuine feeling—and turns it into something vain, pernicious, affected, and false. Once this insidious transformation has taken place, the people find euphoria in sheer distraction and are incapable of facing the hard facts of life. Hence the most popular man in town is the undertaker, with his "softy soothering ways" (252), not the level-headed doctor who can spot a fraud; and thus the duke and king know that a few sensible citizens pose no threat: "Hain't we got all the fools in town on our side? and ain't that a big enough majority in any town?" (249).

When the duke and king sell the slaves we see once more how sentimentality perverts morality. The Wilks girls feel genuine grief over the loss, and many in the town thought it was "scandalous" to separate a family; but it occurs to no one to say that slavery is wrong in the first place, since the evils the girls "hadn't ever dreamed of seeing" (255) are inherent in the institution. The selling of the slaves also gives Huck a chance to con the con men, blaming the disappearance of the money on
them. The duke's response to this supposed theft is priceless: "It does beat all, how neat the niggers played their hand. . . . Don't ever tell me that a nigger ain't got any histrionic talent. Why, the way they played that thing, it would fool anybody. In my opinion there's a fortune in 'em" (256). Here we see a craftsman's admiration for anyone who has mastered the tricks of the trade, as well as the duke's determination to profit by the lesson, but even more telling is the ironic hint that blacks are a human treasure whites neither perceive nor appreciate.

The appearance of the real relatives gives Twain a final chance to show what a "passel of sapheads" (237) and "prejudiced chuckleheads" (270) people generally are. All the excitement of the confrontation between the claimants is "nuts for the crowd" (269), but when it comes to demonstrating the viability of democracy by having the people choose the better cause, distinguishing image from reality and the phony from the authentic, they fail miserably. It is fitting that when the mob swarms in the dark down to the graveyard to dig up the body and find the bag of gold, everybody brings a shovel, but "nobody hadn't thought to fetch a lantern" (274).

Twain's alternative to this world of profligate shams, vacuous sentimentalities, and gullible fools is Huck's deadpan voice and down-to-earth vision. Huck is that breathtaking rarity, a person who sees with his own unblinking eyes and speaks in his own lithe and vital way. Huck's stream of sensation style, with its colloquial cadences, fractured syntax, and uncombed idiom, its wry understatements and wide-eyed wonder, its susceptibility to facts and immunity to abstractions, its uncanny ability to be savvy and naive in turn, is the perfect vehicle for disclosing that America is at the mercy of the wrong set of values; but Huck, of course, cannot appreciate the significance of his own discovery. He adapts himself as best he can to changing circumstances, falling under the sway of various "teachers," while submitting each to his own pragmatic tests, since he is usually more interested in what works than in what's right. He prefers to ad-lib his life, telling whatever fib is handiest at the time and hoping "to go along by" without getting into trouble.

Huck prefers to be "low-down and ornery" (71) than to wear the starched collar of respectability; he doesn't see any advantage (except for the other people) in the Widow's altruism, and his experiment with Miss Watson's concept of prayer yields mixed results (a fishing line, but no hooks); he prefers a barrel of odds and ends where "things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better" (58) to the scrubbed and stiffing decorum of their fastidious piety. Thus Huck and these two old ladies are always talking at cross purposes: what flows for him is fixed for them; when they speak of spirituality and ethics, he is thinking of material things and physical comforts; for them good and bad are ways of behaving, for him the words connote the ease and angst of living. The irony, however, cuts both ways; Huck's sensual immersion in the stream of life often precludes his ability to appraise the moral and philosophical implications of his world, but at least he opts for palpable reality over a sentimental ideality. (See Raban.)
Huck's shrewd escape from his father gives us our first real indication of what the boy can do. Although he wishes Tom Sawyer could have been there to "throw in the fancy touches" (97), what distinguishes Huck's grim ruse is its absolute adherence to hard facts: a rusty wood-saw, a bag of meal, a sack of rocks, and a pig hacked open with an axe—these are the earthy means of Huck's escape, and they have nothing in common with Tom's castles in the air. As elaborate as Huck's escape is, every part of it is necessary; his is a desperate situation, and his staged death must be absolutely convincing if he is to make a clean getaway. Here Huck's actions are equal to the actualities of his vernacular voice, and once he has made good his escape, amid various images of death and rebirth, his senses come alive in a startlingly keen way: "Everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and smelled late. You know what I mean—I don't have the words to put it in" (98), Huck says, unaware of his own eloquence. It is in moments like this that the book reveals its true values; Huck's pragmatic survival skills and his acute savouring of the things of this world are Twain's answer to the dangerous illusions of the sentimental culture Huck is trying to leave behind.

Huck, of course, no more questions the topsy-turvy morality of slavery than an Aztec child would the daily necessity of sacrificing victims to the sun. What saves him, and what enables him to keep his "honest Injun" promise to help his friend Jim, is his conviction that he is just a rotten kid who got off on the wrong foot. In choosing expediency over the perverse ethic of the slaveocracy, Huck is not only choosing what is least "troublesome," but also he is heeding the humane dictates of his heart and the commonsense philosophy of Jim.

The moral and emotional center of the novel occurs in Chapter Nineteen, when Twain frees Huck and Jim from all the sentimental huckstering and provides them with an idyllic moment, a still point of solitude, which, like Ishmael witnessing "Leviathan amours in the deep" and Thoreau contemplating the universe at Walden Pond, seems to bring us into mystical communion with the secrets of the natural world. For a few days before they are returned to the peopled world of disguise and deception, Huck and Jim, naked to the elements, their five senses on full alert, get to loaf and invite their souls and take upon themselves the mystery of things. So acute do they become that they develop a kind of extrasensory perception which enables them to "watch the lonesomeness" and lazy along "listening to the stillness" (185). They even engage in speculation about ultimate things—were the heavens made or did they just happen?—and as they tell stories to explain the unexplainable, we feel we are in the presence of the origin of mythology.

The arrival of the duke and king disrupts this pastoral interlude and relegates both Huck and Jim to secondary and all-too-passive roles. During the Wilks sequence, however, we see Huck taking more initiative. He decides, out of empathy for the Wilks girls, to "hive the money for them or bust" (248); he even experiments with telling the truth ("though it does seem most like setting down on a kag of powder and touching it off just to see where you'll go to") (259); but Huck must
admit that the results of his efforts were “awful mixed”: unforeseen circumstances, not well-laid plans, determine the fortuitous outcome. Huck’s subsequent decision to risk damnation by rescuing Jim is another indicator of his increasing willingness to take action. Critics have tended to make too much of this development, citing Huck’s “growing moral strength and mature independence” (Adams 355), “the ripening of his self-knowledge” (Marx 332), and “his growing comprehension that the racist ‘truths’ of his upbringing are a monstrous political perversion” (Egan 80). The fact is that Twain’s deadpan technique prevents Huck from achieving any of these larger insights; he decides to help Jim because of the specific experiences they have shared: “I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing” (284). In their eagerness to point a moral, many critics forget what the book’s first reviewer noted: “Huck Finn is a genuine boy... He is a boy, just a boy, only a boy” (Matthews 276).

Huck’s essential boyishness helps to explain his disturbing subservience to Tom Sawyer in the novel’s final sequence. Precisely because Huck does not perceive the larger moral issues it is easy for him to regress to being Tom Sawyer’s companion once more. The escape sequence also gives Twain one last chance to take a swipe at sentimentality and pseudo-aristocracy. Even though it is hard for us to accept the idea that pragmatic Huck and Jim, after all they have been through together, would submit to the insipid notions and inept leadership of Tom, Twain may be trying to stress how strong the dominance of the slaveocracy and the deference of the poor whites and blacks were in the South. How else account for the fact that the poor whites, who had little if any stake in the slave system, followed their “betters” into the horrible slaughter of the Civil War? Both Huck and Jim seem to be taken in by Tom’s ability to “out-superintend” others and by his inflated “style,” a word which acquires increasingly negative connotations as the book progresses. As we have seen, Tom’s style is all ostentation and pyrotechnics designed to distract us from moral truths and bedrock realities. Thus there are multiple ironies in Tom’s remark that “when a prisoner of style escapes, it’s called an evasion” (338). In fact, Huck and Jim can only find genuine freedom if they reject the immoral evasions of Tom’s sentimental style and return to the simple eloquence of their own plain-spoken voices.

Although Twain gives the impression during most of the Phelps sequence that as an artist he is part surgeon and part sword swallow without the ability to tell which vocation is the more valuable, the novel’s last three chapters return to Huck’s authentic deadpan irony. Huck’s remark that Tom “had a dream... and it shot him,” the neighbor ladies’ gossiping about what they would do to “the niggers” implicated in Jim’s escape, the doctor’s egocentric account of neglecting his patients to capture Jim, and the sustained mockery of the racist vigilantes who want to get their “satisfaction” out of Jim by hanging him as an example—these scenes represent Twain at his satiric best. And no one has ever suggested that Huck’s final words aren’t apposite: “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" (363). Huck flees from civilization, however, not because he realizes its inherent corruption, but because he personally has always found it too uncomfortable; his body protests, not his mind. Huck, after all, goes "a good deal on instinct" (291), and it is we who must, by rejecting sentimentality in favor of reality, learn a more general lesson.

To appreciate, one hundred years after the publication of Huckleberry Finn, how Twain discovered some of the deep, enduring patterns of American life, it is only necessary to take a random sampling of contemporary folly: for Emmeline Grangerford substitute any number of today's frothy versemongers; for "The Royal Nonesuch," the pornography industry; for the Boggs killing, the media's dwelling on the latest gruesome atrocity; for the twisted logic of Tom Sawyer, the "we had to destroy that village to save it" rationale of the Vietnam war, and so forth ad infinitum. Nowadays the con games and sentimental scams have multiplied beyond calculation. What is the paltry sum of the king's reformed-pirate ploy compared to the one hundred and fifty million dollars a revivalist preacher raked in recently after he claimed a nine-hundred-foot-high Jesus told him to build a hospital? ("Advanced U.S. Hospital" 3). And surely any student of the present political scene knows that the era of tears and flapdoodle, soul-butter and hogwash, is far from over. Certainly if Twain could visit the United States today, as he returned in his old age to the Hannibal of his boyhood, it would be all too appropriate for the equivalent of Tom Nash to nod toward the gaggle of gawking citizens and trumpet in Twain's ear—Same damned fools, Sam" (Autobiography 37).

Works Cited


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