Mark Twain: The Victorian of Southwestern Humor

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When Mark Twain moved into the New England culture, first in 1870 to its edge at Buffalo, and then in 1871 to one of its centers at Hartford's Nook Farm, he came doubly disguised. Truly from the South, he came to New England as a man from the West, and even his Western identity was itself partially concealed by his fame as the all-American traveler of The Innocents Abroad. While it is hyperbolic to say, as Van Wyck Brooks once did, that the New England Twain entered was "emasculated by the Civil War," the war, together with Westward migration, had reduced the male population of the region, changing somewhat its cultural tone. Many of the remaining writers and public figures were unwittingly participating in the process of Victorianization that Ann Douglas has recently called the "feminization of American culture." In this context, as the deeper layers of Mark Twain's personality expressed themselves, his presence was notably—to use an old-fashioned term in a conventional way—masculine. To genteel society he brought free drinking and smoking, to morality he added humor, to sentiment, burlesque, to seriousness, play. (Only Mark Twain's study had a billiards table.) He was in part, as James M. Cox has observed, "an invader" of the dominant culture of New England.

While occupying New England, a secret Southerner in the North, a man in a feminized world, Mark Twain extended himself imaginatively back into the world of his true origin, the Old Southwest. And in this context, his presence was quite different. Twain's absorption of and contributions to the traditions of Southwestern humor have been extensively studied, but certain important aspects of his performance


as a Southwestern humorist in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have not, I think, been fully perceived. For as he entered the territory of his past to create his finest fiction Twain brought to bear upon it a refinement more characteristic of New England than of the Old Southwest.

That Twain was steeped in the humorous traditions of the Old Southwest goes without saying these days. He owned personal copies of works by Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Joseph M. Field, William Tappan Thompson, George Washington Harris, Johnson Jones Hooper, and Joseph G. Baldwin, and he planned to include most of these writers in *Mark Twain's Library of Humor.* His knowledge of the tradition goes well beyond this, however, for as various critics have shown, the comic tradition of the Old Southwest was, in Bernard De Voto's words, the "matrix of Mark Twain's humor." The scholarly investigation of his relationship to this tradition has thus established specific sources as well as the general influence of milieu, and the result is the widespread recognition that in Mark Twain "Southwestern humor reached its climax." What kind of a climax was it?

The tensions that inform his masterpiece of Southwestern humor, *Huckleberry Finn,* were defined by Twain himself as he moved between his frontier days in the West and South and his genteel days to come in New England. Writing from New York in May 1867 as the Traveling Correspondent for the *Alta California,* Twain posted a now well-known notice of George Washington Harris' work. He praised a collection of Sut Lovingood's yarns, saying that the book "abounds in humor," and then he speculated that while it would "sell well in the West," the "Eastern people" would "call it coarse and possibly taboo it." At the time of his report Twain was clearly in sympathy with Harris' humor, free from genteel taboos, but by the time he came to write *Huckleberry Finn* he was more firmly gov-

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5 "The Matrix of Mark Twain's Humor," *Bookman,* 74 (1931), 172–78.


erned by a strong innate sense of propriety. And this is, I think, the key to understanding what he accomplishes within the tradition he employed. Twain reshapes the tradition of Southwestern humor by writing within it as a Victorian.⁸

To describe him as the Victorian of Southwestern humor is unfortunately to raise the specter of the long regional war waged so brilliantly by Brooks and De Voto (and often so dully by their followers) over Twain’s “ordeal.”⁹ But I am not suggesting that the Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope sold out to New England gentility at the cost of his artistry or that his art was fully nourished by the frontier he left behind him. On the contrary, I am emphasizing an innate propriety that was always a part of Mark Twain, a propriety that, if anything, marked him off from frontier life in the first place and finally led him to settle in New England. It was after all, to summon a single representative example, Twain himself, not those “sensitive & loyal subjects of the kingdom of heaven,” Howells, Livy, and Livy’s mother, who cleaned up the perceived impropriety of Huck’s saying “they comb me all to hell.”¹⁰

Twain’s propriety, what I am calling his Victorianism, expressed itself in Huckleberry Finn in several ways. First, it led him to reshape some of the stock situations and characters common to the tradition of Southwestern humor. Second, it caused him to select from the raw materials of that tradition only certain subjects and, more important, to discard others. And third, it governed his creation of character, leading to the formation of a hero whose nature not only transcends the tradition but still challenges us today. Writing as a Victorian, Twain reformed Southwestern humor.

Four elements of Huckleberry Finn have repeatedly been singled out as particularly common to the tradition of Southwestern humor: the con-men (the Duke and the King), the camp meeting, the circus, and the Royal Nonesuch. But Twain’s presentation of these tradi-

⁸ Used casually in Twain scholarship for years, the term “Victorian” is general but apt. Many of his attitudes and values correspond remarkably with the ethos defined in such standard studies as Walter E. Houghton’s The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957) and Jerome H. Buckley’s The Victorian Temper: A Study in Literary Culture (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1951).

⁹ See Brooks, The Ordeal and Bernard De Voto, Mark Twain’s America (Boston: Little, Brown, 1932).

tional motifs is significantly different from the way they are treated
by other Southwestern humorists. His greater complexity and serious-
ness have often been suggested, and in one of the most extended com-
mentaries on his relation to Southwestern humor, Pascal Covici, Jr.,
has pointed out—as a distinguishing difference—a “preoccupation” in
Twain “with revealing a discrepancy between seeming and reality.”
This is certainly true, but what has been overlooked is the fact that
Twain transforms the reality of such situations and characters even as
he exposes their seeming. The camp meeting is a case in point.
Camp meetings were of course both realities of backwoods life and
stock episodes in the humorous fiction that fastened onto that life.
The differences between Twain’s camp meeting and that of Johnson
Jones Hooper in Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs, the
literary work most often cited as a source, illustrate how Twain
Victorianizes the tradition of Southwestern humor. Hooper’s camp
meeting is at once an orgy, a fleecing, a thrill-filled happening, and a
staged melodrama. The religious longings presumably informing the
meeting are transparently bogus; the impulses that actually animate
the gathering are sexual, monetary, sensational, and theatrical.
Hooper is insistent upon the sensual aspect of the action. “Men and
women,” he writes, “rolled about on the ground, or lay sobbing or
shouting in promiscuous heaps.” He exposes the sexual urgencies
underlying the crowd’s frenzy in a highly suggestive language:

“Keep the thing warm!” roared a sensual seeming man, of stout mould
and florid countenance, who was exhorting among a bevy of young
women, upon whom he was lavishing caresses. “Keep the thing warm,
breathring!—come to the Lord, honey!” he added, as he vigorously hugged
one of the damsels he sought to save.

11 Mark Twain’s Humor: The Image of a World (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ.
12 Hooper is cited as a source in The Art of “Huckleberry Finn,” ed. Hamlin Hill and
Walter Blair (San Francisco: Chandler, 1962), p. 453, and in Adventures of Huckleberry
assessments of how successfully Twain uses Hooper, see De Voto, Mark Twain’s America,
p. 225, and Walter Blair, Mark Twain & “Huck Finn” (Berkeley: Univ. of California
13 Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1845),
p. 119. Subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically in my text. The camp
meetings of both Hooper and Twain should be read in the light of such accounts of the
“real thing” as those given in the Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, The Backwoods
“Gl-o-ree!” yelled a huge . . . woman, as in a fit of the jerks, she threw herself convulsively from her feet, and fell “like a thousand of brick,” across a diminutive old man in a little round hat, who was squeaking consolation to one of the mourners.

“Good Lord, have mercy!” ejaculated the little man. (pp. 120–21)

In his punning Hooper is daring as well as amusing. He writes here very much in the so-called strong masculine vein of Southwestern humor.

In his camp meeting Twain preserves the sense of the meeting’s monetary, sensational, and theatrical impulses, but he all but eliminates the sexual. Huck gives us this description:

The women had on sun-bonnets; and some had linsey-woolsey frocks, some gingham ones, and a few of the young ones had on calico. Some of the young men was barefooted, and some of the children didn’t have on any clothes but just a tow-linen shirt. Some of the old women was knitting, and some of the young folks was courting on the sly.  

This is far from the sexual antics of Hooper’s fanatics, and it is far indeed from his ribald language. In fact, Huck’s acknowledgment of covert play between the sexes is phrased in such a way as to suggest its essential innocence: “the young folks was courting on the sly.” Twain does come somewhat closer to the sensual when he has Huck describe the crowd’s response to the King’s outlandish tale of conversion from piracy to missionary work, but again a transformation of the raw material of Southwestern humor is apparent:

So the king went all through the crowd with his hat, swabbing his eyes, and blessing the people and praising them and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there; and every little while the prettiest kind of girls, with the tears running down their cheeks, would up and ask him would he let them kiss him, for to remember him by; and he always done it; and some of them he hugged and kissed as many as five or six times—(p. 112)

The King is a bit of a lecher, though finally more interested in cash than kissing, and the young girls could be said to be sublimating their sexual urges, but what Twain invites us to laugh at them for is not their sublimated desires but their misplaced sentimentality.

Twain’s expurgation of the traditional camp meeting is representative of the way he Victorianizes the material of Southwestern humor. He effects similar changes in presenting his con men, the circus, and the Royal Nonesuch—his version of Gyascutus, that favorite exhibition of Southwestern lewdness. (Huck says the performance was enough to make “a cow laugh” [p. 127], but he characteristically declines to describe it.) In discussing Twain’s ties to George Washington Harris (Harris of course creates a camp meeting that is almost as lascivious as Hooper’s), one critic has suggested that they share a sense of “man’s predisposition to dehumanize himself.”

But more often than not in Huckleberry Finn Twain refuses to let his characters debase themselves by being the fully carnal, somewhat bestial creatures of their tradition.

Even more important than his virtual bowdlerizing of specific episodes common to Southwestern humor is Twain’s selection of material from that body of writing. The traditional subjects of Southwestern humor have often been defined and even itemized. In the introduction to their fine collection, Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham offer this set of categories:

(1) The hunt
(2) Fights, mock fights, and animal fights
(3) Courtings, weddings, and honeymoons
(4) Frolics and dances
(5) Games, horse races, and other contests
(6) Militia drills
(7) Elections and electioneering
(8) The legislature and the courtroom
(9) Sermons, camp meetings, and religious experiences
(10) The visitor in a humble home
(11) The country boy in the city
(12) The riverboat
(13) Adventures of the rogue
(14) Pranks and tricks of the practical joker
(15) Gambling
(16) Trades and swindles
(17) Cures, sickness and bodily discomfort, medical treatments
(18) Drunks and drinking
(19) Dandies, foreigners, and city slickers
(20) Oddities and local eccentrics

While no single work of Southwestern humor contains all these, some come close. *Huckleberry Finn* does not. What is revealing, however, is not the number of these conventional topics absent from *Huckleberry Finn* but the particular kinds that are absent. It ignores, first of all, those subjects, like courtings, frolics, dances, weddings, and honeymoons, that naturally involve adult sexuality. And secondly, it omits entirely or else skims over those activities, like hunting, fighting, gambling, gaming, horse racing, heavy drinking, and military maneuvering, that are the traditional pastimes of manly backwoods living. (Whenever such activities do appear briefly they are targets of ridicule.) In short, Twain purges from the Southwestern tradition its exuberant celebration of rough-and-tumble masculinity.

D. H. Lawrence’s famous dogmatic summary of the essential American “soul” may not do justice to the heroes of classic American fiction, but the summary is a fitting description of the recurrent hero of Southwestern humor: “hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer.” When Twain appropriates the type he disparages it far more than his predecessors do, and, unlike his forerunners in Southwestern humor, he reveals the pernicious traits in gentleman and commoner alike. The adult white males in *Huckleberry Finn* are indeed hard, isolate, stoic, and lethal. From the new Judge who threatens to reform the drunken Pap “with a shot-gun” to Colonel Sherburn, who does reform the drunken Boggs with a “pistol,” the men in the novel are aggressive and destructive (pp. 21, 121). The book is surcharged with an atmosphere of imminent violence whose source is simply the nature of white males. The ferocity they embody erupts in the antics of Pap, in the search of the slave hunters, in the feud between the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, in the relationship of the Duke to the King, in the mob that rides them out of town on a rail, and in the acts of the *Walter Scott* gang, as well as in the gunning down of Boggs. The terror of this masculine violence is intensified by its arbitrariness. When Huck is seeking information about Cairo the day after he has fooled the pair of slave hunters, he meets a nameless man setting a trotline from his skiff. Their encounter is emblematic of the male world of the novel:

“Mister, is that Cairo?”
“Cairo? no. You must be a blame’ fool.”
“What town is it, mister?”
“If you want to know, go and find out. If you stay here botherin’ around me for about a half a minute longer, you’ll get something you won’t want.”18 (p. 79)

Twain’s imagination seems haunted by the memory of a gratuitous hostility in men that borders on violence. The memory is partly of literature, of the rough men who people Southwestern humor, but it is also a recollection of life, of his life in Hannibal, on the river, and in the West. And no doubt this image of man has something to do with the father, John Marshall Clemens, the Judge and Southern gentleman of whom Mark Twain once secretly recorded: “Silent, austere, of perfect probity and high principle; ungentle of manner toward his children, but always a gentleman in his phrasing—and never punished them—a look was enough, and more than enough.”19 Although Twain is sixty-two when he makes this notation, the remembrance of fear is still strong—“a look was enough, and more than enough.” Hamlin Hill has recently suggested that “fear” was in fact “the controlling emotion” of Mark Twain’s life.20 Certainly fear is the dominant emotion in Huck Finn’s experience, and it is most often a fear engendered by the men of his world (Huck is never afraid of women).

In their verbal and physical aggressions the men in *Huckleberry Finn* express their pride, uphold their honor, and assert their manhood—all of which seem for them somehow in question. Pap’s raging complaint is that “*a man* can’t get his rights” (p. 24, my italics), and Colonel Sherburn’s philippic turns precisely upon the question of what makes “*a man*” (p. 124, Twain’s italics). The issue for Twain is far-reaching. Oddly, although it is central to his life, cropping up as a question of courage in his youth, his river piloting,

18 In “The Raft Episode in *Huckleberry Finn*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*, 14 (1968), 11–20, Peter G. Beidler suggests that some of the meaning of Huck’s encounter with the fisherman has been lost by the deletion of the raftsmen’s passage. If, as Beidler believes, the omitted passage makes it clear that Huck and Jim have already passed Cairo, then its inclusion would explain why the fisherman thinks Huck is a “blame’ fool.” But there is still no explanation for his hostility and gratuitous threat of violence.
his brief Civil War experience, his days in the West, and in particular in his abortive duel, Twain’s sense of manliness has never been fully explored.21 Yet from his Western sketches, on through Huckleberry Finn and Simon Wheeler, Detective, to the late essay “The United States of Lyncherdom,” to mention only a few obvious examples, he was preoccupied with the idea of manliness. Significantly, it was bound up for him with two issues that are central to Huckleberry Finn: the sense of freedom and the concept of the gentleman. In an 1866 letter to his boyhood friend Will Bowen (a part of which was later to emerge in “Old Times on the Mississippi”) Twain conflated manliness, independence, and gentlemanliness (all the italics are his):

I am sorry to hear any harm of any pilot—for I hold those old river friends above all others, & I know that in genuine manliness they assay away above the common multitude. You know, yourself, Bill—or you ought to know it—that all men—kings & serfs alike—are slaves to other men & to circumstances—save, alone, the pilot—who comes at no man’s beck or call, obeys no man’s orders & scorns all men’s suggestions. . . . It is a strange study,—a singular phenomenon, if you please, that the only real, independent & genuine gentlemen in the world go quietly up & down the Mississippi river, asking no homage of any one, seeking no popularity, no notoriety, & not caring a damn whether school keeps or not.22

Huck goes quietly down the Mississippi, asking “no homage of any one, seeking no popularity, no notoriety, & not caring a damn whether school keeps or not.” It is no accident that when Huck struggles with his conscience, trying to bring himself to turn Jim in, Twain specifically has Huck denounce himself for his failure to do the “right” thing in the language of manhood. “I warn’t,” Huck says, “man enough—hadn’t the spunk of a rabbit” (p. 76). On the contrary, of course. In resisting the pressures of his society, the norms that dictate Jim’s return to slavery, Huck demonstrates not only his freedom but also his true manhood. Like the pilot of Twain’s vision, Huck assays above the multitude in genuine manliness. His

21 The sexual dimension of the issue is raised provocatively by G. Legman, Mark Twain: The Mammoth Cod (Milwaukee: Maledicta, 1976), pp. 1–17; but see also my very different “Mark Twain Fights Sam Clemens’ Duel,” Mississippi Quarterly, 33 (1980), 141–53.

fortitude in determining to free Jim at whatever cost to himself stands in stark contrast to the self-vaulting courage of the other white males of the novel—and of their prototypes in previous Southwestern humor. Twain recreates the hero of that tradition in Huck, replacing the aggressive, violent male with a passive, loving one. Further, through Jim, Twain ascribes to Huck an additional status. As a recent critic has pointed out, a number of "labels" are imposed on Huck, none of which fits the reality of his character. Thus to the Widow Douglas he is a "poor lost lamb," and to Pap he is "a good deal of a big-bug," while to Miss Watson he is simply a "fool" (pp. 3, 18, 11). Only Jim, who comes to know Huck intimately on the raft, really apprehends the essence of Huck's character. He articulates for us the significance of Huck. On the most intimate level, Huck is "de ole true Huck," Jim's "bes' fren'," but Huck is for Jim also something more: he is a "white genlman" (p. 76).

Huck is the true man and gentleman of the novel, Twain's most radical departure from the tradition that nurtured him. Before Twain the gentleman was trapped in the frame of the Southwestern tale, reduced to moralizing about the action in polite language, while the free and the manly were represented by the unfeeling, amoral, violent vulgarians of the story itself. But in Huck the free, the manly, and the moral coalesce. In order to create Huck—to recreate the conventional hero of the tradition—Twain altered the formal tactics of Southwestern humor in two important ways. First, he changed the frame, that structural division between the conventional gentleman narrator and his vulgar heroes which created a separation between the author's world of order, reason, and morality, and the actor's life of disorder, violence, and amorality. Twain eliminated this division by fusing, in the words of Kenneth Lynn, "the Gentleman and the Clown" into a "single character," into Huck himself. Second,

Twain profoundly changed the tradition of Southwestern humor by changing the language of its narrative; he transformed, as James M. Cox has put it, the traditional "dialect" into "vernacular." These changes gave birth to Huck, but their implications have not been fully understood.

The union of gentleman and vulgarian suggests, on the face of it, a re-alignment of sympathies—away from the conventional and elite toward the radical and common. This is in fact how Twain's achievement is frequently described. But I would suggest that the effect of the formal fusion is just the reverse: instead of committing himself to the common person through his union of gentleman and vulgarian, Mark Twain *elevates the common* beyond itself. The second formal act operates even more clearly in the same way. For to transform dialect into vernacular is to raise the crude language of a restricted region to the broader plain of a more versatile and more nearly universal speech.

Huck has, as recent critics have emphasized, a dual role in his novel: he is, in Alan Trachtenberg's terms, both "the verbalizer of the narrative" and "a character within the narrative." As verbalizer of the narrative, although his language is vernacular, Huck preserves a linguistic decorum—a decorum that would have puzzled the likes of, say, Sut Lovingood, but pleased almost any of the Southwestern *authors*. Huck reports that the speech of Pap "was all the hottest kind of language" (p. 25), and he tells us that, while he himself had "stopped cussing" living at the Widow Douglas' because "the widow didn't like it," he "took to it again" (p. 22) living in the woods with Pap. But of course Huck never *uses* the words, his or Pap's. Huck's propriety of language within the vernacular is one sign of the infusion of the gentleman into Huck—of his more Victorian character. Another is Huck's treatment of sexual material. Here the verbalizer and the character become identical, for not only does Huck as narrator shy away from sexual or sexually suggestive language but Huck as actor also shuns the erotic. The most striking example of Huck's

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modesty occurs when he and Jim enter the floating house that contains the dead Pap. To the reader it is clear that the house—with its "naked" dead man, "old whisky bottles," "bed," two old dirty calico dresses," and "some women’s underclothes" (pp. 43-44)—is either a bawdy house or a house where bawdy activities have been pursued. Huck's narrative gives no sign of whether he has taken this in, but what it does reveal is his response to the graffiti on the walls. Huck says, "all over the walls was the ignorantest kind of words and pictures, made with charcoal" (p. 44). His condemnation of such writings as "ignorantest" is more than a joke; it is indicative of the delicacy in Huck that leads him to keep his own narrative language free from crudity. Further, incorrect as it is, Huck's use of "ignorantest" draws some of its force from the recent conflict in his life between the widow Douglas, who would educate him in the ways of civilization, and Pap, who would keep him as ignorant as he is in order to insure that he is not "better'n" his father (p. 18). But Huck is clearly more civilized than Pap in speech as well as action (as verbalizer as well as character). Although Jim conceals the fact of Pap's death from Huck, Huck's rejection of the pornographic is tantamount to a rejection of the world of his father at its deepest core.28

Huck's avoidance of profanity and his disapproval of the pornographic point to his character as authentic gentleman, just as his courage in behalf of Jim points to his manliness. Transformed as he is from the crude, violent, and amoral hero of Southwestern humor, Huck can be seen as the unlikely representative of true civilization. Twain's novel thus presents more than a simple conflict between a debased society and a primitive goodness; it reveals in Huck the foundation of a genuine civilization. That foundation is nicely summed up in Ortega y Gasset's insistence that the human root of civilization is "the desire on the part of each individual to take others into consideration."29 In these terms, Huck, the most considerate free person in the novel, is clearly the most civilized.

28 If we take into account the distinction insisted upon by Watson Branch, "Hard-Hearted Huck: 'No Time to Be Sentimentering;" Studies in American Fiction, 6 (1978), 212-18, between the past when the events of the narrative occurred and the present in which Huck writes of them, then Huck's description of the scene of Pap's death can be said to be informed by Huck's knowledge of the death.
29 Jose Ortega y Gasset, The Revolt of the Masses (1932; rpt. New York: Norton, 1957), p. 76. For Ortega barbarism becomes the disposition "not" to "take others into account," a formulation that fits well the other free white men in the novel."
Henry Nash Smith has called attention to the presence in the novel of "a residue of the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility," but no one to my knowledge has made the obvious connection between this cult of sensibility and Huck himself. The historical emphasis upon sensibility carried well beyond the eighteenth century of course, becoming a prominent feature of nineteenth-century Victorian life and art, especially the "feminized" American version of it. In attending to such emotionalism Twain was not only being true to his novel's setting in the 1830s or 1840s; he was also commenting on current postures in his own society. The sentimental was, in short, very much with Mark Twain. It was also in him. Twain's burlesque of the cult in *Huckleberry Finn* is in part, I believe, a check against his own susceptibility, and in part a diversion calculated to deflect our attention away from Huck's own overabundance of emotion. A further disguise of "de ole true Huck" is provided by Huck's role as critic of the sentimental. Huck memorably dismisses emotional outpourings as "tears and flapdoodle," "soul-butter and hogwash," "rot and slush" (p. 138). But Huck himself is governed by intense feeling, and at times he gives voice to his emotions in fairly sentimental ways. Unlike the various imposters in the novel who call themselves gentlemen, weeping soulful tears only to perpetrate violent acts, Huck is always a gentleman. His tenderness is extraordinary. For he is, I suggest, Mark Twain's version of the eighteenth-century Man of Feeling.

The ideas that generated the Man of Feeling may be summarized as follows: first, the identification of virtue with acts of benevolence and with feelings of universal good will; second, the assumption that good affections, benevolent feelings, are the natural outgrowth of the heart of man; third, the conviction that tenderness is manly; and fourth, the belief that benevolent emotions, even anguished ones, result in pleasant, self-approving feelings. The first three of these, I suggest, fit Huck's character perfectly. He is virtuous in his predisposition to aid virtually everyone he encounters, from the Widow Douglas to the *Walter Scott* gang, from the Grangerfords to the Shepherdsons, from Aunt Sally to Jim, from Mary Jane Wilks to

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31 I follow closely here R. S. Crane, "Suggestions Toward a Genealogy of the 'Man of Feeling'," *ELH*, 1 (1934), 205-30.
the con-men who would defraud her. This universal good will in Huck is indeed rooted in his heart, the one Twain praised as "sound." And without question Huck's tenderness is manly; his tears are strong and genuine. Twain's departure from the archetype of the Man of Feeling lies in his rejection of the fourth engendering idea: the notion that pleasure can be derived from painful benevolent emotions. This is a crucial variation, one that saves Twain's character from absurd postures of self-approving joy, and more important, one that makes Huck a comic Man of Feeling. Huck never feels good about his goodness; his altruistic emotions—with the possible exception of his aid to Mary Jane—never give him egoistic satisfaction. For of course Huck always thinks that in following his fine feelings he is acting immorally. His confusion is the source of our laughter.

"I cried a little," Huck says, "when I was covering up Buck's face" (p. 98), and when he learns that Jim has been sold by the Duke and the King, he reports, "then I set down and cried; I couldn't help it" (p. 177). In his narrative Huck is recurrently tearful, but most often it is the refusal to set forth his feelings—"I ain't going to tell all that happened" (p. 97)—that persuade us of the depth and authenticity of his emotions. Huck's mode of narrating, in both its language and its flat, matter-of-fact style, conveys his tenderness without sentimental excess. Nothing is more persuasive in just this way than the moment when Huck, accompanied by Tom, who is for once silent and forgotten, first sees Jim in the privacy of the Phelps cabin after their forced separation: "We crept in under Jim's bed into the cabin, and pawed around and found the candle and lit it, and stood over Jim a while, and found him looking hearty and healthy, and then we woke him up gentle and gradual" (p. 207). At times, however, Huck's account, in style and language, flirts with the "rot and slush" of sentimental piety: "It was only a little thing to do, and no trouble; and it's the little things that smoothes people's roads the most, down here below" (p. 160). Only the fact that the "it" here is a lie (one that "wouldn't cost nothing" [p. 160]) saves Huck's utterance from emotional stickiness. What the remark reveals is how bound together in Huckleberry Finn humor and sentiment are.

Twain, who said surprisingly little about humor for a humorist, once insisted that "a man can never be a humorist, in thought or deed,
until he can feel the springs of pathos.”33 It is often the pathos of Huck’s experience as gentle Man of Feeling that creates the humor in the book. And this, too, is something new in the tradition of Southwestern humor. What is generally thought to be Huck’s finest moment, his decision to steal Jim out of slavery and go to hell, is both his greatest moment of pathos and one of the most humorous moments in the entire book. The pathos emerges as Huck faces his dilemma:

I went to the raft, and set down in the wigwam to think. But I couldn’t come to nothing. I thought till I wore my head sore, but I couldn’t see no way out of the trouble. After all this long journey, and after all we’d done for them scoundrels, here was it all come to nothing, everything all busted up and ruined, because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars. (pp. 177-78)

Huck’s language remains steadfastly colloquial, and its earthy incorrectness checks against sentimentality at the same time it provokes amusement. But his style significantly veers away from its characteristic pattern. Huck most often writes run-on sentences that lack subordination and so equalize the events he strings together.34 Here, however, emotion begins to build in the fourth sentence as Huck registers in two subordinates the catastrophe of Jim’s return to slavery as a betrayal of a shared past: “After all this long journey, and after all we’d done for them scoundrels, here was it all come to nothing.” The inversion, “here was it,” is a further departure from Huck’s usually natural speech, one designed to focus and intensify feeling. His emotion breaks into a moral indignation at the end that is realized in the language of feeling hearts and in a syntax that bespeaks compounding emotion: “because they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars.”

The climax of Huck’s feeling comes in the full recollection of his time with Jim, one of the most admired passages in the novel:

I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn’t do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking—thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and 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. But somehow I couldn’t seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I’d see him standing my watch on top of his’n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and such-like times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had small-pox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he’s got now; and then I happened to look around, and see that paper. (p. 179)

The pathos here is worthy of Dickens. Huck’s style becomes rather conventionally poetic, as he employs repetition, alliteration, assonance, and artfully balanced rhythms. He is in fact writing in the cadences of gentility, evoking refined gentlemanly sentiment: “all the time, in the day, and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing.”35 This is a touching, idealized image of the times on the raft, more lyric than any on-the-spot descriptions of them. This welling of pathetic emotion makes unbelievable, moving, and comic Huck’s desperate resolution—“All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (p. 180)—for of course we know that no one of such fine and tender feeling can be damned. Twain achieves here precisely what he once praised in William Dean Howells’ fiction as the power to make the reader “cry inside” and “laugh all the time.”36

35 In Democracy and the Novel (New York: Oxford Univ. Press. 1978), pp. 109–14. Henry Nash Smith also calls attention to Huck’s shift into a more conventionally language and style. For Smith this betrays the moral contamination of Huck’s consciousness by the dominant culture. I would add that it reveals as well the impress of the cult of sensibility. As he slides into a more or less conventionally poetic style, Huck voices the delicacy of feeling espoused, though seldom attained, by the dominant culture: writing for a moment in the cadences of gentility, he in effect authenticates the ideal of feeling so spuriously upheld by the culture.

36 Twain-Howells Letters, II, 533.
Jesse Bier has explained one impetus behind Southwestern humor as a reaction against the "prettification" of American writing in the nineteenth century. Twain was in turn reacting against the coarseness of the Southwestern tradition. While exerting to one degree or another his rowdy-side within the New England culture he invaded, Twain expressed his own propriety while writing within the tradition of Southwestern humor. (The impulse to run counter to the norm was always strong in this man who contained within himself so many contrary selves.) Far from being a simple bowdlerizing, Twain's Victorian reformation on the material and hero of Southwestern humor enacted a profound concept whose cultural implications are still challenging. In its tradition and beyond it to our time Huckleberry Finn is a radical novel.

Huckleberry Finn is still challenging today because of its portrayal of a Man of Feeling whose degree of tenderness defies not only the sexual stereotypes of Southwestern humor but also the still-prevailing values of our own times. Huck's delicacy and tenderness exceed, even today, the popular sense of what constitutes a man's feelings. Leslie Fiedler's now-famous perception of a secret "male love" at the center of Huckleberry Finn both points accurately to a core of feeling and misconstrues it into a "homoerotic" bond. More recently, Harold H. Kolb, Jr., has reviewed Huck's "seemingly motiveless benignity" and ended by calling him a "seven dollar Friendship's Offering moral idealist." Apparently, it is only by employing provocatively a skewed language of love, as Fiedler does, or by using ironically the sentimental language of nineteenth-century women's books, as Kolb does, that we can come to terms with Huck's fineness of feeling. His kind of manliness seems to elude our language for it, even today.

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