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## Into the Parlor: the Persona of Mark Twain as Architect and Satirist of the Genteel Tradition

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Into the Parlor: the Persona of Mark Twain as  
Architect and Satirist of the Genteel Tradition

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Introduction

Mark Twain is often charged with the title, “a man ahead of his time.” His wit, both as a writer and oft-quoted persona, has enabled him to become a renowned influence on the American canon. Early twentieth century modernist writers have lauded Twain’s work as pioneering, the beginning of an entirely new era of literature altogether. Ernest Hemingway once commented that all American literature owes itself to *Huckleberry Finn*. These conceptions of Twain are not necessarily hyperbole, but they do not take into account the fictitiousness of “Mark Twain” himself.

Though it was well-known that Mark Twain was a pseudonym for a man named Samuel Clemens, the invention of the ‘Twain’ persona enabled him to purposely pull a figurative veil over his past. Sam Clemens was a Missourian, a week-long Confederate, a drawling Southwestern native with only a formal a grade school education. His father was chronically unlucky when it came to the game of capitalism, and his family spent most of the 1830s and 1840s in poverty. Clemens held various apprenticeships, had immense wanderlust, eventually becoming river boat pilot—an occupation renowned for its proponents’ attraction to red light districts—and a cub reporter in Nevada during westward expansion, popularly known as the Wild, Wild West. This is not to say that the author was ashamed of his past nor his ruffian disposition. It seems, rather, to be an intense awareness of the cultural and social milieu of the nineteenth century—compounded by Clemens’s own capitalist fantasies of the wealth and comfort he was denied as a young child—that led to the creation of an alias with a far more striking, less slippery, puncturing quality: “Mark Twain.”



The entity of “Mark Twain,” both in his lifetime and today, is a household name associated with rich, picaresque humor of the nineteenth century boyhood experience, traveling, emerging technology, cultural criticism, and unwavering wit. That said, Mark Twain is also one of the most frequently misquoted personas in the American literary canon. It seems even in the contemporary world of search engines and extensive archives, any witticism that evokes a self-deprecating humanity is attributed to the humorist. Such false history bespeaks the extensive apotheosizing that has occurred since his death. But it remains pertinent that even to this day, Mark Twain also remains one of the most controversial nineteenth century writers. Today, scholars, readers, critics, activists, and students argue over the antiquated lexicon and historical racism that saturates the author’s prose. In his own day, Twain was both ridiculed and lauded for the progressive commentary that he continuously unleashed onto his society.

The nineteenth century is remembered as a turning point in American society, in large part because of the art created by the like of Twain. His innovativeness, both stylistically and thematically, led directly into the twentieth century modernism literary era. Twain’s satire works mostly in subversive modes of cultural criticism, and while there was no determined name for American philosophy at the time, Twain was explicitly aware of his concurrent implication in and disdain for a particular attitude that saturated his cultural moment. The genteel tradition, a term coined by Harvard philosopher George Santayana in 1911, only a year after Twain’s death, is a habit of philosophical disjointedness in American society. Amidst “aggressive enterprise” and booming capitalism—sky-scrapers, industrialization, inventions meant to make life more efficient and allow people time to enjoy life—there remained, in the arts and academia, a sense of rote tradition, aesthetic and moral haughtiness, and exclusive artistic sentiments.

Much of the genteel tradition is based in the Calvinist past of America, but only insofar as the methodology and action of the denomination's strict ethical code remained embedded in the fabric of the nation. The spiritual, loftier connotations had been reduced, boiled down to their ritualistic piths and refined to the point of meaninglessness. What's more, it generated a sense of psychic complacency—a static mindfulness that was incongruent and comparatively regressive next to American will, which brought on the Civil War and westward expansion as methods of active progress. The genteel, reserved and distinctly feminine, contrived from empty ornamentation metaphysical meaning, and maintained censorious power over art and literature too vibrant for its uniform gaudiness. Twain found himself apart of this tradition by way of the people who helped shape his career. His editors, literary comrades, and later even his own family restrained much of his insurrectionary energy under the guise of uplifting his artistic status.

The best example of Twain's complex relationship with the genteel tradition is, of course, best demonstrated in his literature. *Roughing It*, published in 1888, is a picaresque novel depicting a fictional recount of Clemens' time in the Wild West. He travelled in a covered wagon from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Carson City, Nevada, with his brother, Orion, in the 1860s, escaping the Civil War raging back East. In it, Twain portrays himself as a tenderfoot leaving home for the first time, who is naive and eager for new experiences. During the brothers' journey, they hear the legend of Slade, a terrifying and murderous outlaw who is renown throughout the Wild West.

Slade was born in Illinois, of good parentage. At about twenty-six years of age he killed a man in a quarrel and fled the country. At St. Joseph, Missouri, he joined one of the early California-bound emigrant trains, and was given the post of train-master. One day on the plains he had an angry dispute with one of his wagon-drivers, and both drew their revolvers. But the driver was the quicker artist, and has his weapon cocked first. So Slade

said it was a pity to waste life on so small a matter, and proposed that the pistols be thrown on the ground and the quarrel settled by a fist-fight. The unsuspecting driver agreed, and threw down his pistol—whereupon Slade laughed at his simplicity, and shot him dead! (Twain, *Roughing It*, 60)

This introduction to the famous outlaw riles the reader's sense of excitement—Slade is the kind of ruthless, cunning villain that an audience adores. His respectable Illinois beginnings and “good parentage” only emphasize his mythic quality, exaggerating the quasi-archetypal figure he has become. Like the deified heroes of comic books, Slade's greatness comes out of humble origins and bespeaks both talent and a destiny for fame. Here, Twain is crafting the anti-hero—who may just be a “hero” in the context of the mythological Wild, Wild West. Slade's strategy for success is, of course, rather unsportsmanlike. His deceitful tactics make a mockery of the honorable, rule-adhering wagon-driver, but the man who wins his life by any means necessary remains the victor. After this ordeal, Slade officially becomes a “Wanted Man,” and so the story goes that:

[h]e made his escape, and lived a wild life for awhile, dividing his time between fighting Indians and avoiding an Illinois sheriff, who had been sent to arrest him for his first murder. It is said that in one Indian battle he killed three savages with his own hand, and afterward cut off their ears and set them, with his compliments, to the chief of the tribe. Slade soon gained a name for fearless resolution, and this was sufficient merit to procure for him the important post of overland division-agent at Galesburg, [...] For some time previously, the company's horses had been frequently stolen, and the coaches delayed, by gangs of outlaws, who were wont to laugh at the idea of any man's having the temerity to resent such outrages, Slade resented them promptly. The outlaws soon found that the new agent was a man who did not fear anything that breathe date breath of life. He made short work of all offenders. The result was that delays ceased, the company's property was let alone, and no matter what happened or who suffered, Slade's coaches went through, every time! True, in order to bring about such wholesome change, Slade had to kill several men—some say three, others say four, and others six—but the world was the richer for their loss” (*Roughing It*, 60-61).

The business-side of Slade further shows Twain's talent for the unfamiliar and incongruent. The story of Slade reconciles ostensibly positive attributes—great family, business success, even, at this time in America, murdering Native Americans—with morally questionable practices—running from the sheriff, killing men who stood in the way of his “resolutions.” Such fearlessness and low regard for human life is only emphasized by the larger-than-life persona this desperado has created for himself. Furthermore, the truth of Slade's story is itself questionable, stretched and aggrandized by gossip and hearsay. He is noted as “an outlaw among outlaws,” and Twain's account revels in the motifs of senseless violence, celebrity, and criminality amidst the Midwestern American landscape. Twain concurrently satirizes and romanticizes the murderous and lawless actions of anti-authoritarian idols who helped characterize the Wild West. Deeply situated in a realm of satire, lovers of Westerns may even be offended by the subtle audacity of Slade, “at once the most bloody, the most dangerous and the most valuable citizen that inhabited the savage fastnesses of the mountains” (Twain, *Roughing It*, 61).

Unlike most legendary personas, the narrator of *Roughing It* is eventually brought “face-to-face” with the outlaw. What he finds is not the “half-savage” he believed, but rather a gentleman with impeccable table manners:

In due time we rattled up to a stage-station, and sat down to breakfast with a half-savage, half-civilized company of armed and bearded mountaineers, ranchmen and station employees. The most gentlemanly- appearing, quiet and affable officer we had yet found along the road in the Overland Company's service was the person who sat at the head of the table, at my elbow. Never youth stared and shivered as I did when I heard them call him SLADE!

Here was romance, and I sitting face to face with it!—looking upon it—touching it—hobnobbing with it, as it were! Here, right by my side, was the actual ogre who, in fights and brawls and various ways, had taken the lives of twenty-six human beings, or all men lied about him! I suppose I was the proudest stripling that ever traveled to see strange lands and wonderful people.

He was so friendly and so gentle-spoken that I warmed to him in spite of his awful history. It was hardly possible to realize that this pleasant person was the pitiless scourge of the outlaws, the raw-head-and-bloody-bones the nursing mothers of the mountains terrified their children with. (Twain, *Roughing It*, 63)

With an astounding and perhaps anti-climactic meeting, the man—the legend—the scourge of the Wild West—is exposed to be as refined as white sugar. He has impeccable table manners, “so friendly” and “so gentle-spoken,” the youthful narrator is more aghast at his “quiet and affable,” and personified “romance.” Twain has comically conflated the hyper-masculinity of the Wild West and its grapevine folklore with the genteel attitude of a Northern gentleman. Such geniality and comportment bespeaks Twain’s ability to make the rougher aspects of the Wild West palatable for his Eastern readers. In this particular portrait, the reputation of the outlaw—and of the West itself—is redeemed in the eyes of the genteel reader. The narrator, our tender-footed, unnamed Twain, poses as a stand-in for the genteel audience expected to purchase his work. Due to the apparent respectability of the dusty, blood-splattered brigand, Twain invites his audience into the West, to laugh with him at any absurd detail he observes. The Western portrait he paints marries the myth to supposed “fact.” The author manages to uphold the rowdy character of the West while also preserving the genteel culture of its Eastern settlers.

Twain continued this theme of reconciling the rough and the refined in much of his literature. But Twain retained this platform only insofar as he employed the syntactical and moralizing vocabulary deemed acceptable by his so-called “peers.” Soon after his fame became a stable force, Twain became increasingly experimental, taking stylistic and comedic risks. To occupy the outsider’s perspective—for example, the first-person vernacular syntax of *Huckleberry Finn*—is to defy those who granted “Mark Twain” the permission to exercise his

talent upon a welcoming audience. Twain's catalogue qualifies him as both an insider and an outsider, able to straddle the society's circle and propose awareness of that which is particularly ridiculous about the American social psyche. Read in its historical context, through the lens of Santayana's cultural criticism of 19th century America, Twain's literature becomes a trove of incredible progressivism, prejudice, and poignancy. H.L. Mencken, in his essay "Puritanism as a Literary Force," focuses throughout on the misconception of Twain as a mere humorist:

This conviction that human life is a seeking without a finding, that its purpose is impenetrable, that joy and sorrow are alike meaningless, you will see written largely in the work of most great creative artists. It is obviously the final message, if any message is genuinely to be found there, of the nine symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven, or, at any rate, of the three which show any intellectual content at all. Mark Twain, superficially a humourist and hence an optimist, was haunted by it in secret [...] (Mencken, 16).

Mencken touches on one aspect of the Twain/Clemens dichotomy that indeed "haunted" the author well after his death. Despite successfully publishing several controversial novels in his lifetime, Clemens was never able explicitly to confront the issues facing American culture and religion. As Mencken suggests, the most radical of Twain's personal meditations on humanity were unpublishable, whether censored by the man himself, his editors, or later, as the executives of his estate, his children. Twain's talent for subversive humor can appear optimistic simply because of the fact that he is so funny; he must be happy—a half-truth that prevented Santayana from realizing the political and philosophical insight of the humorist at large. We will examine the ways in which Twain both upheld and refuted the genteel tradition that infected American society and art during his historical moment in the works of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, respectively. When he married Olivia Langdon, Sam Clemens departed from the atypically mobile American experience he enjoyed as a boy and young man in the

Antebellum South and period of westward expansion that occurred during and after the Civil War. His views on the touchstone issues of this period—slavery, manifest destiny, and even his contemporaries in art and literature—were heavily veiled by his subversive wit or whitewashed entirely by his editors. This is not to say that Twain was at constant war with outside censorship; he greatly enjoyed the comfort that his success brought him and was at times guilty of complacency within the status quo, which Santayana argues allowed the genteel tradition to subvert honest art and philosophy in America.

Indeed, for all Twain's self-censorship, his subtle wit and irony as an author allowed the more oblivious reader to remain unaware of his implication in cultural hypocrisy, bigotry, and discrimination, seen in almost every facet of genteel and liberal complacency. Santayana's charge to American society to self-reflect is in many ways exemplified (or ironically undone) by the characters in Twain's literature; yet their age, race, and literacy saw them only amounting to entertainment for their audience. Twain characterizes with depth and sincerity the impious, the underdog, and the subservient, bringing to light a history which concurrently recognizes, contradicts and turns inward that of the American white middle-and upper-classes. By looking at the life of Sam Clemens leading to his literary success, we see the ways in which his upbringing and the personal connections he made lead him to create some of the most revered characters and novels in the American literary canon.

## Genesis: The Making of “Mark Twain” as a Literary Persona

Before Mark Twain, there was Sam Clemens. As a poor boy from a large Missouri family, young Sam’s upbringing was a critical source of inspiration for some of his most renowned literature. The town of Hannibal, where the Clemens’ lived for most of Sam’s life, is today a living memorial to the man and his work. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* are both set in a fictitious town similar to Sam’s, and several landmarks in these novels—the caves that Tom and Becky explore, the island that Huck and Jim inhabit—exist in Hannibal. The use of childhood memories in these particular works acknowledges Clemens’s Southern heritage—not so much to reveal the specific details of his birthplace, but the mannerisms, dialects, and values of the South that laid the foundation for so much of his persona as Mark Twain. Sam Clemens selected this pseudonym only after he had left the South, piloted a steamboat up and down the Mississippi River, and finally moved West; it was not known widely until he had moved to the Northeast. Twain’s celebrity was indeed steadily paced, but the origins of the name itself bespeak an unwavering fondness for the South, and, despite the author’s general wanderlust, a desire to hearken back to the youthful innocence of his Hannibal boyhood.

Clemens’s life leading up to his literary success is imperative to an understanding of how his literature influenced the culture around him. An ostensible outsider to the world of the literary artists of his day, the rowdy Southerner’s upbringing was not one typical of a literary mastermind. With little formal education and a wandering spirit, Sam saw much more of America than his peers and found himself cynically aware of its particular pitfalls and hypocritical beliefs. He escaped the genteel tradition until he adopted it, and only then came to despise it. A look at the life of the man before he became the author bespeaks a legacy of



confronting stereotypes and general discontent—indications of his innate lack of subscription to society's expectations.

### The Early Years

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. The sixth of seven children, Clemens experienced death at a young age as only three of his siblings survived to adulthood. Born to a devout Calvinist mother, Clemens was instilled with deep sense of mortal guilt at an early age, exacerbated by the death of two of his younger siblings when he was a boy and young man. Sickly and small, young Sam was prone to sleep walking. He was born prematurely and was “hounded” by anxiety and “seismic shifts of mood” (Powers, 9). Clemens's mother, Jane, had little hope for young Sam, assuming the boy hadn't much to aspire to at all. Only four of the Clemens children survived childhood: the eldest, Orion, who played a large role in Sam's wanderlust, Pamela, who remained in Missouri, Sam, and the youngest, Henry.

In 1839, the family moved to Hannibal, Missouri, where Sam would spend the duration of his childhood into early adolescence. While fathers are mysteriously absent from most of his literature, Sam Clemens's own father, John Marshall Clemens, was in the home and was always looking to get rich quick. A spirited entrepreneur without any real talent for success, John Marshall was a chronic failure and an embarrassment to his Virginia gentleman roots. The family lived in various states of transition and poverty for most of Sam's childhood.

Despite their financial unrest, the Clemens family did own slaves—the exact number has been disputed by personal account and public record. Sam recalls an experience with young boy slave who used to constantly sing and whistle a song taught to him by his mother. Young Sam

complained, and his mother reprimanded him, reminding her son that the young boy had been separated from his mother and would probably never see her again. Sam was sobered by this notion, and as the Civil War loomed, the wheels had already been set in motion for Sam's lifelong pushback against racial prejudice. In addition to fostering her son's progressive mind, Jane Clemens is also famous for instilling in Sam an altruistic love of animals, especially cats. Sam's boyhood would be cherished better in retrospect. In his autobiography, Mark Twain writes, "when I was a boy everybody was poor but didn't know it; and everybody was comfortable and did know it" (MTA, 33). He describes the social norms of Hannibal with a surety that comes only with having been raised within them, and does so with reverence, calling the system "a little democracy which was full of liberty, equality, and the Fourth of July, and sincerely so, too" (Paine, 120). Twain's life would be bookended by both structure and patriotism, but he would feel differently about the circumstances on the other side. The emphasis that Mark Twain placed on this particular point in one's childhood—the in-between of formal education and infancy—lends itself to an understanding of the man's high regard for innocence as a purveyor of both idealism and insight.

### Clemens At Work

Like Tom Sawyer, Sam Clemens had no patience for school, preferring instead to spend his time with the son of the town drunk. In 1847, his father died. Sam was able to formally quit school then (as opposed to the occasional playing of hooky), at the age of twelve. This kicked off a period of "fitful job hopping" that "went on for about a year and half" as young Sam attempted to find a niche or trade that was both stimulating and lucrative. He worked at a grocery store, an

apothecary shop, a blacksmith's shop, and as a paper boy. His mother, Jane, helped him find work a bookstore, of which Clemens has recalled, "the customers bothered me so much I could not read with any comfort" (Powers, 45). He went on to work "part-time as a printer's devil at the Hannibal *Gazette*," learning to typeset text on a printing press similar to the one used by Benjamin Franklin centuries earlier. Powers recounts that Sam "claimed that he even spent a week studying the law, but gave it up 'because it was so prosy and tiresome'" (Powers, 46). Finally, in 1848, the Hannibal *Gazette* was purchased by a twenty-four year old named Joseph P. Ament. Unpaid, young Sam was reimbursed in hand-me-down clothes and the occasional hot meal. At the Hannibal *Courier*, Clemens was introduced to a handful of "eccentric misfits," which Powers asserts was typical for the newspaper business, "whether in a rural outpost or a great city" (Powers, 48). These men were, to various extents, the village that helped raise the brawling, amoral Clemens who made his way to the land of outlaws in the Wild Wild West.

But before Clemens embarked upon his own version of manifest destiny, he was lounging in the shade of his brother's shadow. In 1851, Orion Clemens opened his own publishing house. As Powers writes, he "needed all the help he could get" (Powers, 53), and fifteen-year-old Sam was much better suited for success than Orion had ever been. Like his late father, Orion was prone to "los[ing] his enthusiasm" for projects, growing depressed in the middle of them, and calling in a family favor. John Marshall had done this many times over with his brother-in-law, and eventually they became estranged. While Sam never truly abandoned his brother, he did satirize him mercilessly—blatantly as "Orion" in *Roughing It*; more discreetly as one of the "Extraordinary Twins," Angelo Capello, in *Pudd'n Head Wilson*.

This satire was compounded by the fact that Sam “pitied, bankrolled, and safeguarded his sibling” (Powers, 53). Orion founded the *Hannibal Journal* in 1851, and Sam used the opportunity to begin publishing short, satiric sketches and local news items. Despite his mild resentment of Orion’s shortcomings, Sam was fiercely protective of his brother, going so far as to engage in a battle with the publisher of a rival paper who “made the grace, if unsuspecting, mistake of riddling Orion Clemens in print” (Powers, 52). At sixteen, young Clemens had a clear talent for invective wit without a shred of refinement, often scandalizing his older, serious brother. Such a relationship—the tawdry tenderfoot and bumbling gentleman—served as important fodder not only for Sam’s literary career, but also for the persona of Mark Twain in general.

Growing up in Hannibal, Sam’s “universe was constricted to the little river town that had held him since the age of four” (Powers, 58), but after a few arduous years in the type-setting and publishing business, Sam was growing weary of knowing the river life only from the banks. After a few final sketches and stories—a “final boyhood display of his developing gift of ‘voice’—of tonal and syntactic mimicry” (Powers, 60)—published in Orion’s *Journal*, Sam alerted his mother of his plans to leave. A headline appeared on May 25, 1853: “*Wanted! An Apprentice to the Printing Business. Apply soon*” (Powers, 60). With that, Sam travelled South to St. Louis, vaguely planning to find a job in publishing while staying with Pamela and her husband. By mid-June of that year, Sam had boarded a steamboat and set out down the Mississippi. He writes in his autobiography of the memory, “I disappeared one night and fled to St. Louis,” (Twain, *MTA*, 94). Sam Clemens returned to Hannibal “just six more times in his life”

(Powers, 61). He inhabited Hannibal again only through literature, immortalizing in Tom and Huck the woes and pleasures of Southern boyhood.

### Pilot's Life

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman. We had transient ambitions of other sorts, but they were only transient. [...] These ambitions faded out, each in turn; but the ambition to be a steamboatman always remained. (Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 32)

Sam's initial stint in St. Louis is not well-documented, but it is notable that this was his first taste of city life. There, his type-setting skills were considered lethargic and imprecise—perhaps more telling of the kind of boss in Orion than the worker in Sam. Still, his skills couldn't keep him a steady income, and young Sam set off on his own, traveling North by steamboat and train. He worked on and off for small presses and bustling publishing houses. As an itinerant publisher, Sam travelled to Illinois, Washington, D.C., Iowa, Ohio, New York and Philadelphia, chronicling his journey as a passenger on a riverboat into notebooks—something which proved to be integral to his future literary endeavors.

Into these, over four decades, he poured “found data”: wisps of experience and anecdotes; bursts of indignation, opinion, regret; newly minted aphorisms, maps real and imagined; German vocabulary; timetables and laundry lists; notes on the works of Shakespeare and Matthew Arnold; the listing of facts of all kinds; and, as always, the stunning harvest of his intense noticing (“Sailors walk with hands somewhat spread & palms turned backward”) that made his writing burn truer and more mimetic of life-as-lived than anyone else's in American or Europe. (Powers, 69)

These notes would not reveal their true potential until much later, instead serving as practice and dormant dossier for his future career. Orion closed his *Journal* in 1855, and re-opened shop permanently in the hometown of his new wife, Mollie. Sam and Henry joined Orion's Ben

Franklin Book and Job Office: Cards, Circulars, Bill Heads, Bills Lading, Posters, and Colored Work, Printed, in the same year. All three brothers failed to bring in adequate money, especially Orion, whose wife gave birth in September. Sam, annoyed at his slim paychecks, unable to write, again set out by boat to various port cities and took to meandering around the countryside. Far away from Bleeding Kansas and the political hotbeds of the moment, he found himself in Cincinnati and Keokuk with little to do and even less to write about.

Life grew lackluster for twenty-one-year-old Clemens. He had dreams of venturing abroad, to Europe or Brazil. On February 16, 1857, he boarded a steamboat, the *Paul Jones*, “piloted by one Horace Bixby” (Powers, 75), whose persona is known most completely from his description in Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi*, published in 1883. In that account, Twain writes that it wasn’t until the boat entered port in New Orleans that he even considered this to be his opportunity to make a boyhood fantasy a reality. Broke and almost arrested, Sam Clemens had the epiphany. It took three days to convince Bixby that he should take the young man on as his apprentice.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain admits there was a steep learning curve when it came to the art of steamboat piloting. But to be the pupil of Horace Bixby meant having the wherewithal to study under an unrelenting master. Imposing, foul-mouthed, and fond of red whiskey, Horace Bixby was the archetypal pilot. “When I say I’ll learn a man the river, I mean it,” Bixby tells Twain gravely, “And you can depend on it, I’ll learn him or kill him” (Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, 53).

And indeed, Sam Clemens, “in time,” came to know the river as “a wonderful book [...] which told its mind to [him] without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if

it it uttered them with a voice” (Twain, *Life*, 57). His notebooks, still regularly updated, were suddenly filled with rudimentary maps of the Mississippi. When he wasn’t piloting, Sam, an autodidact, read voraciously, learned French, smoked cigars, and outfitted his notebooks with coded river secrets. His knowledge of the Mississippi was so precise that he writes in *Life on the Mississippi*, quite despondently, about the pitfalls of growing so incredibly apt at one’s trade.

Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river! I still keep in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steam boating was new to me. (Twain, *Life*, 58)

In the paragraphs that follow, Twain—albeit uncharacteristically—weaves a gorgeous picture of the river at sunset, gilded and enchanting both in imagery and pure prose. With its ever-changing sights and the grace of its current, its colors and points of interest in some particular region, the river is described so majestically to the reader, one would think they were reading Thoreau. Alas, Twain decries, “a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river’s face; another day came when I ceased altogether to note them” (Twain, *Life*, 59). Once picturesque and innocent, he bemoans his inability to see the beauty in favor of reading the river’s warnings. “All the value any feature of it had for me now,” writes Twain, “was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat” (Twain, *Life*, 59). Twain conjures this river imagery with surprising ease, echoing the likes of Whitman and Thoreau, possibly as an homage, or perhaps to show his reader how easy it is to describe what is beautiful. Albeit a travel writer, Twain never fixated on landscape as carefully as he focused on humans and their culture.

Clemens was a quality pilot with an undeniable mastery of the river, and despite his loss of awe at the expense of his trade, the river was his career. At this time in the late 1850s, his Mississippi river life was considered the cards the world had dealt for Sam Clemens. He was pulling in a sizable salary, and had even pulled strings for his brother, Henry, so the nineteen-year-old could join him on the *Pennsylvania*. But Sam was on the verge of a far different course that even he could not have interpreted from the horizon.

In New Orleans, he met a young girl named Laura Wright, seven years his junior, who was traveling for the first time away from home with her uncle, a pilot on a freight steamer. Twenty-one-year-old Clemens was smitten with Laura. He courted her for three full days, reportedly besotted. They were forced to split ways. Her uncle's boat was shipping out; Sam was devastated. Clemens attempted to "to keep the romance alive" through letters, but the adolescent Ms. Wright let it be known that her "interest" had "waned" (Powers, 83). This caused further emotional devastation for Clemens; he consulted psychics and the girl's mother. Her rejection was to be the first of two major tragedies that he experienced in the summer of 1858.

Despite his physical proximity to Orion, Henry Clemens aspired to be like Sam. Eager to take his younger, much more capable brother under his wing, Sam helped nineteen-year-old Henry get an apprenticeship on the *Pennsylvania* in February of 1858. They worked several trips together, growing close as brothers and friends, Henry worked as a mud-clerk and Sam "on loan from Bixby" as a cub-pilot (Powers, 84). In May of 1858, Sam dreamt that "he had seen Henry a corpse" (Powers, 84). Shaken, their family thought little of his premonition. In June of that year, the *Pennsylvania* once again headed downriver to New Orleans. Issues of steamboat politics



arose among pilots and captains, and, in order to assuage the tension, Sam stayed an extra two days in port before departing back on the *Lacey* on June 11. Powers recounts the fateful day:

Two days later, Sam Clemens heard a chilling shout from the levee: “The ‘Pennsylvania’ is blown up at Ship Island, and a hundred fifty lives lost!” Mark Twain is silent on his reaction to this ghastly news. Whatever shock he felt was temporarily allayed at Napoleon, Arkansas: an ‘extra’ edition of a Memphis newspaper, rushed downriver, listed the fates of some of the passengers. Henry’s name appeared among the uninjured. Then the news turned irreparably bad. A later edition reported that Henry Clemens was “hurt beyond help.” (Powers, 86)

Sam was devastated. In mourning for virtually the rest of his life, Mark Twain “relived and rewrote Henry’s death” in several of his novels and essays; his brother died differently in each recapitulation. The guilt that had plagued Sam since childhood became all-consuming; he couldn’t shake the notion that he had led Henry right to death’s door and taught him how to knock. This sense of responsibility was further exacerbated by the shame, the “excruciating luck” (Powers, 89), of Sam’s own survival. He implored a God he no longer believed in “to strike his ‘wicked head’ and have mercy ‘upon that unoffending boy’” (Powers, 89). A man who once considered joining the ministry found his heart hardened toward religion, now not merely skeptical, but embittered.

Clemens’ entire persona changed. Once jovial and boyishly witty, he became, according to G.K. Chesterton, “‘always serious to the point of madness’” and “‘unfathomably solemn’” (Powers, 89). But the summer 1858 marked the end of the era of young Sam Clemens. With the death of a romance, a brother, and a summer came the dawn of Mark Twain.

Go West, Young Sam

After the death of Henry, Sam continued his life on the river in the years leading up to the Civil War. He wrote many letters home to his siblings and nieces, and continued writing correspondence pieces for newspapers. Following the *Pennsylvania* explosion, Sam's writing began to take on an air of authoritative wit. He penned decisive articles on politics and business that Powers characterizes as the "voice [...] of the Insider" (Powers, 92). While this mode certainly does not characterize all of his narratorial personas, this connoisseur-critic is integral to much of Twain's fiction being narrated in the first person.

On April 9, 1859, Clemens was officially given his pilot's license. He was finally "a member of the river world's elite lodge, with its \$250 monthly salary" (Powers, 94). Sam would be remembered as a solid pilot, though his record is not without a few marks against it—he grounded at least two boats, and accidentally drove a massive vessel called *City of Memphis* into the New Orleans levee. For the latter, Powers writes that "no serious harm was done and no blame assigned" (Powers, 95). In *Roughing It*, Mark Twain calls himself a "good average St. Louis and New Orleans pilot" and was "by no means ashamed of [his] abilities" (Twain, *Roughing It*, 272). In the meantime, Orion moved to Memphis and opened a law practice, and Pamela and her husband were rising through the social ranks in St. Louis.

In November of 1860, Abraham Lincoln was elected President of the United States. Rumors circulated that the Chicagoan planned to abolish slavery. States began to secede from the Union. In February of 1861, Jefferson Davis was elected as President of the Confederate States of America. Sam Clemens experienced the disintegration of the Union from the river, unconcerned with the war brewing and harboring an unsteady position on slavery, which tended to change with his mood. It wasn't until May of 1861 that the fear of being involved in the war

became real and palpable to Clemens. River boat pilots were sought-after on both sides, and Sam was afraid of either side attempting to sway him into joining up—the usual methods of coercion included a pistol to the head.

Missouri had a rather complex stance on their political affiliation during the Civil War. As a Southern state, it was undoubtedly sympathetic to the Confederacy, and had voted for Stephen Douglas in the 1860 election. But Missouri slaveholders knew that “as an isolated northerly catch basin for slave owners, the state would have been virtually surrounded by a hostile nation” (Powers, 97) if it didn’t comply with the Union. In fact, Missouri sent twice as many soldiers to fight for the Union throughout the War. That said, Sam’s allegiance as a Southerner lay with the state of Missouri; after coming into port in St. Louis, he and a few “hometown friends” travelled to Hannibal and joined the Missouri State Guard.

Powers reports that Sam joined up about two weeks before the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. He and his Hannibal comrades called themselves the Ralls County Rangers. Sam was elected second lieutenant, and the Hannibal boys cut their hair short with sheep shears (Powers, 98). He lasted about a week and a half before slipping off, hiding away from both Confederacy and Union at his sister’s house in Memphis. Back in St. Louis, Orion—“chronically cash-poor” (Powers, 102)—was vying for a government appointment after his former mentor had climbed in the ranks. He was sworn in as the Secretary of the Nevada territory on July 11, 1861, and a week later Sam and Orion had consolidated their belongings into traveling trunks, “twenty-five pounds each” (Twain, *Roughing It*, 4). They were to travel two thousand miles westward to Carson City, Nevada. Back in St. Louis, the Clemens brothers left their “swallow-tail coats and white kid gloves,” but brought all six pounds of the Unabridged Dictionary (Twain, *Roughing It*,

4); they travelled with “no stove-pipe hats nor patent-leather boots, nor anything else necessary to make life calm and peaceful,” trading them—and such a life—for new adventures. *Roughing It*, published in 1872, would prove to be a comprehensive chronicle of this journey and its notable destinations thereafter.

### Roughing It

Twenty-five year old Clemens set out West for what he assumed would be a three-month “pleasure trip;” he stayed for seven years. The Clemens brothers were heading for Carson City, Nevada, where the California Gold Rush had come and gone and flared up again, this time with the discovery of silver by Henry Comstock. Sam and Orion lived together in a shanty near the Comstock in a little thrown-together town called Virginia. While Orion was absorbed with his secretarial duties and getting acquainted with the “dark” world of “territorial politics,” Sam “bought himself some cowboy clothes—big slouch hat, flannel shirt, thick pants stuffed into leather boots,” and got to know the others in the boardinghouse. The men he met were mostly, like Orion, young pols of James W. Nye, the newly-appointed territorial governor. The Nye pols talked of getting their feet wet in the “mining bonanza,” and Sam developed a twinkle in his eye that can only be said to be hereditary (Powers, 105). “Here was a chance to get rich,” writes Powers, and indeed Sam took the plunge and began speculating.

His endeavors were mostly fruitless. Letters exchanged between Sam and Orion during this time reveal rapid alternating between Sam condemning Orion for wasting money, begging him to send more, and bragging about how much he had generated. He wrote home often, and

letters to his mother and niece suggest a burgeoning fascination with Western landscape, as well as the establishment of his comic voice. He once wrote to his mother and sister in a letter,

The country [...] is fabulously rich in gold, silver, copper, lead, coal, iron, quicksilver, marble, granite, chalk, plaster of Paris, (gypsum,) thieves, murderers, desperadoes, ladies, children, lawyers, Christians, Indians, Chinamen, Spaniards, gamblers, sharpers, cuyotés (pronounced ki-yo-ties,) poets, preachers, and jackass rabbits. [...] It never rains here, and the dew never falls. No flowers grow here, and no green thing gladdens the eye. The birds that fly over the land carry their provisions with them. Only the crow and the raven tarry with us. (Clemens, *Letters*, 132)

These nuggets of observation would prove essential to the later-codified characteristics typically found and studied in Mark Twain's prose. In a simple list, Clemens already displays his mastery of citing incongruities among an accepted system of order—in this case, the act of living in what was then the US frontier of Western society; all the while, he makes familiar a place that his reader (here, Jane Clemens) has ostensibly never laid on eyes upon. In these letters, Mark Twain begins to poke through pages signed S.L.C.. While he depicts himself as naive and tender-footed as the narrator of *Roughing It*, the writer was in fact rather well-travelled, and kept tedious track of his observations.

While prospecting for silver may have been a short-term goal, it never amounted to much more than a scheme, echoing the fruitless endeavors of John Marshall, former Clemens patriarch. Later, these get-rich-quick attempts would serve as humorous fodder for several short sketches in the episodic epic *Roughing It*. Some of the stories in Twain's novel are too outrageous to be true, yet are recapitulated over and over again by his biographers. There does exist a famous account of Sam and a friend, John D. Kinney, setting out into the Sierra Nevada for a mining expedition and accidentally setting a mountain on fire, which Twain recalls in *Roughing It*. Suffice it to say that Clemens was never much of a miner nor an entrepreneur—perhaps the Clemens curse—but he

did find his niche in the West. He travelled to Aurora and the Humboldt mines but found little in the way of a consistent income.

In late June of 1862, he made the most successful speculation of his life: Sam Clemens decided to try out an old hobby as a career. He had been sending in short pieces to a small newspaper in Virginia City called the *Territorial Enterprise*. Orion pulled some strings and helped his younger brother secure a job as a staff reporter. At twenty-five dollars a week, the gig promised more money than Sam had earned in months. That autumn, after he had formally accepted the position, Clemens “hiked the 120 miles north to Virginia City” from Aurora “with a bundle of blankets on his back” (Powers, 110). When he arrived for that first day of work, Sam famously greeted the office, “Dang my buttons, if I don’t believe I’m lousy” (Powers, 110). Powers remarks that Clemens indeed appeared “less like somebody who’d come to write for the paper than like somebody who’d come to rob it” (Powers, 110).

As a poor Southerner from a rural town, Clemens was much better suited for the Wild West than the bulk of Northeastern pioneers. Foul-mouthed, with a Pike County drawl that was foreign to most, he had a knack for the general news stories he was given at the beginning of his career. Though he considered it rather dreary work at first, Clemens was able to ingratiate himself to the “locals,” gathering information about freight shipments, mining statistics and courthouse rulings. Powers reports that the newspaper went to print at 2 a.m., meaning Clemens started his rounds around noon, patrolling for gossip and hearsay from post office workers, ladies around town, local politicians, and—perhaps most happily—talkative barkeeps. He was bored, and the writing came easily. However, the former teetotaler found that his best work was done over a beer with the miners or after sharing liquor with an afternoon bartender.

After almost a year at the *Territorial Enterprise*, Clemens' editor, Joseph T. Goodman, discovered "the fact that he could write" (Powers, 115). Goodman allowed Sam the freedom to cover stories, mostly political, in Carson City. These bored Sam, an inveterate doodler, who would draw caricatures of the politicians and rename them according to their temperament. In having "lobbied" for the "legislature beat," Clemens crossed paths with Clement T. Rice, a rival reporter from the Virginia City *Union*. Rice, sensing a rookie in political procedure, jumped on Clemens early on for some fumbled detail. Clemens deemed Rice "The Unreliable," and the feud between them began. Sam, bored with the "rote work" of reporting on "stock quotations, earnings from some of the five hundred mines on the mountain, and public meetings in the town" instead turned his column into "a spoof of the genre" (Powers, 116). This initiative migrated into a rather transformational time for Sam, who had begun to master the art of the "19th century newspaper 'letter,'" which demanded "personal intimacy, comic flair, and sharply observed journalism" (Powers, 116). On February 3, 1863, his first letter was published, teeming with the Twainian features of exaggeration, self-deprecation, the critiquing narrator, and an "arresting first sentence" (Powers, 117). The letter was signed with a foreign signature, one never before penned by the former S.L.C: "Mark Twain."

The origins of Clemens' pseudonym are hazy—there isn't much evidence as to the choice being decided after an arduous process or deliberation. It is true that "Mark Twain" is a riverboat term, meaning "mark two," two fathoms, or a depth of twelve feet—"a depth readily navigable and safe" (Powers, 118). Why Clemens developed his literary alter ego is also a subject up for debate. It was certainly in fashion at the time to take a pen name, and furthermore his satire was not always well-received. Twain became the writer, and Clemens the man and the reporter.

“Mark Twain” is perhaps the most analyzed of pseudonyms, and not without reasonable cause—one rarely finds a pen name with such persuasive, every-man syllables glorified by the pleasant, “tight knock of hard consonants” (Powers, 118).

### Friends in High Places

In late December of 1863, Sam met Artemus Ward in Virginia City. Ward, a humorist, was in town giving lectures to adoring audiences. Born Charles Farrar Browne, Ward was an American icon—gangly, “foppish, merry, tubercular, doomed” (Powers, 129)—who exerted an indelible influence over the future of Mark Twain. Ward was by-and-large a lecturer, who first encountered Twain after a night of drinking post-performance in Virginia City. There, in good spirits, the Missourian was no match for the seasoned performer, and Ward is reported to have bested Clemens publicly. But Ward was immediately ingratiated to the drawling, childlike Missourian; Sam was taken with Ward’s modern manipulation of “theatrical devices to explode the merely amusing into the hilarious” (Powers, 132). Artemus Ward was certainly performing “cutting-edge stuff for mid-19th century America” (Powers, 132), and he saw a lot of himself in the in Twain’s blossoming ruffian persona..

Where Ward was maudlin with a twist, Twain was raucous, uninhibited mockery and foolishness. And Sam certainly needed Ward—while the former was known in Nevada and California, the latter was infamous throughout the Union, and had performed in New York City several times. During their platonic Yuletide salons that December, the two engaged in rousing battles of wits, the likes of which the American public would have paid immense sums of money



for in a decade. Ward recommended Twain to his editors as a man of “gorgeous talents” (Powers, 133), and Twain recommended Ward to his mother as a houseguest.<sup>1</sup>

Allegedly, after a two-day stint in Virginia City, Ward joined Twain and Dan DeQuille<sup>2</sup> on a rooftop tour of the mining town. This naturally including copious amounts of liquor (of which Jane Clemens would reproach every last drop) and, according to Powers, found the trio of humorous drunkards on the wrong end of the sheriff’s pistol. He threatened them with rock-salt bullets if they didn’t quiet down, and the men dispersed. Ward departed days later, with a new comrade in his sights. In a letter dated January 1st, Ward wrote to Sam, addressing him as “My Dearest Love,” and proceeding to “[rehash] some of the wild times in Virginia City” (Powers, 134). But Ward was headed East, and, though he invited Mark Twain along with him, Sam remained in the West. As Sam writes to his mother,

Artemus Ward said that when my gorgeous talents were publicly acknowledged by such high authority, I ought to appreciate them myself—leave sage-brush obscurity, & journey to New York with him, as he wanted me to do. I preferred not to burst upon the New York public too suddenly & brilliantly, & so I concluded to remain here. (Twain, Letters)

But Sam would not remain in the West—and certainly not Nevada—for much longer. As with reading the river, Sam Clemens entered the world of journalism as a gifted novice. After two years gone and enemies made, he left the *Enterprise* as a gilded reporter and locally famous humorist. He now had intimate knowledge of both the culture and politics of the Wild West, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ward would never make it to St. Louis; he died of tuberculosis in 1869. Who knows how a longer lifetime would have affected the trajectory and legacy of American humor and performance, not to mention Twain’s career.

<sup>2</sup> Dan DeQuille, born William Wright, lived from 1829 to 1898. Another *Enterprise* journalist, he outlasted Clemens at the paper to stay for thirty years. Like Sam, he is a son of the Sagebrush School literary genre, which encompassed the region and Nevada specifically from 1859 to 1914. The Sagebrush School, named after the sagebrush shrub which is native and pervasive to Nevada, is deeply rooted in the traditions of the American Old West and spanned various genres, “including drama, essays, fiction, history, humor, journalism, memoirs, and poetry” (Crow, 334).

it was time for him to move onward. His time in San Francisco would enable him to enjoy the fruits of this literary maturity.

#### Twain in Bohemia

There are a few rumored tales regarding Clemens' fateful move from Virginia City, Nevada to San Francisco, California in 1864. Despite a new job and a growing reputation, Mark Twain was not loved by all of his contemporaries. In his autobiography, he writes of his one and only duel fought. After exchanging biting criticisms of each other's characters, Sam and James Laird, the editor of another rival paper in Virginia City, entered into an ink-and-paper feud. With the support of his friend and co-worker Steve Gillis, an ostensible waif of a type-setter at the *Enterprise*, Clemens challenged Laird to a duel. He challenged him as Mark Twain, of course, and, as was the medium of their feud, in the newspaper. Clemens seemed to have forgotten that he was a terrible shot. Lucky enough, when the moment came, both men missed their mark, and, in the anxiety of what almost was, decided to call a truce. Handshakes finally settled the matter.

Then, the authorities arrived. While the commandments contained within the Virginia City law book could be held on a napkin, there was a strict no-dueling rule. The penalty was death by hanging. Deciding the town had little to offer now in the way of opportunity, Clemens and Gillis decided to head west—to San Francisco (Fleischman, 88-89). In his version of the story, Powers reports that the duel never happened—that in fact Clemens and Gillis got cold feet, and instead boarded a train to San Francisco the same time that they had called for the duel to occur in print. The Nevada Historical Society, however, claims to have the rusted remnants of Clemens' 1858 Remington pistol (Kane). In either case, Sam now had a reason to run and a roommate to keep him company.

In 1864, San Francisco was a bustling metropolis of bohemians. While its landscape certainly proved soothing to Sam's temperament, the work he found in the bay city could not hold his attention. He landed a job at the *Morning Call*, a local newspaper that had formally purchased several of his *Enterprise* letters as freelance pieces. The work was menial, and yet his life remained transient and luxurious. Sam and Gillis stayed at the Occidental Hotel—"Heaven on the half shell," as he later wrote—and frequently enjoyed the luxury of fine meals and liquor. They also participated in the wanderlust of the artistic beach culture, moving from dwelling to dwelling while relying upon on the kindness of strangers.

This transient existence could only be a vacation for Sam Clemens. Soon he was heading into the mountains yet again with Gillis' brothers in mining camps, trying his luck once more in prospecting. He was largely unsuccessful. His family, specifically Orion, urged him to consider a more serious literary and lecturing career. He started frequenting the Gillis cabin in Tuolumne County, about one hundred miles East of San Fransisco. The cabin sat upon hill quaintly named "Jackass." Powers writes that "[t]here wasn't much to do on Jackass Hill except drink whiskey, subsist on beans and bad coffee, and talk. It rained constantly," and the men "amused one another by telling tales" (Powers, 150).

On one such excursion to Jackass Hill, in late February of 1865, the weather cleared. Clemens and the Gillis brothers decided to try some mining at Angel's Camp, a city in Calaveras County, California. There, at a tavern, Clemens and the Mississippians overheard a drunken tale about a frog. Sam "jotted the story down in [his] notebook," and indeed this "jotting" dated February 6th relays the following:

Coleman with his jumping frog—bet stranger \$50—stranger had no frog, & C got him one—in the meantime stranger filled C’s frog full of shot & he couldn’t jump—the stranger’s frog won. (Clemens, Letters)

The seed was planted. On February 20th, the men returned from Angel’s Camp, and “while the others picked away at their mining claims,” Twain wrote “Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog”—at least, the first draft of it. He continued to work on it heavily until mid-October, creating at least two complete drafts. Finally, the finished product was published in the November edition of an Eastern newspaper, the *Saturday Press*. Twain had intended the story to be included in a collection of sketches by Artemus Ward, but Ward’s editor got ahold of it first, forwarding it to a friend, Henry Clapp, “bohemian editor” of the New York-based *Press*, and Twain became an overnight success; the sketch “launch[ed] Mark Twain into the elusive vapor of national fame” (Powers, 154).

The sketch itself “scored a direct hit upon the American postwar funny bone” (Powers, 154), and it spread backwards toward Sam in San Francisco rapidly, reprinted in daily papers and artsy journals, moving inward back to its origins. In December, it was finally printed in the *Californian*, where Clemens was a frequent contributor, now renamed “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.” Straightforward, “benign” (Powers, 155), and vernacular, the deadpan narrative uses the medium of storytelling as a self-satire and dialect (specifically Pike County, Missouri) as its medium. “The humorous story is told gravely,” Mark Twain himself explained, and advised that “the teller does his best to conceal the fact he even dimly suspects there is anything funny about it” (Twain, *How To Tell A Story*, 4).

Onward and Upward

After the success of “Jumping Frog,” Clemens was offered the opportunity to visit Hawaii—in 1866 known as the Sandwich Islands. He had a series of letters published in the Sacramento Union as Mark Twain, the “Honolulu Correspondent” in which he characterized the island and its natives, and offered distinctly Twainian insight for Americans as to the island’s charms and disparities. He returned with a reputation for excellent travel writing. He then took the Wardian plunge, and planned his first series of lectures with his travels as the subject.

On October 2, 1866, “A Lecture on the Sandwich Islands,” took place at the Academy of Music. The advert for the event read, “Doors open at 7 o’clock. The Trouble to begin at 8 o’clock.” The line drew an enormous crowd, and Mark Twain was an instant success. His deadpan delivery had the audience giddy, and he immediately planned a circuit around California and then the Northeast. As his fame spread, Clemens felt he was outgrowing the West; his itch for traveling returned with a vengeance.

In December, Sam found a way to leave the West for good. The young Ward “negotiated a deal “with the *Alta California* in San Francisco as a “Traveling Correspondent.” On December 15th, Clemens set sail on the *America*, a steamship heading Southeast towards Nicaragua and onward toward the Northeast. In 1866, Justin Kaplan writes, those “in a hurry” to get to the East from California “still retraced the route of the Forty-niners,” traveling by ship “from San Francisco, down the coast of Mexico to San Juan del Sur in Nicaragua, crossed the Isthmus jungle by mule, wagon, and boat, and at Greytown, on the eastern side,” the passengers boarded a ship heading North to New York Harbor (Kaplan, 13). Powers characterizes Sam’s Western years as ending on a high note, “on a plane of accomplishment and prestige” (Powers, 171). Once a “Civil War fugitive,” a “failed silver miner,” and most recently a “hard-drinking

journalist and provocateur,” Sam Clemens “had risen” (Powers, 171). He gave in a farewell lecture in San Francisco before he departed, calling “the California of the future” a modern-day “promised land” (Kaplan, 14).

Despite “Mark Twain” heading the list of Very Important Passengers, Clemens’ cruise to Central America on the first-class deck was anything but prestigious. His captain, Wakeman, had a fouler mouth than Bixby (which, admittedly, Clemens adored), but his brassy, hard-drinking masculinity was the only kind the fairer female passengers could stand. Clemens recalls being rebuffed and whispered about during his voyage, overhearing the scoffing whispers of wealthy ladies intoning, “*Him?* First class?” Despite such a pretense, at least six people, including an infant, died of cholera on board before the *America* had made it to its destination. Once they reach port in San Juan del Sur, an outbreak of cholera was reported among the six hundred or so passengers waiting to travel back westward. Clemens and the others heading East “climbed into carriages and onto horses, and began the beautiful, perilous twelve-mile isthmus crossing” (Powers, 173). Those remaining passengers who made the trek boarded another steamship toward New York. On January 12, 1867, “after twenty-seven and one-half days, two more mechanical breakdowns, and another bout of frigid weather and rough seas” (Powers, 174), the *San Francisco* sailed into New York Harbor.

### Make Your Mark

When Sam Clemens arrived in New York City, two churches towered over the rest of the city. It would be eight years until the “first wave of skyscrapers” which adorn New York’s infamous skyline began to sprout.\* Still, the city was coursing with opportunistic, “hustler

energy,” with the boom of industrialism in the East. Churning factories, railroads, and retail stores sought a new civilian market in the post-war East. Department stores began to emerge, and with them came masses of consumer-minded women. Waves of people began filling out the streets of Manhattan, which had also become one of the busiest shipping hubs of the Western world, and the island was approaching hysterical gridlock—Powers notes that tunneling for subway lines would begin just a year after Clemens arrived.

Despite the massive changes that had occurred in the fourteen years since Clemens had walked the streets of Manhattan, he was eager to keep up his momentum as a published writer, and knew he was in the right place to do it. The rich, foreseeing economic ruin, had settled uptown as the poor immigrants, blue collar workers, and prostitutes settled in the Five Points section of the Lower East Side and Brooklyn. Crime was frequent, violent, and feared by the police. Teeming with class distinctions, five nationally circulated newspapers, and the latest fashion trends, New York City became the cultural and commercial center that it had never before been.

“Make your mark in New York, and you are a made man,” he famously wrote to the Western readers of *Alta California* (Powers, 176). But at the top of his list was not simply to have more sketches published, nor to be featured in another collection featuring Artemus Ward as the top billing-author. Sam wanted to write a book, get it published, and watch his fame skyrocket as it did in Nevada and California. The opposite occurred: with his Sandwich Island manuscript clutched in his fists, Twain searched unsuccessfully for representation. He was rejected from multiple agents and by publishing houses all over the city, but continued to have his New York letters published in the *Alta California*.

During the early months of 1867, Twain performed some lectures in Missouri, Ohio, Mississippi, and Illinois. Upon his return to New York, he found a check from the *Alta California* awaiting him. It was to pay for his ticket upon a ship known as the *Quaker City*, which was scheduled to depart New York in the early summer. In the meantime, Clemens took the spring to finally follow through on his promise to Artemus Ward. His New York lecture debut on April 23, 1867, was incredibly well-received, as has been his lectures in the Mid-West. Critics praised his Ward-esque delivery, his deadpan cadence, and his gnarled, Western camaraderie, which endeared him so graciously to his audiences. His success on this front was followed by a month-long bout of depression. “[W]orn out and miserable, restless full of self-accusation,” and nervous about the lack of consistency with which he wrote to *Alta*, Clemens was in need of a change in scenery. He spent one night in a New York jail after being arrested for brawling in the street, and wrote home to *Alta* about the experience in a series of four letters written in four days. He started this pace in mid-May, and hardly slowed for a month—come early June, it was finally time for his long, lucrative voyage abroad.

### Innocents Aboard

On June 8, 1867, Sam Clemens boarded the *Quaker City* for the voyage that would irrevocably change his life forever. To characterize it is to barely understand the satirical playground Twain found himself in. The trip itself, whose final destination was Palestine, came at a steep price—around \$1,250 for the passage excluding money needed on land. Furthermore, the passengers were cut from Northeastern genteel cloth, “late-middle-aged, prosperous, pious, and abstinent” (Kaplan, 39). Kaplan writes, “[c]reating the conditions for satire, Clemens had



almost deliberately misapprehended the character of the venture from the very start” (Kaplan, 39). But the company proved just fine. While most passengers had come at the hopes of ingratiating themselves to men of some certain “celebrity,” they instead found themselves disappointed to learn that the only notable person on board was an up-and-coming, crude young writer named Sam Clemens.

While on the *Quaker City*, Clemens spent his days walking the decks of the ship entertaining individuals and impressing them with his tall tales, comedic imitations, and reading to them in French. He particularly found himself ingratiated to a young eighteen-year-old named Charles Langdon, a wealthy son of a coal fortune from Elmira, New York, and the brother of Clemens’ future wife, Livy. Sam is said to have first encountered Livy in the form of a miniature bust that Charles kept in his room. But the passenger with arguably the greatest and longest lasting influence over Clemens—or perhaps more precisely, Mark Twain, was a woman named Mary Fairbanks.

He called her “mother.” Such was the extent of the intimate (unromantic) relationship between the middle-aged Mrs. Mary Mason Fairbanks and thirty-two year old Samuel Clemens. “By the time the ship was in the Mediterranean,” writes Kaplan, “Mary Fairbanks had become his mentor in manners and morals, even in writing” (Kaplan, 45). Sam called himself her “Cub” and her “Reformed Prodigal” (Kaplan, 44). He wrote home about her, depicting her as “the most refined, intelligent, and cultivated lady on the ship, and altogether the kindest and the best.” He continues, “she sewed my buttons on, kept my clothes in presentable trim, fed me on Egyptian jam (when I behaved), lectured me awfully on the quarter deck on moonlit promenading evenings, and cured me of several bad habits” (Kaplan, 44).

Fairbanks' genteel, matronly femininity was the sort that Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer "lit out from" (Kaplan, 44). She had noticed something in him, unrecognizable but which undoubtedly "interests and attracts," she once said (Kaplan, 45). She corrected his seated slouch and refined his "scarcely genteel appearance" and treated it all (and him) as a challenge (Kaplan, 45). Shrewd and impeccably raised, she inspired him to reject the writerly instinct in himself, and instead attempt a "suspension of identity" (Kaplan, 45). He was "obedient," writes Kaplan, "formative, and eager to learn [...] [w]ithout hypocrisy" (Kaplan, 45). Perhaps he considered conforming to her standards an "experiment," his "willing submission to her literary standards" gained him a lucrative audience and an assimilated charm. Were it not for Fairbanks, one may not know the subtle, witty, innocent Twain who so winningly disposed of vulgarities in the hopes of providing just enough concealed innuendo. The Mark Twain so revered today may have drowned in Mediterranean had it not been for Fairbanks and the subsequent women who edited, refined, and coached the drawling Missourian into approving presentation. That said, the effect Fairbanks had on Twain's writing never quite touched Clemens, whose persona on board the *Quaker City* and among male counterparts remained classically, brazenly uncouth. Still, with Mark Twain firmly established as the all-American funny-man, Clemens had begun his foray into a facet of society he had yet to touch.

## Tom Sawyer, the Gentleman-in-Waiting

### Belonging to the Better

In May of 1876, William Dean Howells writes, in a review of the novel published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is “a wonderful study of the boy-mind, which inhabits a world quite distinct from that in which he is bodily present with his elders,” and that “in this lies its great charm and its universality, for boy-nature, however human nature varies, is the same everywhere” (Howells). But Howells is less entranced by the boyish charms of Tom than he is the perceived universality of the town of St. Petersburg, “some such idle shabby Mississippi River town” undeniably familiar to Mr. Clemens; yet “Tom belongs to the better sort of people in it” (Howells). Tom Sawyer’s jejune adventures seem to provoke a defensive brokering on the part of the reviewer. “In a word,” Howells writes, “he is a boy, and merely and exactly an ordinary boy on the moral side.” Tom’s childhood, though surely lively, resonates with adult readers because of its benign nature. There is no need for the reader to worry about Tom Sawyer, who “belong[ed] to the better sort of people” than even Twain himself did (Howells).

Thus the “delightful” aspects of Tom’s “wild and fantastic dreams” are relegated to a childishness that still manages to fit into a town realistically drawn as a portrayal of the Southwest. And Tom Sawyer, “mischievous, but not vicious” and who “almost never swears” fits into the town, and reminds his reader of their own sleepy hometowns and boy-natures. The challenge for St. Petersburg society is manifested in Huckleberry Finn, “the worthless vagabond” (Howells) and an ostensible outcast. While he tempts Tom and riles up his rebellious side, Tom’s temperament still “promise[s] reform.” Howells’s claim confirms that Huck’s “identity is

respected,” and though he is far more of a ruffian than Tom, “he will lead a decent life in order that he may one day be thought worthy to become a member of that gang of robbers which Tom is to organize” (Howells). Of course the publishing of *Huckleberry Finn* in 1884 would anesthetize the notion of Huck ever pursuing a career under the jurisdiction of Tom Sawyer. Tom’s story, Howells placates, is “amusing and exciting” (Howells), but his rebelliousness is sweetly recognized as a facet of his childhood.

The town is judged “in the reader’s sense,” on its own, accounted-for morality. “With its religiousness, its lawlessness, its droll social distinctions,” the town achieves the acceptable as a portrait of a rural Southwest river town. “Its civilization qualified by its slave-holding, and its traditions of the wilder West which has passed away” (Howells). Who is this reader Howells is addressing? The reviewer is assuring an audience that the novel is “decent” in a philosophical way; that in the actions and speech of these characters one sees the acceptable virtues of character. This character should be one with whom the audience would also identify. For characters, those traits or thoughts that are not considered socially acceptable are deemed “childish,” or as playing heavily on the “imaginative side.” The sleepy river town of St. Petersburg is redeemed by the “passing away” of the “wilder” Western influences. But Howells is also upholding a modest critique of slavery, which to a Northeastern, genteel reader would doubly intensify the sense of connection between themselves and a small, poor, Southern orphan.

Howells’ review of Tom belies the overwhelming sense of contentment, allowed and administered by the reviewer’s casual upkeep of a status quo. Howells speaks matter-of-factly about the characters, setting, and plot of Twain’s novel. He maintains that Tom Sawyer is, first and foremost, a book that is “realistic in the highest degree, and which gives incomparably the

best picture of life in that region as yet known to fiction” (Howells). The preoccupation with realism “in the highest degree” bespeaks his intent to authenticate a Southwestern tradition that Twain’s novel apparently upholds. In presenting Twain as a writer who creates character “with a fidelity to circumstance” and with such obviously juvenile perceptions, Howells validates the novel by assuring the reader that this portrayal fits into a canon that is yet known, while on the literary side, offering some turns of phrase and witticisms that “delight” and “charm” the adult reader. And to an extent, this novel does live up to Howells’ critique. In comparison to Twain’s later, more daring literature, *Tom Sawyer* remains well-loved but ultimately humble. That is not to discount its position in the American literary canon nor to undermine its renowned scenes; one may understand that Twain was simply getting his feet wet.

Howells paints the experience of reading *Tom Sawyer* as a “simply delightful,” a delicate escape from the dull, unimaginative lives of adult readers; any “terror and superstition” is deemed explicitly “boyish.” He assures his readers that taking up this novel will prove it altogether “instructive,” “well-conceived,” “scrupulous,” and “excellent” (Howells). The audience most affected by Howells’ review—to whom this review, published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, is addressed—is a specific strata of high-minded, middle-and upper-class, educated Americans “who came to substitute art and learning for the stringent moral vision of American Protestantism” (Dawidoff, x). In the early 20th century, Harvard philosopher George Santayana coined this philosophical “habit” the genteel tradition.

### The Genteel Tradition

In August of 1911, George Santayana, addressing an audience in California, spoke about the lack of ingenuity he sensed in the way of American philosophical thought. The “youngness”

of America, he argued, was being overshadowed by an “old” mentality. He diagnosed the 19th century as holding fast to a number of habits that carried over from the colonial period, comprised as “the genteel tradition.” Santayana, viewing the 19th century in retrospect, saw that this tradition had infected all aspects of life in America. Philosophically, the enterprising and vivacious American people were being sold “old wine in new bottles,” finding themselves content with what was being poured into their glass, yet unaware of what they were ingesting. Like Eucharist wine, watered down and explained only through prerecorded script, deeper meaning of one’s action is written off by insubstantial and a ritualistic sense of decorum.

Santayana believed instead that a person’s philosophy should “inspire” and “express” their life in ways that would make living more vibrant than if they were without philosophy. Had Americans “been too much engrossed in living to reflect upon life” (Santayana, 38), a lack of philosophy may have been present, and a void could have been filled by purely American insight. But rather than this hypothetical innocence, American philosophy had drawn too heavily from the customs of the past and distilled them into daily truths. America, Santayana says, was like a wise child—young in age but possessing an aged wisdom. The problem with the wise child is that this wisdom is “thin” and “verbal,” and often results in the physical and emotional stunting of the child’s development. Thus, the wise child, in possession of old wisdom, found that their “fresh mentality” decontextualized this wisdom, overcooking it into something that was reduced to tradition, a form of conventionality and conformity—something to be despised (Santayana, 39).

As counterparts, aggressive enterprise and the genteel tradition act as distributaries. They run parallel, each splitting off from an original stream that has run through America since its

colonization: Calvinism. As Santayana saw it, Calvinism was not only the religion that dominated early American society, but was also the mobilizing force of its organization, government, and attitudes. On its own, Calvinism is “an expression of the agonized conscience,” which is torn between “tragic concern” and “tragic exultation over the situation of one’s existence” (Santayana, 41). Santayana comprises the Calvinist doctrine into three succinct tenets: one, sin exists; two, sin exists to be punished; three, it is beautiful that sin exists to be punished. There is a pleasure and a pride an individual takes in their existence, even if they concurrently know that they are deprived and exist to be punished. But there is a bitter-sweetness there that Santayana finds most intriguing about America’s Calvinist roots.

The philosopher maintains that the depravity and misery of human existence is also a source of pride. “The scandal” of the Calvinist existence, writes Santayana, “is requisite, since otherwise the serious importance of being as we ought to be would not have been vindicated” (Santayana, 41). Thus, a people in the wake or “on the verge of ruin,” if philosophically inclined, may require this principle of pride and misery. Santayana suggests that early American colonists certainly found their ambitions in the New World as deeply rooted in these tenets, and felt justified by the evident “fruits” of their ethic. Success, or “happy results,” slackened the agony of their conscience.

The nation became numerous; it ceased to be either ecstatic or distressful; the high social morality which on the whole it preserved took another color; people remained honest and helpful out of good sense and good will rather than out of scrupulous adherence to any fixed principles. (Santayana, 42)

Out of a tradition of Calvinism comes the “great American virtue” of “Good-will.” The success of America is internalized by its population, and American egoism begins to allow their conscience not only a break from the agony, but Santayana suggests that even with a full sense of

conviction, the individual is both “victorious and blameless” (Santayana, 43). Here it becomes clear how Calvinism, wrung out from the culture of America, leads to a general air of complacency, self-satisfaction, and preservation of a status quo. The pride overrides the sense of depravity perhaps not in the individual, but certainly within the cultural consciousness of the American people regarding their government and global power. As a collective identity, Americans funnel Calvinism’s “tragic concern” into the will of aggressive enterprise, and its “tragic exultation” into the intellect, when they should exist concurrently in a perpetual struggle.

Calvinism is not the only source of the dual mentality within 19th century American society. The influence of transcendentalism as a method of viewing the world contributed greatly to the creation of the genteel tradition, specifically in its solipsistic construction of the individual I/Eye. Transcendentalist method is described by Santayana as a radicalized Protestant spirit that is somewhat different than what was initially inherited (pure Calvinism). Taken too far by the exultant and unrepentant ego, the transcendental method becomes an “instrument of pure romanticism” (Santayana, 46). Autonomous and “calmly revolutionary,” transcendental method concerns itself with the here and now, considers the “Will [...] deeper than Intellect” (Santayana, 47). It is self-trust without a system; methodology in place of active philosophy, and inconsistency as a method. Philosophers, Santayana asserts, generally aspire to a system that is “sufficient and right” without actually seeking truth; instead they seek only “victory and the dispelling of their own doubts” (Santayana, 49). Santayana cites Kant as influencing the marriage of Calvinist faith with transcendentalism method—his philosophy thus appeals to those born into the genteel tradition, “feeling it weak,” and “wishing to save it” (Santayana, 47).



The foil of the transcendentalist is the mirror he holds up to himself, looks into, and sees in its reflection himself as Nature, Nature as himself, created by him. Through this leveled plateau of egoism, the genteel tradition has taken hold of American philosophy. According to Santayana, the genteel tradition is that strain of transcendental egoism that “forbids people to confess that they are unhappy,” thus promoting widespread complacency and maintaining a light-hearted consideration of human existence. Poetry and profound religion are inaccessible to those ensnared by the genteel. At its core, the genteel tradition is academic idealism, a white-washing; it is, “adoring things as they are.” Santayana writes that the genteel tradition in American philosophy holds an “illegitimate monopoly [...] over what ought to be assumed and what ought to be hoped for.” Perhaps the most exciting thing to emerge out of American philosophy is that the genteel has been “challenged and (what is perhaps more insidious) it has been discovered” (Santayana, 60). The awareness and recognition of the genteel has resulted in “rare metaphysical preoccupations,” a marriage of Calvinism and transcendentalism, an agonized conscience and the radically subjective criticism of knowledge as it “has subsisted in the academic mind” (Santayana, 62). This egotistical system, the “I,” is at the very center of the universe, anthropocentric, “and inspired by the conceited opinion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil,” a mirror which reflects Man as the Creator, at “the centre and pivot of the universe,” is the legacy of the genteel tradition (Santayana, 63).

#### Twain Enters the Parlor

This image of the “wise child” strikes one as resembling the persona of Mark Twain. There is an ironic undercurrent to Howells’ reverence for “how rapidly Mr. Clemens has grown

as an artist” when one is simultaneously aware that he was not born into the “better sort of people” like Tom Sawyer (Howells). A chronically poor Missourian, a river boat pilot, a wild Western reporter—Clemens became famous for his humor rather than his realism. He was the young, relentless ruffian who had never known luxury until the Quaker City voyage. On the *Quaker City*, Clemens met Mary Fairbanks, the woman who “be[came] his mentor in manners and morals, even in writing” (Kaplan, 45) despite her feelings that he was a “heretic in art” (Kaplan, 46). Simultaneously, he was penning letters about these travels back to a newspaper in California, which was under the immediate editorship of Ms. Fairbanks. This collected material would become his first full-length novel, *The Innocents Abroad*. Mary Fairbanks’ influence is inextricable from the work that followed his voyage. *The Innocents Abroad* was published in 1869, only two years after his voyage ended. It was a compilation of the travel letters he had written for the *Alta California* and lectures he had given about his voyage thereafter. At the outset of writing, Clemens envisioned a duo at the narrative helm of the novel. The “I” would be Mark Twain, an upstanding and moralistic persona traveling, of course, abroad. His prodigal sidekick would be much more of ruffian, loud-mouthed, ignorant, and linguistically reckless. In the end, Clemens fused these characters into the singular Mark Twain, in all aspects respectable and yet subversively witty and blunt.

Clemens’ refinement process did not end after disembarking from the *Quaker City*. “I acknowledge—I acknowledge—that I can be most lacerating ‘funny without being vulgar,’” Clemens wrote in a response to a “scorcher” of a letter from Mary, after she reprimanded him for delivering a profanity-laden lecture in 1867 in Washington (Kaplan, 67). He promised to integrate her instruction into what would become *The Innocents Abroad*, hoping to not only to

please her, but to make her proud. Through the lens of Santayana's writings, one imagines Mary Fairbanks in her colonial mansion, vilifying her "wise child" for his vulgarity. Clemens, wise indeed, finds himself being fitted for a coat and tails in her parlor as she watches with a keen and tasteful eye.

While Fairbanks is not directly mentioned in any of his novels, she is present in the persona of Mark Twain. To distill her impact to that of only a teacher is to disregard the complex mother-son relationship she and Clemens surely enjoyed. However, her influence instilled in Twain the wider appeal (and far more lucrative career) he could attain if he met her standards. And so the persona of Mark Twain is perhaps an attempt of "writing up" in the hopes of achieving the attention of those who were unfamiliar with or offended by the hard-drinking, drawling, impious scoundrel, Sam Clemens.

In this way, Samuel Clemens may represent an American masculinity that was, in his time, unfit for the feminine delicacy of literature as an art form. Santayana, in his essay *The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy*, similarly portrays American philosophy within the framework of the "wise child." With this dual-minded child, Santayana personifies 19th century America, torn between two philosophies: the "old" is hereditary and intellectual, the "young" is academic, a force of will. This double identity accounts for different facets of American culture. Santayana sees the hereditary, or intellect-based old mentality in religion, literature and morality, while the willful, academic mentality pervades invention, industry, and society. The will in American society is imagined as a skyscraper, an upward thrust of "aggressive enterprise," the masculine warrior of America, on the frontier and in battle. This is the part of the American consciousness that has been "leaping" forward, while the intellect, "high-and-dry" in its colonial

mansion, remains the “sphere,” Santayana writes, “of the American woman,” content with affairs as usual, and is “all genteel tradition” (Santayana, 40).

Fairbanks & Co.

This gendered philosophical binary is overwhelmingly explicit in Clemens’ life and work. Beginning with Mary Fairbanks, the author continued to surround himself with women who kept him, in a word, publishable. When he eventually married Olivia Langdon in 1870, she took over all editing duties from Mary. Olivia, whom Clemens called “Livy,” was extremely well-educated and raised within the insular world of the New England genteel. Kaplan reports that she kept Clemens (at least nominally) Christian, startling his visiting friends and family from the West by leading grace before meals.

Twain is famous for remarking that “training is everything,” but there were also inclinations of the genteel instilled in Clemens from an early age. Sam’s strict Calvinist mother laid the groundwork for Mary and Livy by catechizing a sense of deep mortal guilt in Twain, perhaps hindering the purely masculine sense of will and enterprise that drove him professionally. Both Livy and Clemens’ eldest daughter Suzy were adamant about crafting their patriarch’s legacy as a literary genius as opposed to a lowly humorist.

Surely Twain succeeded in establishing himself as a constant and revered fixture of the American canon, but his posthumously published works reveal a man whose awareness of culture and inability to comment candidly on its hypocrisies and stoicism led to his bitterness, depression, and rage. But early Twain was very content to enter the figurative parlor of a literary class that was traditionally and outspokenly content with the level of subversive humor and language they would endure. He was instead able to inject his cultural conscience into that of a

young boy, while preserving his own voice as the omnipotent narrator. Twain thereby allows a genteel audience to, as Howells does, dismiss much of his societal criticism as childish impatience, ignorance, and imagination.

### Calvinist Legacy in St. Petersburg

The opening of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is a cartoonish and frenzied, yet assumedly typical morning in the household. It begins with the search for the novels' namesake:

"TOM!"

No answer.

"TOM!"

No answer.

"What's gone with that boy, I wonder? You TOM!"

No answer.

The old lady pulled her spectacles down and looked over them about the room; then she put them up and looked out under them. She seldom or never looked through them for so small a thing as a boy; they were her state pair, the pride of her heart, and were built for "style," not service—she could have seen through a pair of stove-lids just as well. She looked perplexed for a moment, and then said, not fiercely, but still loud enough for the furniture to hear:

"Well, I lay if I get hold of you I'll—"

She did not finish, for by this time she was bending down and punching under the bed with the broom, and so she needed breath to punctuate the punches with. She resurrected nothing but the cat.

"I never did see the beat of that boy!"

She went to the open door and stood in it and looked out among the tomato vines and "jimpson" weeds that constituted the garden. No Tom. So she lifted up her voice at an angle calculated for distance and shouted:

"Y-o-u-u TOM!"

There was a slight noise behind her and she turned just in time to seize a small boy by the slack of his roundabout and arrest his flight.

"There! I might 'a' thought of that closet. What you been doing in there?"

"Nothing." [...]

"Well, I know. It's jam—that's what it is. Forty times I've said if you didn't let that jam alone I'd skin you. Hand me that switch."

The switch hovered in the air—the peril was desperate—

"My! Look behind you, aunt!"

The old lady whirled round, and snatched her skirts out of danger. The lad fled on the instant, scrambled up the high board-fence, and disappeared over it. (Twain, Tom, 11)

Unlike Huckleberry Finn, this novel is told in third person rather than first, thus allowing Twain to both construct and comment upon characters from an omniscient narrative perspective. This introduction to Tom begins with his playful hiding from his aunt, avoiding chores and pilfering jam for his own enjoyment. Rowdy and boisterous, Tom Sawyer represents an aspect of general childhood—avoiding adult-ordained duties and rules—but Twain presents this from the confounded, broom-wielding perspective of his older aunt.

Aunt Polly is described solely in these paragraphs as “the old lady” (Twain, Tom, 11). Her first physical description concerns her glasses, which she seems to utilize for “style” rather than “service.” In fact, Twain writes, the spectacles themselves are as good as “stove lids,” and thus perhaps a physical hindrance to her daily life, not to mention the search for her nephew. Thus Polly’s introductory feature is verbal (her yelling) and aesthetic (her glasses), two literal feminine embodiments of the genteel tradition.

Aunt Polly’s good-hearted rules make her prone to being perpetually outwitted by the youngsters in her care, and her softness for Tom is not so much based in motherly instinct as it is on pity. Tom and his siblings are orphans, taken in by their aunt out of the goodness of her heart. Later, Aunt Polly reflects aloud that Tom “he’s my own dead sister’s boy, poor thing, and I ain’t got the heart to lash him, somehow” (Twain, Tom, 12). In this passage one may note a strong Calvinist undercurrent which had been distilled from the original religion into what Santayana would deem the American virtue of “good-will.” But her good-will ironically involved corporal punishment--she perceives her biggest pitfall as being that she “ain’t got the heart to lash

him” (Twain, *Tom*, 12). She sees this inability as a disservice to Tom’s growing up, and instead resolves to “make him work” as a punishment.

Hang the boy, can't I never learn anything? Ain't he played me tricks enough like that for me to be looking out for him by this time? But old fools is the biggest fools there is. Can't learn an old dog new tricks, as the saying is. [...] He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again and I can't hit him a lick. I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth, [...] Spare the rod and spile the child, as the Good Book says. [...] he's my own dead sister's boy, poor thing, and I ain't got the heart to lash him, somehow. Every time I let him off, my conscience does hurt me so, and every time I hit him my old heart most breaks. [...] I'll just be obleeged to make him work, tomorrow, to punish him. It's mighty hard to make him work Saturdays, when all the boys is having holiday, but he hates work more than he hates anything else, and I've got to do some of my duty by him, or I'll be the ruination of the child. (Twain, *Tom*, 12)

After Tom runs off “up the high-board fence,” his aunt “[breaks] into a gentle laugh,” and wonder aloud if she will “never learn” that she can’t keep Tom under her thumb. But aunt Polly is wholly idealistic about her nephew’s good intentions, and instead calls herself an “old fool” (Twain, *Tom*, 12). The old woman’s complacency in response to Tom’s behavior works two-fold. First, it endears Tom to the reader as a redeemable troublemaker. The approval of the kind-hearted aunt, who took in her own dead sister’s three children, establishes for the reader an amalgam of sweetness and pity for these characters. Aunt Polly admits three times that she doesn’t have the heart to beat Tom for his misbehavior, even though his misbehavior and her lack of retribution has become a cycle. But his youth and orphanhood allow her both distance from him, as she is resigned to his antics while feeling a sense of responsibility embedded in the closeness of being Tom’s only maternal figure.

Rather than reprimand Tom, aunt Polly sees the futility of chasing after him. She knows that Tom will be back soon, and he will be put to work then to atone for his misbehavior. Aunt

Polly's position as a caregiver maintains a hold over young Tom as a defendant child, despite his disobedient streak. While he may not always follow her rules, the threat of punishment keeps Tom from getting into too much trouble. One may perhaps understand the genteel tradition's hold over America culture through the power dynamic between aunt Polly and Tom Sawyer. Her hold over him is, to echo Santayana, "verbal," insofar as she can only bring herself to scold him. Even the tasks she does assign him, such as white-washing the fence, Tom combats with a surprisingly enterprising cleverness. Her decision to put him to work superficially seems the antidote to his misbehavior, but instead leads to one of his most enterprising moments in the novel. Rather than allow a fellow schoolmate, Ben, to ridicule him for completing chores on a beautiful day, Tom makes a grand spectacle of things. He combines a selfish wish to play with a bourgeois ideological outlet: delegation of work.

"What do you call work?" Tom asks Ben after he brags about his leisurely plans. "Why, ain't that work?" Ben falls instantly for Tom's ruse. Turning back to his white-washing with feigned enthusiasm, young Mr. Sawyer "answered carelessly: 'Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain't. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer'" (Twain, Tom, 19). Ben asks Tom to "let [him] whitewash a little," a request Tom dramatically considers before responding,

"No—no—I reckon it wouldn't hardly do, Ben. You see, Aunt Polly's awful particular about this fence—right here on the street, you know—but if it was the back fence I wouldn't mind and she wouldn't. Yes, she's awful particular about this fence; it's got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done." (Twain, Tom, 19-20)

In making the task out to be something exceptional, Tom Sawyer successfully tricks Ben into doing it for him—and for a profit. His enterprising spirit approaches patriotism. In exchange for an apple, the protagonist gives up his chores and gains the day (and a snack). Like flies to a



flame, other boys trade their prized possessions for their hand at the fence. The ruse was not only successful in alleviating the boy of his obligations, but “when the middle of the afternoon came, from being a poor poverty-stricken boy in the morning, Tom was literally rolling in wealth” (Twain, *Tom*, 20).

While Tom’s underhandedness may be seen as immoral to some, “boyish” to others, his enterprising spirit proves enthusiastic and his strategies a capitalistic success. Here, Tom proves himself capable of wisdom, outsmarting both his high-minded aunt and his dim-witted peers. But Tom is not all wisdom—otherwise there would be no need for the likes of Huckleberry Finn. The influence of structure and genteel complacency—even a rigid adherence to rules—are proven to be deeply instilled in Tom.

#### By the (Good) Book

In another episode, Tom is playing by himself in the woods when he hears an acquaintance approaching. He hazards a line from a commonly-known book: Robin Hood.

"Hold, my merry men! Keep hid till I blow."

Now appeared Joe Harper, as airily clad and elaborately armed as Tom. Tom called:

"Hold! Who comes here into Sherwood Forest without my pass?"

"Guy of Guisborne wants no man's pass. Who art thou that—that—"

"Dares to hold such language," said Tom, prompting—for they talked "by the book," from memory. (Twain, *Tom*, 53)

Here, Tom and Joe perform a ritual particular to boyhood—quoting famous dialogue from a cultural relic. This exchange between the boys codifies their equal status. When Joe recognizes Tom’s playful call, he attempts to offer the appropriate response. But Mr. Harper is apparently less well-versed in the exact language of the novel, and hesitates slightly, “that—that—,” and prompts Tom to finish the line for him. Tom grows frustrated at Joe’s hesitations. They talk “by

the book,” Twain writes, revealing a quality of play that is inherently privileged. Persons who cannot read or who had not read Robin Hood would have been confused by Tom’s quotation, thus devising an air of exclusivity to the boys’ cavorting. Rather than break character, Joe answers again after Tom’s coaching.

"Who art thou that dares to hold such language?"

"I, indeed! I am Robin Hood, as thy caitiff carcass soon shall know."

"Then art thou indeed that famous outlaw? Right gladly will I dispute with thee the passes of the merry wood. Have at thee!"

They took their lath swords, dumped their other traps on the ground, struck a fencing attitude, foot to foot, and began a grave, careful combat, "two up and two down."

Presently Tom said:

"Now, if you've got the hang, go it lively!"

So they "went it lively," panting and perspiring with the work. By and by Tom shouted:

"Fall! fall! Why don't you fall?"

"I sha'n't! Why don't you fall yourself? You're getting the worst of it."

"Why, that ain't anything. I can't fall; that ain't the way it is in the book. The book says, 'Then with one back-handed stroke he slew poor Guy of Guisborne.' You're to turn around and let me hit you in the back."

There was no getting around the authorities, so Joe turned, received the whack and fell.

"Now," said Joe, getting up, "you got to let me kill you. That's fair."

"Why, I can't do that, it ain't in the book."

"Well, it's blamed mean—that's all."

"Well, say, Joe, you can be Friar Tuck or Much the miller's son, and lam me with a quarter-staff; or I'll be the Sheriff of Nottingham and you be Robin Hood a little while and kill me." (Twain, Tom, 53)

As the boys continue their activities, however impromptu, they maintain fairness and flexibility within the confines of Robin Hood’s canon. Certain individuals remain offensive and other defensive, and there are already winners and losers written into their imaginary contest. This strict adherence to roles and character destiny, “two up and two down,” divulges a familiarity with structure and a desire to remain “true” to the written “authorities” (Twain, Tom, 53). Such faithfulness to the canon manifests the framework and propriety that the boys have internalized—a difference that separates them from boys like Huckleberry Finn, who does not attend school

nor have a traditional family life. Of course, Tom's family life is less than "traditional" by modern standards, but his aunt has clearly done what she could in tolerating and taming his rebellious nature.

Insofar as Tom may represent the "wise child," of Santayana's frustration, his male enterprise has no mentoring figure. The only true authority in his life is that of his old aunt, whose rules are "thin" and "verbal," and without insurmountable threat. Tom's enterprising spirit is thus compromised by his innate obedience to general structure, as seen in these passages. Furthermore, even his apparent recklessness remains attached to a general awareness of his boyhood. In church, though distracted from the actual words of the sermon, he has a general knowledge of the proceedings. When he is distracted by a fly and feels the urge to trap it in his palms, he waits until the congregants are sufficiently distracted before he acts, thus highlighting the already-instilled sense of decorum to which he has been forced to conform.

Earlier in the novel, Tom trades with other Sunday school friends for tickets they earned by memorizing sections of the Bible. While he has earned no tickets of his own merit, he has traded his possessions for them, and accumulated enough to exchange for a small pocket-sized Bible—itsself a great reward to the other children. Tom decides to show off his black market reward the day that his crush, Becky Thatcher, and her father, the new town Judge, attend their first Sunday service. His decision to impress Becky and her father with false piety and intellect bespeaks Tom's knowledge of the social status quo.

Tom's ability to memorize lines from Robin Hood ironically reveals an ability to memorize. His mind, while not always interested in what it was being forced to listen to and

process, unwillingly picks up the pattern of the church service and the general structure of proceedings. After Sunday school one weekend, Tom sits in church:

The boy whose history this book relates did not enjoy the prayer, he only endured it—if he even did that much. He was restive all through it; he kept tally of the details of the prayer, unconsciously—for he was not listening, but he knew the ground of old, and the clergyman's regular route over it—and when a little trifle of new matter was interlarded, his ear detected it and his whole nature resented it; he considered additions unfair, and scoundrelly. (Twain, Tom, 35)

Tom's general complacency in church strikes one as rather audacious. It may be true that he would rather not be in attendance at all, but indeed he is there and he "endure[s] it" (Twain, Tom 35). Tom seems to take pride in the monotony of churchgoing. This lends itself to Santayana's notion of pride and misery in Calvinism, itself a double-edged sword. Of course, Tom's preference for a structured church service without "new matter" is not directly correlated to Santayana's exposition of the joy and sorrow of Calvinist existence, it does communicate a societal habit of churchgoing and church-hating. The "duty" of attending church is nevermore felt so miserably than in Twain's depiction of Tom, young and restless, in a Southwestern church in the summertime.

There is some irony to the notion that Tom seems pious in this scene, for his general knowledge of the church service is itself structural; he knows "the ground of old" and can "detect it[s] [...] whole nature," yet finds additions and liberties taken "unfair" and "scoundrelly" (Twain, Tom, 35). Furthermore, there is great irony in the notion that newness is "scoundrelly" to Tom; he hardly pays attention regardless, but his ear catches on novelty and immediately abhors it. Such complacency bespeaks a rather hastiness to Tom's nature, and is perhaps tied to the part of him who plays Robin Hood by the book. Though he is miserable, Tom

relishes in the continuity of the service and the prayers, and even waits until their conclusion to trap the fly that caught his attention.

Insofar as Santayana's notion of the genteel tradition is concerned, one can trace the roots of genteel sensibilities already fixed to Tom Sawyer. Despite his willfulness and his "aggressive enterprise," his sense of well-being is ratified only by the good-will shown to him by his aunt Polly. He is, of course, indebted to her kindness; had she not taken in Tom and his siblings, they too would be orphans like Huckleberry Finn, without structure or a matriarch to impose it. Aunt Polly's gentility comes through in both her acts of "good-will" and in the satisfaction she receives from the knowledge that Tom does have the ability to fit into the social order he was raised within.

Even Twain himself once remarked that Tom Sawyer was only interesting in boyhood, because he had the temperament necessary to grow up to be a normal person by society's standards. Thus Tom's youth redeems his rebellion for the adult reader, as Howells poses; his rebellion is thwarted by his reliance on structure and his faithfulness to specific authorities. Tom comes to symbolize another aspect of Santayana's argument. The philosopher argues that whatever disguises or does not recognize the genteel tradition, but rather diverts the attention away from society and onto the self, does not necessarily unmoor it. Rather, the focus is placed on how things "ought" to be. Tom's harmless rebellion from these norms makes him certainly an "adventurer," but one, as Howells says, of childish ideals. Thus the mood of the genteel tradition finds itself pleasantly permeated throughout *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, itself perhaps not exemplary of all aspects of the genteel but it is indeed upon its bookshelf.

## Trash Talk: Huck Finn and Aesthetic Satire

### Flat, Stale, and Unprofitable

After the success of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876, Mark Twain became a household figure. Having profited greatly after the success of his novels, he, like his father before him, began what would be a lifelong relationship with venture capitalism. He funneled his money into a publishing house, engineering companies, iron manufacturers, revolutionary typesetters, stock investments, the marketing of his own works, and even theatrical productions adapted from his work. The opulence that the Clemens's enjoyed was normal for Livy. Any private discomfort Sam felt was overturned by her eagerness to raise her husband's status as a literary mastermind and *persona grata* of the elegant class—which she had occupied since birth.

Twain began work on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* soon after the publishing of *Tom Sawyer*. However, writer's block struck the author for a number of years, and he instead compiled the notebooks from his river boat piloting days into *Life on the Mississippi*, which was published in 1883. He would return to *Huck* in the summer of 1884. Clemens reports an unmatched dedication to writing in this period, sitting for ten hours a day, six days a week, and produced over 400 pages of material during the season. The first edition of the novel, set twenty years before, during the Antebellum period, was published in the United Kingdom in December of 1884.

In 1885, Mark Twain published *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the United States to mixed reviews. In fact, *Huck Finn* was immediately banned in several libraries across America before it even hit the shelves. In a contemporary context, one may assume that blatant racism and the repetition of a particular racial epithet might have provoked the outrage, but interestingly,

libraries, booksellers, and reviewers in the mid-1890s were far more scandalized by the novel's lack of grammar, plot, and clear morality.

The crude syntax of its first-person narrator caused some, like one unnamed member of the Concord (Mass.) Public Library committee, to deem the whole work as “the veriest trash” (Fishkin, 115). The tale of The Concord Library offered the following statement:

The Concord (Mass.) Public Library committee has decided to exclude Mark Twain's latest book from the library. One member of the committee says that, while he does not wish to call it immoral, he thinks it contains but little humor, and that of a very coarse type. He regards it as the veriest trash. The librarian and the other members of the committee entertain similar views, characterizing it as rough, coarse, and inelegant.<sup>3</sup> (Fishkin, 115)

Shelley Fisher Fishkin<sup>4</sup>, in her critical book *Was Huck Black?*, chalks this contempt up to Huck Finn's “debut as an ‘author,’” wherein he “entered the drawing room uninvited and unannounced and started talking immediately—coarse talk, irreverent talk, *black* talk” (Fishkin, 114). By “drawing room,” the critic means the expansive libraries in which a genteel literary audience kept their classic works. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, though an introduction to the characters who would inhabit *Huckleberry Finn*, drew “relatively little notice” as a cultural satire. Because *Tom Sawyer* was told in the a third-person narrative style, it remained settled in a satirical “framework” which was still comfortable to more “conservative readers” (Fishkin, 114).

The third-person frame of *Tom* was maintained by “the author, a Standard-English-speaking narrator,” who “bracket[s]” (Fishkin, 113) the narrative with what Mark Twain would later characterize as “the showiest kind of book-talk” (Twain, *Offenses*). This literary language—seen in Twain's contemporaries such as Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Emerson—had

<sup>3</sup> In response to this, Twain wrote to his editor, “Apparently, the Concord library has condemned Huck as 'trash and only suitable for the slums.' This will sell us another twenty-five thousand copies for sure!”

<sup>4</sup> Twain scholar, “dean” of Mark Twain scholarship

been the unspoken rule and assured positive reviews. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, and 18th century author, excerpted in Fishkin's analysis, argues that through this omniscient framing, "humorists also assured their conservative readers of something they had to believe in before they could find such humor amusing" (Fishkin, 114). This object of belief is the vehicle of prose itself, a personified author, the Gentleman who leads the reader through the story and maintains control over what is being revealed and, more importantly, how information is being communicated.

Through high-minded literary language, "namely, that the Gentleman," or the genteel and grammatically elegant author, "was in complete control of the situation he described, as he was of himself" (Fishkin, 114). *Huckleberry Finn* posed as a foil to this narrative style, as it is presented in a first-person narrative. Huck Finn, adolescent and uneducated, told his story in his own dialect, embodying the mood and spirit of the poor, Antebellum South. In *Was Huck Black?*, Fishkin argues for Huck's "blackness" as indicated by his benighted syntax and lowbrow consideration of grammar. But most poor, uneducated children living in the Antebellum South would have employed a vernacular similar to Huck's. In his essay *The Dialects in Huckleberry Finn*, David Carkeet explains that dialects, both "in literature and it in the field," can, and in this novel's case, do "differ from each other in their pronunciation (Huck says *get*, Pap said *git*), grammar (Huck says *you want*, Jim says *you wants*), and vocabulary or lexicon (Huck says *smooch* for 'steal,' the King says *hook*)" (Carkeet, 316). Carkeet goes on to say that there are major differences in dialect between Huck and Jim, but that the similarities connote a mutual influence. The notion that Huck is somehow equated socially to Jim because of their similar dialects, or that their friendship is normalized by their poverty and lack of formal education is



false; the bond the duo eventually share in the novel is immensely anomalous in the context of the pre-war South. While Huck's identity is indeed informed by a rejection of the cultural values of this time period, it is clear that Twain is intentionally satirizing the genteel tradition and its stronghold over the cultural moment in various ways, not blurring the lines of race through speech, which one could argue invalidates the serious, subtle, and atypical convention of Jim and Huck's camaraderie. In allowing "Huck" to narrate his own story in his own vernacular, Twain has eschewed the customary literary standards of the 19th century genteel. He has indirectly rebuffed not only the values of his high-minded readership, but he has made a mockery of language while also satirizing social values.

While *Tom Sawyer* offered numerous parodies of the culture it described, the narrative style was held within these constructs. Still, its humor was considered bold and, at times, scathing. Such were the limitations of humorists of the nineteenth century who still expected to be lauded for their work, not to mention published at all. Santayana writes that the humorists, like Twain, gave "evidence that the genteel tradition is present pervasively, but everywhere weak," by pointing out the folly of the standards, but they "they have nothing solid to put in its place" (Santayana, 51); instead they are resigned to "point out how ill many facts fit into it" (Santayana, 51). But the harshly critical reception by critics of Twain's masterpiece seems to have been glanced over by the philosopher. Even before the unsavory reviews began to roll in, Twain predicted the outcry over his novel's avant-garde narrative. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins with a declaratory "NOTICE" from the author, which decrees the following:

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.

BY ORDER OF THE AUTHOR

PER G.G., CHIEF OF ORDINANCE. (Twain, *Huck*, 4)

On the very first page lies the declaration that this book will not satisfy—and will perhaps blatantly offend—its intended readership. The violence alluded to in this “notice” is so casually stated that the negative reaction offered by critics seem, in a modern context, so ostensibly gratuitous that one can imagine Twain in the throes of laughter at their superficial consideration of his work. And, in fact, he did accept the ridicule in good humor. One can easily imagine the earnest, uptight reviewer scratching out his scathing review, neck strained and veins pulsing with blue blood. The Concord Library committee member who deemed the novel “trash” expounded further on the “trash” he wouldn’t necessarily call “immoral”:

It deals with a series of adventures of a very low grade morality; it is couched in the language a rough, ignorant dialect, and all through its pages there is a systematic use of bad grammar and an employment of rough, course, inelegant expressions. It is also very irreverent. To sum up, the book is flippant and irreverent in style. It deals with a series of experiences that are certainly not elevating. The whole book is of a class that is much more profitable for the slums than it is for respectable people [...]. (Fishkin, 115)

This committee member finds no redeeming qualities in *Huck Finn*. It’s morality “low grade,” its vocabulary “ignorant,” and its style “inelegant” and “irreverent.” These charges are posed as though the novel and its pitfalls form an inscrutable knot, fit for the “trash.” Because the novel does not promote nor provide a protagonist who upholds, validates, or to only tragic ends refute a tradition of “elegance,” and “elevation” in life, it is “trash.” Huck Finn, uneducated, “unsivilized,” usually barefoot, descendant of drunkards, has no place in the parlor. Tom Sawyer would at least clean himself up for a visit to the drawing room, as his story is couched,

alternatively, in the standard “King’s English” of Mark Twain. Huck’s vernacular narration determines the accessibility of novel itself. Written in the “book-talk” Twain so loathed, literature is only approachable to those with the vocabulary to decipher some of its loftier syntax—those who, incredibly, also probably had the leisure time in which to read even an “extraordinarily senseless publication” (*Boston Evening Traveler*).

This anonymous review for the *Boston Evening Traveler* slightly praises and justifies Twain’s other work, assuring the reader that “Mr. Clemens has contributed some humorous literature that is excellent and will hold its place,” but that *Huck Finn* is “singularly flat, stale and unprofitable” (*Boston Evening Traveler*). He speculates about various derogatory advertising methods that would need to be utilized—“Mr. Mark Twain will probably have to resort to law to compel some to sell it by any sort of bribery or corruption”—and that the novel could hardly be “disposed of to people of average intellect” unless they were at “the point of the bayonet” (*Boston Evening Traveler*), a gesture Twain has already accounted for in saying outright that those looking for anything more “will be shot.” An anonymous reporter from *San Francisco Daily Examiner* maintained that the endeavor of the novel entirely was “a pot-boiler in its baldest form” (*San Francisco Daily Examiner*); he is accusing Clemens of publishing *Huckleberry Finn* as a ploy to generate revenue as opposed to anything worthy of artistic or literary merit. This is laughable, insofar as Twain had, at this point, published several novels and short stories to critical acclaim, and money-making was certainly not an issue, even when his various business endeavors proved, as the critics called *Huck*, “unprofitable.”

Ironically, there were many passages of *Huckleberry Finn* that never made it out of Twain’s study. As his wife would carefully mark the passages unfit for public consumption, Susy

Clemens, aged twelve at the time, kept careful records of the sessions in which her father would read aloud his manuscript to the children.

Papa read “Huckleberry Finn” to us in manuscript just before it came out, and then he would leave parts of it with mamma to expurgate [sic], while he went off up to the study to work, and sometimes Clara and I would be sitting with mama while she was looking the manuscript over and I remember so well, with what pangs of regret we used to see her turn down leaves of the pages which meant, that some delightfully dreadful part must be scratched out. And I remember one part pertickularly [sic] which was perfectly fascinating it was dreadful...and oh with what dispare [sic] we saw mamma turn down the leaf on which it was written, we thought the book would be almost spoiled without it. (Powers, 488)

Susy Clemens’ record of the pre-publication process sheds some light on what *Huckleberry Finn* could have been. Once again, the impact of Twain’s female editors is inextricable from the history of his authorship. His literary voice, though obviously refined by his wife, remains tethered to his Southwestern roots rather than formed out of his Northeastern schooling. Women were, of course, not his sole editors—Ron Powers notes that Richard Gilder and William Dean Howells both looked over the manuscript before it was deemed suitable to print.

But the approval of his editors bespeaks the genius of Twain far more reliably than the response from his high-minded critics. Their issues with *Huck Finn*’s “immorality” and lack of tact seem to be the result of their own genteel attitudes—they see the stylistic lack of decorum as an indication of immorality. Because *Huckleberry Finn* is about a child, some critics speculate that the novel is meant as children’s entertainment. This perhaps comes out of its child-narrator, thus intensifying the charge that it is indecent and obscene, even for even adults, much less children, to subject themselves to. But Twain himself noted that both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* were “only [to] be read by adults” and “only written for adults” (Twain, *Huck*, 299). Even if this notice is sardonic in tone, it remains true that in

response to the charge of *Huck*'s ungrammatical and low-grade vocabulary, Twain wished his audience to know that "[t]his boy's language has been toned down and softened here and there" (Kaplan, 270). But "the spokesmen for the genteel tradition," Kaplan writes, "turned their backs on the book which sprang from his deepest personal and creative imperatives" (Kaplan, 270). It took Twain seven years to write *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—he began prior to *Life on the Mississippi* and picked up thereafter, completing the manuscript during a summer of diligent genius. The disconnect between *Huck*'s reception in 1885 by critics and the subsequent praise that was heaped upon it shortly after, in the dawn of literary modernism (by legends in their own right: Hemingway, T.S. Eliot, Toni Morrison), provoke meditation on *Huck* as it was received in its cultural moment, and the specific deprecations that lapsed, changed, and emerged later in history.

Mark "Edison" Twain

Most critics with negative reactions upheld the author's description as "being without a motive, a moral, or a plot," and proceed to negate the authenticity of his "picture of life in the Southwest" (*San Francisco Daily Examiner*). Even those passages found worthy of being deemed "literary" or which may "greatly interest" the reader are "touch[ed]" by "a sort of grotesque pathos" (*San Francisco Daily Examiner*). "Even the author objects to it being considered literature," states one unsigned review from *New York World*, dated March 2, 1885, "That such stuff should be considered humor is more than a pity" (*New York World*).

Such are the damning epithets that cast *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* into controversy. But it is important to note that the false accusations heaped onto *Huck Finn* are what cast it out of the genteel tradition. Rejected by critics for charges of "low morality" and its

syntactical structure, *Huck Finn* draws direct attention to the genteel tradition's "sanitizing" habit, wherein "art" is equated "with the parlor and the parlor with the academic" (Wilson, x-xi). In constructing a novel with a child's vernacular language and unarticulated, subversive morality, Mark Twain concurrently defies and radically re-envision the scope of American literature. Despite these dubious critiques, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* sold more copies than any other Twain novel "in the previous ten years, 39,000 as of March 14" (Powers, 490). Despite the myriad of negative reviews, which charge Twain with "imposing upon an unoffending public a piece of careless hackwork," various publications did see the genius of his latest novel. The *San Francisco Chronicle* praised *Huckleberry Finn* as "a more minute and faithful picture of Southwestern manners and customs" and suggested Twain might be "the Edison of our literature" (*The San Francisco Chronicle*).

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is, at its pith, a tale of Southwestern boyhood from a firsthand account. Despite its ostensible "lack of plot," the action of the story deals with the various themes of boyhood, morality, slavery, and silence. As Fishkin suggests, the framework, which implies authorial control and comportment, is replaced with by the Pike County vernacular of one young orphan, Huckleberry Finn. Huck's life has changed since the reader was introduced to him in Tom's story—he is living with the widow Douglas, who has taken it upon herself to "sivilize" him. Son of the town drunk, Huckleberry has lived much of his life barefoot and rag-clad, riling up the boys of the small river town that is St. Petersburg. The beginning of Huck's narrative picks up where Tom's left off—the boys, "made [...] rich" by the money left by robbers in a cave, have returned to a sense of normalcy. Huck informs the reader that Judge

Thatcher has taken their reward money and “fetched [them] a dollar a day, [...] more than a body could tell what to do with” (Twain, *Huck*, 13).

Huck admits feeling stifled by the “sivilizing” efforts of the widow Douglas, though he knows “she never meant no harm by” stuffing him into “new clothes,” praying over meals, and Bible lessons. Miss Watson, the widow’s sister, similarly attempts to instill some manners into the boy ruffian, scolding his foul language, lack of comportment, and penchant for pipe tobacco. Huck maintains throughout this introduction to his tale that the women meant him “no harm,” yet he cannot help but evade their discipline—it is simply not in his nature. The solecistic syntax of the narrative profoundly impacts the mood of the story. Huckleberry tells the reader, in his way, his feelings of isolation, loneliness, and depression in the face of these good womens’ labor; he continuously runs off at night to play with the other boys and, of course, Tom Sawyer.

These introductory moments mirror those that Tom Sawyer relates in his own story, simply told in the plainer, ungrammatical discourse of Huck Finn. With his own psychology as commentary—rather than the “delightful” humor of Mark Twain’s narrative voice—Huck’s innocence is compounded by his independence. Thus the irony of Twain’s prefatory “NOTICE” must satirically be understood as itself a joke. While readers “looking” for a “motive,” “plot,” or “moral,” may not find it, the enlightened reader may find such devices in what is not explicitly stated—in the moments of Huck’s silence, and in the moral insights brilliantly revealed using his seemingly inarticulate and childish phrasing and logic. Thus *Huck Finn* presents a satirization of the genteel at its most poignant. Despite the ostensible failure of Huck’s alcoholic and abusive father to instill any morality in his child, and the overtly religious “moralizing” forced upon

Huck by his female benefactors, the protagonist's morality is derived from a decidedly unconventional source: Jim, the runaway slave.

### Trash Is What People Is

Huck and Jim's socially-taboo relationship establishes itself gradually over the course of the novel. The two find each other by chance, and yet their mutual longing for freedom from their mutually-exclusive situations of oppression and lack of personal human agency. As Huck is dealing with the reforming attempts of the Widow Douglas, he, Tom, and the other rebellious boys of St. Petersburg decide to start a fledgling gang of robbers. Our protagonist admits growing bored of the operation, but his worries are overruled by the sudden return of Pap, Huck's drunken delinquent of a father. Eager for the money his son is receiving in installments from Judge Thatcher, Pap kidnaps Huck and brings him to a run-down cabin across the River in Illinois. After a series of boozy tirades and fights, Huck cunningly fakes his own death and escapes his forced isolation from society, moving back down river. There, on an island he assumes uninhabited, he finds Jim, the barrel-chested and mild-mannered black man who has run away from Miss Watson and slavery altogether, attempting to find freedom in Cairo, Illinois. Though Huck is initially conflicted by the choice to help a runaway slave—he believes this morally contemptible (“People would call me a low down Ablitionist” (Twain, *Huck*, 55))—the two join forces in an attempt to move North. The pair end up missing their Northern crossing at the Ohio River and heading back even further South—dangerous waters for both a missing dead boy (Huck) and a runaway slave (Jim).



Despite the prejudice that Huck has grown up around, he and Jim quickly become friends. Far more mature emotionally than Huck, Jim plays a fatherly role at various times throughout their journey. Take for example, the scene in which Jim scolds Huck for playing a rather rude trick on him; stealing off in a canoe, Huck causes Jim to think he has been lost to the river. Upon his return, Jim first believes himself dreaming, then Huck a ghost. Once he is sure Huck has not died, his confusion, naturally, turns to anger as he learns Huck tried to pull one over on him.

“[...] When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no' mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en fine you back agin, all safe en soun', de tears come, en I could a got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed.” Then he got up slow and walked to the wigwam, and went in there without saying anything but that. But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back. (Twain, *Huck*, 95)

It takes Huck “fifteen minutes” before he can “work [himself] up to go and humble [himself]” to Jim, “but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither” (Twain, *Huck*, 95). Huck bashfully reports, “I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way” (Twain, *Huck*, 95), codifying a facet of human morality which itself may be seen as inconsequential—or perhaps even consequentially negative—to the 19th century reader. In considering the feelings of Jim, a slave, he has ostensibly accepted that Jim is a human being equal with himself. Even in 1885, this notion is far from widespread, and quite incredible nonetheless coming from a young boy. Such are the unrecognized progressivist notions present in the ideologies of an adolescent, uncouth, runaway orphan.

Jim and Huck's exchange here notably occurs amidst a pile of trash that has been accumulated on their raft. An ironic image indeed, considering now how the validity of *Huckleberry Finn* as a work of art and literature—even entertainment—has been dismissed by many of the critics and supposedly intellectuals of the day; instead it is charged as the “veriest trash.” The OED traces “trash” back to an eighteenth and nineteenth century use referring to the “The refuse of sugar-canes after the juice has been expressed,” which is perhaps highly racially charged yet historically relevant usage, apart from the standard North American meaning for general “rubbish,” and “worthlessness.” The social context of “trash” as both personified term and the environment that Tom and Huck are literally in—a pile of trash—poignantly emphasizes their downtrodden situation, and provides an ironic setting for Huck's moral comeuppance and Jim's defining fatherly moment.

What's more, critics often focus on Huck's behavior in this scene as somehow more noteworthy than Twain's depiction of Jim and his moral insights. Yes, Huck's lesson-learning from a former black slave in the deep South is certainly revolutionary, but so is the rather beautiful, straightforward morality of Jim's teaching. He tells Huck that upon the boy's return, he “could a got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful” (Twain, *Huck*, 95), essentially positing his deep affection for Huck as both a friend and traveling companion. As technically free man, and certainly a man seeking freedom, Jim is shown as possessing not only intense emotional capacities, but also a sense of agency that other white writers of this time period might play off as a racial stereotype of submissiveness. But Jim counters his declaration of love with remonstrative gusto, telling Huck that such tricks “is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed” (Twain, *Huck*, 95). Quite like Huck's

ungrammatical narration, Jim's dialect coats his sentiments in language supposedly impenetrable to a genteel audience, who desire and trust only a King's English speaker to deliver their ethical dilemmas—not so much for clarity, but for the aesthetic implications of what Pap might call “hifalutin” prose. The glossing over of Jim and Huck's deep friendship by critics is perhaps the most crucial affront to *Huckleberry Finn* and Twain's own legacy, but let it be a condemnation of the cultural moment.

Perhaps another result of the story's 1840s setting, Huck admits being hesitant to apologize to Jim because of his status as a black slave in the rural Antebellum South. But Huck's resolve weakens quickly, as does his use of vernacular racial epithets toward Jim. Succinct and heartbroken, Jim articulates his hurt feelings to Huck and quickly exits due to anger. Huck is clearly moved by his friend's words and demeanor, revealing to the reader that, “It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed *his* foot to get him to take it back” (Twain, *Huck*, 95). This scene of repentance is never physically fulfilled, yet the notion of Huck kissing Jim's feet fills one with a sense of equality between the two runaways.

There are, of course, religious connotations that permeate this scene; all four gospels account for the anointing of Jesus, and in Luke, a woman kisses Jesus feet when she asks for forgiveness. This metaphoric replacing of Jesus with Jim is exceptional not only as an image or device, but also as an uncompleted action, and rather an idea. Huck does not immediately nor impulsively fulfill the actions he formulates psychologically—the rumination on ways to apologize to his friend suggest a deep human empathy which surpasses the boyish temerity of Tom Sawyer and drunken imprudence of Pap Finn.

Such thoughtfulness and empathy make the following charges from the *San Francisco Evening Bulletin* rather absurd:

The spice of juvenile wickedness and dare-deviltry give a zest to the book. "Huckleberry Finn" is, in a restricted sense, a typical character. Yet the type is not altogether desirable, nor is it one that most parents who want a future of promise for their young folks would select without some hesitation. The trouble with "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn" is not that they are too good for this world; even as the world goes, they are not good enough. (*San Francisco Evening Bulletin*)

Such damning language begs the question: what type of "goodness" is lacking in Tom and Huck? If it is the quality of Twain's writing that this reviewer discredits, we may allow him his opinion. But to be unable to locate "goodness" of character in Huck, especially, is to overlook the ways in which he defies the complacent nature of the genteel, which, Santayana writes, relies on "Good-will" rather than "goodness." Good-will is an intention, detached and perhaps housed in ritual action as opposed to personal involvement in others' lives. It bespeaks intention, wishing a fellow citizen the best of luck, to help where necessary and perhaps altruistically. The reviewer means to insinuate that "goodness," is lacking in Huckleberry Finn, insofar as religion is missing explicitly from the underlying intention of Tom and Huck, or that it has been manifested in ways vastly different than those apparent to the genteel. "Goodness" in the genteel sense is composed and respectable, an aesthetic confirmation of one's inherent morality. Genteel "goodness," reveals itself through acts of recognized or purported self-sacrifice and, ironically, concurrently, self-satisfaction.

### Breaking Tradition

Santayana closes "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," with the sentiment that one who rejects this stale American habit does so by "learn[ing] what you are really fitted to

do, and where lie[s] your natural dignity and joy, [...] in representing many things, without being them, and in letting your imagination, through sympathy, celebrate and echo” the lives of others.

Huck’s sincerity and good-will thus vindicate the American spirit; Santayana charges that humorists offer only a gestural indication of the philosophical issues entangled in the genteel tradition, but Huck is ostensibly the foil to this generalized lack of “sincere” goodness. Huck’s will to action is sincere enough to refute Santayana’s charge, but the reforming endeavors of the women in his life—and perhaps the critics of Twain’s literature, are not. Though he may not articulate such things to Jim in words, Huck’s actions and his imagination prove Jim’s humanity as it is real and worthy to Huck as a person. “Let us be content to live in the mind,” suggests Santayana, posing the radical notion that self-actualizing the dignity of other humans is redemptive in itself, a social salvation rather than one which holds fast the social acceptability of tradition and expectations of behavior (Santayana, 64). The “imaginative transcript” of “external things,” which one notices blatantly in Huck’s consideration of Jim’s human worth, would be detached in the genteel sense of goodness. Huck, however, is engaged in his good-will toward Jim, as his internal decision is to halt the action of ill-will toward Jim, namely, playing a mean-spirited trick on him. Santayana may be seen as thinking broadly, generally, and impersonally about good-will as a philosophical notion rather than a humanitarian effort. Huck is willing to physically and actively die for his friend. Thus Twain, in a methodological inverse of Santayana’s critique of American genteel philosophy, reconstructing this concept of “good-will” and “goodness,” in such a way that dodges—or possibly refutes and replaces—Santayana’s critique.

Take, for example, the scene in which Huck, believing himself damned to hell, decides for a moment that his way to salvation is to write a letter to Miss Watson, telling her that he is with Jim, her runaway slave, and how she could find him. Huck mulls over this for a while, wondering if praying might come easier if he cleanses himself of the “sin” of fraternizing and enabling a black fugitive. Huck thinks over his relationship with Jim, however, and realizes that there existed no fortifying reasons to implicate Jim for Huck’s own well-being. He writes the letter, but thinks twice before sending it. Huck thinks, and thinks,

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 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.

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

"All right, then, I'll *go* to hell" —and tore it up. (Twain, *Huck*, 222-223)

The irony here is unbelievably profound, insofar as Huck’s logic—as instilled into him by the genteel caretakers and the society in which he was bred secondhand—leads him to believe that his friendship with Jim (and thus his loyalty to him) will send him to hell. While the guilt of his decision and the damnation he believes he deserves carries strong Calvinist undertones, the logic is contained by the societal traditions of black inferiority as reinforced by Southern white supremacy. As he meditates on the special moments that define his and Jim’s friendship, Huck validates Jim’s humanity and the arbitrary racism, which keeps him enslaved in the pre-Civil War South. The sentiment is further enriched by the duo’s gradual progression further South, as they both descend geographically away from their destination—the North, which represents freedom,

grows all the more elusive as the story progresses, even as the muscle of their friendship grows stronger. Jim “would always call [Huck] honey, and pet [him] and do everything he could think of for [him],” strengthening the paternal role that the former slave plays in the young rebel’s life and the impact of his kindness on Huck’s future.

While the pair may not fit precisely into the “good” role that their society expects of “good” people, they carve out a universal goodness that can be said to replace the genteel tradition. Huck’s decision, conceptual as it is active, is further ironized by Huck’s resignation to his own “awful”ness:

It was awful thoughts and awful words, but they was said. And I let them stay said; and never thought no more about reforming. I shoved the whole thing out of my head, and said I would take up wickedness again, which was in my line, being brung up to it, and the other warn't. And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog. (Twain, *Huck*, 223)

“The whole hog,” as it were, would thus define Huck as a committed abolitionist. The mores to which the culture around him are tied are loosened for Huck—perhaps they always have been—but his goodness is, should we assume this word means recognizing and supporting the dignity of human life, in no way compromised. Huck’s will to die for Jim ostensibly overtakes the genteel notion of reform as a virtue. “And for a starter I would go to work and steal Jim out of slavery again,” Huck resolves, “if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too.” Huck’s complete dedication to Jim bespeaks not only an intense emotional bond and fierce loyalty, but implies both a conceptual and physical responsibility to his loved ones—a situation and sentiment that Huck, as an orphan, is rather unfamiliar with. Such passion, though arguably “good,” is not so aligned with the moral vision of the genteel tradition, which is content to lie

back in its chair offering thin, verbal encouragement to those in distress, to rely on intellect rather than will.

It is rather curious to consider how Huck's anguished and sardonic decision to die for Jim is both morally confusing to Huck himself, unknown by Jim, and unrecognized for its ethical resonance by the negative critics. It seems clear that Huck's surrender to eternal damnation is more profound, to the genteel attitude, than the principle which led to it. The young runaway is, of course, not going to hell for his actions. Still, in his acceptance of such a fate, he has redeemed himself from becoming entrenched within the insular tradition of possible damnation so pervasive to the Calvinist spirit so enmeshed in the genteel tradition. The women in Huck's life attempt to draw the boy into their genteel worldview, and he resists while also supplanting a far more active goodness and personal, humanitarian morality.

#### Gaudiness is Godliness

Still, outside of the world of the novel, Twain's critics uphold the nineteenth century's conception of society as a circle one must be included within; the genteel tradition, pervasive and weak, maintains that only those within this circle have the power, status, moral vision, and artistic purity to comment on it. Sam Clemens, in ingratiating himself to the Northeastern upper class, is allowed to use the platform granted to insiders because of his initial acceptance of the genteel. Upon this platform he is able to expound his beliefs about society and the world at large. But he retains this platform only by employing the vocabulary deemed acceptable by his so-called "peers." To occupy the outsider's perspective—for example, the rough syntax of



Huckleberry Finn—is to defy those who granted “Mark Twain” the permission to exercise his talent upon a welcoming audience.

Such an audience resides in the ornate colonial mansion of the feminized genteel. This space is in fact deliberately entered by Huck when he enters the Grangerford house during the novel. The Grangerfords are “a mighty nice family” who own “a mighty nice house, too,” at least compared to any the young orphan has ever encountered. Huck remarks that he “hadn't seen no house out in the country before that was so nice and had so much style” (Twain, *Huck*, 120). Our narrator proceeds to list with particularly objective accuracy everything about the Grangerford house that made it stand out from those he had experienced in rural St. Petersburg. “A brass knob to turn,” “a big fireplace that was bricked on the bottom,” “a clock on the middle of the mantelpiece” with “a big outlandish parrot on each side of the clock, made out of something like chalk, and painted up gaudy,” Huck relays: these items loudly communicate the flaunting of wealth through ornamentation. Perhaps the most comical and revealing item on display in the Southern mansion is depicted in the following excerpt:

On the table in the middle of the room was a kind of a lovely crockery basket that had apples and oranges and peaches and grapes piled up in it, which was much redder and yellower and prettier than real ones is, but they warn't real because you could see where pieces had got chipped off and showed the white chalk, or whatever it was, underneath. (Twain, *Huck*, 120)

Huck’s explicit observation of the fake fruit points to ostentatious faux-realism. “[M]uch redder and yellower and prettier than real [fruit] is,” the counterfeit crockery exposes a genteel habit of false realism. The vibrancy of the fruit’s color points to its artificiality, and in turn reveals the uselessness of the room’s decor. Rather than an offering of actual food from the homeowners, the kitch ornaments instead invite guests to simply appreciate the parlor’s aesthetic value. The

“fruit” is apparently only noticeably fake insofar as Huck notices “where piece had got chipped off,” and “showed,” as he calls it, “white chalk,” which we may assume is clay or porcelain. This display of phony hospitality—inedible fruit—as a rather literal application of the genteel tradition as a “digestion of vacancy” (Santayana, 44). There is no artistic or subversive merit to this decor, and thus a lack of substance and meaning to its presence in the home. This is not to say that it should not exist, but to emphasize its useless existence and the privilege which grants the Grangerfords the ability to own it. Both Santayana and his critics have cited the effect of genteel as it infected both literature and art, but this scene in *Huck* reveals how it has trickled down to gaudy home decor and a prescription of personal taste.

In a philosophical sense, Douglas Wilson explains how “[t]he genteel tradition replaced a reformed Puritanism that had replaced piety with moralism and God-centered vision with one oriented toward the requirements of human community,” (Wilson, x), defining the upper-and-middle-class attitude of aesthetic design as an indication of one’s personal wealth, and thus their moralistic ideology. The more ornate one’s aesthetic display is, the more likely they are to be included in the insular society of the ruling class. Such false morality is echoed in the home decor of the Grangerfords, as it is later revealed their shallow feud with a neighboring family—a situation that culminates in the death of their youngest son, Buck. Wilson notes that the moralistic ideals of the genteel are oddly represented through aesthetics, as decoration, objects without function, pointed to wealth, wealth to moralism, and moralism to decency:

Literature, art, and philosophy, the humanist and human arts, replaced morality at the core of the New England creed. But the aesthetic was expected to be moral and moral meant decent. Art was not supposed to challenge the orthodoxies and especially the conventions of the society but to decorate fortunate individuals within it. The gentility of

the genteel tradition was its false view that art and learning should have a natural connection to the morally sound” (Wilson, x).

Huck continues to list the visible decoration in the Grangerford home, including but not limited to, a table cover “made out of beautiful oilcloth, with a red and blue spread-eagle painted on it,” and “books, too, piled up perfectly exact, on each corner of the table” (Twain, *Huck*, 121). These two specific observations reveal even more aesthetic proofs: the cloth, with its oil-painted eagle, announces the family’s patriotism. It is unknown if the table cover is meant for dining on, but the insinuation of a patriotic table is at once a humorous comment of the blind American nationalism of the genteel and perhaps, if the Grangerfords are a family who pray before the eat, a marriage of God and patriotism as a family tradition. The books perched on the table bespeak the intent of learning as a tenant of gentility—the intellect of the genteel tradition is here as much about aesthetics as it is about personal success and wealth. Those who can afford education propound that it is also a moral obligation; we may understand this notion through the embodiment of its opposite, Huckleberry Finn, whose “rough syntax” is thus condemned by critics as his lack of goodness and the whole novel’s lack of morality. This is doubly interesting as it applies to Clemens himself, only partially educated, and in fact a highly successful autocrat whose “moral vision” was called into question repeatedly with the publication of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Thus the inclusion of Emmeline Grangerford’s poetry—ungrammatical, obscenely decorated “book-talk” that it is—as posing a similar non-function as the Grangerford’s knick-knacks. Deceased by the time Huck encounters her work, Emmeline’s poetry is ironically consumed by the theme of death:

ODE TO STEPHEN DOWLING BOTS, DEC'D  
 And did young Stephen sicken,  
 And did young Stephen die?

And did the sad hearts thicken,  
And did the mourners cry?

No; such was not the fate of  
Young Stephen Dowling Bots;  
Though sad hearts round him thickened,  
'Twas not from sickness' shots.

No whooping-cough did rack his frame,  
Nor measles drear with spots;  
Not these impaired the sacred name  
Of Stephen Dowling Bots.

Despised love struck not with woe  
That head of curly knots,  
Nor stomach troubles laid him low,  
Young Stephen Dowling Bots.

O no. Then list with tearful eye,  
Whilst I his fate do tell.  
His soul did from this cold world fly  
By falling down a well.

They got him out and emptied him;  
Alas it was too late;  
His spirit was gone for to sport aloft  
In the realms of the good and great. (Twain, *Huck*, 122-123)

Here, Twain presents a satirization of Romantic poetry and the showy “book-talk” he so loathed. Emmeline’s influences, sordid and flowery, are the Byrons and Brownings who pushed back against the emerging ideals of the Enlightenment. Thanks to his travel writing and nostalgic and pastoral sections of *Life on the Mississippi*, we as readers are already aware that Twain can weave together this romantic kind of writing. But Emmeline’s version of romantic poetry is brimming with strange, incongruent verbs: “sad hearts round him thickened,” “Nor measles drear with spots,” “Not these impaired the sacred name.” The line construction relies on an awkward ordering of words: “Not these impaired,” “Whilst I his fate do tell,” “His spirit was gone for to sport aloft” which harken to a romantic rhythm that is altogether contrived and ungrammatical.

Still, the poem stands, as a whole, a parody of the story of morbid obituary poetry that Twain found both ridiculous and macabre. An ornamented death eulogy, it attempts to communicate that a person died “[b]y falling down a well” through the robust and saccharine syntax of a love poem, while simultaneously describing in gross detail physical ailments that did not kill Mr. Bots. Huck, while chiefly impressed by Emmeline’s thirteen-year-old talent, is quite depressed by her subject matters, and admits he found her “sadful” subjects rather sordid—this, compounded her death at fourteen, makes Twain’s inclusion of her art all the more darkly comical. His satirization of Emmeline’s obsession with death points to the Calvinist preoccupation with death and depravity. The genteel attitude toward these subjects is further entangled by the notion of reform as one’s primary Christian duty and the overwhelming purpose of life. Thus, Emmeline’s poetry can be seen as a satirization of reforming as the vehicle of individual morality. The high sentiments of genteel art relay and reinforce this attitude, allowing such preoccupations of bodily illness overwhelm a spiritual eulogy for a dead boy. The reader may consider Emmeline’s morose verses as an affront not only to Romantic poetry, but also to the consciously blind eye that the genteel turns toward discussion of the human body. Another imprint from its pious undercurrents, the genteel tradition considers the body far below the intellect in terms of priority, and altogether absent from any discussion on morality.

That said, Twain’s “morality” must of course be understood as it is defined through his adherence to the genteel tradition. We have already covered the broad range of ethical dilemmas and choices that Huck has faced in this novel, and which were not universally recognized as such in his contemporary moment. Thus much of the duties of Twain’s female editors were to more explicitly expose the genius of the author as an American artist, rather than as a general humorist

or a sardonic spectator of the society that he essentially married into. But much of Twain's work written after the 1880s and near the end of his life went unpublished during his lifetime. In particular, many short satirical pieces written throughout his life concerning religion—particularly Christianity—were considered too controversial for the time period, and went unpublished until well after his death. *The Bible According to Mark Twain* is an anthology of these short works that was released in the 1960s, over half a century after Clemens' death.

## Conclusion

*“Never has a man been more painstakingly exposed.” -Lewis Leary<sup>5</sup>*

Mark Twain once joked, “I was born of poor yet dishonest parents.” This one statement is brimming with the subtext that the author is so befittingly famous for: it reconciles the conventions of his genteel culture, so unable to extract the moral from the aesthetic, the academic from the upper-class; a self-deprecating look at his past considered with unwavering wit. Despite the narrow, morally-focused viewpoint of the genteel tradition, pervasive yet weak, Mark Twain stood prominently above the waves of criticism and congratulation which ebbed and flowed beneath him throughout his career. As he did with steamboats on the Mississippi, Twain piloted his literary career with his selfhood and propriety, however private, intact. Critics and publishers—those who write to sell art, authors of capital—have always decided who and what is printed, but in the case of Twain one sees clearly the role that a general audience plays in the larger trajectory of what remains in print. Amidst changing reasons for controversy, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* have remained pillars of artistic, comedic, and historical excellence.

Moreover, we may see how George Santayana, an outspoken dissenter throughout his days at Harvard and now rather obscure even in the philosophical canon, retains his significance and relevancy through his objective critiques of nineteenth century American identity. The genteel tradition, recognized only in retrospect, allows both a critical and conceptual framework for both art and its creators. Santayana pleads for introspection and self-awareness, but should also be held accountable for his blind spots; perhaps the humorous literature of Twain could not

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<sup>5</sup> “Mark Twain is laughing somewhere. His pockets have been picked. They have been turned inside out and emptied of every scrap of lint and shred of tobacco. He has been had, for sure, and he likes it” (Leary, 708).

ease the stringent and Calvinist morality he so despised in American philosophy. Santayana is not remembered as possessing a mollifying sense of humor, and maintains that the nineteenth century humorists, though imperative to recognition of virulent elitism in the arts of the Gilded Age, and able to transcend it, “have nothing solid to put in its place” (Santayana, 51).

There are few writers so notoriously conflicted as Mark Twain. Concurrently lauded and loathed by all facets of literate society, Twain’s work has survived the centuries precisely because of the conversations he initiates around religion, race, gender, travel, and politics and culture both in America and abroad. Poor Missourian, printer’s apprentice, riverboat pilot, Confederate soldier, cub reporter, gold and silver miner, travel correspondent, lecturer, overnight sensation, bankrupt businessman, Great American author—Mark Twain, or perhaps here it would be more accurate to say Samuel Langhorne Clemens, lived the life of the true American, always in search of identity and success. He saw more of America (and the world) than most of his contemporaries, critics, and fellow citizens, and wrote about all of it. His insight into the complex and constantly changing country that was America in the nineteenth century was both a blessing and a curse. His progressivism and skepticism may have been innate, but were undoubtedly exacerbated by his own experience, at once the product of and at war with his historical *mise en scène*.

Accordingly, it would be unjust to consider the work of Twain without the context of his personal history and the endemic social milieu of his day. While often compared to each other as entangled worlds, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huck Finn* may instead be considered as individually tinted lenses through which the nineteenth century can be examined. Because these novels are doing vastly different things—stylistically, tonally, syntactically, thematically—they should be seen as



revealing coexisting truths about both their author and his society. Tom, boyish, innocent, and yet unfit for deeper reflection, remains a story of a boy with a rambunctious soul and a considerably bright future. Huck, innocent, individualistic, morally insightful and yet lacking the esteemed vocabulary with which to articulate his vigorously intuitive worldview, begs not for sympathy nor pity, but to be read and understood as he is. The American boys—heroes in their own right—expose and, at times, fight back against the society which demands conformity and complacency from them as white, male citizens.

Clemens himself was not immune to these pressures, and his deeply-rooted disdain for the expectations of his society often led to the creation of art that America was simply not ready to consume. *The Bible According to Mark Twain*, published in 1995, is an anthology comprised of works from Twain's later and more tortured years, between 1873 and 1909. These years saw the author struggling with the death of both a daughter and his wife, as well as huge financial debt and ill health. It contains various short stories and sketches concerning religion, particularly the Old Testament and Genesis. One included text, *Letters from the Earth*, contains a series of letters written by Satan, temporarily banished archangel, to his comrades Michael and Gabriel. Satan is "deported" to Space, "a punishment he was used to, on account of his too flexible tongue" for ostensibly the cosmic equivalent of a time out—he is banished for "a celestial day," which in our estimation of time "is as a thousand years" (Twain, *Bible*, 221). He travels around in Space—" [c]old and dark—a restful place, now and then, after a season of the over-delicate climate and trying splendors of heaven" (Twain, *Bible*, 219). The story's frame—at once metaphysical and irreligious, displays the far-reaching and cosmic scale of Twain's imagination, as well as perhaps the scope of his growing apathy.

Satan observes the strange experiment “the Creator” began—a “small globe” called “earth” where things called “animals” and “Man” coexist and operate under “the law of nature—the law of God,” and which neither is able to forsake.

This is a strange place, and extraordinary place, and interesting. There is nothing resembling it at home. The people are all insane, the other animals are all insane, the earth is insane, Nature itself is insane. Man is a marvelous curiosity. When he is at his very very best he is a sort of low grade nickel-plated angel; at is worst he is unspeakable, unimaginable; and first and last and all the time he is a sarcasm. Yet he blandly and in all sincerity calls himself the "noblest work of God." This is the truth I am telling you. And this is not a new idea with him, he has talked it through all the ages, and believed it. Believed it, and found nobody among all his race to laugh at it. (Twain, *Bible*, 221)

And so begins Satan’s iconoclastic and astounded observations of Man and his foibles. The archangel gleefully reports the various oddities occurring on Earth, from Man’s assumption that he is “the Creator’s pet” (Twain, *Bible*, 222), the peculiarities of nation-forming, race, prejudice, war, Man’s conception of heaven (“it has not a single feature in it that he *actually values*” (Twain, *Bible*, 223)), and, most stunningly, religion. “First and last and all the time he is a sarcasm,” Satan supposes of Man, and throughout his letters he accounts just how the human race—self-congratulating and yet hypocritically self-destructive and constraining—so “insanely” and catastrophically driven by fabricated myths, unfounded and indiscriminate bloodshed, and self-hatred.

“He is a sarcasm,” Twain writes, succinct and powerful—Man—his existence and his essence is a mockery of essence and existence, forever in pursuit of the demise of his own species in the name of his beloved God. Desperately seeking approval from his Creator, man ironically attempts to prove himself worthy of heaven by destroying himself. Satan—and Twain’s receptive reader—is at once bemused and depressed by the objective aerial view of

human existence. Such were the anxieties that Twain endured at the end of his life. Successful in name and notoriety, Sam Clemens rather bitterly realized, toward the end of his life, how little such things mattered to him. The persistence of his humor can at times outshine the deeply thoughtful insight that Twain possessed. Accordingly, his daughter Clara forbid the publishing of *Letters from the Earth* until the 1960s, fearing her father's reputation was a stake. Eventually, she relented, and thus a new piece of grand puzzle that is Sam Clemens comes together. A religious skeptic—some say agnostic, others atheistic—it is no mystery how the religious undercurrents of the genteel so irked and dis comforted Twain, forcing him to further shroud his questions of belief and supposed morality in literature, and specifically comedy. The Calvinist and Puritanical undercurrents of the genteel tradition—the rote regurgitation of “ought” through class, education, and aesthetics, and total comfortability and complacency within this framework—are perhaps the most disturbing to Twain and yet were (and still are) synonymous with societal acceptance and proof of one's character, and continue to be the driving forces of American popular culture, politics, and general philosophy. But Mark Twain—witty and artful blasphemer—made it possible for such tenets to be challenged, and his legacy urges the outsiders of the world to cast off the expectations of society, to, as Santayana writes, “salute the wild, indifferent, noncensorious infinity of nature” (Santayana, 64), and, like Huck Finn, to not allow one's self to be sivilized.

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