

Challenging the Icon:

Teaching Mark Twain as Literary Worker

An explication of Samuel Clemens' organic composing process helps students and readers see the intimate connections among the novels he wrote as Mark Twain, especially those novels completed during the central years of his work as a writer of books: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). These books are intimately related: the first four contribute mightily to the fifth. In fact, *Huckleberry Finn* would not have been possible without the earlier work that nurtured Clemens' imagination and helped him work through the narrative challenges of presenting the boy's story.

Samuel Clemens made much of his status as a "jackleg" novelist. Scholars, however, have worked long and hard to counter Clemens' self-portrait and to give readers a look behind the curtain at Clemens' long and most often organic process of composition. Particular studies of Clemens' composing process, from Bernard DeVoto's *Mark Twain at Work* to Victor Doyno's *Writing Huckleberry Finn* and *Beginning to Write Huckleberry Finn*, have given us a detailed and well-shaded picture of Clemens as a working writer. Joined by examinations of his careful construction of his public persona (Lou Budd's *Our Mark Twain* is especially good), such studies offer ample evidence of Clemens' meticulous creativity. We know that his was a creativity fueled by voracious reading (see Alan Gribben's *Mark Twain's Library: A Reconstruction* and Joe

Fullton's *Mark Twain in the Margins: The Quarry Farm Marginalia and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*) and by an almost pathological discipline (perhaps an obsession) that drew him to pen and paper (and even to the typewriter and stenographer). Moreover, Clemens' intense involvement in publishing as a business has also been studied: for example, one need only consult *Mark Twain's Letters to His Publishers* or *Hatching Ruin or Mark Twain's Road to Bankruptcy* to appreciate both the depth of Clemens' financial involvement or the breadth of his folly. A recent book, *Printer's Devil: Mark Twain and the American Publishing Revolution*, charts Clemens' interest in printing technology from his early years as a printer's devil to his intense interest in the relationship between print and illustration. Clemens, of course, was keenly aware of the business of writing as well as of the vicissitudes of his muse and the relation of one to the other.

As students read these materials in the order of composition, the connections between and among them become clear. And they begin to see what makes Clemens so strong and prolific a writer: he was constantly working, even if that means leaping from one project to the next to keep his pen moving. This is a revelation for students who are most often not at all familiar with how a professional writer conjures his subject. It also gives them a strong introduction to the discipline of writing, of being at the desk and writing each day to make some progress, even if not on only one piece of writing at a time.

This full picture of Clemens is often (very often) lost to readers who look only to individual works or to students and teachers who worry more about

coverage or who look to the tightly focused introduction to Clemens' career by examining only one book – in this case *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – as a whole and finished product rather than weaving a portrait of the long, eight year writing process that shaped the finished tale. Talking about complexity, however, does little to challenge the iconic Mark Twain, an overly Romantic portrait of a writer dependent upon (or perhaps victim of) a fickle and arbitrary muse and hounded by a need for financial security and a dream of cultural relevance. That icon can be challenged by teaching *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in the personal and creative context in which it was composed, by setting up the chronology for students and then asking them to read the novel in its original sequence of composition, interrupted by the (major) writing Clemens completed during the time he struggled with the novel (Clemens wrote so much and so often that it would be difficult to cover much more than this). What we find is that, in the end, Samuel Clemens was *not* hostage to his muse. In fact, he smartly complemented his inspiration with discipline and adapted his writing practice to suit his creative pulse by using other projects to clarify and finally complete *Huck Finn*.

Here is the chronology of how Samuel Clemens completed the novel:

begins work on <i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>	1872
publishes <i>The Adventures of Tom Sawyer</i>	1876
begins <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> roughly chs 1-11 (incl. first half of ch. 12); 15-18 "It is Huck Finn's Autobiography. I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have got, & may possibly pigeon-hole or burn the MS when it is done." (SLC to WDH 8/9/76)	July-September
begins <i>The Prince and the Pauper</i> roughly the first 12 chapters	1877

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writes <i>A Tramp Abroad</i>	1878-1879
works on <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> roughly ch. 18 thru 21 writes draft of "Notice" in May	March-June 1880
publishes <i>A Tramp Abroad</i>	1880
publishes <i>The Prince and the Pauper</i> Clemens' initial plan is to publish both <i>The Prince and the Pauper</i> and <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> in a single volume (SLC to Pamela Moffet, 14[?] Nov. 1880)	1881
trip to the Mississippi meets G. W. Cable and J. C. Harris	April 1882
publishes <i>Life on the Mississippi</i> given the chapters of <i>AHF</i> already written, it's clear that <i>LOM</i> is influenced by <i>AHF</i> ; Clemens includes "The Raftsman Episode" from <i>AHF</i> as chapter 3 of <i>LOM</i> . <i>LOM</i> is typed in MS form.	1883
Manuscript of <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> is typed	October 1882 – May 1883
Revises <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> Inserts the Walter Scott episode and Jim and Huck's conversations about royalty, the French, and cats; changes the ending of the Sherburn episode by having Sherburn rant at the mob; composes final chapters including the Wilkes episode and the evasion chapters.	June-September 1883
Completes <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> Revises through April 1884; oversees illustrations	September 1883- June 1884
Publishes <i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i> (England;	December 1884 1885 in US)

In all, it took Clemens eight years to create *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Clemens began to write *Huck* soon after he published *Tom Sawyer*; however, he certainly seems to have become more interested in Huck as an independent character in the later chapters of that novel, and he turns a spotlight on the boy

that illuminates him with sympathy and a clear sense of Huck's humble strength in the face of trouble.

Clemens shifts his attention to Huck noticeably at the end of chapter 28 when Tom leaves Huck alone to watch over "Injun Joe." In an extended description of sleeping and eating arrangements, Huck offers a look at his life on the margins of St. Petersburg:

[I'll sleep] In Ben Rogers's Hayloft. He lets me, and so does his pap's nigger man, Uncle Jake. I tote water for Uncle Jake whenever he wants me to, and any time I ask him he gives me a little something to eat if he can spare it. That's a mighty good nigger, Tom. He likes me, becuz I don't ever act as if I was above him. Sometimes I've set right down and eat *with* him. But you needn't tell that. A body's got to do things when he's awful hungry he wouldn't want to do as a steady thing. (*TS* 193)

Much more than in the early introduction of Huck to his readers (*TS* chapter 6), Clemens is here shaping the boy that will appear in the later book, a boy keenly aware of his needs but also aware of the social hierarchy and the firm rule that separates the races as racial bias and that insists that race identity trumps class awareness. Just pages later, in chapter 29, Huck takes the unusual step of calling attention to himself and putting himself at risk by running to get help to protect the Widow Douglas from Joe's revenge. In his explanation to the old Welshman in chapter 30, Huck speaks of his sleepless night: "Well, you see, I'm kind of a hard lot, —least everybody says so, and I don't see nothing agin it—and sometimes I can't sleep much, on accounts of thinking about it and sort of trying

to strike our a new way of doing" (*TS* 203). All of this points to Clemens' new interest in Huck, an interest that will build a rounded and deeply conflicted character.

Clemens' attention to Huck is fateful: he decides to create the sequel by changing to a first person narrative and adopting the consciousness of his boy narrator. He describes the book as "Huck Finn's autobiography" (SLC to WDH 8/9/1876; *SMTHL* 75). Huck's voice becomes a driving force: the opening paragraphs of the new novel (written in 1876 soon after *Tom Sawyer* in completed) underscore that this is Huck's tale of danger and darkness and not a repetition of Clemens' hymn to childhood. While Huck's complaints about the Widow's attempts to "sivilize" him reset the contrast between the concerns of adults and the interests of children, his tale is harsher and more decidedly threatening. In *Tom Sawyer* the threat to Huck (and Tom) comes from an outsider to the community ("Injun Joe"); in *Huckleberry Finn* the danger to Huck grows (at least at first) from intimates, initially from the intrusive rules of guardians but later from the stalking and violence of a biological parent. Huck's depression and sensitivity to threat are manifest in his sense of the dead, in the secrets they cannot tell and the mournfulness in their night wanderings.

In the opening chapters, Huck tells a story of childish games that are prologue to real and dangerous worries of abuse, of a community willing to ascribe guilt to the innocent (St. Petersburg blames Jim for Huck's supposed death), and of an escape that leads both Huck and Jim only deeper into slave territory. Clemens, though, is able to sustain Huck's voice only until chapter 18

when his well runs dry and he pigeon-holes the manuscript. By this time, the book has taken several abrupt and dangerous turns. It is telling, perhaps, that Clemens is stymied by Huck's question to Buck Grangerford, "What's a feud?" (*HF* 146). It would take about three years for Buck to respond.

Clemens refilled his creative tank by turning to a new project, which he does when he takes up his pen to begin *The Prince and the Pauper*. That shift demonstrates Clemens' need to keep working (both for financial reasons – he needed the income – and personal reasons – writing has by this time become both profession and obsession). This "new" project, however, is not all that new: Tom Canty and Edward VI are duplicates of the young Huck and can be seen as Clemens' attempts to refine (perhaps unconsciously) the tale he began in *Huck*. Yes, the setting and situation are different; however, Tom Canty's bouts with his drunk and abusive father are every much the same as Huck's battles with Pap, and Canty's attempt to improvise undetected in the first days in the palace mimic Huck's innate ability to adapt to surroundings. These two sections dominate the first twelve chapters of the novel, which is where Clemens stopped in 1879. As with the composition of *Huckleberry Finn*, Clemens is able to go only so far, and he turns to another project, this time to the promise of lucrative sales for another travel book.

A Tramp Abroad is the focus of Clemens' attention during 1878-79. The "walking tour" provided Clemens with a full set of notes that he shaped into the tale predicated on a simple joke – while on the tramp (with Joseph Twitchell, Clemens' long-time Hartford minister and confidant), the pair of walkers (notice

we have yet another set of twins) will do whatever they can to ride rather than walk. At one point, Clemens writes a long set of chapters that tell the story of an extended raft trip down a German river: the Neckar River tale extends through chapters 14 to 19. Huck's situation is not far from Clemens' subconscious: the rafting episode is a reminder of the runaways' experience. It is also a piece of fiction. It didn't happen.

Clemens used *Tramp* to rekindle his interest in *Huckleberry Finn*. He returns to *Huck* in 1880 and completes another section of Huck's autobiography (up to chapter 21, the shooting of Boggs). Tellingly, this section is home to Huck's romanticizing of the river's healing power at the opening of chapter 19: "Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely...." (*HF* 156). Huck's peace has its roots in Clemens' Neckar experience:

Germany in the summer, is the perfection of the beautiful, but nobody has understood, and realized, and enjoyed the utmost possibilities of this soft and peaceful beauty unless he has voyaged down the Neckar on a raft. The motion of a raft is the needful motion; it is gentle, and gliding, and smooth, and noiseless; it calms down all feverish activities, it soothes to sleep all nervous hurry and impatience; under its restful influence all the troubles and vexations and sorrows that harass the mind vanish away, and existence

becomes a dream, a charm, a deep and tranquil
ecstasy. How it contrasts with hot and perspiring
pedestrianism, and dusty and deafening railroad
rush, and tedious jolting behind tired horses over
blinding white roads! (TA 126)

Clemens' German raft trip comes to an unexpectedly sharp end when he (acting as the raft's pilot) unintentionally runs the raft into a bridge, destroying it just seconds after he steps to the shore:

We went tearing along in a most exhilarating way, and I performed the delicate duties of my office very well indeed for a first attempt; but perceiving presently, that I really was going to shoot the bridge itself instead of the archway under it, I judiciously stepped ashore. The next moment I had my long coveted desire: I saw a raft wrecked. It hit the pier in the center and went all to smash and scatteration like a box of matches struck by lightening. (TA 182-183)

"Smash and scatteration." The phrase echoes the illiterate Huck's facility with language. It also is a fine summation of the end of Huck's and Jim's isolation and ease when the duke and the king show up to break the raft's and the river's spell.

Once the miscreants invade the raft, Huck is forced to serve the Duke and the King. He has, in essence, fallen in among thieves, which becomes young Edward's situation as Clemens continues *The Prince and the Pauper*.

Interestingly, as Clemens ponders the result of Sherburn's murderous act in *Huck Finn's* chapter 21 (in the draft of that chapter, Clemens contemplates the lynch mob getting close to success before Sherburn is spirited away by allies and acquaintances; at one point in the margins Clemens contemplates letting the mob hang Sherburn), Clemens returns to *Prince and the Pauper* and Edward's journey through England. These chapters are intimately tied to Huck's tour of the Mississippi Valley, complete with renegades and thieves. Edward is given the companionship and protection of an exile, Miles Hendon (a ruined noble), who, like Jim, protects the boy out of a sense of responsibility and quite possibly self-interest. Hendon and Jim offer moments of safety for the young boys, moments that allow the boys to take stock of their situations and come to understand their own and others' motivations. To a great extent *Huckleberry Finn* and *Prince and the Pauper* are the same book. In fact, Clemens had the notion, which did not last particularly long, that a two volume set of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Prince and the Pauper* might be possible, especially given the potential for late year and holiday sales. The idea is not an accident. While that idea does not come to fruition, Clemens obviously linked the two books in his own mind. What dooms the plan is his inability to finish *Huck*. *The Prince and the Pauper* is published separately in 1881. There is enough of a link, however, to suggest the stories are parallel, and certainly the lessons of human concern, compassion, and sympathy are clearly drawn.

At this point, we face the so-called "problem" of the ending of *Huck Finn*. With *Prince and the Pauper* complete, in 1882 Clemens toured the Mississippi

River to gather material to add to "Old Times on the Mississippi," his story of becoming a riverboat pilot that appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* during 1875. Returning to the Mississippi and the experience of the post-war South helped Clemens fashion not only the remaining half of *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) but also the final section of *Huckleberry Finn*. It prodded him to create new chapters and episodes: Huck and Jim board the wreck of the steamboat Walter Scott; they have extended conversations about royalty and the French. Sherburn (now) faces down the lynch mob with a potent mix of scorn and misanthropic bile, and the Duke and the King nearly succeed in their con of the Wilkes family. Clemens also creates the evasion chapters in which Jim is re-enslaved, Tom Sawyer comes along, and Huck gives himself over to the craziness of Tom's scheme to free an already manumitted Jim. It is possible to see these sections as a darkening of the novel's atmosphere affected by Clemens' disappointment with the post war South and his growing understanding of oppression that is driven by twin anxieties based on economic potential and custom-driven prejudice. The final chapters of *Huck Finn* do not allow for a great deal of optimism; however, Clemens was now nearing 50 years old. In one of his more telling aphorisms, he would write: "At 50 a man can be an ass without being an optimist, but he cannot be an optimist without being an ass." His creative process progressively opened him to the repercussions of human folly and the disaster of unreflective and naïve hope.

Finally, an important consideration at the heart of this discussion is Clemens' biography, looking especially at the birth dates of his children. The

years 1876-1885 were neither quiet nor uneventful in Clemens' personal life: during this time of literary creativity, the Clemenses also created their family. Their four children were born between 1870 and 1880: their first child Langdon was born in 1870 and died in 1872; Susie was born in 1872 (and was baptized just days prior to the death of her brother); Clara was born in 1874; Jean was born in 1880. In a mark of Clemens' awareness of the domestic influence on his writing, he dedicated *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to Livy ("To my wife This Book is Affectionately Dedicated") and *The Prince and the Pauper* to two his daughters ("To Those Good-Mannered and Agreeable Children, Susie and Clara Clemens, This Book is Affectionately Inscribed By Their Father"). In contrast, *Huckleberry Finn* offers only a warning: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to be find a plot in it will be shot" [written in 1879-1880]. "Persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished" (the middle clause) was added in 1883-1884, which also demonstrates Clemens' evolving sense of how to control reader expectations. Yet with *Huck* his initial audience was his family as he read the day's work to them, often on the porch at Quarry Farm, his sister-in-law's summer cottage.

Langdon's death in June 1872 as Clemens was preparing to write *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* may have been instrumental in Clemens' decision to return to his own past for what he would call a "hymn" to childhood. Both Susie and Clara become the focal point for their father's attempt to begin a tradition of storytelling from father to daughter, a feminized version of the patriarchal scheme that he describes at the opening of *The Prince and the Pauper*: "I will set down a

tale as it was told me by one who had it of his father, which latter had it of *his* father, this last having in like manner had it from *his* father – and so on, back and still back, three hundred years and more, the fathers transmitting it to the sons and so preserving it.” Clemens is breaking that paternal, male tradition: by presenting the story to his daughters he, in effect, begins a matrilineal custom. He has no son to hear the tale.

For Clemens, family remains primary, even, and I would suggest especially, with Huck’s tale of a child at risk. That story was so compelling that he kept coming back to it during the years; it was so compelling that it influenced and, perhaps, controlled his creative process through a decade. In the end, focusing on the composition history of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* affects our understanding of Mark Twain as a literary persona; its relationship to the Clemens family’s history affects our understanding of Sam Clemens as a writer. Most importantly, this approach transforms an American literary icon into a living, breathing writer who struggled to earn a living by making stories.

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