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The Roots of Huck Finn's Melancholy: Sam Clemens, Mark Twain, and a World of Pain

ACCORDING TO MARK TWAIN, HE BASED HUCK FINN ON TOM BLANKENSHIP, the son of the town drunkard, who grew up impoverished but fully self-reliant, and whom the respectable citizens of Hannibal viewed as an outcast. Twain claimed: "In 'Huckleberry Finn' I have drawn Tom Blankenship exactly as he was. He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had. His liberties were totally unrestricted. He was the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community . . ." (*Autobiography* I: 397).¹ Indeed, the fact that Huck was based on Tom Blankenship was so manifest that both Twain's sister Pamela and Blankenship's sister Elizabeth instantly recognized it when they read the novel (*Autobiography* I: 609n397.20-26). Twain also gave Huck the surname of Jimmy Finn, the town's other notable drunkard, who, like Pap, "slept in the deserted tan-yard with the hogs" and died in 1845, the same year that Pap Finn dies (*Autobiography* I: 397, 532-33n213.36-37; Twain, *Among the Indians* 318-19).² But although he based Huck on Tom Blankenship, and

¹In an 1897 series of notes about the Hannibal villagers, Twain wrote this of the Blankenships: "The parents paupers and drunkards; the girls charged with prostitution—not proven. Tom, a kindly young heathen. Bence, a fisherman. These children were never sent to school or church. Played out and disappeared" ("Villagers" 31).

²In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain says Jimmy Finn "died a natural death in a tan vat, of a combination of delirium tremens and spontaneous combustion. When I say natural death, I mean it was a natural death for Jimmy Finn to die" (387). The fabulas of *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* can be dated from internal evidence with a surprising degree of accuracy. The events of *Tom Sawyer* take place between Friday, June 14, and Sunday, November 3, 1844. The beginning of *Huck Finn* follows immediately thereafter, with Huck and Jim exiting Jackson's Island by the end of the first week of

despite the very different experiences of Huck and Sam Clemens, Twain endowed Huck with his author's own tormented psyche.

Why is Huck Finn so morbid, depressed, guilt-ridden, and lonely? During the first eight chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), roughly forty pages in a non-illustrated text, he explicitly describes himself as "lonely" or feeling "lonesome" seven times (4 twice, 7, 31, 48 twice, 51). In a telling passage, only a few pages into the novel, in his room in the Widow's house at bedtime, Huck expresses his characteristic feelings:

Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn't no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl, away off, who-whooping about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night, grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. (4)

The actual details of the scene—shining stars, rustling leaves, the wind, an owl hooting, a whippoorwill, and a dog barking—are not depressing. But Huck's response in this extended pathetic fallacy, in which he projects his feelings onto the landscape, tells us a great deal about him.

A similar moment occurs in Chapter 32 as Huck approaches the Phelps farm to rescue Jim. With the slaves gone off to the fields and no one in sight, the sound of bugs and flies "makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone" and even a breeze "makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it's spirits whispering—spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about *you*. As a general thing, it makes a body wish *he* was dead, too, and done with it all" (276). After describing the farm, he hears a spinning wheel, "and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that *is* the lonest sound in the whole world" (277).

July 1845, possibly and perhaps symbolically, on July 4. See Petersen 3; Byers 86; and Miller 194-95.

There are manifest reasons for Huck's feelings in the opening passage. He has always been a depressed, lonely child who has never fit into any familial or social group. Although he briefly speaks of his deceased mother in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*—"Look at pap and my mother. Fight? Why they used to fight all the time. I remember, mighty well" (179)—in his own book he never once mentions her. Neither his own father, his adopted family, nor his peers remotely understand him—or even care to. To Pap, he's an object of profit (Huck's six-thousand dollar share of Injun Joe's loot from *Tom Sawyer*) who has put on airs while living at the Widow's. His very existence galls his father as an implicit reminder of Pap's inferior status: "You've put on considerable many frills since I been away. I'll take you down a peg before I git done with you. You're educated, too, they say; can read and write. You think you're better'n your father, now, don't you, because he can't? I'll take it out of you" (*Huckleberry Finn* 24). To Miss Watson and the Widow, he's a juvenile delinquent in need of reform: "The widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me" (1). The parents of St. Petersburg see him as the "pariah of the village," the "son of the town drunkard," and he is "hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town," who forbid their children to play with him because he is "lawless, and vulgar and bad" (*Tom Sawyer* 47). Even his putative best friend, Tom, considers him "a numscull" and a "perfect sap-head" (*Huckleberry Finn* 16, 17), constantly criticizes his intellectual limitations, and unless Huck fits into one of his schemes, is not particularly fond of him. Tom's best friend is Joe Harper, not Huck (*Tom Sawyer* 175), and in a telling observation in *Tom Sawyer*, the third-person narrator says of Tom, "He did not care to have Huck's company in public places" (195).

In the second passage at the Phelps farm, Huck has even more reason for his alienation and his proclivity for projecting his inner emotions onto the landscape. Aside from the few days between escaping from Pap's cabin and encountering Jim on Jackson's Island—where he felt "ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome now" (*Huckleberry Finn* 51)—this is the first time he's ever actually been alone for an extended period of time. Despite the tenuousness of their relationship in the first sixteen chapters, he and Jim had each other for company. In the two chapters in which they were separated, he was a Grangerford, with Buck as his brother and new best friend. In one of his few moments of

peace—during the normative center³ at the start of Chapter 19—his description of the landscape was anything but morbid as he and Jim drifted down the river smoking their pipes and discussing the stars. The appearance of the Duke and King ended that normative center with a thud, but paradoxically it led to a closer bond between Huck and Jim, with moments of genuine intimacy and friendship. Now, however, he is alone, terribly alone, both physically and spiritually, and without the support of either human relationships or the social constructions he has internalized. He is approaching an unknown farm in the dreaded Deep South with the deliberate intention of stealing a slave (a much worse crime than aiding an escaped slave); he is a sinner in the hands of an angry God and believes that he has doomed himself to a Presbyterian hell (268-71); he has abandoned the three worlds of the Widow, Pap, and Tom and the boys that have hegemonically formed him (though he still judges and condemns his actions by the ideologies of those worlds); he misses the one person in his life, Jim, who has ever really understood him (even better than Huck realizes) and shown him unconditional love; and *he has no plan*.

Aside from these confessional passages, we also glimpse Huck's emotional state in the stories he makes up to deceive others in moments of crisis. In 1968, Peter G. Beidler was the first scholar to point out how the lies Huck tells provide a window onto his "almost obsessive concern with death"; they give us insight into the "darkness" of his imagination. Beidler observes, "If we examine Huck's lies carefully . . . we find a pattern emerging from them which reveals something of Huck's psychological nature: in many of them Huck casts himself in the role of a

³The "normative center" is a conceptual term I previously coined to describe a technique employed in many nineteenth-century novels in which the author presents the reader with a brief glimpse of "the way things ought to be." A device of authorial judgment, it offers a criterion of relations in the ideal by which readers may assess the actual, that is, what transpires throughout the bulk of the novel. Normative centers emphasize sentimental values—filiation over individualism, feeling over thought, and empathy over self-interest. Examples include the forest scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which we see Hester, Dimmesdale, and Pearl as a nuclear family; the "Grand Armada" chapter in *Moby-Dick*, in which predatory whalers enjoy a moment of appreciation and delight at the sight of whale families; the meal at the Halliday home in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which black and white people sit down to eat a meal on equal terms; and the first six paragraphs of Chapter 19 in *Huck Finn*, in which race briefly disappears, and Huck and Jim carry on a conversation rooted in mutual respect. See Lamb, "Mark Twain's New Method" 11-13.

boy who is alone in the world and whose family is dead, sick, or in grave danger.” After providing an impressive wealth of examples, he further notes, “Perhaps one of the reasons why his lies are usually not questioned is that if his fictitious role is psychologically congenial to him, he *lives* the role as he plays it, and so he is being true, if not to actual fact, then to his own nature” (15-17). As Hamlin Hill summarizes the fabricated stories Huck tells before the Phelps farm episodes, in them we see a total of “four dead fathers and one with smallpox; three dead mothers and one marooned on a [sinking steamboat]; three dead brothers and one disappeared; ubiquitous sister Mary Ann [married and disappeared], bepoxed, and very possibly [also on that sinking boat]; other family members, too numerous to mention, simply died off.” Hill rightly concludes, “Huck’s imagination is fertile but lethal” (301).

Three decades after Beidler, Sacvan Bercovitch observed that Huck is “a morbid, haunted young boy” and that throughout the novel,

Twain provides two clues to Huck’s inner world: the lies that Huck tells and the images that he conjures up when he’s alone—in other words, the reality that Huck himself makes up, for others and for himself. In both cases, it’s the reality of the grotesque. The stories he invents for strangers are a series of horror-tales: families dead, dying, or diseased. And his solitary musings take exactly the same form, except that the dead return as ghosts. One such moment occurs on his arrival at the Phelps Plantation. . . . What’s funny about this description . . . is that actually it’s a lovely Sunday morning; there’s no reason for Huck to think this way, except that that’s the way he thinks. (19)

That is indeed the way Huck thinks, but it’s also the way Samuel Clemens thought; the two share a strikingly similar emotional landscape. Aside from Twain’s fashioned autobiographical narrators in such travelogues as *The Innocents Abroad*, *Roughing It*, *Life on the Mississippi*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *Following the Equator*, Huck Finn is possibly the most purely autobiographical fictional character he ever created. To understand Huck’s psyche fully, we need to understand that of his author.

The Phelps farm, some thirty-seven miles above Baton Rouge, Louisiana,⁴ is based on the farm of Sam’s uncle, John Quarles—located near

⁴There has been a good deal of confusion about where the Phelps farm is located. According to Twain’s later statements, he moved his Uncle John Quarles’s farm from its actual location in Florida, Missouri (south of Hannibal) to Arkansas in fictionalizing

Florida, Missouri—which Twain lovingly described in his autobiography as “a heavenly place for a boy” (*Autobiography* I: 210). But he also recalled a spinning-wheel on the farm “whose rising and falling wail, heard from a distance, was the mournfulest of all sounds to me, and made me homesick and low-spirited, and filled my atmosphere with the wandering spirits of the dead” (*Autobiography* I: 212). Nor was this curious reaction to a spinning-wheel limited to his memories in old age of the summers he spent on the Quarles farm from his seventh to his twelfth years. Almost as if to underscore the passage in *Huck Finn*, in “A Private History of a Campaign that Failed” (also published in 1885)—his dark satire about his experiences during the summer of 1861 as a Confederate irregular in a Marion County militia—he found himself staying at a farmhouse of a man named Mason (in real life, Matson), where “there was no sound but the plaintive wailing of a spinning-wheel, forever moaning out from some distant room,—the most lonesome sound in nature, a sound steeped and sodden with homesickness and the emptiness of life” (875). Those two spinning-wheels and those “wandering spirits of the dead” from Clemens’s youth and early manhood reappear on this pleasant Sunday morning in the thoughts of Huck Finn as he approaches the Phelps farm that, given his situation, seems fraught with bad omens; he imagines the spirits are whispering about him and wishes he were dead as he commences his one-boy suicide mission to release a fugitive slave from bondage.

The similar idiosyncratic responses of Huck Finn and Sam Clemens to the sound of a spinning-wheel are no coincidence, for—as Henry Nash Smith was the first to note—Huck’s character is the product of Mark Twain’s own lifelong depressiveness, loneliness, morbidity, and haunting sense of guilt (130-32). Ron Powers observes that Clemens entered the world already wounded:

Born two months premature, on November 30, 1835, in Florida, Missouri, Sam Clemens narrowly survived childbirth. . . . As a toddler, Sammy was sickly and underweight. . . . He was largely bedridden until his fourth year, and frail for the next

it as the Phelps farm (*Autobiography* I: 210), and for years scholars have routinely placed Pikesville and the Phelps farm in Arkansas. But, as Sherwood Cummings persuasively argues, Pikesville and the Phelps farm are located “on the site of the now vanished village of Point Coupee, Louisiana, on the west bank of the Mississippi, thirty-seven river miles north of Baton Rouge” (442).

three. "When I first saw him I could see no promise in him," his mother Jane admitted. Her frontier fatalism was more than matched by a visitor to the little house. Eying the shriveled form, the woman turned to Jane and blandly asked, "You don't expect to raise that babe, do you?" Jane said she would try. (8; see also Wecter 44)

Until he was seven, Sam Clemens suffered from nightmares, somnambulism, and convulsions (Wecter 80-82). Gary Scharnhorst observes, "nightmares became part of a larger pattern of sleep disorders he suffered his entire life" (22). In his autobiography, Twain admitted as much: "in my age, as in my youth, night brings me many a deep remorse. I realise that from the cradle up I have . . . never been quite sane in the night" (*Autobiography* I: 159). At ten, he intentionally contracted measles from a friend and nearly died during an epidemic in Hannibal that claimed numerous lives. During his childhood, two of his friends drowned in Bear Creek, and Sam himself nearly drowned on several occasions before finally learning how to swim, twice being fortuitously saved by a slave who was passing by (Paine I: 45; *Autobiography* I: 401-02).⁵ Like Huck, he played hooky, and one time, in order to avoid a whipping, instead of coming home he spent the night in his father's law office where, he shortly discovered, he was sleeping near the corpse of a man who had been stabbed to death and was laid upon the floor for an autopsy (*Autobiography* I: 514n158.16-18). Twain would later state, "I have slept in the same room with him often, since then—in my dreams" (F. Kaplan 32).

Huck is hardly the only Twain character whose father is either absent or dead; fathers and nuclear families are scarce as hen's teeth in his works. Although Twain fictionalized his own father in such characters as Squire Hawkins in *The Gilded Age*, Judge Thatcher in *Tom Sawyer*, and Judge Driscoll in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, who were "brooding, somewhat gothic misfits haunted by their lost status as Virginia gentlemen" (Powers 14), Pap Finn, too, is in some ways an exaggerated version of Sam's father.

John Marshall Clemens was a perpetually bitter, unsmiling, emotionally reserved disciplinarian. Scharnhorst points out that "[s]tern' and 'austere' were the adjectives Sam used most often over the years to

⁵In a letter dated January 2, 1895, Twain claimed that he was nearly drowned "9 times before I learned to swim, and was considered to be a cat in disguise" (*Correspondence with Henry Huttleston Rogers* 115).

describe [him], sometimes in conjunction with ‘taciturn,’ ‘irritable,’ ‘dour,’ and ‘humorless’” (6). He was aloof and “ungentle of manner toward his children” (Twain, “Villagers” 39) and impassive in his feelings toward his wife. “All through my boyhood,” Sam recalled, “I had noticed . . . they were always kind toward each other, thoughtful of each other, but that there was nothing warmer; there were no outward and visible demonstrations of affection” (*Autobiography* II: 357). Just before his mother’s death in 1890, Twain discovered that she had harbored “a secret which she had carried in her heart for more than sixty years.” When Jane Lampton was twenty, living in Lexington, Kentucky, she had many suitors, one of whom was John Marshall Clemens, a clerk in her uncle’s law office. But she considered herself “engaged” to the love of her life, a shy, young medical student named Richard Ferrel Barrett. The two had a “lover’s quarrel” over a silly misunderstanding and he shortly left the state. When John again proposed marriage, Twain reports, “she said she would, but it must be instantly, lest her mind undergo a change, since she was not marrying him for love”; rather, in a fit of pique she wanted to show everyone that she had landed on her feet. But she had never stopped loving Barrett. It was, Twain concluded, “as pathetic a romance as any that has crossed the field of my personal experience in my long lifetime” (*Autobiography* II: 358; *Twain—Howells Letters* II: 567-68; see also Wecter 17-19; Scharnhorst 6).

Sam’s father not only refrained from expressing tenderness; he was also inhumane and consumed by a quiet rage. He routinely beat a hired nine-year-old enslaved boy named Lewis; flogged Jennie, an enslaved girl owned by the family, “with a bridle” and sold her to a particularly cruel slave trader bound downriver to the New Orleans market; served on a jury that condemned three abolitionists to hard labor in the state penitentiary; sentenced an enslaved man named Henry to twenty lashes for allegedly making threatening comments; sold an elderly enslaved man named Charley, whom he had received in payment of a debt, downriver in Natchez for forty dollars worth of tar; deeply resented his financial failures; was humiliated by constant, crushing debt; and felt that he had been cheated out of his proper status as a descendent of the Earls of Durham and Virginia gentlemen (Twain, “Villagers” 39; Dempsey 33-48, 53-54, 222-24; Pettit 15-18). Upon his death, officially from pneumonia but more likely from venereal disease, eleven-year-old Sam silently witnessed the autopsy through a keyhole

(Scharnhorst 33-34; Wecter 116-18; Powers 41-44). Years later, Twain wrote that “my own knowledge of him amounted to little more than an introduction” (*Autobiography* I: 654).

The sale of Charley for forty dollars in 1842 made an extremely powerful impression on six-year-old Sam. Carl F. Wieck has observed that “forty” is used almost obsessively throughout *Huck Finn* (93-101, 195-200). In fact, it is used seventeen times if we include the two twenty dollar gold pieces the slavehunters float to Huck (title page, 16, 27, 58, 67, 127, 174, 199, 218, 268 twice, 272, 274, 319, 341, 346, 360). Although the number “forty” figures into various cultural analyses of the novel—especially in the failure of the nation after the war to provide “each slave with forty acres and a mule, thus giving the technical freedom of the Thirteenth Amendment the teeth of economic freedom” (Lamb, “Mark Twain’s New Method” 17)—from a biographical perspective what matters most is its connection to Charley. Arthur Pettit (17) and Shelley Fisher Fishkin (20) both point out that Charley was sold for the same price that the King and Duke sell Jim for in *Huck Finn*. Writing of his father’s attitude toward selling Charley, Twain observed:

poor Charley’s approaching eternal exile from his home, and his mother, and his friends, and all things and creatures that make life dear and the heart to sing for joy, affecting him [John Marshall Clemens] no more than if this humble comrade of his long pilgrimage had been an ox—and somebody else’s ox. It makes a body homesick for Charley, even after fifty years. (“Jane Lampton Clemens” 51)

Huck has the exact same emotional response to the Duke and King selling Jim: “After all this long journey . . . they could have the heart to serve Jim such a trick as that, and make him a slave again all his life, and amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars” (268). Just as Twain was haunted by his father’s sale of Charley, so too is Huck by the King and Duke’s auction of the Wilks slaves: “I can’t ever get it out of my memory” (234).

Fated to be forever unreconciled with his father, the peripatetic Sam Clemens left Hannibal in 1853 at the age of seventeen to work as a printer in St. Louis, New York City, Philadelphia, Keokuk (Iowa), and Cincinnati. In March 1857, he became a cub pilot on the Mississippi, then a full pilot from September 1859 until April 1861, when the war took away the profession he claimed to have loved “far better than any I have followed since” (*Life on the Mississippi* 122). In August, he went

west with his older brother, Orion, whom President Lincoln had appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory, and for the next six years worked briefly as a miner, and then as a reporter in Nevada and San Francisco, later also delivering public lectures. Justin Kaplan sums up Clemens's life by 1866:

[A]t thirty-one—more than half a man's life expectancy then—he had made no real commitment to place, social goal, or identity. He belonged to a professional group that came and went and seldom rooted. He had been a wanderer on and off since 1853; his home was in his valise. His haunts were saloons and police courts, the morgue, and the stage doors of San Francisco's flourishing theaters. He moved among a sub-culture of reporters, entertainers, actors, theater managers, acrobats, ladies of the chorus, prospectors, and short-term promoters. . . . [A]ccording to some in the West the name Mark Twain had more to do with marking up drinks on credit than it did with the Mississippi. (15)

On April 21, 1909, exactly a year before his death, Twain came across a passage in the *Letters of James Russell Lowell* (1893) in which Lowell wrote of having tried to take his own life with a pistol when he was twenty years old. Twain jotted a note in the margin of the book that revealed a similar experience he'd had in early 1866: "I put the pistol to my head but wasn't man enough to pull the trigger. Many times I have been sorry I did not succeed, but I was never ashamed of having tried. Suicide is the only really sane thing the young or the old ever do in this life" (Gribben 425-26; *Letters* I: 325n6).

Although it is perilous for a layman to psychoanalyze someone as complex as Clemens from a distance of a century and a half, it is clear that he exhibited many symptoms of manic depression: wild mood swings, a mercurial temperament, feelings of grandiosity alternating with periods of self-loathing, work habits that swung back and forth from weeks of compulsively intense efforts to stages of almost complete torpor, dangerous thrill seeking, suicidal thoughts, self-destructive behavior that he himself viewed as inexplicable, and always, either in the open or gliding just beneath the surface, a river of melancholy, gloom, guilt, and depression. Even when holding court among friends and family, Sam felt alone—a part of him always distant, a trait he inherited from his father. As William Dean Howells, his best friend of over forty years, observed, Clemens "was apt to smile into your face with a subtle but amiable perception, and yet with a sort of remote absence; you were all there for him, but he was not all there for you" (26). Speaking of

several days that he described as “among the blackest, the gloomiest, the most wretched” in his experience—during a horrible period between August 1870 and February 1871 when his wife Livy’s father died; Livy suffered a nervous breakdown; Livy prematurely gave birth to their first child and only son, Langdon, who was four and a half pounds, sickly, and only lived for nineteen months; Livy’s friend Emma Nye came to visit, contracted typhoid and died in Sam’s own bed; and Livy herself contracted typhoid and nearly died—Clemens wrote: “The resulting periodical and sudden changes of mood in me, from deep melancholy to half insane tempests and cyclones of humor, are among the curiosities of my life” (*Autobiography* I: 362; *Twain in Eruption* 251).

Twain’s memory of his older brother Orion’s personality was unconsciously self-reflexive:

One of his characteristics was eagerness. He woke with an eagerness about some matter or other every morning; it consumed him all day; it perished in the night and he was on fire with a fresh new interest next morning. . . . But I am forgetting another characteristic, a very pronounced one. That was his deep glooms, his despondencies, his despairs; these had their place in each and every day along with the eagernesses. Thus his day was divided—no, not divided, mottled—from sunrise to midnight with alternating brilliant sunshine and black cloud. Every day he was the most joyous and hopeful man that ever was, I think, and also every day he was the most miserable man that ever was. (*Autobiography* I: 452)

Orion himself had recognized these same traits in Sam, observing of his younger brother that his “organization is such as to feel the utmost extreme of every feeling. . . . Both his capacity of enjoyment and his capacity of suffering are greater than mine” (Paine III: 1592).

The depressive psyche of Huck Finn’s creator was fueled by a lifetime of tragedies—violence and death stalked Sam Clemens. An older brother, Pleasant, died in infancy before Sam was born. His nine-year-old sister Margaret passed away when he was nearly four. When he was six, his brother Benjamin—four years his senior and with whom he was very close—succumbed after a sudden illness. Twain recalled holding his grief-stricken mother’s hand as they knelt by Benjamin’s corpse while she wept uncontrollably. In an unpublished sketch, Twain wrote that she “made the children feel the cheek of the dead boy, and tried to make them understand the calamity that had befallen. The case of memorable treachery” (“Villagers” 39; see also Powers 320). In an au-

tobiographical fragment, Twain stated: “Dead brother Ben. My treachery to him.” Dixon Wecter observes, “What grounds for self-reproach a six-year-old might have for ‘betraying’ an elder brother is unexplained, but the guilt complex is characteristic and familiar” (286). As a boy, Sam saw a man named Sam Smarr shot to death point-blank in the chest (upon which he based Colonel Sherburn’s shooting of Boggs in *Huck Finn*); the mutilated body of a fugitive slave named Neriam Todd emerging in front of him on the river (Dempsey 167); a “young Californian emigrant . . . stabbed with a bowie knife” and the “red life gush from his breast” (this was the corpse of the slain man in his father’s office); a sword cane duel between two doctors in which one, who shared the house the Clemens family lived in, was “brought home multifariously punctured”; a man to whom Sam lent matches burned alive in the village jail; the public hanging of an enslaved man who had murdered a ten-year-old boy and raped, murdered, and mutilated the boy’s twelve-year-old sister; and the bludgeoning to death of an enslaved man by a white overseer on the street (*Autobiography* I: 157-58, 514n157.36-37, 514n158.5, 514n158.15-16, 514n158.16-18, 514-15 n158.18, 515n158.22-25; Dempsey 167).⁶

By the time he wrote *Huck Finn*, death had claimed his sister Margaret (1839), his brother Benjamin (1842), his father (1847), his favorite aunt Martha Quarles (1850), his brother Henry (1858), his brother-in-law William Moffett (1865), his father-in-law Jervis Langdon (1870), his infant son Langdon (1872), and his favorite uncle John Quarles (1876). That was just a prelude. In his lifetime he also lost his brother-in-law Theodore Crane (1889), his mother (1890), his mother-in-law Olivia Langdon (1890), his daughter Susy (1896), his brother Orion (1897), Orion’s wife Mollie (1904), his wife Livy (1904), his sister Pamela Moffett (1904), his nephew, surrogate son, and namesake Sam Moffett (1908), and his daughter Jean (1909). He absorbed these deaths without the comforts of religion. Howells observed: “All his expressions to me were of a courageous renunciation of any hope of living again, or

⁶Twain used the murder of Sam Smarr by William Owsley as the basis for Colonel Sherburn’s murder of Boggs in *Huck Finn*. Twain recalled “the grotesque closing picture—the great family Bible spread open on the [dying] man’s breast by some thoughtful idiot, and rising and sinking to the labored breathings, and adding the torture of its leaden weight to the dying struggles” (*Autobiography* I: 158). A similar bible is laid on Boggs’s chest in *Huck Finn* (187).

elsewhere seeing those he had lost. He suffered terribly in their loss, and he was not fool enough to try ignoring his grief" (28-29).

The most devastating of these early losses is especially illustrative of the psyche of the author who created Huck Finn. The death of his beloved nineteen-year-old brother Henry fueled his lifelong sense of guilt and the obsession with fatal calamities that pervade his works. Henry was two-and-a-half years younger than Sam, the darling of the family, and from all accounts an unusually sweet, gentle, and honest boy—the polar opposite of the rebellious, mischievous, rowdy Sam. A few months after Henry's death, Orion summarized his younger brothers:

the boys grew up—Sam a rugged, brave, quick-tempered, generous-hearted fellow, Henry quiet, observing, thoughtful, leaning on Sam for protection; Sam and I too leaning on him for knowledge picked up from conversation or books, for Henry seemed never to forget anything, and devoted much of his leisure hours to reading. (Paine III: 1592)

Twain agreed, with characteristic humor: "My mother had a good deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it. She had none at all with my brother Henry . . . and I think that the unbroken monotony of his goodness and truthfulness and obedience would have been a burden to her but for the relief and variety which I furnished in the other direction." Sid and Tom Sawyer are loosely based on Henry and Sam, with several incidents in *Tom Sawyer* taken from real-life events, though, as Twain was quick to point out: "Sid was not Henry. Henry was a very much finer and better boy than ever Sid was" (*Autobiography* I: 350.)

The meditative Henry lacked a goal in life, but Sam, the erstwhile hellion, had grown increasingly responsible since their father's death and tried to take care of the family. Having become a cub pilot apprenticed to the legendary Horace Bixby in March 1857, the following February Sam secured for Henry—who was out of work and living in a boardinghouse near the St. Louis home where his sister Pamela, brother-in-law William A. Moffett, and mother resided—a job as a mud-clerk aboard the *Pennsylvania*, a large, ornate steamboat on which Sam was the steersman (Scharnhorst 104). Twain later explained that mud clerks (or assistant pursers) "received no salary, but they were in the line of promotion" and could rise to the position of "chief clerk—that is to say, purser" (*Autobiography* I: 274). Ron Powers observes, "Sam had planned to consolidate their blossoming friendship by

expanding Henry's sedate world, drawing him into the dash and glamour of his own new lifestyle" (83-84). Henry performed well in his new job, quickly gaining the respect and confidence of the pilots and crew (Branch 4).

While temporarily piloting a Missouri River boat, Bixby had loaned his cub out to William Brown, the pilot of the *Pennsylvania*, whom Sam soon came to hate. Bixby was quick-tempered and often sarcastic, but always in order to focus Sam on the river—a stern but effective teacher (see, for instance, *Life on the Mississippi* 75-76, 88, 92-94, 119-21). Brown, however, was mean-spirited and abusive for its own sake, humiliating Sam daily, privately and publicly. Twain would later describe him as “a middle-aged, long, slim, bony, smooth-shaven, horse-faced, ignorant, stingy, malicious, snarling, fault-hunting, mote-magnifying tyrant” (*Life on the Mississippi* 152). Asked why he was sitting in the pilot house, Sam replied that he was waiting for an order, and Brown's response sounds exactly like Pap Finn talking to Huck:

“You've had no *orders*! My, what a fine bird we are! We must have *orders*! Our father was a *gentleman*—owned slaves—and *we've* been to *school*. Yes, *we* are a gentleman, *too*, and got to have *orders*! ORDERS, is it? ORDERS is what you want! Dod dern my skin, *I'll* learn you to swell yourself up and blow around *here* about your dod-derned *orders*!” (*Life on the Mississippi* 154)

Instead of learning the river, the cub found himself absorbed in fantasies of murdering Brown. Twain recalled that while abed:

Instead of going over my river in my mind as was my duty, I threw business aside for pleasure, and killed Brown. I killed Brown every night for months; not in old, stale, commonplace ways, but in new and picturesque ones,—ways that were sometimes surprising for freshness of design and ghastliness of situation and environment. (*Life on the Mississippi* 155)

When he was later dismissed from the *Pennsylvania*, Twain would pointedly claim that he felt like “an emancipated slave” (*Life on the Mississippi* 160), the same way Huck feels when he thinks he's free from the Duke and King (*Huck Finn* 258-59).

After the brothers had served together on five round-trips between St. Louis and New Orleans, the *Pennsylvania* was docked in St. Louis, where Sam stayed at Pamela's with their mother, while Henry spent his evenings with them before returning to the boat in time to be ready

for his early morning chores. Typically, Henry said goodbye in the family sitting room on the second floor, then descended the stairs and left “without further ceremony.” But on this one night, Sam recalled, after Henry shook hands and said his usual goodbye, their mother “went with him to the head of the stairs and said good-bye *again*.” Jane Clemens remained there “while he descended. When he reached the door he hesitated, and climbed the stairs and shook hands good-bye once more” (*Autobiography I*: 274-75). The next morning, Sam awoke with a horrible premonition, a dream “so vivid” that “I thought it *was* real.” Henry was a corpse lying in “a metallic burial case” and “dressed in a suit of my clothing, and on his breast lay a great bouquet of flowers, mainly white roses, with a red rose in the centre.” The nightmare seemed “so like reality” that Sam dressed and walked down the block before he realized that he had dreamed it, but his anxiety compelled him to run home and fly up the stairs into the sitting room to make sure “there was no casket there” (*Autobiography I*: 275). Annie Moffett, Pamela’s young daughter, remembered Sam telling the family about this dream, and stated that Jane often later spoke of it (Webster 37).

During the ensuing trip to New Orleans, on June 3, 1858, Captain John Klinefelter ordered Henry to tell Brown to make an unscheduled landing at a plantation. Henry, who as a lowly mud-clerk had few dealings with the pilot, came by the hurricane deck and conveyed the captain’s message, but Brown, as was his wont, “gave no intimation that he had heard anything.” When they passed the landing, Klinefelter appeared on the deck and asked if Henry had told Brown about the stop; the pilot said that Henry had appeared but had said nothing. The captain then asked Sam the same question and he replied that Henry had indeed told them, upon which Brown sneered, “Shut your mouth! you never heard anything of the kind. . . . An hour later, Henry entered the pilot-house” while Sam was steering, and Brown tore into him with a vengeance, calling him a liar and ordering him out (*Life on the Mississippi* 157-58). In a letter to Orion’s wife Mollie, Sam reported that, as Henry was leaving, “Brown jumped up and collared him—turned him half way around and *struck him in the face!* . . . struck my little brother. I was wild from that moment. I left the boat to steer herself, and avenged the insult” (*Letters I*: 81). Sam struck Brown with a heavy stool, then straddled the fallen pilot and pounded him with his fists while the boat was “tearing down the river at the rate of fifteen miles

an hour and nobody at the helm!" (*Life on the Mississippi* 158). After the watch, Klinefelter questioned Sam about the incident, feigning disapproval but also advising him to wait for Brown on shore and there to give him the thrashing he deserved (*Life on the Mississippi* 159-60).

In New Orleans, Klinefelter tried to replace Brown but was prevented from doing so by the Western Boatmen's Benevolent Association, giving him no choice but to leave Sam behind when the *Pennsylvania* headed north on June 9, 1858. He booked Sam passage on the *Alfred T. Lacey*, scheduled to follow two days later, hoping to replace Brown in St. Louis so that Sam could resume his berth as steersman (Scharnhorst 109; Branch 6-7; *Letters* I: 81). The night before the *Pennsylvania* left, Sam and Henry chatted down on the wharf until midnight, prophetically about steamboat disasters. As Twain recounted in *Life on the Mississippi*: "we decided that if a disaster ever fell within our experience we would at least stick to the boat, and give such minor service as chance might throw in the way. Henry remembered this, afterward, when the disaster came, and acted accordingly" (161; also see *Autobiography* I: 275, where Twain claims he was the source of this advice).

Two days after the *Alfred T. Lacey* pulled out of port, news came that a boiler had exploded on the *Pennsylvania* on the morning of June 13, blowing the boat to pieces. A hundred miles below Memphis, Sam found himself passing corpses and parts of the wrecked boat floating in the river (Powers 86). Roughly eighty to a hundred people, including Brown, had died in the explosion, although there may have been more, and many others were badly injured (Scharnhorst 109).⁷ Arriving in Memphis on June 15, Sam hastened directly to the makeshift hospital at the Cotton Exchange, where his demeanor made an indelible impression on observers (Powers 87-88). A local journalist described him as "almost crazed with grief" when he saw Henry, whose "fair young face . . . was almost the only one unmarred by steam and flame." Another observer "witnessed one of the most affecting scenes at the Exchange yesterday that has ever been seen" when the "brother of Mr. Henry Clemens. . . on approaching the bedside of the wounded man, his feelings so much overcame him, at the scalded and emaciated form before

⁷See Branch for the fullest, most accurate account of the *Pennsylvania* explosion and its aftermath.

him, that he sunk to the floor overpowered. There was scarcely a dry eye in the house; the poor sufferers shed tears at the sight" (*Letters I: 82n1*). That night, Sam wrote to Mollie:

Long before this reaches you, my poor Henry,—my darling, my pride, my glory, my *all*, will have finished his blameless career, and the light of my life will have gone out in utter darkness. O, God! this is hard to bear. Hardened, hopeless,—aye, lost—lost—lost and ruined sinner as I am—I, even *I*, have humbled myself to the ground and prayed as never man prayed before, that the great God . . . would pour out the fulness of his just wrath upon my wicked head, but have mercy, mercy, mercy upon that unoffending boy. (*Letters I: 80-81*)

When Henry passed on June 21, three weeks shy of his twentieth birthday, Sam telegraphed brother-in-law William Moffett a terse message: "Henry Died this morning leave tomorrow with the Corpse"; his niece, Annie Moffett, later recalled that the people of Memphis sent a young man to accompany Sam and the casket to St. Louis because he was "so overcome with grief that they were afraid he would go insane" (*Letters I: 85, 86n2*). Before he departed, other parts of his eerie premonition came true:

[W]hen I came back and entered the dead-room Henry lay in that open case, and he was dressed in a suit of my clothing. He had borrowed it without my knowledge during our last sojourn in St. Louis; and I recognized instantly that my dream of several weeks before was here exactly reproduced, so far as these details went—and I think I missed one detail; but that one was immediately supplied, for just then an elderly lady entered the place with a large bouquet consisting mainly of white roses, and in the centre of it was a red rose, and she laid it on his breast. (*Autobiography I: 276*)

Twain dictated the account of both the dream and the above scene in Memphis half a century after the fact, and although the latter may be accurate, it's also possible that he either made it up or had come, over time, to believe it. In either case, it speaks to the depth of the life-long guilt caused by Henry's death. When Twain wrote to Mollie after seeing Henry at the hospital, he stated: "Henry was asleep—was blown up—then fell back on the hot boilers, and I suppose that rubbish fell on him, for he is injured internally. He got into the water and swam to shore, and got into the flatboat with the other survivors" (*Letters I: 81*). There is no mention of any earlier conversation with Henry about sticking to the boat and helping others, which first appeared in *Life on*

the Mississippi twenty-five years later. In *Life*, Twain also states that after Henry was thrown into the water, he “struck out for shore, which was only a few hundred yards away” but “believed he was not hurt” and therefore swam “back to the boat” to “help save the wounded” (163). The conversation with Henry may or may not be true, but the second part about returning to the boat, given Henry’s injuries, could not have occurred (Scharnhorst 109-10; Powers 87; Branch 36; *Autobiography* I: 275).

Yet Twain needed to believe it. The question is why? Clearly, he wanted to make bravery Henry’s literary epitaph, to immortalize him not just as a victim of the calamity but as a hero who died helping others. Toward the end of *Life on the Mississippi*, he underscores this to be the code of the river: among all of the many explosions of steamboats on the Mississippi, “*there is no instance of a pilot deserting his post to save his life while by remaining and sacrificing it he might secure other lives from destruction*” (346). Surrounding this statement with stories of those who followed the code and perished, he either deliberately or unconsciously elevates Henry from a mud clerk to a pilot and subtly implies the glorious career he might have had. But more telling are the self-accusatory elements in both the 1883 *Life on the Mississippi* account and the 1906 autobiography. Henry admires his older brother and Sam takes him into his profession and serves as his role model. In defending Henry from Brown, Sam’s volcanic anger erupts in an extended period of violence. He commits the cardinal sin of abandoning his responsibility of steering the boat, putting all aboard in danger, and this act leads to Henry being left alone on the *Pennsylvania*. The night before, Sam is the one responsible for the idea of staying with a boat after a disaster in order to help, and Henry, heeding his older brother’s lesson, dies. In his dream, Henry’s corpse is dressed in Sam’s clothes, symbolizing that Henry met his fate by emulating Sam. Twain left out his own crazed grief at the sight of Henry in his account in *Life on the Mississippi*, instead focusing on the grotesque injuries of others and quietly falling into understated language to describe Henry’s death: “his hurts were past help. On the evening of the sixth day his wandering mind busied itself with matters far away, and his nerveless fingers ‘picked at his coverlet.’ His hour had struck; we bore him to the death-room, poor boy” (165).

Ron Powers observes that Twain's "skepticism regarding the Christian faith hardened into non-belief, and he embarked on a lifetime of guilt over his role in guiding his brother toward his doom, a guilt compounded by the excruciating luck of his own survival" (89). In his letter to Mollie from Memphis, Twain had complained: "Men take me by the hand and *congratulate* me, and call me 'lucky' because I was not on the Pennsylvania when she blew up! My God forgive them, for they know not what they say" (*Letters* I: 81). What we have here is a case of intense survivor's guilt, one that Twain would try to work through for the rest of his life in his writings, alternating between attempts at expiation and self-accusation, but never able to free himself from its grasp.

In a brief tribute written a few weeks after Henry's death, Twain tried to ignore his guilt: "His brain was injured by the concussion, and from that moment his great intellect was a ruin. We were not sorry his wounds proved fatal, for if he had lived he would have been but the wreck of his former self" (*Letters* I: 84n7). In *Roughing It*, written in 1872 about his journey to Nevada in 1861, three years after Henry's death, Twain indirectly and perhaps unconsciously attempts to reconcile himself with Henry and alleviate his guilt. At South Pass on the Continental Divide, like Huck, he expresses his emotions by projecting them onto the landscape. He observes the stream that sends its water in two opposite directions, one westward "through miles of desert solitudes" to the Pacific Ocean, the other eastward toward the Missouri River, to join the Mississippi and end in the Gulf, "never to look upon its snow-peaks again or regret them" (81). The divided stream is the divided Mark Twain, and he uses it to express what I have elsewhere called his "double impulse": his desire to separate and to join, his need for freedom from his old life and concomitant nostalgia for his home (Lamb, "America" 469). This double impulse then segues into a paragraph in which he meets a man named John leading a wagon train of emigrants. They had been "school-boys together and warm friends" until Sam played a prank by dropping a watermelon on John's head from a third-floor window, ending their friendship. But meeting again in the sublime heavenly mountains, "All animosities were buried and the simple fact of meeting a familiar face in that isolated spot so far from home" makes them forget all unpleasant memories and recall only the good ones (82). They part with each other's blessings. After this scene, Twain's wagon nearly meets its fate in a mountain chasm in a storm

and he morbidly anticipates what he would later say about his attempted suicide in San Francisco: "I have always been glad that we were not killed that night. I do not know any particular reason, but I have always been glad" (84).

The meeting with "John," a complete fabrication, would be insignificant were it not for a story that Twain tells in his autobiography. He had misbehaved and, as a punishment, had to spend a lovely summer day by himself on the third floor of a printer's office. He ate the half a watermelon he found there, and then, sitting by the window overlooking the main street, "it occurred to me to drop it on somebody's head." Waiting for a "safe person" to chance along, at last he spied a proper "candidate": "It was my brother Henry. He was the best boy in the whole region. He never did harm to anybody, he never offended anybody. He was exasperatingly good. He had an overflowing abundance of goodness—but not enough to save him this time." (This last phrase resonates with dark irony.) With perfect accuracy, he let the watermelon go, and it landed right on Henry's head. For his part, Henry never revealed his suspicions as to who the culprit was but three days later exacted revenge, landing a cobblestone on the side of Sam's head (*Autobiography* I: 458-59). Combining these two anecdotes, one purely invented and the other based on a real incident, we can see the deeper meaning of the alleged meeting with John in *Roughing It*. Far away from home, Sam and Henry are reconciled and Twain's guilt seems exiated.

In his initial tribute, Twain ignores his guilt over Henry's death; in *Roughing It*, he tries to mitigate it. Eleven years later, near the end of *Life on the Mississippi*, when Twain is writing about his return to Hannibal for the first time in twenty-one years, he recalls another scene from his youth. In January 1853, seventeen-year-old Sam gave some matches to a drunken tramp for his pipe. The tramp was later picked up by the town marshal and slapped in the calaboose, where he accidentally set his bed on fire. With the jail aflame and the tramp screaming in agony from the barred window, the town was unable to free him and he died, leaving but charred ashes and bones (Wecter 253-56). The incident left young Sam with hideous dreams in which the tramp accused him of responsibility for his gruesome death, and Twain would later state that, although he knew it was not his fault,

mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience, and knew but the one duty—to hunt and harry its slave upon all pretexts and on all occasions; particularly when there was no sense nor reason in it. The tramp—who was to blame—suffered ten minutes; I, who was not to blame, suffered three months. (*Autobiography* I: 157-58)

In this account, seventeen-year-old Sam feels responsible because of the religion he learned as a child but discarded as an adult, a transformation that is echoed in Huck's decision in Chapter 31 to tear up the letter and go to hell (270-71), and later in Huck's own declaration, upon seeing the Duke and King, tarred and feathered, being ridden out of town on a rail:

I warn't feeling so brash as I was before, but kind of ornery, and humble, and to blame, somehow—though *I* hadn't done nothing. But that's always the way: it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him *anyway*. If I had a yaller dog that didn't know no more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet ain't no good, nohow. (290)

When Twain narrates the story of the tramp in *Life on the Mississippi*, however, he uses it indirectly to express the guilt for Henry's death that he could never overcome. In this version, he makes himself ten years old and talks in his sleep, as was his wont when he was a boy. Afraid that he may have unwittingly confessed his role in the tramp's burning to Henry, he explains that some unnamed boy gave the man matches and hypothetically asks, "is that boy a murderer, do you think?" Henry asks whether the boy knew the tramp was very drunk, and Sam says yes: "There was a long pause. Then came this heavy verdict:—'If the man was drunk, and the boy knew it, the boy murdered that man. This is certain.'" The story seems to be about Sam's guilt over the tramp who burned, but it is actually about his feelings of guilt over Henry's death, and the answer is far from comforting. In effect, he has asked Henry if he is responsible for his death and has received from his brother what strikes him as a "death sentence pronounced from the bench" (390).

Sometimes Twain's despair and feelings of guilt were so painful that he could not express them, even in literary equivalents. Langdon Clemens, like his father, was born premature, and during his nineteen months of life remained small and sickly. Barbara E. Snedecor observes, "[t]he new father likely recognized in his infant son's early arrival his

own tentative entrance into the world.” She describes Sam’s emotions during the first week of Langdon’s life as alternating “from humorous whimsy, to anxiety, to fear” (61), and shows him, in referring to Langdon as “the little stranger” and “it,” trying to distance himself from an impending calamity (62). At the same time, he affectionately called his child “cubbie,” drew sketches of him, and anxiously charted measurements of his height and the growth of his limbs and body (63). Ron Powers concurs, noting, “It is impossible to ignore some curious signs of detachment . . . in Sam’s degree of concern about his infant son’s crisis” (304). The invalided Livy, now four months pregnant with Susy, was transported to Elmira, New York on a mattress while Sam was absent on the lecture circuit making money to afford the building of their new home in Hartford, Connecticut, while also desperately trying to finish *Roughing It* and negotiating with his publisher. Livy missed Sam, writing to him, “I do hope that this will be the last season that it will be necessary for you to lecture, it is not the way for a husband and wife to live if they can possibly avoid it, is it?” She also sensed the emotional distance in her husband toward their son, writing, “I know as he grows older you and he will love each other like *every thing*” and “Cubbie is very anxious to have you get home Sat. he hopes that you will not fail us on any account” (*Love Letters* 164-65). Susy was born, also premature, in Elmira on March 19, 1872, but Langdon’s physical growth had ceased, and he developed a cough later diagnosed as diphtheria. On May 29, the family returned to their new home in Hartford, but Langdon grew very sick, and four days later he was dead. After a funeral service in the parlor performed by Twain’s close friend, the Rev. Joseph Twitchell, the child was transported to Elmira for burial in the Langdon family plot near his grandfather, Jervis Langdon. Livy, who had fallen into a deep depression, was too frail to travel with the body and Sam decided to stay alongside her. Neither parent was able to attend their baby’s burial (*Letters* V: 97-101).

Dead babies and dead children appear in Twain’s works but none seem related to Langdon in the same way that he compulsively revisits Henry’s death. The one subtle, and perhaps unconscious, exception may occur in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Scholars have analyzed that novel’s apocalyptic ending in many insightful ways: for example, John Kasson sees it as an anticipatory, cautionary tale of

“the technological violence of which Americans (among others) are capable when their republican values are opposed by an alien and technologically less advanced people, such as the American Indians in Mark Twain’s own time or the Vietnamese in recent years” (212); and Richard Slotkin views it as a fictional representation of Custer’s Last Stand and a complex critique of the American myth of the frontier in which primitivism cannot be reconciled with civilization, and the “egalitarian ambitions of the Jacksonian Frontier hero” notwithstanding, the “maintenance of social order is still dependent on force” (530). Even biographical readings focus upon larger points of cultural significance; for instance, Justin Kaplan suggests that “Clemens, for all his expressed enthusiasm for what he called ‘machine culture,’ nursed the covert belief that the machine was a destructive force”—a belief derived from how his investments in the ill-fated Paige typesetter were bankrupting him as he wrote the novel (300).

Missing from the criticism, however, is an easily overlooked nucleus in the plot. Hank Morgan’s ultimate failure can be attributed to many causes—e.g., his own growing megalomania, his failure to win over the hearts and minds of the populace, the opposition of the Church and the nobles, Sir Launcelot’s insider trading on the stock market and affair with Guenever, the demands of the time travel genre in which the future cannot be altered—but the event that actually precipitates the disaster is that Hello-Central, the infant daughter of Hank and Sandy, is sickly and nearly dies. On the advice of the doctors, Hank leaves the country with his family for nearly two months to sojourn in France for the sake of the child’s full recovery. In his absence, civil war breaks out, King Arthur is killed, the Church issues its Interdict, and Hank is compelled to return and destroy his civilization. Hurlled by Merlin’s magic back into his own nineteenth century, he dies yearning for his wife and child who are gone to him forever. In his delirium, Hank cries out for Sandy and his daughter, “let me touch her hands, her face, her hair, and tell her good-bye” (492). Although Hello-Central, unlike Langdon, does not die, a sickly child leads to a permanent separation from the child’s father and a paternal grief can never be assuaged.

Twain recounted memories of Henry that expressed his full range of emotions—from love and nostalgia to pain and self-accusation. But he was mute about Langdon and focused his parental energies on his three

daughters, especially Susy, his favorite, who was strikingly like her father. The reason for his silence was not the death itself, however, but his irrational assumption that he was somehow to blame. In his 1906 autobiography, he blankly states, "I was the cause of the child's illness." In Elmira, Livy had "trusted him to my care" and he had taken Langdon out on a carriage ride "for an airing." It was a cold morning but the child was comfortably wrapped in furs, and, according to Twain, "in the hands of a careful person, no harm would have come to him." But Twain "dropped into a reverie and forgot all about my charge." The furs had fallen from Langdon's legs, and, Twain states, by the time he and the coachman noticed, the child "was almost frozen." He concludes the passage: "I have always felt shame for that treacherous morning's work and have not allowed myself to think of it when I could help it. I doubt if I had the courage to make confession at that time. I think it most likely that I have never confessed until now" (*Autobiography* I: 433). In his memoir of Twain, Howells reports that Sam only mentioned Langdon to him once during their entire intimate, forty-year friendship, simply stating, "Yes, *I* killed him" (12). But Langdon had died of diphtheria. As Justin Kaplan observes,

Diagnostically this fails to jibe with Clemens' statement that he was responsible for the boy's death. Clemens, a lifelong guilt seeker, remembered or misremembered mainly what he wanted to; even so casual an acquaintance as Mrs. James T. [Annie] Fields noted that "his whole life was one long apology." (149)

A person much closer to him, Livy's sister Susan Crane, made the same point about her brother-in-law five years after Twain's 1906 "confession of guilt": "we never thought of attributing Langdon's death to that drive. . . . After he arrived in Hartford diphtheria developed—Mr Clemens was often inclined to blame himself unjustly" (*Letters* V: 100-01).

Loneliness, morbidity, depression, and guilt—these are central qualities in the character of Huck Finn, and they ultimately derive from his author. In *The Innocents Abroad*, the autobiographical narrator grows increasingly morbid on his journey, a gloom that reaches its crescendo in the Holy Land. In *Roughing It*, the autobiographical narrator describes himself, others, or the landscape using the word "solitude" twenty-six times, "solitary" nine times, "alone" eleven times, and

“lonely,” “lonesome,” or “loneliest” twelve times.⁸ The book reaches its emotional climax when Sam, after courting death by running through the crater of an active volcano, stands atop Mount Haleakala and reports, “I felt like the Last Man, neglected of the judgment, and left pin-nacled in mid-heaven, a forgotten relic of a vanished world” (524). In *Tom Sawyer*, Tom’s antics are motivated by his desire for attention and celebrity but also by a persistent melancholy filled with death fantasies. *Life on the Mississippi* is filled with grotesque events and laughter from the grave, and in a representative metaphor, when Twain returns to the river, where the once bustling wharves are now empty, he sees but one solitary steamboat—the *Mark Twain* (203). Loners and outsiders such as Huck pervade his works, increasingly so in his later years, often in the form of his autobiographical narrators, or Injun Joe, Hank Morgan, David Wilson, the man who corrupts Hadleyburg, and the mysterious stranger who reveals to the young printer (another stand-in for Sam Clemens): “Nothing exists but You. And You are but a *Thought*—a va-grant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering for-lorn among the empty eternities!” (*No. 44* 405).

Similar to the lethal stories Huck fabricates, Twain’s works contain one of the largest number of corpses in American literature. Just as death stalked Sam Clemens in life, so, too, do death and violence pervade his fiction. Dead people are everywhere in *Huck Finn*—Pap, perhaps Jim Turner on the *Walter Scott*, many Shepherdsons and Granger-fords, Boggs, the father and uncle of the Wilks sisters, and Miss Watson. Ancient catastrophes abound in *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, current ones in *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi*. The plots of *Pudd’nhead Wilson* and *Tom Sawyer, Detective* revolve around a murder. In *Connecticut Yankee*, Hank obliterates twenty-five thousand knights in ten minutes, and in *No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger* Twain eradicates the entire human race. Even a children’s book like *Tom Sawyer* is structured around death: the murder of Dr. Robinson in the graveyard (the same cemetery where Twain’s father was buried), Tom’s death fantasies, the faked deaths of the boys, the near death of Becky

⁸“Solitude” appears on pp. 20, 29, 32, 41, 43, 81, 83, 123, 137, 148, 182, 185, 207, 251, 252, 383, 391, 392, 398, 399, 412, 431, 434, 460, 524, 548; “solitary” on pp. 32, 44, 55, 78, 102, 168, 286, 425, 552; “alone” on pp. 32, 168, 219, 254, 259, 265, 331, 425, 431, 478, 552; “lonely” on pp. 77, 120, 243, 245, 425, 431, 434, 492, 532; “lonesome” on p. 123; and “loneliest” on pp. 83, 245.

and Tom in the cave, and Injun Joe's gruesome fate. For a "funny man," Mark Twain's works have an extraordinary body count. As is the case with African American blues humor, Irish fatalist humor, and Jewish dark humor, Twain's humor, as Howells stated, came "from the depths of a nature whose tragical seriousness broke in the laughter which the unwise took for the whole of him" (84).

Peter Beidler, Hamlin Hill, and Sacvan Bercovitch see the clues to Huck's inner reality in the lies and stories he tells: filled with broken families, death, loneliness, and guilt. Why does Huck view the world in this manner? Bercovitch says it's because "that's the way he is" (19). But the real reason why Huck feels this way is because that's how Sam Clemens felt.

* * * * *

This essay is dedicated to my dear friend Shelley Fisher Fishkin.

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