Mark Twain

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

Edited by Leo Marx

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By MARK TWAIN

EDITED, WITH AN INTRODUCTION
AND NOTES, BY LEO MARX

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Samuel Langhorne Clemens, 1835–1910

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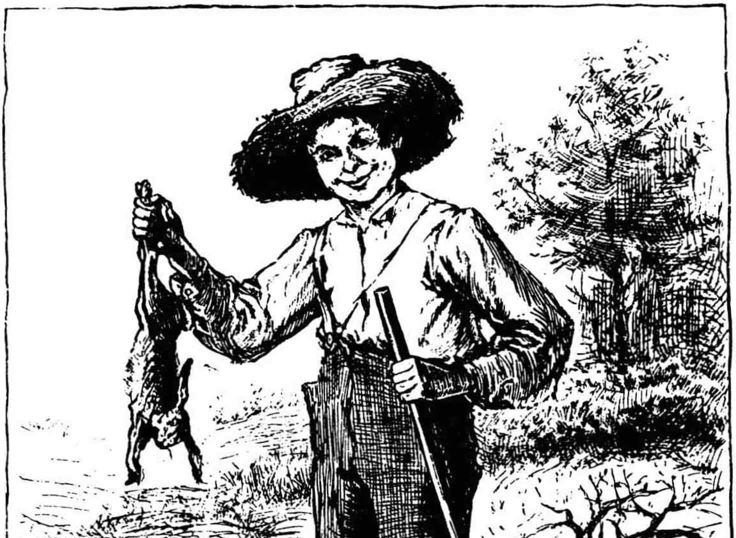
E. W. Kemble
1884

HUCKLEBERRY FINN.

INTRODUCTION

MARK TWAIN'S LIFE AND WRITINGS

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born in Florida, Missouri, on November 30, 1835. His parents were proud, respectable people of mingled English middle-class and Irish ancestry on both sides. Jane Lampton, his mother, came from a Kentucky family with aristocratic pretensions but no money. Spirited and practical, she was better suited to living in small Western villages than was her husband. John Marshall Clemens was an austere Virginian of few words and high principles: a conservative (Whig) in politics and a free-thinker in religion. Much of his energy was consumed in ill-conceived moneymaking schemes. Trained in the law, "Judge" Clemens worked at various times as farmer, schoolteacher, storekeeper, land speculator and justice of the peace. When one of his enterprises failed, as they invariably did, he often took the family to a new place for a fresh start. A few months before Samuel was born, the Clemenses, including four children and a slave, had moved from Tennessee across the Mississippi River to Missouri.

In 1839 they settled in Hannibal, Missouri, where Samuel passed the boyhood upon which he drew for his best work. The town, founded twenty-five years earlier, was becoming a busy Mississippi port. Its population of thirty in 1830 had grown to nearly a thousand by the time the Clemenses arrived. Contrary to the impression that may be derived from Mark Twain's popular books, life in Hannibal was not idyllic. There Marshall Clemens suffered a series of business failures, and when he died in 1847 the family was left in extreme penury. Within two years Sam quit school (he was fourteen) and became a printer's apprentice. When his brother Orion started a newspaper, Sam went to work for him. He wrote a few funny news stories and poems for the paper, but he sent his first piece of fiction, "The Dandy Frightening the Squatter," to a comic paper in Boston. It was a slight sketch, his own version of a well-known Western tale. By the time he was eighteen, he had had enough of Hannibal and of subservience to his amiably ineffectual brother, and he left for good.

During the next seventeen years, Sam Clemens worked as an itinerant printer, Mississippi pilot, prospector, miner, newspaperman, lecturer, and author. His arduous apprenticeship to a river pilot was his nearest approach, beyond elementary school, to disciplined learning. The life of a pilot he found exhilarating, and he might never have abandoned it had the river not been closed by the outbreak of the Civil War. Then, for a few weeks, he served with a ragtag volunteer militia in the Confederate service. But his allegiance to the Southern cause was weak, and when Orion was appointed secretary to the governor of the Nevada Territory, Sam went along to be his assistant. Finding that the post did not exist, he tried mining. These were flush times along the Comstock Lode, but no gold came his way, and he soon drifted back into journalism.

While working for newspapers in Nevada and California, Clemens discovered that he was a writer. For the Virginia City (Nevada) *Territorial Enterprise* he did both serious reporting, signed with his real name, and some wild, humorous features, signed with the nautical term "Mark Twain." In addition to its literal meaning (the mark on the sounding-line showing two fathoms deep), this pseudonym conveyed the elusive doubleness, or two-level meaning, of the "dead pan" style of Western humor. The hallmark of the style, as used by humorous lecturers of the period, was an outward appearance of expressionless innocence, the speaker pretending not to grasp the ludicrous import of his own words. In Nevada Clemens met Charles Farrar Browne, lecturer and creator of the comic character Artemus Ward, and soon he too was giving comic lectures. In San Francisco he fell in with a vaguely Bohemian group, met such professional writers as Bret Harte, and won his first literary success with a version of another widely circulated yarn, "Jim Smiley and His Jumping Frog." He then set out for New York, a traveling correspondent and lecturer billed as "The Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope."

Three years later, Mark Twain had become a national figure. His comic travel letters about a trip to Europe were widely reprinted, and when he recast them as a book, *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), it was a best seller. It expressed the complex attitude toward Europe, a strange blend of reverence and disdain, held by many Americans. In *Roughing It* (1872), he worked in the same mode of fanciful travel narrative, this time using his experience in the far West as raw material. Then he collaborated with Charles Dudley Warner on *The Gilded Age* (1873), a slapdash satiric novel about the corruption of democracy by greed. Like its predecessors, the book was a best seller, and its title was to become a standard name for the era of the robber barons.

Meanwhile, Mark Twain's private life had changed. In 1870 he had married Olivia Langdon, the charming, half-invalided daughter of a wealthy coal dealer from Elmira, New York. They settled in Hartford, Connecticut, where they built an extravagantly expensive mansion, raised three daughters (a son died in infancy), and lived in the style of the very rich. The Wild Humorist of the Pacific Slope now employed six servants, traveled in private railway cars, and spent much of his time in the polite company of literary celebrities and business executives.

The most productive phase of Mark Twain's career began in 1874, when his friend William Dean Howells, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, was prodding him for a contribution· Suddenly Clemens hit upon the idea of depicting "the old Mississippi days of steamboating glory and grandeur" as he had seen them from the pilot house. In writing the series of seven articles called "Old Times on the Mississippi," he tapped an immense reservoir of childhood reminiscences; vivid details of his boyhood in Hannibal came flooding to his mind. While the series was still appearing in the *Atlantic*, he completed the manuscript of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer;* and before that novel was published in 1876 he had written some four hundred manuscript pages of a sequel that he called "Huck Finn's Autobiography." After the first burst of inspiration, however, the writing went less smoothly, and he put the manuscript aside. By the time his masterpiece appeared in 1884 he had made another trip to Europe, had revisited the Mississippi River, and had published three other books.

During the last twenty-five years of Mark Twain's life the tenor of his work became increasingly somber. The turning point is marked by *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), a novel that expresses his conflicting attitudes toward the idea of history as a record of progress. In *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) he again employed the Mississippi village setting of the 1840's; now, however, he wrote about adult passions, miscegenation, and the emotional disorder generated by slavery. After the failure of his large investments in publishing and in a new kind of typesetting machine, he was forced into bankruptcy. To recoup his losses, he did a great deal of lecturing and writing, much of it so second-rate as to lower his self-esteem. During the Nineties he became more and more unhappy about the direction of American life. This feeling, intensified by his financial collapse and by the sudden death of his daughter Susan, is reflected in the dark works he produced at the end of the decade: *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, a bitter satire upon the morality of the small-town world he once had idealized; *What Is Man?*, a dialogue expounding the view that men have no more freedom than machines; and *The Mysterious Stranger*, an angry parable whose hero is an angel called Satan and whose villain is God.

The final decade of Mark Twain's life brought him international acclaim, loneliness, and despair. He was said to be the most admired American in the world: his books were translated into many languages; his picture (long white hair, white suit, walrus mustache) became familiar to a world-wide audience; and his every mordant comment upon human failings was dispatched to all continents. Oxford University gave him an honorary degree; his wife and his daughter Jean died after long illnesses, and as his private life became more bleak, so did his feelings about his country and the human situation. At the time of his death in 1910, Mark Twain retained little of that characteristically American confidence in the promise of a new beginning that he had reaffirmed at the end of *Huckleberry Finn.*

BACKGROUNDS OF *Huckleberry Finn*

His original impulse to write *Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *Huckleberry Finn*, came from the delight Clemens took in writing the "Old Times" series for the *Atlantic* in 1875. He enjoyed reminiscing about his life as a pilot, and he soon conceived the idea of reaching further back into the past to recapture the "boy life" he had known "out on the Mississippi." His memories of Hannibal in the 1840's were the chief source of the matter of *Huckleberry Finn.*

St. Petersburg, with its majestic landscape of river, forest, and prairie, is, of course, a version of Hannibal. In "Old Times on the Mississippi," Clemens had briefly yet vividly described a "white town drowsing in the sunshine" beside the great, rolling river; soon afterward, he used an enlarged image of the sleepy river town, now called St. Petersburg, as the idyllic setting of *Tom Sawyer*. Again, in the opening chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* (in part recast, evidently, from left-over *Tom Sawyer* material), the same innocent village appears, clean, soft, and summery—a manifest idealization of his boyhood home. Though the real Hannibal he had known before the Civil War doubtless had its charm, it was a cruder, tougher, shabbier place than its imaginary counterpart. When Clemens came to the village, it was only twenty years beyond the pioneering stage of settlement; in his reminiscences there are many notations of violence, death, and terror: the corpse he happened upon one night in his father's dark office; the time he saw a white overseer fling a lump of iron at a slave for some trivial offense and kill him; a drunk screaming in agony as he

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burned to death in the town jail; the slaves in a "coffle," or manacled train, lying on the pavement waiting to be shipped down the river—"the saddest faces I have ever seen"; a man shot down in broad daylight in a crowded street—the shooting of Boggs by Colonel Sherburn is based upon this actual murder. If one version of Hannibal in *Huckleberry Finn* is clean, white St. Petersburg, then another is blended into Clemens' picture of the drab hamlets of the lower Mississippi, like Bricksville, scene of the Sherburn incident, with its dilapidated houses, pigs wallowing in its muddy streets, and sinister lynch-mob atmosphere. In representing these squalid villages and the degenerate loafers, drunks, and con-men they sheltered, Clemens combined his less endearing memories of Hannibal with his later observations of the deep South.

Many of the characters in *Huckleberry Finn* also had their origin in Clemens' memories of boyhood. Tom's Aunt Polly inherited several traits from Sam's mother, Jane Clemens; the prototype of Jim was a slave named Uncle Dan'l, whom Clemens remembered as a superb story-teller and a "faithful and affectionate good friend . . . whose sympathies were wide and warm, and whose heart was simple and knew no guile." The original of Pap was bleary-eyed, profane Jimmy Finn, the town drunk, who was "a monument of rags and dirt," had "a nose like a mildewed cauliflower," and slept with the hogs in the abandoned tan-yard. Huck was modeled upon a poor, ignorant, unwashed, underfed companion named Tom Blankenship, whom Clemens later described as having had "as good a heart as ever any boy had" and as having been "the only really independent person—boy or man—in the community." Although he had known no one in Hannibal named "Huckleberry" (he did not encounter the word until much later, when he moved to New England), Clemens said that the sound of "Huck Finn" perfectly suited his ear, suggesting "a boy of lower extraction or degree" than the name "Tom Sawyer."

The gradations of status in the world of *Huckleberry Finn* derive from Clemens' memory of the Hannibal social structure in the 1840's. Though its manners were simple and all its inhabitants knew each other, Hannibal contained several distinct social groups, each with its distinct style of life. At the bottom, of course, were the slaves, most of whom were house servants rather than field hands; what the slaves of Hannibal dreaded was being "sold down the river" to work as field hands in the large, impersonal cotton plantations of the "black belt." There may have been one or two free Negroes in the town. Above the Negroes were the unaspiring, illiterate poor whites, like Jimmy Finn and the Blankenships. Some of these people were the "ornery" kind (in Huck's idiom), who discharged their frustrations in violent hatred of "niggers." (Pap's ranting disquisition on "govment" in Chapter VI is a classic statement of their embittered opinions.) River towns like Hannibal were also likely to harbor a large group of miscellaneous itinerants—boatmen, salesmen, gamblers, promoters, entertainers—who generally had more money and status than the poor whites, but less status than the respectable citizens known to Huck as "the quality." From his "low down" point of view, "the quality" included all the more or less proper families who lived in houses, belonged to a church (Protestant), and sent their children to school. Although some of them were poor, like the Clemenses, and none were truly rich, "the quality" of Hannibal tended to allow themselves genteel and even aristocratic pretensions.

In imagining the comradeship of Huck and Jim, Clemens drew upon memories of his own warm childhood relations with Negroes. Many of his favorite playmates had been slaves, particularly during summer vacations on his uncle's nearby farm; and Negro lore, with its strong coloring of African superstition, fear, and magic, formed an important part of his early education. Even as an old man he retained a large repertoire of songs and stories he had learned in slave cabins. But his close friendships with slaves did not prevent him, during his youth at least, from taking the "peculiar institution" for granted or from sharing the white community's fear and hatred of abolitionists. (Huck was to be endowed with a similar combination of fraternal emotions and stock opinions.)

And later, when Clemens had come to think of himself as an emancipated Southerner, he remembered many incidents that illustrated the pathos and terror of the slaves' situation. There was the time that his father rushed home to flog Jennie, the family house girl, for being uppity and insubordinate to Mrs. Clemens; afterward they sold her, and eventually she was shipped down the river. And there was the time, for which he always held his father in contempt, that Judge Clemens tried his own hand at slave trading. Several episodes in *Huckleberry Finn* may be traced to such remembered incidents. One exciting night, which made a lasting impression on all the Clemens children, six white men recaptured a runaway slave, brought him back to town, bound him with ropes, and left him groaning on the floor of an abandoned shack.

Judging by its apparent influence upon *Huckleberry Finn*, however, the most significant of these memories had to do with Tom Blankenship's older brother Bence and his unassuming generosity toward a slave. Bence was the kind of carefree, unambitious country boy who always fascinated Clemens. (In a late story he described another of these native pastoral figures as a "loafing, good natured, no account, irreverant fisherman, boys' friend, stray-dogs friend, typical 'Sam Lawson'* of the town.") One day during the summer of 1847, Bence came upon an escaped slave hiding in a swampy thicket near Sny Island, off the Illinois shore. A reward had been posted for the fugitive but, rather than claim it, Bence secretly carried food across the river to him for several weeks. But then the slave was frightened away by some woodsmen and disappeared in the deep swamp; a few days later a group of boys, including Sam Clemens, happened to be fishing near the island when the corpse rose, head first, before their eyes.

The main action of *Huckleberry Finn*—the downstream journey of the fugitives—represents a renewal of emotions that Clemens had experienced as a boy in Missouri. One of the most compelling was the urge to get away from an oppressive adult world—a motive that was virtually made palpable by certain distinctive features of that raw Southern environment. The slavery system, the political geography that it entailed, and the almost wild landscape combined to form a striking set of visual contrasts between the constraint that prevailed inside the town and the freedom that seemed available beyond its limits. In Hannibal in the 1840's this idea of freedom was omnipresent. Negro slavery made the color of every man's skin a token of freedom or unfreedom; moreover, since one could look across the Mississippi to the shores of a "free state," even the topography figured forth that elemental contrast. To children, the surrounding countryside offered a wordless invitation to elude adult surveillance; just beyond the settlement was a seemingly endless, unspoiled, unsuperintended playland of hills and woods and river. And though in retrospect Clemens gave the aspect of a refuge to the entire natural landscape, it was the river, with its uninhabited islands and its current moving swiftly toward remote places, that evoked his richest fantasies of escape from harsh authority. This universal if rudimentary motive was to find expression in the image of a raft, with a black man and a white boy aboard, floating quietly down the Mississippi between the shores of a hostile society.

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* "Sam Lawson" was a character in *Oldtown Folks* (1869), Harriet Beecher Stowe's sketches of her rural childhood; later she used the same "loafer and ne'er-do-well philosopher" as the narrator of a popular volume of dialect stories, *Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1872).

Of the funds of past experience that Clemens drew upon for *Huckleberry Finn*, none was richer or more telling, finally, than his extensive and precise knowledge of the popular culture of the South before the Civil War. He knew the manners and customs of the people at every social level, their standards of private and public morality, and their feelings about such universal concerns as child-rearing, education, work, money, religion, marriage, and death. He knew, and could describe in detail, the appearance of the regional artifacts: houses, furnishings, decorations, clothing, tools, and weapons. He knew, and could give vivid examples of, the reigning taste in all the "fine arts," including graveyard poetry, bathetic pictures, dime novels, and melodramatic music. He understood the pervasive influence of Sir Walter Scott, the coloring of the Southern consciousness by sentimental romance, and the conduct of such rites and rituals as feud, courtship, camp meeting, and funeral. But the product of the popular culture that Clemens knew best, the one that contributed most to the special quality of *Huckleberry Finn*, was the spoken language. Clemens had an astonishing, almost infallible memory for colloquial speech, for idioms and rhythms, for variations according to age, sex, social class, and ethnic origin, for regional dialects, and for the special rhetoric of the political stump and the pulpit and the riverboat and the fly-by-night theatrical. The vernacular was of unique importance; from it the novel acquired its distinctive tone, texture, and style. Because the entire book is composed in colloquial American speech, *Huckleberry Finn* does not merely depict the popular culture but in a very real sense is, like its hero's mind, formed by—literally made of—that culture.

Although memory supplied most of the raw material for *Huckleberry Finn*, the relation between the world of Hannibal in the 1840's and the imaginary world of the novel was anything but simple. It was complicated by the relatively sophisticated viewpoint of the writer some thirty years after the event, and by the literary forms and conventions with which he ordered his material. Like most retrospective works, *Huckleberry Finn* exhibits a discrepancy between what Wordsworth called "two consciousnesses": those of the artist as he had been and as he was at the time of writing. Young Sam Clemens had been a sensitive recipient of impressions, but the professional writer who signed his work "Mark Twain" was an artful shaper of the matter he drew from memory.

The primary influence upon the art of Mark Twain was a popular mode of telling comic stories that Americans had cultivated since colonial times. Originally an authentic folk art, this oral mode of humor had developed as a communal activity that satisfied the need of people in the back country for entertainment and aesthetic pleasure. The stories lent significance to their lives, relieved their boredom, and affirmed their solidarity in the face of the disdain with which they were regarded, or thought they were regarded, by citizens of the great world. They defended themselves against sophistication with a comedy of exaggerated self-praise. Though comic exaggeration was the hallmark of all American humor, it was brought to perfection by the humorists of the old Southwest, a region that included Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Missouri. The paradigm of the Southwestern story is the familiar "tall tale," an account of a hunting adventure that rises almost imperceptibly from a plausible, matter-of-fact plane to wondrously fanciful heights. The hero's incredible feat is matched by the imaginative reach of the narrator's fresh, colloquial language—the hero often *is* the narrator—and the combination of physical prowess and linguistic virtuosity becomes, in effect, a ritual celebration of the folk community.

Mark Twain's development as a writer coincided with the flowering of Southwestern humor and with the transition of the mode from an oral to a printed art. In the year Twain was born, 1835, Augustus B. Longstreet published *Georgia Scenes*, one of the first and most influential collections of Southwestern stories. During the next fifty years, Longstreet's book was succeeded by the work of several talented writers, notably Joseph G. Baldwin, George W. Harris, Johnson J. Hooper, and T. B. Thorpe. Most of the Southwestern humor published in book form was written by outsiders—Eastern-educated, conservative, professional men (lawyers, editors, judges, politicians) who took pains to distinguish themselves from the backwoods characters whose stories they told. Their condescension made itself felt in the narrative form they favored: a box-like structure, or framework enclosing a mock oral tale. At the beginning and at the end of the typical framework story, we hear the voice of a cultivated man speaking a refined, literary language; but, in the central episode, we hear the voice of a boisterous, irreverent local speaking a rude, ungrammatical dialect. The incongruous juxtaposition of the two lan-

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