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Home and Heart: Mark Twain's Influences in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

On a quiet street in Hartford, Connecticut, nestled among large trees, sits the home of Samuel L. Clemens and family. For a period of seventeen years (1874-1891), the Clemenses lived among literary contemporaries, and Samuel produced some of America's greatest literary works; perhaps you know him better as Mr. Mark Twain. It is here in Hartford that Twain penned the famous *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. After visiting the "Steamboat House" in Hartford, it is clearly seen that Twain's own personality traits and ideals influenced both the home he lived in and the writing of *Huck Finn*.

Upon first entering Twain's nineteen-bedroom mansion, visitors must take several moments to truly take in all the sights. The ground floor front parlor is full of striking contrasts seen in dark, deep brown mahogany woods and vibrant salmon-colored wallpaper. Then, as the visitors' eyes adjust to the shadowy decor, they move to a sitting room that is full of bright pinks, blues, and large windows to let in as much light as possible. Large mirrors reflect the light, making the room seem welcoming, cheery, and illuminated. Guests then would be escorted to the dining area, where once again eyes would need readjusting. The dining room is dressed with deep, inky, navy wallpaper. A

few small windows allow in some light, but nothing compared to the sitting room travelers have just been in. After dinner, guests would perhaps move to the library area, where they would be greeted with warm, luminous red tones and rich, brown oak shelves. Perhaps the visitors would see a pattern emerging? The mansion is laid out in a series of dark and light motifs.

This pattern of light and dark can be seen in a similar context as one of the major dualities in *Huck Finn*. From the very beginning of novel, we see this contrast emerge in the characters of Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Widow Douglas is the “light” half of the motif: she tries to teach Huck through her own example, rarely gets angry with him despite his many offenses, and even tells him that “she warn’t ashamed” of him (Twain 15). The “dark” half of the duality is seen in Miss Watson: she uses scare tactics and stories of “the bad place” to keep Huck in line and regularly scolds Huck to behave (5).

This duality can also be seen in a contrast at the heart of the novel: right vs. wrong. The most searing example of this motif is seen in the relationship between Huck and Jim. As travel companions, Huck and Jim help each other find food, shelter, and protect each other in dangerous situations. The relationship is so deep that Huck tells Jim, “I wouldn’t want to be nowhere else but here” (42). As they travel down river, Huck promises he isn’t going to tell anyone that Jim is a runaway slave even if people “despise [him] for keeping mum” (37). However, the pull of the perceived right over wrong is strong for Huck. After Jim is captured, guilt begins to come over Huck, and he struggles with two decisions: do the so-called right/moral thing and turn Jim in to Miss Watson, or to do the wrong/immoral thing and rescue him from slavery altogether. In the

end Huck decides that he'll "go to Hell" and "never thought no more about reforming" (179).

As the light and dark motif of the house manifests itself through several dualities in the novel, there is also a striking contrast to be seen between the many rooms of the Twain mansion. The decor of the home is strikingly Victorian; many rooms are filled with opulent chandeliers, ornately carved woodwork, and are furnished with some of the most expensive furniture of the day. World-renowned designer Tiffany (of Tiffany Glass and Crystal fame) even outfitted the house with one-of-a-kind pieces. While many rooms are done in these high-fashion designs, there are more modest rooms in the home. For example, on the second floor, Twain had a special billiards room. The walls are simply painted warm red tones, and the room holds nothing but a billiards table and a simple writing desk. Many of the bathrooms on the mansion are decorated sparsely as well.

This contrast between the rich, romantic appearance and the more practical can clearly be seen in *Huck Finn* too: Tom Sawyer represents the more romantic side of Twain, whereas Huck represents the more practical. When the young boys band together as "robbers" in the beginning of the novel, Tom's romantic ways manifest themselves in his ornate descriptions of "A-rabs...with two hundred elephants, and six hundred camels, and over a thousand "sumter" mules, all loaded down with di'monds" (12). When Huck and Tom are brainstorming plans to free Jim from his bonds, Tom is always looking for the more exotic, romanticized actions; Huck mentions that his plans are "worth fifteen of [his] for style" (195). Tom finally decides on a plan that's "real mysteri-

ous, and troublesome, and good” (196). On the other hand, when Huck suggests a plan to rescue Jim, Tom declares that it’s “too blame’ simple” and that “there ain’t nothing to it” (195). Even when Huck is traveling with Jim down river, he is happiest when on his simple raft: “there warn’t no home like a raft” he tells Jim, “other places do seem so cramped up and smothery...you fell mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (99). Huck is clearly the champion for the practical.

While Twain’s writing reflected his physical environment, Twain’s personal ideals and goals also influenced *Huck Finn*. For many years of his life, Twain’s number one goal was to find wealth. He shuffled from job to job, trying his hand at gold mining, captaining a riverboat, and even publishing. However, his true love remained writing, even though his fame there “did not yield heavy financial return” (Paine 8). Twain continued to struggle with this conundrum: do you do what you love or do what makes the most money?

Huck also seems to struggle with a similar decision. Instead of seeking fortune, Huck seeks freedom and despises feeling “all cramped up” when living with Widow Douglas (Twain 3). He recognizes that Widow Douglas doesn’t “[mean] no harm” by trying to “sivilize” him (3), but he truly feels at home in the open air. For many pages he tries to stay with the Widow, goes to school, and tries to learn this standard of living, but in the end he must go with his heart and seek freedom. At the end of the novel he says he “reckon[s] [he] got to light out for the Territory...because Aunt Sally...[is] going to adopt...and sivilize me...” and he “can’t stand it. [He’s] been there before” (244). This is

the manifestation of Twain's own struggle: he too chooses to stick to his true love of writing even though it is not necessarily making him a fortune.

Along with financial desires, Twain's own pen name greatly influenced *Huck Finn*. The name *Mark Twain* pays homage to the namesake's days on the great Mississippi River as a steam boat captain. In his book *Mark Twain: A Literary Life*, Everett Emerson says that Twain's pen name choice "identified him permanently with the great river" (Emerson x). This association and love for river life finds its way into Huck's life as well. The majority of Huck's journey, both physical and emotional, occurs on a raft floating down the Mississippi. Twain's own love for the river, seen both in the book and his name remained a great influence on his writing. The pen name itself also brings to light a personal struggle of identity for Twain. As Samuel L. Clemens, Twain was a husband, a father, a bread-winner with responsibilities. As "Mark Twain," the author could be anyone, say anything he wanted, and create situations and realities that could not exist for Samuel L. Clemens. Twain could not decide if he was "the irreverent, satirical humorist of the West," or whether he was "the husband of Olivia Langdon Clemens, and conventional father of three daughters" (Emerson xi). This identity issue can also be seen in Huck: is he "the boss" (Twain 34) and explorer of great adventure or does he belong with Tom and Widow Douglas in "sivilized" life? In the end, Huck chooses to stay true to his heart and "light out for the Territory" (244). Twain also decides to remain true to his heart and continues with his writing.

After 1896 when Susy Clemens died, Twain never again lived in his Hartford home. Twain was unable to return to the place where his beloved daughter had died, to a place where he would be confronted with memories of her every day. What was once a symbol of Twain's own dualities, a mirror of opposing personality traits, was something Twain no longer wanted contact with. In the years that followed Susy's death and the family's move, many of Twain's works turned darker, featuring themes of greed, cruelty, and other serious subjects ("Biography"). Readers are instantly able to ascertain the difference. The dualities in his nature became bleakly monolithic. The only mirror now was the writing itself.

Work Cited

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