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21L.702 Studies in Fiction: Rethinking the American Masterpiece
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Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Boy's Search for Family

Some thought it would be good to kill the *families* of boys that told the secrets. Tom said it was a good idea, so he took a pencil and wrote it in. Then Ben Rogers says:

“Here’s Huck Finn, he hain’t got no family – what you going to do ‘bout him?”

“Well hain’t he got a father?” says Tom Sawyer.

“Yes, he’s got a father, but you can’t never find him these days. He used to lay drunk with the hogs in the tanyard, but he hain’t been seen in these parts for a year or more.”

They talked it over, and they was going to rule me out, because they said every boy must have a family or someone to kill, or else it wouldn’t be fair and square for the others. Well, nobody could think of anything to do – everybody was stumped, and set still. I was most ready to cry; but all at once I thought of a way, ad so I offered them Miss Watson – they could kill her. Everybody said:

“Oh, she’ll do, she’ll do. That’s right. Huck can come in.” (37)

Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins with young Huck and his friends conversing about Tom Sawyer’s Gang, an invented band of robbers. The conversation is deceptively complex in that it subtly addresses and introduces several of Huck’s relationships with other characters in the novel. Its cold detachment is acceptable, even amusing, to the reader because of the age of the speakers and the context of the conversation. This provides the introduction to the recurring motif of familial units which Twain creates by establishing several family-type structures for Huck to explore. Yet each of these family units are lacking in some fundamental area, which leads him to continue his search. Huck’s lack of an “authentic” family leads him to continually search for a surrogate family. Or perhaps Huck’s preoccupation with family reflects a sense of displacement; the

“families” that Huck becomes a part of can be attributed to his yearning for a home or community to belong to.

To understand Huck’s motivation behind this quest for the ideal family, it is necessarily to examine his past experiences first. At the beginning of the tale, the reader is aware of Huck’s lack of a mother and siblings. The early allusions to his unreliable father foreshadow the interactions the pair experience later on in the book and Huck’s escape.

Rather than encouraging and nurturing his son during a crucial period of growth, Pap ignores all of the traditional roles of a father. In fact, Huck’s father not only lacks the characteristics of a good parent, but he is the complete antithesis of a parent. Pap conveniently forgets that Huck is a child when he attempts to steal his son’s money, kidnaps him, and drunkenly beats him. Pap’s own insecurities prevent him from even supporting his son’s development, and actively inhibit Huck’s growth by “cuss[ing] [him] for putting on frills and trying to be better than him (47).”

Perhaps Huck’s unstable past with his father make it nearly impossible for him to trust another family completely and explains his struggle with authority and the freedoms it robs from him. Interestingly, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* begins and ends same way, with a matriarchal figure trying to “civilize” him (32, 263). In the introductory pages of *Adventures*, Huck describes, the Widow Douglas “took [him] for her son,” and attempted to “civilize” him (32). Even after he returns from running away from her, she “crie[d] over [him], and called [him] a poor lost lamb, and she called [him] a lot of other names too, but she never meant no harm by it (32). Despite Huck’s resistance to the widows, Douglas and Watson, he feels some form of allegiance to the women who have taken care of him and

defended him against Pap. This is reflected in his internal debate regarding whether or not to assist Jim in his escape from slavery:

That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me, “What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her nigger go off right under your eyes and never say one word? What did that poor old woman do to you , that you could treat her so mean? Why, she tried to learn you your book, she tried to learn you your manners, she tried to be good to you every way she knowed how. *That’s what she done.*” (101)

Although Jim can be viewed as Huck’s closest companion throughout their journey, one can also consider Jim as a father figure to Huck. Twain further emphasizes this by having Jim speak to Huck about his wife and two children and the sacrifices he would make, including “get[ting] an to go and steal them” in order to reunite them (101). Despite Huck’s boyish tricks, Jim remains forgiving and concerned for Huck’s welfare. The pair separates several times along the river, Jim’s elation and affection for Huck. At times, Jim’s gratitude for Huck’s presence is endearing: “Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck; I’s a free man, en I couldn’t ever ben free ef it hadn’ ben for Huck; Huck done it. En you’s de *only* fren’ ole Jim’s god now (102).”

Although Huck is fortunate enough to travel with a companion who takes care of him, he also meets others who would continue to dissatisfy his need for a reliable relationship. Twain inserts several artificial and unconvincing family units in the text to demonstrate to Huck examples of unstable families. For instance, one could argue that Huck and Jim’s relationship with the king and duke on the raft illustrated a defective and haphazard family unit. Also, Huck meets the Grangerfords, a family that appears normal, with their “mighty nice house,” “big family Bible,” and pictures of “Washingtons and Lafayettes, and battles, and Highland Marys” on the walls (110-111). However, their odd behavior and feud with their rivals, the Shepherdsons, quickly reveal their dysfunctional

nature. Ironically, the family is intact when Huck meets them, but crumbles to pieces by the time Huck departs, after Miss Sophia runs off with Harney Sheperdson and Buck suffers an unfortunate death.

In addition to living with a handful of different families, Huck also creates several elaborate families in his head. As Huck encounters various characters throughout his adventures, he is often asked about his past. Rather than adhering to the same account to avoid the need to recall his tales, Huck creates these complex and unstable families:

I told them how pap and me and all the family was living on a little farm down at the bottom of Arkansaw, and my sister Mary Ann run off and got married and never was heard of no more, and Bill went to hunt them and he warn't heard of no more, and Tom and Mort died, and then there warn't nobody but just me and pap left, and he was just trimmed down to nothing, on account of his troubles; so when he died I took what there was left, because the farm didn't belong to us, and started up the river, deck passage, and fell overboard; and that was how I come to be here. (110)

One wonders if these stories are a random concoction of his imagination, or they suggest Huck's desire for a family he can call his own.

Of the numerous families that Tom tries to assimilate into, the Phelps household may have been the most suitable for him, because “[b]eing Tom Sawyer was easy and comfortable (208).” This may be due to his comfort with Tom and familiarity with his friend's mannerisms. After all, Huck is constantly trying to mimic Tom's behavior with exaggerated stories, complicated escape plans, and tricks. But perhaps Huck is only truly able to find a family with the group of boys that he plays with, which include Tom Sawyer. These boys depend and trust one another, and would understand his motivations and desire for freedom, which seem to be the main reasons that drive him to leave a family unit.

Twain's construction of Huck's journey allows him to exhaust all familial options; by the end of the book, Huck has attempted to build a family with a slave, widows, his

paternal father, imaginary characters, members of the aristocracy, con men, and the Sawyers. This indicates that Twain may have used the book as a mechanism to communicate the period's feeling of social dislocation. Published 20 years after the Civil War, *Adventures* may have been a commentary on the fragmentation of American families. Or perhaps, Huck's brief encounters reflect the nation's fragile and uncertain political and social atmosphere, as the United States sought to rebuild and reestablishing old relationships. Nevertheless, it is clear that *Adventures* can be read as both a tale of a boy's search for love and dependability and as a nation's struggle to recreate a cohesive power and desire for some familiarity.

WORKS CITED

Twain, Mark. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Gerald Graff and James Phelan.
Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Comment on the Process of Writing

I was initially intrigued by the topic of family by the passage that I open my essay with. A preliminary search on JSTOR for *Adventures* and the family motif yielded weak results, so I chose to focus the paper on instances of family that appeared in the primary text. By looking through the instances of functional and dysfunctional family units, I was surprised at the contradictory depictions of family. Yet as I continued to reread, I began to read these not as contradictions, but as Twain juxtaposition of various forms of family in an attempt to ask the reader what the definition of family *should* be.