NTU Studies in Language and Literature
Number 33 (June 2015), 33-51
DOI: 10.6153/NTUSLL.2015.33.02

The Power of the Comic: Humoring the Humorless in *Huckleberry Finn*

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Abstract

Mark Twain repeatedly ran into trouble in his humorist career because of his irreverence: the media decried his Whittier dinner speech for his disrespect toward the New England literary establishment, and the Concord Public Library banned *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* for encouraging impertinent behavior in teenage boys. These critics evidence how power relations underlie the perception of humor, which Twain was fully aware of as he plotted his masterpiece, especially when depicting the stern reactions of the characters to jests and pranks.

This paper makes use of the sociologists' differentiation between joking up and joking down, Michael Billig's notion of "unlaughter," and Eric Lott's ideas of defiance towards elite classes cloaked in sympathetic mockery of the underclass to facilitate the discussion of power relations in joking situations. Close analysis of the circus episode exemplifies how unlaughter caused by joking up becomes the subject of further ridicule. The shooting of Boggs, on the other hand, showcases the violence of unlaughter. The fog scene shows Twain's scruples about joking down and his use of unlaughter as empowerment for the underprivileged. Together they highlight Twain's understanding of the interpersonal effects of joking, making *Huckleberry Finn* not only a book of humor but also a book on humor. Meanwhile, the setbacks in Twain's own career prove that the power relations between the classes and the races in the real world likewise affect the audience's reception of humor.

Keywords: Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, humor, unlaughter, power relations

搞笑的權力：《赫克歷險記》的不解幽默

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摘　要

馬克吐溫的幽默在當年屢屢被指爲「失敬」而飽受批評：媒體撻伐他在惠提爾（John Greenleaf Whittier）的七十壽宴上侮辱新英格蘭文壇，康科德（Concord）的公立圖書館也認爲《赫克歷險記》鼓勵青少年的失序行爲而將它列爲禁書。這些事業上的挫折證明權力關係影響幽默的感受，吐溫也將這些心得寫入他的小說，藉由書中不懂幽默的角色和失敗的玩笑來呈現他的觀點。

本文藉由三個面向切入小說的相關情節：社會學家將玩笑分爲「下對上」（joking up）和「上對下」（joking down）的差異；畢立格（Michael Billig）的「非笑」（unlaughter）定義；以及拉特（Eric Lott）主張低俗鬧劇的幽默包容下層階級卻挑釁上層階級。馬戲團章節描繪下對上的玩笑雖然引致上位者的非笑，後者的不悅卻成爲取樂的對象。但是包格司（Boggs）的死證明非笑隱含著致命的暴力。濃霧一章則可見吐溫對於上對下的玩笑不以爲然，非笑更成爲低階者的利器。這些小說情節足以證明吐溫深刻瞭解人際關係決定幽默的運作，使得《赫克歷險記》不只是一本幽默小說，更是一本探討幽默的小說。吐溫自己的事業起伏也證實階級與種族之間的權力關係同樣影響了觀眾與讀者對於幽默作家的觀感。

關鍵詞：馬克吐溫、《赫克歷險記》、幽默、非笑、權力關係

The Power of the Comic: Humoring the Humorless in *Huckleberry Finn*[*]

Hsin-ying Li

On December 17, 1877, seven years before the publication of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain suffered a setback to his career because of an unsuccessful speech at a dinner sponsored by *The Atlantic Monthly* to celebrate John Greenleaf Whittier's seventieth birthday. Following several tributes to the guest of honor and his New England literary peers, the budding humorist told a funny story of three vagabonds who impersonated Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes, right in front of the three literary heavyweights. The audience put a good face on it, but for the next couple of weeks, newspapers around the nation decried "MARK TWAIN'S OFFENSE AGAINST GOOD TASTE" (Smith 101) because the absurd comparison between these revered figures and whiskey-guzzling, card-cheating tramps, in refined society no less, was considered an insult. The uproar, Henry Nash Smith explains, illustrates the conflict between the dominant culture and vernacular values, as "Boston highbrows" and "the middlebrow readers in the hinterland" (100) alike accused Twain of coarseness and vulgarity. The misfired joke troubled Twain immensely, who subsequently sent apologies to the three literary dignitaries for behaving like a heedless "savage" (Smith 99), while at the same time repeatedly defending the drollery of the story in his correspondences and autobiographical writings.[1]

The Whittier birthday speech shows how Twain's humor often got him into trouble with the cultural establishment, which sometimes distressed him, though not enough to mend his ways. Instead, he carried on in this mischievous vein in *Huckleberry Finn*, but dramatized his brushes with the prim and proper as he plotted the interactions between its characters. As might be ex-

[*] I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the reviewers for their valuable suggestions on the revision of this article.

[1] For a full account of the incident and an analysis of Twain's "unconscious antagonism" (97) toward the New England literary establishment, see Chapter 5 of Henry Nash Smith's *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer*. Twain gives his side of the story in the "January 11, 1906" entry of his *Autobiography* (260-67); see also the note on pp. 554-55 for the replies of Holmes, Emerson and Longfellow, as well as Twain's later self-defense.

pected, the novel did not go well with the old guards of good form either. The Concord Public Library banned it in March 1885, with one of the committee members who handed down the decision telling the press: "[It] seems to me that it contains but very little humor, and that little is of a very coarse type" ("[Banned]" 285). The statement presumes that the book intends to entertain and some readers might find it amusing, whereas this gentleman does not because of its impropriety. Unlike later readers who debate its racial outlook, the librarians, who had classified the novel as children's literature, mainly objected to its possible bad influence on boys. As Steven Mailloux delineates in his study of the cultural context of the novel's reception, Twain's contemporaries did not connect the book with the "Negro problem" because they readily associated it instead with literature's effect on juvenile delinquency.[2] Behind the committee's concern for the mental and moral growth of young boys are expectations of adolescent, if not all, literature: teen fiction should be moralistic and didactic, with idealized characters and plots that inspire and uplift the young readers. However, the detractors' objection to the "low," "vulgar" and "irreverent" nature of the book had little to do with the age of the target readers. These arbiters of good taste represent the urban bourgeois elites, who, on the one hand, wished to dictate behavior codes for future adults and, on the other, had yet to come to terms with Twain's popularity. Twain took the humorless criticism in stride this time, thanking the library committee in a public letter for doubling the sales of his book through its "generous action" of free advertisement (Mailloux 125).

One of the major complaints of Twain's unappreciative audiences in these two incidents is the incongruity between humor and disrespect, either in the telling of the joke, as at the dinner, or the content of the joke, as in the novel. Smith cites other dinner guests who thanked the old poets for "help[ing] to save the American nation from the total wreck and destruction of the sentiment of reverence" in contrast to the humorist who "is deficient in 'reverence for that which is truly high'" (105), while the reviews quoted by Mailloux criticized the book's "irreverence which makes parents, guardians and people who are at all good and proper [look] ridiculous" (124). These censurers do not consider challenges to social, cultural and racial hierarchies a laughing matter, which reminds us that humor is subject to social classes

[2] Please see the chapter on "Cultural Reception and Social Practices" in *Rhetorical Power*. See also Nancy Glazener's *Reading for Realism* for a further understanding of the cultural politics of childhood reading, especially pp. 170-75.

and their power relations. Sociologists record that the amount and direction of joking reflects social stratification; those higher on the social scale get more laughs, and people tend to "joke down"—make fun of the lower-status groups (Kuipers 365, 367-78). Twain's humor, in contrast, falls under the category of "contestive humor," to borrow Janet Holmes' terminology for humor in the workplace used by subordinates to subvert the authority of superiors (Billig 202). Michael Billig's "unlaughter," meanwhile, best describes the reaction of the humorless bourgeoisie. The term—the antithesis of "laughter"—is a significance absence of laughter when a humorous reaction might otherwise be expected, hoped for or demanded (192). However, the media and the librarians in the above incidents leveled their displeasure at the spirit of the jokes/joker; in the actual telling, Twain jokes up by joking down—with the "rough lot" in a Californian miner's camp in the dinner speech and a homeless orphan and a runaway slave in the American South in the novel, he takes a dig at the lower classes while thumbing his nose at the sophisticates. Twain's uncouth humor becomes, like the blackface minstrelsy popular in his days, what Eric Lott demonstrates to be "a crucial place of contestation, with moments of resistance to dominant culture as well as moments of suppression" (*Love* 18). Borrowing these ideas, this paper looks at how Twain situates his humor between the mainstream and subculture in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, at the same time contemplating the power relations behind the comic. I focus especially on the episodes where the characters show unlaughter, because the failure of humor is where Twain most directly acknowledges the clashes and their aftermath.

Given the basic requirements of the laughable—the butt of the joke and someone to enjoy the joke—power relations in fact drive humor. The humorist's perception of the butt's folly or misfortune produces a temporary feeling of superiority, regardless of social stratification.[3] For those joking down, this psychological complacency corresponds to social advantages, while, for those joking up, the sense of superiority brought about by humor temporarily cancels out the social reality of inferiority. The good-humored butt, especially if joked down on, demonstrates what communication scholars call the Standpoint Theory. This theory contends that "while those in power need see and interpret events only from their own point of view, those with less power have

[3] This is the gist of the Superiority Theory of humor, the other two major classical theories being the Relief Theory and the Incongruity Theory. See Part I (35-172) of Michael Billig's *Laughter and Ridicule* for detailed discussions of the three classical theories, or the articles by John Morreall (211-29) and Giselinde Kuipers (362-64) in *Primer of Humor Research* for quick summaries.

to learn at least two perspectives based on their status in life: that of the group in power as well as that of their own" (Davis 556); in short, the underdog must learn to laugh along with the majority, or suffer the added stigma of "grinch." As for the resentful butt, those in power can more likely "frown down" on instances of joking up because they are less inhibited from expressing their displeasure, whereas those joked down on rarely have such an option. "Unlaughter," like laughter, is a disciplinary measure against deviant behavior, though much more straightforward, Billig reminds us. As such the unlaughing party wields power. Billig further observes, however, that, just as joking does not always successfully induce laughter, unlaughter does not always successfully silence laughter; it becomes, instead, "a favorite target for the laughter of ridicule" (194).

Even so, in practice the subordinates cannot always resist the dominant class through contestive humor, unlaughter, or mockery of the unlaughing superiors; thus Lott points out another means to fight unlaughter—conformist yet defiant merriment. In *Love and Theft* Lott observes that blackface minstrel shows enabled a self-conscious white working class to form an identity apart from black people and the bourgeoisie in nineteenth-century America. On the conformist side, blackface minstrelsy reinforced racial stereotypes and, as ethnical humor, catered to the white public; yet it was also designated a product of "low" culture because it appropriated black cultural practices. Despite its support to racial demarcation, genteel audiences objected to blackface minstrelsy because the shows kept "sliding from racial burlesque into class affiliation or affirmation": "On the one hand, they constantly deflated the pretensions of an emerging middle-class culture of science, reform, education, and professionalism, while on the other, they . . . assuaged an acute sense of class insecurity by indulging feelings of racial superiority" (64). Lott's line of argument echoes Mailloux's thesis that the early trouble with *Huckleberry Finn* was not race but class values, which the readers and the audiences well understood. The popular theaters carved out a space above the blacks yet apart from the urban elites for its proletarian audiences, who, unlike Twain's silent subscribers, fed the flames of rivalry between high and low entertainment.[4] However, the class divide implicitly associated the patrons with "blackness," so that, Lott further observes, racial imagery often became "a

[4] This tension resulted in the Astor Place Riot of 1849, when "b'hoys" from the Bowery Theater, which often staged "Jim Crow," tried to shut down a performance for "the aristocracy of [New York] city" (Lott, *Love* 85) at the Astor Place Opera House. For a brief account of the incident, see Stanley R. Pillsbury's article in *Dictionary of American History*.

metonym for class" with occasional "tones of racial sympathy" (72). The white performers impersonating blacks on the stage used racial caricatures to express class dissent, just as Twain does through an uneducated, unscrupulous child's voice and his adventures with a fugitive slave.

Below I mainly examine three episodes from *Huckleberry Finn* in which a humorless character is not amused by the fun at his expense. The trick played by the drunken horseback-rider on the ring-master is a good example of how joking up causes unlaughter which is in turn ridiculed. Colonel Sherburn's shooting of Boggs, in contrast, suggests that the contestive joker, the bystanders and even the readers can ill afford to discount unlaughter, due to either inauspicious social conditions or awakened sympathetic emotions. Huck's prank on Jim after they travel through a thick fog in the night, meanwhile, shows Twain's scruples about joking down and how unlaughter can empower the underprivileged. These episodes illustrate Twain's sensitivity to the power relations involved in playful interactions and his mixed response to failed attempts at humor: on the one hand he apprehends the violence of unlaughter; on the other hand he also knows well the violence of ridicule. The clash between the two discloses Twain's musings on the interpersonal effects of humor, so that *Huckleberry Finn* not only showcases his versatility in the comic, but also his observations of aggressive joking. His own antagonistic humor, if truly an innocent offense at the Whittier speech, develops into deliberate artistic choices in *Huckleberry Finn*.

Unlaughter is the staple of Twain's deadpan humor. The character most unable to enjoy humor in the novel is none other than Huck. Some say it takes three to enjoy a joke—one to tell it, another who gets it, and a third who does not—so that, after laughing at the joke, the first two can further laugh at the third person. Twain consolidates the droll jester and the clueless listener in Huck, thus achieving the same three-person effect with the first-person narrator and the reader. If we recognize Twain as the real humorist behind Huck's narration, then we actually laugh along with Twain at Huck. Besides Huck's verbal humor, most of the fun in the novel comes from tricks played on butts, though, so the above interaction usually involves an unlaughing fourth party, which adds another layer of merriment for Twain and the knowing reader. Either way, the reader indeed feels superior to nearly all the characters in the novel, including the pranksters and the tricksters like Tom, the King and the Duke, because Twain shows us their limitations even while they take advantage of their foolish victims, such as Tom's mindless adherence to adventure storybooks and the con artists' pitiful attempt to pass themselves off as

Englishmen in the Wilks episode. The pranksters and the tricksters nevertheless get a good laugh out of their endeavors, but Huck not only misses his own jokes, he rarely joins in the fun either. Even as a spectator with no personal interest at stake, for instance at the circus in Chapter 22, Huck is "all of a tremble to see his danger" (193) when a drunkard climbs on a skittish horse and the crowd goes wild.

Huck's unlaughter makes him a rare sympathizer of the butts in the novel. This creates the impression that Huck is too kind-hearted and identifies too much with unfortunate bumblers to find pleasure in another's foolish slips or, as in the above instance, imminent disaster. Even after the drunkard reveals himself to be a member of the circus to the audience's great delight, Huck still "[feels] sheepish enough, to be took in so, but [he] wouldn't a been in that ring-master's place" (194), because the latter had supposedly been fooled in front of the whole company. Ironically, the Concord Library Committee wrongs Huck, at least in this episode, because he does not at all commend the horseman's contestive humor. For whatever excusable reason—the sense of insecurity or the inferiority complex of an underprivileged boy, perhaps—Huck never learns to laugh at himself, even in this case when he thinks he is accidentally involved in a prank.[5] Twain gives the reader further cause for amusement at Huck's misplaced sympathy for the ring-master, because the episode is most likely part of the show—it is the ring-master who suggests that the audience let the drunken interrupter ride in the first place. Huck's earlier marvel at how the clown "ever *could* think of so many of [his funny replies to the ring-master], and so sudden and so pat" (192) already suggests a similar misunderstanding.[6] In that case, however, Huck seems to enjoy the banter, although, like in the rest of the book, he never describes himself smiling or laughing, thus preserving the reader's impression of his straight face. The reader is nudged by Twain to laugh along with the audience at these mock incidents of joking up, which suit all parties, with the ring-master feigning a sick look to add to the fun. Twain further grants the reader the privilege to laugh at the misguided Huck, who once again becomes the odd participant of Twain's elaborate humorous story. In fact, fun as the circus acts

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[5] For a detailed argument for Huck's troubled psychology, see Peter G. Beidler's "The Raft Episode in *Huckleberry Finn*" 245-49.

[6] Mark Storey notes that the circus performances are well-rehearsed scripts and finds similar descriptions in William Dean Howells' childhood memoir. He emphasizes, however, Huck's moral distance from the Southern crowd (223-24), while I stress that this moral seriousness makes Huck humorless, which, Twain shows us, is not always convenient for the humorist.

are, Twain gets his real laughs from Huck's gullibility—as well as from his future prudish critics.

A good part of the humor in *Huckleberry Finn* comes from joking up, which Twain mostly permits the reader and himself to enjoy, despite the butt's universal indignation. Huck, for instance, questions Miss Watson's depictions of heaven and hell in the opening chapter, Tom leads his gang to raid a Sunday-school picnic in Chapter 3, Pap dupes the new judge with his talk of reform in Chapter 5, and the audience of the Royal Nonesuch in Chapter 23 also includes a "jedge." We need to differentiate between these instances, which are much more common in the novel, from the circus episode because the ring-master and his performers obviously have a joking relationship, which anthropologist Alfred Radcliffe-Brown defines as "a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence" (195). The closest example of this type of teasing social ritual in the novel is possibly the boastings of the ring-tailed roarers in Chapter 16, where the raftsmen playfully threaten to thrash each other. In both the commercialized instance of the circus performance and the recreational activity on the raft, Twain adds grouches, sham or sincere, for an extra twist to the joke. Little Davy in the raft episode might or might not misunderstand the playful situation like Huck; at any rate, he beats the ring-tailed roarers up for their empty threats, to the glee of the raftsmen and the readers. When such a joking relationship does not exist or is not tolerated, however, as for instance when Tom Sawyer's Gang raids the Sunday-school picnic, pranks become misconducts in the eyes of the disconcerted elders in the novel and of Twain's detractors in the reviews.

Twain shows the full force of unlaughter from higher-up in the confrontation between Boggs and Colonel Sherburn in Chapter 21, where a contestive joking relationship goes amiss. The rustic, "the best-naturedest old fool in Arkansaw" (184), makes it a monthly ritual to get drunk, come to town and pick one of the residents to "chaw up." The whole community is in on the joke, crowding around and jeering along, until Sherburn, the owner of the biggest store in town, appears and claims to be tired of the prank and demands an end to it. Sherburn's weariness shows that he is familiar with this running gag, though his refusal to play along throws into question this communal lapse from normality, in response to which the bystanders immediately sober up. When not sanctioned by custom, the permission for impertinence in joking relationships must come from those in power. We usually expect such

a permissive course because it creates a win-win situation: the privileged classes can graciously dismiss the provocation from inferiors as nothing more than laughing matters and continue to assert their superiority, even while the inferiors may temporarily experience a psychological lift. Such social expectations reverse the Standpoint Theory in that the powerful need to take the perspective of the less powerful and laugh along with them; or, to modify the Standpoint Theory, the minority, in terms of numbers, will feel the pressure to join the amusement of the majority, as head count becomes a show of power equal to other social advantages.

The "proud-looking" Sherburn, in spite of all this, refuses to excuse Boggs as a drunken fool like the other townsfolk and insists on treating the challenges and insults seriously. On the one hand, Boggs' resentment could be real, although perhaps Sherburn does not need to take it personally, since the drunkard threatens and insults the bystanders as well; on the other, it is unclear whether the spectators make fun of Boggs or Sherburn or both, so possibly the Colonel sees this as a display of communal hostility toward himself. At any rate, his reaction spoils the joke for the crowd, forcing them to take his view of the scene as a confrontation and to scramble to save Boggs from his wrath; it also makes his suspicion of the townsfolk a self-fulfilling prophecy when a mob gathers to lynch him. Sherburn is thus one of the most powerful personages in *Huckleberry Finn* because he asserts the authority to determine what is funny or not, regardless of how the other characters feel.

Sherburn's resort to violence in order to stop the joke has shocked critics into calling him "a cold-blooded killer" (Jehlen 109) and "an inhuman monster" (Smith 135); yet the critics focus on his killing of Boggs, whereas killing the joke is no less a crime in a humorous piece of writing.[7] I do not mean to equate a comedian's metaphorical "dying out there (on the stage)" with homicide, but all meaningless murders—like the bloody massacre of the Grangerford and Shepherdson feud in Chapter 18—are unsettling; Sherburn is

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[7] To be more accurate, the few critics who comment on this episode focus more on Sherburn's misanthropic speech in Chapter 22. Henry Nash Smith notices a change in tone between Chapter 21, where Sherburn is a cowardly, unsympathetic murderer, and the next chapter, where Twain partially identifies with him; Sherburn in the later chapter, Smith argues, is an early example of Twain's "transcendent figures"—intellectually superior individuals with extraordinary powers and without a moral sense (135-36). Myra Jehlen basically agrees with Smith, although she does not see any contradiction in characterization: Sherburn hates the inescapable presence of the damned human race and kills Boggs to express his rage (106-09). Forrest G. Robinson pays equal attention to the villagers, who evade their moral responsibilities and deserve the treatment they receive from Sherburn (140-51).

such a forceful character, though, because he even silences the laughter of the reader, while Twain still allows us to laugh at the Grangerfords. Smith remarks that Twain slips into straight reporting and hardly notices Huck in this episode, which he attributes to Twain's unease about an unforgettable childhood experience of a similar shooting (135). Twain's autobiography does not describe the original event as a joking relationship or the murderous merchant as a spoilsport (158), however, so the additional touches likely reflect Twain's discomfiture in regard to curmudgeons. Some critics blame the Bricksville folks for enjoying the amusing spectacle in bad faith and regard Sherburn a Jeremiah (Robinson 145-49); while this view is true about the crowd's fascination with the shooting and death scenes, their pleasure in Bogg's drunken rampages, without the hindsight of his violent death, is no more malicious than the other pranks in the novel—or, for that matter, than all jokes, which find pleasure in other people's weaknesses. Sherburn, meanwhile, even without his later speech, proves himself superior to the mirthful masses with his unlaughter. His means of suppressing the laughter, furthermore, manipulates the audience to reassess their role in the joking situation and take his ill-humored view of the buffoonery.

The notion of joking down, on the other hand, does not seem to inspire Twain, because it reinforces power relations. The novel contains but few examples, due in part to the young age and/or lower status of the major jokesters, pranksters and tricksters—Huck, Tom, the King and the Duke—so that the butts are mostly Huck and Jim. Since Twain loved blackface minstrelsy, the scarcity of the humor related to Jim is a deliberate artistic choice.[8] The very first prank in the book, following Huck's unwitting retorts to Miss Watson, is played on the dozing Jim by Tom, who hangs the black slave's hat on a tree. The reader does not really laugh at the practical joke, though; the real joke is Jim's interpretation and elaboration of this incident into a supernatural experience that raises his status in the black community. While Tom may also take additional pleasure in Jim's ingenuity, Jim gets the last and best laugh as he turns the boy's mindless prank to his own advantage. He becomes both the butt and the trickster, with a deadpan similar to Huck's, although the reader cannot tell if he is as unwitting as Huck. If Jim cannot show displeasure due to his peculiar condition, Twain allows him to transform his unlaughter into

[8] See Eric Lott's essay on "Mr. Clemens and Jim Crow: Twain, Race and Blackface," where he argues that Twain imitated both the structure and style of minstrel shows; but Jim is not a typical minstrel caricature, nor is Jim's pairing with Huck.

his own prank; this also indirectly increases the victims of Tom's joking down to include other black slaves, but Twain purposefully shifts the focus to let Jim eclipse Tom in a new hoax between equals, so the novelist, the characters, and the readers can all take guiltless pleasure in the black slave's masterstroke. If most critics do not betray a smile, they nonetheless applaud Jim for "seiz[ing] rhetorical and perhaps actual power" (Lott, "Mr. Clemens" 136).

When Huck also tries to play tricks on Jim, Twain imagines consequences far less profitable or tolerable for the black slave. In Chapter 10, after Huck puts a dead rattlesnake on Jim's blanket "thinking there'd be some fun" (64), Jim nearly dies from the bite of its mate. Huck is rarely in such roguish moods, and his choice of victim suggests that one not only feels superior to the butt after the joke but indeed before—Huck feels comfortable and secure enough to pick on Jim of all people most likely because he does not worry about incurring the runaway slave's displeasure. In fact, with the two of them alone on Jackson's Island, Huck seems to expect Jim to share the laugh or at least tolerate it. The prank misfires, however, illustrating, in terms of characterization, that Huck lacks Tom's knack for gags: poor judgment results in bad jokes that give pleasure to neither the prankster nor the audience (reader), let alone the victim. Yet more important, Twain sets up this story of a deadly joke to imply that joking down can be as fatal as Boggs' joking up, although in both cases the underclass must bear the risk. If Boggs, as the initiator of the confrontation with Sherburn, must also take part of the blame, the butt of downward jokes is doubly victimized—first by the social system and then by the callous and/or thoughtless prankster. Twain's lesson echoes Lott's idea that the lower-class joker and his even lower butt actually share a comradeship of suppression.

Twain marks the turning point of Huck and Jim's relation with another instance of unsuccessful joking down in Chapter 15, where Huck fools Jim into believing that he dreamed of the fog which separated them on the river. Like the previous instance, Huck again expects Jim to play both the butt and the audience of the entertainment. The prank again misfires but this time Jim takes offense, chiding Huck for his lack of consideration for his companion's feelings. Huck clearly thinks he is joking down, for he struggles for fifteen minutes before he "humbles" himself to a black slave; Jim, who upbraids the youngster for "[puttin'] dirt on de head er dey fren's en mak[in'] 'em ashamed" (105), sees himself as Huck's equal, though—a friend. Only in this capacity can Jim express his annoyance at Huck's untimely mischief, and Huck, through his apology and empathy, also acknowledges that Jim deserves

his regard. In addition to correcting Huck's behavior, Jim's unlaughter enables him to assert his equality and dignity. With power relations reversed, what for Colonel Sherburn was a reconfirmation of his superiority becomes for Jim a newfound freedom of expression. Twain expects the readers who might have laughed along with Huck at Jim's gullibility to at least share Huck's new sensitivity to the ridiculed underdog, even if they still cannot help but appreciate that Huck has gotten better at hoaxes. In truth, Jim's reaction to the prank again dominates the conversation on this episode, with critics calling it "the beginning of [Huck's] moral testing and development" (Trilling 87).

Due to Jim's newly-won dignity and successful plea for consideration, the readers find it more difficult to laugh at Tom's elaborate schemes to rescue Jim from Phelps' farm. Jehlen maintains that this unlaughter is not exclusive to current readers, but "insofar as the preceding chapters have revealed Jim's full-fledged manhood, his humiliation at the hands of the increasingly idiotic Tom must have made unpleasant reading at any time" (100). While the pranks played on the Phelpses, likes those targeting the elders in St. Petersburg, still provide contestive entertainment, the prolonged antics performed at Jim's expense lose much of their fun if, like Huck, the readers "couldn't seem to strike no places to harden [them] against him" (270). Even with the hindsight that Miss Watson had already freed Jim when he suffered Tom's thoughtless imitation of adventure books so the whole episode becomes a mock escape with no need for concern and pity, the readers still wince at Jim's physical discomfort. Unlike the rattlesnake incident which the author depicts as a failed attempt at humor, Twain clearly regards Tom's extravaganza as good fun, to the extent of drawing it out into the longest episode in the book. Critical responses differ, however. Leo Marx voices the prevailing complaint that the ending "hardly comes off as burlesque" (117) but jeopardizes the moral integrity, in socio-political terms, of the novel. Scholars such as Charles H. Nilon who defend the ending as Twain's satire on contemporary society, on the other hand, do not really enjoy the satirical humor either while they offer analyses of the unjust socio-historical conditions and the unequal interpersonal relations. The one thing critics agree on, finally, is that the last chapters are not a laughing matter, which defeats the purpose of Twain's prolonged treatment of Tom's escapades.

James M. Cox's resigned acceptance of the ending as Twain's mean trick on the reader (397) notes the altered relation between the humorist and his audience at the end of the book: the reader becomes the victim of Twain's stratagem to get some last laughs out of a conclusion that structurally and

thematically refuses to fall into place.[9] The reader's grave response might partly have to do with the indignation over Tom's (and therefore Twain's) concealment of Miss Watson's benefaction, but then Jim (again in complicity with Twain) is equally guilty of hiding the news of Pap's death, though far fewer readers have complained. The readers are not so much grouchy for their own sake, therefore, but unresponsive to Tom's sense of humor, the key reason for which, besides sympathy with Jim, is a heightened sensitivity toward racial relations. Power relations in the real world and how the readers react to them clearly affect the reception of humor too. Communication scholars, who underscore the significance of context and surroundings on the perception of humor, offer this germane observation: "As a culture, we have come to acknowledge the Political Correctness of not using hurtful humor to stratify society" (Davis 547). Twain and his contemporary readers likely had no such scruples, so, contrary to Jehlen's speculation above, at least one early critic thought that "[the] Romantic side of Tom Sawyer is shown in most delightfully humorous fashion" in Jim's evasion (Matthews 31). The earliest objections to Tom's artificial imitation of a rescue operation as "somewhat forced" because "the caricature of adventure books leaves us cold" and "has no place in the book" (Perry 34), meanwhile, pertain to literary tastes and structural flaws. The modern readers' emotional reaction may surprise Twain—he imagines Jim to take the situation good-humoredly when Tom gives him forty dollars for playing along as prisoner, which to Twain possibly echoes the first prank on Jim where the black man profits by spinning a supernatural tale out of Tom's "hat trick." From the viewpoint of modern racial and social relations, however, Twain's treatment of Jim on Phelps' farm resembles instead Huck's prank on the raft where the young rogue takes pleasure in misrepresenting the black man's experience and demeaning his feelings; but most likely Twain would have answered, just like his young protagonist: "I wouldn't done that [mean trick] if I'd a knowed it would make him [Jim or the reader] feel that way" (105).

The last quote is very close to how Twain expresses his remorse for his blunder at the Whittier dinner: "I did it innocently & unwarned," he wrote in his letter of apology, "I am only heedlessly a savage, not premeditatedly" (Smith 99). In his *Autobiography* twenty-eight years after the incident, Twain recalls how his mistake dawned on him as "the expression of interest in the

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[9] Twain put aside the manuscript several times over the seven years it took him to write *Huckleberry Finn* (summer 1876 to autumn 1883), which suggests that he had a difficult time working out the plot and the structure. For a brief account of the writing process, see Hamlin Hill and Walter Blair's "The Composition of *Huckleberry Finn*."

faces turned to a sort of black frost" and he staggered to the end "in front of a body of people who seemed turned to stone with horror"; "I shall never be as dead again as I was then," he claims (265-66). The ill-received speech, as narrated by Twain, parallels the Boggs-Sherburn episode: the ridicule of powerful figures to their faces, the disapproval of the joke's victims, the audience's change of mood, and the "death" of the joker.[10] Unlike Boggs, though, Twain never owned up to the hidden malice in his speech, but no matter how great the difference between these men of letters and the tramps in his story who drank, gambled, cheated, stole, misquoted and plagiarized, Twain must have relished the unflattering association. His audience and the media certainly recognized what Lott saw also in the minstrel shows: the joke pokes fun at both the underclass impersonators and the impersonated elite class; Twain's speech implies, Smith elucidates, that "the [sacerdotal] roles assigned to [the three poets] by the official culture was false and sterile" (100).

Or perhaps Twain would insist on the humor of the novel's ending, as he did of the Whittier dinner speech. He maintains in his *Autobiography* that the speech is "saturated with humor" without "a suggestion of coarseness or vulgarity in it anywhere," and claims to have been assured of its cleverness by newspaper readers of the event; he even proposed to deliver the speech in front of the Twentieth Century Club in 1906: "If they do not laugh and admire I shall commit suicide there" (267). He speaks as if there were a universal standard of good form and good taste, or as if his standards were no different from those of his criticizers. The intrinsic merit of the joke is not the point, however. No doubt the story may be funny in print or in repetition, but Twain glosses over the situational conditions emphasized by communication scholars (Davis 550). Like Boggs calling Colonel Sherburn names in front of his store, Twain evoked negative imaginations of the renowned literary figures in their presence, an act of defiance which the humorist incongruously expected his butts to suffer with grace.[11] Moreover, if Twain had presupposed the dinner guests would share his secret animosity, the audience, like the Bricksville folks, took the victims' point of view because either their sympathies or their

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[10] The Boggs-Sherburn chapters were written in 1883 (Blair 300-01), so Twain might have worked some impressions and sentiments from the Whittier dinner into the episode. The shooting of a Hannibal farmer by a leading merchant, an incident from Twain's childhood that he linked to the story (*Autobiography* 514; Blair 412), had no element of jest and thus may not be the sole source of inspiration.

[11] Henry Nash Smith attributes Twain's faux pas to "the divorce between conscious and unconscious motives" (99), but such a humorous craftsman as Twain must have at least considered his audience and the points of his joke.

interests lay with these revered gentlemen. In truth these literary dignitaries, although "disappointed" in his "playful use" of their names, took the offense in stride, brushing aside Twain's apology with the dismissal that the incident was "a matter of such slight importance" (*Autobiography* 554); yet it left Twain with a memory that "pretty nearly killed [him] with shame" (*Autobiography* 267). Which goes to show that those in power do not need to resort to violence as Sherburn did; the insecure trespasser's own unease is sufficient punishment in itself.

Twain had certainly chosen the wrong objects of ridicule. Thus he ruminates over his failure years later:

> Could the fault have been with me? Did I lose courage when I saw those great men up there whom I was going to describe in such a strange fashion? If that happened, if I showed doubt, that can account for it, for you can't be successfully funny if you show that you are afraid of it. (*Autobiography* 267)

Afraid of what? Of tickling the other guests but not "those beloved and revered old literary immortals" (*Autobiography* 267) because he loved and revered them so? If that was the case, he likely would have worried about having insulted them even if they appeared to have been amused.[12] Or was he ashamed of himself, as a darling of the media, for mocking these outdated celebrities? In that case he would have been joking down under the guise of joking up and furthermore pressing home his advantage through the wide publicity of his put-down—for all the notoriety, Twain unmistakably upstaged all the literary men at the Whittier dinner. Whatever Twain's true feelings for those precursor writers, the point is he cared how they felt about his speech and that is why the joke lost its flavor, perhaps in reality, certainly in retrospect. Although the power relations are reversed, the incident mirrors Huck's prank on Jim after the fog where the butt demands the prankster to consider his viewpoint of the situation. As the theorists of humor explain, the joker has to feel superior to his victim, discipline or exclude the latter through ridicule, and discharge un-

[12] Scholars in fact document that the dinner speech proceeded quite well. Some newspapers reported that Longfellow "laughed and shook" and Whittier and the guests "enjoy[ed] it keenly," while Emerson was said in one paper to seem "a little puzzled" but in another to "[enjoy] it as much as any" along with Holmes. Other journalists, however, criticized Twain's bad taste (*Autobiography* 554). The negative comments and W. D. Howells' discouraging reaction possibly colored Twain's memory (*Autobiography* 266-67; Blair 157-58).

necessary sympathy in laughter; expecting the butt to also become an appreciator of the joke depends too much on this individual's mood and standpoint, the calculation of which contradicts the humor theories.

Power relations decide the joker's choice of target, the audience's reception, the butt's reaction, and the joker's own impression of the joke. If the humorist wields power by picking on another, the butt and the audience assume power by unlaughter. The great variety of pranks and jokes in *Huckleberry Finn* enables Twain to portrait the complicated power relations involved in humor. Differentiation between the incidents of joking up and joking down in the novel shows that Twain sympathizes more with the underprivileged in his writing: the readers are encouraged to enjoy the offensive-defensive humor targeting the rich and self-righteous, while the author often censures thoughtless fun at the expense of the unfortunate and oppressed. Huck's apology to the displeased Jim is probably the only example in the novel where a trickster shows respect for the butt's viewpoint, a victory for unlaughter which ironically wins universal approval in this humorous masterpiece. Despite this exercise in poetic justice, Twain nevertheless takes heed of social reality in the Boggs-Sherburn episode, where hierarchy determines funniness and the humor of the powerless is likewise powerless. To borrow Billig's comment on pre-modern comedians who ridiculed secular and religious leaders, "Having lifted the veil of dignity, the fool reveals not the powerless nakedness of the authority—but the fact of the authority's naked power" (213). Boggs in fact merely makes a fool of himself while Sherburn barely loses any dignity. The ideal scenario of racial reconciliation through unlaughter and the shocking depiction of power struggle over an ill-timed joke take a funny turn in the real world, though. In almost a replica of the prank between Huck and Jim, modern readers object to Twain's treatment of Jim's evasion, as if their stern reaction also advanced racial relations. Twain's contemporary readers, on the other hand, criticized him for joking up at Whittier's birthday dinner, for which the novelist duly apologized, although not quite rectifying a Boggs-like blunder. By the time the Concord Public Library enacted the ban on *Huckleberry Finn*, the committee members could have been imitating the mirthless elders in the novel, while Twain felt no more remorse than Tom and Huck. The fortunes of the humorist show that readers are not exempt from power relations either when choosing what kind of joke to laugh or cringe at—which Twain had already anticipated in his great work of humor: not only does the novel move us to laughter but also nudges us to examine our own unlaughter.

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[Received 9 July 2014
accepted 23 January 2015]