

## A Female Huck Finn?: Reading Together *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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Read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) and the similarities leap out at you. They are impossible to miss. Two fourteen-year-old whites run away from home. Circumstances have each of them joining up with a black fugitive, a fugitive in serious trouble with the law, but one who is only trying to take possession, in an unjust society, of a basic human or civil right: Jim, his freedom from slavery, and Rosaleen, her right to register to vote.

But the differences leap out at you, too. It almost seems too obvious to say, but in *Bees*, it is two women on the run, not two men, and whereas Huck seems determined to get anywhere but somewhere definite, Lily has a specific destination—Tiburon, South Carolina—from the very get-go. The nearly identical plot lines draw attention to how differently Twain and Kidd, respectively, fill them in: the texture of their fictional worlds, tone, the ways in which their protagonists develop (or don't), and their narrative strategies all seem diametrically opposed. In all, the reading experiences offered are like night and day. It is, however, the main purpose of this paper to argue that despite these salient differences, the themes of the two novels—their authors' intents—are, in the end, nearly identical. Recognizing this, I think, sheds light on how not only the age in which an author writes, but his or her gender—or more accurately, his or her degree of comfort with the “feminine”—can affect the manner in which he or she goes about his or her business.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It is not my purpose in this article to define, outside the world of these novels, what is meant by the word *feminine*, but only to identify what it signifies *inside* them.

First, an extended examination of the key similarities.

Huck in the novel he lends his name to, and Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees*, both grow up without mothers and both have to cope with abusive fathers, both of whom are completely out of tune with what their child needs to get on in life, and both, lacking any self-esteem themselves, determined to prevent their children from getting an education and rising above them. Lily's father, T. Ray, cannot understand anything about her social reality as a teenage girl and refuses not only to allow her to participate in slumber parties or school dances, but even to go to school football games or Beta Club car washes (*Bees* 8). Even her sitting down with a book and reading irritates him. Whenever a neighbor tells T. Ray he must be proud of what a fine reader she is, T. Ray would "half kill" her (*Bees* 15). Huck's father is the same, as his admonishment of Huck, below, shows:

You've put on many frills since I been away. I'll take you down a peg before I get done with you. You're educated, too, they say; can read and write. I'll take that out of you. Who told you you might meddle with such hifalut'n foolishness, hey?—who told you you could? (*HF* 31)

Lily asks readers, "What kind of person is against *reading*?" (*Bees* 15). The answer is simple: *her* father and *Huck's* father. Huck's father tries to keep him locked up and isolated in an abandoned cabin; T. Ray wants to keep Lily locked up and isolated in her bedroom.

While Lily is much more obviously on a spiritual quest than Huck, the both of them are desperate to free themselves of conservative and — in their views — suffocating religious thought. Attempts to indoctrinate Huck with basic Christian ideas and beliefs leave him feeling "cramped up" (*HF* 14). When confronted with the story of Moses, he can only conclude that it is ill-advised to take "stock in dead people" (*HF* 15), and Miss Watson's notions on prayer and heaven leave him cold. When he listens to Tom tell of the Arabs and elephants, he says, "It had all the marks of a Sunday school" (*HF* 26)—that is, it is impossible to believe. Similarly, Lily is at odds with the narrow doctrines of the Ebenezer Baptist Church — her father's church, not her mother's — which she has been coerced into attending, and which she says, tellingly, that T. Ray has attended for forty years and only

become the worse for (*Bees* 3). The picture of the black Mary that her mother has left her inspires her to question why Ebenezer has never had much of anything to say about the significance of the virgin mother, to question why Ebenezer has never believed “in women having a lot of say about things,” and it makes her wonder how reliable Ebenezer’s fixed “five-part plan of salvation” can be. It makes her wonder whether Mary might have been “an outdoor type who preferred the trees and insects over the churchy halo she had on” in most pictures she has known (*Bees* 58). Huck is famous for saying that he wants no part of any heaven where harps are constantly being plucked (*HF* 16), and Lily seems to be of the same opinion. She imagines her mother brushing her hair for her, helping her to shine—and “people all over heaven [dropping] their harps” to admire the beauty a person, living in the world, might be capable of” (*Bees* 3).

Both Lily and Huck, not knowing any other way to deal with a distasteful status quo, resort to elaborate lying, and both consciously contemplate the necessity of lying as well as their own skill at the art. “The secret of a good lie,” Lily says, “is don’t overly explain, and throw in one good detail” (*Bees* 76). When she’s explaining her past to August and accidentally tells the truth, she groans, “Any other day of my life I could have won a fibbing contest hands down” (*Bees* 72). Huck so believes in the necessity of lying that when he is suddenly confronted with a situation in which telling the truth seems the most sensible thing, he cannot but think that it is “strange and irregular” (*HF* 198-199). His lie that his father is not all that sick, which he intentionally tells poorly in order to be disbelieved and to draw attention away from a previous, more important lie — that it’s his father and not Jim traveling with him on the raft, a lie that he absolutely must have believed—suggests that he and Lily might just be a fairly even bet in any “fibbing contest” (*HF* 111-112).

As they try to make their way through unfriendly, difficult worlds, both are keenly aware of being “bad”—that is, aware of behaving in ways they feel society will never understand or sanction. “I don’t mean to be a bad person,” Lily says to August, telling her of busting Rosaleen out from the hospital—“I can’t seem to help it. [ ... ] I do all the wrong things” (*Bees* 241). Huck, the moment he decides not to send the letter to Miss Watson in which he has written that he knows where she can find Jim, says that he will never think “no more about reforming,” that he

will “take up wickedness again, which was in [his] line, being brung up to it” (*HF* 223).

Huck declares, in perhaps the novel’s most famous line, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell” (*HF* 223), and Lily does not protest when Rosaleen tells her, Your life has gone straight to hell” (*Bees* 64). Given their concepts of “heaven,” “hell” is a place neither is ashamed to call home.

With both Lily and Huck at a loss to understand how they can be moral in an immoral world, with both motherless, with both abused, it is not surprising that both are insecure about their own identity. This insecurity is symbolized in both novels by the two protagonists taking on false identities that mask their real, yet-to-be-recognized-in-full selves. Huck becomes, in turn, Sarah Williams, George Jackson, an English servant, and Tom Sawyer. Lily poses as a jailer’s wife, to help get Rosaleen out of the hospital, and when she arrives at August’s house, she announces herself as Lily Williams. Her real name is Lily Owens.

A final similarity between Huck and Lily is that both have a lot to say about the literature they have read—and while Huck is a published author (he’s aware that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is his achievement), Lily has a dream of being one. I’ll have more to say about this below.

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Next, a more detailed discussion of the differences.

The dominant setting in *Bees* is August Boatwright’s home and honey farm, a woman’s world, without question. There is August, the matriarch, surrounded by two sisters, a statue of a black virgin Mary, and a queen-centered bee population. Kidd frames the action there, however, between appearances by the misogynistic T. Ray, whose church, as I mentioned above, has never believed “in women having a lot of say about things,” and who “hate[s] female puberty more than anything” (*Bees* 27). As the novel begins, he is abusing her, forcing her to kneel on bare knees on piles of grits, and as the novel ends, he is at the Boatwrights, trying to force Lily to leave the female presence that has so comforted her. The framing is reversed in *Huckleberry Finn*. Huck’s story begins in the Widow Douglas’s home with her and her sister, Miss Watson, and ends with Tom Sawyer’s explanation about what Miss Watson has thought, said, and done in regard to Jim’s emancipation. That explanation brings the plot to a logical end. In between those

“appearances” by the women, however, the bulk of Huck’s time is spent with, and the majority of his attention is focused on Pap, Jim, the frauds, and Tom Sawyer—men. He meets women, too, who leave their mark on him — Mary Jane, in particular — but for the greater part of the novel, it is the behavior and values of the above-mentioned men that are there before him to observe and try to make sense of.

Thus, while Lily runs away from a man’s world, finds shelter in a woman’s world, and finally, refuses to be led back to the man’s world she’s escaped, Huck gets pulled out of a woman’s world, journeys through a man’s world, and neither having found a place for himself in the man’s world, nor feeling comfortable returning to the woman’s, sets off for a no-person’s land—“the Territory” (*HF* 296). *Bees*, then, is the story of a girl who manages to discover a place she belongs, while *Huckleberry Finn* is the story of a boy who fails to find any place in which he can live as his just awakening moral sense tells him he should.

One reason the novels read so differently is that the one, *Bees*, allows the protagonist to discover the beauty in life and to relish in it, whereas the other, *Huckleberry Finn*, forces the protagonist, again and again, to confront the ugly. Take away the scenes in which Huck and Jim are alone (and later I will make clear why Jim needs to be considered separately), and a highlight reel of what Huck “witnesses” through his “adventures” might include the following: his father, in town, drunk and acting the bore; his father, fallen from the porch-roof, his arm broken, out cold, drunk; his father beating him with a hickory stick; a gang of robbers — men all, talking of double-crossing and murder; a huge raft of men, drinking, arguing, brawling; two men refusing to help a boy with a sick father; Shepherdsons trying to kill every last Grangerford, Grangerfords trying to kill every last Shepherdson; two frauds conning folks left and right, lying for profit; Sherburn shooting down Boggs in the street; the frauds shamelessly trying to defraud orphan girls out of an inheritance; and Tom Sawyer bedeviling Jim for the mere sport of it. That’s what the *male* world presents to Huck.

On the other hand, if you take out the in-town scenes in which racial hatred is directed toward Zack, a highlight reel of Lily’s experience in Tiburon, in the *female* world, might look like this: Feeling, in August’s home, “a consolation, a pure relief” (*Bees* 82); feeling, in the presence of the Mary statue, “a curtain of

protection” (*Bees* 92); experiencing a spiritual awakening, feeling as she would had the trees become transparent and she “could see through to something pure inside them” (*Bees* 71); meeting a young man, in whom she can confide her dream of becoming a writer; recognizing that “the whole fabric of bee society depends on communication” (*Bees* 164); recognizing that “[s]tories have to be told or they die,” understanding that stories are essential, that without them “we can’t remember who we are or why we’re here” (*Bees* 107); recognizing, in August, “a hearth fire you could depend on, you could draw up to and get warm by if you were cold, or cook something on that feed the emptiness in you” (*Bees* 181); feeling, as she and the other women rub down the Mary statue with honey, as if she and the others’ movements are one, as if she were “wearing a pair of gloves with magic properties,” feeling “content” down to her core (*Bees* 270-271).

Lily is an active participant in the events she narrates, while Huck seems a much more reluctant one; and while Lily embraces the emotions she experiences along the way, Huck seems frightened by his feelings. Certainly, *both* characters experience confusing feelings, but what might seem an epiphany to Lily would likely strike Huck as something to talk himself out of recognizing. These differences are reflected in their opposing attitudes toward literature and authorship.

For the most part, Huck’s experience with literature, with the “classics,” has been negative. To him, the Bible stories of Moses and Solomon are remote and suspect. His only chance to experience Shakespeare is through the perverted performance of the frauds. And the “wisdom” gleaned from the stories that Tom Sawyer lives and breathes is incomprehensible to Huck; he is made to feel the fool for not “getting” what these “classic” boy tales have to offer, for being so ignorant of them. When Huck continues to suggest practical means to help Jim secure his freedom, Tom Sawyer belittles him like this:

“Well, if that ain’t just like you, Huck Finn. You *can* get up the infant-school-iest ways of going at a thing. Why, hain’t you ever read any books at all? — Baron Trenck, nor Casanova, nor Benvenuto Cheleeny, nor Henri IV, nor none of them heroes? [...]” (*HF* 247)

Given such negative experience with literature, it is little surprise that when he

finishes penning his own adventures, he is left with no particular feeling of achievement:

[S]o there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more. (*HF* 295-296)

On the other hand, Lily's experience with literature is all positive. When her teacher, Mrs. Henry, assigns the class "*another* Shakespeare play" (Bees 15, italics added), she is thrilled. She also loves Thoreau, and after reading his *Walden*, she began "appreciating Mother Nature" (Bees 57), preparing herself for her spiritual awakening. She reacts to Emerson's "My Philosophy of Life" by penning a three-page essay about her own thoughts. At first, her soon-to-be-beau, Zack, rolls his eyes when he discovers her favorite subject is English, but when he says he bets she even likes writing, she does not flinch: "As a matter a fact I do" (Bees 120), she retorts. Later, Zack gives her a notebook, and with a sudden surge in confidence in herself as a potential writer, she throws her arms around him spontaneously. She writes in the notebook "constantly," imagining stories, getting them down. She joyfully reads to Zack, thinking she will "never find a better friend" and she glows in his attention (Bees 135). For her, writing is a pure joy; for her, it never feels troublesome or a burden.

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Before I can discuss how similar I think the themes are in these two novels, it is essential to clarify how I read *Huckleberry Finn* — but it is, without doubt, a novel that has produced tremendous disagreement in regard to what exactly Twain was up to in writing it and how well he succeeded. Here, I'd like to reiterate the thoughts of three different critics, Jane Smiley, Toni Morrison, and David L. Smith, as a way of introducing my own.

Smiley argues that *Huckleberry Finn* is completely undeserving of its reputation as a great work, claiming that Twain knew "how to give Huck a voice but didn't know how to give him a novel" (62). She suggests that Huck's actions demonstrate that "neither Huck nor Twain take Jim's desire for freedom at all seriously," that any protagonist who sincerely cared about Jim's fate would have

figured out how to get the two of them *across* the river, not have had them drift mindlessly and purposelessly *down* it. Students forced to accept the novel as a classic, she claims, are encouraged to think that “you don’t actually have to act in the interests of [Jim’s or anyone’s] humanity” to be a great person (63). Simply put, the novel is a failure for her because its protagonist fails to act.

But both Morrison and David L. Smith find greatness in the novel despite Huck’s failure to work with conviction and direction to secure Jim’s freedom. Smith sees the novel primarily as “a critique of those socially constituted fictions—most notably romanticism, religion, and the concept of ‘the Negro’—which serve to justify and disguise selfish, cruel, and exploitative behavior” (104); he believes it employs “a strategy of subversion” to attack established thinking on race (105), and with the exception of Melville’s work, “is without peer among major Euro-American novels for its explicitly antiracist stance” (104). For Smith, the narrative strategy is not so much to put Huck in a position in which he saves the day or doesn’t—that is, its power does not depend on a plot-driven, climax-centered story—but rather to undermine and refute “racist presuppositions” through a collage of contrastive scenes (108); Twain’s strategy is to have Jim’s virtue leap out in bold relief from a background of debunked social constructs.

Not only does Morrison seem to find no problem in Huck’s inaction, she sees his silence at key emotional moments central to the novel’s strength; she believes that “much of the novel’s genius lies in its quiescence” (33):

These silences do not appear to me of merely historical accuracy—a realistic portrait of how a white child *would* respond to a black slave; they seem to be expert technical solutions to the narrative’s complexities [...] (36)

She argues that, from the beginning, Huck and Jim’s black/white relationship is doomed, that “no enduring adult fraternity will emerge,” and that “the cry of inevitable rupture is all the more anguished by being mute” (35). Like Smith, Morrison believes that much of the power of the novel arises from contrast: “When Huck is among society—whether respectable or deviant, rich or poor—he is alert to and consumed by its deception, its illogic, its scariness”; “all of the white men who might function as father figures for Huck are ridiculed for their hypocrisy,

corruption, extreme ignorance and/or violence”; “consolation” and “healing” are only available when Huck is with Jim; and only with Jim can he experience “real talk,” talk “so free of lies it produces an aura of restfulness and peace unavailable anywhere else in the novel” (35).

The readings of Smiley, Smith, and Morrison are all reasonable and well presented, and none should be dismissed outright. Having said that, though, my understanding of what Twain intended with *Huckleberry Finn* is much closer to that of Smith’s and Morrison’s than Smiley’s. Smiley’s comments are quite legitimate for a “traditional” protagonist/climax-centered work of fiction, and it is because the novel has big problems as such a work that many readers have found it confounding. But I don’t think Twain ever intended such a work—or at least, it was not his main intent. Like Smith, I think that Twain’s main intent was to debunk social constructs, and his main strategy was contrast—a contrast that gets its power from a heavy, heavy dose of irony.

One of my favorite lines in the novel comes in the Grangerford-Shepherdson section. Buck is explaining to Huck how the feud began. A legal suit “went agin one of the men,” he says, “and so he up and shot the man that won the suit—which he would naturally do, of course.” Buck could stop here and Twain’s irony would still be absurdly obvious. It is natural to kill your opponent in a civil suit? Really? But Twain has Buck add two more words, “Anybody would” (*HF* 128). When I read those two words, what I can hear Twain saying to readers is, “In case you didn’t notice the obvious—and I don’t you see how you *couldn’t*—I was being ironic! These men are posing as noble, honorable men, but they are *savages!* Okay?!”

Twain’s aim in *Huckleberry Finn* is to turn social constructs on their head; and his strategy is, to a large degree, to employ over-the-top irony, as above, and to confound expectations—to make the novel seem to be something that *it itself* is not at all sure it is. His strategy, I think, is to get readers asking themselves questions like these: *What kind of story is this? Why is it so episodic? Doesn’t that break everything up? Sometimes it reads like a tall tale. Sometimes it seems so real. Why—just when it looks like Huck might be poisoning himself for action, when he seems so, so real—does Twain force him to become, of all people, Tom Sawyer—and to participate, once again, in a tall tale? What is going on here!* Well, what

is going on is the novel is mixing up the real and the tall tale just as society has mixed up reality and social construct. As Morrison puts it, the novel is able to “transform its contradictions into fruitful complexities and to seem to be deliberately cooperating in the controversy it has excited. The brilliance of *Huckleberry Finn* is that it is the argument it raises” (33).

In such a light, the inaction of Huck’s that so bothers Smiley becomes crucial to the narrative strategy. Again and again, we see Huck feeling something so honest, recognizing something so real about Jim’s virtue, but also feeling emotionally confused or demonstrating deep-rooted blindness. He is still gripped by social constructs that make those oh-so-real feelings seem impossibilities.

Three examples will suffice. In chapter 16, Huck begins to feel guilty for abetting a runaway slave, and so he decides to go ashore and get someone to apprehend Jim. Just as he is leaving, though, Jim shouts out what a good friend Huck’s been (Jim’s not stupid here, for sure), and Huck’s conscience is torn. Jim’s been a great friend—but that doesn’t change what needs to be done. Huck tells himself, “I *got* to do it — I can’t get *out* of it.” Just then, Twain confounds Huck by having two men come along in a skiff. Huck lies, saying the man on his raft is white, not black. Yes, he does the right thing, but at the same time, he can only tell his lie knowing that the lie will not be discovered, and when the men are gone, he is left “feeling bad and low,” because he knows “*very well* he had done wrong” (HF 113, italics added). The scene does not end with any moral clarity.

In chapter 31, in perhaps the novel’s most famous moment, Huck tears up the letter he has written to Miss Watson, in which he has explained where she can find Jim. As he shreds it, he says, “All right, then, I’ll *go* to hell.” It is the moment in the novel in which he feels most intensely Jim’s inherent virtue, but it is also a moment in which he shows us that he has not yet shaken his mind free from the hold social constructs have on him. He thinks that his thoughts are “awful thoughts,” that he will *have* to go to hell (HF 223). He can still not see that the contradiction is not in himself, but in the religious social constructs.

In chapter 40, Tom lies with a bullet in his leg. Jim refuses to leave him until a doctor comes, although it certainly means being apprehended and forced back into slavery. This selflessness touches Huck’s heart—and he thinks to himself, “I knowed he was white inside” (HF 279). Huck means this as a compliment

(as Smith points out in his article), but the remark reveals a double confusion on Huck's part: he still believes it is not normal for a black man to be so considerate and selfless, *and* he still believes it *is* normal for a white man to be so. As the novel is ending, these two social constructs still continue to color his thinking.

What Twain is really doing with Huck's repeated inaction—neither sending Jim back to slavery nor securing his freedom—is drawing attention to his moral confusion; and drawing attention to Huck's moral confusion, in turn, is meant to draw attention to society's. Huck has a conscience, but his enslavement to social constructs prevents it from flourishing. His being left, finally, to think that “a person's conscience has got no sense” (*HF* 240) is at the heart of the tragedy.

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Considering, then, as I do, the novel as one of contrasts, and considering the manner in which it inverts the narrative structure of *The Secret Life of Bees* (a tale of men placed between appearances by a woman versus a tale of women placed between appearances by a man), it will be of little surprise that, for me, one of the most intriguing readings of *Huckleberry Finn* is the one written by Nancy Walker, “Reformers and Young Maidens: Women and Virtue in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.” After stating that “Men occupy center stage in *Huck Finn*,” she argues that while

[ ... ] for most readers, the significance of *Huck Finn* requires the male characters to occupy the foreground, leaving the female characters as part of the scenic backdrop [ ... ], it is possible to re-view *Huck Finn* as embodying a basic tension between male and female values and roles—a tension that bears directly on Huck's moral growth. [ ... ] The virtues that Huck begins to develop—honesty, compassion, a sense of duty—are identified in the novel as female virtues. Yet Huck's maleness requires that he ultimately emulate men, that he see women as “other”; and in the end he tries to run from the civilizing presence of women, unable to make the distinction between essential humanity and what society incorrectly considers virtue. (172)

When seeing the novel in this way, so many of its details take on greater significance. In the first couple of chapters, Huck tells us how “cramped up” living

with the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson and having to go to school makes him feel, but he also admits that, gradually, he was becoming accustomed to school and the Widow Douglas:

The longer I went to school the easier it got to be. I was getting sort of used to the widow's ways, too, and they warn't so raspy on me. [...] I liked the old ways best, but I was getting so I liked the new ones, too, a little bit. (*HF* 27)

Huck it seems, from the very beginning, is open to the “feminine” world—though a permanent engagement with it certainly frightens him. He does need, every now and then, “to slide out and sleep in the woods” (*HF* 27).

At the end of chapter 10, when Jim suggests that he dress up like a girl when he goes ashore seeking out information, Huck tells us, “That was a good notion, too” (*HF* 66). He does not mind at all trying out being a girl. He is uncomfortable in the dress, yes, and not at all convincing, but at the same time, he is able to enjoy the company of Mrs. Judith Loftus. Her chattiness, compassion, hospitality, and common sense all seem soothing to him.

In chapter 28, Huck finds himself moved by the heartbreak Mary Jane experiences over the sale of the family slaves. That the black mother and children will be separated is more than she can bear. Her virtue overwhelms him and turns his moral world upside down. Her compassion leads him to consider the possibility that honesty might just have a place in this world.

In chapter 31, after he has written his letter to Miss Watson, he tries but fails to turn his heart against Jim—and all his images of Jim reveal that Jim's virtues are primarily feminine in nature. Jim has been for him what none of the other men could possibly be, offering him (again in Morrison's words) “consolation,” “healing,” and “highly vocal affection” (35). In other words, Jim is for Huck, what August, in *Bees*, is to Lily—a substitute mother. Whether Huck is conscious of it or not, it is this “mother” in Jim that so attracts him.

Huck expresses his loneliness repeatedly through the novel, but for me, his most powerful expression of it comes in chapter 31, just as he is approaching the Phelps's house:

When I got a little ways, I heard the dim hum of a spinning wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again; and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that *is* the lonest sound in the whole world. (*HF* 229)

The sound, going up, going down, seems to mirror his own moral confusion, and the loneliness seems to arise from his being caught in no-person's land: he is a man indeed, at least a young man, but he feels alienated from the world of men, and while he feels some attraction, at least some faint attraction to the feminine world (in this case, the hearth and the spinning wheel), he remains afraid to embrace it.

In chapter 35, when Huck tries to inject some common sense into their discussion about how to “free” Jim, Tom Sawyer — that standard bearer for slavery-justifying southern romanticism — accuses Huck of faint-hearted femininity: “Whoever heard of getting a prisoner loose in such an old-maidy way as that?” he says, criticizing Huck (*HF* 247). The word *old-maidy* must have been shocking to Huck, for throughout his narrative he himself has only used *old maid* once—and then to describe Miss Watson! To Tom, he is acting like Miss Watson?! In the end, it seems that Huck and Miss Watson do indeed have something in common, as Tom's explanation of Jim's real emancipation and the ensuing exchange between Huck and Jim illustrates:

“[ ... ] Old Miss Watson died two months ago, and she was ashamed she ever was going to sell him down the river, and *said* so; and she set him free in her will.”

“Then what on earth did *you* want to set him free for, seeing he was already free?”

“Well that *is* a question, I must say; *just* like women! Why, I wanted the *adventure* of it; and I'd a waded neck-deep in blood to—[...].” (*HF* 291-292. Tom's sentence is cut off suddenly in the novel, as presented here; he suddenly sees, and calls out to Aunt Polly.)

There it is, Tom throwing it right smack in Huck's face. You, he says, are thinking just like a woman. He himself, Tom admits (admits without knowing it),

has displayed a trait that so many other male characters have — a willingness to wade “neck-deep in blood,” and for nothing more than his own amusement and gain. But how can Huck deny it? What he has wanted to do all along has been done by a woman, done by the woman who made him feel more “cramped up” than any other woman in the novel. He doesn’t want to wade neck-deep in blood, but he is not quite ready to become Miss Watson either. And so he runs, not to freedom, but to a moral no-person’s land. He runs out a confused fourteen year old, and we never lay eyes on him again. And so “he will always be fourteen years old,” as Harold Bloom writes, and “whether his morally ambiguous attitude toward society could survive maturation is therefore an inappropriate question” (8). Smiley may be irritated that Twain leaves Huck in this morally ambiguous state, that he does not have Huck *do* anything, but by freezing the fourteen year old in time, we are left with a powerful image of him caught between two worlds: the one masculine, neck-deep in blood; the other feminine, consoling, healing, a world where the conscience can breathe.

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What if Twain had taken out all the tall-tale aspects of the novel? What if the action were more realistic from beginning to end? What would we have expected of Huck then? If he were meant to be an extraordinary boy, maybe he would have taken some action that Smiley would judge sufficient. He might have been more decisive — and gotten Jim across the river at great personal risk. But if he were meant to be an ordinary boy, would his simmering conscience really have led him to take such decisive action in the pre-Civil War American South? A thousand different scenarios are possible, but all in all, I tend to think not. And so I have no qualms with Huck’s confusion lasting for all eternity. For certain, it would have been much easier for Huck to do the right thing had he been born in Lily’s day. Sure, he would have had the same racial hatred to overcome—perhaps even a more intense hatred—but also, he would have had a world of media around him, he would have known his country was bigger than his region, and he would have known that the tide was turning.

But even had Lily and Huck lived in the same age, I doubt that their authors would have seen the same possibilities for their protagonists. There is a tradition in American literature of male authors creating violent male worlds sadly in need

of the feminine, worlds in which the male characters living in them are tragically unable to make room for the feminine in themselves. In *Billy Budd*, Melville lets us know that the tragic execution of the “handsome” sailor is the result of the male military world refusing to listen to “the feminine in man” (*BB* 362). As *Moby-Dick* races towards its catastrophic conclusion, Melville contrasts the “murderous thinkings of the *masculine* sea” with “the gentle thoughts of the *feminine* air” (*MD* 542, italics added), and he allows the vengeful Ahab a moment to reflect that had he left room in his life for the feminine, it might not have been such a “desolation of solitude” (*MD* 543). In *The Sound and the Fury*, we listen to three agonized brothers longing for and/or hating their sister. The sister, Caddy, is given little voice, but we know from Faulkner’s own words that he considered her “the beautiful one” (*Faulkner in the University* 1). We feel in her absence a great loss. In *Of Mice and Men*, the ranch hands suffer from loneliness and a lack of communication, but the only two characters who seem comfortable with their gentler feminine sides, with softness — Lennie and Curley’s wife — lie dead at the end. In *Going After Cacciato*, Paul Berlin tries to escape the violence of the Vietnam War by imagining himself walking to Paris with a Vietnamese woman, Sarkin, but in the end, even in his imagination, he chooses loyalty to his male squad members over her, condemning himself to participating in a war he hates.<sup>2</sup>

I’m one to believe that men can write about women and women can write about men and no absolutes can be delivered about how a male or female author approaches the empty page, but having said that it would seem not at all strange if, in general, in books where the embracing of the feminine is the central concern, the male characters produced by male authors encountered significant trouble in doing so.

But there is clearly a risk for authors, male or female, who depict an embracement of the feminine and an enshrinement of it too absolute. In *Bees*, August is the paragon of feminine virtues. Her patience is overwhelming and her wisdom, seemingly, complete. The consolation Lily receives, her healing, her understanding of the Black Mary and the queen-centered bee’s world, and her recognition of

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the information in this paragraph was previously introduced in my 2009 article, “Dreaming of the Feminine in Man: A Reading of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*”; the sentences pertaining to Melville are direct quotations from it.

her feminine self are absolute. While this may satisfy some readers, it may leave others thinking that is all just a little bit too sweet.

Here are bits and pieces of reviews of the movie version of *Bees* taken from the *Rotten Tomato* homepage. The movie is, overall, faithful to the novel.

“This movie is *really* good.”

“A dense story about a little girl and the impact her mother’s death has on her makes terrific cinema in this beautifully realised (*sic*) film.”

“There’s a purity, clarity and honesty to this feminist heart-warmer’s melodramatic instincts that make it surprisingly moving and satisfying.”

“Bees is almost too sweet [...]”

“It’ll be way too cloying for most [...]”

“On most levels the film, which has a surprising number of unconvincing details, takes the sugary option; it shies away from the harsher realities whenever possible.”

“The whole thing is coated in a golden hue, as though the lens has been dunked in syrup. Males—or females with a horror of smug, sugary sentiment—should run a mile.”

Part of the reason *Bees* is labeled “sugary” and “cloying” is that Kidd *is* over the top with the presentation of some of her characters. They do seem a little bit too perfect to be true. But part of the reason it is so labeled is because of its thematic thrust—an embrace of the feminine. And thus the last review quoted above becomes so telling. Some women may find it cloying, it suggests, but *men* are sure to. No, not all men are the same, they are not all Neanderthals. Still, there is some truth in what this reviewer’s observation implies, and something of what it implies seems to have been at work when Melville, Faulkner, Steinbeck, O’Brien, *and* Twain were writing.

And thus we can see that both Kidd and Twain felt the same at heart. They both felt that there was a sickness in the male world, that that world had to be escaped, and that a feminine world, one in which gentleness, affection, compassion, comfort, patience, nurturing, and healing are available, needed to be entered. For Kidd, it seemed natural that her protagonist would succeed in doing so. Twain,

on the other hand, felt there was greater literary power in having his protagonist struggle mightily—but fail.

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