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The Fate of Marginality: An Approach to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

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I

Mark Twain's prime as a writer approximately coincides with the "Gilded Age." In this age, capitalism of the United States developed rapidly. American national ideal suffered a change in quality. According to the traditional "American Myth," America was supposed to be a new world. Everyone can restart one's life and attain happiness there. Originally, the "happiness" had a kind of moral implication. In the Gilded Age, however, the situation changed. The "happiness" was identified with economic success. For Mark Twain's contemporary Americans, the common goal in life was to get rich quick with one's talent and effort. The "American Myth" seemed to support this type of success story.

Mark Twain's two "boy's story," *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, were written in this historical context. The situation of the Gilded Age was projected into these novels. But each of them gives rather different impression to the reader. The basic tone is not same. The protagonists, Tom and Huck, also seem to be contrastive.

The aim of this paper is to consider whether this contrast is real one or not. It will help to understand the unique significance of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

II

Tom Sawyer's personality is made clear in the first some chapters of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The "fight" episode shows his aggressiveness (chapter 1). The fence whitewashing episode shows that

he well understands human nature (chapter 2). The ticket collecting episode shows that he can make a profitable deal (chapter 4). Tom has a good ability of business.

In the middle part of this novel, chapter 25, this boy wants to search for the "hidden treasure." He chooses Huck as a partner. Each of them talks of his own dream. If they successfully find the treasure, Tom says, he will "save" it and "have something to live on, by and by." And then, he will lead such a life: "I'm going to buy a new drum, and a sure-nough sword, and a red neck-tie and a bull pup, and get married."¹) This childish dream has some traces of the middle class life. Tom has the common ideal with the respectability of the society.

Later in the story, Tom experiences an adventure. Tom and Becky Thatcher go to the McDougal's cave on a picnic, and lose their way in it. In this critical situation, Tom never gives up. He cheers up his girl friend. At last, with his nice judgment, he succeeds to get out of the cave. This success brings a good fortune to him. In the cave, he finds the hidden treasure. The money is far beyond the average property of the townspeople.

This money brings another fortune to Tom. He is admitted into the society of St. Petersburg. Judge Thatcher praises Tom comparing with George Washington. The judge also suggests the desirable future of Tom. He hopes Tom to become a great lawyer or a great soldier. Each of these professions is a typical step toward the great success in American society. Someday Tom will become a member of the respectability. Judge Thatcher is one of the most distinguished persons of St. Petersburg. We can regard his opinion as a consensus of the respectable townspeople.

In this way, Tom attains considerable success with his own talent and effort. His pattern of success is similar to that of the successful adults in the Gilded Age. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* looks like a children's version of the success story. Tom seems to be the incarnation of the American Myth.

In the last chapter, Tom behaves as an agent of the moral standard of the society. His friend, Huck, can not stand the civilized life at the Widow Douglas's. At last he runs away. But Tom immediately locates

his whereabouts. Tom tries to persuade him to go home. Tom even threatens him, saying "we can't let you into the gang if you ain't respectable."²) This word indicates that Tom himself is now after the respectable life. He was integrated into the society.

III

The second "boy's story," *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, seems to be different from the predecessor in some ways.

First of all, Huck's characterization is different from Tom's. When he first appeared in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, his social position was made clear. From the viewpoint of the respectability, Huck is a detestable "pariah." The school teacher does not like his pupils to associate with Huck. Huck is free from all kinds of duty. The respectability of the society instinctively notices that such an existence may threaten the fundamental morality of the society.

As we have already seen, in chapter 25 of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck joins in Tom's search for the treasure. But his motivation is different from Tom's. Huck was "always willing to take a hand in any enterprise that offered entertainment and required no capital."³) His dream is also different from Tom's. If they successfully find the treasure, he says, "Well I'll have pie and a glass of soda every day, and I'll go to every circus that comes along. I bet I'll have a gay time."⁴) He excludes as useless the idea of saving the money. His attitude is against the virtue of diligence.

As these facts show, Huck stands in contrast to Tom. This contrast becomes more clear in the sequel. In the last part of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Huck was persuaded to go home. But, in the first part of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck tries to escape again. At the mental level, Tom and Huck live in two different worlds. Tom lives near the center of the society. Huck is a marginal person who tends to deviate from the society.

This is why Huck shows less attachment to money. In the preceding novel, he got six thousand dollars. But, in chapter 4 of *Adventures of*

Huckleberry Finn, he readily abandons it. When Huck knew that his “pap” came back to the town, he hastens to Judge Thatcher’s. After a brief conversation, Huck signs a contract and sells all his property in exchange for one dollar. He feared that the “pap” would extort the money. But so unprofitable a deal is not thinkable of Tom.

In addition, Huck is surrounded by various marginal factors. For example, Huck’s “pap” is a homeless drunkard. He dropped out of the success race. Now he stands at the opposite extremity to the success. He defies the social authority. He also obstructs his son’s “civilization.”

Huck’s fellow traveler, Jim, is also a marginal person. He is entirely excluded from the success story. He makes resistance to the society. He runs away from the owner and quests for freedom. Actually, the downstream journey is motivated by Jim. In this novel, unlike *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, an Afro-American is given such an important role.

The geographical background of this novel is the Mississippi River. The river is a place of transition. It is contrasted with the stable society of St. Petersburg. This river is the common periphery of more than one society. It also functions as a kind of corridor that connects the societies. Huck goes downstream in such a marginal landscape.

To sum up, Huck is a child who has intense marginality. He is also surrounded by various marginal factors. In contrast to Tom, Huck is not integrated into the adult society. This child is opposite to the adult. This position seems to enable Huck to defamiliarize the American Myth.

We can find a similar contrast between the thematic structures of these novels. As we have seen, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* confirms the American Myth. On the other hand, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seems to problematize it. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, the search for treasure is regarded as desirable. Tom succeeds in it, and is happily admitted into the society. But in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this deed is reversed to a detestable one. In this novel, the frauds search for treasure. Tom and the frauds are both “romantic.” This similarity emphasizes the thematic reversion. The frauds often attain

minor success. But their major work, cheating of Wilks's inheritance, ends in failure. Again, Tom's success is reversed to the frauds' failure. In a sense, the frauds search for treasure with their own talent and effort. But their talent is evil one. This episode suggests that a serious corruption is now corroding the American Myth.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn discloses the problems concealed behind the American Myth. Huck, with his story, seems to defamiliarize the American Myth.

IV

We have found various marginal factors in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Some of them seemed to defamiliarize the American Myth, which is the ideological foundation of the society. With further close reading, however, we can find some facts that clash with this interpretation.

The resistance of Huck's "pap" is dubious. He is rejected from the society. But it does not mean that he is free from its ideology. His own words show it. After he confined Huck in a cabin, one day, he gets drunk and attacks the government. This seems to be his protest against the society. But here, he regards his son as his "property" that is "worth six thousand dollars and upards."⁵⁾ He complains that the government took away his "property." His "attack" is regulated by the logic of money.

We can find a similar attitude in Huck. At first glance, he seems to have no attachment to money. But it is not the case. During the journey, Huck sometimes gets some money unexpectedly. He boasts of it. He also lacks morality about money.

More serious is the problem concerning his relation with Jim. During the downstream journey, Huck gradually discovers Jim's humanity. At the end of the journey, he decides to deliver Jim from slavery. He even says, "All right, then, I'll go to hell."⁶⁾ This episode is the emotional climax of this novel. We are inclined to regard this determination as genuine. But immediately after that, we find a passage that clashes with this assumption. Huck encounters "duke," one of the frauds who sold

Jim off. Huck says, "Why, he was *my* nigger, and that was my money."⁷) Huck is now pretending ignorance to deceive the "duke." But these words premise that the Afro-American is property. We can not overlook the fact that such words poured from his lips. We can find other similar cases. In chapter 32, Huck fabricates a story of steamboat accident. When he is asked whether anybody was hurt in it, he answers, "No'm. Killed a nigger."⁸) He doesn't include the Afro-American in "anybody." At the deep level, Huck is bound by the ideology of the society.

Jim himself has a desire for money. In chapter 8, Jim and Huck have a long conversation about "signs." Jim has hairy arms and a hairy breast. According to Jim, this is a sign that he is going to be rich. He says that he has been rich once. He had fourteen dollars. First, he speculated in a cow. But soon the cow died. Next, he deposited the rest of money in a fellow slave's "bank." But the next day, the "bank" was "busted." This episode reminds us of the situation of the Gilded Age. Then, suggested by a dream, Jim gave the last money to "Balum's Ass." Balum, following a preacher's words, gave the money to the poor. But, to his disappointment, no money was returned to him. This episode also shows that the religious morality is helpless in the face of the logic of capitalism. Anyway, Jim lost all the money. He is similar to the victims of the fallacious dream of the Gilded Age. Even Jim is involved in the logic of success story.

This conversation suggests another problem. Jim concludes it saying: "Yes—en I's rich now, come to look at it. I owns myself, en I's with eight hund'd dollars."⁹) He estimates himself with the price determined by the white slaveholder.

Through this novel, Jim is repeatedly priced by others. Jim became too superstitious and "was most ruined, for a servant" (chapter 2). One night, Jim eavesdrops on a conversation of his owners. The owner says that she will sell him down at eight hundred dollars. Jim decides to escape (chapter 8). Huck is informed that the reward of three hundred dollars is offered for capturing Jim (chapter 11). The "duke," one of the frauds, prints a fake description of a runaway slave. The description has a notice of two hundred dollars as the reward (chapter 20). The

“king” sells Jim off, “for forty dirty dollars.” Jim was actually traded at the price of forty dollars (chapter 31). Near the end of this novel, the price of Jim suddenly rises. Jim helps a doctor to treat Tom’s wound. Jim shows the most faithful attitude for Tom. Later the doctor says, “a nigger like that is worth a thousand dollars.”¹⁰) Such a high evaluation is a reward for his faithfulness to the white (chapter 42). At the end of this chapter, Tom discloses the fact. Two months before, Jim was set free with the owner’s will. It seems to be a happy ending, but the word “free” invites another meaning. Now Jim has neither price nor value. The owner thought that he was completely “ruined” for a servant. This is why she abandoned the ownership.

The slavery institution is based on such estimation. The problem is that Jim expresses no protest against it. He sometimes seems to be proud of the high price. At the mental level, he surrenders to the slavery institution. He ran away simply because he feared being sent to the Deep South.

Even the landscape is not spotless. In chapter 12, the raft passes by a stranded ship. On the ship, Huck finds two gangsters torturing a betrayer. The cause is sharing of the stolen goods. They intend to lynch the betrayer. The desire for money freely penetrates into the periphery. The raft, which goes down the river, suffers a similar fate. In chapter 18, after the gun fight between two families, Huck and Jim take refuge on the raft. Then Huck admires the raft life. But in the next chapter, two frauds break into the raft. After that, the raft becomes a mere extension of the shore society.

The marginal factors in this novel are inconsistent. They seldom protest against the society. If any, their protest ends in a dubious result. It is because they are bound by the logic of money, which is the dominant ideology of the society. The society has finally incorporated the marginality.

V

The last twelve chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is called “Phelps farm episodes.” The basic tone of this part is different from

that of the preceding part. In this part, a shift of identification occurs. This shift is closely related to that of setting. During the downstream journey, Huck and Jim were often in danger. It truly deserved to be called an "adventure." Contrary to it, Phelps farm is basically equivalent to the stable society of St. Petersburg. An "adventure" in such a place is nothing but a "let on" game. Tom is an expert in this kind of game. This is why Tom seems to lead the plot in this part.

In this way, Phelps farm episodes have a similar appearance to St. Petersburg episodes. But the impression of Tom is not same. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom is childlike and attractive. The first three chapters of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* seem to be a direct sequel to the preceding novel. But here Tom's "let on" games prove to be empty and stupid. Tom's "gang" is almost grotesquely unreal. Compared with these episodes, Tom in Phelps farm episodes is more selfish and cruel. He even does not notice his own evil. The worst aspect of his innocence is betrayed here. Under the pretext of "deliverance," Tom suggests various absurd plans. He forces Jim to follow these plans with patronizing attitude. After the fake "deliverance" was over, Tom says, "I wanted the *adventure* of it."¹¹⁾ Even at this point, he shows no repentance. Instead, Tom compensates Jim for all his troubles with some money. Jim is much pleased and proudly declares that the sign of hairy breast is now fulfilled. At the end of this novel, Tom is still the incarnation of the logic of money. Jim has not yet been freed from the logic.

Another problem of this "deliverance" concerns Huck's role in it. Huck came to Phelps farm in order to deliver Jim out of slavery. After Tom joined, however, Huck suddenly becomes passive. His attitude toward Tom's absurd plans is ambiguous. He sometimes shows reluctance, but often obeys Tom. Huck also praises Tom for his planning ability. Some critics, including Leo Marx, complain about Huck's yielding to Tom.¹²⁾ But they neglect the fact that Huck has played a nasty trick on Jim in chapter 15. Huck did it for his own joy. Huck and Tom stand on the common ideological ground. Huck's submissive attitude is not surprising.

At the end of this novel, Huck's next journey is suggested. One day, Tom proposes going to the Territory for "howling adventures." And then, Huck is informed that Mrs. Phelps intends to adopt and discipline him. He plans to escape for the Territory "ahead of the rest." This "Territory" is the Indian Territory, which had been organized since 1820s as a reservation for Native Americans. According to the notice on the title page, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is set in 1830s or 1840s. During this period, white civilization did not exist in the Territory. By going there, Huck will be able to attain the true freedom.

If we take another viewpoint, however, we can find some unexpected significance in Huck's next journey. In 1880s, when Mark Twain was finishing the novel, the Territory faced a crisis. Innumerable "Boomers" trespassed on the Territory in search of the new land. Huck goes to the Territory "ahead of" them. Roy Harvey Pearce correctly points out: "No matter where he [Huck] goes, he will be one step ahead not only of the Tom Sawyers of his world but also of the sort of people into whom the Tom Sawyers grow."¹³⁾ However, Pearce also claims that Tom's and Huck's sense of the Territory are contrasted here. Pearce says that Huck seeks a freedom beyond the limits of any civilization. Pearce interprets the word "ahead of the rest" as indicating the chronological order. But, as we have already seen, Huck has much in common with Tom. That is, Huck is not opposite to the Boomers. When Tom proposed the next journey, Huck brings up the matter of money. Such a boy's journey to the Territory can not be a quest for freedom. On the contrary, he will introduce the logic of money into the new land. Read in this light, the word "ahead of the rest" seems to have another meaning. Huck will become the first one of the Boomers.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Huck often supports the ideology of the society. He does so under the appearance of resistance or evasion. At the end of this novel, he follows this pattern once more.

VI

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn was written at the turning point of

Mark Twain's career as a writer. In the earlier works, he had expressed general reliance on American civilization. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* belongs to this type of works. In this novel, the plot develops in accordance to the American Myth. This is why the basic tone of this novel is optimistic. But it is not true with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It depicts clearly the contradiction and dubiousness concealed behind the American Myth. It made this novel much less optimistic, if not pessimistic.

More serious was the problem concerning the characters. Tom, as the incarnation of the American Myth, looked merry and innocent in the preceding novel. But in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the darker side of his innocence is betrayed. At first glance, Huck seems to be opposite to Tom. As a truly innocent boy, he is expected to direct an alternative way. But ironically, in the process of the novel, this expectation is disappointed. Gradually it becomes clear that he is no less bound by the logic of money. Perhaps, Mark Twain came to have some doubt about the American Myth. But he could not suggest any alternative.

In his later works, including *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), "The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg" (1900) and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916), the pessimistic tone is dominant. After 1890s, failure of the American Myth became clear. In 1890, the federal government declared that the frontier was closed. The American Myth lost the material support. Race conflicts occurred frequently in the whole country. Mark Twain seriously deplored when he heard of lynching in his home state.¹⁴⁾ Faced with the reality, Mark Twain lost faith in the American Myth. But he had no alternative to it. His own novel had already shown invalidity of such an alternative. He was in a serious dilemma. It must have intensified his despair. Mark Twain's later despair can be traced back to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

NOTES

- 1) John C. Gerber, Paul Baender, and Terry Firkins, eds., *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 177.

- 2) *Tom Sawyer* 235.
- 3) *Tom Sawyer* 175.
- 4) *Tom Sawyer* 177.
- 5) Walter Blair, and Victor Fischer, eds., *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) 33.
- 6) *Huckleberry Finn* 271.
- 7) *Huckleberry Finn* 273.
- 8) *Huckleberry Finn* 279.
- 9) *Huckleberry Finn* 57.
- 10) *Huckleberry Finn* 353.
- 11) *Huckleberry Finn* 357.
- 12) Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot; Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*." *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Claude M. Simpson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968) 31.
- 13) Roy Harvey Pearce, "'Yours Truly, Huck Finn.'" *Modern Critical Views: Mark Twain*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986) 179.
- 14) Mark Twain, "The United States of Lyncherdom." *The Portable Mark Twain*, ed. Verner DeVoto (New York: The Viking Press, 1974) 584.