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James Barlow Lloyd
University of Mississippi

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The Nature of Mark Twain’s Attack on Sentimentality in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

by James Barlow Lloyd

Mark Twain was not a man to do things by halves; when he wished to make the people of Bricksville, Arkansas, repulsive, they ended up looking much like Yahoos; when he wished to make Col. Grangerford an aristocrat, the old gentleman got starched so badly that one can hardly imagine him sitting down. Thus, if he did not crib a subtitle from Laurence Sterne and call his book *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Sentimental Journey*, he probably just did not think of it, for the sentimentality most emphatically exists, especially in the form of the good old-fashioned cry, which occurs no less than seventy-one times\(^1\) in the novel.

But, since the term sentimentality has become practically meaningless, and since, conceding a definition, its existence in the novel must be of some importance, perhaps some explanations are necessary. According to William E. Lecky's *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, which Mark Twain used extensively,\(^2\) moral man is either “inductive” or “intuitive”; thus, he is governed both by his head (reason) and his heart (feeling).\(^3\) An equal balance between the two will here be considered to result in a right emotional reaction which will be called sentiment as opposed to an imbalance, which will result either in hypocrisy, because of too much head, or sentimentality, because of too much heart. The sentimentalist, then, emphasizes feeling, and quite logically since, as Ernest Bernbaum

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\(^1\) Each time that a character is referred to as crying has been considered a separate instance; hence a character may cry three or four times on the same page.


notes, he assumes that human nature is "perfectible by an appeal to the emotions."  

Applied to the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the above definitions mean that the characters may cry in three different ways: correctly, with the proper balance of intellect and feeling, or hypocritically, with some ulterior intellectual motive, or sentimentally, with too little regard for the intellect. If one then divides the aforementioned seventy-one cries in this way, one may graphically illustrate the importance of sentimentality in the novel by applying the precept of moral perfectibility and measuring the moral states of the characters who cry sentimentally against those who do not. Luckily for the purposes of this study, most of the major characters behave consistently, with only the notable exceptions of Huck and Mary Jane, and either cry correctly—like Huck, Mary Jane and Jim—or hypocritically—like Pap, the Duke, and the King—or sentimentally—like the Judge and his wife, Emmeline Grangerford, the camp meeting crowd, and the Wilks bunch.

In a field dominated by the hypocritical criers, who cry thirty-one times, and the sentimentalists, who cry thirty-six times, Huck, Mary Jane, and Jim are rank amateurs uninitiated in the fine art of crying and woefully out of practice—Jim says, "I doan' skasely ever cry"—whose meager total of eight is almost lost amid the general wail and confusion. Nevertheless, they possess the proper balance of head and heart because, of all the important characters, they alone are shown to cry for such reason and in such manner as most reasonable men might deem justifiable. They may cry, for instance, as Huck and Mary Jane do, over the death of a friend (p. 48) or relative (p. 151), or, as Jim does, over the separation of a family (p. 131), but they will not cry hypocritically, in order to get out of some predicament, or sentimentally, over the death of someone whom they do not know. Yet


6 The total here—seventy-five—differs slightly from the seventy-one cries cited earlier because occasionally a group of characters will cry together, but in different ways, as when the Duke and King and the Wilks bunch cry over the coffin (p. 188).
Huck and Mary Jane behave inconsistently; he cries in order to make the two boatmen believe his smallpox story (p. 77) and she sometimes indulges in a sentimental cry with the Wilks bunch (p. 138). In other words, Huck follows his head too much and Mary Jane her heart. However, just as he does not seem to belong with the hypocrites, she does not seem to belong with the sentimentalists because, one feels, they have more in common with each other and with Jim than with any of the other characters, as will be shown below.

The problem of the relative moral perfectibility of the members of this or any other group may be approached either by finding evidence of previous improvements or by exploring the character's capacity to be perfected. To find evidence of previous improvements one need only note a character's good qualities and assume that they were produced by some earlier move toward perfectibility. Jim, for instance, proves his loyalty and courage by helping the doctor bind Tom Sawyer's wound and examples could be produced to illustrate Huck's and Mary Jane's courage, but the true relationship between the correct cries goes deeper than the mere citation of abstract qualities. Instead, they are united by the capacity to feel love, and this feeling, and it only, elicits the response which has been classified as a correct cry. Huck cries over Bud (p. 98), Mary Jane over her father (p. 151), and Jim over his family (p. 131), and this capacity to form relationships with other people both sets the correct cries apart from the members of the other groups and establishes a standard for the measurement of the capacity for moral perfectibility.7

The members of the hypocritical group—Pap, the Duke, and the King—cry often—thirty-one times—and with an eye toward making a fast buck; they are professionals. Pap cries during his unsuccessful attempt to keep the Judge on his side in the dispute over Huck's money (p. 20), but he is far outstripped by the other two. The King manages to exact over four hundred dollars from the camp meeting crowd with only two cries (p. 112), and when he and the Duke really open up on the Wilks bunch, crying thirteen times altogether, the total runs into the thousands. In fact, when the two first meet on the raft, they have what amounts to a crying contest to establish domi-

7 That, at least in American literature, the capacity to love equals the capacity for moral improvement should be self-evident. Witness, for instance, the hero of the early seduction novel who repents his follies as soon as he falls in love with the heroine.
nance (pp. 103–5), prompted, one supposes, by the logical assumption that whoever most expertly wields the tools of the trade is most fit to lead.

Naturally, the evidences of previous moral improvements in the members of this group are rare. Pap extorts protection from Huck, while the Duke and the King stoop to robbing the Wilks children. In short, they are about as morally imperfect a lot as one is likely to find; yet, for all that, they still seem harmless enough, probably because although they lack the capacity to love, they lack the capacity to hate as well. That is, they may lie and steal, but they do so not vindictively but disinterestedly, as if it were their duty, their place in the world, to gull the inhabitants of Bricksville. Their position, perhaps, becomes clearer when compared with that of Col. Sherburn who actively hates the Bricksville mob. The King and the Duke, in contrast, do not seem even to dislike anyone, the Bricksville mob included. Governed wholly by their heads, they remain neutral, simply doing their job and moving on with no hard feelings, at least on their side.

If the hypocritical group are professionals, the sentimentalists are talented amateurs who cry because they enjoy crying. What other reason could they possibly have, for, unlike the correct criers, they usually cry over someone whom they do not even know, as the Judge and his wife do when they cry over Pap (p. 20), as Emmeline Grangerford does (posthumously) over Stephen Dowling Bots (pp. 87–88), and as the camp meeting crowd does over the King (p. 112). Occasionally, of course, the object of the sentimental crier's pity is known to him, like Mary Jane's father, but then he, like the Wilks bunch, carries his crying to such lengths as to make himself ridiculous (p. 138). Thus, governed wholly by their hearts, the sentimentalists cry either for what most reasonable men would consider insufficient reason—because they enjoy it—or in what most reasonable men would consider an improper manner—too lustily.

Like the moral character of the hypocritical criers, that of the sentimental criers provides little evidence of perfectibility. In fact, too little information about the moral character of the members of this group exists, aside from the fact that the Wilks bunch turns out to be rather greedy, to make any judgment of them. On the other hand, the sentimental criers are obviously unable to love, since Emmeline Grangerford, to write the kind of poem she does, must feel nothing for Stephen Dowling Bots, and since such others of the group as the
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Judge and his wife and the camp meeting crowd, not knowing Pap and the King, may hardly be said to love them. But if, unlike the correct criers, the sentimentalists cannot feel love, then unlike the hypocritical criers they can hate, at least in the opinion of the Duke, who says of the Wilks bunch, "if the excited fools hadn't let go all holts and made that rush to get a look, we'd a slept in our cravats to-night—cravats warranted to wear too—longer than we'd need'em" (p. 173).

Thus, far from being morally the most perfected, the members of the sentimental group are the most morally deranged. Unable to love, yet more dangerous than the hypocritical criers since they are able to hate, they are the objects of a satirical attack which cuts two ways. In the first place, Mark Twain simply uses the hypocritical criers to expose the sentimentalists, to work them up. Pap, for instance, is the tool he uses to get at the Judge, just as he uses the Duke and King to get at the camp meeting crowd and the Wilks bunch. In the second place, the fact that the members of the sentimental group rather than the members of the hypocritical group are the principal objects of the satiric thrusts constitutes an attack in itself. After all, what must the bottom of the scale be like if the Duke and the King are in the middle?

WORKS CITED

