

LaPlant 1

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Interesting Dialogue: Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Amy Blair, and Edith Wharton's "Vice of Reading"

Although Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may at first glance appear to be merely an adventure narrative, it in fact contains an interesting dialogue in a debate over the woe of realist authors which Edith Wharton dubbed the "mechanical reader" (515). Wharton feared these readers because their of their great potential to influence the literary market, and although it doesn't show up explicitly as such in the novel, characters reading words without comprehension is a recurring theme. The conflict between "born readers" on the one side (Wharton 515), and "mechanical readers" and the "trusted intellectual" on the other (Blair 2), is represented through 1) the interactions of Colonel Sherburn with the "mechanical readers" Boggs and the lynch mob; 2) the mechanically reading Wilks sisters (as a group) with the "trusted intellectuals", King Capet Dauphin and Duke Bilgewater, and the born reader Dr. Robinson; and 3) the "trusted intellectual" Huckleberry with the arguably "born reader" Joanna and the "mechanical reader" Mary Jane. All of these cases serve to suggest that Twain was familiar in some capacity with the issue outlined by Wharton.

To begin with, the events leading to Sherburn's murder of Boggs gives important hints on the nature of the debate over readership. Sherburn is sick of Boggs' drunken habit of cursing at and threatening him, so he tells Boggs "I'm tired of this, but I'll endure it till one o'clock. . . . If you *open your mouth* against me *only once*, after that time, you can't travel so far but I will find

you” (emphasis added) (Twain 218). From this statement, it is explicitly clear that any insult against Sherburn by Boggs would be met with retribution, but it also implies that *any* word from Boggs directed towards Sherburn would be met with the same. In this way, Sherburn's murder of Boggs is a metaphor for the author taking power of intent back from those who perform what Blair terms “misreading” of their texts (11): Boggs' last words represent the desire of the “mechanical reader” to “perform whatever interpretive gymnastics necessary to assimilate” (11) Sherburn's “authorial coyness” (11) to his own ambitions. Although it was certainly unjust, Sherburn follows up on his threat exactly as issued: by aiming his gun at Boggs, he gained a perfunctory and instinctive plea for mercy, which Boggs incorrectly believed would achieve his ambition of not getting shot, which in turn triggered Sherburn's true meaning as he fired into Boggs, instantly silencing him. Wharton was like Sherburn in that she was not going to sit idly by as mechanical readers ran off with her texts, and although lacking the metaphorical power to kill, she did have the power to hold contempt for and write scathing articles about “mechanical readers” like Boggs. The claim by a townsman that Boggs had “never hurt nobody, drunk nor sober” demonstrates the general misreading by the townsfolk of Sherburn's threat and followup (Twain 219), which leads directly into the next conflict.

Prompted by Buck Harkness' agitations that Sherburn ought to be lynched, it doesn't take long for everyone to start saying it (Twain 219, 20-21). As a mechanical reader who “misreads” the slaying and its cause, Harkness gives the kind of dangerous and unwarranted opinion kind which “terrifies Wharton” (Blair 13), in an effort to sway the literary market as symbolized by a lynch mob. The townsfolk, who are also “mechanical readers”, see this hollow reading as something to aspire to, and as though in awe of one they perceive as brighter than themselves, they follow what this “adept of supererogation” (Wharton 33) claimed was the correct course,

which is perhaps an element of the “great flood of books” that readers were mired in (qtd. in Blair 1): they receive mixed messages about what texts were “desirable” (Blair 1) because everyone had differing opinions. This “sense-of-duty”, as Wharton calls it (515), therefore carries their feet towards Sherburn's house, but is woefully insufficient for them to actually carry it out: as Sherburn asserts, there is no conviction behind their actions, as they are merely following the crowd, afraid to appear unsophisticated before others (Twain 221). They mirror those “mechanical readers” who “had the audacity to respond to literature, to offer an opinion” without fully comprehending what it was about (Blair 13): this is why the mob was vanquished as easily as it formed, which proves the merit behind Sherburn's claim that there is only “half a man” (Twain 221), or a “mechanical reader”, among them. Like Wharton, Sherburn stands on his soapbox, speaking with authority as he berates these cowards for daring to sally forth into the world of “born readers.”

Furthermore, the lynch mob demonstrates Wharton's worst fears come to fruition, which is that of mechanical readers hijacking a text and completely destroying its meaning. In this instance, the mob tears down clotheslines for lynching just as Wharton's carefully constructed texts were used as mere tokens with which pretentious readers hoped to “achieve wealth and elevated status” (Blair 2): they had “misread” lynching. Such notions are reinforced by Sherburn's argument that an army is nothing more than a mob of cowards with “courage borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. But a mob without any *man* at the head of it, is *beneath* pitifulness” (Twain 221), as the mob's subsequent dispersal is similar to the effect of demoralization and chaos that may occur when an army's commander is slain. This is the “mass appeal” that Blair speaks of (13), as the group's strength derives not from its quality, but its quantity due to pursuit of the “book that is being talked about” (13). However, this particular

headless mob's "misreading" of lynching is so embarrassing that Sherburn absolutely had to correct this "active mass of 'sense of duty'" (Blair 13) wannabe judges, jury, and executioners, as their "misreading" of lynching endangered its best authors. If such masses succeeded in changing the landscape of lynching as Wharton feared they would influence which texts were published (Blair 13), it would have been terrible for the concept as a whole: orderly lynching under the cover of darkness with masked cowards headed by a *man* would be replaced with a spectator sport run by incompetents who couldn't even get the rules right, and society would become even more anarchic than it already was (or "mechanical readers" would control publishing). Wharton states that "It is when the mechanical reader, armed with this high conception of his duty, invades the domain of letters—discusses, criticizes, condemns, or, worse still, praises—that the vice of reading becomes a menace to literature" (515), and in order to curtail such militant inclinations, it was necessary for born readers like Wharton and Sherburn to upbraid these rabble-rousing cowards, and tell them to stick to tarring and feathering "poor friendless cast-out women" (Twain 220) and reading "light literature" (Wharton 515).

In other news, the Wilks sisters can be read as "mechanical readers" seeking advice from "trusted intellectuals" (Blair 2). However, if the "trusted intellectual's advice opens the path to books" (2), then it might also be said that the malicious "intellectual's advice opens the path to" oblivion as they seek to profit from steering their audience in a certain direction. The King and the Duke (henceforth "the frauds" when referred to as a pair) are two such malicious intellectuals who, by convincing their prey that they are their uncles, also convince them that they care about their future. Blair states of "mechanical readers" that "Governed by a sense that there must be some meritocracy to reading, and motivated by a culture of success that insisted that every action be directed towards upward mobility, these readers turned to a willing group of elite

cultural arbiters for advice on what to read and why” (24): in this instance, the frauds are the “cultural arbiters”, and the “upward mobility” is what the sisters perceive would come from trusting them.

The bag of \$6,000 is important in its role of carrying the economic aspect of this desire for “upward mobility”. When Mary Jane gave the King the bag, she told him to “*invest it for me and my sisters* any way you want to, and don't give us no receipt for it” (emphasis added) (Twain 235): this statement by the sisters' implicit spokesperson subtly implies that they are hoping to make a profit out of the money given to them. This willing transfer of the power of investment in their own money to a third party is a parallel of Huckleberry's implicit trust in Judge Thatcher to handle and invest his money (also \$6,000) properly (131, 140), and although that trust was given to a trustworthy individual, the premise is the same: by investing their money with the frauds, they believed that they would see monetary gain. In either case, the investment was made because the idea of making money off of money was seen as desirable, and in the sisters' case, it is an example of praise: by praising the frauds' fraud, the sisters are exercising the praise of literature, which is one of the actions Wharton reviled mechanical readers the most for, and since the frauds intend to defraud them of every last penny, they are exalting the wrong literature (515). This is indicative of the “mechanical reader's” utter vulnerability to manipulation by trusted intellectuals: having no idea of how to navigate the “flood of books” (qtd. in Blair 2), they place their trust in someone who claims to be able to guide them, but if that individual has the intention of manipulating them for his own gain, they would be none the wiser.

This is why the sisters' rebuke by Dr. Robinson, a “born reader” who immediately identifies the King for a fraud because of his bogus explanation of “orgies” and fake English accent (Twain 234), is ironically the catalyst for their ultimate acceptance of the frauds' lies.

Robinson warns them that the King “has come here with a lot of empty names and facts which he has picked up somewhere, and you take them for *proofs*, and are helped to fool yourselves by these foolish friends who ought to know better” (235): but instead of accepting his passionate warning, they perceive it as the wrong text to read, and instead accept the guidance of the frauds who had gained their confidence. According to Blair, reading advice columnists like Hamilton Wright Mabie deliberately avoided recommending books that might cause the reader to “feel certain negatively charged affects, including disgust, contempt, and shame” (qtd. in Blair 19), which explains why Robinson inadvertently triggers a self-defense reaction in appealing to the sisters' sense of shame. The frauds, on the other hand, feed the sisters words and actions which reinforce positively charged feelings, such as a heartwarming reunion with their long lost uncles, and giving their share of \$3,000 to them while implying that the father would have wanted the “sweet lambs” to have it (Twain 233). The narrator even states that everyone “begged and begged” Robinson “not to hurt Harvey's and the poor girls' feelings” (234), which reinforces the idea that “mechanical readers” preferred to read only those texts which reinforced their positive emotions and aspirations for exaltation: because the sisters don't want to feel the unpleasantness of shame, they react adversely to Robinson's pleading. This is implied by Robinson's final warning that the sisters would “feel sick whenever you think of this day” (235), which indicates a keen awareness that by attempting to safeguard themselves in the short term from feelings of disgust and shame, they were merely multiplying the crop of sorrows they would reap in the future.

On a related note, when the sisters become enamored with the idea of moving to England to live with the frauds, they demonstrate further capitulation to “upward mobility.” Blair calls this activity of picking up and reading a text “in the interest of self interest” because “experts

have deemed it 'the best' thing to read 'reading up'" (2-3): in this case, the sisters are taking the promise of life in England as their text, and in reading it, are willing to throw away everything that binds them to America in the hopes that their life in England would be better. The only one of the sisters who even suspects anything is Joanna, which demonstrates that she at least has more than just her self interest at heart, even if she wasn't what Wharton considers a born reader due to her actual acceptance of the frauds' promises. When Joanna interrogates Huckleberry about England, she is constantly reading his claims for comprehension, and after catching him several times, calls him out on his "stretchers" (Twain 236-7). However, it's difficult when those around oneself are constantly telling one that one simply has to read something, as the societal pressures to conform to a certain middle-class lifestyle more or less forces one to read it, whether one truly believes it or not. This is why Mary Jane and Susan spite Joanna for failing to adequately perform the "interpretive gymnastics necessary" to believe Huckleberry's lies (Blair 11): she challenges his claim that he was from England, and therefore, she was acting against the advice of their "trusted intellectuals", which would also cause them to feel "negatively charged affects", and in particular, shame. What's more, Mary Jane's language reflects reading advice columnists' aversion to recommending texts which inspire these same "negatively charged affects", as she doesn't want to make someone in a foreign land "feel ashamed" (Twain 238). So although she wasn't exactly a "born reader", Joanna does demonstrate properties in accordance with one by picking apart Huckleberry's inconsistencies in search of comprehension, rather than merely taking the advice given by an alleged authority at face value. The fact that she had Huckleberry swear on a dictionary, rather than the Bible, is further evidence of her insistence on ferreting out the truth herself: if this isn't the case, it's rather convenient that she just happened to have such a handy book with her (as it never mentions her leaving to get a book) during their

dinner *after* the King made his little speech on “orgies” (237). However, the fact that she capitulates and agrees to believe “some of” what Huckleberry says (237), combined with her unfaltering belief in his story about Mary Jane possibly contracting the “dreadful pluribus-unum mumps” (249) demonstrates that she can't actually tell what to believe and what not to believe without being instructed.

The fact that the slaves were allowed to be sold provides further evidence that the sisters desire upward mobility above all else. Huckleberry explains that “they hadn't ever dreamed” of splitting the family apart or having them sold out of the town (Twain 243), and he “thought them poor girls and them niggers would break their hearts for grief; they cried around each other, and took on so it most made me sick to see it” (243), but it appears that their grief over their servants' apparent fates meant less than their dedication to the “trusted intellectuals”. The sisters had previously given the frauds free reign over the \$6,000, and the fact that they allow them to sell everything including their slaves just so they could go to live with the frauds in England and have “good times” (249), as Joanna puts it, makes one wonder how far they are willing to go to protect themselves from the shame of admitting that Dr. Robinson was right. Mary Jane was certainly aggrieved by the slaves' sale out of the town, and yet she is packing her bags and weeping as though this events were completely out of her power when Huckleberry inadvertently blurts out that the slaves weren't sold legally (247). Additionally, her absolute willingness to follow Huckleberry's instruction to the letter as indicated by her farewell of “Good-bye– I'm going to do everything just as you told me” (Twain 248) cements her as a static character and “mechanical reader” who shows a literal unwillingness to doubt a “trusted intellectual” unless told by another “trusted intellectual” to do so. Her sisters are no better, as they both believe Huckleberry's lies about the “pluribus-unum mumps” (249): in fact, Joanna is so blindly excited

about getting to England that she entertains keeping silent about Mary Jane's potential illness so their uncles won't need to wait out the three month incubation period (249). As such, the Wilks sisters are perfect examples of “mechanical readers”, whose navigation of the “flood of books” is impossible without the guidance of “trusted intellectuals”.

Ergo, Edith Wharton's principles about “mechanical” and “born” readers and Blair's concept of the “trusted intellectual” have a strong presence in Twain's novel. Although Wharton's “The Vice of Reading” was written nearly 20 years later, the bizarre and sometimes horrifying encounters between the highlighted characters most certainly suggest that Twain was at least aware of such issues, even if he didn't display evident loathing for such “mechanical readers” in his novel. Those who misread in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* suffer either tragedy or shame, which suggests that the potential consequences for those foolish enough to “misread” texts or unflinchingly accept the advice of others might be very similar in real life, and thus would seem to imply that Twain's interest in the subject may have been concern for such consequences, rather than fear of the “mechanical reader's” influence on the market. It is details such as these that create such an interesting dialogue.

Works Cited

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