

Sentimental Trouble in Mark Twain's "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It"

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1. Introduction

Over the last one hundred years since Twain's death, a number of critics and scholars have debated whether or not Twain was really a sentimentalist, as well as how Twain evaluated sentimental novels and culture. For example, there was a controversy over evaluation of Twain's works between Van Wyck Brooks and Bernard De Voto during the 1920s and the 1930s. On the one hand, Brooks regretted that Twain curtailed his genius by repressing his natural artistic bent for the sake of American sentimentalism embodied by his wife Olivia (25). On the other hand, De Voto maintained that although he was negatively influenced by the feminized Victorian culture in the North East, Twain, based on his own experience in the West, could achieve and express his masculine thoughts and values (210-16). Thus, the critics took opposite positions with respect to evaluation of Twain on sentimentality. Nevertheless, we can detect the same assumption shared by them; while associating sentimentality with femininity and devaluing both, they viewed anti-sentimentalism as the authentic standpoint for Twain's literature.

The aim of this essay is to reexamine the question of sentimentality in Twain. As I will show, Twain is overwhelmed by sentimental discourse in one of his most famous short stories, "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I Heard It" (1874). In contrast with Brooks, my analysis will demonstrate the author's sentimentality more positively as enabling him to encounter others in terms of race and gender. First, I will show that although Twain was

well known as an anti-sentimental writer, he privately showed preference for sentimental novel and culture. Then, looking at his depiction of sentimentality in his works, I will demonstrate how Twain vacillates between his critique of and his partiality for sentimentality. Then, focusing on the short story “A True Story,” I will discuss how the sentimental story told by a former enslaved woman named Aunt Rachel leads him to reflecting on his own ignorance of others in terms of race and gender. Finally, my essay will explore how the narrator is overwhelmed by and obsessed with her narrative. Through this procedure, my essay will not merely clarify that Twain was involved with sentimental discourse, but also how it brought him an encounter with others in terms of race and gender.

2. The Birth of Mark Twain from the Culture of Sentimentality

Samuel Clemens was recurrently interested in the discourse of sentimentality, whether rejecting or embracing it. On February 19, 1863, Clemens published sketches entitled “Ye Sentimental Law Student,” using a comic format to make fun of the sentimental language found in popular fictions. Clemens cites a fictive letter as if he had accidentally found the love letter on the summit of Sugar Loaf Peak, written by someone named Solon Lycurgus, a law student and Notary Public in and for the said County of Storey, and Territory of Nevada. Clemens viewed him as an exemplar of a dim-witted person, because he was mixing love notes with legal jargon. This young journalist sent it to a newspaper to get it published. According to James Edward Caron, “the clash of inappropriate rhetoric—sentimental and legal—found in ‘Ye Sentimental Law Student’ expands the earlier version of this comic device when a wedding vow tangles with jargon from the stock market” (113). The founding editor of *Territorial Enterprise*, Joseph T. Goodman remembered “Ye Sentimental Law Student” as a special article for *Enterprise* signed with the pseudonym “Mark Twain” for the first time. More

strictly speaking, Clemens had first signed the penname on February 3 to his weekly satirical piece in the Virginia City Territorial Enterprise. Just after adopting this pseudonym, Clemens wrote a fake love letter by himself in order to caricature its sentimental aspect. Clemens obviously saw profit in promoting "Mark Twain" through a critique of sentimentalism, while allowing himself to indulge in his sentimentalism and humor.

What is interesting in the fake love letter is that Twain mixes sentimental content with legal jargon. Twain here evokes laughter from his reader by pointing out that the law student mixes "the beautiful language of love" with "the infernal phraseology of the law" (25). That is to say, Twain himself constructs the binary opposition between law and sentimentality. Given the fact that the author writes the hoax letter himself, however, it is clear that sentimental and anti-sentimental emotions are both located within himself. To put it another way, he makes his reader laugh by burlesquing sentimentality within himself from the anti-sentimental viewpoint.

Before discussing Clemens's involvement with sentimental discourse, however, we need to clarify the genre of sentimental novel and its conventions of which Twain was strongly conscious. We can firstly point out that the genre was associated with women writers and was expressive of women's issues like affectionate ties and sympathy especially among family members. In regard to sentimental novel's chief characteristics, Jane Tompkins maintains that "it is written by, for, and about women" (124-125). Secondly, we can draw from sentimental novels that sentimental novelists view family bond and sympathy as a central theme. One of the most influential sentimental writers, Harriet Beecher Stowe in her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) urged the reader to "feel right" and show sympathy to others. Stowe continues: "[a]n atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who feels strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human

race” (385). As a mother, Stowe could not allow people to give up their human connection, especially a familial one, and maintained how significant it was for her readers to extend their sympathy toward black slaves who were not allowed to make their family. Like Stowe, other sentimental writers like Susan Warner and Maria Susanna Cummins also thematize affectionate ties, especially family ones.¹ As Cindy Weinstein maintains, the “making of family is the task that awaits most sentimental protagonists” (8).² Lastly, the sentimentalists’ approval of sympathy results in repeated description of tears as an external sign of compassionate emotion in their novels. When Little Eva in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a virtuous girl typical of sentimental novel’s heroine, is dying, Stowe demonstrates that “it is impossible to describe the scene [the dying scene of Little Eva], as with tears and sobs, they [black slaves] gathered round the creature [Little Eva], and took from her hands what seemed to them a last mark of her love” (251). Behaviors such as sobbing and grasping her hand designate sympathetic exchanges between the dying girl and the black slaves.

Getting back to Twain, despite his burlesque of sentimental tropes, Samuel Clemens was not always immune to the sentimentality he parodied

1 For example, Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) depicts a young heroine’s, Ellen Montgomery, struggle to endure her mother’s death, as well as the brutality and contempt of those she encounters on her life voyage in order to emphasize her final triumph by finding her husband and building her new family. Likewise, Maria Susanna Cummins’ *The Lamplighter* (1854) narrates a story of Gertrude, an orphan girl rescued at the age of eight by a kind old lamplighter. She is lovingly raised and taught virtues and religious faith by him. As a result, she is finally rewarded with marriage to a childhood friend and reunion with her father. By emphasizing potential loss of affectionate ties, sentimental novelists emphasize how significant they are.

2 While admitting that making of a family plays a central role for sentimental heroines, Weinstein insists that “many of them [sentimental novels] fiercely challenge the patriarchal regime of the biological family by calling attention to the frequency with which fathers neglect the economic as well as emotional obligations owed to their children.” According to her, “[t]o extend the meaning of family is to extend the possibility of sympathy” (9).

in his article and major works such as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and its sequel *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). As a teenager in Keokuk, Iowa, Samuel Clemens wrote poetry such as "To Jennie" (1853) and "To Mollie" (1854). For example, "To Jennie" is depicted as follows:

Good-bye! A kind good-bye,
 I bid you now, my friend,
 And though 'tis sad to speak the word,
 To destiny I bend.

And though it be decreed by Fate,
 That we ne'er meet again,
 Your image, graven on my heart,
 Forever shall remain.

Aye, in my heart thoult have a place,
 Among the friends held dear, —
 Nor shall the hand of Time efface
 The memories written there.

Good bye,
 S.L.C.

(quoted in Norton version of *Huck Finn* 306)

Jennie was Ann Virginia Ruffner, with whom Clemens socialized briefly in 1853 before she left town. His grief and sorrow of his separation from Jennie is typical of sentimental novel's convention emphasizing affectionate ties with the beloved. Furthermore, we should not miss that Clemens makes a clear contrast between "Fate" and his personal memory of Jennie. He admits that he was defeated by "destiny" or "Fate," which seems to go beyond time and man's will. At the same time, Clemens tries to resist destiny, by showing strong attachment to his own memory. As Thomas Cooley, the editor of the Norton version of *Huck Finn*, points out, there is not a hint of irony,

burlesque, and satire at all, in this poetry written by Samuel Clemens (206n). The poem indicates Clemens' predilection for his own personal past, sentiment, and nostalgia. He has a romantic fantasy that his affection for her is so infinite that it can transcend the "Fate" and continues forever.

Here we can recognize what Justin Kaplan calls "the doubleness of Samuel L. Clemens and Mark Twain" (101). On the one hand, Clemens privately shows his preferences for sentimental poetries and novels. In fact, he at first privately wrote *The Prince and The Pauper* (1882) to his daughters, and anonymously wrote *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), both of which are reminiscent of sentimental novels, in terms of their style and contents.³ Interestingly enough, his most beloved daughter, Susy claimed that "'His Prince and Pauper' is his most original, and best production" (*Autobiography Vol.2*, 332). Twain responded on September 21, 1906: "[s]he has said it well and correctly. Humor is a subject which has never had much interest for me" (*Autobiography Vol.2*, 332). His tendency for sentimentalism is obvious from his private life as well. From 1874, Clemens, his wife Olivia, and their daughters moved to Hartford, Connecticut, and became close neighbors of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Stowe was their family friend, and they owned a variety of her books. Indeed, Clemens was interested in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) not only for its contents, but also for its popularity, noting its many dramatic performances and comparing the book to his own works (Harris "Harriet Beecher Stowe"

3 In other stories, too, Twain's short story "Which It Heaven? or Hell?" (1902) is about a moral dilemma that elderly sisters are confronted with when tending their dying niece and the latter's dying daughter. (Though they firmly believe any kind of lie to be a sin, they hide from them each one's critical condition and tell a lie about them respectively.) R. Kent Rasmussen evaluates this piece as "a sentimental story" (206). "Which It Heaven? or Hell?" draw relatively less attention from critics and scholars than Twain's other works such as *The Prince and The Pauper* and *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. Nevertheless, the story suggests that Twain obviously shows his preference for sentimental topics.

717). The autobiographical studies about Samuel Clemens make it clear that he read sentimental novels with appreciation, including Stowe's magnum opus.

Nevertheless, Mark Twain publicly burlesqued and downplayed sentimental novels and their conventions, establishing his position as a humor writer. For instance, in *Life on the Mississippi* (1883), Twain vehemently criticized the Southern partiality for romantic and sentimental novels of Sir Walter Scott, arguing that they helped cause the huge catastrophe of the Civil War:

There [in our South], the genuine and wholesome civilization of the nineteenth century is curiously confused and commingled with the Walter Scott Middle-Age sham civilization; and so you have practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works, mixed up with the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past that is dead, and out of charity ought to be buried. But for the Sir Walter disease, the character of the Southerner--or Southron, according to Sir Walter's starchier way of phrasing it--would be wholly modern, in place of modern and medieval mixed, and the South would be fully a generation further advanced than it is. (332)

Twain elsewhere describes the South's attachment to the past as what he calls "Sir Walter Scott disease." In his view, the worst traits of southern character and manners stem from Scott's romanticism, and it functions to prevent the Southerners from facing southern backwardness. In the quote above, Twain makes a stark contrast between "practical, common-sense, progressive ideas, and progressive works" and "the duel, the inflated speech, and the jejune romanticism of an absurd past." In other words, the South is characterized as retrogressive in contradistinction to modernity and progress, which is implicitly represented by the North. In this way, Twain vehemently criticizes the southern backwardness in terms of romanticism and sentimentalism. His critique of sentimentality depends upon such a dichotomy he himself makes

between civilization and anti-civilization.

Likewise, he also has his protagonist Huck feel uncomfortable with the sentimental pictures and poetries left by Emmeline Grangerford, a dead fifteen-year-old girl in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*:

There was one where a young lady was at a window looking up at the moon, and tears running down her cheeks; and she had an open letter in one hand with black sealing wax showing on one edge of it, and she was mashing a locket with a chain to it against her mouth, and underneath the picture it said “And Art Thou Gone Yes Thou Art Gone Alas.” These was all nice pictures, I reckon, but I didn’t somehow seem to take to them, because if ever I was down a little they always give me the fantods. (121)

Emmeline’s works display a sentimental obsession with death, eternal separation, and sorrow that gives Huck “the fantods.” Unlike tears celebrated by the sentimental writers, Emmeline’s drawing of tears is regarded as expression of narcissism and self-pity. Like Twain’s indictment of Sir Walter Scott, the protagonist’s reaction to her indicates his irritation: her pictures and poetry are aesthetically conventional and obscure the underlying culture in which a homicidal feud is destroying her family as well as the brutal injustice of a society founded on slavery.

Furthermore, Twain tries to differentiate the sentimental culture Emmeline embodies from Huck and Jim’s world in terms of gender. As shown above, sentimental culture tends to be associated with women and feminine culture. By making his protagonist feel uncomfortable about Emmeline’s works, the author makes a stark binary between masculine and feminine culture.

Ironically enough, the portrait of a young lady on a crayon drawing recalls the girls in young Clemens’ poetry. The girl in Emmeline’s drawing expresses sorrow of separation, just like the young Clemens. Nevertheless,

whereas he sincerely expressed his sorrow about the separation from the girl he loved, Twain burlesques the same type of girl Emmeline draws. Leland Krauth makes a point concerning this contradiction:

The sentimental was, in short, very much with Mark Twain. It was also *in* him. Twain's burlesque of the cult in *Huckleberry Finn*, is in part, I believe, a check against his own susceptibility, and in part a diversion calculated to deflect our attention away from Huck's own overabundance of emotion. ("The Victorian Southwestern Humor" 230)

Indeed, while caricaturing Emmeline's works, Twain dramatizes Huck's sentimental and sympathetic feeling for Jim. Twain's contradictory attitudes toward sentimentality lead us to exploring why he privately shows an inclination and preference for it even as he publicly problematizes and criticizes sentimentality at the same time. In fact, Twain's attack on the Southern partiality for Sir Walter Scott's novel and Huck's reaction toward Emmeline's works suggest that he believed that sentimental culture and works were linked with insincere, narcissistic, or false feelings. In his view, sentimentality functions as a screen deflecting attention away from the harsh realities of racial and familial conflict in the South.

In short, Twain tended to make a stark contrast between sentimentality and modernity. While associating progress mainly with masculinity, the North, and civilization, Twain viewed sentimentality as feminine, Southern, nostalgic for the past, and anti-civilization. His dichotomies lead us to confirming that he performs "Mark Twain" as an anti-sentimental and masculine writer.

3. Aunt Rachel's Voice

Despite his public attack against sentimental novel and culture, Twain dramatizes sentimental topics like separation from family members in his short stories. "A True Story, Repeated Word for Word as I heard It" (1874)

thematizes separation under slavery and reunion between a black mother and her son. It begins in the first-person from the point of view of “Misto C” suggestive of Clemens himself. When he unintentionally asks Aunt Rachel, a black servant aged about sixty who is described as “a cheerful hearty soul” (94), about how she could have lived so long with no trouble, she tells a story of losing her family members “without even a smile in her voice”: “An’ dey sole my ole man, an’ took him away, an’ dey began to sell my chill’en an’ take dem away, an’ I begin to cry; an’ de man say, ‘shet up yo’ dam blubberin’, an’ hit me on de mouf wid his han’” (96). On the one hand, her narrative shares with sentimental novel the similar topic of a broken-up family. On the other hand, it demonstrates that tears Aunt Rachel sheds do not serve as sympathetic exchange between her and her slave trader at all. Here we can detect that her narrative not merely follow but also differ from sentimental fiction’s convention. Whereas sentimental novelists approve tears as compassionate exchange, tears of a slave woman in the context of slavery do not affect a slave trader at all. In addition to her separation from her family, her dialect narrative shows how she endured many difficulties including the Civil War and its aftermath, when she and other slaves abandoned by their southern masters had to defend themselves. She bore all these troubles with pride and dignity and never abandoned her hope to have a reunion with her youngest son Henry.

Thus, her narrative can be taken as a contesting version of a sentimental novel. As Nina Baym rightly maintains in her book *Woman’s Fiction*, “the slave [of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*] was not a woman, and the slave woman’s problems were of another order of magnitude than the bourgeois heroine’s” (268). By the same token, Aunt Rachel in the short story is regarded not as a woman but just a commodity, as shown in the scene where the slave trader ignores her cry and tears and hits her on the mouth. Whereas white women in tears might move the reader’s heart or conscience, tears shed

by black slaves have little or no effect on the part of slave traders.

Nevertheless, as Arthur G. Pettit calls "A True Story" "a heavy dose of Victorian sentiment" (53), her separation from and moving reunion with Henry is founded on sentimental novels' favorite theme: separation and moving reunion between family members. Having managed to escape from the South, grown-up Henry reappears as a Union soldier in her kitchen. In a discovery scene, she recognizes him by the mark on his forehead and wrist: "De pan drop' on de flo' an' I's doin' to you—an' den I goes for his forehead an' push de hair back so, an' 'Boy!' I say, 'if you ain't my Henry, what is you doin' wid dis welt on yo' wris' an' da tsk-yar on yo' forehead? De Lord God ob heaven be praise' I got my own ag'in!" (98). To be sure, there is no description of sympathetic exchanges like sobbing, tears, and embraces between daughter and father expressed in a typical sentimental novel *Lampighter*.⁴ Nevertheless, in spite of years of separation between a black mother and her son, these marks on Henry's body explicitly indicates that he is her own son, just as Henry recognizes her by the trope of self-assertion. Paradoxically, Twain effectively dramatizes the reunion between the black mother and her son, one of the favorite topics of sentimental novels, by evading sentimental tropes such as tears and embracing.

4 When the protagonist in *Lampighter*, Gertrude has a reunion with her father, who has been searching for her for years, the description of the sensation the heroine feels is described as follows: "So noiseless is her light step, that before he is conscious of her presence, she has thrown herself upon his bosom and, her whole frame trembling with the vehemence of long-suppressed agitation, burst into a torrent of passionate tears, interrupted only by frequent sobs, so deep and so exhausting that her father, with his arms folded around her, and clasping her so closely to his heart that she feels its irregular beating, endeavours to still the tempest of her grief, whispering softly, as to an infant, 'Hush! hush, my child! you frighten me!'" (392). The sobbing, tears, and embraces of the two represent an affective exchange between the father and the daughter after years of separation. Thus, the sentimentalists' approval of sympathy results in the repeated description of tears as an external sign of compassionate emotion in their novels.

Interestingly, this short story is not only sentimental but also a sort of critique of the ignorance of the narrator “Misto C—.” In the end of the novel, she concludes her narrative: “Oh no, Misto C—. I hain’t had no trouble. An’ no *joy!*” (98). Given the narrator’s remark—“Aunt Rachel, how is it that you’ve lived sixty years and never had any trouble?” (94)—, her last words function as a critique of white male ignorance of black female slaves’ difficulties. To put it another way, Aunt Rachel’s narrative leads white readers to recognizing how ignorant and insulated they are from understanding the severe life circumstances of Aunt Rachel. Here, we recognize how the narrator draws a boundary between himself and her. First, when he appears in the novel, the white male narrator behaves in a paternalistic way toward Aunt Rachel. As her story goes on, however, it turns out how superficial his understanding of Aunt Rachel is. Furthermore, Aunt Rachel, just like Jim in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, insists that “An’ we had chil’en—seven chil’en—an’ we loved dem chil’en just de same as you loves yo’ chil’en” (95). The boundary between Aunt Rachel and the narrator gradually disappears. Finally, as Aunt Rachel closes the novel by her last word, the narrator is completely silenced. As Judith Yaross Lee argues, “The absence of a closing frame by Misto C—(a convention of the genre) scorns him further by giving Aunt Rachel the last word” (752). The ending of the short story shows that the narrator loses his privileged voice and is overwhelmed by Aunt Rachel’s voice.

4. Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown that Twain/Clemens had trouble with his own sentimentality. Despite his outward attitude towards sentimental discourse, he was deeply influenced by it. In particular, I explored how the narrator of “A True Story” is so overwhelmed by sentimental power Aunt Rachel exercises. Her sentimental narrative leads Twain to confronting his

unrecognized privilege over, and utter ignorance of, others in terms of race and gender. Interestingly, sentimental power is exercised not merely by Aunt Rachel but also other characters such as a mother of Tom Canty in *the Prince and the Pauper*, Jim in *Huck Finn*, Sandy in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, and Roxana in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. In spite of his open critique of sentimentality, Twain/Clemens's sentimental trouble allowed him to encounter racial and gender differences, leading to questioning his white male privilege and authority.

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