

Spring 2016

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Morgan, "The Making of a Southern Man" (2016). *English Class Publications*. Paper 22.
http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/english_class_publications/22

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American Literature II

5 April 2016

The Making of a Southern Man

What exactly makes a man? Could it have anything to do with appearance, strength, or interests? Does it occur at a specific age, or does it happen differently for every boy? Each culture decides these ideas for itself, and the American south is no different. Southern ideals shape a boy's upbringing and guide his transition to adulthood. The father-son relationship plays an especially crucial role in the development of a white southern man.¹ A male's development has to do with his father's example—the ideals with which his father raised him. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* demonstrate this. By comparing the way southern culture has changed over the span of roughly a century, readers can see what exactly makes a male character a man. Ultimately, the southern man is marked by the ideals of strong morals and dedication to family.

Boys naturally exhibit characteristics that men do not. This allows them to develop and mature; no toddler acts like a man as a toddler. These characteristics typically include qualities like “aggression without control” and an “almost brutish nature” (Rotundo 21). Most little boys like to roughhouse. People accept it as normal. As boys grow older, however, it becomes less and less acceptable. The character Huckleberry Finn demonstrates these qualities. He and his friends share such an immense enthusiasm for make-believe violence that they form a gang, intending to

¹ “AAA father was the first man a boy knew, was the ultimate source of material comforts, made decisions that controlled a boy's life, and was a boy's predominant role model as a man” (Rotundo 27).

“stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money” (Twain 136). They take themselves seriously, sealing the deal with a blood oath and a promise to murder the families of dissenters. Generally, readers find this description funny and satirical because Huck and the gang are children, not adults. Otherwise, this gang would present a real and frightening problem. Ordinary children do not truly intend to wreak havoc on their communities, as much as they may pretend to. They grow out of it.

Similarly, typical boys like to show off in a way men generally do not. Boys across generations value “physical prowess and the various forms of courage” (Rotundo 43). In other words, boys strive to appear brave and strong. Huck desperately wants admission into Tom’s gang—it seems to provide a sort of validation for him. The acts of sneaking out, sneaking past Jim, and attacking a Sunday school class all thrill him. They allow him to demonstrate his own courage and adventurous spirit. When a boy backs down from similar situations, like Tommy Barnes, the others ostracize him. The gang ridicules Tommy for wanting to back out, calling “him a cry-baby” (Twain 137). However, they tease each other as a way of forming bonds of friendship, not out of real dislike. Most young boys place high value on both loyalty and combat. The small groups of friends that form “[represent] a curious mixture: affection joined with combat; mutual nurture combined with assault and battery” (Rotundo 39). In other words, they show affection through fighting and look down on those who cannot handle it. The Tommy Barnes situation demonstrates this idea—the gang’s treatment of him exemplifies the fierce loyalty of young boys that adults seem to lose. Friendships, such as Huck’s with the members of Tom’s gang, are intended to last forever.

One of the most important facets of Huck’s personality is his love of dramatics and pranks. In escaping the island, he cannot resist creating a convoluted, highly detailed plan. He

imagines that searchers will “follow the track of the sackful of rocks to the shore and then drag the river for [him]. And they’ll follow that meal track to the lake and go browsing down the creek that leads out of it to find the robbers that killed [him] and took the things” (Twain 151). It seems that only a young boy could think of such a wild plan of escape. Similarly, Huck passionately loves pulling pranks. When he finds Jim and the raft after briefly getting separated, he lays down and pretends to wake, informing Jim that he “hain’t seen no tow-head”—Jim dreamed their adventure in the fog (Twain 181). Dramatics and pranking make up an essential part of Huck’s personality in the novel. They also demonstrate his boyishness. Pranks act as “a kind of guerilla warfare that boys wage against the adult world” (Rotundo 47). Though usually harmless, they serve as a form of rebellion, of childishness. As Huck matures in the novel, he begins to pull fewer pranks.

Another general characteristic of boys is an enthusiasm for imitating adult life. Many games reflect adult activities. Between playing soldier or cowboy or even businessman, most boys take “particular interest in imitating—or taking part in—the work of a specially admired man: their father” (Rotundo 37). Even Huck has the tendency to imagine adulthood in a glorified way. He sets up “a nice camp in the thick woods” on Jackson’s Island, taking pride in declaring himself “boss of it” (Twain 154). He hunts, fishes, explores, and defends himself— adult responsibilities that provide a sense of wonder to a child. For someone so young, he acts in a remarkably self-sufficient manner.

Manhood, on the other hand, holds different ideals. One of these ideals, particularly in the nineteenth-century south, means having “an independent household and landownership, a submissive wife and children, and, ideally, slaves” (Friend, ix). In regards to this idea, Pap hasn’t quite achieved manhood. He does not own anything, he has no wife, and he definitely does not

have a submissive son. This could explain why he tries to thrash Huck into obedience. Even after he kidnaps his son, he gets “too handy with his hick’ry” (Twain 145). In taking Huck back to his house in the woods, Pap attempts to prove his manliness. He tries to demonstrate that he has somewhere to go and can make his son obey him.

A southern man would also refuse to show weakness. This could come about in a variety of ways; materialism, femininity, or lack of leadership threatens a male’s “claims on manhood” (Friend, xiii). Pap once more strives to appear manly in this way. He blusters and lies and threatens, all to no avail—the only talent he really has is “raising Cain around town” (Twain 144). It seems as though Pap tries to make up in his forceful personality for what he lacks in person.

Furthermore, he expresses no affection for Huck. Although a southern man may not give his sons a great deal of tangible affection, he is still “encouraged to love and cherish” them (Rotundo 27). This comes as a crucial part of fatherhood. As already mentioned, fatherhood and manhood go hand in hand; a real man also acts as a good father. Contrary to this, Pap terrorizes Huck and shows contempt rather than love. He threatens to “learn people to bring up a boy to put on airs over his own father and let on to be better’n what *he* is” (Twain 142). Rather than allowing Huck to make improvements, he gives in to vindictiveness. He makes Huck leave school and the Widow’s against his will, and then neglects him. As this goes against the values of southern men, Pap continues in his state of physical manhood only.

Although Huck does not have the influence of his father to learn from, he still matures and begins to grow into manhood himself. Manhood requires a person “to be strengthened in conscience and spirit” (Rotundo 23). This describes Huck rather than Pap. Pap does not seem to possess a conscience or any sort of moral compass. Huck, however, has started to develop one as

a child. After experiencing many “flaws and failures of several definitions of American manhood,” he creates his own definition (“*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*”). At the climax of the novel, he has “to decide, forever, betwixt two things”—helping Jim or informing Miss Watson of Jim’s whereabouts (Twain 262). In other words, Huck makes an intentional, moral decision based off his own feelings and rationale. He decides to face consequences for his actions and “go to hell” rather than do what society expects (Twain 262). At this point, Huck thinks more like a man than a boy.

Where does Huck learn about manhood, then? He lacks the example of Pap, who cannot be considered a real man in terms of his own period. The closest thing Huck has to a father is Jim. Although his contemporaries would not consider Jim a man at all, he demonstrates all the values of his time—a wife and kids, lack of femininity, a generally loving nature, and strong morals. His enslavement presents the only disadvantage. Society considers Jim less than a person because of his situation in life and the ignorance that comes with having no education. However, the bond that grows between Huck and Jim after Jim’s escape reads more like a father-son relationship than a mere friendship. Upon their reunion, Huck says that “nothing ever sounded so good before” as the sound of Jim’s voice, and describes how Jim “grabbed [him] and [hugged] him, he was so glad to see [him]” (Twain 201). The affection he shows Jim, and the affection he receives in return, makes it obvious that Jim has become a father figure. He even learns through his adventures what it means to be a man. He realizes the harm of pranks, and learns that he needs to follow his own convictions in moral dilemmas. He may have gained these traits on his own. Without Jim’s influence, however, the likelihood of that happening decreases. Without some semblance of an example to follow, he would not know how an adult male should act.

Roughly one hundred years after the events in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* take place, the action of *To Kill a Mockingbird* occurs. How much had the south changed in this century? It had seen the Civil War, Reconstruction, World War I, and the onset of the Great Depression. Segregation and Jim Crow laws gained prominence. However, the ideals of manhood continued in the same vein. Father-son relationships still played a vital role in the shaping of a man. Southern men still had gentlemanly behaviors expected of them. However, one major change came about: fathers now sought “closer emotional ties, expressed affection with growing ease, enjoyed playful times with their boys” (Rotundo 27). The twentieth-century father actively showed affection whereas the nineteenth-century father did not, at least not as often. Atticus Finch demonstrates this newer type of manhood.

Although manhood had changed, the nature of boys had not. Jem acts similarly to Huck, which is similar to typical boys across centuries. Among other traits, they especially value “physical prowess and the various forms of courage” (Rotundo 43). Jem demonstrates these qualities multiple times throughout *To Kill a Mockingbird*. For instance, instead of backing down from Dill’s dare to touch the Radley house, Jem runs “to the side of the house, [slaps] it with his palm,” and then runs back to safety (Lee 16). He obviously fears this house. Dill dares him multiple times to venture into the yard, and he begins to feel obligated to prove his bravery to both Dill and his younger sister. After he achieves this, he becomes much more eager to perform more daring adventures—adventures he previously would have shunned completely. He and Dill first try to give a note to Boo Radley, and then boost their audacity by attempting “to peep in the window with the loose shutter to see if they [can] get a look at Boo Radley” (Lee 58). Jem once again wants to show off. He seems to desire Scout’s and Dill’s admiration by going to a criminal’s house. Of course, this cannot help but appear a bit childish in the overall scheme.

Atticus, for example, asks his children to “stop tormenting that man” (Lee 54). Adults should not spy on their neighbors, mock them, or tell outrageous stories about them. They also generally discourage showing off. Jem exemplifies his own childishness in these acts, however innocent his intentions. He does what he wants despite anyone’s protests—not out of spite, but out of wanting to take control of his own environment.

Like Huck, Jem grows into more of a man throughout the novel. Although his basic personality does not change, he begins to assume more responsibility; he begins to imitate the adult world. For instance, he has always looked after Scout. He tries to shield her from harm, teach her, and keep her out of trouble. Jem initially refuses to run up to the Radley house because he “[has] his little sister to think of” (Lee 15). Even Scout notices that he demonstrates an uncommonly large amount of protectiveness for an older brother. He also develops an extremely strong sense of morals. Jem takes it personally when Mrs. Dubose calls Atticus names. Although Jem has entered a “phase of self-conscious rectitude” and possesses “a naturally tranquil disposition and a slow fuse,” he gives into rage on his father’s behalf and destroys Mrs. Dubose’s flowers (Lee 118). Of course, by doing so he shows his own childishness—he has not quite cast it off yet. This example does, however, exemplify the development of unshakeable morals, a facet of adulthood in itself. As the novel progresses, he questions more and begins to reflect on heavier issues of life. He relates the court proceeding to Scout when she does not understand them and gets excited about the trial. At one point he “[seems] to be having a quiet fit. He [pounds] the balcony rail softly, and once he [whispers], ‘We’ve got him’” (Lee 202). This description seems more appropriate for a man, not a boy.

Jem also discusses events in the manner of a grown man, and feels passion about law matters in a way more suited for a lawyer than a young boy. After the jury condemns Tom

Robinson, Jem comments that “’t’s all right to talk like that—can’t any Christian judges an’ lawyers make up for heathen juries... soon’s I get grown—” (Lee 246). Here, Jem’s words seem out of place when considering his age. The passion and insight with which he speaks seem far more suited to an experienced lawyer than a boy of twelve. The understanding he gains helps him grow. Atticus’s example provides him with a way to begin his ascent into adulthood while keeping his own personality, and a bit of his childishness.

Another way in which southern manhood in the twentieth century looked different from southern manhood of the previous century is in the role of the father. Fathers began “to play a critical role in shaping their children’s personality development and individual adjustment” (“Fatherhood”). In other words, society started to expect a southern father to influence the growth of his children in a positive way. He had more power. Atticus demonstrates this new type of fatherhood. Whereas Pap, a century before *To Kill a Mockingbird*, hardly ever sees his son, Atticus exerts an enormous amount of influence in the way his children think. He knows that he is their primary role model:

Before Jem looks at anyone else he looks at me, and I’ve tried to live so I can look squarely back at him... if I connived at something like this, frankly I couldn’t meet his eye, and the day I can’t do that I’ll know I’ve lost him... if they don’t trust me they won’t trust anybody. (Lee 314)

Scout and Jem look to him first because he is the most important figure in their lives. Jem especially looks up to him, as Atticus provides the model for manhood that he will follow as he grows up. He has no other male role models. Should Atticus prove a bad example, like Pap, Jem may not grow into a man of strong morals and convictions. Honor and morality already played a

major role in the ideals of the south; however, with the coming of the twentieth century, people began to realize the importance the father played in the shaping of these ideals.

Similarly, responsibility as a general trait gained significance. While people had always taken parental duties seriously, men began treating fatherhood with a new reverence in the twentieth century. Now, southern men “were quiet and sober, for theirs was a life of serious business. They had families to support, reputations to earn, responsibilities to meet” (Rotundo 55). Atticus works a great deal. Some of his dedication to his job may be due to the time-consuming nature of his career, but much of it likely results from trying to meet his family’s needs. An important aspect of this idea involves provision—men “became increasingly focused on breadwinning” (“Fatherhood”). Perhaps this came about during the Great Depression. With money and resources so scarce, men had to work harder than normal, often to no avail. After all, when Scout asks Atticus if they are poor, he tells her that they “are indeed” (Lee 23). Readers can assume he works so much in order for his family to have enough food. He sets an example in thinking of others before himself. This aspect of his personality, combined with the integrity he demonstrates in choosing to defend Tom Robinson, paints a picture of the responsible father idealized by the twentieth-century south.

Fathers also became more emotionally available. In the past, they had acted more closed off—not uncaring, just distant. However, with the new century, the balance began shifting. Now, “emotion rather than intellect drove southern masculinity” (May viii). Atticus portrays this idea as well. Though outwardly dry and unemotional, he shows his children how much he cares about them by his interactions with them. For example, he allows Scout to sit in his lap many times throughout the novel and comforts her when she gets upset. After the drama outside the jail, “Atticus [reaches] out and [massages] Jem’s hair, his one gesture of affection” (Lee 176). These

small ways of demonstrating emotion, though not said outright, prove just how much Atticus loves his children. This too proves that Atticus is a real man in terms of the 1930s south. Nurture and sensitivity gained significance in this time period in a way they previously had not.

Southern manhood has not changed significantly throughout the centuries. Granted, there are a number of small differences—for example, the emphasis on responsibility and emotion during the twentieth century. What holds true is that society constructs the idea of manhood. Regardless of whether we read nineteenth or twentieth-century literature or experience it in modern day life, changing societies impose a certain set of values on various groups, and the south is no different from the rest of the world. It helps to realize this; it aids in understanding characters' motivations, for example. A man in a novel such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* may act in a seemingly strange way because of the different ideals of his society. It also allows us to understand men today, too. If we consider the ways our society, especially in the south, has changed since the 1930s, we may better understand people. Reading *Huck Finn* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* in this light allows readers to grasp the concept of socially constructed manhood. Not only does it add depth to the male characters, but it gives insight into our own world.

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