

Tess and Huck: Two Paths to Fulfillment

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Tessibel Skinner, as found in Grace Miller White's novel Tess of the Storm Country is a fifteen-year-old girl growing up along the shores of Cayuga Lake in 1909. As the Mississippi River provides the enabling medium for the novel Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, so too does the lake inform and encapsulate the world of Tess, a girl living with her father as a lakeside squatter, poaching fish for sale and subsistence. Like Huck's Pap, "Daddy" Orrin Skinner is a social pariah, but unlike Pap, he is a good man who deserts Tess only when he is wrongly accused of murdering a game warden. Like Huck's support of the runaway slave Jim, Tess bends the norms of society by caring for the illegitimate baby of Teola, the sister of Frederick, the Cornell student whom she loves. Unlike Huck, Tess is beaten not by Pap, but by the Reverend Graves, the illiberal minister who is Teola and Frederick's father, when she steals milk for the baby. Yet while the details of the transformation that each undergoes differ in ways that we will explore, the goal of this paper is to show that, more often than not, the growth of Tess and Huck is comparable throughout their namesake works.

We will also examine the descriptive language of Twain and White. How the authors' life experiences influenced their treatment of characters will be looked at. We will consider how the two novels have been treated in early film in the years after they were written. Finally, the thematic relationship between the two novels will be discussed.

When we first meet Tess she is a feckless girl who cooks fish and bacon for Daddy in their one-room hut. "Tess could climb to the top of the highest pine tree in the forest yonder; she could squirm through the underbrush with the agility of a

rabbit."¹ She upbraids a neighbor for stealing eggs out of a robin's nest. Similarly, Huck Finn's life on Jackson's Island is deeply engaged with nature: "I was boss of it; it all belonged to me...I wanted to know all about it; I found plenty strawberries, ... and green summer grapes, ...and the green blackberries was just beginning to show."²

Tess' mother died in childbirth. Besides Daddy she has Frederick, a pet toad named after her student crush. The real Frederick is a Cornell freshman and the son of the Minister Graves, on one corner of whose summer property the Skinners live by a legal technicality as squatters. Her best friend is Myra Longman, an unmarried young woman with a baby fathered by the disagreeable fisherman Ben Letts. In singing to the child, not without affection called the 'brat', Tess proves that she is a soothing caregiver. Ben disavows any interest in marrying Myra or in supporting the child. In fact, both he and Ezra Longman, Myra's brother have eyes for Tess and in their own crude way press their interest on her, with no success.

Tess' everyday life reaches a crisis when, during a night of poaching in the lake with Ben and Ezra, Orrin Skinner is arrested for killing a game warden who apprehends them. The next morning, the rest of the members of the party return to Skinner's hut, to give the sad news to Tess. Not knowing how to cope with this shock, Tess runs out calling the name "Frederick" to obtain comfort from her beloved toad. She finds him dead, the victim of a sadistic attempt by Ben Letts to focus her attention on him. Suddenly at the door of the hut appears the real Frederick, the student who one day hopes to be a minister. He gives Tess a way forward. "He had said that the cross and crown would save her daddy--had said to pray to the G-d of whom she knew so little, and his words had given birth to a great faith within her."³ This is Tess' first great transformative leap in the novel. In a similar crisis, Huck tears himself from his abusive Pap, and although in this case the separation between father and child is self-induced and beneficial, it nonetheless throws Huck into the life of a solitary runaway. The chance meeting

¹ Miller White, Grace, *Tess of the Storm Country*, New York, Grosset & Dunlap, 1909, p. 9.

² Twain, Mark, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York, Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003, pp. 38-39.

³ White, op. cit., p. 42.

of Huck with Jim on Jackson's Island provided a turning point in Huck's life in way comparable to what has just happened to Tess. As Huck says, "I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn't lonesome, now."⁴

Tess is fortunate in that, as the trial leading to Daddy's conviction for murder and sentencing to execution concludes, a new friend, Professor De Forrest Young of the Cornell Law School, rises to proclaim his innocence. Young takes the case pro bono and attempts to improve Tess by offering to send her to school to enhance the self-taught Bible reading which is a key outgrowth of Frederick's intercession. Young in affect becomes Tess' Miss Watson, offering to promote Tess' growth into literacy and higher social effectiveness at some cost to her independence. As Huck eventually rejects the bounds enforced by a proscribed life, so Tess immediately resists Young's entreaties, preferring to maintain the squatter's hut for Daddy's eventual return. In their interplay, Young soon falls in love with Tess, adding a measure of romantic rivalry in the novel not mirrored in Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

A further complication in Tess' life occurs when Teola is introduced to Dan Jordan, a brother of Frederick in the "Cranium" fraternity. Teola and Dan fall in love, and on a winter sleigh-ride escapade, they make love. When Teola informs Dan that she is pregnant, he acts responsibly, talking of getting a job at the end of the semester in order to provide a home for Teola and the child. Soon after this revelation, Dan perishes while trying to rescue three pledges from a fire in the tower of the "Cranium" fraternity house. These events place Teola, an unwed pregnant woman in the first decade of the last century, in an untenable position.

We can best understand Teola's plight by reference to a true story. We speak now of Grace Brown, a 19 year old fabric cutter at the Gillette Skirt Company in Cortland, New York, about 20 miles from Ithaca.⁵ She dates Chester Gillette, 23, nephew of the owner, and someone who, though complicit in Grace's pregnancy, is unwilling to marry her. The prospects for Grace, and for Teola, are summarized

⁴ Twain, op. cit. p. 41.

⁵ Brownell, Joseph W. and Wawrzaszek, Patricia A., *Adirondack Tragedy: The Gillette Murder Case of 1906*, Interlaken, Heart of the Lake Publishing Co., 1986, p. 41. This is the story which on which Theodore Dreiser based the novel *An American Tragedy*.

in the following paragraph from *Adirondack Tragedy* : "It is difficult to appreciate the predicament in which Grace was trapped. Should her problems become public knowledge she would be treated as a social outcast. With the threat of stigma hanging over her she could confide in no one; not her parents, who would feel outrage and hurt; not a counselor, for in that day there were none. There was of course the clergy but whether Grace dared to share her secret with a minister is doubtful and in any event he could offer as solutions only marriage and prayer".⁶

Winter turns to spring, and Teola's parents go to Europe. On a walk, Tess finds an ill, distraught Teola in the woods. Sensing that the latter has a "woman's kind of sick", Tess brings her back to the hut and summons Mother Moll, the local midwife. That afternoon, a little Dan is born, a sickly baby with a serious birthmark across its face. In the morning, Teola states confusion about caring for the child. "He air a-sleepin' now," replied Tess. "And he stays here with me, ye hear?"⁷ This is the second spiritual leap that Tess makes in the novel, for added to the burden of Daddy's incarceration, she offers to protect Teola by becoming a caregiver, something that may expose her to derision. Moreover, Tess promises to keep Teola's identity as the baby's mother a secret.

Some months before Tess had taken in a freezing Frederick who had just escaped from a class prank. The morning after a chaste night shared by the two, and with Frederick still sleeping, Tess answers the door to find Ben Letts who wants to take her away. Frederick wakes, slaps Letts down, and kicks him out. "Then the boy and girl turned and faced each other. The shanty rocked in the wind like the cradle of a child. The willow mourned its tale of winter over the roof, scraping the broken tin in hollow groans, shrieking now and then as a gust roared through it."⁸ The next step is Tess' first romantic kiss. And then Frederick promises the possibility of a deeper relationship, when he says "Tess, have you ever thought that, some time, we might be more to each other--some time in the future when

⁶ Ibid, p. 63.

⁷ White, op. cit., p. 225.

⁸ Ibid, p.182.

you have learned and studied much?"⁹ As with Professor Young, Tess demurs on the subject of going away to school, because in her absence the shack could be reclaimed by the landowner (Frederick's father), and thus unavailable to welcome Daddy back. But they part buoyed by having finally expressed their feelings for each other if only in a circumscribed way.

A few days after the baby's birth, while Teola is visiting Tess and her charge in the shanty, Frederick ducks in during a violent storm. Asking who the baby belongs to, he is met by the silence of Tess, unwilling to break her pledge, and the confusion of Teola, who finally blurts out "Don't blame her too much, she is only a girl!"¹⁰ The shock and disappointment in Frederick's eyes is inestimable, and for Tess, the intimation that she is the baby's mother crushes her dream of happiness with him. Frederick's anger is so great that he throws Tess' Bible into the fire. As Frederick and Teola leave at the chapter end, Tess says: "Ye can go, both of ye. Ye burned my Book, ye did, but ye can't take it out of my heart. The God up there ain't all yers. He air mine--and Daddy's--and the brat's."¹¹ With this statement, Tess punctuates her third transformation, from being guided by Frederick through her engagement with G-d to someone who deals with G-d directly.

The climax in Tess comes rather quickly. Teola, her health failing and her spirit broken, consistently refuses to admit the truth as Tess continues to care for the sickly baby. Frederick's disappointment in Tess cools to compassion when he returns with a Bible to replace the one he burned up. Young continues to work for Daddy's release as he comes to realize that Tess will never love him. Returning to Ithaca after one visit, he overhears Ben and Ezra arguing over "rights" to Tess and rescues the latter after Ben throws him into the pit called the Hog's Hole. He draws an admission from Ezra that Ben murdered the game warden and framed Daddy. The road to his exoneration is open, though yet unknown to Tess. At Teola's final visit, she begs for Tess to somehow have the baby baptized at that Sunday's special service for all babies. Tess takes the dying baby to the church, and when Reverend Graves refuses, she sprinkles the baby with holy water

⁹ Ibid, p. 185.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 268.

¹¹ Ibid p. 272.

herself, aided by a sympathetic congregant in chanting the baptismal prayer. This marks Tess' fourth and final vital transformation in the novel. In this action, as when Huck decides to insure Jim's freedom even if he himself goes to Hell, Tess defies the orthodoxy, not of slaveholding but of religious law, to do what in her heart is right.

Teola rises in the family pew. "Father," she cried, "Father, if you don't take the baby and baptize him in the name of the Savior, you will consign to everlasting darkness--...your own flesh and blood. G-d! dear G-d, take us both to Dan!.....Frederick pressed his way to his sister's side. The squatter threw up her head before him: for the first time since that last dreadful night, she looked directly into his eyes. Frederick's soul shone forth in the glance he sent her. G-d in his own time had given back the student."¹²

When Tess returns to the shack, she meets De Forrest Young standing outside. He ushers her in, where she is surprised by her now-released Daddy. Then Frederick arrives with a note from Reverend Graves stating that both Teola and the sickly baby have died and thanking Tess for caring for them both. As a part of his apology to the father-and-daughter squatters, he will hand over the lease to the land they occupy to Orrin Skinner. "Tess--Tessibel, I can only say with my father that we all love you for what you have done for her...And for myself, I say again, as I have said many times I - I love you- with my whole soul!"¹³ At this point, overwhelmed by the return of her father, she is not ready yet to commit.¹⁴ In the novel's conclusion she states this in a way that shows White's mastery, shared with Twain, of regional dialect: "I air Daddy's brat," she whispered. "But I says," and she flashed Frederick a lightning-like glance through the red lashes before she dropped her eyes, and murmured, "but I says, as how I said before, that I are yer squatter."¹⁵

In the first paragraph of Chapter 19 of *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain writes the beautiful passage describing sunrise from Huck and Jim's perspective. In the long

¹² Ibid, pp. 357-8.

¹³ Ibid, p. 364.

¹⁴ For good reason, since *Tess of the Storm Country* is followed with several sequels.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 365.

sentence beginning with "The first thing to see, looking away over the water.." Twain uses the device of a chain of shorter sentences separated by semicolons which appears throughout the book with expressive power. White does not use this tool. She is adept, however, in describing the nature of the Storm Country. Soon after learning of Daddy's arrest, Tess is on the way to get her fortune told by Mother Moll. "She opened the door and stood for a moment before stepping into the abating storm. Her eyes fell upon a giant pine tree at the edge of the forest, far beyond her father's hut. It was silhouetted against a light streak in the southern sky, its long arms extending straight in the air. The branches of the tree had always made a fantastic figure in Tessibel's eyes. It took the form of a venerable old man and it had been one of her vivid imaginings,.... that some time the man shaped against the skies would step down in the flesh. Tess had grown to love him....--to watch him in silent, mystified longing as he bent toward her day after day. In the nodding head and swaying arms, Tessibel suddenly established Frederick's deity."¹⁶ So White's descriptive power is substantial but different from Twain's.

As the characters, language, and locations of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn drew from Twain's childhood in Hannibal, Missouri, so do the same factors stem in Tess from Grace Miller White's experiences growing up in Ithaca. She was born in 1868 one of 14 children.¹⁷ There were eight squatter families living on the Miller property, and they often stole the Millers' eggs and milk for their own use. Her father was tolerant of these acts, as he knew their poverty was real. The squatters were people who came to the area for seasonal work on the railroads or canal barges.¹⁸ On the off-season they depended on hunting, fishing, and trapping for sustenance. With their undesirable homes and manners, they were the targets of attempts to beautify the waterfront.

Tess' story has also been retold in the two silent movie versions of the novel made in 1914 and 1922. Movies are a vehicle for bringing a great novel to those

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 43.

¹⁷ Google Ithaca Journal Romancing the Stone.

¹⁸ Groups of the latter were towed to the northern tip of Cayuga Lake where they could enter the Erie Canal and from there proceed to the Great Lakes or New York Harbor. Thus, in theory, Cayuga Lake was as much a gateway to the world as was Mark Twain's Mississippi River.

members of the public who may not have the time or inclination to read. Silent movies are especially notable when their technical limitation is transcended by superior acting and careful cinematography. In both of these movies Tess was portrayed by Mary Pickford. "Displaying the same intuitive genius for film acting as (David Wark) Griffith had for direction, Pickford rejected the broad stock gestures of 19th century stage technique in favor of a stillness that riveted audience attention. She not only showed feeling, but she captured the subtle shift of feeling without dialogue and, as the first actor to understand the impact of the close-up, soared to the top of the new art form...."¹⁹ The 1914 movie, as her first box office blockbuster, helped raise Mary Pickford to major film stardom.²⁰ In the opening credits of the 1922 version, Pickford states that the 'Tess' character was her favorite role and that her goal was to employ more modern cinematic techniques in the remake.²¹ Unlike the majority of silent movies, which turned to dust due to poor storage methods, the latter version of Tess survives for viewing today.²²

As does the 1920 version of Huckleberry Finn, with Lewis Sargent as Huck and Gordon Griffith as Tom.²³ The movie was favorably received when it came out on February 20, 1920. "As far as possible, the inimitable flavor of Mark Twain has been retained, and it is said to be a production of which the great humorist...would approve," wrote the *Southeast Missourian*.

In summary, we have seen in Tess and Huck two characters who react to the traumatic problems of their lives with improvisation, with tenacity, and the willingness to take new paths and deal with obstacles that arise. In describing Tess, the film critic Robert K. Klepper states that "its message is a strong one, showing examples of one household in which traditional values are preached but not practiced, and the other household in which these morals are practiced, but

¹⁹At <https://www.tcm.com>, search Mary Pickford. Left click Mary Pickford, Actor, Biography.

²⁰ Klepper, Robert K., *Silent Films 1877-1996: A Critical Guide to 646 Movies*, Jefferson, McFarland & Company, Inc, Publishers, 1999, p. 70.

²¹ Ibid, p. 241.

²² Available as a DVD under the Image Entertainment label.

²³ At <https://www.tcm.com> search Huckleberry Finn. Left click Huckleberry Finn (1920), then Articles and Reviews.

not preached."²⁴ Clearly, the former household is that of Rev. Graves, while the latter is that of Daddy Skinner. As an experiment, let us replace the former household with the antebellum United States government, built on the concept of "all men are created equal" yet accepting slavery in the South. And let us replace the latter household with the micro society on Huck's raft, where equality of races exists in practice without being dictated. Then we see the common thematic thread which unites Tess of the Storm Country with Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

²⁴ Klepper, op. cit., p.241.