A Tramp at Home: 
*Huckleberry Finn*, 
Romantic Friendship, 
and the Homeless Man

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The central chapters of Mark Twain’s episodic, meandering narrative entitled *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) revolve around the experiences and relationships of four American males: a white male aged about fourteen called Huckleberry Finn; an African American middle-aged male called Jim; a white male aged about thirty, known as the “duke”; and a white male aged about seventy, known variously as the “dauphin” or the “king.” In legal terms Jim is at first a slave, owned by an unmarried white woman named Miss Watson, and later he is a freedman; the duke and the dauphin are citizens of the United States; and Huckleberry Finn is a minor and later an orphan. None of these individuals has a fixed, permanent abode, and none has steady employment. Jim has a wife and two children, though a marriage between slaves is not legally binding and, prior to his escape, he lived apart from his family. The duke and the dauphin, whatever their marital status, are currently not cohabiting with their families either.
Despite their differences in age, race, and social background, the four characters have one thing in common beyond being men without women: they are all on the run. Jim is on the run from his owner, Miss Watson; Huck is on the run from his father, Pap Finn, and his guardian, the Widow Douglas; and the duke and the dauphin are on the run from the law and the outraged citizenry of several towns and villages along the Mississippi River.

If we move from the legal and demographic realm into the more nebulous field of personal relations, we observe that Jim’s primary relationship throughout the narrative is with Huck, while the primary relationship of the duke and the dauphin is with each other. What is interesting about these men and their relationships is that they are hard to define, be it in nineteenth-century or twentieth-century terms. The men are in a liminal state, a kind of identitarian limbo. Their status as individuals is in flux—undefined and, maybe, undefinable. Are Huck and Jim best described as friends or, symbolically, as brothers? Are they like a father and son, as several critics have claimed, or maybe even a mother and son, as Gregg Camfield suggests in noting Jim’s role as moral instructor, his use of “terms of endearment,” and “his self-sacrificing behavior”?\(^1\) Is Huck and Jim’s relationship better captured by terms like master and slave, or is Jim most of all like a “mammy . . . clucking over her surrogate child”?\(^2\) Or does Jim play Becky Thatcher to Huck’s Tom Sawyer, as Leslie A. Fiedler once scandalously sug-

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\(^2\) Fredrick Woodard and Donnarae MacCann, “Minstrel Shackles and Nineteenth-Century ‘Liberality’ in *Huckleberry Finn*,” in *Satire or Evasion*, p. 146.
gested? Similar questions may be asked about the identities of the duke and the dauphin, as well as their relationship. Are they primarily confidence men, journeymen printers, or just plain tramps? Are they friends, business partners, lovers? All three, or none of the above?

Mark Twain himself described Huck and Jim as "close friends, bosom friends, drawn together by community of misfortune." In 1960 Franklin R. Rogers called their relationship "a curiously complex matter," while Henry Nash Smith, in his famous study of the novel from 1962, described it as a "strange comradeship." Neil Schmitz observed in the early 1970s that "Huck and Jim do that appalling thing—loaf on their raft with perfect equanimity, eat, drink and sleep together, enjoying . . . a horizontal as well as a vertical relationship." In 1994 Laura E. Skandera-Trombley wrote: "Huck and Jim form a bond that proves stronger than any other relationship in the novel, including Huck's friendship with Tom." To complete this brief survey of responses to Huck and Jim's bond: Christopher Looby observes that "Twain portrayed a loving interracial male same-sex bond in all of its dense affectional complexity, with all of its social inscrutability, and portrayed it within the ambiguous and tragic historical circumstances that made it so hard to understand and represent." This much is clear: Huck and Jim's relationship is unlike any other they engage in through-


out the course of the novel. Indeed, it is unlike any relationship between an African American and a white American that we know of in any other story of the period.

*Huckleberry Finn* contains the materials for a wide-ranging analysis of the different and competing understandings of American manhood in the nineteenth century and the ways in which men might interact with each other and love each other. In order better to understand the sexual and emotional dynamics of the novel, we must understand the other kinds of writings about men alone and together that Twain was responding to. In this essay I place Twain's classic novel in two nineteenth-century discursive contexts that have been obscured in the existing criticism: the fiction of romantic friendship and the public debate on the homeless man. *Huckleberry Finn* may be seen as the reverse of the ideal of normative, middle-class masculinity in Victorian America and as a counterpoint to the more conventional, idealized accounts of romantic friendship in the works of several of Twain's contemporaries and rivals. I suggest that while Huck and Jim negotiate an uncommon type of romantic friendship across barriers of race and generation, the duke and the dauphin appear as a grotesque parody of high-minded “brotherly love.” By co-opting some of the conventions of romantic friendship fiction, Twain decreased the distance between his underclass characters and his middle-class readers. At the same time, by writing and publishing the first novel about tramps during a period of heightened national concern about homeless men, Twain increased the topicality and popular appeal of what was, in its initial American publication in 1885, a subscription book that needed an element of sensationalism in order to sell.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is fertile ground for examining nineteenth-century ideas about masculinity and male same-sex relations. This is partly due to the fact that Twain ventures into new regions of the American social landscape: both in geographic and in racial terms, he goes where no author had gone before. Twain's narrative represen-
tation of several strong male same-sex bonds raises many questions: in a family-bound, marriage-oriented, capitalist society, can there be such a thing as a non-instrumental, devoted, intimate friendship between two men? Do these men have to have the same ethnic or racial background, or to belong to the same class, or to be the same age? Do they have to be equally masculine, or, indeed, does one person necessarily “feminize” in relation to the other? What does it mean to have an equal friendship, and how long can the relationship last? These are questions that literature can only explore in a partial, tentative, and indirect way, yet fictional narrative remains a vital source of specific historical knowledge when read in tandem with other sources and discourses from the period.

Another reason for the importance of *Huckleberry Finn* to an analysis of nineteenth-century gender and sexual attitudes is that it was written at a time when it was still possible for an American man or boy to have an unself-conscious and shameless, consuming passion for a member of his own sex. The novel was first published in England in late 1884, after a gestation period of more than seven years. Twain completed it at a time when fallen, sinful humanity had not yet become fragmented into discrete categories on the basis of their scientifically defined sexual nature—what we now call “sexuality.”

When we study the literatures and cultures of the nineteenth-century United States, we are confronting a different sex/gender system—that is, a different way of regarding what men and women are and how they should relate to each other, both sexually and emotionally. In what we may call Victorian society on both sides of the Atlantic, gender is a primary identity-category, but sexuality is not. Gender identity, in turn, is largely determined by marital and family status: are you married or single? do you have children? are you a provider? Marital and family status—inflected by class and racial identity—provides the answer to gender identity in the period. The fact that a person is sexually attracted to the same or the opposite sex (or to both) is not a basis for identity formation at this time. Thus, while persons were certainly engaging in what we would identify today as homosexual and heterosexual acts, there were in a sense no homosexual or heterosexual individuals.
In *Huckleberry Finn* Twain is blazing out new trails in the representation of male affective relations in the nineteenth-century United States. He does this on the basis of a fundamental ambivalence about the innate goodness of human beings and men’s ability to act honestly, selflessly, and devotedly toward each other. Based on his personal experiences in his native Missouri, on the Mississippi, and in the rough-and-tumble pioneer world of Nevada and California, Twain had mixed feelings about men and their relationships. This ambivalence is part and parcel of the entire narrative of *Huckleberry Finn*, but it is perhaps most clearly seen in the Grangerford-Shepherdson episode, in which the members of two feuding families listen to a sermon on “brotherly love” one day and then go on to murder each other the next.9 The symbol of the snake that recurs throughout the narrative is a fitting emblem of the author’s conflicted attitude toward men and their relationships. The snake resonates in Western culture as a symbol of fidelity, but also as a symbol of dangerous knowledge, loss of innocence, poison, betrayal, and men’s sexual organs.

Like quite a few nineteenth-century American men, Twain dreamed of a world in which relations between males would not always be governed and structured by competitiveness and self-interest. Michael Kimmel observes: “The widening chasm between men produced a deep yearning for the intimacies that had earlier marked men’s lives. . . . Such tenderness and intimacy were now tainted by fears of dependency.”10 According to Walter Blair: “[Twain] was pulled by the fervent wish that his picture of Huck and Jim represented a way some individuals at least might live. As a result, contrasts and incongruities between Huck and Jim on the raft and the society on the shore . . . embody a theme of great personal significance to the author.”11 Unlike some of his literary contemporaries, though, Twain was doubtful about the vaunted purity of men’s romantic

9 See Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, p. 147. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.
relationships with each other. He was also pessimistic about the future of intimate, committed, non-instrumental male relationships of the kind he had known in his youth. This may be one reason why his stories of manly love are cast in the nostalgic, backward-looking mode of the boy book and the historical novel. Kenneth Lynn noted as far back as 1959: “Evidently, Mark Twain was only capable of imagining Huck and Jim’s relationship as existing in the condition of slavery and under the aspect of flight—as an ‘underground’ affair—although he tried very hard to imagine it otherwise” (Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, pp. 243–44).

Huck and Jim, as well as the duke and the dauphin, are representative of types of American males who left few records of their lives and loves, which makes it tempting to generalize based on the novel’s characters and action. Research based on other types of historical sources is even beginning to show that intense same-sex friendships were not the exclusive reserve of men from the middle and upper classes. Yet I do not primarily want to claim that *Huckleberry Finn* is a sociological or ethnographic case study of the emotional lives of members of subaltern and underrepresented groups in American society, be it African American slaves, poor whites, tramps, or, for that matter, boys. *Huckleberry Finn* is not a documentary or realistic novel; it does not attempt to give a statistically or demographically representative account of how tramps and interracial couples behaved toward each other in so-called real life or what is now history. As a fictional representation, Twain’s novel makes claims about truth and plausibility that are as much governed by the ideal as by the real, and that are determined as much by the standards of good storytelling and the expectations of its audience as by any determination to give an insider’s account of the emotional lives of slaves, tramps, and pubescent boys. Ultimately, then, *Huckleberry Finn* tells us more about the people it was written for than about the possible historical counterparts of its fictional characters.

During the past thirty years, critics such as Neil Schmitz, Robert Shulman, Steven Mailloux, and Stacey Margolis have focused on the extent to which the action of Twain’s novel, though set in the mid-to-late 1840s, may be seen primarily as a
commentary on the time of its writing and initial reception—that is to say, the mid 1870s to mid 1880s.\(^2\) It has often been the case with romantic and historical fiction—be it by Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Bret Harte, or Mark Twain—that it can tell us more about the time it was written in and for than about the time it was written about. However picaresque and outlandish its characters, plot, and setting, *Huckleberry Finn* is ultimately a bourgeois novel about the hopes and fears of the American middle class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a story about the ways in which men may live together and love each other. This thematic is the classic ground of the subgenre of mid-nineteenth-century literature that I have called romantic friendship fiction.\(^3\) The aim of this literature was to imagine and describe what making another man the object of one's affections might be like, as well as what a man's life with another man might be like. This literature was being written at the last moment in American history when the desire to live such a life did not yet mark one out as being constitutionally different from other men. As the French philosopher Michel Foucault has reminded us, the homosexual had not yet become a "species."\(^4\)

Nineteenth-century male romantic friendship may be defined as a non-institutionalized, socially sanctioned, often temporally limited and premarital, ostensibly platonic, nonexclusive yet primary emotional relationship; it was usually a relationship between young, coeval, coequal white men of the middle class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

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and upper classes. Some romantic friendships may have had a sexual component, but that was as ancillary to the relationship then as it would be essential to a romantic relationship today. Lillian Faderman was the first to suggest, in the context of female romantic friendship, that at a time when “genital contact was not a sine qua non for a nineteenth-century premarital male-female love relationship,” it would not have been for a same-sex relationship either.\(^\text{15}\)

As a type of relationship between men, romantic friendship was significant for being founded on values such as voluntariness, intimacy, equality, reciprocity, and selflessness. These were values increasingly difficult to live up to as the century progressed, for at least two reasons: first, the competitive, instrumentalist, capitalist business ethos dominated more and more of men’s dealings with each other; and second, strong emotional bonds between men came under increasing surveillance and suspicion from medical men, the police, and the general public. This second development was reflected in the literature of the period as well, with novels such as William Dean Howells’s *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890) and Alan Dale’s *A Marriage Below Zero* (1889) being among the first to register the changing climate for love between men.\(^\text{16}\)

Though romantic friendship was a historical reality in the lives of many American men during most of the nineteenth century (as historians such as E. Anthony Rotundo, John W. Crowley, Karen V. Hansen, and Jonathan Ned Katz have amply documented), romantic friendship in literature should be regarded primarily as a myth—a guiding myth that authors might use to structure both a narrative and its reception. As a literary topos, romantic friendship has been found in American fiction from its beginnings in the eighteenth century.\(^\text{17}\) Leslie Fiedler is correct in pointing to works by James Fenimore Cooper,

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Richard Henry Dana, Jr., and Herman Melville as significant precursors for *Huckleberry Finn*, particularly in their interracial component. Yet in 1876, as an intensely competitive, ambitious, and still largely unproven writer when he started on what he hoped would be the great American novel, Mark Twain was surely more concerned with what other up-and-coming writers were doing than with the works of dead, or as good as dead, writers.

The 1870s was the decade when "everyone" was writing about "manly love." Throughout the decade Twain could read his friends' and rivals' paens to romantic friendship in the pages of the illustrious *Atlantic Monthly* and elsewhere. In the mid 1870s his closest literary ally, William Dean Howells, had published *Private Theatricals* (in the *Atlantic*, which Howells edited), a novel in which the relationship of two young gentlemen summering in Maine is threatened by the machinations of a *femme fatale* figure. Howells's novel ran partly parallel in the *Atlantic* with Henry James's most famous romantic friendship fiction, *Roderick Hudson*, serialized all through 1875 and published in book form in the United States in 1876 and in England in 1878. Twain's San Francisco friend and short-term secretary, Charles Warren Stoddard, collected a number of racy travel sketches in a volume entitled *South-Sea Idyls* in 1873, the most famous being "Chumming with a Savage" (originally published in a shorter version in 1869 as "A South-Sea Idyl"), a story about his romantic friendship with a native Hawaiian. Further corroboration of this literary trend may be found in the works of Theodore Winthrop, Bayard Taylor, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Horatio Alger, and Frederick Loring, as well as in novels by women such as Elizabeth Stoddard and Augusta Jane Evans.

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19 I use the terms "romantic friendship," "manly love," and "brotherly love" interchangeably, as was the practice during the period.
Twain's most important precursor in the romantic friendship field was no doubt his former mentor and lifelong *bête noir*, Bret Harte, who had been writing about strong male bonds in pioneer California since the early 1860s. Harte published his most famous story of brotherly love, "Tennessee’s Partner," in the *Overland Monthly* in 1869. In this story the partnership of two gold miners survives the temporary absconding of the one with the other's wife, only to be permanently sundered by the hanging of the least law-abiding of the two. In adopting the literary conventions of romantic friendship fiction to a Western setting and to laboring, rural characters, "Tennessee’s Partner" is an important pre-text for *Huckleberry Finn*. The duke and the dauphin—known only by their nicknames, as are Harte’s male couple—may be seen as a parodic response to what we know Twain considered an overidealized and unrealistic account of male same-sex love in Harte’s story.

Unlike Twain and most of his other contemporaries, Harte continued to celebrate male romantic friendship till the end of his long literary career in 1902. Harte’s "In the Tules," which first appeared in the *Strand* in 1895, shows the increased focus of the genre: "The culmination of a line of development starting with ‘Notes by Flood and Field’ in 1862 . . . , the story ‘In the Tules,’ was the most blatantly homoerotic story Harte ever wrote." "In the Tules" is also one of the purest representations of the myth of male romantic friendship, and it contains in capsule form most of the genre’s typical motifs. As such, it

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provides a fertile counterpoint to Twain's at least partial de-
bunking of the friendship tradition ten years earlier.

Described by one critic as being "as intense as a poem and
as inward as a prayer,"26 "In the Tules" opens with the rugged
Pike County Missourian Martin Morse settling on the banks of
the Sacramento River, where he nightly observes with wonder
the passing of a steamboat. One evening he spots a black shape
in the river, which turns out to be a man, whom Morse saves
from drowning. This man, "Captain Jack," pays Morse to fetch a
horse, and the next day is gone. Shortly afterward Morse dis-
covers the corpse of a middle-aged man on the riverbank and
receives two fine horses from an anonymous donor. Suspecting
that Captain Jack has sent them, Morse determines to set out to
find his benefactor. On the steamboat to Stockton he overhears
a conversation that makes it clear that Captain Jack is the gam-
bler Jack Despard, who fell overboard on the very same steam-
boat with Sheriff Seth Hall and has not been seen since. Realiz-
ing now why Despard has been avoiding him, Morse returns to
his home, where he falls ill with swamp fever. Out of the blue a
doctor and nurse arrive from Sacramento, and Morse recovers,
only to be nearly drowned by the great flood of '54. He is saved
just in time by Despard, who leaves him in Stockton. Destitute,
Morse joins a pack train as a muleteer and makes his fortune in
the mountains. He comes upon Despard, who is about to be
lynched, and Morse is shot dead while trying to save him.
Despard is then hanged, and the two men are buried in the
same grave.

Twain contributes to the romantic friendship fiction of the
period not by taking romantic friendship as a given and an end
in itself, but rather by testing the limits of its conventions and
borderlines. At first glance, a middle-aged, married, African
American slave on the run and a homeless boy of Irish extrac-
tion would not seem qualified to wear the laurels of romantic
friendship.27 Yet a quick comparison with the summary of "In
the Tules" makes clear that, for all its novelty of plot, setting,

26 See William Macdonald, introduction to Bret Harte, Stories and Poems by Bret
27 On Huck's ethnic background, see Dawson, "Ethnicity of Huck Finn."
and character, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains several features typical of romantic friendship fiction. As in other accounts of this kind, the novel traces the trials and tribulations of a male couple: their disputes, tests of friendship, forced separations, and glorious reunions. The storyline contains further standard features in the delineation of the great sacrifices that Huck and Jim are willing to make for each other, their increasing sense of intimacy, the uniqueness of their bond compared to their dealings with other characters in the story, and their willingness to open their hearts to each other as to no one else. From differing starting points, theirs becomes a joint journey, a common project: “We judged that three nights more would fetch us to Cairo, . . . and that was what we was after”; “We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all” (*Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 99, 155).

If we compare Huck and Jim’s relationship to that of Huck and Tom Sawyer, we see how much more equal a friendship the former is than the latter. Huck has what one may describe as an adolescent crush on Tom thatmingles hero-worship with emotional neediness, similar to David Copperfield’s feelings for James Steerforth in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1849–50), or John Godfrey’s for Alexander Penrose in Bayard Taylor’s interesting second novel, *John Godfrey’s Fortunes* (1864). In his loneliness at the beginning of his journey, Huck thinks only of Tom and wishes he were there with him (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 41). Yet, as Michael Davitt Bell points out, it does not take long before Jim replaces Tom in Huck’s thoughts and affections.28 Before Huck encounters Jim on Jackson’s Island, his fondest wish is to be with Tom, be it in heaven or hell; by the time we get to chapter 31, however, it is Jim whom Huck is willing to go to hell for (*Huckleberry Finn*, pp. 4, 271). In the interval, Huck and Jim have been involved in what Kenneth S. Lynn calls “the most memorable idyll in American literature” (*Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor*, p. 244). Lynn is referring, of course, to chapter 19, but the neglected chapter 9 is almost

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equally idyllic, as Jim and Huck make a first home for themselves in a cave high up on Jackson’s Island, which Huck describes: “‘Jim this is nice,’ I says, ‘I wouldn’t want to be nowhere else but here’” (Huckleberry Finn, p. 60). Here Jim begins to call Huck “honey” and “chile,” and here Huck begins to refer to their new home: “We got home all safe” (p. 62).

In a famous essay first published in 1953, Leo Marx observes: “Only on the island, and the raft do [Huck and Jim] have a chance to practice that idea of brotherhood to which they are devoted.”29 Since the early 1970s, a critical tradition has grown that interprets Huck and Jim’s relationship in instrumental rather than idealistic or romantic terms. Critics such as Harold Beaver, James M. Cox, Thomas Weaver and Merline A. Williams, and Forrest G. Robinson see Jim as a trickster figure who is only out to save his own skin. While Robinson’s view of Jim, in particular, is both stimulating and convincing on its own, largely ahistorical, terms, he and like-minded critics cannot adequately explain why Jim loses his temper with Huck after the episode in the fog, and they have little or nothing to say about the idyllic passages in chapters 9 and 19.30 Beaver, in a quixotic essay from 1974 that appears to have originated the “school of suspicion” approach to Jim, claims that, in berating Huck for lying to him, “[Jim] had overreached himself in his nervous tension; and his overheated reaction almost proves his undoing.”31 Yet Beaver cannot or will not venture an explanation of why Jim should risk alienating Huck’s affections at this point. Similarly, in his lengthy discussion of this episode from chapter 15 of the novel, Robinson concludes that “this surrender to authenticity is a grave mistake,” but he does not analyze why Jim “is too stung by the revelation of Huck’s betrayal, his own blindness, and the cruelty of his fate, to check the overflow of pain and anger” (“Characterization of Jim,” p. 382). It is difficult to see how Jim’s violent reaction can be read otherwise

29 Marx, “Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and Huckleberry Finn,” American Scholar, 22 (1953), 431.
than as a genuine feeling of hurt and betrayal based on genuine feelings of affection for Huck.

An entire essay might be written about how the reception of the character of Jim reflects the gender ideals of Twain's critics and their various and widely differing strategies for "making a man" of him. The question is: do we make Jim more fully human and manly by ennobling him, celebrating his selflessness, courage, and sympathy, or by intellectualizing him and showing him to be a shrewd and cunning con man? How do these varying reading strategies reflect the gender ideals and sexual ideology of their time and place? The heavily freighted history of paternalistic and stereotypical representations of African Americans notwithstanding, we are looking at a highly curious reversal of values when a devious, self-serving, and manipulative individual with "an active impulse to chicanery" is considered more complex and fully human than a devoted, selfless, and giving individual.\(^{32}\) There is no small degree of modern-day heterosexism in the claim that Jim would betray any trust or run any risk to be reunited with his family. If we cannot trust Jim in his avowals of affection and gratitude toward Huck, then his devotion to his family may be false as well, and is only an effective means to evoke sympathy for self-serving ends. How can we be sure that Jim's wife and children actually exist? If Jim is a lying and conniving character, then how do we determine where truth ends and untruth begins? Due to the novel's narrative structure, where we have no direct access to Jim's thoughts, the question of his reliability is a genuine interpretive impasse. Ultimately, Jim's equivocal status and enigmatic character may be seen to tie in directly with Twain's basic ambivalence about men's friendships. In other words, Jim's friendship with Huck need not be entirely idealistic or purely instrumental. When James Cox points out that "the possibility that Huck will abandon or betray Jim is... at the very center of the whole journey" ("A Hard Book to Take," p. 391), he is indicating an aspect of all true friendships: where there is trust, there is always the danger of betrayal of that trust.

Critics have seen chapter 19, in which Huck and Jim find peace and contentment floating down the river on a raft dressed in nothing but their birthday suits, as something unique in American literature. Yet certain aspects of this account are not without precedent. In addition to the representations of interracial male coupling on the high seas in Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840), Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), and Charles Warren Stoddard’s 1873 short story “In a Transport” (which Roger Austen calls “one of the most lavender pieces of prose published in the nineteenth century”),33 we find a partial parallel in chapter 7 of Bayard Taylor’s widely read travel narrative *A Journey to Central Africa* (1854).34 Like the two chapters in *Huckleberry Finn*, chapter 7 of *A Journey* is a peaceful, pastoral interlude in an otherwise hectic, action-packed book. By the time of his death in 1878, Bayard Taylor was the most famous travel writer in America and a legendary figure. His trip to Egypt in late 1851—particularly the journey down the Nile with his romantic friend, August Bufleb—marked a turning point in his life. Chapter 7 of *A Journey to Central Africa* is entitled “Life on the Nile,” and its contents and basic structure are revealed by its subheadings: “Independence of Nile Life—The Dahabiyeh—Our Servants—Our Residence—Our Manner of Living—The Climate—The Natives—Costume—Our Sunset Repose—My Friend—A Sensuous Life Defended” (*Journey*, p. 85). Like Twain, Taylor describes the establishment and mode of life of a utopian, all-male domestic household: in his case, the “floating Castle of Indolence” (*Journey*, p. 98) is a traditional Egyptian *dahabiyeh*, ten feet wide by seventy feet long. Taylor describes his and


Bufleb’s daily routine of hunting, sketching, sightseeing, reading, dining well, writing letters, and watching the sunsets and passing scenery while smoking a Turkish shebook and enjoying a finjan of coffee. He writes:

We are cut off from all communication with the great world of politics, merchandise and usury, and remember it only through the heart, not through the brain. We go ashore in the delicious mornings, breathe the elastic air, and wander through the palm-groves, as happy and care-free as two Adams in a Paradise without Eves. It is an episode which will flow forward in the undercurrents of our natures through the rest of our lives, soothing and refreshing us whenever it rises to the surface. I do not reproach myself for this passive and sensuous existence. I give myself up to it unreservedly. . . . (Journey, p. 96)

The parallels with Huck Finn’s account in chapter 19 are evident on the level both of structure and of content. As Huck succinctly puts it: “It’s lovely to live on a raft” (Huckleberry Finn, p. 158).

Still, the differences between generic romantic friendship narratives and Huckleberry Finn are as marked as the similarities. Unlike the roving, cruising protagonists of romantic friendship fiction by Dana, Melville, Taylor, Harte, and Stoddard, Huck and Jim are not escaping from marriage and so-called adult responsibility, but instead from the twin institutions of slavery and patriarchy. This makes their situation fundamentally different from those of the white, middle-class men we encounter in the more typical literature of romantic friendship, with their pipe-dreams of escaping to a hidden valley or their brief flirtations with irresponsibility in exotic places. In the end, these bourgeois male characters mostly marry or go home, or both. They have a home to go home to, but Huck and Jim do not. Huck and Jim are excluded from the cozy warmth of American bourgeois domesticity, and this fact places them in a more precarious but in some respects freer position.

The differences also become clear if we compare the style of Huckleberry Finn with the rhetoric of mainstream romantic friendship fiction. This rhetoric is aptly illustrated by the following passage from Harte’s “In the Tules”:
The advent of the man himself [Captain Jack] was greater to him [Martin Morse] than the causes which brought him there. He [Morse] was as yet quite unconscious of the complete fascination this mysterious stranger held over him, but he found himself shyly pleased with even the slight interest he had displayed in his affairs, and his hand felt yet warm and tingling from his sudden soft but expressive grasp, as if it had been a woman's. There is a simple intuition of friendship in some lonely, self-abstracted natures that is nearly akin to love at first sight. Even the audacities and insolence of this stranger affected Morse as he might have been touched and captivated by the coquetries or imperiousness of some bucolic virgin. And this reserved and shy frontiersman found himself that night sleepless, and hovering with an abashed timidity and consciousness around the wagon that sheltered his guest, as if he had been a very Corydon watching the moonlit couch of some slumbering Amaryllis.  

("In the Tules," p. 269)

Here we can identify several important tropes of romantic friendship fiction: the emphasis on the erotics of the hand, the allusion to ancient Greece, and the feminization and infantilization of the men involved in a homoerotic relationship. If some of the sentimental rhetoric and symbolism of typical romantic friendship fiction is missing in *Huckleberry Finn*, then this is no doubt because Twain's narrator is an unreliable, unschooled, slangy boy speaking in his own voice, rather than the high-toned, omniscient narrator of most romantic friendship fiction. Through his unique combination of narrative voice and perspective, Twain creates both a paean to and a parody of the romantic friendship tradition.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is the first major novel about tramps in the United States. The homeless

35 The interest in tramps as a subject for fiction arose roughly parallel with the public debate on the homeless man in the 1870s. Initially tramps only made their appearance in shorter narrative forms, such as Anna Hoyt's short story "My Tramp" (1873) and Bret Harte's sketch "My Friend, the Tramp" (1877). See Anna M. Hoyt, "My Tramp," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 46 (1873), 562–70; and Bret Harte, "My Friend, the Tramp," in *The "Argonaut Edition" of the Works of Bret Harte*, 25 vols. (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1906), I, 229–39. The first book-length narratives about tramps
man had first been targeted as a social problem with the panic of 1873 and the ensuing “tramp scare” of the late 1870s.\textsuperscript{36} During this decade there were an estimated six thousand homeless men in the United States, which gave rise to a chorus of disapproval from politicians and concerned citizens.\textsuperscript{37} In one symptomatic utterance from the \textit{New Englander and Yale Review} of July 1878, Professor William H. Brewer asked in his title “What Shall We Do With Our Tramps?” He responded that homeless men were “a dangerous element in our society,” and continued in the racist rhetoric of the age: “[Their] attitude towards the thriving and wealthy is one of hostility, very analogous to that of a hardy, prolific, warlike tribe of Indian savages towards a neighboring settlement of peaceful, industrious, civilized whites.” He concluded melodramatically: “this tribe must be throttled, or—it will throttle us!”\textsuperscript{38} The Honorable Horatio Seymour was no less hysterical in his article in the December 1878 issue of \textit{Harper’s New Monthly Magazine}, where he traced the origins of “a class of men known as ‘tramps’” to the jails, “those pest-houses of vice.”\textsuperscript{39}

“In the 1880s,” writes Kenneth L. Kusmer, “public fear of tramps was only slightly less intense than it had been during the crisis-ridden seventies” (\textit{Down and Out}, p. 57). The homeless man would recur as a subject of public debate and inquiry for the remainder of the century, with a new peak of interest in the

\textsuperscript{36} On the tramp crisis of the 1870s, see Kusmer, \textit{Down and Out}, pp. 35–56; and DePastino, \textit{Citizen Hobo}, pp. 3–29.


mid 1890s. By that time the tramp had become a powerful symbol both of crime and vice, including potentially “perverse” sexual behavior. He also became yet another personification of bourgeois society’s fear of untrammeled male sexuality, joining company with those powerful nineteenth-century symbols of male gender trouble: the sodomite, the masturbator, and the bachelor. “By refusing to domesticate their sexuality,” writes Todd DePastino, “hoboes justified middle-class fears about homeless men’s lack of sexual restraint, fears that had emerged with the tramp crisis of the 1870s” (Citizen Hobo, p. 91).

As we well know, the harmony of Huck and Jim’s idyllic existence on the river is ruptured by the intrusion of a boisterous male couple, the duke and the dauphin. The sudden arrival on the scene of these two tramps engenders a fall, as the artificiality and conventionality of racialized social intercourse and class deference again make their presence felt. In addition to their significant plot function, the duke and the dauphin emerge in the course of Huckleberry Finn as a cunning parody of the myth of romantic friendship and a subtle critique of the idealized representations of it that Twain had been reading throughout the 1860s and 1870s. Dirty, dastardly, and derelict, the two

40 As early as 1877, Francis Wayland “led a chorus of opinion associating tramps with rape” (DePastino, Citizen Hobo, p. 27).

41 Several critics have discussed the parodic aspects of the duke and the dauphin. Robert Shulman couches his analysis in domestic terms, seeing the tramps as “a parody of the positive family Huck and Jim create” (“ Fathers, Brothers, and ‘the Diseased,’” p. 336). Leland Krauth observes: “The duke and the king . . . embody the worst of both sexes. In their performances they are not only sentimental but also sadistic. Twain makes them parodies of the conflicting modes enacted by the raftsmen and Emmeline” (Proper Mark Twain [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1999], p. 175). Focusing mainly on Roughing It (1872) and Twain’s portrayal of partnerships among gold miners, Peter Stoneley points out that “often [Twain] ironizes the literary conventions of manly love”; Stoneley concludes that Twain, like his precursor Bret Harte, was “endorsing and ironizing the myths of partnership” (“Rewriting the Gold Rush,” pp. 202, 203). Stoneley discusses Huckleberry Finn only in passing, due to his focus on California gold-mining partnerships and his dubious premise that “the most typical partnership in the novel is between Huck Finn and Buck Grangerford” (p. 203). He claims that Jim and Huck’s “de facto inequality” creates an “imbalance . . . which denies the possibility of partnership” (p. 203, n. 24). I would argue that Huck’s and Jim’s manifold differences and inequalities, not just in race but also in age, legal status, life experience, physical strength, and masculinity, ultimately even each other out. A shared linguistic repertoire and inferior social status no doubt bring them closer together. See Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Was Huck Black? Mark Twain and African-American Voices (New York: Oxford
tramps are the reverse of the ideal of brotherly love, and they may also be seen to symbolize the budding anxieties surrounding passionate male same-sex bonds. How selfless were these bonds, Twain seems to ask, and how chaste? He seems to be purifying Huck and Jim’s ambiguous relationship by projecting the possible negative associations onto the duke and the dauphin; yet the dichotomy between romantic friendship and sexual deviance is not clear. If the duke and the dauphin are potential deviants, why are not Huck and Jim? What is to prevent us from seeing them as, in tramp lingo, a “jocker” and his “prushun”?

One suspects that, in the case of the duke and the dauphin, their theatrical vows of devotion, their fervent tears, hugs, and hand-claspings, are mostly for show. Yet despite the men’s many squabbles, Huck vividly describes how “the tighter they got the lovinger they got” and how they sleep together in the wigwam “a-snoring in each other’s arms” (Huckleberry Finn, p. 264). Nearly fifty years later, when the old-time tramp was a dying breed, Nels Anderson wrote in his classic sociological study: “homosexual practices among homeless men are widespread. They are especially prevalent among men on the road among whom there is a tendency to idealize and justify the practice.”

Anderson writes further that among tramps, “homosexual attachments are generally short lived, but they are real while they last” (The Hobo, p. 148).

The earliest explicit linking of homeless men with the emerging discourse of homosexuality that I have located is “Homosexuality among Tramps,” which appeared as an appendix to Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds’s Sexual Inversion (1897). The author of the essay is “Josiah Flynt” Willard (1869–1907), who after spending extended periods of time on the road and in tramp “jungles” emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century, according to DePastino, as “the

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nation's premier expert on tramps” (Citizen Hobo, p. 49). Flynt’s series of articles for Harper’s New Monthly and the Century, with titles such as “The Tramp at Home (1894), “Club Life among Outcasts” (1895), “How Men Become Tramps” (1895), and “The Children of the Road (1896), were the first ethnographic studies of tramp life. They were collected and published in 1899 as a book entitled Tramping with Tramps: Studies and Sketches of Vagabond Life.44

Flynt identifies what he calls “three distinct classes” of “low life”: the “Kids,” the “Natives,” and the “Old Bucks”—that is to say, children between ten and fifteen years of age, middle-aged men, and elderly men (“Club Life,” p. 712). In his article “The Children of the Road” Flynt points out: “The main reason why hungry boys and girls are found upon the road is drunken fathers” (“Children,” p. 64). He continues: “In Hoboland the boy’s life may be likened to that of a voluntary slave. He is forced to do exactly what his ‘jocker’ commands, and disobedience, willful or innocent, brings down upon him a most cruel wrath” (“Children,” p. 68). In September 1895 Flynt published a thinly veiled autobiographical sketch entitled “Jamie the Kid,” where in one dramatic episode in a railway car a “big burly negro” tries to abduct the “Kid” of the title (“Jamie,” p. 780). The first-person narrator writes of his relationship with Jamie: “It was not, however, an entirely one-sided affair, for I was in his service also. I had to protect him from all the hoboos we met, and sometimes it was not so easy as one might think. He was so handsome and clever that it was a temptation to any tramp to ‘snare’ him if he could, and several wanted to buy him outright” (“Jamie,” p. 780). In this story we find the African American male as a sexual threat not to a (white) woman, but to a boy. In his Sexual Inversion essay Flynt estimated that every tenth home-

less man practiced “unnatural intercourse” in the form of intercrural or anal sex (“Homosexuality among Tramps,” p. 253).

Though the association of the tramp with same-sex sexual deviancy appears not to have been part of the printed public discourse on homeless men in the 1880s, that is not to say that there was no awareness of the sexual proclivities of certain “men without women.” Whatever his own personal experience of sex with men, Twain would have had ample opportunity to acquaint himself second-hand with the phenomenon that would soon be known as “homosexuality.”

In addition to his descriptions of physical intimacy between the duke and the dauphin, it is significant that Twain has the two men put on a strange play called “The Royal Nonesuch,” which women and children are not allowed to watch. Walter Blair suggests that what the dauphin performs with his nude body—painted in something that we might anachronistically describe as resembling a gay pride flag—may have been “a burlesque phallic dance.” In this episode Twain comes closest to suggesting the erotic dimension of the Southwestern tradition, a subject that he customarily eschewed in his public writings. Wallace Graves has shown that the episode of “The Royal Nonesuch” was called “The Burning Shame” in the manuscript of the novel, and only altered shortly before publication. The story on which the episode was based, which Twain first heard in Jim Gillis and Dick Stoker’s cabin in 1865, may have involved a naked man coming on stage on all fours, with his partner sticking a candle in his posterior and lighting it. As with the symbol

46 See Blair, Mark Twain and Huck Finn, pp. 318–19. The phrase “burlesque phallic dance” is from B. J. Whiting, “Guyuscatus, Royal Nonesuch, and Other Hoaxes,” Southern Folklore Quarterly, 8 (1944), 273; see also DeLancey Ferguson, Mark Twain: Man and Legend (New York: Bobbs Merrill, 1943), p. 224.
of the snake, there is ambiguity in the symbolic significance of nudity in *Huckleberry Finn*. What is idyllic and natural for Jim and Huck alone on the raft is rendered grotesque and unnatural when put on stage before an all-male audience.\(^{49}\)

As we have seen, Mark Twain was topical in hitherto unrecognized ways in focusing both on romantic friendship and on homeless men in his great American novel. Hamlin Hill noted in a 1963 essay that Twain, in choosing to publish *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a subscription book, faced the challenge of “enticing the common man, the masses, the rural, semiliterate, usually Midwestern customer who had rarely bought a book before.” Twain’s solution, Hill claims, was to include topical material, to alternate humorous and informative writing, to structure the narrative in an anecdotal and picaresque pattern, and to throw in generous dollops of the macabre, the grotesque, and the morbid. Yet Hill notes that in addition to popular success, Twain also yearned for the approval of his peers—men like James, Howells, Harte, and Aldrich.\(^{50}\) By both incorporating the conventions of romantic friendship fiction and alluding to the sensational topic of the homeless man, Twain might well hope to appeal to low-, middle-, and high-brow readers.

Gregg Camfield writes: “for sentimental literature to promote moral change it must re-create in the reader’s mind a

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\(^{49}\) Critics do not appear to have considered the possible sexual joke lurking between the lines in the passage where Jim is described striking an Uncle Remus-like pose “with his head down betwixt his knees, moaning and mourning” (*Huckleberry Finn*, p. 201); see also Joel Chandler Harris, *Legends of the Old Plantation* (1880), in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, ed. Robert Hemenway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 142. Similarly, Twain, as the author of such ribald pieces as “Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism” (1879), might have wished to suggest something more than idleness in his description of villagers with their hands constantly in their bitches pockets (see *Huckleberry Finn*, p. 182); see also Mark Twain, “Some Thoughts on the Science of Onanism,” in his *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays*, 1852–1890, ed. Louis J. Budd (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1992), pp. 722–24.

sense of psychic reality. Such responses depend on shared associations and sympathy” (“Sentimental Liberalism,” pp. 102–3). One structural means to obtain such an association and sympathy for Twain’s lower-class characters by his middle-class readers would be through incorporating elements of the cultural script of male romantic friendship. To some of the more genteel and literate members of the novel’s original audience, Jim and Huck’s romantic friendship would have rendered them heroic in itself and would have justified their representation—despite their many disqualifying characteristics—as the heroes of a major American epic. From this point of view, their friendship ennobles them. It is as if their race, class, and ethnicity, as well as their poverty, ignorance, cunning, and mendacity, all fall away, allowing them to shine forth in the edifying light of their common humanity and devotion to the highest ideals of male same-sex bonding.

Yet, according to Camfield, this was a precarious strategy, as “such sentimental reactions are easily upset by conflicting associations and by anything that might impede sympathy” (“Sentimental Liberalism,” p. 103). Obviously not all readers (including, most famously, the Concord Library Committee) responded equally well to Twain’s double-edged representation of strong same-sex bonds. The Springfield Daily Republican accused Twain of “gross trifling with ever fine feeling,” which surely also included his unconventional depictions of male friendship. And among the “subjects dignified by age” that, according to the Boston Daily Advertiser, Twain and his followers apparently had “cast the slimy trail of the vulgar humorist” over, we may surely count the biblically inspired love “passing the love of women.”

Paradoxical though it might seem today, Twain’s overt focus on brotherly love was a way to broaden the appeal of this androcentric narrative to include women readers. There is

52 Skandera-Trombley gives a different account of how Twain appealed to women readers, one that does not so much contradict mine as need to be modified in its inter-
ample evidence that many nineteenth-century middle-class women approved of men's love for each other and were not threatened by it in life or literature. Emily Sellwood, for example, resumed her engagement with Alfred Tennyson after having read his *In Memoriam* (1850). The American actress Clara Morris related in her autobiography that, in order to cry on cue when performing in the mid 1870s, she had thought of "poor old Tennessee's partner as he buried his worthless dead." Lilian Woodman Aldrich spent more than twenty years of her married life in a "three-cornered marriage" with her husband, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, and Massachusetts state senator and industrialist Henry L. Pierce. In *Prue and I* (1856), George William Curtis's popular collection of sketches on the mundane charms of bourgeois married life, the narrator relates how his wife, Prue, likes nothing better than to hear her husband tell of his "always beautiful" male cousin the curate. Women writers as different as Augusta Evans and Elizabeth Stoddard wrote novels where male romantic friendship figured conspicuously, such as Evans's *St. Elmo* (1866) and Stoddard's *Temple House* (1867).


Twain concluded *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) with these words: "When one writes a novel about grown people, he knows exactly where to stop—that is,

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with a marriage; but when he writes of juveniles, he must stop where he best can." The problems that Twain would encounter in concluding Adventures of Huckleberry Finn were, of course, even more serious than they had been in Tom Sawyer. Discussions of the ending constitute the locus classicus of criticism of Huckleberry Finn, and many critics have found fault with the so-called "Evasion" episode, which concludes the story. At the risk of his life, Jim plays along with Tom Sawyer's outrageous schemes, and Huck reverts to the role of a more or less willing accomplice to Tom's shenanigans.

Twain's dilemma in resolving his plot is at least partly due to the lack of a cross-sex romantic interest in the story. Thus, Twain encounters the same problem as many of his peers in trying to find an appropriate way to end a love story between two males in a marriage-oriented society; a society that, however tolerant of romantic friendship between men and between women, regarded marriage and parentage as the main motives in life. In the more typical examples of the romantic friendship genre, either one or both of the friends die, or one or both of them marry. Thus, in "Tennessee's Partner," Tennessee is hanged and is followed to the grave both literally and figuratively by the eponymous anti-hero, who dies of grief. In another classic of the genre, Bayard Taylor's Joseph and His Friend (1870), the hero ends up marrying his bosom buddy's sister. In Two College Friends (1871), an early novel of the Civil War by Frederick Loring, one of the friends dies in the war and the other goes on to marry and start a family. (Naturally, he names his first-born after his dearly departed comrade.) In Henry James's Roderick Hudson, Roderick dies and his friend, Rowland Mallet, is left to grieve with Roderick's fiancée, Mary Garland. In what may be seen as Bret Harte's response to Huckleberry Finn, "An Apostle of the Tules" (1885), the hero, Gideon Deane,

59 See Frederick W. Loring, Two College Friends, rpt. in The Romantic Friendship Reader, pp. 87-125.
finally severs his romantic bond with the dashing gambler Jack Hamlin and marries the homely “Sister Hiler” instead, in order “to watch over the widow and fatherless.” Even in romantic friendship fiction, then, two men seldom live happily ever after. Harte’s story “Uncle Jim and Uncle Billy” (1897) is a rare exception, but it is set in pioneer California, where male partnerships both in the home and in the workplace had been known since the Gold Rush days.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is one of the relatively few major American novels of the nineteenth century that does not end with the marriage or death of any of the main characters. The ending is conventional enough, though, in that vice is punished and virtue rewarded. The duke and the dauphin are not only ridden on a rail, but tarred and feathered to boot. We know that they have been guilty of theft, forgery, and quackery of various kinds, yet the punishment they receive was also used for persons convicted of sexual misconduct. In his celebrated jeremiad in chapter 22 of Huckleberry Finn, Colonel Sherburn mocks the crowd for tarrying and feathering “poor friendless cast-out women” (p. 190). Christopher Looby notes that in 1865 a Confederate soldier was ridden on a rail for sleeping with a black man. Maybe the duke and the dauphin have been found guilty of so-called “crimes against nature,” too, in addition to their pecuniary infractions.

Although Jim has a vaguely formulated plan to buy back his wife and children after escaping successfully to the North,

60 Bret Harte, “An Apostle of the Tules,” in Works of Bret Harte, I, 309. One of Twain’s many diatribes against Harte is worth a small digression here. In his Autobiography (first published in 1924), Twain recounts a supposed tongue-lashing that he once gave Harte, which reads in part: “Where have you lived? Nobody knows. Your own people do not know. But I know. You have lived in the Jersey woods and marshes and have supported yourself as do the other tramps” (The Autobiography of Mark Twain, Including Chapters Now Published for the First Time, ed. Charles Neider [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959], p. 298). In this attack on his dead mentor and collaborator, Twain alludes to his privileged knowledge of the tramp life while impugning Harte’s masculinity.


62 We find an echo of the traditional romantic-friendship plotline in the death of Huck’s erstwhile friend, Buck Grangerford. George C. Carrington, Jr., is one of the few critics to claim that the duke and the dauphin die as a result of their ill treatment (see Carrington, The Dramatic Unity of “Huckleberry Finn” [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1976], p. 29).

63 See Looby, “‘Innocent Homosexuality,’” p. 544.
the actual narrative takes a different direction both geographically and plotwise. Jim is sidetracked from his goal of securing freedom for himself and his family by the responsibility he feels toward another person close to his heart—namely, Huck. While some critics have suggested that Jim keeps Pap’s death a secret from Huck purely in the spirit of self-preservation, Jim’s action may equally be explained by his fear of losing Huck’s companionship and affection: with Pap dead, Huck might be tempted to return to St. Petersburg.

Huck’s collaboration in Tom’s outlandish schemes might in turn be explained by Huck’s fear that Jim’s successful escape will mean their permanent separation, as Kenneth Lynn has suggested (Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, p. 244). Jim may well have opted to try to save Tom’s life not out of any particular love for Tom, but rather out of his love for Huck, whom he knows dotes on Tom. Laurence B. Holland noted in 1979 that Jim and Huck have reached a new level in their relationship by the end of the story. They reinforce their bond in making the mutual decision to go for a doctor, knowing all the while what dire consequences this decision may have for their future.

Thus, within the conventions of romantic friendship fiction, the ending of Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is rendered cohesive with what has gone before through Huck and Jim’s increasing devotion to each other. This devotion culminates, on the one hand, with Huck’s determination to risk going to hell for Jim’s sake and, on the other hand, with Jim’s determination to stay with Huck and the wounded Tom Sawyer at the risk of being captured. In accordance with the myth of romantic friendship, Huck and Jim must see things through together until the day they can stand face to face, freed of their mental and physical shackles. Ironically, that is also the day they very likely must part. The only way in which Huck and Jim might remain together would be by remaining what they have already unwittingly become—namely, tramps.

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ABSTRACT
Axel Nissen, “A Tramp at Home: Huckleberry Finn, Romantic Friendship, and the Homeless Man” (pp. 57–86)

Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) contains the materials for a wide-ranging analysis of the different and competing understandings of American manhood in the nineteenth century and the ways in which men might interact with each other and love each other. In order to understand better the sexual and emotional dynamics of the novel, we must understand the other kinds of writings about men alone and together that Twain was responding to. In this essay I place Twain’s classic novel in two nineteenth-century discursive contexts that have been obscured in the existing criticism: the fiction of romantic friendship and the public debate on the homeless man. *Huckleberry Finn* may be seen as the reverse of the medal of normative, middle-class masculinity in Victorian America and as a counterpoint to the more conventional, idealized accounts of romantic friendship in the works of several of Twain’s contemporaries and rivals. I suggest that while Huck and Jim negotiate an uncommon type of romantic friendship across barriers of race and generation, the duke and the dauphin appear as a grotesque parody of high-minded “brotherly love.” By co-opting some of the conventions of romantic friendship fiction, Twain decreased the distance between his underclass characters and middle-class readers. Yet by writing and publishing the first novel about tramps during a period of heightened national concern about homeless men, Twain increased the topicality and popular appeal of what was, in its initial American publication in 1885, a subscription book that needed an element of sensationalism in order to sell.