

Hunting Huckleberries: Intertextual Connections between Mark Twain and Lee Smith

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Most all reviews and scholarly articles on Lee Smith's fiction include her own views about her writing. She tells us the writers she admires and the ones who have influenced her work. Scholars have drawn comparisons to the usual suspects. As Smith says, "of course, it was impossible not to be influenced by Faulkner,"¹ but she is also connected to Joseph Campbell, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, the Bronte sisters, Virginia Woolf, and without a doubt, Mark Twain. Smith has said she read "all of Mark Twain over and over again,"² particularly *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* (1885). *Huckleberry Finn* may be a boy's book, but Twain was not just a man's writer. Smith proves the book is important for women, and many other female writers have voiced their literary debt to Twain. Twain's friend William Dean Howells (1961) asserted that, Twain's "humor is not for most women: but I have a theory that, when women like it, they like it far beyond men."³ Smith is clearly one of those women.

Her novel *The Last Girls* (2002) is a direct tribute to Twain's, as it fictionalizes Smith's real-life adventures down the Mississippi River on a raft with the "Huckleberry Girls." However, despite the obvious nods to Twain in this later novel, Smith's *Fair and Tender Ladies*

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(1988) has the stronger intertextual connections to *Huckleberry Finn*. The protagonist Ivy Rowe by Smith's own admission was intended to be "a female Huck Finn." The protagonists of both novels are storytellers on a quest, searching for guidance and a place where they belong, and they both head out for the "territory," even if on a very different terrain.

The Last Girls is a fictional recreation of "the Huckleberry girls" and their actual recreation of Huck's voyage and speaks to the strong influence of Twain on Smith's fiction. The book jacket calls Smith's novel "*The Big Chill* meets *Huckleberry Finn*." The work continuously quotes from *Huckleberry Finn* and references the college literature course in which the characters were introduced to Twain's novel. This real-life course inspired Smith's actual trip as well as the trip that takes place in the novel. The girls head out on the river, "just like Huck Finn and Jim in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which they were reading in Mr. Gaines's Great Authors class at Mary Scott, sophomore year."⁴ As he reads from the novel, Mr. Gaines becomes Twain for his students: "For Huck Finn, he adopted a sort of Mark Twain persona as he read aloud from the book, striding around the old high-ceilinged room with thumbs hooked under imaginary gulluses."⁵ Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn run all through *The Last Girls*.

As Smith says, "it all started with the river."⁶ Her description of the modern Mississippi echoes and updates Twain: "The river is brown and glossy, shining in the sun like the brown glass of old bottles. Here at Memphis it is almost a mile wide; you can barely see across it. The Hernando De Soto Bridge arches into Arkansas, into oblivion, carrying lines of brightly colored cars like so many little beetles."⁷ The river is still impressive, yet tainted by the modern world with its bridges and automobiles. The central character of the book, Harriet Holding, watches the river from a distance, high in the Peabody Hotel, and through a window, as Smith says

“behind glass.”⁸ She is removed from it as Huck never is. Despite this separation, “Harriet feels insignificant before this big river, this big sky.”⁹ The river moves Harriet as did Huck when she first read about him in college.

Mr. Gaines’s performance does not strike Harriet so much as do Twain’s descriptions of Huck and his feelings. She is especially moved by the hoot owl passage describing Huck’s loneliness: “Then I set down in a chair by the window and tried to think of something cheerful, but it warn’t no use. I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead.”¹⁰ Smith says, “This passage could have been describing Harriet... Harriet felt it as personal, deep in her bones.”¹¹ Harriet is the most Smith-like character in the book, and the reader can easily see Harriet as a young Smith. The character is writing her first novel on the college river trip just as Smith was writing her first, *The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed* (1968). Harriet’s novel is “an initiation story,”¹² as is Smith’s first work and *Huckleberry Finn*, but unlike Twain’s work, the first novels of Smith and her character cast young girls as the protagonists. Harriet doubts the reliance of her novel’s plot: she thinks to herself, “such plots may have been suited only to boys’ books anyway.”¹³ “Mr. Gaines had explained that Huck – their inspiration – was an American Odysseus off on an archetypal journey, the oldest plot of all.”¹⁴ Harriet dismisses her effort as falling short of that prototype and unlike Smith never finishes it.

Ironically, in *The Last Girls*, Smith immerses both Huck and Twain in romance. The young steward who serves Anna Todd, the successful romance novelist, plays the part of Huckleberry Finn: “finally the steward is waiting for her now on the landing of the Promenade Deck, grinning like Huck Finn himself.”¹⁵ Characters refer to the steward as Huckleberry throughout the remainder of the novel. Anna forms a fantasy of seducing young Huckleberry, but as the novel comes to a close, she learns that his attentions to her have not been romantic, but

professional. He has a manuscript he would like to show her. Smith casts Huck as an aspiring writer. Anna channels her disappointment over the failure of her seduction into a new book, where she has Francesca, an older, experienced woman, say farewell to her adoring young suitor, and “Huckleberry tries to be brave, though his freckles are slick with tears.”¹⁶ Smith changes Huck’s quest from “lighting out for the Territory” to searching unsuccessfully for his lost love.

Although Anna’s seduction of young Huckleberry may fail, Harriet is more successful with her own Mark Twain. In the novel, Harriet is courted by Pete Jones, a Riverlorian and Mark Twain impersonator from Cairo. At the end of the trip, Harriet is faced with the choice of going back to her lonely life or joining Pete, or Mark, in his life. At the close of the novel, the ghost of Harriet’s college friend Baby asks Harriet, “How many English majors ever got a chance to fuck Mark Twain? You’d better go for it, girl,”¹⁷ and Harriet says “Okay” to Baby and to Pete. The novel comes full circle. It begins and ends with Twain and his river.

Despite these direct references, this novel is not the one most grounded in the Huck Finn Tradition. *Fair and Tender Ladies* holds that honor. The later book is about the last “girls,” women born and raised in the pre-feminist era, but living out their adulthood in its aftermath. The experiences of this generation of women were split between cultures. Rather than a Bildungsroman, this book is about adult women and that split, these “girls” before and after. Huck and Twain may populate *The Last Girls*, but the novel does not tell a Huck story.

Fair and Tender Ladies, on the other hand, is a coming of age novel and firmly grounded in the Huck Finn Tradition. With Ivy Rowe, Smith wanted to create a woman “who would have a heroic journey. But you had to put that journey in Ivy’s terms and on her turf.”¹⁸ Smith says, “Women don’t go to sea, women don’t go to war....”¹⁹ Men may seek their fortunes or strike out for the territory; they may run from community, but women are never allowed that freedom; they

cannot escape community. They must stay and care for family. They are forced to define themselves within the community. Smith's novel is about a different kind of heroism and a different kind of art, a domestic art: cooking, baking, quilting, or in the case of Ivy Rowe, letter writing.

Smith's most obvious nod to Huck in *Fair and Tender Ladies* comes when she outfits Revel Rowe in a dress, as he pretends to be a woman to avoid the sheriff. "Revel put on a old ladys dress and bonnet, it must have been his mommas or his grannys."²⁰ This passage echoes Huck's famous gender inversion scene: "We shortened up one of the calico gowns and I turned up my trouser-legs to my knees and got into it. Jim hitched it behind with the hooks, and it was a fair fit. I put on the sun-bonnet and tied it under my chin."²¹ Revel successfully fools the high Sheriff, but Mrs. Loftus tells Huck, "you do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men, maybe."²²

Later in the novel, Smith turns the tables and has Ivy Rowe wish she were a boy. Ivy contemplates dressing up and riding a raft down the river with the lumber to Kentucky, but she knows the disguise would not be successful. "I will say I have even thoght of waring jeans and a boys shirt and shoes and trying to sneak along, Still I had half a mind to try and go as a boy and ride a raft myself"²³ According to Nancy Sawyer Fox (2001), "the river becomes a significant motif for the epic tale of America."²⁴ In her comparison of this river motif in *Huckleberry Finn* and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, she says logs "symbolize the industrialization that has made America a powerful nation and, at the same time, corrupted the values of its people through commercialism and materialism."²⁵ Ivy's wish to disguise herself as a boy seems an image of Huck, a Twainian image strengthened further by the connection to the river, the raft, and the logs.

Through her portrayal of the coal industry, Smith certainly furthers Twain's warnings of the commercialism and materialism resulting from modernisation. Smith shares a social consciousness with Twain. *Huckleberry Finn* is without a doubt social commentary on the times, and Twain seeks to strengthen the community through expression of his views on slavery, race relations, and reconstruction. Smith voices similar commentary for her place and time. Smith's Appalachian fiction consistently revisits the theme of change, change to this place and this culture. Writing to her son Danny Ray, Ivy says: "Now that you are a big politician, I want you to know what is going on over here... Everybody has took everything out of here now – first the trees, then the coal, then the children. We have been robbed and left for dead."²⁶

This social conscience and raft riding imagery joins again after the mine collapse in Diamond. Ivy is hurrying to the mine with the rest of the townspeople. She thinks, "It was like they picked us up and carried us along, like we were riding a raft down river."²⁷ The raft is taking her to Oakley. Her destination becomes marriage, more children, and returning to the mountain. Smith refers to riding a raft again shortly after Ivy discovers she is pregnant with Joli. She dreams she is riding a raft with her sister Silvaney. In the dream, Silvaney falls off the raft and eventually Ivy does as well. As Elizabeth Pell Broadwell (1997) believes, Silvaney is Ivy's imaginative and creative side.²⁸ Losing her at this critical moment symbolizes Ivy's fear that she has lost all chance of a life other than her mother's drudgery. Her pregnancy will keep her from fulfilling her dreams of travel and writing. Obviously, the raft image borrowed from Twain is a powerful one for Smith.

Twain echoes through Smith's cave scenes as well. Ivy first finds a cave while picking berries as a child. Berries symbolise enjoyment of life, as her father tells her "the taste of spring,"²⁹ a phrase that comes back to Ivy repeatedly. That taste represents the fleeting moments

of happiness found in life. She calls inside the cave and hears an echo. Her “Hello” comes back to her, almost as if Huck were there beckoning her. Ivy’s first kiss comes from Oakley in this cave. This scene with Oakley parallels the Tom Sawyer Gang plotting their adventures in the cave in *Huckleberry Finn*. In Twain, this scene is the height of the boys’ immaturity and a symbol of childish pranks: oath signing, pirating, and ransoming. Huck will soon dismiss these as he begins his journey into adulthood. Ivy’s kiss is stereotypical of an initiation, but she tries to dismiss it as insignificant, a symbol of a life she rejects for herself, a life of domesticity, marriage and motherhood. She tells Molly she will not fall in love with Oakley and stay on the mountain. “I am going to marry somebody that makes me feel like a poem.”³⁰ Despite the reality of Oakley, she holds on to a fantasy. She has fantasies of princely lovers rather than adventurous pirates. More critical cave scenes follow in both books. On Jackson’s Island, Huck seeks shelter from the storm in a cave with Jim. The cave is where the more significant bond between Huck and Jim begins. When Huck finds Jim, he says “I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn’t lonesome now.”³¹ Similarly, Ivy goes into a cave with Honey decades after she received Oakley’s kiss in the same cave. Although she has married Oakley, the bond with Honey is more metaphorically significant.

Twain's novel appears again when Smith has Ivy eating “huckleberries” with Honey on the mountain top.³² These five weeks in a cave with Honey contain the happiest moments of her life. Her happiness with Honey and the mountain echoes Huck’s communion with Jim and the river. Characteristic of Smith’s attention to romantic love, Ivy finds this fulfillment with a lover instead of a parental figure. Despite the contrasts in the situation, the reference to huckleberries at the height of the novel’s intensity and Ivy’s most significant crisis seems a loud echo of Twain and a strong testament to his influence.

Echoes of *Huckleberry Finn* appear throughout *Fair and Tender Ladies* but exhibit a significant difference from their source. Smith's novel contains a female protagonist who has fantasies of disguising herself as a boy, as Huck, and repeats many of Huck's experiences and conflicts, but from a female perspective. Smith's shift creates a complete gender inversion. Until the age of 15 or 16, Ivy is a female Huck, but unlike Huck she lives on, and we see what we never do with Huck – the grown and fully-realised individual. In addition to these parallel scenes and direct references to Twain's novel, Smith's girl is very much like Huck, up to a point.

Ivy is as much an orphan as Huck. Her father who has been near death for most of the novel and barely speaks before his death, although certainly a better father than Pap, is hardly a parent. Like Huck, Ivy is more the parent as she sees to her father's physical needs, just as Huck cooks and cares for his father who is indisposed due to alcoholism. Ivy's mother, although physically healthy, is emotionally damaged and likewise absent. By the time she is 14, Ivy's father is dead, and the remaining members of the family have moved to Majestic, where her mother withdraws even further. Ivy becomes literally orphaned by age 16. In addition to the loss of her parents, Ivy's siblings have dispersed as well.

Also like Huck, Ivy finds herself isolated from her community. This isolation leads to despair and extreme loneliness, or as Huck would say "lonesomeness." Harriet Holding of the *The Last Girls* is not the only Smith character to identify with this characteristic. Huck and Ivy are longing for something they cannot name, companionship and belonging. While listening to her mother and others tell stories at her father's wake, Ivy writes, "I rember I was setting on the top step then and listening to Momma tell it inside and I was all full up with wanting, wanting something so bad, I culd not of said what it was."³³ On at least one occasion, this despair over her isolation leads, as with Huck, to suicidal urges. In the snow scene, which is repeated in more

than one other Smith novel, Ivy goes out in the snow to get water and slips and falls. She lies in the freezing snow crying into the night. Ivy says, “I wuld of layed there forever if I culd of. Do you think this is evil? It is true thogh, belive you me.”³⁴ She believes this inclination is evil because it reveals her death wish. She would have lain in the snow until she froze to death. Like Huck, Ivy is preoccupied with death. It is all around her: her father, Babe, Danny Ray, and her mother die in her early years and the deaths continue into her adulthood with her friends, siblings, and children. Amidst all this loss, they seek companionship, human connection, someone to hold on to. Like Huck joining Tom in his adventures, Ivy reaches out to Hannakee and later to Molly. Her friendship with Molly is much more successful than her attempts at finding a “pen friend” in Hannakee, who never writes back. Molly is Ivy’s Tom, a prissy, female Tom. She has a more conventional childhood, as does Tom, despite the absence of parents. Like Tom, she has her aunt as well as wealth, comfort and ease; Molly is getting the things Ivy thinks she wants, especially an education. They become friends, but as with Tom and Huck, Molly can never fully empathize with Ivy.

Ivy’s loneliness stems from her isolation and a sense of being trapped within herself. Ivy identifies with her unborn child and provides Silvaney with a more concrete image of how she has felt most of her life: “And I could see that baby as clear as day, tiny and pink and all curled up, and then it started beating with its little fists against my stomach, trying to escape.... And then, ... I was that little baby caught inside of my own self and dying to escape.”³⁵

Pregnancy has intensified this familiar trapped feeling because she now feels as a mother her chances of escape are depleting. Ivy’s feelings of isolation are a product of her difference from other people on the mountain. As Tom Sawyer tells Huck he is not like everyone else, “You don’t ever seem to do anything that’s regular.”³⁶ Garnie tells Ivy, “you always were too smart

which is the flaw in your tragic nature.”³⁷ Ivy’s intelligence and awareness ostracise her from her family and social class, but ironically, her social class and life of responsibility limit her inclusion in a society where her true self might be accepted. She does not fit in because no matter where she is she is different from those around her. Like Huck who does not want to be civilised, “Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.”³⁸ Ivy fears the domestication that is inevitable for women, especially once they become wives or mothers. However, becoming a mother before she becomes a wife spares her partially from the constraints of society: “Because it is a fact that if you are ruind, like I am, it frees you up somehow,”³⁹ just as Huck’s position outside of polite society frees him.

Huck and Ivy, due to their familial situations, are both required to grow up quickly. Typical of the abused and neglected child, Huck copes with his loneliness and these expectations through adaptability. He meshes with his continuously changing surroundings and finds a home where ever he finds himself: his father’s cabin, on the island or the raft with Jim, even with the king and the duke, or at the home of the Widow Douglas, the Grangerfords, the Wilks, or the Phelps. He says of his captivity in Pap’s cabin, “and it warn’t long after that till I was used to being where I was, and liked it.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Ivy without changing her own identity settles in to Mrs. Brown’s, Majestic, Diamond, back on her homestead at Sugar Fork, and in a cave on top of the mountain with Honey. She, like Huck, adapts. Tanya Long Bennett (1998) sees Ivy’s “fluidity” as her strongest characteristic. Ivy’s “self” is “not a permanent or static self ... Rather it is a fluid self, comprised of many identities; as Ivy writes to Joli, ‘I have been so many people.’”⁴¹ Unlike Oakley who is an Oak, strong and steadfast, never changing, Ivy is a vine, winding herself around whatever is available, but yet maintaining her own selfhood.

Despite this adaptability, Huck longs for freedom from being civilised, being told who and how to be. Similarly, Ivy seeks freedom from the drudgery of her difficult life and expression of her intelligence and creativity. She struggles against domestication as well, against society's expectations of a mountain woman. She wants to travel and be a writer. Miss Torrington represents a door to a different life, but Ivy recoils from her as well because Miss Torrington behaves as if she owns Ivy. She tells Ivy, "I feel like you have been given to me by God...."⁴² Going with her teacher to Boston would be yet another type of bondage. Miss Torrington sees Ivy as a possession and presents the same trap a husband would. As her kiss shows, her intentions are more than just to teach.

In the search for definition, both characters seek a more mature guide. As Huck reaches out to Jim for a parental bond, a mentor to guide him, Ivy seeks a mother to replace her dysfunctional one. Ivy's Jim could be Mrs. Brown, Granny Rowe, Geneva Hunt, Miss Torrington, Beulah, or even Violet Grayheart. All these women attempt to guide Ivy. However, Ivy never really finds her Jim, her role model. She has to become one. At least for Smith, Ivy becomes a role model. She tells Linda Tate: "And I think, Ivy, when I was writing, was sort of like a role model for myself. Because she was very tough and I kept hitting her with these awful things and she would be real tough. There was a lot going on when I was writing that book."⁴³ Smith shows us this journey, Ivy's progression to a guide for other women. During this transformation, Granny Rowe provides Ivy with the most viable model. According to Broadwell, "An independent woman who has great intuitive knowledge and is attuned to nature, Granny Row foreshadows what Ivy will become at the end of her life."⁴⁴ Granny provides Ivy with the most significant guidance. She is the most like Jim, a reader of the signs of nature. Huck says, "Jim knowed all kinds of signs."⁴⁵ Unlike Jim's, Granny's signs are

not illusions. Instead of the silliness of Jim's prophetic hairball, her remedies and readings have real, practical application, and she is meant by Smith to be revered for her knowledge. However, this guidance comes only in flashes. Granny is not a constant in Ivy's life. She seems to appear when Ivy is in greatest need, for example at Joli's birth. By her 70s, Ivy has become this wise, "crazy," old mountain woman, but the struggle for this identity is lifelong. Ivy struggles to resolve who she is on the inside with the limited roles society provides for women. While Granny is the role model for the woman Ivy becomes, Silvaney represents her inner self, Ivy's imagination, creativity, independent nature as well as her spirituality.

Within her struggle for selfhood is a search for spirituality. This search manifests itself in a lifelong debate over the validity of religion. Ivy ponders the existence and intentions of God and expresses doubts correspondent to Huck's. When Huck decides that Tom's magic lamp does not contain a genie, that it is just "one of Tom Sawyer's lies," he says "it had all the marks of a Sunday school."⁴⁶ To Huck, Sunday school is not any more real than a genie in a magic lamp, and prayer is not going to bring him any fish hooks. Because of these sorts of questionings, both characters believe they are evil. Ivy writes, "Well now this is the time I know Mrs. Brown when you pray, but to anser your questin if I pray, I can not. So I know I am evil but I do not feel evil."⁴⁷ They agonise over their inability to embrace prayer as a means to relieving their suffering and struggle with the emotions aroused by tent meetings. The preaching in *Huckleberry Finn* is motivated by greed, but for Smith, preaching is motivated and furthered by hysteria. At Sam Russell Sage's rival, Ivy says everyone is "acting crazy,"⁴⁸ and she is almost swept up in the religious hysteria. "I admit it started to get to me. I started to think, now will I go to Heaven, or burn in the flames of Hell? I was getting so scared I could not breth."⁴⁹ She almost goes forward to be saved, but Miss Torrington "took sick" which forces her to leave, stopping her from

answering what she believes to be God's call. Ivy writes that shortly after leaving, "the fiery hand of God let go of my stomach."⁵⁰ She has a reaction to the communal frenzy of the rival, but it is only temporary and emotional rather than truly spiritual. Later in her life, Oakley wants her to be saved and her society expects it, but salvation never comes to her.

Ivy comes to recognize the hypocrisy of religious forms and their promoters. Ivy says, like Huck does of Miss Watson, if Garnie is going to heaven, she does not want to go. "Garnie has come back here now and he is awful... and if he is going to heaven then I will rot in hell and be happy about it."⁵¹ This passage echoes Huck's statement after Miss Watson tells him about heaven: "I made up my mind I wouldn't try for it."⁵² Ivy eventually comes to terms with this presumed failure to answer the call and finds peace without Christian salvation. She seems to see three religious alternatives: the hypocrisy in characters such as Sage and her brother Garnie who use "the Lord to get money and women,"⁵³ the goodness of characters such as Oakley, and a natural alternative. Ivy is repulsed by the hypocrisy, and she feels she cannot be as "good" as Oakley.⁵⁴ Therefore, the inability to embrace the first two options pushes her on in the search. Ivy is never saved in a traditional sense, but she finds spirituality in nature and family. While having Sunday breakfast with her family, she says "I felt like church, I mean I think I felt the way you are supposed to feel in church, which I never do."⁵⁵ Unfortunately and unlike Ivy, Huck still thinks he is going to hell at the end of the novel. Ivy's alternative religion is her father's "taste of spring."⁵⁶ It is union with nature. Like Huck and his river, Ivy feels at one with the mountain.

If the river in *Huckleberry Finn* is God, as T. S. Eliot says, then the mountain in *Fair and Tender Ladies* is its counterpart. Smith presents the mountain as "a sacred place."⁵⁷ Ivy's leaving the mountain for the city parallels Huck going back and forth from civilisation on shore

to the river. Both writers present the conflict of nature vs. society. Ivy eventually climbs even further up the mountain and forms a closer “connection with the elemental powers of nature.”⁵⁸ She finds a wilder nature with Honey. Her five weeks there take their physical toll, but they also awaken her spirit, bringing her back in touch with herself and lifting her out of her depression, “the soft darkness”⁵⁹ she has fallen into. Ivy more fully recognizes the spiritual connection with nature that Huck feels but cannot name. Despite the commonality between Twain and Smith in this union with nature, a difference in the male and female perspectives exists. For Twain, nature is grand, panoramic, and powerful. The river and the storms are frightening and truly dangerous. Huck is swept into nature and subjected to it. Rather than the mighty river rushing Huck along, the mountain is strong, but steady. It is still. Smith presents nature on a smaller scale. It is kinder, gentler, almost microscopic, possibly more traditionally feminine. Ivy notices the “bees buzzed in the clover and the Queen Annes lace by the side of the road.”⁶⁰ Rather than forcing Ivy to respond to it, nature reflects Ivy’s feelings. Smith’s pathetic fallacy is most clearly exhibited in the rainy funerals. The sky cries with Ivy. Smith follows Twain’s lead with this natural spirituality but again performs a gender inversion. The mountains, the flowers, the sky have more feminine characteristics.

Despite this difference in the novels, Smith’s treatment of nature does sound a great deal like a long passage about his youth from Twain’s autobiography which mentions both berries, tree sap, and the making of sorghum, key images in *Fair and Tender Ladies*:

I know how the wild blackberries looked and how they tasted; ...I know the stain of blackberries... I know the taste of maple sap and when to gather it, and how to arrange the troughs and the delivery of the tubes, and how to boil the juice, and how to hook the sugar after it is made....⁶¹

The parallels to images in *Fair and Tender Ladies* are strong. Blackberry stains on Ivy’s dress after Oakley’s kiss in the cave are a powerful sign of this rite of passage, possibly a euphemistic

representation of a girl's first sexual encounter. The taste of blackberries and originally tree sap are "the taste of spring"⁶² which Ivy's father instructs her is what life is about, communion with and enjoyment of nature. Twain's hooking of the sugar parallels "the big stir off" at Sugar Fork⁶³ or as Ivy calls it "the long sweetening,"⁶⁴ nights when she and Oakley steal away from the party to make love. For Smith, nature, spirituality, and sexuality mesh.

Just as parallels between protagonists, scenes, images, and themes in Smith's and Twain's novels stand out, so do similarities in point of view. Huck and Ivy both tell their own stories, and Smith like Twain uses first-person narration, but a more obvious correspondence is the authors' recreation of actual speech. Each writes in the vernacular of the novel's time and place. Twain announces in his "Explanatory" note to *Huckleberry Finn* that the novel is written in at least seven dialects. Scholars have written volumes on various aspects of his endeavour, and many, many writers that followed him publicly acknowledge his influence on their prose styles. Smith declares of *Oral History* (1996), "the ghost of Mark Twain was hovering someplace in the background, inspiring me to write that novel in so many voices."⁶⁵ Shelly Fisher Fishkin (1996) has said *Huckleberry Finn* "was a book that talked,"⁶⁶ and Smith does indeed make her first person narrator, Ivy Rowe, talk. Her speech is that of the Appalachian people of Virginia, and although she is writing letters, she tells her story in her own language. Smith's style is also indebted to the oral traditions of her and Ivy's storytelling ancestors, as Twain's is to Old Southwest Humor and the speech of African-American slaves. However, while Huck's Missouri dialect stays that of an adolescent boy throughout the novel, Ivy's voice grows up along with the character. Early in the novel she struggles to write at all, "I have nare seed the ocean,"⁶⁷ but by the end her prose is much more standard, "I never have slowed down... when I close my eyes I see him always Oakley...."⁶⁸

The act of writing also signifies something very different for Ivy than for Huck. Huck is presumably telling the reader a story or possibly writing a book, as he says at the end “so there ain't nothing more to write about, and I am rotten glad of it, because if I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it,”⁶⁹ while Ivy writes letters. However, the very end of Huck's book does sound like a letter valediction: “Yours Truly, Huck Finn.”⁷⁰ The letter format does create an episodic structure similar to that of Twain's method. Letters are by their very nature episodic. However, Huck is allowed to tell his own story without apology. Telling his story is an egocentric act as opposed to Ivy's socially acceptable medium of letter writing. As a female, Ivy would not be allowed to write creatively. Fiction writing would take her from her family responsibilities. Ivy can write her letters without censure from her society. Her thank you notes and family updates are written for others, at least on the surface. Ivy wants to reach out to others, to keep her family together. Through the years, she chronicles her family history and keeps everyone informed of each other's activities. She also writes letters to “hold on to what is passing,”⁷¹ to combat time by recording experience.

The genesis of *Fair and Tender Ladies* was a box of letters Smith purchased at a yard sale for 75 cents. The letters written by a woman to her sister told her life story. Smith has said, if this woman “had had a chance to be educated and not have five children, she might have really been a writer of some note.”⁷² Like cooking or quilting, letter writing must first serve a practical purpose. Women's art is often performance art, the obvious performance of a social function. It must have as its first priority service to others. These creative instincts and aspirations must be channelled into socially acceptable mediums. When Ivy apologizes in a letter to Beulah for not marrying Franklin Ransom as her sister wanted or becoming a schoolteacher as Mrs. Brown and Miss Torrington had hoped, she implies failure but with compensation: “So I will just write my

letters instead, for it means so much to me to keep in touch.”⁷³ This statement implies the letters are more than just keeping in touch. They bring her emotional and intellectual fulfillment. However, had she tried to write stories or even a journal, this would have been perceived as wasteful of her time and as a selfish act. She channels her imagination and creative urges into a socially acceptable form, acceptable for a woman, and at the same time creates what Smith would call domestic art. Letter writing is unique to women’s art, something beyond cooking, quilting, or gardening, something intellectual, but it is a perfect medium for Ivy whose aspirations are to write. According to Debbie Wesley (1997), “Ivy’s misconception concerning her own creativity stems from the limited patriarchal view of art.”⁷⁴ Smith has inverted Huck’s egocentric book writing to Ivy’s social-serving letter writing, but they are both storytellers.

Beyond the social function of letter writing, this process becomes a form of self-expression and a vital aspect of Ivy’s process of becoming her own mentor or guide through life. Her letters aid in her self-sufficiency as she in essence becomes her own psychotherapist. Smith says, *Fair and Tender Ladies* is “about writing as a way to make it through the night” (qtd. in Tate 2001), not just Smith’s writing, but Ivy’s as well.⁷⁵ Broadwell asserts, through letter writing, “Ivy affirms her belief in writing as a process of self-discovery.”⁷⁶ As Ivy says, “Sometimes I despair of ever understanding anything right when it happens to me, it seems like I have to tell it in a letter to see what it was, even though I was right there all along!”⁷⁷ After Oakley’s death, she writes to Joli, “We buried him yesterday. But somehow it did not seem real to me, not even then. It does now, for I am writing you this letter.”⁷⁸

The attitude toward the process of writing is one aspect that marks a difference between Twain’s “boy book” and Smith’s “girl book,” as does the attention to limiting factors which apply only to women. Twain wrote about oppression, and Smith takes up that call, but she again

shifts the perspective. Instead of racial oppression, her fiction explores the limitations of gender. She takes up a cause closer to her experience. Her novel presents women torn between self and cultural expectations, the conflict between being a woman and being a wife and mother.

Obviously, men provide obstacles to self-actualisation. Ivy repeatedly confronts the expectation of submission to a man. Lonnie immediately expects marriage. Beulah plots a marriage for her with Franklin Ransom. Oakley believes she is his girl, without ever discussing this possession with Ivy. She responds, “I am not anybody’s girl.”⁷⁹ Even much later in her life after Oakley’s death and the death of Ivy’s sister Beulah, her husband Curtis Boswick tries to bind Ivy in marriage. Ivy wants to be in love and write about love and presents several romantic relationships throughout the novel, but she understands the limiting nature of marriage and hails divorce as “the wave of the future.”⁸⁰

Despite the restrictions imposed by men, women in Smith’s fiction rather than overtly oppressed by men are restrained more by circumstances – biology. According to Smith, “they’re [women] bound by family. They’re bound by biology. And they’re bound by place.”⁸¹ Men, marriage, and romantic relationships contain women, but more than husbands, babies keep women at home and too busy to think of their own selfhood and goals. Miss Torrington is an educated teacher, and Geneva Hunt runs her own boardinghouse. They are independent woman, but they have no children. Violet Grayheart has become famous fighting for the union, but she leaves her child with Ivy to raise. These “successful” women avoid the limiting consequences of motherhood. Ivy, on the other hand, becomes a mother at 18.

Ivy later writes to Miss Torrington that many years have elapsed since her last letter because she has so many babies to keep up with: “ever since my little twins were born, it is like I don’t have near enough hands, or time either one. The time just slips away.”⁸² Ivy has Joli and

Violet's daughter Martha; plus after she marries Oakley, she has four more children and two miscarriages. After her own childbearing years have passed, Ivy tells her daughter Joli to get herself some birth control pills and sings to her younger daughter Maudy the praises of this new technology that provides freedom from childbirth for women. Despite her views on marriage and birth control for her daughters, she cherishes her husband and her children. After Oakley's death she misses him daily and admits "Children will swell up your heart."⁸³ She is in the paradoxical situation all women face: the love of a husband and the joy of motherhood vs. the desire for freedom and self-actualisation.

Ironically, the relationship with Honey, a man, sets Ivy free from her depression, but Honey is neither "male" nor quite "real." Like Huck's famous, "All right then, I'll go to hell."⁸⁴ Ivy has such a moment when she decides to walk up the mountain with Honey. She acknowledges the illegitimacy of the affair, yet she does not resist it. Likewise, when Huck is repeatedly troubled by the lawlessness of helping Jim escape from slavery, he too, is distraught over his intentions and society's censure as well as God's wrath. Ivy commits cultural disobedience rather than civil. She knows how society will view her adultery. She is breaking cultural laws. Despite this struggle with conscience, the decision is the correct one for each character. Her affair with Honey, gives her back her own soul and awakens her spirit. Huck makes the decision to go to hell for Jim, to sacrifice himself for someone else, but Ivy makes the sacrifice for self. She takes off her apron, walks out of her house, leaving the dirty dishes in the sink, to follow Honey up the mountain. Her heart knows what she needs to free her spirit and her feet follow. In going up the mountain, Ivy has defied the stereotypical roles set for woman. "I could of climbed up here by myself, anytime! But I had not. I remembered as girls how you and me would beg to go hunting on the mountain, Silvaney, but they said, That is for boys...."⁸⁵

Ivy says, “I felt I had got a part of myself back that I had lost without even knowing it was gone.”⁸⁶ Through this experience, Ivy rediscovers herself as an individual. Ivy, like Huck does often in *Huckleberry Finn*, experiences a rebirth. She goes into the Appalachian Mountains in search of enlightenment, and her quest into the wilderness is successful.

She pays a heavy price for this act, but her awakening benefits her marriage and her children. Women must affirm self and then go back to men and children. Ivy is alive again and better able to function in the prescribed roles of wife and mother. The time with Honey also revitalizes her creative spirit. She writes to Silvaney again for the first time in many years. Like tree sap, blackberries, and huckleberries, Honey is “the taste of spring.” He is “honey,” a product of the bees, and as Ivy says, he is like a forest creature. Honey is that connection with nature and self that fosters life. She writes to Silvaney, “At least I am alive now, since I ran off with Honey.”⁸⁷ Honey is Ivy, and loving him is symbolic of Ivy learning to love herself. In Smith’s fiction, self love for women is a hard-earned commodity. Women must convince themselves that they deserve an autonomous self.

This battle for self is a quality that makes Huck somewhat feminine. Without his own mother to love him, his love of self does not come easily. However, Huck never faces the obstacles of love, marriage, or children in his pursuit of freedom and self-definition. When Smith creates a female Huck, she has to include the limitations not only of society but biology as well. Only boys get to go to the top of the mountain. In Ivy’s world, only men are able and allowed to have both marriage and children as well as personal and professional fulfillment. Ivy does make it to the top of the mountain eventually. Ivy affirms the importance of self, but only after life has stolen her chances for what the top of the mountain represents. She no longer has the opportunity for education, career, travel, independence – the chance to head out for the

territory. There is no “territory” for women, at least not of Ivy’s generation and culture. Ivy reaches the symbol but not the actual. However, it does show an attainment within herself, her spirit. She is changed after the trip and not just by LuIda’s death and society’s judgment. After Oakley’s death and her children are grown, she continues her struggle to maintain solitude and selfhood. However, the mother’s aspirations are fulfilled in her daughter. Ivy tells Joli, “And now you have done on past me down the road.”⁸⁸ Joli moves to the city away from the mountain life and receives an education, becomes a writer, divorces her husband, and has only one child.

Ivy’s most heart-felt dreams have not been realised, but she does surpass her own mother. She works with Molly to educate the children of her community and fights the coal company that continues to rape the Appalachian environment. She also helps and advises her children. She writes, reads, and maintains her solitude; she dies as she wants to, on her mountain, in the house she was born. Her life comes full circle – apparently having gone nowhere, maybe nowhere physically, but a long way intellectually and spiritually, a long distance from where her mother went, but not as far as her daughter will go. At the end of her life without any such attachment, she can start over: “I can make up my own life now whichever way I want to, it is like I am a girl again, for I am not beholden to a soul. I can act like a crazy old woman if I want to which I do.”⁸⁹ Ivy feels she can start over, but ironically, she has been robbed of the time necessary to be other than wife and mother.

Despite the numerous parallels with Twain’s novel, the close of Smith’s presents a fundamental contrast. Unlike *Fair and Tender Ladies*, *Huckleberry Finn* ends with a strong statement of Huck’s searching. Huck is still looking and longing, but because the reader is allowed to follow Ivy through to the conclusion of her life, we have a definitive ending and definite conclusion. The reader learns of Ivy’s choice to stay a mountain woman. Ivy’s end, and

the end of the novel, unlike Twain's is very definite and ironically even though the protagonist dies, very positive. She is happy with the life she has lived and accepting of her death. Ivy remembers her life as a time when she "walks in her body like a Queen."⁹⁰ She has "loved and loved and loved."⁹¹ In her final letter to Silvaney, she recounts her life and expresses her satisfaction with it. The journey has taken a lifetime, but she has learned to appreciate herself, to see that she is a queen. When referring to the "Huckleberry girls," Smith says:

This was a raft of English majors who grew up reading Joseph Campbell and believing in his notion of the quest, the mythic journey. But actually, the mythic journey with its quest-and-conquer motif is a male thing that doesn't apply to women at all. Campbell's metaphor wasn't going to work for us because women's lives are not linear and not about the destination. They are about the trip.⁹²

Twain ends with Huck "lighting out for the territory." Ivy does not go anywhere, but she undertakes a journey nonetheless. Unlike Huck, she grows up. Ivy's death isn't sad; it's natural. Rather than mourn her death, Smith would have us recognize her accomplishments and celebrate her life.

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Endnotes

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- ³ William Dean Howells, "Mark Twain: An Inquiry," in *Huckleberry Finn: Text, Sources, and Criticism*, ed. Kenneth S. Lynn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1961), 176.
- ⁴ Lee Smith, *The Last Girls* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2002), 11.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 12-13.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁰ Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.
- ¹¹ Lee Smith, *The Last Girls* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2002), 5.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 19.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁵ Lee Smith, *The Last Girls* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2002), 63.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 368.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 370.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.
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⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.
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