

Larry Watson's American Boy—Shades of Huckleberry Finn
Comparing Bildungsromans

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In writing *American Boy* Larry Watson notes that he thought his style to be akin to the sparse prose of Ernest Hemingway (cf. Hertzell). I think he might be even more closely aligned, both style wise and in characterization to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Both authors are rooted in rural Midwestern America as they follow a young man's journey to maturity, first by going through a series of Tom Sawyer-like adventures and then making some wrenching decisions that involve truly "growing up." In the process Watson, like Twain, invokes an era while telling a story that is timeless (Cusumano).

Moreover, I would like to suggest that Watson's protagonist, Matt Garth, like Huck, is responsible not merely to one but two companions who influence his development. For Huck it is the hopeless romantic Tom Sawyer—and by extension the "civilized society" of the Widow Douglas, the slave owner, and her type associated with his adventures to which Tom wants Huck to return and "be respectable." The second is the black slave, Nigger Jim, whom he meets on the river, and who like Huck is escaping that same society, though for different reasons—he fears being sold and his family disrupted.

Matt's constant companion is Johnny Dunbar, the local doctor's son. Shaw calls him Matt's "best friend-cum-rival." Matt might be Johnny's big brother, for Johnny often acts like "a child in no hurry to grow up" (46). Like Tom Sawyer, Johnny sometimes gets involved in irrational, indeed infantile, experiences where he is often protected, even overprotected, by his father. Such incidents cause Matt to often question his association with Johnny, much as Huck does regarding Tom and his romantic escapades.

The other companion is a woman, Louisa Lindahl, who enters the picture after she is shot by her live-in boyfriend, Lester, who later kills himself. Louisa came to town with Lester from North Dakota as a way of escaping a broken family and a lecherous minister, as well as a place to find jobs. This doesn't happen for her, though she served as a soda clerk in Burke's Pharmacy. On Thanksgiving Day, after being shot, she is rescued and then treated by Dr. Dunbar. Later, she becomes a friend, confidant, and even an honest critic of Matt, much as Jim functions with Huck.

Unlike Louisa, the wealthy and cultured Dr. Rex and Alice Dunbar are pillars of the small town of Willow City. They might be akin to the Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, and Judge Thatcher, whites who rule the racist world of St. Petersburg. And Johnny, like Twain's Tom, belongs to that same kind of "respectable" world of his parents. The Dunbars and their friends are the town leaders who party together, go to the symphony, and regularly attend church on Sunday. And it is the Dunbar's huge Victorian mansion that Matt spends most of his time, much as Huck is never quite removed from Tom's adult world, or its equivalent, even after he joins Jim on the river.

Truly Watson captures the rhythms of small town life in the 60s (Leach), much as Twain the flow of the river in the early pre-Civil War 1800s. Matt, unlike Johnny, is the son of a "town gossip" from "the wrong side of the tracks" (Schwinghammer). His father died when he was eight, and now his mother serves as a waitress for a living. She smokes and berates the rich Dunbars, and though white, like Jim is a kind of slave to her low level situation. Because she has to work on Thanksgiving, Matt goes to the Dunbars to eat, though it is there that he also spends time with Johnny on a high school science project. So Matt belongs largely to Johnny's world, much as Huck initially does to Tom's, that is, until that Thanksgiving Day shot that fells Louisa.

As classmates, Matt and Johnny plan to be doctors. So Dr. Rex treats them like his students, allowing them hands on medical experiences. One of these happens after Louisa is shot. Upon hearing of that incident during their dinner, the two boys launch out on a romantic Tom Sawyer-like adventure into Frenchman's Forest they know so well, though their search is futile. But when the girl is found and brought in, the two young neophytes get to witness the actual treatment of her wound. At this point Matt is caught touching her body while viewing her naked breasts—a sight that changes his life forever. That revelation is equivalent to Huck's decision to give up Tom's shenanigans and head for the Mississippi.

Almost like a surrogate father, Dr. Dunbar cautions Matt about touching a woman out of "personal curiosity" (26). However, this is only the first of many admonitions he gives young Matt, and it strikes the boy as odd when later the doctor himself carries Louisa upstairs, obviously holding her wounded body. Further, as Louisa recovers, the doctor insists she stay in his and Alice's house, and even work with him as an assistant. This makes Matt envious of Louisa's presence, much as Huck gradually comes to see Jim as

more than a slave, once they are together on Jackson Island. Like Huck's St. Petersburg superiors, Dr. Dunbar becomes Matt's social critic, which Matt no more than Huck, is inclined to totally accept.

The doctor continues that kind of rebuke later on the hockey rink (Rex was a former UND player) when at one point he jabs Matt hard in the ribs for checking his son, not as talented or realistic about the game as Matt. When later he warns Matt about "getting ahead of your skates"(60), he is talking about life, not hockey. And Matt then sees the jab as retribution. Such critical action might parallel the early *Huck Finn*, where Twain satirizes religion, as when Huck gives up on Miss Watson's idea of prayer when nothing is answered. Or when Tom pushes imaginary figures like Don Quixote which Huck sees as absurd. Watson is less humorous than Twain, but still connects the doctor (cf. Miss Watson) and Johnny (cf. Tom) as Matt's nemesis. So mentally Matt has to operate beyond both mentor and classmate.

Later Matt's other companion appears. When Louisa is bored with the Dunbar medical atmosphere, claiming there are too many Norwegians, she joins Johnny and Matt in the mansion's attic one day when the folks have left for the night out. While Johnny is getting drunk she shares her tragic history with Matt, which is not unlike his own. One thinks of Jim when he first meets Huck telling him not only about his leaving because his family would be separated, but even sharing his superstitions, including losing money but keeping his hairy body, a sign of good fortune.

Then Johnny, imagining his childhood, gets in his old baby buggy, tips over and throws up. Like Tom Sawyer, this kind of action is irrational, though Huck often acts like Tom, as when he dresses like a girl, goes ashore and toys with Mrs. Loftus who wants to find and turn in Jim, but not Huck who has also run away. But what is worse for Matt, the doctor unexpectedly comes home to discover Johnny's mishap. Again he rebukes Matt for "not being a man" while only telling Louisa, also part of the catastrophe, to take care of Johnny. Here Matt is caught between manhood and the opposite, for his conversation with Louisa has been that of a grown up, but he again is chastised as a child when it was Johnny who went berserk. What's even more curious is that he imagines Johnny being "tucked in" by Louisa, showing as a companion of Johnny that there is something of the little boy (Tom Sawyer) in him too.

Louisa again joins the two when Johnny's parents go out to celebrate New Year's Eve. The three drive out to Frenchman's Forest to celebrate for themselves. Here Louisa is also honest with both of them. She tells them the details of her being shot, but does not let Matt fool with her. When he tries to slip his hand around her, she puts it back, and even gives him some advice about his own girlfriend, Debbie, saying "You push too hard" (92-3). One thinks of Huck trying to fool Jim, as though he were the likes of Tom Sawyer. Once when separated from Jim in the canoe, he tells his worried companion that he (Jim) only dreamed that he (Huck) was gone. But then Jim discovers the truth, for the raft is covered with debris, and Huck must apologize--"humble himself to a nigger." Jim like Louisa is a dependable and straightforward companion.

At another time Matt and Johnny go on an adventure to play poker where Glen Vann Dine harangues about Lester and Louisa's grossly sexual actions. He makes lewd statements, including calling her a whore. When he asks Johnny, "Do you and your old man take turns with her?" (107), Matt attacks him. One is reminded of Huck's TS-like journey ashore where he witnesses the violent Grangerfords vs. the Shepherdsons. Rooted in family honor, their feud is totally bizarre and ends in the death of Huck's friend Buck. In Matt's case, he too acts irrationally, starting a fight with Van Dine and ultimately breaking the man's arm. Like Huck crying over Buck's death Matt must suffer the consequences of his own violent act--the doctor will again ask if he has "Louisa Lindahl fever" (117), though the observation might also be applied to the doctor.

The real test of Louisa's affection for Matt comes when the three again go out to the Merchants Club House and get involved in a kissing contest. When the boys ask about Lester she admits he was a good kisser, adding that she needed him. When Matt asks why she's here with them, she says "to have a little fun...to get away from those tight-assed Norwegians" (167), which is another of her needs. Then Matt puts his arms around her but she backs away, saying they didn't have to beat up guys to protect her because there will always be stories about her. So Matt asks, "And you didn't need me?" She replies, "That's right," though when he asks: "Is it the doctor then?" (170), she pauses. Louisa at this point is a companion surprisingly straightforward.

Likewise as a companion Jim could not be more faithful. Once Huck considers sending him back to Miss Watson for he considers her a good person who could sell Jim for \$800. But then when Jim tells him “Huck: you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s evedre had” (89) Huck relents. Louisa and Jim both have terrible backgrounds, and both are seeking freedom, though in different ways. What brings them together as companions is that they have similar memories of the past and are honest about their needs. Huck, of course, is sometimes ambivalent about Jim, and so is Matt about Louisa. Even after all Louisa has said about her life to date, including the place of kissing, Matt wonders “whether there is something rarer than sex—friendship—which could develop further . . . (173).

At another time, Johnny, a teen out of control and unrealistic like Tom Sawyer, takes the two on a rampage in the Valiant. They drive into the country near where Matt’s father had worked. This visit brings to mind the fact that when he died Matt was only eight and Dr. Dunbar, the “civilized” doctor, broke the news to Matt in medical terms—“a ruptured spleen” (26). This is different from Nigger Jim’s approach to Huck’s dead father. When boarding an abandoned houseboat from their raft, because he acts to prevent Huck from seeing the dead man, Jim displays a humanity that transcends both his color or his condition as a slave. Compare this to Louisa as a companion who later tells Matt that she even feels sorry for Lester, who after he shot her hanged himself because he was alone, as she had been before he helped her survive.

Then one Sunday morning after church the power brokers of Willow City, like the ruling elite of St. Petersburg, were involved in “small talk and handshakes” (176) at the Heritage’s House’s restaurant. Hoffman says Watson does a superb job of peering under the masks of such people to reveal who they really are. Suddenly the restaurant’s owner Dale McDonough has a stroke. Dr. Dunbar elects to take him, along with Louisa rather than his assistants, to the hospital in Bellamy, fifty miles away. As with the specious scheme of the Duke and the Dauphin to capture and sell Jim, the whole situation with Willow City’s popular doctor smells of subterfuge. Could it be that that Rex Dunbar, like the blatant actions of the Royal Nonesuch, is a fraud, as the Wilks sisters and later a Dr. Robinson maintain.

The plot thickens in the meantime when Matt and Johnny happen to visit Louisa's room where Matt discovers her intention to "steal him (Rex) away" (186). Yet Matt is still under the power of Louisa, like naïve Huck who becomes "ashamed of the human race" when learning of the Duke and Dauphin's imprisonment of Jim, but is powerless to steal him back. It is Alice Dunbar, however, who is most aware of what is happening to her husband at the hands of Louisa. So when she discovers by phone that they had left the hospital two hours ago, she sends the two boys out in the blizzard on another TS-like adventure to find some answers.

Upon visiting the hospital, and discovering that Dale was already dead, they drive on to discover Rex's car at the Wagon Wheel Motor Inn. Johnny fears the worst, though Matt, still Johnny's friend, and concerned about Louisa, defends the doctor because of the storm. Earlier in Twain's novel Huck is upset though confused about the Duke and Dauphin's scheme to rip off the Wilks sisters' fortune, which would mean the separation of a slave family. Jim, of course had talked about his own separation and longing for his family, and his guilt in beating a deaf daughter, a confession that reveals a humanity in Jim that touches Huck deeply.

At the motel itself, however, it becomes evident that Louisa and Rex have been together. Matt, thinking that he knows everything about her, from her naked body to her inmost secrets, makes a final effort to take her away, grabbing her arm in one last "declaration of love" (213). He thinks his friend Johnny will help him, but the opposite is true when both his boyhood companion and his father kick and drag him toward the door. This surprising action parallels that of Huck in the final chapters of Twain's novel when he joins Tom who is now planning another adventure. This time Tom hopes to capture Jim, when it so happens that Jim is already free. Though the attack on Matt is more real and violent, in both cases the action is futile.

When the doctor puts his foot on the back of his neck, Matt is made starkly aware of who actually possesses the power and weight in this world (215), much as Huck discovered early on. So another TS-like adventure goes awry, though Matt connects this beating to those of the past, and he resolves not to be blindsided again (215). Gordin notes that Watson is good at capturing "lost innocence and the loss of innocence," for both Matt and Louisa are caught in epiphanies that change their lives radically, albeit tragically.

Matt leaves the motel in the Valiant, now realizing that there is no hope for a life with Louisa, that he could not compete with this grown man of power (218). But then he slips off the road, whereupon a couple of Indians stop while other cars whiz past. After they help Matt, one of them reveals a horrendous pain in his stomach, and Matt is able to use his medical knowledge to diagnose the man's condition so that they get him immediately to the hospital. No doubt here he "acts like a man" while Dr. Dunbar did not. Nor does Huck at the end. Ironically, it is his loyal companion Jim, now free, who assisted Tom Sawyer after he is shot. Later, Huck and Tom leave for Indian territory on another dubious adventure, a choice quite the opposite of Matt's non-racist act and Jim's humanitarian gesture.

When he gets back to Willow City Mrs. Dunbar comments on his friendship with Johnny, whom the twins, Julia and Janet, miss most, not knowing that Johnny, like Huck abandoning Jim in the end, had become his enemy. Louisa, Matt's companion and honest critic throughout, while still honest about her needs, which she said he never met, was about to break up a family to fulfill them. It's interesting that Jim had once told Huck that he felt guilty for how he treated his deaf daughter, causing Huck to admire a black slave's humanity. Louisa now put her needs above the Dunbar daughters, who would lose their father.

When Matt meets Louisa the next day he tells her she's going to Denver as she once claimed as a goal, which she calls "a pie in the sky notion." But then he brings forth her scheme to "steal away" the doctor, whom she claims "fell for me" (239). But he then offers her his life savings to pay for her trip, knowing that "something had slipped away from her" to be enticing any more as the companion he once desired. One thinks of Huck saying "All right, then, I'll go to hell," rather than turn in Jim and ruin his family. Matt now turns Louisa out and she leaves, now no longer a major threat to the Dunbar family.

It could be argued that Louisa, in spite of her power over Matt and his passion for her, was a positive companion for him until she overtly tied up with the power elite of Willow City, personified in Rex Dunbar. This connection eventually destroyed his family, much as the St. Petersburg elite, focused in Miss Watson's desire to sell Jim, would breakup his family. And Louisa may even have done Matt—and herself—a favor in leaving Willow City.

How a favor? She partied with the boys because she was bored with the Dunbar Norwegian setting. Once when buying beer for the boys at the Red Hawk bar, they asked why she stayed so long, and she replies “shooting the shit” with old friends (154). Though they might have felt ignored, Louisa was telling them directly or indirectly that she had a need for enjoying all kinds of people, including them, who were more natural for her—like Jim and Huck enjoying each other on the raft. And by hindsight the Dunbar and company elite probably would never have worked for her.

So the key to her positive stature rested in her honesty and need for community. The child of a broken family herself and therefore dire poverty, she was rooted in personal needs which did her in—got her shot (she wouldn’t make Lester Thanksgiving dinner) and ultimately banished (pursuing the Dunbar riches). But she was honest about her connection to young Matt as a friend, not a lover, much as Jim was honest with Huck’s being his best friend, and sharing his own vulnerability when talking about failing his own family through abusing his daughter.

Though Matt cannot but believe that Louisa loves him, she tries to convince him of the opposite. In the attic with the boys she removed Matt’s hands from her shoulder to demonstrate the meaning of friendship. Moreover, she told him how to relate—not to “push too hard” (92)--to his girl friend Debbie. Her counsel might even have been operating when he rejects Mrs. Knurr’s “wooing” him, for he is no more moved than Louisa by the upper class hypocrisy. Bazzett says the incident between Matt and the lawyer’s wife recalls a Mrs. Robinson scene from that famous movie. Huck too learns from Jim. Having tricked Jim with a snake-skin, he then witnesses Jim’s nearly drinking himself to death (53). So first hand Huck sees his friend’s fear of snakes is rooted in more than superstition.

At another time she explained to Matt that he need not protect her from the sexually lewd stories that floated around the Red Hawk Bar, though again Van Dine might have been somewhat right about the bar as her natural setting. She also explained her own family background and the consequent need for Lester to rescue her from poverty, something Matt could understand. And she told him about when Dale McDonough was dying she “held him close” because he was alone and she knew what it meant to be lonely (211). Jim has such human feelings too. Once when Huck is separated from Jim on the raft, he claims Jim was just dreaming, but when

Jim discovers the prank, and shares his loneliness, Huck must recognize Jim's humanity, admitting he had to "humble himself to a nigger" (86).

In a large way she teaches him "how to be a man" that go counter to Dr. Dunbar's claims. Once while witnessing the boys' science project, she showed the young medical students her scarred body in a non-sexual way as part of their education. This shows forth when he uses his medical knowledge to treat the Indian when two of them stop to help him with his car during the snowstorm. And because of Louisa and her need for Dr. Dunbar, his power and wealth, to save her, he knows that when needs are selfishly motivated that whole families suffer, as will Alice Dunbar and the twins.

One might say that she is no better than the Duke and the Dauphin. In a way her relations to Dr. Dunbar was a con, though the Royal Nonesuch were dishonest in the worst way, conning the innocent and the vulnerable in the name of religion so that it makes Huck "ashamed of the human race." (162). Louisa is a cultural victim, gone wrong, but she showed her heart in several places, and was able to accomplish many positive things along the way in her effort to survive, much as Huck himself was often caught between two choices. Both make bad ones in the end though Matt and Jim are the real heroes, while ironically Louisa and Jim are the catalysts to maturity.

Louisa, when traveling with the boys, enters a bar to buy beer, while they wait outside. There they observe their highly judgmental teacher going in to buy liquor. So for them it is not only the young who are hypocritical, but all the adult power brokers of the city. It is an insight about their town that ironically Louisa makes possible. And maybe Louisa's caution to Matt about his sexual advances had some effect, for later when working at an event at Palmer's, the adults ask Matt to drive Mrs. Knurr home with her drunken husband. Once there she tries to seduce him, but fails. So Matt at least sees the difference between sex and love, as well as something hypocritical about the wealthy town folk.

It's interesting that the ending to *American Boy*, in spite of similarities in the two companions, represents a radical reversal from the final pages of *Huckleberry Finn*. In that novel Huck, shows great strides in becoming a real human being in a thoroughly racist environment. But in the end he reverts to form and joins Tom in his romantic teenage adventures. In Watson's novel Matt is locked into an adolescent passion to the extent that

he confuses lust and love. Shaw says Matt recalls Turgenev's teenage protagonist Vladimir Petrovich from the 1860 novel *First Love*. Ultimately, however, thanks to Louisa's tie up with the doctor, he concludes that the power elite is too strong for his desires, and suddenly he grows up.

As for Johnny as a companion, he provides a foil for Matt's struggles to become a man in spite of or because of his boyish passion for Louisa. Like Tom Sawyer he loves his adventures with Matt, from searching the woods, to playing hockey, to recklessly driving the Valiant. *National Geographic* recently unveiled a portrait of the teenage brain (Dobbs). Johnny is forever that teen, and though he would like to be on Matt's team when they make the discovery at the motel, his immaturity prevails, and he joins his father in TS-like fashion to attack Matt. His greatest fear is that Louisa would turn out to be his step mother (203); Matt's coming of age saves him from that, though he will lose his father in the process.

Louisa, on the other hand, emerges as a person with needs dating back to her youth—to poverty, to abandonment, to sexual abuse. As a companion to Matt she shows considerable wisdom in distinguishing between the power of sex and friendship. And she displays a deep regard, a sympathy that is far more important than medical terminology, for those who die alone, much as does Nigger Jim. She also has a need for fun and mixing with her kind of people, which includes the boys, even though the adult world of the doctor and what he can provide lingers in the background. For Watson, the characterization of Louisa gives that unique power to *American Boy* much as Nigger Jim does to Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

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