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# Aunt Polly, Are You A Witch?

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WAGURI Ryo

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# Aunt Polly, Are You A Witch?

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WAGURI Ryo
Department of Practical English

## 0. Introduction.

Both in The *Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876, hereafter *Tom*) and in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884, hereafter *Huck*), witches and witchcraft have some importance in the narratives and draw a certain attention of the audience. For example, in reading *Tom*, the audience takes this fiction for a witch story, when the audience is interested in witches and their superstitions, since Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn witness Dr. Robinson's murder case on the graveyard under the full moon.[1] The surroundings of the case remind the audience of witches' meeting in the dead of night. Several people in St. Petersburg believe witches could do harm to a few people there, and Huck betrays to Tom, "She [Mother Hopkins] witched pap. Pap says so his own self. He come along one day, and he see she was a-witching him, so he took up a rock, and if she hadn't dodged, he'd a got her." (*Tom*, Ch.6, 51).[2] Mother Hopkins, though a peripherally minor character, takes half a page of illustration and shows more significance than Tom Sawyer's bosom friend Joe Harper.[3] After Huck's suggestion, Tom becomes superstitious and wants to round up all the marbles he ever lost, but in vail. Then Tom comes to pass the buck to a witch, and says, "He puzzled over the matter some time, and finally decided that some witch had interfered and broken the charm." (*Tom*, Ch. 8, 66) In *Huck*, Jim claims he has been bewitched and ridden by witches down to New Orleans during the night and "was most ruined, for a servant, because he got so stuck up on account of having seen the devil and been rode by witches." (*Huck*, Ch. 2, 8) St. Petersburg is a superstitious village where witches are supposed to walk around to do harm to the villagers.

Tom Sawyer's seemingly cheerful adventures mostly disable most of the readers to think of melancholy as deeply connected with witches. Yet, Tom is

(*Tom*, Ch. 3, 23)

repeatedly thrown into melancholic feelings through his breathless adventures. After his escaping from Aunt Polly's violent control in her home, Tom becomes melancholic on a log raft. True Williams, the illustrator of Tom Sawyer, represents Tom's depression through his sitting position with his elbow on the knee, which is undoubtedly inspired by Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I* (1514):


Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528)　*Melencolia I* (1514)[4]

Tom's attitude with his chin rested in his hand is one of the typical expressions of melancholy after Dürer.

Masatake Kurokawa historically demonstrates that witches experienced deep melancholy, and that the melancholic attitude was regarded as one of the typical appearances of witches. Although his demonstrations focus chiefly on European cases and partially on American ones, in America single women were sometimes accused as witches, as is shown as to Ann Hibbins in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Women who were called witches were single in many cases, and it is safely said that single middle-aged women, in making deep melancholic sighs and mumbling something indiscriminate, may have been called witches even in America.

## 1 The Melancholic Tom Sawyer.

On melancholy many scholars have been carrying on a voluminous inquiry and discussions. For example, Mitchell Breitwieser takes up a long tradition of meditation on death in classic American literature and discusses it in *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature*. Breitwieser points out Twain's stunning discouragement when Twain knew his daughter Susy's sudden death:

> Or perhaps, since houses cannot be promoted to edifying example without considerable risk of ludicrous personification, mourning for a lost house may capture the feel of actual mourning for a real person: because a house is a vessel rather than a being, it cannot be summed up, and its contents have to be recalled serially. So at least Twain seems to have felt when he tried to describe his reaction to a cablegram bearing the news of his daughter Susy's death: (Breitwieser 78)

Beitwieser's investigation into thanatopsis is totally piercing and inspiring, but, unfortunately, he does not pay any attention to Tom Sawyer's melancholy under the dark sky. Beitwieser's oversight shows Tom Sawyer's melancholy is so unexpected even to an erudite scholar.

In *Tom*, Tom Sawyer becomes downhearted after his failed serenading under the window of the Becky Thatcher's house:

> He wandered far from the accustomed haunts of boys, and sought desolate places that were in harmony with his spirit. A log raft in the river invited him, and he seated himself on its outer edge and contemplated the dreary vastness of the stream, wishing, the while, that he could only be drowned, all at once and unconsciously, without undergoing the uncomfortable routine devised by nature. (*Tom*, Ch. 3, 23)

Tom Sawyer wants to pass away, even if "unconsciously," and his unconscious downheartedness is melancholy. True Williams depicts Tom as sitting with his head supported with an arm on the knee, inspired by Arbrecht Dürer's *Melanchoria I*, cited above. The narrator does not employ the word melancholy here, but the illustration shows it.

TOM MEDITATES

Yet, Tom Sawyer falls into melancholy, just after being refused by Becky Thatcher to be engaged to get married. In this depression Tom Sawyer wants to pass away again, and the narrator calls it as melancholy:

> The boy's soul was steeped in melancholy; his feelings were in happy accord with his surroundings. He sat long with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, meditating. It seemed to him that life was but a trouble, at best, and he more than half envied Jimmy Hodges, so lately released; it must be very peaceful, he thought, to lie and slumber and dream forever and ever, with the wind whispering through the trees and caressing the grass and the flowers over the grave, and nothing to bother and grieve about, ever any more. (*Tom*, Ch. 8, 63-64)

Here again, in the back woods of Cardiff Hill, Tom Sawyer holds the same posture as he

shows on the raft. The repetition, both in text and in illustration, of Tom Sawyer's sitting posture, even though slightly changed, enhances Dürer's influence on Twain and on True Williams. (left, *Tom*, Ch. 8, 65)

He meditates on death, and then dreams of his desperate future, in the dark woods. What he ruthlessly dreams of are fatally dangerous occupations, such as a soldier and a pirate. They are childishly fickle and superficially romantic.

Melancholy and witches are united with each other in Tom Sawyer. After hearing of witches and witchcraft from Huck Finn in the Monday morning, Tom Sawyer self-deceivingly falls into melancholy in the afternoon. And then, he thinks of trying to get back the marble he ever lost through his charm, but fails. Tom Sawyer gives up his trying, and says, "So it was a witch that done it. I just knowed it." (*Tom*, Ch. 8, 66) On this Monday, witches and melancholy becomes connected with each other in Tom Sawyer himself.

The narrator employs "melancholy" fourteen times in this fiction, but contrastingly enough, never does Huck Finn, the narrator of *Huck*.[5] Out of the fourteen instances, two are expressive of Huck Finn's feelings, and the other twelve are of Tom Sawyer's. Melancholy, or meditation on death, quick downheartedness, and romantic dreams are limited chiefly to his school children, does not spread all throughout St. Petersburg.

In Mr. Dobbins's composition classes, melancholy is a popular topic, and "A prevalent feature in these compositions was a nursed and petted melancholy" (*Tom*, Ch. 21, 156). On the stage on exhibition of the Examination evening, "a slim, melancholy girl," reads a poem entitled "A MISSOURI MAIDEN'S FAREWELL TO ALABAMA" (*Tom*, Ch. 21, 157).[6] In a certain rural side of the nineteenth century Missouri, especially among the school children, melancholy may have been a kind of prevalent topic. Then Huck Finn is caught in melancholy, only twice, since he is never in school, at least in *Tom*.

What Mr. Dobbins teaches through melancholy seems to have a wide meaning, ranging from romantic and unattainable desire to meditation on death. Then the slim girl sings a sorrowful farewell to Alabama, and a young lady describes a spiritual appearance in the dark, stormy night in "A Vision." (*Tom*, Ch. 21, 158)

Jacky Bowring, painstakingly, tries to define melancholy, but in vain:

> Melancholy is elusive. Slipping and sliding between widely disparate fields, it is as common to find a debate over the definition of melancholy in a psychiatric journal as it is in a journal of literature, art, design or philosophy, as illustrated in two conferences from the last decade. The first, in 2002, was in the area of the humanities and titled 'Culture and Melancholy', and ... the second conference, focused only on the field of psychiatry, offers no more precision in terms of a formulation of melancholy. (Bowring 12)

Huck Finn feels melancholy on the Jackson's Island and on the river as "sitting on the gunwale of a flatboat, listlessly dangling his feet in the water and looking very melancholy." (*Tom*, Ch. 27, 194). Melancholy in this fiction also includes Huck's sluggishness.

When Huck Finn enters the church after the Jackson's Island adventures, he finds he is unwelcomed therein and feels uncomfortable, as if he were a returned prodigal son, "not knowing exactly what to do or where to hide from so many unwelcoming eyes." (*Tom*, Ch. 17, 131) The narrator refrains from depicting Huck here as melancholy, but his uncomfortableness grows deeper and deeper into unbearableness. Still, it is not regarded as melancholy in this fiction.

Mr. Dobbins is the originator of the prevalence of melancholy, and then it is spread among the school children, and even Huck Finn, while with Tom Sawyer, shows melancholic attitude. Mr. Dobbins, a school master and an only teacher, stands on the upper class of St. Petersburg. The melancholy giver belongs to the establishment of St. Petersburg, and he gives it to the school children as a rite of passage, since his melancholy has no philosophical depth at all. Mr. Dobbins is unable to make his students understand melancholy existentially.

## 2 Witches and Witchcraft in Tom.

Huck Finn comes into direct contact with Mother Hopkins and is informed of the superstitious treatment from her about how to heal his warts by using a dead body of a cat. Huck Finn confesses "old Mother Hopkins told me." (*Tom*, Ch. 6, 50) His father also has direct relationships with Mother

Hopkins, even though unfavorably, and these three people belong to the lowest class of St. Petersburg. Since witches were, in many cases, socially estranged people, Mother Hopkins must be a member of the lowest of St. Petersburg, and Mother Hopkins, Pap Finn, and Huck Finn have actual connections with each other. All of them belong to the lowest people.

After Huck Finn refers to Mother Hopkins, Tom Sawyer calls her a witch and comes to feel melancholy. Yet, there in the woods Tom Sawyer comes to mistake witchcraft for profitable magic for his lost marbles, and says to himself, "some witch had interfered and broken the charm." (*Tom*, Ch. 8, 66) Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn try to use witchcraft to their own purposes, but in vain. Their innocent and ineffectual uses of witchcraft show witches and witchcraft are groundless, at least in St. Petersburg.

When melancholy is a rite of passage given to the children and to the socially lowest class people including Mother Hopkins, witches and melancholy become social concerns. Whenever the lowest class people do fall into melancholy and speak something indiscriminate, they may be called witches and socially estranged from the decent citizens.

It is no coincidence that the author gives this woman the name of Mother Hopkins, since there was a famous witch accuser in England in the seventeenth century: Matthew Hopkins (c. 1620–1647).

Matthew Hopkins published *Discoverie of Witches* in 1647 and exercised many atrocious accusations against innocent women and he became famous:

> Hopkins' methods were thorough and merciless. He stripped suspects to search for witches marks, and used starvation, sleep deprivation, swimming, and other tests and torments. The confessions he elicited show his acceptance of the continental tradition: the witches were member of a sect worshipping the Devil; they met at night; held initiations; had sexual relations with the Devil; and sacrificed to him. Nor did Hopkins neglect English tradition; his witches kept familiars in the shape of dogs, cats, mice, moles, squirrels, and with names such as Prick-ears, Flo, and Bess.... But Hopkins had gone too far too fast. By 1646 considerable opposition to him was already surfacing; later that year he was forced to retire, and the following year he died in some disgrace. In the short space of two years he had earned for himself the informal

> title witchfinder-general of England and the contempt of future generations. (Russell 100)

In Twain's major fictions, Mother Hopkins is the only example of an actually living witch. She suffers no tortures, even though a few children unconsciously call her a witch, for there is no Matthew Hopkins in St. Petersburg. Through giving her the name of Mother Hopkins, there profound strained relations underlie the people in *Tom*. She reminds the audience of the merciless witch hunter, Matthew Hopkins. Mother Hopkins is no longer a simple member of the lowest class of St. Petersburg. All the superstitious people in this village may change themselves abruptly into a cruel mob of witch persecutors, who will attack the lowest people including Huck Finn. The name of Hopkins suggests that a bloody massacre will happen in the seemingly peaceful village of St. Petersburg. The author shows the seemingly heavenly peace of St. Petersburg is weak and superficial. Samuel Clemens was among the "future generations" who were shocked at the bloodshed witch hunter, Matthew Hopkins.

### 3 Aunt Polly Protects Herself through the Children

Aunt Polly keeps strong interest in medicine and is always buying several periodicals on medicine, and puts several remedies on the magazines into practice with her family members, especially with Tom Sawyer. She gives the water treatment, several patent medicines and Pain-Killer to Tom Sawyer. She has to pull out Tom Sawyer's tooth on the early Monday morning. She looks like a notorious medicine woman:

> She was as simple-hearted and honest as the day was long, and so she was an easy victim. She gathered together her quack periodicals and her quack medicines, and thus armed with death, went about on her pale horse, metaphorically speaking, with "hell following after." But she never suspected that she was not an angel of healing and the balm of Gilead in disguise, to the suffering neighbors. (*Tom*, Ch. 12. 93)

Aunt Polly is a very earnest and honest guardian, but she can be looked upon as a witch, since witches are supposed to have a mount of medical knowledge

and be good at utilizing their knowledges, sometimes in a fatal way. The narrator describes her favorably here, but Tom Sawyer feels melancholy: "Yet notwithstanding all this, the boy grew more and more melancholy and pale and dejected." (*Tom*, Ch. 12, 93) Although Aunt Polly feels no melancholy at all, she spreads melancholy just around her.

Aunt Polly's voice can be overheard as horrible murmuring of witches. She soliloquizes dangerously, just after Tom Sawyer gets a breathtaking escape from her violent whippings:

> Hang the boy, can't I never learn anything? Ain't he played me tricks enough like that for me to be looking out for him by this time? But old fools is the biggest fools there is. Can't learn an old dog new tricks, as the saying is. But my goodness, he never plays them alike, two days, and how is a body to know what's coming? He 'pears to know just how long he can torment me before I get my dander up, and he knows if he can make out to put me off for a minute or make me laugh, it's all down again and I can't hit him a lick. I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth, goodness knows. Spare the rod and spile the child, as the Good Book says. I'm a laying up sin and suffering for us both, I know. He's full of the Old Scratch, but laws-a-me! he's my own dead sister's boy, poor thing, and I ain't got the heart to lash him, somehow. (*Tom*, Ch. 1, 2)

If the audience hears her mumbling literally, she must be misunderstood as a witch, since she swears at Tom Sawyer and wants to kill him, since she says, "Hang the boy." She repeats bad sayings, for example, "goodness," "hit him a lick," "dander," and "Old Scratch." If Matthew Hopkins would eavesdrop of her just outside of her house, he could accuse her of witching Tom Sawyer.[7] Then Aunt Polly must have experienced the worst torture.

There is another person who keeps strong interest in medicine in Tom: Mr. Dobbins. He has kept an unsatisfied ambition to be a medical doctor for a couple of decades, and his unsatisfactoriness makes him peruse an anatomy book secretly hidden in his classroom desk.[8] His distorted desires makes him a stringent schoolmaster and he introduces melancholy to his students. He does neither make any murmuring nor going out at night, but his mental distortion can sometimes go too far.

In *Tom*, the school children experience a rite of passage through melancholy. Still, the slim, melancholy girl stretches the meaning of melancholy and the young lady, who composes "A Vision," makes a broad interpretation of the word. Mr. Dobbins has introduced melancholy to his students, but they understand it of their own, not necessarily connected with witches.

Witchcrafts and sorceries proved to be powerless by Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, even if indirectly. Tom Sawyer reveals Mr. Dobbins's bald head on the Examination evening, and his mischief shows that Mr. Dobbins is only a human. The children's power seems too small to fight against the white establishment, but the children protect St. Petersburg from the dangerous superstitions of witches. It becomes unnecessary for St. Petersburg to keep a Matthew Hopkins who accuses decent citizens of witches, since it has several innocent children to stop him.

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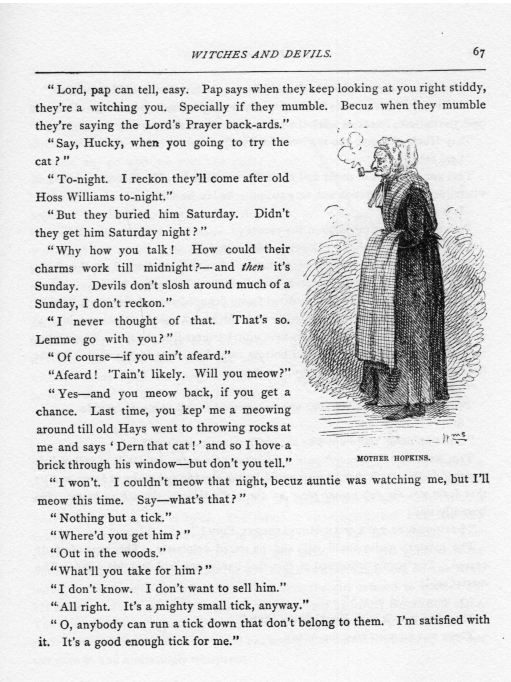
[1] See Ryo, WAGURI, "A Long Shadow of Joshua on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*; Samuel Clemens's Critical Eye Against the Christian Respectability." *Shujitsu Ronso* (51, 2021), 47–63.

[2] All the page references of citations, including the illustrations, are to the Works Cited, with the abbreviated titles of Clemens's works or the author's names.

[3] Mother Hopkins's illustration is large enough to draw attention:



*WITCHES AND DEVILS.* 67

"Lord, pap can tell, easy. Pap says when they keep looking at you right stiddy, they're a witching you. Specially if they mumble. Becuz when they mumble they're saying the Lord's Prayer back-ards."

"Say, Hucky, when you going to try the cat?"

"To-night. I reckon they'll come after old Hoss Williams to-night."

"But they buried him Saturday. Didn't they get him Saturday night?"

"Why how you talk! How could their charms work till midnight?—and *then* it's Sunday. Devils don't slosh around much of a Sunday, I don't reckon."

"I never thought of that. That's so. Lemme go with you?"

"Of course—if you ain't afeard."

"Afeard! 'Tain't likely. Will you meow?"

"Yes—and you meow back, if you get a chance. Last time, you kep' me a meowing around till old Hays went to throwing rocks at me and says 'Dern that cat!' and so I hove a brick through his window—but don't you tell."

MOTHER HOPKINS.

"I won't. I couldn't meow that night, becuz auntie was watching me, but I'll meow this time. Say—what's that?"

"Nothing but a tick."

"Where'd you get him?"

"Out in the woods."

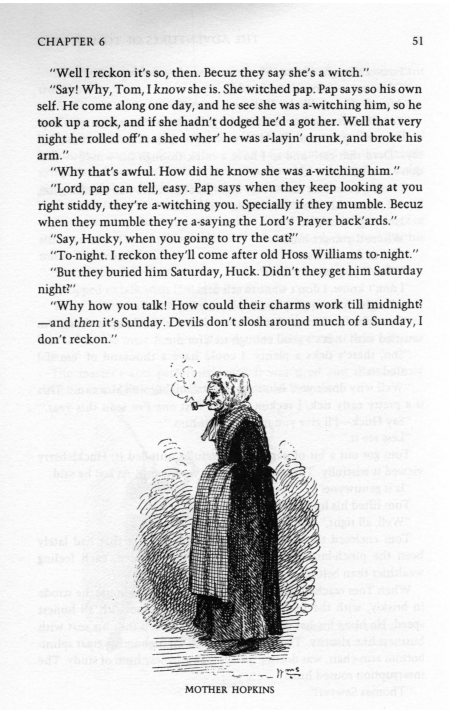
"What'll you take for him?"

"I don't know. I don't want to sell him."

"All right. It's a mighty small tick, anyway."

"O, anybody can run a tick down that don't belong to them. I'm satisfied with it. It's a good enough tick for me."

(*Tom First*, Ch. 6, 67)



CHAPTER 6 51

"Well I reckon it's so, then. Becuz they say she's a witch."

"Say! Why, Tom, I *know* she is. She witched pap. Pap says so his own self. He come along one day, and he see she was a-witching him, so he took up a rock, and if she hadn't dodged he'd a got her. Well that very night he rolled off'n a shed wher' he was a-layin' drunk, and broke his arm."

"Why that's awful. How did he know she was a-witching him."

"Lord, pap can tell, easy. Pap says when they keep looking at you right stiddy, they're a-witching you. Specially if they mumble. Becuz when they mumble they're a-saying the Lord's Prayer back'ards."

"Say, Hucky, when you going to try the cat?"

"To-night. I reckon they'll come after old Hoss Williams to-night."

"But they buried him Saturday, Huck. Didn't they get him Saturday night?"

"Why how you talk! How could their charms work till midnight? —and *then* it's Sunday. Devils don't slosh around much of a Sunday, I don't reckon."

MOTHER HOPKINS

(*Tom*, Ch. 6, 51)

Mother Hopkins reminds the audience of Mathew Hopkins, "a successful lawyer … who was to cause more people to be hanged in two years than had been

hanged in the previous century," (Russell 97–98) since their names are very similar to one another.

Tom Sawyer's bosom friend, Joe Harper, is always with Tom Sawyer, and it is very difficult to tell him from Tom Sawyer on the illustrations:


(*Tom*, Ch. 8, 67)


(*Tom*. Ch. 16, 128)

On these illustrations, Joe Harper is so small, as compared with Mother Hopkins.

[4] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Melencolia_I. Accessed October 24, 2022.

[5] In *Tom*, Huck Finn feels melancholy in Chapter 27:

Huck was sitting on the gunwale of a flatboat, listlessly dangling his feet in the water and looking very melancholy. Tom concluded to let Huck lead up to the subject. If he did not do it, then the adventure would be proved to have been only a dream.

THE NEXT DAY'S CONFERENCE (*Tom*, Ch. 27, 194)

Unlike Tom Sawyer, Huck does not hold his face with his hand on the knee. This difference is significant, since melancholy, portrayed in a traditional sitting posture, is not conveyed to Huck Finn. Huck Finn is quite out of the cultural tradition of the white establishment and remains out of the melancholy influence by Mr. Dobbins.

[6] The melancholy girl's poem reads:

ALABAMA, good-bye! I love thee well!
  But yet for a while do I leave thee now!
Sad, yes, sad thoughts of thee my heart doth swell,
  And burning recollections throng my brow!
For I have wandered through thy flowery woods;
  Have roamed and read near Tallapoosa's stream;
Have listened to Tallassee's warring floods,
  And wooed on Coosa's side Aurora's beam.

Yet shame I not to bear an o'er-full heart,
  Nor blush to turn behind my tearful eyes;
'Tis from no stranger land I now must part,

'Tis to no strangers left I yield these sighs.
Welcome and home were mine within this State,
  Whose vales I leave—whose spires fade fast from me
And cold must be mine eyes, and heart, and tete,
  When, dear Alabama! they turn cold on thee! (*Tom*, Ch. 21, 157)

The poem shows what Mr. Dobbins teaches through melancholy. It is a romantic aspiration for a far-away state, Alabama, and its pastoral nature.

[7] Aunt Polly shows quite different attitudes toward Tom Sawyer and Sidney Sawyer. To Tom Sawyer she seems a very strict aunt, but to Sidney Sawyer she is a responsible but hands-off guardian. See Ryo WAGURI, "

[8] Mr. Dobbins's anatomy book is identified as frontispiece of Calvin Cutter's *A Treatise on Anatomy, Physiology, and Hygiene* (Boston: Mussey 1855). See *Tom Norton*, 208.