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Domestic Interiors: Boyhood Nostalgia and Affective Labor in the Gilded Age

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At the end of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1875), Mark Twain appends a terse note: “So endeth this chronicle. It being strictly a history of a boy, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a man.” The ending is as abrupt as it could be: until its final chapters the text celebrates what Twain calls “the pure unalloyed pleasure” of boyhood, inviting adult readers to immerse themselves once again in the “pattern—restless, noisy, and troublesome” of childhood energy. By the end, however, as Tom’s summer adventures draw to a close and he must once again face the socializing injunctions of home, school, and church; as Huckleberry Finn is adopted by the widow Douglas; the boyhood world of St. Petersburg grows increasingly constricted, haunted by the specter of an adult manhood that, as Twain acknowledges in his conclusion, threatens the novel’s idyllicism.1

I point to the awkward conclusion to emphasize how indelibly linked and yet fundamentally antagonistic are boyhood and manhood in the novel, a tension acknowledged in Twain’s prefatorial promise “to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves” even as he insists on “what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in.” In the novel men are judges, teachers, and ministers; together they enforce a moral universe of right and wrong, deferred pleasure, and certain retribution. They ceaselessly rehearse that authority by disciplining boys, who themselves resist with practical jokes and more often escape into fantasy worlds of violence and superstition. Yet boys, as Twain backhandedly acknowledges in his conclusion, must become men—“pretty grave, unromantic men, too, some of them” (254)—men who will either embody
the self-controlled lives they once rebelled against, or, like Injun Joe, succumb to their anger, commit murder, and plot to mutilate respected widows. The narrator tells us that Tom “would be a President, yet, if he escaped hanging” (173), and it is this anxiety about the future, the sense that the end of childhood will transform Tom utterly into the embodiment of either authority or criminality, that suffuses Twain’s conclusion.

Yet if some mysterious metamorphosis of boy into man marks the border of Twain’s fictional imagination, what Twain calls a “rightly constructed boy’s life” (175) was built out of—an inverted reflection of—the very adult masculinity the text tries to keep at bay. What Twain would later call his fictional “hymn” to boyhood grew out of a conviction that emerged in middle age that “the romance of life is the only part of it that is overwhelmingly valuable, & romance dies with youth. After that, life is a drudge, & indeed a sham...I should greatly like to re-live my youth, & then get drowned.” 2 Given the privation and uncertainty that characterized his youth—particularly after the death of his father when Twain was twelve—a youth that Twain himself recalled elsewhere as “so damned humiliating,” it is apparent that the novel’s architecture (to borrow a word from Twain’s preface) of a boyhood past rests on the foundation of an adult present. 3 The boy may be but father of the man, to paraphrase one of William Wordsworth’s best-known poems of the period, but he is also in this case the man of the father, the projection onto boyhood of a specific adult experience of masculinity.

It is precisely this dual gesture of forgetting and projection that defines the core of the novel’s nostalgia, and that makes the text such a resonant example of nineteenth-century America’s remaking of childhood in general and boyhood in particular. For Tom Sawyer is but the most enduring product of an era that invented boyhood in fiction, autobiography, childrearing manuals, and the domestic home itself, as a separate sphere of experience—complete with its own psychic geography—that served both as a therapeutic retreat from the demands of adult masculinity and as a space in which that masculinity could best be formed. As such, Twain’s nostalgic splitting of boyhood and manhood—which necessarily acknowledges that boys and men are (opposed) components of a common masculinity—teaches us much about the sheer complexity of the Gilded Age’s making of gender. But the ways in which the novel fashions that masculinity suggest that the logic that separated the two seemingly divergent topoi of boy and man itself was the manifestation of a more fundamental form of cultural work. In what follows I shall suggest that Tom Sawyer represents the culmination of the century’s construction of a sensibility that assigned to boys and men radically different emotional natures, a sensibility that was both the product of, and finally legitimated, what I shall call an affective labor dedicated to building an internal masculine character that
appeared most visibly as the middle-class self-controlled man. Beneath the history of Twain’s fictional boyhood lies the history of the nineteenth century’s ideologies of selfhood.

The social roots of this contradictory history lie in the formation of the middle-class home. Early in the century, Tom Sawyer and his fictional kin were born of a marriage between a sexual division of labor that reconfigured family government as mothering, and Lockean notions of the child as “plaster,” to use a common trope of advice writers, susceptible to the impress of environment and awaiting the moral molding of parental care. The environment identified as most conducive to this molding was the domestic home—a private enclave dedicated to the cultural preservation and emotional redemption of values seen as missing in the competitive public sphere. There “the boy” emerged as the product of the middle class’s attempt to secure for itself a foothold amid the profound upheavals that were transforming a largely rural nation of republican communities into a nation of industrial capitalism. The most immediate threats to economic and social stability were recognized as the erosion of the apprenticeship system, and the increasing need for young men to leave their homes and communities to find work in what Benjamin Franklin, the century’s best-known prodigal son, called “the wide World.” No longer able to guarantee their sons’ placement in specific trades, families turned to preparing for the future by building character rather than imparting skills. Thus advice writers urged parents to inculcate boys with a conscience, what Mary Ryan has called a “portable parent”—an internal mechanism of control that would in the future allow a man to resist the temptations and vices of the outside world. This character not only would guarantee a safe crossing of the border between the domestic and the economic, it would build a loyalty to the family that would solidify its financial prospects and social status.

No doubt these strategies of privatized consolidation and character building—whether pursued consciously or not—provided families with important resources for successfully negotiating a changing economic world. These material concerns, however, unfolded within a discourse that increasingly seized upon the domestic home as a symbolic domain of class-specific values, attributes, practices, and expectations. Thus to frame nostalgically the play of boys in fictions like Twain’s, to isolate them from manhood, was to effect in the naturalized figure of the boy a form of sentimental synecdoche similar to that which invested such components of the home as the kitchen hearth and the easy chair with a cultural aura that affirmed and even perpetuated the domesticity that produced it. Such fictions gave eloquent and coherent expression to what Eli Zaretsky has called the signature fantasy of the middle class: “that humanity can pass beyond a life dominated by relations of production.”

The popular success of Twain’s nostalgic rendering (it was reviewed as a
"realistic" depiction of boys' lives) not only attests to the hegemony of this vision, it suggests the ways in which insisting on the gap between boy and man helped justify the middle-class family's retreat into self-protective privacy. Certainly this was clear early in the century, when the growing characterization of children as infinitely susceptible to the influence of environment coincided with the reorganization of the home into a reproductive sphere: just as motherhood was charged with the full weight of femininity, boyhood emerged as the legitimating object for its fulfillment. By the 1870s such a developmental gap helped transform that retreat into another source of capital: the longer a son was held out of productive life, the more he was prepared for a career, the greater his value as a marker of class status. Thus boyhood served as an important component in what Stephanie Coontz has described as the production of "the class-specific values so necessary for the social reproduction of capitalism.

Men's economic and political patterns determined the class status of the family; women's socialization reproduced the values and behaviors necessary for the male child to step into and maximize his position in the social order.

With this in mind, I would like to situate Twain's novelistic entrance into the late-Victorian construction of boyhood as an active constituent in this complex process of class reproduction. Twain's boy naturalizes and finally legitimates, even as it obscures (indeed because it obscures), a subtle yet assiduous form of affective labor that refocused social anxieties onto the building of character — a labor that, according to the century's childrearing and educational experts, was best pursued in the socially isolated family. Thus *Tom Sawyer* makes visible both those forms of work that created a separate boyhood in the service of a middle-class masculinity, and the necessity for hiding, or evading, the constructedness of that separation.

Indeed, to momentarily exceed the limits of this chapter, I would argue that in the conventions of boy-making underwriting Twain's fiction lay the nascent formation of a code of *internal* character development that prepared the ideological ground for the emergence of the twentieth century's middle-class therapeutic culture. To be sure, a vast gulf separates Tom's fictive life from the popular contemporary construction of an "inner child" at the core of a psychological self. Orphan that he is, in his robust energy Tom bears none of the fragility that would presumably make him vulnerable to the wounds of family dysfunction. Nor would Twain and his contemporaries have recognized any such "wounds" as relevant to their own emotional health. Nevertheless, the conditions and discourses which for the middle class made possible, and finally compelling, both the split between boy and man, and the assumptions that the preparation of one shaped the destiny of the other, at the very least anticipate our culture's assumption that childhood survives as a distinct emotional sphere within our adult experience of gender and class. In suggesting that there is a
little Tom Sawyer in all of us, I urge a historical, rather than a psychological, argument. ¹⁰

The dynamics of this boy-making labor emerge in the opening pages of Twain's novel, when Tom's half-brother Sid betrays to Aunt Polly Tom's lie that he had gone to school instead of swimming. Instantly Tom rushes from the house vowing revenge, only to find, "within two minutes, or even less," that his troubles have vanished. "Not," the narrator tells us, because they were "one whit less heavy and bitter to him than a man's are to a man, but because a new and powerful interest bore them down and drove them out of his mind for the time—just as men's misfortunes are forgotten in the excitement of new enterprises" (5). Tom, then, suffers no less than a man, and he responds to that suffering no differently than does a man. Thus when he immerses himself in the "new enterprise" of learning to whistle, Tom's delight in his skill leaves him feeling "much as an astronomer feels who has discovered a new planet." With this joy, however, emerges a difference: "No doubt, as far as strong, deep, unalloyed pleasure is concerned, the advantage was with the boy, not the astronomer."

At the heart of this comparison lies a language of emotional investment. The relationship between boys and men is marked not so much in physiological terms—the book is remarkable for, with few exceptions, its utter lack of attention to its characters' physical appearances—as it is in their relative capacities for apparently unmediated emotion. A whistling boy striding "down the street with his mouth full of harmony and his soul full of gratitude" may prefigure the more mature triumphs of science, but only by underscoring the astronomer's emotional diminution.

Or rather, the astronomer's emotional focus: for whistling is not Tom's only form of unadulterated pleasure. Twain marks boyhood's "pattern" with the sheer energy of Tom's naive capacity for emotional investment both in physical objects—dollops of jam, bits of brass, fruit, a dead cat, or gold—and fantasies of mystery and power that lead Tom beyond the purlieus of St. Petersburg to haunted houses, Jackson's Island, and McDougall's Cave. Once in the grip of love, dejection, terror, remorse, "a raging desire" (175) for hidden treasure, Tom cannot resist his impulses; he must follow them until they run their course. Men, on the other hand, extend to their charges the same modes of restraint and control they demand of themselves: it takes a Sunday school superintendent dressed in a collar so stiff it "compelled a straight lookout ahead, and a turning of the whole body when a side view was required," to understand the importance of asking his students to "sit up just as straight and pretty as you can," eyes forward in the classroom (32).

These distinctions of emotional control both offer an imaginative vocabu-
lary with which to constitute a sex-based field of identity, and allow Twain to endow adult masculinity with an authority associated directly with institutions of social discipline: the school, the church, the courts. As such, this implied developmental narrative—whose trajectory carries boys from the margins to the center of social power—unfolds squarely within what Peter Stearns has described as the “emotional culture” of late Victorian America, “a complex of interrelated norms, standards, and ideals that govern[ed] the endorsement, the expression, and ultimately, even the acknowledgment of emotions.” In his formulation, such culture performed primarily a regulatory and legitimating function by identifying and refining appropriate modes, spaces, and times for both the expression and the repression of certain emotions. This process of “emotional differentiation” was particularly important in the construction of gender, as boys and girls were taught to embrace and control emotions appropriate for what were perceived as their separate adult destinies. Alongside this, however, emotional culture also served a constitutive function by gendering such emotions as anger (masculine) and jealousy (feminine) as markers of identity, thus “convinc[ing] men and women that gender labels were secure.” In this light Twain’s text naturalizes an affective cultural vocabulary of bodily control and emotional channeling underwriting authoritative adult masculinity.

Yet surely this overstates the case about the novel. After all, St. Petersburg boys bubble with “adventurous, troublesome ways” (3) that overrun the discipline of men: Tom and his friends play hooky from school, run away from home, and find any diversion at hand to relieve the tedium of discipline. Once free, they visit graveyards at midnight with dead cats, steal from the sugar bowl, lie when they have to, and laugh in church. They follow their passions into a contumacious world of “secret troubles” regulated by superstitions, magical incantations, oaths signed in blood, and dominated by ghosts, devils, pirates, and robbers. At times the energetic naïveté of boys grows so forceful it overwhelms adult self-control. When Tom’s prize pinch bug escapes his grasp in the middle of a sermon and leaves the church firmly clamped to the rear end of a yelping dog; when Tom and his friends appear from behind a pew in the church at their own funeral; and finally when he and Becky return to town after being given up for lost in McDougall’s Cave, adults break out in a release of laughter and tears—in the latter instance “swarming” the streets “frantic” and “half-clad,” “roaring huzzah after huzzah” in their excitement (233–34).

To the extent that such moments of emotional release dramatize the nostalgic pleasure Twain strives to provoke in his readers, they tie the novel to a Wordsworthian tradition which “discovered” in the child new possibilities for spiritual renewal. In this formulation, Twain’s novel challenges, rather than reinforces, the disciplined emotional differentiation Stearns describes. But to say this is at once to say too much and far too little: Tom’s incitements to
release deliver no emotional redemption. As he and his friends discover when they run away to the freedom of Jackson’s Island only to find that “swimming’s no good... when there ain’t anybody to say I shan’t go in” (121), the transgressive pleasure of boyhood adventure depends on the efforts of unredeemed adults to hold in place rules of behavior. The same holds true for Twain’s authorial adventures. Boys are boys, men are men: astronomical success may but dimly reflect a boy’s pleasure in learning to whistle, but it is Twain’s assumption of that dimness that allows his narrator to suggest that “the reader probably remembers how to do it if he has ever been a boy” (5). The pleasure of Twain’s text lies not in any rediscovery of a state of boyishness, but in its managed emotional response to a distant boyhood.

Nor is this boyhood as Wordsworthian as it first appears. For Twain, like Stearns, understands the inherent conventionality of affective discourse. Consider, for instance, Tom’s romance with Becky Thatcher. When Tom first spots the “lovely little blue-eyed creature” (19) in the garden of Jeff Thatcher’s house he is instantly smitten. It takes only two days to arrange a schoolyard tryst with “the Adored Unknown” and seal their engagement with a kiss; and it takes only a few minutes more, in a dizzying turn of events appropriate only to the highest melodrama of love, to lose her affection. Tom is devastated enough to consider suicide—“it must be very peaceful, he thought, to lie and slumber and dream forever and ever”—but the disadvantages of death outweigh its effectiveness as a vehicle for revenge on the heartless Becky (“She would be so sorry some day—maybe when it was too late”). So “the elastic heart of youth” leads Tom to other fantasies: he will run away to become a clown, a soldier, an Indian, or finally, a pirate. “And at the zenith of his fame, how he would suddenly appear at the old village and stalk into church... and hear with swelling ecstasy the whisperings, ‘It’s Tom Sawyer the Pirate!—the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main!’” (64). At a stroke Tom’s imagination delivers him from a maudlin indulgence in a Werther-like sentiment for death into a priapic fantasy of revenge.

In one sense, of course, Tom’s melodrama of romance evokes yet one more instance of his boundless capacity for emotional investment. Yet Twain narrates Tom’s lachrymose wanderings and displaced plots of revenge, and Becky’s swerve from coquetry to abjection, in a voice that facilely mimics sentimental euphemism and dime-novel enthusiasm even as it deploys literary conventions of romance (the two lovers, for instance, share an encounter that parodies the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet). The result is a text that insists on the artificiality, even the theatricality, of Tom’s emotional adventures. Tom in effect performs, rather than embodies, the anguishes and joys of romance; like a child actor he delivers his lines without quite understanding the play. From this standpoint, the novel’s representation of the “unalloyed pleasure” of boy-
hood is nothing more, or nothing less, than an alloy of an adult emotional culture.

From this perspective Twain's tale, far from representing a story of liberatory rediscovery, unfolds most coherently as a narrative of affective management. But even this reading does not tell the whole story. To the extent that Twain assigns appropriate feelings to different levels of maturity (boys pursue passion while adult readers indulge in meditative amusement), his text seems to reinforce Stearns's argument that emotions served as tools to create and finally to adjudicate distinctions between boy and girl, boy and man. But this conjunction also points to where author and historian most clearly part company. For Stearns, manliness was the product of the right management of boyhood excess. For Twain, the need for right management is the product of the split between boyhood and manhood. In other words, in suspending the conventional developmental narrative, Twain locates the genesis both of his novel's representative boyhood and the perceived need for the emotional management of that boyhood within the affective discourse of manhood. The gendered labor so apparent in the novel itself depends on, as much as it legitimates, the discursive production of a masculine selfhood that needs to be emotionally regulated. In this sense *Tom Sawyer* most powerfully participates as a novel in its era's emotional culture by bringing into focus two interanimating discourses—gender differentiation and affective constitution—powerful enough to bring to fictive life an eternal boyhood, and to historical life a far more dynamic story about the history of emotions than that told by Stearns.

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was but one of a number of books Twain wrote on boyhood. Indeed, Twain wrote about boys so often—in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1882), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Huckleberry Finn* (1885)—two sequels to *Tom Sawyer*—and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916)—that by the end of his career the composite childhood constructed in his texts had become for his public, and to some extent for Twain (whose memory was always more creative than accurate), indistinguishable from that of the author himself. Yet as intimate a part of his own literary psyche as it may have been, Twain's investment in youth was but one note in his era's sustained chord of adulation for the child, and boyhood in particular. Twenty years earlier Samuel Goodrich, who spent a lifetime educating and entertaining children (including the young Samuel Clemens) as "Peter Parley," remembered his own youth as "one bright current of enjoyment, flowing amid flowers, and all in the company of companions as happy and jubilant as myself." So powerful were the "exultant emotions" of walking barefoot in summer "that I repeated them a thousand times in happy dreams."12

Whether or not such sentimental romanticism was repeated in dreams, it
certainly appeared thousands of times in print. *Tom Sawyer* entered a popular reading market for and about children, shaped by pulp fiction, textbooks, instructional works, and pleasure fiction, even magazines like *St. Nicholas* and *The Riverside Youth Magazine*. Eschewing the overt didacticism of earlier writing for children, writers like Twain embraced a mass-market emphasis on entertainment to address an audience primed, in the words of a contemporary reviewer, to “look back to our childhood, as the paradisiacal period of our life, our Eden before we are driven into the world by sin.” In their nostalgia, these texts joined painting, popular illustration, verse, and song to capture the period’s fascination with childhood and shape what has been called the Golden Age of children’s writing. By the second decade of the twentieth century, when the tide began to ebb, the “boy book” genre had attracted the talents of some of the era’s most distinguished writers—William Dean Howells, Louisa May Alcott, Henry James, Stephen Crane—and yielded some of the era’s most enduring popular fiction.

The two earliest examples of what by the turn of the century became a widely popular convention give a good idea of the cultural tenor of this celebration. In 1869 Thomas Bailey Aldrich published his boyhood reminiscence, humorously entitled *The Story of A Bad Boy*, which celebrated a forever-lost “happy, magical Past” in which even a boyhood enemy is transfigured into a Wordsworthian angel “with a sort of dreamy glory encircling his bright red hair.” Several years later Charles Dudley Warner, himself a respected essayist and co-author with Twain of *The Gilded Age* (1873), predicated his widely read fictional memoir, *Being a Boy* (1878), on the simple statement that “one of the best things in the world to be is a boy.” Like much of the children’s writing emerging during the late nineteenth century, each text returns in fantasy to a childhood that is admittedly lost forever. Just as Tom Sawyer is bound in the pastoral world of St. Petersburg, Aldrich’s Tom Bailey lives in the small town of Riverhead, while Warner’s youth lives on a working farm where he varies his chores with wandering the fields and fishing. Both boys endure the agonies of youthful romance (Aldrich explicitly compares the sufferings of his pseudonymous hero to Goethe’s Werther); while Tom orchestrates with his friends elaborate practical jokes and attempts to run away from home, Warner’s protagonist immerses himself in a natural world that recalls Tom Sawyer’s excursion to Jackson’s Island. And, like *Tom Sawyer*, the conjunction of and distance separating boyhood and manhood bring each narrative to a halt before maturity. This tension is most apparent in Aldrich’s narrative, where the narrator makes it clear in the beginning that his account is at least partially autobiographical: “This is the story of a Bad Boy. Well, not such a very bad, but pretty bad boy; and I ought to know for I am, or rather I was, that boy myself.” The indetermi-
nacy of Aldrich’s “I”—“I am,” or “I was” that boy—registers the same discomfort with linking boy and man as Twain’s novel.14

In its conventionality, such writing seems to reflect what E. Anthony Rotundo has described as the “heady and even liberating experience” of boy culture during the last half of the century: “separate both from the domestic world of women, girls, and small children, and from the public world of men and commerce,” boys formed a subculture of rituals and games that both allowed escape from home and school and prepared them for the graver responsibilities of manhood. Marcia Jacobson has recently read these texts as their authors’ fictional engagements with biographical crises in fatherhood. Clearly these formulations have the virtue of situating such writing in specific historical contexts, but both miss the extent to which these texts, and all fiction, actively shaped the affective culture of manhood they seemed to reflect.15

The historian Daniel Rodgers has offered the grounds for a more dialectical approach by characterizing popular boys’ fictions as regressive fantasies shaped by contemporary anxieties about modernization: “Retreating to preserves of the imagination or to rural and child-centered oases of boyhood memory, children’s writers tried to carve out a place unviolated by . . . industrial society.” In his formulation carefree childhood typified a spontaneous creativity and self-expression denied by modern forms of industrialized or bureaucratized labor and patterns of urban social life. Aligned as it was in a historical narrative extending from rural to modern, the gap between boy and man registered a sense of lost horizons, even a historical inevitability; it helped readers accommodate to an alienating and reified present they did not understand. Like the era’s political nostalgia-filled oratory, like the flowering of antiquarian history and regionalist writing, boys’ books enacted a “sentimental regression” from a disturbing present. In this light, the fictional child functioned therapeutically, in the words of T. J. Jackson Lears, by offering readers “a vision of psychic wholeness, a ‘simple, genuine self’ in a world where selfhood had become problematic and sincerity seemed obsolete.”16

Such readings persuasively suggest that authors produced such escape fantasies for the same reasons they were read: to objectify in a simpler past middle-class yearnings for cultural homogeneity and tradition. As Rodgers outlines the problem (and as Jacobson’s readings suggest), the sense of historical disjunction posed a particular difficulty for those men who most endured the modern reorganization of work. One need only compare such texts with, for instance, Susan Warner’s Wide Wide World (1850) and Alcott’s Little Women (1869) to see that the dream of idyllic childhood survived in public rhetoric as a male fantasy. Jo March, the central figure in Little Women, matures in an environment founded on injunctions to self-discipline and diligent labor, not
boundless play. Most strikingly, in both of these novels the authors posit an end to childhood when a girl assumes her mother’s role as the authority in her own domestic world, a position for which she prepares throughout the novel.17

From this point of view the disjunction between boy and man in boyhood fictions delimits a profound conflict at the heart of their implicit conceptualizations of masculinity. When at the end of Little Women Marmee exclaims to her married daughters, “Oh, my girls, however long you may live, I never can wish you a greater happiness than this,” she recognizes in her children the perpetuation of the very traditions of labor and character that had formed her, in a way that virtually no fictional father did in his sons.18 At one level, this fictional discontinuity attests to the profound distance separating boys and men: while the former embodied a psychic wholeness, the restrictive demands of the ideals of manhood led men to register extraordinary concern for evaluating and reaffirming their “manliness.”19 By the 1870s writers of advice literature and etiquette guides, virtually assuming the urban marketplace as the arena for manliness, figured manhood as a precarious balancing act by advising their readers to perform as “athlete[s] of continence” even as they embraced a “battlefield code” of vigor and prowess. Nowhere did these strains appear more clearly than in advice on anger. “The man who is liable to fits of passion,” warned one mid-century advice writer, “who cannot control his temper, but is subject to ungovernable excitements of any kind, is always in danger. The first element of a gentlemanly dignity is self-control.” And yet, as Stearns has argued, men were also counseled that they “needed anger as an emotional spur for the competitive zeal and righteous indignation desirable in the worlds of business and politics.”20

In these terms then, “the history of a man” unfolded as a strained, self-conscious performance of what John Kasson has called “feeling rules.” Boys, on the other hand, followed a very different script. When Aunt Polly yet again forgives Tom Sawyer his trespasses because he is “just giddy and harum-scarum” (116), she echoes the opinions of Jacob Abbott, whose work as an educator and writer of countless children’s books qualified him as one of his era’s most authoritative childrearing experts. Writing in his Gentle Measures in the Management and Training of the Young (1871), he argued that “nine-tenths of the whispering and playing of children in school, and of the noise, the rudeness, and the petty mischief of children at home, is just this hissing and fizzling of an imprisoned power, and nothing more.” Let your boy, he would have advised Aunt Polly, be a boy: tolerate rather than extinguish the “rapid succession of bodily movements and of mental ideas, and the emotions mingling and alternating with them” that are necessary to healthy children (193–94).21

The gap between these proscriptions of men and boys reflects in shorthand what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has described as the “structured psychic
discontinuity” experienced by middle-class boys. Because of the rapid rationalization of labor, the traditional pathways to manly occupations of apprenticeship and/or inheritance which in the past had linked generations of artisans, farmers, and merchants were dwindling. No longer able to rely on the guidance of fathers for their entry into the workforce, sons left home to strike out on their own. This discontinuity was registered culturally by expressions of fear of rootless young men in the city, and displaced as deep concerns, even fears, of male sexuality. Young men themselves dealt with this liminal passage by flocking to secret fraternal orders like the Odd Fellows and Freemasons, where they participated in elaborate initiation rituals which repeatedly—members spent hours each of several nights a week in attendance—dramatized a transition of naif into initiate, boy into man. By the end of the century parents and educators had responded by expanding the scope of “man-making” institutions—Boy Scouts, youth organizations like the YMCA, fraternities and other activities of college life, boys’ schools, organized sports—thereby virtually inventing adolescence as a stage of protracted border-crossing that could extend into a young man’s thirties.22

Each of these strategies represents a practical response to a perceived problem of rightly constructing, out of the raw material of boyhood, a manhood capable of succeeding in a dangerously fluid economic order. More to the point, they suggest that the “oases” of boyhood most readers knew lay less in the antebellum idyllicism described by Rodgers than in the middle-class home. This is not to argue, however, that such writing represents only a fictional reaction to changing social conditions. For both boyhood and the domestic home which nourished it were most recognizable as social categories not in the myriad households of nineteenth-century America, but in the outpouring of fiction and prescriptive writing—printed sermons, magazines on mothering and home life, didactic fiction of all kinds, publications on medicine, ethics, religion, etiquette—which comprised what Daniel Walker Howe has called the “communications system” of mid-Victorian America. Seeking to link values with information, authors of advice manuals for young men, childrearing guides, and children’s literature offered practical advice to parents intent on preparing their children for a modernizing world in such a way as to link the day-to-day concerns of family life to a rhetoric of social order and class success.23 In this sense Twain’s novel stands as but one of the best-known instances of a discourse that, in celebrating and analyzing boys, finally constructed boyhood as the linchpin in an elaborate middle-class narrative which integrated family practices with broader visions of class reproduction and modern selfhood.

In short, the “boy’s life” embodied in fictions like Twain’s was “rightly constructed,” as much discursively and ideologically as it was socially, by a middle class that had as much invested in creating, maintaining, and dwelling on gaps of masculine development as it did in bridging them. Whereas working-class
boys were expected at an early age to help support the family at least as secondary wage earners, the middle class held its sons out of productive life as long as feasible to educate and prepare them for careers that promised more social mobility and financial security. Such strategies made economic sense—white-collar employers expected formal education at least until the age of fourteen, preferably as late as eighteen, and other professions demanded more. At the same time, they made an extended boyhood an important source of cultural capital, and the resulting momentous transition to manhood a mark of status legitimating the expenditure of that capital.  

These same distinctions functioned to separate the white middle class from the majority of African Americans. Newly emancipated black families, finding themselves yoked to the demands of sharecropping and unskilled industrial work, felt the same incentives as European working-class families to bear more children and put them to work at early ages. Moreover, the middle-class creation of a discrete childhood dovetailed well with a century-long propensity to characterize African Americans, Native Americans, and immigrant groups as either children or savages. Just as antebellum Irish workers were, in the words of Ronald Takaki, “denounced for their failure to develop self-restraint—the quality which separated adult from child,” black slaves were stigmatized as children in need of the discipline of paternalistic slave ownership. Whatever mixed motives underwrote this projection, such distinctions served to legitimate through the trope of boyhood a white manhood of emotional and sexual restraint.

Yet, if “harum-scarum” middle-class boys were metaphorically akin to African Americans, they were distinguished from them by the mere fact that their savageries were performed safely within the confines of the emotionally controlled home. Thus insisting on the distance of boy and man allowed domestic authorities to position the affective labor of women at the center of visions not only of class reproduction, but of the entire social order. If, in Warner’s words, “Every boy who is good for anything is a natural savage”; if, with his “primal, vigorous instincts and impulses,” he is more akin to “primitive man” than to adults “in this sophisticated age”; then at stake in his developmental genealogy is nothing less than the making of civilization itself. “Your future happiness is in the hands of your children,” warned one writer to his mother readers. Otherwise, as Goodrich cautioned in his own childrearing book, if boys were “permitted to grow up ungoverned, when they go forth into society they are likely to surrender themselves [as do, for instance, African Americans] to every species of license.” Inherent in such admonitions was the perception that social order was less the result of the institutional regulation of collective life than it was the product of “civilized” character: what men were would determine what men did.
The fit between such fantasies of order and boyhood emerges most clearly in what was probably the most significant book on family government during the century: Horace Bushnell's *Christian Nurture* (1861). With rhetorical mastery the Hartford, Connecticut, minister—an elder member of the city's intellectual circles that included Twain and Warner—links the ways of God with those of the middle-class home, building a vision of social reproduction around an environment of intimate labor that, in its urge to "restore" the tradition "we have well nigh lost," frames an ideological template for the nostalgic regression characteristic of boyhood fictions. Indeed, whatever practical advice Bushnell may have offered families eager to have their sons succeed, it is clear from the text's insistent social fantasy that at root his concern lay in casting the home as the vehicle for "family propagation": a site of reproductive labor that joined biology with culture to produce a "populating force of faith and piety." The key constituent of this ambitious vision was the internally malleable boy: bear more sons, inculcate them from infancy with Christian virtues—a respect for authority, privacy, duty, and self-control, all the behavioral codes of the middle class—and it will come "to pass that a son, grown almost to manhood, will gladly serve the house, and yield to his parents a kind of homage that even anticipates their wishes." 28

At the heart of this vision lies a metaphor of organicism. Americans, he argues, have lost any sense of the "organic" relations between state, church, and family: "All our modern notions and speculations have taken a bent toward individualism. . . . Instead of being wrought in together and penetrated, to some extent, by historic laws and forces common to all the members, we only seem to lie as seeds piled together, without any terms of connection." Bushnell seeks to supply just those terms by transposing the sexually and generationally prescribed divisions of labor and authority of the Biblical family ("The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough") to the physically isolated and affectively autonomous family of the nineteenth century. The result is a hothouse environment fertile enough to spawn "a common character" among its inhabitants: "inclosed within the four walls of the dwellings," family members participate in a "common life . . . so nearly absolute" in its pervasive power that they become "partakers in a common blood, in common interests, wants, feelings, and principles." 29

The organic unity of the family grows out of the multitudinous and ineffable "transactions and feelings" that incorporate "the whole circle of the house" into a shared culture of privacy. But nowhere are the restorative possibilities of this unity more visible than in the relations between parents and children. The young child (almost universally "he"), after all, is born unformed, impressionistic, "more a candidate for personality than a person." Thus in a manner consistent with much of the century's advice literature, Bushnell urges
parents to begin early in shaping their children’s characters. He is not, however, interested in how parents “teach, encourage, persuade, and govern”; in short, he is not interested in what he calls the conscious and predetermined exercise of “influence.” Such efforts at rational persuasion are important, of course, but what determines a child’s personality, and thus what he will become as an adult, comes from what Bushnell calls “the spirit of the house”: manifested in “manners, personal views, prejudices, practical motives,” it forms “an atmosphere which passes into all and pervades all, as naturally as the air they breathe.” Thus character is built most powerfully “unconsciously and undesignedly” in a “bond” between parents and children “so intimate” that parents’ “character, feelings, spirit, and principles must propagate themselves, whether they will or not.”

In locating the site of affective labor in an arena beyond conscious control, Bushnell proposes a complementary fit between a privatized family and what could be called a psychological pedagogy that takes as its subject an affective unconscious instead of a rational consciousness. The right construction of children entails a manifestly internal, even hidden, labor, that depends for its efficacy less on what a parent does than on who a parent is. “Now,” he instructs his readers, “there is a perpetual working in the family, by which the wills, both of the parents and the children, are held in exercise, and which, without any design to affect character on one side, or conscious consent on the other, is yet fashioning results of a moral quality, as it were by the joint industry of the house.” He must qualify his point with “as it were” because, as his passive verbs imply, the industrial arts he imagines are less applied than they are constitutive: “It is not what you intend for your children so much as what you are, that is to have its effect.”

Whether or not such a family would propagate the Christian family state Bushnell envisioned, his text helped to propagate an ideological rationale for linking the perpetuation of a privatized domestic sphere to affective labor. More particularly it made the unformed boy a prism through which the domestic split between public society and private family life was refracted in the distinction between conscious influence and unconscious management. “A wise parent understands that his government is to be crowned by an act of emancipation”; governed rightly, the boy will leave home with the “odor of the house . . . in his garments, and the internal difficulties with which he has to struggle will spring of the family seeds planted in his nature.”

Boys may or may not have been prepared for the future as self-consciously as Bushnell and his peers advised, but as they were portrayed in advice literature they provided a rhetorical meeting place for the envisionment of a patently psychological, and finally homogeneous, society perfected by the assiduous application of affective labor. This utopian narrative in turn depended on the
creation of a boyhood both open to such attention and in need of the intimate management that only a privatized domesticity could provide. Boys had to be different from men to legitimate the bounded world of the middle-class family. The harum-scarum boy was necessary to the vision of "a rightly constructed boy's life," which in turn was formed in the image of the bourgeois man.

This at least was what the novelist Frank Norris found when just after the turn of the century he surveyed the boy-book genre shaped in part by Aldrich, Warner, and Twain: "The ten year old—who always went in swimmin' and lost his tow... Do you know who he is? He is the average American business man before he grew up. That accounts for his popularity. The average business man had clean forgotten all about all those early phases of primitive growth, and it amuses him immensely to find out that the scribe has been making a study of him and bringing to light the forgotten things that are so tremendously familiar when presented to the consideration." If Norris rightly sees the businessman reflected in the ten-year-old, his uncertain pronouns suggest he is less sure about which is image and which subject. Who is it the "scribe" studies, the boy who will naturally grow up to be a man? Or is it the adult, who creates boyhood precisely as the image of the familiar in things forgotten? And what is it that has been forgotten? Norris's confidence that boys grow into men, that they follow a natural course of development, implies that he has forgotten, or is unaware of, how unnatural, how social, is the separation of boy and man. In this sense his ironic dismissal of the hackneyed conventions of boy narratives recalls nothing more than the pronominal shifting that opens Aldrich's tale. For if the indeterminacy of "I am, or rather I was" bespeaks a gender anxiety, the easy humor with which he accepts this relationship to the "not such a very bad" boy of his youth acknowledges the sanguine confidence of an adult in his unconscious training as a youth—a training that takes place outside of his story even as it makes possible the nostalgia of its reminiscence.

But what of Tom Sawyer? His story, after all, is told by an adult narrator who clearly stands apart from the boy culture he celebrates. But Tom too follows unwritten rules. He may be "full of the Old Scratch," as Aunt Polly says; he may resist with all his heart the socializing injunctions of tyrannous men; he may in short be immune to the power of conscious "influence," but he has been managed. The efficacy of that affectionate construction emerges in the conscience that qualifies the pleasure of transgression on Jackson's Island, and most powerfully drives him to break his oath of silence with Huck—an oath grounded in the preservation of all that is boyish from the prying eyes of adults—and testify in court against Injun Joe, the racial half-breed who never manages to control his emotions. It emerges as well in the care Twain and his peers took in cutting off the developmental narratives that would show the
transformation of boys into men, even as they supplied their protagonists with the inner resources for adulthood. Of course, properly managed boys do not know where their consciences come from, and authors of fictional boyhood care not to remember: thus the selective forgetfulness of a nostalgia for “swimmin,” dead cats, and dollops of jam. But as Bushnell explains, “What they do not remember still remembers them, and now claims a right in them. What was before unconscious, flames out into consciousness.” That flame burns most brightly in those fictions like Twain’s, Warner’s, and Aldrich’s, which most insist on forgetting.

Notes


3. For a brief discussion of Twain’s motives for writing the novel, see Marcia Jacobson, Being a Boy Again: Autobiography and the American Boy Book (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 44–70; the quotation, taken from William Dean Howells’s My Mark Twain, appears on 47. I discuss boyhood’s place in the novel more fully in “Littery Man”: Mark Twain and Modern Authorship (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

4. Samuel Goodrich wrote in an early advice book for parents that children are “then like plaster, prepared by the moulder, soft and impressionable, taking forms and images from everything we may chance to touch.” Fireside Education (New York: F. J. Huntington, 1838), 62.


8. As Carl Degler has written, “It is surely not accidental that the century of the child


19. Rotundo, in examining a wide range of correspondence between middle- and upper-class parents and sons, notes that “one of the main topics in nineteenth-century correspondence . . . was ideals of manhood.” See his “Learning About Manhood: Gender Ideals and the Middle-Class Family in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800–1940, ed. J. A. Mangan and James Walvin (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), 35–51. The quotation appears on 43. The lifetimes of the three male authors I consider span this half-century; Warner was born in 1829, Twain in 1835, and Aldrich in 1836.


29. Ibid., 74, 75, 79.

30. Ibid., 74, 206, 77, 76.

31. Ibid., 88, 97. Richard Brodhead identifies this joint industry as a form of disciplinary intimacy that constrains both children and adults in a bond of love. I emphasize more its constitutive function: as is implied by Bushnell’s displacement of what one does by what one is, at stake in his book is the formation of an environment conducive to a particular kind of emotional interiority. See Brodhead’s “Sparing the Rod: Discipline and Fiction in Antebellum America,” *Representations* 21 (1988): 70–74.

