

**“If Mark Twain had a Sister”:
Gender-Specific Values and Structure in *Daddy Long-Legs***

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“Novels and stories should be studied...because they offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and preparing solutions for the problems that drape a particular historical moment.”

(Tompkins, xi)

In re-evaluating the relationship of *Huckleberry Finn* to the canon of American Literature and its influence in *What Was Literature?*, Leslie Fiedler expands on his well-known concept of Huck as the archetype of male freedom. Women, he notes, also identify with Huck, and concludes that the women who have taken to the road in independent lives prove that the American hero is not limited to one sex. The “myths of Home as Heaven and Home as Hell do not divide, as certain male critics (including me) have been tempted to believe, women from men and popular fiction from art novels. We are all divided against ourselves, irremediably ambivalent on this score, as both best sellers and the canonical ‘great books’ of our tradition reveal” (Fiedler 239). This evaluation may well be accurate for today’s audience, as indeed some recent feminist novels indicate, but the readership of Twain’s time was far more gender-distinct.¹ The lives of women and men in the United States until very recently were so diametrically different that although the goals of independence and freedom came to be similar, particularly at the beginning of this century, the means to achieve these goals were antithetical. This antithesis results in different plot strategies in the basic novel structure which can be seen in a comparison of *Huck Finn* (1885) with *Daddy Long-Legs* (1912) by Jean Webster.

How do I dare to compare the novel from which all American literature has descended with the frothy novel that brings titters to the lips of serious scholars? Although Webster was Twain’s grand-niece, I’m not assuming here that kinship ties justify such a comparison. Rather it is the comparable quality and popularity of the two novels that facilitate the study of the gender and the political differences between two somewhat similar relatives. This situation is as

proximate to laboratory conditions for the scientific study of this subject that literature can afford.

A comparison of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* with Jean Webster’s *Daddy Long-Legs* reveals numerous structural and thematic parallels that indicate similar mythic sources.² The protagonists, both orphans abused by their primary guardians and redeemed in their relationship with another caring adult, follow similar uncharted quests for individual fulfillment. Both protagonists display a similar combination of personality characteristics—naivete, resourcefulness, insightfulness, intelligence and moral integrity. They discover the same Emersonian principles of self-reliance, they perceive their individuality in its relationship to society, and their styles of self-expression are original, confessional and colloquial, influenced by their surroundings as much as their unique personalities. Furthermore, the continuing popularity of the two novels, while not equal, has been comparable.³ But while *Huckleberry Finn* has been canonized by authoritative figures as Hemingway, Fiedler, Chase, Smith, Trilling and the rest, *Daddy Long-Legs* has been relegated to the children’s shelf and has received no critical attention whatsoever. Through a delineation and exploration of the differences in these two novels, it is possible to examine some of the reasons for canonization and exclusion.

Whatever the reasons for canonization and exclusion, one result is that the average scholar is doubtless familiar with the plot of *Huck Finn*, but may recall only vaguely something of *Daddy Long-Legs* from childhood or Hollywood, necessitating a preliminary review of the narrative. *Daddy Long-Legs* opens with a brief expository introduction describing how the protagonist, Jerusha Abbott, an 18-year-old working inmate of a dreary and dependent orphanage, is granted a college education by an anonymous trustee who is impressed with her literary talents. Because she is to be trained to become a writer, the trustee requests monthly letters as progress reports. The novel then resumes in the epistolary genre, since the trustee has— by providing a literary education and an audience—

literally given the orphan her own voice. Jerusha, now in college, writes her required letters to this shadowy figure who is both responsible for her release from a life of drudgery and the only authority to whom she is ultimately answerable. Having no knowledge of her benefactor except a brief glimpse of his elongated shadow on the orphanage wall, she combines his patriarchal role with her new freedom from abject obedience by addressing him as Daddy Long-Legs.

There is no direct response in the four years to Jerusha's letters—the development of her character and her narratives of academic and emotional education provide all the drama in the book. Jerusha, or Judy, as she chooses to become known, creates herself and her world as she sees fit through a conscious and intense effort. Giving up the name Jerusha (meaning inheritance), she creates her own inheritance with a name relating to no ancestors. She becomes a Suffragette and a Socialist, and even understands the freedom her status grants her to extend to eschatological matters.

Thank God I don't inherit God from anybody! I am free to make mine up as I wish Him. He's kind and sympathetic and imaginative and forgiving and understanding—and He has a sense of humor." (Webster 52)

In the course of her development, she is granted an academic scholarship to the college, accepts it against the wishes of her benefactor and begins to publish lucrative fiction, which enables her to repay the money she feels she owes, and reclaim her own destiny.

An increasing portion of her narrative is devoted to her growing relationship with her roommate's uncle, Jervis Pendleton, with whom she eventually falls in love, and who she educates to accept her independence. She rejects Pendleton's proposal because of their unequal background and her consequent feelings of inferiority in what should be an equal relationship, regrets it and, after sharing her dilemma with Daddy Long-Legs, discovers that the two men are one. Her final letter of the book is the first declaration of love. She will, it is clear, marry Pendleton and become empowered, not only as a writer, but as a reformer of those very social institutions from which she suffered in her youth. Her marriage will not be the end, but the continuation of her active reform of a world which does not recognize individuals.

Although it may initially seem that the differences between the plots of *Huck Finn* and *Daddy Long-Legs* are insurmountably great, and any comparison would be forced, the actual distinctions between the two novels rest upon one major difference—male/female

causality: the protagonist of *Huckleberry Finn*—because he is male—fulfills his individuality by rejecting women and corrupt societies and "lighting out for the territories," while the protagonist of *Daddy Long-Legs*—because she is female—fulfills her individuality by succeeding in an educational environment, by becoming an involved socialist and supporter of women's rights and by training and marrying an enlightened man.

For the American male protagonist, education is the beginning of entrapment, the socialization process which will make him unfit for the wilderness in which he can find himself, the closing of his mind and limiting of his creative imagination. But the situation is different for women. In a society where formal education is a key to economic independence and freedom from domestic service, but is usually denied females, it becomes valued. Education becomes the determinant which allows the woman to discover and fulfill herself in the same way that man is fulfilled by avoiding education.

It is true that female protagonists in most canonized literature do not usually realize themselves in this manner. The reactions of heroines like Carrie Meeber, Edna Pontellier, Daisy Miller, Hester Prynne or Maggie against the social institutions which form their character and life convey the same profound message of the limitations of society as conveyed by novels featuring male protagonists. The protagonist who does not conflict with society—whose progress in life is actually enabled by society, appears at least initially to be merely reinforcing accepted and acceptable values. Since it is often considered precisely the function of children's literature to reinforce these values, *Daddy Long-Legs* seems appropriately consigned to the nursery. However, the unique situation of the educated woman at the turn of the century demands a reconsideration of the relationship of the female protagonist to society.

A comparison of the different attitudes to education in society and the relative values of education for men and women at the turn of the century may illustrate the problem: Huck Finn, in escaping the clutches of the Widow and Aunt Sally and avoiding the confines of educational institutions, proves his greatness and strong individuality of his character by his ability to be educated by the greater world outside. Similarly, other famous protagonists in American literature are great in proportion to their lack of dependence on formal education: Holden Caulfield's escape from school, Jay Gatsby's tenuous relationship with Oxford and his marvelous uncut books, Ishmael's rejection of the academic world. It is the self-made and

self-reliant protagonist who is truly the individual, truly the emblem of democracy.

Lack of education has precisely the opposite effect for women as for men. Heroines of this and previous periods are generally characterized by their lack of freedom in society, and Hester Prynne, Carrie, Maggie and Edna Pontellier became dramatic heroines of interest precisely because of their lack of education and their related inability to rise above the limitations of their lives. But education for women of this period was viewed as total indoctrination for the purpose of reeducation for freedom.

"Earmarked from the outset as potential future leaders, young men knew they were expected to have ambitions and to prepare for future public responsibilities," notes Mary Kelley in *Public Woman, Private Stage*. It is precisely these future public responsibilities from which independent young protagonists must free themselves. "In stark contrast," Kelley continues, "a young woman could not fail to understand early that her future would be as a subordinate, supportive, and nurturing figure within the confines of domesticity, that her life and status as an adult would be dependent on and circumscribed by a male's social standing" (57). In this context, the young woman who strives for an education that would both open her mind and her options for the future, would be attempting to achieve the same independence as her male counterpart.

Education for women of this period had the paradoxical goal of total indoctrination for the purpose of reeducation for freedom. As M. Carey Thomas, president of Wellesley College when *Daddy Long-Legs* was written, noted:

A woman's college is a place where we take those wonderful, tender and innocent freshmen with their inherited prejudices and ancestral emotions and mould them by four years of strenuous intellectual discipline into glorious thinking, reasoning women fit to govern themselves and others. (Frankfurt 52)

The process of educating women is a demanding one—demanding initially utter discipline with the goal of utter freedom—because previous modes of thinking must be entirely overturned.⁵ Ultimately educated women become individuals, self-fulfilled, able to create for themselves exciting alternatives. In Anzia Yeziarska's *Bread Givers* (written in 1925, but concerned with events of the same period as Webster's novel), it is only through education, purchased with grueling labor at great price, that the protagonist is able to escape the deadly influence of

her father and/or a patriarchal husband. With her new found conceptions she is able to reverse the patriarchal system and form a matriarchal-democratic home which includes both father and husband. Because she is a woman, then, Judy Abbott is liberated by the very system which would have been unbearably confining to a young man. The lack of men provided women with a competition-free environment enabling them to participate in activities such as basketball, journalism and politics that would have been impossible in the male-dominated world outside. For Judy, the result is the same as for Huck: Huck runs away to be free of women; the college girl at the turn of the century is confined so as to be free of men. Both are thus liberated from the restraints of established society.

Freedom through education leads to an ability to cope with and evaluate the world as it is given to the protagonists. If we compare the use of literary texts in Huck Finn and *Daddy Long Legs* the emphasis on the results can be further clarified. Huck's use of literary and biblical texts is purposely limited to emphasize the disparity between literature and life. His willingness to follow Tom Sawyer's lead in the last chapters because Tom's authority is literary, reveals his lack of ability to weigh his true moral education against the externally valued concept of education. In allowing Tom to follow the authority of the Count of Monte Cristo instead of following his own instinctive ethic and helping Jim to escape, Huck reveals the extent to which literature is an unexamined authority. For Judy Abbott, however, literature is constantly weighed against her experience and her own literary directions. The romantic violence of the popular writer Marie Bashkirseff, for example, is ridiculous to the modern, practical minded orphan: Listen to this: 'Last night I was seized by a fit of despair that found utterance in moans, and that finally drove me to throw the dining room clock into the sea.' It makes me almost hope I'm not a genius; they must be very wearing to have about—and awfully destructive to the furniture."

(Webster 62)

The entire concept that self-indulgence and emotional freedom are necessary for art, so current in the sophisticated literature of the time, is wiped out here. The idea of being taken over by inspiration is simply not congenial with independence. Elsewhere Judy describes the identification she makes with characters in literature:

I put myself to sleep every night by pretending I'm the person (the most important person) in the book I'm reading at the moment.

At present I'm Ophelia—and such a sensible Ophelia! I keep Hamlet amused all the time...I've entirely cured him of being melancholy/The king and queen are both dead...so Hamlet and I are ruling in Denmark...We have the kingdom working beautifully. He takes care of the governing, and I look after the charities. I have just founded some first class orphan asylums..." (Webster 68)

Her use of literature, then, is creative. Not only has she transformed the protagonist of the play into one with whom she can identify sexually, but also she has altered the plot to suit her present interests and needs—conscious, of course, of the disparity between the original and her more pleasant version, and of the social criticism implied in her variations.

The education of Judy Abbott, then, provides her with the tools to escape the confinements of life. When the educated woman is perceived in literature as a perversion (even those women who are sporadically and self educated, such as those in Henry James' *The Bostonians* or Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*), the reasons are not usually sexism but its opposite: the employment of the same standards for men as for women and the same relationships to society. The fallen woman or the rebellious teenager is far more interesting to the reader than the successful schoolteacher or writer because it is the fallen woman who is perceived as "free" or fulfilling the ideals of individualism in society, and the other is confined, a mere tool of society. The choice of the subject of *Daddy Long-Legs*, the education of women, is therefore significant in its feminization of the masculine concept of identity and independence.

If education works to liberate Judy, other comparisons to Huck Finn show how the larger social universe constrains women. The freedom allowed by the social environment is different. Through careful manipulation, Huck manages to create a temporary floating environment which allows for his freedom. But Judy's sex precludes the possibility of her development outside the confining frameworks of social institutions such as the orphanage and education. Although she is self-created, and her name chosen from a telephone book and a tombstone, her future has been predetermined by the social codes dictating women's roles as adults. Like all women, she is to be trained to become either a professional domestic or a wife.⁶ Running away like Huck would ensure further confinement. The raft environment would ensure a woman's manipulation by some powerful male.

The sexual differences work in other ways as well: Although both orphans leave mother-figures and attach themselves to father-substitutes, this is a more major

leap for the female than the male. Mrs. Lippett, in charge of the John Grier Home for Orphans, and Aunt Sally have as their goal the 'sivilizing' of the orphans. But Mrs. Lippett, being a woman and having a female child as her charge, endeavors to make Judy an extension of herself. The consequences show how Judy internalizes her "mother's role." Not only will Judy be blamed if the sandwiches are too thick or the children are rude, but Judy will agree about the responsibility for the crime. Huck, as a male, feels the imposition of the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson as externally imposed disciplines to be evaluated and rejected.⁷ The transition to a more free society is natural for Huck. For Judy it demands a negation of her sexual identification. Real society, for Huck, is to be found in Tom Sawyer's gang or in the society of other males who also seem to reject the confining influence of women. While Huck is provided with the possibility to become a self-fulfilled man by quietly opposing domestic society, Judy is destined to become self sacrificing.

Their manner of escape is equally appropriate. Even the miraculous lifting of Judy out of her fate and into college, while Huck makes his own miracles and takes his future in his hands, is part of the awareness of the difficulty of the leap. Although as an orphan she is given the same freedom from the past as her male American hero, the freedom of her future is even more limited than the child of living parents. Judy and Huck are both trained to become self-sacrificing servants of their guardians, but their responses are judged very differently. Literally locked up by a madman, Huck is a hero if he escapes. Rebellion for Judy against the thankless expectation to "cover" for Mrs. Lippett and to do the behind-the-scenes female work, for which she will receive no credit, is only acceptable in a less threatening form of escape. The result, a satiric essay, is the first sign of her "education" and the cause of her liberation. Mrs. Lippett calls her into her office and says:

It seemed to me that you showed little gratitude in holding up to ridicule the institution that has done so much for you. Had you not managed to be funny I doubt if you would have been forgiven. But fortunately for you, Mr.—, that is, the gentleman who has just gone—appears to have an immoderate sense of humor. On the strength of that impertinent paper, he has offered to send you to college. (Webster 6)

Huck saves himself through a physical escape while Judy is brought to freedom through the freedom of her observations. The distinction represents a social

definition of sexual identity. A more violent response than the passive rebellion of satirical essays could not be tolerated in a woman and could probably be only self destructive. A girl breaking away from an orphanage would more likely suffer a fate similar to Virginia Woolf's Judith, Shakespeare's imaginary sister, who, pregnant, dies by her own hand “and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle” (Woolf 50). But the humor in her essay deflects Judy's criticism of the social institution which confines her and thus she is allowed to get away with her form of rebellion. Webster, then, overcomes the initial social inequality, the initial realistic impossibility, with a slight miracle a leap of faith, as it were. From this point on it is possible for Judith to develop an individual identity.

These distinctions between the potential and limitations of heroes and heroines need to be extended to an evaluation of plot and direction as well. In an American novel plot it is often defined by the conflict of the individual with the society and his ability to overcome the pressures society places upon him. Huck Finn-like characters prove their superiority by encountering society, understanding its pernicious influence and fleeing it. Contemporary literature by women may also follow this pattern. The protagonists of Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* and Plath's *The Bell Jar* find themselves in conflict with society and basically reject it. But Webster perceived other alternatives for women to fulfill themselves in relation to society, and the plot of *Daddy Long-Legs* is accordingly different.

The seemingly stereotypical nature of Webster's plot derives some of its characteristics from the formulas of American literature and others from the unique situation of women and political reformers in relation to this formula. Not only does Webster's belief in and desire for equality of rights for the sexes alter the formula, but her socialism directs the structure. For while a belief in equality and democracy may create a protagonist for whom fulfillment is essential, the conviction that society should have a responsibility in this private fulfillment directs the conclusion toward a collective and not an individual one.

From the first moment when Judy Abbott is informed that she will be trained to become an author, the uniqueness of the conflict with society is evident. For a young man, this kind of fiat would be the beginning of the “civilizing” process, one that should be avoided at all costs. For Judy, however, it is a manifest liberation. First, the decision coincides with her talents and interests and creates an opportunity for self development. Secondly, the only other

“independent” decisions she could possibly make under those circumstances would be self-destructive ones. Thus society here takes responsibility for freeing the individual. The fact that the representative of society here is a man whose power is derived from successful capitalism, but whose use of power is related to his eccentric socialism, is also significant: only a man liberated politically from patriarchy can be educated to sexual equality.

Once free of the orphanage, of the influence of maternal figures, Judy is free to choose her father. Although financially dependent upon the absent father, she is obligated only to communicate—the nature of her communication is entirely up to her. The kind of relationship she creates becomes mutually beneficial and creative. As so many critics of Huck Finn have noted, the relationship between Jim and Huck does not fare so well, and Jim often becomes little more than a stick figure which enables and highlights the development of Huck.⁸ The final degradation of Jim to a storybook prisoner is merely an extension of Huck's perception of this relationship. Jim's use as a sounding board is considered necessary for Huck's development, but, if he is only a sounding board, how can there be a relationship between the friends? By dividing her antagonist into two, Webster allows him to serve two contradictory functions—to be the sounding board for Judy as Daddy Long-Legs and as Jervis to be dramatically changed by her. She can derive security and understanding from both but she can be influenced by neither: “Daddy” is silent and Pendleton has no authority over her life. Judy's individuality is thus allowed to develop untrammelled and undirected. In the same way, the school provides her with choices:

“The test of true scholarship,” says Chemistry Professor, “is a painstaking passion for detail.”

“Be careful not to keep your eyes glued to detail,” says History Professor. “Stand far enough away to get a perspective of the whole.” (Webster 66)

Because she is presented with two alternatives, she is not obligated to either. Judy learns to make her own decisions and her development in this area is clear.

The framework of her summer vacations is one way in which this development can be illustrated. Judy's first summer vacation embodies the limitation on her progress when she is ordered to return to her old position in the John Grier Home, but is saved when Daddy Long-Legs deposits her on a farm, allowing her the leisure to develop her writing skills. The second summer, she makes her own arrangements: she is offered a vacation at her roommate's summer camp

but, perhaps because of the attractiveness of her roommate's ardent brother, Pendleton orders Judy to the farm again. Her awareness of the limitations on her freedom as a result of this relationship begins to become apparent, and independence from the father becomes a necessity. Refusing the invitation of Daddy Long-Legs to send her to Europe the next summer, she takes a position of governess. In this way she returns to the menial tasks of the John Grier Home, but to assert and not to limit her independence. By the end of the fourth summer, Judy has sold her novel and has returned partial payment on her patron's investment. The involvement of Daddy Long-Legs in her life, then, ironically provides Judy with the ability to reject his direction and find her own.

The complementary relationship developing between Pendleton and Judy, like those of Elizabeth and Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* and Jane Eyre and Rochester, seems initially uneven in terms of class and power. This initial inequality of power and class between Jervis and Judy must be redressed in order for any relationship to develop. As with other classic novels of developing heroines, the lover's financial superiority, coupled with his sophisticated knowledge of the world, tend to threaten the budding "selfhood" of the young orphan. Like Darcy and Rochester, the male suitor must also be educated to understand the necessity of otherhood. Both as a man and as an aristocratic socialist, Jervis must learn the limitations of his power before he can be a full participant in any kind of union. In order to facilitate this process, Judy takes his advice only selectively, mocks his attempts at subterfuge and control and initially refuses his proposal for marriage, redressing the initial social imbalance that confronts Elizabeth Bennett and Jane Eyre and motivates their initial refusal of their lovers. For his pride and stance of superiority, Pendleton is punished like Rochester with physical affliction from which he appears to recover only when Judy comes to visit him as Daddy Long-Legs. Pendleton here, unlike Huck's Jim, must develop in the course of the book because *his* development is integral to the happiness of the heroine.⁹

Antithetical attitudes toward the potential of society also result from this sexual difference. Judy Abbott's developing interest in Fabian Socialism, Women's Suffrage and social reform is parallel but antithetical to Huck Finn's growing awareness of the corruption of southern society and his desire to separate himself from it. Huckleberry Finn, helpless before the apparently universal corruption, can do no more than say, "I want no truck with it." Judy Abbott, versed in the modern principles of economic reform, perceives the potential of society differently. Though

personally without freedom, like Huck, she constantly reaffirms the potential of the individual to rise beyond limitations and tragedy and anticipates the kind of social reform which would enable potential to be fulfilled.

I've elected economics this year—very illuminating subject. When I finish that I'm going to take Charity and Reform; then, Mr. Trustee, I'll know just how an orphan asylum ought to be run. Don't you think I'd make an admirable voter if I had my rights? I was twenty-one last week. This is an awfully wasteful country to throw away such an honest, educated, conscientious, intelligent citizen as I would be.

(Webster 104)

The novel, then, relates its ideals of sexual equality to its belief in the potential of society, a revolutionary concept, but one quite at odds with the acceptable pattern.

The most significant element of *Daddy Long-Legs* that makes it ineligible for serious consideration as literature, that relegates it to the category of domestic fiction, is the "happy end." If the perfect novel ending, often imitated, is the promise of further escape for Huck Finn—both from civilization and from women, the accepted sentimental ending is the romantic unification of two people of the opposite sex which promises the creation of what Leslie Fiedler calls "home as haven" (145-68). Marriage and a home seem to be the culmination of the confinement that education directs. But it is clear that the major differences throughout the two novels necessitate antithetical endings. Huck, fearful of being overtaken again by a society so acquisitive it must control its inhabitants, plans to escape; Judy, a successful, independent author with great financial potential and two immediate marital alternatives, chooses to marry the man who has not only educated her but has helped to reinforce the very values which have created her as an independent individual. Their engagement at the end of the novel is a conscious affirmation of the power of the proper society to liberate the potential of the individual. The marriage for Judy Abbott will ensure her further liberation and allow her to instigate the reforms of which she could only dream as an inmate of an orphan asylum. For Huck—who is, of course, some years younger since pubescence is another aspect of the trap by which females enchain men—marriage or any kind of compromise with social institutions could only be enslavement.

But it is also in other ways that the "happy ending" in *Daddy Long-Legs* is not a capitulation to the sentimental or romantic convention. Marriage was not

the goal of the educated woman of this period. The statistics are clear on the fact that a woman entering college began to reduce her chances for marriage almost with the first lecture she heard. There was a clear feeling about the distinction between career and children. Webster herself married at the age of 39, and none of the friends she loved and respected ever wed.

If marriage is not the only fortunate resolution for the life of an educated young woman, why does it conclude the novel? There are legitimate reasons to ask this question. When Judy discovers that she has been shamelessly manipulated, that the man who has courted her and the man who shared her intimate secrets are one and the same, should she not have ‘lit out for the territories’ with Huck? As the victim of a total deception, one certainly against all principles of democracy and/or socialism, should she not have rejected the conniving old aristocrat outright?

Judy’s evaluation of marriage and its effects as she approaches the end of her college career deals specifically with the problematic nature of marriage and its danger to her individuality. Although she usually believes she will succeed in her career as author, there are moments of great gloom when she fears she “may end up by marrying an undertaker and being an inspiration to him in his work” (Webster 121). Marriage without a sense of self is literally a form of self burial, one that she consciously struggles against.

For this reason the last quarter of the book, dealing with her last year of college and graduation, is a struggle for self-expression. “No one can dictate to me but you” (Webster 122), she writes Daddy Long-Legs when under his real name, Jervis Pendleton, he attempts to convince her to go to Europe for the summer. All of Pendleton’s endeavors to arrange Judy’s life are foiled, sometimes only for pedagogical purposes: “I *must* show him that he can’t dictate to me” (122), she insists. Marriage must not be a denial of self, but a fulfillment, and Judy’s choice to marry a free one. In addition to its emphasis on independence, the ending is also designed to promote the equality of classes and the concept of collective living. The intervention of politics here is not unusual or new. Nancy Armstrong’s recent study of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, argues that the emphasis on romance and marriage in the novels of this period was basically political.

Narratives which seemed to be concerned solely with matters of courtship and marriage in fact seized the authority to say what was female, and...they did so in order to contest the reigning notion of kinship relations that attached most

power and privilege to certain family lines. This struggle to represent sexuality took the form of a struggle to individuate wherever there was a collective body, to attach psychological motives to what had been the openly political behavior of contending groups, and to evaluate these according to a set of moral norms that exalted the domestic woman over and above her aristocratic counterpart...the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcomes of the struggle among competing ideologies.”

(Armstrong 5)

The situation of *Daddy Long-Legs* may be understood more readily in the light of this political interpretation of the novel. For certainly an underlying basis for the relationship of the two lovers is political: Pendleton’s initial intervention in Judy’s education results from the socialism that labels him a “black sheep.” But although at the beginning of their relationship he teaches her about socialism and her individual potential, the capitalistic/philanthropic basis of his socialism that causes him to remove the individual from his environment rather than correcting the general situation itself—suggests that he has something more to learn about politics and people. This he learns from Judy in their confrontations as she grows to understand and explain the precise nature of the damage imposed by a charitable institution lacking in humanity and individuality and as she comes to refuse to accept even overwhelming gifts while reiterating the need for responsible freedom. In the sequel to *Daddy Long-Legs*, *Dear Enemy*, in which the John Grier Home is reformed by Judy’s former roommate, Sally, the lessons of Jervis and Judy are put to practical use. The subject of reform is continually referred to in Judy’s letters. A related and equally significant issue is the concept of individual responsibility in society, and the necessity of broadening the definition of society to include women.

The only way I can ever repay you is by turning out a Very Useful Citizen (Are women citizens? I don’t suppose they are.) Anyway, a Very Useful Person. And when you look at me you can say, “I gave that Very Useful Person to the world. (Webster 121)

The error of his socialism is also seen in his aristocratic intervention in the lives of others, including his charge and future fiancée. For it is only when he grasps that his disguise (probably kept up to give him the upper hand in the relationship) has actually hindered their romantic progress because it has prevented him from the total honesty necessary for winning love, and it has prevented her from the necessary equality to feel and

express love, that he is able to meet her face to face. Socialism in this novel can best be taught by women because, unburdened by power and unwilling to learn the means whereby power can be employed, they gravitate to systems that promote equality.

Daddy Long-Legs has a reconciling conclusion in the sense that it promises a happy beginning—the association of the wealth and power of capitalism with socialist values and knowledge and male with female. Ultimately, the opposite sex is not the kind of danger that Huck perceives, but a promise of mutual freedom.

There are at least two important reasons then why *Daddy Long-Legs* has so long escaped critical discussion and the possibility of canonization: 1) on the surface it appears to follow the structure of the sentimental novel—with a traditional love affair told from the point of view of the woman than ends happily, 2) The underlying structure is essentially political and radical affirming the necessity of combining individuality and society by including each individual as an equal into a single society and accepting political responsibility for them. This is a book which inverts the assumptions of canonic literature and shows how socialism can work within a democratic framework when the individual has a clear “American” sense of self.

The conclusion of *Daddy Long-Legs*, unlike the conclusion of *Huck Finn*, centers the protagonist in the most basic issues of the period and suggests that the way to fulfill the desire for self-fulfillment is through involvement and reform of society and not escape.

Notes

¹The distinction between novels for males and for females is illustrated in *Daddy Long-Legs*. Judy Abbott, catching up at 18 on the important reading she missed as a child, mentions only Robert Lewis Stevenson, Samuel Pepys and Shakespeare among her male writers. Stevenson is the only one she reads on her own. Female writers include the Brontes, Alcott and Bashkirseff, read for “role models” as well as for literary pleasure. There is universal literature, but there is also sexually defined literature.

²There are indications that Webster was indeed aware of her use of Twain’s classic, although outright acknowledgement of her debt to her grand-uncle who was indirectly responsible for her father’s, Charles Webster’s, suicide, must have been difficult. The large portrait of Twain that hung in her workroom over her desk (Simpson 138) must have encouraged his influence in this, her seventh novel. He was still around for her first novel and wrote his wife when it came out:

I read the most of Jean Webster’s book today; and the most of what I read greatly pleased me—the workmanship, I mean. It is limpid, bright, sometimes brilliant; it is easy, flowing, effortless,

and brimming with girlish spirits; it is light, very light, but so is its subject. Therefore its lightness is not a fault; its humor is genuine and not overstrained. There are failures in the book, but that happens with all books (Simpson 67).

This encouragement no doubt spurred her on to more complex works.

³Since the closest the epistolary novel *Daddy Long-Legs* has ever come to the adult world has been through the Fred Astaire-Leslie Caron film version (or the Mary Pickford or the Janet Gaynor version), adapted loosely from the play rewritten by Jean Webster from her novel, there is hardly a single grown-up, much less a professor of literature, history or literary history who would not smile at the suggestion of a serious reading. After all, it has been a classic of children’s literature since its publication in 1912, translated into 18 languages and even the inspiration of the “Daddy Long-Legs Doll” manufactured and sold by F.A.O. Schwartz for years. *Huck Finn* has had movies and far more notoriety.

⁴One may wish to compare this attitude to the attempts made by Huck to accept the religion given him by the Widow. There are numerous biographical parallels between Jean Webster, Judy Abbott and Webster’s roommate at Vassar College, Adelaide Crapsey. Crapsey’s father, an Episcopalian minister, encouraged precisely this kind of thinking before he was convicted of heresy. For more information, see Karen Alkalay-Gut, *Alone in the Dawn*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988.

⁵It was customary, for example, to provide full maid service for women students so that they would not have to think of those menial tasks by which they had been exclusively motivated in the past.

⁶Judy’s orphan status links her with Billy Budd and *Huck Finn*, but orphanhood for woman remains different. American heroes are granted greater individuality by the status of orphan, the possibility of fulfilling Emerson’s concept of “Self Reliance.” Furthermore, their orphanhood is a closed door: They do not, for example, discover their parentage as do British orphans such as Tom Jones or Pip. Neither do they endeavor to return to the structure from which they were removed. They neither seek out the places of their past nor do they endeavor to reconstruct what they have lacked.

⁷Because all children initially identify with their mother, a girl’s gender and gender-role identification process is different. See Chodorow, 194.

⁸Huck’s willingness to accept Tom’s dramatic manipulations of Jim as per *The Count of Monte Cristo* continues to trouble admirers of Twain, even though he proves throughout the book that the literariness of a source grants immunity from criticism. How can Huck be free if he accepts literary authority blindly?

⁹Elsewhere, Webster was trying to work out the concept of mutually supportive relationships. In an unpublished manuscript entitled, “Half a Loaf,” for example, she created two characters who feeling themselves crippled for love, agree to live together as friends. But the “Half a Loaf” becomes a whole one.

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