

The Joy of Piracy: Ned Buntline, Mark Twain, And The Black Avenger Of The Spanish Main

Daniel Gorman Jr.
Department of History
University of Rochester
500 Joseph C. Wilson Boulevard
Rochester, New York 14627 USA

Faculty Advisor: Prof. Joan Shelley Rubin

Abstract

Although an obscure text today, Ned Buntline's *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main* was a bestselling dime novel in the 1800s. This paper seeks to understand the influence of *Black Avenger* on pirate fiction and Mark Twain, who repeatedly references Buntline's story in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In the plot of *Black Avenger*, Buntline depicts piracy as a sort of moral vigilantism: If motivated by a good cause, individuals are within their rights to temporarily step outside normal codes of behavior. However, only white men are entitled to such an escape, for Buntline portrays women and African American in an incredibly disparaging manner. *Black Avenger* is then compared to Prentiss Ingraham's *The Black Pirate*, a pirate story of much lesser quality written thirty years later. The extraordinary plot similarities to *Black Avenger*, negative portrayal of women and African Americans, and concept of moral vigilantism found in *The Black Pirate* reveal that Ned Buntline's novel became the template for the pirate sub-genre. Finally, the themes and tropes developed by Buntline (and recycled by Ingraham) are found to be present in the Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn novels by Mark Twain. Tom Sawyer's personality is heavily influenced by Buntline's characterization of the Black Avenger, and the plot of *Tom Sawyer* critiques the clichés of dime novels. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain deconstructs the poor treatment of African Americans and women found elsewhere in popular literature, subtly criticizing the darker undercurrents of dime novels. Overall, this paper, through textual and historical analysis, traces an intertextual path from lowbrow fiction to great literature, showing not only how Ned Buntline shaped pirate literature, but also how the sophisticated texts of Mark Twain owe much to the pulp fiction of the 19th century.

Keywords: Buntline, Piracy, Twain

1. Introduction:

Before there were comic books, there were dime novels. Printed on cheap paper, dime novels brought outrageous tales of cowboys, detectives, pirates, soldiers, and damsels in distress to the American public for little cost.¹ Dime novels steadily grew in popularity throughout the 1800s, but suffered from a gradual decline in quality and popularity in the last quarter of the century.² Many of these books were produced in *fiction factories* – writers and editors collaboratively producing texts, which finally were published under pseudonyms – but a number of individual writers rose to prominence.³ One such author, Ned Buntline, was particularly well known, and his most famous work, *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main*, became the iconic pirate yarn of his age. From a thematic standpoint, *Black Avenger* is notable for depicting piracy as a temporary release from normal codes of behavior. To understand the lasting influence of this pirate story, especially its intertextual relationship with the works of Mark Twain (e.g., *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*), this paper will explore both the literary techniques and depictions of race, gender, and morality present in dime pirate novels.⁴

2. Buntline, Solonois, Ingraham, & The Parts That Have Not Aged Well:

For such a successful writer, Ned Buntline (real name, Edward Zane Carroll Judson) is the subject of very little critical material. Only one full biography of Buntline – Jay Monaghan’s *The Great Rascal* – exists, and that book focuses more on Buntline’s life than on his writing. With that said, Buntline lived a remarkably colorful life that paralleled the roving exploits of his fictional characters. Enthralled by ships and disenchanting with schoolwork, young Ned ran away from home and worked as a cabin boy, giving him a chance to visit Cuba and the Spanish Main.⁵ In a series of subsequent adventures that stretch credulity (but really happened), Ned fought in the Navy during the Seminole War, served prison time for inciting a New York City riot, survived a lynching attempt, became a sergeant in the Union Army during the Civil War, and traveled as a temperance lecturer.⁶ Later in life, Buntline wrote a number of dime novels and plays starring Buffalo Bill Cody, helping to get Cody’s self-mythologizing entertainment career underway.⁷

To be clear, Buntline is not a forgotten genius of American literature. His prose is hyperbolic and melodramatic, lacking the technical or symbolic brilliance of contemporaries like Melville or Hawthorne. Ned’s style never evolved much beyond the overblown conventions of genre fiction, as indicated by his 1869 novella, *Buffalo Bill, the King of the Border Men*:

Judson’s story, the first in a series of fictional representations of Buffalo Bill, did not present [Cody] as much more than a compendium of clichés.⁸ The characterization is crude and predictable, using well-worn language....⁹

Nonetheless, Buntline was a prolific author with a fertile imagination. In 1847, the year that he achieved breakthrough success as a writer, Ned published seven novellas (including *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main*) in a matter of weeks.¹⁰ Buntline might not have been Shakespeare, but within his very specific literary niche, he excelled, and his works of escapist fiction became popular. *Black Avenger* and *The Red Revenger*, novels written simultaneously, “were still being reprinted forty years later, and Mark Twain, in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, had his hero dream” of becoming one of Buntline’s heroes.¹¹

The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main is an obscure text today, though, and so a summary is necessary before analyzing it. Like any good melodrama, *Black Avenger* is a revenge story, starring a fearsome pirate named Francisco Solonois.^{12, 13} Born in France, but kidnapped and sold as a slave to Cuban governor Enrico Larranaga, Francisco falls in love with the governor’s daughter, Medora. The two elope and have a child, and Francisco takes up piracy to support his family. Medora, a good Christian, dislikes her husband’s profession, but Solonois claims that he does, too: “Be not sad, oh my beautiful, my own! I soon will quit the wild life which now from necessity I lead....”¹⁴ After returning from what was meant to be his last voyage, Francisco finds his fortress in ruins, his family kidnapped by a spiteful Don Enrico. Enraged, Francisco declares war on the Don, crying to the heavens, “Revenge! Medora! Death to the Spaniards!”¹⁵ With the aid of his pirate crew, Francisco sets out to eliminate the Spanish navy, while Don Enrico imprisons Medora and raises the baby, whom he christens Juan, as his nephew.

The plot now jumps ahead seventeen years to spring 1673. Juan, now a dashing soldier, has killed Solonois in battle. A jubilant Enrico plans to inform Medora (“she who dared to blacken the purest blood that ever flowed through Spanish veins”) and then kill her and Juan.¹⁶ At the Don’s summer estate, Juan falls in love with the Don’s younger daughter, Luella; Juan thinks she is his cousin, when she is really his aunt, leading the reader to suspect that the plot will end with incest. Meanwhile, Solonois (who did *not* die, after all) appears and tasks a sleeper agent – Lobo, the Don’s black hangman – with killing people in the governor’s mansion, to unnerve the Don. Solonois (disguised as “Doctor Sangre”) goes to kill an ailing Juan, but an old family maid reveals his son’s identity. Lobo then meets up with Solonois, and they explore a prison facility adjacent to the estate. There, they find a number of prisoners, including the kidnapped son of Lobo, a woman whose own daughter was kidnapped, and Medora.

With the Solonois family reunited, the family maid reveals that Juan and Luella are not really related: The Don’s younger daughter died in childbirth, and the maid swapped the dead baby for an abandoned child, Luella.¹⁷ With the youths free to marry, Solonois prepares for his final act of revenge. By accident, Francisco meets Luella’s father, Don Miguel Castro, who imprisoned his wife and gave away his daughter after suspecting his wife of being unfaithful. Francisco helps reconcile the Castros and then gathers all of his allies for the endgame. Instead of violence, though, Francisco stages a play for Don Enrico, depicting all of the Don’s crimes and starring the people whose lives he destroyed.¹⁸ Confronted by the magnitude of his vendetta, the Don begs forgiveness and promises to

pardon Francisco for his acts of piracy. Captain Solonois retires to live with his family, and the dime novel ends with the wedding of Juan Solonois and Luella Castro.

Black Avenger's episodic plot contains so many narrative threads that it rivals modern soap operas in both complexity and absurdity. Still, Buntline's dime novel is undeniably entertaining, and although the text contains little character development, the *Black Avenger* becomes a compelling figure. Even though he goes on a killing spree of ludicrous proportions, Solonois cherishes traditional morals (i.e., the morals of 1840s America). Francisco turns to piracy only because he sees no other way to support his family, and he still wants to lay down his arms and live a good Christian life. Unfortunately, the Don is so enraged by French blood entering the Larranaga clan that he robs Francisco of domestic bliss. Denied a normal life, Francisco now relishes piracy, which lets him eschew law and order to avenge his family's honor. Buntline thereby stresses the importance of family, lending a moral foundation to the narrative. The author also presents criminal activity (metaphorically presented as piracy) as an extreme, yet acceptable, course of action, provided that good intentions motivate the crime. Of course, there are dangers if this belief is carried to extreme lengths, but Buntline implies that piracy should only be a temporary escape from normality. In the end, Solonois renounces bloodshed and returns home, subjecting himself once more to the rule of law and the Christian family values he always desired.

Even as *Black Avenger* presents an intriguing message about vigilantism and escaping from one's subject position, the text conveys less positive messages about women. Although she is the Helen that launches Francisco's ship, Medora is an extremely passive, even bland figure. Aside from languishing in prison for seventeen years with nary an escape attempt, Medora is notable only for her skill at tearful farewells.¹⁹ Certain women take more active roles – Luella goes for help when Juan falls from a cliff, and Elizabetta the maid reveals crucial information of her own volition – but these women never venture beyond the confines of home without a male chaperone.²⁰ For a pirate story, the actual pirating involves only a handful of characters, all of which are male. Buntline thereby hews closely to the gender notions of his era, especially the idea that women were too emotional to be useful outside the home. In Buntline's imagined Caribbean, piracy is entirely a men's affair.

In addition to this treatment of women, Buntline uses the character of Lobo to portray African Americans in a less than flattering manner. Buntline introduces the hangman as “a hideous and unsightly being, whose looks of beastly ferocity” gave Solonois pause.²¹ The author then hammers home this animal nature by having Lobo drink blood as a sign of loyalty to Solonois.²² Subtler details, like Lobo's horribly mangled grammar and habit of referring to himself in the third person, further set the hangman apart from the white characters, who all have excellent elocution. Lobo even sees *himself* as less than a man. Consider this passage, where Lobo discusses his kidnapped son, Quasey:

“He was a dwarf, and more hateful to the eye than I am, who makes folks shudder as I pass along!” [...] [F]or a moment, singular as it may appear, the hangman's hideous face assumed an expression most strangely human for him, and two large, bright tears stole down his ebon cheeks....²³

Regrettably, Lobo cries only for his lost son, and not for the way that whites perceive him. Ultimately, Lobo aids Solonois faithfully and discovers the location of Medora's prison, but on the whole Buntline portrays the hangman as a sub-human figure.²⁴ Clearly, Buntline has no desire to challenge the racial stereotypes of 19th-century fiction.

Negative messages about women and African Americans did not detract from the book's sales, though. *Black Avenger* proved so popular that elements of its plot soon became common traits of the pirate subgenre. Consider Prentiss Ingraham's 1882 dime novel, *The Black Pirate; or, The Mystery of the Golden Fetters*. Only twenty pages long, *Black Pirate* is one-fifth the length of *Black Avenger* and tells a completely different story, with supernatural overtones and a swashbuckling navy officer protagonist who goes undercover as a pirate. Still, Ingraham clearly incorporated (or ripped off) many elements of Buntline's seminal tale: The plot begins at a remote fortress; the protagonist makes the trip from Europe to the Americas; minimal character development occurs; a black character hangs terrified white men; the good characters emerge unscathed, regardless of the calamities thrown their way; the protagonist gathers his allies for the final battle against evil; and, like all good literary romances, the story ends with a wedding. Simultaneously, Ingraham's work exemplifies the decline in dime novel quality that occurred in the late 1800s. Compared to *Black Avenger*, which is fairly easy to follow despite its twists and turns, *Black Pirate* is nearly incomprehensible, with innumerable plotlines and indistinguishable supporting characters packed into its twenty pages. Ingraham also throws every last cliché of genre literature – women disguised as men, natural disasters, a dying man's curse, a corrupt Catholic priest, dueling lovers, a lifeboat lost at sea, and so on – into his narrative. At least Buntline was selective in his use of genre clichés.²⁵

Still, *The Black Pirate* is noteworthy for recycling and heightening the themes developed in *Black Avenger*, particularly Buntline's concept of piracy as a temporary release from normal behavior. While working undercover,

heroic Leon St. Vale claims that, like Solonoi, he has taken up piracy out of necessity.²⁶ A few pages later, when St. Vale and another pirate fall overboard, Ingraham shows the moral dilemma of good men driven to piracy:

It was a hard thing to do, to drive a knife to the heart of one who clung to him, begging him to save him from death; but Leon St. Vale saw that he must rid himself of the human burden he carried, or sink with him.²⁷

In other words, St. Vale deplures the things he must do as an undercover agent, but feels that his overarching goal (to bring down Captain Ebony, the Black Pirate) validates the occasional act of evil. The ends justify the means, and so St. Vale operates outside the rule of law. As in *Black Avenger*, though, the protagonist willingly returns to a normal, law-abiding life after bringing down his enemy: The wedding at the end is St. Vale's.²⁸

Ingraham's *Black Pirate* also incorporates negative female stereotypes, but goes to even greater lengths to deride women. "Frank," a young woman disguised as a man, joins St. Vale on his quest to defeat the Black Pirate.²⁹ Unfortunately, when stranded in a lifeboat, Frank rapidly loses her mind from the stress and commits suicide. Moments later, St. Vale and the other passengers are rescued.³⁰ The message is clear, and brutal: Women will not survive outside of their traditional gender role (i.e., in the home). Ingraham denigrates African Americans, as well, denying Captain Ebony any of Lobo's redeeming qualities. The Captain exhibits not only a considerable appetite for violence, but also a disturbing sadism – he keeps the skeletons of dead enemies around his dinner table, and he hangs an entire crew of sailors from their ship's mast, as a warning to others.³¹ This animalistic portrayal of African Americans harkens back to Buntline, but goes even further into grotesquerie. In this way, *The Black Pirate* becomes an interesting commentary on the post-Reconstruction era, suggesting that the rise of Jim Crow undid any expansion of democracy, and that African Americans received poorer fictional portrayals than they did before the Civil War.³²

3. Mark Twain, The Sawyer/Finn Novels, & The Parts That Have Aged Well:

Having illustrated the iconic stature attained by Buntline's novel, let us now turn our attention to Samuel Clemens, the brilliant, witty man who wrote as *Mark Twain*. Clemens, "the classic American writer closest to the dime novel in practice, influence, and audience [...] began his career with one foot in the fiction factory, but was able to step into the literary world of the gilded age."³³ His work can therefore be regarded as a fusion of serious literature and the less subtle thrills of dime literature. Nowhere is this thematic hybrid clearer than in his most famous books, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Like dime novels, the Sawyer and Finn books have rambling, episodic plots, as the protagonists wander from one uproarious adventure to another. At the start of *Huckleberry Finn*, Clemens openly acknowledges his debt to the mad plots of genre fiction:

Notice: Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot. – By Order of the Author; Per G.G., Chief of Ordnance.³⁴

Of course, Clemens is being facetious, for *Huckleberry Finn* (and *Tom Sawyer*, for that matter) does contain morals and a definite plot structure. Clemens's satirical voice, mocking the conventions of pulp fiction even as he appropriates them, sets him apart from Buntline and Ingraham.

Chronologically the first of the two Sawyer and Finn novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* depicts a boy whose extraordinary imagination sets him apart from other children. Enamored of tall tales and dime literature, Tom Sawyer particularly idolizes Ned Buntline's immortal hero, Francisco Solonoi.³⁵ During one of his many reveries, Tom imagines running away from St. Petersburg to become a pirate, only to return in glory:

[He] would suddenly appear.... brown and weather-beaten, in his black velvet doublet and trunks, [...] his crime-crusted cutlass at his side, his slouch hat with waving plumes, his black flag unfurled, with the skull and cross-bones on it, and hear with swelling ecstasy the whisperings, "It's Tom Sawyer the Pirate! – the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main!"³⁶

Except for a few minor details, Tom's imagined future self looks identical to the illustration of "Francisco Solonoi, the Dreaded Buccaneer" that appears in *Black Avenger*.³⁷ Clearly, Tom has read and internalized Buntline's book. This daydream scene therefore comments on the proliferation of dime novels in American culture, while also

stressing the inherently juvenile nature of dime literature. A child, young enough to still engage in magical thinking, could read *Black Avenger*, take the story at face value, and want to live the adventure.

As Clemens mocks the silliness of pirate stories, he simultaneously patterns sections of *Tom Sawyer* on *Black Avenger*. Both works feature violent non-white characters (Lobo and Injun Joe, respectively), and women play a subordinate role to men (Medora passively accepts her imprisonment; Becky Thatcher grows ill in the caves, while Tom actively seeks a way out).³⁸ Clemens even adds some of Captain Solonois's personality traits into Tom Sawyer. For example, Solonois is masterful at getting people to do his bidding; when Solonois encounters Lobo years after their initial blood oath, Lobo drops everything to obey the Black Avenger's commands.³⁹ Similarly, Tom commands the respect of other children and easily manipulates them to his own advantage, as when he enlists a host of boys to whitewash a fence for him.⁴⁰ The whitewashing incident also indicates that Tom enjoys temporarily escaping from his responsibilities, just as Solonois steps outside normal behavior to seek revenge. Clemens and Buntline's treatments of piracy differ crucially, though: Tom just wants to have fun, and his daydreams of a pirate reflect a desire to play hooky; Solonois is out for blood, and uses piracy to unleash terror.

With that said, Solonois and Tom both seek a return to their original subject positions. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, this concept becomes apparent through the Jackson's Island sequence. Fed up with school, Tom, now calling himself the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main, talks Joe Harper and Huck Finn into running away to Jackson's Island.⁴¹ Once there, the boys engage in various shenanigans, such as pipe-smoking and supply raids to the mainland. Before too long, though, Tom and Joe start to miss home – they continue to say their prayers, although no adult is there to make them pray.⁴² In other words, the boys' escape from their normal environment proves frightening, and homesickness trumps the allure of the pirate dream. Fed up with piracy, the boys return to St. Petersburg, interrupting their own funeral.⁴³ The Jackson's Island episode reveals Clemens's two-tiered approach toward dime novel conventions: The sequence apes *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main*, but Clemens also shows how difficult it is for people to abandon the rules they have long been subject to. More people will act like Tom (i.e., quickly look for a way home) than Solonois (i.e., become a fanatical outcast for nearly twenty years).

Despite this exploration of the outcast's psyche, Clemens primarily uses *Tom Sawyer* to satirize the narrative conventions of pirate stories. In *Huckleberry Finn*, however, Clemens shifts his attention fully to the themes developed in pirate fiction, as well as larger trends in American literature. Most significantly, Clemens uses the character of Jim to challenge black stereotypes, which so often portrayed African Americans as sub-human or homicidal. A runaway slave, Jim is a peaceful man who acts as both a big brother and a father figure to Huck Finn as they journey down the Mississippi. To be fair, Clemens does not completely eschew the racial stereotyping seen in *Black Avenger* (like Lobo, Jim speaks with exaggerated, incorrect grammar). Nonetheless, Clemens portrays Jim as an authentic human being, with a sense of pride and firm moral convictions. The following passage, where Jim chastises Huck for pulling a prank, is notable not only for showing Jim's pure heart, but also because a black man rebukes a white man *and gets away with it*:⁴⁴

“When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin’ for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz broken becase you wuz los’, en I didn’t k’yer no mo’ what become er me en de raf’. En when I wake up en fine you back agin’, all safe en’ soun’, de tears come en I could a got down on my knees en kiss yo’ foot I’s so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin’ ‘bout wuz how you could make a fool uv old Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is *trash*; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren’s en makes ‘em ashamed.”⁴⁵

Clemens's audacity to portray Jim as morally superior to Huck, a white citizen, completely upends the precedent set by Lobo and Captain Ebony. This passage also shows that Clemens is shifting away from fantasy toward literary realism, even though *Huckleberry Finn* retains the episodic structure and playful spirit of a dime novel.

Clemens also challenges the pro-male sentiments of popular literature by including strong female characters. Tom's Aunt Polly, portrayed as a fairly provincial woman in *Tom Sawyer*, seems newly empowered in *Huckleberry Finn*: When she suspects that Tom is causing mischief at a relative's house, Polly boards a riverboat and travels 1,100 miles to find out the truth.⁴⁶ The frail Becky Thatcher makes no appearance; in her place, Clemens includes the spunky Mary Jane Wilks, for whom Huck may have romantic feelings.⁴⁷ When Huck warns Mary Jane that two con artists, the King and the Duke, plan to steal her inheritance, Mary Jane does not take the news lying down: “Come – don't waste a minute – not a *second* – we'll have them tarred and feathered, and flung in the river!”⁴⁸ Later, when Huck sets in motion a plan to reveal the King and Duke's treachery, Mary Jane fulfills her responsibilities with aplomb – she goes to a family friend's house for aid, and lights candles to signal Huck that she is safe.⁴⁹ Mary Jane is not a bystander to her own story, like Medora, or unable to show grace under pressure, like poor Frank. In Huck's voyage down the Mississippi (a kind of inland pirate narrative), both men *and* women matter.

Finally, Clemens targets one of his own protagonists, Tom Sawyer, to show the limits of the pirate dream. When Tom visits his Uncle Silas, the boy discovers that Huck and an imprisoned Jim are on the farm. Seeing the chance to have another great adventure (on a par with the events of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*), Tom hides the fact that Jim is now free (Jim's owner died recently) and offers to help Huck free the unfortunate slave.⁵⁰ Instead of finding an easy way to free Jim, Tom remarks that "this whole thing is just as easy and awkward as it can be," and so a more complex escape plan must be devised.⁵¹ In other words, reality must be made more interesting, or more like a dime novel.⁵² Secretly, Tom hopes that he can accompany Huck and Jim "down the river, on the raft, and have adventures plumb to the mouth of the river," and then they can all return to St. Petersburg as heroes.⁵³ Unfortunately, Tom's imagination proves reckless, for adults discover the liberation attempt and shoot at the boys, believing them to be bandits. Tom receives a bullet to the leg, and Jim opts to get help, sacrificing his own freedom to save Sawyer.⁵⁴

This incident shows the dangers of Buntline's escape/return paradigm, when carried to extremes: The fantastical adventures described in pirate stories cannot happen in reality without people getting hurt. As Huck puts it, "[Tom] had a dream [...] and it shot him."⁵⁵ In the final pages, Tom recovers from his wound and shows his usual bluster again, but the boy's aura of childish magical thinking – a holdover from the first Sawyer and Finn novel – has been destroyed. Adulthood beckons, and Huck recognizes this fact. Rather than return to St. Petersburg, Huck opts to "light out for the Territory."⁵⁶ This departure is not another initiation of Buntline's escape/return pattern, but rather a total break from a world that has been unkind to Huck. Young Mr. Finn wants to make his own decisions, and to do so, he must *permanently* break free of the forces to which he has been subject.

4. Conclusion:

The intertextual path linking Ned Buntline and Mark Twain is long and circuitous, much like the plot of a dime novel. *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main* started out as a simple pirate story in 1847, only to become a staple of dime literature, reprinted for several decades and serving as the template for other pirate stories. *Black Avenger* also established piracy as a metaphor for stepping outside society's codes of behavior, albeit an escape for white men only. Buntline's denigration of women and African Americans fit into greater trends in American literature, which became even more pronounced after the Civil War. Samuel Clemens recognized these trends and tackled them in his Sawyer and Finn novels: in addition to mocking the structure of pirate stories, *Tom Sawyer* shows the absurdity behind trying to escape subjectivity, while *Huckleberry Finn* proposes alternatives to the reductionist fictional treatment of women and African Americans. Indeed, "Twain's successes mark the limits of the dime novel: what the dime novel fails to achieve is *Huckleberry Finn*," or *Tom Sawyer*, for that matter – texts that respect the conventions of dime novels, but combine the medium's clichés with a more sophisticated, self-aware sensibility.⁵⁷ Clemens's success laid the course for the future of American popular literature, reflecting (and accelerating) the dime novel's loss of quality and prestige. Thanks to Mark Twain (and to Ned Buntline and the *Black Avenger of the Spanish Main*), a new genre – the American picaresque novel – was on the rise.

5. Directions for Further Study:

When it comes to Ned Buntline, a sizeable gap exists in the history of American literature and readership. *The Great Rascal* is the only major biography of Buntline. Virtually no critical material exists on *Black Avenger*. Even in *The Great Rascal*, *Black Avenger* receives only a cursory mention.⁵⁸ Criticism of Ned Buntline's work therefore must be expanded, since Buntline wrote for more than forty years. For modern readers, though, dime novels make for challenging reading. The standard dime novel page contains two or three columns of text, using miniscule font. This difficult formatting, combined with the extraordinarily convoluted plot lines, demands the reader's constant attention. It is time-consuming and exhausting to read these stories. A truly comprehensive study of dime novels will require a much longer researching period, simply to read through a large number of texts. More time and more primary sources would also help with identifying themes and literary techniques prevalent across the medium.

6. Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank Phyllis Andrews, Manuscript Librarian at Rush Rhees Library; Carolyn DeNoyelles and Eileen Shepard, two of my high school English teachers; and Professor Joan Rubin, Rochester Department of History.

7. Notes:

1 J. Randolph Cox, *The Dime Novel Companion* (Westport: Greenwood, 2000), xiii-xiv: The periodical *Beadle's Dime Novels* (1860-1874) was the first notable publication to sell for a dime, but the moniker of dime novel came to apply to all such cheap entertainments, "no matter what the cover price."

2 Cox, xx-xxi; Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (New York: Verso, 1987), 16.

3 Denning, 23-24.

4 On page xxiii, Cox describes two types of dime novel scholarship: (a) using dime novels to "explicate a thesis" about American culture or literature; or (b) examining dime novels as a form of literature. I seek to combine the two techniques to trace the evolution of Buntline-created paradigms, and how Samuel Clemens ("Mark Twain") manipulates them in his Sawyer and Finn books.

5 Jay Monaghan, *The Great Rascal: The Life and Adventures of Ned Buntline* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1952), 41-42, 46.

6 Monaghan, 54-55, 108-109, 164; Cox, 148-149.

7 Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 20-21.

8 Note: Scholars differ when giving Ned's name – some refer to him as *Judson*, other as *Buntline*. I will refer to him in this paper as Buntline, even though he may be Judson in some quotations.

9 Kasson, 20.

10 Monaghan, 125-127.

11 Monaghan, 127.

12 The version of *Black Avenger* I examined was a reprint in *The Flag of Our Union* from 1852, rather than a first edition from 1847. Citation: Ned Buntline, "The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main: or, The Fiend of Blood. A Thrilling Story of the Buccaneer Times," *The Flag of Our Union* (Boston: F. Gleason), 1852, Dime Novel Collection, University of Rochester Library, Department of Rare Books & Special Collections.

13 All quotes from *Black Avenger* that appear in this paper come from a first edition placed online, since I could not take the 1852 text out of the University of Rochester archives. Citation: Ned Buntline, "The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main: or, The Fiend of Blood. A Thrilling Story of the Buccaneer Times," *The Flag of Our Union* (Boston: F. Gleason), 1847, <http://bit.ly/vwSgHL>.

14 Buntline, 11.

15 Buntline, 18. The cry of "Death to the Spaniards!" appears throughout the text with such frequency that it becomes quite (unintentionally) funny.

16 Buntline, 39.

17 It is left ambiguous whether the Don *intended* for Juan and Luella to fall in love, as part of his greater scheme of humiliating the Solonois family. A comment on page 72 by Elizabetta the maid – "It is well for their happiness, that they are not so nearly related as the Don believes them" – could be interpreted two ways: (a) The Don wanted the youths to fall in love so he might reveal the incest; or (b) the Don simply thinks that Luella is his biological daughter, and therefore Juan's aunt.

18 Buntline, 98-100. This tableaux, presenting the antagonist's crimes for all to see, bears more than a passing resemblance to the play-within-a-play from *Hamlet*. In Shakespeare's tragedy, Prince Hamlet recruits a company of travelling actors to implicitly accuse his uncle of murdering the old king. While I cannot say for certain that Buntline stole this plot device from *Hamlet*, the similarity between the two scenes suggests that Buntline, while not a terribly original writer, was rather good at cobbling stories together.

19 Buntline, 12. Admittedly, Medora does have prodigious talent for tearful farewells.

20 Buntline, 52, 84. All the female characters participate in Francisco's play, but of course male characters like Solonois and Don Castro accompany them.

21 Buntline, 36.

22 Buntline, 36.

23 Buntline, 58. This passage is one of the rare instances in *Black Avenger* where Lobo actually uses “I” in reference to himself.

24 Buntline, 70: Lobo reveals that he overheard Don Enrico discussing the prison.

25 All plot details listed in this paragraph come from: Prentiss Ingraham, “The Black Pirate; or, The Mystery of the Golden Fetters. A Romance of the Last Days of Piracy,” *Beadle’s New York Dime Library* 14, no. 172 (New York: Beadle & Adams), February 8, 1882, Dime Novel Collection, University of Rochester Libraries, Department of Rare Books & Special Collections.

26 Ingraham, 8. St. Vale did kill a fellow officer in a duel, but is not really an exile, as he hunts pirates in the King’s name (refer to *Ibid*, 5). However, St. Vale’s undercover work lets him behave like a true pirate, acting outside the normal codes of behavior. Just as in *Black Avenger*, the use of criminal tactics is permissible, so long as there is a good motive behind the crime.

27 Ingraham, 10.

28 Ingraham, 21.

29 Ingraham, 16.

30 Ingraham, 20: “Through tempest and sunshine, night and day, and at last in calm, went the long-boat, until one night when each man in that boat had begun to hate the others, came the scene that is the prologue to this story, and one of the thirteen survivors sprung into the sea. That one was the poor woman known as Frank, who had lived for revenge upon one who had cruelly wronged her, herded with pirates, and dropped the garb of her sex to hunt to death the Black Pirate.”

31 Ingraham, 8, 9-10.

32 Before the Civil War, there was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. After the war, there was *The Klansman*.

33 Denning, 208.

34 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London: Chatty & Windus, 1884; Philadelphia: Courage Books, 1990), 11.

35 While Clemens repeatedly uses the “Black Avenger of the Spanish Main” moniker, he never includes the name *Francisco Solonois* in the text.

36 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Riverside Literature Series, eds. Kenneth S. Lynn and Arno Jewett, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 53.

37 Buntline, 13.

38 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 189.

39 Buntline, 47.

40 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 12-13.

41 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 82.

42 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 86.

43 Twain, *Tom Sawyer*, 109. The arrival of Tom, Huck, and Joe at their own funeral mirrors the tableaux of supposedly dead characters at the end of *The Black Avenger of the Spanish Main*, further illuminating the intertextual link between the two novels.

44 Lobo never rebukes Solonois, but rather acts as the Black Avenger’s servant. Captain Ebony does insult white men (usually before killing them), but in the end, the pirate is killed as punishment for his crimes. Both Buntline and Ingraham thereby argue that black characters should be kept in their place, playing into the pro-white sentiments of 19th-century American fiction.

45 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 78.

46 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 228.

47 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 156: “You may say what you want to, but in my opinion she was just full of sand. It sounds like flattery, but it ain’t no flattery. And when it comes to beauty – and goodness too – she lays over them all.”

48 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 153.

49 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 164-165.

50 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 181, 227.

51 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 190.

52 Tom has been accused of being delusional or sadistic in the last chapters of *Huckleberry Finn*, but I think that is too harsh of a judgment. Remember that Tom is very young. Despite the threats (Injun Joe, the caves) he encountered in the first novel, Tom emerged unscathed; to a young boy raised on a diet of pulp literature, such good luck would seem like a dime novel’s promise being fulfilled in reality. This magical thinking would surely inspire feelings of invincibility, or even arrogance. Indeed, after the Injun Joe adventure, Tom seems a bit full of himself,

inventing ever more complex fantasy games for himself and Huck. Then (in the early pages of *Huckleberry Finn*), Huck disappears down the Mississippi, leaving Tom without his best friend. Obviously, life in St. Petersburg must have become dull. As such, when Tom discovers Huck on Uncle Silas's farm, Tom sees a chance to resurrect his friendship and have another adventure, one that could surpass the events of the first book. Tom is not intentionally malicious, but rather misguided, his judgment obscured by youth and magical thinking.

53 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 229.

54 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 217.

55 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 218.

56 Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, 230.

57 Denning, 209.

58 Monaghan, 127.