Meddling with “hifalut’n foolishness”:
_Capturing Mark Twain in Recent Comics_ ¹

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With the exception of Edgar Allan Poe,² no American writer has been more adapted to comic book form than Mark Twain. Characters such as Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and Hank Morgan have found form in a variety of illustrated texts, and even the figure of Mark Twain himself—an icon of American literature—has appeared through a variety of popular culture media. We see Twain’s work and persona translated through children’s picture books, animated cartoons, popular music, superhero comics, television series, Broadway performances, Disney World exhibits, webcomics, science fiction novels, and video games. Such an abundance of material is indeed staggering, giving pause to almost any cultural critic. Some of the most striking examples of this phenomenon include the many recent adaptations of his narratives into comic book and graphic novel form—or what Pap Finn might call “meddl[ing] with such hifalut’n foolishness” (Twain 24).³

Recently there have been several notable examples of Twain-related comics that take the adaptation of his work in curious new directions. Earlier comic book adaptations of Twain’s narratives were more or less static in their presentation—presenting their stories primarily through medium-shot panels with little variation of perspective—and privileged “fidelity” to the original plots. Indeed, many of the writers/adapters of the original _Classics Illustrated_ comic book series followed the storylines closely and left little room for creative interpretation, succumbing to a “factory” formula that, according to Geoffrey O’Brien, resulted in “officially sanctioned blandness” (qtd. in Richardson 81). However, a number of more recent comics have adapted Twain’s narratives in innovative ways, abjuring straightforward faithfulness to the text and choosing instead to translate the material through ahistorical or differentiated contexts, cartoony illustrations, equivocal conclusions, ambiguous tones, and comic irony. Many of these adaptations complicate the primary narratives—just as Twain’s own writings encouraged difficult or conflicting readings—and in the process, perform a kind of postmodern distancing between reader and text. While recent comics versions of Twain’s fiction certainly pay homage to the great American writer and icon, they do so by capturing the form or the technique of his storytelling. Put another way, instead of merely trying to “get

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the story right,” several contemporary comic book writers and illustrators have been more concerned with the comedic and ironic spirit underlying Twain’s aesthetics.

The graphic narratives discussed in this essay will be limited to those that have been published in the past twenty years. Although I may reference earlier comics adaptations of Twain’s narratives, such as the case of the various Classics Illustrated issues, I will do so primarily as context. M. Thomas Inge has already provided insightful studies on earlier translations of Twain’s works, and this essay intends to pick up where his investigations leave off. Furthermore, I will focus on those comics that fully integrate both text and image, interdependent (although not always equal) combinations “where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (McCloud 155). As such, I will not include any analyses of editions or reprints that rely heavily on illustrations—such as those by E. W. Kemble, Daniel Carter Beard, or True W. Williams—that, while arguably providing a narrative all their own, function as a supplements to Twain’s words. Nor will I include any of the myriad of pictured editions that are marketed to children. Along with this, I will privilege those comics whose audience is not solely younger readers and whose purpose is not merely to encapsulate the gist of Twain’s stories in a stripped down or simplified fashion. Instead, I will discuss those comics with an intended young adult and adult readership and that adapt Twain’s narratives, or the historical figure and icon “Mark Twain,” in ways that go beyond unadorned plot summary.

Adapting the Figure of Mark Twain

In her work on adaptation theory, Linda Hutcheon presents what she calls a “reception continuum” model when defining those works that deliberately translate, revisit, or remediate a text. At one end are “those forms in which fidelity to the prior work is a theoretical ideal, even if a practical impossibility.” At the other end of the continuum are works much more loosely adaptive, either as “spin-offs”—texts that derive from or offer commentary on a prior work, whether or not that work reuses material from another medium—or “expansions,” works that play off of a prior text as a point of departure, such as sequels and prequels, fanzines, and fan fiction (171). Regarding recent graphic adaptations of Mark Twain, there are those that fall along the entire spectrum of Hutcheon’s model: comics that attempt a faithful translation, those that reinterpret the original narratives in light of more contemporary issues, texts that use Twain’s stories as a springboard for completely original tales, and cartoons that use the very icons that surround the nineteenth-century author.
Some of the more notable of these comics adaptations fall in the latter categories, for instead of attempting to retell any of his original stories, they use the figure of Mark Twain as a basis for their own fictional narratives. Of these, the most absurd and even surreal can be found in two Internet-based comic strips and in an ongoing alternative comic book. *Thinkin’ Lincoln* is a (mostly) daily webcomic featuring the floating heads of historical and popular figures—such as George Washington, Charles Darwin, Queen Elizabeth II, Grigori Rasputin, the famous racehorse Secretariat, groundhog Punxsutawney Phil, and the eponymous Abraham Lincoln—and their bizarrely non sequitur adventures. One of the recurring characters is Zombie Mark Twain, who, according to comic’s website, is described as “a famous American author and satirist and all around cool dude. BUT THEN HE CAME BACK AS A RAVENOUS ZOMBIE. He is pretty much the same” (Grover, capitalization in original). Chris Onstad’s webcomic, *Achewood*, featured a brief story arc titled “Mark Twain” (running between 20-25 Aug. 2003), where two of its anthropomorphic characters, Raymond Smuckles and Philippe, inadvertently time travel back to 1882 and run into author (see fig. 1). The historical Twain narrates these strips as he writes in his journal about the appearance of the strange creatures. What is notable about this four-part story is its reliance on science fiction tropes that bring to mind *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) as well as Twain’s interests in machines and contraptions.

![Fig. 1.](image)

DECEMBER 25, 1882

*Huckleberry Finn shall be the vessel in which a sound heart and a deformed conscience come together in—consarn it, what is that racket in the yard?*
But perhaps the most absurd comics manifestation of Mark Twain can be found in Michael Kupperman’s comic book series, Tales Designed to Thrizzle. Published by Seattle-based Fantagraphics with five issues to date, the series is a hodgepodge of comic strips, nonsensical narratives, risqué illustrations, and faux advertisements that parodies comic books, television, and other popular media. Beginning in issue #3 (2006), Kupperman began a strip featuring Mark Twain and Albert Einstein, placing them in various crime-fighting episodes reminiscent of detective and police television dramas of the 1970s and 1980s (see fig. 2). The two figures have nothing in common other than a visual similarity—Kupperman renders them in such a way that they are almost indistinguishable—and a penchant for getting into trouble. Issue #5 (2009) contains the most sustained episode of “Twain and Einstein,” with Twain narrating, in a manner of 1940s film noir, his and his partner’s adventures as Hollywood detectives. In this disparate and dadaesque narrative, Twain recounts how two of his closest friends, Humpty Dumpty and Brand X Fruit Drink, are killed as he attempts to break up a prostitution ring—“You want real horror, imagine 37 bullets striking a man made of egg” (n.p.)—what happens when one of Einstein’s experiments temporarily turns them into caped superheroes, the burdens that detective work puts on Einstein’s marriage, and finally how the two men are honored at a Las Vegas crimefighting convention, where Twain alludes to A Connecticut Yankee and then makes out with a female robot. The comic is as outrageous, and as hilarious, as it sounds, not only reflecting Kupperman’s own brand of offbeat humor, but also bringing to mind the compositional haphazardness for which Twain was famous. For those critical of his disjointed narratives, the episodic nature of “Twain and Einstein” may not be so much of a parody of Twain’s fiction as it is an accentuated reflection.

Three recent graphic novels employ the character or history of Mark Twain in a much less outrageous manner. Based on Alex Archer’s series of bi-monthly prose novels, and written by Barbara Randall Kesel, Rogue Angel: Teller of Tall Tales (2008) is the story of archaeologist and adventurer Annja Creed who visits a college friend and fellow archaeologist in Virginia City, Nevada. Her friend, Rashmi, is obsessed with Mark Twain, and back in her homeland of India, she imagined her life as similar to that of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn (see fig. 3). Rashmi is now excavating the site of a former tavern where Mark Twain was reported to frequent while working at the Territorial Enterprise. As legend has it, the young journalist used to share his story ideas with a free African American, James Ikeba, who went by the name of “The Great Observer.” The researchers believe that Twain used Ikeba as a model for the slave Jim, and that proof of this can be found in Ikeba’s
Fig. 2.
“I was already away from India by the time I read his books, but in my mind’s eye, Tom Sawyer was Indian like me.”

Fig. 3.
lost notebook, a manuscript that will supposedly reveal the true “black” voice in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Also in search of this lost notebook is a group of white supremacists that plans to keep the manuscript a secret, thereby preserving the “whiteness” of Twain’s canonical work. Kesel not only adapts to comics form Alex Archer’s magically-endowed heroine—she gains her powers by summoning at will the sword of Joan of Arc—but she does so with a keen eye on the literary politics surrounding Twain’s novel. Her fictional Ikeba, “The Great Observer,” brings to mind Twain’s 1874 sketch, “Sociable Jimmy,” and the links that Shelley Fisher Fishkin has made between it and the voice of Huckleberry Finn. In this expansion—to use Hutcheon’s term—on Twain’s compositional history, Kesel is able to build her narrative off both the historical figure of Samuel Clemens as well as the scholarship surrounding his work.

In three other graphic novels, Mark Twain himself becomes the heroic, or at least heroically supportive, figure. John Ridley and George Jeanty’s *The American Way* (2007) was an eight part mini-series from DC Comic’s Wind-Storm imprint that ran from April to November 2006, and then later collected in graphic novel form. It is the story of the Civil Defense Corps (CDC), a team of genetically- and psychologically-enhanced superheroes, created and handled by the U.S. government to help fight the propaganda war with the Soviet Union during the 1960s. Set in a time of political and racial strife, *The American Way* becomes a commentary on American race relations when one of the masked CDC members is revealed to be an African American. One member of the team is The Captain, a precognitive hero who looks like Mark Twain, affects his mannerisms, and recites aphorisms that sound like those of the American author. He wears a white suit, à la Twain during his later years, always has a cigar, and carries a mysterious watch that has the power to manipulate time (see fig. 4). Given the graphic novel’s emphasis on race, it is no accident that the aloof Captain is associated with time—his real-life inspiration, after all, was a writer who was able to comment on race relations by bridging the temporal links between Antebellum and late-nineteenth-century America. Indeed, the most significant scene involving The Captain takes place almost exactly in the middle of the graphic novel, when he gives his watch to the African American hero (in what later becomes a life-saving gift) and alludes to having written *Huckleberry Finn* (102-03).

Twain also makes an appearance in the popular Transformers saga. Much like Ridley and Jeanty’s graphic novel, Chuck Dixon and Guido Guidi’s *The Transformers: Evolutions, Hearts of Steel* (2007) is a superhero narrative that integrates the fantastic with historical figures—such as Mark Twain, Jules Verne, and the legendary John Henry—although in this case, the “superheroes”
are Transformers, sentient or humanoid robots who can transform into a variety of machines, vehicles, and other mechanical objects. In this installment of the Transformer series, the Autobots (the Transformers who are inclined to help humankind) battle with the Decepticons (considered the “villains” in the Transformer universe, and who are antagonistic toward humans) in the late nineteenth century during the days of the railroad boom and robber barons. While the Decepticon’s ally with various railroad industrialists in an effort to consolidate their nefarious power, Twain meets up with a young inventor, Tobias Muldoon, to fight alongside the Autobots. The famous author’s role is relatively minor in this graphic novel—John Henry figures much more
prominently in the narrative—but even his limited presence, especially given
the context of the story, reminds the reader of the real-life Mark Twain: a
man captivated by inventions and gadgets, a writer who was fascinated by the
fantastic, and a public figure who, in many ways, fought against consolidated
capital powers.¹¹

While the Twain figure serves a secondary role in both *The American
Way* and in the Transformers text, he stands front and center in *The Five Fists of
Science* (2006). Written by Matt Fraction and illustrated by Steven Sanders, this
example of steampunk¹² graphic fiction teams up Mark Twain, inventor Nikola
Tesla, and Baroness Bertha Felicie Sophie von Suttner who join forces to fight
the dark industrial powers of John Pierpont Morgan, Andrew Carnegie, and
Thomas Edison (similar to the ways that Twain joins forces with the inventor,
Muldoon, to fight the railroad industrialists in *Transformers: Evolutions, Hearts
of Steel*). Combining Tesla’s scientific know-how with Twain’s penchant for
theatrics, the duo help defeat the underworld demons unleashed by the evil
J. P. Morgan (see fig. 5). *The Five Fists of Science* takes as its starting point
the historical friendship between Clemens and Tesla, and its characterization
of Twain owes more to the mischievous side of the man than it does to the
revered literary lion. The antics of Fraction’s Twain bring to mind the kind

![Fig. 5.](image-url)
of manipulative showmanship found in his literary personae Tom Sawyer, Hank Morgan, David Wilson, and No. 44. What is more, the graphic novel ends with a clever metafictional reference. After Twain, Tesla, and company have defeated Morgan and his crew—using a robot-like device called the Teslatronic Dynamo—the author says of their adventures, “Well, it'll make a hell of a book,” to which someone responds, “Psh, no one would believe a word.” Twain’s final words, “So when has that stopped me?,” not only alludes to the historical author’s own proclivities toward the fantastic—e.g., A Connecticut Yankee, “The Great Dark” (1898), “Sold to Satan” (1904), “Captain Stormfield’s Visit to Heaven” (1907-08)—but also foregrounds the very book that readers are holding in their hands. It is a story that both does (in fictional graphic novel form) and does not (in reality) exist, much like the popular legends surrounding Samuel Clemens. In The Five Fists of Science, Fraction and Sanders are able to expand upon or “spin off” from (Hutcheon 5, 171) the figure we have come to know as “Mark Twain” while at the same time creating a narrative that is entirely their own.

Adapting the Narratives of Mark Twain

Although the aforementioned narrative offshoots are significantly inspired by Twain and his works, none of them attempt to directly engage or “faithfully” adapt Twain’s original texts. However, there are a number of recent comics adaptations that are closer to the fidelity end of Hutcheon’s continuum, those that adhere to the basic outline of Twain’s stories. Some of these comics are “true” to the time and place of the original fiction, although others re-envision the earlier rendition and transcribe the tales to a different temporal and/or sociopolitical context. The recent comics adaptations that primarily follow Twain’s storylines include Michael Ploog’s 1990 version of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, recent manga-inspired versions of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (2009) and Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (2009), and two different editions of Graphic Classics: Mark Twain (2004, 2007), volume eight in Eureka Productions’ Graphic Classics series. All five books contain narratives that use comics to enhance Twain’s original stories and even highlight the style of his fiction. Many of these recent translations of Twain’s work—the Graphic Classics volumes have multiple shorter tales by a variety of artists—retain the humor and/or the ironic tones of the originals, even if they do not strictly follow every detail of the plots. Earlier comic book adaptations, such as those in the original Classics Illustrated series of the 1940s and 1950s or Pendulum Press’ Now Age Illustrated series of the 1970s, were more realistic when retelling the stories. Both their visuals and their plots reflected the intentions of Twain’s original narratives. The stories adapted for
the early issues of *Classics Illustrated* comics are a perfect example of this. These versions of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (#19, 1944), *A Connecticut Yankee in King Author’s Court* (#25, 1945), *The Prince and the Pauper* (#29, 1946), *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (#50, 1948), and *Pudd’nhead Wilson* (#93, 1952) are drawn mimetically and reflect the temporal and geographic settings found in the originals. They are also “respectful” toward the subject matter of Twain’s fiction, reading his boyhood tales and historical romances unambiguously and disregarding much of its playful duplicity. However, the more recent adaptations are not limited in this way. The writers and illustrators of these versions employ a variety of styles, from the realistic to the abstract and impressionistic, and some even revise Twain’s texts so as to reflect an entirely different social context.

Michael Ploog’s adaptation of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published by the Berkley/First Publishing Group for the second series of *Classics Illustrated* (a revival of the old *Classics Illustrated* comic books, but with brand new adaptations), refuses to sugarcoat the more somber side of Twain. Ploog’s distinctively vibrant illustrative style, influenced by his work with the legendary Will Eisner, attempts to represent what many of the earlier *Classics Illustrated* comics tried to capture: the whimsical and carefree nature of boyhood. And that aspect of Twain’s original novel is certainly there, which Ploog translates through his bright colors and cherubic faces of both child and adult alike. However, while privileging the more child-like side of the *Tom Sawyer*, Ploog nonetheless retains the darker or more serious sides of the text, something that the original *Classics Illustrated* adaptation tended to undercut or (since the reference is *Tom Sawyer*) whitewash. For example, in the 1948 comic, adapted by Harry Miller and drawn by Aldo Rubano, most of the threatening and alienating moments that Tom experiences—e.g., Becky’s rejection of him, the murder of Doc Robinson, the storm on Jackson Island—are rendered in an indistinct manner, the art in these episodes bearing no striking difference from the rest of the narrative. The tone, in other words, is constant throughout, giving little sense of dramatic tension. However, Ploog differentiates his foreboding scenes by the use of darker colors and shifts in visual perspective within the panels (or the equivalent of camera angles and positions in film), and we can see this in the manner he delivers Tom’s encounters with Injun Joe, most of his stay on Jackson Island, and his time with Becky lost in the cave (see fig. 6).

Ploog’s adaptation of *Tom Sawyer* stands apart from the earlier *Classics Illustrated* version in other significant ways, especially when it comes to racial “revisioning” and the manipulation of ethnic difference. In his representation of Injun Joe, Ploog deviates significantly from the earlier 1948 *Classics*
Illustrated adaption in that he refuses to characterize the threatening figure, half Native American and half white, through any overt racial iconography. His Injun Joe is almost visually indistinguishable from the other characters that populate St. Petersburg, other than the fact that he is rough and unkempt. This stands in contrast to Rubano’s representations of Injun Joe in the original Classics Illustrated version, who marginalized his murderer by giving him an eye patch, thereby enhancing his role as a dubious outsider. The racialization of Injun Joe is given an even more profound twist the 1961 Classics Illustrated rewrite of Tom Sawyer (see fig. 7). In that anonymously-drawn adaptation, Injun Joe dons the headband and clothes of the more stereotypical and marginalized Native American, even retaining Rubano’s eye patch. So by making Injun Joe more white, Ploog problematizes any facile notions of the Other, thereby visually injecting into his adaptation a discourse on racial otherness, a theme which defines much of Mark Twain’s narratives.

In fact, the racial significance of Twain’s Mississippi narratives is given further treatment in another manifestation of the Classics Illustrated comics. Between 1997 and 1998, Acclaim Comics, a New York-based publisher, acquired the rights to refurbish and reissue many of the original Classics Illustrated comics and present them in the form of study guides. The original Classics Illustrated versions of Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, The Prince and the Pauper, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, and Pudd’nhead Wilson were republished along with author biographies, critical commentary, and study questions that made these repackagings the comic book versions of Cliff Notes. Visually, the reprinted Classics Illustrated text was the same as the original. However, and within the context of this study, there was one notable
difference. In the reissuing of *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1997), the character of Roxy is more blatantly racialized. In Twain’s 1894 novel, Roxy is a mixed race slave whose complexion is light enough to pass for white. In the original *Classics Illustrated* adaptation, illustrator H. C. Kiefer represented Roxy in this manner, giving her a lighter skin tone that accentuated her hybrid and ambiguous racial heritage (see fig. 8). In the 1997 study guide reissue, her complexion is significantly darker (see fig. 9). Why the publisher, Acclaim Comics, chose to re-visualize race here remains uncertain. Not only does the blackening of Roxy rupture the believability of the adaptation—readers may wonder, why was Roxy’s child, Valet de Chambre, born so white?—it undercuts *Pudd'nhead Wilson* as a text that problematizes our conceptions of race and whiteness. Roxy’s raced identity as a visually white woman throws into question the very foundations of blackness in America, so the removal of that graphic signifier—the light skin—tends to reinscribe race as a function of biology.

Issues of narrative consistency are also apparent in Adam Sexton and Hyeondo Park’s *Huckleberry Finn* as well as Jean David Morvan, Frederique Voulyze, and Severine Le Fevebvre’s adaptation of *Tom Sawyer*. The adapters of these volumes have been heavily influenced by Japanese manga, one of the most popular forms of comics sold today. Stylistically, they employ many of
the characteristics of Japanese comics, particularly shonen manga\(^\text{16}\), including the use of innocent-looking wide eyes, exaggerated facial features, excessive emotional display, “speed” lines to represent motion, jagged edges, slower pacing, and an abundance of text-free paneling. Sexton argues in the introduction to his volume that manga is an especially suitable style for *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* because it is an example of *popular* and not “high” culture, it does not shy from depicting violence, and it tends to be cinematic in its presentation—all of which would characterize Twain’s original narrative (2-3). Sexton and Park are more or less faithful to Twain’s text, and there is only one major episode, the events at the Wilks house, that is entirely cut from their adaptation. What is more, Park’s cute or cartoony illustrations, a characteristic of many manga texts, do not undercut the serious import of Huck and Jim’s plight. Indeed, all of the major moral dilemmas that Huck faces throughout the Twain’s novel—e.g., his decision to humble himself to Jim after the “trash”
scene at the end of chapter 15, his run in with the slave hunters in chapter 16, and his decision in chapter 31 to go to hell instead of betraying Jim—are represented dramatically and in full. The wordless action, the cramped and angled edges of the panels, and the relatively slower paced moment-to-moment and subject-to-subject transition between panels all draw our attention to Huck’s decisions and force the reader to linger on the gravity his predicament (see fig. 10).

Sexton and Park’s adaptation is part of Cliff Notes’ line of manga editions of literary classics, and since the text is marketed as an “alternative” to the original, the authors sought narrative fidelity. The same can be said of the most recent manifestation of Classics Illustrated comics and its adaptation of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. In 2007, Papercutz acquired the rights to the Classics Illustrated label and began publishing shorter graphic novel adaptations—some of which are reprints of the 1990s Berkeley/First Publishing
editions—as well as more substantive editions under their “Classics Illustrated Deluxe” line. Originally published in French, Morvan, Voulyze, and Le Fevebvre’s adaptation of Tom Sawyer is a deluxe title that is much more faithful to Twain’s novel than Michael Ploog’s 1990 version. The latter, which was limited to 48 pages (more or less standard for the Berkeley/First Publishing volumes), eliminated or truncated a number of episodes from Twain’s original story, e.g., the Sunday school events in chapters 4 and 5, Aunt Polly’s homeopathic treatment of Tom in chapter 12, Becky tearing Mr. Dobbins’s anatomy book in chapter 20, and the examination day performances in chapter 21. While many of these scenes may seem tangential to many readers—although Twain’s Tom Sawyer is structured episodically, complicating any questions of “secondary” action—the Papercutz edition retains them and, in this way, is “truer” than any of the earlier Classics Illustrated renditions. Le Fevebvre’s art lacks the soft richness found in Ploog’s adaptation, and the coloring is far from subtle. But even more than in the recent Cliff Notes edition, the creators of the Papercutz volume employ the full range of manga flourish, including bold motion lines, skewed perspectives, and text-free sequencing that accentuates the action (see fig. 11). This becomes a significant feature of the text, given

Fig. 11.
the fact that most of *Tom Sawyer* is plot-driven and relies heavily on episodic movement.

**Adapting Mark Twain’s Tone**

While the recent adaptations of Twain’s longer and better known fiction are deferential toward their plots, the various comics in Eureka Production’s Mark Twain editions take greater liberties with the original texts. Not only do they capture the basic outlines of the author’s narratives, but they also employ the comedic or ironic tone of the originals in ways that the earlier adaptations do not. The comics in the two *Graphic Classics* editions are adapted and illustrated by a variety of graphic artists, each of which applies his or her own spin to Twain’s original stories. Also, in contrast to the *Classics Illustrated* or manga versions that translated only novelistic works, the *Graphic Classics* authors privilege Twain’s shorter fiction, many of which highlight the comedic, and perhaps more legendary, aspect of Twain. There are, however, examples of adaptations that take on the more serious side of the author, such as Rick Geary’s version of *The Mysterious Stranger* and Simon Gane’s take on the short story, “Is He Living or Is He Dead?” What’s striking about both of these adaptations are the ways in which both authors maintain a somber mood by privileging a reflective first-person storyteller, one that seems detached from the actions we see played out. These comics rely heavily on narratized speech set off from the events within the panels and written across the top of each. We can see this clearly in Geary’s adaptation of *The Mysterious Stranger*, one of the longest pieces in the *Graphic Classics* collection (see fig. 12). The constant voiceovers of Theodor Fischer, the story’s protagonist, compete with and at times overshadow the dialogue balloons for dominance within each comic panel. The effect is one of isolation and even alienation, a condition played out in the solipsistic ending of the story when Satan tells Theodor that he is nothing but a “vagrant thought, wandering among the empty eternities” (141). We find a similar narrative style in Gane’s “Is He Living or Is He Dead?” (see fig. 13). Like Geary, the illustrator effects narrative distance by relying primarily on summarizing voiceovers, which in this case is even more significant, given the fact that the story of François Millet, the artist who must feign death in order to gain notoriety, is told twice removed: first by one of Millet’s fellow artists and second by the unnamed narrator himself.

Other cartoonists in the *Graphic Classics* collection employ different strategies when translating Twain’s texts. In his adaptation of “The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County,” Kevin Atkinson uses extreme close-ups and skewed angles to create the “tall-tale effect” of Twain’s much-antologized
story. Figure 14 is a fairly typical example from the comic where both Jim Smiley and his buckshot-filled frog consume the second and fourth panels. Such framing adds to the embellished nature of the story, where the characters visually—and literally—become exaggerated. Other artists use more extreme means of representing Twain’s humor. In their rendition of “The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut,” Antonella Caputo and Nicholas Miller use an almost frantic illustrative style in revealing the outrageousness of Twain’s early farce. This is the fantastic story of a man trying to rid himself of his nagging conscience, which takes the form of a repulsive homunculus. The outlandish tone of Twain’s original tale is revealed not only through exaggerated actions, but through iconic references to classic American humor. In one selection from the comic (see fig. 15), Caputo and Miller showcase Chaplin’s little tramp figure. Another example contains an intertextual comics reference to Richard F. Outcault’s The Yellow Kid, the lead character in his turn-of-the-century comic strip, Hogan’s Alley (see fig. 16). Milton Knight and Anton Emdin employ a somewhat similar style in their adaptations in the first Eureka edition. In his version of “How the Author Was Sold in Newark,” Knight captures the hilarity of Twain’s original tale—premised on the frustration of the humorist not getting a laugh—through cartoony characterization and visual hyperbole (see fig. 17). Emdin performs the same move in his adaptation of “A Ghost Story.” The preposterous tone of the original work is preserved through the comic’s many visual exaggerations, all of which undercut not only the gothic import of the tale, but also any
misplaced reverence the reader may feel for the “seriousness” of its original author (see fig. 18). In other words, Twain’s farcical handling of P. T. Barnum’s fake Cardiff Giant—which in itself was a pop cultural charade—finds an apt translator in Anton Emdin, a cartoonist known for his over-the-top style of illustration.

Perhaps one the most inventive adaptations in the Graphic Classics collection is Lance Took’s “A Dog’s Tale.” In Twain’s original story, a dog recounts her life with a middle-class family and the events that lead to the death of her young puppy. The dog’s role as a naïve narrator is similar to that of Huckleberry Finn in that she reveals to us the cruelty and injustice
"The teller took the money and started away, and sorta jerked his thumb at Dandy and says..."

Well, I don't see no pints about that frog's tail any better'n any other frog.

"Smiley scratches his head and looking down at Dandy says..."

"I wonder if there ain't somethin' the matter with this frog?"

"And he took Dandy and turned him upside down and he belched out a double handful of shot."
surrounding her, the significance of which she cannot really understand. In Took's version, the characters in the tale are represented as African American performers, donning masks when playing their roles (see fig. 19). Such a visual strategy calls to mind W. E. B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness or better yet, Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem, “We Wear the Mask” (1896). Tooks, an African American cartoonist, adapts Twain's tale into one of racial injustice, where the owner-dog relationship is translated into one resembling that of a master and slave. Indeed, Tooks represents racial dominance by using the images of popular white male icons. Not only do we see in the owner's mask an image of the capitalist from the Monopoly game, but there are also the disembodied heads of such patriarchal figures as Benjamin Franklin, Abraham
Fig. 17.

I warmed up to my work, and assaulted him right and left, in front and behind.

I fumed and sweated and charged and ranted 'til I was hoarse and sick and frantic and furious.

But I never moved him once—never a ghost of a smile—never a suspicion of moisture!
Lincoln, George Washington, Adolf Hitler, Mr. Spock, Bob Dylan, the Lone Ranger, Colonel Sanders, and Woody Allen. Tooks uses this motley crew as a way of showing the racially marginalizing nature of our culture, even as defined through its cartoon figures. (Notice, for example, the heads of Charlie Brown and The Thing from the Fantastic Four.) Perhaps even more significant is Tooks’s use of theatrical metaphors. What better way to reveal the performative underpinnings of racial identity, as well as the iconographic nature of comics, than to present your action as if upon a stage?

What is perhaps most significant in these Graphic Classics adaptations—and others of note include Tom Pomplun and George Sellas’s “Tom Sawyer Abroad” and William L. Brown’s “A Curious Pleasure Excursion”—are their creative interpretations of Twain’s original work, moving beyond the blunt mimetic style found in the earlier Classics Illustrated editions. Such adaptations, with their exaggerated use of word and image and their abstract, even
They disputed and disputed, and I was the very center of it all, and I wished my mother could know that this grand honor had come to me, it would have made her proud. Then they discussed optics, as they called it, and whether a certain injury to the brain would produce blindness or not, but they could not agree about it, and said they must test it by experiment. Next they discussed plants, and that interested me, because in the summer Sadie and I had planted seeds— I helped her dig the holes—and after days and days a little flower came up there, and it was a wonder how that could happen, but it did. I wished I could talk—I would have told those people about it—but I didn’t care for the optics, it was dull, and when they came back to it again I went to sleep.

Pretty soon it was spring, and the mother and the children went away to visit their kin. And one day those men came again and said, now for the test, and they took the puppy to the laboratory, and I limped along, feeling proud.

Fig. 19.
absurd, storylines do more justice to Twain’s fiction than do more “realistic” or deferential renderings. In other words, projects such as Graphic Classics—and to a lesser degree Ploog’s updated Tom Sawyer and the recent manga-influenced editions—re-imagine Twain’s tales as something other than mere narrative artifacts and, in the process, demonstrate that comics are more than a supplementary medium. Perhaps just as important, these graphic adaptations help to reveal to a new audience the intricate voice as well as the narrative complexities underlying Twain’s writing.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Tom Pomplun, Eric Reynolds, Jaak Jarve, William B. Jones, Jr., Chris Ryall, Tom Waltz, Michael Petranek, Georges Jeanty, Joe Keatinge, and Chris Onstad for their help in securing most of the illustrations I cite in this essay. Thanks also to M. Thomas Inge for his assistance on this project and for sharing with me his ongoing scholarship on comics and adaptation. His example has been inspiring. The style for citing comics in this essay is based on the format developed by the Comic Art and Comics Area of the Popular Culture Association and delineated in “Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide,” <http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite.html>. In addition, graphic adaptations of Twain’s work will be listed in the Works Cited according to the adapter’s last name, not by Twain as writer, and indicated parenthetically by “(adapt).”

2 M. Thomas Inge has argued that Poe has been adapted to the comics medium more than any other American writer, well over 300 times (Incredible Mr. Poe 14). For studies on the abundance of comics adapted to the writings of Poe, past and present, see Inge’s “Poe and the Comics Connection” and The Incredible Mr. Poe, as well as my own study of Poe and recent graphic narrative.

3 The term “graphic novel” is problematic in a number of ways, and it is outside the scope of this essay to explore adequately its semantic parameters. For my purposes, I am defining “graphic novel” here as long-form comics, either previously serialized or created solely as a holistic text, that are self-contained narratives and more developed than individual comic books, which are published in magazine- or pamphlet-like format that typically run 24-32 pages and usually include advertisements.

4 No one has done more to track the popular cultural manifestations of Mark Twain than Inge. See, for example, “Mark Twain and the Comics,” “Mark Twain, Chuck Jones, and the Art of Animation,” and his entry in The Mark Twain Encyclopedia. For closer readings of comic book and cinematic adaptations of A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court, see Cari Keebaugh.

5 It is worth noting that even in Twain’s original publications, the intricate interplay between word and image produced a narrative quite different from that of the text alone. As Earl F. Briden observes in his reading of race and Huckleberry Finn, “Kemble’s drawings rewrite the Huck-Jim relationship by reducing Jim, who Huck gradually recognizes as an individualized human being, to a simple comic type, a stock figure in an emerging pictorial tradition” (384). Perhaps another perspective on
Kemble’s illustrations can be found in Will Eisner’s assertion that “the stereotype is a fact of life in the comics medium. It is an accursed necessity—a tool of communication that is an inescapable ingredient in most cartoons” (17). Although Kemble was not creating comics as we understand them, his “countertext” was nonetheless based on a similar iconography read as visual shorthand.

6 In this sense, I will ignore those graphic narratives that drastically privilege the word over the picture, or what Scott McCloud has called “word specific” combinations (153). This kind of comic-art adaptation includes Twain’s tales in either abridged or sometimes in full form, and it uses illustrations sparingly and only as a means to compliment the original texts.

7 Examples of these adolescent comics include the Pendulum Press’ Now Age Illustrated series (currently out of print), with volumes on Huckleberry Finn (1973), A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1977), and The Prince and the Pauper (1978). In 2005, Saddleback Educational Publishing reprinted all four of the Now Age series comics through their Illustrated Classics Series, colorizing the black and white illustrations of the original Now Age comics and, curiously enough, eliminating the adapters’ and the artists’ names of the original volumes. Other recent examples of simplified adaptations include A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (2001), for Oxford’s Bookworm Starters series, and Stone Arch Books’ The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (2007). All of these are marketed to educators and librarians for the purpose of introducing young readers to classic literature. I will also exclude two other recent adaptations intended primarily for a young audience. The first, Henry Barker and Dan Spiegle’s dramatically stripped down “A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court” (World Almanac Library, 2007), is a reprint from a 1999 Boys’ Life magazine. The other is Tom Ratliff and Penko Gelev’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (2008), part of Graphic Classics series from Barron’s Education (not to be mistaken for the Eureka Productions Graphic Classics books, which I will discuss later in much more detail). The Barron’s editions, with their flat graphics and text-heavy presentations, read more as illustrated crib sheets than as dynamic comics. Other examples of these kinds of “educational” comics—such as the Acclaim Comics series, which I will discuss later in this essay—approach the classics in a more overtly Cliff Notes-like manner, but many are no longer in print.

8 Traveling along Hutcheon’s continuum from the “fidelity” extremity, one finds works that attempt “true” faithfulness to the original, those that condense or truncate the prior text, those that retell or revision popular works (sometimes in parody), and finally on down to those texts that use the originals as jumping off points for something decidedly different (171).

9 Rogue Angel: Teller of Tall Tales was originally published as a series five monthly comic books, running between February and June 2008, and was later collected as a single-volume graphic novel by IDW Publishing.

10 This graphic novel originally ran a series of four individual comic books, a narrative arc that was published between June and September 2006.
As several scholars and biographers have pointed out, most notably Justin Kaplan, Twain was both repulsed by and attracted to figures of authority and late-nineteenth-century capitalists. In the Transformer narrative, as well as in The Five Fists of Fate, the Twain that emerges is less complicated, an avenger fighting against the powers of ruthless industrialists.

A nineteenth-century counterpart to cyberpunk, steampunk is a subgenre of sci-fi or speculative fiction, set in Victorian times (when steam was a prominent source of machine power), and involving either fictional technological inventions—à la Jules Verne or H. G. Wells—or actual technology that significantly postdates the nineteenth century.

For more information on these series, see Inge's “Mark Twain and the Comics.” William B. Jones, Jr., provides even more detail surrounding the history of the Classics Illustrated issues.

The original Classics Illustrated editions included author biographies and sometimes excerpts of Twain's writings.

According to Danny Fingeroth, manga sales now make up roughly two-thirds of the graphic novel market in the United States (239).

Manga is simply Japanese comics, so “manga” and “comics” are more or less the same thing. However, given certain cultural differences between Western and Eastern visual representations, manga is also considered a style. Shonen is a category of manga, Japanese comics that are intended primarily for a young male audience between the ages eight and eighteen and are usually action-packed adventures.

Here I am using the taxonomy of Scott McCloud, who distinguishes between six different styles of panel-to-panel transition in comics and their function in reader involvement and narrative speed. As he points out with his examples of Japanese artists, manga's slower pace is partly due to its reliance on moment-to-moment paneling—where action is cut into smaller paneled segments—and subject-to-subject plot movement, where visual framing among different aspects of a scene establish a more complete narrative context (77-81).

Unlike their well-known study guides, and unlike the Acclaim Comics versions of Twain, Cliff Notes' manga editions do not include study questions or critical supplements. Instead, each volume is comprised of a brief introduction to the comic, pointing out the appropriateness of manga as an adapting form, and the manga itself.

The two editions of Graphic Classics: Mark Twain do not include the same material. The first one (2004) contained adaptations of fifteen shorter works, four of which were almost entirely text-based and provide few illustrations. The second edition (2007) included only eight adaptations, seven of which are reprints from the 2004 edition. Cut from the newer collection were adaptations of “How the Author Was Sold in Newark,” “The Legend of Sagenfeld,” “Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd,” “P.T. Barnum and the Cardiff Giant,” “A Ghost Story,” “A Reminiscence of the Back Settlements,” “An Encounter with an Interviewer,” and an excerpt from Twain's seventieth-birthday address at Delmonico's on 5 December 1905. The one new substantive addition to the 2007 volume is a retelling of Tom Sawyer Abroad, a longer
comic that takes up almost a third of the text. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to the Eureka adaptations are to the second edition.

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