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THE LOVABLE HEATHEN OF HAPPY VALLEY: MARK TWAIN'S ASSAULT
ON THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION IN "HUCKLEBERRY FINN"

Middle Tennessee State University

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The Lovable Heathen of Happy Valley:
Mark Twain's Assault on the
Christian Religion in
Huckleberry Finn

Richard G. Thompson

A dissertation presented to the
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The Lovable Heathen of Happy Valley:
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Christian Religion in
Huckleberry Finn

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Abstract

The Lovable Heathen of Happy Valley:
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Christian Religion in
Huckleberry Finn

by Richard G. Thompson

The purpose of this study is to show that the "dark side" of Mark Twain existed long before personal tragedies and financial calamities befell him; existed, in fact, when he was one of the most recognizable personages on the globe; when he was at the very pinnacle of family, social, literary, and financial success; when he was considered Fortune's favorite; when indeed he was thought to be the very "darling of the gods." The focus of this study is Twain's generally acknowledged masterpiece, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, published 100 years ago in 1884. This book, almost as controversial today as it was when published, masks the bitterness and despair Twain felt about organized religion in general, and the Christian religion in particular. Behind its gentle humor, comic scenes, burlesque, and farce, and even its more violent episodes is a vicious attack on

Richard G. Thompson

spokesmen of the church, as well as revered rituals and sacred icons.

Chapter I establishes Twain as still the most popular writer in American letters by citing past and contemporary evidence of the reverence shown to him by the American public.

Chapter II recreates the happy period of Twain's family, social, literary, and financial life between 1876 and 1884, the beginning and ending dates of the composition of the novel.

Chapters III and IV use specific examples from the book to prove that Huckleberry Finn attacks the Christian religion, the Bible, the pulpit, the gullible faithful, and English novelist Sir Walter Scott, whom Twain considered the foremost romantic spokesman of "swinish religion." To emphasize the fallibility and hypocrisy of religion, Twain cites the role of the church in its support of the institution of slavery.

Finally, Chapter V shows that The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is a cornerstone of the creed of secular humanism, the plea of a gadfly humorist humanist still regarded the world over as the "most lovable heathen of happy valley."

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Chapter I

High Profit to the Hoi Polloi: The Unequaled Reverence for Mark Twain by the American Public

The continuous and unflagging popularity of the writings of Mark Twain, and of the man himself as a literary figure, is truly a unique phenomenon. The case can be made that, in a country that has produced Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Crane, Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and others, there have been superior artists and more skillful craftsmen of the written word. Equally, it can be argued that Twain's thought is not easily compared with that of Hamilton, Jefferson, Thoreau, Emerson, Lincoln, James, or for that matter, T. S. Eliot.

It matters not: these issues are as moot as they are irrelevant. Samuel Langhorne Clemens (hereafter in this paper referred to by his Mississippi River nom de plume, Mark Twain) is unrivalled as the American writer if measured by the affectionate though sometimes inordinate esteem--and love--heaped upon him by the American people. Twain would have enjoyed the pretentious French term for "alias"; given a choice, however, he would have selected nom de guerre.

After Twain, there seems to be no second place; very few Americans could name two works of Melville or Faulkner, let alone T. S. Eliot. The writer who waged war on his fellow man, and upon his fellow man's most cherished institutions, conquered them. The vast majority of the American people who have revered him for more than a hundred years still have not realized that he ever fired so much as a single shot. Time, like distance, lends enchantment, and time has lent an Olympic measure of enchantment to Mark Twain.

This is not to imply that professional scholars are in lockstep agreement behind general readers. Indeed, they are not; and some, like William Van O'Connor, have argued that, not only is Twain not a major world literary figure, he is not even a major American writer. Sculley Bradley, in the Norton Critical Edition of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, includes several critical essays on the "greatness" of the novel. He prefaces these essays by pointing out that "in 1955 a debate was staged in the pages of the journal College English between Professor Lauriat Lane, Jr., who contended that Huckleberry Finn was a great world novel, and Professor William Van O'Connor, who denied that it was even a great American novel."¹ Professor Lane's comments

¹ Sculley Bradley, ed., The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Samuel Langhorne Clemens (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1962), p. 364. (All internal footnotes from the novel are from this edition.)

are interesting but not germane to this thesis at this time. More interesting are Professor O'Connor's.

In his essay, "Why Huckleberry Finn Is Not the Great American Novel," O'Connor contends that "there are two sorts of theatricality in the novel, melodrama and claptrap. Huck's relationship with his father is melodrama. So is the shooting of Boggs, or the tar and feathering of the Duke and King."² O'Connor gives no specific examples of what he considers to be "claptrap," a vigorous pejorative meaning "insincere language," nor does he use the word again; however, it is reasonable to assume that he was referring to any of Huck's picaresque adventures not directly connected to plot, because all these disparate adventures develop characterization and contribute to the themes of the book.

O'Connor quotes William Dean Howells' famous comparison of Twain and Abraham Lincoln:

Longfellow, Lowell, and Holmes--I knew them all and all the rest of our sages, poets, seers, critics, humorists; they were like one another and like other literary men; but Clemens was sole, incomparable, the Lincoln of our literature.³

² William Van O'Connor, quoted in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, p. 372.

³ William Dean Howells, quoted by William Van O'Connor, in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, p. 375.

About this remarkable accolade given Twain by one of the foremost literary critics of his time, O'Connor writes:

The association of Lincoln and Twain may seem appropriate at first glance--but only at first glance. Presumably Howells meant that both men discovered their need for comedy in the pathos and tragedy of the human condition, that both men were sons of a frontier society. To a degree, the comparison holds. But to allow for a detailed comparison, Lincoln should have written novels, or Twain to have been a politician, statesman, or writer of speeches. . . .

Inssofar as Lincoln the writer and Twain the writer can be compared, Lincoln is the greater. Lincoln's wit, also in a vernacular idiom, is frequently more subtle than Twain's and may be expected to be more lasting. Lincoln's ability in writing analytical prose, flexible and closely reasoned, and his ability in writing a serious and, when the occasion required, solemn rhetoric were also greater than Twain's.⁴

The point here is that there is no question about Lincoln's greatness. Howells knew that and used the President of the People to compare the Writer of the People. Pantheons contain more than one god. In O'Connor's argument is the echo of envious Cassius' complaint:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world
Like a Colossus, and we petty men
Walk under his huge legs, and peep about
To find ourselves dishonourable graves.
(Julius Caesar, I.ii.136-39)

⁴ O'Connor, in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, p. 375.

In his book Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, Justin Kaplan argues that Twain was indeed a superlative in all three listed vocations, as well as being the most-recognized, highest-ranked, non-appointed ambassador to the world the United States has ever seen.⁵ Several highly diverse events of very recent times tend to confirm Twain's election to the foremost position in the populist pantheon of American men of letters. First, the September 14, 1981, issue of Newsweek magazine carried the following story in its "Newsmakers" feature:

The two macho movie stars have long dreamed of acting onstage together, but it seemed that the twain would never meet. Now Burt Lancaster, 67, and Kirk Douglas, 64, are teamed in a new play portraying Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn as old men. The Boys in Autumn picks up Mark Twain's immortal youths in the mid-1920s; the rascalion Huck (Lancaster) has become a staid businessman, and Tom (Douglas), once the more reputable, is a vaudevillian. "The play tries to recapture the beauty of a friendship the two had at a time they took it for granted," explains Douglas, who has been a pal of Lancaster's for longer than either of the two can remember. "Working on a play like this, we've learned a lot about each other," adds Lancaster with a laugh. We've got what I call a love-hate relationship."⁶

Lancaster's remark about a "love-hate relationship" perfectly characterizes Twain's ambivalent attitude toward

⁵ Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 284.

⁶ "Newsmakers," Newsweek, September 14, 1981, p. 57.

the masses. He mistrusted men and their motives and derided the idea of the perfectability of man. He was the writer who popularized the phrase "the damned human race" and who wrote,

What a coward every man is! and how surely he will find it out if he will just let other people alone and sit down and examine himself. The human race is a race of cowards, and I am not only marching in that procession but carrying a banner.⁷

Twain's self-deprecating addendum to his personal culpability in the matter of humanness is a lifelong characteristic, one which, in a phrase, neutralizes paragraphs of generalized vitriol that has preceded it.

It is the purpose of this thesis to show that Huckleberry Finn is a concealed attack on white Christian Americans and their gullibility in the matter of religion. It will be shown that not a single white American male (with, of course, the exception of Huck) possesses anything near virtue or wisdom or kindness. From Pap Finn to Uncle Silas, these male representations are characterized by dirt, greed, and brutality, on the one hand, and by bigotry, racism, and religious arrogance on the other. And yet, five years after the publication of the novel, Twain wrote a letter to the

⁷ Mark Twain, A Pen Warmed-Up in Hell, ed. Frederick Anderson (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 202.

English critic Andrew Lang, commenting on the book's popular success, but then critical failure:

Indeed I have been misjudged from the very first. I have never tried in even one single little instance to help cultivate the cultivated classes. I was not equipped for it, either by native gifts or training. And I never had any ambition in that direction, but always hunted for bigger game--the masses. . . . Yes, you see, I have always catered for the Belly and the Members but have been served like the others--criticized from the culture standard--to my sorrow and pain; because honestly, I never cared what became of the cultured classes; they could go to the theatre and the opera, they had no use for me and the melodeon.⁸

However, it should be emphasized that since the publication of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer in 1876 and the long-delayed (almost nine years) "sequel," Huckleberry Finn, the adoring public--especially the reading, theater-going, television-viewing American public--seems adamant in admitting only the "love" element in Twain's writings. The purpose of this paper is to show that much of the humor of Huckleberry Finn masks the author's contempt for the American public, the hoi polloi and patrician alike. This contempt surfaces most visibly with an analysis of Twain's assessment of religion, in this case obviously the Christian religion. As a special target, Twain aimed at the

⁸ Mark Twain, quoted by Justin Kaplan, Mark Twain and His World (New York: Crescent Books, 1974), p. 182.

vulnerability of the Bible, upon which so much of the Christian religion depends. Americans during his lifetime as well as contemporary Americans seem either not to understand his attacks or not to care. "Saint Mark" (as Andrew Carnegie called him) can do no wrong, say no wrong, write no wrong.

Quite recently, for example, the "Fanfare" section of The Commercial Appeal of Memphis, Tennessee, chose a full-page cover portrait of Twain as the herald of the new tourist attraction in Memphis, Mud Island. The caption beneath the portrait, datelined Sunday, June 27, 1982, reads, "Mark Twain Returns to the Mississippi." For Twain to symbolize the Memphis attraction is altogether fitting and proper: the ex-steamboat pilot loved the river city. Obviously the people of Memphis remember that and continue to love him. In Life on the Mississippi, referring to the accidental steamboat scalding death of his younger brother, Henry, Twain wrote:

A steamer came along, finally, and carried the unfortunates to Memphis, and there the most lavish assistance was at once forthcoming. By this time Henry was insensible. The physicians examined his injuries and saw that they were fatal, and naturally turned their main attention to patients who could be saved.

Forty of the wounded were placed upon pallets on the floor of a great public hall, and among these was Henry. There the ladies of Memphis came every day, with flowers, fruits, and dainties and delicacies of all kinds, and there they remained and nursed the wounded. All the

physicians stood watches there, and all the medical students; and the rest of the town furnished money, or whatever else was wanted. And Memphis knew how to do these things well; for many a disaster like the Pennsylvania's had happened near her doors, and she was experienced, above all the other cities on the river, in the gracious office of the Good Samaritan.⁹

Such tender and gracious appreciation and homage to the caring people of Memphis, with its final Biblical allusion, typifies the ambivalence of Twain's attitudes about humanity and the importance and relevance of Scripture. It should be remembered that he had completed sixteen chapters of Huckleberry Finn before he began writing Life on the Mississippi, and it is generally believed that it was his research for the latter book that prompted him to complete the former. Nowhere in Huckleberry Finn, however, do there appear river people with the endearing qualities of the generous Christian souls of the people of Memphis.

In the same newspaper supplement, under the headline "Holbrook Still is Twain, This Time Beside His River," an article reads,

Hal Holbrook, the 57 year-old actor, is the nearest thing to Mark Twain since Samuel L. Clemens. The formative years of Clemens/Twain were spent on and beside the Mississippi and much of his writing revolved around it.

⁹ Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 137.

So it is altogether fitting that a place such as Mud Island, oriented toward the Mississippi, have Holbrook for the "historic opening show" in its 4300-seat amphitheater Saturday night.

The presentation will be "Mark Twain Tonight!" That label has long been affixed to the one-man show in which Holbrook portrays, interprets and almost seems to re-create Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910).¹⁰

Advertising Mud Island, The (Nashville) Tennessean depicted, in a four-color, full page spread, Twain in his characteristic white suit, black shoestring tie, incongruously smoking a pipe. (The pipe, of course, is a trademark of Huckleberry Finn, and its inclusion in the advertisement shows how the American public confuses Huck and Tom Sawyer with their creator. According to Justin Kaplan, Twain disdained pipes, preferring cigars, smoking, on an average, forty a day almost to the day of his death.¹¹) The Commercial Appeal dared even further liberties with the personal habits of Saint Mark: commemorating the July 3, 1982, opening of Mud Island, it showed the classic Twain figure affectionately displaying a bottle of Coca-Cola! About the soft drink Twain would have roared, because, as the crony and oftentimes dinner companion to Andrew Carnegie, he was, according to Kaplan,

¹⁰ "Fanfare," The Commercial Appeal, Memphis, Tennessee, June 27, 1982, p. 11.

¹¹ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 340.

. . . the recipient and consumer of bottles, cases, and finally barrels of Carnegie's private-stock scotch--"the best and smoothest whiskey now on the planet"--which always seemed to come at the right time. "Whiskey never comes at the wrong time," Clemens said.¹²

As its celebrative edition featuring the opening of Mud Island, the June 1982 issue of the slick (160 pages) magazine Memphis portrayed Twain, white suit, white hair, white moustache, black shoestring tie, on the cover, pouring from a champagne bottle labeled "Mud Island: Mississippi Mud." The caption reads, "Here's Mud In Your Eye!" Obviously an in-joke, the bottle, at least, is more accurate.

If the media see Mark Twain as transformed into a twinkle-eyed, kindly, doting grandfather-type, casually smoking a pipe and imbibing a Coke while spinning hilarious yarns about common, everyday river folks, Walt Disney Productions has created such a figure: Mark Twain is now a co-spokesman of the "American Adventure" at the EPCOT Center in Florida, which opened October 1, 1982. Disney has produced a walking, talking, AudioAnimatronic robot in the image of the frontier humorist.

At a cost approaching \$1 billion, it may well be the country's biggest private construction project. But when it comes to unbounded imagination and inventiveness, there isn't a price tag big enough. The scope is vast. . . . Futuristic

¹² Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 355.

buildings enclose two million square feet of show space. . . . The centerpiece of World Showcase, American Adventure, is presented jointly by American Express and Coca-Cola. . . . In a theater seating more than one thousand, an American saga is recounted. None other than Ben Franklin and Mark Twain are the hosts. They are the first of 35 AudioAnimatronics personalities who will escort you on a three-century rediscovery of the country in 17 scenes. . . . In a rousing finale, Franklin and Twain reappear to point out that the American Adventure continues with each of us--that the future is ours to create.¹³

These few examples of Twain's contemporary popularity are by no means all that are available; however, to include more would be both superfluous and redundant. Suffice it to say, then, that the American people love Mark Twain, and it is reasonable and understandable that they should. After all, America spawned and nurtured him, and his more popular writings seem to speak for those Americans who continue to search for their own lost halcyon days of youthful indulgence and innocence, forever exemplified by Tom and Becky and Huck and the rest of the "robber gang." Americans revere him as that native son, favorite son, so brilliantly articulate in expressing the boundless optimism and enthusiasm of a bustling, burgeoning, westward-to-the-Hesperides, capitalistic melting pot of democracy without equal in the entire history of the civilized world. He seems to extol

¹³ "Epcot Center Special Advertising Supplement," Newsweek, November 22, 1982, p. xv.

every-man-for-himself individualism, while he ridicules Old World feudalism as aristocratic, corrupt, decadent, and stagnant. Twain, alone, Americans believe, shattered Europe's haughtily superior veneer in his first major success, The Innocents Abroad: Or The New Pilgrim's Progress.

Like most of his fellow Americans, unequipped by "either native gifts or training," Twain mocks the most sacrosanct tourist havens on the Continent, scornfully lampooning the sculpture, architecture, music, and paintings of the Old Masters, mocking in fact religious icons and treasures centuries old. He is successful because, for the most part, he is funny even in his most candid cynicisms. He is successful, too, because, when he attacks religions, he concentrates on the religion of the Pope, or the Jew, or the Muslim. Evangelical, American, Bible-supported, Christian fundamentalism must wait for Huckleberry Finn, fifteen years after Innocents; even then, as will be shown, most readers will lose sight of the attack because of the humor.

Twain's description of the Cathedral of Notre Dame is an excellent example of his American, self-satisfied smugness:

We recognized the brown old Gothic pile in a moment; it was like the pictures. We stood a little distance and changed from one point of

observation to another and gazed long at its lofty square towers and its rich front, clustered thick with stony mutilated saints who had been calmly looking down from their perches for ages. . . . These battered and broken-nosed old fellows saw many and many a cavalcade of mail-clad knights come marching home from the Holy Land; they heard the bells above them signal for the St. Bartholomew's massacre, and they saw the slaughter that followed. . . . I wish these parties could speak. They could tell a tale worth listening to.¹⁴

Twain's description of the Cathedral as "the brown old Gothic pile," his association of "stony mutilated saints," "broken-nosed old fellows," with mail-clad knights returning from a "holy" war in the Holy Land, and his references to the slaughter of Christians in the name of a Christian saint gratified American readers who equated Romish kingdoms with feudalism and oppression of the common people. The "broken-nosed" saints (Catholic gargoyles, Twain implies) perched atop "the brown old Gothic pile" do not have to speak; Twain has spoken for them, has retold the sordid history they have witnessed in the hyperbole and derisive tone of the Southwestern frontier humorist. Twain's "travel book" introduces lifelong themes of aristocratic decadence and cultural hypocrisy in the name of church and state, irreverence for things deemed sacred, and the ubiquitous inhumanity of man towards his fellow man,

¹⁴ Mark Twain, The Innocents Abroad (New York: Airmont Publishing Co., 1967), p. 86.

themes found in Huckleberry Finn. The tone of the narrator's voice in The Innocents Abroad is that of a literate Huck Finn, a Huck Finn who does not believe in lamps or genies--or religious icons or saints. In the catacombs of Rome, Twain describes the burial place of St. Philip Neri:

Here the heart of St. Philip Neri was so inflamed with divine love as to burst his ribs. I find that grave statement in a book published in New York in 1858 and written by "Rev. William H. Neligan, LL.D., M.A., Trinity College, Dublin; Member of the Archaeological Society of Great Britain." Therefore I believe it. Otherwise I could not. Under other circumstances, I should have felt a curiosity to know what Philip had for dinner.¹⁵

This short passage shows Twain's economical brilliance in the making of a joke, and, as usual, a joke where he is more than just an interested party. Twain loves punning and other forms of word play; he is a master of phrasing and rhythm; his timing is faultless; he loves bathetic detail. Such bald humor was well received in a country still known for its anti-intellectualism; by implicitly comparing the educational background of the Reverend Neligan with his own (and with that of his readers), Twain practices one-upmanship in behalf of good old, common, everyday horse sense.

¹⁵ Twain, Innocents, p. 197.

In a thinly veiled attack on the Christian religion and its concordant mythology, Twain gives his impressions of seeing "The Last Supper" by Leonardo da Vinci:

Here in Milan, in an ancient tumbledown ruin of a church, is the mournful wreck of the most celebrated painting in the world--"The Last Supper," by Leonardo da Vinci. . . . "The Last Supper" is painted on a dilapidated wall of what was once a chapel attached to the main church in ancient times, I suppose. It is battered and scarred in every direction, and stained and discolored by time, and Napoleon's horses kicked the legs off most of the disciples when they (the horses, not the disciples) were stabled there more than half a century ago. . . . People come here from all parts of the world and glorify this masterpiece. They stand entranced before it with bated breath and parted lips, and when they speak, it is only in the catchy ejaculations of rapture:

"Oh, wonderful!"

"Such expression!"

"Such grace of attitude!"

"Such dignity!"

"Such faultless drawing!"

"Such matchless coloring!"

"Such feeling!"

"What delicacy of touch!"

"What sublimity of conception!"

"A vision! A vision!"

I only envy these people; I envy their honest admiration, if it be honest--their delight, if they feel delight. I harbor no animosity toward any of them. But at the same time the thought will introduce itself upon me: How can they see what is not visible?¹⁶

In the passage above Twain's disdain for affectation and fatuous pomposity is seen, two more themes that will find

¹⁶ Twain, Innocents, p. 125.

their way into Huckleberry Finn, especially when Huck exults about the magnificent decor of the Grangerford's plantation. Like Twain's fellow pilgrims, Huck believes that the decor is magnificent because he has been told that the decor is magnificent. The sharp-eyed reader sees it for what it is: the dreck of an affected gentility.

In Tom Sawyer Abroad, a disappointing mini-novel involving Tom, Huck, and Jim and published several years after Huckleberry Finn, the disdain for religions of any stripe and religious books in any language continues. In a balloon, the trio has crossed the Atlantic, crossed the Sahara, and arrived in Cairo, Egypt, where they visit a Muslim mosque. The novel is pure Tom Sawyer, but, as in Huckleberry Finn, recounted in Huck's first-person narration; he says:

Now and then a grand person flew by in a carriage with fancy dressed men running and yelling in front of it and whacking anybody with a long rod that didn't get out of the way. And by and by along comes the Sultan riding horseback at the head of a procession, and fairly took your breath away, his clothes was so splendid; and everybody fell flat on his stomach while he went by. I forgot, but a feller helped me to remember. He was the one that had a rod and run in front.

There was churches, but they didn't know enough to keep Sunday; they keep Friday and break the Sabbath. You have to take off your shoes when you go in. There was crowds of men and boys in the church, setting in groups on the stone floor and making no end of noise--getting their lessons by heart, Tom said, out of the Koran, which they think is a Bible, and people that knows better knows enough to not let on. I never see

such a big church in my life before, and most awful high it was; it made you dizzy to look up; our village church at home ain't a circumstance to it; if you was to put it in there, people would think it was a dry-goods box.

What I wanted to see was a dervish, because I was interested in dervishes on account of the one that played the trick on the camel-driver. So we found a lot in a kind of church, and they called them Whirling Dervishes; and they did whirl, too. I never see anything like it. They had tall sugar-loaf hats on, and linen petticoats; and they spun and spun, round and round, like tops, and the petticoats stood out on a slant, and it was the prettiest thing I ever see, and made me drunk to look at it. They was all Moslems, Tom said, and when I asked him what a Moslem was, he said it was a person who wasn't a Presbyterian. So there is plenty of them in Missouri, though I didn't know it before.¹⁷

Tom Sawyer Abroad and Tom Sawyer Detective (also told in Huck's first-person narration) enjoyed neither critical nor substantial financial success: they were composed too rapidly, are filled with tepid jokes and implausible occurrences, and are virtually devoid of theme. In a word, they were written because the author believed that they would sell, if only because of his popularity. In point of fact, however, they failed because they do not conjure up any feelings of nostalgia, any longing for the "good old days," any desire to return to youth and innocence. Characterization in both books is extremely weak. Never having had too much lovability, Tom easily loses whatever he had.

¹⁷ Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer Abroad (New York: Lancer Books, 1968), p. 141.

His tone is sophomoric--smart-alecky. Whatever dignity Jim achieved in Huckleberry Finn is lost in Tom Sawyer Abroad: he has reverted to his superstitious "darkie" character and is present mainly as an ignorant interlocutor for Tom Sawyer's wit. Huck, too, is a two-dimensional shadow of himself.

In these later works, Twain reuses material which had been successful in the earlier books. For example, compare Huck's description of Uncle Silas' preaching in Huckleberry Finn with that of Tom Sawyer Detective. In Huckleberry Finn, Huck says:

Aunt Sally she was one of the mixed-apest looking persons I ever see; except one, and that was Uncle Silas, when he come in, and they told it all to him. It made him kind of drunk, as you may say, and he didn't know nothing at all the rest of the day, and preached a prayer-meeting sermon that night that give him a rattling reputation, because the oldest man in the world couldn't a understood it. (p. 224)

The same scene in Tom Sawyer Detective reads:

It was good to be there again behind all that noble cornpone and spareribs, and everything that you could ever want in this world. Old Uncle Silas he peeled off one of his bulliest old-time blessings, with as many layers to it as an onion, and whilst the angels was hauling in the slack of it I was trying to study up what to say what kept us so long. When our plates was all loadened and we'd got a-going, she asked me, and I says:

"Well, you see--er--Mizzes--"

"Huck Finn! Since when am I Mizzes to you? Have I ever been stingy of cuffs or kisses for you since the day I stood in this room and took

you for Tom Sawyer and blessed God for sending you to me, though you told me four thousand lies and I believed every one of them like a simpleton? Call me Aunt Sally--like you always done."¹⁸

Although it could have been expected that the later Tom Sawyer books might have tarnished the reputation of the earlier ones, no such thing happened. Twain's popularity precluded that. His reputation had been chiseled in white marble. William Dean Howells, nine years before the publication of Huckleberry Finn, had written (regarding "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut"): "It was an impassioned study of the human conscience. Hawthorne or Bunyan might have been proud to imagine that powerful allegory, which had a grotesque force far beyond either of them."¹⁹ In 1898, after both Tom Sawyer Abroad and Tom Sawyer Detective had appeared, Howells' position regarding Twain's reputation remained firm. In a letter to Twain he wrote, "I wish you could understand how unshaken you are, you old tower, in every way. Your foundations are struck so deep that you will catch the sunshine of immortal years and bask in the same light as Cervantes or Shakespeare,"²⁰ and, after rereading

¹⁸ Mark Twain, Tom Sawyer Detective (New York: Lancer Books, 1968), p. 191.

¹⁹ William Dean Howells, quoted by Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 318.

²⁰ Howells, quoted by Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 318.

"The Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," he concluded, "You are the greatest man of your sort that has ever lived, and there is no use in saying anything else."²¹

Twain enjoyed the immense popular acclaim he received in his lifetime; in fact, he virtually wallowed in it. Howells complained, "I hate to see him eating so many dinners and writing so few books."²² In Mark Twain and His World, Justin Kaplan says:

On the streets and in the theatres and in the restaurants Mark Twain was so often pointed out and applauded that, as Clara said, "it was difficult to realize he was only a man of letters." He had, in fact, become something more--sage, oversoul, spokesman, and a hero of a distinctly antiheroic and vernacular sort. . . . He became, without a parallel or equal, a celebrity --in Daniel Boorstin's definition, "a person who is known for his well-knownness." He was to be the subject of countless news stories which, by the dynamics of celebrity and through his own brilliant management, made him even better copy and brought him closer to realizing his declared ambition to be the "most conspicuous person on the planet." And he may actually have realized this ambition in 1907, when he journeyed to England [he would have been willing "to journey to Mars," he said] to receive the degree of Doctor of Literature from Oxford and the robe of scarlet and gray which he cherished and flaunted from then on.²³

²¹ Howells, quoted by Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 319.

²² Howells, quoted by Kaplan, Mark Twain and His World, p. 188.

²³ Kaplan, Mark Twain and His World, p. 193.

The world turns. The frontier wit who had ridiculed men of letters and institutions of education and religion, in the philosophy of "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," had conquered Oxford and secured his scarlet and gray prize. He must have found the irony delicious.

By this time he had begun to affect the white suits for which he is still so famous. In December 1906, he testified before a joint committee of Congress on the matter of the copyright law, a lifelong personal crusade. The veteran lecturer and raconteur understood the impact of theatricality. As he stood up, he slowly removed his long overcoat, revealing beneath an immaculate suit of white serge. Kaplan says that:

He was like a blaze of sunlight in the dimly lighted room in the Library of Congress. Then, as he had been doing for years, he spoke out, like Dickens, in defense of intellectual property rights and in anticipation of the happy day when, as he had said long before, "in the eyes of the law, literary property will be as sacred as whiskey, or any other of the necessities of life."²⁴

His dazzling white suits certainly helped him in his effort to become "the most conspicuous person on the planet,"

²⁴ Twain, quoted by Kaplan, Mark Twain and His World, p. 177.

but they seemed to suggest something more. As Kaplan argues,

In their assertion of inner purity (Howells called him "whited sepulchre") the famous white suits answered to a lifetime hunger for love and expiation. White was the garb of publicness for Mark Twain, just as it had been the garb of reclusiveness of Emily Dickinson. Dressed in white he would walk up Fifth Avenue to Fifty-ninth Street on a Sunday morning and rest in the lobby of the Plaza Hotel until the churches were out; then he walked homeward along the sidewalks crowded with fashionable strangers who lifted their hats to him in recognition and homage. "It was his final harvest," said his biographer [Albert Bigelow Paine], who accompanied him on these walks, "and he had the courage to claim it."²⁵

Near the end of his life he again displayed the same courage by testing the adage, "You can't go home again." His wife now an invalid, he returned alone to Hannibal where he was greeted as The Favorite Son, The All-Conquering Hero, The Commonfolk's Prophet of the Prairie. Kaplan writes that:

. . . when he left from the depot at Hannibal at the end of his stay, he posed once again for the photographers, this time holding a bunch of flowers. Over the din of the huge crowd that had come to say goodbye, his boyhood playmate Tom Nash shouted to him in a deaf man's whisper, "Same damned fools, Sam."²⁶

²⁵ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 198.

²⁶ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 201.

Years earlier, Twain might have shouted back, "I hear you, Tom," but by this time he had mellowed greatly. What is seen as his terminal pessimism and bitterness is spoken from the grave, some of it not published for more than fifty years after his death. These late works seem to belong less to general readers than to the world of critical scholarship; his notebooks, manuscripts, and letters have been, until very recently, jealously guarded. In these books, edited by Twain scholars like Bernard De Voto and Charles Neider, Twain continues his lifelong crusades against sham and superstition, hypocrisy, war and savagery, hypocrisy, greed and exploitation in the name of religion, and hypocrisy, greed and exploitation in the name of religion, and hypocrisy. In them one can actually read a kind of hope that, as he implies, if only . . . if only . . . if only. . . .

William Van O'Connor's disparaging assessment of Twain as a great novelist must be seen as an antagonistic catalyst designed to provoke critical discussion in a purely literary exercise. On rereading O'Connor's charges, one is again reminded of Cassius' complaint, with only the names changed:

Now in the names of all the gods at once,
 Upon what meat doth this our Caesar [read
 Clemens] feed
 That he is grown so great?
 (Julius Caesar, I.ii.149-51)

Thomas Bailey Aldrich, one of the Boston group of literary figures which years earlier had received if not exactly welcomed him, pondered his new dimension.²⁷ In December 1901, Aldrich wrote to Howells, "Mark's spectacular personality is just now very busy all over the world. I doubt if there is another man on earth whose name is more familiar."²⁸ How much more astonished Aldrich would have been had he lived to see what the increased power of print and electronic media have done to "Mark's spectacular personality," how his white-maned, white-suited, twinkle-eyed, yarn-spinning image is instantly recognizable to millions of people who have never read a single book of his. It is fitting that Twain's image should be joined with Benjamin Franklin's (whose "early to bed, early to rise," "a penny saved is a penny earned," and other "good-boy" homilies infuriated Twain) as the spokesmen for the "American Adventure" in Walt Disney's EPCOT extravaganza.

Similarly, it is fitting that the American public continue to revere him, even though he referred to them as "the damned human race," "human muck," and so on, ad nauseam. After all, they do not know that. His life was truly an effort to better the conditions of humanity;

²⁷ Thomas Bailey Aldrich, quoted by Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 287.

²⁸ Aldrich, quoted by Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 287.

according to Kaplan, in Twain's last meeting with Howells, short months before his death, the two "talked about labor unions as 'the sole present help of the weak against the strong.'"²⁹ Deaf Tom Nash probably would not have been surprised. He could have said, "We're all the same damned fools, Sam."

²⁹ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 388.

Chapter 2

Taking Dictation From an Outside Source:

The Creating of The Adventures of
Huckleberry Finn

In his introduction to a 1950 edition of Huckleberry Finn, T. S. Eliot wrote that the novel is "the only one of Mark Twain's various books which can be called a masterpiece. I do not suggest that it is his only book of permanent interest, but it is the only one in which his genius is completely realized, and the only one that creates its own category."¹ Because of Huck's disreputable habits, Eliot's parents had kept the book from him. He says that "the opinion of my parents that it was a book unsuitable for boys left me, for most of my life, under the impression that it was a book suitable only for boys. Therefore it was a few years ago that I read it for the first time, and in that order, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Tom Sawyer did not prepare me for what I find its sequel to be."²

¹ T. S. Eliot, "Introduction to Huckleberry Finn," Critics on Mark Twain, ed. David B. Kesterson (Coral Gables, Fla.: Univ. of Miami Press, 1973), p. 62.

² Eliot, p. 62.

Indeed it should not have, even though the earlier book has elements of pessimism and cynicism. In the characterization of Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer is extremely valuable, since his first-person narration in Huckleberry Finn contains precious few descriptive autobiographical physical details. Twain's use of third-person omniscient narrator in the earlier book gives his readers the best description of Huck. (Huck himself agrees.) He says, "You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,' but that ain't no matter" [p. 1]. To critics who cannot agree on so much as Huck's precise age, it certainly does.) In Tom Sawyer, Twain writes:

Shortly Tom came upon the juvenile pariah of the village, Huckleberry Finn, son of the town drunkard. Huckleberry was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle and lawless and vulgar and bad--and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society, and wished they dared to be like him. . . . Huckleberry was always dressed in the castoff clothes of full grown men, and they were in perennial bloom and fluttering with rags. His hat was a vast ruin with a wide crescent lopped out of its brim. . . . Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and in empty hogsheads in wet; he did not have to go to school or to church, or call any being master or obey anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose, and stay as long as it suited him; nobody forbade him to fight; he could sit up as late as he pleased; he was always the first boy that went barefoot in the spring and the last to resume leather in the fall; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes. In a word, everything that goes to make life precious,

that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in St. Petersburg.³

Both books were written during the happiest period of Twain's life. According to Kaplan, Susan Crane, Twain's sister-in-law, had built for him a writing study,

. . . an octagonal summerhouse . . . on the brink of a lofty ridge. . . . Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn were emerging from the realm of imagination to set out upon their immortal careers. In order to bring them into the world their creator relived his own boyhood, and to do so brought him the most glorious hours he had ever spent at his desk.⁴

Kaplan goes on to describe this study, which was high above the city of Elmira and removed from the main farmhouse by some one hundred yards.

It was a single octagonal room with six large windows, a little one cut through the chimney above the mantelpiece, and a wide door facing the valley. The furniture consisted of a sofa, a round writing table, and a couple of chairs. . . . Each morning after a breakfast of steak and coffee, he climbed up the hillside to his study, and, without stopping for lunch, he worked steadily through the day till dinner-time. Like a pilothouse, which it resembled, the octagonal room offered a commanding view; he could see city and countryside, storms sweeping down the valley, flashes of lightning over the blue hills. . . . The writer Mark

³ Samuel Langhorne Clemens, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (New York: Scholastic Books, 1975), p. 65.

⁴ Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 178.

Twain worked in the same solitary, untouchable splendor as Sam Clemens the pilot. He was isolated--from Livy, children, servants, the entire domestic complex.⁵

At this point he was forty-one and in the best of health; he was truly Fortune's favorite, the darling of the gods; in his own words he was "the busiest white man in America," and he could have added "engaged in the happiest business." In this idyllic setting, in upper New York State a thousand miles from Hannibal, were born the immortal American--Southern--youths, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. In her book, America's Own Mark Twain, Jeanette Eaton imagines the creative process:

Once again he was devising pranks and undertaking risky adventures on the Mississippi River with his gang. All day from half past eight in the morning until five in the afternoon, Sam Clemens dwelt in Hannibal, Missouri. On its dusty streets he met the boys and girls he used to know, sat rebelliously at school, and prowled with his companions through the vast, mysterious cave. Best of all was to go back with them to Glassocks Island. To recall those marvelous days of sunshine and those nights beside the campfire inspired his writing with sheer magic.

To Olivia's frequent protest that he was working too hard, Sam would reply, "But it isn't work, Livy. I often feel that I'm simply taking dictation from some outside source. The writing is fun, splendid fun. The incidents just pour themselves out."⁶

⁵ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 178.

⁶ Jeanette Eaton, America's Own Mark Twain (Dayton, Ohio: George A. Plaum, 1958), p. 132.

It is interesting to contemplate the notion of Twain, the self-professed nonbeliever, crediting his creative genius to "an outside source." Indeed several critics have pondered the origin of that outside source, how a man so ostensibly happily fulfilled in every possible way could write such despairing philosophy in such seemingly happy books. However, because the cynicism, the pessimism, and even the misanthropy are couched in rich native humor with universal application, or straightforward farce, or broad burlesque, or even Huck's incredibly ingenuous credulity, this attitude of despair is overlooked; or it is simply ignored. It is as if the reader, and especially the white American Christian reader, refuses to acknowledge this attitude by convincing himself that either Twain did not say it, or if he did say it, he did not mean it. It is as if the reader believes, wants to believe, has to believe that this most favorite of American storytellers could not possibly be a victim of hopelessness.

Twain anticipated that his views would not be taken seriously regardless of the subject: he expected it. Almost clairvoyantly he predicted the public response that his most serious, if not his most downright vicious, criticisms of man's most cherished institutions would elicit. It mattered not whether these criticisms assailed social, political, economic, or religious institutions. As early

as 1909 (long before Twain's most vitriolic prose, published after his death, was available for critical study), Archibald Henderson wrote:

Even today, though long dissociated in fact from the category of Artemus Ward, John Phoenix, Josh Billings, and Petroleum V. Nasby, Mark Twain can never be sure that his most solemn utterances may not be drowned out in roars of thoughtless laughter.

"It has been a very serious and difficult matter," Mr. Clemens lately remarked to me, "to doff the mask of humor with which the public has always seen me adorned. It is the incorrigible practice of the public, in this country, or any country, to see only humor in a humorist, however serious his vein.

"Not long ago I wrote a poem, which I never dreamed of giving to the public, on account of its seriousness; but on being invited to address the women students of a certain great university, I was persuaded by a near friend to read the poem. At the close of my lecture, I said, 'Now, ladies, I am going to read you a poem of mine'-- which was greeted with a burst of uproarious laughter. 'But this is truly a serious poem,' I asserted--only to be greeted with renewed, and this time, more uproarious laughter. Nettled by this misunderstanding, I put the poem in my pocket, saying, 'Well, young ladies, since you do not believe me serious, I shall not read my poem,' at which time the audience almost went into convulsions of merriment."⁷

This anecdote is impossible to refute: in our own time comedians like Jack Benny have been capable of doing the same thing to an audience with a flirt of the eye, or

⁷ Archibald Henderson, "Mark Twain," Harper's Monthly 118 (May, 1909), 948-55, in Mark Twain: Selected Criticism, ed. Arthur L. Scott (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1955), p. 101.

even the shrug of the shoulder. There was no possible way that Benny could have publicly opined on such issues as nuclear warfare. I will attempt to demonstrate that this very same misunderstanding is possible, if indeed not virtually inevitable, in a casual or surface reading of Huckleberry Finn. Whether it is the credulous comments of literal-minded Huck, the rowdy escapades of the Duke and the King, or the farcical elaborations of Tom Sawyer's "escape plan," the cynicism and latent despair, along with a serious attack on the institution of the Christian religion (and its believers, "the damned human race" of white America) and the Bible are skillfully concealed in humor. Missing Twain's profound pessimism while reading Huckleberry Finn is easily excusable and can be blamed on the genius of the humorist; besides, as the genre of "gallows humor" confirms, most people would far rather laugh than cry.

Henderson believes that "Twain's humor has international range, since, constructed out of a deep comprehension of human nature and a profound sympathy for human relationships and human failings, it successfully surmounts the difficulties of translation into alien tongues."⁸ Twain

⁸ Henderson, p. 103.

himself had confided to Henderson that:

. . . my secret, if there is any secret, is to create humor independent of local conditions. Though studying humanity as exhibited in the people and localities I best knew and understood, I have sought to winnow out the encumbrance of the local. Humor, like morality, has its eternal verities. Most American humorists have not been widely famous because they failed to create humor independent of local conditions not found or realized elsewhere.⁹

There is no question about Twain's genius for creating humor; the problem, however, is that within Twain-the-humorist, indeed the consummate American humorist whose frontier yarn-spinning still has universal implications as well as global appeal, is Twain-the-anti-religionist, the bitter and cynical critic excoriating, as Henderson says, "man's instability, weakness, cowardice, cruelty, and degradation."¹⁰ I believe that Twain could have silently tolerated these human failings--he never did resign from the human race--be they harmless frailties or sordid depravities, were they not perpetrated and sanctioned by institutions almost always manipulated by brazen hypocrites. And for Twain the situation was intolerably exacerbated by the fact they were always, almost without exception, white Christian hypocrites hiding behind the cloth, the cross, and

⁹ Henderson, p. 103.

¹⁰ Henderson, p. 103.

the Bible. Henderson asserts that Twain conducted a "lifelong assault on the illusions of freewill, integrity, decency, and virtue with which mankind makes tolerable its estate."¹¹

To launch this assault at this time in his life, when it could jeopardize the material bliss he enjoyed as Fortune's favorite (let alone continue unstintingly throughout an adult lifetime as the most prominent, sought-after lecturer in the entire world) required no small amount of courage, and, of course, the impenetrable shield of humor. In the words of Kurt Vonnegut,

Twain was so good with crowds that he became, in competition with singers and dancers and actors and acrobats, one of the most popular performers of his time. It is so unusual, and so psychologically unlikely for a great writer to be a great performer, too, that I can think of only two similar cases--Homer's, perhaps, and Moliere's.¹²

Fortunately, Twain was well supplied with both courage and humor. Henderson explains Twain's dilemma (to entertain? to educate?) when he says that,

Twain has had to pay in full the penalty of comic greatness. The world is loath to accept

¹¹ Henderson, p. 105.

¹² Kurt Vonnegut, "Opening Remarks," The Unabridged Mark Twain, by Mark Twain, ed. Lawrence Teacher (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1979), p. xv.

a popular character at any rating other than its own. Whosoever sets to himself the task of amusing the world must realize the almost insuperable difficulty of inducing the world to regard him as a serious thinker.¹³

George Bernard Shaw, who regarded Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain as America's greatest achievements, told Henderson that he considered Twain primarily not as a humorist, but as a sociologist, which he defined as a great writer who "inheres in his mastery, that highest sphere of thought, embracing religion, philosophy, morality, and even humor."¹⁴ With typical Shavian insight and wit, he added that "Mark Twain is in much the same position as myself: he has to put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking."¹⁵ Shaw, of course, was absolutely correct in his insight: if the white American Christian reading public had truly understood Huckleberry Finn, they most assuredly would have hanged the writer who signed on as the "CHIEF OF ORDNANCE"--the writer whom proper Bostonians would have called the witty, wicked, whipper-snapper of the West. As will be shown, descendants of the original critics of Twain and Huck are still trying to hang

¹³ Henderson, p. 105.

¹⁴ Henderson, p. 105.

¹⁵ Henderson, p. 105.

them both almost one hundred years after the publication of the book.

The book was begun some weeks before the completion of Tom Sawyer, but was not published until some nine years later, in 1885. In the words of Bernard De Voto, it was published at a time when "he was then the most widely known and admired writer in America, and very likely the world. He was at the summit of his personal happiness."¹⁶ To write and publish an assault on mankind and Christianity, using a Negro slave as co-hero only thirty years after the Civil War, required (to paraphrase Shaw) a genius to put matters in such a way as to make people believe he was only joking.

Kaplan quotes a letter Twain had written to Mary Fairbanks at this time: "I am the busiest white man in America --and much the happiest."¹⁷ Kaplan goes on to say that:

. . . the exuberant varieties of his energies and interests during the most productive years of his life seemed also to reflect his country and his times. He was humorist, novelist, short-story writer, social historian, dramatist, journalist, occasional lecturer, and frequent dinner speaker, inventor, entrepreneur, all-night raconteur and billiard player, lavish host, devoted family man.¹⁸

¹⁶ Bernard De Voto, "Mark Twain at Work," Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Henry Nash Smith (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 141.

¹⁷ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 175.

¹⁸ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 175.

Twain had already written The Innocents Abroad, Roughing It, Sketches New and Old, The Gilded Age (in collaboration with Charles Dudley Warner), A Tramp Abroad, The Prince and the Pauper, Life on the Mississippi, and, of course, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer before the publication of Huckleberry Finn. He had collaborated with Bret Harte in writing Ah Sin, a play that, according to Milton Meltzer, "never had a chance to fail; no one would produce it."¹⁹ In 1884 Twain said about it,

When our play was finished, we found it was so long, and so broad, and so deep--in places--that it would have taken a week to play it. . . . I never saw a play that was so improved by being cut down; and I believe it would have been one of the very best plays in the world if [the play's manager's] strength had held out so that he could cut out the whole of it.²⁰

Two years later Twain thought the work "dreadfully witless and flat; . . . [the demise of the production] was the result of incurable defects: to wit, Harte's deliberate thefts and plagiarism and my own unconscious ones."²¹ Almost every Twain critic, however, has emphasized the artistic, domestic, and financial success Twain was

¹⁹ Milton Meltzer, Mark Twain Himself (New York: Bonanza Books, 1960), p. 176.

²⁰ Quoted by Meltzer, p. 176.

²¹ Quoted by Meltzer, p. 176.

experiencing at this time in his career. De Voto summarized that success best when he wrote:

His books had won him not only world-wide fame, but a fortune as well. He was the husband of a greatly loved wife, the father of three delightful children, the master of a house famous for its hospitality, the center of a small cosmos of beloved friends, and an intimate of the famous men and women of his time, courted, praised, sought after, universally loved. His life had a splendor that marked him as the darling of the gods.²²

In short, Mark Twain had metamorphosed as no other American writer before or since. As De Voto continued, no romantic concoction of Tom Sawyer's feverishly fertile imagination could match "the backwoods boy, the tramp printer, the Mississippi pilot, the silver miner, the San Franciscan Bohemian [who] had become one of the great men on earth."²³ The humor of his books and lectures had transformed him into the world's most cherished butterfly, a role he was to play spectacularly, especially during the last years of his life when he donned only in public the immaculate white suits that became his trademark. The irony of all this is that he achieved this unmatched fame and love, fortune and reverence, from the very people he was attacking. Like Socrates, Twain believed his role to be gadfly to the human race and

²² De Voto, p. 141.

²³ De Voto, p. 145.

its institutions, not butterfly for them; in his castigations, he had become spokesman for them, weak and poor, powerful and wealthy alike. Henderson was absolutely correct: the world would accept him only on its own conditions. The reason was simple enough: like the college girls who would not listen to his poem, they could not hear him; they were laughing too loudly. Mark Twain had become court jester to the world. Of such inscrutable contradictions are myths and legends made.

Twain began Huckleberry Finn when he was forty-one; by the time he finished it he was fifty--and a self-admitted pessimist. Literary critics of the Freudian inclination make much of the financial and personal catastrophes that befell Twain. These critics, and certainly not without a reasonable amount of logic, explain his despair and pessimism, his misanthropy and bleak outlook on life, as the expectable result from a writer whom the gods had betrayed. Often referred to as the "King," Twain, they claim, suffered from hubris: "whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad." There was the failure of the Paige typesetter, into which Twain had poured between \$250,000 to \$300,000, throwing hard-earned money from his books and lectures into a Colonel Sellers-type speculation in golden goose dreams of enormous and endless wealth. There was his bankruptcy and its attendant ignominy, especially for one who had been

enjoying regal status. There were the calamities that destroyed that family he so deeply loved. De Voto, for example, argues that:

. . . a mysterious alteration [happened] in the personality of his youngest daughter, Jean, and finally the terrible mystery was cleared up by the discovery of the still more terrible truth, that she was an epileptic. During these years, his capricious but usually exuberant health failed. He was wracked by bronchitis, which he was never again to lose, by the rheumatism which was the inheritance of his frontier youth, and by other ailments which were the result of the enormous strain he was under.²⁴

With these events some critics explain the pessimism and barren determinism of his writings.

The point of reciting this all-too-familiar litany--the Paige typesetter pronounced a failure, the Webster Publishing Company in bankruptcy, the epilepsy of Jean (who was to die tragically in a freak bathtub accident just before Christmas in 1909), the death of his favorite daughter, Susy (of meningitis in 1896), the invalidism of his beloved wife, Livy (who was to die in Italy in 1904)--is that all these catastrophes occurred many years after the writing and publishing of Huckleberry Finn, which, as has been shown, was written when Twain was truly the "darling of the gods."

²⁴ De Voto, p. 146.

And so the conundrum persists: why would one of the great men of the earth attack the people and institutions which had deified him? Several theories exist. The self-confessed duality of personality, brilliantly analyzed in Van Wyck Brooks's The Ordeal of Mark Twain and in Justin Kaplan's Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, is certainly a plausible explanation. Ever a sensitive and humane artist, with a lifelong adoration of children and women and animals (probably in that order), Twain was also an inveterate, scheming businessman, a grasping dabbler in capitalistic, get-rich-quick ventures which almost invariably ended disastrously. The conflict between the two cameras of his brain produced a nagging guilt for which he did not want to accept responsibility, and so he lashed out at people and gods who frustrated his avaricious aspirations. That is a reasonable explanation, and critics familiar with Brooks's treatise must acknowledge its academic credence. I can support this thesis, but I believe there is something more.

I believe Twain was a frustrated idealist (his preference for children, women, and animals would support this). His idealism was compromised by one of his favorite literary targets: cupidity. Brooks argues this subject:

I have given many instances of his instinctive revolt against the spirit of his time, moral, religious, political, economic. "My idea of our civilization . . . is that it is a shabby poor thing and full of cruelties, vanities,

arrogancies, meannesses and hypocrises. As for a word I hate the sound of it, for it conveys a lie; and as for the thing itself, I wish it was in hell, where it belongs. . . . Well, the 19th century made progress--the first progress in ages and ages--colossal progress. In what? Materialities. Prodigious acquisitions were made in things which add to the comfort of many and make life harder for many more. . . . All Europe and America are feverishly scrambling for money. Money is the supreme ideal. . . . Money-lust has always existed, but not in the history of the world was it ever a craze, a madness, until your time and mine. This lust has rotted nations; it has made them hard, sordid, ungentle, dishonest, oppressive." Who can fail to see that the whole tendency of Mark Twain's spirit ran precisely counter to the spirit of his age, that he belonged as naturally in the Opposition, as I have said, as all the great European writers of his time?²⁵

In this passage Brooks is actually condemning Twain for not using his artistic spirit to condemn "money-lust" in his books, and not in his private letters. I believe Twain confronted and recognized an enemy of the people: Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the gifted, sensitive, compassionate humanitarian who wanted to have his cake--and some of everyone else's, too. As T. S. Eliot noted, only Huckleberry Finn reflects Twain's pure artistic genius, for reasons which will be discussed at length below. Huckleberry Finn, I will attempt to prove, is the only book (including Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc) which he did not write for money.

²⁵Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain (New York: Meridian Books, 1955), p. 218.

As "the kid from the backwoods who made good" (in the big time), Twain enjoyed an intimate relationship with the American plutocratic oligarchy--the vested Establishment--in general, and the Standard Oil Company and Henry Huttleston Rogers in particular; because of this relationship, he continually refused to join the ranks of the then popular "muckrakers," typified by Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair. In his Autobiography there is a wistful hint that this might have been something of a mistake, that he had sold out the artist Twain to cupiditous Clemens:

I was lofty in those days. I have survived it. I was unwise then. I am up-to-date now. Day before yesterday's New York Sun has a paragraph or two from its London correspondent which enables me to locate myself. The correspondent mentions a few of our American events of the past twelvemonth, such as the limitless rottenness of our great insurance companies, where theft has been carried on by our most distinguished commercial men as a profession; the exposure of the conscienceless graft, colossal graft, in great municipalities like Philadelphia, St. Louis, and other large cities; . . . and finally today's lurid exposure, by Upton Sinclair, of the most titanic and death-dealing swindle of them all, the Beef Trust, an exposure which has moved the President to demand of a reluctant Congress a law which shall protect America and Europe from falling, in a mass, into the hands of the doctor and the undertaker.

According to that correspondent, Europe is beginning to wonder if there really is an honest male human creature left in the United States. A year ago I was satisfied that there was no such person existing upon American soil except myself. That exception has since been rubbed out now and it is my belief that there isn't a single human being in America who is honest.

I held the belt all along, until last January. Then I went down, with Rockefeller and Carnegie and a group of Goulds and Vanderbilts and other professional grafters, and swore off my taxes like the most conscienceless of the lot. It was a great loss to America because I was irreplaceable. It is my belief that it will take fifty years to produce my successor. I believe the entire population of the United States--exclusively of the women--to be rotten, as far as the dollar is concerned. Understand, I am saying these things as a dead person. I should consider it indiscreet in any live one to make these remarks publicly.²⁶

It was because Twain said these remarks not indiscreetly as a dead person that Brooks complained; he, who had created Huck Finn with monumental courage, acquiesced; he, who had created an orphan river-rat with the wisdom to disdain "six thousand dollars . . . all gold," had wholesaled his artistic genius. I believe that Twain knew what he had done; and, although he was eager to accept just about every other kind of guilt, real or imagined, he could not accept this one, and lashed out blindly against humanity and God in vituperous, self-loathing vindictiveness.

Although muckraking is a popular exercise in any generation, and muckrakers who have done their homework perform an important service for the uninformed masses, it is not necessarily an artistic exercise, as any reader of the last half of Upton Sinclair's The Jungle will attest.

²⁶ Mark Twain, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 132.

Twain (through Huck) seems to sense his predicament:

"that's just the way; a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequence of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain't no disgrace" (p. 166).

The argument can be made that Twain was a born muck-raker: he practiced extensively in Nevada, and some critics believe that it was his reporting of political corruption in San Francisco that encouraged him to seek the sunnier and calmer shores of Hawaii (the then Sandwich Islands). With Charles Dudley Warner, he had written The Gilded Age in 1873, whose chief value (excepting the characterization of Colonel Sellers) is a picture of the unconscionable greed and corruption of the human soul, especially the souls of those elected to high offices in Washington. Congress he characterized (as Will Rogers would after him) as an "asylum for the helpless." Jeanette Eaton, in her biography entitled America's Own Mark Twain, offers a possible explanation; she says that the "author of The Gilded Age was alarmed to see money-making set up as the national goal. His own dream was to become a millionaire by supplying products valuable to the whole country."²⁷ To imitate Twain's wit, "if that ain't a paradox, only one of them made the Ark."

²⁷ Eaton, p. 158.

Van Wyck Brooks offers a better explanation. He writes:

Even the title he [Twain] suggested for his first important book--The New Pilgrim's Progress--was regarded in Hartford as a sacrilege. The trustees of the American Publishing Company flatly refused to have anything to do with it, and it was only when the money charmer, Bliss, threatened to resign if he was not allowed to publish the book that these pious gentlemen who abhorred heresy, but loved money more than they abhorred heresy, gave in. It was these same trustees who later became Mark Twain's neighbors and daily associates; it was with them he shared that happy Hartford society upon whose "community of interests" and "unity of ideals" the loyal Mr. Paine is obliged to dwell in his biography. Was Mark Twain to be expected to attack them?²⁸

Most critics and scholars expect the answer "yes" to that question; the truth is that it is a very highly qualified "yes," and one that finds its best expression in Huckleberry Finn.

Twain, who had raved against the unscrupulous ways in which great fortunes were being made, had taken upon himself the noble project to eradicate Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's financial burdens by publishing Grant's memoirs; less than thirty years after the end of the Civil War it was a no-miss marketing endeavor. And indeed it was. Kaplan reports that Twain

²⁸ Brooks, p. 218.

. . . delighted in figuring the precise dimensions of the gigantic success he was to have with Grant's book. In May 1885 [Huckleberry Finn had come out in January of the same year] he predicted--conservatively, as it turned out--a sale of 300,000 sets [600,000 books], a profit of \$200,000 for his publishing house, and royalties to the Grant family of over \$400,000 (or, as he translated it, seventeen tons of silver coin at twelve dollars a pound.) Howells imagined him smoking and swearing in "wild excitement" as he kept count of the twenty presses and seven binderies that worked day and night to meet the demand.²⁹

Howells, of course, as Twain's most cherished friend, editor, critic, and confidant, was well aware of Twain's smoking and swearing prowess; he could hardly have anticipated a letter from Twain (written in 1903) where he (Howells) was credited with the same ability. In this letter, a put-on, of course, Howells is accused of calling Twain's gardener "a quadrilateral astronomical incandescent son of a bitch."³⁰

The point of all this is that Huckleberry Finn was being written amidst this cornucopia of "good life and prosperity." Susy Twain, his favorite daughter, wrote in her biography of her father (when she was approximately Huck's age): "Mama and I have been very troubled of late,

²⁹ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 278.

³⁰ Mark Twain, "Letter to William Dean Howells," The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard De Voto (Dallas, Pa.: Offset Paperback Manufacturers, 1979), p. 783.

because Papa, since he has been publishing General Grant's books, has seemed to forget his own books and works entirely."³¹ Friends shared this concern. It appeared that Mark Twain, genius, had been eclipsed by Sam Clemens, businessman. But at this point in his life the opposite was true; prosperity allowed him to find his true voice, or at least to take dictation. From somewhere, someone, plumbing the river, was "a-hollerin," "Mark twain! Full steam ahead!," and Huckleberry Finn was born. As Van Wyck Brooks says of Twain:

Through the character of Huck, that disreputable, illiterate little boy . . . he was licensed to let himself go. We have seen how indifferent his sponsors were to the writing and fate of the book. "Nobody," says Mr. Paine, "appears to have been especially concerned about Huck, except, possibly, the publisher." The more indifferent they were, the freer was Mark Twain! Anything that little vagabond said might be safely trusted to pass the censor, just because he was a little vagabond, just because he was an irresponsible boy, he could not, in the eyes of the mighty ones of the world, know anything in any case about life, about morals or civilization. That Mark Twain was almost, if not quite, conscious of his opportunity we can see from the introductory of the book: "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." He feels so secure of himself that he can actually challenge the censor to accuse him of having a motive. Huck's illiteracy, Huck's disreputableness and general outrageousness are so many shields behind which Mark Twain can

³¹ Eaton, p. 144.

let all the cats out of the bag with impunity. He must, I say, have had a certain sense of his unusual security when he wrote some of the more frankly satirical passages of the book, when he permitted Colonel Sherburn to taunt the mob, when he drew that picture of the audience who had been taken in by the Duke proceeding to sell the rest of their townspeople, when he made the King put up the notice, "Ladies and Children not Admitted," adding "There, if that line don't fetch them, I don't know Arkansaw!" The withering contempt for human-kind expressed in these episodes was the sort that Mark Twain expressed more and more openly, as time went on, in his own person; but he was not indulging in that costly kind of cynicism in the days when he wrote Huckleberry Finn. He must, therefore, have appreciated the license that little vagabond, like the puppet in the lap of a ventriloquist, afforded him.³²

In those years between 1876 and 1885, when Huckleberry Finn was being written, Twain tasted deeply the money-lust he claimed had always existed; the acquisition of large sums of money and the anticipation of even greater sums did not blind him to his artistic genius; rather, it freed him to use it. Kaplan argues that, although Twain was ever the "moralist and the people's author, [he] had also become the pet and peer of the moguls, and on a personal plane he was loyal to them in return . . . [believing that] the Standard Oil Captains were simply the victims of an unremitting public hostility whipped up by the magazine publishers like McClure and a demagogic trust-busting [President]."³³

³² Brooks, p. 191.

³³ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 384.

Kaplan reports how Samuel L. Clemens, businessman, became a shill for the oil barons of Standard Oil:

The simple fact that in forty-five years the employees of Standard Oil had never gone out on strike . . . proved that their "chiefs cannot be altogether bad," and in this benevolent mood he was willing to be an agent in the public rehabilitation of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. Frank Doubleday, one of Rockefeller's golfing companions, made a strategic approach: he told Clemens about the work of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, especially about its research into meningitis, the disease that killed Susy. On the strength of these good works Clemens agreed that the Standard Oil leaders deserved a fair hearing. At the Aldine Club on May 20, 1908, about fifty magazine publishers had the dramatic surprise of seeing the Rockefellers, father and son, file into the lion's den. With them were Henry Rogers and Mark Twain, who made a conciliatory speech, after which the elder Rockefeller, "speaking sweetly, sanely, simply humanly," told them about the work of his Institute. As Clemens described the speech and its reception in an autobiographical dictation the next morning, Rockefeller "achieved one of the completest victories I have ever had any knowledge of."³⁴

The key to Kaplan's story is that this "conciliatory speech," made in behalf of the avaricious buccaneers of Standard Oil, was made twenty-three years after the publication of Huckleberry Finn, when the King and the Duke and the bounty hunters and the slave owners were being vilified for their greed. Sycophantic shill for Standard Oil?

³⁴ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 384.

Samuel L. Clemens, entrepreneur, most certainly; Mark Twain, artist, never.

Even in these later years, however, Twain was not blind to the rapacity of the Trusts; as "pet and peer to the moguls," he was still capable of discerning selfish motives; while refusing to attack them publicly, their unconscionable behavior obviously chafed his democratic sensibilities, and he noted that wages had replaced whips for workers being destroyed in capitalistic sweatshops. Maxwell Geismar, in his study of Twain titled An American Prophet, writes:

And just here, despite his abiding affection for his financial savior, Rogers, Sam Clemens was not diffident about pointing out some facts concerning the Standard Oil Trust. "Mr. Roosevelt is easily the most astonishing event in American history, if we except the discovery of the country by Columbus. The details of the purchase of the Presidency by bribery of voters are all exposed now, even to the names of the people who furnished the money and the amounts which each contributed. The men are the great corporation chiefs and three of them are Standard Oil monopolists. It is now known that when the canvass was over a week before election day and all the legitimate uses for the election money at an end, Mr. Roosevelt got frightened and sent for Mr. Harriman to come to Washington and arrange measures to save the state of New York and the Republican Party. The meeting took place and Harriman was urged to raise two hundred thousand dollars for the cause. He raised two hundred and sixty thousand and it was spent upon the election in the last week of the campaign--necessarily for the purchase of votes, since the time had gone by for using the money in any other way." . . . And De Voto underestimated--for once--the depths of Mark Twain's bitterness and despair

about the new American Empire when Twain closed this essay by saying he would vote for Taft and the continuation of the "monarchy."³⁵

Twain's inner turmoil is reflected in his opinion of Andrew Carnegie, whom he corresponded with as "St. Andrew," and whose largesse he willingly accepted, knowing that it was the fruits of the labor of Carnegie-abused steelworkers.

Twain wrote:

He never has but one theme, himself. . . . He is himself his one darling subject, the only subject he for the moment--the social moment--seems stupendously interested in. I think he would surely talk himself to death upon it if you would stay and listen. . . . He talks forever and ever and ever and untiringly of the attentions which have been shown to him. Sometimes they have been large attentions, most frequently they are very small ones; but no matter, no attention comes amiss to him and he likes to revel in them. . . . He is the Ancient Mariner over again; it is not possible to divert him from his subject; in your weariness and despair you try to do it whenever you think you see the chance, but it always fails; he will use your remark for his occasion and make of it a pretext to get straight upon his subject again.³⁶

If Twain's gift for acerbic invective against the millionaire-patricians of social-climbing capitalists had been post-Huckleberry Finn, critics who claim that his "familiarity with the breed had bred the contempt" would

³⁵ Maxwell Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 284.

³⁶ Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet, p. 286.

probably be correct; but as early as 1869, years before even The Gilded Age, he had written an open letter to Commodore Vanderbilt, denouncing him for obsessive and excessive greed. He closed the letter:

You observe I didn't say anything about your soul, Vanderbilt. It is because I have evidence that you haven't any. . . . Go and surprise the whole country by doing something right. Cease to do and say unworthy things, and excessively little things, for those reptile friends of yours to magnify in the papers. Snub them thus, or else throttle them.

Yours truly,

Mark Twain³⁷

The few examples cited are but a selection of the dozens available to show that Twain understood the dynamics of avarice run amok in a free-for-all, laissez-faire jungle of social Darwinism; indeed Twain knew from reflective introspection of his own motives. Jeanette Eaton sees Twain as a victim of financial and popular success, truly an artistic genius caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of fame and fortune and between responsibility duty. Not underestimating the genius and universal appeal of Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and The Mysterious Stranger, she nevertheless concludes her biography of Twain by stating that

³⁷ Mark Twain, Life As I Find It, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 42.

. . . he strikingly represents the perils besetting American artists who become famous in any field. Few of them can stand success. In this country publicity and financial rewards all too often lure gifted individuals from that lonely realm of spirit where inspiration can be received. Adulation of personality such as that received by Mark is intoxicating to the human ego. As a result the connection with the true source of artistic creation is broken.³⁸

In his introduction to Brooks's The Ordeal of Mark Twain, Malcolm Cowley wrote that "American society was largely to blame; it was emotionally uninformed, [in Brooks's words] 'in a state of arrested development . . . sealed against that experience from which literature derives its value.'"³⁹ In other words, Americans accept and revere Mark Twain on their own terms because as a nation America has been denied the long continuity of intellectual experience that only time provides.

Twain's complexity lends itself to these interpretations: to the people he is a god; to the critic, on the other hand, he is either the genius who "sold out" or the solipsistic pessimist espousing a philosophy of despair. In the writings of several critics, I sense that they feel betrayed on both counts, because, as Brooks said, "Poets and novelists and critics are the pathfinders of society; to them belongs the vision without which the people

³⁸ Eaton, p. 158.

³⁹ Malcolm Cowley, "Introduction," in Brooks, p. 6.

perish. . . . Our literature has prepared no pathways for us, our leaders [and especially Mark Twain] are lost."⁴⁰

Maxwell Geismar, in his introduction to Mark Twain and the Three R's, must have sensed the same contradictions because he writes that:

The truth is that Twain was never the horrid old man, the embittered and failed artist, the drunken cynic he was supposed to be. The myth is so consistent from his own time to ours that it almost seems he must represent some kind of literary threat, some barely concealed challenge, to our accepted literary and scholarly institutions--and that is just what he did--and does.⁴¹

As the reverential public confuses Twain with Huck and Tom, critics seem not to want to dissociate Twain the creative genius from Twain the creative capitalist. As he was a confidant, bonhomie, and fellow-traveler to millionaire plutocrats living The Gilded Age, so too was he the people's author, the king of the canaille, and still is. He was truly Fortune's favorite, admired, idolized, and revered by the masses; he was a would-be millionaire, a whiskey-drinking pal of millionaires, a beneficiary of millionaires who, because of it, refused to join the muck-rakers against the avariciousness of the Trusts exploiting

⁴⁰ Brooks, quoted by Cowley, p. 6.

⁴¹ Maxwell Geismar, Mark Twain and the Three R's (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1973), p. xvii.

the masses. He lived with a relentless, remorseless conscience that typifies this conflict. Disdaining the "Oil Trust," the "Steel Trust," the "Beef Trust," the "Railway Trust," or any of the other dozens of "Trusts" that raped, and continue to rape, the American public, Mark Twain wrote The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn as an attack on "The Religion Trust," an all-powerful Christian trust he believed had been betrayed by cupidity and stupidity combined.

Chapter III

Holy Scripture and Sir Walter Scott: Staunch Supports for Southern Slavery

In his critical essay "A Sound Heart and a Deformed Conscience," Henry Nash Smith says that:

The conflict in which Huck is involved is not that of a lower against an upper class or of an alienated fringe of outcasts against a cultivated elite. It is not the issue of frontier West versus genteel East, or of backwoods versus metropolis, but of fidelity to the uncoerced self versus the blurring attitudes caused by social conformity, by the effort to achieve status or power through exhibiting the approved forms of sensibility.¹

Using much the same interpretation, V. L. Parrington believes that Huckleberry Finn is the

. . . western philosophy of Mark Twain, a philosophy that derives from the old Naturalistic school. It is a drama of the struggle between the individual and the village mores, set in a loose picturesque framework, and exemplifying

¹ Henry Nash Smith, "A Sound Heart and a Deformed Conscience," in Mark Twain: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Henry Nash Smith (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 92.

the familiar thesis that the stuff of life springs strong and wholesome from the great common stock.²

In Parrington's view Huck is simply a child of nature who has lived close to the simple facts of life, unperverted by civilizing tyrannies straining to make him conform, to make him a "good boy." Parrington believes that Huck's schooling came from the "unfenced woods, from the folk tales of Negroes and poor whites, from queer adventures with Tom Sawyer, and from such experiences he had got a code of natural ethics."³

As far as these interpretations go they are helpful to the thesis that Twain is engaged in a far more serious work than might first appear. It will be remembered that he began Huckleberry Finn two weeks before he had completed Tom Sawyer, during a period which has been described as the happiest of his life. I believe that it was exactly at this point that Twain was finding both his creative animus and his artistic "voice." It would be helpful to compare Twain's description of the "civilizing" process with Huck's.

² Vernon Louis Parrington, "The Backwash of the Frontier--Mark Twain," from The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1930), pp. 86-101, in Mark Twain: Selected Criticism, ed. Arthur L. Scott (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1955), p. 195.

³ Parrington, p. 195.

In The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, Twain writes:

Huck Finn's wealth and the fact that he was now under the Widow Douglas' protection introduced him into society--no, dragged him into it, hurled him into it--and his sufferings were almost more than he could bear. The widow's servants kept him clean and neat, combed and brushed, and they bedded him nightly in unsympathetic sheets that had not one little spot or stain which he could press to his heart and know for a friend. He had to eat with a knife and fork; he had to use napkin, cup, and plate; he had to learn his book; he had to go to church; he had to talk so properly that speech was become insipid in his mouth; whithersoever he turned, the bars and shackles of civilization shut him in and bound him hand and foot.

He bravely bore his miseries for three weeks, and then one day turned up missing.⁴

At this point in the narrative, after some three hundred pages of third person narration, Twain finds the voice that he was to immortalize in Huckleberry Finn, the American idiom of actual speech. Near the end of Tom Sawyer, Huck now tells Tom what Twain has just reported:

"Don't talk about it, Tom. I've tried it, and it don't work; it don't work, Tom. It ain't for me; I ain't used to it. The widder's good to me, and friendly; but I can't stand them ways. She makes me get up just at the same time every morning; she makes me wash, they comb me all to thunder; she won't let me sleep in the woodshed; I got to wear them blamed clothes that just smothers me, Tom; they don't let any air git through 'em, somehow; and they're so rotten nice

⁴ Samuel Langhorne Clemens, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1962), p. 205.

that I can't set down, nor lay down, nor roll around anywher's; I hain't slid on a cellar door for--well, it 'pears to be years; I got to go to church and sweat and sweat--I hate them ornery sermons! I can't ketch a fly in there, I can't chaw. I got to wear shoes all Sunday. The widder eats by a bell; she goes to bed by a bell--everything's so awful reg'lar a body can't stand it. . . . And, dad fetch it, she prayed all the time! I never see such a woman!"⁵

As Huck continues to give his reasons for leaving "the widder's," the reader hears for the first time a faint echo of Twain's conscience; Huck says,

"Looky-here, Tom, bein' rich ain't what it's cracked up to be. It's just worry and worry and sweat and sweat, and a-wishing you was dead all the time. . . . Tom, I wouldn't ever got into all this trouble if it hadn't a been for that money."⁶

Two weeks before Twain wrote this, it is reasonable to assume because Tom Sawyer ends only two pages later, Twain had found the germ for his masterpiece: religion corrupted by money; he had also found the way to put the rhythm and phrasings of speech into print. Five centuries earlier Chaucer had expressed the same message in the Prologue to The Pardoner's Tale:

But shortly myn entente I wol devyse:
I preche of no thing but coveityse.

⁵ Clemens, Tom Sawyer, p. 206.

⁶ Clemens, Tom Sawyer, p. 206.

Therefore my theme is yet, and evere was,
Radix malorum est Cupiditas.
 Thus kan I preche agayn that same vice
 Which that I use, and that is avarice.
 (lines 423-28)

The most important factor in the life of the thirteen-year-old Huck is the formidable and possessive presence of not one, but two, mother figures, the saintly Widow Douglas and the uncompromising Miss Watson. There is little question of Huck's genuine affection for the Widow, despite her civilizing "smothering," or of his open aversion to the spinster, "a tolerable slim old maid with goggles" (p. 8). Huck has not known a mother (or, for that matter, a functional father). He never once mentions her, leaving the reader to believe that he has no recollections of her. She is referred to only once (and not by Huck) when Pap claims that, like the rest of the Finn clan, "Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died" (p. 21). And now Huck is assailed by two mother figures, one doting and affectionate, the other stern and demanding, who can read, and who read to him from the Bible. The magic of being able to decipher print is combined with the awesome majesty of the King James prose; that it should have a long-lasting effect on impressionable, literal, and credulous Huck is inevitable. In this way, then, Huck's natural ethics are conditioned and tempered by the canon of Scripture--to Huck, as well as to the women, Holy Scripture,

the very word of the Almighty Himself. This conflict of natural ethics and Christian doctrine, in this case a conflict of conscience, occurs time and again when Huck agonizes between what he believes to be right and what he knows to be right.

Huck's predicament revolves about his willingness, eventually his eagerness, to free Jim from the church-sanctioned institution of slavery. Through the Widow, Miss Watson, and the pulpit, Huck has learned that to help a slave escape from his owner is contrary to the laws of God, a sin, and a most heinous one at that, punishable by the fires of hell. In Huck's rebelliousness, Parrington sees the Missouri freethinker, Twain, himself:

The rebel Huck is no other than the rebel Mark Twain whose wrath was quick to flame up against unrighteous customs and laws of caste. If men were only honest realists--that is, if they were men and not credulous fools--how quickly the stables might be cleansed and life become decent and humane. If only the good brains could be segregated and trained in a real "man-factory" [an allusion to Hank Morgan and A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court], the history of civilization might become something the angels need not weep over as they read it. It all comes back to an honest realism that in accepting fact will clear away the superstitious fogs in which men have floundered and suffered hitherto. The one sacred duty laid on every rational being is the duty of rebellion against sham--to deny the divinity of clothes, to thrust out quack kings and priests and lords, to refuse witless loyalty to things. This creed of the rebel is written all through Mark Twain's later

work, edging his satire, and lending an Emersonian note to his individualism.⁷

As far as it goes, Parrington's interpretation is accurate; however, it takes little or no account of Twain's early despair that religion, and especially the established Christian religion, could provide either earthly happiness or eternal paradise. It is fair to say that Huck is relatively unconcerned about the horrors of hell; for him they seem to exist only in Miss Watson's "good book." But without the paralyzing terror of the punishments of hell for going against the teaching of the good book, there can be little hope for the joys of the Widow's "good place":

Sometimes the widow would take me one side and talk about Providence in a way to make a boy's mouth water; but maybe next day Miss Watson would take hold and knock it all down again. I judged I could see there was two Providences, and a poor chap would stand a considerable show with the Widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there warn't no help for him any more. I thought it all out, and I reckoned I would belong to the widow's, if he wanted me, though I couldn't make out how he was agoing to be any better off than what he was before, seeing I was so ignorant and so kind of low-down and ornery. (p. 15)

This seemingly harmless and irrelevant joke, coming very early in the book, betrays Twain's ambivalence, inconsistency, and ambiguity about matters religious. His use of

⁷ Parrington, p. 194.

the lower case "h" in the personal pronoun "he" (whose referent, obviously in the household of the Widow and Miss Watson, is Jesus) reflects the struggle between Twain's humanism, his youthful Calvinist indoctrination, and his theories of man's prospects for salvation. In other passages in the book, Twain does capitalize words whose referent is Jesus; in addition, it should be pointed out that Providence is here and everywhere else in the book capitalized. In checking several editions of the novel, including The Annotated Huckleberry Finn, a facsimile publication illustrated by E. W. Kemble, the original illustrator, and edited by Michael Patrick Hearn, I found the typography in these instances to be exactly the same, that is to say, consistently inconsistent. Huck's deprecation of the possibility of eternal salvation is misread because of its appearance in the context of humor; Twain's confusion about the subject can be read in the typesetting.

The humor of the passage conceals Twain's scathing criticism that man's religions, of whatever stripe, are so much hypocritical sham and dogmatic cant. As we have seen, Huck is a true and faithful reporter; he sees humanity as it really is; he instinctively recognizes that the King and the Duke are frauds; through Huck, Twain implies that all kings and dukes, and high priests and preachers, sycophants and acolytes are frauds, suffering from a combination of

blind vanity, avarice, and duplicity. And all in the self-professed service of God. A contrary interpretation, and where Twain is concerned there is always ambiguity, is that Huck takes on, innocently at first, but with final full knowledge and acquiescence, a Christ-like mission, the deliverance of Jim. In this context Huck's willingness "to go to hell," his adventures in a human hell, and his decision to "light out for the Territory [like Providence, capitalized] ahead of the rest" take on a very different significance.

The title of the first chapter of Huckleberry Finn, "I Discover Moses and the Bulrushers," sets both the mock-serious tone of Huck's view of religion and Twain's purpose in the novel. The capacity of humor to provide deliverance is an important theme in this novel, one that will be restated vigorously in Twain's last work of genius, The Mysterious Stranger. On the surface, the pun on "bulrushes" is a play on the Bible story of the foundling-deliverer of the Jews from Egyptian bondage and the persecution of the Pharaoh. Beneath the surface is an example of Twain's well-acknowledged reputation for scatological word-play, stating, as it does, his assessment of churchly interpreters of the Bible, the selfsame teachers of the pietistic and genteel Widow and Miss Watson, the self-serving instructors of the Scripturalized legitimizing of slavery. Twain

has still another purpose for the title: he sets up the analogy of the river-orphan Huck and the river-foundling Moses, nicely couched in the vernacular humor of the Frontier.

But even before the symbol of the mission of Moses is introduced, the reader is drenched with the image of fidgety Huck, squirming uncomfortably in the atmosphere of the efforts of the two old celibate women civilizing him in the acceptable mores of their society, both domestic and religious. Their methods have been to "clean him up" physically and, they believe, morally. Huck has been able to tolerate the procedure for three weeks in Tom Sawyer; there is no mention of time in reference to his second escape:

The widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways, and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar-hogshead again and was free and satisfied. But Tom Sawyer, he hunted me up and said he was going to start a band of robbers, and I might join if I would go back and be respectable. (p. 7)

In Huck's case, to "go back and be respectable" is definitely a retrogressive and degrading action; further, the need for surface respectability shows that Tom (as he will prove by the end of the novel) has been civilized to

contemporary religious attitudes regarding slavery. The delicious, alliterative oxymoronic phrase describing the Widow, "dismal regular and decent," and the proximity and alliteration of the words "robbers" and "respectable" cannot be dismissed--or lightly regarded--although a surface reading allows only the humorous incongruity to appear. The "dismal decent and regular" ways of the Widow threaten to smother Huck's innate freedom and encourage him to accept the mores of the village; equally, Mark Twain (as Samuel Clemens) understood that much more is stolen with "respectable," "regular," "religious" pens than with "robbers'" pistols.

Huck is teenage grumpy about the Widow's habit of insisting upon the saying of Grace before meals; he considers it both unnecessary and meaningless, a time-consuming and unctuous ritual--of, at best, questionable unction. In comparison to the freedom of Huck's barrel-lodgings, he finds himself in the Frontier equivalent of a Christian boarding academy. He gripes:

Well, then, the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time. When you got to the table you couldn't go right to eating, but you had to wait for the widow to tuck down her head and grumble a little over the victuals, though there warn't really anything the matter with them. That is, nothing only everything was cooked by itself. (p. 7)

Twain's description of the Widow "tucking down her head and grumbling" is humorous; Huck's griping adds to the humor because inside he is "grumbling over the victuals," too. The passage is introduced with the ringing of the dinner bell (the church bell calling the favored faithful to share in the fruits of the land?). To the young heathen, it is simply the signal to eat; but behind is the elder heathen, Twain himself, grumbling about rituals, caste, and religious obeisance. Twain's faith in secular democratic ideals is neatly concealed in Huck's "victuals" metaphor. Compartmentalization--everything neatly cooked by itself and served in separate platters--like institutionalization and rigorous religious class structures, is distasteful and unnecessary to Huck, and, to Twain, inimically artificial and repressive. "In a barrel of odds and ends," says Huck (relishing the contrast to the Widow's culinary compartmentalization), "it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and things go better" (p. 7).

To emphasize the religious atmosphere surrounding Huck, Twain, supper now over and Grace--"grumbling"--long forgotten, itemizes another of the Widow's "dismal regular and decent" habits, the nightly reading of the Bible. Huck, of course, is a captive audience of the process.

After dinner she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by-and-by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people. (p. 1)

Huck's disparagements of the rituals of religion, the Grace-saying and the reading of the Bible--apparently offhand comments from an uneducated and credulous thirteen-year-old, just a simple, lovable, natural heathen, ignorant of Scripture--mask the depth of contempt (of the author) for religiosity in general and the hypocrisy of self-righteous, fundamentalist gentility worshipfully wallowing in self-serving, sanctimonious, ceremonial cant. The seemingly superfluous remark, "I don't take no stock in dead people," is a frontal assault on the fundamental underpinnings of the Christian religion, the idea that it is through the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ that man receives the promise of salvation. To Twain, Huck's aside means "no stock in all dead people," thereby including the Son of God.

Further, the implications of Huck's innocently blasphemous credo allow for two interpretations, both negative. First, "no stock" is worth taking in dead people, because if they do exist, they exist in a form unknown to Huck, no stranger to death and dying. Second, "no stock" is worth taking in dead people because in Huck's imagination and consciousness they simply do not exist in any form; human beings

(Twain implies) are exactly like other forms of nature in an eternal cycle of birth, life, and death. As stated earlier, not even once does Huck mention his mother, or, for that matter, any longing for her. When it is reported that Pap has been found drowned, Huck's reaction is singularly afilial:

Well, about this time he was found in the river drowned, about twelve mile above the town, so people said. They judged it was him, anyway; said this drowned man was just his size, and was ragged, and had uncommon long hair--which was all like pap--but they couldn't make nothing out of the face, because it had been in the water so long it warn't much like a face at all. They said he was floating on his back in the water. They took him and buried him on the bank. But I warn't comfortable long, because I happened to think of something. I knowed mighty well that a drowned man don't float on his back, but on his face. So I knowed, then, that this warn't pap, but a woman dressed up in a man's clothes. So I was uncomfortable again. I judged the old man would turn up again by-and-by, though I wished he wouldn't. (p. 15)

The novel, for all its humor, is replete with death and the images of death. At thirteen, Huck is well aware of dead people and the possibility of dying. He stages his own "murder." He is witness to the cold-blooded executions of Buck Grangerford and his cousin. He has seen the good-natured old drunk Boggs cut down in a show of arrogance by Colonel Sherburne. Huck's ability to dismiss these horrors in a relatively short time is uncanny, and, on analysis, probably unnatural. He is as close to Buck as a beloved

brother, and he is obviously saddened when he retrieves Buck's body from the river. The scene is as close as Twain will allow Huck to approach sentimentality:

When I got down out of the tree, I crept along down the river bank a piece, and found the two bodies laying in the edge of the water, and tugged at them till I got them ashore; I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me. (p. 94)

After Buck's death, however, Huck never again mentions his name. Like his mother, the thieves on the Walter Scott, as will Boggs and Pap, Buck, "being gone, you see," is no longer worth taking stock in.

The difference between the living and the dead is emphasized immediately after the scene when Huck and Jim are reunited. They return to the safety of the river where they agree that "there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (p. 95). Critic Sculley Bradley comments on the significance of Huck's words:

The two chapters devoted to the Grangerford episode contrast the idyllic and picturesque description of the family and their home with the hideous and vainglorious inhumanity of the feud, which even Huck's experience has not prepared him to stomach. In addition, there is the subtle realization of Twain's continuous contrast of the river with the shore and simple nature with human nature, epitomized here in Huck's final comment. (p. 95)

This contrast between "simple nature and human nature" is vividly depicted as soon as the two fugitives are back on the raft. The resolution of the Grangerford feud ended Chapter XVIII. Chapter XIX begins with a long description of the river, with Huck's opening words: "two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely" (p. 95). This description, as close to pure poetry in prose as can be found in all of American literature, serves two purposes: it reinforces the divine influence of the river upon Huck, of Nature's influence upon Huck; and it quickly proves that, under the influence of the living, Huck truly takes "no stock in no dead people."

Twain follows this comment with another of Huck's irreverences, this time when the Widow prohibits him from smoking his corncob pipe:

Pretty soon I wanted to smoke, and asked the widow to let me, but she wouldn't. She said it was a mean practice and wasn't clean, and I must try not to do it anymore. That is just the way with some people. They get down on a thing when they don't know nothing about it. Here she was abothering about Moses, which was no kin to her, and no use to anybody, being gone you see, yet finding a power of fault with me for doing a thing that had some good in it. And she took snuff, too; of course that was all right, because she done it herself. (p. 2)

It is easy to miss Huck's (read Twain's) irreligiosity here: the issue seems to be tobacco. Huck's conclusion that Moses

was "no kin to her and no use to anybody" is softened and made palatable by the addition of the colloquial "being gone you see," "being gone" being an acceptable euphemism for "dead" and going somewhere; and for the faithful, of course, this would obviously imply heaven. However, interpreted straightforwardly, Huck's casual dismissal of the value of Moses is a restatement of his disregard of the importance of life after death, the very cornerstone of Christianity. Huck's comment allows Twain to ridicule out of the mouths of babes the Judaeo-Christian ethic and the Bible as little more than meretricious dissimulation--only longing, self-serving self-deception, as it were, mere holy humbug. That it is not read that way is testimony to the accuracy of Shaw's insight: Twain has to put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking. Hidden behind the tobacco smoke-screen, also, is the introduction of the theme of appearance versus reality, one that will follow Huck all the way down his long journey on the Mississippi. The saintly Widow dips snuff, which is "all right because she done it herself." Twain is mocking those who make the argument that slavery is all right because Christians, supported by the Bible, "do it theirownself."

Once again it is well to be reminded that Twain began the book before he had finished Tom Sawyer, where even the

most perceptive reader will have to strain to find blasphemy.

He wrote to Howells:

Began another boy's book--more to be at work than anything else. I have written 400 pages on it--therefore it is nearly half done. It is Huck Finn's Autobiography. I like it only tolerably well, as far as I have got, and possibly may pigeonhole or burn the MS when it is done.⁸

To his ultimate good fortune, of course, he did not burn the manuscript; I believe he never burned any manuscript, but he did pigeonhole them, and he pigeonholed this one.

Kaplan writes:

He worked on it again in 1879 or 1880, pigeonholed it again, and finally finished it in 1884, eight years and seven books after he first began it, a wandering process of creation that is a book-length story in itself. In the first sixteen or so chapters that Clemens wrote that first summer and liked "only tolerably well," he set Huck and Jim afloat on their raft, their fragile island of freedom between the two shores of society. When they passed Cairo, Illinois, in the night, the last free-soil outpost, Mark Twain found himself faced with an enormously difficult problem of plot and structure. He solved that problem with a persistence that reveals his deep involvement with the book as a literary artist and as a man desperately trying to resolve his own bewilderments about conscience and the restraints and freedom of the community.⁹

⁸ Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Letters, ed. Albert Bigelow Paine (New York: Harper & Bros., 1917), p. 283.

⁹ Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 197.

When Twain first stopped writing the novel, he had the raft-borne escapees all but permanently terminated; the image of their imminent and impending, if not inescapable, demise is significant:

Often they [up-river steamboats] do that and try to see how close they can come without touching. . . . She was a big one, and she was coming in a hurry, too, looking like a black cloud with rows of glow-worms around it; but all of a sudden she bulged out big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us. There was a yell at us, and a jingling of bells to stop the engines, a pow-wow of cussing, and a whistling of steam--and as Jim went overboard on one side and I on the other, she come smashing straight through the raft. (p. 78)

First it must be remembered that absolutely everything on the river was a potential danger to Huck, as a runaway vagabond, and to Jim, as a runaway slave. This danger is in the form of a "monster," "big and scary" with "red-hot teeth." Huck dives to the near-bottom of the Mississippi to escape it, evoking the memory of another naturally clever wanderer, the "wily" Odysseus, who similarly had adventures with sea monsters and who had to descend into the underworld to learn of his fate and of his eventual return to Ithaca. I believe that Twain was well aware his "other boy's story" was taking on epic proportions, and that, unlike Homer, he had no gods (in fact no God) to call upon to assist his endangered and beleaguered heroes. Perhaps he was equally

aware that the story was taking control of him and that he was temporarily at a loss for a logical plot extension of an escape story with a fugitive Negro slave heading South. Kaplan, while affirming Twain's ostensible happiness, health, and prosperity, points out that Twain was suffering from inner turmoil precisely at this time:

That Mark Twain wrote even as much of Huckleberry Finn as he did during the summer of 1876 is proof, if any were needed, that the book sprang from a deep inner necessity. Chronically subject to rages and depressions which at other times might have stopped him altogether, he managed to work on it at the same time he looked on helplessly while Tom Sawyer, the augur of a decline in his fortunes, headed for disaster.¹⁰

The "deep inner necessity" to write Huckleberry Finn had placed Twain on a collision course with his conscience and his desire for acceptance in fashionable, hypocritical Hartford. To continue on course, glorifying an ignorant boy and a minstrel-show "darkie" rapidly developing into hero status, in an assault against Christianity and his Christian neighbors, whose favor at that very moment he was currying and coveting, must have seemed the most suicidally self-destructive activity possible. And so the manuscript, never in danger of being burned, was pigeonholed.

¹⁰ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 199.

Twain's conscience, however, would not allow the book to be permanently pigeonholed; his literary and financial successes listed earlier made his Hartford neighbors less formidable. By 1884, he was ready to finish what he knew was an American masterpiece, and his personal commitment to the truth. When he resumes the narrative, however, Huck and Jim are not only in hostile territory, but separated. In addition, sixteen chapters have passed since Huck has been associated with his Biblical counterpart, Moses. He solves both problems (Huck's association with Moses and the rejoining with Jim) at the Grangerford plantation. As the novel takes on a fresh impetus, and at the very first instance when Huck and Buck Grangerford are alone, the association with deliverance is reasserted, this time by using a humorous riddle popular at the time.

When we got upstairs to his room, [Buck] got me a coarse shirt and a roundabout and pants of his, and I put them on. While I was at it he asked me what my name was, but before I could tell him, he started telling me about a bluejay and a young rabbit he had caught in the woods day before yesterday, and he asked me where Moses was when the candle went out. I said I didn't know, and hadn't heard about it, before, no way.

"Well, guess," he says.

"How'm I to guess," says I, "when I never heard tell about it before?"

"But you can guess, can't you? It's just as easy."

"Which candle?" I says.

"Why, any candle," he says.

"I don't know where he was," says I, "where was he?"

"Why, he was in the dark! That's where he was!"
 "Well, if you knowed where he was, what did you ask me for?"
 "Why, blame it, it's a riddle, don't you see?" (p. 81)

This delightful vignette, though it contributes absolutely nothing to the plot movement, serves several purposes in the novel. It establishes the atmosphere between these two soon-to-be fast friends. It makes the death of Buck more poignant and explains Huck's soul-felt grief for him. It sets up Buck's ability to explain "feuding" to Huck. The scene serves as still another testimonial to Huck's benign credulity and justifies our faith in him as a truthful and literal reporter. Most important, it reminds the reader of Huck's still unfinished Moses-like mission to deliver his then-missing raft-mate out of slavery. And finally, for Twain's purpose, concealed in the gentle humor is the author's wry comment on the validity of the Bible, as well as the possibility of eternal salvation, the possibility of life after death, as promised by several religions--but in this instance, by the inheritor of the Old Testament, the Christian religion.

In this context, the "Moses Riddle" allows for several interpretations, all connected with despair. If the "candle going out" is equated with "denied light," denied life, then Moses in the dark (that is, dead, "being gone you see"),

the reader is reminded, is thereby not worth "taking no stock in." Further, "Moses in the dark" can be interpreted in the sense in which "in the dark" is "without knowledge," without information, without truth, and to Twain's purpose, without the Truth with a capital T. Thus, he implies, Moses the prophet is in the dark--all prophets are in the dark--and prophets without light, without Truth, are truly the blind leading the blind, good only for humor, worthy of the ridicule of the riddle, certainly not worth taking stock in. Twain's suggestion that the deliverer of the Jews out of Egypt, the deliverer of the Ten Commandments, virtually the foundation of fundamentalist Christianity, is little more than a pathetic joke is an indictment of religion.

Religion requires ritual. Ritual reinforces faith. The Christian religion requires some sort of group attendance, e.g. the Mass of Catholicism, church functions, prayer-meetings, revivals, retreats. Twain attacks practically all forms of church-going, from funeral services to evangelical prayer-meetings. While with the devout Widow and Miss Watson, Huck never mentions attending church; his first mention of actually participating in a church service occurs while he is living virtually as a member of the Grangerford family, and shortly after this last scene with Buck. The Grangerfords, it will be remembered, have been

feuding with another aristocratic Christian Southern family, the Shepherdsons. No one seems to know how long the feud has been going on, or, for that matter, what started it. Huck is puzzled by the intensity of hate between the two families; he asks:

"Has this one been going on long, Buck?"
 "Well, I reckon! It started thirty year ago, or som'ers along there. There was trouble 'bout something, and then a lawsuit to settle it; and the suit went agin one of the men, and so he up and shot the man that won the suit--which he would naturally do, of course. Anybody would."
 "What was the trouble about, Buck?--land?"
 "I reckon maybe--I don't know."
 "Well, who done the shooting? Was it a Grangerford, or a Shepherdson?"
 "Laws, how do I know? It was so long ago."
 "Don't anybody know?"
 "Oh, yes, Pa knows, I reckon, and some of the other old people; but they don't know what the row was about in the first place." (p. 89)

There is more than surface irony in a mysterious, murderous feud about something no one can identify; its inclusion in the book has absolutely nothing to do with the random plot of the novel, but it is vitally significant to the theme of the book, the hypocrisy of self-professed followers of the teachers of Christ. In addition, it contributes strongly to the appearance versus reality theme: almost nothing on the plantation, including the furnishings of the house, is what it appears to be. The bloody resolution of the feud indicates the depth of Twain's contempt for Phariseeism.

The Grangerford-Shepherdson feud has loud echoes of the Biblical account of Cain and Abel, the primal murder. Twain's use of the Genesis passages describing the fratricide is, to his purpose, brilliant, and most certainly not fortuitous. Though quite brief, Genesis 4:1-15 is generally rich in material suitable to Twain's purpose. Twain knew the Bible; for him it was a lifelong study. Edward Wagenecht, in his excellent study, Mark Twain: The Man and His Work, points out that:

Mark Twain never wrote an essay on "Books That Have Influenced Me"; if he had, he must surely have begun with the Bible. Professor [Henry A.] Pockmann counted 124 Biblical allusions in his writing--eighty-nine of them to be sure in Innocents--far more than to any other book or writer. But not only does Mark Twain quote the Bible; he burlesques it; he takes the reader's knowledge of it absolutely for granted; he derives from it in every conceivable way. . . . The beauty and simplicity of Mark Twain's style at its best owe much to that well of English undefiled.¹¹

In order to preclude the possibility that the reader might miss these allusions to Genesis, Twain advertises the Biblical metaphor in the very names of the combatant Christian families, the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. It is reasonable to believe that church-going, nineteenth-century, Christian Americans would receive this signal and be

¹¹ Edward Wagenecht, Mark Twain: The Man and His Work (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1967), p. 62.

familiar with these verses:

And Adam knew his wife, and she conceived,
and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man
from the LORD.

And again she bare his brother Abel. And
Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a
tiller of the ground. (Genesis 4:1-2)

In Twain's metaphorical use of these passages, the Grangerfords represent the first-born of Adam and Eve, Cain.

"Granger" means "farmer"; thus the Grangerfords stand for the original farmer, the original "tiller of the ground." Even more obvious is the name Shepherdson, who represents Abel, the original "keeper of sheep." Thus arrayed the two families represent any or all of the following several murdering, warring, opposing, or "feuding" factions.

First, the feuding families can symbolize the Northern and Southern forces just recently engaged in a prolonged and murderously self-destructive Civil War. For the soldiers in the trenches, those actually engaged in hand-to-hand combat, the followers and conscripts of each government, those actually doing the dying, there is the bitterness of senseless death. One recalls Buck's explanation of the feud: "Oh, yes, Pa knows, I reckon, and some of the older people; but they don't know what the row was about in the first place" (p. 89). Both forces were for all practical purposes all-white, virtually all Christian, and in this the irony is double deep. Professing Christianity and

considering the Bible the sacred and revealed word of God, Northern and Southern forces interpreted this Genesis passage in diametrically opposite ways. The irony was not lost upon Twain, the "most Southernized Northerner in Christendom."

God, in these passages, rejects Cain's offering, incurring Cain's (the Grangerfords') "very wrath." The Grangerfords represent the South, whose main resource was the land and whose chief product was cotton. It is to be remembered that the Grangerfords (the South) precipitate the heating-up of the feud, following the elopement of Miss Sophia and Harney. And indeed it was South Carolina who fired the first shots on Fort Sumter that started the Civil War, April 12, 1861. In this analogy, God (Christianity), by fomenting in Cain both envy and anger, becomes a factor in the murder of Abel.

And the LORD said unto Cain, Where is
Abel, thy brother. And he said, I know
not. Am I my brother's keeper?
(Genesis 4:9)

To the Abolitionist elements in the North this passage was interpreted as a command, an injunction, from the Almighty Christian Divinity Himself, to provide immediate deliverance of the Negroes from the bondage of Southern slave-holding plantation owners. This attitude of Christian Northern fervor is best exemplified in the person of the radical

Abolitionist John Brown, whose attempts to free the slaves independently and almost single-handedly, according to Louis Filler, "cost a number of lives and helped indirectly to bring on the Civil War."¹² As a fanatical Christian counseled by Scripture, Brown, reports Filler, "led an expedition to Pottawatomie Creek, where his men brutally murdered five proslavery settlers. A small number of bloody battles broke out between Free State men and those who wanted slavery."¹³ So much did he detest the institution of slavery, Brown even contemplated invading the South with his radical Christian followers as his militia. Needing weapons, he finally led an attack on the United States Arsenal at Harpers Ferry in what was then western Virginia. The date was October 16, 1859, only six short months before Gen. Pierre Beauregard demanded the surrender of Fort Sumter. The next day, however, "the local militia bottled up Brown with his dead, wounded, and a few prisoners in the arsenal."¹⁴ Forced to surrender, he gave himself up to the Union commander, who believed in his cause as much as Brown did his. The name of the Union colonel was Robert E. Lee.

¹² Louis Filler, "John Brown," World Book Encyclopedia (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corp., 1957), p. 534.

¹³ Filler, p. 534.

¹⁴ Filler, p. 534.

Convicted of treason, Brown was hanged some three weeks before Christmas, 1859. According to Filler,

. . . the event inspired Ralph Waldo Emerson to say that Brown would make the gallows "as glorious as a cross." Union troops, when the Civil War began, sang:

"John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in
the grave,
His soul goes marching on."¹⁵

Certainly Southern Christian zealots defending the institution of slavery were equal in their violent fanaticism; still the idea persists that Twain believed they were manipulated, manipulated by the Christian pulpits for money: slavery for salvation--and silver. In Huckleberry Finn, Twain's disgust is hidden in the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud. In A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (a book still worth reading, but certainly not one of his best, published just four years after Huckleberry Finn), Twain gives a more prosaic description of the manipulative process:

It reminded me of a time thirteen centuries away, when the "poor whites" of our South who were always despised and frequently insulted by the slave-lords around them and who owed their base condition simply to the presence of slavery in their midst, were yet pusillanimously ready to side with the slave-lords in all political moves for the upholding and perpetuating of slavery, and did also finally shoulder their muskets and pour out their

¹⁵ Filler, p. 534.

lives in an effort to prevent the destruction of that very institution which degraded them. . . . This same infernal law existed in our own South in my own time . . . and under it hundreds of freemen who could not prove they were freemen had been sold into lifelong slavery without the circumstance making any particular impression upon me; but the minute the law and the auction block came into my personal experience, a thing which had been merely improper became suddenly hellish. Well, that's the way we are made.¹⁶

The very same Biblical passages which animated John Brown seem to have provided Robert E. Lee and other Christian elements in the South support for the institution of slavery. God, through the Bible, sanctions and justifies slavery; not to support this institution would be to enlist in the service of the Anti-Christ. This is the lesson Huck learned from the Widow's "good book"; it is precisely the reason his conscience is tormenting him. Genesis continues:

And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground.

And now thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand.

When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. (Genesis 4:10-12)

As expounded in a thousand Christian pulpits in the South, the Genesis curse on Negroes, "When thou tillest the

¹⁶ Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (New York: Nelson Doubleday, n.d.), p. 203.

ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength," was welcome Gospel: it both aptly suited and accurately described the condition of Southern agriculture, as well as Southern religious culture. Negroes tilled the ground, but its strength belonged to the plantation owners. But for Mark Twain, what a happy and propitious translation is that last clause, "a fugitive and a vagabond shall thou be in the earth." What better description so aptly, so accurately, and so tersely characterizes his lowborn Southern heroes, Huck and Jim. Jim is a fugitive for both his freedom and his life; Huck, from what the reader can glean from Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, has been a vagabond for all of his life, and at the end of the novel seems anxious to resume the role once more. Twain seems to be asking, "Are these two innocents the unwitting martyrs, 'poor white' and Negro slave, the cursed of the God of the Bible, the fugitives and vagabonds driven and hunted from Christ's church?" Cain himself repeats the phrase:

And Cain said unto the LORD, My punishment is greater than I can bear.

Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in this earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me.

And the LORD said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.

And Cain went out from the presence of the
LORD, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the
east of Eden. (Genesis 4:13-16)

The inscrutable ambiguity of the "mark" set upon Cain by the Lord was conveniently explained by Southern Christian ministers as the pigment of Negro skin. Being driven "from the presence of the Lord," driven from white society, from the social acceptance of the true believers of God and the Bible, hardly requires discussion. But the neatness of the curse, "When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength," could not better describe the miserable condition of black servitude supporting the unconscionable wealth (King Cotton from the ground) of the white Christian slaveholding class. Verily, in terms of both economics and religion--verily, this was true Scripture revealed.

The irony of the phrase "my brother's keeper" certainly was not lost upon Twain: Jim is both the symbolic father and brother denied Huck. Jim almost always refers to him as "chile," and when Huck saves Jim from the bounty hunters (once again in the image of the wily Odysseus using his wits to foil a more formidable adversary) by employing the small-pox "stretcher" on them, Jim exclaims, "But lawsy, how you did 'em, Huck! Dat wuz de smartes' dodge! I tell you, chile, I 'speck it save' ole Jim--ole Jim ain't ever gwyne to forgit you for dat, honey" (p. 76). Because of his wits

and his whiteness, Huck, willingly or not, has truly become Jim's "keeper"--his symbolic brother.

In its most literal sense a slave-owner is also a "keeper" of men, and a most defensive and jealous one at that. "Am I my brother's keeper?" fell not upon deaf ears south of the line that divides Pennsylvania from Maryland. Nor was the power of this phrase--and its implicit injunction--lost upon Northern Abolitionist belligerents who interpreted the words in what they considered its more Christian sense of "guardian" or "protector." Jim was aware of the strength of this group and unwittingly fuels Huck's raging conscience when he tells Huck that if his children's master would not sell them back to him and his wife, "they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them" (p. 73).

To Twain, the arguments were equally invalid: feuds, wars--like a latter-day Mercutio, he seems to say "A plague o' both your houses!" He had a brief, two-week experience as an officer in a rag-tag unit of the Confederate army which he described in an essay titled "The Private History of a Campaign That Failed." The story is interesting for its self-revelations, but it must be considered apocryphal: nowhere is the incident Twain relates corroborated. But as the son of a man who had owned two slaves and as a democrat who detested slavery, Twain's account in "The Private

History" is in keeping with the lifelong ambivalence of the man himself. He writes, conjuring up visions of Huck and Tom and the "robber gang":

Several of us got together in a secret place by night and formed ourselves into a military company. . . . I was made second lieutenant. We had no first lieutenant. . . . There were fifteen of us. By the advice of an innocent connected with organization we called ourselves the Marion Rangers. . . . The young fellow who proposed this title was perhaps a fair sample of the kind of stuff we were made of. He was young, ignorant, good-natured, well-meaning, trivial, full of romance, and given to the reading of chivalric novels and singing forlorn love ditties.¹⁷

The romance of war, the Tom Sawyer fun of "ambuscading," was soon and forever lost upon the newly commissioned second lieutenant. In a defensive posture in Missouri, the group somehow believed that they were under assault by an unidentified horseback rider, quickly surmised to be a "Yankee" spy. Without attempting to stop and identify him, in a volley, they shot and killed him. By the time Twain reached him,

He was lying on his back with his arms abroad, his mouth was open and his chest heaving with long gasps, and his white shirt-front was all splashed with blood. The thought shot through me that I was a murderer, that I had killed a

¹⁷ Mark Twain, "A Private History of a Campaign That Failed," in The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard De Voto (Dallas, Pa.: Offset Paperback Manufacturers, 1979), p. 121.

man, a man who had never done me any harm [a line straight out of Huckleberry Finn]. That was the coldest sensation that ever went through my marrow. I was down by him in a moment, helplessly stroking his forehead [in the image of the sixteen-year-old daughter of the good-natured old drunk Boggs after he had been cold-bloodedly murdered by the ascetic, aristocratic Colonel Sherburne], and I would have given anything then--my own life freely [in the image of Huck burying Buck Grangerford] to make him again what he had been five minutes before.¹⁸

The similarity of images from Huckleberry Finn is expectable: "The Private History" was published in the same year, 1885. Twain's conscience at the time has been "stirring him up" much like Huck's. He concludes the piece:

The man was not in uniform and was not armed. He was a stranger in the country, that was all we ever found out about him. The thought of him got to preying upon me every night; I could not get rid of it. I could not drive it away, the taking of that unoffending life seemed such a wanton thing. And it seemed an epitome of war, that all war must be just the killing of strangers against whom you feel no personal animosity, strangers whom in other circumstances you would help if you found them in trouble, and would help you if you needed it. . . . I could have become a soldier myself if I waited. I had got part of it learned, I knew more about retreating than the man who invented retreating.¹⁹

The innocent who titled the Marion Rangers, "young, ignorant, good-natured, well-meaning, trivial, full of

¹⁸ Twain, "Private History," p. 139.

¹⁹ Twain, "Private History," p. 142.

romance, and given to the reading of chivalric novels and forlorn love ditties," is a caricature of what Twain believed to be the young Southern male enamored of the writings of Sir Walter Scott. Next to the Bible, he blamed Scott's writings for the ardent fervor of Southern patriotism; after all, who can deny the power of patriotic guilt inspired by Scott's poem "Breathes There the Man"?

Breathes there the man with soul so dead
 Who never to himself hath said,
 This is my own, my native land!
 Whose heart hath ne'er within him burned,
 As home his footsteps he hath turned
 From wandering on a foreign strand?
 If such there breathe, go mark him well;
 For him no minstrel raptures swell;
 High though his titles, proud his name,
 Boundless his wealth as wish can claim.
 Despite those titles, power, and pelf,
 The wretch concentrated all in self,
 Living, shall forfeit fair renown,
 And, doubly dying, shall go down
 To the vile dust from whence he sprung,
 Unwept, unhonored and unsung.

What politician, what demagogue, what evangelist could want more than that? "Woe betide," I believe Twain would have said, "draft-age males when those lines are matched with martial music."

Twain's resentment of Scott has been long-standing before the publication of Huckleberry Finn. In Chapter XLVI of Life on the Mississippi, titled "Enchantments and

Enchanters," Twain wrote that:

Sir Walter has got the advantage of the gentlemen of the cowl and the rosary. . . . His medieval business, supplemented with monsters and oddities, and the pleasant creatures from fairyland, is finer to look at than the poor fantastic inventions and performances of the reveling rabble of the priests' day [Ash Wednesday] and serves quite as well, perhaps, to emphasize the day [Mardi Gras] and admonish men that the grace line between the worldly season and the holy one is reached.²⁰

Twain links Scott with religion in an especially bitter diatribe in this chapter; what is truly ironic is how the two writers shared similar financial ambitions, failed, and recovered through their artistic creations; but before his own particular setbacks, Twain attacked the author of Ivanhoe vigorously:

Then comes Sir Walter with his enchantments, and by his single might checks this wave of progress, and even turns it back, sets the world in love with dreams and phantoms; with decayed and swinish forms of religion; with decayed and degraded systems of government; with the sillinesses and emptinesses, sham grandeurs, sham gauds and sham chivalries of a brainless and worthless long-vanished society. He did measureless harm; more real and lasting harm, perhaps, than any other individual that ever wrote. . . . In our South they flourish pretty forcefully still. . . . It was Sir Walter who made every gentlemen in the South a Major or a Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war, and it was he, also, who made these gentlemen value these

²⁰ Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 265.

bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste down there, and also reverence for rank and caste, and pride and pleasure in them. Enough is laid on slavery, without fathering upon it these creations and contributions of Sir Walter.

Sir Walter had so large a hand in making Southern character . . . that he is in a great measure responsible for the war. . . . The Southerner of the American Revolution owned slaves; so did the Southerner of the Civil War; but the former resembles the latter as an Englishman resembles a Frenchman. The change of character can be traced rather more easily to Sir Walter's influence than to that of any other thing or person. . . . A curious exemplification of the power of a single book is shown in the effects wrought by Don Quixote and those wrought by Ivanhoe. The first swept the world's admiration for the medieval chivalry-silliness out of existence; and the other restored it. As far as our South is concerned, the good work done by Cervantes is pretty nearly a dead letter, so effectively has Scott's pernicious work undermined it.²¹

It is true that the fever of patriotism generated by Scott's glorifications of medieval feudalism raged in the American South, but, in the words of Walter Houghton, "The link between Tory politics and heroic literature can . . . be found in conservative circles of the middle class. Ruskin, to take the most famous example, began his Praeterita with a defiant profession of faith:

I am, and my father was before me a violent Tory of the old school;--Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's. I name these two out of the numberless great Tory writers,

²¹ Twain, Life on the Mississippi, p. 267.

because they were my own two masters. I had Walter Scott's novels, and the Iliad (Pope's translation), for constant reading when I was a child.²²

Thomas Carlyle was equally affected by the writings of Scott; he wrote:

Might we not say, Scott in the new vesture of the nineteenth century, was intrinsically very much the old fighting Borderer of prior centuries; the kind of man Nature did of old make in that birthland of his? In the saddle, with the foray-spear, he would have acquitted himself as he did at the desk with his pen. . . . He too could have fought at Redswire, cracking crowns with the fiercest, if that had been the task; could have harried the cattle in Tynedale, repaying injury with compound interest; a right sufficient captain of men. A man without qualms or fantasticalities; a hard-headed, sound-hearted man, of joyous robust temper, looking to the main chance, and fighting direct thitherward; valde stalwartus homo!²³

If Scott's novels could have generated such zeal in Ruskin and Carlyle, "there ain't no telling what he [Scott] could a done by-and-by" (as Huck says of Emeline Grangerford and her romantic poetry) with third and fourth generation plantation owners affecting a white Southern genteel Christianity aristocracy.

²² John Ruskin, quoted in Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), p. 326.

²³ Thomas Carlyle, quoted in Houghton, p. 206.

However, that Sir Walter Scott should shoulder so much blame for the Civil War is, at best, highly questionable; still a case can be made for Twain's thesis. Carl Sandberg, in his definitive biography Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, wrote:

Into Richmond streamed regiments from all parts of the South. The cry in the South, "On to Washington!" . . . Among the troops at Richmond were farmers and hillmen who had never owned a slave nor an acre of ground, and young men from the First Families where a thousand acres and a hundred slaves was the unit. Dapper companies with shining blouses, brass buttons, uniform rifles of recent make, were regimented with other companies in butternut jeans, carrying shotguns and squirrel rifles.

"I was introduced to several privates by their captain, who told me they were worth from \$100,000 to half a million dollars each," wrote J. B. Jones, diarist in the Richmond War Department. . . . Russell, of the London Times, wrote, "Secession is the fashion here. Young ladies sing for it; old ladies pray for it; young men are dying to fight for it; old men are ready to demonstrate it."²⁴

Michael Patrick Hearn writes that "Twain argued that it was this residue of this 'Sir Walter Scott' disease which had kept the South from progressing after [emphasis mine] the Civil War."²⁵ In The American Claimant, published seven years after Huckleberry Finn, Twain continued this

²⁴ Carl Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln: The War Years, I (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1939), 238.

²⁵ Michael Patrick Hearn, ed., The Annotated Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1981), p. 139.

attack on Scott; in this stilted and contrived work, justifiably one of Twain's least-read books, Colonel Sellers returns with a rehash of much the same diatribe that appeared in Life on the Mississippi. I would have hoped that Twain had not written Sellers' speech: there is no sense in beating a dead chevalier.

The difference between art and polemic is illustrated in Chapter XIII of Huckleberry Finn where Twain metaphorically dismisses the "medieval-chivalric sillinesses and emptinesses" of Scott's writings by the simple expedient of naming a wrecked steamboat after him. The facts that the Walter Scott's last passengers are thieves and cutthroats and that the boat itself is an otherwise abandoned derelict sinking in the middle of a then-turbulent American river express the contempt that Twain feels for "Sir Walter." And its humor, albeit self-satisfied, smug humor, is far more effective than withering, redundant vitriol. Huck says:

But take it all around, I was feeling ruther comfortable on accounts of taking all this trouble for that gang, for not many would a done it. I wished the widow knowed about it. I judged she would be proud of me for helping these rascallions, because rascallions and dead beats is the kind the widow and good people take the most interest in.

Well, before long, here comes the wreck, dim and husky, sliding along down! A kind of cold shiver went through me, and then I struck out for her. She was very deep, and I see in a minute there warn't much chance

for anybody being alive in her. I pulled around her and hollered a little, but there wasn't any answer; all dead still. I felt a little heavy-hearted about the gang, but not much, for I reckoned if they could stand it, I could. (p. 63)

In the space of approximately 150 words, Huck has conveyed a great deal: he has shown us his courage and his compassion; his remarks have allowed Twain to editorialize on "rapscallions and dead beats," people whom the Widow and "good" people take the most interest in; the gang is gone; the Walter Scott and all it stands for are gone. And Huck (read Twain) smugly assesses the damage with a eulogy, "I reckoned if they could stand it, I could." The gang, "rapscallions" or predators like the King and the Duke, are those who use loyalty and religion to prey upon the gullible in the name of patriotism and God; the "dead-beats" are those who reside in the government or the church because they have nothing to contribute. The Widow and the other good people who are interested in saving either type are gulls who cannot tell a condor from a canary, and Twain (through Huck) is laughing at them all, and miraculously has got us laughing, too.

The romantic writings of Sir Walter Scott catalyzed the patriotic fervor of the South; the Christian church and the Bible supported the religious zealotry with which men are ready, willing, and eager to die for a holy cause. As

stated earlier, religion requires ritual, which usually means some group activity where learning and blessings are exchanged, usually in the context of money. Huck's first description of attending a church service, amazingly enough, does not mention offerings, collections, or pledges. Twain cannot conceal his contempt and disgust in the scene in which Huck attends church with the Grangerfords. Buck, it will be remembered, has just outlined some of the more vividly grisly aspects of "feuding." Huck says:

Next Sunday we all went to church, about three mile, everybody a-horseback. The men took their guns along, so did Buck, and kept them between their knees or stood them handy against the wall. The Sheperdsons done the same. It was pretty ornery preaching--all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness; but everybody said it was a good sermon, and they all talked it over going home and had such a powerful lot to say about faith and good works and free grace and preforeordination, and I don't know what all, that it did seem to me to be one of the roughest Sundays I had run across yet. (p. 90)

Huck's complaint that the day was one of the "roughest" Sundays he had run across yet, on the surface, is read in the same context as his concern about the Widow's concern for Moses, "being no kin to her, and no use to anybody, being gone you see." It is humorous to imagine a thirteen-year-old, hot and bored and confined to a hard bench, persevering through an interminably long discourse on testament treacle. Twain, however, using the symbol of the

Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, la crème de la crème of the local Christian aristocracy, is reviling the hypocrisy of a Christian assemblage of brethren, gathered in the name of the Prince of Peace, armed like a group of guerrilla butchers. Twain lived to see Christian brothers mucked in mutual slaughter during the Civil War, and he wrote Huckleberry Finn, despairing of the value of patriotism, and religion, the ideas of Sir Walter Scott and the Bible stirred in blood.

Metaphorically, Twain excoriates the faithful who withstand "ornery preaching--all about brotherly love, and such-like tiresomeness," shotgunned and bandoleered. Miss Sophia (trusting only Huck) asks him to return to church in order to retrieve her Testament; unbeknownst to Huck, of course, it now contains the appointed hour of her assignation with Harney of the detested fellow-worshippers, the Shepherdsons. Huck agrees to do it, pleased to do it, proud to do it: like Twain, he has a deep and abiding affection for the innocent. He tells us about this mission:

So I slid out and slipped off up the road, and there warn't anybody at the church, except maybe a hog or two, for there warn't any lock on the door, and hogs like a puncheon floor in summer-time because it's cool. If you notice, most folks don't go to church only when they've got to, but a hog is different. (p. 90)

About this passage, Michael Patrick Hearn writes that, "considering how much the sermon on brotherly love has affected the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons, one must agree with Huck that the hogs got more out of the church than did its congregation."²⁶

This particular joke has chilling overtones when the reader recalls the description of Pap Finn, sleeping partner of the hogs:

He was most fifty, and he looked it. His hair was long and tangled and greasy, and hung down, and you could see his eyes shining through like he was behind vines. It was all black, no gray; so was his long, mixed-up whiskers. There warn't no color in his face where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl--a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white. (p. 20)

Pap, the wearer of the Christian cross of nails in his left boot heel to ward off the Devil, is distinguished only by his lack of a single saving grace, and he is filthy, despicable, and greedy. So much, Twain implies, for hypocritical Christian supplicants who suffer "ornery" preaching about "tiresomeness" because of a cool puncheon floor.

Scott and Scripture, or an impenetrable unregeneracy of the human soul? This confusion is the attack in Huckleberry Finn, written at a time when Mark Twain was the "busiest, happiest, lovablest heathen in America."

²⁶ Hearn, p. 238.

Chapter IV

The Effects of "Swinish Forms of Religion": Twain Attacks the Greedy Pulpit and the Gullible Faithful

Much of the appeal of Huckleberry Finn is thought of as a nostalgic longing for the past, a return to the innocence of youth, an unshakable belief that things really were better in "the good old days." Most readers, after a sufficient passage of time has fuzzed the facts and blurred the most cold-blooded episodes, recall the book as a lazy Odyssey on a raft down the Mississippi by a good-hearted teenage boy and a good-natured "darkie" whose superstitions and humorous misinterpretations make him a promising candidate for an Al Jolson minstrel show. Huck is so good, Jim is so dumb, and then, of course, there is Tom Sawyer, so romantic and imaginative. What could be funnier?

The truth, of course, is that Huck is not always good; Jim is most certainly not dumb; and Tom Sawyer's romantic preposterousness is funny only on the surface. Beneath

much of Tom's fantastical imaginings is Twain's continued attack on Christianity, camouflaged so cleverly in "just kids' fun" as to be missed by all not looking specifically for it. For example, Tom, as head of the robber gang, selects as the symbol for the gang, not the grim ensign of the blanched "skull and cross-bones" against a black background, the flag of the swashbuckling pirates of the Spanish Main, but rather a Christian cross. Huck tells us that:

Tom got out a sheet of paper that he had wrote the oath on, and read it. It swore every boy to stick to the band, and never tell any of its secrets; and if anybody done anything to any boy in the band, whichever boy was ordered to kill that person and his family must do it, and he mustn't eat and he mustn't sleep till he killed them and hacked a cross in their breasts, which was the sign of the band. And nobody that didn't belong to the band could use that mark, and if he did he must be sued; and if he done it again he must be killed. And if anybody that belonged to the band told the secrets, he must have his throat cut, and then have his carcass burnt up and the ashes scattered all around, and his name blotted off of the list with blood and never mentioned again by the gang, but have a curse put on it and be forgot, forever. (p. 12)

This entire chapter reads more like Tom Sawyer than the middle section of Huckleberry Finn. Twain, at this point, is writing at both books. Tom's oath is fraught with the ridiculous pomposity and grand "style" of teenage boys playing Bluebeard. The ghosts of the Crusaders could not

laugh at Tom's style, but numberless Masons did, and members of the Knights of Columbus and the Ku Klux Klan did, too. Twain masks his intention by having the line following this passage read, "Everybody said it was a real beautiful oath, and asked Tom if he got it out of his own head. He said, some of it, but the rest was out of pirate books, and robber books, and every gang that was high-toned had it" (p. 12). Twain says "pirate books" and "robber books," but he implies "the Widow's good book," the oath-swearing Bible of presidents, and witnesses, Masons, Knights, and Klansmen alike.

To prove this thesis, I must use references from works that came after Huckleberry Finn, where Twain is less intimidated by his Hartford neighbors. Tom has said that miscreants and nonbelievers should be "hacked with a cross on their breasts and their bodies burned and scattered around." Tom's oath finds its way into practice in The Mysterious Stranger; here the message is presented more forcefully than a Tom Sawyer delirium; as a matter of fact, the description of church-ordered and -authored atrocities against heretics and "witches" accounts for the book's not being published during Twain's lifetime:

The mere mention of a witch was almost enough to frighten us out of our wits. This was natural enough, because of late years there were more kinds of witches than there used to be; in old times it had been only old women, but of late years they were of all ages--even children of eight and nine; it was getting so

that anybody might turn out to be a familiar of the Devil--age and sex hadn't anything to do with it. In our little region we had tried to extirpate the witches, but the more of them we burned, the more of the breed rose up in their places.¹

The next passage, read in the context of the details of the life of Mark Twain, is enlightening. It will be remembered that Twain was a loving and doting father in the extreme; it will also be remembered that his beloved Susy died of meningitis when she was only twenty-three, and when he and the rest of the family were in Europe. Twain indicts the God of the Bible for her death; he viciously attacks His latter-day lieutenants of the Christian church for their sanctified sadism. The following passage condemns organized religion more than anything he had ever written, which accounts for the delay of its publication until after his death.

Once, in a school for girls only ten miles away, the teachers found that the back of one of the girls was all red and inflamed, and they were greatly frightened, believing it to be the Devil's marks. The girl was scared, and begged them not to denounce her, and said it was only fleas; but of course it would not do to let the matter rest there. All the girls were examined, and eleven out of the fifty were badly marked, the rest less so. A commission was appointed, but the eleven only cried for their mothers and would not confess. Then they were shut up,

¹ Mark Twain, The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories (New York: Signet Classic, 1962), p. 198.

each by herself, in the dark, and put on black bread and water for ten days and nights; and by that time they were haggard and wild, and their eyes were dry and they did not cry any more, but only sat and mumbled and would not take food. Then one of them confessed, and said they often had ridden through the air on broomsticks to the witches' Sabbath, and in a bleak place high up in the mountains had danced and drunk and caroused with several other witches and the Evil One, and all had conducted themselves in a scandalous way and had reviled the priests and blasphemed God. That is what she said--not in narrative form, for she was not able to remember any of the details without having them called to her mind one after the other; but the commission did that, for they knew what questions to ask, they being all written down for the use of witch-commissioners two centuries before. They asked, "Did you do so and so?" and she always said yes, and looked very weary and tired, and took no interest in it. And so when the other ten heard that this one confessed, they confessed, too, and answered yes to the questions. Then they were burned at the stake all together, which was just and right; and everybody went from all the countryside to see it. I went, too; but when I saw that one of them was a bonny, sweet girl I used to play with, and looked so pitiful there chained to the stake, and her mother crying over her and devouring her with kisses and clinging around her neck, and saying, "Oh, my God! oh, my God!" it was too dreadful and I went away.²

This scene of a "bonny, sweet girl . . . chained to the stake," a scene of unmitigable, indefensible, hideous barbarism, attended by her mother who was "devouring her with kisses and clinging to her neck, and saying, 'Oh, my

² Twain, Mysterious Stranger, p. 198.

God! oh, my God!" best expresses its heartfelt passion with a biographical reference. Following the death of his beloved daughter, Susy, Twain wrote to William Dean Howells. About this letter, William R. Macnaughton wrote,

Several letters written within two months of the tragedy convey a genuine and terrible sense of loss. His well-known letter to William Dean Howells, for example, contains sincere, conventionally expressed outpourings of grief as well as virulent oblique references to a treacherous God.³

Three factors should be noted in connection with this letter and The Mysterious Stranger. First, Twain had already established himself as an anti-religionist, suspicious of the value of religion in general, and the religion of the Bible in particular. Second, Susy was struck down by a mysterious illness while Twain was away on an around-the-world moneymaking trip. And third, Livy Clemens, who loved the girl probably as much as Twain did, was denied by just a few short days from seeing Susy while she was still alive. Once again, as the letter to Howells reveals, a guilt-ridden Twain felt impotent in confronting an implacably inscrutable, malevolent force which he calls

³ William R. Macnaughton, Mark Twain's Last Years as a Writer (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1979), p. 14.

"God"--for him, the Christian God:

To me our loss is bitter, bitter, bitter. Then what must it be for my wife. It would bankrupt all the vocabularies of all the languages to put it into words. For the relation between Susy & her mother was not merely & not only the relation of mother and child, but that of sweethearts, lovers, also. "Do you love me, Mama?" "No, I don't love you, Susy, I worship you."

What a ghastly tragedy it was: how cruel it was; how exactly & precisely it was planned; how remorsefully every detail of the dispensation was carried out. . . . She was brimming with life & the joy of it. That is what I saw; & it was what her mother saw through her tears. One year, one month, & one week later, Livy & Clara had completed the circuit of the globe, arriving at Elmira at the same hour in the evening, by the same train & in the same car--& Susy was there to meet them--lying white and fair in her coffin in the house she was born in.

They were flying on the wings of steam & in the torture of dread & anxiety; & if three little days could have been spared them out of the rich hoard laid up for the building of coming ages, poor Susy would have died in her mother's arms--& the poor three days were denied; they could not be afforded. . . . Good-bye. Will healing ever come, or life have value again?

And shall we see Susy? Without doubt! without shadow of doubt, if it can furnish opportunity to break our hearts again.⁴

Five years later, from Vienna, Twain wrote to Howells again about an unidentified manuscript (most probably The Mysterious Stranger) mentioning Susy; he concludes the letter,

⁴ Macnaughton, p. 14.

I couldn't get along without work now. I bury myself in it up to the ears. Long hours--8 and 9 on a stretch, sometimes. And all the days, Sundays included. It isn't all for print, by any means, for much of it fails to suit me; 50,000 words of it in the past year. It was because of the deadness which invaded me when Susy died.⁵

Long before the writing of The Mysterious Stranger (let alone its appearance)--three years before the impossible-to-anticipate early death of Susy--Twain had used the symbol of an innocent young female tormented and murdered by Christian executioners in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, written only four years after Huckleberry Finn, when Twain's fortunes were at their absolute zenith. Tom Sawyer's "style" loses some of its humorous trappings when Twain describes how "high-toned gangs" operate in the days of Arthur. The book is bitter indeed, short on humor and laced with vitriol, at times maudlin, most often saturated with an overwhelming, obsessive contempt for the rich, the royal, and the religious. A young wife has seen her husband taken from her, impressed into the royal naval service against his will in the "name of God and Arthur!" With her young baby, she faces death for the crime of petty

⁵ Mark Twain, The Portable Mark Twain, ed. Bernard De Voto (Dallas, Pa.: Offset Paperback Manufacturers, 1979), p. 778.

theft. She had begged when she had the strength, but

. . . when she was starving at last, and her milk failing, she stole a piece of linen cloth of the value of a fourth part of a cent, thinking to sell it and save her child. But she was seen by the owner of the cloth.⁶

Twain has set his favorite scenario for attacking the Christian church: a young mother and a babe, money, and an officer of God and government. The description of her execution is barely literary enough to escape polemicism.

After his prayer they put a noose around the young girl's neck, and they had great trouble to adjust the knot under her ear, because she was devouring the baby all the time, wildly kissing it, and snatching it to her face and breast, and drenching it with tears, and half moaning half shrieking all the while, and the baby crawing, and laughing, and kicking its feet with delight for what it took for romp and play. Even the hangman couldn't stand it, but turned away. When all was ready the priest gently pulled and tugged and forced the child out of the mother's arms, and stepped quickly out of her reach; but she clasped her hands, and made a wild spring toward him, with a shriek, but the rope-- and the under-sheriff--held her short. Then she went on her knees and stretched out her hands and cried:

"One more kiss--oh, my God, one more, one more, it is the dying that begs it!"

She got it; she almost smothered the little thing. And when they got it away again, she cried out,

⁶ Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (New York: Nelson Doubleday, n.d.), p. 245.

"Oh, my child, my darling, it will die!
It has no home, it has no father, no friend,
no mother--"⁷

These disparate passages, taken from A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court and from a letter to Howells, written for different purposes, both before and after Susy's death, illustrate the strength of two of Twain's most characteristic lifelong traits: first, his genuine love, sincere affection, and platonic adoration for women and youth (and especially young girls, although that statement is open to argument, given his creations of Huck, Tom, and Theodor Fischer); and second, his virulent animosity, loathing, and aggressive contempt for pretentiously pristine priests and religiously officious bureaucrats ministering in the service of what he considered to be a vindictive, malevolent, or at best uninterested, God.

Murder is not funny; murder in the name and shadow of the Christian cross perpetrated upon young mothers in the company of their children in the most sadistic ways should tax Twain's colossal reputation as the supreme American humorist, but miraculously it does not; the American people accept Twain on their own terms. People forget the adventures of Hank Morgan and the adventures of Theodor Fischer;

⁷ Twain, Connecticut Yankee, p. 245.

they remember The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

Tom Sawyer's robber gang symbol of the cross would be an appropriate symbol for the white Christian vigilantes of Arkansas, a thinly veiled reference to the Ku Klux Klan, when they set out to mete justice to the King and the Duke. Twain implies that they take as much perverted sexual pleasure in tar-and-feathering and riding the pair out of town on a rail as they did in the King's gross perversity on the stage. Because it contributes so little to the plot, the scene is often overlooked, as is the intensity with which Huck describes it. Of course the description allows the reader to plumb the depths of Huck's humanity, as he shows his willingness to forgive the King and the Duke--those crooked, rascally scoundrels. Only Huck Finn can evoke compassion for "them frauds" as he describes their doom.

Here comes a raging rush of people, with torches, and an awful whooping and yelling, and banging tin pans and blowing horns; and we jumped to one side to let them go by; and as they went by, I see they had the king and the duke astraddle of a rail--that is, I knowed it was the king and the duke, though they was all over tar and feathers, and didn't look like nothing in the world that was human--just looked like a couple of monstrous big soldier plumes. Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness

against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another. (p. 180)

Just how pitiful this sight was to witness can be imagined when one considers the graphics of the punishment of the King and the Duke. Hearn reports that "riding a rail" involved

. . . splitting a log lengthwise, and then splitting the halves, so that the fence-rail was wedge-shaped at the ends with a sharp and splintery edge. When a man was ridden on a rail, with nothing between his body and the rail but a coat of tar and feathers, there would be very little left of his groin, and chances were that he would lose at least part of his genitals as well.⁸

Earlier the King has boasted that he has been successful as a fake preacher. He has used a fraudulent religion, decayed and swinish, to gull the gullible; and Twain suggests that the faithful deserve to be gulled.

Twain's disgust for those who use the institution of religion to prey upon the ignorant, the insipid, and the innocent is symbolized in the revoltingly abject degradation he will inflict upon the King in the perverse production of "The Royal Nonesuch." The Duke understands human nature. By doubling the price of admission and by adding

⁸ Michael Patrick Hearn, ed., The Annotated Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, by Mark Twain (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1981), p. 189.

the caveat "LADIES AND CHILDREN NOT ADMITTED," he is guaranteed a full house of white, lusty males--Christian, of course. The Duke gloats over his assessment of the populace: "If that don't fetch them, I don't know Arkansaw!" (p. 120). One wonders how Huck got in to see the performance (as children supposedly were not admitted), but Twain wants his most faithful, truthful reporter on the scene, and, in fact, Huck's description is mild enough to pass any censor:

And at last when the Duke got everybody's expectations up high enough, he rolled up the curtain, and the next minute the king come a-prancing out on all fours, naked; and he was painted all over, ring-streaked and striped, all sorts of colors, as splendid as a rainbow. And--but never mind the rest of his outfit, it was just wild, but it was awful funny. The people most killed themselves laughing; and when the king got done capering, and capered off behind the scenes, they roared and clapped and stormed and haw-hawed till he come back and done it over again; and after that, they made him do it another time. Well, it would a made a cow laugh to see the shines that old idiot cut. (p. 121)

Three times Twain has made the King debase himself, and it is to be remembered that the King is a pretender not only to the throne of France; he has also posed as a man of God, if indeed kings did not, and do not, represent themselves as "men of God," and specially chosen men at that. The king--the "missionary"--has debased himself three times,

and at the behest of the loyal faithful, and for what? Money. We should remember, too, that the Duke has doubled the price of admission, thereby doubly gulling the gullible.

Twain's original title for the Royal Nonesuch's performance was "The Burning Shame." In his Autobiography, he reminisces about a California friend, Jim Gillis, who had recently died. He describes Gillis as a brilliant natural humorist, unencumbered by literary training or parlor-room social approval. Twain says,

In one of my books--Huckleberry Finn--I think --I have used one of Jim's impromptu tales, which he called "The Tragedy of the Burning Shame." I had to modify it considerably to make it proper for print and this was a great damage. As Jim told it, inventing it as he went along, I think it was one of the most outrageously funny things I ever listened to. How mild it is in the book and how pale; how extravagant and how gorgeous it is in its unprintable form.⁹

Michael Patrick Hearn agrees that the inclusion of "The Tragedy of the Burning Shame" is to degrade the King to the nadir of human existence; he points out:

Wallace Graves in "Mark Twain's 'Burning Shame'" has recorded an extravagant performance that closely follows the account in Huckleberry Finn: "It was about two destitute actors [in Sweden] who decided to raise money by giving a performance in a small

⁹ Mark Twain, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 152.

town. Women and children were not admitted; they rigged a stage with a curtain, and made sure that an escape door at the rear of the stage was open for a quick getaway after the show. One man collected money while the audience filed in, then came round and appeared before the curtain announcing that a great dramatic play called 'The Burning Shame' was about to be shown. The curtain was then raised, and his partner, naked, came out on his hands and knees. The other said, 'And now gentlemen, you are about to see the tragedy of the Burning Shame.' He inserted a candle in the naked man's posterior, and lit it. When nothing further happened, the audience shouted for something more; the man said the performance was over; the viewers shouted, 'You mean that's all?' 'Yes,' the man said, 'have you ever seen a better example of a 'Burning Shame?' Then the two dashed out of town, the audience in hot pursuit."¹⁰

It does not matter whether this tale is an exact representation of Jim Gillis' tale of bawdry. The King's performance is seminal enough to represent side-show, sleazy sex for money. The point here is that the King's willing self-abasement (for money) represents Twain's feelings about the royal and the religious willing to use any ploy to divest the stupid from their silver. Huck is immune because he is no more a part of that audience of white Christian male hypocrites who clamored for "more" and still "more" than he is an altar boy. Huck laughs because he sees the King with the Emperor's new clothes; Twain

¹⁰ Hearn, p. 225.

laughs because the image is disgusting. Of course, Twain could be laughing because the scene got by Livy, Howells, the censor, and the public he was demeaning.

In chapters previous to this scene, Huck has known all along that these two scoundrels are imposters; that he has known intensifies his humanity, his willingness to accept and forgive humanness in others, as proven by his compassion for the frauds when they are being ridden out of town. They are ridden out of town not because they offended moral sensitivities of the townsfolk but because they had defrauded them of money. Huck says,

It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted to call themselves kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections, 'long as it would keep peace in the family; and it warn't no use to tell Jim, so I didn't tell him. If I never learnt nothing else out of pap I learnt that the best way to get along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way. (p. 102)

Huck's seemingly irrelevant aside about "dukes," "kings," and people "who wanted to call themselves kings and dukes" --about which he had "no objections, 'long as it would keep peace in the family"--is certainly self-revealing autobiography for the Twain writing in 1885. Living and

associating with kings and dukes, barons and buccaneers, frauds and imposters, Twain had one major concern: his family. Spiritually and artistically he redeems himself when he has Jim and Huck give a true estimate of the "frauds":

By-and-by, when they was asleep and snoring, Jim says:

"Don't it 'sprise you, de way dem kings carries on, Huck?"

"No," I says, "it don't."

"Why don't it, Huck?"

"Well, it don't, because it's in the breed. I reckon they're all alike."

"But, Huck, dese kings o' ourn is regular rapsCALLIONS; dat's jist what dey is; dey's regular rapsCALLIONS, as fur as I can make out." (p. 123)

Huck then proceeds to misremember the historical facts about royalty he has gleaned from the books taken from the wrecked steamboat, the Walter Scott. Huck's conclusion "Take them all around, they're a mighty ornery lot" shows his (and Twain's) contempt for royalty. Jim agrees:

"But dis one do smell so like de nation, Huck."

"Well, they all do, Jim. We can't help the way a king smells; history don't tell no way."

"Now de duke, he's a tolerble likely man, in some ways."

"Yes, a duke's different. But not very different. This one's a middling hard lot for a duke. When he's drunk there ain't no near-sighted man could tell him from a king."

"Well, anyways, I doan' hanker for no mo' un um, Huck. Dese is all I kin stan'."

It's the way I feel too, Jim. But we've got them on our hands and we got to remember what they are, and make allowances. Sometimes I wish we could hear of a country that's out of kings."

What was the use to tell Jim these warn't real kings and dukes? It wouldn't a done no good; and besides, it was just as I said, you couldn't tell them from the real kind. (p. 124)

The King has told us that he has posed as a preacher at camp meetings and has done some "missionaryin' around"; we have seen him posing as the Reverend Elexander Blodgett, and then he impostures as the Reverend Harvey Wilks himself. In both instances he has relied upon disguises as a man of the cloth to prey upon the faithful. Huck understands, as we shall see, what is going on; through Huck, Twain tells us, the reaction to the King's playing reverend should not be unexpected: in the words of Huck, "You couldn't tell him from the real kind."

In Huck's speech quoted above he has referred to the King as an "old ram," a revealing substantiation of the old man's gross lechery that has been seen once before in the prayer-meeting scene at the evangelical campsite. The "old ram" has just witnessed; significantly, he told the wide-eyed faithful of his thirty years as a pirate in the Indian Ocean, and, although he had returned to the American Christian frontier to recruit thieves and cutthroats, he was now a changed man. If the piratical King's mission is to recruit thieves and cutthroats, what better place (Twain

implies) could he have chosen than a religious camp meeting? And why? Because, he says, attending the prayer meeting "was the blessedest thing that ever happened to him, because he was a changed man now, and happy for the first time in his life; and poor as he was, he was going to start right off and work his way back to the Indian Ocean and put in the rest of his life trying to turn pirates to the true path" (p. 107). The King's dramatic last-minute conversion to the true path calls up a memory of an earlier "saving" of a drunken, Christian reprobate: the "born-again" Pap Finn in the house of the new judge. When Pap falls off the wagon that very night, "the judge he felt kind of sore. He said he reckoned a body could reform the ole man with a shot-gun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way" (p. 23). The King and Pap--a rascal and a deadbeat--these are the people that good Christians take an interest in.

To part fools from their money, the King knows, you have to make them feel guilty; his "witnessing" performance, as ludicrous and incredibly preposterous as it is, matches that ante (for money) and raises the bet (for lechery) when he gets the females to cry:

And then he busted out into tears, and so did everybody. Then somebody sings out, "Take up a collection for him, take up a collection!" Well, a half a dozen made a jump to do it, but somebody sings out, "Let him pass the hat around!" Then everybody said it, the preacher too.

So the king went all through the crowd with his hat, swabbing his eyes, and blessing the people and praising them and thanking them for being so good to the poor pirates away off there; and every little while the prettiest kind of girls, with the tears running down their cheeks, would up and ask him would he let them kiss him, for to remember him by; and he always done it; and some of them he hugged and kissed as many as five or six times. (p. 107)

Hearn notes that E. W. Kemble, the original illustrator of Huckleberry Finn,

. . . had depicted the incident, but Twain suppressed the drawing. "It was powerful good," Twain admitted to Webster about the picture of the lecherous old rascal kissing the girl at the camp meeting, "but it mustn't go in--don't forget it. The subject won't bear illustrating. It is a disgusting thing, and pictures are sure to tell the truth about it too plainly."¹¹

This scene, Hearn believes, was inspired by a description of camp-meeting incidents in Johnson Jones Hooper's "The Captain Attends a Camp-meeting." The King's lechery compares with the preacher's of the sketch, whose

. . . passions are aroused by revival fever. Simon Suggs shrewdly sees through the hypocrisy, however, and comments, "Wonder what's the reason these here preachers never hugs the old, ugly women? Never seed one do it in my life--the sperrit never moves 'em that way! It's

¹¹ Hearn, p. 203.

nater tho; and . . . I judge ef I was a preacher, I should save the purtiest souls, myself."¹²

Although he does introduce sexual hysteria veiled as religious inspiration at the Pokeville camp meeting, Twain judiciously restricts the "ramishness" to the born-again, old-goat pretender to the throne of France. Kings and goats, preachers and pigs, Twain piles image upon image of his feelings about religion and royalty.

Twain has made a point he does not want the reader to overlook or undervalue: the lechery of the King (goatish symbol of royalty and religion) is reemphasized when he and the Duke appear before the Wilks girls as their uncles from England. Mary Jane is nineteen, Susan fifteen (the age of Susy Clemens when the book is published), and Joanna about fourteen--"that's the one that gives herself to good works and has a harelip" (p. 128). Twain's bitter attack surfaces here in bad taste; it is difficult to imagine the description of Joanna getting by Livy and Howells. The point, Twain implies, is that pretty girls grow up and head for the cafe; ugly ones go to church and devote their sexual lives to "good works." Twain does not sentimentalize Huck, and Twain-lovers should not sentimentalize him: at his best he could be as cruel as the most jaundiced Jacobin.

¹² Hearn, p. 203.

Huck has just told us that he has almost run out of patience with these two hypocrites. Twain is using his favorite scenario once more: innocent young girls, money, and a (pretending) clergyman.

The king's duds was all black, and he did look real swell and starchy. I never knowed how clothes could change a body before. Why, before, he looked like the orneriest old rip that ever was; but now, when he'd take off his new white beaver and make a smile and do a bow, he looked that grand and good and pious that you'd say he had walked right out of the ark, and maybe he was old Leviticus himself. (p. 126)

Later,

The townsfolk gathered around the frauds, and sympathized with them, and said all sorts of kind things to them, and carried their carpet-bags up the hill for them, and let them lean on them and cry, and told the king all about his brother's last moments, and the king he told it all over again on his hands to the duke, and both of them took on about that dead tanner like they'd lost the twelve disciples. Well, if ever I struck anything like it, I'm a nigger. It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race. (p. 130)

Sculley Bradley says that

. . . in the Wilks episode the schemes of the king and the duke, hitherto at the level of halloween frauds, for the first time sink to the depths of absolute immorality in the proposed exploitation of the grief-stricken family. Huck realized it was "enough to make a body ashamed of the human race" but did not expose them because he thought they knew Jim was a runaway. (p. 130)

Twain is thus indicting the entire "human race," pretentious frauds and pious fools alike, exploiters and exploited of "decayed and swinish forms of religion."

Delancey Ferguson notes that both the King and the Duke were substantially more lascivious in the original manuscript than in the finally published version, bowdlerized by Howells and Olivia Clemens. Huck tells us that:

Mary Jane was red-headed but that don't make no difference, she was the most beautiful, and her face and eyes was all lit up like glory, she was so glad her uncles come. The king he spread his arms, and Mary Jane she jumped for them, and that hare-lip jumped for the duke, and there they had it! (p. 130)

The original manuscript reads:

Soon as he could, the duke shook the hare-lip, and sampled Susan, which was better looking. After the king had kissed Mary Jane fourteen or fifteen times, he give the duke a show and tapered off on the others.¹³

I believe that Howells and Mrs. Clemens served Huckleberry Finn quite well in having this passage changed, for it adds nothing to the characterization of the frauds, already indelibly established. The point to be made, as Bradley has argued, is the depths of absolute immorality the King and the Duke have reached in their proposed exploitation of

¹³ Delancey Ferguson, Mark Twain: Man and Legend (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 226.

the grief-sticken Wilks girls. If the image is not one of rape, it certainly is of seduction of the innocent; except for Huck, the scam would have most probably succeeded.

Both Twain's intentions and the humor come off better in the description of the King's behavior at the ludicrously lugubrious funeral of Peter Wilks. The proceedings are temporarily interrupted when

. . . straight off the most outrageous row busted out in the cellar a body ever heard; it was only one dog, but he made a most powerful racket, and kept it up, right along --the parson, he had to stand there over that coffin and wait--you couldn't hear yourself think. It was right down awkward, and nobody didn't seem to know what to do.
(p. 143)

The scene soon becomes farcical when the problem is finally resolved by the long-legged undertaker: "then in about two seconds we heard a whack, and the dog he finished up with a most amazing howl or two, and then everything was dead still, and the parson begun his solemn talk where he left off" (p. 143). The undertaker explains the row to the assemblage by announcing the dog "had a rat!" (p. 143). To this point in the novel, Twain's description of Christian churches and camp meetings have been infested with a menagerie of repulsive creatures: hogs in the Grangerford episode, dogs and rats here in the Wilks adventure, frauds and lechers here and at the camp meeting, and sniveling pious hypocrites everywhere.

In the scene "all full of tears and flap-doodle," Huck's disgust with pious cant is both obvious and bitter; it is as if Twain has allowed his character to shed his benign credulity temporarily. As he watches the funeral ceremony, and the King's exploitation of it, Huck realizes that it is all sham, minister and mourners alike. It is solid evidence for his credo of "taking no stock in no dead people."

Then the king he hunched the duke, private-- I see him do it--and then he looked around and see the coffin, over in the corner on two chairs; so then, him and the duke, with a hand across each other's shoulder, and t'other hand to their eyes, walked slow and solemn over there, and everybody dropping back to give them room, and all the talk and noise stopping, people saying "Sh!" and all the men taking off their hats and drooping their heads, so you could hear a pin fall. And when they got there, they bent over and looked in the coffin, and took one sight and then they bust out a crying so you could a heard them to Orleans, most; and then they put their arms around each other's necks, and hung their chins over each other's shoulders; and then for three minutes, or maybe four, I never see two men leak the way they done. And mind you everybody was doing the same; and the place was that damp I never see anything like it. Then one of them got on one side of the coffin, and t'other on t'other side, and they kneeled down and rested their foreheads on the coffin and let on to pray all to theirselves. Well, when it come to that, it worked the crowd like you never see anything like it, and so everybody broke down and went to sobbing right out loud--the poor girls, too; and every woman, nearly, went up to the girls, without saying a word, and kissed them, solemn, on the forehead, and then put their hand on their own head, and looked up towards the sky, with

the tears running down, and then busted out and went off sobbing and swabbing, and give the next woman a show. I never see anything so disgusting. (p. 131)

This scene, so easily overlooked, is filled with telling implications. First, the King and the Duke are kneeling with their foreheads against the coffin containing the gold they expect to bilk the girls out of: Twain thus suggests that mammon is their god and this is the way they worship it. Second, the gold amounts to \$6,000, exactly the same amount Huck has left back with Judge Thatcher. And, finally, the effusive demonstration of the mourners is a mockery in itself, a parody of piety, as if they, too, "had lost the twelve disciples, instead of that one dead tanner." It is to be remembered that these same people saw how "the king he counted the gold and stacked it up, three hundred dollars in a pile--twenty elegant little piles. Everybody looked hungry at it, and licked their chops" (p. 133). Huck knows the destructive power of money; he has seen the effect it had upon Pap. Interestingly enough, he has consigned the girls' inheritance to a coffin; because it is not in their possession, they too are saved.

When the King delivers his "obsequies/orgies" eulogy he reveals that, like Pap, he is without a single saving human grace. The King has been talking about "funeral orgies" in the service of his "diseased" brother; the Duke,

at least, knows the proper term and

. . . writes on a little scrap of paper, "obsequies," you old fool, and folds it and goes to goo-gooing and reaching it over people's heads to him. The king he reads it, and puts it in his pocket, and says:

"Poor William, afflicted as he is, his heart's aluz right. Asks me to invite everybody to come to the funeral--wants me to make 'em all welcome. But he needn't a worried--it was jest what I was at."

Then he weaves along again, perfectly ca'm, and goes to dropping in his funeral orgies again every now and then, just like he done before. And when he done it the third time, he says,

"I say orgies, not because it's the common term, because it ain't--obsequies bein' the common term--but because orgies is the right term. Obsequies ain't used in England no more, now--it's gone out. We say orgies, now in England. Orgies is better, because it means the thing you're after, more exact. It's a word made up of the Greek orgo, outside, open, abroad; and the Hebrew jeesum, to plant, cover up; hence inter. So, you see, funeral orgies is an open er public funeral." (p. 134)

Because of his established and reemphasized lechery, his malapropism is a true Freudian slip. Hearn explains that "orgies is from the Greek, meaning 'secret rites,' referring to the nocturnal festivities in honor of Bacchus, the god of wine; and in Latin, it means 'secret, frantic revels.'"¹⁴ For the lecherous old goat, the whiskey-stealing and swilling King, the word is perfect self-betrayal--one that also conveys Twain's appraisal of the clergy.

¹⁴ Hearn, p. 241.

These vicious assaults on Christian ritual and religion have their gentler counterparts in Huckleberry Finn, safely sly sorties against sincere and gentler folk. For example, kindly, if senile, Uncle Silas, like the Widow, is essentially a "good" person, God-fearing and hard-working, devoted to his family, devout in his beliefs, representing what was best in the breed of frontier farmers. Twain implies that salt-of-the-earth Silas is but an ignorant and defenseless gull of the Religion Trust and the Bible. Huck says that Uncle Silas "never charged nothing for his preaching, and it was worth it, too. There was plenty other farmer-preachers like that, and done the same way, down South" (p. 177). The joke here is mild and tepid--good-natured, in fact. Twain gently satirizes sincere believers whose humanness is essentially good. Frauds and shams, pious and pompous hypocrites hiding behind Christian cloth and Christian cross in avaricious and lascivious pursuits, these are the targets of Twain's envenomed arrows.

But Twain is still a humorist, and he cannot resist expanding on a joke. Huck has told us that every day Uncle Silas preaches to Jim, prays with him. However, the absolute zenith of Uncle Silas' preaching comes following the unmasking of Huck and Tom. The disclosure of their true identities "made him kind of drunk as you may say, and he didn't know nothing all the rest of the day, and preached

a prayer-meeting sermon that night that give him a rattling good reputation, because the oldest man in the world couldn't understand it" (p. 224).

As has been shown, and as Ensor has so capably documented in his study Mark Twain & The Bible, Twain was a lifelong student of Scripture. He points out the use of familiar Biblical passages in early correspondence, the allusion to Bible stories in Twain's works, and finally Twain's bitter assault on the validity of Scripture in an essay, "Bible Teaching and Religious Practices," not published until thirteen years after his death. In Huckleberry Finn the attack is disguised in narrative. For example, after old man Boggs has been cold-bloodedly gunned down by that stalwart example of Southern Christian patricianism, Colonel Sherburne, the townspeople place "one large Bible under his head, and opened another one and spread it on his breast. . . . He made about a dozen long gasps, his breast lifting the Bible up when he drew in his breath, and letting it down again when he breathed it out--and after that he laid still, and was dead" (p. 116). In this image the Bible is an oppressive burden to the living, a useless anvil to the dead.

The Bible is the favorite reading material of the Widow, Miss Watson, and Uncle Silas; and it is the most important tool of the trade when the King is "missionaryin'"

around. In these images Twain labels the book as suitable for mush-minded, slaveholding bigots as well as for lecherous, duplicitous frauds. In both instances the Bible is an instrument of narrow self-interest and moral dishonesty: Twain implies, "Yer pays yer money, and yer takes yer choice." In "Bible Teaching and Religious Practice," written years after Huckleberry Finn, he writes:

The Christian Bible is a drug store. Its contents remain the same; but the medical practice changes. For eighteen hundred years these changes were slight--scarcely noticeable. The practice was allopathic--allopathic in its rudest and crudest form. The dull and ignorant physician day and night, and all the days and all the nights, drenched his patient with vast and hideous doses of the most repulsive drugs to be found in the store's stock; he bled him, purged him, puked him, salivated him, never gave his system a chance to rally, nor nature a chance to help. He kept him religion sick for eighteen centuries, and allowed him not a well day during all that time. The stock in the store was made up of about equal portions of baleful debilitating poisons, and healing and comforting medicines; but the practice of the time confined the physician to the use of the former; by consequence, he could only damage his patient, and that is what he did. . . . The methods of the priest and the parson have been very curious, their history is very entertaining. In all the ages the Roman church has owned slaves, bought and sold slaves, authorized and encouraged her children to trade in them. Long after some Christian peoples had freed their slaves the Church still held on to hers. If any could know, to absolute certainty, that all this was right, and according to God's will and desire, surely it was she, since she was God's specially appointed representative in the earth and sole infallible expounder of his Bible.

There were the texts; there was no mistaking their meaning; she was doing this thing what the Bible had mapped out for her to do.¹⁵

In Huckleberry Finn the vitriolic virulence expressed in the above passage is muted in humor, hidden in the artistry of the narrative, disguised in seemingly noncontiguous, picaresque "adventures." However, Twain's disgust for religiously sanctioned slavery--self-serving, sanctimonious hypocrisy--is observable. Take, for example, the "soliloquy" of Pap Finn, the dirty, drunken, disgusting hypocrite, the anti-humanist, anti-liberal symbol of Christian fundamentalism at its pathetic worst:

Oh, yes, this a wonderful govment, wonderful. Why, looky here. There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had on the whitest shirt you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had; and he had a gold watch and a chain, and a silver-headed cane--the awfulest old gray-headed nabob in the state. And what do you think? they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could vote, when he was at home. Well, that let me out. Thinks I, what is the country a-coming to? It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a state in this country where they'd let that nigger vote,

¹⁵ Mark Twain, "Bible Teaching and Religious Practice," in The Complete Essays of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963), p. 570.

I drawed out. I says I'll never vote again. Them's the very words I said; they all heard me; and the country may rot for all of me-- I'll never vote agin as long as I live. And to see the cool way of that nigger--why, he wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out of the way. I says to the people, why ain't this nigger put up at auction and sold?--that's what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why, they said he couldn't be sold till he'd been in the State six months, and he hadn't been there that long yet. There, now--that's a specimen. They call that a govment that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the state six months. Here's a govment that calls itself a govment, and yet's got to set stock-still for six whole months before it can take a-hold of a prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted free nigger and-- (p. 27)

Pap's tirade against the "govment" is the tirade of all rapsallions and deadbeats looking for protection from a government they contribute nothing to. He is the kind that "good" people like the Widow take an interest in; he is the type of clay that manipulators mold in the name of patriotism and religion, the fanatic faithful of Sir Walter Scott and the Bible. Twain's opinion of Pap is hidden in Huck's description of Pap's behavior following this oration. Pap takes out his anger and frustration on a tub of salt pork, but, as Huck, points out,

It warn't good judgment, because that was the boot that had a couple of toes leaking out of the front end of it; so now he raised a howl that fairly made a body's hair raise, and down he went into the dirt, and rolled there,

and held his toes; and the cussing he done then laid over anything he had ever done previous. He said so his own self, afterwards. He had heard old Sowberry Hagan in his best days, and he said it laid over him, too; but I reckon that was sort of piling it on, maybe." (p. 27)

This scene seems to provide comic relief from Pap's racist bombast; it does, in fact, distract the reader from what seems to be Pap's biggest complaint, that the black nabob "p'fessor" wore the whitest shirt and the shiniest hat, in stark contrast to Pap's sad and seedy fare. What is significant is the fact that Pap kicks with his left boot, the boot with the Christian cross of nails in the heel "to ward off the devil": the cross, Twain is saying, is protection against neither the devil nor a tub of salt pork, and those who depend upon its protection are doomed to roll in the dirt.

Maxwell Geismar, in Mark Twain and The Three R's, has gleaned from Twain's writings virtually every assault available on organized religion and the Bible. Most of the material comes from Letters from the Earth, which was not published until 1962; the work had been suppressed by Clara Clemens Gabrilowitsch Samoussoud, the only daughter who survived him. She had objected because "certain parts of the manuscript presented a distorted view of Mark

Twain."¹⁶ Most of the material in Letters from the Earth is polemical in nature, as this selection from an item titled "The Father of Mercy" will show:

Human history in all ages is red with blood, and bitter with hate, and stained with cruelties; but not since Biblical times have these features been without a limit of some kind. Even the Church, which is credited with having spilt more innocent blood, since the beginning of its supremacy, than all the political wars put together has spilt, has observed a limit. A sort of limit. But you notice when the Lord God of Heaven and Earth, adored Father of Man, goes to war, there is no limit. He slays, slays, slays! All the men, all the beasts, all the boys, all the babies; also all the women and all the girls, except those that have not been deflowered.

He makes no distinction between innocent and guilty. . . . What the insane Father required was blood and misery. . . . The heaviest punishment of all was meted out to persons who could not by any possibility have deserved so horrible a fate--the 32,000 virgins. Their naked privacies were probed, to make sure they still possessed the hymen unruptured; after this humiliation they were sent away from the land that had been their home, to be sold into slavery; the worst of slaveries and the shamefullest; the slavery of prostitution; bed-slavery, to excite lust, and satisfy it with their bodies; slavery to any buyer, be he gentleman or be he a coarse and filthy ruffian.

It was the Father that inflicted this ferocious and undeserved punishment upon those bereaved and friendless virgins, whose parents and kindred he had slaughtered before their eyes. And were they praying to him for pity and rescue, meantime? Without a doubt of it.

These virgins were "spoil," plunder, booty. He had claimed his share and got it. What use

¹⁶ Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 385.

had he for virgins? Examine his later history and you will know.¹⁷

Twain's Biblical reference here is Chapter 31:17-18 of Numbers, where God has commanded Moses:

Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that hath known man by lying with him.

But all the women children, that have not known a man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves.

In these passages God indeed does share in the booty: sheep, beeves, and virgins; verse 40 states, "And the persons were sixteen thousand, of which the LORD'S tribute was thirty and two persons." Twain has plumbed the Bible for his favorite scenario: money, innocent girls, and an officer of God, this time Moses himself. He had not allowed these writings to be published during his lifetime; his daughter suppressed them for another fifty-two years. He should not have worried. Few people who claim to believe in the Bible ever read it; and even fewer people who claim to believe in Mark Twain read him either. And even of these people, fewer still can understand the message of Huckleberry Finn.

¹⁷ Mark Twain, Letters from the Earth, ed. Bernard De Voto (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 54.

In Mark Twain: An American Prophet, Maxwell Geismar mentions that there have been "further attempts to censor The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, without doubt the great epic of childhood in our literature, and whose hero is the old Negro slave, on the grounds that this figure is called 'Nigger Jim,' rather than 'Negro Jim' or 'Black Power Jim.'"¹⁸ The first attempts to censor the book, of course, occurred shortly after its publication; the most recent attempt happened in April 1982 at the Mark Twain Intermediate School in Fairfax County, Virginia! The school's administrative aide, John Wallace, told the Washington Post that:

The book is poison. It is anti-American; it works against the melting-pot theory of our country; it works against the idea all men are created equal; it works against the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and the preamble that guarantees all men life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.¹⁹

I wrote a sketch about what Huck might have said about the above comment, now on file in the Mark Twain Memorial in Hartford, Connecticut. A short part of it reads:

¹⁸ Maxwell Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 271.

¹⁹ Carol Richards, "'Huck Finn' Set Adrift by Mark Twain Intermediate School," in The Nashville Tennessean, April 17, 1982.

"It gets worse, Jim. We's workin' agin the 14th Amendment to the Constitution and the preamble that guarantees all men life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

"Now Huck--Huck Finn, you look me in de eye; look me in de eye. Yo' ain' afoolin' ole Jim agin, or is yo'?"

"No, Jim, I ain't; it's just as plain as this raft."

"Well, dat's de powerfulest trash I ever did see. En I hain't never heard no trash b'fo' dat's tired me like dis one."

"But. . . ."

"But, nuff'n. Looky here, boss, dey's sumf'n wrong, de is. Is I me, or who is I? Is I heah, or whah is I? En ain't yo' Huck? de good ole Huck? En, chile, ain' yo' runnin' fo' yo' life, en ain' I arunnin' fo' my liberty, en ain' dey what's got the happiness doin' de pursuin? Now dat's what I wants to know."

Almost one hundred years ago a friend of Twain's told him that Huckleberry Finn had been banned by the Sheepshead Bay Branch of the Brooklyn Library because librarians had been disturbed by "Huck's deceit, lies, immoral behavior, and perhaps, worst of all, improper language."²⁰ Twain's rejoinder is classic because it links his disgust of hypocrisy with his contempt for Scripture. Contrary to his statement to Howells that he was "writing another boy's book," he wrote:

I am greatly trouble by what you say. I wrote Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn for adults exclusively, and it always distresses me when I find that girls and boys have been allowed access to them.

The mind that becomes soiled in youth can never again be washed clean; I know this by my own experience, and to this day I cherish an unappeasable bitterness against the unfaithful guardians of my young life, who not only permitted but compelled me to read an unexpurgated Bible through before I was 15 years old. None can do that and ever draw a clean sweet breath again this side of the grave. Most honestly do I wish I could say a softening word or two in defence of Huck's character, since you wish it, but really in my opinion it is no better than those of Solomon, David, Satan, and the rest of the sacred brotherhood.²¹

Twain concludes the letter with humor etched by acid; he asks his friend to check the library to see if there is "an unexpurgated Bible in the Children's Department, [and if there is] won't you please help that young woman remove Huck and Tom from that questionable companionship."²²

Sarcasm and invective are often too heavy to be funny. This is because they are almost always reactionary in character, bitter knee-jerk responses to some real or perceived criticism. Sarcasm is the stuff of pamphleteers, not great artists, and Mark Twain is an artist.

One more scene is necessary to this thesis that Huckleberry Finn is an assault on the believers of Christianity. Through Huck we have witnessed the tarred and

²¹ Mark Twain, quoted by Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet, p. 272.

²² Twain, quoted by Geismar, Mark Twain: An American Prophet, p. 272.

feathered King and Duke being ridden out of town on a rail; we have Huck's comment that "human beings [read Christians] can be awful cruel to one another." The reader will remember the only other reference to tar-and-feathering in the novel. The arrogant, cold-blooded murderer of the good-natured old drunk Boggs, Colonel Sherburne, has challenged the outraged Christian mob that has come to lynch him. All alone, he snarls at them, ridicules them, sneers at them for being cowards. He implies that they are less than human and imperiously demands that they "droop their tails and go home and crawl in a hole" (p. 118). The confrontation allows Twain to editorialize on Southern "justice," which he will attack later in an essay so vitriolic that he will suppress it, "The United States of Lyncherdom." Sherburne, scolding, taunts the mob:

The idea of you lynching anybody! It's amusing. The idea of you thinking you had pluck enough to lynch a man! Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless out-cast women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a man? Why, a man's safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind--as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him. (p. 117)

Admittedly there is not much to like about Sherburne, but he has informed us that this white male Christian mob has tarred and feathered (and ridden out of town on a rail?) "poor, friendless out-cast women," in the name of protecting

virtue. How incongruous indeed is that moral exercise when one considers that it is that of a group of very much the same "crusaders" that formed the audience that demanded more and more of the King's lewd, perverse, and sleazy shenanigans. The incongruity is not lost upon Huck. It disturbs his conscience; like the worship of dead people, "it is not worth taking no stock in." Obviously he and Tom Sawyer discuss it.

So we poked along back home, and I warn't feeling so brash as I was before, but kind of ornery, and humble, and to blame, somehow--though I hadn't done nothing. But that's always the way; it don't make no difference whether you do right or wrong, a person's conscience ain't got no sense, and just goes for him anyway. If I had a yaller dog that didn't know more than a person's conscience does, I would pison him. It takes up more room than all the rest of a person's insides, and yet it ain't no good, nohow. Tom Sawyer he says the same. (p. 181)

With that statement of Huck's, Twain has published his manifesto, has slyly slid by both Howells and Livy--and almost all the rest of the American reading public. Religion, religious teaching, the Bible--conscience, the residue of these--"ain't no good, nohow. Tom Sawyer he says the same."

Delancey Ferguson points out that the original manuscript read that a person's conscience "takes up more room

than a person's bowels,"²³ but the passage was deleted by either Howells or Livy. Twain's contempt of the idea of "conscience" was lifelong. In his Autobiography he says, "Mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience and knew but the one duty--to hunt and harry its slave upon all pretexts and on all occasions, particularly when there was no sense nor reason in it."²⁴ It must be noted, however, that Twain is here equating conscience with conventional morality and not with a higher, purer spiritual force. Huck is as confused here as he was with the descriptions of Providence as provided by the Widow Douglas and Miss Watson. Because of his sound heart, Huck's conscience supersedes learned lipservice morality to a prescribed religico-social system. We have seen Huck erroneously assume that he was doomed to the fires of hell for his "conscienceless" act for determining to free Jim. That act, of course, the willing self-sacrifice of one human being for another, is the height of conscience, and Twain knows it. Huck's disparagement of conscience here is the kind provided by a "decayed and swinish religion," and, unlike Huck, Twain knows that, too.

²³ Ferguson, p. 179.

²⁴ Twain, Autobiography, p. 44.

Chapter V

De Lord God Almighty: One Plea of a Secular Humanist

In one of the scenes of Huckleberry Finn that William Van O'Connor considers either melodrama or more likely "claptrap," Jim has once again been standing Huck's night-watch. This has been typical of Jim's behavior since Huck's successful foiling of the bounty hunters. At this point Jim promises, "I tell you, chile, I 'speck it save' ole Jim--ole Jim ain't gwyne to fogit you for dat, honey" (p. 76). And Jim proves to be true to his word. Huck reports, "I went to sleep, and Jim didn't call me when it was my turn. He often done that" (p. 124). Huck's willingness to accept responsibility and some guilt for not being allowed to serve his watch proves how much he has matured with Jim's guidance. When he does wake, Huck senses that Jim longs for his wife and children, now hundreds of miles behind the south-drifting raft. Huck says:

I knowed what it was about. He was thinking about his wife and children, away up yonder, and he was low and homesick; because he hadn't ever been away from home before in his life;

and I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white folks does for ther'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so. He was often moaning and mourning that way nights, when he judged I was asleep, and saying, "Po' little 'Lizabeth! po' little Johnny! it's mighty hard; I spec' I ain't ever gwyne to see you no mo', no mo'!" He was a mighty good nigger, Jim was.
(p. 124)

Huck's unconscious irony almost defies comparison: Huck, it must be believed, has never known a conventional home; a sugar hogshead barrel has provided the most comfortable habitat before the raft. White people, with the exception of the ministering Widow Douglas, seem to have never cared for him. But, to the point, this simple statement conveys the depth of affection Huck has developed for Jim during the long journey down the Mississippi. With the unintended help of aristocratic feuds and verminous frauds, he has matured significantly. He bears little resemblance to the malicious Huck who played the rattlesnake prank, or to the supercilious Huck who enjoyed making a fool of Jim when the two were finally reunited following the near-disaster in the fog-shrouded towheads.

In addition, Huck's equation of Jim's humanity with that of "white folks" is in direct contradiction to the Widow's attempts at Christian "sivilizing." This scene allows Twain to scalpel away the veneer of legitimacy of slavery, to expose it for what it really is (a most

unwelcome text for Christian Bible readers). Slavery involves the breaking up of families in the name of economic opportunity: church-sanctioned, white, Christian, American greed. Has Huck not told us that Jim's children are the legal property of a man Huck does not even know?

What has triggered Jim's emotional outburst has been a loud noise from the shore that has reminded him of a pathetic incident involving his four-year-old daughter, "Lizabeth." The child had just recently recovered (Jim most painfully learns) from a devastating siege of scarlet fever. The details of the incident, parental, domestic, and human, are so commonplace.

Jim remembers that he asked the child to close an open door. The child does not respond. He asks her again, and again she does not respond. More forcefully he asks her again, commands her. She does not respond, and impulsively he boxes her ears, knocking the child sprawling. At that moment (if it had happened only seconds earlier, Jim would have learned the painful facts about his daughter's afflictions without using the physical violence which still torments his conscience), the wind blows the door shut with a thunderous "ker-blam!" Even then the child shows no evidence of having heard anything. The horrible realization

struck Jim like divine lightning. He unburdens his guilt to Huck:

She never budge! Oh, Huck, I bust out a-cryin' en grab her in my arms en say, "Oh, de po' little thing! de Lord God Almighty fogive po' ole Jim, kaze he never gwyne to fogive hissself as long as he live!" Oh, she was plumb deaf en dumb, Huck, plumb deaf en dumb--en I'd been a-treatin' her so! (p. 125)

Little 'Lizabeth will recover from Jim's unfortunately human display of temper; it is reasonable for anyone who has had children and has acted thus stupidly to assume that she did recover as Jim showed his contriteness by embracing her. But from the curse of scarlet fever, the fact that she has become both deaf and dumb, she will never recover. Twain again indicts God (eleven years before the death of Susy), and while he was still Fortune's favorite.

Jim, as a runaway slave, trapped in the heart of the Deep South, alone in a white hostile world except for Huck, uneducated, despondent, is helpless to alter his situation. For himself he feels no concern; for little Lizabeth and little Johnny, he suffers; his admission of guilt, the confession of his soul, is a tribute to his fundamental goodness, and a tribute not lost upon Huck. Jim's feeling of guilt springs from his realization that striking an innocent child--totally innocent, like the 32,000 Midianite virgins--is essentially, universally, and eternally immoral: the

contemptuously impulsive, self-serving, and abusive treatment of a blameless human being. The message is clear enough. Twain is saying, "I can create an uneducated nigger with more divine qualities than the God of the Bible; and for encores, I'll make an orphan river-rat show more soul than Moses."

The conventional interpretation of this passage conceals Twain's bitter assessment of what he believes to be the "real" facts. The guilt for Jim's action does not belong on his soul, because he did not know that the child could not hear; rather, it belongs on the altar at the feet of "de Lord God Almighty"--the One who both knows it and (it makes no difference to Twain) either causes it to happen or allows it to happen. God alone is directly responsible for all diseases, sicknesses, deformities, and death:

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life;

Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

In the sweat of thy face shall thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

(Genesis 1:16-19)

In this context, Jim is begging forgiveness from the only source of all his anguish and travail, the very same "Lord God Almighty." He is praying for forgiveness in the image of the virgins praying to a God for relief from a situation in which He has more than a casual interest. This scene may be melodrama or claptrap to O'Connor, but it was crucial to Twain's purpose in Huckleberry Finn. He was adamant in protecting not only the scene but the precise language. He had allowed Livy and Howells to edit everything he wrote for Huckleberry Finn--with the unique exception of this passage. "This expression shall not be changed,"¹ he pencilled in the margin beside the words "de Lord God Almighty." Justin Kaplan believes that it was because "he too would cry to heaven for forgiveness."² However, since Twain's pleas would be made many years in the future, the insistence on his phrase must be considered as just another imponderable volte-face in his anfractuous relationship with the Deity.

Only the most sensitive contemporary reader could have possibly recognized that scene as a double-barrelled assault on what Twain believed to be: first, God's inscrutable wrath and ruthless lack of concern for His innocent

¹ Mark Twain, quoted by Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966), p. 189.

² Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 189.

creations, as symbolized by little Lizabeth; and second, the Christian church's disdain for selected elements of mankind, as symbolized by Jim, the contrite supplicant who is furnished dogma but not freedom.

Each of Twain's children suffered at the hands of a seemingly implacable fate: his only son Langdon died of diptheria before he learned to walk, before his second birthday, almost five years before Twain started to write Huckleberry Finn. Susy, the favorite since birth, died in 1896, when she was only twenty-three. Jean, who, like little Lizabeth, actually contracted scarlet fever in 1882 when Twain was working on the book, is associated with a macabre vignette, now remembered only as one of Twain's last jokes; as Kaplan reports:

On December 23 [1909] Jean telephoned to the New York manager of the Associated Press Clemens' denial of a familiar rumor: "I hear the newspapers say I am dying. The charge is not true. I would not do such a thing at my time of life. I am behaving as good as I can. Merry Christmas to everybody." The next morning it was Jean who was dead; she had an epileptic seizure in her bath. On Christmas Day, too ill to travel, Clemens stood at the window and watched the hearse moving downhill through a heavy snowstorm. "I have never greatly envied any one but the dead," he said to [Albert Bigelow] Paine. "I always envy the dead." It was only then, after writing his account of her life and sudden death, that he considered his autobiography, and

his career, finished: "I shall never write any more."³

Even Clara, the only child that survived him, did not escape this malevolent fate: she suffered a nervous breakdown, and for a year Twain was not allowed to visit her, telephone her, or even write to her.⁴

Twain, after the deaths of Langdon, Susy, and Livy, had run out of cheeks to turn; with every atom of his literary skill and his knowledge of the Bible, he vented his spleen against God--all gods--and the "damned human race" that worshipped them. In a work to be published after his death, Letters from the Earth, he wrote:

Would you expect this same conscienceless God, this moral bankrupt, to become a teacher of morals; of gentleness, of meekness; of righteousness; of purity? It looks impossible, extravagant; but listen to him. These are his own words:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

· · · · ·
Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

· · · · ·
Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake.

³ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 387.

⁴ Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, p. 372.

The mouth that uttered these immense sarcasms, these giant hypocrises, is the very same that ordered the whole massacre of the Midianitish men and babies and cattle; the whole destruction of house and city; the wholesale banishment of the virgins into a filthy and unspeakable slavery.⁵

But the point here is that, not only were these last words not printed in his lifetime, they were not printed until fifty-two years after his death; by then, "the darling of the gods" had become one--he who had challenged, profaned, and blasphemed all the gods.

The people who love Huck and Tom, Becky, and the Prince and Tom Canty, and Hank Morgan and Colonel Sellers and Pudd'n'head Wilson--and Mark Twain--love them all on their own terms. There is not the possibility that one in a hundred of them would question Twain's position as the American writer because of his irreligious attitudes or, for that matter, because of anything else he said, wrote, or did. His life is an open book to them (they believe): his successes, his defeats, his acclaim by the public and his recognition by such universities as Yale and Oxford, his personal tragedies, his family losses, and, at the last, his canonization by hoi polloi and patrician alike. He actually lived the American Dream. He provided the

⁵ Mark Twain, Letters from the Earth, ed. Bernard De Voto (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 55.

reason for this adulation in The Mysterious Stranger when benevolent Young Satan confides to Theodor (which translates as "gift of God"):

For your race in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon--laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution--these can lift at a colossal humbug--weaken it a little, century by century; but only laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast. Against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.⁶

In all his adversity, Hamlet fondled and cherished and mourned the noisome skull of Yorick. In all theirs, the American public revere "God's Fool," Mark Twain, the lovable heathen of happy valley.

⁶ Mark Twain, The Mysterious Stranger and Other Stories (New York: Signet Classic, 1962), p. 248.

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