The Dramatic Unity of *Huckleberry Finn*
The world that Mark Twain has imagined as the non-human basis of *Huckleberry Finn* is a world of disorder and chaos, but, being an imagined world, it is a structure of disorder and therefore orderly. To use Kenneth Burke’s trick with italics, we have a model of disorder that is at the same time a model of disorder. The disorder is presented through a narrator who is incapable of perceiving order under the surface of the things and events he reports, as we see in the Grangerford episode, when order is thrust under his nose: “There was some books. One was ‘Pilgrim’s Progress,’ about a man that left his family it didn’t say why. I read considerable in it now and then. The statements was interesting but tough” (chap. 17).

Huck encounters the greatest Puritan literary embodiment of the Christian apocalyptic tradition, the central form-creating tradition of his culture, and he is baffled. He cannot even grasp the fact that *Pilgrim’s Progress* is an
organization, a fictional action. He perceives a beginning, a man leaving his family, without realizing what that means in itself or in relation to the rest of the book. He is not aware that he ought to know the meaning of the beginning without being told, or that, if he does not know it, he ought to try to figure it out. He does not look outward from the book to the world around him; certainly he sees no parallel between his own leaving of Pap and Mr. Christian's leaving of his family, no contrast between the Grangerfords' savage behavior and their ostentatious display of this book. *Pilgrim's Progress* is "interesting, but tough"—something is there, perhaps, and Huck is stimulated to dip into the book, but he is incompetent to find the meaning. In his narration, written a month or two later, he shows no curiosity about his failure. He drops the matter and goes on to finish his description of the Grangerford parlor.

Twain reinforces the point of this isolated but significant instance with the repeated ironical references to the snakeskin. As those references show, Huck and Jim think that they are pursuing some fate down the river. By handling that snakeskin, Huck violated, he believes, some mysterious law of nature and doomed Jim and himself to—what? We never find out. Huck does not tell us; he does not know, and cannot know, because there never was any such law of nature—there was only Huck's belief that there was. At the end Jim is freed and officially becomes a human being; Huck plans to go on being himself; and Tom Sawyer, Huck implies, is going to do the same. So perhaps one's fate is to exist and, as one who is being and not becoming, to imitate the "fate" of a John Marcher and have no fate. Santayana said that men like Twain
could point to the flaws in the genteel tradition but could not abandon it because “they have nothing solid to put in its place.”2 “Nothing solid” and “no fate” are indeed what Huckleberry Finn offers us, without Huck’s knowledge. Conventional causation (“fate”) is replaced by random change; solidity is replaced by the mutability expressed in an image Huck uses twice—the constant “squashing” of a river bank undercut by the gnawing of the river (chaps. 21, 29).

The destruction of solidity, the creation of “squishiness,” that is, the celebration of random activity and the denial of stasis and finality—these are at the heart of the world of Huckleberry Finn as it presents itself to the characters and to the reader. In postulating the universality of activity, often frenetic or destructive, Twain foreshadows the nightmare ending of A Connecticut Yankee, and in a later era the inexhaustible pointless creativity of the Satan-figures in the Mysterious Stranger manuscripts and the energy of argument in What Is Man? And in writing Huckleberry Finn itself, Twain demonstrated his principle of activity: he pigeonholed the manuscript more than once, and returned to it more than once before finally finishing it, thus maximizing the possible fuss.

This ever-active disorder I call “turbulence,” a useful contemporary scientific term for the basic form of ordered disorder or orderly disorder in the universe. “Every system of ‘statistical order,’ if viewed in sufficiently broad perspective, will be found to be part (fluctuating and temporary though it may be) of a larger, more inclusive system of turbulence.” The “systems of ‘statistical order’” that constitute the scientist’s reality tend to “interpenetrate” each other, thus putting stress on each other and causing
a breakdown into "turbulence." In order to describe natural turbulence, the scientist must analyze in terms of process, and the critic in his efforts to understand *Huckleberry Finn* must subordinate all order to process. Description of static elements is not enough to understand a novel whose basis is change. Critics have tended to stress the element of smoothness in the natural flow in *Huckleberry Finn*; thus Tony Tanner: "Through Huck Clemens re-established a profoundly simple contact with a nature whole and in process in all of its parts; the naïve vernacular child narrator provided him with a language which could establish an effortless yet reverent rapport with the empirical details of the seen flowing world, the world as seen for the first time, that is." Tanner speaks of Huck’s craving for "even uninterrupted peace" in a world that is a "continuous Sabbath." This version of pastoral is a natural corollary of the world seen as smooth flow, but I must reject it along with other interpretations of the novel as a hymn to nature, because such a view does not answer the questions raised by the constant disordered activity, the natural and human turbulence, of the novel. If the characters cannot accept smoothness and order (as we shall see), then the critic can hardly lay stress on it.

How does Twainian man experience his world? And then, having established an attitude toward his world as a result of his experience, what does he do? The answer to my second question will take most of the rest of this book and justify the controversial episodes of the novel. The answer to the first question is simply that man in *Huckleberry Finn* is a stranger in his world, and his feelings about that world are those of a stranger under stress—uncertainty, anxiety, fear, even panic terror. Men reach
different solutions to the problems posed by nature and culture, which itself is a group of fossilized ad hoc solutions of former men to their own problems. The problems, however, are always the same, underneath the changing surface. It is difficult to see the problems clearly because Huck is not analytical; he habitually does not record details of behavior from which we could infer deep feelings, and in any case, some problems, like Tom Sawyer and Colonel Sherburn, are impervious to analysis. But we can feel the presence of the eternal problem of being strange; we can feel it in Pap, with his tirades and terrors, and we can feel it in Pap’s son.

When Huck approaches the Phelps farm, hears the spinning wheel, and wishes he “was dead and done with it all,” he is defining “it” as his burden. Huck cannot explain, then or later, what he means by “it”; but at this point (chap. 32) a reader should know what “it” is—a cluster consisting of natural and cultural pressures, human anxieties resulting from those pressures, the endless efforts to relieve the anxieties, and the sense of futility arising from awareness of the failure or inadequacy of the efforts and the needlessness of the pressures. “It” is an existential matter, far beyond the social “coercion” defined as Huck’s problem by some critics.5 Rejection of the Rousseauistic idea of “coercion” of “the self” by “society” does not, however, mean abandoning the concept of the individual, or the possibility of the individual’s being in conflict with his culture. As modern anthropology has shown, one may be well integrated into his culture and yet have a world-outlook of alienation. The culture in fact may be a vehicle for celebrating this outlook and at the same time trying to cope with it. This
is the case in *Huckleberry Finn*. In this novel all men are coerced by the human situation to coerce each other. The latter kind of coercion, the social kind, is what Huck calls "civilization" and flees from, but the former kind, the existential kind, is primary.

The pressure of the human situation, nature, is the cornerstone of *Huckleberry Finn*; everything is building upon it, although the building makes the cornerstone hard to see. This pressure gives nothing to man except the turbulence that he cannot bear. Man’s sense of this pressure is instinctive and pre-verbal; his reaction to it is uncontrollable, though almost equally unconscious. Generally it is a constant pressure, best seen in the discussion of Bricksville, the grimmest town in the novel: “Such a town as that has to be always moving back, and back, and back, because the river’s always gnawing at it” (chap. 21). When it comes to the pressure of nature, every town in the novel is “such a town as that,” and every person a dweller in it. Twain himself dwelt in it and carried it around with him, so to speak, and his life was an “always moving,” to which could be added, as he grew older, “back, and back, and back.” This natural pressure creates the genuine religion of the novel, witchcraft, which unites master and slave in a community of anxiety (both Nat, the Phelps' slave, and Huck tie up their hair with thread to keep the witches away). The belief in witches and ghosts provides as solid and artistically useful a religious basis for *Huckleberry Finn* as traditional Christianity does for the kind of novel admired by Henry James.

Huck himself has many brushes with the pressure of nature, and two head-on confrontations with nature in its most frightening form—an endless, meaningless flux.
Because this formlessness challenges man’s need for organizing activity, Huck reacts against it violently and revealingly. The two confrontations are placed strategically, one at the beginning, and one at the moment of Huck’s arrival at the Phelps farm to rescue Jim.°

During the opening chapter Huck experiences the pressures of “civilization” as harshly as he ever will. “Miss Watson had jist come to live with the Widow Douglas,” says Huck, giving the impression that Miss Watson had been sent by some malignant agency to harass him. Her nagging is ingenious. It combines bullying with indifference, so that Huck is subject both to human pressures (“She worked me middling hard for about an hour”) and natural ones (“Then for an hour it was deadly dull, and I was fidgety”). Eventually she manages to combine the two pressures: “Miss Watson she kept pecking at me and it got tiresome and lonesome.” When Huck gets off by himself he is still in this mood, and, being physically alone, passes into an ominous further stage: “I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead.” Then come wordless intimations of the particulars of “death” (that is, raw nature) from the inhabitants and familiars of that anti-world—owls, “whippowills,” dogs, and ghosts. “I got so downhearted and scared,” Huck tells us. “Scared,” the primitive panic fear of nonhuman nature; “downhearted,” the despair at being in a world that can do this to men and at feeling helpless to do anything about it. And what does being downhearted and scared do to the boy who a few minutes earlier could not wait to get off by himself? “I did wish I had some company,” he says, in a striking demonstration of the dependence of man on situation and of situation on natural pressure.

Huck’s pipe helps to sustain him as the house becomes,
appropriately, “still as death,” and the town clock strikes twelve—more than a banal melodramatic touch, midnight in this fictional world being the time when man has the least control over nature. In this situation it is appropriate for Huck to be grateful when he hears Tom Sawyer signaling for him. When seen against this background of pressure from nature, Huck’s deep pleasure in the absurdities of Tom and his gang later that night makes sense, as the sign of his relief from the pressure.

The other confrontation, which is even more important, comes as Huck approaches the Phelps house full of dedication and enthusiasm for the rescue of Jim. It is high noon, another moment when time seems to stand still: “it was all still and Sunday-like” (chap. 32). There is no one around. In the air the “bugs and flies,” aimless creatures, make “dronings,” a word that well expresses a kind of activity that is worse to a human being than inactivity because its pointlessness and monotony deny the possibility of “meaningful” human activity, like static drowning out a radio frequency. These dronings are the kind “that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody’s dead and gone.

” “Lonesome” and “dead” describe conditioned responses that, as in the midnight scene, follow from the unbearable direct perception of inhuman, meaningless nature. After references again to breezes and spirits whispering, Huck concludes the opening paragraph of the chapter, “As a general thing it makes a body wish he was dead, too, and done with it all.” At this stage in the discussion we can see better than before what “it” means (and at this stage in the reading of the novel, the little pronoun has the weight of thirty-one chapters behind it).

After a paragraph of stage-setting description of the
“little one-horse cotton plantation,” Huck heads for the house and the climax of his experience: “When I got a little ways I heard the dim hum of a spinning-wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again; and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that is the lonesomest sound in the whole world.” This sound was Twain’s private symbol of the unbearable. In “The Private History of a Campaign That Failed,” published less than two years after *Huckleberry Finn* was finished, Twain tells us of his company’s stay at a farm:

After all these years the memory of the dullness, and stillness, and lifelessness of that slumberous farmhouse still oppresses my spirit with a sense of the presence of death and mourning. There was nothing to do, nothing to think about; there was no interest in life. There was no sound but the plaintive wailing of a spinning-wheel, forever moaning out from some distant room,—the most lonesome sound in nature, a sound steeped and sodden with homesickness and the emptiness of life.⁹

This passage—quite the most rhetorical in this ironic essay—again offers the cluster of key words (“dullness,” “stillness,” “death,” “lonesome”), and stresses the idea of man’s need for activity, but ends with an explicitness that Huck is not capable of: “the emptiness of life.” Life, in other words, is not occasionally empty; it is basically empty. One starts from emptiness and builds on it. Human culture, Twain realizes, is not “life,” but an artificial creation made from it and sitting precariously atop it.

The connection of this sound with homesickness is confirmed by a passage dictated by Twain for his
autobiography in the late 1890s. Reminiscing about his uncle John A. Quarles’s farm near Florida, Missouri, he said, “I can see the farm yet, with perfect clearness. I can see all its belongings, all its details; the family room of the house, with a trundle bed in one corner and a spinning-wheel in another—a wheel whose rising and falling wail, heard from a distance, was the mournfullest of all sounds to me, and made me homesick and lowspirited, and filled my atmosphere with the wandering spirits of the dead.”10 In this chapter of classic American nostalgia for childhood and the family farm, the symbol of life’s misery has a central place.

Responding so strongly to these terrible confrontations, and describing them so vividly, Huck makes them stand out from the other scenes of the novel; but although these few situations differ in degree from most of the other situations in which the characters find themselves, they do not differ in kind. All situations in this novel demand and receive response; human behavior, psychological or social, is a function of situation. “Demand value” is the useful term that social scientists use for this domination of situation over response. A circular but clear definition is Margaret Mead’s: “The habit of taking each situation as a single unit and adapting rapidly and fully to it is situational.”11 As a student of what people do rather than what they ought to do or think they do, Twain might have agreed with the statement of Jerome S. Bruner: “Situations have a demand value that appears to have very little to do with the motives that are operative. Surely it isn’t simply a ‘motive to conform’; this is too great an abstraction. [Reciprocity] is about as primitive an aspect of human behavior as we know.” “Reciprocity,”
says Bruner, "involves a deep human need to respond to others and to operate jointly with them toward an objective." 

The world of *Huckleberry Finn* is a situational world, and man in that world is situational man. The term "character," referring to a fixed structure of traits, is irrelevant and misleading; men are groups of potentialities that respond to situations. The "objective" toward which men "operate" is the organizing of situations into what I call dramas (see chapter 2), but that kind of responding, which often seems so voluntaristic and aggressive, is as helpless as passivity; consider Tom Sawyer in the hectic latter stages of the evasion (see below, pp. 178-79). A kind of temporary standoff, based on a response of fear and respect, is the best that man in this novel can hope to achieve, as Huck does in his idyllic moments.

Without using the term "demand value of situations," Twain thought in terms of the idea for most of his literary life. In the early 1870s, when he was beginning to turn toward his river material, Twain clearly saw man as a mechanism dominated by its situation and by the need to respond to, and become involved in, situations; see, for example, the marginal comments in Twain's copy of W. E. H. Lecky's *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (1869), discussed in Walter Blair's *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*. By the time of *What Is Man?* Twain was setting forth the idea of situationalism with a belligerence that reveals his sincerity along with his amateurishness and his emotional desperation. "It isn't a philosophy, it is a fact," said Twain through his spokesman, the "Old Man," suggesting, along with the nervous truculence, that Twain was working from his
own observations of mankind. "The human being," says the Old Man, "is a chameleon; by the law of his nature he takes the color of his place of resort." Eliminating Twain's overtones of contempt, we have here a satisfactory working definition of situational man. The mind, Twain further contends, not only responds to external stimuli but creates its own situations. A fifteen-minute reverie, says Twain's straight man, the "Young Man," is "a drifting panorama of ever-changing, ever-dissolving views manufactured by my mind without any help from me."

In *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), written during several of the years (1876-83) when Twain was erratically occupied with *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain used similar terms to suggest the dreamlike shifting vistas of an imaginary raft trip. Twain spontaneously clothed his determinism in the kind of imagery from which *Huckleberry Finn* is constructed. As we shall see, river life and natural events such as sunrises are to Huck what the Young Man's reveries are to him, and in the novel man involuntarily "manufactures" artificial events, which I call "dramas," out of his situations, as the Young Man's mind "manufactures" its "panoramas."

In *What Is Man?* Twain's paired concepts, "temperament" and "training," the controlling influences on man's behavior along with situation, do not refer to immediate situations; but "training" does suggest the continuous situation of enculturation, the long process by which the infant is turned into a human being and a member of his culture, and a good deal of *Huckleberry Finn*, the beginning especially, is devoted to examining efforts to enculturate Huck. For the most powerful
revelation of Twain's realization of the demand value of situations, we can turn again to What Is Man?: man, "the chameleon, has only to change his habitat—his associations. But the impulse to do it must come from the outside. Sometimes a very small and accidental thing can furnish him the initiatory impulse and start him on a new road, with a new ideal." In a late essay, "The Turning Point of My Life," in which Twain gave the final and strongest expression of his long obsession with the power of situation, he said, "Necessity is a Circumstance; Circumstance is man's master—and when Circumstance commands he must obey."

He went on to link "Circumstance" to "temperament," thus giving us for all practical purposes a modern deterministic psychological system to account for human behavior.

Thinking in terms of "situational man" trying to cope with the pressures of a turbulent world allows us to answer some perplexing questions, e.g., Why does Huck sneer at cornpone at one time but later say "there ain't nothing better"? Why does Huck, who is friendly and grateful to Jim most of the time, torment him after the fog episode? Why does Huck, the redemptive possibility of the human race, bully Sunday-school children? Why does Huck propose a practical plan to rescue Jim, and Tom an absurd plan? Why does Jim remain passive during the evasion but tell the Phelpses about the Royal Nonesuch? Why does Huck resolve to rescue Jim in chapter 31, but yield to Tom thereafter? Why does the Duke talk elegantly at one time, bluntly at another, coarsely at a third? Why does Jim call Huck "honey"?
Taking these events on the level of the given turbulent world of flux and activity organized in immediate terms by the principle of situationalism, they are not only explicable but inevitable. In chapter 8 Huck sneers at "low-down cornpone" because he has just set his teeth into a loaf of "baker's bread," the food of the quality; but in chapter 17 he proclaims that "there ain't nothing better" than "cold corn-pone" because it helps satisfy his ravenous appetite in the security of the Grangerford house after the steamboat hits the raft and throws Huck into a terrifying crisis. During the fog episode (chap. 15) Huck is on the edge of panic but controls himself, because the situation demands a cool head if he is to survive and rejoin Jim. Huck allows his fear to emerge only in expressions like "I did wish the fool would think to beat a tinpan, and beat it all the time, but he never did." (Huck can be excused in this situation for not realizing that Jim cannot afford to attract attention.) Only after the emotional reunion with Jim can Huck afford to give full vent to his tension, by calling Jim "a tangle-headed old fool" and badgering him into the belief that the whole affair was a dream. Once Huck has discharged his feelings, he can apologize to Jim; and the two, all passion spent, can resume their quiet drifting. In chapter 3 Huck is still testing what "civilization" offers him, is under pressure from Miss Watson and Tom, and is about ready to chuck the whole thing, so he takes out his frustrations and boredom on the Sunday-school children without qualms and without any real malice—he is interested only in his own feelings.

In these and other episodes Huck acts on a principle that he can express only after writing about the greatest
immediate crisis of the novel, the denial of Jim’s blackness to the slave-hunters (chap. 16). Huck realizes that his share of what Twain later called “training” is inadequate—“a body that don’t get started right when he’s little ain’t got no show there ain’t nothing to back him up”—and concludes, “So I reckoned I wouldn’t bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.” “Whichever come handiest at the time”—that explains the situational Twain world. “Whichever” it is, it “come” by itself; that is, behavior is determined. It “come handiest”: behavior obeys simple laws. It “come handiest at the time”: behavior is special, temporal, without being consistent. The Huck of this philosophy seems very distant from the high-minded “saintly” Huck of Arnoldian criticism.

This key phrase, “whichever come handiest at the time,” contrasts with another, “taking stock,” which appears most often during Huck’s gropings in the early chapters. To take stock in something is to make a commitment; it is to align oneself more or less permanently, according to an abstract principle. For Twain, with his complex feelings about money and making money, taking stock—speculating, as we would say—was tied up with his sense of personal worth (also a financial term in origin) and his personal identity. But during the 1890s Twain found out to his sorrow that in a real and changing world speculation was risky and that a man who identified himself with his speculations ran the risk of a loss greater than monetary loss, the loss of self-esteem. Jim learns this lesson when he “tackles stock” of a live kind, loses all his savings, and makes a fool of himself. Huck
also learns that permanence and principles are irrelevant concepts in a situational world. Huck says, "I don't take no stock in dead people" (chap. 1), and he rejects a blanket commitment to the dead; but later he lectures Jim about medieval and biblical kings (chap. 14). Huck is not contradicting himself. The two episodes are governed by different principles. Interest in the dead has nothing to do with lecturing Jim about Solomon; a desire to impress Jim, to "show off," to display "style," has a great deal to do with it.

The traditional concepts of "comic character" and "tragic character" disappear along with the concept of character itself as the sum of fixed faculties and qualities. Instead, Twain shows us systems of potentials, ready to interact with situations in different ways, and driven to do so by the principle of reciprocity, with "comic" results in some cases and "tragic" ones in others. Character can still be evaluated, but only in situational terms. At the bottom are the loafers in Bricksville; at the top is Tom Sawyer. The loafers are Twain's control, his zero-mark, men in no situation, with no stimuli from nature and no help from their culture (which hardly exists anyway). We are shown in painful detail the actions of men in a non-situation: they cheat each other out of bits of tobacco and set fire to stray dogs. Huck is "better" than the loafers, not because he is inherently superior, but because he is luckier—he almost always has some opportunity for action, or is able to find action when he craves it (as he finds Jim or Mrs. Loftus or the King and the Duke). The chivying of the Sunday-school picnic shows what loutishness Huck is capable of when he is bored and lacking in chances for action. The example of
his father suggests what the wrong situation could make Huck into.

Human behavior, however, does involve continuing situations—the man-made ones, the dramas of culture, which give some people more power than others. Much of the novel depends on the continuing cultural differences between Huck and Tom. Being part of a favorable cultural situation—what Huck calls “the quality”—Tom can ignore immediate situational demands and give full rein to his vigorous temperament. In a sense he must do that and do it all the time, for “the quality,” like any aristocracy, redefine and renew their situation continually by showing that they can afford to ignore the pressures that others must bow to. The evasion is the great chance for Tom to demonstrate his position on a large scale before a large audience; thus Tom’s passionate energy there, which alarms Huck so much. Jim has nothing to do with it all, except to be the occasion of the demonstration. For Tom, Jim’s interest in the evasion is “only personal,” as Gatsby says of Tom Buchanan’s love for Daisy. The “authorities” and the other nonsense in the ending have no point. That is their point—to be “merely comic,” as Henry Nash Smith says; to be as far as possible from the grubby world where actions must be tidy and sensible and consistent. All this is behind Tom’s startling attack on Huck’s plan of rescue: “What’s the good of a plan that ain’t no more trouble than that?” (chap. 34). At the end comes the nicest touch of all: while Huck, his situation suddenly controlled by the suspicions of the adults, hunts for some good lies to explain the evasion, Tom wakes up and at once begins to tell the truth about the whole affair.
Only he can afford to. A few times circumstances—the beginning of the Walter Scott episode, the return to the raft after the fog—give Huck the feeling that he too can get away with daring gestures of freedom, but he is quickly taught his lesson each time: the river takes the raft away from the wreck, Jim’s anger makes Huck realize that he needs Jim’s friendship.

Jim is the most unlike Tom. Jim must be the most fully alert to situations, and is the most bound and victimized by them, for by cultural definition he is a passive victim in a permanent situation, slavery. Jim and the other slaves are the most alert and cunning of the characters. In the course of this bloody, death-haunted novel not one black person dies. Many of the whites go too far, do stupid things for no visibly necessary reason, and are destroyed; the slaves never “go” at all, except under the most pressing or the most favorable conditions. Pressed by Miss Watson’s threat to sell him into slow but certain death down the river, Jim reacts instantly and strongly, and with a craft worthy of Huck or Tom at his best. Bullied and sold by the King and the Duke, Jim does nothing in revenge until the one perfect opportunity presents itself: he learns that the two rascals are going to put on the Royal Nonesuch again. Then he acts. He tells the Phelpses “all about that scandalous show” (chap. 33). The King and the Duke die, horribly. Jim is perfectly secure in his revenge; he is upheld, in fact, by all of the outraged Puritanism of the culture. Huck, predictably, fails to see that the event is Jim’s revenge.

The great reverie, in chapter 31, in which Huck vows to steal Jim despite the mores of his culture, arises from Huck’s circumstances and depends throughout on
them, along with his “training,” the residue of earlier situations. This, after all, is what a reverie is—the presentation of the flux of the mind itself, a series of mental situations that result from earlier ones and cause later ones. Huck’s sense of shame arises partly from the addition of his training to the neutral statement, based on Huck’s knowledge, that “it would get all around that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom.” The chiding voice—“the plain hand of Providence” that watches “all the time from up there in heaven”—is the voice of Miss Watson. Earlier Huck rejected her; now he accepts her. Huck has not changed, but his situation has, and the Watson ethos and manner now mesh with it. Huck’s shame also comes by a process of association from the beginning of the reverie. It is sad, Huck thinks, that Jim is now a slave again; it would be better if he were a slave at home; a letter home would fix that up; it would work to Jim’s disadvantage, because Miss Watson would despise Jim for being ungrateful; everybody despises an ungrateful slave; everybody despises a nigger-stealer; Huck is a nigger-stealer. The pressure on Jim would itself be a situation—“they’d make Jim feel it all the time.” Jim’s “rascality and ungratefulness for leaving her” are taken for granted. In the large situation of Huck’s culture a slave who runs off is an ungrateful rascal. Huck has never questioned that general rule or the foundation of his culture in slavery. He has questioned religion, so the elements of religious “training” enter later, after Huck has built up a load of guilt and has allowed the situation to simmer (“the more I studied about it ”). Here Twain illustrates the general principle that the demand value of situations depends
on the sum of many factors in the present and from the past.

The ending, the aftermath of Huck’s reverie, is the novel’s clinching demonstration of situationalism. The ending is a disaster, most people feel, and only a sadist or a child can get unalloyed pleasure out of it; but the disaster is inevitable. Huck cannot help letting his conscious commitment to rescue Jim take a back seat to Tom and his antics. We are in a world where conscious commitments are secondary to the governing forces, to what Twain later called “the Master”: “It is as I have said: the thing which will give you the most pleasure, the most satisfaction, in any moment or fraction of a moment, is the thing you will always do. You must content the Master’s latest whim, whatever it may be.”

In such a world it is indeed ominous to see Huck slowly approaching the Phelps house and “not fixing up any particular plan, but jist trusting to Providence to put the right words in my mouth when the time come” (chap. 32). Huck’s “Providence” amounts to the “demand value” of situations, and his trust is a form of capitulation to this governing power, capped by his justification for that trust: “I’d noticed that Providence always did put the right words in my mouth if I left it alone” (chap. 32). This amounts to saying, “Whatever is, is right,” or, as we have seen Huck putting it, “I reckoned I wouldn’t bother no more about it, but after this always do whichever come handiest at the time.”

In the situational world of Huckleberry Finn this philosophy is hopelessly weak. It happens that Huck’s comment about doing “whichever come handiest” follows his instinctive and (to the reader) wholly admirable defense
of Jim from the slave-hunters (chap. 16), so the broad inapplicability of the general philosophy is concealed in the acceptability of the particular example. Or, to put it another way, if we accept the philosophy of "whichever come handiest" in chapter 16, then we must accept it in the ending too; and then we must accept the ending.

When one considers the language of the novel in terms of situationalism, it falls into a new pattern, as the plot does. Henry Nash Smith has acutely observed that the language of *Huckleberry Finn* is two languages, a "vernacular," the unselfconscious colloquial American speech, and an "official" language, a self-conscious system designed for making impressions and expressing overt values. This approach, good as taxonomy, is inadequate in terms of the dynamics of the novel. In these terms we have an Emersonian situation, Man Talking, a dynamic linguistic unity in which the momentary sum of situational factors, "temperament," and "training" dictates the choice of words. ("Training," of course, is a product of past situations; "temperament," like situations, is a given.) If we postulate, as Professor Smith does not, a consistently superior "vernacular" language and a consistently inferior "official" language, then it is hard to deal with the fact that the superior language is spoken by the worst characters in the book as well as the best—if Huck is the best—and the inferior language is spoken by some of the better characters. Professor Smith points out the fact; I think that we can go a step further and explain it if we drop the rigid linguistic categories, except as identifying tags, and see language as a unity from which choices are made by situation.
The Bricksville loafers are again the zero-markers, victims of entropy. In the absence of personal skills and outside pressures beyond the need to kill time, they drift to the bottom of language considered as a medium for social interaction. The loafers' speech is undeniably vernacular. So is the King's, when he is not trying to make an impression. "What are you heaving your pore broken heart at us f'r?" he snarls at the Duke, when the latter is preparing to make himself top rascal on the raft by cleverly using sententious rhetoric, impressive and thus appropriate to the situation. The slow-witted King finally catches on and clumsily mouths enough appropriate bilge to supersede the Duke. But training and temperament, or rather the lack of them, finally catches up with the King in later linguistic situations. When he talks to the prayer meeting at Pokeville, his linguistic limitations are concealed by his narrative skill and by the situation (the ignorance of the crowd and their hysterical craving for any kind of stimulus). At the Wilkses the King is finally defeated by his inability to step fully beyond the vernacular. He makes the error of casting the Duke, the better non-vernacular talker of the pair, as the deaf-and-dumb brother. The expert imitation of a minister that the situation demands cannot be furnished by the King, whose desperate efforts merely make him look like a fool to Huck and to the handful of townspeople whose temperaments allow them to see the King as he is rather than in terms of their own desires. Ironically, the King's final downfall has nothing to do with language; he never has a chance to speak before the mob seizes him (chap. 33).

Huck's own language and the effects of its use are
likewise influenced by the shifting equations of situation. The book itself is a giant situation, or rather the writing of it is. The narrative passages of the novel are more precise and expressive than the reported dialogue; the narrative has been made, it is artificial, a product of effort. Huck is fully aware of all this. At the end he says, "If I'd a knowed what a trouble it was to make a book I wouldn't a tackled it, and ain't agoing to no more." The strong colloquial flavor of the passage, and the "bad" grammar and numerous contractions, reflect a kind of ostentatious falling-off of effort, like the handwriting of a student rushing through the last sentences of an impromptu essay. Many of the narrative and descriptive passages are written with care, and it is from these passages that one derives the sense of the greatness of the "vernacular" prose style. But the "vernacular style" is not colloquial. As Huck makes clear in his rueful remark, his prose is literary, written—thought up, thought over, and put down on paper. (I will return to this important point below, pp. 115-16.) To sweep every sloppy colloquial utterance in the novel into one classification with Huck's great descriptive and narrative passages is to repeat in reverse the error of the Concord librarians who banned the entire book as vulgar.

Huck's own speech also varies according to the situation, but since he lacks facility in the immediate use of words, the variations are few and awkward. When lecturing Jim on kings and the Bible, Huck talks like a mediocre Tom Sawyer, an imitation of an imitation. Tom uses his pedantic prattle for the sound reason that it helps him attain and keep power over his world. But Huck can dazzle only Jim, who by the harsh cultural
definition is of no importance. Given the laws of drama, the human need to organize and to display organizing power, and the situation—for some time Jim is Huck's only audience—Huck has no choice but to try to impress him, but that does not change the triviality of the material and the situation. Huck has little motivation or opportunity to use cant skillfully and sustainedly, and most of the time he does not use it at all. In speech he drifts into the ordinary colloquial style of his time and place. Only in the leisureed situation of writing after the evasion does Huck find the outlet for his energies, in the carefully wrought narrative style and the thoughtful comments on men and events. The book itself is thus the domain of Huck's verbal efforts, and his audience is the invisible reader.

Huck makes extensive use of conventional "literary" language only in his great reverie (chap. 31), where the fear of public opinion modulates into the voice of conscience speaking in Miss Watson's style of evangelical Protestantism—"the plain hand of Providence," "there's one that's always on the lookout," and so on. As mimesis this is excellent; as logical fiction it is dubious (see below, pp. 143-48). Fortunately, the earlier part of the reverie is completely logical in cultural terms; in a monolithic slave culture Huck did not need to go to Sunday school to learn that helping Jim is shameful. This section of the reverie follows from the thoughts about how "ornery and disgraced" Jim would feel if caught. Twain's masterstroke here is to show us unobtrusively how the pressures of situation and "training" can make an "ungrateful nigger," even one with Jim's free temperament, agree with his tormentors. The language is genuine vernacular:
And then think of me! It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was ever to see anybody from that town again, I'd be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame. That's just the way: a person does a low-down thing, and then he don't want to take no consequences of it. Thinks as long as he can hide it, it ain't no disgrace. That was my fix exactly.

Up to this point the sequence is flawless. The shame arises from “training,” the general comments from personal experience. The comments—“as long as he can hide it, it ain’t no disgrace”—are a devastating statement of the rotting Puritanism of Huck’s culture; all he needs to add in order to sum up his world is something like “And if he can’t hide it, then it still ain’t no disgrace as long as he can make himself and others think it’s not a low-down thing.” But after this sequence Huck starts talking about conscience, and the motive of the scene shifts from Huck’s to Twain’s own concerns. I think, therefore, that an argument about the opposition of “vernacular” and “official” language should find a better example than this scene.

Another example of the language of the novel can be studied situationally. This is Jim’s use of “honey” and “chile” in addressing Huck. In the well-known article “Come Back to the Raft Agin, Huck, Honey,” Leslie Fiedler bases on this usage much of his influential claim that Huck and Jim are consciously or unconsciously homosexuals and thus illustrative of a far-reaching tendency in American culture. Considering the social significance of these epithets, one can only say that, as Fiedler apparently did not know, they were and are common southern forms of address from adults to children (though not from white adults to black children),
and that the overtones of the two words are not always affectionate, sometimes quite the opposite, especially in the case of "child." Within Huckleberry Finn the two words have these situational meanings; in fact, the matter is such a locus classicus of the dominance of situation in this novel that it is worth some close reading.

Huck is called "honey" and "chile" by two characters, Jim and Mrs. Loftus. Mrs. Loftus and Huck can hardly be linked in any kind of sexual relationship. In accordance with the value of the words in the southern vocabulary, this peppery woman calls Huck "honey" when she still thinks that he is a girl, and "child" when she learns, to her satisfaction, that he is a boy. Jim and Mrs. Loftus are the only lower-class characters who are nice to Huck; some of the quality are, but they are too distant to address him as "honey" or "child." The kindly feelings of Jim and Mrs. Loftus take special form, depending on their own situations, when they are directed toward a child rather than an adult. Two of Jim's uses of "honey" and one of "chile," as well as Mrs. Loftus's two uses of "honey," are patronizing and superior. Beginning to realize that "Sarah Williams" is not all she says she is, Mrs. Loftus says, "What did you say your name was, honey?" On being told that the name is "Mary Williams," Mrs. Loftus continues, "Honey, I thought you said it was Sarah when you first come in?" She is being sly, not affectionate. After she has forced Huck out of his pose and is feeling rather pleased with herself (so that she cannot see through his new pose), she patronizingly calls him "child": "Goshen, child? This ain't Goshen." Whether she is saying "honey" or "child" her attitude is always superior, and not at all affectionate.
Jim’s suggestions of superiority all come early in his life with Huck, while they are isolated on Jackson’s Island. Here and only here is it possible for Jim to be superior; on the river and elsewhere he is too dependent on Huck. When Huck remarks that it is nice to be in a cave out of the rain and the flood-water, Jim replies triumphantly: “Well, you wouldn’t a ben here, ’f it hadn’t a ben for Jim. Wou’d a ben down dah in de woods widout any dinner, en gittin’ mos’ drowned, too, dat you would, honey. Chickens knows when it’s gwyne to rain, en so do de birds, chile” (chap. 9). The adult as initiate and expert, the child as naïve ignoramus: the cultural role is there for the taking, and Jim plays it to the hilt. It is hard to see here any sexual application, overt or latent. A little later, when Huck says that the loot from the floating house shows the error in the snakeskin superstition, Jim replies, “Never you mind, honey, never you mind. Don’t you get too peart. It’s a-comin’ Mind I tell you, it’s a-comin’” (chap. 10). Of course Jim is right; the two often have trouble, usually because Huck is “peart.” To the role of superior adult watching over the heedless child, Jim adds that of the knower of mysteries instructing the layman. Faulkner has a similar usage in the first part of *The Sound and the Fury*:

> How will they know it’s Dilsey, when it’s long forgot, Dilsey, Caddy said.
> It’ll be in the Book, honey, Dilsey said. Writ out.

Later, when the situation forces a reversal of roles, Jim’s use of “honey” and “chile” is full of blind gratitude. The various crises—the encounter with the slave-hunters, the betrayal of the King—make the point of role-reversal explicit; they put Jim in situations so terrible that
just surviving them leaves him broken down. When Huck and Tom enter Jim’s cabin at the Phelps, after he has been an isolated prisoner for a day or so, “he was so glad to see us he most cried; and called us honey, and all the pet names he could think of” (chap. 36). This is not sex; it is pathetic joy at the sight of friends and the hope of rescue. To link sex with the use of “honey” here is an insult to Jim and his situation as a prisoner, a black man, and a slave. The matter of real interest here is Huck’s failure to realize Jim’s position. He reports Jim’s rapture without comment, just as he merely reports Jim’s agreement, a little later, with Tom’s plan to put off the escape until they have had some fun—as if Jim had any alternative!

The same pathetic joy is found elsewhere. When Huck finds the raft again after the fog, Jim says, “You’s back ag’in? It’s too good for true, honey, it’s too good for true. Lemme look at you, chile, lemme feel o’ you. No, you ain’ dead! thanks to goodness!” (chap. 15). “Thanks to goodness,” to be sure. Without Huck, Jim is a lone black man, obviously a runaway slave, on a raft in the middle of the Mississippi, with a slave state on one side and a slave state (Kentucky) or a hostile free state (southern Illinois) on the other. “Feeling of” Huck is not sexual. It is necessary, given the witchcraft-religion of the novel, because a person ostensibly returned alive from a dangerous experience may actually be his ghost returned to haunt you. Tom Sawyer feels Huck, at Huck’s suggestion, when Tom encounters what he is sure is Huck’s ghost on the road near the Phelps, hundreds of miles from where Huck “died.”

Shortly after the fog episode, Jim’s position changes
only to get worse. While Huck is enjoying himself at the Grangerfords, Jim is immobilized in the depths of the swamp. Huck does not grasp the overtones of this situation when he encounters it; he visits Jim and leaves him again. Jim’s rapturous greeting here (“He nearly cried, he was so surprised”) has no more effect on Huck than Nat’s rapturous thanks (“Will you do it, honey?—will you? I’ll wussup de groun’ und’ you’ foot, I will!”) have on Tom after Tom promises to make a witch pie for Nat (chap. 36). Jim does use “honey” once in the Grangerford scene, at the close when he comments on the Grangerford slaves: “Dey’s mighty good to me, dese niggers is, en whatever I wants ’m to do fur me, I doan’ have to ast ’m twice, honey” (chap. 18). The word here is the product of Jim’s expansiveness in his new mood of relative security and confidence.

Jim does not stick to “honey” and “chile” (not that he uses those words much). When he is arguing with Huck man to man, which in the world of this novel means “enslaved black man to free white man,” Jim uses the word “boss”: “Well, looky here, boss, dey’s sumfn wrong, dey is” (chap. 15). The term, half servile and half aggressive, is nicely fitted to the particular situation and to the general culture, a culture of slavery. Situation is everything, and situations change. These two postulates of this novel are again revealed here.

II

Thus each character responds to the demand value of each situation. The movement of the novel from situation
to situation depends also on underlying levels of laws or "structure" of which the characters, including Huck, are not aware, even if they manipulate situations skillfully. In obeying the law of demand value of situations, Twain's characters bring the structural rules into action, producing further situations that in turn demand actions and reactions that in turn create further situations, and so on. The characters move geographically in a roughly straight line from Missouri to lower Arkansas; culturally they move along a line of increasing intensity of the great cultural factor, slavery. Neither factor satisfactorily explains the movement from one incident to another. On the surface the incidents have no connection, so that many critics have seen the novel as a picaresque fiction held together only by the personality of its narrator. But on the level of deep structure the episodes are related, in terms of the emotional state that leads Huck (or Huck and another character) into the incident or causes him to leave it. The movement of emotional states is circular, although the sequence is often broken or distorted by situations or the interference of another character. The basic sequence, picking a point of entry arbitrarily, is (1) peace and passivity, (2) boredom and yearning for action, (3) excitement in action and in involvement with others, (4) irritation at troubles and dangers arising from action, (5) nervousness or fear in flight that leads to security and inaction and thus to peace. The greater (usually in intensity) one stage, the greater the next. Thus *Huckleberry Finn* satisfies Jean Piaget's dictum that "the notion of structure is comprised of three key ideas: the idea of wholeness, the idea of transformation, and the idea of self-regulation."
Differences in intensity can be deceiving in this novel. One of the stages may be inconspicuous or completely implied, but that is a characteristic of deep structure and makes no difference. When Huck goes from the idyllic peace of the raft (in chap. 19) to the raucous involvement of the episodes with the King and the Duke (chaps. 19-31), he seems to skip the stage of boredom, and he apparently does not seek action or involvement. But when Huck encounters the two rascals in the woods (chap. 19), he abandons the idyll without a thought, helps the pair willingly, and soon becomes involved in their world despite his strong objections to them. If Huck were not ready to move on from the inaction and peace of the idyll, he would continue to act as circumspectly as he does during the idyll (hiding during the day, and so on) or he would escape from the rascals during one of his several chances to do so (at the camp meeting, during the Sherburn uproar and the Nonesuch performances, and so on). At times, as in the sequence after Huck’s escape from Pap’s cabin, the categories are so conspicuous that even Huck is vaguely aware of them, though he cannot realize that one emotional state is the consequence of the other. In a few of his most intense experiences Huck can see connections. He realizes that the involvement with the Grangerfords led to trouble, and several months later he is still wishing that he had not “ever come ashore to see such things” (chap. 18).

Intensity also has internal structural effects satisfying the requirement of self-regulation, that is, that a change in the system must lead to another change that leads to a new harmony. In Pap’s cabin Huck is close to death; his subsequent escape is therefore complex and intense in
mood, his sense of peace on the river and Jackson's Island total, and his subsequent boredom, action (roaming the island), and involvement with Jim equally great and portentous. The overwhelming catastrophe of the Grangerford episode produces an equivalent peace on the raft ("Two or three days swum by"). Huck's sense of time changes so that these "two or three days" seem much longer to him and to us—so much longer to many readers, in fact, that from this brief episode has largely grown the widespread sense of the raft voyage as a timeless idyll. In contrast the Wilks episode seems long to most readers and interminable to Huck, partly for the reason that he has been with the King and the Duke for a long time and is bored and exasperated with them. Earlier, just an hour or so with Miss Watson drives Huck into the depths of misery because she puts so much pressure on him. Boredom can be staved off or decreased by a succession of diverting man-made events, as in the opening chapters (the robber gang, trying prayer), or in the rich variety of the King-and-Duke episode, or by a string of interesting but not frightening natural events, as in the weeks Jim and Huck spend watching storms and floods on Jackson's Island. But the staved-off boredom always comes, leading in the cases mentioned to hasty strong actions by Huck—his clumsy involvement in the Wilks business and his nearly disastrous journey in girl's clothes to Mrs. Loftus—or to grateful acquiescence in actions of others ("It was kind of lazy and jolly, laying off comfortable all day" in Pap's cabin).

Overriding the passively endured situational sequence is the actively created dramatic episode, and because it
can dominate and break up the round of the emotional structure, for a time at any rate, I will take up this crucial kind of sequence later in isolation and detail. There are other key structural situations to be examined here: the paradigmatic escape from Pap's cabin and the controversial ending.

After getting away from Pap, Huck achieves a momentary stability through the exhaustion of conflicting impulses after prolonged conflict. Since the beginning of the novel he has been in conflict with nature, Miss Watson, Tom Sawyer, and Pap. He has bested Pap, Miss Watson, and Tom in turn, by escaping from the cabin, by making it look as if he were dead, and by doing the whole thing with "style." Completely at peace, and close to the fundamentals of nature—"everything was dead quiet, and it looked late, and smelt late"—Huck yields himself to the now-pleasant flow of nature: "I got out amongst the driftwood, and then laid down in the bottom of the canoe and let her float. I laid there, and had a good rest and a smoke out of my pipe, looking away into the sky; not a cloud in it. The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knewed it before." Twain is nodding here, for Huck has seldom slept under a roof and ought to know the effects of moonlight. At any rate, one expects a long and thorough communion with nature, especially if one sees Huck as a pastoral hero. But the Emersonian yielding to the perfect whole ends there; we are not in the world of the Transcendentalists, and we are not dealing with a conscious mystic. The world of man intrudes: "And how far a body can hear on the water such nights! I heard people talking at the ferry-landing. I
heard what they said, too—every word of it.” Does Huck resent this interruption? No, he enjoys it at the time; he listens to what the people at the landing are saying until he drifts downstream and can hear them no more. Several months later, he accepts the interruption again, this time by recording it carefully on paper.

Shortly after hearing the men, he is again in nature as he lands on Jackson’s Island and looks out “on the big river and the black driftwood and way over to the town, three mile away.” He is in nature (“the big river”), but still in relation to man (“the town”). Again he turns to the man-made world as he tells us how he watches a lumber raft float past and hears men giving commands on it. This example is more delicate than the first, in which there is a harsh contrast between the fathomless moonlight and the raucous jesters at the ferry landing. Here the human, the lumber raft, is integrated into nature, floating with the current, as Huck was earlier, and the commands of the raftsmen are in harmony with the situation. With man and nature in harmony, for the time being, it is possible for Huck to go to sleep and wake up the next morning “feeling rested and ruther comfortable and satisfied” (chap. 8).

Huck’s world is never more harmonious than this, and the satisfied feeling lasts for a record time, “three days and nights. No difference—just the same thing.” But Huck can stand no more of this peaceful inaction, even though he sits on the bank and counts “stars and drift-logs and rafts” in order to defeat his loneliness and boredom. He destroys the situation deliberately by exploring the island, “mainly,” he says, “in order to put in the time.” This desire to kill time and escape the
static, even if the static is idyllic, leads to the meeting and involvement with Jim and thus the action of the last three-quarters of the novel.

No other reaction from nature is as marked as this one, excepting, of course, the two moments of panic when Huck is in his room (chap. 1) and when he arrives at the Phelps (chap. 32). Huck's last two major reactions in the novel, the ones leading to the final episode and away from it, are against social involvements (with the two rascals and the Phelps world) rather than against nature. The sequence leading to the evasion has complications that contribute to the unsatisfactory qualities of the evasion itself. After Huck revolts against the King and the Duke, he returns to the solitude of the raft, where he enters not nature but a state of nature in which it is possible for this white boy to dedicate himself to the service of a black slave. In this exalted, open, and vulnerable mood Huck approaches the Phelps house only to be confronted with the terrific blankness of nature at its most pure and least human. The experience leaves Huck shattered. Presented a few minutes later with the chance to reenter structured human life as Tom Sawyer, a leading symbol of the world rejected in chapter 31, Huck unhesitatingly chooses the organized acceptable lie and repudiates the disorganized unbearable truth. Huck's decision makes it impossible to help Jim on the level of dedication and sacrifice that Huck reached so painfully in chapter 31, and makes it possible for the rescue to be the perversion that Tom Sawyer makes it.

In the last pages of the novel Huck again reacts against "civilization," but thanks to the satisfactions of
his recent experiences as and with Tom Sawyer, the reaction is much less violent and complete than the one in chapter 32. Still ready for a limited kind of involvement, Huck falls in easily with Tom’s plan to continue their antics in the Indian Territory. A few paragraphs later, Huck announces that he has decided to leave ahead of the rest, not in order to get away from them but to counter Aunt Sally’s scheme to “sivilize” him. There is no sharp anxiety here, nor is there anticipation of delight and rest in nature. Huck may remember those idyllic moments on the river—in fact, he just got through writing about them—but he cannot link memory to anticipation because that would require a coherent world, and he lives in a world of changing situations that he experiences as changing pressures and changing emotional responses to them. The only anticipation he has and can have is that something will turn up that he can turn into diversion. He does not set nature against civilization in general; he sets his own cycles of activities against the demands of the cycles of others.

It is a sign of Tom Sawyer’s genius that he can use Huck as an instrument and at the same time make Huck feel that he is a friend and a collaborator—a naïve and slow-witted collaborator, but one just the same (see below, pp. 172-76). Other characters in the novel are not so clever, and with them Huck passes rapidly through the stages of involvement, irritation, and flight. Miss Watson bluntly, and the Widow Douglas gently, try to ram their styles down Huck’s throat. It takes Huck only a few moments to see through and reject them. Huck turns to Tom’s gang and accepts it until the assault on the Sunday-school picnic destroys the illusion that the
gang is his gang as well as Tom’s. Huck avoids Tom thereafter until the very different situation of the ending. Living at Pap’s cabin is pleasant for Huck until Pap casts him as the victim in a paranoid fantasy. The Grangerfords too are delightful until Huck becomes an unwitting instrument in their highly organized “civilization,” the feud. The Grangerfords’ world is so fully integrated and isolated that in the crisis Buck assumes that Huck is a skilled feuder and depends on him to keep close watch on the Shepherdsons. Buck was wrong, but Huck never does realize it.

With the King and the Duke, Huck goes through a similar but longer sequence of relationships. At first, on the raft, Huck is the spectator, amused, aware that the men are frauds, but unaware that he might become unpleasantly involved with them. At Pokeville camp meeting Huck is still the pure spectator; at Bricksville he becomes a minor collaborator, helping with “our show” and enjoying the Nonesuch swindle. At the Wilkses, however, Huck is forced to play an active, demanding part. His clumsiness with the “harelip” (Joanna Wilks) reveals his unwillingness to obey the con men. It is not entirely a question of skill; Huck handles more delicate situations capably in earlier episodes. When his anger at the King and the Duke passes a crucial point, Huck is provoked into a complex counter-scheme that he handles fairly well until he is upset by the ultimate kind of pressure—brute force, in the shape of “that big husky Hines” (chap. 29), who drags Huck off to the cemetery and almost to his death.

The most subtle and important revelations of the effects of pressure are visible in the relation of Huck and
Jim. Here there is involvement that does not arise from overt aggressiveness or superior finesse, but from a claim made in the name of friendship. Before Jim says why he is on Jackson's Island, he makes sure of Huck:

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You wouldn't tell on me ef I 'uz to tell you, would you, Huck?'

"Blamed if I would, Jim."

"Well, I b'lieve you, Huck. I—I run off."

"Jim!"

"But mind, you said you wouldn't tell—you know you said you wouldn't tell, Huck."

"Well, I did. I said I wouldn't, and I'll stick to it. Honest injun, I will. People would call me a low-down Abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don't make no difference. I ain't a-going back there anyways." (Chap. 8)
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This is Huck's moment of commitment to Jim, a much more important moment than the celebrated "I'll go to hell" speech of chapter 31, where Huck merely reconfirms what he says here (and confirms again in the encounter with the slave-hunters in chapter 16). To make Huck his instrument, Jim takes advantage of a conditioned response, the boys' ethic that one should not "tell." This is an artificial ethic, a dramatic construction including friendship but transcending it, and in the immediate situation even transcending the most powerful organizing concept in this culture, the idea of slavery. Twain is cheating here: he is bringing some qualities of the boys' world of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* into a very different world that is connected to the earlier quite tenuously by the brief references to Twain and Tom Sawyer in the opening paragraphs.
of *Huckleberry Finn*. At any rate, although Twain makes the claims of boys’ honor irresistible to Huck, it is clear, when Huck refers to what people might say, that he feels at once the difficulty, the pressure, of his situation. Huck goes on to defy public opinion, and gives two reasons for his defiance—his vow and, as a casual afterthought, the fact that he “ain’t a-going back there anyways.”

In that phrase is the seed of Huck’s later shameful relations with Jim. At the time the point is comforting to the characters and the reader. If Huck is not going back, what difference does it make what St. Petersburg thinks of him? But, given the Twain principle of activity, Huck is sure to go somewhere, just to be going, and given the actual situation—the river, Huck’s weakness, Jim’s helplessness—it is likely that their movement will involve drifting in more ways than one. Huck is not going “back there,” but he is going down the river, into the Deep South, to settings that make “back there” look peaceful.

Huck has no sense of the implications of his involvement and his comments, and indeed never understands why he treats Jim the way he does, with alternate affection and indifference. Huck does accept the pressure that Jim has put upon him by binding him to the boys’ code of honor. Huck keeps his word—he never tells on Jim, and he does help him. But all this “pulls tight” on Huck, as he would say, and he makes Jim pay and pay for it. Huck puts the snakeskin in Jim’s bed, conveniently forgetting the probable consequences; Huck forces Jim onto the *Walter Scott*; Huck makes Jim miserable after the fog because Huck was miserable during it;
Huck forgets Jim during the Grangerford episode; Huck condones the Duke’s cruel treatment of Jim; Huck allows Tom Sawyer to treat Jim as a plaything during the ending. Overall is the raft’s endless southward drift, generating the tensions of the relationship out of the flux of nature. When Huck fails to spot the junction of the Ohio and the Mississippi, he is punishing Jim, and also punishing himself for being a “low-down Abolitionist.” Jim cannot complain. His strategy of appealing to Huck’s dramatic sense does succeed; Huck does keep his word, even when he does not want to, in chapter 16 when he faces the slave-hunters. Only when Huck drives Jim to the limit does Jim complain, as in the quarrel after the fog, and even those objections depend largely on the situation. Jim does not and cannot object to Huck’s neglect at the Grangerfords and later.

The pressure of this relationship is increased by the closed nature of the world of the novel. A unified world is a closed world. Huck therefore cannot escape Jim because there is no escape. Huck and Jim cannot go North, up the Ohio, because there is no North; it is just a fantasy that people talk and dream about, like Moscow for Chekhov’s three sisters. “North” is a fantasy of agreeable, sensible organization; “South,” where the characters find themselves imprisoned, is the real world of turbulence and drift and man’s clumsy scramble to control or to escape from them. Huck and Jim must go into the Deep South, the heart of pressure from nature and man—or rather, the raft must take them there—because we are in a determined world, not a voluntaristic world. We are a long way from the glorious, fresh, open world postulated for this novel by Tony Tanner (*The Realm of Wonder*) and Bernard De Voto.


4. The consensus of modern Twain criticism is that the archetypal Twain character, from "The Jumping Frog" to the late manuscript fragments, is the stranger. The "transcendent" man, a type of Satanic stranger beginning with Colonel Sherburn, is discussed in Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, p. 136. See also Lynn, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor, pp. 246–47. For the late manuscripts see William M. Gibson, ed., Mark Twain's "Mysterious Stranger" Manuscripts (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 1–34.


8. The first and still the most important discussion of these passages and of Twain's obsession with spinning wheels is in Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, pp. 130–31. Professor Smith is mainly concerned to demonstrate Twain's free-floating guilt; my approach to, and use of, these passages is quite different.


15. Ibid., p. 161.

16. Ibid., p. 182.


20. Ibid., p. 167.

