The Dramatic Unity of *Huckleberry Finn*

The Role of Drama

If he can, if he has anything "transcendent" in him, Twainian man in *Huckleberry Finn* responds to the pressure of situations not by yielding to the structural cycle of emotions but by turning situations into events, that is, finite temporal patterns of human action, which I will call "dramas." For some time Twain critics have been examining similar ideas. Richard Chase has spoken at length of the importance of melodrama in *Huckleberry Finn*; Roger B. Salomon, of "romance," "true adventure," and "ritual." Henry Nash Smith says, of the riverbank culture he opposes to the raft culture, "The falseness of the prevalent values finds expression in an almost universal tendency of the townspeople to make spurious claims to status through self-dramatization," that is, through self-inflation, as Smith's context shows.¹ In *Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns* Franklin P. Rogers postulates the hoax as the basic Twain form and points
out that a world of hoaxes is a man-made and bizarre world. None of these readers, however, sees dramatic behavior as part of the structural and thematic unity of Huckleberry Finn, or as a generative, structural principle in the novel. Chase's "melodrama" is a characteristic of tone and world-outlook; Salomon's "ritual" is to drama as bricks are to the principles of architecture and the buildings based upon them. Smith's view, like all his work on the novel, postulates a standard from which civilization has deviated, and, in this case, reduces human dramatic behavior to isolated individual acts of "fraudulent role-taking."  

But the whole matter is much wider and deeper than that. The critics have been chipping at the edges of something universal and overwhelming in the novel, something that not only underlies the usual social values and behavior but generates and controls them. Reading the novel, one is bothered by numerous anomalies (in addition to the ones that can be explained by the demand value of situations). At the beginning, when Huck and Tom alarm Jim outside the widow's house, why does Huck endure agonies rather than scratch his itching nose and reveal himself to Jim? Jim is not likely to make a fuss. Is it just a matter of a "game"? Or are "games" the matter of Huck's world? Why does Huck, writing the novel and looking back over his adventures, group this trivial event with funerals and other important occasions when "it won't do for you to scratch" (chap. 2)? What does Tom mean by "fun" when he says he wants to go back and "tie Jim to the tree for fun" (chap. 2)? And why does Jim later exaggerate the incident of finding his hat hung on a tree limb, and
why do the other slaves look up to him for it? Why does Huck want to substitute Tom’s brand of “style” for the purely functional quality of the escape from Pap’s cabin? Why do the people at Pokeville camp meeting fall for the King’s absurd blarney about pirates? Why do the mourners at the Wilks funeral “naturally” want to know what caused the commotion in the cellar, and why is the undertaker’s sotto voce explanation, “He had a rat!,” such “a great satisfaction to the people” (chap. 27)? Why do the Bricksville mob forget their duty to lynch Colonel Sherburn until they have repeatedly reenacted the shooting of Boggs? Why does Huck put up with the King and the Duke for so long rather than decamp with Jim while the rascals are busy on shore? Why do the Wilkses’ neighbors prefer fake Wilks relatives to the real thing?

The answer in each case is the human need for drama, the central human activity of the novel. Drama is order-making activity, in contrast to mere activity, which is associated with the passive response to situations. The goal of drama is the temporary ordering of the alternate flatness and turbulence (both unbearable) of man’s existence in nature. Permanent ordering is impossible because life is a matter of turbulence and change regardless of what one tries to do about it, because men find most prolonged order boring and therefore change it, and because in a unified world no ordered system (e.g., the Grangerford feud) can escape intrusion followed by instability and destruction.

The essence of drama is not the passing product but the purposeful activity itself, the drama-making process that leads to the temporary order. The activity, not the
completed drama, is the essence, because in and through that activity man can resist and for a time dominate nature; anyway, a completed drama cannot count for anything because being completed it no longer exists—it has become the past. The ordering can be of separate words and things, individual situations, or cultures (systems of values and the behavior resulting from their applications to situations). The activity is controlled by the law that rules *Huckleberry Finn* but that Twain did not formulate until years later: "From his cradle to his grave a man never does a single thing which has any FIRST AND FOREMOST object but one—to secure peace of mind, spiritual comfort, for HIMSELF." In *Huckleberry Finn* "peace of mind" and "spiritual comfort" mean relief from the pressures of "civilization" (other people's dramas) and from the fear caused by unrelieved confrontations with nature.

Peace of mind for oneself does not imply solipsism or completely isolated activity. Given the unity of the world of *Huckleberry Finn*, communal interaction is in itself a "spiritual comfort" to the characters; the dramatic results of such interactions can be enjoyed individually. In *What Is Man?* Twain suggests this point in a negative way that obscures the concession to communalism: "The [charitable] act must do him good, FIRST; otherwise he will not do it. He may think he is doing it solely for the other person's sake, but it is not so." What drives the drama-making character is a blind instinct that Twain called "Will" in *What Is Man?*. Thanks to his characteristically fuzzy thinking, the power and quality of this instinct are less stated than implied, as in the aforementioned summary of a long reverie: "a
drifting panorama of ever-changing, ever-dissolving views manufactured by my mind without any help from me.”

Though the concept of drama is not presented explicitly in *Huckleberry Finn*, because of Huck’s limitations as a thinker, the dramatic instinct is clearly not only what animates characters but what ranks them in their world. Drama-making activity has a double function: to organize the flux of reality, and to win status for the dramatist by demonstrating his prowess, which enables him to rise above those who can only yield to situations. This status is genuine, not “spurious” as Henry Nash Smith says: it is the basis of every other kind of status in the world of this novel. Given these postulates of drama, we can see, for example, why the mourners at the Wilks funeral must know what that racket in the cellar is, why they accept the undertaker’s interruption of a solemn moment, and why they admire him less for stopping the noise than for telling them what caused it and for telling it in a certain way. As long as the reason for the noise is unknown, the dog is doing more than interrupting a tedious social ritual; he is breaking up the order provided by that ritual. The undertaker gains status not only for resolving the uncertainty but for announcing it in a stage-whisper, so that he perfects the decorum, the ordered flow, of the funeral, as he maintains the decorum. And we can see why Huck, during his escape from the cabin, emphasizes his own safety less than the way he is fooling others: creating a communal drama and putting “style” into it are more important than saving one’s skin crudely. And why Tom, after dominating Huck and the whole ending,
feels free to flaunt his own rule of secrecy, and indeed must do so, at the end of Chapter the Last. The very superfluity of Tom’s antics in the ending, like those of a tightrope walker with his chairs and bicycles, underscores Tom’s mastery of the situation. In a turbulent world this mastery, with its attendant gestures, must be endlessly renewed. Because it has not been challenged in a way that calls for a practical response, it can be renewed only through the superfluous, “impractical” gesture.

As one might expect from the nature of the world of Huckleberry Finn, the need for drama is immediate and intense to the point of desperation. Frank Kermode understates the case when he says, “Men in the middest make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle.” Before the arrival of the daily steamboat in Old Times on the Mississippi, “the day was glorious with expectancy”; after it left, “the day was a dead and empty thing. Not only the boys but the whole village felt this” (my italics). For the critic, the need for “consonance” is a philosophical matter; for the inhabitants of Hannibal, St. Petersburg, Pokeville, Pikeville, and Bricksville, it is a matter of life and death. Without drama life is only a husk, a static and empty thing. Drama fills it, organizes it, and literally animates it. Melville’s problem of meaning, suggested in Moby-Dick and explored in the shabby dramas of The Confidence-Man, has been taken to its conclusion here. At Pokeville camp meeting “the people woke up more and more” (chap. 20), they came to life, during the singing; having
been dead, they were now ready to make "considerable investments" ($87.75) in the "coherent patterns" provided by the King. The condition of despair that prevails only at the end of The Confidence-Man, after the light has been put out, has become the everyday condition for these Twain characters. The King is the savior of Pokeville.8

Behind the sameness of everyday human life lies the sameness of nature, to which man reacts with the boredom and fear that I have discussed earlier. The simplest reaction to nonhuman, meaningless time and its flow is an act of blind, nondramatic aggression: "killing." Many of the characters kill people. Huck kills time and thus gets a direct revenge on the medium that threatens him. References to killing time and to the need to kill time are frequent:

It was deadly dull, and I was fidgety. All I wanted was a change, I warn't particular. (Chap. 1)

I was 'most all the time at it [trying to escape from Pap's cabin], because it was about the only way to put in the time. (Chap. 6)

How slow and still the time did drag along. (Chap. 6)

There ain't no better way to put in time when you are lonesome. (Chap. 8)

I went exploring around down through the island mainly [because] I wanted to put in the time. (Chap. 8)

Next morning I said it was getting slow and dull, and I wanted to get a stirring up, some way. (Chap. 10)

Here is the way we put in the time. (Chap. 19)

"I'm jist a-freezin' for something fresh." (Chap. 20)
Most of these examples come from the early part of the novel, before Huck and his companions have more than enough excitement thrust upon them.

If boredom and lonesomeness can be eliminated—that is, if a fairly large and isolated group of people can persuade themselves that time has been killed for good—then one has a paradise on earth. The Grangerford feud and Tom Sawyer's scheme for the evasion both meet this requirement—with limitations for Huck, who is not completely inside either drama though he gets some excitement out of both, and ultimately with limitations for everyone involved, there being only so many feuders to kill and so many ways to stall the Phelps. As narrator, Huck is able to master time by shaping it to fit a timeless entity, a book. In particular he masters time by using shaping devices like the phrase "by and by." This phrase allows him as narrator to slide over the meaningless (to him) periods of life as if they had never existed for him as character, and get to the elements that fit with each other to produce meaning for him. Huck, then, can use language as magic—which more than makes up for his embarrassing failures with prayer and lamp-rubbing in chapter 3.

The need to dominate, a primary need in the novel, is the other reason for the power of drama and for man's need of drama, and is the source of the most important type, "gratuitous" drama. By organizing his own life and the lives of others, Twainian man demonstrates his superiority to his situation in a turbulent natural world and in a human world that tries to dominate him. The need for domination is, like other forms of sadism, insatiable. No one in this novel ever has enough of
dominating. Regardless of reputation or rational requirements, Tom Sawyer is driven on and on, during the ending, and the King and the Duke, at the Wilkses. “I never see such a girafft as the king was for wanting to swallow everything,” says Huck (chap. 28), as the King tries to sell off the last unwanted bit of Wilks property (ominously, a graveyard plot). The rascals take too long; but even when the real Wilks heirs arrive and the scheme is collapsing, the King keeps right on, to Huck’s amazement. The episode reveals Huck’s limitations as well as the King’s. Lacking the demonic force that drives men like the King, Huck cannot begin to understand him, or Buck Grangerford, or Tom Sawyer. Twain is never more like Swift, the satirist to whom he is often compared, than in this study of an irrational drive that he projects from himself. What baffles Huck about Buck and Tom is what might have baffled a more perceptive Twain about his own infatuation with the Paige typesetter: not only a willingness to throw himself whole hog into the affair but a need to spin it out and to draw more and more people into the vortex of destruction.

Huck unwittingly provides an explanation when he says that Tom walks up to the Phelps house “ca’m and important, like the ram” (chap. 33). Tom is potent; he has a natural urge to dominate and he does so—he cannot help it. Many others do the same, in their way. Jim cannot control many people, but he can shape situations on an abstract level. He at once assimilates the “dream” of the fog into his ruling mental system (his religion of superstition). When Huck tells him the truth, that it was not a dream, Jim, after great effort, assimilates
the matter to his self-respect, a major part of his conception of himself.

After the hounds "bulge in" under Jim's bed, the evasion is in peril. Huck can do nothing, but Tom quick-wittedly organizes—that is, dramatizes—the situation. He gets rid of the dogs, confirms the Phelpses' slave Nat in his belief that the dogs are witches, and persuades him to see the boys' future behavior in terms of witchcraft. Greatly relieved, Huck says, "That was all fixed" (chap. 37). What follows from drama is just this feeling of relief and satisfaction, the intensity of which, like so much else in Huckleberry Finn, depends on the situation—the greatness of the need and the complexity of the drama. As the supreme form of human action, the only one that leads to peace and fulfillment, drama satisfies; and the bigger and better the drama, the more it satisfies, whether or not the situation is "serious" or "important" by conventional cultural standards or in the reader's expectations. Huck's escape from the cabin is a "serious" matter, and it is proper that the morning after this adventure Huck wakes up, lies quietly in the grass, and feels "rested and ruther comfortable and satisfied" (chap. 8). It is questionable, though, which is greater, his satisfaction at getting away from Pap, or his pleasure in tricking and dominating Pap and the townspeople through the "style" and "touches" of the escape. The Grangerfords, according to Buck's account (chap. 18), also felt comfortable and satisfied after killing old Baldy Shepherdson, who had killed, in the proper manner, young Bud Grangerford, who had "stopped and faced around so as to have the bullet-holes in front, you know"—a comfortable and satisfying death,
take it all around, as Huck would say. Nothing in this episode or Buck’s telling of it, however, makes sense in terms of conventional or logical standards of behavior. As the Duke expects, the townspeople in Bricksville go from rage to smug satisfaction when they figure out a way to turn their humiliation by the King and the Duke into a deception of their neighbors. The townspeople in the Wilks episode are, as we have seen, comfortable and satisfied when the undertaker helps them make sense out of the mysterious racket in the cellar.

The matter or use of the event, or the explanation of it, must “answer.” In a scene that looks utterly silly on the surface, the boys’ meeting in the cave (chap. 2), Tom nearly loses control of his followers when he cannot define the word “ransom.” Finally he says that it means “keep them till they’re dead.” Ben Rogers, Tom’s most severe critic, says, “Now, that’s something like. That’ll answer. Why couldn’t you said that before?” We can see that Tom’s explanation is absurd, but Ben Rogers does not see it that way. For him the matter has been cleared up and put in order. Order is what counts. Effectiveness in ordering is everything; ineffectiveness is catastrophe. The attack on the Sunday-school picnic fails to “answer” for anyone in Tom’s gang, and that is why the attack is wrong. None of the boys feel any guilt about stealing toys from small children.

Drama can be absurd or it can fail in practical terms, yet it can still “answer,” order life and divert people for a while from the unbearable, from the mystery and disorder of nature. This characteristic makes drama universal in *Huckleberry Finn*, and makes the term “drama” more useful in discussing the novel than “romance,” a
term closely associated with this novel since Richard Chase applied it in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. "Romance" is well defined by Roger Salomon:

True romance was for Twain the independent struggle by a strong and capable individual against the forces that control human existence. It meant in a word, adventure—heroic not in its moral purity but its grandiosity, its feats of skill and daring, and, above all, its freedom. True romance was the antithesis and eternal enemy of the false as Huck was antithetical (potentially hostile) to Tom Sawyer. True romance was the celebration of the American folk hero; false romance was the perpetuation of a foreign mythology on an alien soil.9

This suggests drama, a man’s “independent struggle against the forces that control human existence,” but limits us to but one aspect of drama (large adventures), puts the emphasis on the social level and the archetypal approach rather than on internal relationships and the psychological approach, and postulates a fundamental hostility between Huck and Tom where I see a fundamental similarity in kind along with considerable differences in degree (of which more below). Slighting the apparent trivia of the novel for the impressively archetypal material makes it difficult to see, for example, the deep and ominous resemblance of the boys’ gang and the Grangerford feud, of Huck’s satisfaction with his escape from Pap’s cabin and his satisfaction with the absurd complexities of the evasion.

Drama involves everyone—all ages, all classes, both sexes, both races—and “answers” for everyone, satisfies everyone’s need to respond to the pressure of situations and engage in reciprocally satisfying relationships. It
is this link to the qualities of the world of *Huckleberry Finn* that makes "drama" a more fully useful critical concept than Salomon's "romance," Smith's "self-dramatization," Rogers's "hoax," Boorstin's "pseudo-event," or even Twain's own term "glory" (used extensively in *Old Times on the Mississippi* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*). It is in moving from one-sided hoaxes and self-centered "glory" to drama that Twain makes *Huckleberry Finn* a more profound study of man than any of his earlier novels. The world of *Tom Sawyer*, like the world of the hoax, is a Cartesian world of subject and object, of one glory-hungry youth and a large passive world for him to victimize. The world of *Huckleberry Finn* is a unit; both persecutor and victim take part in the dramas, and both benefit. Unlike *Tom Sawyer*, moreover, *Huckleberry Finn* deals not with glory and isolated adventures but with the reasons why people like Tom Sawyer seek glory and adventures.

This reciprocal, participatory quality of drama may be seen from beginning to end, even in those episodes where the dramas fail because they do not call for participation. One of the most remarkable examples of both kinds is the Pokeville episode (chap. 20). The King goes to the prayer meeting; the Duke stays in town and works in the printing office. Each man succeeds according to his real, his dramatic contribution to the satisfaction of others. Moving into a crowd that has been "woke up" and is "just crazy and wild"—that is, a group that is hungry for meaningful (dramatic) action—the King gives them a story that fits their best picture of themselves, that allows them to see themselves as "natural brothers and benefactors of the race." After the King rewards
them, they reward him. He leaves with $87.75, the kisses of the prettiest girls, and a three-gallon jug of whiskey. The Duke spends the day printing runaway-slave posters, swindling farmers out of their petty cash and produce, and setting up a romantic poem ("Yes, crush, cold world, this breaking heart"), actions that people probably do not want and certainly do not need. The Duke ends the day with $9.50. The ratio of the two sums, nearly ten to one, suggests the value of genuine drama as opposed to simple hoax (and also to real toil, something almost never seen in this novel).

Another ratio of values is suggested when Aunt Sally comments on Tom's deception of her and Uncle Silas: "I'd be willing to stand a thousand such jokes to have you here" (chap. 33). Tom's is a straightforward malicious hoax, but Aunt Sally does get an emotional satisfaction out of it, plus the satisfaction of a spectator at a play ("Well, to think of that performance!"). One might object that another victim, Boggs, hardly benefits from being shot down by Sherburn; but Boggs has a good deal of satisfaction at the beginning of his episode (chap. 21), and in sum the negative (his death and his daughter's grief) is lost in the positive (the enormous satisfaction of the crowd and the unmeasurable pleasure of the inscrutable Colonel Sherburn). Death, the ultimate drama, can, as in biology, form part of a perfect symbiosis.

Drama is not only wide but deep; it takes us to the bedrock of culture. Culture has been defined as "a result of individual and social striving for symbolically meaningful experience." That is, culture is drama. But in the turbulent world of *Huckleberry Finn* drama must be
impermanent. Twain is projecting little of the anthropologist's sense of a rich culture, eternal or repeated patterns of functional rituals reflecting and satisfying the basic needs of a largely static human group. Twain gives us mostly incidents, episodes, that "answer" for the time being but otherwise have nothing in common with what went before.

In Twain's commitment to this vision of culture, he advances beyond—or perhaps retreats from—the world of *Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and the Pauper* toward the nightmare chaos of the end of *A Connecticut Yankee* and the majority of his late manuscript fragments (the *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, "Which Was the Dream?", "The Great Dark," and so on). In *Tom Sawyer* the boys may raise hell with the institutions of culture and society; but these institutions are solid and permanent, and one is always aware of St. Petersburg as a going concern. The same is true of Tom Canty's Tudor England. In *Huckleberry Finn*, however, society and culture virtually disappear. We know that the South of this era was a farming region based on slavery, a powerful cultural concept. Slavery is omnipresent in this novel, but as a self-sufficient dramatic concept. Its *raison d'être*, the agricultural economy, has vanished. We learn that the Phelps live on a "one-horse cotton plantation" (chap. 32) and that Colonel Grangerford owns "a lot of farms, and over a hundred niggers" (chap. 18), but we never see or even hear of any farming activities. The Phelps' neighbors appear, not as working farmers, but as excited actors in a thrilling one-performance drama. Colonel Grangerford is seen in action only in his daily family ritual of greeting. The only permanent or
cyclical material lies in the domain of nature, which most people avoid and which can bore even Huck after "two or three days." The only kind of natural phenomenon that can deeply satisfy Huck is a thunderstorm or a sunrise—that is, a finite event, a natural drama, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Huck, as I have said, turns in panic from nature as flat eternity or as mere turbulence, just as the Bricksville loafers turn to sadistic sports from the endless gnawing of the river at their village. To keep himself sane, Twainian man must be less the symbol-making animal, as the anthropologists call man, than the symbolic-event-making animal. Twain's imagined world, like his real one, knew only episodes; and Huck, being Twain's creation, treats everything in his life and in his book as episodes, or tries to make situations into episodes.

Reality, then, must be organized, and the organization must reflect the nature of the world that the characters know. The boys calmly accept Tom's establishment of the gang in terms of "nothing only robbery and murder" (chap. 2), the only organized criminal activity that they know of (no doubt from legends of the Murrill gang). Huck must organize his escape as an event (a murder); the townsfolk must swallow the bait and quickly settle on a murderer; the ritual hunt for the corpse must follow, complete with cannonades and floating loaves. Only Mrs. Loftus can see the smoke on Jackson's Island—the men of her community can think only of death, not of the humdrum activities of the living. In giving Huck an identity as a runaway apprentice, Mrs. Loftus not only solves a problem but organizes the situation and assimilates it to the standard poor-white vision of life as misery. The Wilks
crowd seize unerringly on a similar opportunity: it is much more fun and more meaningful to dig up a corpse by lantern light than to wait two days for the solid but dreary evidence of the Reverend Mr. Wilks’s luggage. The evasion ends in an ecstasy of appreciation for a mock-apocalypse combining a slave insurrection, African witchcraft, and attacks by western desperadoes. Aunt Sally does not hesitate to explain the incompetence of the Phelps dogs in supernatural terms. The natural and true explanation—that they ran into people they knew—is literally inconceivable because it is undramatic and unsatisfying. Her judgment of the evasion—"Why, spirits couldn’t a done better, and been no smarter" (chap. 41)—is based on the cultural sense of the power of death and the dead, and on the final importance of drama. All these incidents, and many others, reveal that importance.

The dramatic organizing must be done to satisfy the self, or a group of selves acting as one, a mob. The point is made early in the book when Huck rejects the widow’s dictum that he “must help other people, and never think about myself.” He says bluntly, “I couldn’t see no advantage about it—except for the other people” (chap. 3). This doctrine of the primacy of self-pleasing is stated quite explicitly in What Is Man?. In Huckleberry Finn even the most altruistic action serves the self. It is pleasing to see Huck try to rescue the men on the Walter Scott, but upsetting to hear him say he is doing it “so they can be hung when their time comes” (chap. 13). In this novel even social decorum begins with self-pleasing.

That the need for drama is involved with egotism is not astonishing, but it is curious to see the need dominating real demands and benefits. Huck endures the itching of
his nose (chap. 2); he puts up with the scouring of wooden swords because he wants "to see the camels and elephants" (chap. 3) of the Arab caravan promised by Tom. The judge whom Pap victimizes sets himself up for the kill by indulging in sententious generalities; here, clearly, is a predestined victim, a man who prefers any organization of reality to caution and safety. Pap likewise sets himself up for Huck’s escape by suggesting to Huck the idea of faking a murder; as Huck realizes, Pap’s obsession with killing eliminates in advance any chance that he might analyze the escape rationally. Huck accepts without comment the Duke’s decision to tie Jim with ropes: "Handcuffs and chains would look still better on him, but it wouldn’t go well with the story of us being so poor. Ropes are the correct things—we must preserve the unities, as we say on the boards" (chap. 20). This concern with immediate satisfaction and inner harmony reflects Twain’s own practice. At the height of his career, when he was intensely money-minded and consciously practical, he could get “6 1/2 days of booming pleasure” from writing “Simon Wheeler, Detective,” an improvisation that he later called "witless" and did not finish or publish.

Drama even dominates being. Colonel Grangerford, we learn, “was sunshine most always—I mean he made it seem like good weather” (chap. 18). Huck’s hasty correction of “was” to “made it seem like” suggests that what matters to Huck in recollection, as he writes the book, is not the colonel’s nature but his ability to project himself into his environment and involve other people in his mood. The colonel’s methods not only are effective at the moment but leave a powerful after-image with his family: “When he turned into a cloud-bank it was awful
dark for a half a minute and that was enough; there wouldn't nothing go wrong again for a week" (chap. 18). The ease of rebirth in *Huckleberry Finn* illustrates again this power of drama over being. To be reborn and re-created is normal in a world where life is constant re-creation as well as recreation. The loafers and would-be lynchers of Bricksville fail and earn Colonel Sherburn's contempt not just because they are what they are but because they are only what they are and cannot change.

A less important but equally pervasive point is the domination of drama over truth, consistency, and probability. The reader, as much a happy victim as the characters, accepts these manipulations because they give him the artistic effects that he wants. Aunt Sally is at first a spry housewife, the mother of toddlers (chap. 32); within a few weeks she has aged twenty years and acquired an "old gray head" (chap. 41). In the one case she is supposed to be formidable; in the other, pitiable. No one has objected to this contradiction in character and appearance. No one has found it odd that two Wilks brothers are at home in England and the other has migrated without explanation to darkest Arkansas. The reader is in the same situation as Joanna, the youngest Wilks sister, in her argument with Huck (chap. 26). She does not want truth or probability in Huck's stories about life in England; she wants coherence, and she accepts Huck's wildest lies when they fit a pattern. Huck himself comes down on the side of coherence when he defends truth-telling not because it is virtuous but because it is fairly often more effective—"better, and actually safer, than a lie" (chap. 28). That is, truth may, oddly enough, lend itself to a beneficial order when a lie does not.

The reader benefits in the same way, because one's
world as reader is as aesthetic, as dramatic, as the characters’ worlds are. The outraged reaction of many readers to the ending is similar in kind if not in cause to the disgust of the characters at each others’ incoherence and dramatic failures, and to their fury at their own failures. Huck waxes sarcastic at Pap’s transparent bluster and incompetence, while being properly frightened by Pap’s rages, the results of his failures. Huck likewise admires the King and the Duke when they are in good dramatic form, but despises their silly antics and bloated rhetoric at the Wilkses: “I never see anything so disgusting. It was just sickening,” and so on (chap. 25). (But we should remember that those antics are effective with their audience, the townspeople, just as Tom’s antics are effective with Huck and the farmers during the ending, so that both episodes are functional and successful, as long as they are effective.)

The need for drama varies from person to person, and (to a lesser degree) from situation to situation. Every one but Tom quits the robber gang when the boys fail to get any real loot. Huck cannot afford this sort of nonsense, because of his difficult psychological and social situation, and the other boys do not need it, but Tom needs it and can well afford it. Huck drops prayer when Heaven ignores his demands for fishhooks, but Miss Watson keeps right on with religious ritual, which helps her organize her world so that she can righteously bully Huck and Jim. The latter, survival-oriented by necessity, is decidedly uninterested in departures from reality. For Jim even the French language is a needless complication; “Why doan’ a Frenchman talk like a man?”, he argues (chap. 14), revealing that for him as for the other characters reality is consistency according to the narrow world he knows.
II

The inherent power of drama, the deepest of the structure-generating principles in *Huckleberry Finn*, explains the characters' desire to organize existence dramatically, and in fact explains that organizing, desire or no desire. Twain was well aware of the workings of this power in himself. In a striking passage in "Is Shakespeare Dead?" he not only used ideas connected with drama as weapons for "proving" that Shakespeare could not have written the plays, he admitted that he had to take the dramatic approach to the discussion of this poet. Twain recalled that he was at first enthusiastic about Shakespeare, but: "Then the thing happened which has happened to more persons than to me when principle and personal interest found themselves in opposition to each other and a choice had to be made: I let principle go and went over to the other side. Not the entire way, but far enough to answer the requirements of the case." 13 "Personal interest" is the need that drama fits. The sense of the dramatic power, in the narrower sense of artistic power, "the thing in me," was thrust especially hard upon Twain after the death of Susy Clemens, when he abandoned social life, one of his favorite dramatic media, yet was still driven on to work.

I like that; I enjoy it, & stick to it. I do it without purpose & without ambition; merely for the love of it.

Indeed I am a mud image, & it puzzles me to know what it is in me that writes, & that has comedy-fancies & finds pleasure in phrasing them. It is a law of our nature, of course, or it wouldn't happen; the thing in me forgets the presence of the mud image & goes its own way wholly unconscious of it & apparently of no kinship with it. 14
There is then nothing belittling about Satan's final pronouncement in Paine's version of *The Mysterious Stranger*: "You are but a thought." This is in fact a compliment to man. Thought creates the world, Satan implies, after showing the principle in action to the boys. Nothing is more powerful than drama because reality is a series of dramas, so that there is nothing for drama to be less powerful than. Men in *Huckleberry Finn* live in a natural world that is real enough—all too real, often—but they yearn for a pure, thought-created world. Their troubles arise from the clash between the world of reality and the world of thought, and their triumphs come in those brief moments when thought manages a precarious domination over reality. Huck, in fact, insists on seeing people as characters or parts, not as actors of parts. Though Huck is sorry to see people die—Buck Grangerford, for example—it never occurs to him that he is really involved with them, that permanent effects for them might be permanent effects for him, and vice versa. It is only a step, though a long one, from the anonymous "king" and "duke" in *Huckleberry Finn*, and Huck's brief pity for their deaths, to the little people created by Satan, and the narrator's brief sorrow when Satan mashes them into the ground. And it is only a step from the gang admiring Tom Sawyer to the Eseldorf boys admiring Satan. In each case the arrogance of the drama-maker irritates the boys, but his power dominates them.

This concept of a controlling power, invisible but as pervasive as the law of gravity, accounts for much in *Huckleberry Finn*. Once released, this power takes over and operates according to its own laws, with results that also depend, like the effects of gravity, on the situation.
Drama's natural tendency is to go to extremes, to create a world of melodrama like that of modern political extremists and, for that matter, the American novel as interpreted by Richard Chase in *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. The operation of such an immaterial force in a material world is suggested by the way Huck explains Tom's wound to the doctor: “He had a dream and it shot him” (chap. 41). “Singular dream,” says the doctor, who is dazed by the situation, but is himself so fully controlled by the great cultural drama, slavery, that he neglects his regular patients rather than risk letting Jim escape. The ending, which I shall discuss in detail later, is a process that depends on the power of drama and generates more power and more control as it goes. The reader, like the doctor, must yield to the forces unleashed by Tom Sawyer and his half-willing thralls. (A kind of hangover from this experience perhaps accounts for some of the critical distaste for the ending.)

The inherent power of drama has numerous side effects. It makes people do things they otherwise would not do. In chapter 1, where Huck is Miss Watson’s victim, he cannot sit still; in chapter 2, where he is taking part in a drama he needs and enjoys, he can make himself lie still and suffer agonies from his itching nose, and later can listen reverently to Tom’s nonsense in the cave. While Huck is escaping from Pap’s cabin, he wishes Tom were there so he could “spread himself” and “throw in the fancy touches” (chap. 7)—the situation itself does not demand fancy touches, but once Huck has it organized as a drama, the stylish touches are essential. The need for the kind of dramatic experience known as “adventure” pushes Huck aboard the *Walter Scott*, despite the fears of
Jim, who, being in a special personal situation, must fight the force that he yielded to earlier, in the witch-riding and hair ball episodes, for example.

The raft need go only a little out of its way to reach the wrecked steamboat, but at other times the dramatic power can make people go far out of their way, literally and figuratively. Tom turns around and goes back to “fool Jim” (chap. 2); Boggs is hurrying toward his rendezvous with death when Sherburn steps out to shoot him. The great power of drama makes listeners accept farfetched explanations, the novel’s most typical brief verbal dramas. The slave-hunters are not merely ready to believe Huck’s tale of woe—they finish it for him: “Your pap’s got the small-pox, and you know it precious well” (chap. 16). Mrs. Loftus, as we have seen, supplies Huck with the best possible identity for his situation, and does not think of making him prove it as she made him try to prove that he was a girl. Jim’s friends respond ardently to his wild story of being ridden by witches, because it fits their religious drama. At first amazed by Tom’s story of the evasion, Aunt Sally quickly assimilates it to her accepted view, the accepted view, of boys (“harum-scarum”), so that in the end what Huck and Tom have done is right, not morally right, but fitting for a dramatic world. Though Huck knows very well what the King and the Duke are, he lets them have their way as they have their way with each other when they reveal their noble identities. They are all riding with the current of drama, which reinforces the current of situation—Huck is bored, the rascals need new identities.

In chapters 22 and 23, when Huck casually drops his narrative of the lynching scene, turns to his long
enthusiastic discussion of the circus, derides the King's performance of Shakespeare, and finally gives an admiring account of the Nonesuch episode, we can see another corollary to the law of the power of drama: effective drama dominates truth. Huck is not bothered by the fake drunk at the circus and fails to notice the ringmaster's faking, but the failure of the Shakespeare show is embarrassing because Huck is involved with the King's obvious incompetence. By the time of the Wilks episode Huck has become something of a connoisseur of drama, so the King's awkwardness disgusts him; but the townsfolk, starved for entertaining and meaningful experience—that is, for drama—prefer the King to the real Wilks heir, not because the King has proofs, but because the King is exciting and the real Mr. Wilks is colorless. Despite the King's unsuitability for his role of English minister, he pursues it so vigorously that "he was actually beginning to believe what he was saying, himself" (chap. 29)—a sign of the difference between drama and hoax. Dramatically effective language, rather than honest language, dominates throughout the ending. Huck may object to the hollowness of Tom's language, but he goes along, always, as he must.

When language actually bends and changes, as in the King's bland dismissal of "obsequies" in favor of "orgies"—"it means the thing you're after, more exact"—or the redefining of "ransom" by Tom to mean murder, we encounter another corollary of the power of drama: life molds itself to fit drama. It is not simply that drama molds life. Such an idea misleadingly implies passivity. Following the law of reciprocity, men work with each other toward mutually desirable goals. If changes are needed to create or impose drama, and if changes can be made, then
they will be made. A presumptuous or aggressive dramatist will lean on life unnecessarily at times, just to remind others that he can. The King changes “obsequies” to “orgies”; Tom changes “picks” to “case-knives.” In each case others go along. Generally the changes to reality are made or helped along spontaneously and eagerly by participants in dramas (not by victims of hoaxes, as adherents of the hoax-theory would say). When changes are not made eagerly, they are at least made. Harvey Wilks starts off confidently enough (“I am Peter Wilks’s brother Harvey, and this is his brother William”); but the crowd prefers the King, and the King has hypnotized himself and them into believing that he is Harvey Wilks, so that a few pages later the real Harvey is constrained to say, “Is there anybody here that helped to lay out my br— helped to lay out the late Peter Wilks for burying?” (chap. 29). Poor Harvey cannot call his brother his brother any more; he must yield to the demands of the dramatic situation. There is hardly a more striking example of the power of drama to soften and remold.

Yielding to drama can be unwilling. Jim bows to the boys again and again; in fact, he bows to every one (white) in the novel, not because he enjoys the situations he is put into (he commonly feels “powerful sick” during them), but because he, being black and a slave, is always cast in a subordinate part. His real needs as a person do not matter, do not exist, because as a person he does not exist. People (whites) who do want and need drama can do amazing things to make others yield to it. Before Boggs is shot (chap. 21), he disappears, only to reappear suddenly, “a-reeling across the street towards me bareheaded, with a friend on both sides of him aholt of his
arms and hurrying him along.” Boggs is being hurried toward Colonel Sherburn, not away from him. We know this because Huck, after observing Boggs, has to turn around (“I looked over there”) in order to see Sherburn. Sherburn aims at Boggs, the men jump to one side, and Sherburn fires, violating his own vow to shoot Boggs only if Boggs bothered him again. Who are these “friends”? Why are they “hurrying him along”? Boggs, as Huck notes, is “doing some of the hurrying himself,” no doubt under the drunken impression that he is being taken away from Sherburn. These “friends” are deliberately hurrying Boggs along to the final act of his tragicomedy. If they did not take charge of him, he might wander off and escape what they have come to regard, with his help, as his destiny. The desperately bored and drama-hungry townspeople must have the shooting of Boggs; they cannot risk its not happening.

The depth of their hunger is well suggested by the scene that follows the death of Boggs. Every dramatic possibility of the killing is used and reused and savored and exhausted of meaning. Only after that does the crowd remember its manners and become a lynching mob. The immediate power of drama is suggested in this seizing first on the immediate and available materials for drama-making rather than the biggest and most “important” but distant ones. The attempt to lynch Colonel Sherburn is itself wholly dramatic, as Sherburn’s speech suggests. There is contempt in the speech, but no anger; he knows that the crowd is just excited and not hostile—in the latter case they would subordinate the public and dramatic aspects of the affair and come masked in the dark. The crowd is, really, grateful to the colonel
for reminding them ("The idea of you lynching anbody!") that they are playing parts for which they are ill-suited. They are out to kill time, not the colonel.

Human groups in this novel are all "mobs"; they are all formed and controlled by the power of drama. "The town," as Huck calls it, has a similar temporary corporate quality in the Wilks episode, as does the Phelps' neighborhood in the ending. The people at Bricksville, being on permanent holiday, have an excuse for being available for mob duty. The other groups have no such excuse; like the Grangerfords, they seem to have economic functions, but in reality exist only to supply actors and choruses. In the Wilks episode there are a few, like the lawyer Levi Bell and the "husky" Hines, who stay in the world of reality, but the town rejects them as it rejects the real Wilks brothers. The farmers in the ending are all pulled into the current of the evasion, and are kept there first by their close physical grouping in Aunt Sally's parlor and later by the exhortations of the chorus of farmwives. Huck has been pulled in from the beginning of the evasion, because the power of the gratuitous drama necessarily directs him away from his colorlessly practical plan to walk into Jim's cabin and walk out with him.

Drama even controls perception, the most elementary human contact with natural reality. Mrs. Loftus sees the smoke on Jackson's Island because she has no need, as others do, not to see it, and because she is a newcomer to the St. Petersburg area. The old inhabitants do not see the smoke. We get a glimpse of the reason when Mrs. Loftus says that someone told her "hardly anybody ever goes to that island over yonder that they call Jackson's Island" (chap. 11). The local people, imprisoned in their
narrow communal “knowledge” that nobody lives on the island, cannot see what their eyes are looking at: smoke from a fire made by someone living on the island. The ignorant newcomer can see it.

Like folkways and folk-knowledge, dreams and stories are part of the large world of drama, and blind people the same way. Even after Huck points to the trash on the raft as concrete proof of the falsehood of his story, Jim is still dominated by it: “He had got the dream fixed so strong in his head that he couldn’t seem to shake it loose and get the facts back into its place again, right away” (chap. 15). Likewise Huck cannot shake loose the impression that Colonel Grangerford makes on him. The long description of the colonel (chap. 16) is loosely organized and never used directly. The colonel is simply there. Rather than blame Twain for this, as Richard Bridgman does, it would be better to blame Huck. The colonel’s appearance is his drama, his “thing.” Huck is as hypnotized by the colonel’s act as Jim is by Huck’s “dream” and the St. Petersburg people by what they think they know about Jackson’s Island. The length of Huck’s description suggests his fascination. He begins in a neutral way (“Col. Grangerford was very tall and very slim”) and describes the colonel’s manner rather anxiously at first (“when the lightning begun to flicker out from under his eyebrows, you wanted to climb a tree”) but ends on a cheerful and affectionate note.

This process recapitulates Huck’s actual experience, from neutral observing, through the conflicts of acculturation, to full acceptance of the colonel’s standards and manner. Having once accepted Colonel Grangerford, Huck must describe him at length later (when he is writing at the
Phelpses); many other aspects of the Grangerford culture (such as the way they ran their farms) are not described, because Huck has not really seen them, has not absorbed them dramatically.

Huck perceives the King and the Duke more simply and naïvely, making his troubles with them all the more disturbing, to him and to us. When Huck first sees them, they are fleeing from a mob. Assuming that all outcasts are like Jim and himself, Huck helps the two strangers without question. After the Wilks episode, when the rascals fail at every trick and begin to “talk low and confidential” in the wigwam, Huck and Jim do not “like the look of it,” but are far from anxious for themselves. “We made up our minds they was going to break into somebody’s house or store, or was going into the counterfeit-money business, or something” (chap. 31). Huck has shared so much with these men and gotten so much excitement out of them that, despite his knowledge of them and his fresh memories of the Wilks episode and its aftermath, he cannot believe that they will use him as raw material.

Huck’s blindness to the intentions of the King and the Duke is paralleled by his frequent blindness to nature. The critical interpretations of the force of nature as myth in *Huckleberry Finn* ignore the wide fluctuations in intensity of the treatment of nature as environment. This level of intensity is not an independent variable; it is rather a function of the real independent variable, drama. Nature is a secondary reservoir of drama; it commands attention when nothing of interest is going on in the human world, and is ignored when something is going on there, because that something is drama. During two
leisured intervals Huck describes thunderstorms in great
detail and with obvious relish (chaps. 9, 20). A thunderstorm
is, as I have said, an event, highly “dramatic” in more
ways than one. While the mob is digging up Peter Wilks’s
coffin (chap. 29), another thunderstorm gathers that
Huck notes periodically and that forms a functional
background to the action (the lightning shows Huck an
unmoored boat for his escape). But “them people never
took no notice of [the storm], they was so full of this
business.” Perception of nature, that is, is in inverse
relation to absorption in drama—a good example of the
self-regulating nature of structures. On the raft Huck
is doing nothing and can fully appreciate storms; in the
graveyard Huck is still doing nothing but has a vital
interest in what is happening and places the storm in the
middle background; the mob around the Wilks grave is
totally occupied and sees no storm at all.

It is much the same with the level of specificity of
descriptions arising from Huck’s other contacts with nature.
When Huck and Jim are under pressure, they notice only
what they need to notice in nature; but on the flooded
Jackson’s Island they notice every small detail because
they have nothing else to do (chap. 9). Huck indulges in
the long, marvelous description of the sunrise because
for “two or three days” he and Jim are completely at
ease, following their narrow escape from the Grangerfords
(chap. 19). Only occasionally does physical nature (the
river) enter directly as a dramatic force (e.g., the fog
episode, Huck’s two encounters with panic), and it is in
such scenes that we have “the great brown god” of
T. S. Eliot and other critics. When Huck is absorbed in
human events and affairs—the camp meeting, Tom’s gang,
the murder of Boggs, and the foolery of the evasion—he shows no awareness of nature or weather. We can feel the warmth and humidity of the raft voyage because Huck tells us that he and Jim “was always naked, day and night, whenever the mosquitoes would let us” (chap. 19); but the state of the weather during the last quarter of the novel can only be inferred from Huck’s remark, “We was down south in the warm weather, now” (chap. 31), and from a few other clues like Huck’s complaint about the heat of the roomful of farmers (chap. 40). Settings also interest Huck only as part of dramatic events. Pap’s cabin and the Phelps farm are described in detail because the dramatic events that happen there require a close knowledge of the terrain. The Grangerford parlor is not the setting of any action, but is described minutely as part of an elaborate dramatic construction, the Grangerford “style.”

III

The power of drama, which dovetails with the need for drama, generates the dramas themselves. These are of two types, survival drama and gratuitous drama. The two resemble each other in structure, since every drama must have certain characteristics to be effective, but differ radically in the most important aspect, function. Survival dramas are devised for physical survival. Huck’s escape from Pap’s cabin is the classic example. Successful survival dramas give little satisfaction. Huck feels less pride in escaping from the cabin than in escaping in “style.” Gratuitous drama is the reorganizing of a situation to give it meaning and divert everyone present from the horrors of nature and time, which otherwise could
drive the characters involved into boredom at best and panic at worst. Gratuitous drama is thus a kind of survival drama too, keeping one’s sanity being a form of survival. Because gratuitous drama has no immediately obvious necessity, it is open to attack by readers (and by characters, like Huck at the Wilkses) for being mere hoax or time-wasting. Gratuitous drama is also a kind of celebration of the dramatist’s physical and social security, as Huck implies in his awed comments about Tom’s taking the lead in stealing Jim (chap. 34).

Gratuitous drama takes two forms, artificial and functional, or ineffective and effective. All drama is literally “artificial” in the sense that it is made, but artificial drama in this novel is artificial in the pejorative sense—contrived, awkward, and unrewarding for its audience or its victims. Henry Nash Smith mistakenly, I think, attacked all drama-making in Huckleberry Finn as the making of “spurious claims to status through self-dramatization,” an apt description if limited to the artificial gratuitous drama. Typical of the really artificial kind are the ones Huck is unprofitably involved with in the opening chapters: Miss Watson’s sadistic Puritanism (a private drama); the “robber gang” in its later, unsuccessful stages; the operations, like prayer and lamp-rubbing, that involve useless efforts to carry out other people’s unexplained instructions. These things do kill some time—the central job of any drama—but they are true hoaxes, they often involve bullying, they bore quickly, and they leave a sour aftertaste that in Huck’s case makes him grateful for the change forced on him by Pap.

The functional gratuitous drama does not bore, when it
is at its peak. Such a drama, no matter how silly or crude to the reader, works for the characters involved—the dramatist on one side, the audience or participants (more properly the latter) on the other. Such a drama arises from the characters’ situations in time, space, and social rank, enlists all their talents and energies, and satisfies, for a time, the deep need for order that I have discussed above. The flow of meaning from traditional culture has dried up; what is left behind is a litter of empty shells to be used as the containers or stages of gratuitous dramas. The basic structure of social status—the division into the quality, other whites, and black slaves—still survives, but only in relation to drama; the quality, headed by Tom Sawyer, Colonel Sherburn, and the Grangerfords, define themselves by their dramatic skill and impudence, and the other classes take their places below. The traditional American harmony of home, school, and church exists to be derided as “civilization,” and, in the case of the church, abandoned to the hogs (chap. 18). The Phelps culture exists so that “Sid Sawyer” may take it apart and rebuild it as a set for his greatest drama, the evasion. This evasion and the earlier feud are parodies of culture, monstrous self-destroying machines. The Wilks funeral is not a decorous ceremony in and through which the townsfolk come to terms with death; it is a drama, a diversion from the boredom of village existence. The dominant emotions are the people’s macabre curiosity about that racket in the cellar, and Huck’s and the reader’s excited awareness of that bag of gold on the breast of the corpse. The body of Mr. Wilks is not treated with the dignity and ceremony traditionally given the dead; it becomes a toy in an exciting game,
"Who's the Real Wilks?" The Dionysian uproar of camp meetings served real purposes in the semi-frontier of Twain's youth, but in *Huckleberry Finn* it serves only to stimulate the people of Pokeville to bamboozle themselves.

One powerful continuous drama of culture, slavery, has, however, survived to serve Twain's purpose. Slavery is so pervasive that paradoxically it disappears, like the oxygen in the air, while continuing to affect everything. For the reader slavery is therefore an impressive cultural force, and cultural structure, but only up to a point. Since slavery was a completely historical phenomenon, dead twenty years before publication of the novel, one can hardly react to it as a timeless concept. There were still rafts and Wilks funerals in the 1880s, and these things are still imaginable today, but slavery died in the 1860s and cannot return or be reimagined.

This central kind of drama, the functional gratuitous drama, is of three basic sorts: dramas of action, appearance, and language. I will discuss these three sorts at some length, classifying the most complex sort, the dramas of language, in terms of intricacy. I will then try to show that dramas can be approached profitably in terms of intensity, the amount of conscious pretense involved, audacity, and finally the basic criterion of effectiveness.

The most common sort of drama in *Huckleberry Finn* is the drama of action, in which one or more characters try to create meaningful events or try to shape events to make them meaningful. The great example is the evasion, in which Tom Sawyer tries to reshape an entire world. When I use the term "drama," especially in talking about structure, I usually mean the drama of action. Of the three
sorts of drama the simplest is the drama of appearance, of which Colonel Grangerford provides the best example. In himself he is a work of art, and without uttering a word he can produce great effects. That is why Huck describes him at such great length and hardly mentions him otherwise. In contrast, all we know of Colonel Sherburn's appearance is that he is "a proud-looking man about fifty-five—and a heap the best-dressed man in that town" (chap. 21). Sherburn is a different kind of dramatist from his fellow colonel, and we are given just enough about Sherburn to sense his position in relation to Boggs and the lynching mob but not enough to remove the air of inscrutability that surrounds him and makes him frightening. The primacy of action for Sherburn is demonstrated in the baldest way when he shoots Boggs without justification or Sawyeresque "style," turns on his heel, and walks off—a gesture of contempt for everything that is not pure action.

In the lynching scene, though, Sherburn shows us the breadth of his talents by doing little and saying much, with this result: "'Now leave.' The crowd washed back sudden, and then broke all apart and went tearing off, every which way" (chap. 22). Here is a major kind of gratuitous drama, the drama of language, of which there are several types. I will look at them in terms of their levels of complexity. Twain himself was a master of the dramatics of appearance and an eternally hopeful experimenter in that form of dramatic action known as "business"; but the center of his life was dominating others through rhetoric, and he projects that emphasis into Huckleberry Finn. The most potent talkers among the characters are the most potent dramatists, and vice versa,
though it is well to remember that the most successful dramatist, Colonel Sherburn, is also a silent man of action—Twain’s ultimate hero, a combination of himself and General Grant. Almost every character in the novel can use language with some skill; Twain could not project himself into inarticulate McTeagues. Buck Grangerford, a mere boy, defends the feud brilliantly; the youngest Wilks girl, the “harelip,” cross-examines Huck with tenacity and skill. The greatest talkers are the most memorable characters: Pap, the Duke, the King (at times), Colonel Sherburn, Tom, and Huck himself, the writer of the book.

“One cannot insist too much on the verbal quality of *Huckleberry Finn,*” says Richard Bridgman, quite rightly. He has examined in detail Twain’s subtle and extensive use of linguistic oddities and distortions, his “placement of familiar words in unfamiliar situations, his repetitions of sounds,” his repetitions and associations of words in order to create resonances and cross-references. Bridgman approaches the verbal level of the novel principally from the point of view of the author at work, though of the King’s first speech at the Wilks house, Bridgman says, using the limited approach of hoax-critics, “The king’s words are florid, full of spurious rhetoric. As such they successfully represent the fraudulent confidence-man at work.”

I approach the language of the novel in terms of its relation to the dramatic dynamics of the novel. The “stylistic activities” of the King and others are forms of drama. Their function is less to communicate than to organize and to dominate. They dominate by projecting a verbal organization onto the flux of life, and they
maintain that organization and domination through the devices that Bridgman mentions. There is nothing “spurious” or “fraudulent” about all this, or, to put it another way, human activity as Twain projects it here is all “spurious” and “fraudulent.” The power here of the American vernacular reflects the importance of language, and the place of language, in American culture. American vernacular forms, says a pioneer student of American civilization, “represent the unself-conscious efforts of common people to create satisfying patterns out of the elements of their environment. It is the art of sovereign, even if uncultivated people.”\(^{18}\) When everyone is a sovereign, then those “satisfying patterns” are bound to be sovereign themselves.

On the simplest level language dominates through the energy behind it. On this level sense is secondary (or, even more secondary than it is elsewhere). Language usage here is a violation of the law of entropy, first a focusing of energy, and then a maintaining of that focus. Talking is, as I said of drama in general, a kind of tightrope-walking that dominates onlookers as illogically and completely as the circus dominates Huck. A successful speech or sequence of speeches in *Huckleberry Finn* may be nothing but energy.

The great example here is the raving of Sister Hotchkiss, one of those Twain characters we glimpse only for an instant but who are unforgettable just because of their raw power. A sample, which begins with her interruption of a man who seems ready to go on for some time himself:

“*You may well* say it, Brer Hightower! It’s jist as I was a-sayin’ to Brer Phelps, his own self. S’e, what do *you* think of it,
Sister Hotchkiss, s'e? think o' what, Brer Phelps, s'I? think o' that bed-leg sawed off that a way, s'e? think of it, s'I? I lay it never sawed itself off, s'I—somebody sawed it, s'I; that's my opinion, take it or leave it, it mayn't be no 'count, s'I, but sich as 't is, it's my opinion, s'I, 'n' if anybody k'n start a better one, s'I, let him do it, s'I, that's all. I says to Sister Dunlap, s'I —." (Chap. 41)

This speech contains only one item of conventionally useful information, the reference to the sawed-off bed-leg, and this is really the contribution of Mr. Phelps, not Sister Hotchkiss. Anyway, her point is so elementary—that the leg did not saw itself off—that the speech is a parody of communication. In a positive sense the speech is a demonstration of power gained through energy. Sister Hotchkiss organizes skillfully and, when necessary, with subtlety. She lessens the effect of her interruption of Brer Hightower by making it a compliment and by referring gracefully to the host, Brer Phelps. Once she has taken command, Sister Hotchkiss drops her pretenses and launches into a line of nonsense-patter designed to keep the floor and the attention of the crowd for herself alone. The last half of the speech, one long garbled breathless "sentence," is nothing but defiance of the audience, and an assertion of the primacy of energy over logic, as if to say, "If you dare and if you can, knock me off my tightrope." Colonel Sherburn's speech is a suave version of the same thing (see below, pp. 138-39).

This use of energy is the foundation of all the great speeches and the dominating element in dialogues and general conversation, even if they make conventional sense too. Miss Watson's speeches ("Don't put your feet up there, Huckleberry") are notably "sensible" and flat—one reason why she fails with Huck. Tom's manner of
speaking, well illustrated the night of Miss Watson’s failure, is energetic at all times—one reason why he dominates Huck and the novel. It is significant that when the boys get to the cave, Tom speaks first and unequivocally: “Now, we’ll start this band of robbers and call it Tom Sawyer’s Gang” (chap. 2). “Everybody was willing,” says Huck; no one dares to meet Tom’s challenge. Once his domination is established, Tom never relaxes his grip. When the boys offer logical objections, like Ben Rogers’s complaint about keeping watch over prisoners who are going to be killed anyway, Tom crushes them with short, decisive sentences (“Kill the women? No—nobody ever saw anything in the books like that”), cadences that suggest the spurious authority of modern advertising (“Yes! Four out of five doctors agree!”).

At a higher level of the drama of language are the imitations that gain their power through alignment with established authorities and roles carefully chosen for the occasion. These include many of the memorable passages in the novel, especially the speeches of the King and the Shakespearean rantings of the Duke. That butchered version of Hamlet’s soliloquy in chapter 21 is so tiresome to modern readers that they may not try to understand Huck’s open-mouthed admiration of it. But that speech does fit. We should recall first the dominance of situation in the novel (Huck has nothing to do but watch this novelty). We should note that the speech is not merely an absurd version of Shakespeare, but an absurd version of Shakespeare, the poet whom the world admires most, so that the passage becomes a Twainian debunking of the bard, as well as satire of the period’s love of bombast.
The King's flamboyant speeches are easier to take than the Duke's. It is easier to admire the King's repentant-pirate style (chap. 20) and his mournful-uncle style (chaps. 24 ff.) because we do not bring complex preconceptions to these modes as we do to Shakespearean acting.

A higher rhetorical form still is the argument, the drama of dialectic. It is easy to ridicule many of the wrangles—Tom and the boys in the cave, Huck and Jim arguing over the French language, Tom and Huck disputing the aims and details of the evasion. But these arguments begin to make sense if we see them not in terms of their rubbishy content but as exercises in drama or as series of ritual dramas of conquest. The cave episode is not about robbers but about who is boss. What eventually discredits Tom is the failure of the attack on the Sunday school, not the immorality of the attack or the arrogance of his manner throughout the episode. The disputes on the raft and during the evasion are really about power. Huck indirectly suggests this point when he rationalizes his failure with Jim in the discussion of French: "I see it warn't no use wasting words—you can't learn a nigger to argue" (chap. 14); that is, the occasion is, or should be, not one of legitimate dialectic ("words") but one of carrying to its end a racist drama in which Huck wins because he is white and therefore strong and intelligent and Jim loses because he is black and therefore weak and stupid. At this point Huck accepts unconsciously the power-relationships of the slavery system (and since he is writing after the events of the story, we can assume that he still accepts them). Jim's powerful speech about the trash on the raft (chap. 15) and Huck's silent acceptance of it mark a turning point in their relationship: the white
listens to a brilliant speech by a black, accepts it, and later passes on both the speech and his humiliation to the world at large. The arguments between Huck and Tom during the evasion are similarly a matter of power. In these exchanges much of the outcome depends on differences in style that reflect dramatic talents and attitudes. Huck speaks soberly and directly; Tom uses the devices of rhetoric—repetition, variation, balance, antithesis—and charges his phrases with his ruthless energy.

"Here's the ticket [says Huck]. This hole's big enough for Jim to get through, if we wrench off the board."

[Tom says:] "It's as simple as tit-tat-toe, three in a row, and as easy as playing hooky. I should hope we can find a way that's a little more complicated than that, Huck Finn." (Chap. 34)

And:

"Don't you reckon I know what I'm about? Don't I generly know what I'm about?"
"Yes."
"Didn't I say I was going to help steal the nigger?"
"Yes."
"Well then." (Chap. 34)

These exchanges, fairly early in the evasion, lead to ones in which Huck says less, and Tom says more and says it even more vehemently. When Huck objects, Tom pounces on him instantly; and even when Huck is fertile with his objections, as in the argument over Jim's tin plate (chap. 35), Tom is more fertile with overwhelming answers. This pattern repeats one established during the argument with Buck Grangerford about the feud (chap. 18). As in the conclusion of Strauss's Till Eulenspiegel, force pounds
at weakness until weakness is reduced to monosyllabic answers and finally to silence.

The book itself is the ultimate demonstration of language as energy focused gratuitously for power. The book is Huck’s drama, his gesture of power, and his writing style is his “style,” in the Tom Sawyer sense, the stamp that Tom puts upon his actions as a defiance of time and death. Nature may be potent and terrifying; with its ally time it may “gnaw” away everything, eventually; but it cannot talk, and Huck can. The novel is his violation of entropy. As the omnipresent, the first and the last, talker in the novel, Huck is as far above momentary talkers like the King as the King at Pokeville is above a mere toiler like the Duke. Huck himself can abandon his own style for the style of others, as in the sanctimonies of his reverie in chapter 31; but he always returns to his own style, the ground base of the novel. As gratuitous drama, the book is supreme. Even Colonel Sherburn has more reason to kill Boggs than Huck has to write this book. At the beginning we may feel that Huck is writing to correct Twain’s “stretchers” in *Tom Sawyer*. Huck’s book quickly develops its own momentum, however, and like the evasion becomes a serious presentation of world-outlook and values.

Huck’s canny observations of others are less a matter of sympathy than of evocation and artistic practice. By noting that, for example, lights in cabins late at night mean sickness, Huck indicates and sharpens his powers of observation. At the end Huck refers directly to writing:

Tom’s most well, now, and got his bullet around his neck on a watch-guard for a watch, and is always seeing what time it is, and so there ain’t nothing more to write about, and I am
rotten glad of it, because 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 last part of this suggests the seriousness and effort in
the novel; the first part suggests what Huck is up to
with all that effort. Tom is doing thus and so, "so there
ain't nothing more to write about." Huck's logic is strange
unless we take the novel as a presentation of man and
his situation in a certain kind of world; then we may realize
that once the presentation is made, there is no reason to
repeat it. Having already seen in detail Tom's conceit and
dramatic power, we need see no more of it; and having
also been shown that Tom is the most conceited and potent
character in the novel (Huck, as writer, is not wholly
in the novel), we cannot benefit from seeing anyone else.
That Huck can so easily drop the potent Tom demonstrates
Huck's ultimate power and the ultimate gratuitousness
of his drama, the book. People can be brought to life and
discarded at his whim. When he is not thinking
about them, they do not exist, as Jim does not exist during
several episodes. When Huck changes his way of talking
about people, they change in essence, as Jim changes
from human being to toy during the ending; there Huck
says much about Jim's toy during the ending; there Huck
says much about Jim's hours as a toy and little about
Jim's still numerous hours as a human companion—and
nothing at all about Jim's solitary hours as a frightened,
imprisoned slave. We are only a short distance from
Twain's ultimate dramatist, Satan, who creates people and
then literally rubs them out, and finally tells the boys
that everything they know is their own mental creation.

These are the three significant types of dramas.
Classifying dramas in terms of major characteristics and ranking them within those characteristics reveal important qualities of the novel. If one ranks dramas in terms of intensity, at the bottom come the small gestures that amount to no more than affronts to nature, the equivalent of Twain's pet loathing, the scratching of one's initials in famous public places (see *The Innocents Abroad*). Much of this dramatic activity is petty, spiteful destructiveness, true "time-killing." It is associated with the less important and (or perhaps because) less competent characters: the Bricksville loafers bully sows; Pap rips up Huck's little picture that he got "for learning my lessons good" (chap. 5). Trivial though such gestures are, they can have great effect in the right situation. The King's mulish insistence on staying at the Wilkses and selling off that last little graveyard plot leads to his downfall. Huck's handling of the snakeskin—a presumably trivial gesture of indifference toward witchcraft—leads him and Jim into disaster upon disaster. A concentration of small gestures at one time can add up to a formidable whole. For example, Bricksville. The disgusting people, the mud streets, the shabby houses, the filthy yards, all are affronts to the higher levels of drama, in particular the basic idea of social decorum. Nature will, of course, win in the long run, after it has "gnawed" at the town long enough; but in the meantime, in the middest, Bricksville is always with us. Bricksville the physical environment is produced by Bricksville the anti-society, and helps produce it. This anti-society is a system of affronts. The loafers jeer at each other and destroy life; Boggs jeers at Huck, the stranger, and Colonel Sherburn, the leading citizen (both of whom should be treated with special
courtesy); the colonel contemptuously destroys Boggs and sneers the lynching mob into submission; Huck, under the spell, treats it all with casual indifference. The Duke, after failing with Shakespeare, catches on. He bases the primary appeal of the Nonesuch on the crude salaciousness of the townsfolk, and the continued working of the hoax on their eagerness to "sell" their fellow citizens the same way they have been "sold."

The highest level of continuously available dramatic framework is the religion of witchcraft that governs the novel. It is supreme, and more powerful than Christianity, because it gives meaning and order to all of human experience, including cruelty. Christianity, as these people know it, has to do more with the dead than the living, and as Huck says, "I don't take no stock in dead people" (chap. 1). In a world of passing situations and limited dramas, the historical sense disappears and only pigs feel comfortable in church. Christianity cannot explain the snakeskin for Huck, or the spirit voices and the hounds for Nat, the Phelps's slave. Witchcraft is even better—broader, more orderly, more dependable—than Tom's system of authorities. Witchcraft, then, is what students of society call a superior "conceptual map." Beside this advantage its disadvantage—the fear it creates and strengthens—is trivial.

Dramas can also be ranked according to the amount of conscious pretense involved. At the bottom is "letting-on," open pretense; it is useful as an emergency measure to save a larger drama. "Letting-on" occurs during the evasion, the largest drama in the book, when it becomes clear to Tom that the whole affair is about to collapse. If the boys continue digging with case knives, they will
not reach him quickly enough to maintain unity of time; if they simply walk in Jim’s front door, as Huck suggests, they will have abandoned the whole drama. Tom solves the problem with a compromise. He demands a pick, saying, “There’s excuse for picks and letting-on in a case like this; if it warn’t so, I wouldn’t approve of it, nor I wouldn’t stand by and see the rules broke.” With picks the boys are able to dig Jim out in a couple of hours. We sniff at this and sympathize with Huck when he says, “Picks is the thing, moral or no moral”; but within the world of the novel it is Tom who is right, or at least decorous, and Huck who is indecorous and therefore second-rate. Huck himself agrees implicitly with this evaluation; he does not object to the letting-on and admires Tom for being “full of principle” (chap. 36).

At the other end of the spectrum of pretense come the dramas that are utterly sincere and also successful. Tom’s efforts with the robber gang are sincere enough but poorly related to reality. The feud is much better, and the evasion is best of all because it fits into an aspect of the greatest cultural drama, slavery. So great is the southern fear of a slave revolt that even the most preposterous details of the evasion are not questioned once that fear is tapped. In this state of autointoxication even a generally rational character like Aunt Sally can instantly warp natural phenomena to fit the fantasy structure. When, surrounded by hysterical farmers, she notices a yellow liquid trickling down from under Huck’s hat, her mind ignores mundane explanations and selects the idea of brain fever from the most melodramatic level of illness she knows.

Drama can also be evaluated on a scale that measures
audacity and extremism. The more extreme a drama, the more effective, provided that the execution is minimally acceptable (and if the preposterousness becomes a little too obvious, there is always “letting-on” as a cure). After Huck tells an improbable story justifying his relation to the situation on the *Walter Scott*, his audience, the watchman on a ferryboat, exclaims, “My George! It’s the beatenest thing I ever struck” (chap. 13). This is the reaction that Huck needs. If the story were less “beaten” and the watchman not beaten down by it, he might ask embarrassing questions rather than help Huck. The Shakespearean show put on by “Mr. Garrick” and “Mr. Kean” fails ludicrously because the two rascals cannot carry it off. The circus, in contrast, carries off its faking with professional smartness, and Huck, along with the crowd, accepts all of it without question. The hoax of the Nonesuch, likewise, is based on assumptions so daring and execution so perfect that it cannot help succeeding. A full-length obscene show would leave its audience satisfied but, once the euphoria had worn off, ready to lynch the King and the Duke for putting on an obscene show. The Nonesuch, as presented, is long enough to interest the crowd, but short enough to make them feel cheated and react to the cheating rather than to the obscenity. The Wilks episode does fail, but not for a lack of audacity, which the King displays with success in the very teeth of the facts. The later failures of the rascals, at dancing schools and “yellocution,” result from their failure to reach minimum standards of competence: “they didn’t know no more how to dance than a kangaroo does” (chap. 31).

The final criterion, as I have said, is effectiveness,
“answering.” The opening of the novel, usually slighted, is of crucial importance, because it is there that Huck learns this basic principle of dramatic effectiveness. In a few pages he becomes involved in personal and cultural dramas, limited and continuous dramas, high-pressure and low-pressure dramas. In experiencing them, he develops patterns of response that he follows throughout his later experiences. He rejects Miss Watson’s “pecking” not only because it is unpleasant but because it does nothing for him; on the other hand he accepts the Widow’s tactful “civilizing” pressure because it satisfies basic physical needs (like warmth in winter) and opens up areas of personal advantage, like the ability to read, without asking too much of him. Huck rejects prayer because he can “see no advantage about it” (chap. 3)—that is, it is ineffective as drama—and because Miss Watson will not solve this problem of effectiveness for him. According to Richard Poirier, Huck condemns Tom’s “games” in the opening chapters, but it is clear that Huck condemns not the games but their occasional ineffectiveness. Huck enjoys the early phases of the robber gang. He appreciates the logic, the dramatic logic, of the criminal ideas Tom spouts in the cave, and fails to note the absurdity of their content. Huck is “most ready to cry” (chap. 2) when he cannot produce a parent to kill so that he can join the gang. Killing a parent is an effective dramatic touch in a boys’ group founded in a cultural situation of parental meddling and severity like Twain’s St. Petersburg, which in these opening chapters is still the St. Petersburg of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. The idea of patricide “answers.” Questions of ethics and possibility are irrelevant. Huck quits the
gang only when he can "see no profit in it" (chap. 3). He criticizes Tom's story of the genie and the lamp on the ground that there is nothing in it for the genie (he instinctively takes the side of the enthralled), but he does decide to give lamp-rubbing a chance to show its effectiveness for him. "I rubbed and rubbed till I sweat like an Injun, but it warn't no use. I judged that all that stuff was only just one of Tom Sawyer's lies. It had all the marks of a Sunday school" (chap. 3). At the end of the novel, when Tom invents an effective drama that has none of the marks of a Sunday school, Huck goes along with it despite his numerous reservations. Likewise, when the King and the Duke are smooth and successful, Huck puts up with their faults; when they are ineffectual and nasty, he turns against them at once. Effectiveness is always the ruling principle.

Thinking in terms of the laws of drama and dramas, a critic can begin to make sense out of the farcical elements of Huckleberry Finn. Many readers have felt uneasy about the snake episode in the ending and indeed about the entire ending; such elements have often left an unpleasant aftertaste, a feeling that Twain is not really a serious writer. But farce is pattern, and pattern is what is wanted in the world of drama. The old hierarchy of modes is replaced in this novel by a hierarchy of dramatic effectiveness. Some of the farcical scenes, like the antics with snakes and rats in the ending, can be attacked on the ground that they are poorly done and therefore ineffective as the author's (Twain's) work; but within the novel, as the characters' actions and Huck's work, such scenes may be effective and significant.

Farce, as an easily practiced mode, is a handy shelter for
Twainian dramatists. As Eric Bentley has noted in his stimulating discussion of farce in *The Life of the Drama*, style is essential to successful farce. And certainly style is central to the world of *Huckleberry Finn*. Yapping dogs and shouting women greet Huck’s uncertain approach to the Phelps house; a few hours later, silent and respectful attention greets Tom’s “ca’m and important” approach to the same house. Bentley points out further that a major element of farce is hostility, handled of course with style, else the art of farce is a mere exhibition of sadism. Given the world of *Huckleberry Finn*, where domination is everyone’s goal and everyone’s fear, where the only coherent cultural behavior is enslaving and killing, nothing else but farce can be suitable as a basic art form. To feel as Henry Nash Smith does, that the ending of this novel should properly be tragic, is to require that Twain violate his own artistic decorum.

IV

The Twainian “dramatist” is not an actor; drama-making must be distinguished from role-playing. The characters usually act out their own dramas, and often create them as they go along, but the creation of the dramatic concept and the ordering of reality around it count more than the acting. Tom Sawyer creates the drama of the robber gang attacking the rich Arabs, but the part he plays in the debacle of the actual attack is not mentioned. At any rate the plan collapses because it is no good, not because Tom’s acting is no good. Both the King and the Duke act at Pokeville, the Duke all day, the King for a few minutes. The rewards go to the King, who gives satisfaction to the most people, not to the Duke,
who tries the hardest. The rascals' later successes, especially the Nonesuch, are the responsibility of the Duke, generally the more able dramatist of the pair; their failures come from their error in allowing the King to take over the planning in addition to acting the major roles.

But in *Huckleberry Finn* Twain, then at his own worldly peak, usually shows us good dramatists and their characteristics. The master dramatist first of all embodies the greatest quality of Twain's ironic ideal, Satan: he *knows* man and the world, man's permanent nature and the world's mutability. With Colonel Sherburn he can say, "I know you through and through," and he has Sherburn's ability to grasp situations and to make up actions to suit. This is gratuitous drama, the highest type. Dramatists can be graded according to their dramatic practice, along a scale from survival drama, the basic but unprestigious form, to the gratuitous type, which, as I have said, is a gesture demonstrating the dramatist's superiority to questions of survival. At the top of the scale is Colonel Sherburn, the dramatist's dramatist, nonchalantly killing Boggs in the key example of pure gratuitous drama, and then turning a survival situation, the lynching scene, into a harangue that demonstrates again his domination of his world. Tom Sawyer is very high on the scale and gets so much exposure that he is over-all the major dramatist of *Huckleberry Finn*. Poor Boggs, squashed for daring to try a little gratuitous dramatizing, is at the bottom, only a little below the mass of Bricksvilleans. Huck, who fails except as a survivalist, would be near the bottom too, were he not able to produce the ultimate gratuitous gesture, a book.

One's degree of security parallels and determines his
place on the dramatic scale. Those whom the situational world of the novel has made secure can afford the dramatic gestures that demonstrate their security. The relationship of security to drama arises from Twain's own yearning for security and assurance great enough to allow him to do anything and evade any responsibility—a godlike state he projected into his Satans and other "strangers," and embodied in the conscience-killing psychopathic narrator of "The Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut," written only a few months before *Huckleberry Finn* was begun. In the highest dramatic gesture of personal security Colonel Sherburn, after killing Boggs, drops his gun and turns his back, thus abandoning two basic safeguards in his dangerous world. (One recalls that one Grangerford, Bud, was shot down when unarmed, and another, Buck, was shot from behind.) Pap, the opposite pole from the colonel, pays with his life for his strutting and swagger. Slaves, by cultural definition, are totally insecure as persons and secure only as property; they stick to survival drama, and they survive. Compared with Jim or any slave, Huck is relatively secure. Add to that the truth that he really is more secure with Jim on Jackson's Island than with Pap in the cabin, and he develops the self-delusion that launches him into the episodes of the snakeskin, Mrs. Loftus, and the *Walter Scott*—disasters all. At the very end of his adventures, when Huck really is secure for the first time in his life, he is finally able to indulge himself at length, and he does: he writes a book.25

As the most secure and the most potent character, and an often-seen one, Tom is the major dramatist of the novel. (Colonel Sherburn is more potent, but he appears for
An early version of the Prometheus-Satan-Prospero figure, Tom brings the sacred fire, the fascination and magic of drama, to Huck, the other boys in the gang, Aunt Sally, and Sister Hotchkiss and her friends. Tom is marked for what he is in his first appearance (chap. 2): he goes back to trick Jim and to steal candles. Many characters in this novel would try to avoid the situation, as Huck does; others might play tricks if the situation offered itself; Tom creates his own situations. He turns back, makes up the trick on Jim, and plays it. In aggressiveness the King and the Duke resemble Tom, but they are his inferiors at spotting, establishing, and maintaining long-term dramas (and they lack his secure social status). Tom is also superior in his ability to extend the weaponry of drama to include books that matter to his victims. His “authorities” are authorities not just because they are books but because they truly have authority over people, even if the authority is spurious. Some books fail, even the greatest, as the King and the Duke learn when Shakespeare, badly acted, is a flop at Bricksville. In contrast Tom’s unnamed “pirate books and robber books” (chap. 2) serve, when used with Tom’s manic energy, to dominate the other children in the gang and to regain control after Ben Rogers trips up Tom on the meaning of “ransom.” The use of “authorities” is not in itself a perfect weapon. Tom is shown this primary lesson, though he is blind to it, in the latter part of the evasion. There he works less from his own ideas, which were quite effective in the early part of the episode, and more from the “authorities.” They conflict with the situation, already exacerbated by the panic he himself has created, and the result is a narrow escape from catastrophe.
Tom’s wildness in the evasion is a sudden release of impulses thwarted previously by lack of opportunity. Jim, in contrast, can never know any such frustrations or any such release. Within his situation as a slave, the drama forced upon him, his religion is big enough to be all-absorbing most of the time, and satisfying enough to keep him content. Tom’s paying Jim “forty dollars for being prisoner for us so patient, and doing it up so good” (Chap. the Last) shows Tom’s realization that “being prisoner” is an acting job for Jim and no more than that. From a humanistic standpoint the payment of Jim is shameful, because no one can repay him for the humiliations and absurdities that have been forced upon him. From a dramatic standpoint, though, the payment suggests Jim’s practicality, which is so foreign to the novel and hence absurd. During the ending Jim, as a passive helpless victim, is absurd, as victims are in farce. Even when Jim is a free agent, he is a highly unsatisfactory collaborator in drama—not good at “argument,” overcautious or else not cautious enough (it is his suggestion that Huck dress up like a girl and visit Mrs. Loftus).

But when he is working in his own areas of competence, Jim is a success. Saying he knows “most everything” (chap. 8), he lavishly explains natural signs, which are everything he knows and therefore “everything.” Huck loses interest in the Loftus episode once it is over, but Jim offers a shrewd analysis of the probable actions of Mrs. Loftus and the posse she sends out. Posses are something slaves must care about. Earlier, in the hair-ball episode, Jim dazzles Huck with his expertise and his concluding harangue that covers all possibilities for Huck’s
future without committing Jim to anything. But at the end Jim goes outside his realm of mastery and escapes disaster only through luck: he plays the part of an honorable man and gives himself up to save Tom's life. Having violated the rule of situation, which does not allow Jim to join in the dramas of white men, Jim is doomed to reenslavement until he is released by the *deus ex machina* of Miss Watson's deathbed act.

Like Huck the character, Huck the artist is a mixture. As the maker of the novel, he dominates it totally; but in the action he makes, he is for the most part either a spectator or a victim, and when he joins in gratuitous dramas, he usually reveals his incompetence. He thus reflects Twain's duality about himself in relation to the world and his habit of treating that duality ambivalently. Huck is an artist, but he is ineffectual in worldly affairs; Huck is ineffectual in worldly affairs, but he is an artist.

Within his limits Huck is a sharp and analytic observer. He cherishes and uses his perceptions, such as they are. He follows James's advice to be one on whom nothing is lost—to which we should add the comment, based on a more modern psychology, that a great deal is lost before Huck begins to perceive. Students of Huck's perceptiveness have not only overrated it but have tended to deal with it as a limitless quantity of virtuous behavior rather than as an artistic trait operating strongly within narrow limits. Huck's eye for the artificiality of the Grangerfords' fruit is noted, but not Huck's failure to disapprove. There is nothing virtuous about Huck's description of the chalk fruit, or of the crockery animals that squawk but do not "look different nor interested"
Huck is as cool and detached as the animals. He is observing for the sake of observing. This stance of the cool artist is his dramatic form, his "style," at once his attitude and the stamp his attitude puts on material. He notes that the lights in cabins at night are beside sickbeds; he describes a sunrise with care and precision. Just as Tom shows his immersion in the drama of action by turning back to play tricks on Jim, Huck shows his own kind of immersion by stopping the action to describe minutely this trick and Jim's own drama based upon it. Later, as I have noted, Huck controls his first encounter with Pap by observing him calmly (chap. 5). These are gratuitous observations that correspond to the gratuitous dramatic actions of others, and they succeed for the same reasons, because they are "needless" and therefore demonstrate Huck's superiority to mere contingency, and because they are handled (written) skillfully.

Huck's facile role-playing is the sign in him of the human plasticity that is one of the essentials of drama. He senses this plasticity and its cause when he says to himself, "There ain't no telling but I might come to be a murderer myself, yet, and then how would I like it?" (chap. 13). This is not to say that Huck is in practice a perfect artist. He has a tendency toward exaggeration. In mulling over his discovery that at times truth is better than a lie, he says, "I never see nothing like it" (chap. 28), a slovenly vernacular hyperbole that does his point no good. And Huck loses his artistic coolness in moments of anxiety and frightening novelty—leaving Jackson's Island, boarding the Walter Scott, watching the annihilation of the Grangerfords.
Huck's artistic stance must be considered apart from his inferior behavior and achievements. The gap between stance and behavior follows inevitably from the lack of analytic power, of intelligence in the Jamesian sense, that keeps him from being truly the redeemer of the human race. Curiously, he is intensely aware of dramas and dramatists of action and language, and of his own inadequacies as dramatist, yet he cannot make use of his knowledge to improve his performance. All this is consistent with Twain's deterministic theories and his sense of his own inconsistencies and inadequacies, but it ruins Huck. After realizing the dishonesty of the King and the Duke, Huck justifies his passivity toward them by thinking, "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" (chap. 19). Huck fails to foresee the consequences of this decision, or later to connect the consequences to the decision, or to see the glaring fact that his own escape from Pap contradicts this policy of passivity. Nor does Huck realize that he stays with the rascals less because he is afraid of them than because he admires them, and it is only when he no longer admires them that he stops trying to get along with them. When Tom turns up at the Phelps, Huck compares him to a ram and with no more than a token struggle yields him the control of Jim's escape. Far from being weak here, Huck is perceptive and decorous: Tom is a "ram" and Huck is not. But Huck never thinks about the consequences, for himself and Jim, of this acceptance of reality, and the result is near-disaster for all. In Twain's world to live decorously in accord with the nature of man is to court failure, given the nature of man.
But the *Walter Scott* episode teaches Huck quite clearly that he had better not try to succeed in the world—the world, that is, of gratuitous drama. Huck does nothing “wrong” in this episode; he does nothing, in fact, except be there, and the supernatural intervention (removing the raft) is thus all the more clearly a lesson. Huck is already aware, though, of his lack of dramatic potency. When he fishes out the baker’s bread that the searchers float on the water (chap. 8), he concludes that the prayers of “the widow or the parson or somebody” sent it there, so that prayer works for them; “but it don’t work for me, and I reckon it don’t work for only just the right kind.” The “right kind” are those with potency, those who can pray or rub a lamp or walk up to a house, and get what they want. Huck’s failure is reinforced in the short time between his arrival at the Phelpses and Tom’s arrival. Huck’s rebirth as Tom is a favor that the situation grants him—for half an hour. “Providence” has told him that to rescue Jim he must have Tom’s wits and brutality. The real Tom Sawyer then arrives “like the ram.” The favor of “Providence” has been withdrawn; role-playing must yield to the real thing. Again we should realize that Huck’s submission to Tom here is not the weak submission of a noble natural man to a sadistic lunatic, but rather the respectful bow of mediocrity to talent and energy. Within himself Huck is not natural after his decision to “go to Hell” (chap. 31), that is, to become a criminal in his own terms. In his relations to others he cannot be natural either, at this point, because to everyone except Tom and Jim, he is Tom Sawyer.

As a practicing dramatist Huck has several major faults. Again, he is not analytic enough, as the Loftus episode
teaches. Before he goes into Mrs. Loftus's cabin, he says, "I made up my mind I wouldn't forget I was a girl" (chap. 10). Voluntarism, however, is an inadequate substitute for training and talent, a point that Huck would have ignored but for Jim's nagging. Huck forgets what he is doing and badly fails Mrs. Loftus's simple tests. Afterward he refuses to analyze his failure, but continues to work on the basis of impulse and instinct ("Providence"). As I said earlier, passive drifting does not help one to succeed in the situational world of this novel; and it is the worst possible way to practice drama, which calls for relentless energy and alertness. Having yielded to Providence the moment before he enters the Phelps's yard, Huck is in trouble the first time he must think up information to give Aunt Sally rather than choose between answers she suggests. She asks him where his steamboat went aground, and his instinct says "she would be coming up—from down towards Orleans" (chap. 32). Fortunately his quick thinking enables him to evade the question entirely. Active intelligence shows itself superior to instinct: an axiom that helps to explain Tom's domination of the conclusion. The real "Providence" or ruling force of life is not at all what or where Huck thinks it is, but is rather the nature of the universe revealed in the nature and relationships of situations and of men, and Huck cannot read the signs.

In part Huck's passivity and incompetence follow, as is proper in this novel, from his situation. As a lowly figure in his world, and acutely conscious of his "mudcat" status, Huck has not been able to practice dramatics and develop confidence and skill, as Tom has. Huck's desire has been crushed; he just wants to survive, and the
occasional flickerings of his dramatic instinct only serve, as we have seen, to show the wisdom of his usual practice. Twain's thinking here is unconsciously Marxian. He emphatically associates dramatic potency with the ruling social group. Through his Sherburns and Tom Sawyers, as well as in books like *The Prince and the Pauper* and *A Connecticut Yankee*, Twain shows us that "ruling" is drama and drama is ruling. And in showing us that Huck is not merely passive but incompetent, Twain suggests the scheme, explicated in *What Is Man?*, that man's fate is determined not merely by "training" but by "temperament." The rulers gain skill by ruling, but become rulers through talent. Unfortunately, Huck's undeniable literary talents are irrelevant to ruling.

4. Ibid., p. 133.
5. Ibid., pp. 199, 201.
6. Ibid., p. 182.
8. Revealing the limits of a critical method based on folklore and local color, De Voto concludes that the King's pretending to be a pirate tarnishes "the reality of a fine scene" (*Mark Twain at Work*, p. 91).


19. Opening sentences are often crucial; consider Colonel Sherburn's cowing of the mob with his first sentence, "The idea of you lynching anybody!" (chap. 22), or the doctor's soothing of an angry crowd, "Don't be no rougher on him than you're obleeged to, because he ain't a bad nigger" (chap. 42).


22. Ibid., pp. 219ff.


25. Eric Solomon has dealt with the novel as a search for security, rather than a gesture of security; see "Huckleberry Finn Once More," *College English* 22 (December 1960): 172–78.

26. The classic example is Twain's conception of his speech at the Whittier Birthday Dinner (17 December 1877) and his oscillation afterward between feelings of triumph and self-disgust; see Henry N. Smith, "'That Hideous Mistake of Poor Clemens's,'" *Harvard Library Bulletin* 9 (Spring 1955): 145–80.
