A Structure of Dramas

I

In one sense *Huckleberry Finn* is situations and dramas, but in another sense it is some kind of a whole. Clearly it is not a well-articulated structure in the Aristotelian sense—only a few of the dramas, like Pokeville, and the Nonesuch, are that—but even if it lacks such a structure, it does begin, it does have a middle section, and it does stop. That sounds like a parody of traditional literary form, and indeed it is one of Twain's aims to deny the reader the comforts of conventional form, to make him experience chaos along with the characters, and thus to make him accept drama as the characters do. I will discuss below the reader's experience of the book. Before looking at *Huckleberry Finn* from outside as the reader sees it, it is necessary to look at what on the inside makes it a whole—that is, to look at Huck as the narrator.

In this novel about a turbulent situational world it is Huck whose presentation and embodiment of it provide the
only continuity. The formal qualities of Huck the presenter dominate and determine the archetypal qualities of Huck the embodiment of traits, as the opening and closing paragraphs of the novel suggest. At the beginning Huck shows himself aware of a subtle but major problem of presentation, that of the dependence of truth-telling on precision: "'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. It is mostly a true book, with some stretchers, as I said before" (chap. 1). Huck is a conscious, concerned narrator, and he knows that he is doing something special and final. At the end, after what we can take to be a sustained effort to tell the truth and avoid "stretchers," Huck is relieved: "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" (Chap. the Last). And Huck never did; Twain never did use him again in a major, serious work of fiction.¹

When Howells observed that *Huckleberry Finn* was a "romance" because Huck was made able to tell his story,² he sensed that Twain was not writing local color or escapism but creating an unusual artistic strategy and a problem that draws attention to the strategy. The first-person narrator is inherently a distancing device.³ Huck can offer us none of the "guidance" for which Wayne Booth prays in difficult fictional situations.⁴ It is not that Huck is distant or fails to discuss problems. He often confides in "you," with whom he assumes he has a good deal in common, but he fails to clarify basic
problems and pursue implications. Why is he so concerned about "stretchers"? Why, after learning through experience the difficulties of writing a book, does he continue to the end?

In working toward answers to these questions, it is necessary to keep in mind that Huck is the maker of the book. It is easy to forget or to ignore this point, thanks to Twain's guile. The novel is written at the Phelps house while Tom is recovering from his wound during a period of a few weeks after the evasion. There is only the one brief reference to the writing of the book itself ("there ain't nothing more to write about"), and that reference is followed and dominated by Huck's grumblings about the general difficulties of writing books. One is led to remember the difficulty of writing and forget the fact of writing. The short interval between Huck's experiences and his writing makes impossible the reflective passages and even the general air of contemplation that stamp a book long-considered (by the narrator) and then "done," like those other first-person American classics, Moby-Dick and The Great Gatsby. The opening of Huckleberry Finn is not suggestive of Huck's role as maker either. "Me" appears in the opening line, but with reference to Huck the character in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, not Huck the writer living after the events of Huckleberry Finn. The writer discussed in the opening paragraph is Twain, not Huck. The word "Huck" does not appear until the sixth paragraph, where Huck is brought in not as a writer or narrator but as a passive character squirming in the clutches of Miss Watson. The full name "Huck Finn" does not appear until chapter 2.
The novel begins with such subtlety that it is almost impossible, especially in normal non-critical reading, to realize the shift from reflection and summary to the actual narrative itself. After commenting on *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in the first paragraph, Huck summarizes its ending in the second paragraph, and then, in the third, begins to summarize the post-*Tom Sawyer* events—that is, the events of *Huckleberry Finn*—in such a way that no one who had not read *Tom Sawyer* could tell which events are which. The paragraph shift is a signal, and to be sure Huck opens the book with a warning—"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of 'The Adventures of Tom Sawyer' "—but Huck follows that with the disarming comment, "but that ain't no matter." The summary-exposition of the third paragraph ("the old thing commenced again") leads to the details of what was wrong with the widow's typical meal, and a general comment, in the present tense, on the right kind of meal. We are apparently still in the area of the general, but now a new paragraph begins: "After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers." Without warning and thus without thought we have moved from the static general past to the dynamic immediate present, the present of fiction, in which the book remains until the last paragraph of Chapter the Last. Twain thus interlocks (1) general past, (2) general timeless present, and (3) specific fictional present. His method can be contrasted with the decided manner in which initial reflections are separated from the body of the work in *Moby-Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*. Twain minimizes Huck's role as judging outsider; Melville and Fitzgerald emphasize the double positions of Ishmael and Carraway.
We get few other clear glimpses of Huck as external maker of the book. After Buck Grangerford is killed, Huck moves to the writer's present to comment on the traumatic effects of the incident on him. Otherwise Huck's position as maker is visible only indirectly through his comments, which put us only a little out of the flow of the novel and then only for a moment. For example:

The sky looks ever so deep when you lay down on your back in the moonshine; I never knowed it before. (Chap. 7)

We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft. (Chap. 18)

The second quotation rises to a high level of generality, but, like a similar passage in chapter 19, it ends a chapter, so that its summary, "so much for that" quality is appropriate to the context, and the remark does not draw attention to its violation of narrative decorum. A similar generalization—"It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another"—does not end a chapter, so that the remark stands out sharply.

As the maker of the whole book, Huck is also the maker of its language, the third great unifier of the novel after the narrator and the elements of deep structure. This language, as I have said, is a made thing, a unified artistic creation—not "vernacular" but the illusion of vernacular. The natural vernacular, actual speech, is incoherent, repetitious, and boring. At no point is Huck's narrative style incoherent, repetitious, or boring. Even at its more freely associative, in the reverie in
chapter 31, for example, it is coherent. In many of the most admired passages of *Huckleberry Finn* the narrative style is highly but unobtrusively organized. Consider the often-quoted sunrise scene (chap. 19). Aside from representing the idyll element stressed by T. S. Eliot and other critics, the scene is the representation of a natural drama, the sequence of sunrise ending in the temporary stasis of “the full day.” The sequence, simply by being a sequence, looks like vernacular, because the vernacular, the “and then” style, is primarily sequential. But the subsections of Huck’s description are subtly ordered; for example, “by-and-by you could see a streak on the water which you know by the look of the streak that there’s a snag there in a swift current which breaks on it and makes that streak look that way.” Here *which* and *that* are used deftly and unidiomatically to make the sentence communicate a complex idea. Our attention is skillfully diverted from the grammatical complexity by the unusually “bad” grammar as well as by the conventional use of short words. We are accustomed to think, as the Concord Public Library thought, that “bad” grammar is the major sign of vernacular speech, whereas we are beginning to understand that really “common” speech is characterized first of all by slovenliness and dishonesty. Huck, as a writer, can be accused of neither of these faults; Twain of course cannot be either.

But even if one accepts that Huck unites the novel by being its sole and complete maker and by creating its language, it is still not clear why he does it. Why does he put up with that “trouble to make a book” and a literary language? Or why, barely literate and utterly ignorant of book-making, does he start to write a book
in the first place? To answer “literary convention” is merely to look at the question from another point of view. I see two reasons for Huck to write his novel: to purge himself, and to create his own supreme drama.

After Huck describes the murder and mutilating of Buck Grangerford, he adds, “I wished I hadn’t ever come ashore that night, to see such things. I ain’t ever going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them” (chap. 18). The novel can be seen in one light as Huck’s attempt to purge himself, to “get shut of” not only what happened to Buck but of what happened to Jim, Pap, the King, and the Duke—in short, to everyone—and beyond that, to “get shut of” what man is like, including Huck himself, for what he has to worry about most is what he did to his friend Jim.

Huck is right in saying, “There ain’t nothing more to write about.” Once he has gotten down what he did, while keeping his role as speaker as unobtrusive as possible, there is truly nothing more to write about. Huck makes his attempt as best he can, but purgation is impossible, as Huck recognizes in the comment on Buck’s death. First Huck wishes he “hadn’t ever come ashore that night, to see such things”; then in the present tense he answers himself in the negative: “I ain’t ever going to get shut of them” (my italics). The situation is a paradigm. Coming ashore is moving through the world, either, the sentence ambiguously suggests, to encounter human suffering involuntarily, or in order to search for it sadistically. “That night” is all of time, including the ending, after which “there ain’t nothing more to write about”—that is, the burden of life cannot increase but does not decrease. “Such things” is the suffering he
encounters, or the suffering he seeks in order to inflict it on others. The situation and Huck's despairing acceptance of his misery and guilt suggest Twain's own dark mood and foreshadow his darkest late manuscripts, which alternate between the feeling that men suffer unjustly and the feeling that they create sufferings for which no amount of guilt can pay. The people on those endless dream voyages, though, never need to "come ashore" because "such things" come to them, in the form of storms and sea monsters, which are, from the other point of view, a kind of sadistic and masochistic wish fulfillment.6

The writing is not, however, a total failure as a gesture of defense. Before Huck shifts to the present of writing and starts using "now" ("Tom's most well now"), the last thing we learn in novel-time is that his father is dead. This puts an end to the list of Huck's fears (Miss Watson, the King, and the Duke have preceded Pap). But Huck has already learned how to cope with Pap through art. When he first sees Pap at the widow's, Huck realizes he is no longer "scared of him worth bothering about," though Huck "used to be scared of him all the time, he tanned me so much" (chap. 5). Huck does not understand or say why Pap no longer frightens him; certainly, the threat of tanning is still there (and amply fulfilled later). But Huck says, "I stood a-looking at him" and presents what he sees. In and by this long description Huck triumphs finally over Pap. Huck's defense is his ability to master the threat of the memory of Pap with words, words like "There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body
sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl—a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white.” The whiteness, so Melvillean in its impact, can “make a body sick,” but Huck is not just “a body,” anybody—he is an artist. With each of the unnecessary virtuoso phrases he displays and celebrates the artist's defense against fear—here the greatest fear, the fear of the death that Pap carries in his face.

In a sense, then, the novel is Huck's attempt at purgation; but because, as Huck implies, purgation is impossible, and because Huck lives in a world where action is life and stasis is death, we can see the novel as an action, Huck's action, his defensive gesture. The novel is, in other words, Huck's drama, which not only tells us about his impossible situation and his guilt but tells us in an organized way—that is, artistically—so that the impossible is put at arm's length and becomes bearable. That Huck's drama takes the form of a verbal construction, a lyric cry, follows from the nature of his burden. The Bricksville loafers, those model characters, have their boredom and deal with it physically; Huck has his memories and can only deal with them verbally. Here he is his father's son: Pap's burden, as his harangue about the "govment" shows (chap. 6), is his memory of insults to his peculiar self-respect and of his failures to deal adequately with them, and the harangue itself is his verbal drama of defense against those memories.

As a dramatic gesture the novel can be placed, as I have said, in the few weeks following the evasion, when the hullabaloo is over and Huck for the first time since that gloomy evening at the widow's (chap. 1) has a chance to sit down and think things through. The novel thus dramatizes a special mood. What Huck gives us is not a
photographic and phonographic record, but *his* record, of
his experiences from the end of *Tom Sawyer* to the
present time following the evasion. On another level,
that of Twain’s presentation, the novel may seem to be a
record, but on Huck’s level the materials of the novel
must be considered as matters of artistic choice.
Such comments as “You feel mighty free and easy and
comfortable on a raft” must be seen as written after
the action and as representing a backward displacement
of Huck’s feeling at the end. Every other element in
the book is similarly but less obviously chosen to be a note
in Huck’s lyric cry.

This is not to say that the choice is conscious. Huck
is, after all, the projection of a writer who was
knowledgeable about the smaller techniques of storytelling
but notoriously inarticulate about the deeper meanings of
his most serious work. The Twainian obsessions, like
“conscience,” are no more than the tip of the iceberg;
the description of Huck as a boy with “a sound heart and a
deformed conscience” is a faint clue rather than a
final explanation.

In chapter 1 Huck projects his desperate need to speak
unverbally, to dramatize the undramatizable:

The wind was trying to whisper something to me and I
couldn’t make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers
run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind
of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about
something that’s on its mind and can’t make itself under-
stood, and so can’t rest easy in its grave, and has to go about
that way every night grieving.

Like the wind and especially like the ghost, Huck, in his
weariness and anguish, must try to tell us something but cannot
in so many words. The wind and the ghost do communicate their feelings well, however, and likewise the novel, as a dramatic gesture, “tells” us what Huck cannot tell us explicitly. “The cold shivers” is an adequate response to the novel, but a response few readers want or can bear.

From the inside the book is Huck’s; from the outside it is Twain’s and the reader’s—a set of strategies, for Twain, that cause a series of experiences, for the reader. Twain’s over-all strategy is to leave the reader, or to force the reader to find himself left, in possession of that “nameless something,” that dumb truth, communicated directly through the experience of the book, which Twain told Howells was the essence of any really good work of fiction. In the tradition of the poker-faced, malicious western humor that Twain had made the origin and foundation of his art, the novel introduces itself briefly and enigmatically—in the two prefatory notes—and then proceeds with apparent aimlessness to force the reader to make a fool of himself and thus not just to see but to experience and to internalize the “nameless something”—Twain’s sense of the world and of man trying to live in, and deal with, that world. The reader sees a turbulent world of situations that provoke reactions (flight, participation) designed to satisfy emotional needs but themselves creating further emotional needs leading to further activities, and so on and on in an endless chain. The reader sees the irresistible need to make the activities in the situations sequential, and he sees the power that these temporal organizations (“dramas”) have once they are begun. Twain shows us all this, and depends on the reader to make it satire by reference to moral norms. Tom’s obsession with climbing that lightning rod demonstrates not only the power of drama
and the need for drama but the absurdity of dramatic man, whether he is Tom breaking his neck or Huck resolving the impasse by suggesting that Tom climb the stairs and "let on" that they are the lightning rod. Huck's comment, "Human beings can be awful cruel to one another," as he watches a redneck drama of revenge, the tarring and feathering of the King and the Duke, places Twainian man squarely against the central norm of Western, Christian culture, but it is up to the reader to make the satiric connection. Huck sees no connection; he thinks that he has made an original discovery. Beyond this showing and stimulating of judging, neither of which is enough to make this novel great, lies the level of the book as a unity, a single experience for the reader.

The highest meaning of the novel lies in the reader's outraged response to it, the central part of that response being the usual resentment of the ending. Without committing himself or forcing us, Twain allows us to identify contentedly with Huck; then he disillusion us, and we howl. This alienating effect—or more properly, process—is a meaning of the novel. For this process all of the book is essential, but, to repeat, the meaning does not exist in idylls or social satires or other static elements. In the process Twain parodies the traditional quest, so that satire and action are one. A traditional quest begins with certainty and passes through uncertainty and suffering to a new, earned certainty; Huckleberry Finn, on the other hand, begins with a demonstration of uncertainty and a process of withdrawal ending with Huck sitting comfortably on Jackson’s Island. Instead of a hero's night of despair, the middle of the novel gives us a relapse into easy living, conscious devotion to Jim,
and unconscious commitment to the King and the Duke and the self-indulgence that they stand for. The third stage of the quest, arising from latent attitudes developed in the second one, is a new and better version of the first—that is, the selfishness and self-indulgence of the first, covered with a glow of the attractive pseudo-commitment of the second.

One psychological satisfaction of the traditional quest-action lies in seeing how the synthesis of the final triumph arises logically from the thesis and antithesis of earlier sections. The disgust felt by many while reading the end of *Huckleberry Finn* arises from slowly realizing that Twain is parodying this agreeable conclusion of the quest-action, is doing so openly and unmercifully, and is basing it all on the reader’s blind voluntary commitment to Huck earlier in the book. Most readers, I believe, put up with the beginning while missing its lessons and ignoring what it is committing them to. Most readers—and the bulk of criticism bears this out—eagerly accept the middle of the novel without seeing any tension between the first part and Huck’s behavior in the middle, or between Huck’s formal devotion to Jim and his greater implicit interest in travel and excitement. Thus, when Huck manages to have his cake and eat it too, during the ending, a large number of readers, perhaps the majority, feel betrayed. These readers are even more outraged when Twain prolongs the evasion with more and more absurd antics while depending upon interest in Jim’s fate to keep readers gritting their teeth and plugging away through it all. And readers howl even louder when they realize that this masochistic interest in Jim is their own creation, not Huck’s; in fact, the worst
blow of all is to realize that Huck thinks he is telling our story too, that he is sure everyone wants to hear about these exciting, irritating, wholly absorbing events, and would have taken part in them if given the chance. As we read, Huck makes us his accomplices. As we recover and stand a little away from the book, we realize that it is really Twain who has done that by standing back and allowing us to make ourselves accomplices from the opening sentence of the book. Twain thus makes us show ourselves to ourselves, as human beings dominated by the same unconscious cravings as the characters', and as Americans dominated by our “drama” of race. We cannot forgive him for making us make fools of ourselves, and especially for making us see ourselves.

II

In the reader’s self-inflicted unified drama each episode has its place. The general opinion of the opening chapters is that they are desultory comedy, mildly amusing at times but not going anywhere until Pap kidnaps Huck. The reasoning seems to be that because these scenes do not look important, they are not important. There is a confusion here between seriousness and solemnity. Comedy and farce, apparently, are not serious art forms or ones that can contribute to the serious presentation of a world-outlook in art. The ghost of Twain’s enemy Matthew Arnold raises its head to mutter, “How can the antics of these tiresome boys create high seriousness?” If one considers the opening, and especially the robber-gang section, in isolation from the rest of the story, with the
belief that some conventionally uplifting meaning ought to come of it all, and with the conviction that anything else is “improvising,” then he will agree with De Voto that the opening has “no dynamic purpose.”

It is better to look at the novel in terms of what it does, starting at the beginning. Twain’s “Explanatory” statement suggests that the novel has been written with care. The “Notice” about motive, moral, and plot suggests that the story does not have conventional meanings, but does have some kind of meaning, probably hidden. Both notes, especially the second one, suggest the unconventional way in which meaning will come: ironically, facetiously, outrageously. If we approach the opening as something that gives us serious meanings in a doubly improper way, we may get somewhere with it. The critical error lies in seeing only the impropriety and dismissing the whole thing as “merely comic” without looking at it carefully and relating it to the rest of the novel.

The first few chapters establish the world of the novel and the characters in that world and in the action of the novel. This seems quite enough to ask of one opening. The first paragraph hints that we are going to be given “truth” or truths, and by its rambling repetitious style suggests that these truths will not be communicated in a conventional way, and, further, that the world to be presented is not conventional either. The pointlessness of the opening chapters foreshadows the rest of the book. There is no coherence in the world of this St. Peterburg, unlike the same town in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. The characters do a great deal, but accomplish nothing. They have the madly active
purposelessness of ants without the long-range order that underlies ant behavior. Each of the characters is obsessed, isolated in some desperate posturings that are desperate dramatic responses to the desperate human situation. Working with admirable economy, Twain gives us the essence of the situation at once, at the end of chapter 1. After briefly exposing us to one of the maddest characters, Miss Watson, and showing how she violates others in playing out her Calvinist dramas, Twain presents her disintegrating effects on Huck and the shaken boy’s glimpse of ultimate chaos. By the end of chapter 1 we know a good deal about human needs, human awareness of those needs, and the kind of attempts men make to satisfy those needs.

Or rather we experience this without realizing it. We only realize it later when we look back and grasp the pattern, which is presented several times in the opening chapters. After Miss Watson comes a very different character, harum-scarum Tom Sawyer, and after him a character radically different from both, the slave Jim. They are all alike, though. Each of the three characters fulfills his need for temporal order, for drama, with maximum energy and with total disregard for the triviality of the materials at hand. Jim sticks to the materials of his own low-status world, that is, to witchcraft and superstition, but these are more than the trivia of peasants; they are, as we eventually learn, the religion of the novel. In the opening Twain not only raises witchcraft to a serious matter; he reduces all human behavior to the usual level of witchcraft, the level of trivia, and then seriously shows how men take their trivia seriously. It is the implication that everything is at once
trivial, silly, and important that an Arnoldian or Emersonian critic cannot stand, because such an implication violates the canons of both high seriousness and democratic realism.

The opening also establishes the ground rules of this manic world. From the judge's failure with Pap, and Tom's failure with the gang, we learn that successful drama-making requires not only desire and talent but also the right situation, and the successful combination of all three. With the boys in the cave we are given a concentrated demonstration of how a leader, a dramatist, establishes and maintains his leadership in the face of criticism, illiteracy, and crises. That one crisis arises from Huck's illiteracy and the other from a conspirator's falling asleep should not deter readers from looking through the surface to the essential meaning. From the activities and failures of the gang we can derive the aforementioned general rule that man will put up with a great deal in order to gain dramatic satisfaction, but will revolt if he feels his trust has been violated, and will revolt the harder the more he has trusted. These laws are relevant to the relations of Huck with the King and the Duke, of the Wilks and Bricksville mobs with the impostors, and most of all of Huck with Tom in the conclusion. We also learn in the beginning the difference between cultural agencies as passive dramatic props (religion, reforming activities like the widow's and the judge's) and cultural agencies as active teachers of drama.

In relation to teaching and learning drama, the opening is a complete action, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is Huck's education as a dramatist—his search for dramatic power and his failure to find it.
The education begins with Huck’s yielding to Tom’s demand that he go back to the widow’s, that is, remain in the world of others’ dramas rather than retreat to his private static world in the hogshead. Unable to develop anything himself, driven half-crazy by Miss Watson’s aggressiveness yet attracted by the potentialities of religion, irritated by Tom’s bossiness but drawn by his magnetism, Huck undergoes an agony in the opening chapters. In the first hours of the novel he abandons simple yea-saying American voluntarism because he tries and fails to make himself cheerful (chap. 1). He abandons more complex forms (magic) when he fails to get anything out of verbal efforts (prayer) or physical efforts (lamp-rubbing). Meanwhile other characters are pursuing voluntarism and having difficulties that Huck observes closely. Huck decides to go to hell, thus abandoning the anchor of Christianity entirely; he yearns only for change, and thus embarks on the endless cycle of responses to situations that creates and controls the underlying structure of the novel. He abandons his freedom to Tom Sawyer, and although he finally rejects Tom, he at once yields himself up to Pap, not through fear, as a careful reading of chapter 5 shows, but through interest. Pap fails Huck more than Tom does, for Pap’s first drama, his first great speech, casts Huck merely as an observer, although he prefers active roles; and Pap’s second drama, his dt’s, gives Huck an unacceptable role, that of victim.

Unable to deal with any of these pressures—that is, inept at gratuitous drama—Huck withdraws from the world, “kills himself,” and abandons himself to the drift of the river. It is a modern, private catastrophe, not
destruction but self-destruction. The canoe in which he
lies is his new hogshead, and Jackson's Island is an
improved version of the tanyard. At this point the opening
of the novel ends. The power of situations, the
situation-changing mood cycle, and the need for drama—
these great principles of Huck's world, principles larger
than any personal need or quality, take over and generate
the middle of the book, leaving the beginning an entity.
The beginning also stands as the first part of the three-part
structure of the novel, running from the abandonment
of commitment, through the education in drama, to
the blending in the ending of intended moral commitment
to Jim and real dramatic commitment to Tom. Some
of the characteristics of the ending are suggested in the
beginning. The eager submission to Tom (chap. 2) closely
parallels the submission to Tom in the ending (chap. 34);
in each case it is capitulation not so much to Tom's
superior blarney, powerful though that is, as to the
reassurance that Tom's drama-making power gives Huck
after an attack of panic in the face of nature. In each case,
also, Tom appears, like a god (or a devil), at the moment
of greatest anxiety. And the Huck who says at the
beginning, under pressure from Miss Watson, "All I
wanted was to go somewheres; all I wanted was a change,
I warn't particular," is the Huck who, at the end,
reacts against the painful pressure of his obligation to
Jim and rushes off in every direction except the right one.

Twain fails to tell us why Miss Watson feels ashamed
at the idea of selling Jim down the river, but our
glimpses of her in the opening chapters allow a hypothesis
that fits the logic of the book and of Twain's fictionalized
southern world. The decision to free Jim, like the
earlier decision to sell him away from his family, demonstrates her power to control people without limit, and her urge to use that power. Like the slave-owner Driscoll in *Pudd’Nhead Wilson*, she enjoys playing God, concealing sadism in thick layers of self-satisfying ritual. We can see her drives openly in chapter 1, where she forces Huck to sit still—that is, she deprives him of liberty and in effect of life, for to a Twain boy liberty is life. Deprived of Huck, Miss Watson turns on Jim, the other available victim, and hurts him deeply while adhering to the code of property and Presbyterian propriety. In the situation of her deathbed she uses a traditional dramatic model, the deathbed-repentance scene, to gain some more credit; no other motive makes sense, because the slave she is “freeing” has been gone for months and can be presumed dead or safe up North. To the ignorant public, though, she has sacrificed much and has made herself a model of charity; but being dead, she loses nothing—only her estate does. Miss Watson thus achieves the ultimate capitalist triumph of getting something for nothing. Also, she does have her quiet triumph over Huck. He absorbs the didactic quality of her lectures about the Bible even though he resists the lectures themselves; and in chapter 14 he lectures Jim about Solomon with Miss Watson’s authoritarian self-confidence but without her knowledge of the subject.

III

The middle of the novel, chapters 8-31, is Huck’s return to an education in the world. On the surface it seems to involve Huck’s commitment to Jim and his quest for
freedom for, and with, Jim. The interaction of surface theme and real theme produces complex ironies, which, like so much else in the novel, assert themselves indirectly and cumulatively, and produce an effect not of shock but of slowly growing uneasiness. The reader may accept missing the Ohio and wasting time at the Grangerfords, but after the King and the Duke take over and Huck seemingly forgets Jim, the reader may begin actively to demand the concentrated action of a "lyrical novel." After these many chapters of evading the issue, the ending comes first as a relief—"Now it will happen!"—and then as the shock that makes readers howl. Thus Twain deviously makes the body of the novel serve the ending.

The early parts of the middle give glimpses of a satisfying romance. In chapter 1 Huck manifests a few characteristics of the typical romantic hero: his parents are not visible, he has no mother at all, and he has a treasure hoard. His turning to pastoral after his troubles with Pap is properly romantic. But the lesson is clear as Huck, bored and restless, prowls the island and finds Jim: the romantic principle is subordinate here to the dramatic principle and is in fact relevant only in travesty (for example, Tom's mock-heroic arrival at the Phelps and Tom's consistent use of romance in its trashiest form).

Huck's narrative method reinforces the presentation of the middle of the novel. Because Huck is practicing and learning all the time, both during the moment of experience and later during the time of writing, he narrates and describes in great detail and does so little himself that one critic has been led to complain that his passivity means the end of his "quest for freedom."
Though it is clear that Huck is a secondary figure in the middle of the novel, that fact would not necessarily harm his quest (if he were on one) any more than the virtual disappearance of the physical Ishmael in the middle of *Moby-Dick* harms that novel (and, at any rate, I see no evidence that Huck is on a quest). It is rather a question of the author’s strategies for getting his job done. Considering Huck’s role in the middle of the book, I think that Huck, who chooses the material from his own experience and writes the book, has disappeared not from but into the narrative, so that every line of each episode tells Huck something and tells us about Huck. The Grangerford house reminds us of the pretentiousness of the cotton snobs, but Huck’s memories of it remind him of experiences that he enjoyed and is eager to share. The *Walter Scott* episode has strong overtones of cultural satire for us, but for Huck it is (or was) practice in *Sawyerismus* and a sharp lesson in the limits of voluntarism and his own talents. Huck is not merely imitating Tom Sawyer, as Richard Poirier sees it, in these chapters before the Grangerford episode; rather, in order to do more than survive, Huck is trying to learn the art of drama and is following the best practitioner he knows. After Huck fails and falls back on attentive observation of the dramas and dramatists before his eyes, the references to Tom cease.

It is in the beginning of this middle section, the Jackson’s Island episode, rather than in chapter 31, that Huck binds himself irrevocably to Jim. Like so much else in the novel, and especially in the middle, this is done with maximum indirection. When Jim says, “I owns myself,” and thus denies the basis of southern culture
in three words, Huck says nothing. As the reminiscing author-narrator, Huck places these words at the end of a chapter, thereby giving them added emphasis and finality. Huck’s understatement here, or rather non-statement, is worth more than the “I’ll go to hell” speech of chapter 31. By saying nothing Huck shows that he has already gone to “hell.” Later he indicates his relationship to Jim by visiting Mrs. Loftus in disguise. In this rigid slave-holding culture any degree of ambivalence is defined as treason, and here Huck is doubly ambivalent, first as a “girl” concealing a boy, and then as “George Peters” concealing Huck Finn the slave-stealer. When Huck acts on Mrs. Loftus’s information, he finally solidifies his illegal relationship to Jim and commits himself to a life of deceit (though he does not commit himself to activity on Jim’s behalf).

In this episode also, Huck, having bound himself to Jim, betrays him and binds himself to evil, thus exactly foreshadowing the ending. Just after the flood all the animals are docile, there is a prolonged sense of peace, and nature proffers a union with man; this is the most intense part of the longest and strongest pastoral interlude in the book. But Huck violates the truce with man’s old enemy the snake, kills a rattler, and puts it in Jim’s bed as a joke. The snake’s mate should revenge himself on Huck, but instead bites Jim. Huck’s gratuitously evil act thus betrays nature, betrays Jim, and dooms both Jim and himself to a pattern of betrayal and failure in their own actions, their relations with other men, and their relations with nature. This is Huck’s “original sin,” and he never escapes it, as Jim predicts. The point is reinforced when Jack, Huck’s servant
at the Grangerfords, leads Huck to “a whole stack o' water-moccasins” (chap. 18), which turn out to be Jim. The joy of Huck's and Jim's reunion is somewhat dampened for the reader by the suggestion that Jim, like the original snakeskin, is Huck's sin and Huck's burden. The antics of the ending may be seen as hysterical attempts to get shut of that snakeskin for good, but Huck is shown that the opposite is happening—he and Tom are opening Pandora's box—when the bag full of snakes is opened and snakes swarm through the Phelps house. The boys torture Jim with snakes, among other pets, but underneath the fauna and all the rest Jim is still there, still Huck's agonizing burden. The snake nonsense, like the other antics of the boys, is designed not to rescue Jim but to maximize the chances of getting him killed.

The other central episodes likewise teach their lessons in a roughly progressive way. There is a gradual widening of significance from the Grangerfords through the King's and the Duke's adventures and the Bricksville horrors to the Wilks episode; and Huck gradually moves closer to these events, as he goes from the complete passivity and accidental involvement of the Grangerford episode to energetic participation in the Wilks episode. These central sections begin after Huck's bungling of the Walter Scott business and the attempt to find Cairo. His rather too obviously symbolic death and rebirth, complete with deep immersion, wipe out his failures and his worries about them. He is ready to observe and to learn. From the point of view of Twain the writer, the break, as Walter Blair has demonstrated, was a way of avoiding the consequences of Huck's casual
commitment to Jim in chapter 8 and his impulsive saving of Jim in chapter 16. Blair suggests that Twain quit because he could not resolve the plot. From my consideration of the internal dynamics of the story, I would say that Twain did not want to resolve it, that his problem was not how to resolve it but how not to, or at least how not to bring it up to the point where he would need to face the results of what he had started in chapter 8 and brought out into the open in chapter 15. A man who despised rigid behavior and who spent a good deal of his life evading the consequences of commitments he had made, Twain could not treat a character as close to him as Huck was as if Huck were an ordinary fictional hero to be run through a plot like that of The Prince and the Pauper. Twain, in the 1870s at least, refused to do that with Tom Sawyer. After the crisis with the slave-hunters in chapter 15, Huck is so firmly committed to Jim that only a deus ex machina like the steamboat can destroy the momentum driving the plot toward—what? A cozy steamboat ride up the Ohio and a triumphant return to St. Petersburg, and Miss Watson, and, for all that Huck knows, Pap? Or Jim’s death, a grim conclusion like the one thought up by Professor Seelye for The True Adventures of Huckleberry Finn?

What Twain actually does is far more honest as a projection of his own style and Huck’s style. Having committed himself to the good bourgeois life in his fabulous house in Hartford, Twain dropped the whole thing four years later (a year after dropping Huck Finn) and went to Europe. Having saved Jim’s life and risked his own for him, Huck survives a disaster, forgets Jim utterly, and enters a new life of relaxed and anti-dramatic behavior.
He is interested in the Grangerfords and their feud, he enjoys living with them, but he does not argue vigorously with them or share with them, as he did with Jim. There are none of the strong reactions of the Wilks episode or the spirited involvement of the ending. He completely forgets to watch out for the Shepherdsons, and Buck Grangerford is killed. Compare that with Huck’s alertness and quick thinking in several earlier episodes.

Also he fails, rather indifferently, with art. He does not seem to care that he cannot figure out Pilgrim’s Progress. He does try to write some poetry as a tribute to Emmeline Grangerford, but “I couldn’t seem to make it go, somehow” (chap. 17)—a sign of Huck’s lack of potency. His complex response to Emmeline suggests his relation at this time and later to the Tom Sawyer type of aggressive artist. Her strange, artificially dramatic pictures “aggravate” Huck, and his admiration for her poems is one of distant respect rather than intuitive liking. Nevertheless he does admire the poems and her headlong method of writing (“she would slap down a line, and if she couldn’t find anything to rhyme with it she would just scratch it out and slap down another one, and go ahead”), which resembles Tom’s method of impetuous improvisation: “I needn’t tell what [Tom’s plan to steal Jim] was, here, because I knewed it wouldn’t stay the way it was. I knewed he would be changing it around every which way, as we went along, and heaving in new bullinesses wherever he got a chance. And that is what he done” (chap. 34). Huck admires Emmeline’s youthful genius as he later admires Tom’s: “What a head for just a boy to have!” (chap. 34).
Huck retains his dramatic potential, then, without doing anything himself. The active, vigorous passages involving Huck, like the sunrise passage in chapter 19, are the product of Huck the writer after the fact, not of Huck the participant at the time. The episodes with the King and the Duke, however, bring Huck back into the world of drama. Little by little the lesson is brought home to him that even though situations often allow him to evade participation, he ultimately cannot evade it. With the King and the Duke life runs from falling in the river to bullying, betraying, and lynching; Huck's reactions run from laughter and amused contempt to fear and finally to action against the frauds. It tells us something rather ominous about Huck's (and Twain's) sense of values that what finally moves Huck to such action is not Jim's plight but the misery of a sweet young girl. A major climax of a serious work on American race relations is, alas, a sentimental attachment to a cliché of Victorian kitsch.

Twain calls forth the Young Girl, the standard victim of melodrama, because the King and the Duke have become embodiments of aggressive evil, that is, melodramatic villains. The two rascals also serve as Dantesque guides leading Huck to view man at his worst in Bricksville, the static center of hell beyond which one can go nowhere but up. Bricksville is what Kroeber called a cultural "climax," the focus of a cultural area, where the values that form a culture appear in their purest and strongest form. Its climactic rottenness is strengthened by its total isolation ("a little one-horse town in a big bend"). Bricksville is the opposite of everything that the word "Brick" meant for the Victorians of
Twain's generation: the strength and security of their mansions and railroad depots and 7 percent gold bonds, the loyalty and decency of a friend ("he's a brick"). The town continues Huck's education by offering him the book's most absurd dramatic failure (Boggs's attempt to play badman) and its two most impressive dramatic successes (the loafers' killing of time and the colonel's killing of Boggs). No one in the town is doing anything in the way of organized activities (the Grangerfords at least toasted each other and went to church). Colonel Sherburn himself is defined as leading citizen only in terms of his clothes and his decorative, suspect title. Bricksville is therefore the standard of anti-culture, or rejection (of community and humanity) as a value and as a basis for conduct.

The colonel's speech, apparently a model of rhetoric and of advice for killers, is actually double-talk, impressive gibberish, a verbal drama of pure "style" comparable to the speech of Sister Hotchkiss (chap. 41). In the colonel's second paragraph, beginning "Do I know you?", he implies that the "average [man] all around" is a coward; then he differentiates the individual northerner from the individual southerner, to the advantage of the latter; then he repeats that southerners are no braver than any other people; then he says that juries (in the South) will not condemn a murderer because his friends will assassinate the jurymen, an action that we must assume will require courage. What are we to make of this contradictory jumble? It mesmerizes the mob, at any rate. In the colonel's second paragraph the ideal man seems to be the one "who stopped a stage full of men, in the day-time, and robbed the
lot”; in the third paragraph the ideal is the man who “goes in the night, with a hundred masked cowards at his back” and murders someone. Who is better, the lone-wolf daytime robber or the sociable nighttime lyncher? Sherburn does not say, and of course Huck does not. In the last paragraph of his speech the colonel says, “If any real lynching’s going to be done, it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion.” This is virtually an invitation to the mob, but nothing comes of it—as far as we know. In this confused and confusing speech is Twain attacking mobs, or praising the frontier badman (already a legend by 1880)? Whatever Twain’s aims, the speech, like so much else in Huckleberry Finn, shows how dramatic intensity can make nonsense real and the real nonsense when there are no standards of reference, no “bricks,” to appeal to. The speech is Sherburn’s gesture of contempt for logic and a reminder of what the colonel’s weapons, very American weapons, really are—charisma and a shotgun.

The moral of all this is wasted on Huck, who is apparently impressed by the colonel’s “style,” but remains withdrawn from action and evaluation until the Wilks episode. This section is the longest in the book before the ending, but it has been largely neglected, or attacked. Its length, given Huck’s interest in truth-telling, should suggest that it is important to Huck. As the most highly plotted episode, it should attract admirers of form and complexity, but readers are put off by its literariness—the outlandish coincidences, the sentimentality, the use of melodramatic types. From the point of view of Huck and his education, however, this melodramatic atmosphere is admirable. Here is a world of pure drama, for
melodrama is "the quintessence of drama." This world is like the Grangerfords’ world but more fluid and therefore more open to an outsider like Huck. At the Grangerfords he could accelerate the denouement but not change it. Now, for the first time, Huck can take part in a manageable gratuitous drama, one that lasts for a while (unlike the frantic survival dramas in the early episodes), one that puts him in a position where he can accomplish something without being overmatched. This drama is quite different from Huck’s own desperate survival dramas, or the two rascals’ hoaxes that Huck observes as a docile underling. The dramatic training has important implications for the ending, where Huck applies his experience for his own ends.

This is not to say that Huck does well either as a valet or as a counter-conspirator. When put to the test by Joanna Wilks, Huck fails miserably. De Voto sees this as an inconsistency, Huck having no trouble making up stories elsewhere, but the situation is special here. Huck either does not like or does not know the people he lies to elsewhere, but he does like the Wilks girls. Anyway, the incident is not his own survival drama; telling a good story to Joanna will not get Huck anywhere, in more than one sense. The episode thus provides Huck with practice in fooling people he likes, and in the conclusion he makes good use of this experience. Huck also learns that he is poor at such fooling, and later he leaves the bamboozling of the Phelpses to Tom. Most of all, Huck in the Wilks episode is able to study dramatic failure at close range. The already advanced state of his dramatic education is suggested by the intensity of his disgust at the King’s slovenly acting of a preacher’s role. As the
episode continues, Huck sees what happens when men highly competent at short simple dramas take on long complex ones. Huck’s effort to help Mary Jane Wilks is a gauge of his exasperation at the “beats” as well as his admiration for Miss Watson’s antithesis, the true heroine of the novel. The final touch is the snarling return of the King and the Duke when Huck is sure he has escaped at last. All this makes Huck eager not only to escape the frauds but to accept a really competent dramatist when one comes along. By the end of the Wilks episode Huck has graduated from his school of drama and is ready for Tom Sawyer again.

IV

But first Huck goes through the crisis of chapter 31, probably the most discussed and the most admired episode in *Huckleberry Finn*. It is here that Huck formally defies his culture, decides to go to hell rather than turn Jim in, and sets out to steal him. Most readers consider this decision the crisis of the novel and Huck’s action an admirable denunciation of his society. The analysis of Henry Nash Smith develops the thesis that Huck moves from false conventional responses, expressed in the false official language of the novel, to honest personal responses, expressed in true vernacular.¹⁸ I see chapter 31 rather differently, as a drama that resembles the others in the novel more than it differs from them, and as an episode that, depending on future situations, may or may not lead to any given conclusion. I will examine this chapter in terms of its relation to the logic of the world of the novel, its structure, its language, and its significance.
There is no reason to see chapter 31 as a climax to be followed by a certain conclusion. A critic who approaches the novel as picaresque might find it desirable to drop the idea of a conclusion, or at least to drop the idea that any one episode is the cause of the conclusion. For picaresque W. B. Gallie has proposed the useful term "interim conclusions": "We could if we wished, speak of following a story through a series of interim conclusions to a final conclusion." Because *Huckleberry Finn* is situational and sequential, with episodes developing out of the principles of drama, it is an error to isolate a "conclusion" as final or the cause of a final conclusion; it is better to consider all the "interim conclusions" and evaluate the final one in terms of them all. This is what I do below in trying to justify the ending of *Huck Finn*. We should think of chapter 31 in the light of what goes before. As I have said, Huck's real commitment to Jim, as far as society is concerned, comes in chapter 8 when he fails to comment on Jim's subversive statement, "I owns myself." The commitment may be put a little earlier, when Huck fails to report Jim as soon as he sees him asleep—after all, what other reason than escape could Jim have for being on that island? The commitment is tightened with every mile the raft floats down the river into the Deep South. Certainly it is tightened as far as his culture is concerned. Huck may be untroubled by his situation, and often acts as if it did not exist, but in this culture there are no halfway covenants where slavery is concerned. The Grangerford episode in many ways foreshadows chapter 31 and decreases its effect. Huck loses Jim, learns that he is in a "prison" (in the depths of a swamp), ignores him for what might be
an indefinite time, finally is reunited with him (by necessity, not choice), and then continues the raft journey. After all that, why should another spell of imprisonment for Jim and another adventure for Huck spell the end of the journey? To be sure, Twain decided to end it there, but he did not need to. He could have omitted Tom Sawyer; he could have had Huck break into the cabin, slip the chain off the bed-leg, and walk off with Jim toward another adventure or adventures. Chapter 31 is, then, not a bombshell; it is one episode.

If one considers the novel as the story of Huck's moral rise, then chapter 31 makes a good climax. But the wheel that raises Huck to his peak must continue to turn and bring him down. Huck has his moment of epiphany, his union with nature and the moral world; but that moment can only be a moment, one situation in a succession of situations. If it were not, then the whole novel would be a comedy, not a popular word among critics of the novel. It is better to admit the ending, accept that Huck's moment of "life" in chapter 31 is followed by a "death" in chapter 32 and a rebirth as, of all things, Tom Sawyer. The novel then becomes tragicomedy, a more modern form than tragedy or comedy and one more suited to the genre of the novel.

The episode is reverie, and it can be attacked as unsatisfactory reverie in terms of the "rules" established in the course of the novel, which is by now thirty chapters and about two hundred pages long. The reverie is acceptable in itself, for Huck has done a good deal of brooding during his many hours of solitude. The situation is fitting for reverie: Huck is disgusted, and he is alone. The first thoughts about social pressures are acute. Miss
Watson is the kind of woman who would sell Jim again out of spite, and the town would despise Huck for stealing a slave. He knows himself, too: “It would get all around, that Huck Finn helped a nigger to get his freedom; and if I was to ever see anybody from that town again, I’d be ready to get down and lick his boots for shame.” This is a “shame culture,” in which people act according to what others will think (if the others find out and if their opinions matter), as much as a “guilt culture,” in which people act according to internalized principles. We have known that since the fifth paragraph of the novel, where the widow attacks smoking, although “she took snuff ; of course that was all right, because she done it herself” (chap. 1).

But from cultural analysis Huck turns to brooding about his conscience and what he should have learned but did not learn at Sunday school, and with this the episode falls down. “The more I studied about this the more my conscience went to grinding me”—why? The transition is handled smoothly, but it is Twain doing the manipulating, not Huck moving from one topic to another according to the laws developed in the book. What happens here is the return, under stress, of Huck’s obsession with conscience. This obsession is the extension of Twain’s own. Huck could not acquire a conscience from the members of the book’s culture; they do not have consciences. Some of them have great native kindness, but the irrelevance of that to conscience is well revealed in the famous exchange between Huck and Aunt Sally, the most sweet and motherly character in the book:

“We blew out a cylinder-head.”
“Good gracious! Anybody hurt?”
"No'm. Killed a nigger."
"Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt."
(Chap. 32)

The novel demonstrates the lack of conscience. Huck’s irritation with it has a rough relevance, because conscience is an organizing, synthesizing principle, and Huck tries to avoid constants and fixity. The active, turbulent world of this novel cannot contain conscience; it is entirely irrelevant.

It may be irrelevant, but it is still taught, in Sunday schools and elsewhere, as surface culture. Huck is right in saying he could have learned it at Sunday school. But consider the way in which the point is presented: “Something inside of me kept saying, ‘There was the Sunday-school, you could a gone to it; and if you’d a done it they’d a learnt you, there, that people that acts as I’d been acting about that nigger goes to everlasting fire.’ ” This will not do. It suggests that Huck does not know what he says he knows. We have a boy judging himself according to principles that he admits he does not know. He is talking about “something inside of me” that “kept saying”—that is, he is referring to ground-in knowledge, what Twain in What Is Man? was to refer to as “training,” in opposition to mere knowing-about (Twain, as a patient student of the German language, was aware of the distinction between wissen and kennen). In the opening chapters Huck rejects a stock indoctrination into conventional Christian morality, rejects it on firmly pragmatic grounds, and acts toward it as if it were all a complete novelty to him. No moral voice “inside of me” develops in the opening; the authentic voice of those chapters is the one of Huck’s real experience, the one that says, “I don’t take no stock in it.” And certainly Huck
does not develop a conscience as he goes through the novel—he has no chance to.

If Huck does learn anything in the opening, he learns to hate cant. His experiences in the rest of the book reinforce that. Certainly in the Wilks episode his loathing for the King’s cant is close to nausea. But in chapter 31 cant, the public language that Henry Nash Smith has well defined, starts flowing spontaneously into Huck’s mind, and he starts to admire it and to admire himself for thinking it. This will not do either; it is false to Huck’s character and to the novel. It is true that Huck is made to speak a certain kind of public language in earlier scenes in which he is troubled by his terrible crime against his culture. He thinks, for example, “Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn’t even know; a man that hadn’t ever done me no harm” (chap. 16). For Huck this is the right kind of cant, the cant of general cultural values that are taught and learned without benefit of Sunday school and that need no formal learning because they are part of the atmosphere that people (whites) breathe from birth. When Huck mentions his “conscience” in that scene from chapter 16, he is using the term correctly in terms of the world of the book—that is, he is using it with unconscious irony to refer to the internalized values of his culture and the psychological mechanisms that make those values effective. In chapter 31, however, Twain makes him use “conscience” incorrectly.

Finally Huck says, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” and tears up that letter to Miss Watson. The first action is
verbal; the second one is negative (not-sending). Neither commits him irrevocably to anything new—Huck opts for hell in the sixth paragraph of the book, and destroying the letter leaves him no more and no less a "nigger-stealer" than he has been since he ran across Jim in the woods on Jackson's Island. Not turning in a slave is, to be sure, something of an achievement in a culture as rigid and as passionately founded on one issue (slavery) as this culture. It is, nevertheless, a major achievement only if one believes that not doing something is a major achievement, if one believes that conscious commitment in chapter 31 is more important than behavior in chapter 8, and, most of all, if one can still believe, after thirty chapters, that conscious commitment rather than behavior is really meaningful in the world of Huckleberry Finn. Many intellectuals, being verbal types anyway, assume that pronouncements are real actions rather than symbolic actions, and overlook Twain's book-long demonstration that language is not itself reality but a device for dealing with reality.

It helps to see chapter 31 not as gospel but as a record put down with no grasp of what it means (and, from Twain's side, without much attention to the decorum of point of view). Then, it itself, it becomes a drama, a dramatic monologue, that tells us more than the speaker realizes or wishes us to know, in contrast to a soliloquy, in which the speaker is objective about himself and the world. On the surface Huck's reverie is a noble melodrama of self-sacrifice and renunciation. Beneath that it tells us that Huck has had a glimpse of better things, a high level of perceiving and living, but that in a situational world the glimpse is only momentary. Ignoring wider implications, I
think that the scene suggests the theory of motivation articulated in *What Is Man?*: "A man often honestly *thinks* he is sacrificing himself merely and solely for some one else, but he is deceived; his bottom impulse is to content a requirement of his nature and training, and thus acquire peace for his soul." Huck does attain peace in this episode, first by writing the letter and then by tearing it up and accepting a punishment ("going to hell") that he really does not mind. Earlier in the book he justifies his habitual thefts of food by giving up one fruit that is not ripe yet and one fruit that he dislikes. In chapter 31 he is the same Huck; but the situation has changed, and now his sophistical use of gestures is not funny.

At the end of chapter 31 we can predict nothing with certainty; we know only that something will happen, because something always does happen in the turbulent world of this novel. If we place the episode in the context of the whole book it makes sense and fits with the ending—Huck never does write to Miss Watson, he does rescue Jim, and he risks both social and physical hell in doing so. In this sense chapter 31 is profoundly ironic, suggesting the unlimited gap between man’s sincere pretenses and his actual behavior, and also profoundly true to a world where men are dominated by situations and by the need to dramatize those situations.

1. Twain tried to use Huck in the unfinished "prairie-manuscript," and did use him in *Tom Sawyer Detective* and *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, neither of which add any dimensions to Huck or indeed have much literary quality. The prairie-manuscript has been edited by Walter Blair and
published in *Life*, 20 December 1968, pp. 32A–50A, and in *Hannibal, Huck, and Tom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 81–140. Blair thinks that Twain dropped the story because he was unable to deal with a rape to which his narrative had become committed. But the story was going nowhere, and if it had had any vitality, Twain’s fertile mind would never have been utterly defeated by a narrative block of the sort Blair discusses.


15. A typical, and typically brief, attack is in De Voto’s *Mark Twain’s America*, p. 312.


17. *Mark Twain’s America*, p. 312.
20. Twain’s concern with conscience is dramatized in “The Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut” (1876) and discussed in *Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, chap. 10.
22. J. R. Boggan notes Twain’s error in “That Slap, Huck, Did It Hurt?”, *English Language Notes* 1 (March 1964): 212—15.