The Dramatic Unity of *Huckleberry Finn*

Afterword

*Huckleberry Finn* and the Spirit of '77

Finishing *Huckleberry Finn*, a reader emerges from within Huck's personality and blends afterimages of the ending with a reawakening sense of the real American world. From this process a final and larger meaning of the novel begins to emerge. Twain does not articulate this meaning nor does he prepare the reader for it; we are dealing here with a cultural resonance of the work, not with one of its internal qualities. I therefore call this section an "afterword" rather than "chapter 5." From our experience of Twain's dramatic world and of Huck's vision of reality we can learn something of how and why the Jims of America were and are treated shabbily by the fictional and the real Hucks and Toms of America then and now. Thanks to Jim's helpless involvement in Huck's emotional cycle from involvement to boredom to withdrawal, Jim is made to reenact the eternal human drama of the victim and the American drama of the nonwhite. It is not a conscious allegory of betrayal, but a
helpless illustration of the fact that some human beings betray and others are betrayed.

By the late 1870s and early 1880s, when Twain was working on *Huckleberry Finn*, he had grown beyond the mechanical topical novel and was working with a complex mixture of local color, southwestern humor, nostalgia, and myth; yet he was so completely of his era and his culture that when he stumbled into treating the extended relationship of a black slave and a white youth, at the very time (1876–83) that the nation was undergoing a fundamental shift in its relation to blacks, he could not help paralleling the national drama-sequence. In chapter 31 Huck would sincerely “go to hell” to free Jim; a few hours later he is thrown off stride by the situation at the Phelps; a few hours after that he is easily seduced by Tom Sawyer into a grandiose scheme that uses the rescue of Jim as a means to an end; eventually Huck loses all but a spectator’s interest in Jim. Rather like a group of genteel Hucks, the northern middle class, many of them former Radical Republicans who had fought to free the slaves, became irritated by the long bother of Reconstruction, became tired of southern hostility, and were easily seduced by strong-willed politicians and businessmen into abandoning the freedmen for new excitements like railroad building. In the crucial event, the Compromise of 1877, the Republican leaders traded withdrawal of the last troops from the South in return for the electoral votes of three southern states and continued control of the federal government. The spirit that led the country to accept the Compromise might ironically be called “the spirit of ’77.” Absorbed in his work and his new life in Hartford, Twain shared that
spirit. He thought the Compromise a very good thing indeed. Three generations later the white civil-rights movement of the 1960s took a similar course: enthusiasm and dedication followed by loss of interest and absorption in new issues. “The spirit of ’77” is still in us.¹

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn is thus not only a great but a sadly typical American drama of race: not a stark tragedy of black suffering, but a complex tragicomedy of white weakness and indifference. It is one of those modern books that, as Lionel Trilling says, “read us,” tell “us,” Trilling’s well-meaning, confused liberal Americans, about ourselves. In Huckleberry Finn Twain obeys Thoreau’s basic rule, followed in many American masterworks, “to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world.” The meanness of Huckleberry Finn is not that man is evil but that he is weak and doomed to remain weak. This vision of man is embarrassing at best and unbearable at worst. As Stanley Elkins says of slavery, “There is a painful touchiness in all aspects of the subject; the discourse contains almost too much immediacy, it makes too many connections with present problems.”² Twain did not shirk the presentation, but managed to avert his gaze from the subject’s Medusa horrors by looking at it through his uncomprehending narrator.

However indirect Twain’s method, Huckleberry Finn, including its ending, “speaks,” as Barthes would put it, Twain’s recognition of an American and a human dilemma and his acceptance of its painful difficulties. When Howells looked at Twain’s dead face, he found in it
"the patience I had so often seen in it: something of a puzzle, a great silent dignity, an assent to what must be from the depths of a nature whose tragical seriousness broke in the laughter which the unwise took for the whole of him." In writing the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain made such an assent. By experiencing and accepting the ending we can perhaps take a step toward a similar level of self-awareness. A novel that can help its readers do that is indeed a masterwork and deserves its very high place.

1. The public events and feelings summarized here are well presented in C. Vann Woodward, *Reunion and Reaction: The Compromise of 1877 and the End of Reconstruction* (1951; rpt. Boston: Little, Brown, 1966); Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction, 1865-1877* (New York: Knopf, 1965); and William B. Hesseltine, "Economic Factors in the Abandonment of Reconstruction," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 22 (September 1935): 204-9. Woodward, notes (p. 86) the resemblance between Twain's Colonel Sellers, of *The Gilded Age*, and Tom Scott, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad and a major force behind the Compromise; Tom Sawyer, though harder and much younger, has a good deal in common with Colonel Sellers. Twain's enthusiasm for the Republican cause in 1876-77 is abundantly clear in *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, 1:143 passim. (In his old age Twain was stricken by the memory of the swindle of Tilden, the Democratic candidate, but failed to see it as a swindle of southern blacks also; see *Mark Twain in Eruption*, pp. 286-87.) In 1883, the year that Twain finished *Huckleberry Finn*, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was declared unconstitutional, thereby opening the door for the final act of legal segregation.
