

MARK TWAIN'S VIEWS ON FORMAL EDUCATION

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MARK TWAIN'S VIEWS ON FORMAL EDUCATION

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

From the time that he first won the attention of his countrymen through humorous sketches and travelogues, Mark Twain has been perhaps the best known of American men of letters. Though he was renowned during his lifetime as a lecturer and raconteur, his writings--travel books, essays, short stories and novels--have been responsible for his continued popularity.

Two complementary qualities are evident in Twain's work: most of his writings are based on personal experience, and almost all are of a humorous or satirical nature. The reason for his dependence on fact Twain explained rather fully in the following entry from his notebook.

For the Princeton Review--to be written in April, 1888: If you attempt to create a wholly imaginary incident, adventure, or situation, you will always go astray, and the artificiality of the thing will be detectable, but if you found on a fact in your personal experience it is an acorn, a root, and every created adornment that grows up out of it, and spreads its foliage and blossoms to the sun will seem reality, not inventions. You will not be likely to go astray; your compass of fact will keep you on the right course.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Mark Twain's Notebook, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine (New York, 1935), pp. 192-193.

Twain was, then, not only a realist who used fact as a springboard for his imagination, and a humorist who exaggerated human experiences and character for humorous effect, but also a satirist who expressed his criticism under the guise of humor.

Though late in life he came to consider the role of humorist as only incidental to the role of social critic,<sup>2</sup> Twain was, from the beginning of his literary career to its close, a writer for whom criticism and humor were inseparable.<sup>3</sup> In a conversation with Archibald Henderson in 1907, Twain remarked that he had succeeded where the American regional humorists " . . . Shillaber, Doesticks, and Billings failed because they never had any ideal higher than that of merely being funny."<sup>4</sup> Twain had higher ideals; as a social critic he states his theory of satire quite clearly in The Mysterious Stranger:

[The human race], in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon--laughter. Power, money, persuasion, supplication, persecution--these can lift a colossal humbug--push it a little, weaken it a little, century by century; but only

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<sup>2</sup>Samuel Langhorn Clemens, Mark Twain in Eruption, edited by Bernard DeVoto (New York, 1940), pp. 202-203.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Foner, Mark Twain: Social Critic (New York, 1958), p. 63. See also Gladys Carmen Bellamy, Mark Twain as a Literary Artist (Norman, 1950), p. 139.

<sup>4</sup>Archibald Henderson, Mark Twain (New York, 1911), p. 99.

laughter can blow it to rags and atoms at a blast.  
against the assault of laughter nothing can stand.<sup>5</sup>

With laughter, then--sometimes boisterously, sometimes bitterly--Twain assaulted the injustices that he saw the "darned human race" inflict upon itself.

One of the most significant areas of Twain's satire, based directly on his own experiences as well as on his observations, is that of public school education. In the autobiographical works he speaks often in a nostalgic fashion of the classroom experiences. He makes numerous critical comments on formal education in his travel writings, and he expresses his views humorously and even more critically in several essays that specifically concern formal training. Especially notable in his fiction are the caricatures of schoolmaster Dobbins and his charges in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; the contrast between Tom Sawyer, the romantic student of the classroom, and Huck Finn, the realistic student of the river, in the two books bearing their names; and the absurd efforts of Hank Morgan in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, whose plans for the education of the people of Camelot have no reasoned goal other than to produce a good "effect."

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<sup>5</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, "The Mysterious Stranger" and Other Stories, Vol. XXVII of The Writings of Mark Twain, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, 37 volumes (New York, 1922), p. 132.

In spite of his obvious interest in the public educational system as a subject for humorous satire, Twain's comments have received relatively little attention from the critics. Considerable research has been done on the extent of Twain's own learning, and the resulting studies show him to have been much better educated than is popularly believed. His interest in the sciences has been investigated by H. H. Waggoner in "Science in the Thought of Mark Twain" (1937),<sup>6</sup> and by Sherwood Cummings in "Mark Twain's Social Darwinism" (1957)<sup>7</sup> and in "Science and Mark Twain's Theory of Fiction" (1958).<sup>8</sup> These studies and others show Twain to have been well informed concerning contemporary scientific investigation.<sup>9</sup> Walter Blair's "On the Structure of Tom Sawyer" (1939),<sup>10</sup> his Mark Twain and Huck Finn (1950),<sup>11</sup> and Franklin Rogers's Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns (1960)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>H. H. Waggoner, "Science in the Thought of Mark Twain," American Literature, VII (January, 1937), 357-370.

<sup>7</sup>Sherwood Cummings, "Mark Twain's Social Darwinism," Huntington Literary Quarterly, XX (February, 1957), 163-175.

<sup>8</sup>Sherwood Cummings, "Science and Mark Twain's Theory of Fiction," Philological Quarterly, XXXVII (January, 1958), 26-33.

<sup>9</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, Mark Twain: The Man and His Work, rev. ed. (Norman, 1961), p. 101.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Blair, "On the Structure of Tom Sawyer," Modern Philology, XXXVII (August, 1939), 75-88.

<sup>11</sup>Walter Blair, Mark Twain and Huck Finn (Berkeley, 1960).

<sup>12</sup>Franklin R. Rogers, Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns (Dallas, 1960).

point out that Twain's knowledge of literature was extensive and that much of the author's fiction either alludes to or burlesques fictional works he had read. So extensive has been the reappraisal of Twain's interest in the sciences and in literature that Edward Wagenknecht has reversed his position and rewritten a chapter formerly entitled "The Divine Amateur" for his 1961 revision of Mark Twain, the Man and His Work.<sup>13</sup> One might expect that with the re-evaluation of Twain's interest in the various areas of human knowledge would also come an investigation of his theories concerning classroom instruction, especially since there are numerous references to the schools in his works. In the entirety of Twainian criticism, however, only three articles have been written which deal specifically with Mark Twain's views on public education; all were written over twenty years ago, and none contains substantial critical comment on the subject.

The first scholarly mention of Twain's interest in the educational field was made in 1901 by Clemens J. France in an article entitled "Mark Twain as an Educator."<sup>14</sup> Using Tom Sawyer as his only source, France cites Twain's early sympathy with contemporary educational views and classifies

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<sup>13</sup>Wagenknecht, pp. vii-viii. The first edition was published in 1935.

<sup>14</sup>Clemens J. France, "Mark Twain as an Educator," Education, XXI (January, 1901), 265-274.



him as a strong advocate of "the subjective standard in education."<sup>15</sup> He points out Twain's remarkable characterizations of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, noting that Twain is in sympathy with Huck's freedom.<sup>16</sup> He does not, however, analyze the difference between Tom, a product of the St. Petersburg school, and Huck, a product of life on the river; neither does he point out what Twain implies about classroom instruction through these differing characterizations. More surprisingly, he makes no mention of the strict schoolmaster portrayed so effectively in Tom Sawyer. Instead, grasping the tenor of Twain's educational thought, France uses Tom Sawyer only as a point of departure for a discussion of his own educational views. He thus theorizes a good deal, referring only sporadically to Twain's writings.

No further analysis was made until Robert T. Oliver published "Mark Twain's Views on Education" in 1940.<sup>17</sup> His discussion is a fairly adequate summary appraisal of Twain's theories of classroom instruction. Staying much closer to his primary sources than did France, he establishes Twain as a progressive educator. He notes that Twain predated Dewey in his insistence that children "be made partners in the educational enterprise" and that they learn by doing.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>17</sup>Robert T. Oliver, "Mark Twain's Views on Education," Education, LXI (October, 1940), 112-115.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

He mentions Twain's overemphasis on the role of environment and his dislike of rote memorization.<sup>19</sup> However, he bases his analysis on only seven sources, omitting works like Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, stating that though

. . . the remainder of [Twain's] works have been examined, and [though] from them could be drawn many more comments to be set down . . . , if used, they would only elaborate (and perhaps obscure)--but would not change to any important degree--the summary of Twain's educational theory.<sup>20</sup>

The only other discussion, "Mark Twain's Educational Views," was penned by William G. Slade not a year later than Oliver's essay.<sup>21</sup> It is nothing more than a list of some of Twain's comments on the classroom and classroom subject matter. It reaches no conclusions other than that ". . . some of [Twain's] observations are worthy of notice"<sup>22</sup> and is thus worthy of little more than notice itself. Though Robert T. Oliver's article stands out as a fair summary of Twain's educational theories, like the others it is not complete. In short, the existing analyses of Twain as a critic of education are inadequate.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to discuss Twain's role as a critic of the educational system of his

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 115.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>21</sup>William G. Slade, "Mark Twain's Educational Views," Mark Twain Quarterly, IV (Summer-Fall, 1941), 5-10.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

day and to explore his views concerning the purposes, methodology, and value of formal education below the college level. Primary sources for the study include all of Twain's fiction, essays, speeches, travelogues, and autobiographical writings. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Twain's work are to Albert Bigelow Paine's definitive edition The Writings of Mark Twain.<sup>23</sup>

Chapter II discusses the classroom instruction young Sam Clemens received in Missouri.<sup>24</sup> Such a study is necessary since, as has been noted, Twain relied heavily on his recollection of personal experiences as subject matter for many of his works. Particular attention is given to the classroom scenes Twain describes in his Autobiography and in other autobiographical writings collected by Bernard DeVoto in Mark Twain in Eruption (New York, 1940). Many of the incidents Twain describes may never have happened to him; however, since they reveal what he "remembered" to be his experience in the classroom, they are of foremost importance.

Chapter III analyzes the views on the characteristics of a valid educational system which Twain expresses in his non-fiction--travel books, essays, speeches, and letters.

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<sup>23</sup>Samuel Langhorn Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, edited by Albert Bigelow Paine, 37 volumes (New York, 1922).

<sup>24</sup>Throughout this paper the name Sam Clemens is used to distinguish the boy in Hannibal from Mark Twain, the man and writer.

The analysis points out that Twain believed the purpose of formal instruction to be essentially pragmatic; that he felt that those teaching methods should be used which present subject matter on a level which the student can understand; and that he thought that the primary value of an effective educational system lies in its ability to instruct the student morally.

Chapter IV explores Twain's conscious and unconscious use of vivid characterizations in his fiction to illustrate his educational theories. The discussion shows that Twain's caricature of the ridiculously strict schoolmaster, Dobbins, in Tom Sawyer illustrates ineffective teaching methods; that his juxtaposition of Huck Finn, a self-educated realist, and Tom Sawyer, a school-educated romantic, emphasizes, through Tom's actions, the effect of an improper understanding of the purpose of book knowledge; that his characterization of Hank Morgan implies the catastrophic results of a mechanized, short-sighted plan for the education of mankind; and that his characterization of Fudd'nhead Wilson embodies his nearest approach to a concept of an educated man.

Chapter V concludes that Mark Twain, basing his opinions on his own classroom experiences as well as on personal observation, expresses in his non-fiction and implies in his fiction a philosophy of classroom instruction.

It has already been noted that secondary sources which deal with Twain's views on formal education are limited.

A few critical analyses, however, offer helpful comments. If for no reason other than for the scope of his work, A. B. Paine's Mark Twain, a Biography (1925) has been useful. Invaluable aid in the area of Sam Clemens' education has come from Dixon Wecter's Sam Clemens of Hannibal (1952); this book, a posthumous publication, is only a portion of what might have been the definitive biography of Mark Twain, and it is the only biography that deals in any extensive way with Twain's childhood. It is also the only published source for selections from both "The Mysterious Stranger in Hannibal" and an unfinished dramatization of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer, two of Twain's works which are used in the discussion of young Sam Clemens' classroom experiences.

For the discussion of Twain's fiction, several sources have proved helpful; those deserving mention are Gladys Bellamy's Mark Twain as a Literary Artist (1950), Walter Blair's Mark Twain and Huck Finn (1960), Edgar Branch's The Literary Apprenticeship of Mark Twain (1950), Pascal Covici's Mark Twain's Humor (1962), Philip Foner's Mark Twain: Social Critic (1958), Franklin Rogers' Mark Twain's Burlesque Patterns (1960), and A. E. Stone's The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain's Imagination (1961).

## CHAPTER II

### THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS: THE EDUCATION OF SAMUEL CLEMENS

Thirteen days after Halley's comet reached its perihelion on November 17, 1835, a seven-month child was born to John and Jane Clemens.<sup>1</sup> As a premature infant Samuel Langhorn Clemens' first step into the world was on precarious footing. He reports in his Autobiography that he was a very sickly child and that he "lived mainly on allopathic medicines during the first seven years . . ." of his life.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of his sickly nature, however, young Sam was without doubt an active, boisterous child, one whom his mother was quite willing to enroll in the local dame school shortly after the family moved to Hannibal, Missouri.<sup>3</sup>

Young Twain's family remained at his birthplace, Florida, Missouri, until he was just four years old, then moved overland from the Salt to the Mississippi River and Hannibal. His father had been a commissioner of the Salt

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<sup>1</sup>Dixon Wecter, Sam Clemens of Hannibal (Boston, 1952), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVI, 108.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, a Biography, Vol. XXXII of The Writings of Mark Twain, p. 35.

River Navigation Company, but plans to clear the stream for commercial purposes ended with the Panic of 1837 and with the coming of the railroad. In an effort to support his family, John Clemens took the office of judge in Monroe County, but financial difficulties set in, and trying to remain solvent, he moved his family to Hannibal.<sup>4</sup>

The Clemens family was never to be a prosperous one, for Judge Clemens was somewhat less than a financial wizard. He was known, however, for his sternness--his unsmiling face, his inflectionless voice, his austere punctiliousness.<sup>5</sup> Later in life Twain quipped that his father had thrashed him only twice and that those two instances were the only times his father had ever touched him, either out of love or exasperation.<sup>6</sup> However strained the father-son relationship was, it is certain that some of his father's traits made lasting impressions on young Sam. Dixon Wecter notes that the elder Clemens was a man of learning; he read constantly and was among the most highly educated of the community. But in the midst of the coarseness of Hannibal, "the talents of [his] hard, cold, precise intellect were singularly wasted."<sup>7</sup> Young Sam was probably awed by this man who took interest in his books and in organizations

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<sup>4</sup>Wecter, pp. 47-53

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., pp. 66-67.

<sup>6</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXI, 28.

<sup>7</sup>Wecter, p. 50.

such as the Natural History Society of Hannibal<sup>8</sup> instead of in his family; perhaps it is not too far-fetched a notion to assume that the boy's rebellion against formal education was in part a rejection of things that his father enjoyed. Nevertheless, Judge Clemens saw to it that his children were given the opportunity to attend school whether they liked it or not.

Jane Lampton Clemens was not nearly as influential in her son's schooling as was her husband. She was neither interested in nor did she have the capacity for her husband's intellectual pursuits. Though she doubtless encouraged Sam, his brothers, and Pamela in their schoolwork, she did not do so with sternness as did her husband. She was persevering, however; Archibald Henderson records her comments on her efforts to keep Sam in school: ". . . his father and the teacher both said it was no use to try to teach Sam anything, because he was determined not to learn. But I never gave up."<sup>9</sup> Twain remembered her as a woman who was "fine and striking and lovable."<sup>10</sup>

Twain asserted late in life that he had begun his school days at the tender age of four and a half years.<sup>11</sup> It was customary in those days to begin a child's education

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 68

<sup>9</sup>Henderson, p. 19.

<sup>10</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVI, 115.

<sup>11</sup>Clemens, Eruption, p. 107.



early, and the local dame school provided instruction through the third reader for twenty-five cents weekly.<sup>12</sup> The dame school in Hannibal was taught by Elizabeth Horr, the wife of the village cooper.<sup>13</sup> Twain was to remember her as the woman who, when he was only five years old, had said within his hearing that one day he would be "'President of the United States, and would stand in the presence of kings unabashed.'"<sup>14</sup> The dame school's associate teacher, Miss Mary Ann Newcomb, was a personal friend of the adult Clemenses. She took many of her meals at the Clemens household, and she must have known all four of the children well. Being prim and angular, Miss Newcomb was the perfect picture of the old maid schoolmarm. One can imagine Sam's disgust at having to stay inside and listen to an "'old maid and a widow'" all day instead of being outside, and he evidently showed his frustration, for in reference to young Clemens Miss Newcomb is reported to have noted that though he was slow of speech, he was "'certainly not slow about thinking up ways of getting out of studying.'"<sup>15</sup> In a moment of reminiscence, however, Twain remarked, "'I owe a great deal to Mary Newcomb, she compelled me to learn to read.'"<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Paine, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXII, 37.

<sup>13</sup>Wecter, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup>Clemens, Eruption, p. 234.

<sup>15</sup>Wecter, p. 84.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

In one of his letters to Will Bowen, an old classmate and boyhood friend, Twain recalls another teacher in the school, a Miss Torrey.<sup>17</sup> She was evidently the children's favorite, possibly because she was more lax in her instruction than the other two teachers. On one particular day, the boys, under Ed Stevens' leadership, declaring themselves in rebellion against Miss Newcomb in an effort to force her to allow them to go over to Miss Torrey's side of the classroom, remained outside long after the play period was scheduled to end. Twain recalls that they "sassed" Laura Hawkins when she was sent out to call them in, but that they eventually submitted and "marched in in threatening & bloodthirsty array, --& meekly yielded, & took each his little thrashing, & resumed his old seat entirely 'reconstructed.'"<sup>18</sup>

Certainly the deportment problem was a staggering one, especially for the completely feminine teaching staff. In an autobiographical sketch on his early days in Hannibal, Twain writes of his first school whipping. On his first class day he broke a rule and was informed that to do so again would automatically call for a whipping. Presently he broke the rule again and was sent outside for a switch.

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<sup>17</sup>Twain spelled her name "Torry." The spelling used here is found in Wecter, p. 84.

<sup>18</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Mark Twain's Letters to Will Bowen, introduction by Theodore Hornberger (Austin, 1941), p. 19.

One can imagine the frustration of the teacher when he returned with a rotten cooper's shaving in his hand, a pathetic, pleading look on his face. It was common practice in those days to send an offender after his means of punishment; it was also common practice to award the selection to a classmate if the offender did not supply an appropriate instrument of correction. Twain says that Jim Dunlap got the switch and that in the selection of switches, "I recognized that he was an expert."<sup>19</sup>

The curriculum of the school was similar to that of the other dame schools of the day: the ABC's, spelling from Webster's, reading from McGuffey's Reader, recitation, and, of course, Bible reading and prayer.<sup>20</sup> All of the learning was by rote. The diet of straight subject matter was all but unpalatable to students like Sam. The dry lessons in reading, "cyphers," or writing, were certainly uninteresting, and their explanations probably had the same effect on Sam as one of Mrs. Horr's explications of the scriptures which Twain recorded years later. The text was "Ask and ye shall receive," and in her brief talk Mrs. Horr told the students that whatever they prayed for in earnestness would be given them by God. Young Sam Clemens immediately decided to put the information to a test.

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<sup>19</sup>Clemens, Eruption, pp. 107-108.

<sup>20</sup>Wecter, p. 84.

Every day at lunch-time he longed for the gingerbread that Margaret Kooneman, the baker's daughter, brought in her lunch, so he determined to pray for it. To his amazement, when he looked up from his prayer, there sat the gingerbread before Margaret, and she was looking the other way. In an instant Sam filched the coveted cake and was converted. No such sterling opportunities presented themselves again, however, and he humorously recalled that seeds of doubt were sown in his young mind.<sup>21</sup> Obviously young Sam had missed the point of the lesson.

Of course, it is probable that the events of the above story may never have happened to Twain exactly as he told it. In the autobiographical works he acknowledges that his memory fails him much of the time: "When I was younger I could remember anything, whether it happened or not; but my faculties are decaying now and soon I shall be so I cannot remember any but the things that never happened."<sup>22</sup> But, as has been noted earlier, whether the occasions never happened to Twain--whether they happened to someone else or were products of his imagination--is of no real concern, for these late recollections serve the purpose of clarifying his attitude toward his own educational experience even if they do not present exactly what happened. If the child

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<sup>21</sup>Clemens, Eruption, pp. 108-109.

<sup>22</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVI, 96.

Sam Clemens missed the point of the scripture lesson, the man Mark Twain did not fail to use the instance to illustrate the ineffectiveness and imprecision of the teaching methods in the dame school.

While the Clemens family lived in Hannibal, relatives and friends remained in Florida, and it was family practice to spend the summers at the Quarles farm a few miles north of the old home. The fun-filled days at the farm were not lost to education, however, as the children all attended school once or twice a week at an old schoolhouse near the Quarles home.<sup>23</sup> There is virtually no record of these school days; of the curriculum, the teacher, or the play activities little is known, but it may be assumed that the school was less formal than the dame school in Hannibal. Twain noted in his Autobiography that one of the older girls at the school shamed him by saying, "'Here is a boy seven years old who can't chew tobacco.'"<sup>24</sup> Adding that he never learned to chew tobacco, only to smoke it, he states that the days at the country schoolhouse are those he looks back on with the greatest satisfaction. Perhaps the relaxed atmosphere of the country classroom enabled him to enjoy his schooling--something he could never do in Hannibal.

Two or three years before his father's death in 1847, young Sam was enrolled in William O. Cross's "'good common

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 109

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

school for boys and girls."<sup>25</sup> Located at the top of Schoolhouse Hill on the public square, the school overlooked the broad Mississippi. In unpublished manuscripts Twain recalled the tedious chore of climbing the steep hill on icy mornings; occasionally the young scholars would purposely lose their footing just so they could slide down the slope, and those who had sleds always brought them to school.<sup>26</sup>

Horseplay prevailed in Cross's school much as it had in Mrs. Horr's. In one of his rare youthful literary moments, Sam contrived a rather poor but clever verse about the Irish Mr. Cross:

Cross by name and cross by nature--  
Cross jumped over an Irish potato.<sup>27</sup>

The poet showed the fruits of his labors to classmate John Briggs who considered it a stroke of pure genius and chalked it on the board at noon recess. Cross lived up to his name when class resumed and gave poor John a thorough thrashing. He assumed either that the Briggs boy had written the rhyme or that since he would never discover the true author he had better punish the publisher.<sup>28</sup>

Not all was play in the schoolhouse, however. The day began much as it had begun in the dame school with a prayer and a hymn followed by recitation of the arithmetic lesson

<sup>25</sup>Decker, p. 131.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 131-132.

<sup>27</sup>Paine, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXII, 69.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

and multiplication tables. In "The Mysterious Stranger in Hannibal," a sketch of his home town that was later developed into one of his best short stories, Twain recalls that the next lesson was the "'grammar class of parsing parrots, who knew everything about grammar except how to utilize its rules in common speech.'"<sup>29</sup> The elder Twain put into words what the young Clemens and his classmates were doubtlessly thinking. They memorized words and rules, but they retained only what they learned by chance from the memory work.

If there was any subject that Sam liked, it was spelling. He recalled that ". . . when I was a boy there was not a thing I could do creditably except spell by the book."<sup>30</sup> Paine notes that there were two medals given weekly at the school: one for good citizenship, "amiability," and the other for winning the Friday spelling bee. Sam nearly always won the spelling medal, and Paine says, rather romantically, that one of the few times he lost was when he deliberately left the first "r" out of February so the medal could be awarded to Laura Hawkins, his childhood sweetheart, the prototype of Becky Thatcher.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Samuel Langhorn Clemens, *Mark Twain Papers*, DeVoto 326, cited in Wecter, p. 132.

<sup>30</sup>Clemens, *The Writings of Mark Twain*, XXXVII, 257.

<sup>31</sup>Paine, *The Writings of Mark Twain*, XXXII, 69-70.

Late in life Twain came to think that all of his schooling had taken place in the building atop Schoolhouse Hill. As a result, Paine mentions only the years Twain spent in Cross's classroom. But in actuality, after his father's death, Sam left Cross's school and enrolled in another where he studied for at least two years under the direction of J. D. Dawson. Wecter notes an advertisement of Dawson's that ran in the Fannibal Journal announcing instruction for young ladies and boys "'of good morals, and of ages under 12 years.'"<sup>32</sup> It is this school that Twain immortalizes in Tom Sawyer, and he identifies the connection between fact and fiction in his Autobiography.<sup>33</sup> The school, he says, was atop Holliday's Hill<sup>34</sup> and was taught by Mr. Dawson, whose son Theodore--"inordinately good, extravagantly good, offensively good, detestably good"--was the star pupil.<sup>35</sup>

Among Twain's unpublished writings is an incomplete dramatization of Tom Sawyer. Though this work is clearly fiction, the following excerpt is quoted by Dixon Wecter to illustrate Twain's recollection of a typical classroom atmosphere:

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<sup>32</sup>Wecter, pp. 131-133.

<sup>33</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVII, 179.

<sup>34</sup>Wecter, p. 135. Twain identifies the location as Cardiff Hill, the fictional name he gave it in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer.

<sup>35</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVII, 179.



"Enter a scrambling swarm of hot and panting boys and girls in dresses of 40 years ago, and hang up their things and hustle to their places, and go to whispering, cuffing, punching each other, catching flies, giggling, etc. Enter old Dobbins, the schoolmaster . . . a hush falls upon the school, pupils stare and wait. . . . After Dobbins says 'Get to your lessons,' he goes into a brown study, and the boys and girls get to scuffling, pinching, sticking pins in each other--a boy sits down on a pin, says 'ouch!' cuffs his neighbor. Spit-balls are thrown, peaguns are used, etc., fly catching goes on. Buzz of study from some of the better children."<sup>36</sup>

One may assume that Sam was not one of the "better children."

A great part of the day was filled with recitation of the lesson. The young scholars engaged in the solution of Dawson's arithmetic word problems. In a continuation of the above dramatization, Twain stages a discussion between Dobbins and Joe Harper:

"D. [Dobbins] : Pay attention, now. If A has a barrel of apples, and sells an eighth of them to B, and a quarter of them to C, and half of them to D, and gives an eighth to the poor, what remains?  
 H. [Harper] : (Pause) The barrel, sir.  
 D. [Dobbins] : (Reflective pause) Correct.--I didn't think of that. You may go."<sup>37</sup>

Though the conversation has probably been sharpened by Twain for dramatic purposes, it seems to represent fairly accurately Sam's experience of typical classroom dialogue. Dobbins's call to attention, followed by a terse, dry problem, is answered by Harper's humorous but also imaginative reply.

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<sup>36</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, Mark Twain Papers, Paine 40, cited in Wecter, pp. 133-134.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

In comparison, the teacher and his question are distinctly devoid of humor and imagination.

The grammar lesson recitation was probably the most confusing and the least looked forward to by the students. Exemplary of their frustrated parroting is this glib response by Ben Rogers: "Many is an adjective, possessive case, comparative degree, second person, singular number, and agrees with its object in number and gender."<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, the classroom time was not completely given over to study, as the students commonly brought in objects of diversion. One incident which Twain was to use in his fiction concerned Arch Fuqua, the oldest student in the school, a man of twenty-five.<sup>39</sup> Fuqua produced a louse in class one day, sold it to Will Bowen, and Will and Sam became intrigued in the task of keeping the creature from crossing a line on a slate. So excited did they become that they entirely forgot class and were surprised with a sound boxing on their ears by Dawson who had sneaked up behind them.<sup>40</sup> Twain later incorporated this incident into The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Other in-class activities consisted of playing with spool guns, jew's harps, birds' eggs, and other items of interest.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVI, 179.

<sup>40</sup>Wecter, p. 134.

Recess time was certainly the favorite part of the day. No supervised recreation was provided for the youngsters, so they played whatever games or engaged in whatever activities they desired. More often than not, recess and lunch period were devoted to the harassment of fellow classmates. In a letter to Will Bowen, Twain recalls that they used to

. . . indulge in that very peculiar performance on that old bench outside the school-house to drive good old Bill Brown crazy while he was eating his dinner . . . [and that they would remain] at school at noon and go hungry in order to persecute Bill Brown in all possible ways--poor old Bill. . . .<sup>41</sup>

Missing from this survey of Sam's school days is Tom Blankenship, the son of the town drunkard. Tom was free from the drudgery of the classroom; he never attended school or church. Of him Twain later said, "He was ignorant, unwashed, insufficiently fed; but he had as good a heart as ever any boy had."<sup>42</sup> He was later immortalized as Huckleberry Finn.

In his Autobiography Twain recalls, "I was taken from school at once upon my father's death and placed in the office of the Hannibal Courier as a printer's apprentice. . . ."<sup>43</sup> Paine records that beside his father's coffin, young Sam had sobbingly promised his mother that he would be a

<sup>41</sup>Clemens, Letters to Will Bowen, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXVII, 174.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

better boy in honor of his father if only he could be permitted to quit school and that Mrs. Clemens had agreed.<sup>44</sup> It was noted earlier, however, that actually Sam attended school some two years past the date of his father's death. Paine's information came from Twain himself, and again the author's memory seems to have failed. Nevertheless, though confused about the facts, Twain remembered the emotions he had about continuing his formal schooling. Dixon Wecter says that Sam probably served as a part-time employee of many of the local businesses--the grocery store, the blacksmith shop, the bookseller's shop, the drugstore--before quitting school altogether to become an apprentice printer under Mr. Joseph Ament. At any rate he received no formal instruction past the age of fourteen.<sup>45</sup>

In summary, the general classroom atmosphere in the Hannibal schools was similar to that of other contemporary Midwestern schools. The curriculum for all students consisted of reading, writing, spelling, grammar, mathematics, and moral instruction, and little of it was geared to the learning capabilities of the students. The classroom was generally under the domination, and not the supervision, of teachers whose demands were for the children's attention instead of for their interest and who used a great deal of

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<sup>44</sup>Paine, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXII, 72.

<sup>45</sup>Wecter, p. 131.

physical persuasion to get what they demanded. All oral classwork consisted either of recitation or of a strict question-and-answer session; all study required rote memorization. The presentation of subject matter was not done in such a way as to make the students curious about their lessons. Whatever creativity the students possessed was either stifled by the strict classroom atmosphere or was used by the students to seek out diversions from study.

Several conclusions may be drawn concerning young Sam's education. Of the subjects--including moral instruction--which made up the curriculum of the classrooms, Sam excelled only in spelling. He approached his studies with a riotous sense of humor, spending more time in trying to avoid learning than in learning, devoting much of his class day to diversions which had little value in the eyes of his teachers. Though apparently not all the incidents recalled were true, that Mark Twain remembered wanting to quit school indicates perhaps the attitude the young Sam Clemens had toward the classroom when he ended his formal education.

From the time that Sam quit school, to use a well-worn but appropriate phrase, the world became his classroom. After learning the printer's trade, he became, in succession, a riverboat pilot and a miner. He served as a traveling correspondent for several American newspapers, writing from points within the United States, Hawaii, and Europe. His yen for traveling and his efforts to secure both subject

matter and international copyrights for his books took him to Europe many times and on one round-the-world trip. A few years before his death in 1910, Twain was formally recognized as a literary figure by being awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters degree by Oxford University. Twain said that the Oxford doctorate was a ". . . loftier distinction than is conferrable by any other university on either side of the ocean, . . . worth twenty-five of any other, whether foreign or domestic."<sup>46</sup> He had been awarded two such degrees in the United States, but he spoke with great pride of his English degree; he had been recognized as an educated man by what he considered to be the greatest educational institution in the world.

His official biographer, A. B. Paine, thought that Twain was fortunate to have been kept from extensive institutional training.<sup>47</sup> However, Twain recognized his lack of formal education as a liability. In an essay on "Taming the Bicycle," he remarks:

The self-taught man seldom knows anything accurately, and he does not know a tenth as much as he could have known under teachers; and besides, he brags, and is the means of fooling other thoughtless people into going and doing exactly as he himself has done.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, edited by Charles Neider (New York, 1959), p. 349.

<sup>47</sup>Slade, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XVI, 290.

Twain recognized that formal education had great value. Because of his own classroom experiences, however, and because of what he observed as an adult, he directed some intelligent criticism at formal education. Those views and educational theories which are expressed in his essays and in his other non-fictional works are analyzed in the following chapter.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE NON-FICTIONAL WORKS: TWAIN'S VIEWS ON THE PURPOSE, METHODOLOGY, AND VALUE OF FORMAL EDUCATION

On November 23, 1900, Mark Twain addressed a meeting of the Berkeley Lyceum in New York City. In Twain's usual manner, the speech opens with a humorous comment: "I don't suppose that I am called here as an expert on education, for that would show a lack of foresight on your part and a deliberate intention to remind me of my shortcomings."<sup>1</sup> But regardless of his lack of formal training, Twain had become known as an occasional critic of American education, and his position as a speaker before a public education association was not at all ludicrous. The address continues with a comment on the fact that the Russian government had chosen to withdraw funds from the public school allotment in order to keep Russian troops in China. Comparing the Russian actions with a movement in a mid-century Mississippi River township to close the schools because of the expense involved, Twain recalls an old farmer's remarks that nothing was ever gained by closing schools--since for each school

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<sup>1</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXVII, 211.



closed a jail had to be built. Twain concludes humorously, "I believe it is better to support schools than jails."<sup>2</sup>

Because he recognized the power of formal education, and because he knew that the educational system could be greatly improved, more often than not Twain's support was but a qualified endorsement. When he was provoked, it took the form of a benign invective, as the quotation from "Pudd'n-head Wilson's New Calendar" illustrates: "In the first place God made idiots. This was for practice. Then He made School Boards."<sup>3</sup> In many respects, however, Twain was in favor of the work done by the public school, stating, as in the speech mentioned above, that "out of the public school grows the greatness of a nation."<sup>4</sup>

In educational matters, Twain was a pragmatist.<sup>5</sup> A child of the frontier, he no doubt possessed some of the pioneer spirit which viewed life in a very practical way. It was noted in Chapter II that young Sam had been apprenticed to a printer immediately after he left school. While his course of action followed a conventional pattern, it may give some indication of the way young Sam felt about his schoolwork; probably there seemed to be little value in "book learning" to a boy in nineteenth century Mid-West America. Thus, possibly because he doubted the practical

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 213

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., XXI, 273.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., XXVII, 212.

<sup>5</sup>France, p. 267.

value of much of his own experience in the classroom, Twain voices in his writings the conviction that the public educational system should teach its students usable knowledge.

Twain's attitude, however, does not smack of anti-intellectualism, nor does it necessarily exclude formal training of the child in any of the areas of human knowledge. In A Tramp Abroad Twain generously praises the German gymnasium, then noted for the wealth of knowledge it imparted to its students:

[When he reaches the university, the German youth]. . . has spent nine years in the gymnasium, under a system which allowed him no freedom, but vigorously compelled him to work like a slave. Consequently, he has left the gymnasium with an education which is so complete, that the most a university can do for it is to perfect some of its profounder specialties. . . . [Foreign youths] go to the university to put a mansard roof on their whole general education; but the German student already has his mansard roof, so he goes there to add a steeple in the nature of some specialty, such as a particular branch of law, or medicine, or philology--like international law, or diseases of the eye, or special study of the ancient Gothic tongues.<sup>6</sup>

Though it required hard work of the student, the gymnasium provided him with a solid foundation for his vocational intentions. During his long, arduous schooling, the child would be certain that his learning could be used to attain a practical end.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., IX, 28-29.

When Mark Twain made his lecture tour around the world in the 1890's, however, he was alarmed to find the opposite to be true of the educational system in India. There, as he notes in Following the Equator, a sort of over education was taking place. Countless Indians attended schools and colleges and spent years in preparation for scholarly or technical occupations only to be assigned to clerical positions upon graduation. Struck with the impracticality of such a situation, Twain observes that the "market for all this elaborate cultivation was minutely out of proportion to the vastness of the product."<sup>7</sup>

Twain recognized also that the same problem existed in the United States. In one of his speeches he deplores the fact that young men were often required to remain in school when to their advantage they could have been making a living at one of the trades or in agriculture. He was amazed that he made no converts, for the community was overrun with young men who thought themselves too good to continue in their fathers' lines of trade but who could find "no market for their 'book-knowledge.'"<sup>8</sup> Twain thought such schooling did damage to the scholar as well as to the nation.<sup>9</sup>

While he expressed the desire that the subject matter taught in the schools be useful in later life, Twain also

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., XXI, 274.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 275.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 274.

leveled an indictment at the methods through which the subject matter was presented. In "English as She Is Taught," he complains that much of the curriculum in the schools is above the levels of understanding of many students:

Isn't it reasonably possible that in our schools many of the questions in all studies are several miles ahead of where the pupil is?--that he is set to struggle with things that are ludicrously beyond his present reach, hopelessly beyond his present strength?<sup>10</sup>

By way of elaboration, he notes also that

. . . a large part of the pupil's "instruction" consists in cramming him with obscure and wordy "rules" which he does not understand and has no time to understand. It would be as useful to cram him with brickbats; they would at least stay.<sup>11</sup>

Twain wrote the essay "English as She Is Taught" to introduce to the public a small volume of unintentionally humorous compositions and ridiculous statements by school children. The compiler of the book, Miss Caroline Le Row, a teacher in the Brooklyn public schools, had been encouraged by Twain to publish the volume after he had read the manuscript and had been assured that its contents were genuinely composed by children.<sup>12</sup> Though many of the statements in the book are simply illustrative of typical mistakes made by students, Twain uses several of them to illustrate the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., XAVI, 241.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., XXI, 283. See also Samuel Langhorn Clemens and William Dean Howells, The Mark Twain-Howells Letters, edited by Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson (Cambridge, 1960), II, 587.

imprecise teaching methods employed in contemporary schools. He points out that facts are neither presented on a level with the intellectual capabilities of the students nor are they explained except by rules which the students memorize but do not understand. Included in his appraisal are mathematics, geography, grammar, literature and literary analysis, science, history, and, his only good subject in school, spelling.

Perhaps remembering his own recitations of arithmetical axioms, Twain reveals his sympathy with the frustration of young mathematicians struggling with rules. He harvests the following "fruit" from Miss Le Row's book, most of it being ". . . mainly in an unripe state.

A straight line is any distance between two places.

Parallel lines are lines that can never meet until they run together. . . .

To find the number of square feet in a room you multiply the room by the number of feet. The product is the result."<sup>13</sup>

He goes on to relate the story of a mathematical contest in a New York town. Twenty-two of the brightest boys in the local schools entered the contest, but though the problem to be solved should not have proved difficult for boys of their intelligence, all of them failed to answer the problem correctly.

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<sup>13</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXVI, 245-246.

Some searching questions were asked, when it turned out that these lads were glib as parrots with the "rules," but could not reason out a single rule or explain the principle underlying it. Their memories had been stocked, but not their understandings.<sup>14</sup>

Of Miss Le Row's chapter on geography, Twain remarks that the children's statements indicate that they hunted geographical game with a shotgun and that what they brought in was crippled. He cites a few such examples:

"North America is separated by Spain. . . .  
Climate lasts all the time and weather only a few days.  
The two most famous volcanoes of Europe are Sodom and Gomorrah."<sup>15</sup>

Twain uses the hunting image purposely to illustrate the vast number of unrelated facts taught to the students, most of whom attempted to bag their limit with one scattergun shot.

In Twain's selections from Miss Le Row's chapter on grammar, one can almost hear in the background young Sam's classroom of "parsing parrots." "'Gender is the distinguishing nouns with regard to sex'"<sup>16</sup> must have reminded Mark of his own school days. Twain remarks: "The following is a brave attempt at a solution, but it failed to liquefy:

When they are going to say some prose or poetry before they say the poetry or prose they must put a semicolon just after the introduction of the prose or poetry."<sup>17</sup>

Again, a child had not understood the rule he was forced to memorize.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 254.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 246-247.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

Twain realized that some students have no better luck with the interpretation of literature than they do with the interpretation of the rules of grammar. After quoting a child's inscrutable analysis of a stanza of Scott's "The Lady of the Lake," Twain facetiously remarks: "I see, now, that I never understood that poem before. . . . this is the first time the whole spacious idea ever filtered in sight."<sup>18</sup> Since some students were seldom able to write accurate precis of a single stanza in a poem, Twain questioned the zeal with which

. . . into the restricted stomach of the public-school pupil is shoveled every year the blood, bone, and viscera of a gigantic literature, and the same is there digested and disposed of in a most successful and characteristic and public-school way.<sup>19</sup>

Though he never does so directly, he thus points out the need for graduated reading books.

Realizing that dry precepts of science only confuse small children, Twain makes a plea also for a new approach to the teaching of the sciences. Miss Le Row's book offered ample evidence of the garbled understanding many children had of scientific data:

"The stomach is a small pear-shaped bone situated in the body.

The gastric juice keeps the bones from creaking. . . .

A body will go just as far in the first second as the body will go plus the force of gravity and that's equal to twice what the body will go."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 281.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 252-253.

In an essay written in the 1890's, Twain tells of Austrian inventor Jan Szczepanik's bi-monthly return to the classroom as a science teacher. Szczepanik had worked out a system with the government whereby he could remain out of the army and carry on research as long as he taught school once every two months. Twain records one such visit in glowing terms:

Szczepanik put the sapless school-books aside, and led the children a holiday dance through the enchanted lands of science and invention, explaining to them some of the curious things which he had contrived, and the laws which governed their construction and performance, and illustrating these matters with pictures and models and other helps to a clear understanding of their fascinating mysteries.<sup>21</sup>

Some of Twain's most outspoken and perceptive remarks concern the teaching of history. In his introduction to Miss Le Row's book, he comments humorously on the

. . . depth to which one date has been driven into the American child's head--1492. The date is there, and it is there to stay. . . . But the fact that belongs with it? That is quite another matter.<sup>22</sup>

He further remarks that the child would apply the date 1492 to everything ". . . from the landing of the ark to the introduction of the horsecar."<sup>23</sup> Twain realized also that the date of occurrence of a historical event had no meaning to a child who had but little conception of time in connection with the event he was trying to place in history. He therefore devised a game for his daughters to help them

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., XXIII, 266.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., XXVI, 248.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.



remember both the event and the date. He marked off along the road near his house the dates of the reigns of England's monarchs, as well as those of the French monarchs and the important dates in American history. As his children were able to see the lengths of the reigns and their relationships to other dates in world history, the events and their respective dates of occurrence were learned within a week.<sup>24</sup> In an essay entitled "How to Make History Dates Stick," Twain supplements his plan by suggesting that if the "road-pegging" scheme does not work for his young readers, they should draw pictures of the events they want to remember and label them with the proper date. Twain learned and used this memory aid when he was on the lecture circuit.<sup>25</sup> Thus, as his comments on the teaching of history and science attest, Twain recognized the need to explain with the aid of visual association a child's lessons to him so that he may clearly understand them.

Mark's one good subject in school, spelling, received a great deal of attention from him. Perhaps because he could spell correctly without trying, he was continually in a state of wonder that others could have problems with the one part of classroom curriculum at which he was proficient. He felt that the errors made by spellers were inherent in the nature of the language. Thus, when the craze for

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 144-148.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

simplified spelling began in the mid-1890's, Twain supported the movement.<sup>26</sup> Though Twain does not suggest that the phonetic alphabet be taught in the classroom, it is obvious from his earlier writings and from his continued interest in phonetic spelling that he would have favored such a move.

Near the conclusion of his essay on "English as She Is Taught," Twain remarks, "If a laugh is fair here, not the struggling child, nor the unintelligent teacher--or rather the unintelligent Boards, Committees, and Trustees--are the proper target for it."<sup>27</sup> Perhaps the only laugh that could be voiced would be aimed at the ridiculousness of the situation, not at the people whose ignorance both instituted and maintained an ineffective educational system.

If Twain was questioning the appropriateness of a laugh at the American system of education in 1887, he had completely made up his mind that there were no grounds for humor ten years later. In Following the Equator, he condemns the methods of classroom instruction with acute clarity:

Suppose we applied no more ingenuity to the instruction of deaf and dumb and blind children than we sometimes apply in our American public schools to the instruction of children who are in possession of all their faculties? The result would be that the deaf and dumb would acquire nothing. They would live and die as ignorant as bricks and stones. The methods used in the asylums are rational. The teacher exactly measures the child's capacity, to begin with; from thence onward the tasks imposed are nicely gauged to the gradual development of that capacity; the tasks keep pace with the steps of the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 253-254.

child's progress, they don't jump miles and leagues ahead of it by irrational caprice and land in vacancy--according to the average public-school plan. In the public schools, apparently, they teach the child to spell cat, then ask it to calculate the eclipse; when it can read words of two syllables, they require it to explain the circulation of the blood; when it reaches the head of the infant class they bull it with conundrums that cover the domain of universal knowledge. This sounds extravagant--and is; yet it goes no great way beyond the facts.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, though Twain was not in favor of the methods of instruction then in use in the public schools, he was in complete agreement with the methods used to instruct the handicapped. In 1867 he visited his first blind asylum, and though he made no evaluation of what he saw, the report of the visit shows him to be a careful though not critical observer.<sup>29</sup> He was so much in agreement with the methods of the instruction of the blind by the 1890's that he became partly responsible for Helen Keller's college education by endorsing a fund to pay her expenses.<sup>30</sup> In Following the Equator, Twain bestows high praise on the methods used by her teacher: "Has Miss Sullivan taught her by the methods of . . . the American public school? No, oh, no; for then she would be deafer and dumber and blinder than she was before."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., XXI, 273.

<sup>29</sup>Samuel Langhorn Clemens, Mark Twain's Travels with Mr. Brown, edited by Franklin Walker and C. Ezra Dane (New York, 1940), pp. 214-219.

<sup>30</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXV, 637-639.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., XXI, 281.

Although Twain held that formal schooling should prepare the student vocationally for later life by presenting subject matter in such a way that he could clearly understand it, in his opinion the greatest value of the educational system lay in its opportunity for moral instruction. Young Sam Clemens had been thrashed quite often for his mischievous acts, and one might think that Twain would see no use for physical correction in the classroom. However, in 1867, when the whippings were still fresh on his mind, Twain voiced subtle opposition to a movement to eliminate the whipping in the public schools. In a letter to the Alta California, a San Francisco newspaper, he makes numerous references to the things he did to deserve thrashings in school and concludes, tongue-in-cheek, "It is but another evidence of advancing civilization when public sympathy speaks up for the persecuted school-boy."<sup>32</sup> By 1875, however, when he wrote Tom Sawyer, Twain had changed his mind.

Because Twain knew that better methods than whipping could be used for the moral education of the child, he took serious interest in the possibilities of the educational theater because of its excellent opportunities for moral instruction. In a speech given when The Prince and the Pauper was presented in play form to the delight of children, Twain comments:

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<sup>32</sup>Clemens, Travels with Mr. Brown, p. 245.

In other schools the way of teaching morals is revolting. Here the children who come in thousands live through each part. . . . They spend freely the ten cents that is not saved without a struggle. . . . They make the sacrifice freely. This is the only school which they are sorry to leave.<sup>33</sup>

Twain again expresses the idea that a child must in some way experience what he is taught if he is to learn. He realized that the drama provides the opportunity for a vicarious involvement in a moral dilemma, through which learning can take place.

A rather naive expression of faith in the inherent moral value of education is found in Twain's essay "The Curious Republic of Gondor," published anonymously in 1875. In this essay Twain describes his concept of a democratic utopia:

. . . every citizen [in the Republic of Gondor], howsoever poor or ignorant, possessed one vote, so universal suffrage still reigned; but if a man possessed a good common-school education. . . , he had two votes; a high-school education gave him four; . . . a university education entitled a man to nine votes. . . .<sup>34</sup>

Votes were also awarded according to the wealth of the voter, but

. . . learning being more prevalent and more easily acquired than riches, educated men became a wholesome check upon wealthy men, since they could outvote them. Learning goes usually with uprightness, broad views, and humanity; so the

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<sup>33</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXVIII, 333-334.

<sup>34</sup>Samuel Langhorne Clemens, "The Curious Republic of Gondor," Atlantic Monthly, XXXVI, 461.

learned voters, possessing the balance of power, became the vigilant and efficient protectors of the great lower rank of society.<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps one reason Twain places such an inordinate emphasis on the ability of the educated man to act morally as a protector of the rights of the "lower rank of society" is that in this essay he is attempting to project a society in which all men are rewarded by civil law for personal achievement. To award men votes for material gain would result in a plutocratic despotism. Therefore, while he rewards men for material gain, he rewards them even more for intellectual improvement, assuming that the acquisition of knowledge leads toward a broader moral perspective than does the acquisition of wealth. Another reason for Twain's apparent faith in the moral value of the educational process may be traced to events in his life. He wrote "The Curious Republic of Gondor" not long after his acceptance into the genteel society of Hartford, Connecticut. During this period in his life he expressed a glib optimism about the future of the human race, partly because of the respect he had for his highly educated associates.<sup>36</sup> By 1883, when he wrote Huckleberry Finn, he had lost his shallow optimism. Whereas here he expresses a faith in the ability of the

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Kenneth R. Andrews, Noek Farm: Mark Twain's Hartford Circle (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 78-79.

educational process to instill moral sensibility into its products, in none of his other writings does he disclose a similar expression of faith.

Thus, in educational matters, Twain was essentially a pragmatist. Possibly because he doubted the value of his own experience in the classroom, and certainly because he doubted the validity of many of the classroom situations which he observed as an adult, he demanded that schools educate their students to some practical end. Because he felt that a primary purpose of formal training was to teach the student usable knowledge, he believed that the educational system should be responsive to the needs of society.

Twain spoke out also on the methods of teaching in the classroom. His comments on the manner of presentation are basically the same for all subject matter: the curriculum should be geared to the learning capabilities of the students, and factual material should be presented in such a way as to make its significance clear to the student. Twain considered a mass of memorized, but not understood, facts as useless.

Finally, Twain felt that the ultimate goal of the educational system should be the moral education of the student, the preparation of the child for life as a mature moral adult. Because, in his estimation, moral education is not necessarily inherent in all learning experiences,

he believed that the classroom should be utilized consciously as a situation for giving moral instruction.

Though in his non-fictional works Twain states explicitly his theories of formal education, in his fictional works he imparts his criticism of the educational system implicitly through characterization and scene. The following chapter analyzes Twain's use of the dramatic qualities of fiction to satirize various aspects of classroom education.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE FICTIONAL WORKS: TWAIN'S VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF EDUCATION

Mark Twain's most perceptive satire on formal education is found in his fictional works. Whereas in his autobiographical writings he points out flaws in the Hannibal educational system by recording his own experiences in the classroom, and though in his non-fictional works he states a fairly lucid theory of education through criticism of contemporary educational procedures, Twain makes his most profound comments on the nature and consequences of the educational process through characterization in his fiction. Mark Twain was not a philosopher; he never underwent the rigorous training that would have structured his thought patterns. Thus, the subjective nature of fictional writing seems to have provided him with the form through which he could both consciously and unconsciously disclose his thought and feeling. Employing his personal experiences and observations as factual bases, Twain was able through imaginative characterization to imply criticism he never openly stated.

Those characters which embody Twain's satire of formal education are found in four novels--The Adventures of Tom

Sawyer, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, and Pudd'nhead Wilson.

Each of the characters points up Twain's belief that true education occurs only if an individual, by involving his total personality in an experience, is made to think. In other words, true education requires the understanding of acquired information. Dobbins, the schoolmaster in Tom Sawyer, is caricatured to point out the ridiculousness of the idea that either factual or moral understanding can be imparted to a child by forcing him to adhere to memorized rules. Correspondingly, the characterizations of Dobbins' students illustrate the results of his teaching methods; the students are reduced to machines who are unable to think--because of their superficial understanding. Though Tom Sawyer initially is a hero who rebels against Dobbins' stifling authority, he is later, in Huckleberry Finn, an immature romantic who illustrates the results of an educational system which teaches only surface knowledge. In contrast to Tom, Huck Finn seems mature and realistic. His characterization suggests that a reliance on self is necessary if real learning is to take place. Hank Morgan, in A Connecticut Yankee, further embodies the results of a superficial education; his attempt to mass-produce thinking men fails miserably. Pudd'nhead Wilson, on the other hand, is generally illustrative of Twain's concept of the educated man: his self-concept is strong enough to enable him both

to assert his individuality--to rely on self as Huck does-- and to remain a vital, contributing part of the community, which Huck does not do.

The most extensive comments on classroom education in Twain's fiction are implied in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Initially his plans called for a good deal of general satire, as he intended to write a book about boys for adults. At the urging of his wife and William Dean Howells, however, Twain converted the book into a volume for children by omitting the most pointed satire. He reports his revision in a letter he sent Howells in January, 1876:

I reduced the boy-battle to a single paragraph;  
I finally concluded to cut the Sunday-school  
speech down to two sentences (leaving no suggestion  
of satire, since the book is to be for boys and girls;  
I tamed the various obscenities until I judged that  
they no longer carried offense.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of his revisions, however, he omitted only the most obvious satire. In so doing, he let the book serve a double purpose. Though he wanted it to be read by children, he hoped also that it would be read by men and women. As he states in the Preface,

. . . part of my plan has been to try to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Clemens, Twain-Howells Letters, I, 122.

<sup>2</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, VIII, xix.

Twain says in a letter written in 1887 that "Tom Sawyer is simply a hymn, put into prose form to give it a world air."<sup>3</sup> As a hymn to boyhood, the book truly sings. Tom is a healthy, intelligent, mischievous boy; though his age is undetermined, he obviously has not yet reached adolescence. He plays hooky from school, steals jam from his aunt's cupboard, fights, runs away from home, deceitfully wins a Bible in church; but he is not a bad boy. As Walter Blair points out, the character Tom is Twain's answer to the sentimental Good Boy-Bad Boy Sunday-school literature that was prevalent when he wrote the book (1874).<sup>4</sup> Tom is not bad, as Aunt Polly says, "only mischeevous."<sup>5</sup> Twain does not label boys as either "good" or "bad;" he portrays Tom Sawyer simply as boy.

It is obvious that when he wrote the book Twain was in sympathy with Tom. Tom's natural, childish rebellion against authority is used to illustrate areas of midwestern life that Twain had misgivings about. Tom's exuberant curiosity especially provides Twain with a foil for the stern dullness of Dobbins, the schoolmaster, who, as the butt of some of Twain's jokes, represents the object of his satire--the school. That Tom grows in emotional maturity because he

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., XXV, 477.

<sup>4</sup>Walter Blair, "On The Structure of Tom Sawyer," Modern Philology, XXXVII (August, 1939), 78-83.

<sup>5</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, VIII, 130.

rebels against the stifling authority Dobbins represents is used to illustrate the need for freedom if growth is to take place.

Tom attends school in a small frame schoolhouse perched singly atop Cardiff Hill. Evidently the one building and its lone teacher serve the needs of the entire community; students of all ages assemble in the same room. The schoolmaster sits in a "great chair upon a raised platform"<sup>6</sup> at the front of the classroom, a blackboard behind him and a desk before him that looms large over the rows of benches and tables where the "scholars" sit, boys on one side of a center aisle, girls on the other.

The schoolmaster, Mr. Dobbins, is one of Twain's most effectively drawn two-dimensional characters. He is patterned after J. D. Dawson, one of young Sam's teachers.<sup>7</sup> Dobbins is a fairly tall, middle-aged man, who is self-conscious of the balding head he covers with a wig. His personality is completely devoid of humor. The reader learns early in the book of Dobbins' attitude toward his occupation:

The master, Mr. Dobbins, had reached middle age with an unsatisfied ambition. The darling of his desires was to be a doctor, but poverty had decreed that he should be nothing higher than a village schoolmaster. Every day he took a mysterious book out of his desk and absorbed himself in it at times when no classes were reciting. He kept that book under lock and key.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., XXXVII, 179.

There was not an urchin in school but was perishing to have a glimpse of it, but the chance never came. Every boy and girl had a theory about the nature of that book; but no two theories were alike. . . .<sup>8</sup>

The book was an anatomy text, and since it contained pictures of the human body, Dobbins kept it hidden. It is interesting to note that the hiding of the book is the only thing Dobbins does in class to arouse the curiosity of the students. Albert Stone suggests that Dobbins is driven by his disrespectful, noisy charges to dreams of another profession when he remarks that, in the light of the discipline problem Dobbins had to deal with, ". . . it is no wonder . . . that in a play version of Tom Sawyer it was a whiskey bottle and not an anatomy book hidden in his desk."<sup>9</sup> Regardless of whether Dobbins was frustrated because of external pressure or because of unrealized ambition, he is characterized as a teacher who is totally disinterested in his occupation. In the first classroom scene in the book, Twain writes that Dobbins, ". . . throned on high in his great splint-bottom arm-chair, was dozing, lulled by the drowsy hum of study."<sup>9</sup> No definite reason can be given for Dobbins's disinterest, because Twain's characterization of him is not complete. He thus emerges as simply a caricature of the strict, stern village schoolmaster.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., VIII, 178.

<sup>9</sup> Albert E. Stone, Jr., The Innocent Eye: Childhood in Mark Twain's Imagination (New Haven, 1961), p. 81.

Twain illustrates both through his caricature of Dobbins and through his characterizations of Dobbins's students the ineffectiveness of the St. Petersburg school. Dobbins is inadequate as a disciplinarian, as an instructor of subject matter, and as a teacher of morals. Nearly every time he appears, he is pictured with a switch or a rod in his hand. He attempts through physical punishment to instill a sense of discipline into the students; the result of his efforts is that he only imposes an authority upon them.

Several incidents from the book serve to illustrate the confusion resulting from Dobbins's relentless whippings. When Tom enters the classroom late one morning, he spies an empty chair next to Becky Thatcher, the new girl in town. Knowing Dobbins's responses to standard situations, Tom confesses loudly when asked why he is late: "'I STOPPED TO TALK WITH HUCKLEBERRY FINN!'"<sup>10</sup> Huck is the uneducated son of the town drunkard. Dobbins, incensed, follows his usual pattern; he administers a severe lashing, then sentences Tom to the empty seat in the girls' section for the rest of the morning. The predictability of Dobbins's actions allows Tom to use the disciplinary measures to his own benefit. He is willing to be whipped if after being whipped he will be forced to sit by Becky. His knowledge that he could have

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<sup>10</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, VIII, 61.

gotten a lighter punishment by making up an excuse for his tardiness points up the ineffectiveness of Dobbins's correctional methods.

In another incident Tom is falsely accused of spilling ink on his spelling book and is whipped for it--though he firmly denies responsibility for the damage. Twain notes that Tom is not broken hearted, though, for he thinks he may have unknowingly spilled the ink: ". . . he had denied it for form's sake and because it was custom, and had stuck to the denial from principle."<sup>11</sup> Twain states the obvious--Tom might easily have deserved punishment. But he also points out that when whippings occur so often and so indiscriminately, the child learns to ignore their purpose.

Twain's most pointed criticism of the disciplinary measures used in the classroom, however, is directed at Dobbins' vindictiveness. One day at noon Becky happens to find the key in the lock that protects the precious anatomy book. She opens the book to the frontispiece, a naked human figure, just as Tom Sawyer's shadow falls across the page. In her scramble to restore the volume to its sanctuary, Becky tears the frontispiece halfway down the middle.<sup>12</sup> When Dobbins discovers the damage, his temper blazes. Twain describes his severity:

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 171-172.



The next moment the master faced the school. Every eye sank under his gaze. There was that in it which smote even the innocent eye with fear. There was silence while one might count ten, the master was gathering his wrath.

"Who tore this book?"

There was not a sound. One could have heard a pin drop. The stillness continued; the master searched face after face for signs of guilt.<sup>13</sup>

Dobbins accuses each boy, then turns to the girls. When he comes to Becky Thatcher, she pales and cannot meet his gaze, admitting her guilt by her fright. Tom suddenly springs to his feet, shouts "I done it!" and then is struck with his folly.<sup>14</sup> But he soon realizes the nobility of what he has done, and he goes happily forward to take ". . . without an outcry the most merciless flaying that even Mr. Dobbins had ever administered. . . ." <sup>15</sup> Of course, the reader's primary interest in the scene is Tom Sawyer's noble defense of Becky. But Twain uses the scene to criticize the vindictive punishment of a child. Becky's appearance should have been enough to convince Dobbins she was the object of his search. But Dobbins, possibly because he can vent more of his wrath on a boy than on a girl, accepts Tom's admission and beats him soundly.

In the above incidents Twain implies that for disciplinary measures to be effective, the teacher must have an understanding of the workings of the human mind.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 174-175.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 175.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

He must acknowledge that children are basically inquisitive and rebellious. He must not attempt to make each of them adhere to a set of strict rules, for to do so neither acknowledges their individuality nor instills a sense of control within them. His methods of punishment must be applied judiciously, for they can lead to his loss of control. In addition to the probability that the child will not be disciplined by a whipping, there is also the danger that the teacher's personal distress will cause him to apply the rod to get revenge on the child rather than to correct him.

Dobbin's lack of insight as a disciplinarian is not his only inadequacy; he lacks insight also in his method of teaching. He does not attempt to interest the students in material they are supposed to learn; instead, he forces it upon them. Twain uses Dobbins's methods to criticize a classroom that presents facts for its students to learn without first securing the students' attention. Even Tom Sawyer is more conscious of the workings of a child's mind than is Dobbins. Clemens J. France points out that Tom arouses the interest of his friends in whitewashing by pretending that he enjoys painting the fence.<sup>16</sup> As a result, each boy who comes by begs to do his work for him. It was noted earlier, however, that the only time Dobbins arouses

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<sup>16</sup>France, p. 267.

curiosity is when he hides his mysterious book. That he thrashed a student for looking at it indicates that he mistook natural inquisitiveness for meddling.

When his students do not pay attention, Dobbins does not wonder why they are bored; he only whips them for not being attentive. In one incident Tom and Joe Harper "stir" a tick around on Joe's slate for some time before Dobbins at last becomes aware of their game, tiptoes around the room until he stands behind them, and rains blows on their shoulders for a full two minutes.<sup>17</sup> It never occurs to him that he has not motivated them to pay attention.

There are other reasons besides boredom, however, that cause the classroom instruction to be ineffective. In one scene Tom Sawyer tries to study but cannot because he is too excited about his romantic conversation with Becky Thatcher.

In turn he took his place in the reading class and made a botch of it; then in the geography class and turned lakes into mountains, mountains into rivers, and rivers into continents, until chaos was come again: then in spelling class, and got "turned down" by a succession of baby words, till he brought up at the foot and yielded up the pewter medal which he had worn with ostentation for months.<sup>18</sup>

With distractions such as this one to cope with, Dobbins's methods hopelessly fail.

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<sup>17</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, VIII, 65-67.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

Tom Sawyer, in spite of Dobbins, shows an interest in some of the areas of study he encounters in the classroom. He is a good speller, perhaps partially because he likes the attention he receives when he wins the medal. Walter Blair notes that Tom also loves and imitates books; perceptively Blair calls such an affinity the ". . . most important trait of Tom in this novel. . . ." <sup>19</sup> But Tom's love of books is not so significant as is his imitation of them, as several episodes point out. For example, in one scene Tom and Joe Harper act out the story of Robin Hood. With Tom as Robin Hood, the two engage in hearty combat. Soon Tom shouts:

"Fall! fall! Why don't you fall?"  
 "I sha'n't! Why don't you fall yourself?  
 You're getting the worst of it."  
 "Why that ain't anything. I can't fall; that  
 ain't the way it is in the book. The book says,  
 'Then with one back-handed stroke he slew poor Guy  
 of Guisborne.' You're to turn around and let me  
 hit you in the back."

There was no getting around the authorities, so  
 Joe turned, received the whack and fell. <sup>20</sup>

In his reading Tom had found something that interested him. Perhaps the historical romances attract his attention because they can be made real. That the boys think the dramatization of Robin Hood's adventures is more exciting than dull memory work in class is pointed up by the fact that they are playing hooky from school when they enact their drama.

<sup>19</sup>Blair, Mark Twain and Huck Finn, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, VIII, 78.

The disinterest of the students thus directs criticism toward imperceptive teaching methods. Twain implies through the students' actions that if learning is to take place there must be motivation. In the classroom, subject matter must be presented in such a way that the child will not seek out diversions, but rather that he will become interested in the subject matter in spite of childish fantasies that demand his attention. More important, the learning situation must be made real enough to involve the child's imagination.

Though the younger boys rebel against the restrictive nature of the classroom, the older girls do not. They do what is required of them and are thus the pride of the "Examination' day" exercises held at the end of the school year. The content of the original compositions which they read, however, directs a pointed criticism at the kind of education they have received. Subject matter for their papers includes such topics as ". . . 'Dream Land'; 'The Advantages of Culture' . . . ; 'Melancholy'; 'Filial Love'; [and] 'Heart Longings'. . . ."21 Twain's comments on the content of the compositions is especially important:

A prevalent feature of these compositions was a nursed and petted melancholy; another was a wasteful tendency to lug in by the ears particularly prized words and phrases until they were worn entirely out; and a peculiarity that conspicuously marked and marred them was the inveterate and

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 180.

intolerable sermon that wagged its crippled tail at the end of each and every one of them. No matter what the subject might be, a brain-racking effort was made to squirm it into some aspect or other that the moral and religious mind could contemplate with edification. The glaring insincerity of these sermons was not sufficient to compass the banishment of the fashion from the schools. . . .<sup>22</sup>

Though Twain evidently thinks the "features" of the compositions are liabilities, the St. Petersburg townspeople do not. In reference to one of the manuscripts, Twain remarks:

There was a buzz of gratification from time to time during the reading, accompanied by whispered ejaculations of "How sweet!" "How eloquent!" "So true!" etc., and after the thing had closed with a particularly afflicting sermon the applause was enthusiastic.<sup>23</sup>

As Twain points out, the young ladies are encouraged both to use an affected style in writing about trite subjects and to end each endeavor with an obviously insincere moral. Both the compositions and the reception of them by the people lack depth. Much as the whippings did little to correct Tom and his young friends, so does the writing of compositions fail to instruct the girls either in a creative use of good mechanics of writing or in a morality that is genuine in its foundations. The girls develop only a talent for imitation.

Twain's description of the St. Petersburg school ends with a delightful, though malicious, joke which the boys pull on the schoolmaster at the end of the examination day exercises.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 181.

While the scene is most humorous, it ridicules the educational system better than any other incident in the book. Some of the boys participate in the exercises by recitation, but none of them have any interest in the program. They concentrate entirely on Dobbins's actions, waiting patiently for him to become completely absorbed in his role as moderator. When the master's attention is diverted to the construction of a map on the blackboard, a muzzled cat--clawing the air--is lowered through a trap door in the ceiling until she comes within reach of Dobbins's wig. She grabs it in her claws and desperately clings to it as she is hauled back into the attic. Dobbins stands helplessly before the assemblage of students and parents, his wig gone, and his bald pate glistening with the gold paint one of his students had applied to it while he slept earlier in the day.<sup>24</sup>

The joke is an ingenious bit of devilment, and Twain's tone indicates that he approves of it. The author gives the schoolmaster what he thinks he deserves. The revenge sought by the boys may be viewed as only a boyish prank, but it may also be viewed as an attempt on the part of the students to strike out against an element that stifles developmental progress. If so, the nature of Dobbins's disciplinary measures and instructional methods leads ironically to his

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., pp. 183-184.

public embarrassment. Had his attempts been effective, he might indirectly have prevented his being made the butt of a malicious joke.

Twain's agreement with the spirit Tom and his classmates show was noted earlier. Tom's exuberance is used throughout the book as a foil for the dullness of intellect seen in characters like Dobbins. Because he refuses to let his curiosity be stifled, Tom emerges at the end of the book a hero who is praised by those of the community who disliked his foolish pranks. In a sense, however, he compromises, for he come to terms with a society whose nature, like that of the school, attempts to stifle individuality. For instance, though he forms a robber gang and runs naked in the woods while playing Robin Hood,<sup>25</sup> he tells Huck Finn in the last chapter of the book, ". . . we can't let you into the gang if you ain't respectable, you know," and he encourages Huck to go to school.<sup>26</sup> It thus can be seen that Tom comes to patronize the very school that he rebelled against earlier in the story. This knowledge casts a new light on the characterization of Tom.

Whereas Tom appears to use his imaginative abilities freely in comparison with Dobbins, a further examination of some of his activities reveals that he is imaginative only within conventional bounds. In fact, Tom's imagination

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 290.



seldom leads him to be creative; he is largely imitative. For instance, though his dramatization of Robin Hood's exploits points out the inability of dull classroom study to interest him, it also points out his inability to respond creatively to his reading. When Joe says, "'Why don't you fall. . . ? You're getting the worst of it,'" Tom replies "I can't fall; that ain't the way it is in the book."<sup>27</sup> Instead of using the story of Robin Hood as the basis for his imagination, Tom uses it as the outline for his actions. That he is getting the worst of the fight between himself and Joe makes little difference; Tom adheres literally to what he has read. Just as the young ladies parroted conventional moral concepts, so does Tom mimic the exploits of Robin Hood. The nature of his formal education may then in some respects be held responsible, since it sanctions--even encourages--a shallow concept of morality and a superficial understanding of fact.

Tom's shallowness is obscured, however, as long as he remains in St. Petersburg. Though he does only what custom requires, Tom gives the appearance of thoughtful maturity when, at the risk of his own life, he valiantly saves Muff Potter, from being unjustly hanged.<sup>28</sup> But when he goes down river in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Twain's sequel to Tom Sawyer, his limitations become evident. Compared to

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-197.

Huck Finn's genuine involvement in a moral dilemma, Tom's literal approach to historical romance and his blind acceptance of social convention point out the inadequacy of an educational system which teaches only superficial knowledge.

Unlike Tom, Huck Finn is able to think outside of an existing moral framework. Having responded to Tom's suggestion at the end of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer that he become respectable and go to school, Huck has learned how to read and write. But at the beginning of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Huck quits the school and leaves St. Petersburg, thus rejecting the stifling elements Tom has surrendered to.

Huck's trip down the river to escape "civilization" is a real learning experience for him. Although his vast store of practical knowledge of the physical world is not substantially increased, he matures in that he wrestles with a moral dilemma. He comes to love Nigger Jim, a slave, and to view him as a human who because of his humanity deserves freedom. But he knows that to help a runaway slave makes him a criminal; more important, in terms of his understanding of Christian theology, it makes him deserving of hell. Huck describes his final moment of crisis:

I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide,  
 forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it,  
 I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath,  
 and then says to myself:

"All right, then, I'll go to hell". . . .<sup>29</sup>

In his struggles Huck thus questions convention, something that Tom Sawyer never does, and is even willing to risk social ostracism and eternal damnation so long as he can remain true to the decision he has reached.

When Tom re-enters the action after Jim is captured and held for a bounty, he knows that Jim has already been freed in the will left by his owner, Miss Watson. Thus, in his efforts to help Huck restore Jim's freedom, Tom never faces Huck's problem of defying convention--he never considers his actions. Instead, he sets about planning a rescue of Jim from a slavery that no longer binds him. Remembering rescues he has read about, Tom risks his life as well as those of Jim and Huck in order to effect Jim's rescue just as an adventurer would have rescued his compatriot from a dungeon. So that he can get the same kind of attention for winning Jim's freedom that he got for winning spelling bees, Tom withholds his knowledge of Jim's freedom until the farcical rescue is over. More important, throughout the entire sequence he is completely unaware of the basis of Huck's moral dilemma because he has neither compassion nor understanding. After the rescue fails because he receives

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., XIII, 297.

a bullet wound in the leg, Tom commands from his bed that Jim be freed from the shack where he is reimprisoned. His concern, however, stems not from an impassioned awareness of Jim's worth as an individual but from a knowledge that Jim is no longer legally a slave.

In comparing the actions of Tom and Huck, Gladys Bellamy observes that "Tom makes a great show of adhering to the letter of the law, while Huck cuts through to the essentials of the spirit."<sup>30</sup> Whereas Tom imitates, Huck evaluates. While Tom is guided by a blind acceptance of the authority of convention, Huck is governed by an intelligent questioning which--though it shows a deep respect for social and moral conformity--is not awed by it. As Edgar Branch notes, Huck has a ". . . basic self-respect. . . ."<sup>31</sup>

It is this knowledge of self, this acceptance of self, that sets Huck apart from Tom Sawyer, for Tom does not have a similarly firm self-concept. In spite of instruction in academic and moral matters--evidently because of it--Tom Sawyer is unable to make a genuine, personal response to the world he lives in. And it is, then, this weakness of Tom's personality that directs the most unfavorable criticism toward the St. Petersburg school. Twain points out that

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<sup>30</sup>Gladys Carmen Bellamy, Mark Twain as a Literary Artist (Norman, 1950), p. 337.

<sup>31</sup>Edgar M. Branch, The Literary Apprenticeship of Mark Twain (Urbana, 1950), p. 210.

training which robs a person of his individuality does not educate him but rather cripples him so that he cannot function meaningfully in situations which require creative thought.

In Hank Morgan, the Yankee in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Twain portrays another character who, though he appears to be able to think because of his vast store of practical information, has only superficial knowledge. Morgan, the superintendent of an arms factory in nineteenth-century New England, mysteriously wakes up in sixth-century England after having been knocked out in a fight. After being named second in command to the king with the title of The Boss, he pursues noble plans not only for bringing to King Arthur's Camelot the comforts of the nineteenth century but also for educating the people out of their ignorant state. The futility of Morgan's attempts to mass-produce thinking men just as he would mass-produce machinery illustrates Twain's belief that education occurs only if the acquisition of external knowledge results in understanding.

In critical commentaries on the book, there is much disagreement about the implications of the Boss's actions. Critics do not agree upon the object of Twain's satire. Twain once said of The Boss: ". . . he is a perfect ignoramus; he is boss of a machine shop; he can build a locomotive or a Colt's revolver, he can put up and run a telegraph line,

but he is an ignoramus, nevertheless."<sup>32</sup> However, Roberta Wiggins holds the belief that "Twain himself shows no awareness of the Yankee's full ignorance."<sup>33</sup> She claims that Twain has complete faith in The Boss and that he is in agreement with all The Boss does. Noting that The Boss is representative of the nineteenth century, she says Twain ". . . believed he merely made a contrast between two periods in history to the advantage of the later one."<sup>34</sup> Louis J. Budd, in his book Mark Twain: Social Philosopher, elaborates in a complete chapter the belief that Twain intended A Connecticut Yankee to be a satire on British aristocracy, the Catholic Church, and American conservatism,<sup>35</sup> implying that Twain did not at all intend to satirize The Boss. Other critics, however, take Twain's statement about Morgan at face value. Gladys Bellamy says, ". . . Mark Twain fully understood the Yankee's deficiencies."<sup>36</sup> And more specifically, Albert Stone remarks:

Though Twain's chief target is sixth century superstition, The Boss, too, is held up to laugh at; his blatantly nineteenth-century prejudices--naive scientific optimism, skepticism, materialism--are

<sup>32</sup>Paine, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXXII, 887-888.

<sup>33</sup>Roberta Wiggins, Mark Twain: Jackleg Novelist (Seattle, 1964), p. 79.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>35</sup>Louis J. Budd, Mark Twain: Social Philosopher (Bloomington, 1962), pp. 111-144 passim.

<sup>36</sup>Bellamy, p. 314.

as exaggerated as the presuppositions of the medieval mind in the Knights and Merlin.<sup>37</sup>

The content of the book serves to support the validity of the point of view offered by Bellamy and Stone. While Twain believed the nineteenth century had advantages over the sixth, he realized that many of its doctrines were adhered to with the same blind faith with which the people of Camelot adhered to their superstition. For example, at one point The Boss muses about the superstitious nature of Sandy, the girl who eventually becomes his wife:

Everybody around her believed in enchantments; nobody had any doubts; to doubt that a castle could be turned into a sty and its occupants into hogs, would have been the same as my doubting among Connecticut people the actuality of the telephone and its wonders--and in both cases would be absolute proof of a diseased animal, an unsettled mind.<sup>38</sup>

On the basis of his own beliefs, Morgan thinks that Sandy's belief in superstition is unfounded, and he attempts to educate her over to his point of view. He unknowingly points out, however, that his faith in the wonders of nineteenth-century science is based on the same blind acceptance of popular opinion Sandy uses as a basis for belief in enchantments. The passage thus calls into question not only the validity of Sandy's faith in superstition but also the validity of Morgan's faith in the wonders modern technology can produce. Consequently, though Twain is in

<sup>37</sup>Stone, p. 167.

<sup>38</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XIV, 178.

agreement with Morgan's attempt to educate Sandy, he ridicules Morgan's lack of insight into the basis of his beliefs.

Not only does Twain ridicule Morgan's lack of insight, but also he deplores Morgan's lack of a basic compassion for man. For instance, in one sequence in the book, the king accompanies The Boss on a trek around the country to see what reforms need to be made. When two knights rush at them, Morgan ends their danger by obliterating the knights with a dynamite bomb. He describes the scene as follows:

When they were within fifteen yards, I sent that bomb with a sure aim, and it struck the ground under the horses' noses.

Yes, it was a neat thing, very neat and very pretty to see. It resembled a steamboat explosion on the Mississippi; and during the next fifteen minutes we stood under a steady drizzle of microscopic fragments of knights and hardware and horseflesh.<sup>39</sup>

Morgan's insensitivity is heightened by the reader's knowledge that Twain's younger brother was killed in a Mississippi River steamboat explosion.

Morgan's lack of compassion and self-understanding leads to his downfall as an educator, for he lacks the perception that would enable him to know the nature of the men he tries to educate. He treats men as if they are machines which can be educated by being processed through

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 272.



training factories. His superficial knowledge of the powers of environmental forces leads him to think that the training he subjects people to can blot out their previous knowledge.

The Boss's attempts to educate the people of Camelot are ridiculous from the beginning because of the manner in which he plans to effect that education. Part of his first efforts includes the establishment of schools; he writes: "I had started a teacher-factory . . . the first thing; as a result I [soon] had an admirable system of graded schools in full blast. . . ."40 One cannot help but notice Morgan's reference to the teacher-training schools as "teacher-factories" and his description of a grade school as an iron foundry. Throughout the book Morgan never changes his initial idea that people can be lathed and polished just as gun barrels can be. He treats the uneducated of Camelot like raw materials which need only a skilled craftsman to shape them into perfect men. When he happens upon an intelligent man, he sends the man to Clarence, his assistant, to be taught to read and to be instructed in a skill. One man whom he sends to Clarence bears a note, written by Morgan with the man's own blood, which states: "Put him in the Man-factory."41 The name of the training place does not seem so incredible here, though, as it does

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

in a later passage: "I'll book you . . . for my colony; you'll like it there; it's a Factory where I'm going to turn groping and grubbing automata into men."<sup>42</sup> The naivete of The Boss's statement is striking; he thinks that individuals can actually be mass-produced. The shallowness of The Boss's vision is matched by the products that it turns out.

Though The Boss believes that the men he has sent to his Factory are educated, when The Church and Merlin, leader of the superstitious element in the population, launch an attack on The Boss, all the adults go back to their old ways. The Boss is surprised, but he should not be, for he had earlier said,

Inherited ideas are a curious thing, and interesting to observe and examine. I had mine, the king and his people had theirs. In both cases they flowed in ruts worn deep by habit, and the man who should have proposed to divert them by reason and argument would have a long contract on his hands.<sup>43</sup>

Obviously he does not understand the depths of his own statement. Instead of trying to educate the superstition out of the people, he has tried to replace their blind faith in enchantments with a blind faith in the wonders of science. Thus when troubles come, the people again change the object of their faith. Only those who have been taught from childhood the ideas The Boss holds remain faithful

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

to him; they do so not because they have been taught to reason and now agree with him but because they know nothing else. Like Tom Sawyer, and like Hank Morgan, they cannot think; they can only parrot what they have been taught. In character and personality they are no different from their superstitious neighbors.

Through Twain's portrayal of Hank Morgan, a criticism of educational theory and methodology can be inferred. Though the goal of educating an entire nation is an honorable endeavor, unless the project is based on an understanding of the requisites of real education the results will be catastrophic. Again in A Connecticut Yankee the point is made that a superimposition of factual information upon a person's mind may result in learning, but it will not result in education. Only when understanding is imparted along with information and when a change takes place within does education take place. Morgan cannot produce thinking men because he is incapable of creative thought. Similarly, an established society tends to perpetuate itself, kind producing kind; Camelot is no different from St. Petersburg in this respect. And Morgan, like Tom Sawyer, because of his lack of compassion for man, never fathoms the moral foundations of the kind of civilization he attempts to establish. Just as real education is the result of an inner change, ". . . civilization

must come from within the people themselves, it cannot be imposed upon them from without."<sup>44</sup>

Hank Morgan has a shallow understanding of the nature of man; Pudd'nhead Wilson has a deep understanding. Whereas Morgan may be compared to Tom Sawyer, Wilson may be compared to Huck Finn, because he has a strong self-concept. Wilson, however, as a mature man is able to do something that the immature Huck cannot do; whereas Huck leaves civilization for the "territory" because he cannot understand why men act as they do, Wilson accepts man's general lack of ability to think creatively and remains a part of the society while retaining his own individuality. Significantly, however, Wilson is also somewhat like Tom Sawyer, as he has had years of formal instruction--and like Hank Morgan, as he has a vast store of technological information. Thus, even though the novel in which he appears as title character makes no direct reference to formal education, Pudd'nhead Wilson is of significance to this study, for he apparently embodies the qualities belonging to Twain's concept of the educated man.

When Wilson arrives at Dawson's Landing, a Mississippi River town like St. Petersburg, he is immediately dubbed a "Pudd'nhead" by the townspeople because his ideas do not exactly coincide with theirs. He makes observations

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<sup>44</sup>Bellamy, p. 314.

which, because they show insight, are beyond the understanding of the unthinking citizens. As a lawyer he is interested in modern criminological methods, and though his actions amuse the village, he keeps records of the fingerprints of all the members of the community. Through the use of his fingerprint records, he eventually proves that a prominent young gentleman and his fair-skinned Negro slave had been exchanged in their cradles and that the man whom the townspeople think is white is actually Negro. Wilson is thus made a hero and the townspeople no longer call him "Pudd'nhead." But because they cannot comprehend that their mistake indicates racial differences to be only nominal, they instate the former slave as a gentleman and sell the former gentleman down the river. Thus, though Wilson's actions win him the respect of the community, and though they should have served to illustrate the illogical basis of slavery and racial discrimination, they have no effect on the public mind.

The townspeople do not benefit from Wilson's actions because they do not know how to think. Wilson is obviously aware that this shortcoming is not necessarily their fault. In one of the aphorisms which he writes and compiles in a private "calendar," Wilson says,

Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.<sup>45</sup>

Absurd as it may seem, the statement has a sound basis; both pairs of plants illustrate modifications within biological families. Wilson uses the differences in the plants to illustrate the differences in people which result from the environmental forces to which they are exposed. He implies that with the proper training all men can be made to think. It is on the basis of this concept that Wilson remains a part of the community and tries to work to its betterment.

Wilson's strength of character is obvious throughout the book. His rejection by the Dawson's Landing society does not make him doubt himself; in fact it sharpens his self-reliance. He continually tries to win the approval of the community, but he does so in a manner identical with that suggested by the Old Man in Twain's essay "What is Man?": "Do right for your own sake, and be happy in knowing that your neighbor will certainly share in the benefits resulting."<sup>46</sup> Like Huck, Wilson relies on his own perception for the formulation of his opinions, but unlike Huck, he is not disillusioned because those around him do not think. Like Huck he does not envision himself as a part of society,

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<sup>45</sup>Clemens, The Writings of Mark Twain, XXVI, 59.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., XVI, 37.

but more perceptively than Huck, he envisions society as an extension of himself. His concept of self is broad enough to include the entire community.

It should be noted here that late in life Twain pessimistically came to believe that man's basic temperament defies education.<sup>47</sup> Seen in this light, the inability of the Dawson's Landing townspeople to think may have resulted not from their lack of proper training but from an inherent incapability. Twain held this view, however, in conjunction with the idea stated above--that man can, with proper training, be educated, and he never resolved these conflicting points of view.<sup>48</sup> It is therefore not valid, in spite of his belief that man may be by nature uneducable, to discount his belief that man can be educated.

Throughout much of his fiction, Twain criticizes education which is superficial in nature. He implies that real education takes place only if the student understands the information he learns. On the basis of this concept of the nature of education, Twain criticizes educational methods which are lacking in insight. The ineffectiveness of Dobbins as a disciplinarian points out that if those who apply corrective methods do not acknowledge that a child is by nature rebellious, they will stifle his curiosity. If they attempt to make a child blindly adhere to a set of

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<sup>47</sup>Henderson, pp. 20-21

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

rules, they will not instill a sense of control within him. The whipping thus fails as a disciplinary measure because it does not help a child understand why he is being corrected. It further fails because it tempts the teacher not to discipline the child but to use the child as a scapegoat for personal frustrations.

Dobbins's ineffectiveness as an instructor points out that a teacher must consider the nature of a child's mind in formulating his teaching methods. Though a child is naturally curious, the ordered structure of a classroom situation may tend to stifle his curiosity and thus cause him to seek entertaining diversions. The teacher must therefore attempt to make the subject matter interesting. More important, however, the teacher must encourage creative thought. Although memorization can sometimes be an effective teaching device, it is of no use unless the child understands what he is memorizing. As the essays written by the schoolgirls suggest, the child who is taught to do nothing but memorize gains only a superficial knowledge of fact.

The effect of such a shallow education is illustrated in the character of Tom Sawyer. He is unable to use his store of information meaningfully because he does not understand what he has learned. Though he appears to use reason as a basis for his actions, he actually only mimics actions he has read about. In contrast, the character of Huck Finn



illustrates the real education that takes place when one understands what he learns. Huck is forced to rely on himself in order to survive his journey down the river. He is thus capable of questioning the institution of slavery, something that Tom cannot do because he does not know how to question a social convention. Thus, a superficial education is dangerous because it develops in a person the ability to imitate but not the ability to evaluate. It stifles the development of self-trust. Twain's sympathy with Huck indicates his belief that real education endows a person with a compassion for man because it develops a basic self-respect.

The character of Hank Morgan points out even more strongly the effects of superficial learning. Though he knows a wealth of factual information, Morgan is a man whose thoughts and emotions are mechanical. His educational methods thus produce men whose thoughts and emotions are identical with his own. The catastrophic results of his educational attempts indicate that only when a change occurs within an individual so that he has both a mental and emotional understanding of his knowledge does education take place.

The character of Pudd'nhead Wilson apparently embodies Twain's concept of an educated man. He has Tom Sawyer's curiosity, Hank Morgan's practicality, along with Huck Finn's self-reliance and compassion. He understands that most men

do not think but rather mimic ideas they have been taught. He therefore is not disillusioned as Huck is but continues to work in his own way for the good of the society. Through Wilson's actions Twain implies that the objective of a valid educational system should be to endow each individual with a basic self-respect which enables him to function creatively in society.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

In many of his writings Mark Twain satirizes various aspects of formal education by depicting situations in which instruction takes place. Through his satire, he criticizes the purposes, the methodology, and the goals of contemporary formal educational systems. From his criticism can be inferred his views on the nature of valid formal education.

As in many other areas of his satire, Twain's criticism of formal education is based on incidents which had happened either to him or to his acquaintances. Because he was often displeased with what he experienced and observed, in his writings Twain presents imaginatively exaggerated but realistic situations in a manner implicitly satirical. His belief in the power of laughter as a weapon against injustice led him to express his criticism humorously.

Because he was an untrained thinker, Twain did not set down his views on the nature of valid formal instruction in a logically organized treatise. In his autobiographical works he describes humorously his own formal training in Hannibal, Missouri. He directly criticizes current educational practices throughout his travelogues, speeches, and essays. In his fiction he both consciously and unconsciously

implies criticism of some elements of formal instruction through his vivid characterizations. Although Twain never explicitly states a philosophy of formal instruction, his views may be inferred from the critical comments he makes about classroom education throughout his writings.

A product of the frontier, Twain took a rather utilitarian view of the role of the school. His observations as an adult augmented the conclusions he had reached probably as a result of his own seemingly useless schooling. Believing that the school should fulfill the needs of the society in which it functions, Twain thought that the school should teach a student usable knowledge. He believed that if the school does not prepare the student vocationally, it harms both the student and the society. It is important to note, however, that his utilitarian thought did not lead Twain to suggest the exclusion of any area of human knowledge from the curriculum.

Twain criticized methods of teaching which fail to take into consideration how a child's mind functions. The humorous recollections of his own classroom days, the criticism of teaching methods in his essays--especially in "English as She is Taught," and the characterization of Tom Sawyer all attest to Twain's belief that a child cannot comprehend much information that is simply common adult knowledge. The writings also point out that Twain believed curriculum should be tempered to meet the intellectual

capabilities of the student. Personal knowledge of the boredom of rote learning perhaps led him to advocate the teaching of laboratory sciences and the use of visual aids in elementary schools. Memories of the dull, dry lessons in the Hannibal schools perhaps persuaded him to suggest through characterization in Tom Sawyer that teachers should attempt to interest their students in the subject matter. He believed that unless a child is interested in his studies, he will find diversions from them as the children in Dobbins's classroom do.

Twain also criticized correctional methods which do not show an understanding of a child's innate rebelliousness. Though as a young adult he tacitly approved of whipping as a deterrent to classroom horseplay, Twain later came to believe that it had no corrective value. He believed that attempts by force to make a child adhere blindly to rules of conduct not only stifle the child's curiosity, but also fail to instill a sense of control within him. He points out through Dobbins the danger that the teacher may be tempted to use his rod vindictively. More important, through the ineffectiveness of Dobbins's disciplinary actions he implies that a child must be made to understand why he should behave in the classroom.

Just as he believed that the child must understand the purpose of disciplinary measures if they are to be effective,

Twain also believed that the child must understand the factual information he learns if it is to be of any benefit to him. This point is illustrated by the imitative quality of the schoolgirl compositions in Tom Sawyer and by the blind loyalty of the Boss's young followers. These children can do nothing but mimic what they have been taught; they do not really understand what they have learned.

Through these and other fictional characterizations, Twain implies that understanding can be developed in a person only if he is encouraged to think creatively. The lack of insight shown in Tom Sawyer's ridiculous attempts to free Jim and in Hank Morgan's short-sighted attempts to educate the people of Camelot results from superficial education. Tom and Morgan both have vast stores of practical knowledge; they are unable to use that knowledge effectively, however, because they cannot think creatively.

From the characterizations of Huck Finn and Pudd'nhead Wilson it can be inferred that Twain believed the goal of an educational system should be to instill within its students a basic self-respect and compassion which will allow them to act individually within society. Huck is able to think creatively because he has not been subjected as Tom Sawyer has to an educational system that encourages imitation. Huck's education is incomplete, however, for his self-reliance leads him to reject society. Wilson, on the other hand, seems to embody Twain's concept of an educated man.

His mature self-reliance allows him to remain a part of the community and at the same time to retain his individuality.

Man's characteristic inability to think independently seems to be the basis of Mark Twain's criticism of the educational system of his day. Twain believed that not only should the school teach its students usable knowledge but that it should also challenge its students to question and thus, hopefully, to understand what they learn. He realized that a person can make a meaningful contribution to the society in which he lives only when he dares to trust his own perception and perhaps to question even the basis of that society. He felt that only as it encourages his individuality and enables him to function as a creative member of society is an educational system valid.

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