ORALITY, LITERACY, AND HEROISM
IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

THESIS

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By

William David Barrow, III, B.A.
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This work re-assesses the heroic character of Huckleberry Finn in light of the inherent problems of discourse. Walter Ong's insights into the differences between oral and literate consciousnesses, and Stanley Fish's concept of "interpretive communities" are applied to Huck's interactions with the other characters, revealing the underlying dynamic of his character, the need for a viable discourse community. Further established, by enlisting the ideas of Ernest Becker, is that this need for community finds its source in the most fundamental human problem, the consciousness of death. The study concludes that the problematic ending of Twain's novel is consistent with the theme of community and is neither the artistic failure, nor the cynical pronouncement on the human race that so many critics have seen it to be.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This work on The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn initially grew out of my interest in the problematic ending of the book and my conviction that the ending was neither the obvious artistic failure, nor the bleak verdict on the fate of the human race that so many critics have found it to be (See for instance, Smith 129, 137; Cox 183; Carrington 123-24, Murphy 385-386). Unmistakably, the ending undermines, but deciding exactly what has been undermined is the complex task which the book leaves the reader after he has turned the final page. Most modern critics have moved away from the once common contention that Twain undermined himself inadvertently and simply nodded in the final chapters (Marx 341). More popular among modern critics is the theory that the reader is the dupe of a playful but bitter Twain who has created one of the great heroic characters of literature for the purpose of dismantling him before our eyes, and with him the values which allowed us to sympathize with him in the first place. In The Dramatic Unity of Huckleberry Finn, George C. Carrington writes:

One psychological satisfaction of the traditional quest-action lies in seeing how the synthesis of the final triumph arises logically
from the thesis and antithesis of earlier sections. The disgust felt by many while reading the end of *Huckleberry Finn* arises from slowly realizing that Twain is parodying this agreeable conclusion of the quest-action, is doing so openly and unmercifully, and is basing it all on the reader's blind voluntary commitment to Huck earlier in the book. (123)

Similarly, in *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* James M. Cox writes:

To see that Tom is doing at the ending what we have been doing throughout the book is essential to understanding what the book has meant to us. For when Tom proclaims to the assembled throng who have witnessed his performance that Jim "is as free as any cretur that walks this earth," he is an exposed embodiment of the complacent moral sentiment on which the reader has relied throughout the book. And to the extent the reader has indulged the complacency he will be disturbed by the ending. (175)

As an alternative to these two views of the undermining quality of the ending, I am positing the possibility that Twain has intentionally undermined his own art and himself as artist, and in so doing has addressed the problem of human discourse at its most fundamental level.
The work of the written word is to create the illusion of frozen meaning, to remove meaning from the unpredictable realm of memory, and in keeping with this, the ultimate task of the artist has traditionally been to create an object which, like a rock in a stream, can seem to withstand the erosive forces of time which surround it. The power of writing is that it can create contingent realities which can exist physically apart from the human consciousness. For the literate consciousness, the choice is no longer between meaninglessness and meaning, as it must be for the purely oral consciousness, but between one meaning and a host of others. But the written artifact must in some sense be always at odds with itself. If the technology of writing answers a need for a permanent and stable reality, the multiplicity of realities which writing makes possible implies the contingent nature of those realities.

The problem facing any artist who would state such a truth is that in stating it he or she must defy it, and this is why much of modern literature is openly and artfully ambiguous. Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" stops short of adopting a value system which would make sense of the troubled couple's predicament, but it stops short, too, of decrying all value systems, for that would imply that Hemingway had either written his story without reason, or else was unaware of the truth he had demonstrated—that reality is contingent upon the individual consciousness that
perceives it. The effect is a gridlock of options which can only be resolved by the bald imposition on the text of the reader's own values. Curious, then, that Hemingway, while crediting *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as the source of all American literature, went on to dismiss the ending as "cheating" (22), for in the ending of the novel Twain pioneers the territory that Hemingway would later exploit to its fullest. What in Hemingway's story is a reiteration of a modern theme is in *Huckleberry Finn* a radical departure from the conventional view of literature. If, in the vein of his romantic predecessors, Twain had intended merely to replace one set of values with another, he was certainly artistically capable of doing so. But Twain in fact defied the cult of art in the ending of his book. His refusal to leave us with an unambiguous hero is a gesture, the meaning of which must be sought both in and beyond the novel. In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker helps clarify the significance of this gesture:

The key to the creative type is that he is separated out of the common pool of shared meanings. There is something in his life experience that makes him take in the world as a problem; as a result he has to make personal sense out of it... Existence becomes a problem that needs an ideal answer; but when you no longer accept the collective solution to the problem of
existence, then you must fashion your own....

His creative work is.... the expression of his heroism and the justification of it.... No sooner have we said this than we can see the immense problem that it poses. How can one justify his own heroism? He would have to be as God....

The whole thing boils down to this paradox: if you are going to be a hero then you must give a gift. If you are the average man you give your heroic gift to the society in which you live, and you give the gift that society specifies in advance. If you are an artist you fashion a peculiarly personal gift, the justification of your own heroic identity, which means that it is always aimed at least partly over the heads of your fellow men. (171-172)

Following Becker's reasoning, we can say of Twain's "gift" that it fails to justify his heroic identity, but designedly so. It speaks not of a particular heroism, but to the problem of heroism itself--the impossibility of justifying one's own context. In so doing, the novel undermines the impulse which, according to Becker, prompted its creation, and so it becomes a true gift, one given without the motive of self-validation. Twain has offered more than a novel to the world; he has offered self. Unlike Twain's character,
Colonel Sherburn, who was incapable of recognizing the futility of his power in the face of the mortality he shared with the people of Bricksville, Twain's power speaks finally of its own inability to overcome the terror of existence. Twain thus accomplishes something which Becker argues even Freud, in his intense self-awareness, was incapable of "... the combination of fullest self-expression and renunciation" (173).

The importance of literacy in Twain's novel has already been treated at some length in Kevin Murphy's monograph, "Illiterate's Progress: The Descent into Literacy, in Huckleberry Finn" and although Murphy ignores the question of orality, which I believe is equally significant, his work is an excellent guide to those episodes in which literacy plays a pivotal role. Although we come to quite different conclusions about the meaning of Huck's literacy, I must acknowledge that on occasion I work ground that Murphy has already broken. Our understanding of the fragmenting qualities of literacy is very similar, but I do not take literacy for the unqualified evil that Murphy apparently does. Furthermore, though Murphy and I agree that Huck's writing of the novel is an integral part of the action of the book, we are entirely at odds in our evaluations of the significance of this act to Huck's character.

My aim in this study is to understand the broadest possible context within which the actions of Twain's novel
can be evaluated, and I think the difference in scope as much as any other factor accounts for the widely divergent conclusions that Murphy and I draw from much of the same material. Drawing on the ideas in Walter J. Ong's work *Orality and Literacy*, I attempt not merely to track the course of Huck's literacy through the novel, but to place that literacy within the larger context of all human discourse. By opposing literacy to orality and by acknowledging that the former grows out of the latter, it is possible to separate the inevitable from the potential in the evolution of Huck's character, and from this high ground we may then evaluate Huck's choices as such. Only from such a vantage point can the concept of heroism as it applies to Huck be discussed with clarity, for Huck's heroism must be defined within the limits of the forces that mold his world. Because the context within which Twain's gesture has been made is a literate one, this context, above all others that give the book its meaning, must be examined for what it is.

Nothing more clearly demonstrates the extent to which Murphy and I come to different conclusions about Huck's burgeoning literacy than a comparison of our interpretations of the pivotal episode in the novel in which Huck decides to go to hell rather than betray Jim to Miss Watson. With regard to the note Huck writes revealing Jim's whereabouts, Murphy writes:

Huck's literacy, the skill he has used at times
throughout the novel to get out of tight spots, is here the very agent of execution for Jim. When Huck, holding his breath, finally says, "All right, [sic] I'll go to hell," and rips up the letter we feel that some major moral ground has been won . . . .

Alas, as many readers have exclaimed, if only the novel ended here. But as should be clear from earlier parallel incidents, Huck's moral illumination and resolve are both temporary and susceptible to outside influence, especially when that influence coincides with his own deep yearning for acceptance and for an end to his lonesomeness. (377-78)

To fault Huck, as Murphy does, for not having cemented his moral victory for all time is to decry the very characteristic which has enabled Huck to tear up the note in the first place. For all the comfort that Huck receives from the illusion that his written message will set things right permanently, he has nevertheless been able to identify this sense of permanence as illusion. To wish, then, that Huck's "moral illumination and resolve" were permanent, to wish, moreover, that the book had ended with Huck's decision, is to succumb to the very literate bias Huck has avoided. In this connection it might be noted that, apparently without irony, Murphy has used the word "alas,"
which only a few pages earlier he has identified as "Emmelinesque," in reference to the literate, but empty, language of the Duke (373).

This leads us to the problem of literate bias in general, and to its antidote, the understanding of orality. The emergence of the literate Huck is accompanied by the suppression of the oral Huck, and only by accounting in some way for what Huck has given up can we accurately assess what he has gained in grasping his literate destiny. Ong notes:

Literacy . . . is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself. There is hardly an oral culture or a predominantly oral culture left in the world today that is not somehow aware of the vast complex of powers forever inaccessible without literacy. This awareness is agony for persons rooted in primary orality, who want literacy passionately but who also know very well that moving into the exciting world of literacy means leaving behind much that was exciting and deeply loved in the earlier oral world. We have to die to continue living. (Orality 14-15)

The agony which Ong refers to accounts, I believe, for a
great deal of the loneliness and guilt which plague Huck Finn throughout his novel. In chapter II, within a few lines of the private reading lesson he has received from Miss Watson, Huck says:

I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead. The stars was shining, and the leaves rustled in the woods ever so mournful; and I heard an owl away off, who-whooing about somebody that was dead, and a whippowill and a dog crying about somebody that was going to die; and the wind was trying to whisper something to me and I couldn't make out what it was, and so it made the cold shivers run over me. Then away out in the woods I heard that kind of a sound that a ghost makes when it wants to tell about something that's on its mind and can't make itself understood, and so can't rest easy in its grave and has to go about that way every night grieving. I got so down-hearted and scared, I did wish I had some company. (4)

Like the emerging artist of Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," Huck has become the alienated and self-conscious interpreter of the world of nature, a world from which he must become differentiated if he is to describe it. Whereas the economy of Whitman's poem can give us the experience of the poet's birth in a single line, "My own songs awaked from that hour," (1. 178), Twain's prose
equivalent describes both the atrophying of the unreflective, oral Huck and the tentativeness with which the reflective, literate Huck abandons one consciousness for another.

To understand that *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is as much about the death of the oral Huck as it is about the birth of the literate Huck is to create a context within which Huck's actions can have moral significance. Like so many critics, Murphy sees Huck's acquiescence to Tom Sawyer in the end of the novel as a selling out of the moral victory he has gained when he refuses to turn Jim in to Miss Watson. In Murphy's words, "In this bottoming out, we realize that the narrator has not understood the implications of the tale he has told us" (385). The message of the book is thus rendered deterministic by a hero who has not been able to transcend the pressures of society, and the stage is set for Twain's decline into cynicism in his later writings. But the implications to which Murphy refers are themselves culturally grounded and, I would argue, have evolved from the same pressures to which Huck has presumably succumbed. If Huck were as clearly the product of books and education that Tom Sawyer is, we might well judge his actions by these criteria, but by looking to Huck's oral roots, that is, by acknowledging a world which, though strange to us, is nonetheless an undeniable source of
meaning for Huck, we can see that Huck has made choices which presuppose freedom and are heroic.

In his preface to *Fighting for Life*, Ong writes:

My body resembles the bodies of my parents and earlier ancestors. But my own self, what I refer to when I say "I," is no more related to my parents than to anyone else. It has no genetic constitution. And even though it is embedded in a particular culture, which provides it with its characteristic ways of relating to others, to the world, and even to itself, it still floats free of its culture. The "I" that I say is as completely different from any other self in my own culture as it is from any other self in any other culture, real or imaginable. I am simply not you, no matter who or how close you are. (10-11)

To get at the "I" of Huckleberry Finn, the I which Ong calls the "dialectical complement of human freedom" (*Fighting* 11), we must range wherever possible beneath the cultural context of the novel and seek out those peculiarly personal contexts from which Huck draws his meanings. The largely oral context, then, from which Huck emerges is of paramount importance in decoding the character of Huck Finn.

It is necessary here to clarify Ong's terminology regarding orality and literacy. Ong describes a primary oral culture as one "with no knowledge whatsoever of writing
or even of the possibility of writing" (Orality 30). There is no such culture in Huckleberry Finn, but it will be necessary to refer to the concept of primary orality to clarify my assertions about the nature of orality in general and to draw distinctions between the oral and literate consciousness. Ong's term "residual orality" is more directly applicable to Twain's novel, but here another problem presents itself. In its narrowest sense, residual orality refers to that person (or culture) who, though he or she cannot read or write, has some knowledge of literate consciousness and whose own consciousness is influenced to some degree by this knowledge. In its broadest sense, residual orality may refer to the persistence in writing of oral mnemonic and noetic devices. To characterize a person or culture as residually oral is then meaningless without reference to the amount of residue involved. Pap is certainly residually oral, but so are Huck, Tom, and Twain. Clearly, a complex continuum exists, but for the most part, it will serve the purposes of this paper to speak in terms of oral persons, persons that do not read and write and whose consciousnesses are in most instances primary oral, and literate persons, persons who do read and write and whose consciousnesses are dominated by the internalization of literacy. I avoid, as Ong does, the terms "illiterate" and "preliterate" to describe the predominantly oral person. As Ong points out, this "presents orality--the primary
modeling system'--as an anachronistic deviant from the 'secondary modeling system' that followed it" (Orality 13).

Further complicating the direct application of Ong's terminology to the characters in the novel is the fact that the cultures described in Huckleberry Finn sit upon the crest of a dialectic wave which, though it breaks inevitably in the direction of universal literacy, is characterized as much by its residual orality as by its burgeoning literacy. These dialectic forces are played out within, as well as among the characters of the novel. We might say of the Grangerfords, for instance, that though they are literate, literacy in their hands is not the self-reflexive instrument of science and art described by Ong, but rather a sort of super mnemonic device which has defined and frozen for all time the abstractions which give meaning to their brutal existence. This is a perversion of the inherent conservatism of orality. Ong writes:

Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation. Knowledge is hard to come by and precious, and society regards
highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving it, who know and can tell the stories of the days of old. By storing knowledge outside the mind, writing and, even more, print downgrade the figures of the wise old man and wise old woman, repeaters of the past, in favor of younger discoverers of something new. (Orality 41)

Secure in their knowledge that the abstractions of right and wrong, honor and glory sit safely out of the line of fire in the parlor library, the Grangerfords proceed with the slaughter of the human vessels that are no longer necessary for the perpetuation of meaning. Emmeline's insipid poetry is emblematic of the literally dead end to which the Grangerford's literacy has brought them, for in Emmeline, even "the young discover of something new" has been subordinated to the quest for stasis. One need only compare Huck's description of the death of Buck Grangerford to Emmeline's "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd" to perceive the very different ends which their literary creations serve. In both theme and style, Emmeline's poetry is static:

And did young Stephen sicken,
And did young Stephen die?
And did the sad hearts thicken,
And did the mourners cry? (139)

Huck's prose attends always to the pressures of a dynamic
reality:

The boys jumped for the river—both of them hurt—and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, "Kill them, kill them!" It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't going to tell all that happened—it would make me sick again if I was to do that. (153)

Huck's literacy must ultimately be set apart from the literacy which pervades the Mississippi River Valley of the novel. Murphy argues that Huck's "transformation, from illiterate to literatus,... does not grant Huck any special insight into his own predicament" (385). But such an argument ignores the fact that the novel could be nothing but the creation of an intensely self-reflexive being, whose "own predicament" must indeed be considered, apart from those predicaments which society, or even the socialized reader, has created independently of him. We might say that while Huck has become literate, he is not the product of literacy, as are Tom Sawyer and Emmeline Grangerford, and indeed, most of us who have read or ever will read The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

In fact, there can be little question that the backdrop of the novel is deterministic and that the majority of the novel's characters are victims of the dialectical violence which controls their world. Much critical inquiry into the
novel focuses on the extent to which Huck is himself the product of deterministic forces, and those critics who see the message of the novel as overwhelmingly bleak inevitably point to Huck's submission to Tom's plans in the end of the novel. What is wanted, it seems, is for the profoundly introspective Huck to suddenly take control of the situation and overthrow the powerful Tom Sawyer. This, however, would only cement Huck's identification with Tom. There can be no doubt by the ending of the novel that Huck's intellect is superior to Tom's, and there is even evidence that Huck's reverence for Tom's powers is frequently sarcastic; but above all, what distinguishes Huck from Tom is that Huck's powers are consistently turned inward, Tom's inevitably directed toward others. The twist is that Huck is able to absorb much more of what is outside himself, while Tom, in manipulating reality, also shields himself from it. In *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker writes:

... most of us--by the time we leave childhood--have repressed our vision of the primary miraculousness of creation. We have closed it off, changed it, and no longer perceive the world as it is to raw experience. Sometimes we may recapture this world by remembering some striking childhood perceptions, how suffused they were in emotion and wonder--how a favorite grandfather looked, or one's first love in his early teens. We change
these heavily emotional perceptions precisely
because we need to move about in the world with
some kind of equanimity, some kind of strength and
directness; we can't keep gaping with our heart in
our mouth, greedily sucking up with our eyes
everything great and powerful that strikes us.
The great boon of repression is that it makes it
possible to live decisively in an overwhelmingly
miraculous and incomprehensible world, a world so
full of beauty, majesty, and terror that if
animals perceived it all they would be paralyzed
to act. (50)

Huck's nausea at the death of Buck Grangerford, his dread on
approaching the Phelp's plantation, and even his sense of
guilt in viewing the plight of his enemies, the king and
duke, all speak eloquently of Huck's vulnerability to ex-
perience. But for some readers, Huck's willingness to share
to some degree in the repressions of others is damning proof
that he is fundamentally like others, that is, at the mercy
of a deterministic world. And indeed, he is precisely like
others in that he must somehow cope with an "overwhelmingly
miraculous and incomprehensible world." As Becker has
indicated, repression is a fact of human existence, a
necessity for action, and those who fault Huck for experi-
menting with the repressions of others must posit, as an
alternative, the possibility of an unpressed existence.
James Cox says of Huck that

His instinct is neither to give nor to receive pain if he can avoid it.

The prime danger to his identity comes at the moment he chooses the developing inner or Northern conscience. This moment, when Huck says "All right, then, I'll go to hell," is characteristically the moment we fatally approve, and approve morally. But it is with equal fatality the moment at which Huck's identity is most precariously threatened. In the very act of choosing to go to hell he has surrendered to the notion of a principle of right and wrong. He has forsaken the world of pleasure to make a moral choice. Precisely here is where Huck is about to negate himself—where, with an act of positive virtue, he actually commits himself to play the role of Tom Sawyer which he has to assume in the closing section of the book. To commit oneself to the idea, the morality of freeing Jim, is to become Tom Sawyer. Here again is the irony of the book, and the ending, far from evading the consequences of Huck's act of rebellion, realizes those consequences. (180)

I quote Cox at length here because he clearly implies the possibility of an unrepressed Huck, or at the very least, he
implies that the inevitability of repression is the grim and, again, deterministic message of the novel. But Becker's message is precisely that repression per se is not some sort of option which, if we only had the strength, we could resist. He devotes an entire section of his book to debunking what he calls "the impossible heroism," or the notion that man can somehow overcome the repression of reality. Becker's insight is that the human character is the repressed character, that

... guilt is not a result of infantile fantasy but of self-conscious adult reality. There is no strength that can overcome guilt unless it be the strength of a god; and there is no way to overcome creature anxiety unless one is a god and not a creature. The child denies the reality of his world as miracle and as terror; that's all there is to it. Wherever we turn we meet this basic fact that we must repeat one final time: guilt is a function of real overwhelmingness, the stark majesty of the objects in the child's world. (261-62)

Becker's reaction to those he calls the "revolutionaries of unrepression" (265) points to a profound shortcoming of much of the major criticism of Twain's novel. Cox's assertion that "freedom for Huck is not realized in terms of political liberty but in terms of pleasure" (178),
and his subsequent conclusion that the "logic of pleasure at the heart of the book must also be at the heart of any 'positive' value we may wish to ascribe to the experience of reading it" (179), reveal the extent to which Cox has attempted to impose the ideology of unrepression on the novel at the expense of Huck's complex character. Indeed, as Becker writes, "to talk about a 'new man' whose ego merges wholly with his body is to talk about a subhuman creature, not a superhuman one" (263). Too often, critical responses to Huckleberry Finn seek to undermine the tension by which the character of Huck is defined, for the heroic beauty of Huck lies neither in triumph of some imagined, unrepressed self, nor in the possibility of Huck's permanent transcendence of self through the repression of choice.

To characterize Huck as either a failed hero of unrepression, or conversely, a failed hero of some idiosyncratic repression is to confuse potentiality with actuality and to miss the point that it is precisely Huck's ability to exist with some equanimity between these tempting though illusory options that constitutes his heroic attitude. No critic more nearly understands this than Henry Nash Smith; and yet Smith, too, implies a sort of guilt by association in his final pronouncement on Twain's novel. In Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, Smith writes:

Colonel Sherburn's cold-blooded murder of Boggs, his failure to experience remorse after the
act, and his withering scorn of the townspeople are disquieting portents for the future. Mark Twain, like Huck, was sickened by the brutality he had witnessed in the society along the river. But he had an adult aggressiveness foreign to Huck's character. At a certain point he could no longer endure the anguish of being a passive observer. His imagination sought refuge in the image of an alternative persona who was protected against suffering by being devoid of pity or guilt, yet could denounce the human race for its cowardice and cruelty, perhaps even take action against it. The appearance of Sherburn in *Huckleberry Finn* is ominous because a writer who shares his attitude toward human beings is in danger of abandoning imaginative insight for moralistic invective. . . . Colonel Sherburn would prove to be Mark Twain's dark angel. His part in the novel, and that of Tom Sawyer, are flaws in a work that otherwise approaches perfection as an embodiment of American experience in a radically new and appropriate literary mode. (137)

The "flaws" which professor Smith identifies in the novel are in fact the resistance against which Huck's character can take its most definite shape. There can be nothing ominous about the mere appearance of Sherburn in the novel,
and to suppose that Twain has spoken through Sherburn a message he could not speak through Huck is to forget that it is Huck who relates the Sherburn incident and who, in his closing words on the matter, passes judgment not only on the cowardly mob, but on Sherburn as well. "I could a staid, if I'd a wanted to, but I didn't want to" (191), says Huck.

If Sherburn has given Huck a lesson in the use of power, he has also revealed its limits, for it is the curse of this powerful man to find contemptible all that lies within his power. The index of Sherburn's power is finally only the weakness of the Bricksville mob, and in choosing to stay among those who cannot find the courage to hang him, he is surely fleeing the thing he cannot control, the inevitability of his own death. His calling out of the mob, however effective in demonstrating his power over the living, only reiterates his inability to call out death itself.

Boggs cannot answer for the stark meaninglessness of Sherburn's own mortality, but he is killed anyway—not in a transcendent act, but rather, one which is profoundly desperate. Boggs is the emblem of all that Sherburn cannot control, a drunken, reeling reality that in weakness, not strength, must be done away with. And can all of this really be lost on Huck, who has faced, gun in hand, a much more threatening drunk than Boggs and yet stayed the
trigger? For, indeed, it was Pap who in a drunken fit nearly took Huck's life. And yet when Huck was faced with the opportunity of killing Pap, he was unwilling to accept it.

Huck's great insight is that the Boggses and Paps of this world cannot be eliminated, that they rise up from within as reminders of the meaninglessness that must be confronted, but can never be controlled. Though a boy and an outcast, Huck nonetheless has at his disposal a potent tool, one which he shares with Sherburn, for creating the illusion of an ordered and controllable reality. Within the despised world of Bricksville, Sherburn's literate consciousness allows him the illusion of supreme power, a source of static meaning separate from the community, but more powerful still is Huck within the world of his novel. And yet, Huck has not attempted to reform reality in his novel.

The circus scene that follows so closely on the heels of the Sherburn confrontation reveals with wonderful concision Huck's attitude toward reality. Again, we are confronted with the image of the drunk, whose repression of reality reveals, in its transparentness, the ineffectuality of all repression. When the drunk attempts to ride the circus horse, Huck says, "it warn't funny to me, though; I was all of a tremble to see his danger" (193). To Huck, all mankind sits astride a runaway horse, thinking it can con-
trol the uncontrollable. His genuine fear for the drunk reveals Huck's understanding of the dilemma which faces all persons, that they are subject to destruction, and his inability to alienate himself from the show in the ring speaks of far more than mere boyish naivete. Huck's conscience is a terror to him because it reaches for its source to the fundamental horror of human existence, the consciousness of the possibility of meaninglessness and death. The drunk, Huck's own pap, is the boy's paradigm for human helplessness in the face of an overwhelming reality.

Without an understanding of this paradigm, we are likely to judge Huck harshly for the seeming inconstancy of his resolve. As T. S. Eliot has said of Huck, he has not imagination, in the sense in which Tom has it: he has, instead, vision. He sees the real world: and he does not judge it--he allows it to judge itself. (329)

Huck's vision, his empathy, extends both to the helpless drunk and to the dazzling acrobat into which he is transformed, but most telling of all is that it extends as well to the bamboozled (as Huck believes) ringmaster:

Then the ring-master he see how he had been fooled, and was the sickest ring-master you ever see, I reckon. Why, it was one of his own men! He had got up that joke all out of his own head, and never let on to nobody. Well, I felt sheepish
enough, to be took in so, but I wouldn't a been in
that ring-master's place, not for a thousand
dollars. (194)

The trade-off for Huck's expansive vision is that he can
never act with the confidence of Tom Sawyer or Colonel
Sherburn. The circus act confirms for him the impossibility
of controlling events and predicting the outcome of one's
actions. The transcendent vision of the drunkard's metamor-
phosis is immediately tempered by the ringmaster's apparent
humiliation. Herein lies the compelling ambiguity of Huck's
character, and the source of so much discomfort in his
readers.

Ong notes that "sustained thought in an oral culture is
tied to communication" (Orality 34), and such communication
is at the heart of Huck and Jim's relationship. No episode
more clearly illustrates this than the fog passage and
Huck's subsequent attempt to convince Jim that he has
dreamed the events of the previous night. Kevin Murphy has
understood that Huck's prank is the product of a literate
mind when he compares Huck's actions to those of Tom Sawyer:

In playing a gratuitous prank on Jim, pretending
that there was no fog and that Jim must have been
dreaming, Huck recapitulates exactly Tom's earlier
prank on Jim at the beginning of the novel when
Tom puts Jim's hat up in the tree. (368)

Indeed, Huck flexes his literate consciousness, and in so
doing, violates the communicative bond between himself and Jim. As Murphy (369) and other critics have pointed out, Huck's apology to Jim for having played a prank on him represents a recognition of Jim's humanity by Huck, but also implicit is Huck's recognition of the fundamental difference between his own consciousness and Jim's. Huck and Jim have negotiated the fog of reality, each in his own way, and as surely as Cairo and the possibility of freedom as they have imagined it are behind them, so too is the possibility of sustaining their oral community. Huck fares considerably better than Jim in the fog. An example from the passage, written by Huck, is itself evidence of Huck's ability to think literately and analytically as he works his way through the fog:

Thinks I, it won't do to paddle; first I know I'll run into the bank or a tow-head or something; I got to set still and float, and yet it's mighty fidgety business to have to hold your hands still at such a time. (99-100)

Jim's night is comparatively hellish:

"When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no mo' what become er me en de raf." (105)

Without Huck, we sense that Jim is lost, and indeed, without the anchor of his oral community, Jim is ill-equipped to
face reality alone. Ong notes:

In the absence of elaborate analytic categories that depend on writing to structure knowledge at a distance from lived experience, oral cultures must conceptualize and verbalize all knowledge with more or less close reference to the human lifeworld, assimilating the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. (Orality 42)

But we have no such fears for Huck. Huck's recognition of his ability to function without Jim's help is the sine qua non of the moral implication of his decision not to turn Jim over to Miss Watson. Huck's attack of "conscience" is not the regression that Murphy sees (369), but rather the natural consequence of Huck's new understanding of the profound differences between himself and Jim.

Huck's vision is finally, of course, the product of a literate consciousness, but a literate consciousness tempered by the experience of and the loss of its oral source. Ong points out that

fortunately, literacy, though it consumes its own oral antecedents and, unless it is carefully monitored, even destroys their memory, is also infinitely adaptable. It can restore their memory, too. (Orality 15)

This restoration is for Huck more than an intellectual, or
even artistic, exercise. Huck's book attempts to answer his deepest need, to create a meaningful community in a world fractured by the written word. Neither Huck nor society can return finally to the idyllic raft, and yet the standard against which Huck must judge the meaning of community is the bond he has shared with Jim.

To fully understand the source of Huck's need for community we must turn to Pap, himself the victim of a fog more dense and unrelenting than that faced by Jim and Huck. Of all the characters in the book, Pap is surely the most pathetic. Entirely without community, Pap must find reality a perpetual torture, for he lacks his son's ability to deal with the literate world which has risen around him, and such oral community as he may have had has died before him. While Jim may flee St. Petersburg in the hope that he may one day return to his community, Pap Finn must flee, without hope, a world which he cannot understand. This hopelessness is finally the evil against which Huck must measure the effectiveness of all remedies and the adversity against which any meaningful heroism must take its shape.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER II

"Tramp--tramp--tramp . . ."

Henry Nash Smith's treatment of Pap Finn (125-29) well illustrates the problems of literacy biased interpretation of an oral character. While Smith describes Pap as "a note of tragic relief in a predominantly comic story" (129), he fails to explain the nature of the tragedy and seems to undermine his own assertion by allowing that Pap's actions "may be plain loafing, without moral significance" (128). And yet, Smith also describes Pap as a "vernacular outcast" (127), raising the question of whether Pap has withdrawn from society or has been cast out. It becomes clear, however, through an analysis of Pap's orality, that society and Pap have inevitably diverged from each other, and that only against this inevitability can Pap's words and actions, and their ultimate effect on Huck's own character, be evaluated with some objectivity by the literate consciousness.

In his first exchange with Huck, Pap refers explicitly to his oral community:

"Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died. None of the family couldn't, before they died. I can't; and here you're a-swelling yourself up like this. I ain't the man to stand it--you hear?" (24)
We can only speculate about the specific causes for the 
demise of Pap's family, but the emphasis in Twain's novel on 
public schooling, surrogate parents, and the influence of 
the community on the individual points with certainty toward 
the waning importance of the frontier family as the primary 
unit of social organization in the Mississippi River Valley. 
Both as an individual and as a type, Pap is doomed by the 
emerging social forces that dominate in Twain's novel. 
Smith notes that Pap "is in a sense a ghost the first time 
we see him, for his faceless corpse has been found floating 
in the river . . ." (127). Of course, the corpse was not 
Pap's, but the incident reiterates the fact that Pap is as 
good as dead in the eyes of St. Petersburg society. He is 
figuratively a drowning man from the time of his first 
appearance in the novel.

In a discussion of the real-life prototypes for Pap in 
*Mark Twain and Huck Finn*, Walter Blair writes:

Pap is made much less likable than his somewhat 
amusing counterparts were. Soon he is to champion 
attitudes appropriate for such a loathsome 
character--self-pity, sentimentality, hatred for 
learning, and racial prejudices. (108)

Certainly, Pap's attitudes are loathsome, but Twain's 
characterization of Pap must be set against the larger 
backdrop of the entire novel if it is not to be interpreted 
as simple invective against a fellow human being. Pap's
diatribe against the educated Negro, for instance, is packed with complex ironies which, while they do not exculpate Pap for his bigotry, do far more to implicate St. Petersburg than Pap in the crime of slavery. Pap, after all, owns no slaves. By his seething condemnation of the black professor, Pap is merely voicing the feelings that Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas must repress if they are to continue the duplicity of holding slaves while professing piety. Indeed, Pap is in many ways the embodiment of the bald and unrepressed evils which haunt the Southern, slave-holding world. In this role he is analogous to Conrad's Kurtz, a horrifying mirror from which polite society must turn its eye to preserve its own sanity. But whereas Kurtz has willingly cut himself off from society in order to strip away its lies, Pap simply has no access to those lies. Without an oral community to sustain him, and without the ability to read and write, Pap is as effectively isolated in the back alleys of St. Petersburg as Kurtz is at the end of the Congo River. And in perfect opposition to Pap, the black professor has access both to the literate community and to the black oral community from which he has risen, which, unlike Pap's backwater oral community, has been preserved by the slaveholding society. Pap's self-disenfranchisement upon learning that the black man is even allowed to vote in his home state is the pathetic defiance of a man who has long since lost all power over his destiny,
a relinquishing of that which has already been taken:

"It was 'lection day, and I was just about to go
and vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to get
there; but when they told me there was a State in
this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I
drew out. I says I'll never vote agin. Them's
the very words I said; they all heard me; and the
country may rot for all me--I'll never vote agin
as long as I live." (34)

Huck is the lone surviving member of Pap's oral
community, and yet he too has passed into the ranks of the
literate by the time Pap finds him. Significantly, although
Pap's initial motive for finding Huck is to take Huck's
fortune from him, their first conversation quickly comes to
focus on the issue of Huck's literacy. At stake is
certainly Pap's power over his son, and subsequently his
power over his fortune, but Pap's reference to the dead
family members' inability to read or write and the vehemence
with which he warns Huck against continuing his schooling
betrays a fear of something more than material loss. Even
after Pap has secured a dollar from Huck for liquor, he
takes time to admonish Huck to stay away from school:

When he had got out on the shed, he put his head
in again, and cussed me for putting on frills and
trying to be better than him; and when I reckoned
he was gone, he come back and put his head in
again, and told me to mind about that school, because he was going to lay for me and lick me if I didn't drop that. (26)

And Huck's description of Pap further emphasizes the air of desperation which surrounds the old man. Pap's whiteness is that of a dead thing, "a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white," and his hair, "all black, no gray" (23), emphasizes the morbid whiteness while simultaneously removing from the reader's mind any thought of age and its accompanying dignity. Most telling of all, Pap appears to have declined since Huck last saw him, to the extent that he no longer directly evokes fear in Huck. But it cannot be supposed from this that that which Pap must represent for Huck, the inevitability of death, has lost its terror. George Carrington argues that in writing about Pap, and thus indirectly about death, Huck succeeds in repressing death:

In and by this long description Huck triumphs finally over Pap. Huck's defense is his ability to master the threat of memory of Pap with words, words like "There warn't no color in his face, where his face showed; it was white; not like another man's white, but a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl--a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white." The whiteness, so Melvillean in its impact, can "make a body sick," but Huck is not just "a body,"
anybody--he is an artist. With each of the unnecessary virtuoso phrases he displays and celebrates the artist's defense against fear--here the greatest fear, the fear of the death that Pap carries in his face.

In a sense, then, the novel is Huck's attempt at purgation; but because, as Huck implies, purgation is impossible, and because Huck lives in a world where action is life and stasis is death, we can see the novel as an action, Huck's action, his defensive gesture. The novel is, in other words, Huck's drama, which not only tells us about his impossible situation and his guilt but tells us in an organized way--that is, artistically--so that the impossible is put at arm's length and becomes bearable. (118-19)

Here Carrington nearly places his finger on the central dynamic of Huck's character, and yet his predisposition to see the novel as essentially deterministic has caused him to err on a crucial point. Just as Huck is not just "anybody," neither is he just any artist. Huck does indeed grow nauseated at the sight of Buck Grangerford's death, and significantly, he is unable to describe the incident completely for fear of becoming sick again. Time and time again, Huck's art fails to answer for the "impossible," fails to circumvent the inevitability of death, and Huck
overcomes his fear of Pap because he discerns that death, not Pap, is that which is to be feared. Pap brings the knowledge of death to Huck that precludes Huck's return to the Eden of St. Petersburg, where death is indeed placed "at arms length" through the magic of the literate consciousness. But to understand fully the manner in which Pap has brought this knowledge to Huck, Pap's oral consciousness must be explored in greater detail.

Seeing Pap as merely a spiteful, alcoholic illiterate who seeks sway over his son and his son's fortune does not do justice either to Twain's characterization or to the nature of Pap's relationship to Huck. But by approaching Pap's character through the idea of orality, pathos replaces revulsion, and a major wellspring of Huck's empathy for his fellow man is identified. The conservative nature of the oral mind has already been noted, that is, the need for the oral mind to inhibit changes in stored knowledge. Since knowledge in an oral community is limited to that which can be remembered by its members, important knowledge must be contained in formulae which aid memory, and any knowledge which threatens these formulaic structures must be incorporated slowly and with great care lest it threaten the entire method of recall. Of this necessity Ong writes:

Aides-memoire such as notched sticks or a series of carefully arranged objects will not of themselves retrieve a complicated series of
assertions. How, in fact, could a lengthy, analytic solution ever be assembled in the first place? An interlocutor is virtually essential: it is hard to talk to yourself for hours on end.

(Orality 34)

Pap's conservatism is intensified by his isolation, for he lacks even a single interlocutor to aid him in the assimilation of new knowledge. His ossified and impoverished view of reality is a matter of cognitive survival, and indeed, the real threat that unassimilated reality presents for Pap is frighteningly revealed in his alcoholic nightmare:

"Tramp--tramp--tramp; that's the dead; tramp--tramp--tramp; they're coming after me; but I won't go--Oh, they're here! don't touch me--don't! hands off--they're cold; let go--Oh, let a poor devil alone!" (36)

Death, meaninglessness itself, inevitably pierces Pap's feeble defenses, for in the absence of an oral community with which to create complex repressive structures, Pap has come to depend almost wholly on the unreliable powers of alcohol to repress the unfathomable reality impinging upon his world. Becker puts the dilemma in more familiar terms: Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing. As awareness calls for types of heroic dedication that his culture no longer
provides for him, society helps him forget.

(Orality 284)

Pap's one-sided conversations with Huck reveal at the same time both his need for human discourse and the extent to which his capacity for such discourse has atrophied. Huck is called upon only minimally by Pap to function as interlocutor, and he is thus unable to achieve the sort of viable oral community he will later form with Jim. Nonetheless, Pap's orations exhibit the structures of a consciousness grounded in orality. Ong lists a number of characteristics of oral thought and expression to which Pap's discourse conforms. Many of these characteristics are particularly revealing with regard to Pap's character, for they show that much of what Pap says, and the way in which he says it, is a function of his orality. These characteristics thus help distinguish between a character who is innately malignant, or worse, one who has freely chosen to be malignant, and one who deserves our sympathy because he is the victim of cultural forces beyond his control.

The characteristics of the oral mind most pertinent to an analysis of Pap are (1) that the oral mind and speech are "aggregative rather than analytic" (2) that oral speech and thought are "redundant" (3) that the oral mind is "conservative or traditionalist" (4) that oral thought is "close
to the human lifeworld" and (5) that oral speech is agonistically toned (Orality 38-46).

In noting the aggregative quality of oral thought and speech, Ong writes:

This characteristic is closely tied to reliance on formulas to implement memory. The elements of orally based thought and expression tend to be not so much simple integers as clusters of integers, such as parallel terms or phrases or clauses, antithetical terms or phrases or clauses, epithets. Oral folk prefer, especially in formal discourse, not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. Oral expression thus carries a load of epithets and other formulary baggage which high literacy rejects as cumbersome and tiresomely redundant because of its aggregative weight.

The cliches in political denunciations in many low-technology, developing cultures—enemy of the people, capitalist war-mongers—that strike high literates as mindless are residual formulary essentials of oral thought processes. (Orality 38)

From such necessity arises Pap's description of the black professor as a "prowling, thieving, infernal, white-shirted
free nigger . . . " (34) as well as his description of the "govment" that refuses to sell him on the auction block. Despite the lack of evidence that the black man is characterized by any of the epithets Pap uses to describe him, Pap must make the black professor fit his remembered store of formulae for describing the black race. This observation is not intended to supersede the historical context for Pap's hatred of the black man, but rather to emphasize that language, and particularly the oral quality of that language, is integral to that historical context.

Ong points out that "redundancy, repetition of the just-said, keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track" (Orality 40). Pap repeats the word "govment" ten times in the space of two paragraphs in his famous speech in Chapter 6. The effect of this is a crude and sometimes comic unification of Pap's widely disparate complaints against society, and the comic quality is emphasized by seeing Pap's speech in print, for through the technology of reading we are able to identify as patchwork that which is presented as a whole. But the speech is inarticulate only if we analyze it in terms of literate expectations. As analysis of an abstraction--"govment"--Pap's speech is a total failure. But for Pap, the government is not an abstraction. Indeed, his conception of government illustrates perfectly the necessity of the oral mind to connect words with specific experiences, with the
"lifeworld" as Ong calls it. Government has meaning for Pap through its immediate contact with his life. It is a person who is "a-standing ready to take a man's son away from him," that "jams him into a trap of a cabin," and "that can't sell a free nigger till he's been in the State six months" (33-34). Government is what government is for Pap. Pap's categorization is bound entirely to his experience and owes nothing to the written record that stipulates the meaning of government for the literate mind.

The adversarial character of Pap's speech is also explicable in terms of his orality. Ong remarks:

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known. By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. (Orality 43-44)

Though Huck is never expected to respond, Pap phrases much of his speech in the form of questions. Indeed, Pap's speech begins with the words "Call this a govment!" (33), as though in response to some imaginary interlocuter, and the remainder of his tirade is filled with what a literate
audience would identify as rhetorical questions. But Pap's oratory is completely lacking in the objective quality which such rhetorical questions would ordinarily serve to create. Pap's remark that the black man "wouldn't a give me the road if I hadn't shoved him out o' the way" (34) serves as prologue to the eruption of physical violence with which the speech ends:

Pap was going on so, he never saw where his old limber legs was taking him to, so he went head over heels over the tub of salt pork, and barked both shins, and the rest of his speech was all the hottest kind of language—mostly hove at the nigger and the govment, though he give the tub some, too, all along, here and there. He hopped around the cabin considerable, first on one leg and then on the other, holding first one shin and then the other one, and at last he let out with his left foot all of a sudden and fetched the a tub a rattling kick. (34)

Pap's attempt at rhetoric, which Ong identifies as the institutionalization of "the agonistic dynamics of oral thought processes and expression" (Orality 45), finally disintegrates into the prototypical struggle from which it evolved. In the absence of participatory interlocuters, Pap's struggle must be internalized, and the pressure from such internal strain is vented in physical violence. How-
ever, even this attempt to externalize his struggle through violence backfires on Pap, for he only succeeds in injuring his own foot when he kicks the inanimate tub. Finally, in his terrifying nightmare Pap must struggle with death itself, and though he cannot finally win the struggle, he has succeeded at least in creating the delusion that he is grappling with others, with the dead of his oral community.

As noted before, the inherent conservatism of Pap's oral mind is exacerbated by his isolation. Ong acknowledges that

Writing is of course conservative in its own ways. . . . But by taking conservative functions on itself, the text frees the mind of conservative tasks, that is, of its memory work, and thus enables the mind to turn itself to new speculation. (Orality 41)

Pap must encapsulate his past in rigid formulaic patterns if he is to retrieve that past at all, and while the same may be said generally of oral communities, in the discourse between individual consciousnesses lies the possibility for assimilation and change. In a sense Pap has himself become a text, having taken unto himself all of the conservative functions necessary to his existence—a responsibility which would be shared among the individuals of an oral community.

As the owl has foretold to Huck in Chapter I, someone—Pap—is already dead (4). He is dead at least to the world
of living discourse. Pap's alcoholism, his bigotry, his violence, and his inability to participate in society are not the sources of the fatal aura that surrounds him, but rather the evidence of decay long underway. To live, Pap has acceded to a psychological rigor akin to death, and in desperation he has tried to impose this rigor on Huck as well. And while certainly we cannot suppose that Huck is cognizant of all the forces that have led Pap to his fate, there is nonetheless a thread of tolerance in Huck's treatment of his father. When Pap is thrown in jail for a drunken spree, Huck writes: "He was just suited--this kind of thing was right in his line" (29). At another time Huck says that "Pap warn't in a good humor--so he was his natural self" (31). Huck's reluctance to pass judgment on his father seems at first remarkable in light of the beatings and privations he suffers at his hand, and despite Huck's avowed distaste for the civilizing tendencies of Miss Watson and the Widow Douglas, the reader must at some point wonder why Huck does not actively aid the forces of society in removing himself from Pap's power. Indeed, the central mystery of Huck's character, the fatality with which he so often aquiesces to forces that he might well overcome, finds its first expression in his relationship with Pap.

In a discussion of the nature of the heroic individual, Ernest Becker writes:

No organismic life can straightforwardly be
self-expansive in all directions; each one must draw back into himself in some areas, pay some penalty of a severe kind for his natural fears and limitations. It is all right to say, with Adler, that mental illness is due to "problems in living,"--but we must remember that life itself is the insurmountable problem. (270)

The insurmountable problem of life which Becker refers to is the consciousness of death that faces all human beings. By repressing this consciousness, by drawing back, one is able to function, but at the price of having one's world shaped and limited by the repression of choice. Again, Becker writes:

we can also see at once that there is no line between normal and neurotic, as we all lie and are all bound in some ways by the lies. Neurosis is, then, something we all share; it is universal. Or putting it another way, normality is neurosis, and vice versa. We call a man "neurotic" when his lie begins to show damaging effects on him or on people around him and he seeks clinical help for it—or others seek it for him. Otherwise, we call the refusal of reality "normal" because it doesn't occasion any visible problems. . . .

But the whole thing becomes more complex when we see how the lies about reality begin to
miscarry. Then we have to begin to apply the label "neurotic." And there are any number of occasions for this, from many ranges of human experience. Generally speaking, we call neurotic any life style that begins to constrict too much, that prevents free forward momentum, new choices, and growth that a person may want and need. (178-79)

Huck begins his adventures caught between the "normal" neurosis of St. Petersburg and the "abnormal" (because it is not shared by society) neurosis of Pap. But because Huck has not been raised to the "normal" neurosis of St. Petersburg, as have Tom Sawyer, Miss Watson, the Widow Douglas, and others, the extent to which this neurosis restricts him is objectively apparent to Huck. Furthermore, Huck's literacy, meant to bolster his identification with society, serves instead to set him further apart from it. Because literacy is in some sense imposed on Huck's context, rather than having arisen from it, it develops free of the inherent self-validating ends that characterize the literacy of Tom Sawyer and the Grangerfords, for instance. Literacy is patently strange to Huck, and as such it poses a threat to his identity, just as Huck himself, as literate, poses a threat to Pap. Thus, literacy can never be for Huck the unambiguous source of power that it is for so many other characters in the novel. For Huck to objectify his actions
through literacy, as Tom Sawyer does in the ending of the novel, would entail not merely a repression of external reality, but of self.

Having emerged both culturally and biologically from Pap, Huck must acknowledge the dark potential that Pap represents. St. Petersburg society can relegate Pap to the role of town drunk, or it can attempt to reform him, as the new judge does by having Pap appropriately make his mark on a written document. But society can never acknowledge Pap, as he is, as one of its own, for to do so would be to acknowledge its own potential for meaninglessness and death. The new judge's comment upon Pap's failure to reform, that "a body could reform the ole man with a shot-gun, maybe" (28), as well as the mistaken identification of the drowned corpse in chapter three as Pap, reveal society's desires as much as its expectations. Huck alone recognizes that Pap, and more importantly the death that dogs him, cannot be so easily disposed of. Indeed, at one point, in Pap's closed and darkened cabin, so similar to Pap's darkened mind itself, Huck has the means, the motive, and the opportunity to fulfill society's wish--he trains Pap's own gun on him. And yet he declines to commit an act which will not answer in any ultimate sense to the problem of death itself. If Pap has taught Huck anything, it is that the laws and conventions of St. Petersburg which stand ready to exculpate Huck for the murder of his violent father have no power over
the ranks of the dead, who can come in the night to claim their own.

Huck's enactment of his own death serves as an appropriate farewell to the competing neuroses of Pap and St. Petersburg, for it reiterates as nothing else could the object of his adventures. Huck must find a way of coping with his own mortality. To avoid the fate of his father, Huck must find a community with which to share the knowledge Pap has left him, a knowledge which the community of St. Petersburg cannot share, for it threatens the fundamental myth on which that community rests, that literacy can sustain it against the advances of death. Pap's son can never be a member of the literate community, and yet he is himself a literate. It is left for Huck to create his own community, and ultimately he will accomplish this through his book. But it is the oral community he forms with Jim on the raft which enables Huck to transcend the inherited repressions of St. Petersburg and to achieve the self-reflexive attitude that transforms an artistic act into a heroic one.
CHAPTER BIBLIOGRAPHY


CHAPTER III:

"You can't learn a nigger to argue"

The short but significant interim between Huck's escape from Pap and St. Petersburg and his discovery of Jim on Jackson's Island reveals Huck's fundamental need for human discourse. Alone, Huck is subject to both a deep loneliness and a discomforting uncertainty. Of his first night on Jackson's Island, Huck writes, "when it was dark I set by my camp fire smoking, and feeling pretty satisfied; but by and by it got sort of lonesome ..." (48). Three days later, upon finding Jim's abandoned campfire, Huck is filled with uneasiness and dread. He withdraws that night to his cramped canoe for safety, but then says, "I can't live this way; I'm going to find out who it is that's here on the island with me; I'll find out or bust. Well, I felt better, right off" (50). And when Huck does discover Jim on the island, almost his first remark is "I warn't lonesome, now" (51). Certainly, Huck might have continued downstream at the first opportunity and so avoided the danger of searching out whoever it was that shared his island; that he did not reveals the priorities of his journey. Though Huck may be an outsider, he is no loner. His departure from Pap and St. Petersburg is not, as so many critics have implied, the
result of Huck's desire for freedom. Freedom, as Pap's fate illustrates, can be both physically deadly and cognitively deadening. Rather, Huck's escape is from the impossibility of community that the juxtapositioning of Pap's oral consciousness and St. Petersburg's literate consciousness has created for him. In connection with this, Twain's much noted evocation of Christian imagery, e.g., Huck's ritual death, his three days of solitude, and his appearance to Jim as a ghost, serves to enhance the significance of Huck's isolation. Like Christ, Huck is torn between his father and his community, belonging to both, and yet to neither.

Likewise, Jim is escaping not from slavery, but from the potentially permanent loss of his community—his family and the other slaves of St. Petersburg—from whom he will be separated if he is sold down the river. Kevin Murphy notes that "for Jim, freedom is family unity, and if one considers the number of orphans, broken families, and child abusers who populate this novel, that definition seems both encompassing and admirably concrete" (369). Here Murphy correctly identifies the essential dynamic of Jim's flight, while at the same time falsely associating Jim's values with those of genteel St. Petersburg. "Family unity," like freedom, is a literate abstraction, and the list of ills to which Murphy refers would have little meaning for Jim outside of a living context. Ong notes that an oral culture, such as Jim's must largely be, is always close to
the "human lifeworld":

A chirographic (writing) culture and even more a typographic (print) culture can distance and in a way denature even the human, itemizing such things as the names of leaders and political divisions in an abstract, neutral list entirely devoid of a human action context. An oral culture has nothing so neutral as a list. (Orality 42)

Jim's need for his family and, more broadly, the entire slave community of St. Petersburg is tied to nothing so abstract as a code of family ethics. It is rather Jim's very memory, his identity, which is threatened by the loss of his oral community. For without that community, Jim is subject to the same sort of restrictive reality that has enveloped Pap.

Huck and Jim's imperative need for community renders irrelevant the critical controversy over whether they are questing for freedom, or merely fleeing society's repression. And such judgments upon Huck's character as have evolved from the application of the abstract, and unlikely ideals of freedom and un-repression must be re-evaluated from this perspective. Specifically, Huck's decision not to betray Jim to Miss Watson, and later his willingness to cooperate with Tom's outlandish plans for Jim's escape must be reassessed in light of this new dynamic; i.e., the need for community; moreover, the concept of orality must be
applied in order to escape the bias of a literate interpretation of Huck and Jim's relationship.

While his ties to Pap have disengaged the evolution of Huck's literacy from the cultural ends that initiated it, Jim supplies the nurturing link with Huck's oral past that will enable Huck to become the self-reflexive author of his adventures. Though Huck's creation is unmistakably literate, it speaks to the oral need for a living community. The use of the first-person narrative, the absence of a clearly linear plot progression, and even the problem of closure at the end of the novel all harken back to the oral origins of discourse. But at work is more than simple regression to an oral state. Ong writes:

Print . . . mechanically as well as psychologically locked words into space and thereby established a firmer sense of closure than writing could. The print world gave birth to the novel, which eventually made the definitive break with episodic structure. . . . The novelist was engaged more specifically with a text and less with auditors, imagined or real . . . But his or her position was a bit unsettled still. The nineteenth-century novelist's recurrent 'dear reader' reveals the problem of adjustment: the author still tends to feel an audience, listeners, somewhere, and must frequently recall that the
story is not for listeners but for readers, each one alone in his or her own world. The addiction of Dickens and other nineteenth-century novelists to declamatory reading of selections from their novels also reveals the lingering feeling for the old oral narrator's world. An especially persistent ghost from this world was the itinerant hero, whose travels served to string episodes together. . . . (Orality 148-49)

Paradoxically, the appearance in Twain's novel of such literary conventions reveals a break with, rather than a continuance of, the spirit of the nineteenth-century novelist. Huck's initial address to the reader and, more strikingly, his salutation at the end of the novel, "The End, Yours Truly Huck Finn," are designedly inadequate devices for masking the oral quality of the narrative. By their overwhelming failure to lend a literate air to Huck's narrative, these devices serve to emphasize the ineradicable orality of the novel's language. Indeed, Huck's opening address parodies the form it is meant (by Huck) to preserve:

You don't know about me, without you have read a book by the name of "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I
never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was aunt Polly... (1)
Huck undermines his literate allusion even as he offers it, and with it the community of literate readers he is addressing. By contrast, Melville's explicitly oral opening of *Moby-Dick*, "Call me Ishmael," is quickly subsumed by the overtly literate language of the narrator:

Call me Ishmael. Some years ago--never mind how long precisely--having little or no money in my purse, and nothing particular to interest me on shore, I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. (1)

And before we leave the first paragraph, Ishmael alludes to Cato's throwing himself upon his sword--clearly an attempt to create intimacy with his literate audience.

The inversion of oral and literate values in Twain's novel marks nothing short of a dialectical cresting, for it represents a literate embracing of the very orality from which literacy had been trying for so long to differentiate itself. And only by turning literacy upon itself, by the most literate of literate acts, could Twain achieve this. However, Twain has not simply superimposed his own self-reflexive attitudes on Huck's character.
Ong points out that "intelligence is relentlessly reflexive, so that even the external tools that it uses to implement its workings become 'internalized', that is, part of its own reflexive process" (Orality 81). But a peculiar quality of Huck's literacy is that it appears to have been internalized virtually from its inception. Of course, the demands of fiction account for much of Huck's facility with writing--the fact that we would not put up with a narrator who could not write well--and Walter Blair has written definitively on this subject in his article "Was Huckleberry Finn Written?" (1-3). But to conclude, as Blair does, that Huck's literate abilities and foibles are acceptable because they are "essential to the humor of America's funniest classic" (3) is to dismiss too readily the remarkable quality of Huck's literacy. Blair's insight hinges on his recognition of the ironic incongruity between Twain's voice and that of Huck, and so far as they are incongruous, the observation holds. For instance, Huck says at the end of Chapter 15, after his discussion with Jim concerning the French language, that "you can't learn a nigger to argue. So I quit" (98). His words are ironically opposed to both the immediate argument posed by Jim, one of the comprehensive arguments of the novel--that unlike the various genera of animals, the various species of mankind are more alike than different.
Jim's insight arises out of the aggregative quality of his oral consciousness—man is one thing, not many things, and should speak a single language. Conversely, Twain's insight is grounded implicitly in a literate, scientific analysis which recognizes differences among species, but also recognizes the greater relative differences between any two genera. And while Huck's analysis is faulty in the scientific sense, his approach to the problem of language is nonetheless analytical rather than aggregative, and as such is methodologically closer to Twain than to Jim. Moreover, even Huck's naive division of mankind according to language serves convolutedly to subsume the equally questionable division of humankind according to color. Thus, while Huck's falling back upon the social convention that regarded blacks as intellectually inferior to whites, i.e., that "you can't learn a nigger to argue," reflects the frustration of his attempt at analysis, the attempt itself nonetheless demonstrates Huck's willingness to disengage his literacy from the society which spawned it, and indeed to turn literacy upon that society.

Kevin Murphy has observed of Huckleberry Finn that "as with any tale told in the first person, we have two dramas to witness: the story being told and the unfolding sensibility of the person telling it" (383). This much discussed problem of disentangling Huck the narrator from Huck the character leads Murphy to conclude that Huck has, in the
end, not understood the significance of his story; Huck the narrator and Huck the character are at last one and the same. Murphy cites the inconclusive last paragraph of the novel, in which Huck the narrator actually appears as a character, as evidence that Huck remains essentially unchanged by his act of writing a book. Murphy writes:

Huck's assertion, after he learns of Pap's death and thus of his eligibility for . . . adventure, that he is going "to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest" offers a tiny hope that Huck wishes once again to escape the forces of repression. But we should recognize that this assertion is offered not so much as a repudiation of all Huck has witnessed on and along the river in his drift downstream, but as a resistance to the adopting and "sivilizing" that Aunt Sally alone is planning. That Huck continues to call Sally Phelps "Aunt Sally" has its own implications in terms of Huck's desire for family cohesiveness, and thus wherever he goes, Huck will surely bring with him his lonesomeness, the emotional vulnerability which makes prey to the dehumanizing schemes of a Tom Sawyer. (385)

Murphy's analysis fails in two respects. First, like James Cox, whose analysis has been discussed in an earlier chapter, Murphy entertains the possibility of an unrepressed
Huck. This leads Murphy to see Huck's "lonesomeness" and "emotional vulnerability," the very qualities that set Huck apart from Tom Sawyer, as weaknesses. The second failure is connected to the first. In searching for an unrepressed Huck, an unrealizable ideal, Murphy overlooks the real significance of Huck's literate act. In its failure to offer a conclusive recipe for action, as Tom Sawyer's schemes do, Huck's book refuses to validate any attempts at formal resolution. In short, the book subverts itself and so subordinates itself forever to its evolving human audience.

Huck has all along been witness to repressive schemes, discourse schemes, which inevitably dominate their human contexts. The Grangerfords, as has been noted, sacrifice common humanity to romantic ideals, which allows them to slaughter the Shepherdsons and sacrifice their own children without hesitation. The King and the Duke consciously manipulate discourse for less lofty, though perhaps less insidious, ends--their material needs--undermining their own community as well as others in the process. But of all the discourse schemes Huck encounters along the river, none more clearly disregards the human context than that of Colonel Sherburn. Moreover, Sherburn's attitude toward community stands in such distinct opposition to Huck's that further analysis of the Sherburn incident is essential to a better understanding of Huck's character. This analysis offers an opportunity to introduce the concept of "interpretive
communities," which I openly borrow from Stanley Fish's book *Is There a Text in This Class?* and which concept is crucial to my conclusion about Twain's novel.

In his chapter "How to Do Things with Austin and Searle," Fish applies speech-act theory to Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in conjunction with his own concept of "interpretive communites" (197-245), and his analysis of the character Coriolanus is strikingly applicable to Sherburn's character. Indeed, it is so appropriate that one must wonder if Sherburn is not actually modeled upon Coriolanus. Like Sherburn, Coriolanus sets himself apart from his community, refusing to abide by its laws and rituals and effectively forming a community of one, and he seeks some higher authority than the surrounding community by which to justify his actions. Fish writes:

What Coriolanus does opens the way for anyone who feels constrained by the bonds of a society to declare a society of his own, to nominate his own conventions, to stipulate his own obligations; suddenly there is a possibility of a succession of splinter coalitions, each inaugurated by the phrase Coriolanus hurls at those whom he has cast behind him: "There is a world elsewhere."

... The world elsewhere he seeks is not another state (for then he would simply be trading one system of conventional ties for another) but a
world where essences are immediately recognized and do not require for their validation the mediation of public procedures. (216-217)

When Sherburn stands before the Bricksville mob after he has shot the helpless Boggs, he says to them that the pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is--a mob; they don't fight with courage that's born in them, but with courage that's borrowed from their mass, and from their officers. (191-92)

Sherburn, too, seeks a world where abstractions like courage and honor are intrinsically meaningful and not reliant upon an interpretive community for meaning. But as Fish notes, such a world is an illusion, and any man who posits such a world becomes "exactly what he always wanted to be, a natural force whose movement through the world is independent of all supports except those provided by his own virtue. He is complete and sufficient unto himself. He is a God" (217). But of course, this too is an illusion, and Coriolanus is ultimately destroyed by the very sort of authority he has disdained (Fish 219).

We can only speculate about the ultimate fate of Colonel Sherburn, but we may be certain he has succumbed to the illusion that he can live apart from a community, sustained by ideals which he believes are intrinsically meaningful. The consequence of this is that he is able to
construe the killing of a helpless drunk as a positive act, as either courageous, or honorable, or both. Indeed, in the unfettered community of one, any action can become a virtue. And that Sherburn can sustain this illusion against the Bricksville mob speaks not of the correctness of his values, but of the weakness of the Bricksville community.

Huck is clearly caught between two extremes of community. At one extreme is the community of St. Petersburg, which threatens to envelope him and subsume his individuality. At the other extreme is Sherburn's community of one, which is in fact the antithesis of community. Somewhere in between lies the possibility for human choice, for such a concept has no meaning except in the tension between the community and the individual, between complete submission and absolute individual will. And all of the dialectics to which Huck is subjected throughout the novel, even those arising from his experiences with Jim, are finally subordinate to Huck's need to define his relationship to a community.

Those critics who have chosen to focus on those instances wherein Huck's evaluation of Jim's humanity falls short of the ideal of universal brotherhood are reflecting a bias toward an interpretive community, their own, at the expense of Huck's individuality. In other words, through inattention to the overriding problems of discourse suggested by the novel, such critics are themselves constrained by
interpretive systems which can only displace, but never account for, alternate interpretive systems. Such critics can be said to be formalist in the sense that, just as Sherburn has set up absolutes and attached intrinsic value to his own individual perceptions, they have attached intrinsic value to the perceptions of their interpretive communities. For instance, Kevin Murphy writes that "when Huck, in response to Jim's altruistic offer to delay his freedom to help the wounded Tom, says, 'I knewed he was white inside,' we see the extent to which Huck's determination to rationalize his freeing of Jim has warped his thinking" (381). Murphy's desire to depict Huck's literacy as the chain which binds him to the values of slaveholding society causes him to see only the extent to which Huck's thoughts reflect those values and to ignore how radically such a statement departs from the status quo of St. Petersburg. That is, Huck's thinking is only "warped" with regard to the ultimate "moral" (something Twain explicitly warns us not to find in the novel) of the story as perceived by Murphy.

Even George Carrington, who consciously tries to avoid a formalist approach to the novel, reveals his commitment to an interpretive strategy which looks to that most illusory of other worlds for its authority, a world beyond even language itself:

Not turning in a slave is, to be sure, something
of an achievement in a culture as rigid and as passionately founded on one issue (slavery) as this culture. It is, nevertheless, a major achievement only if one believes that not doing something is a major achievement . . . and . . . if one can still believe, after thirty chapters, that conscious commitment rather than behavior is really meaningful in the world of _Huckleberry Finn_. Many intellectuals, being verbal types anyway, assume that pronouncements are real actions rather than symbolic actions, and overlook Twain's book-long demonstration that language is not itself reality but a device for dealing with reality. (147)

Here Carrington misses the point that the reality which language deals with is always constituted by language itself. There is no knowable, absolute reality beyond that created by language. Only with faith in such an absolute, objective reality can Carrington make his evaluative distinction between doing and "not doing," between "something of an achievement" and "a major achievement," and between "symbolic actions" and "real actions." Moreover, Carrington's characterization of "intellectuals" as "verbal types" is rendered ironic by his implicit assertion that Huck would have committed a "real action" only if he had written the note to Miss Watson. All normal humans are
verbal, but intellectuals are specifically **literate** types, who always value what is written over what is merely thought or said. And Carrington places himself foremost among these literates by valuing as "most real" that which is written.

Indeed, Huck's reticence to act, and to act as a literate, grows directly out of his sensitivity to shifting linguistic contexts, his sensitivity to contingent realities. The hell to which Huck commits himself when he refuses to betray Jim in Chapter 31 is not the static, abstract, and thus manageable hell of Miss Watson, but rather the far more frightening hell of existential uncertainty. It should not be supposed from this, however, that Huck's decision is a nihilistic one, for while his dilemma is existential, Huck is no existentialist. His action is in keeping with his deepest needs, for with Jim lies the possibility of community. But here, too, the formalist trap must be avoided. Huck and Jim are no more likely to perceive jointly some absolute reality than are the citizens of St. Petersburg, or Pap. Moreover, even in a community of two, tension must exist between the shared views of the community and the views of the individual. Huck's literacy can never be absorbed by his community with Jim, and we cannot suppose that it should be. Ong points out that orality is not an ideal, and never was. To approach it positively is not to advocate it as a permanent state for any culture. Literacy opens
possibilities to the word and to human existence unimaginable without writing. Oral cultures today value their oral traditions and agonize over the loss of these traditions, but I have never encountered or heard of an oral culture that does not want to achieve literacy as soon as possible. (Some individuals of course do resist literacy, but are mostly soon lost sight of.) Yet orality is not despicable. It can produce creations beyond the reach of literates, for example, The Odyssey. Nor is orality ever completely eradicable: reading a text oralizes it. Both orality and the growth of literacy out of orality are necessary for the evolution of consciousness. (Orality 175)

Ong's remarks indicate both the impossibility and the undesirability of Huck's returning to the "ideal" of orality through his relationship with Jim. Unlike Pap, Huck will not be "lost sight of." But more importantly, Ong suggests that the literate consciousness is expanded by the self-reflexive examination of its oral origins, and it is precisely this self-reflexiveness which has been thrust on Huck through the necessity of forming an oral community with Jim. In attending to the needs of a community which cannot finally account for Huck's individuality, specifically his literate perceptions, the linguistic grounding of that
community, and indeed of all communities, is made manifest to Huck, though certainly at a subconscious level. The proof of this understanding lies in Huck's refusal to betray Jim to Miss Watson in Chapter 31. Huck's belief that he is sacrificing an absolute reality for a contingent one (he is actually trading one contingent reality for another), is perfectly opposed to Sherburn's actions in regard to Boggs and the citizens of Bricksville. Huck freely chooses the needs of the community over his individual needs.

Huck and Jim's partnership is not, however, an end in itself, but rather a step in the evolution of Huck's consciousness. And though this is in no way to belittle the importance of Huck and Jim's friendship, which is itself the key to Huck's expanded vision, such an understanding must vitiate the claim of many critics that the success or failure of the novel hinges on Huck's ability to sustain an unchanging relationship with Jim following the actions of Chapter 31. Huck must inevitably carry back to the literate world, through his book, the revelations he has gained through his association with Jim. For it is to this larger community, the community of his readers, to which Huck must ultimately answer. And fortunately or not, while Jim cannot follow Huck into this world, or more accurately, continue leading him in it, the apotheosis of community which characterizes Huck and Jim's relationship will also characterize Huck's literate creation.
It is necessary at this point to backtrack a bit and deal with the most prominent sub-theme in Twain's novel. The question of race must be logically subordinated to the problem of discourse if the charge that the ending of Twain's novel is regressive is to be avoided. David L. Smith's essay, "Huck, Jim, and American Racial Discourse," is the single most cogent discussion of the complex linguistic context which surrounds and defines Jim's character. Smith systematically destroys any doubt that Twain's characterization of Jim is dignified and anti-racist, and if we accept as the primary focus of the novel the problem of "racial discourse," little can be done to improve on Smith's observations. However, through the application of the orality/literacy dichotomy, it becomes clear that Twain has addressed the problem of discourse at an even more fundamental level. Smith writes in his conclusion that "given the subtlety of Mark Twain's approach, it is not surprising that most of his contemporaries misunderstood or simply ignored the novel's demystification of race" (10). But Twain's demystification of race is subordinate to his demystification of discourse in general. For only through such a comprehensive approach can we make sense of the disparate signals the novel sends.

Smith's analysis of racial discourse in the novel affords him relatively high ground from which to evaluate Jim's character. He argues that "by presenting us a series
of glimpses which penetrate the 'Negro' exterior and reveal the person beneath it, Twain debunks American racial discourse" (8), and for his chief example, he explores Jim's apparently stereotypical attachment to superstition. Smith's observation is that while Jim may indeed be superstitious, his superstitions work for him in a way that counteracts the attempts by the reader, or Tom Sawyer, or Huck to gain comic currency from those superstitions at Jim's expense. For instance, in Chapter 2, when Tom Sawyer attempts to play on Jim's superstitions by hanging Jim's hat on a tree while he is asleep, Smith notes that the net effect is to Jim's advantage. Jim gains notoriety among the other slaves by telling, embellishing, and retelling his adventure with witches. Smith writes:

This incident has often been interpreted as an example of risible Negro gullibility and ignorance, as exemplified by blackface minstrelsy. Such a reading has more than a little validity, but can only partially account for the implications of this scene. If not for the final sentence, such an account might seem wholly satisfactory, but the information that Jim becomes, through his own storytelling, unsuited for life as a slave, introduces unexpected complications. Is it likely that Jim has been deceived by his own prevarications—especially given what we learn
about his character subsequently? Or has he cleverly exploited the conventions of "Negro superstition" in order to turn a silly boy's prank to his own advantage? (7)

One can hardly hope to eclipse Smith's insight into the true spirit of the incident, that is, that Twain is elevating, not demeaning, Jim's character. However, the possibility that Jim has "cleverly exploited the conventions of 'Negro superstition' in order to turn a silly boy's prank to his own advantage" seems remote, since there is no textual evidence that he has sensed he was the victim of a prank. Moreover, the real hurt Jim suffers, when in the fog episode of Chapter 15 he catches Huckleberry Finn in a blatant lie, mitigates against the possibility that Jim would himself consciously exploit others. Smith does acknowledge the darker implication of his analysis, that Jim's "prevarications" place him a notch higher in, but not outside of, the exploitive pecking order of Tom Sawyer's world:

Jim's triumph may appear to be dependent upon the gullibility of other "superstitious" Negroes, but since we have no direct encounter with them, we cannot know whether they are unwitting victims of Jim's ruse or not. A willing audience need not be a totally credulous one. In any case, it is intelligence, not stupidity, which facilitates
Jim's triumph. Tom may have had his chuckle, but the last laugh, clearly, belongs to Jim. (7)

The prospect, certain or not, that Jim's intellectual triumph can come only at the expense of his good character is unsettling. But the dilemma is resolved by looking beyond the fact that Jim's actions are stereotypically "Negro" and observing that they are inherently oral. It is, after all, Huck's literate rendering of Jim's successive versions of his adventure that underscores the discrepancies among those versions. This is not to imply that an oral audience would not notice the changes in Jim's story, but that the high value placed on verbatim repetition of a narrative is a literate value, because such repetition is verifiable only in the presence of a text (Orality 57-68). And in a number of other ways, Jim's mode of storytelling conforms to the needs of the oral consciousness. The increasingly sensational nature of Jim's story accrues to Jim a certain amount of personal glory, but it also serves to make the story itself memorable. Ong observes that "oral memory works effectively with 'heavy' characters, persons whose deeds are monumental..." (Orality 70). Thus, in an oral culture, it is the storyteller's duty to his listeners to tell a story which is above all memorable. The formulaic superstitions upon which Jim's story is grounded are themselves memorable structurings of reality which enable the oral community to cope with their world, and through his
story, Jim re-establishes the connection between these superstitions and the world of living memory. As Ong points out, "for an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known" (Orality 45).

In recasting the ancient superstitions in personal terms, Jim has, in a sense, brought them forward and made them meaningful within the context of the present. Indeed, he repeats this function during the first encounter with Huck on Jackson's Island, invoking a number of superstitions pertinent to the immediate circumstances:

Some young birds come along, flying a yard or two at a time and lighting. Jim said it was a sign it was going to rain. He said it was a sign when young chickens flew that way, and so he reckoned it was the same way when young birds done it. I was going to catch some of them, but Jim wouldn't let me. He said it was death. He said his father laid mighty sick once, and some of them caught a bird, and his old granny said his father would die, and he did. (54)

Jim then takes the opportunity to catalogue a number of other superstitions, which is consistent with Ong's observation that, in the absence of neutral, written lists, the oral narrator will embed abstract information "in a narrative presenting specific commands for human action or
accounts of specific acts . . " (43). Thus, what might
appear to the literate mind as a wandering from the topic,
appropriate to the confused thinking of the stereotypical
Negro, is, within the context of orality, a necessary and
artful attention to the communal memory. The significance
of this observation is that because Jim's undermining of the
Negro stereotype is inadvertent, we need not look for him to
be consistent in this role. To be sure, Jim's intrinsic
talents frequently and necessarily create cracks in the
Negro stereotype, but they often parallel that stereotype,
too, particularly in the closing chapters of the novel. We
can only perceive the fundamental worth of Jim's character
by setting him free a final time--here--from the expec-
tations of literate discourse, and acknowledging his stature
as entirely independent of those expectations.

Huck couldn't "learn a nigger to argue," but Jim, the
oral storyteller, was able to teach Huck that discourse must
always attend to its human context if it is not to subor-
dinate that context. Jim's interpretation in Chapter 14 of
the "Sollermun" story clearly demonstrates his disregard for
static abstractions like justice when such abstractions are
valued above the immediate needs of a living child. And his
poignant revelation in Chapter 23 of his own unjust
punishment of his daughter demonstrates that Jim, too, is
vulnerable to reliance on conventions that do not fit the
immediate human context to which they are applied.
Revealingly, it is because his daughter is deaf and dumb that she is wrongly punished for being disobedient. Her mode of discourse, her smile, is misinterpreted through Jim's own oral context, and perhaps no other episode in the novel offers so much insight into Twain's comprehensive sympathy for his fellow beings.

As many critics have observed, the "fog" episode of Chapter 15 is pivotal in the evolution of Huck's relationship to Jim. However, Huck's recognition of Jim's humanity in this scene is not without significant ambiguity. Huck's prank, making Jim believe he has dreamed the events of the night before, directly violates the principles of the oral community that Jim has sought to form with Huck. Jim's stories, for all their rich embellishment, are never meant to deceive. They are meant to instruct, to entertain, and most important of all, they are meant to sustain that most valuable of all commodities in an oral community, living memory. Huck's prank, however, is intrinsically literate, not because of its inventiveness, for Jim's stories are certainly inventive, but because it consciously treats living memory as a plaything, and this disregard for memory can only be afforded by those who have recourse to a history, a text, which of course, Jim lacks. (This principle is later carried to its extreme by the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, who cannot recall the initial reason for their feud, but who continue to slaughter one
another according to the conventions of romantic literature.) Huck discovers through his boyish prank both his need for community and his power to subvert that community, both his commonality with Jim, and the essential difference in their operative realities.

Through his actions in Chapter 31, Huck undermines the literate community to which he is thus inescapably bound and, because of his literate talents, unusually suited. The choice Huck makes "forever, betwixt two things" when he tears up the note betraying Jim to Miss Watson is not simply a choice between Jim and society, between right and wrong, or even between orality and literacy. His choice is far more complex, for it is between the primacy of discourse and the primacy of the human community which is always in some sense defined by discourse. Ong seems almost to have had Huck's attack of conscience in mind when he wrote:

The advent of print intensified the inwardness fostered by script. The age of print was immediately marked in Protestant circles by advocacy of private, individual interpretation of the Bible, and in Catholic circles was marked by the growth of frequent private confession of sins, and concomitantly a stress on the examination of conscience. (Orality 153)

Thus, Huck's introspection, which leads him to deny the primacy of written discourse, is itself the product of
written discourse. In apparently moving away from literacy, when he tears up the note to Miss Watson, Huck has, in fact, more deeply interiorized that literacy. And while in one sense he has moved yet further away from the oral community he is seeking to preserve, he is, in another sense, no longer dialectically opposed to that orality. Written discourse can be fully subverted by the literate consciousness and has no need of orality to accomplish this task. And we should recall at this point what has already been pointed out about *Huckleberry Finn* as a whole. Twain's re-creation of the oral narrative was a result of literacy turned reflexively upon itself, the most literate of literate acts. Both Twain and Huck achieve their most heroic stature through acts of denial born out of reflection. Twain’s book, which is also Huck’s book, can never finally answer the discursive questions it raises, and thus must look forever to its community of readers for validation. The book denies the very illusion that a book inevitably creates—that meaning resides in the book, apart from interpretive community that makes sense of it—and so anticipates the critical argument that Stanley Fish would put forth nearly a hundred years later:

> interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader . . . produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features.

Interpretive communities are made up of those who
share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (14)

In the oral world, Jim's world, it can be seen that the interpretive community and that which the community interprets are always one. This is why Jim takes Huck's prank in the "fog episode" personally, that is, as an attack on his person, for he has no way of "objectively" distancing his person from the meaning of the prank—the prank has meaning only in Jim's consciousness. Indeed, such is the nature of all language, written or oral, but so strong is the illusion created by writing that language exists apart from its human component that, as Tom Sawyer will amply demonstrate in the closing chapters of the book, the literate consciousness regularly assumes that language is exempt from the flux of human consciousness and is in fact imbued with a static meaning.

To understand the human impulse behind this assumption we must again invoke the words of Ernest Becker:

The individual has to protect himself against the world, and he can do this only as any other animal would: by narrowing down the world, shutting off experience, developing an obliviousness both to
the terrors of the world and to his own anxieties. Otherwise he would be crippled for action. We cannot repeat too often the great lesson of Freudian psychology: that repression is normal self-protection and creative self-restriction—in a real sense, man's natural substitute for instinct. Rank has a perfect, key term for this natural human talent: he calls it "partialization" and very rightly sees that life is impossible without it. What we call the well-adjusted man has just this capacity to partialize the world for comfortable action. I have used the term "fetishization," which is exactly the same idea: the "normal" man bites off what he can chew and digest of life, and no more. (177-78)

This ability to partialize is certainly linguistic, and it can be seen that the great advantage of written language over oral language lies in the potential for written language to make "comfortable action" both infinitely accessible and infinitely variable. The danger is of course that written language interpreted by an individual operating outside of an interpretive community, or by an individual within an interpretive community which is itself anchored to a cannon of texts, may construe almost any action, even slavery, for instance, as "comfortable action." In an oral
community, comfortable action must always be limited by the relatively narrow scope of the communal consciousness.

Interestingly, James Cox has noted that "the ending [of *Huckleberry Finn*] is, to use Huck's term, uncomfortable. The problem is to define the source of this discomfort" (174). We would answer that the source of this discomfort lies in the book's refusal to do what we expect it to do: "partialize the world for comfortable action." Jim's mark upon Huck's consciousness, and upon his most ambitious literate creation is revealed in the book's unwillingness to do for its readers what Tom Sawyer's books have done for him, that is, offer static recipes for action which may be followed without reference to a living community.

Having discarded his "recipe for comfortable action," his note to Miss Watson, Huck approaches the Phelps' farm in a state of isolation we cannot long expect him to sustain. Indeed, his description in the opening of Chapter 32 evokes the memory of Pap's nightmare in Chapter 6. Effectively without an interpretive community, Huck, like Pap, is subject to the community of the dead:

> When I got there it was all still and Sunday-like, and hot and sunshiny—the hands was gone to the fields; and there was them kind of faint dronings of bugs and flies in the air that makes it seem so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone; and if a breeze fans along and quivers the
leaves, it makes you feel mournful, because you feel like it's spirits that's been dead ever so many years—and you always think they're talking about you. As a general thing, it makes a body wish he was dead, too, and done with it all. (276)

The sound of a spinning wheel, a fitting symbol for the domestic warmth and belongingness of the interpretive community that Muck so ardently desires but can no longer believe wholeheartedly in, subsequently causes Huck even to wish he were among the dead, for there, at least, he could belong:

When I got a little ways, I heard the dim hum of a spinning wheel wailing along up and sinking along down again: and then I knewed for certain I wished I was dead—for that is the lonesomest sound in the world. (277)

For a brief moment, Huck stands alone in the face of a tragic human fact, that only in the stasis of death is discourse immune to subversion by its human context, and even if circumstances did not intervene, which of course they do, we could not expect Huck to stand long before this icy absurdity. But in this moment Huck does articulate in the most profound terms his deepest need, his need for community, and it is within the context of this need that Huck's actions in the closing chapters must be evaluated.
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CHAPTER IV

THE CHILD OF STRENGTH AND THE ARTIST OF THE BEAUTIFUL

One could say it is necessary to approach the final chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* in much the same condition as Huck approaches them, that is, unsure of our interpretive strategy and trusting to "Providence" for direction. Because to the extent that readers attempt to fulfill their formal expectations through the ending of the novel, they will be disappointed by the novel's refusal to cooperate. The book can finally take us only to a place as ambiguous as the "territory," a region no longer wholly a wilderness and not yet a state, wherein the relationship between the individual and the community has yet to take its final shape. It is from this land, per Twain's warning, that "persons attempting to find a moral" in the book "will be banished," for the territory ceases to exist for those who would resolve its ambiguity. Many years after Twain gave his notice to his readers, William Styron, in a prefatory note to *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, wrote:

Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an "historical novel"
in conventional terms than a meditation on history. (vii)

Styron's "meditation" (who can help but wonder how directly a product of Twain's own meditation it is) created a character of such overt and wrenching ambiguity that his note to the reader seems a much more biting joke than Twain's. For Nat's own "morality" makes of him an avenging angel whose every act is at odds with his own humanity. Through the distorting perspective of time, Twain has come to be for many readers but a chider and cajoler of the conscience, an equivocating diluter of the brutal absurdity from which Styron's Nat Turner offers no apparent escape except death. And it is tempting to answer such a charge by simply noting that within his own social context Twain did his worst, that though he helped to create an audience that would one day pay to be alienated, Twain himself was forced to attend to certain conventions that inevitably took the edge off his message. Among these conventions is the final nod toward community, represented by the happy return to the nostalgic world of Tom Sawyer, which many readers see as the final destination of Huck and Jim's adventure. I do not believe, however, that Twain's object was merely to evoke self-awareness for its own sake, nor that he would have in any event retreated from this goal to please the popular sensibility. I have argued here that Twain's attendance
upon the value of community is a consistent theme of the novel, and that the problem of discourse and the question of community are finally inseparable. Thus, the final chapters should in no way be seen as a thematic acquiescence on Twain's part. Moreover, I will show that the ending of the novel represents, on the part of both Huck and Twain, a heroic action grounded in the interrelationship between individual and community.

We have said that Huck enters the closing chapters of the novel effectively without an interpretive community, but it would be more accurate to say that he has joined an interpretive community which, with regard to its potential to prescribe action, is ineffective. In concrete terms, he has abandoned the larger, more authoritative community of St. Petersburg for the community he has formed with Jim. However, in abstract terms, he has traded the constricting, and prescriptive community of religious and social stability for the open, but hopelessly fragmented community of all humanity. Tom Sawyer's appearance is a relief to Huck precisely because he is able to supply a context for action, and however absurd those actions may be, they are apparently in concert with Huck's sympathies, if not with his common sense.

We are faced in the end of the novel not so much with two Tom Sawyers, i.e., Tom, and Huck-as-Tom, as with two Mark Twains. On the one hand is Huck, the groping artistic
soul whose desire for understanding must be characterized as much by dread as by sincerity. On the other is Tom, the conscious craftsman who must ultimately give form to Huck's impulse, and in so doing must in some way make of it a lie, a rigged game that is both dishonest and presentable at the same time. By thus dividing himself, Twain can observe the demands of form that fiction, and indeed literacy, place upon him, while at the same time preserving the dignity of the impulse that underlies his writing (Barrow 9). Twain's writing is as much a "partialization" (Becker 177-78) of reality as the romantic novels Tom Sawyer invokes in his plans to free Jim, but by bringing this partialization to the forefront of the novel's action and by openly parodying this process through Tom, Twain refers the reader to the contingent nature of all discourse, even his own. The community of man, after all, shares no common interpretive strategy, and if Twain is not merely to wink at this paradox, he must somehow account for his own literary impulses.

To put Twain's dilemma less abstractly, Twain must account, without condescension, for the fact that his novel's most sympathetic character, Jim, cannot read his own story. To write is to create outsiders, and to discourse to posit an interpretive community. Tom Sawyer's character serves not merely as a barb in the side of the Romantic tradition, but as a self-assessment of Twain's own literate consciousness. And from this perspective, we can begin to
comprehend the appropriateness, both in scale and tone, of Tom's lengthy "evasion." The evasion takes up approximately the last nine chapters of the novel, and throughout this section Tom incessantly and, for many readers, tediously invokes the conventions of Romantic literature, just as Twain, in much more subtle fashion, has done throughout the book. In his essay "Languages and Identity in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn," Brook Thomas writes:

All of Huck's and Jim's adventures are created in Twain's literary imagination. Like Tom inventing his difficulties, Twain "had to contrive them out of (his) own head." But also, like Tom, Twain really comes up with derivative rather than original adventures. He relies on the staples of adventure stories, drawing from sources as diverse as Walter Scott and Shakespeare. (9)

Here Thomas's argument precisely parallels my own analysis of the ending. Tom's romances must be identified with Twain's own literate creation as well as the works of his romantic predecessors. But Thomas proceeds on the assumption that language approximates rather than constitutes human reality (9), a point of view which is at odds with my own analysis of discourse and ultimately my overall evaluation of Twain's book. And though his identification of Tom Sawyer's romances with Twain's own writing is in perfect accord with my own evaluation of the
ending, it is necessary here to draw clear distinctions between Thomas's analysis and my own.

Thomas argues that all language is in some sense a "lie" about reality, and that "our ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' lies in Huckleberry Finn depends on the original contract with the author to trust the sincerity of his fiction" (9). Following this argument, Thomas concludes that Huck's decision to head for the territory is a rejection of discourse itself, a rejection of lies, and an opting for "that imaginary space of silent simplicity" (10). But the inherent trouble with discourse is that it can ultimately be no more absolutely identified as a lie than a truth. That language must itself constitute reality, and yet must always be contingent upon an interpretive community for meaning is an unavoidable ambiguity of human existence. And far from fleeing this ambiguity, Huck and Twain pursue it to its most profound consequences.

Huck's shock at Tom Sawyer's willingness to aid him in Jim's escape arises not out of Huck's lingering attachment to the community of St. Petersburg, but out of the realization that Tom is violating the concept of community as Tom, not Huck, must understand it. Huck, after all, has undergone a great deal of anguished soul searching in coming to his decision to free Jim, and consciously or not, he has not simply cast off the standards of his interpretive
community, but rather heeded the imperatives of a more comprehensive community. Huck's failing, such as it is, is in his inability to comprehend that he has truly chosen this larger community, and not merely been driven by his own shortcomings from the community to which he should naturally belong. Ironically, Tom Sawyer, who is far too imbedded in the community of St. Petersburg to make such a choice, appears, to Huck, to be freely discarding his community without any principle whatsoever. This is clearly Huck's perspective when he writes:

Well, one thing was dead sure; and that was, that Tom Sawyer was in earnest, and was actuly going to help steal that nigger out of slavery. That was the thing that was too many for me. Here was a boy that was respectable, and well brung up; and had a character to lose; and folks at home that had characters; and he was bright and not leatherheaded; and knowing, and not ignorant; and not mean, but kind; and yet here he was, without any more pride, or rightness, or feeling, than to stoop to this business, and make himself a shame, and his family a shame, before everybody. I couldn't understand it, no way at all. It was outrageous, and I knowed I ought to just up and tell him so; and so be his true friend, and let him quit the thing right where he was, and same
To Huck, Tom's actions must appear as willful, if not as terrifying as Colonel Sherburn's murder of Boggs. Huck correctly perceives that the abandonment of one's interpretive community is not an act to be taken lightly, and his sensitivity to Tom's contextual identity is fully consistent with his recognition of Jim's identity as a human being in earlier chapters.

Huck's attempt to warn the King and the Duke about their impending lynching confirms his own expanded notion of community, and his observation upon seeing them tarred and feathered that "human beings can be awful cruel to one another" (290) is an eloquent distillation of the axiological dynamic at the core of Huck's consciousness. But also revealed by this episode is the ungainliness of Huck's sympathies, for they must attend to both enemy and friend alike—thus Huck's "yaller dog" conscience that is as likely to attack its master as its master's enemy. We can then see that when the work of the world must get done, when Jim must be freed and the Phelps' must be mercilessly tricked (and by analogy, when a novel must be written) Tom Sawyer's codified schemes are a relief from Huck's unpredictable "providence" that may indifferently watch a slave sold down the river or an old man tarred and feathered.

The affront to Jim's dignity which Tom Sawyer's games represent to so many readers is mitigated by a number of
circumstances. Just as Jim's oral consciousness could not perceive of Huck's prank in Chapter 15 as being somehow decontextualized (and therefore impersonal), as something harmless and comical apart from his own person, neither can he imagine that Tom Sawyer's antics are anything but essential to the needs of his situation. Indeed, Tom Sawyer's prescriptions are no more inherently bizarre than the superstitions with which Jim himself confronts the mysteries of existence. Certainly Jim may doubt the necessity of some of Tom's directives, as when he says that he's "willin' to tackle mos' anything 'at ain't unreasonable, but ef you en Huck fetches a rattlesnake in heah for me to tame, I's gwine to leave, dat's shore" (325). But Jim must finally accede to Tom's apparently superior authority in matters of escape, though Tom does settle for garter-snakes with buttons on their tails instead of a rattlesnake. Tom himself believes wholeheartedly in the appropriateness of his actions with regard to the apotheosis of style that dominates his interpretive strategy. His schemes, though certainly dehumanizing from the reader's perspective, are so only inadvertently. And even in the final chapter of the novel, Jim's acceptance without indignity of the knowledge that he was free all along is neatly juxtaposed to the reaffirmation of his faith that his "hairy bres'" (360-61) would bring him riches one day. What matters is not the ephemeral string of events leading up to the stroke of good luck,
which the literate reader can review with a sense of irony, but the ultimate outcome, which for Jim is preordained.

It must be reiterated as well that the shift in tone between Chapter 31 and the closing chapters, essentially from the sincere to the comical with regard to Jim's predicament, is a necessary element in Twain's own "evasion" of the literate dilemma as I have described it. Tom's "style" must clash with the preceding episodes at every level if Twain's subversion of his own artistic power is to be complete. And Twain's artistic powers must be subverted if he is at last to escape the charge that he is simply a more subtle and creative version of Tom Sawyer. Like the mechanical butterfly created by Hawthorne's Artist of the Beautiful, Twain's novel can achieve its highest significance only through its formal destruction at the hands of the uncomprehending "Child of Strength" (Hawthorne 247), Tom Sawyer.

Had Twain succumbed to the temptation to allow Huck his moment of glory (as every film version of Huckleberry Finn has done), had he allowed Huck to throw off the oppressive schemes of Tom Sawyer and free Jim in a manner more befitting the form of the first thirty-one chapters, he would have destroyed through this formally apt resolution the central ambiguity of his novel. And it is this ambiguity which speaks across not only the barriers of race and
class, of nationality and language, and even, as we have argued, orality and literacy, but also across the barrier of time itself. For the source of Huck's dilemma is not merely the circumstances of a particular time and place, but rather his very humanness. Huck's defense against the world, against the fact of his own individual mortality, is to embrace that world, to identify with an all-encompassing abstraction that negates his individuality and at the same time places it beyond the reach of death. Again, we must turn to Becker for clarification:

we [can] see that what the psychoanalysts call "identification" is a natural urge to join the overwhelming powers that transcend one. Childhood identification is then merely a special case of this urge: the child merges himself with the representatives of the cosmic process—what we have called the "transference focalization" of terror, majesty, and power. When one merges with the self-transcending parents or social group he is, in some real sense, trying to live in some larger expansiveness of meaning. We miss the complexity of heroism if we fail to understand this point; we miss its complete grasp of the person—a grasp not only in the support of power that self-transcendence gives to him but a grasp of his whole being in joy and love. The urge to immortality is
not a simple reflex of the death-anxiety but a reaching out by one's whole being toward life."

(152-53)

In the first three chapters of this work we have seen how Huck has been propelled, by his linguistic context, beyond indentification with family and society toward identification with humanity itself. However, in the closing chapters of the novel, we see that Huck's transcendent vision must, if it is to apply to the world of flesh and blood, be partialized, and that in this partialization also lies the potential for the vision to be compromised. As Becker would put it, Huck is a candidate for "clinical neurosis" (184) at either extreme. Complete fidelity to his vision would exclude the possibility of action in the world of experience. Becker describes the results:

If you are not involved in what others take for granted as the nourishment of their lives, then your own life becomes a total problem. At its extreme this describes the schizoid type par excellence. Clinically this state was called the "narcissistic neurosis" or psychosis. The psychotic is the one who cannot shut out the world, whose repressions are all on the surface, whose defenses no longer work; and so he withdraws from the world and into himself and his fantasies. He fences himself off and becomes his
own world (narcissism). (182-83)

At the other extreme, Huck is susceptible to the sort of compulsive behavior that characterizes Tom Sawyer, a result of "too much narrowing-down of the world for action" (Becker 180). Tom's inflexible approach to experience is none other than a way of avoiding the terror of real experience. For despite his ability to appropriate the visions of others, Tom Sawyer is finally incapable of creative action. Huck alone is able to avoid the extremes which Becker describes, through his most heroic action, the simultaneous creation and renunciation of his book.

Becker's own abstraction of the problem of human existence strikingly confirms what I have said about the ending of *Huckleberry Finn*:

The neurotic exhausts himself not only in self-preoccupations like hypochondriacal fears and all sorts of fantasies, but also in others: those around him on whom he is dependent become his therapeutic work project; he takes out his subjective problems on them. But people are not clay to be molded; they have needs and counter-wills of their own. The neurotic's frustration as a failed artist can't be remedied by anything but an objective creative work of his own. Another way of looking at it is to say that the more totally one takes in the world as a problem, the more inferior
or "bad" one is going to feel inside oneself. He can try to work out this "badness" by striving for perfection, and then the neurotic symptom becomes his "creative" work. . . But it is obvious to us that the only way to work on perfection is in the form of an objective work that is fully under your control and is perfectible in some real ways. Either you eat up yourself and others around you, trying for perfection; or you objectify that imperfection in a work, on which you then unleash your creative powers. In this sense, some kind of objective creativity is the only answer man has to the problem of life. In this way he satisfies nature, which asks that he live and act objectively as a vital animal plunging into the world; but he also satisfies his own distinctive human nature because he plunges in on his own symbolic terms and not as a reflex of the world as given to mere physical sense experience. He takes in the world, makes a total problem out of it, and then gives out a fashioned, human answer to that problem. This, as Goethe saw in Faust, is the highest that man can achieve. (184-85)

Clearly, Huck is moving toward an artistic solution to the dilemma of his existence--his book--while Tom is just as clearly a failed artist, working out his dilemma on Huck and
Jim. Tom must frenetically attend to matters of style if he is to avoid the reality of the utter meaninglessness of his actions. Indeed, he must hide from himself the knowledge that Jim is already a free man if his games are to retain their meaning for him. To Huck's credit, he is able to force Tom to "let on" occasionally when Tom's compulsive behavior truly threatens to endanger Jim's chances for freedom, as when he convinces Tom that a pick and not a caseknife should be used to dig the hole beneath Jim's cabin (307). And it should be noted in this connection that however supple Huck may appear to be with regard to Tom's "foolishness," he is able to apply his creative powers at the crucial moment and bend Tom's will to his own.

Huck's creative solution to his dilemma, however preferable to Tom's compulsions, does not of itself answer entirely for what I believe to be the truly heroic nature of Huck. Becker adds a single caveat to the artist's solution to the problem of existence, and it is essential to my analysis of *Huckleberry Finn*. The artist's work too can be a form of compulsion. Art can be construed, in Becker's words, as "a social license to be obsessed" (186). Thus Huck's own renunciation of his book, his assertion that if he had "knowed what a trouble it was to make a book [he] wouldn't a tackled it and ain't agoing to no more" (362) is the final indispensable ingredient of his heroic vision. Moreover, his willingness to abandon a world he has shaped
in answer to his own problems of existence for the uncertainties of the Territory reveals that the true hero can never fully be, in time, but must somehow always continue to become. The heroic vision must look forever to another time and place for its consumation, such acts as it may inspire falling forever short of that inspiration.

By juxtaposing Huck and Tom in the final chapters of his book, Twain succeeds in revealing the continuing inner struggle that an artist must face if his work is to rise above the realm of imitation and enter the world of original creation. Moreover, in revealing the struggle, Twain was himself required to enter into it. And whether we conjecture that Twain was aware of the insight he gave us into his own artistic impulse, or that like Huck, he was propelled by his own integrity into a sphere of heroism he could not himself fully comprehend, the stark originality of Huckleberry Finn is sufficient evidence of Twain's courage. The novel stands before us, flaunting what Henry Nash Smith has called its "flaws"--in fact the cryptic passwords of the truly heroic and unfailingly loving community to which Twain and Huck sought admission. That this community of the heroic can exist only in the artistic imagination is perhaps the great human tragedy. For as the paradoxical combination of words "tragic hero" implies, our limitations, our bodies, our mortality, conspire against our visions. And the visions themselves must be tempered by doubt, even as they
are brought forth through monumental effort in works like *Huckleberry Finn*. The reader of *Huckleberry Finn* must accept this doubt, not as a flaw in Twain's novel, or evidence of a decline into cynical despair, but as an essential ingredient of the heroic vision. It must weigh equally with that most optimistic of human endeavors, the artistic creation. Huck's book, Twain's book, calls forth a community which can at last be realized only in the individual, heroic heart.
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