DEATH IN THE WORKS OF MARK TWAIN

THESIS

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By

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An examination of the persistent death motif in Twain's literature reveals a strong fusion of his art, personal experience and philosophical conclusions. Death imagery dramatizes Twain's pessimistic view of an estranged humanity existing without purpose or direction in an incomprehensible universe. Twain shows in his works that religious and social beliefs only obscure the fact that the meaning of death is beyond man's intellectual and perceptual powers. In Twain's view the only certainty about death is that it is a release from the preordained tragedies of existence. Illusions, primordial terrors, and mystifying dreams shape man's disordered reality, Twain concludes, and therefore death is as meaningless as life.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Mark Twain is known throughout the world as a master humorist; all ages, classes, and nationalities find his comedy irresistible. Few can restrain their laughter from his deft and artless wit that is so broad in its appeal. Twain's humor, however, is not really based on gaiety and geniality but the sad recognition of human failure, violence, and inevitable death. Beneath the sparkling surface of his wit runs a deep vein of pessimism and melancholy. Intensely aware of the potential of tragedy in every comic situation, Twain once observed, "Everything human is pathetic. The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow . . . ."¹ The tragic figure of death pervades Mark Twain's comedy and is his most persistent and most effective literary motif. Twain plays upon the death motif in a variety of ways—in farce, satire, parody, and irony—to express moods of estrangement and dread and to present the terrible reality of death. He uses death imagery to expose man's guilt, morbidity, sentimentality, cruelty, stupidity, and pretentiousness, and to depict the irremediable schism between man and nature.

¹Mark Twain, Following the Equator (New York, 1897), I, 119.
Twain's death motif shows his great versatility of literary expression, and it also measures his artistic development and the expansion of his social concerns. In his early stories, he treats death with coarse, burlesque humor and exploits the shock value of horror and violence; but even in these unpolished works Twain uses death imagery for social and political criticism. As Twain developed and refined his use of the death motif, the early coarseness and sensationalism abated, but his urge toward social reform continued. The social commentary in his early stories anticipates Twain's life-long commitment to expose and correct the depraved human condition. The death motif in his first travel books, The Innocents Abroad (1869) and Roughing It (1872), illustrates his growing concern for universal social issues. In both of these books, death imagery underlines the theme of estrangement and exploitation between societies and the ultimate alienation between man and nature. In The Innocents Abroad, Twain sees the Old World exploiting the culture of the dead past and ignoring the suffering of the living present. Compounding this human callousness is the supreme indifference of nature, which Twain depicts as aloof from the ineffectual endeavors of man to leave some permanent mark upon the earth. But, at the same time, Twain sees nature as a malevolent force, serving as a pattern for man's own savage and malicious behavior. In Roughing It, human
brutality rules the new Western society, preying upon all who are weak, helpless, or different, and this human violence is played against a background of a seductive, malicious nature, spawning human greed with false promises of instant riches.

In his Mississippi River reminiscences, Twain reaches artistic heights in the use of death imagery. In *Tom Sawyer* (1876), Tom's estrangement from adult society, underlined by the death motif, becomes a microcosm of man's alienation from an indifferent universe. While Tom plays at imitative games to impress an enigmatic adult society, his elders play at ceremonial games to cope with an incomprehensible reality.

To prepare for the writing of *Life on the Mississippi* (1882), Twain revisited the scenes of his youth, regaining atmosphere and material that made this book an engrossing, sometimes poetic glimpse into the dangers and rewards of river life. Most important, Twain's reexamination of his boyhood environment enabled him to synthesize both the romantic and realistic views of life and death along the river. This new insight helped him complete the half-finished *Huckleberry Finn* (1884). In alternating patterns of burlesque and reality, *Huckleberry Finn* reflects the inseparability of joy and sorrow, life and death. While *Tom Sawyer* depicts a world of idyllic illusion, *Huckleberry Finn* shows a many-faceted view of river life, the beauty and
threat of nature, the heroism and vulnerability of the individual, the apathy and savagery of the mob, the pathos and tenacity of the outcast, and the piety and hypocrisy of society. In *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain uses death imagery to show the tragedy of human delusion and the tawdry pettiness that survives the destruction of man's noblest intentions.

Twain's later works treat the universal problems of death and human destiny. *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), *A Connecticut Yankee* (1889), and "The Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts (written from 1897 through 1908) show Twain retreating into a deterministic philosophy in which man is the helpless victim of a preordained fate and death is preferable to the fluctuating fortunes of life. In the unfinished manuscript "The Great Dark" (written in 1897), however, Twain expresses for the first time in his literature a transcendent human spirit, resigned to, yet triumphant over, the inevitability of death. In this brief episode, Captain Davis does not see death as an escape but as a challenge to human fortitude and faith. Just as the complexities of life and death are granted in *Huckleberry Finn*, "The Great Dark" acknowledges the sublime courage of man as he confronts the unknowable.

Twain's philosophical conclusions about life and humanity were neither original nor profound, and they were often contradictory. He could never achieve the philosopher's logical,
analytical detachment. All his life he furiously rebelled against the inseparable mixture of good and evil in the "damned human race." As responsive to inner turmoil as to the life around him, Twain recognized the errors of humanity in his own twofold nature:

What a man sees in the human race is merely himself in the deep and honest privacy of his own heart. Byron despised the race because he despised himself. I feel as Byron did and for the same reason.2

Twain's strong emotions got in the way of his undisciplined intellect, and, unable to accept life's inevitable disappointments, he often wasted his creative powers in futile rage. He could not endure any deviation from his own high expectations as to what the quality of life and the morality of man should be. As Gladys Bellamy has said,

He always expected too much of life, too much of himself, and too much of mankind. Essentially a perfectionist, he was too bitterly disappointed to be able to make ready adjustments when life and mankind failed to measure up to his expectations . . . . [I]t dictates his reluctance to grant the mixed nature of life, and inevitable mingling of good and evil which is the very stuff of life.3

His was an emotional rather than an intellectual genius, but Twain's uncanny knowledge of human nature, expressed with the richest of imaginations, raised humor and retrospection to the level of poetry. Max Eastman includes him in "the

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2Mark Twain, quoted by Van Wyck Brooks, The Ordeal of Mark Twain (New York, 1920), p. 13. Brooks states this observation was "noted on the margin of one of [Twain's] books."

3Gladys C. Bellamy, Mark Twain as Literary Artist (Norman, 1950), p. 218.
tribe of Shakespeare" for his imaginative genius, and Bernard DeVoto points out that Twain's shallow philosophy did not diminish the power of his perception:

Mark Twain was not a systematic thinker . . . . [H]e held in succession all possible opinions about every subject he tried to analyze, held none of them long and was able to drive none very deep beneath the surface. Especially as a metaphysician he was as feeble a novice as ever ventured into that stormy sea. But in what he perceived, in what he felt, in the nerve-ends of emotion, in the mysterious ferments of art which transform experience, he was a great mind—there has been no greater—in American literature.  

With his unerring perception of human responses, Twain knew intuitively the origins of laughter. He was incapable of an intellectual analysis of humor, but his instincts for the comic were infallible. First of all, he knew that absurdities must be clearly and instantly recognizable. Henri Bergson calls meticulous attention to authentic detail the essence of humor, and Twain stated his first consideration was authenticity. He knew that laughter was inspired by incongruities, and his constant use of the death motif and persistent juxtaposing of life-death imagery shows he recognized that the fundamental incongruity of life and

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death serves comedy best of all. Sigmund Freud says we expend devastating emotion through the release of laughter, and Twain, from his own experience, knew that relief from overpowering anguish can be attained through comic expression.

Although Twain's epistemology was shallow and imprecise, he showed a remarkable insight into the changing directions of philosophy. Long before the advent of existentialism, Twain anticipated the twentieth century's sense of alienation from God and nature, and he saw that human existence is both tragic and absurd. There is something very modern in Twain's alien souls futilely struggling to understand some puzzling, impenetrable order closed to them by an indifferent authority. Twain realized that comedy better than tragedy can depict the truths about the alienated human condition, and that the absurdity of man's existence is accentuated by the comic incongruity of life and death.


9Bellamy, p. 68.
Death and humor for Twain, then, were strongly related, and some of the sources for his death motif were the same as for his humor: the Western literary tradition, the preoccupation of his fundamentalist upbringing, the effect of the death-fraught Mississippi River milieu, and the influence of his journalistic background. Primarily, though, Twain's death motif stems from his own viewpoint, from the deep disturbances of his spirit. Calling for further study into Twain's psyche, DeVoto makes a tentative psychological speculation equating Twain's fear of death with a fear of sex:

More . . . will have to be studied in the book that someone must eventually devote to the bases of Mark's mind. Perhaps the central effort of that book will be to determine why death, the image and humors and disgusts of death, the fear of death, and the threat of death colored his phantasy from childhood on and perhaps the answer if it is ever found, will show that the threat of death was twinned in his phantasy, as it often is, with the fear of women's sex.\(^\text{10}\)

Leslie Fiedler, in what may be a response to DeVoto's invocation, says that Twain's preoccupation with death and avoidance of sex in his literature was due to unresolved Oedipal feelings. Fiedler indicates that this psychological repression is confined to American authors, including Twain,\(^\text{11}\) but he ignores the fact that sexless novels about childhood and violence were in abundance in English as well as American literature in the late nineteenth century. This was a

\(^{10}\) DeVoto, p. 102.

popular Victorian literary genre, and its use is no proof that any particular author employing it necessarily suffered from sexual abnormality. Since Twain openly expressed a regret at the limitations and prudishness of Victorian literary standards, it seems likely that his morally "pure" literature was not due to personal sexual repression but was simply in compliance with the tastes and moral codes of his time. And although Fiedler implies that Twain's late marriage is additional proof of abnormality, in actuality Twain's past history of a regrettable lack of sexual repression almost jeopardized his suit for the virginal hand of Livy Langdon.

It is only possible to surmise the real causes of Twain's preoccupation with death, but it must be granted that his constant reference to death both within and outside his literature is unusual. Death turns up everywhere in Twain's expression—in his wittiest remarks, his most revealing letters, and his most casual statements. The subjects of Twain's death-oriented statements range from interviews—

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13 Justin Kaplan, Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain (New York, 1966), p. 15.
The moment "talk" is put into print, you recognize that it is not what it was when you heard it; you perceive that an immense something has disappeared from it. That is its soul. You have nothing left on your hands . . . . Everything that gave that body warmth, grace, friendliness . . . is gone and nothing is left but a pallid, stiff, and repulsive cadaver-- to unwelcome visitors--"Some mentally dead people brought their corpses with them for a long visit--" to a supplicant for favor--

I have long wanted to meet you, get acquainted with you and kill you . . . . What do you want with a consulship? What you want is a rope . . . . The thing for you is a burial permit. You have only to speak, I will see that you get it.1

In a fearful attack of stage fright before his first lecture, Twain claimed he saw the face of death.17 He attempted suicide18 and admitted he had once traveled twelve hundred miles in an aborted plan to murder a man.19 He visited cemeteries out of curiosity20 and responded to death with

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15Clara Clemens, My Father, Mark Twain (New York, 1951), p. 42.


18Albert Bigelow Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography, XXX (New York, 1912), 291.

19Kaplan, p. 15.

20Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Letters, p. 714.
overwrought emotion.\textsuperscript{21} In what can only be termed a severe neurosis, Twain saw death as an ubiquitous, constantly threatening phenomenon, and that it was never far below the surface of his mind is evident from the variety of ways it is used in his commentary.

Twain's personality had a great deal to do with his death orientation. He was an extremely sensitive, emotional man, and letters reveal that even during his happiest and most successful stages he had periods of extraordinary pessimism.\textsuperscript{22} Van Wyck Brooks theorizes that this despondency was the result of his frustration as an artist caused by his stifling provincial background and the rigid domination by his wife and mother.\textsuperscript{23} Other critics' arguments that Twain's background contributed to his genius are more convincing,\textsuperscript{24} however, and many believe that Livy and Jane had

\textsuperscript{21}There is every evidence that Twain had a strongly neurotic reaction to death: distraught letters followed almost all family deaths; he had nightmares and spells of somnambulance following deaths; and he included detailed accounts of personal tragedies in all his autobiographical material.

\textsuperscript{22}Mark Twain, \textit{Mark Twain to Mrs. Fairbanks}, pp. 199-200.

\textsuperscript{23}Brooks, pp. 26, 58.

\textsuperscript{24}Critics who state that Twain was benefited and stimulated by his Southwestern background are Minnie M. Brashear, \textit{Mark Twain, Son of Missouri} (Chapel Hill, 1934), p. 73, and Constance Rourke, \textit{American Humor} (New York, 1931), p. 218.
little domination over Twain.  Although moodiness would be natural to a man of Twain's volatile disposition, there was something unnatural about the degree of guilt that Twain associated with every experience of death. Guilt, of course, was part of his religious upbringing, and Twain had many unfortunate experiences as a child that would have fostered a nagging, remorseless conscience. Twain's overwrought letter to his sister-in-law following the death of his brother Henry indicates that this tragedy may have set the pattern for Twain's life-long habit of self-blame. After Henry's death, Twain held himself responsible for the deaths in his family, sometimes exaggerating the circumstances in order to emphasize his culpability. The problem of the badgering human conscience appears constantly in his literature, reflecting his own relentless conscience which he symbolically killed in "The Facts Concerning the Recent Carnival of Crime in Connecticut" (written in 1876). Twain's artistry enabled him to transform his own disturbing experiences into literature that treats the anguish of human guilt.

For his literary material, Twain drew mainly from his emotional retrospection. The clues to the "bases of Mark's mind" lie in this literature, and an examination of the

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25 DeLancey Ferguson, Mark Twain: Man and Legend (Indianapolis, 1943), p. 152. Ferguson is among the majority of critics who feel that Twain was not greatly influenced in his writing by family members.

26 Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Letters, XXXIV.
relationship of Twain's literary expression to the phenomenon of death helps clarify his use of several mysterious submotifs to his death imagery. These submotifs provide a key to some of Twain's psychological obsessions and show how he was able to transform his emotional experiences into literature. For Twain, there was a strong symbolic association between human alienation and the mystery of life and death, and his presentation of the alienated stranger in an impenetrable society symbolizes human existence confronting the inexplicable universe: there is Twain himself alienated in the Old World and the new West, Tom Sawyer separated from an indifferent adult society, Huck Finn estranged from a paradoxical civilization, Pudd'nhead Wilson ostracized by Dawson's Landing, Roxie segregated by an exploitive white society, and Hank Morgan banished by a backward, irrational society.

Many of Twain's submotifs are associated with water, ships, derelicts, and sometimes the imagery of either an ice-bound or fiery sea. Twain often equates a drifting, lifeless ship with doomed human existence, and a sense of aimless wandering pervades his literature. Human vagrants, drifting towards death or an unseeable future, are the primary focus of his literature. Parts of the human body lend mystery and dread to his death motif. Hands are foreboding, thumbprints betraying, and dead faces are usually veiled. Twain puts great emphasis on sounds to evoke moods of fear,
alienation, and loneliness. He paints landscapes of death with moonlight, shadowy gravestones, and rotting fences. Evil men are described as having dead-white faces and long, black hair, and creatures associated with death--rats, spiders, snakes, hounds, and owls--fill the hostile background. Twain often goes below the earth to describe receptacles of death--vaults and dungeons, and tomb-like caves. Some of these submotifs are for gothic effect, and some show his background among the superstitious and imaginative river people. Others, like the cave, the drifting ship, the hand, and the dead face submotifs, are directly related to Twain's own experiences and are significant not only to his literature but to an understanding of his psychology.

The significance of the submotifs in Twain's death imagery can be understood when they are related to the traumatic events of his youth. Twain's ability to reshape these experiences produced retrospective literature of great poignancy and universal concern. The death submotifs associated with water, like the drowning scene in "The Chronicle of Young Satan" (written in 1897), are derived from childhood experiences. The doomed, drifting ship that appears in Huckleberry Finn and "The Great Dark" was undoubtedly inspired by the Hornet disaster survivors and Twain's cholera-plagued voyage to the East. Ice-bound waters were part of Twain's steamboat pilot experience, and fiery seas can be associated
CHAPTER II

THE SHADOWED VALLEY: THE FORMATIVE PERIOD

The region which nurtured Mark Twain's genius was a land of idyllic illusion and grim reality--beauty and danger, lethargy and violence, optimism and deep melancholy--the manifold incongruities that are reflected in Twain's dualistic literature. Embodying the Mississippi River Valley's contradictions was the great river itself, "the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun . . . ." The river's sparkling surface, like Twain's illusory humor, belied its potential for tragedy. Swollen by torrential rains, the Mississippi brought death and destruction to the people along its shores, and childhood memories were filled not only with the river's grandeur and freedom but also with the inevitable drownings and tragic accidents in its dangerous waters. Young Sam Clemens was often a witness to the terrors of the river, and the adult Mark Twain would transform these nightmarish recollections into the dark undertones of his literature. The memories of mutilated bodies, of playmates' drownings, of his own innumerable escapes, of a child's permanent affliction--all part of young Sam's river experiences--are expressed in the large

1 Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi (New York, 1944), p. 28.
number of drowning deaths, real and feigned, that appear in Twain's literature: there are the counterfeit drownings in Tom Sawyer, the symbolic and real drownings in Huckleberry Finn, the fatalistic drowning in "The Chronicle of Young Satan," and the hideous drowned corpse in The Innocents Abroad. Few authors have excelled Twain in describing the beauty of the river and childhood's loving kinship to nature, but Twain's early experiences taught him that natural forces are primarily hostile to life:

... [T]here is nothing kindly, nothing beneficent, nothing friendly in Nature toward any creature, except by capricious fits and starts; ... Nature's attitude toward all life is profoundly vicious, treacherous and malignant. 2

The Mississippi steamboat, too, showed a two-faced promise of life and threat of destruction. To the little river towns, slumbering along the shore, it brought excitement and bustling commerce, inspiring boys like Sam Clemens to become river pilots. In Life on the Mississippi, the negro drayman's exhilarating cry, "S-t-e-a-m-boat a-comin'," awakens the town to life and stirs the small boys' imaginations. In reality, however, the steamboat took a fearful toll of lives:

The Hannibal press was filled with constant news of hulls ripped open on snags, boilers bursting with their live steam and tongues of flame, races that ended in collision or other shapes of sudden death ... And

commonly enough, carelessness and violence on river boats left their mute evidence along Hannibal's shore--some person unknown washed up at the mouth of Bear Creek . . . a man's corpse tangled in driftwood . . . or . . . a woman's body "drowned at least a month" . . . . Captains rarely turned back at the cry of man or woman overboard . . . less from indifference than conviction that the boat's wheel seldom missed its mark.3

When Twain's dream of becoming a pilot was finally realized, it had become marred by a personal loss in a tragic steamboat explosion and his own tortured awareness of the river's lurking dangers. In Huckleberry Finn, the association of death and the steamboat plays an important and symbolic role in Huck's adventures. As a steamboat threatens the destruction of Huck and Jim, it assumes the image of hellish malignancy, a Mississippi Moby Dick:

We could hear her pounding along, but we didn't see her good till she was close. She aimed right for us. Often they do that and try to see how close they can come without touching; sometimes the wheel bites off a sweep, and then the pilot sticks his head out and laughs, and thinks he's mighty smart. Well, here she comes, and we said she was going to try to shave us; but she didn't seem to be sheering off a bit. She was a big one, and she was coming in a hurry, too, looking like a black cloud with rows of glow-worms around it; but all of a sudden she bulged out, big and scary, with a long row of wide-open furnace doors shining like red-hot teeth, and her monstrous bows and guards hanging right over us . . . . As Jim went overboard on one side and I on the other, she come smashing straight through the raft.4

3Dixon Wecter, Sam Clemens of Hannibal (Boston, 1952), p. 165.

The heterogeneous valley population reflected the river's shining promise and dark reality. Although the region was often governed by high-principled intellectuals like Twain's father, John Clemens, it was also infested by men of incredible brutality. On the river, the boatmen drank, fought, and killed with animalistic ferocity. Outlaws and renegades, marauding from hideouts in the wilderness, killed for pleasure as well as profit and made the forests death traps for travelers and a constant threat to the defenseless river towns. Adding to the primitive violence of the environment, slave owners were given the unquestioned right to mutilate and kill their slaves. Twain witnessed such an accepted practice of the era:

When I was ten I saw a man fling a lump of iron ore at his slaveman in anger—for merely doing something awkwardly, as if that were a crime. It bounded from his skull and the man fell and never spoke again. He was dead in an hour. I knew the man had a right to kill his slave if he wanted to, and yet it seemed a pitiful thing, and somehow wrong, though why wrong I was not deep enough to explain if I had been asked to do it.

Compounding the scourges of brutal humanity and destructive nature, malarial disease ravaged the valley people,

5 Minnie M. Brashear, Mark Twain, Son of Missouri (Chapel Hill, 1934), p. 29.

6 Kenneth S. Lynn, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor (Boston, 1959), p. 23.

7 Mark Twain, Notebook, p. 271.
leaving them physically weakened and victims of emotionally disturbing fevers.⁸ Chronically disease-ridden, they were likely to be lethargic and melancholy, visionary, and fanatically religious.⁹ The majority of the people looked fervently to religion to impose some kind of understandable order upon their chaotic environment. Emotional religious sects that fed upon primordial fears and guilts prospered in the river valley, promising solace and salvation but, in reality, only intensifying the psychological burden of the conscience.¹⁰ In the valley's fundamentalist viewpoint, man is innately depraved and sinful, and disasters and death are the proper wages of his inherent guilt. Only simple, truly innocent souls like Twains' mother, Jane Clemens, could live comfortably with such a harsh religious doctrine. Her husband John found it incompatible with his rational mind and complex personality, and her famous son would always be emotionally torn between his spiritual indoctrination by his

⁸Lynn, p. 24.
⁹Bernard DeVoto, Mark Twain's America (Cambridge, 1932), p. 57.
¹⁰Ibid., p. 51.
with his brother Henry's death. Water imagery used in scenes of death and rebirth in *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* have biblical significance and can be related to Twain's early religious exposure. The ominous hand submotif that appears in *Tom Sawyer* can be traced to Twain's disturbing recollection of a corpse on the floor of his father's office. Most meaningfully bound to Twain's psyche are the cave and dead face submotifs, both stemming from his memory of Hannibal's cave with its gruesomely exhibited corpse. In *Tom Sawyer*, the cave becomes Injun Joe's tomb; in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain dramatically, but perhaps unconsciously, expresses his revulsion towards death, for all the dead faces in this novel are veiled from the sight of the living.

Twain's death motif shows the strong fusion of his life and artistry. His literature is undeniably shaped by an emotional bias derived from his extraordinary experiences and his tumultuous early environment. The death motif not only provides a key to the puzzle of the man and the artist but also becomes the measure of Twain's artistic growth, philosophical thought, and imaginative genius. To understand how the death motif helps solve this literary and psychological puzzle, it is necessary to review the relationship between Twain's formative years and their expression in his literature.
devout mother and his father's example of an intellectual rejection of all religious dogmas. 11

According to the fundamentalists, death was an accepted punishment for immanent sin, and evil was personified in the figure of the devil. This literal religious concept was natural to the valley pioneers and suited their need to dramatize, rather than analyze, the mysteries of human existence. Resembling their early English ancestors in their dramatic expression and deeply-seated superstitions, these people developed a fanciful folklore that helped expend their oppressive fears and concerns. 12 Irrationality guided their lives: good fortune, read in natural phenomena, was preserved by careful observation of rituals, and death and disasters were forewarned by omens and dreams. 13 This fantastic

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11 That Twain retained some of his early religious beliefs, is evident in this letter to Howells (Mark Twain-Howells Letters, II [Cambridge, 1960], 461):

...the religious folly you are born in you will die in, no matter what apparently reasonabler [sic] religious folly may seem to have taken its place meanwhile, & abolished & obliterated it.

Twain continually vacillated between the Calvinistic belief in immortality and satirization of this belief. Just before he died, he gave some indication that he did, after all, believe in the afterlife—for he whispered to his daughter, "If we should meet again . . . ." (See Clara Clemens, My Father, Mark Twain [New York, 1931], p. 156).

12 DeVoto, p. 67.

13 Ibid., p. 71.
atmosphere, further enriched by negro slave mysticism, stimulated imaginations and fostered a strong love of story telling. The valley folk loved to exchange exaggerated and imaginative tales that astonished and frightened. They enjoyed the melodramatic and revelled in rituals--prayer meetings and revivals, baptisms, and, particularly, funerals.

The frontiersmen sought comfort from their fears through literature as well as religion, story-telling, and ritual. Their needs were satisfied by several different literary approaches to the problems of their existence. Some found solace in the sentimental prose and graveyard poetry printed in local newspapers and the popular "gift" books that were sold by subscription. Kenneth Lynn points out that the graveyard poetry had a therapeutic effect on the pioneer:

... verses about death gave voice to the Westerner's yearning for release from the tough world in which he lived; and because it was sentimental, such poetry enabled him to take a melancholy satisfaction in his fate--to dissolve brutal thoughts and secret sorrows in a warm bath of tears.

Laughter, rather than tears, was a more satisfactory release for those frontiersmen who had adopted a stoical attitude towards catastrophes. From the wellspring of their suppressed emotions surged a defiant humor that ridiculed their grim existence by comic exaggeration and burlesque. This heroic,

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14 DeVoto, pp. 92-94.  
15 Wecter, p. 44.  
17 Rourke, pp. 36-37.
self-ridiculing attitude gave birth to the rich tradition of Southwestern humor that inspired the literature of Mark Twain. Twain's burlesque of the romantic, sentimental attitude towards death was the result of his literary apprenticeship with Southwestern humorists who felt romantic melancholy was inappropriate to the frontiersman's tough, realistic way of confronting the death and violence that surrounded him.\textsuperscript{18} In \textit{Huckleberry Finn}, Twain takes great glee in mocking sentimental verse with "Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd" by the dead and doleful Emmeline Grangerford ("with her disposition, she was having a better time in the graveyard."). In Huck's dead-pan manner, Twain ridicules the poetess:

\begin{quote}
Every time a man died, or a woman died, or a child died, she would be on hand with her "tribute" before he was cold. She called them tributes. The neighbors said it was the doctor first, then Emmeline, then the undertaker--the undertaker never got in ahead of Emmeline but once, and then she hung fire on a rhyme for the dead person's name, which was Whistler. She warn't ever the same, after that . . . .\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Comic burlesque and exaggeration like Twain's was the literary approach that genuinely expressed the Westerner's method of coping with his stark environment. Lynn says of the frontiersman that "instead of yearning for death as a surcease to human degradation, why not revel in life by building a fantastic humor about one's brutish unconcern."\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{Life on the Mississippi}, Twain's poetic rendition of the raftsman's battle

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{18}Bellamy, p. 45. \textsuperscript{19}Clemens, \textit{Huckleberry Finn}, p. 85. \textsuperscript{20}Lynn, p. 27.
\end{flushright}
cry is an example of the frontiersman's comic defiance of death and destruction:

"Whoo-oop! I'm the old original iron-jawed, brass-mounted, copper-bellied corpse-maker from the wilds of Arkansaw! Look at me! I'm the man they call Sudden Death and General Desolation! Sired by a hurricane, dam'd by an earthquake, half-brother to the cholera, nearly related to the smallpox on the mother's side! Look at me! I take nineteen alligators and a bar'l of whisky for breakfast when I'm in robust health, and a bushel of rattlesnakes and a dead body when I'm ailing. I split the everlasting rocks with my glance, and I squench the thunder when I speak! Blood's my natural drink, and the wails of the dying is music to my ear. Cast your eye on me, gentlemen! and lay low and hold your breath, for I'm about to turn myself loose."

For the Southwestern humorists, the social rituals of death, even the corpse itself, were objects of broad humor; they stressed the gruesome and offensive aspects of death and deformity. Obsessive interest in disfigurement was a characteristic of the valley people, and Twain recalls how a grossly deformed thumbnail of his teacher aroused great interest and envy among the students. Lynn says that pre-occupation with the bizarre and macabre was an important element in Southwestern humor. Newspapers emphasized the sensationalized and gory, and the popular tall stories were filled with gruesome details. Again, the Westerner found he could reduce death and disaster to understandable human terms, if he could find some way to laugh at his violent existence.

21 Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, p. 18.

The stories the Westerners laughed at were sickeningly violent, as exaggeratedly cruel as the tall talk was blasphemous; at their comic heart . . . lay the apprehension of some fantastically deformed thing—a frontiersman's face, hideously mangled, a Negro or an Indian writhing in pain; the death-agony of a poor animal . . . Anthony M. Ludovici's gloomy contention that laughter is man's way of showing his fangs finds ample justification in the humor of trans-Allegheny West.23

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the bored townspeople find joy in setting a mongrel on fire and laugh when a circus clown seems destined to be killed. In Twain's *Autobiography* (1959), an abolitionist's hanging becomes the town's picnic, and in both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the townspeople crowd a ferry searching the river for the boys' supposedly drowned bodies. In these episodes, Twain expresses his contempt for the callousness of the crowd and their macabre preoccupation.

Twain was disgusted with the crowd's gory interests, but he had learned his craft in a newspaper environment, and his own comedy contained much that was gross and bizarre. In 1881, a few years after he had published *Tom Sawyer*, Twain wrote "The Invalid's Story," which deals with the stench of a supposed corpse placed in a railcar. A philosophical trainman, mistaking the odor of ripening Limburger cheese for the stench of a decaying body, comments:

"He's pretty ripe, ain't he! . . . Sometimes it's uncertain whether they're really gone or not—seem gone, you know—body warm, joints limber—and so although you think they're gone, you don't really

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23 Lynn, p. 30.
know . . . ." Then, after a pause, and slightly lifting his elbow toward the box, --"but he ain't in a trance! No, sir, I'd go bail for him!"24

Despite its coarseness, "The Invalid's Story" is irresistibly funny, but William Dean Howells, Twain's friend and sometime mentor, strongly disapproved of the story, and it was not published until eleven years later in Twain's "Merry Tales" (1892). DeVoto comments that it is "grotesquely awful in its insistence on smells . . . . The sketch is not describable as lovely, but it is immensely true to one kind of humor of the frontier and of Mark Twain."25

Frontier literary interests were not confined to the romantically sentimental or the Western genre of the exaggerated and grotesque. English literature was available to the valley pioneer, for the local newspapers invariably ran stories and monthly installments by English writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The valley people were not isolated from the literary world; Brashear points out that the literacy rate was surprisingly high in the river valley counties, and that a number of libraries and colleges were established and well-attended.26 Certainly, the novels of Charles Dickens, who mixed both sadness and humor in his portrayals of humble life, were immensely popular with the valley pioneers, for


26Minnie M. Brashear, Mark Twain, Son of Missouri (Chapel Hill, 1934), p. 207.
they recognized this incongruous mixture as part of their own lives. The Dickensian brand of humor, with its undercurrent of human tragedy and social criticism, is evident in the literature of Mark Twain, but this influence was something to which Twain never admitted. Twain was well-read and was often seen with "a volume of Dickens or Poe, or a history under his arm. During his pilot years, possibly earlier, he read Cervantes, Tom Hood, Goldsmith, Milton and Shakespeare . . . ." Brashear reports that once, in Keokuk, Twain was asked what he was reading, and he replied that it was just a "so-called" funny book and that one day he would write a funnier one himself. Most authorities agree that the "so-called" funny book was probably Dickens' *Pickwick Papers*, which--like so many of Twain's works--has a strong theme of human injustice and estrangement underlying its comic facade.

Although he was undoubtedly inspired by the tragi-comedies of universal literature, Twain received most of his impressions from the tumultuous environment of his childhood. The Mississippi Valley in the mid-Victorian period was a ruthless, turbulent region, the perfect atmosphere to nurture an imaginative genius, especially one perceptive of the dualistic quality of this passionate, yet melancholy, society.

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28 Brashear, p. 197.
29 Ibid., p. 222.
30 Ibid., p. 222.
31 Ibid., p. 222.
Twain inherited an established literary tradition that dealt with the incongruities of this valley, but his imaginative humor and great sensitivity would raise this literature to the level of universal significance. He possessed both the intensity and the despondency of these valley people and would always see reality as dualistic as the environment in which he was reared. His literature is expressed largely in terms of duality, in imagery that juxtaposes the real and the unreal--twins, dreams, claims, and pretenders--and places the celebration of life beside the ritual of death.

Twain knew death intimately from early childhood, and the disturbing impressions he received then would give his literature its undercurrent of tragedy. Although frequent, violent, and premature deaths were commonplace to the pioneer era of the valley region, young Sam Clemens was an uncommonly impressionable child. The things that happened to him in his childhood would be forever implanted in his fathomless memory, enriching his literature but distorting his personal viewpoint. The basic health problems of the valley were such that both children and adults died with appalling frequency, and the sad losses of the Clemens family were not unusual. When Twain was four, his elder sister Margaret died. When Twain was seven, his beloved, ten-year-old brother Benjamin died, and he would associate Ben's death with a vivid impression of his mother. He always remembered how she moaned in
anguish over the death, had all the Clemens children touch the dead boy's cheek, and shared a rare and sorrowful embrace with her extremely reserved husband. Twain recalled Benjamin's death with strong guilt, although the feeling is inappropriate since he was so young at the time of the death. Overpowering guilt associated with death, however, would be his life-long affliction and would be extended beyond family members.

One of the most vivid of Twain's guilt-haunted Hannibal memories was the death of a friendless tramp. Young Sam sympathized with the drunken vagrant, who was being taunted by a crowd of boys, and gave him some matches for his pipe. Later the tramp was placed in the village jail, where he accidentally set his straw bed on fire. In the morning, the villagers found the cell in flames and the tramp beyond help. Sam, appalled at the sight and filled with guilt, watched until he could stand it no longer:

The drunken tramp who was burned up in the village jail lay upon my conscience a hundred nights afterward and filled them with hideous dreams--dreams in which I saw his appealing face as I had seen it in the pathetic reality, pressed against the window bars, with the red hell glowing behind him--a face which seemed to say to me "If you had not given me matches this would not have happened; you are responsible for my death." I was not responsible for it, for I had meant him no harm but only good, when I let him have the matches; but no matter, mine was a trained Presbyterian conscience and knew but one duty--to hunt and harry its slave upon all pretexts.

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and on all occasions, particularly when there was no sense nor reason in it. The tramp—who was to blame—suffered ten minutes; I who was not to blame, suffered three months.

In Tom Sawyer, Muff Potter is a seedy, pathetic drunkard, much like the tramp whose death tortured the conscience of Sam Clemens. Tom is also tormented by nightmares, for Muff has been jailed for a murder Tom secretly knows was actually committed by the vindictive Injun Joe. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain tells how, tortured by nightmares about the tramp's death, he talked in his sleep and became anxious that his younger brother Henry would overhear his terrible secret. He deceived the suspicious Henry into believing another boy had given the tramp the fatal matches. Tom Sawyer has a similar anxiety about his brother Sid, who is curious about Tom's mutterings in his sleep. Worried that he will divulge his guilty secret in his sleep, Tom binds his jaws nightly for a pretended toothache. And, again like the sympathetic Sam, Tom and Huck sneak tobacco and matches to the hapless Muff Potter.

Guilt and death were forever twinned in Twain's fantasy. In The Innocents Abroad, and in his lectures, he recalled a dreadful scene from childhood that is a forerunner of the guilt-ridden death scenes that haunt Tom and Huck. In Milan,

33 Ibid., p. 40.
34 Twain, Life on the Mississippi, p. 328.
he is shown a statue of a skinned man, and the hideous figure awakens a traumatic memory of a dead body in his father's office. The dead man, a victim of a homicide under the jurisdiction of Judge Clemens, was placed in the office to await the coroner's inquest. Young Sam returned home late at night after playing hookey from school, and decided to sleep on the office couch to avoid discovery and punishment. In this dramatic episode, Twain uses with great effect the death submotif of the outstretched hand, Sam's first glimpse of the greater horrors that await. Here, the dead face is described in gruesome detail, probably for its sensational effect when Twain used the sequence on the lecture stage.

As I lay on the lounge and my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, I fancied I could see a long, dusky, shapeless thing stretched upon the floor. A cold shiver went through me. I turned my face to the wall. That did not answer. I was afraid that that thing would creep over and seize me in the dark. I turned back and stared at it for minutes and minutes--they seemed hours. It appeared to me that the lagging moonlight never, never would get to it. I turned to the wall and counted twenty, to pass the feverish time away. I looked--the pale square was nearer. I turned again, and counted fifty--it was almost touching it. With desperate will I turned about, all in a tremble. A white human hand lay in the moonlight! Such an awful sinking at the heart--such a sudden gasp for breath! I felt--I cannot tell what I felt. When I recovered strength enough, I faced the wall again. But no boy could have remained so, with that mysterious hand behind him. I counted again and looked--the most of a naked arm was exposed. I put my hand over my eyes and counted till I could stand it no longer, and then, the pallid face of a man was there, with the corners of the mouth drawn down, and the eyes fixed and glassy in death! I raised to a sitting posture and glowered on that corpse till the
light crept down the bare breast,—line by line—inch by inch—past the nipple,—and then it disclosed a ghastly stab!

The human hand, stretched so ominously towards young Sam Clemens, appears twice in similar dreadful circumstances in *Tom Sawyer*, and, in both cases, it is Injun Joe's. Tom sees the hand when he opens the door to Injun Joe's moonlit room in the tavern; later he sees it stretched before him in the candlelit cave where he and Becky are lost.

The terror of the corpse scene is followed by young Sam's comic retreat, illustrative of Twain's use of the alternation of the serious and the comic. In the frontier manner, death is put in its proper place; it is a reality that must be coped with, and characteristically, with tension-relieving humor:

I went away from there. I do not say that I went away in any sort of hurry, but I simply went—that is sufficient. I went out at the window, and I carried the sash along with me. I did not need the sash, but it was handier to take it than it was to leave it, and so I took it. I was not scared, but I was considerably agitated.

This account is reminiscent of Twain's suspenseful "Golden Arm" story, a gruesome tale that he first heard from the slave Uncle Dan'l, owned by Twain's uncle, John Quarles. Twain loved the negro race all his life and revered their poignant spirituals and vivid story-telling. The influence of this race upon his literature is not only reflected in the

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35Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (New York, 1869) I, 173.

36Ibid., p. 174.
compelling characterizations of Nigger Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* and Roxy in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, but also in the wealth of detailed superstitious rituals practiced by Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Jim. The plight of the negro slave, with its denial of basic human freedoms and rights, establishes the tragic themes in both *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. Twain recognized the association with the slaves as one of the privileged riches he enjoyed each summer on the farm of the expansive, loving Quarles family. From the negroes he learned to pace his horror stories for maximum suspense and enjoyment, utilizing their instinctive knowledge of man's guilty, irrational response to death and the unknown. Recalling Uncle Dan'l's expert ghost story-telling, Twain said

*It was on the farm that I got my strong liking for his race and my appreciation of certain of its fine qualities . . . . I can feel again the creepy joy which quivered through me when the time for the ghost story of the "Golden Arm" was reached . . . . 37*

It is incongruous that the man who could so joyously recall the carefree days of childhood actually experienced as a child such extraordinary violence, horror, fear, and death. The memories of the past were so painful that Twain dreaded writing his autobiography because it reminded him of the violence of his childhood. 38 Most of his autobiography


is written with the detachment of the adult looking back and resolutely avoiding the most excruciating revelations rather than with an immediacy and authenticity of impression and experience. DeLancey Ferguson says of Twain that "strangely little of his inner life and thought and feeling entered the Autobiography; for those, the reader must go to Tom Sawyer, Huckleberry Finn, and 'The Mysterious Stranger.'" 39 One of the most bizarre of Twain's recollections, and one which he reports in his autobiography as heard second-hand rather than one of personal involvement, is of the cave near Hannibal known as McDowell's in Twain's childhood. In Tom Sawyer, this cave is referred to as "McDougal's" and becomes Injun Joe's tomb. During Twain's childhood a cadaver was exhibited in the cave, and it is possible that the effect of this gruesome object may have had a great deal to do with the strangely veiled dead faces in Huckleberry Finn. Both Life on the Mississippi and the Autobiography describe the corpse of the young girl in McDowell's cave, and, in both books, Twain states that "it is said" that the body was viewed by the coarse and morbid. Wecter establishes that the cadaver was in the cave in the 1840's, at a time when Twain was no older than ten. In Life on the Mississippi, Twain recalls,

There is an interesting cave a mile or two below Hannibal, among the bluffs . . . . In my time the person who then owned it turned it into a mausoleum

39 Ferguson, p. 307.
for his daughter, aged fourteen. The body of this poor child was put into a copper cylinder filled with alcohol, and this was suspended in one of the dismal avenues of the cave. The top of the cylinder was removable; and it was said to be a common thing for the baser order of tourists to drag the dead face into view and examine it and comment upon it.

In his Autobiography, Twain again recalls the dreadful exhibit and says, "The body was preserved in alcohol and it was said that loafers and rowdies used to drag it up by the hair and look at the dead face."

It is difficult to imagine that Sam Clemens, one of the most incorrigible and curious of the Hannibal boys, was not among the "rowdies" who took a morbid joy at the awful sight, and that his extraordinarily sensitive nature did not react with severe guilt and revulsion. At the least, Twain, described by Howells and Joe Twichell as having "exquisite" sensibilities, would be likely to recall the experience with a deep sense of shame. Twain's inability to recall the faces of his dead or absent loved ones is a matter of record, and

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40 Twain, Life on the Mississippi, p. 324.
41 Twain, Autobiography, p. 9.
42 Twain, Notebook, p. 388. Twain was disturbed that he was unable to recall faces; after his wife's death, he wrote: "I cannot reproduce Livy's face in my mind's eye--I was never in my life able to reproduce a face. It is a curious infirmity--and now at last I realize that it is a calamity."
in *Huckleberry Finn*, Jim covers Pap's dead face to conceal it from Huck, Huck covers Buck Grangerford's face when the boy is killed in ambush, and Peter Wilkes' face is covered with a "damp cloth" when Huck hides the money sack in the dead man's coffin.

As individuals, the valley people committed bizarre and violent deeds, but they were capable of extreme cruelty when they acted in crowds. Banded together in their small defenseless towns against the chaos of the frontier, they were more likely to accept mob rule than to think independently and judiciously. They formed the pitiless crowds that Twain depicts in his literature, crowds that goad, tar and feather, threaten and bully, judge and ostracize the helpless individual. Witnessing the mob's rapacity, Huck Finn would say with simple, sad recognition, "Human beings can be awful cruel to one another." In *Huckleberry Finn*, the drunken Boggs would be goaded by such a mob into defying the deadly Colonel Sherburn, and the greedy Royal Pretenders would be tortured by the stupid crowd they so easily gulled. In his childhood, Twain saw Boggs' prototype die under the attentions of a stupidly self-righteous mob:

The shooting down of poor old Smarr in the main street at noonday supplied me with some more dreams; and in them I always saw again the grotesque closing picture—the great family Bible spread open on the profane old man's breast by some thoughtful idiot and rising and
sinking to the labored breathings and adding the torture of its leaden weight to the dying struggles. We are curiously made. In all the throng of gaping and sympathetic onlookers there was not one with common sense enough to perceive that an anvil would have been in better taste there than the Bible, less open to sarcastic criticism and swifter in its atrocious work. In My nightmares I gasped and struggled for breath under the crush of that vast book for many a night.43

Twain parodies the mob's blood-thirsty appetite in the Roman gladiator scene in The Innocents Abroad, and in The Gilded Age a pitiless crowd is eager to see Laura Hawkins convicted and executed. In Twain's viewpoint, the evils and stupidities of the "damned human race" were greatly magnified in the crowd.

Singly, or in crowds, the people of the river valley made an indelible impression upon Sam Clemens. And certainly the reverse was true, for Sam was determined to be noticed. As a child, he was melodramatic by nature, endowed with great personal magnetism, a fine voice, and a knack for story telling. He was popular with the other boys for his adventuresome leadership. As a boy, he was as prankish as Tom Sawyer, and as resourceful and bumptious as Hank Morgan. When a childhood plague hit Hannibal, killing a large percentage of the child population, Sam felt left out because he did not catch the disease. He deliberately courted an almost fatal case of measles, rather enjoying the attention his condition brought. He was saved from drowning innumerable times, but no punishment could persuade him to stay away

43Twain, Autobiography, p. 41.
from the river. An emotional child in a large, poor, and undemonstrative family, sickness and near-death brought the attention that Sam desperately needed. His was a strange childhood, full of fantasy, weird and wonderful escapades, and shadowed by loneliness, violence and death. Sam's imagination and sensitivity would make him abnormally receptive to his turbulent environment and leave him extremely vulnerable to the tragic inevitabilities of reality.

Twain's childhood was soon behind him, for his father died when Sam was eleven, leaving his family impoverished. The ethical but ineffectual John Clemens, regarded by his children with respect but not deep affection died after a brief illness. Twain remembered the death with deep remorse, recalled that his father gave a last word and kiss to his daughter Pamela only, remembered that his mother extracted a promise of obedience from him as he wept before his father's coffin, and that he was disturbed by sleep-walking and nightmares for months afterwards. He may or may not have surreptitiously viewed his father's autopsy. Howells urged him to delete the mention of the autopsy in the Autobiography as a reflection on John Clemens' "character."44 The account is confusing, and whether Sam actually saw his father's autopsy has not been confirmed. If it were true, it would be consistent with the rest of Sam's bizarre experiences and

44 William Dean Howells, Mark Twain-Howells Letters, II, 315.
would be one more reason for his dualistic attitude towards death, a strange mixture of fascination and revulsion.

Even the pilot's life that Twain recalls in *Life on the Mississippi* as idyllic was shadowed by death and catastrophe, for records indicate that his river career was fraught with oppressive worries and fears of disaster. And in 1858, when Twain was twenty-three, he suffered one of the most traumatic personal losses of his life--the death of his brother Henry--as the result of a steamboat accident. This disaster seems likely to have affected him most as man and artist. In retrospect, he always associated guilt with death but Henry's tragedy may have initiated this association, or at least accentuated Twain's neurosis concerning death. Twain deeply loved his younger brother, although he was quite jealous of him. Henry was the favorite of his mother--a well-behaved, handsome, brightly studious boy, never unmanageable like Sam. Twain portrayed him as Sid in *Tom Sawyer*, and Henry was the same observant tattle-tale, although Twain said he was a "much finer" person than Sid. Twain got Henry the job as clerk on the ill-fated *Pennsylvania*, a steam packet on which Twain was serving as steersman. Twain had a fight with the irascible pilot and left the packet three days before she exploded. When the explosion occurred, Henry was thrown clear of the boat and was uninjured; but, perhaps

45 Ferguson, p. 55.
remembering Twain's advice in event of disaster, he returned to share the rescue work and was caught in the raging fire. Twain found his dying brother in an improvised hospital in Memphis and watched by his bed for six days and nights. Henry rallied and, according to Twain's account in his Autobiography, was out of danger when he was mistakenly given an overdose of morphine, a sedative Twain had ordered hoping to give the boy a peaceful night. His account indicates that the hospital staff was inexperienced:

The physicians on watch were young fellows hardly out of the medical college and they made a mistake—they had no way of measuring the eighth of a grain of morphine, so they guessed at it and gave him a vast quantity heaped on the end of a knife blade, and the fatal effects were soon apparent.46

The most poignant letter in the entire collection of Twain's letters is his account of Henry's death to his sister-in-law.47 In it, Twain pleads for her prayers for forgiveness, for his guilt in this tragedy is understandable: if he had not quarreled with the pilot, he would have been on the boat with Henry; if he had not convinced Henry of his duty in case of disaster, the boy would not have returned to the burning boat; if he had not asked for the dose of morphine, Henry would have survived his injuries.

46Twain, Autobiography, p. 101. Medically, it would be unlikely that the amount of morphine that would fit "on the end of a knife blade" would be fatal. Also, although Twain claims that the dead face "was drawn and distorted by the effects of opium" (p. 102), morphine does not have this effect. It seems likely that Twain's culpability here was fantasized.

In *Life on the Mississippi*, Twain gives the details of the fiery deaths of others on the *Pennsylvania*, while his *Autobiography* focuses on Henry's death. In the *Autobiography*, Twain states he had a prophetic dream before the tragedy. In the dream, he saw every detail of Henry's casket, and when Twain rushed to the viewing room to make sure that the opium-distorted dead face would not be visible to his mother, he found that the room setting, the flowers, the chairs supporting the casket were exactly as appeared in his dream. Time has a way of becoming confused in the minds of the grief-stricken, and Twain's dream may have been either a re-enactment of the tragedy or the fantasy of a reminiscing old man, for the account of the tragedy in *Life on the Mississippi*—written when Twain was comparatively young—does not mention the dream. But the interesting part of the *Autobiography* account is his anxiety concerning Henry's face—here, again, it is important to Twain that the dead face is screened from the living.

Twain must have suffered terribly from relentless self-castigation following Henry's death. His Presbyterian upbringing, with its emphasis on innate guilt, and his unfortunate childhood confrontations with death had already distorted his conscience. After Henry's tragedy, Twain's conscience appears to have become a sort of "Mr. Hyde," the

psychological personification of self-torture. Brashear points out that

there is ample evidence that Sam Clemens had an almost devastating conscience. Besides the autobiographical stories of his boyhood suffering under its lashes, the mere count of the number of times the word conscience appears in Mark Twain's writings is evidence of how insistently the monitor had sought to establish its hold upon him. His "Carnival of Crime" story, written during the most successful period of his life, was his way of getting even with it, and is characteristic of his valiant and humorous manner of facing repulses throughout his life. . . . 49

In "Carnival of Crime," Twain makes his conscience a disgustingly deformed dwarf who nags Twain about all his past guilts and finally drives him into murder:

With exquisite cruelty he recalled to my mind, item by item, wrongs and unkindnesses I had inflicted and humiliations I had put upon friends since dead. . . . "For instance," said he, "take the case of your younger brother, when you two were boys together many a long year ago. He always lovingly trusted in you with a fidelity that your manifold treacheries were not able to shake. He followed you about like a dog, content to suffer wrong and abuse if he might only be with you; patient under these injuries so long as it was your hand that inflicted them." 50

Henry's death is reflected in much of Twain's writing. When Twain was a rather callous reporter on the "Call," he wrote an unusually emotional account of the explosion of the steamer Washoe, an incident that recalled Henry's death. 51

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49 Brashear, p. 84.

50 Mark Twain, The Complete Humorous Sketches and Tales of Mark Twain, edited by Charles Neider (Garden City, 1961), p. 287.

51 Mark Twain, Clemens of the Call, edited by Edgar M. Branch (Berkeley, 1969), p. 194.
In *The Gilded Age*, there is a detailed account of a steamboat explosion and its doomed passengers, an accident in which Laura Hawkins supposedly lost her parents.52 And in *Huckleberry Finn*, Huck fantasizes about a steamboat explosion that killed a "nigger." Bellamy comments on the number of water images in Twain's work but says, "to explain the even greater number of fire figures is not so simple."53 She attributes the fire imagery to the drunken tramp incident, but certainly the Pennsylvania tragedy played a far more important part in Twain's consistent habit of transforming personal trauma into literary imagery. There are an extraordinary number of deaths by fire in Twain's works, in *A Connecticut Yankee*, "The Chronicle of Young Satan," *The Prince and the Pauper*, and *Recollections of Joan D'Arc*. In *A Connecticut Yankee*, a killing is likened to a "steamboat explosion."54

Water and death have a close association in all Twain's literature. Besides the number of drowning deaths, the drifting ship is a persistent death image. Twain used the


53Bellamy, p. 253.

imagery of a doomed, derelict ship in his personal commentary, as well as in his literature. After his oldest daughter Susy died, Twain wrote his friend Twichell:

You know our life . . . You have seen our whole voyage. You have seen us go to sea, a cloud of sail, and the flag at the peak, and you see us now, chartless, adrift—derelicts; battered, water-logged, our sails a ruck of rags, our pride gone.55

And he used the same imagery in a letter to Howells about old friendships: "Old derelicts drifting around . . . with some of our passengers gone and the sunniness of the others in eclipse."56 On his seventieth birthday, he said,

... I am seventy . . . and would take my rest, and . . . when you in your turn shall arrive at pier No. 70, you may step aboard your waiting ship with a reconciled spirit and lay your course toward the sinking sun with a contented heart.57

The drifting ship-death figure was as much inspired by Twain's experiences at sea as on the Mississippi. In Honolulu, he wrote his first nationwide newspaper account of the survivors of the Hornet who spent forty-two days on the Pacific. The story was one of extreme horror, and included the possibility of cannibalism. When Twain sailed East, his ship suffered a cholera plague, and when the becalmed ship finally reached the east coast, thirteen passengers had died.

55Twain, Mark Twain's Letters, II, 640.
56Twain, Mark Twain-Howells Letters, II, 670.
57Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Seventieth Birthday, Record of a Dinner Given in His Honor, Supplement to Harper's Weekly (New York, 23 December 1905), pp. 2-3.
In *Huckleberry Finn*, the drifting-death imagery is an integral part of the novel. A derelict steamboat becomes the floating tomb for a gang of criminals, a disreputable flooded house drifts down the river containing the body of Pap Finn; and the raft itself drifts towards a promise of a new life for Nigger Jim, then abruptly drifts downriver to his likely capture and death. In one scene on the raft, Jim, disguised as an Arab, looks "considerably more" than dead. In the spectral fog scene, the raft with only Jim aboard drifts aimlessly, and Huck is feared dead.

Death and ships are associated in a variety of ways in Twain's literature. In his later works, the death ship is often trapped in an ice-bound sea. The association of ice and death can be traced to Twain's Mississippi experience. While Twain was a river pilot, he and his chief were out in a yawl, sounding the river channel for a safe route for their steamboat. The river was filled with ice floes, and the yawl became trapped until a wave from a passing steamboat loosened the ice. Twain and his chief were finally brought aboard the steamboat, completely covered with ice and nearly frozen to death. 58 This close brush with icy death was bound to be remembered by Twain and transferred in its terror to his literature. DeVoto says that after Twain's late personal sorrows, he wrote

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58 Twain, *Mark Twain's Letters*, I, 37.
a number of apparently aimless sketches which... dealt with sailors or other people marooned in the vast Antarctic waste of ice and darkness. In one of these there had been introduced a legend of an enchanted sea wilderness in the midst of this eternal winter where ships were caught in a central place of calm, circumscribed by the ice and snow, and held drifting forever there with the dead bodies of their crews and passengers preserved by the unearthly cold...59

This is the setting of Twain's last unfinished manuscript, "The Great Dark," a drifting ship sailing in a dark sea of ice, its passengers a tragically doomed family exactly like Twain's.

Certainly, incredible tragedies stalked Twain's family, and each one deepened his destructive self-blame. His two-year-old son Langdon died under circumstances for which Twain felt greatly at fault. Curiously, in the entire collection of Twain's letters, there are none referring to the circumstances of Langdon's death, although Twain usually sought release from sorrow through his expressive letters. In his old age, however, he simply said of his son, "I killed him," and the quiet self-accusation expresses a lifetime of lacerating guilt. As in the case of Henry's death, details of the tragedy emphasizing Twain's culpability appear in his Autobiography, written in Twain's old age. Just as the Autobiography states that Twain's ordering morphine was the real cause of Henry's death, it also points out that Twain's

59 DeVoto, Mark Twain at Work, p. 121.
neglect of his son exposed the baby to a fatal chill. 60
Langdon, however, actually died of diptheria contracted weeks after his exposure, and therefore Twain's negligence could not have caused the child's death. It seems likely that he was not at fault in either of the two deaths, but that his nagging conscience drove him into self-incrimination. Clara Clemens recalled that it was her father's custom to accept blame where there was none:

If on any occasion he could manage to trace the cause of someone's mishap to something he himself had done or said, no one could persuade him he was mistaken. Self-condemnation was the natural turn for his mind to take, and often he accused himself of having inflicted pain or trouble when the true cause was far removed from himself. 61

Langdon's death seems to have had no discernible influence on Twain's literature, however; nor is the incident transformed into literary imagery. Following the tragedy, he wrote his finest works, including Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, and, despite Livy Clemens' chronic illness, had a good and happy marriage. For awhile, Twain seemed to have the best of everything in life--fame, wealth, and a loving family. But it was not to last. In 1876, at the height of his success and happiness, he wrote his friend Mary Fairbanks a deeply pessimistic letter, seemingly prophetic of the impending tragedies that awaited him:

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60 Twain, Autobiography, p. 190.
61 Clara Clemens, p. 6.
What a curious thing life is. We delve through years of hardship, toil, despondency; then comes a little butterfly season of wealth, ease and clustering honors.--Presto, the wife dies, a daughter marries a spend-thrift villain, the heir and hope of the house commits suicide, the laurels fade and fade away. Grand result of a hard-fought, successful career and a blameless life: Piles of money, tottering age, and a broken heart... 62

The letter was not really a prophecy but an indication of Twain's lifelong pessimistic viewpoint, shaped by his powerful reactions to the tragedies that took place so long ago in the Mississippi River Valley. His present happiness did not change this viewpoint, and he strongly distrusted his "butterfly season." Twain's deterministic attitude was taking shape long before his last tragedies, and the events that occurred at the end of the century only solidified his philosophic stance—that the fate of human beings is in the hands of a malignant authority. The crystallization of Twain's fatalistic attitude can be traced in his works. In Huckleberry Finn, Huck helplessly views the tragic events that occur around him, as if he were in a bad dream. His one important decision ("All right, then, I'll go to hell!") is negated by circumstances over which he has no control. In Pudd'nhead Wilson, the valiant Roxy intercedes with fate, and a series of tragedies follow. Finally, in "The Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts, Fate itself, in the form of the cynical young

62Mark Twain, Mark Twain to Mrs. Fairbanks, edited by Dixon Wecter (Los Angeles, 1940), pp. 199-200.
Satan, becomes the protagonist, and the human being is placed in Twain's pessimistic philosophical position, that of the most tragic nonentity of the universal scheme.

In the eighteen nineties, Twain's last personal disasters began. The Paige typesetter, in which he had invested a fortune, failed, and Twain was forced into bankruptcy. To repay his debts, he and his family left on a worldwide lecture tour, leaving behind Susy, Twain's favorite daughter. Before the family returned, Susy died in the agonies of spinal meningitis, and Twain never recovered from the death which he felt could have been prevented if he had not left the country. Twain, his wife, and two remaining daughters went into a long period of mourning during which Livy's health deteriorated. Twain's youngest daughter Jean was diagnosed as an epileptic, and the Clemens' futilely sought cures for her affliction in Europe and the States. Livy died finally in Italy, leaving the family utterly desolate and Twain as guilt-ridden as ever in the face of death. Clara, overworked by Livy's sick-room care, collapsed following the death and was hospitalized with a psychotic breakdown for two years. Jean, finally released after years of treatment in a sanatorium, spent less than a year happily at home before she died in an epileptic seizure. All the catastrophes occurred within a decade, an emotional burden terrible
enough to break the toughest of men, but Twain's spirit did not break. His literature, however, lost the touch of genius, as Twain no longer had anything profound to say. Nevertheless, he had accomplished one of the most difficult literary feats in producing a literature that enables men to laugh at what they fear the most—the strong possibility that their very existence means absolutely nothing.

63 As example of Twain's remarkable resilience, a few months after Susy's death, he became involved with Helen Keller's welfare, and, after Livy's death, was deeply interested in the presidential campaign.
CHAPTER III

THE DARKENING VISION: THE MIDDLE PERIOD

Undoubtedly, Mark Twain's emphasis on death in his literature is a reflection of his shadowed life, for throughout his works many of the episodes involving death are autobiographical. But regardless of the source, the repetitious use of the death motif implies an attitude towards the whole of life, and Twain's viewpoint is an increasingly somber one. His novels, from the earliest on, reflect his pessimistic and conflicting views of existence: God and nature are both hostile and indifferent, and man is both helplessly entrapped in a predetermined universe and yet somehow responsible for his degraded condition. Man, in Twain's view, is a deluded misfit in an inconsistent nature, and his end is in the inevitable and inglorious annihilation of death:

[Men] vanish from a world where they were of no consequence; where they achieved nothing; where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they left no sign that they had existed--a world which will lament them a day and forget them forever.¹

Death, in this literature of Twain's middle-period, is shown in two contradictory perspectives: as a welcome and blessed release from the oppressions of life, and as an obscure and insignificant destiny. These opposing views of

death parallel Twain's incongruous notion of the universe: on the one hand, Twain sees nature as an actively malevolent force, and on the other, as an impassive, disinterested infinitude. This philosophical antithesis is not reconciled in Twain's middle literary phase but is presented as the chaotic condition of human existence.

The recurring death motif in these middle-period works expresses Twain's view of a disordered world and a vulnerable humanity. From the descriptions of a decadent Old World in *The Innocents Abroad*, and the portrayal of a murder-prone early far West in *Roughing It*, to the ubiquitous death scenes in *Tom Sawyer* and *Life on the Mississippi*, death imagery illustrates Twain's portrayal of man's helplessness before a paradoxical nature: a half-breed outcast slowly starves to death ignored by an indifferent nature absorbed in an eons-old construction of a stalagmite, but thousands of Pompeiians are cremated in an instant by a savage nature on a rampage; the slowly-disintegrating skeletons of men and animals are strewn across an impassive Western desert, but a malevolent Mississippi River swiftly turns men and buildings into floating debris.

Twain's determinism, in this literary phase, gradually dominates his philosophy. Although he does not give up the hope until the end of his literary career that the independent individual is free to construct a rational and orderly world,
there is an increased emphasis in these middle works on the association of death and entrapment, a relationship implying that the only escape from a preordained existence is through the release of death. Twain seems obsessed with the fear of being locked away and forever forgotten, and death accompanies all his subterranean descents; as he enters the innumerable caves, mines, tombs, vaults, and dungeons of his literature, time and distance become meaningless, sounds and lights eerily fade away, and humans become the wraith-like or demonic creatures of another world. Like these underground receptacles, nature--alternatingly aloof and malevolent--is the ultimate death trap: in *The Innocents Abroad*, the sea is a malicious, engulfing force; in *Roughing It*, the desert takes on the aspects of a vast prison; in *Tom Sawyer*, the wilderness is a beguiling and dangerous seductress; and in a chapter of *Life on the Mississippi*, nature becomes a stagnant space attracting an ever-increasing crowd of insanely-cavorting human corpses.

Twain seems to have had a special horror of entrapment, for besides these episodes in *The Innocents Abroad*, fatal entrapments appear throughout his literature; for instance--an entrapped tramp in a burning jail (*Life on the Mississippi*), entrapped victims of burning *Pennsylvania* (*Life on the Mississippi*), the drowned Dutchy entrapped by undergrowth (*Life on the Mississippi*), the entrapped Injun Joe (*Tom Sawyer*) Huck entrapped in a cabin, followed by his faked death (*Huckleberry Finn*), an entrapped gang aboard the Walter Scott (*Huckleberry Finn*), Hank Morgan entrapped in a cave for thirteen centuries (*A Connecticut Yankee*), an entrapped, doomed ship in "The Great Dark."
The Innocents Abroad (1869) shows Twain's dread of fatal entrapment and his preoccupation with what he regards as two related and inescapable conditions of existence; humanity's alienation from nature and the outcast's isolation from society. In Twain's predetermined universe, social behavior is shaped by the forces of the environment, and therefore both the hostility and indifference that Twain sees in nature are manifested in the calloused and savage actions of society. In Twain's opinion, the alienation fostered by an aloof yet dangerous nature infects every level of human existence: the universal truths of life and death are forever inaccessible to the human intellect; every attempt by mankind to make a permanent mark upon the earth is doomed to eventual destruction; the nonconforming or vulnerable individual is brutally rejected by society; and the differences between cultures and customs are irreconcilable. In The Innocents Abroad, Twain illustrates with death imagery this remote and hostile universe, and he sees that death is mankind's final severance from nature.

The irreparable breach between the culture of the Old and the New World is described in The Innocents Abroad in terms of death: the American tourist is repulsed by Old World idolatrous and ostentatious burial customs and the worship of the ancient dead, and the European is offended by the boorish vandalism and irreverence of the American.
Twain sees in this book that the Old World strews riches upon its dead and leaves its living poor, naked, and starving. The entombed history he describes in his travels abroad fills him with discomfort, anger, and revulsion: he is the idealistic American lost in a strangely perverted world, and European superstition and exploitation are the targets of his gibes at ancient history, art, architecture, and all that seems decadent or grotesque. He is repulsed by the elaborate burial shrines he visits and views these barbaric exhibits as attempts to disguise the starkness of death: "How poor, and cheap, and trivial these gewgaws seemed in the presence of the solemnity, the grandeur, the awful majesty of Death!"  

Twain sees reminders of death everywhere in the Old World, and there are indications he found the incessant visits to burial places very depressing. Even the decaying old towns with their crumbling monuments remind him of death, and while walking through the "gloomy crevices they call streets" (IA, I,167), he recalls the eerie isolation of Hannibal's cave, with "its lofty passages, its silence and solitude, its shrouding gloom, its sepulchral echoes" (IA, I,167). Bellamy points out that the atmosphere of The Innocents Abroad is permeated with death imagery:  

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3 Mark Twain, The Innocents Abroad (New York, 1911), I, 176. All subsequent quotations from The Innocents Abroad are from this edition and are cited in the text as IA.
The dreary bedrooms of Europe were "tomblike"; the romantic gondola of Venice was a "hearse"; and the Quaker City excursion itself was a "Grand Holy Land Funeral Procession"—without a corpse. The horrors of the Capuchin Convent are painted in detail: underground vaults decorated with human bones—grinning skulls, knotted vertebrae, elaborate designs formed of kneecaps and toenails. A dried-up monk lay in an alcove; two lusterless tufts of hair stuck to the skull.

The macabre displays of Europe repel Twain, and the barbarous interests of its mobs anger him; throughout The Innocents Abroad he deals with the cruel and blood-thirsty mob whose appetite for death and violence rivals nature's hostile ways. He describes an ancient Roman crowd excitedly watching two young amateurs die in a gladiators' contest, and at the morgue in Notre Dame he is scornful of the morbid crowd which has come to view the bodies: "...[P]eople, I thought, who live upon strong excitements and who attend the exhibitions of the Morgue regularly, just as other people go to see theatrical spectacles every night" (IA, I, 127).

This pitilessness of the mob Twain sees extending to all of European society, and he is saddened by reminders of the terrible isolation suffered by the prisoners in the dungeon of Castle d'If. The ancient walls are gouged "with the rudely carved names of many and many a captive who fretted his life away...and left no record of himself but these..."

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sad epitaphs wrought with his own hands" (IA, I,94). The prisoners, Twain feels, have virtually been buried alive and were driven to this last communication with the outside, because "[t]hey could suffer solitude, inactivity, and the horrors of a silence that no sound ever disturbed, but they could not bear the thought of being utterly forgotten by the world" (IA, I,95). This imagery of futile carvings by the doomed on the walls of prisons or the doors of caves appears throughout Twain's middle literary phase. Twain recalls his visit to Venice where, in the thick-walled cells of the dungeons under the Bridge of Sighs,

many a proud patrician's life was eaten away by the long-drawn miseries of solitary imprisonment--without light, air, books; naked, unshaven, uncombed, covered with vermin; his useless tongue forgetting its office, with none to speak to; the days and nights of his life no longer marked, but merged into one eternal eventless night; far away from all cheerful sounds, buried in the silence of a tomb . . . losing his memory at last . . . ceasing to scratch vain prayers and complainings on walls where none, not even himself, could see them, and resigning himself to hopeless apathy . . . (IA, I,227).

Society ignores its doomed and entrapped outcasts, and in the Pompeiian ruins Twain sees that nature and society follow the same brutal practice. In Pompeii, he describes the tragic fate of a people entrapped by a violent nature; like the names hopelessly inscribed on the Castle d'If walls and, in Tom Sawyer, like Injun Joe's futile gouges on the cave entrance, an inscription on a Pompeiian necklace is all that remains of an existence doomed to obliteration:
In one apartment eighteen skeletons were found, all in sitting postures, and blackened places on the walls still mark their shapes and show their attitudes, like shadows. One of them, a woman, still wore upon her skeleton a necklace with her name engraved upon it—JULIE DI DIOMEDE (IA, II,41).

The dead left in Pompeii were stuck down thousands of years ago, but they confirm Twain's concept of the human condition—the vulnerability of man in a chaotic universe and before an uncaring Deity. This awful monument left by natural devastation and untouched by human artifice is a deeply disturbing confrontation with the stark reality of death. And here, as in so much of Twain's writing, death mocks human faith in the power of earthly treasures. Materialistic human values are meaningless in the universal scheme; just as Bishop Borromeo's dead face is made more hideous by its costly adornments and Injun Joe's bowie knife can hack its way to hidden treasure but not to life and freedom, death traps an ancient Pompeian who reaches for the illusory power of gold.

As Twain leaves Pompeii, he ponders that tragic reality that would always haunt him, the impermanence of human effort: "Men lived long lives in the olden time, and struggled feverishly through them . . . and died, happy in the possession of an enduring history and a deathless name. Well, twenty little centuries flutter away, and what is left of these things?" (IA, II,43).

In Pompeii, he depicts the hostile side of his twofold view of nature; here he sees humanity hopelessly locked into
an interminable struggle with a nature seemingly bent on destroying all traces of man and his works. This is the same aspect of nature that he experiences aboard the storm-tossed Quaker City, and the plight of the ship is suggestive of the vulnerable human encountering an enigmatic, hostile nature. He often said that there is no figure for the human being like the ship, and in this passage, both ship and man face the same unforeseeable fate:

...[T]he vessel climbed aloft as if she would climb to heaven--then paused an instant that seemed a century and plunged headlong down again, as from a precipice. The blackness of darkness was everywhere. At long intervals a flash of lightning clove it with a quivering line of fire that lit up the faces of the men with a ghastly luster... Some thought the vessel could not live through the night, and it seemed less dreadful to stand out in the midst of the wild tempest and see the peril that threatened than to be shut up in the sepulchral cabins, under the dim lamps, and imagine the horrors that were abroad on the ocean (IA, I,48-49).

Twain projects neither the hope of eventual unity with nature nor the peaceful coexistence of the world's diverse societies. Throughout The Innocents Abroad, he shows man's intolerance towards cultural differences; he sees the American plundering Old World shrines, and the scornful European exploiting the American tourist. Unable to appreciate Old World reverence for the ancient monuments, the tourist repeatedly interrupts the narratives of the native guides with

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the jesting refrain of "Is he dead?" The two cultures clash, and Twain does not see a possibility of amelioration; he shows the Old World rigidly adhering to a decadent world view, but the New World too uncertain of its own perceptions to establish a fresh and honest viewpoint.

Near the end of The Innocents Abroad, Twain presents his pessimistic view of the transient place the American will hold in the history of humanity. He describes the great Egyptian Sphinx and tells of the human history the ancient monument has witnessed with impassive calm. The Sphinx evokes Twain's second view of the universe—the total indifference of nature and God, and, indeed, he states that viewing the Sphinx is like being in the "awful presence of God." (IA, II,383). An American tourist crawls up and tries to break a specimen from the face of the Sphinx, but "the great image contemplated the dead ages as calmly as ever, unconscious of the small insect that was fretting at its jaw" (IA, II,384). The avaricious American, enriching his own culture by vandalizing that of the Old World, will pass into oblivion with the rest of human history. Twain always sees the futility of all human effort, and in his concept of the universal scheme, man is an insect, his existence is meaningless, and doomed to the eventual annihilation of death.

If, in The Innocents Abroad, Twain criticizes the failures of civilization, in Roughing It (1872), he deplores the
absence of all cultural restraints. He sees the antisocial environment of the early far West as completely estranged from all human enlightenment and the lawless Westerner as an example of the basic savagery of human nature. Everywhere he looks in the West, he sees inexorable divisions—between the weakened law and the bold, violent gunman; between the exploited immigrant and the rough and intolerant pioneer; between a brutal nature and an avaricious populace. He portrays the West as a land in which all deterrents to crime have been banished:

Violence was the rule. Force was the only recognized authority. The commonest misunderstandings were settled on the spot with the revolver or the knife. Murders were done in open day . . . and nobody thought of inquiring into them . . . . After a murder, all that Rocky Mountain etiquette required of a spectator was that he should help the gentleman bury his game—otherwise his churlishness would surely be remembered against him the first time he killed a man himself and needed a neighborly turn in interring him.6

But a keen sense of self-preservation is necessary for survival in this "paradise of outlaws and desperadoes" (RI, I,65), and therefore the cold, relentless killer is greatly envied and admired by the rest of the populace. The extreme paranoia of the outlaw Slade inspires both the fear and reverence of the Nevada territory; while the people judge

6Mark Twain, Roughing It (New York, 1871), I, 65-66. All subsequent quotations from Roughing It are from this edition and are cited in the text as RI.
him "the most bloody, the most dangerous" man in the West, they also recognize Slade as "the most valuable citizen that inhabited the savage fastnesses of the mountains" (RI, I,62):

We had gradually come to have a realizing sense of the fact that Slade was a man whose heart and hands and soul were steeped in the blood of offenders against his dignity; a man who awfully avenged all injuries, affronts, insults or slights; of whatever kind--on the spot if he could, years afterward if luck or earlier opportunity compelled it; a man whose hate tortured him day and night till vengeance appeased it--and not an ordinary vengeance either but his enemy's absolute death--nothing less . . . (RI, I,62).

Just as Twain sees the fundamental brutality of man in Western society, he sees that the hostile aspect of nature dominates the Western landscape. Unlike the calm, impassive Egyptian desert Sphinx, this nature is deliberately destructive, and the sun "beats down with dead, blistery, relentless malignity . . ." (RI, I,128). All life has been extinguished in this brutal land; there is "not a sound--not a sign--not a whisper--not a buzz, or a whir of wings, or distant pipe of bird . . ." (RI, I,128). The grating metallic noises of the mules--their harsh sneezing and the "champing of the bits" (RI, I,128) --accentuate the prison-like isolation of the landscape. And he describes Mono Lake as a "solemn, silent, sailless sea" (RI, I,259) of corrosive waters which are "nearly pure lye" (RI, I,260). The lake is surrounded by a "lifeless, treeless, hideous desert" (RI, I,260) and supports no life except a thread-like worm. "The ducks eat the flies--
the flies eat the worms--the Indian eats all three--the wildcats eat the Indian--the white folks eat the wildcats--and thus all things are lovely" (RI I,261).

The California valleys show the devastation of man's greed and the fruitlessness of his efforts. Throughout Sacramento's once-rich mining area, the hills are "torn and guttered and disfigured by . . . spoilers" (RI II,93). Where once was a flourishing mining town, "now nothing is left of it at all but a lifeless, homeless solitude. The men are gone, the houses have vanished, even the name of the place is forgotten" (RI, II,132). A few stragglers stay on at the played-out mines and abandoned towns, committed to the sterile hope of sudden wealth and beguiled by a capricious nature into voluntary isolation:

They had accepted banishment, forgotten the world and been forgotten of the world. They were far from telegraphs and railroads, and they stood, as it were, in a living grave, dead to the events that stirred the globe's great populations, dead to the common interests of men, isolated and outcast from brotherhood with their kind (RI, II,153).

But Twain saw that these self-imposed social outcasts were not the only deluded victims of this historic seduction by nature. The gold rush attracted the most vigorous and optimistic of the pioneer movement, "stalwart, muscular, dauntless young braves . . . royally endowed with every attribute that goes to make up a peerless and magnificent manhood" (RI, II,132). Twain shared the exuberance of his time and place but saw the potential tragedy of the unlimited
optimism of the era. The promise ended with a suddenness that left a heritage of unfulfilled dreams, and men of great potential met a premature fate, "victims devoted upon the altar of the golden calf" (RI, II,132). Twain sensed the gold rush was in a way symbolic of the other promises of this new democracy--man-made, and as such, doomed to failure. Many of his later works, such as The Gilded Age and A Connecticut Yankee, deal with the disappointments of American materialism, and the remoteness of man's dreams from the starkness of reality.

As it did in Roughing It and The Innocents Abroad, the imagery of death again dramatizes the themes of Tom Sawyer and Life on the Mississippi. Twain shows in these books that the river valley children perpetuate the rigid beliefs and morbid obsessions that alienate their society from a peaceful unity with nature, and that the children's guilty and fearful attitude towards death is shaped by their religious training. Though the boys learn to respond to death with superstitious anxiety, they are driven to court it in order to gain the concern and remorse of the indifferent adult society. Twain's river valley child has a complex view of death; he sees it as a release, as the focus of adult attention, as the reason for guilt and fear, and as inspiration for his imaginative games.

Death is always theatrical in Tom Sawyer (1876); it is either highly romantic, as in Tom's death wishes, or
It has the exaggeration of the child's view of death; not, of course, a child like Sam Clemens or Huck Finn, but the child who is unfamiliar with real death and gets his notions from romantic fiction. In *Life on the Mississippi* (1882), Twain deals with realistic death and the underlying cause of the child's anxiety. Twain shows in this book that the religiously-trained child assumes responsibility for death because he is unable to view it as a natural, normal phenomenon. This topic is a favorite source of satire for Twain—religion, its false beliefs, and the injurious effect of these beliefs on man. In a macabre chapter in *Life on the Mississippi* which was suppressed at the time of publication of the novel, he portrays man's inglorious destiny of death, and chief among the figures he mocks is an endlessly chastizing, foolishly posturing skeleton of a priest.

The death motif dramatizes the theme of human estrangement in *Tom Sawyer* and pervades the setting and plot of the novel. The child feels rejected by adult society and yearns for the solace of death. The outcast futilely struggles to escape his socially-determined doom. A deluded society prays to an indifferent God to spare its lost children from death. Alienated children imitate their elders' preoccupation with death and violence in order to gain acceptance into an inexplicable adult world. The book contains some of the most
grisly death scenes in literature, and the adjective "dead" is used some fifty-two times—there are dead cats, dead rats, dead spiders, and dead humans. Children, in their play world, imitate adult preoccupation with death and violence, and adults kill in gruesome reality. Blood is spilled in a graveyard murder, and small boys write binding oaths in blood. The nights are filled with the symbolic sounds of death—hooting owls and the ominous baying of strange hounds. Tom's death wish is urgently repeated in scenes of melancholy stillness, and his actual death is threatened in the hell-like atmosphere of McDougal's cave.

In Tom's romantic yearnings, he sees death as the key to the closed and impassive adult world. Punished unfairly by his aunt, Tom imagines the dramatic recognition his death would bring: "How she would throw herself upon him, and how her tears would fall like rain, and her lips pray God to give her back her boy and she would never, never abuse him anymore!" Tom's death wishes are invariably inspired by the feelings that he is unnoticed, unneeded, that no one "cares," an evocation of the perennial alienation of childhood, that strong sense of separation from the adult world of experience.

Mark Twain, The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (New York, 1936), p. 35. All subsequent quotations from Tom Sawyer are from this edition and are cited in the text as TS.
This alienation is emphasized by the oppressive atmosphere of the summer day: "There was not even a zephyr stirring; the dead noon day heat had even stilled the song of birds; nature lay in a trance that was broken by no sound but the occasional far-off hammering of a woodpecker . . ." (TS, p. 79). Tom's romantic picture of death is unmarred by reality; he thinks of it only in bitter-sweet terms—an isolation from a grieving, remorseful humanity and a deliverance from cares and criticism. His death wish is solely concerned with the beauty of death—its tranquillity, release, and oneness with nature—"it must be very peaceful . . . to lie and slumber and dream forever and ever, with the wind whispering through the trees and caressing the grass and the flowers over the grave" (TS, p. 79).

Twain balances Tom's sentimental image with a grim picture of death's malevolent destruction; the murder scene that follows Tom's daydream emphasizes the ugliness of death—its decay, horror, and desolation. The cemetery setting symbolizes these aspects of dread and deterioration:

It had a crazy board fence around it, which leaned inward in places, and outward the rest of the time, but stood upright nowhere. Grass and weeds grew rank over the whole cemetery. All the old graves were sunken in, there was not a tombstone on the place; round-topped, worm-eaten boards staggered over the graves, leaning for support and finding none (TS, p. 87).

The disparity between the worlds of child and adult in Tom Sawyer is dramatized by the alternation of the child's
innocent play and the adult's depraved action. The children's concern with death and violence is an inheritance from adult society, but innocence separates the child from the adult world of degradation. First, the boys play at Robin Hood and act out some of the aspects of the murder scene that will follow. The children switch roles at killing and being killed. Tom, in the role of the outlaw, falls back and "would have died" (TS, p. 85) but he lands on a nettle and springs up "too gaily for a corpse" (TS, p. 85). The very next scene is not pretense; this time the outlaw and the murder are part of a gruesome melodrama—the boys become frightened witnesses to a reenactment of their childish game of killing. Describing actions greatly resembling Tom's in the children's game, Injun Joe lies about the murder; he tells Muff Potter that the doctor "fetched you one with the headboard and you fell flat, and then up you come, all reel-ing and staggering, like, and snatched the knife and jammed it into him" (TS, p. 92). The murderer's and the boys' actions are constantly interrelated; Muff Potter begs Injun Joe to remain silent about the murder, and the deceitful outlaw promises he will not tell; the children make a similar pledge of silence and scrawl the oath in blood. Later, both the boys and the outlaws separately discuss killing women; the boys, who are pretending to be outlaws, say the women are too "beautiful" (TS, p. 122) to be killed, while the real outlaw describes his plans to destroy Widow Douglas' "looks" (TS, p. 232).
The children respond to social rejection by retreating into the natural world. When the runaway boys are presumed drowned, bread is cast out by society in a gesture of reclamation, and the boys, who have felt alienated, understand that they are being called back to rejoin society. They realize that death has endowed their ordinary existence with magical qualities, for society is fascinated by its mystery. As Tom had hoped, death has been the key to the closed adult world: "Here was a gorgeous triumph; they were missed, they were mourned; hearts were breaking on their account . . . . and best of all, the departed were the talk of the whole town, and the envy of all the boys" (TS, p. 129). Tom is indeed enjoying dying "temporarily" (TS, p. 80). The drama, the spectacle of death, and the chance to play a central role overcome his natural sympathy for his suffering aunt. His death wish with all the attendant melodrama has been fulfilled, and he is alive to witness and enjoy it.

Death leaves a legacy of guilt, and society is plagued by the unaccountable and absurd guilt that the living always feel towards the dead. It obstructs the truth about the absent boys, and a sermon perpetuates their memory into a false importance and exaggerated merit--"the graces, the winning ways, and the rare promise of the lost lads . . . . [E]very soul there, thinking he recognized these pictures,
felt a pang in remembering that he had perfectly blinded himself to them always before . . ." (TS, p. 151). Death has made saints of mischievous boys, and Aunt Polly and Joe Harper's mother add their ridiculous regrets:

". . . [M]y Joe busted a firecracker right under my nose and I knocked him sprawling . . . Oh, if I was to do over again I'd hug him and bless him for it (TS, p. 134).

". . . [M]y Tom took and filled the cat with Painkiller . . . [a]nd God forgive me, I cracked Tom's head with my thimble, poor boy, poor dead boy" (TS, p. 134).

Religion serves to isolate society from the reality of death. The river valley society visualizes a benevolent authority commanding death, but while it mourns it "dead" children, nature--and this time Twain shows its hostile side--almost converts their pretended death into a reality. A storm lashes the island, bent on destroying everything in its path; Twain makes it clear that there is no protective Deity present and that only chance can save the boys from destruction. When they return to the camp they had deserted at the height of the storm, they find they have missed death by a narrow margin: "[T]he great sycamore, the shelter of their beds, was a ruin, now, blasted by lightnings and they were not under it when the catastrophe happened" (TS, p. 147).

But valley beliefs will not permit either the boys or society to accept the possibility that death was determined by mere chance. The boys are "thankful," and with the children's safe return, society loudly sings its praises to a benevolent God.
The boys have escaped, but the spectre of death now lurks within the hell-like labyrinths of McDougal's cave:

... [O]ne might wander days and nights together through its intricate tangle of rifts and chasms, and never find the end of the cave; and ... he might go down and down, and still down, into the earth, and it was just the same--labyrinth underneath labyrinth, and no end to any of them (TS, p. 228).

In the cave, alternating light and darkness symbolize life and death, and the candles carried by Tom and Becky are symbols of hope, sustaining their lives. Bats, creatures of death, continually threaten to extinguish the candles, but they remain lighted as long as there is hope. When this hope is extinguished, the candlelight also ebbs away, and death approaches. Believing they will never be found, the children

fastened their eyes upon their bit of candle and watched it melt slowly and pitilessly away, saw the half inch of wick stand alone at last, saw the feeble flame rise and fall, climb the thin column of smoke, linger at its top a moment, and then--the horror of the utter darkness reigned! (TS, p. 253).

It is light that finally leads the desperate Tom out of the cave; he sees a "far-off speck that looked like daylight" (TS, p. 258). Light shows the children the way out, and a protective society extinguishes the light--and the life--of their persecutor. Judge Thatcher orders the entrance to the cave closed, and the outlaw's tomb is sealed from the light of the outside world. The destiny of Injun Joe has been determined, and he will die whether or not he
struggles to be free. After a futile attempt to carve away the obstruction to his freedom, the outlaw dies with his face turned to catch a last glimpse of the light from under the sealed entrance.

The children go back to their perpetual games of death and violence. Tom promises the restless Huck initiation into the "robber gang," whose bloody oath pledges murderous loyalty. Huck is impressed; he sees that this is the way to gain social approval: "I'll stick to the widder till I rot . . . . and if I git to be a re'lar ripper of a robber, and everybody talking 'bout it, I reckon she'll be proud she snaked me out of the wet" (TS, p. 283). The children mirror the society around them; it is obsessed with violence, and if they are to find a proud and important place in it, they must at least play at the game.

Death never becomes much more than a game in Tom Sawyer. Though the story touches on the fringes of Twain's own anguished memories--the dying tramp who resembled Muff Potter, and the cave that once contained the hideously preserved corpse--death in this novel is an extravagant illusion. And certainly St. Petersburg is not the savage society portrayed in Huckleberry Finn; while it is true that the people in Tom Sawyer gather around to enjoy Injun Joe's burial, Twain depicts them as superstitious, hypocritical, and gullible rather than cruel and blood-thirsty. Only in the description
of Tom's guilt-ridden nightmares does the book suggest the emotional tortures that death imposed upon the prototypes of Tom and his gang; for the greater part of Tom Sawyer, death merely serves as a melodramatic contrast to an idyllic portrayal of river life. Twain intended Tom Sawyer to be acceptable for young children who, unlike young Sam Clemens, must be carefully protected from harsh realities. A more authentic view of river life with all its incongruities—its savage realities, as well as its nostalgic charms—would have to wait until he finished Huckleberry Finn, and he had completed only sixteen chapters of that long-delayed book when he revisited the river in 1882 to gather material for Life on the Mississippi. It was a visit that would reawaken his impressions from his early experiences and, coordinating these memories with his developing artistry, enable him to write about the Mississippi with new vigor and authenticity. Life on the Mississippi, however, was only a prelude to Twain's masterpiece; although it gives us a richly-varied picture of river life, it serves primarily as a stage setting into which the immortal Huck would step and interpret for us the tragi-comic ways of the river folk.

Important to the interpretation of Twain's work, Life on the Mississippi records many of Twain's traumatic early experiences that illuminate the use and meaning of the death motif in his literature. In this book, he reminisces about
the lost glory of the steamboating epoch as well as the many tragedies he and others experienced on the river. As he describes his river journey down to New Orleans, he portrays a decadent Southern society which has erected a false past in hopes of immortalizing its faded glory. As he moves back upriver towards his Hannibal home, he recalls along the way episodes from his childhood, many of them painful encounters with death that show the devastating effect of overzealous piety upon the impressionable child. The stories portray the child as the innocent victim of a moral view that was relentless in its psychological punishment, and *Life on the Mississippi* contains so many resentful references to Twain's "Presbyterian conscience" that it is obvious that the stern religious doctrine of his early years affected Twain's emotions throughout his life. He was his own example of the theory his fiction establishes—that the irrational morality that inhibits adults from a peaceful unity with the rest of nature is bequeathed to, and perpetuated by, the child. Although Twain was able to express his resentment at religious castigation in satire like the suppressed chapter of *Life on the Mississippi*, he was never able to escape from his own nagging conscience which had been trained to assume responsibility for all human error.

Twain's overly-conscientious attitude would force him to anticipate catastrophe, and many episodes in *Life on the
Mississippi clearly show this chronic pessimism. At the beginning of his reminiscent chapters of childhood, Twain records going back to his boyhood home in Hannibal and looking at the view of the Mississippi from Holliday's Hill. It was, he says, "as young and fresh and comely and gracious as ever it had been," but he worried that his "other friends . . . would be old, and scarred with their griefs and defeats, and would give me no uplivings of spirits." Since he was only forty-seven when he wrote Life on the Mississippi, it was too early to dwell on the defeat and aging of his contemporaries. It was typical, however, of Twain's melancholic outlook. Repeatedly, in this book, he recounts the guilt, injury and fear of his bygone youth as he tells of the jail-house fire and the death of the imprisoned tramp, of diving into the river and touching the hand of his drowned companion, of the explosion of the Pennsylvania and the death of his brother Henry, and of lying in terror while thunderstorms raged at night.

The river tragedy Twain recalls most frequently is drowning, and these incidents from his childhood are invariably associated with furious night storms and the tortured conscience of small Sam Clemens. The passages show that the

8Mark Twain, Life on the Mississippi (New York, 1944), p. 308. All subsequent quotations from Life on the Mississippi are from this edition and are cited in the text as LM.
child's confused understanding of death is the result of his religious exposure, and beneath the humor that invariably accompanies these accounts is Twain's great anger at the suffering caused by the more severe fundamentalist teachings. Since the river child was taught that the earned punishment for sin was death, every tragic event was a reminder to the sinner of his own fate. Twain's funny story of Sam's frightened reaction to the death of a small friend who went fishing on Sunday is typical of his portrayals of the religiously-indoctrinated child who envisions a vengeful God. Frightened by heaven's formidable vigilance in the punishment of the sinful Lem Hackett, young Sam shivers through a terrible thunderstorm. The drowned Lem was "the only boy who slept that night" (LM, p. 313), and guilt-ridden Sam awaits the destruction of his world:

To me there was nothing strange or incongruous in Heaven's making such an uproar about Lem Hackett. Apparently it was the right and proper thing to do . . . . There was one thing which disturbed me in the most serious way: That was the thought that this centering of celestial interest on our village could not fail to attract the attention to people among us who might otherwise have escaped notice for years. I felt that I was not only one of those people, but the very one most likely to be discovered. That discovery could have but one result: I should be in the fire with Lem before the chill of the river had been fairly warmed out of him (LM, p. 313).

Since the valley children believed that death was the weapon of heaven, they submitted to its threat. The very next account of a drowning death in Life on the Mississippi
shows the effect of such religiously-induced guilt. Sam and his friends dare a poor swimmer into a foolhardy dive, and the grisly task of finding out why the boy did not surface falls to the unfortunate Sam. He finds the entrapped body at the bottom of the creek, and though "some of us knew that if the boy were dragged out at once he might possibly be resuscitated" (LM, p. 317), the boys are too fearful to do anything but run from the scene. Young Sam finds it ironic that the victim was a pious scholar of the Bible and ponders over the anxious question--why should he be spared from hell, when the devout are punished?--"all heart and hope went out of me, and the dismal thought kept floating through my brain, 'If a boy who knew three thousand verses by heart is not satisfactory, what chance is there for anybody else?'" (LM, p. 317).

Sam's naive and desperate question illustrates Twain's repeated criticism of religion as the interpreter of the universal mysteries. He saw that the meaning of existence would be forever inaccessible to the limited human intellect, and that man would never understand either the purpose of his existence or the direction of his destiny. This view of a blind, meaningless human condition is expressed in the death-oriented episodes in his literature that suggest existence as an aimless drifting in a timeless, uncharted void, whether in a cave, on sea, or in the air. Tom Sawyer
Abroad, written later in his career, has Tom and Huck floating in a balloon, witnessing the frequent earth-bound death scenes from their remote perch. Drifting balloons also appear in a chapter of *Life on the Mississippi* that was suppressed because of its explicit morbidity. The chapter deals with a macabre account of drifting balloons filled with skeletons. A man relates his nightmarish experience alone in a balloon. Encountering another balloon in the lonely atmosphere, he is overjoyed because he had felt unbearably isolated. He is shocked, however, to find that the occupants of the balloon are all dead. The skeletons are assembled in what appears to be a wedding party, complete with a priest. The two balloons are suspended in the dead air together, going nowhere, and the man becomes repulsed by the constant presence of the dead, particularly the priest. The dead priest, with his wagging finger and admonishing posture, seems to scold the man, "to wake him up." The man tells how he tried to rid himself of the torturing spectre:

"... [T]he priest was sort of hanging over the edge of the basket, with his arm and skeleton fingers stretched out and wagging with the balloon's motion, and often these fingers would rake my cheek and wake me up... I reached for the priest, and pulled him out with a boat-hook. It actually made matters a hundred times worse--for we were right on the top of the atmosphere... and the priest didn't descend an inch!--merely bobbed around--as if in water--in a bent and drunken way, the same old arm stretched out and claw hanging down, and leering from under his hood! Well, after that, he was forever hanging around and looking in--first on one side, then on the other--day and night the same. I hit him a crack with the boat-hook every time I got a first rate chance; but I stopped that, presently, because I saw that the more I battered him the more disagreeable he looked and the more unpleasant it was to have to live with him. Up there, matter attracts matter--and powerfully. As the years rolled on, one ragged balloon after another came along
and bunched up with us--and all of them full of dead people in all possible stages of greenness and mildew, and all of them grinning and staring . . . . [A]nd also came other corpses that got jiggled out by balloons colliding; and these joined the drunken priest . . . and week in and week out, and night and day, they noiselessly and drunkenly balanced and sasshayed to each other, there in the empty air, and wagged their skinny arms, and grinned and leered, and the balloon-audience looked on, as if from opera boxes; and they, too, grinned and leered . . ." (LM, pp. 396-398).

There is a ghastly humor in this picture of grimacing skeletons performing their eternal dance for an endlessly-increasing audience of corpses. It is the type of humor that Kenneth Lynn said helped the burdened pioneer endure his dangerous and tragic existence--the tall tale that could outdo his own experiences in horror and still find a way to make him laugh.9 Here Twain uses a burlesque of death to express the empty isolation of human destiny. Later he was able to express this view more profoundly in the last of the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts, in which he depicts existence as a grotesque dream and the human as "a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities."10 This suppressed chapter from Life on the Mississippi, however, with its mood of emptiness, entrapment, and eternal alienation, foreshadows the deepening pessimism of Twain's later works.

9Kenneth Lynn, Mark Twain and Southwestern Humor (Boston, 1960), p. 30.

His literature to this point—the travel books, *The Innocents Abroad* and *Roughing It*, and the retrospective works, *Tom Sawyer* and *Life on the Mississippi*—already express a strong pessimism. In these books, he shows that the inability to understand the meaning of life and death is indigenous to the human condition, a universal affliction bequeathed to descendants through a legacy of stultifying religious and social beliefs. The novels show that man absorbs his dissonant social attitudes from his environment; that the hostility of nature serves as the pattern for violent human behavior; and that the child in turn reflects the behavior and superstitions of adult society. He asserts that man's works and hopes are doomed to failure and that death is his ignoble destiny, and he indicts institutionalized religion for offering guarantees that human efforts would be immortalized in exchange for unquestioning faith and obedience. Twain would continue to depict this pessimistic world view of man's inevitable alienation from nature by equating mankind's confrontation with an inexplicable and indifferent universe with the plight of the individual encountering an uncaring and paradoxical society. His most eloquent expression of this view would be in *Huckleberry Finn*. 
CHAPTER IV

THE VEILED SPECTRE: DEATH IN HUCKLEBERRY FINN

More profoundly than in any of his other works, the death motif in Huckleberry Finn (1884) expresses Twain's deeply pessimistic social philosophy. Death in this novel becomes the malevolent shaper of events—it inspires the superstitious beliefs, the morbid preoccupations, the greed, and the depraved actions of river valley society; it casts a spell of omnipresent dread and horror, and it threatens Huck and Jim throughout their flight, leaving thirteen dead people in the path of their river journey. The compelling view of death is provided by the "innocently experienced"2 boy Huck, who sees death far more realistically than does Tom Sawyer and young Sam Clemens in Twain's earlier works. In Huck's view, death is a figure of terror—an inescapable spectre whose ways are as mysterious and ruthless as the Mississippi. Unlike Tom, who seeks glory in death, Huck fights desperately to avoid it, and his book tells of his long battle to preserve his existence by whatever means he can. And unlike the young Sam, who believes that death is

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1According to Philip Young's count (Three Bags Full [New York, 1972], p. 149).

2The phrase is Albert E. Stone, Jr.'s. He describes Huck as having the "eye of the river pilot and the emotion of the passenger" (The Innocent Eye [New Haven, 1961], p. 152).
the instrument of religious tyranny, Huck has no religious theory. He accepts death as an inexplicable finality—he simply does not "take much stock in dead people."  

Huck finds, however, that the society around him prefers to obscure this finality by masking the reality of death with religious rituals and sentimental fantasies. He feels increasingly uncomfortable in a world in which illusions take the place of reality; although he constantly lies to outwit the forces that threaten to destroy his existence, he cannot understand the self-directed lie. Society in *Huckleberry Finn* constructs a whole system of such lies to conceal the unpalatable truths—the oblivion of death, the impotency of religion, and the decadence of social morality. These deceptions are in the form of religious, social, and ethical commandments which appear to be based on innate truths but are actually the unexamined assumptions of a biased viewpoint perpetuated by apathy and moral blindness. Society chooses to delude itself throughout *Huckleberry Finn*, and the confusion of appearances with reality is one of the central themes of the book. Twain shows in this novel that judgments based on appearances continually mislead society and that the truth lies hidden behind established social facades: the stigma of race and slavery, the veneer of piety.

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3Samuel Langhorne Clemens, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, edited by Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty, and E. Hudson Long (New York, 1961), p. 78. All subsequent quotations from *Huckleberry Finn* are from this edition and are cited in the text as HF.
and gentility, the appearances of clothes and manners, and the rituals of death. Twain sees here that society is forever alienated from reality because it refuses to examine the rigid and superficial concepts that obscure the truth. He holds, however, a more optimistic view for the individual, who, in a determined drive towards the truth, is forced to explore the relationship of established social attitudes to the world of his own personal experience. Reality, the individual Huck discovers, does not lie within the categorical descriptions of society but within the genuine and humane impulses of his own heart.

Society's meretricious attitudes are exposed through the naturalness and humility of Huck's responses to the world around him: his naive reactions as he confronts social institutions and rituals ironically point up the valley's duplicitous viewpoints on life and death. Since Huck is an heir to the valley's biased views, he is not able to question them. He knows only what he is accustomed to, and like the rest of the valley folk, accepts the prevailing social values as basic truths. The oppositions of the viewpoints of the humane, self-examining individual Huck and of an impersonal, rigid society provide the brilliant dialectical

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4Pascal Covici, Jr., sees that Huck's "dead-pan" naivete is an effective dramatic contrast to the duplicity of valley society ([Mark Twain's Humor] [Dallas, 1962], p. 83).
tensions of *Huckleberry Finn*, and the story centers on Huck's struggle to understand the motives of the society from which he is emotionally alienated.

In lonely sadness, Huck stands before the social chaos he confronts along the great river, propelled against his wishes into an environment of ever-increasing puerility, materialism, decadence, and violence. Huck perceives that the errors of society—ignorance, hatred, cruelty, greed, and fear—contaminate social views, but he finds it difficult to understand that its rigidly-held views also blind society to reality. When he finds himself in opposition to the accepted social beliefs, Huck regards himself as an errant sinner; but nevertheless he makes a moral choice of supreme courage and self-sacrifice. Although Huck cannot help being influenced by the moral perspective of his society, he judges the truth of all things in the light of his own instincts and personal experience, and his penetrating examinations into the nature of truth, death, justice, and friendship guide him into moral responsibility. Huck, too, sometimes confuses appearances with reality, but he continually searches for the truth; when he finds at last that reality exists only within himself, he declares his independence from society.

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5 Henry Nash Smith analyzes Huck's vernacular viewpoint and the drama of his moral dilemma (*Mark Twain, The Development of a Writer* [Cambridge, 1962], p. 120).
Because society does not search for the truth but is content with appearances, it is constantly deceived, and the entire novel is concerned with the aspects of deception—hiding, dissembling, disguising, and concealing. Twain illustrates this manifold concealment of truth by the use of a large number of masking motifs—clothing and manners, social veneers and brands, hoaxes, fictitious and mistaken identities, lies and ruses, rituals, role-playing, and pious pretensions. Thus, society's masks hide human truths, but it is through the veiled concealment of death and nature that Twain eloquently portrays in *Huckleberry Finn* man's alienation from the universal truths.

The masks of death and nature are shown as impenetrable in *Huckleberry Finn*, and again, as in *Tom Sawyer*, Twain equates the incomprehensibility of nature with the mystery of death. Nowhere in his literature does Twain more effectively show than he does in *Huckleberry Finn* that the secret of death is eternally hidden from mankind. Huck hears, but cannot understand, the death-associated sounds of the wilderness: the leaves that "rustled in the woods ever so mournful" (*HF*, p. 8), and the owl, "who-whooing about somebody that was dead" (*HF*, p. 8); the dog and the whippoorwill, "crying about somebody that was going to die" (*HF*, p. 8), and the wind "trying to whisper something . . . and I couldn't make out what it was" (*HF*, p. 9). Unintentionally, he kills
a spider and fearfully awaits nature's dark revenge: "I was scared and most shook the clothes off me . . . . I hadn't ever heard anybody say it was any way to keep off bad luck when you'd killed a spider" (HF, p. 9). And Huck is oppressed by the sense of a dread abyss between the world of the living and the dead: "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" (HF, p. 9).

Twain symbolizes death's impenetrable mystery throughout the novel with the darkness, silence, and shrouding fogs and mists of the river. The outcasts Huck and Jim seek the death-like concealment of nature, and the river provides them with a protective veil of darkness and mystery. On the "big still river" (HF, p. 55), there "warn't a sound" (HF, p. 55), and "killed" steamboats slide "dim and dusky" past the shore, while the two friends slip "along down in the shade . . . dead still, never saying a word" (HF, p. 54). On the river's eerie blackness, where human voices float disembodied through the silence, where mists and fogs distort all objects into ghost-like shapes, Huck and Jim find safety and peace, for the river provides an escape from the dangers and imperfections of the outside world. Each time the two
escape from society, they slip into the unearthly stillness of the river and an imperturbability resembling death:  

We didn't touch an oar, and we didn't speak nor whisper, nor hardly even breathe. We went gliding swift along, dead silent . . . then in a second or two more we was a hundred yards below the wreck, and the darkness soaked her up, every last sign of her, and we was safe, and knowed it (HF, p. 60).

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

. . . .[S]o we struck for an island, and hid the raft, and sunk the skiff, and turned in and slept like dead people (HF, p. 63).

Death itself wears a mask in Huckleberry Finn, for the faces of the dead in the novel are veiled from the living. Of the thirteen corpses in this book, five are essential to the plot, and the faces of all five are concealed. Each of these concealments illustrates something about both social and individual attitudes towards the unseen forces of the universe. Huck and Jim have a natural, although superstitious, response towards death; they accept it as a dread, inevitable phenomenon that is beyond their understanding. For them, the dead face symbolizes death's incomprehensible finality, and in accordance, both cover the face in gestures of genuine emotion—Huck's profound grief over the senseless termination of young lives, and Jim's love and loyalty towards his friend. Society, however, refuse to acknowledge that there are secrets beyond human understanding; it attempts to reduce death to human terms—by utilizing it for vicarious

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6Phillip Young sees the river as a metaphor for Huck's death wish, pp. 143-147.
excitement, by ritualizing it in religious fantasy, by evaluating it in terms of material legacy, or by sentimentalizing it in romantic escapism. For society, the dead face becomes the object of ritualistic attention and superficial judgment, an artificial mask that is the social substitute for harsh reality.

Masked death appears at the very beginning of the novel in an episode that points up the contrast between society's superficial judgments and Huck's reliance upon his unerring instincts and personal experience. When a corpse with an unidentifiable face is found in the river, the town is easily convinced that the missing Pap Finn has been drowned:

They judged it was him anyway; said this drowned man was just his size, and was ragged, and had uncommon long hair—which was all like pap—but they couldn't make nothing out of the face, because it had been in the water so long it warn't much like a face at all (HF, p. 15).

Huck, however, cannot be deceived, for he judges by his own experience. Knowing all too well the ways of death and the river, Huck sees the reality beyond the appearances: "I knewed mighty well that a drownded man don't float on his back, but on his face, so I knewed, then, that this warn't pap, but a woman dressed up in a man's clothes" (HF, p. 15). The mode of Pap's supposed drowning here will suggest Huck's own faked death later on; taking advantage of society's superficiality, Huck will let the town believe his body was left in the river, and dressed in woman's clothes, he will assume his first false identity.
Huck can never take the risk of letting society see his real self. Concealment is a matter of life to him, and for self-protection against a society he totally distrusts, he wears a mask of death. He stages his own "death" before he begins his river journey, Pap mistakes him for the Angel of Death, and Tom and Jim mistake him for a ghost. The community believes that he has been murdered and that his body is in the river. Again, as in *Tom Sawyer*, bread is cast upon the water in order to bring the dead back into the fold of society. Huck notes that everyone of importance in the town is on the ferry to see his drowned body surface. But the gesture does not beckon Huck back; instead, he takes out the quicksilver and eats the bread—the town's gesture towards the dead becomes the sustenance of Huck's new life. Now "dead" to society, Huck is reborn into a kind of non-identity, and in his journey down the river, he assumes new names and new identifications as he enters the river communities. He tries to deceive Judith Loftus by passing himself off first as Sarah Williams and then George Peters; at the Grangerfords he becomes George Jackson; at the Wilkses he is Adolphus, and at the Phelpses he is Tom Sawyer. And each time he must invent a new family, Huck describes it in terms of disaster and death, for that has been the nature of his experience. He tells Buck's family that:
Pap and me and all the family was living on a little farm down at the bottom of Arkansaw, and my sister Mary Ann run off and got married and never was heard of no more, and Bill went to hunt them and he warn't heard of no more, and Tom and Mort died, and then there warn't nobody but just me and pap left, and he was just trimmed down to nothing, on account of his troubles; so when he died I took what there was left, because the farm didn't belong to us, and started up the river, deck passage, and fell overboard . . . (HF, p. 81).

Huck employs all manner of lies and ruses to protect himself and Jim. To keep two armed men from coming aboard the raft, he leads them to believe his entire family is sick with smallpox, and even his attempt to get help to the doomed cutthroats trapped on the Walter Scott involves the invention of a death-haunted family. Huck's disguises and lies are defensive trickery against a society he knows to be both untrustworthy and gullible.

Jim's mask is not assumed but imposed upon him by society. The stigma of race and slavery not only brands him as mere property to be thought of in terms of money, but the suppressed fear and guilt of the slaveholding community forces it to view Jim as a potential killer. Judith Loftus tells Huck that, though the townspeople were at first prepared to lynch Pap for Huck's supposed murder, before night "they changed around and judged it was done by a run-away nigger named Jim . . . . [T]hey put it on him, you see . . . while they was full of it . . . . They'll get the nigger pretty soon, now, and maybe they can scare it out of him" (HF, p. 49). St. Petersburg is caught in a dilemma
of its own making, for its uneasy conscience is haunted by the spectre of a bloody slave insurrection. Intuitively, the town fears what Jim will do with his freedom, and, if he were not valuable property, they would gladly hang him. But, as Huck says, "people that's always the most anxious for to hang a nigger that hain't done just right, is always the very ones that ain't the most anxious to pay for him when they've got their satisfaction out of him" (HF, p. 219). Huck has to save Jim from the St. Petersburg lynchers, but another lynching party will reconsider hanging Jim when they are reminded of his monetary value. Property values establish the order of river valley morality.

Even Huck has trouble seeing beneath the brand of property that society has placed on Jim, and his conscience bothers him when the slave's escape seems imminent. On the raft, however, Huck gradually begins to see the real man behind Jim's racial mask. In a natural environment, Jim no longer plays his socially-determined role of docile, chuckle-headed "nigger" but reveals his authentic self—a man of sensitivity, compassion, and pride—along with an amazing ability of anticipating death and disaster. He changes from a haunted creature, quaking with the fear of the unknown, into a knowledgeable instructor in the ways of the unseen world. No longer whimpering about ghosts and witches, he teaches Huck to avoid catastrophe by the skillful interpretation of the oracles.
of nature, for "Jim knowed all kinds of signs" (HF, p. 41). His superstitious mind dwells on death, and he believes that the natural world reveals the secrets of the malevolent powers. In the weather, in the sky and river, in the omens of luck carried by the natural creatures, Jim finds the talismans of death: flying birds warn of storms, but to catch them means death; bees must be told when their owner dies, or they too will die; towheads in the river warn of disaster and dangerous companions; to talk of the dead will destroy the tranquillity of the raft. And although Jim warns Huck, "it was the worst bad luck in the world to touch a snake-skin" (HF, p. 46), Huck puts a dead rattler in Jim's bed, and its mate coils around it and bites Jim. Jim relies upon black magic to enable him to escape death—he eats the roasted snakehead and ties the rattler around his wrist. The sorcery seems to work; he does survive and his faith in his superstitions is now confirmed. Tragically submerged in the mental obscurity of irrational beliefs, Jim is unable to understand that his brief victory over death is not the result of his witchcraft but his own great strength and fortitude.

Huck, however, does recognize Jim's exceptional qualities, and the more clearly he sees them, the more ashamed does he become of his own racial taints of arrogance and
condescension. Following the rattlesnake skin incident, Huck hides his guilt about causing Jim's close brush with death. His perverted moral sense is again exposed, however, in an episode in which the friendship of the two is put to test. As the raft arrives at Cairo, it is the turning point of their relationship as well as of their river journey. Jim emerges from the experience an emotionally emancipated person of great dignity, and Huck is forced to see in himself some of the evils of river valley society. As they approach Cairo, the atmosphere becomes strongly suggestive of death and alienation, and Jim and Huck become separated in a thick fog, Huck in the canoe and Jim on the raft. Huck says, "I shot out into the solid white fog, and hadn't no more idea which way I was going than a dead man" (HF, p. 68). The two call to each other, but the erratically drifting current and the dense fog distort their sense of direction. The atmosphere takes on an unearthly quality, and Huck says, "I couldn't tell nothing about voices in a fog, fur nothing don't look natural nor sound natural in a fog" (HF, p. 68). When the fog clears, Huck finds Jim asleep on the raft, and he deceives the simple-hearted Negro into believing the experience was just a dream. When Jim realizes he has been hoaxed, he asserts his pride; just as the fog has cleared, so have the conditions of their friendship. Huck has been assuming the role of the arrogant slave owner, and Jim has
accepted this without protest. When Jim finally rebels, Huck sees his error clearly. "It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger--but I done it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither" (HF, p. 71). And with this humble apology, Huck begins to emerge from the river valley world of perverted morality.

If Huck has been partially perverted by his environment, Pap Finn is totally twisted by it. He sums up in his warped soul the accumulated social evils of the river valley--ignorance, bigotry, degradation, and depravity. He is the open sore of valley society and knows it, and he thoroughly enjoys the discomfiture his unwholesome appearance causes his St. Petersburg neighbors. His filthy rags are offensive and his face is a nasty reminder of the chronic sickness, lurking death, and depraved violence that the valley is accustomed to endure--Pap is the spectre unveiled. His beady eyes, half-hidden behind a tangle of greasy hair, shine through "like he was behind vines" (HF, p. 20). His pallor is corpse-like; it is "a white to make a body sick, a white to make a body's flesh crawl--a tree-toad white, a fish-belly white" (HF, p. 20). All Pap's beliefs are grounded in evil and sloth, and his superstitions stem from a different emotional source than those of Huck and Jim. Their mystical beliefs seek to shape reality into a pattern
of safety and peaceful communion with nature, while Pap's is a hostile confrontation with unseen powers whose threat he has neither the soundness of spirit nor intellect to repel sanely. He drinks himself into a state of depravity and so abuses Huck that the boy fears for his life. Terror pervades the atmosphere, while Huck watches Pap's death-struggle. Again, nature portends the presence of death; Huck hears "the owls and the wolves, away off in the woods, and it seemed terrible still" (HF, p. 28). And the terrified Pap hears the approach of the dead: "[T]ramp--tramp--tramp; that's the dead; 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!" (HF, p. 28). In his delirium, Pap sees Huck as a malevolent spirit: "He chased me round and round the place with a clasp-knife, calling me the Angel of Death and saying he would kill me and then I wouldn't come for him no more . . . ." (HF, p. 28). Huck dodges and saves himself and the exhausted Pap drops off to sleep. With a gun posed to kill his father, if he must, the trapped Huck awaits Pap's return to sanity.

Pap sees his eventual death in the power of abhorrent spirits and his existence on the level of a loathsome animal, for he sleeps with the hogs in the stinking tanyard and asks a misguided benefactor to shake "a hand that was the hand of
a hog" (HF, p. 23). And, symbolically, it is a hog that Huck kills to help effect his own pseudo-murder and gain his freedom from his brutal father. He catches a wild hog and "hacked into his throat with the axe, and laid him down on the ground to bleed" (HF, p. 31). He uses the hog's blood to simulate an axe murder: "I pulled some of my hair, and bloodied the ax good, and stuck it on the back side, and slung the ax in the corner" (HF, p. 31). In a mystical allusion that arises from the depths of the unconscious, if Huck is to survive, his evil father must die.

Later, Pap's death does free Huck from the greatest threat to his existence and his fortune. And just as Pap's ragged clothes and sordid associations symbolize the degradation of his existence, so also do they mark his dishonorable death. When Jim finds Pap's bullet-riddled corpse in the drifting house, he "threw some old rags over him" (HF, p. 44), and the clothes and objects left with Pap's corpse are mute evidence of his debauchery:

There was heaps of old greasy cards scattered around over the floor, and old whisky bottles, and a couple of masks made out of black cloth; and all over the wall was the ignorant kind of words and pictures, made from charcoal. There was two old dirty calico dresses, and a sun-bonnet, and some women's underclothes, hanging against the wall, and some men's clothing, too (HF, p. 44).

But if the clothes and possessions in the house of death disclose Pap's sleazy nature, the violence and brutality of the aristocratic Grangerford family are carefully disguised by their impeccable clothing and manners and the
gentility of their possessions. Beneath a cultured veneer, the feuding Grangerfords hide their hostile natures; they faithfully attend sermons on brotherly love with their guns poised to kill and pride themselves on their honor while they shamelessly involve the old and the helpless in their feud. Although they seem civilized, they refuse to investigate the original purpose of the murderous feud, and though they appear courageous, they are unable to accept the reality of death. They prefer a completely artificial view of death and attempt to perpetuate the dead Emmaline by making a sentimental shrine of her room, decorating the walls with her morbid crayon sketches which are "black, mostly, than is common" (HF, p. 83). Huck is uneasy in Emmaline's room; he knows nothing about feuds, but he has seen a good deal of death, and he realizes there is no relationship between reality and the Grangerfords' ritualization of Emmaline's death.

But the death they ritualize comes again to the Grangerfords in a brutally realistic form, and the entire male line of the family is wiped out in the feud's final skirmish. Huck witnesses the death of young Buck and his cousin, ambushed by the Shepherdson men and pitilessly slaughtered. He covers the boys' dead faces just as Jim had earlier covered Pap's face, and now the number of dead in Huckleberry Finn who have met their fate on the river, and whose faces have been veiled from the living, total four.
In contrast to the artificial rituals of society, this last gesture that Jim and Huck make toward the dead is one of complete sincerity; Jim's gesture stems from his love and pity for Huck; he wants to spare Huck from the knowledge of Pap's dishonor--"Huck... doan look at his face--it's too gashly" (HF, p. 44). And Huck's gesture expresses his grief over the death of his young friend--"I cried a little when I was covering up Buck's face, for he was mighty good to me" (HF, p. 94).

It is over the issue of death that Huck feels his strongest alienation from river valley society. As he accompanies the fraudulent Duke and King through an increasingly demoralized shore society, Huck is forced to witness the panorama of human error: the corruption brought about by the greedy anticipation of legacy, the cynical and curious response to fatality, and the crowd's cowardly reactions to the threat of death.

He finds that river society enjoys the spectacle of personal tragedy, and in one of the squalid little river towns, Huck sees death stir a lethargic and bored people into excited life. He meets the drunken Boggs roaring into town "a-tearing along on his horse, whooping and yelling like an Injun, and singing out--'Cler the track, thar. I'm on the waw-path, and the price uv coffins is gwyne to rise'" (HF, p. 114). The town knows Boggs is a harmless sham--
"He's the best-naturedest old fool in Arkansaw--never hurt nobody, drunk nor sober" (HF, p. 114). In his drunken delusion, Boggs threatens to kill Colonel Sherburn, and the townspeople egg him on. The streets are filled with people "listening and laughing and going on" (HF, p. 114). The confrontation quickly becomes the town's entertainment; when Sherburn, too cynical to place any value on human life, kills Boggs without remorse, the people take a savage joy in viewing the body. So obsessed are these people with this vicarious experience with death, they long to perpetuate every detail of the event: "Everybody that seen the shooting was telling how it happened, and there was a big crowd packed around each one of these fellows, stretching their necks and listening" (HF, p. 116). Out of the crowd steps a stranger in the costume of the traveling entertainer, and he reenacts the shooting for the town. The mob is grateful because the stranger has transformed a terrible reality into a spectacle; this is the way the crowd prefers death--a vicarious entertainment, frightening enough to be exciting, yet so unreal there can be no identity with the dead man.

Death for Huck, however, is a reality, not a spectacle; he can never understand why the crowd enjoys the death-defying act. In a scene so strongly resembling the Boggs-Sherburn shooting that it seems a parody of the earlier
tragedy, a drunk at a circus performance forces himself into the riding ring and defies both the seemingly alarmed ringmaster and the jeering crowd. Allowed to ride and encouraged by a mob that fully expects to see him break his neck, the drunk circles the ring in a crazy and dangerous manner. The crowd goes wild with excitement "standing up shouting and laughing till the tears rolled down" (HF, p. 119), but Huck sees no humor in the performance: "It warn't funny to me, though, I was all of a tremble to see his danger" (HF, p. 119). Both Huck and the crowd are amazed when the drunk turns out to be a skilled performer and competently completes his act. Huck is relieved, and the crowd is entertained—but it would have had just as much enjoyment if the rider had been killed instead of metamorphizing into an accomplished horseman. Only Huck trembles to see another's danger; for the rest, the real fate they dread individually becomes a spectacle in the safety of the crowd.

Although society enjoys death in the role of an entertainer, it is even more fascinated with it in that of benefactor, and when Huck and the Royal Pair descend upon a river town, they find that the memory of its most prominent citizen, Peter Wilks, is perpetuated in terms of his sizable legacy. Wilks' human qualities have been forgotten, and the townspeople have focused their entire attention on his inheritance. In order to get their hands on the estate,
the Duke and the King disguise themselves as the brothers of the deceased Wilks and make Huck pose as their English valet. Society is again taken in by the appearances and pious pretensions of the role-playing rogues, and they succeed in getting control of the entire inheritance, including a large bag of gold. Huck, in order to return the bag to the Wilks heiresses, hides it in the handiest place—the coffin. And now a fifth dead face—covered to preserve it for the next day's social ritual—arouses Huck's fear and anxiety:

The lid was shoved along about a foot, showing the dead man's face down in there, with a wet cloth over it, and his shroud on. I tucked the money-bag in under the lid, just down beyond where his hands were crossed, which made me creep, they was so cold . . . (HF, p. 142).

The corpse is interred in a ceremony that exposes the community's counterfeit reverence. The mourners are so bored during the funeral service, that they seek diversion through a rat-catching dog, and when they file past the coffin, they dutifully "looked down at the dead man's face a minute, and some dropped in a tear" (HF, p. 142). But the corpse must be dug up later to examine the marks on the breast, for the frauds and the rightful claimants give conflicting descriptions of the tattoo on Wilks' chest. The coffin is raised, and a flash of lightning reveals the dead man with the bag of gold on his chest where Huck had hidden it—
ironically, Peter Wilks has literally been branded by his legacy. And so fascinated are the townspeople by the sight of the gold adorning the corpse, that they forget the purpose of the exhumation and allow the suspects to escape.

Huck retreats from the capers of the Wilks affair in which the sham and materialism of society has been exposed, and he seeks again the tranquillity of life on the raft with Jim. For a moment it looks as though the two friends have regained Utopia, but the King and the Duke catch up with them and reinfest raft life with their fraudulent schemes. Huck's hope is crushed: "It was all I could do to keep from crying" (HF, p. 162). There seems to be no way to keep evil away from the raft paradise. Huck sees escape as the only way he can alter the course of events, and he is determined to take Jim along with him--not only to protect him from bounty hunters, but also because he realizes that Jim is the only human capable of the loyalty and love that Huck so desperately needs. He finds, however, that the King has sold Jim to Silas Phelps as a runaway slave, and Huck experiences the conflicting emotions of guilt and grief. The grief comes from his own heart, a spontaneous outburst of rebellion against the greed and cruelty of a sadistic practice--everything, he feels, is "busted up and ruined" (HF, p. 166), because Jim is a slave again, and "amongst strangers, too, for forty dirty dollars" (HF, p. 166).
But Huck's guilt stems from the moral coercion of the slaveowning community; the truth about slavery is hidden from Huck by the engrained perspective of river valley morality. He sees it was "the plain hand of Providence" punishing him for "stealing a poor old woman's nigger" (HF, p. 166).

The slavery question remains obscured for Huck, but even while he is chastizing himself for slipping below the laws and standards of his society, he separates the person Jim from the categorical description of subhuman that valley society has imposed on the black man. Huck recalls the events which make him realize Jim is more valuable to him than the moral codes that govern his conscience, and he decides to sacrifice himself to help free Jim--"All right, then I'll go to hell" (HF, p. 168). In Huck's new image of Jim, the face of an affectionate and loyal friend has replaced the river valley mask of race and slavery: "I see Jim before me, all the time, in the day, and in the nighttime, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking, and singing, and laughing . . . . I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping . . . ." (HF, p. 167).

Huck enters the Phelps farm, determined now to free Jim, and is immediately overtaken by death-associated feelings of estrangement--"so lonesome and like everybody's dead and gone . . . . I heard the dim hum of a spinning-wheel
wailing and sinking along down again, and then I knowed for certain I wished I was dead—for that is the lonesomest sound in the whole world" (HF, p. 171). Huck's depression is a repetition of his mood in Chapter 1, in which he describes the Widow Douglas' house as "all as still as death" (HF, p. 9), and feeling "so lonesome I most wished I was dead" (HF, p. 8), he yearns for "some company" (HF, p. 9). And company he gets—he answers a "me-yow!" from the woods, slips "down to the ground and crawled in amongst the trees, and sure enough there was Tom Sawyer waiting for me" (HF, p. 9). And, sure enough, in this last farcical, and severely-criticized episode of Huckleberry Finn, Tom Sawyer is again waiting for Huck. It immediately becomes Tom's world of romantic illusion, and this usurping of Tom's romance over the tragic realism of Huck's experiences is emphasized by the brilliant burlesquing of the somber events from the first part of the book. Throughout the entire "Evasion," each earlier death-associated event is given a farcical twist at Tom's insistence—a veil of parody and farce now obscures the melancholy tone of Huck's river journey into the corrupt heart of valley society: Huck made his darkly symbolic escape from his father through a blanket-covered hole in the cabin, and now Tom insists that Jim make his farcical escape through a blanket-covered
hole dug beneath the slave cabin; \(^7\) Huck has nearly killed Jim by placing a rattlesnake skin in his bed, and now Tom insists on placing harmless house snakes in Jim's cabin; Huck was dressed in woman's clothes when he and Jim made their terrified escape from the lynchers, and now Tom insists that Jim dress in woman's clothes when he makes his contrived escape; Pap tried to kill Huck with a knife, and now Tom insists that they must have a knife to dig out Jim's escape tunnel. In the end, Huck finds that even his self-sacrificing intentions have been turned into a farce (and if he had actually helped a runaway slave escape, it would have been a crime punishable by death), for most ironical of all, Jim had been freed before the whole bizarre escape was planned.

In the midst of frantic comedy and moral confusion, Huck helplessly submits to Tom's puerile game-playing with an air of saddened resignation. Not only is he dismayed with the foolish machinations of Tom, but he is puzzled by Tom's apparent defiance of valley moral code. Huck, after all, sees Tom as having "character" and being "full of principle"; Tom is very much a part of the society to which

\(^7\)Frank Baldanza points out the repetition of the blanket-covered holes and states that the structure of the novel is on the Proustian principle of repetition and variation ("The Structure of Huckleberry Finn," American Literature, 27 [November, 1955], 347-355).
Huck would like to belong if it were not so "uncomfortable." Huck is uneasy about the moral perspective of the genial folk at Phelps farm; these people seem so good and kind—not the cardboard-thin courtesy of the Grangerfords, nor the fussiness of the Widow Douglas and her sister, but the solid good-heartedness of humble folk. The perverted morality of the Phelps farm people, in such contrast to their benevolent appearance, adds immeasurably to Huck's confusion over the issues of moral rights and wrongs. Their hopeless duplicity is revealed in subtly ironic ways. Tender-hearted Aunt Sally says she is glad no one is hurt in Huck's fictitious accident, although she has been told it had "killed a nigger" (HF, p. 173). The "very nice, kind-looking" (HF, p. 213) old doctor neglects sick patients to hold Jim captive, although he has seen Jim's great sacrifice. "Innocentest, best" (HF, p. 177) old Uncle Silas allows Jim to be chained and cruelly punished, although he knows the negro has helped to save his nephew. Huck realizes that no one in the seemingly generous Phelps world is able to see the fine individual Jim beneath the mask of race and slavery.

And this same inability to penetrate Jim's mask is the source of Huck's great disillusionment with Tom. Although Huck is shocked that Tom is willing to steal a slave from the Phelpses despite his valley "bringing up," Huck expects that Tom will share his own uncontaminated view of Jim as a
decent human. Huck plans to do the stealing himself and sees this as a wickedly degenerate thing to do—"I'm low-down, and I am going to steal him, and I want you to keep mum and not let on" (HF, p. 176). Instead of agreeing to silence, Tom involves Jim in an escape plan that reduces the black man to a mere pawn in a childish game. And after the tedious "adventure," Tom comforts Jim with "forty dollars for being prisoner for us so patient, and doing it up so good . . ." (HF, p. 225), a poor gift in the face of Jim's self-sacrificing offer to stick by the wounded Tom despite the inevitability of recapture. "No, sah--I doan budge a step out'n dis place, 'dout a doctor, not if it's forty years" (HF, p. 213). Tom remains unaware of Jim's honorable qualities; only Huck is able to penetrate through the thick veil of bias to the truthful picture of Jim. Huck is no longer an ardent admirer of Tom's imaginative ways; in response to Tom's proposed "adventure" if the escape plan had not aborted, Huck's disenchanted thought is that he "reckoned it was just as well the way it was" (HF, p. 225), and his plans to "light out for the Territory ahead of the rest" (HF, p. 226) do not include his friend Tom.

Just as all lofty human aspirations are shown to be illusions in Huckleberry Finn—the culture and chivalry of the Grangerfords, the aristocracy and learning of the Royal Pair, and the piety and righteousness of all river society—
so is the heroic rescue of Jim shown to be a farce. Even Jim's emancipation belongs to the world of illusion; he "couldn't see no sense" in Tom's silly rescue plans, yet he "allowed we was white folks and knowed better than him; so he was satisfied, and said he would do it all just as Tom said" (HF, p. 193). Pettiness and puerility are all that survive Huck's noble intentions, and there is nothing left to do but enjoy the sardonic joke. And even death hides behind a farcical grin at the end of Huckleberry Finn, for the snake and the spider--those earlier dread omens of death and disaster--become in these last chapters the harmless and frolicsome playmates of the liberated prisoner Jim.

However improbable the means, Jim's freedom has been accomplished without the help of Huck, but the boy's long, hard search into the nature of his responsibility to his enslaved friend has done much to illuminate his own understanding of truth, justice, and human destiny. Huck's attitude on the question of slavery may be forever contaminated by his Southern moral perspective, but he has found that the central guiding truths are only discoverable within his own experiences and instincts—that justice arises from individual concern rather than the biased guarantees of social and
religious codes, that friendship is more valuable than social acceptance, and that death is the mysterious, and inevitable, condition of existence. Huck has been told by Jim that he is "gwyne to get hung" (HF, p. 20), and all Jim's prophecies have an eerie way of coming true. Huck's obscure fate has only one certainty—death—and that is the reality, he knows, from which escape can only be temporary; when he arrives at the Territory ahead of the rest, it may well be there waiting for him.
CHAPTER V

THE APOCALYPTIC VIEW: THE FINAL PERIOD

Although death is an omnipresent figure in Huckleberry Finn--knelling its warnings through the wilderness, lurking beneath the depths of the river, stalking the streets of the indolent towns--it still plays a more subtle role in the story of Huck's river journey than it does in Twain's last literature. And the dominant tone of Huckleberry Finn--although darkened by death's shadow--is optimistic, for Huck's rebellion embodies the hope that the self-aware individual can free himself of inbred illusions and create his own set of moral values. In Twain's last works, however, this optimistic promise is lost amidst death imagery of cataclysmic proportions and melodramatic power--the world of rationality is destroyed, death and evil triumph, and the hope of salvation is annihilated.

In Twain's last fiction, the individual again questions the distinction between reality and illusion and finds that he is unable to discern differences. There seems to be no way for man to reach the central truths and thereby achieve salvation, and, in Twain's final view, the only possible escape from the blind chaos of human existence is through the uncertain consolation of death. Twain sees, however,
that man refuses to surrender the hope of redemption and continues to dedicate himself on the altars of religious and social establishments, and the paramount theme of these final works is the universal enslavement to the authority of church and state—a degrading bondage which terminates in corruption and death. And because all the protagonists in these works are powerless to transcend this subjugation, they all tragically fail in their attempt to transform their worlds by breaking the chains of illusion.

In *A Connecticut Yankee*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, "The Great Dark," and the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts, common man is shown as hopelessly entrapped at all levels of his existence. His fate is determined by obscure and malevolent cosmic forces, his soul is fettered by irrational guilt and fears, his creative energies are bonded to the service of an indifferent elite, and his moral choices are dictated by tyrannical religious and social institutions. The apocalyptic view in this literature seems to be that death and annihilation are the only alternatives to human tyranny and cosmic predetermination: Hank Morgan's efforts to free a civilization from bondage end in a holocaust and his own doom; Roxana's rebellion precipitates a murder and the moral destruction of her son; the cosmic stranger reveals that the most violent death is preferable to the tragedies of preordained existence; and for Henry Edwards, there is little
choice between the terrors of life and death. Moreover, the protagonists of these works see their bright hopes eclipsed by the ancient errors and repressions of humanity: Hank's new world is destroyed because the old irrational beliefs persist in his progressive society; Roxana's rebellion is defeated because of the innate evil of her society; Henry Edwards' will is paralyzed by primordial fears; and August Feldner, striving towards the cosmic freedom demonstrated by the mysterious stranger, finds himself helplessly bound by the limitations of physical existence.

Reflecting Twain's despair for mankind, the death motif in these works takes on a terrible force and is sometimes expressed in disturbing black humor: bodies are beaten to pulp or stretched upon racks, rot in prisons or plague-ridden huts, writhe in flames or dangle at the end of nooses, poison the air with the stench of decay, freeze in seas of perpetual winter, or, standing stiffly erect, pile up in hordes against electrified fences. Humans are eaten by sea-monsters, burned alive to provide fuel, shot down by the tens of thousands, pressed to death under the feet of the crowd, swept away in opened sluices, blown to fragments by explosives, cremated by solar glare, and boiled to death in oil. The violence of death in these works expresses Twain's fury at the inexorable human condition. When the most explicitly apocalyptic of his last fiction, A Connecticut
Yankee (1889) was finished, Twain wrote Howells that if he could write it over again "there wouldn't be so many things left out. They burn in me; & they keep multiplying, & multiplying; but now they can't even be said. And besides, they would require a library--& a pen warmed up in hell."¹ But it is with just such a diabolical and frustrated pen that Twain reveals in his final books his lost hope for his damned, yet beloved, fellow man; especially in A Connecticut Yankee his doom-filled message is an eloquent lament that common man has forfeited his moral independence to the gods of irrationality, ignorance, social convention, and apathy--and that the road to universal freedom and justice seems to be lost forever.

The sixth-century England of A Connecticut Yankee--like the nineteenth-century Mississippi Valley that Twain satirizes in his reminiscent novels--is described in terms of its crushing social and economic burdens: slavery, illiteracy, religious tyranny, poverty, superstition, and total commitment to a decadent chivalric code. Like Twain's river valley towns, the English feudal towns are peculiarly estranged from the beautiful, virgin wilderness that surrounds them. When nineteenth-century Hank Morgan wakes up in medieval England, he finds himself in a pastoral setting

devoid of human life; the countryside is as "lonesome as Sunday . . . [T]here were no people, no wagons, there was no stir of life, nothing going on."² In the distance he sees Camelot, very like St. Petersburg in that it too is a "far-away town sleeping in a valley by a winding river" (CY, p. 7). Hank finds that entering the forest outside the town is like entering a sepulcher: "[W]e moved like spirits, the cushioned turf giving no sound of footfall . . . . [W]e left the world behind and entered into the solemn great deeps and rich gloom of the forest . . . where only the . . . birds were [disturbing] the impenetrable remoteness of the woods" (CY, p. 93). In both the Mississippi and Camelot valleys, nature maintains a mysterious and spectral isolation from the defilement of man; for Twain, the wilderness is always unsullied Eden, welcoming only the truly innocent or the innocuous dead.

Ousted from Eden and plagued by the spectres of death, disease, and oppression, the commoner in A Connecticut Yankee is as psychologically warped as the mudsill white in Twain's Mississippi Valley literature. Because of cowardice and misplaced loyalty, the peasants of Abblasoure Manor help execute their neighbors suspected of murdering the cruel

²Mark Twain, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court (New York, 1889), p. 10. All subsequent quotations from A Connecticut Yankee are from this edition and are cited in the text as CY.
manor lord, and Hank associates these traitorous serfs with the foolish poor whites who served in the Confederate Army, giving their lives to defend a ruling class that kept their own people deprived and humiliated. Hank's comparisons clearly indicate that Twain is including nineteenth-century America in his criticism. When Hank categorizes medieval England as a "nation of worms" (CY, p. 65) whose freedmen are "slaves, pure and simple" (CY, p. 63), he blames this submissive attitude on the teachings of Christianity--"the beauty of self-sacrifice . . . , meekness under insult . . . , meanness of spirit, nonresistance under oppression" (CY, p. 65). Moreover, Twain makes it clear that he is also concerned with religious oppression in the nineteenth century, for Hank states that any established Church means "death to human liberty, and paralysis to human thought" (CY, p. 77), and he sees this danger existing "even down to my birth-century" (CY, p. 65).

The two centuries resemble each other in more than the unjust pairing of power and privilege. Twain shows that the crowds of both ages have the same base appetites; Huck Finn is sickened by the Mississippi mob's lust for excitement and blood, and Hank Morgan is disgusted by the savage spectators at a medieval tournament--when a mortally wounded knight would fall with a "lance-shaft the thickness of your ankle
clean through him and the blood spouting" (CY, p. 69), the mob "would clap their hands and crowd each other for a better view" (CY, p. 69).

The children of both centuries are inheritors of their societies' contaminated viewpoints and share their elders' obsession with violence and death. The boys in *Tom Sawyer* act out in fantasy the savage ways of the adults, and in *A Connecticut Yankee*, a mob of children had hanged a little fellow with a bark rope, and he was kicking and struggling, in the process of choking to death. . . . It was some more human nature; the admiring little folk imitating their elders; they were playing mob, and had achieved a success which promised to be a good deal more serious than they had bargained for (CY, p. 304).

Whether it occurs in Hank Morgan's England or Huck Finn's Mississippi Valley, captivity means death to the human spirit. Hank's description of the docile prisoners in Morgan le Fay's dungeon could easily apply to the monotonously patient Nigger Jim. Hank says that these "down-trodden" (CY, p. 170) people do not rebel, that there is no "outburst of rage against their oppressors" (CY, p. 170). They have had to endure so much that "nothing could have startled them but a kindness" (CY, p. 170). And Hank sees that, for these captives, the inner spirit—the ultimate "me"—that he himself so cherishes, has been totally destroyed: "Their entire being was reduced to a monotonous
dead level of patience, resignation, dumb uncomplaining acceptance of whatever might befall them . . . . Their very imagination was dead. When you can say that of a man, he has struck bottom . . . ." (CY, p. 170).

Although there is a striking similarity between the social dilemmas of Twain's Mississippi Valley and the England of A Connecticut Yankee, the role of the protagonist Hank Morgan greatly differs from that of Huck Finn. Huck passively observes the evil stagnation of Mississippi society, while Hank tries to reform and modernize Camelot. In order to prepare the feudal people for their entrance into his own century of progress and technology, Hank sees that they must be weaned (and throughout the novel he pointedly refers to them as babies and children) from their irrational perspective and backward ways. In an attempt to modernize the royal army, Hank indoctrinates in modern warfare a highly talented commoner but finds that the man's humble origins eliminate his chances for the generalship. It is explained that, just as saints cannot be canonized by the Church unless they have been long dead, neither can a man command the army unless he can prove an ancient and noble descent. In Hank's viewpoint, this obsession with antiquity, so like that noted throughout The Innocents Abroad, is related to a preoccupation with death and is symbolic of the decadence of any social caste system:
In one case a man lies dead-alive four generations—mummified in ignorance and sloth—and that qualifies him to command live people, and take their weal and woe into his impotent hands; and in the other case, a man lies bedded with death and worms four generations, and that qualifies him for office in the celestial camp (CY, p. 244).

Hank seeks to destroy this decadent and irrational society, and his deadly weapon is modern industrialization. The tone of Hank's reference to industry indicates that he is fully aware that it is a destructive force. He hints that the menace of death and violence is hidden everywhere in England, for the secret factories are like "a serene volcano, standing innocent with its motionless summit in the blue sky and giving no hint of the rising hell in its bowels" (CY, p. 78). Before the defeat of his attempt to bring an age of enlightenment and material progress to feudal Britain, Hank shows he understands the lethal potential of industrialization; he has his factories destroyed in order to keep them out of the hands of the irrational forces: "All our noble civilization-factories went up in the air and disappeared... We could not afford to let the enemy turn our own weapons against us" (CY, p. 433).

The hidden threat of mechanization is realized in the holocaust at the end of A Connecticut Yankee. A church-supported insurrection overturns Hank's newly-organized government based on democratic principles and nineteenth-century American pragmatism. The nation reverts to its former oppressed condition, putting an end to Hank's
optimistic belief that irrationality and superstition can be trained out of man. The electrically lighted Camelot becomes darkened and "sepulchral" (CY, p. 412), and--in a gesture implying a forced return to primitivism--the persecuted Hank and a handful of his faithfuls retreat into a cave. Fortified by Gatling guns and a system of electrically-charged fencing, Hank and his aides dynamite and electrocute the attacking knights, leaving 25,000 rotting corpses before the cave entrance. Hank realizes his forces are doomed, however, for the dead will eventually kill the living with the poisonous gases of decay: 3 "We were in a trap, you see--a trap of our own making. If we stayed where we were, our dead would kill us . . ." (CY, p. 446).

The battle for human freedom and self-determination is lost, and Hank is finally wounded by a dying knight. In an extension of the weaning metaphor that symbolizes the emancipation of the child-like people of Camelot, Merlin the Magician, in the guise of an archetypal Evil-Mother figure sentences Hank to a thirteen-century sleep. Irrationality then comes back to reclaim her lost children. When Hank awakens in the nineteenth century, he is overcome with nostalgia for ancient Britain and dies yearning to be

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3 Roger Salomon says that the Yankee's entrapment resembles Melville's Moby Dick, with "imagery like Ahab--trapped by the bodies of those he has slaughtered" (Twain and the Image of History [New Haven, 1961], p. 113).
reunited with the sixth century--perhaps just as the troubled and aging Twain, whose lifetime spanned first a pastoral, then an expanding, and then a rapidly industrializing America, may have yearned to return to the tranquil Mississippi Valley in spite of its often painful memories. Hank, dying in a "gray and sad" (CY, p. 558) nineteenth-century world, struggles to recapture the lost dream of the past:

... I seemed to have flown back out of that age into this of ours, and then forward to it again, and was set down, a stranger and forlorn, in that strange England, with an abyss of thirteen centuries yawning between me and you! between me and my home and my friends! between me and all that is dear to me, all that could make life worth the living! (CY, p. 449).

In Hank's travels along "this pathetic drift between eternities" (CY, p. 150), he seems to have discovered that, although he cannot hope to ameliorate the tragic human condition, he can endure the vagaries of life and the inevitability of death by the simple cherishing of his essential experiences. Hank can finally say, "death is nothing, let it come" (CY, p. 449), and the disillusioned reformer finds a degree of peace.

In A Connecticut Yankee, Mark Twain shows that common man is powerless to free himself from the enslavement of religious and social tyranny. In Pudd'nhead Wilson (1894), the institution of slavery again illustrates Twain's conviction that the free-thinking individual can defy oppressive social systems only at the risk of inviting tragedy. The
slave Roxana finds to her sorrow that her scheme to save her son from the degradation of slavery sets up a tragic sequence of events, all stemming from the irreparable damage to the boy's character. Roxana has the courage and imagination to defy the commandments of her society, but the price she eventually pays is higher than death itself—the total destruction of her inner spirit and her son's sentence to ultimate slavery.

The death motif in this novel symbolizes many aspects of Twain's fatalistic social philosophy: the human impulse to escape from unbearable reality (Roxy in her anguish repeatedly talks of killing herself and her son), the concealed hatred fermenting within both slaveholder and slave, the absurd honor code of Southern aristocracy, the corruptive effects of social training, and the futility of any attempt at self-determination. Beyond the more conventional uses of the death motif, Twain's curious and persistent association of dogs with impending tragedy again appears in this book. In *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the howling of dogs portends death; in "The Recent Carnival of Crime" a dog is associated with human betrayal and remorse; in "The Chronicle of Young Satan" a mutilated dog leads rescuers to his dying master; in "The Enchanted Sea-Wilderness" a dog is involved in catastrophe and human perfidy; and here, in the beginning of *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, and in a mysterious and
seemingly joking manner, the symbolic pairing of a dog and death hints at the murder that will later occur.

An "invisible" howling dog disturbs David Wilson's conversation with his new Dawson's Landing neighbors. In jest, Wilson says if he owned half of the annoying dog, he would "kill" his half (PW, p. 16). The "deadly remark" (PW, p. 19) causes the young attorney to lose face with the townspeople, who are seeking some way to put this presumptuous stranger in his "place" in their exacting social system. The town labels Wilson a "dam fool," christens him "Pudd'nhead," and for years ostracizes him socially and professionally (PW, p. 17). The dog joke, however, does more than make Wilson an outcast; it is also prophetic of a tragedy that will affect the entire community, for Wilson will eventually try to "kill" his share of the town's secret blight by prosecuting another "invisible dog" for murder.

The murder plot of Pudd'nhead Wilson provides a framework for Twain's deterministic statement--that the hope of individual self-regeneration in a fixed society is doomed. The real villain of the story is not the murderer but the rigid social system of Dawson's Landing. Twain depicts the indolent little town as a grim prison in which the major

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4Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson (New York, 1893), p. 16. All subsequent quotations from Pudd'nhead Wilson are from this edition and are cited in the text as PW.
characters serve out their life roles unable to escape their fates. Those who either deliberately or unconsciously change their social categories are punished by a society whose existence is dependent upon the perpetuation of an unchanging caste system.

The beautiful mulatto slave Roxanna, torn between fear for her baby's future and hatred for her white lover, Colonel Essex, considers death as an escape from her entrapment:

I hates yo' pappy; he hain't got no heart--for niggers, he hain't anyways. I hates him, en I could kill him!

... I got to kill my chile, dey ain't no yuther way --killing him wouldn't save de chile fum goin' down de river ... Mammy's got to kill you--how kin I do it!

But ... she gwine wid you, she gwine to kill herself too (PW, p. 31).

But Roxana, who is a nurse to the new-born Tom Driscoll after his mother's death, recalls a chance remark on the striking resemblance between her son and the Driscoll heir and decides on a happier alternative. She exchanges the babies in their cradles, substituting her own thirty-second part negro son for the son of her indifferent master. The mulatto boy grows up as a debauched and self-centered aristocrat, and the true Tom Driscoll becomes identified as his humble and abused slave Chambers. Because the ostensible Tom Driscoll conceals in his soul both innate and cultivated evil, he--like the compounded evil of slavery itself--eventually brings tragedy to all whose lives he touches. Moreover, just as the evil of slavery is concealed behind the aristocratic slaveholder's
facade of gentlemanly integrity, kindness, and high purpose, Tom hides behind a mask of racial purity and class culture. Because the prominent citizens of Dawson's Landing unquestioningly accept Tom's facade, they welcome him into their genteel parlors. Tom, driven to manifest the complex evils hidden behind his social mask, lies to and steals from the society that harbors him. Tom is truly the "invisible dog" that haunts Dawson's Landing.

The ostensible slave Chambers is indoctrinated into the subservient mentality that accompanies his degraded position. Because he cannot bring to the slave role any of the natural grace and self-preserving wisdom of the negro but merely the total servility that has been drilled into him, he is constantly victimized by the arrogant Tom. He has the poor judgment to save his brutal master from drowning—an act implying that slavery sustains the exploitive life of the Southern aristocrat—and Chambers is renamed 'Tom Driscoll's nigger pappy' (PW, p. 45), to signify Tom's "second birth into this life" (PW, p. 45). But Tom—like the totally dependent slaveholding society—is consumed with secret guilt, shame, and hatred by the life-giving act. He deeply resents having to be grateful, "to remain publicly and permanently under such an obligation as this to a nigger, and to this nigger of all niggers—the life-giving act. He deeply resents having to be grateful, "to remain publicly and permanently under such an obligation as this to a nigger, and to this nigger of all niggers—this was too much" (PW, p. 44). Maddened by frustrations, Tom tries to kill Chambers but only succeeds in wounding him.
Tom continues to show the damaging effects of his false existence upon his innately weak and evil nature. He wants the advantages but not the obligations of aristocracy. When he is challenged to a duel, he refuses, and his fervently chivalric uncle, who was perfectly content to allow Tom to grow up without moral responsibility, is willing to sacrifice his own life for Tom's supposed honor. Even Roxie, who has every reason to know that Tom's ancestry is without either honor or decency, is horrified to find her son is not willing to die to remove this small stain from his illustrious name. Judge Driscoll's pompous stand for honor, and Roxy's naive parody of it, is a subtle and savage commentary on the Southern aristocracy's honor code and its staunch support by a people cruelly victimized by the slaveholder's myth of moral superiority.

Judge Driscoll survives the duel, which is a sharp study in comic satire: all the bystanders are hurt but neither of the principals. It is Judge Driscoll's fate, however, to be killed by the evil progeny of the slaveholding morality he cherishes. Tom kills his uncle when he is surprised in a robbery attempt. The murder of this prominent member of Dawson's Landing society seems to threaten the destruction of the caste system, for Tom manages to escape the murder scene undetected. Society, however, proves to be more powerful than its individual members. Because the townspeople have withheld their company from the outcast
Pudd'nhead Wilson, he has been forced to spend his time on the hobby of fingerprinting. Now, in determining Tom's guilt through an old fingerprint, Wilson becomes the agent of the society that has rejected him. He is finally in a position to destroy the "invisible dog" of Dawson's Landing, for the prints show that Tom is both slave and murderer. Again, death and a dog are associated; unconscious of his impending doom, Tom taunts Wilson with his failure to catch the murderer: "Don't take it so hard . . . you'll hang somebody yet" (PW, p. 203), and the suddenly enlightened Wilson mutters, "It's no lie to say I am sorry to have to begin with you, miserable dog though you are!" (PW, p. 204).

Acting upon Wilson's successful prosecution of Tom, society seeks its revenge for this audacious defiance of its caste system, and the existences of all those involved in the plot to evade the system deteriorate; Tom, Chambers, and Roxy are all condemned to lives that are close to, or worse than, death. Since Tom is now a slave, he is regarded as property rather than as a human. Because it would be unjust to deprive a slaveowner of his rightful property, Tom is pardoned and sold down the river. Tom has escaped death for what he, Roxy, and every slave realize is the more terrible alternative. Chambers' future is nearly as sad; a sense of inferiority has been so thoroughly trained into him that he is imprisoned in the role of slave forever. The white man's life is frightening and uncomfortable, but Chambers can no longer socialize with negroes. He is condemned to spend his
existence in a state of near-death, isolated from the life of both races. Roxy's fate is the most tragic of all, however, for it spells the doom of self-determination. Her solitary rebellion against fixed destiny is forever defeated, and with it the belief that the individual can create a new and better existence. The results of Tom's trial have so disordered Roxy's emotions that she totally withdraws from life: "The spirit of her eye was quenched, her martial bearing departed with it, and the voice of her laughter ceased in the land" (PW, p. 224). In all but physical fact, Roxy is dead, and with her dies the hope that man can exercise his free will and establish his own destiny in a mechanically predetermined world.

Both *A Connecticut Yankee* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, with their themes of dual existences--Hank Morgan's existence in two centuries and the switched lives of Tom and Chambers--show Twain's preoccupation with the confusion of reality with illusion. Following the first of his late personal disasters--the death of his daughter Susy and his bankruptcy--Twain wrote a score of manuscripts in which the protagonists seek an escape from unbearable reality by convincing themselves that what seems real is only a dream. Not only does Twain dismiss reality in these works, but he also reveals a twofold picture of death; it is both a release from the oppressive illusions of existence and the configuration of man's most terrible fears. Death in this last literature,
however, is no more real than life; Twain shows it to be the basic nightmare of humanity and describes it in terms of primordial horror and the apocalyptic imagery of the collective unconscious.

The manuscripts, repeatedly revised, were never completed. In many of these unfinished stories, the characters confront tragedies similar to Twain's own—the death of loved ones and the loss of a happy existence. One of the most horror-filled of these incompleted manuscripts is one DeVoto entitled "The Great Dark" (written in 1897), which, like Huckleberry Finn, is a story of a voyage—in this case, a journey to death occurring in a dream setting. The central figure of the story, Henry Edwards, examines a drop of water under a microscope and notices the grotesque creatures that inhabit the drop. He falls asleep, meets the "Superintendent of Dreams," and asks him to make arrangements for the exploration of the "ocean in a drop of water," Edwards finds himself, his wife Alice, his two daughters, and two servants on a manned ship out at sea, lost in an icy storm, and about to face incredible horrors.

Edwards describes the sea as dark and desolate and the ship as phantomlike—its masts and sails towering "spectrally,
faintly flicked here and there aloft with smothered signal lanterns." When the faint lights are extinguished, "everything was dimmed to obliteration" ("GD," p. 106). And the crew become like disembodied spirits: "Men were within twenty steps of me, but I could not make out their figures; I only knew they were there by their voices" ("GD," p. 106). Signals become shostly; Edwards hears "the muffled sound of the distant bell, followed by a far-off cry" ("GD," p. 106). Adding to the general eeriness, the ship defies the laws of gravity, for the decks remain level in the tumultuous sea. At first, Edwards is not frightened by the strangeness; he believes that the Superintendent of Dreams--whose spectral presence frightens the crew--is in control of this chaotic world. Besides, Edwards cannot take the nightmare voyage seriously because he is sure he is dreaming. The Superintendent, however, understands Edwards' unspoken thought and asks him if he is positive it really is a dream. And Edwards suddenly realizes that he must accept this horrible phenomenon of a journey as a reality, as the only life there is, and he finds that life continually filled with new terrors and images of death, including monsters that threaten to snatch victims off the ship and devour them. The most terrible of the

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5 Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Which Was The Dream?, edited by John S. Tuckey (Berkeley, 1967), p. 106. "The Great Dark," which is included among the selections, is cited in the text as "GD."
monsters, a giant spider-squid, tries to climb aboard the ship, and the attack so unnerves the crew that they mutiny, for they fear "the world has come to an end" ("GD," p. 120).

The captain subdues the rebellion, however, with a plea for human dignity and makes a spirited address that is Twain's most transcendent literary reference to death:

Are we rational men, manly men, men who can stand up and face hard luck and a big difficulty that has been brought about by nobody's fault, and say live or die, survive or perish, we are in for it, for good or bad, and we'll stand by the ship if she goes to hell! . . . Are we . . . men made in the image of God and ready to do when He commands and die when He calls . . . . If it is God's will that we pull through, we pull through--otherwise not" ("GD," p. 150).

Twain stopped the manuscript with the captain's speech and never finished the rest of the tragedy, but another draft of the voyage-of-disaster story shows he had intended to have the ship face even greater disasters: a crew maddened by the lust for gold, and a child kidnapped by a second ship which becomes stranded in a merciless solar glare:

They were to catch up with the other ship at last--but in the Great White Glare, where the child and all the crew and passengers of the second ship were to be killed by the merciless heat--and the Glare was to further madden the gold-maddened mutineers and to dry up the sea, the monsters were to gather and in a final, apocalyptic phantasy of destruction, the two beloved daughters were to be killed, the grief-crazed wife was to die, all remaining survivors of the first ship were to die also, leaving only the helpless narrator and the loyal negro who was his servant.6

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Twain's notes show he intended to bring the story back to reality. The terrible fantasy ends, and Edwards says, "It is midnight. Alice and the children come to say goodnight. I think them dreams. Think I am back home in a dream." Although his family is safe around him, Edwards cannot accept them as real. His mind is so besieged by images of horror that these alone have reality for him. For Henry Edwards, as well as for Hank Morgan and Roxana, the shadow of death and disaster has totally eclipsed the bright hope for a good existence.

Thus, in Twain's view, man is unable to escape his cataclysmic world by constructing a saner one because he brings to this new existence the crippling fears and the innate evils of the old. Salvation is a delusion, and man, according to Twain, is doomed to remain one with the earth and share its eternal impurity and perpetual decay. As Philip Traum says in "The Chronicle of Young Satan," Man is made of dirt . . . . a museum of disgusting diseases, a home of impurities; he comes to-day and is gone tomorrow, he begins as dirt and departs as a stench."8


8 Mark Twain, Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, edited by William M. Gibson (Berkeley, 1969), p. 55. All subsequent quotations from the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts are from this edition and are cited in the text as MS.
Twain did retain one hope, however, for he shows in his last work that within the self-aware individual another freely creative self has the ability to transcend the fixed conditions of human existence and explore the possibilities of either a better world, or at least of self-fulfillment which affords release from the constant burdens of life.

In a letter written after the death of his daughter Susy, Twain tells of the flight of his creative self from what he termed his "mud image." The letter was written during the period in which the first of Twain's incomplete versions of the "Mysterious Stranger" began to emerge, and touches upon the theme of creative transcendency that dominates these stories. In the letter, Twain says of himself and his wife,

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9 Mark Twain, Selected Mark Twain-Howells Letters, p. 313.

10 William M. Gibson states that "Mark Twain's The Mysterious Stranger, A Romance, as published in 1916 and reprinted since that date, is an editorial fraud perpetrated by Twain's official biographer and literary executor, Albert Bigelow Paine, and Frederick A. Duneka of Harper & Brothers publishing company" ("Introduction," Mark Twain's Mysterious Stranger Manuscripts, p. 1).

11 Stanley Brodwin says that the "Mysterious Stranger" stories "represent projections of an inner dialogue going on with Mark Twain, himself, and their real meanings and tensions can be located in his need to 'liberate,' psychologically and philosophically, his creative Self from the non-creative claims . . ." ("Mark Twain's Masks of Satan: The Final Phase," American Literature, 45 [May, 1973], 218).
"We are dead people who go through the motions of life. Indeed I am a mud image . . . ."\textsuperscript{12} He is puzzled, however, that his creative imagination continues to function unaffected by his depression, that it "writes, & . . . has comedy fancies & finds pleasure in phrasing them . . . . [T]he thing in me forgets the presence of the mud image and goes its own way wholly unconscious of it & apparently of no kinship with it."\textsuperscript{13} By committing himself to creativity, Twain becomes indifferent to his psychological burdens and achieves a transcendency--the only salvation Twain sees possible--that finds expression in the theme of the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts. In these, the creative Self assumes the role of young Satan, the revelator, creator, and destroyer of illusions. In Twain's last manuscript, "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger" (written in 1908), Satan discloses that the world, including his own conjuration, exists only in the imagination, in the dream-world, of the creative mind, and it is this imagination that could release the individual from the burdens and limitations of human existence, if only the mind could resist psychological illusions and social conformity. Twain indicates that socially-imposed anxieties hamper the creative imagination's freedom to function; in "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," the mind of the protagonist, August Feldner, is

\textsuperscript{12}Mark Twain, Selected Mark Twain-Howells Letters, p. 313.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., p. 313.
split in three conflicting ways—the Waking-Self, the Dream-Self, and the Soul—and these three are in constant war with each other. The Waking-Self is subject to the morals and principles of man, the Soul is man's essence, and the Dream-Self is a hedonistic and amoral spirit whose home is the universe. In the story the conflict of the divided mind ends in confusion and threatens self-destruction; finally, Emil Schwarz, the Dream-Self ordered by Satan to assume August's human form, cries out to be liberated:

oh, free me from them; these bonds of flesh—this decaying vile matter, this foul weight, and clog, and burden, this loathsome sack of corruption in which my spirit is imprisoned, her white wings bruised and soiled—oh, be merciful and set her free! (MS, p. 369).

Satan can free the Dream-Self because it belongs to the universe, but only death can free the Waking-Self from its human imprisonment. And death, in Twain's last fiction as in all his work, is the liberator, not the curse of humanity. Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar states, "All say, 'How hard it is that we have to die'—a strange complaint to come from the mouths of people who have had to live" (PW, p. 89); and over and over again, in all versions of the "Mysterious Stranger" stories, Twain shows that death is preferable to human existence. Young Satan in all these stories is amazed at man's fearful response to death. In "Schoolhouse Hill" (written in 1899), young 44 rescues thirteen people in a terrible snowstorm, and announces he would have rescued more
if he had only realized the village thought it desirable. "What a misfortune!" cries the schoolmaster, and the puzzled 44 replies, "Is it?" (MS, p. 208). Forty-four cannot understand the human race, "By my reading I gather you are not conscious of either death or sleep; that nevertheless you fear the one and do not fear the other. It is very stupid. Illogical" (MS, p. 216). And in "The Chronicle of Young Satan" (written in 1900), Satan demonstrates that death is just an illusion; he casually squashes two little workmen he had created to demonstrate his cosmic powers and then "wiped the red from his fingers... and went on talking" (MS, p. 49).

Death is the preferred condition in "The Chronicle of Young Satan"; Philip Traum tells Theodor and Seppi that he will make the lives of two of their favorite friends happier. The boys are delighted until they discover that small Lisa and Nikolaus must soon drown if indeed their predetermined futures are to be changed for the better; otherwise, they face a lifetime of physical incapacity and degradation. Later, Gottfried Narr's innocent grandmother confesses to the charge of witchcraft because she realizes her life is ruined by the stigma of suspicion; therefore, she chooses confession and death--"The fire is best, it is soon over" (MS, p. 80).

The boys finally learn the value of death; when they are told Frau Brandt's future years are certain to be filled with grief
and hunger, they ask Satan to be merciful. He is, and Frau Brandt is burned at the stake for heresy in a couple of days, "and we were glad of her death and not sorry that we has brought it about" (MS, p. 133).

Swift death in these stories is a blessing, but protracted death is viewed as man's worst punishment, and God is shown to be indifferent to the prolonged suffering of even those who have served Him. In "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," 44 brings August to the bedside of the completely paralyzed Johann Brinker, who had once been a gifted artist. In rescuing a priest from drowning, Brinker suffered a stroke and has been doomed to a thirty-year invalidism. His sisters have had to give up their plans for marriage and family to care for the helpless man. Only his brain has remained intact--"the worse for him" (MS, p. 322)--and the paralysis has deprived him of all means of communication--"he cannot speak, he cannot hear, he cannot see, he is wholly helpless" (MS, p. 322).

In "The Chronicle of Young Satan," Philip shows Theodor the death-in-life conditions in a nineteenth-century factory, in which both adults and children toil long hours in a filthy, hazardous environment. The protracted deaths of these workers, Philip points out, is more terrible than the swifter death of the heretic in Theodor's own fifteenth century.
... [H]is punishment is trivial compared with theirs. They broke him on the wheel and mashed him to rags and pulp... and he is dead, now, and free of your precious race; but these poor slaves here--why they have been dying for years, and some of them will not escape from life for years to come (MS, p. 73).

But murder--swift and deliberate, or slow and indifferent--is the inescapable compulsion of the human race. In "The Chronicle of Young Satan," Philip shows Theodor and his friends the history of civilization, starting with the wars, murders and massacres of the Old Testament, and all the bloody battles of history. After the invention of guns, the carnage intensified, "raging, struggling, wallowing through seas of blood, smothered in battle-smoke through which the flags glinted and the red jets from the cannons darted, and always we heard the thunder of the guns and the cries of the dying..." (MS, p. 137).

Most of the death imagery in Twain's final work is melodramatic and explicit, reflecting the intensity of his rage against God and humanity. In "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," however, there are quiet moments when the motif takes on a haunting beauty, equal in power to the lyrical death-and-the-river metaphor in Huckleberry Finn. In an episode that magnificently combines fear, laughter, and heartfelt nostalgia, 44 mimics the Mr. Bones of the black-face minstrels, and the outlandishly comical figure that bounds down the hall into August's room is unmistakably that of Death:
It came, and came,—that dreadful noise—straight to
my door, then that figure capered in and slammed the
doors to . . . and betwixt the fingers of the violent
hands were curved fragments of dry bone which smote
together and made that terrible clacking; and the
man's mouth reached clear across his face and was un-
naturally red . . . and the teeth showed intensely
white between them, and the face was as black as
midnight. It was a terrible and ferocious spectre,
and would bound as high as the ceiling, and crack its
heels together . . . like a fiend . . . (MS, p. 354).

A banjo materializes from nowhere, the fantastic creature
starts playing and singing an old plantation song, and the
narrator is suddenly no longer a young Austrian in the
fifteenth century but the aging Twain, recalling tender
memories of a long-dead past: Mr. Bones' songs tell of
his humble lost home, and the joys of his childhood,
and the . . . faces that had been dear to him, and
which he would look upon no more—and there he sat
lost . . ., with his face lifted up that way, and
there was never anything so beautiful, never anything
so heart-breaking, oh! never any music like it below
the skies . . . and when the last notes were dying
away . . . .afar off the home was there, a cabin of
logs nestling under spreading trees, a soft vision
steeped in a mellow summer twilight—and steeped in that
music . . . which was dying, dying, fading, fading;
and with it faded the vision, like a dream, and
passed away . . . spectrally, with the perishing home
showing . . . as through a veil . . . (MS, p. 356).

And it is with this same feeling of isolation and sad-
ness that August later views the procession of the dead that
44 has called "from all the epochs and ages of the world"
(MS, p. 400). As if in a nightmare, the spirits of the past
and the skeletons of the famous dead pass in review, each
tagged with his name and date. Among the dead, August
sees "... skeletons whom I had known myself... men and women, boys and girls... For hours and hours the dead pass..." (MS, p. 402). Then, suddenly, "44 waved his hand and we stood in an empty and soundless world" (MS, p. 403).

In this last manuscript, "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," 44 has already demonstrated with the creation and destruction of the multiple selves that life and death are illusions; now he shows August the world as it really is—a void that he describes as simply reflecting the thoughts created by the isolated Self: "Nothing exists; all is a dream. God—man—the world,—the sun, the moon, the wilderness of stars: a dream, all a dream, they have no existence. Nothing exists save empty space—and you!" (MS, p. 404). There is, therefore, no afterlife, no death. There is nothing beyond August's thought, and he is nothing but a thought; 44 says, "... you have no body, no blood, no bones, you are but a thought, I myself have no existence, I am but a dream—your dream, creature of your imagination" (MS, p. 404). And with this dismissal of all reality, Twain reaches the climax of his apocalyptic world view. The secure Victorian world of order, rationality, faith in human progress, and the possibility of free will dissolves into a dream.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Throughout his literary career, Mark Twain examined the lack of harmony between what man expects from life and what actually happens. Incongruity, he found, is the very substance of existence; nothing ever is as it appears to be. The chaotic conditions of the universe, Twain recognized, shape the contradictory elements of life and arouse in man the conflicting emotional responses of laughter and tears. In the shadow of joy Twain saw sorrow; in the shadow of life he saw death; and the spectre of death stands behind all his great comedy. The death motif is Twain's most frequent and powerful literary imagery; it appears in all his works and symbolizes his notion of man's discordant existence in an inconsistent and disordered universe.

The origins of Twain's paradoxical reality stem from his background: he was born to people who were lured to the Southwest by the promise of a better life, only to realize a harder, more deprived one; he was attracted by the beauty and freedom of the river, only to experience its lethal dangers; he fulfilled his dream of becoming a steamboat pilot, only to encounter tragedy and frightening responsibilities; he was educated to believe God showed a
primary interest in man, only to discover that there was no unique status for mankind apart from life in nature. Twain's early beliefs were molded into a concept of an orderly, rational world of cause and effect. His experiences, however, showed him that man is not equipped to sense ultimate reality, and that the ideal of a supreme, thinking Being and man's eventual unity with nature is an illusion. Twain lived in a time and place which witnessed overwhelming changes in religious and philosophical ideas. The rapid reshaping of old, established beliefs disconcerted the minds of most thinking men; it created in Twain's responsive, erratic intellect an irreconcilable schism between the old philosophy of reason and harmony and the new reality of disorder and alienation from nature.

Twain was not only intellectually disconcerted by the paradoxes in human existence, but he also found them emotionally impossible to accept. His works, from the middle period on, reflect his great fury at human failure to live up to ideals of order and rationality and at God's abandonment of man to a chaotic world. The death imagery in The Innocents Abroad and Roughing It dramatizes dissonant cultures, an entrapped humanity, and a nature that alternates between an active hostility and a total indifference towards man. There is no harmony in the worlds that Twain shows in these travel books, and in Tom Sawyer and Life on the
Mississippi, he reveals the source of this incongruous and death-obsessed existence, for the children in these works are constantly torn between fear of a vengeful authoritarian God and a strong sense of separation from an indifferent adult society. The lonely and guilt-ridden world of Tom Sawyer and young Sam Clemens is described in terms of death: in defiance of authority, the boys court death; in fear of retaliation, they await it.

Death fascinates the rebellious children of Tom Sawyer and Life on the Mississippi, and in Huckleberry Finn it haunts Huck's journey to moral independence. The death motif in this book is more than a dramatization of Twain's inharmonious reality; it is an integral part of the central themes of Huckleberry Finn—the disparity between appearances and reality, and the triumph of individual over collective morality. It symbolizes the incomprehensible reality that lies hidden behind religious and social facades, a reminder to Huck that there are phenomena that defy all human explanations. Huck's journey through the deluded valley is a voyage of self-discovery, and he finally concludes that his own good instincts are more reliable than communal doctrines. The novel ends on a pessimistic note, however, for the forces of a duplicitous society are shown to be stronger than individual righteousness. Huck's great sacrifice for Jim is reduced by society to an act of comic confusion, and all
the things that Huck associated with the power and mystery of death are transformed into the prankish elements of Tom's feigned rescue of Jim. Tawdriness is all that survives Huck's noble intention, and death is again disguised as social entertainment. A confused and saddened Huck leaves for the wilderness and an existence supposedly free from social contamination.

At least in Huckleberry Finn there is a possibility that the individual is free to construct a rational world by transcending moral corruption. In Twain's last works, however, this optimistic hope is defeated amidst apocalyptic death imagery, and in his final work the hope fades into a dream. The death motif dominates this final literature and increases in intensity and explicit horror. It dramatizes Twain's idea of predestination, and the futility of man's efforts to escape from his own fate. In A Connecticut Yankee a plan to bring order and progress to a decadent civilization is destroyed in a shocking holocaust; in Puddn'head Wilson a maneuver to evade slavery is defeated by a savage murder; in "The Great Dark" a man's life is blighted by the inescapable dreams of a terrible unknown. Man, in all these works, is unable to transcend the nightmarish conditions of his existence except through the release of death. But even death is a dubious escape, for in "The Great Dark" Twain shows it as the realization of man's most hideous dreams.
Unable to reconcile the incongruities of life and death, Twain dismisses them as illusions in his final work, the "Mysterious Stranger" manuscripts. He shows in these stories a possibility for creative transcendency and a nihilistic solution to the paradoxes of existence. The central figure in these stories is young Satan, who encompasses the powers of the creative imagination. Satan creates and destroys illusions, and he is beyond the authority of moral principles. In the final story of the series, "No. 44, The Mysterious Stranger," Satan explains that the creative imagination is the eternally free component of the human intellect and that the enlightened individual can transform existence not only by the exercise of his creativity, but also by the recognition that all reality—including life and death—is simply the reflection of his own thought.

In his last phase, Mark Twain annihilated the world of irreconcilabilities, and a life filled with unbearable frustrations dissolved into a dream. His creative genius, once his great defense against madness, was fading, and the melancholy humorist was forced to alter reality into something he could endure. Throughout his long, magnificent career he had described life in terms of death and humanity in terms of failure; he had incited laughter by recalling terror and guilt. Now he desperately sought the obliteration of all life's jarring incongruities; and he dismissed death, which for years he had both feared and longed for, as another illusion of the limited human mind.
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Articles

