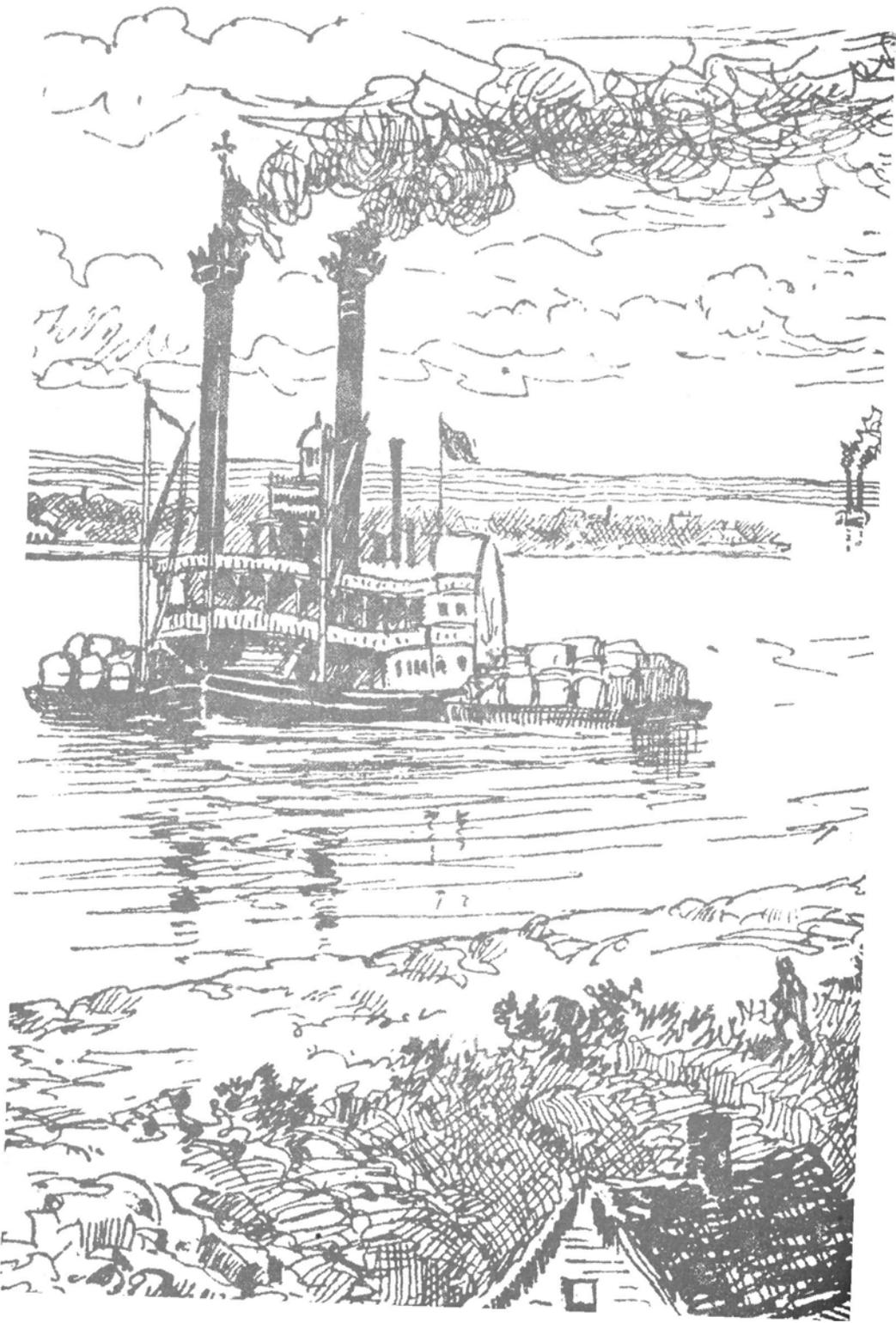


The Dramatic Unity  
of *Huckleberry Finn*



George C. Carrington, Jr.

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## Introduction

The hundreds of books and articles on *Huckleberry Finn* have failed to answer a basic question about the novel: Does the ending belong to the book? Answering “No” as many critics of the book have done puts students of American literature in an embarrassing position. Almost all such critics consider *Huckleberry Finn* not just an interesting novel, but a very great novel, one of the supreme American works of art. *PMLA*, the official publication of university English studies, has declared it a national treasure.<sup>1</sup> But many able critics have agreed that the ending of the “great American novel”<sup>2</sup> seriously violates its unity. (One critic would omit the beginning, too.)<sup>3</sup> The ending of *Huckleberry Finn* being a quarter of the novel, we are left with a radically flawed treasure, as if *Hamlet* had a bungled fifth act. This situation does not seem to bother many critics, but I think it should. Works of the first order should stand up to the most searching examination. Either we should establish that *Huckleberry Finn* is unified, even if we dislike its mode of unity, or we should let the present towering reputation of the novel lapse, and call it a partial failure like *Pierre*—a significant partial failure, and a

greater achievement than the successes of many minor artists, but a partial failure just the same. And no matter how one defines “partial,” a partial failure is not a success.

Rather than drive the question into a Thoreauvian corner, it is pleasant to let the matter rest. American literature has so few indisputable masterpieces (as admirers of English literature rather enjoy pointing out) that upholders of our literature are tempted to inflate the virtues and play down the faults of our candidates. But, seizing the nettle, I have looked in *Huckleberry Finn* for what Twain himself, in a letter to Howells, called “the nameless something            the subtle something”<sup>4</sup> that accounts, he thought, for the nature and the life of a true work of literary art. I have reached conclusions that may help readers in the eternal dialectic that is the critical life of a major work of art.

Before I outline my argument I should deal with some of my assumptions, some possible objections to them, and some critical approaches that I think get in a way of a full understanding of *Huckleberry Finn* and its ending, whether that full understanding involves my conclusions or not. First, I assume that every word of the novel can be taken seriously and that Twain (as he suggests in his prefatory notes) knew what he was doing. As David Lodge has said, “Apart from the possibility of textual corruption having occurred in the process of printing (where the critic must rely upon the assistance of textual scholarship), we may, in citing a reliable text and sticking to it, be confident that we are dealing with an artistic whole.”<sup>5</sup> I use the Houghton Mifflin paperback text of *Huckleberry Finn*, which follows Twain’s carefully prepared first edition, and in which the major corruptions (the chapter titles and the word *The* in the title) have been eliminated.

An argument based on piety toward the author's text must face the *ad hominem* counterattack, which places Twain in the class of Wolfe and Kerouac, Dionysian writers who knew less about their works than critics know. Bernard De Voto, who crushed Wolfe with the comment "Genius is not enough," tried to crush the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* by calling it "extemporized burlesque."<sup>6</sup> Wolfe's surly reactions to De Voto's attack suggest that the critic was right in that case; but Twain was not present to defend his own novel, and the idea that the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* is careless improvising or extemporizing has gained wide acceptance. De Voto's attack begs the question when he talks about improvising, but he is on more acceptable ground when he criticizes the ending for being irrelevant. Perhaps De Voto took surface effect for totality of meaning and failed to dig for that "nameless something." "To string incongruities and absurdities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way" was to Twain the way to form "the American art," the humorous story; "to seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities" was the stance to be taken by the artist.<sup>7</sup> There may be a moral lurking here for the student of Twain's fiction. "You were all there for him, but he was not all there for you," said Howells, who for many years knew Twain as well as any man ever did, that is, not very well.<sup>8</sup>

Twain was fully capable of shrewd professional self-criticism. His comments on the rewriting of *Those Extraordinary Twins* suggest that he was aware of structural problems of the sort that bother critics of *Huckleberry Finn*. When he wanted to, Twain could turn out well-made novels—*The Prince and the Pauper* and *Joan of Arc*, for example. "How to Tell a Story" and the essays on Cooper

show that Twain had decided opinions on technique and craftsmanship; we may disagree with those opinions, but not with the fact that he had them and was proud of them. He was capable of hopelessly bad judgments of his own manuscripts, like the burlesque *Hamlet* that he wrote in the summer of 1881.<sup>9</sup> But just as Clemens distinguished sharply between his public (including semiprivate) and his really private behavior, between reading Browning with the ladies in the parlor and reading *1601* with his cronies in the billiard room, so Mark Twain, his literary persona, distinguished between his improvisations and his real work. What is important about the burlesque *Hamlet* is not Twain's passing enthusiasm for it but his later and permanent rejection of it. De Voto is right in saying that Twain *wrote* "improvisations," unplanned verbal doodlings, but wrong in saying that Twain *published* them. In judging *Huckleberry Finn* we must concentrate on the relevant fact, the published novel.

There is no use speculating on the novel as it could have been written or as we think it should have been written. Henry James put the critic's obligation very well: "We don't know what people might give us that they don't—the only thing is to take them on what they do and to allow them absolutely and utterly their conditions." It is all too easy, as the history of Twain criticism shows, not to allow him his "conditions"—beginning with his own respect for the published work—and not to concentrate on what he "does" under those conditions.

Any character we draw for Twain, from white Uncle Remus to dirty old man, can be supported from his works and behavior. He had passionate opinions on many sides of everything and gave them forth lavishly. It is

dangerously easy to see this writer of many ideas as a worker with ideas, a controlled and self-critical verbalizer in the modern tradition of Joyce, a builder of logical systems—or, not finding such systems, to assume that Twain was trying to create them and failing. Thus many readings of *Huckleberry Finn*, especially those of the 1950s and 1960s, torture the novel on the Procrustean beds of modern criticism and modern intellectual life. We apply our own terms to the novel, and if they fail, we blame Twain. Much of the trouble in examining *Huckleberry Finn* comes from demanding rigid consistency. Some readers apply the formalist or “new critical” concept of the work of art as a thing that radiates meaning but is nevertheless basically a thing, composed of parts whose harmony is brought into the work from fixed genres or modes. Henry Nash Smith, author of the most respected book on Twain’s fiction, is upset because “what had begun as a comic story developed incipiently tragic implications contradicting the premises of comedy.”<sup>10</sup> A novel, that is, has no business breaking the rules of generic consistency. Professor Smith analyzes this situation generically, in terms of the effects of Twain’s triumph with Huck’s point of view and with the “vernacular” style of the novel. To Professor Smith these triumphs posed “a new technical problem to which there was no solution.”<sup>11</sup> Rather than consider the matter a violation, it might be better to see it as a characteristic. The same critic complains that Tom Sawyer, at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, “has no tragic dimension whatever,”<sup>12</sup> so that Twain violates the tragic mood that was itself a violation of the original comic mood of the novel. We can see here the limits of genre

criticism, which introduces unconsciously the idea of decorum and ignores the possibility of functional relationships that may incidentally be violations of decorum. "Pastoral" is another genre term the use of which results in a demand for rigidity. Once Huck gets onto Jackson's Island or out in midstream on the raft, he should stay there, it seems. (But perhaps Huck has reasons for moving, and Twain has reasons for moving him.) Genre operates negatively, too. The ending of the novel is often seen as "farce," which is taken as inferior to both "tragedy" and "comedy." No matter what he does, Twain is doubly damned. If shifting from comedy to tragedy is wrong, then shifting from comedy or tragedy to farce, the lowest of the low, is disgraceful. One critic attacks a reading of the ending as farce by saying, "Such a reading deprives *Huckleberry Finn* of any serious meaning."<sup>13</sup> In such a view farce is "low," not "serious"; it cannot tell us anything important about the human condition. But perhaps it can, and I will try to show that the farce in the ending of *Huckleberry Finn* does tell us something of great importance that should upset us.

American literature and American studies have in part tried to justify their existence as undergraduate academic fields with the claim that study of the materials of their fields makes the student a better person. The ending of *Huckleberry Finn* is a bother to supporters of this view. Huck seems to develop morally until in chapter 31 he becomes a truly noble figure, but within a few pages he has relapsed into clownishness, and the last chapter finds him about where he was at the beginning. To a moralistic critic, who wants Huck to help us stand

at moral attention forever, the ending is unendurable. In a powerfully argued and widely influential essay Professor Leo Marx maintains that the novel is a quest, Huck is “the redemptive possibility of the human race,” and the ending, violating both quest and possibility, is outrageous. Professor Marx is so upset by this betrayal, as he sees it, that he polarizes the ending in relation to the body of the novel, and shows Huck changing from a saint to a worm, who makes an “awestruck submission” to Tom Sawyer.<sup>14</sup> Better than weakness and clowning would be total failure, so we now have Professor John Seelye’s rewritten version of *Huckleberry Finn* in which Jim dies and Huck is left in solitary despair.<sup>15</sup> Seelye’s Huck retains, throughout, that splendid “commitment to freedom and spontaneity” that Henry Nash Smith finds early in the novel in Twain’s Huck.<sup>16</sup> Despite its surface coarseness the Seelye version suggests the neoclassic dictum that if a book is not “correct,” it should be rewritten.

But we must not reduce *Huckleberry Finn* to a tract, unless it is clear that Twain wanted readers to see it as a tract, and there is no strong evidence for that. Readers of this novel have too often been “bettors” rather than “spectators,” to use W. B. Gallie’s terms. The bettor, being interested in one outcome only, has lost the spectator’s pure interest in the game itself, and, if it goes against him, either turns away in disgust, or tries to tamper with the game.<sup>17</sup> Or, to use a more literary image, this approach to *Huckleberry Finn*, this using it rather than studying it, is still linked to what Frank Kermode calls the first two stages of man’s use of the past, the stages of ritual and pattern-finding, rather than the third