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"The Greatest of All Arts": Mark Twain and the Theater

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"THE GREATEST OF ALL ARTS":
MARK TWAIN AND THE THEATER

A Thesis

Presented To
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Michael J. Garcia

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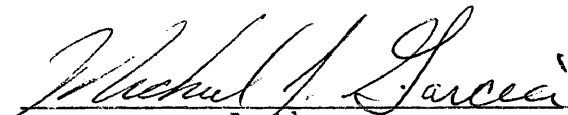
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APPROVAL SHEET


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"THE GREATEST OF ALL ARTS":

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ABSTRACT

Little has been written about Mark Twain's attempts at playwriting. No collected edition of his plays exists: some have been recently published by the University of California Press, some have long been out of print, and some remain unpublished in the Mark Twain Papers at Berkeley, California. Critics of Mark Twain have given only superficial attention to the plays and, although brief introductions to the published plays exist, no in-depth study has been made.

The history of Twain's playwriting reveals a great deal about his motivations as a writer, and the plays provide an insight into his own theatrical nature. People who knew Mark Twain and critics who later wrote about him have described him as an actor, a man who loved to perform. To a man with such character traits the theater held a special fascination.

In addition to craving the attention offered by the theater, Twain's other main goal in playwriting was financial gain. His first play, The Gilded Age, introduced him to the money to be made by writing drama. Making a great deal of money doing something he enjoyed was the way Twain saw his playwriting.

All of Twain's plays after The Gilded Age failed. He tried collaborating with Bret Harte and William Dean Howells but still success eluded him. Twain was unable to adapt his style of fiction writing to the stage. Finally in 1898, after a string of failures, Twain gave up trying to write drama, but up until his death in 1910 he continued to take a close personal interest in the theater.

During his career as a writer, Mark Twain wrote several plays, two of which were collaborations with major literary figures of his time: Bret Harte and William Dean Howells. With one early exception, Twain's dramatic attempts always failed, and this failure was frustrating for a writer who was publishing highly successful novels such as The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn during the same period. His genius could not be adapted to the methods of playwriting. The financial reward of the theater and the public exposure it offered were great incentives, but dramatic requirements of plot and character development made the stage an unattainable goal for Mark Twain.

To understand the conflict between the techniques involved in playwriting and Twain's own literary style, it is helpful to examine the article "How to Tell a Story." In this piece Twain explains the requirements of telling the humorous story. The humorous tale, according to Twain, is strictly American, and it is nothing like the comic story, which he associates with France. Twain appears as a proponent of the humorous story, and the style he describes for the telling of it is closely related to his own style as a humorous story writer. His main point in this article is that this type of story "depends for its effect upon the manner ¹ of the telling," while the comic story depends only upon the matter.

Twain transferred this emphasis upon the manner of the story-telling to his written work. Two devices that he used to make a successful transformation from oral story telling to written fiction were dialect and an ingenuous narrator or main character. The

manner in which the story is presented may be exemplified by "The Story of the Old Ram," "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral," and "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Twain's use of these methods develops character, creates humor, and maintains interest.

In "How to Tell A Story," Twain also stresses the importance of the pause. In his platform speeches, his main experience with live audiences, he often employed the pause to great effect. When Twain wrote for the stage he was writing lines that were meant to be spoken, and he used this favorite device often. The problem was that actors who had a less delicate, or different, sense of timing were responsible for delivering his lines to the audience. Twain's struggle to maintain control of this vital comic element is evident in a note he sent to his brother Orion after the author had attended the rehearsals of his play Ah Sin in 1874: "I staid [sic] on the stage 2 to 4 hours several days in succession showing them how I thought the speeches ought to be uttered. The consequence was, the play went right through without a hitch on the very first night." Other playwrights could afford to leave the timing to the actors, but Twain relied so heavily on this device that he felt as if any change in his conception of the timing would seriously mar the production.

Twain believed that to "string incongruities together in a wandering and sometimes purposeless way, and seem innocently unaware that they are absurdities, is the basis of the American art" (p. 158). This was not a successful technique for a playwright. Brander Matthews, a contemporary of Mark Twain's and a professor of drama at Columbia University in New York, felt that Twain

"could not organize a structure with the necessary and harmonious connection and relation of its parts," and he was "without the compact directness demanded by us when we are in the theater."³

Arthur Hobson Quinn, a friend of Matthews and a professor of drama himself, had a similar view of Mark Twain's shortcomings as a playwright: he had "a lack of constructive sense and an inability to discard material which detracted from the unity of stage presentation."⁴ George O'Dell in his Annals of the New York Stage states his opinion more bluntly: "Mark Twain was a great genius, but he simply could not write plays."⁵ These men, closely associated with the theater, all agree that Twain's style was not adaptable to the stage. The difference between Mark Twain's opinion and the view of the drama experts is made clear in the striking difference between Twain's philosophy of the humorous tale contained in "How to Tell a Story" and one of Matthews' "Theories of the Theater," presented in his introduction to Playwrights on Playwriting. It reads:

The drama is differentiated from the other forms of storytelling by the fact that an audience desires to behold a conflict, a stark assertion of the human will, a clash of character upon character (p. xi).

In his article Mark Twain had scorned the "English" comic story, with its concentrated form and its need for an ending with a point" (p. 156). These were the same elements the theater required; they were requirements Mark Twain could not meet.

It is difficult to understand why Mark Twain, a writer who possessed a style suited to fiction, would attempt to write in a form so alien to his methods. His motivation was strong enough for him to persist in writing plays even after several failures.

One reason for this desire was Mark Twain's admiration for the theater as an art form. This feeling is a main point in his speech, "The Drama," made on June 9, 1900 at a Dramatic and Literary Society Dinner in London. He told his audience: "The greatest of all arts is to write a drama. It is a most difficult thing. It requires the highest talent possible and the rarest gifts." When Howells wrote to Twain expressing his satisfaction on completing a comedy, Twain replied: "What have you done that God should be so good to you?" Edward Wagenknecht, in Mark Twain: The Man and His Work, mentions that the author was exposed to a great deal of theater in California as part of his journalistic duties. Twain associated with many of the people involved with the theater (actors, managers, producers), and their company spurred his interest in their field. His library contained many plays by Shakespeare, Shaw, Ibsen, Boucicault, Strindberg, Goethe, Schiller and Wilbrandt. The theater was a force in Mark Twain's life, a force he had a great deal of exposure to and held a special reverence for.

The playwright was also the center of much critical and public attention, especially when his play was a hit. The writer could enjoy the immediate response of a live audience, and revel in the spotlight of attention focused on his triumphant curtain speech. All of this appealed to Mark Twain, a man who Brander Matthews said "possessed to the end of his life the boyish delight in being conspicuous that he ascribed to Tom Sawyer" (p. 163). The theater was the place for a man who had "a fondness for distinctive costume" and a "tendency to dramatize himself." Twain was lured by its promise of immediate and substantial gratification.

Mark Twain desired a material reward as well. He wrote plays to make money, and he always expected to make a great deal of money on each new work. One experience in Twain's life directly exposed him to the profit that could be made from a successful play; this was the 1874 dramatization of his novel The Gilded Age. In that year, Gilbert Densmore, a newspaper man on the West Coast, produced an unauthorized dramatic version of the novel in San Francisco with John T. Raymond in the leading role of Colonel Sellers. Twain heard about the success of the project, and, as he and Gilded Age co-author, Charles Dudley Warner, had taken out a dramatic copy-right on the book's publication, quickly put a stop to the performances. He bought Densmore's script and convinced Warner to relinquish
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all rights he might have in the piece.

There is some controversy surrounding the amount of revising Twain performed on Densmore's script. Howells claims that the final script was "substantially the work of this unknown dramatist [Densmore]." ¹²
Clemens, although he acknowledged that "the plot or skeleton" ¹³ was furnished by Densmore, claimed he entirely reworked the play three
¹⁴
separate times. In any case, the structure of the play had already been provided, and this was one aspect of writing drama that frustrated Mark Twain.

The critics were unimpressed with The Gilded Age as a drama, but they hailed the comic performance of John T. Raymond as Colonel Sellers. On 17 September 1884, the New York Times review of opening night read: "Certain it is, however, that 'The Gilded Age' pleased chiefly on account of a character not at all essential to the main

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 story." On September 26, after the show had packed the house for a week, the Times stated that Raymond made an "original and elaborate portrayal," and that the play itself "deserves favorable notice as a thoroughly American work."¹⁷ Howells also makes it a point to praise Raymond's performance in his review for The Atlantic Monthly: the play is "scarcely more than a sketch or framework," but Colonel Sellers "is a personality rarely imagined by the author and interpreted without loss by the actor."¹⁸ From the earlier production in San Francisco, Twain had been provided with a dramatic structure and a skilled comic actor.

The importance of Raymond's performance to the early success of the play can be better appreciated by looking at the Times review of a revival of The Gilded Age in 1877. Raymond was again playing Colonel Sellers, but the novelty of his stage antics had worn off, and the newspaper that had praised this "American work" now states: "Mark Twain's comedy will be remembered as having a protracted career at the same house [Park Theater], and is no doubt kept in mind, simultaneously, as a very bad play."¹⁹ In the original production of The Gilded Age Raymond delivered his lines in a manner that made audiences overlook the shortcomings of his dramatic vehicle. When the critics reviewed the revival of the play, however, they gave less attention to Raymond's repeat performance and more attention to the weaknesses of Twain's drama.

The attention that was focused on Raymond, both by the audience and by the critics, aroused Twain's resentment. In a curtain speech given on opening night, Twain made several satirical references

that expressed his dissatisfaction with his leading man: "I think this gentleman tries hard to play it right . . . but his face is against him . . . But I think he will learn." ²⁰ Raymond, as Twain saw it, was only reciting the author's lines and claiming all the credit. Twain explains this resentment of Raymond in a letter to Howells dated 7 May 1875, by stating that the actor has made a burlesque out of a complex character: "Raymond has not taken a vague suggestion from the novel and by his genius created a fine original character from it, but has simply faithfully reproduced the Sellers that is in the book . . . the truth is the finer points ²¹ of Sellers's character are a trifle above Raymond's level."

Twain wanted the credit of playwright and performer: the same type of credit he received for a public reading, with the added honor and spectacle associated with the theater. In his later plays Twain would often argue with his collaborators and his lead actors, always trying to retain as much of the credit and attention as possible. In some of his dramatic work it seems as if Twain deliberately made his lead character an absurd burlesque in order to reduce the possibility of another Raymond claiming what the author felt was an inordinate amount of credit.

The play was a great financial success, running 116 nights and ²² eventually earning Twain more than \$70,000. In My Mark Twain Howells gives this description of the joy Twain experienced in receiving his share of the profits:

The postals used to come about dinnertime, and Clemens would read them aloud to us in wild triumph. One hundred and fifty dollars--two hundred dollars--three hundred dollars--were the gay figures which they bore, and which he flaunted in the air before he sat down at the table, or rose from it to brandish, and then flinging his napkin, walked up and down to exult in (p.22).

Twain was so concerned about his share of the profits that he sent an agent along with the road company to oversee the counting of each night's receipts and to make sure the author received his fair share. Twain was making a large amount of money from a project that had required little physical or creative energy.

As a first experience with the theater, The Gilded Age was a complete success. Twain, as the dramatist, was given the opportunity of making curtain speeches; he made one on opening night, September 1874, and he was called upon again after the one hundredth performance, on 23 December 1874. In this latter speech Twain's pride in his role as playwright and his desire to be associated with that role are evident: "It is right for an outsider, or for somebody not connected with the concern, but for me, the dramatist, to praise these actors of mine, and this success of ours -- that would not come gracefully from me." ²³ Twain's first production was the high point of his experience with the theater.

Initial success in his first attempt at drama led Mark Twain to pursue his vision of becoming a playwright. He always felt that his next play would bring in even more revenue than The Gilded Age, and with each failure he looked to his next project to make his fortune. Twain's early success created an attitude toward the

theater that Justin Kaplan, in his biography Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain describes as obsessive:

The stage obsessed him, as it did Henry James, Howells, and Bret Harte, and it exhausted him. Despite mounting evidence that he had little talent for either dramatic plotting or stage management, Clemens persisted in believing that the theater, like a bonanza mining strike, would yield him a maximum of income from a ludicrous minimum of effort.²⁴

In a letter dated October 1876 -- two years after the opening of The Gilded Age -- Twain tells Howells of his continuing return on the play: "Check for 1,616.16 has just arrived -- my clear profit on Raymond's first week in Philadelphia. Write a drama, Howells."²⁵

The royalty checks served as a reminder to him of the financial possibilities of the stage: he had only to write another drama to renew the flow of wealth. A precedent had been set for large monetary gains with little effort, and Twain would spend the next fifteen years trying to repeat the glory of The Gilded Age.

In October 1876 Mark Twain and Bret Harte went to work on a play which would later be called Ah Sin. Harte had suggested the idea to Twain, and the latter, confident that the reputations of the two writers would ensure a success, was looking to repeat the financial windfall of The Gilded Age.²⁶ Harte was going to be responsible for the character of a Chinaman and Twain was to add Scotty Briggs of "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral." Twain wrote to Howells explaining that the Chinaman would be "the character in the play, and both of us will work on him and develop him."²⁷ The lead role was to be given to Charles T. Parsloe, a famous comic actor, who had previously appeared as a Chinaman in Harte's unsuccessful play, Two Men of Sandy Bar.

Ah Sin is set in a Western mining camp named Deadwood and, although both authors were famous Western humorists, most of the material in the initial script was provided by Bret Harte.²⁸ The character Ah Sin first appeared in Harte's "Plain Language from Truthful James." The Plunketts, a coarse mining family, are taken from Harte's "A Monte Flat Pastoral." The plot of Ah Sin revolves around the supposed murder of Mr. Plunkett.

In the first act a fight between Plunkett and Broderick, another miner, breaks out. Broderick throws Plunkett over a cliff and believes he has killed him. During the next two acts Broderick tries to frame York, a miner he detests for his gentleman's manners and snobbish air, for Plunkett's murder. At the trial in the fourth act Ah Sin produces evidence against Broderick (a bloody jacket he stole in the first act), and then he clears Broderick by producing Plunkett--alive and well.

Ah Sin also contains a love story and a case of mistaken identity. Mrs. Tempest and her daughter Shirley, rich society types, are mistaken by York for the wife and daughter of the missing Plunkett. Shirley, who loves York because he saved her from a stage coach accident, does not undeceive him. When the real Plunketts arrive she convinces them to impersonate the two Tempests. York confesses he has fallen in love with Shirley. They are separated by his arrest, and then reunited after his acquittal.

The authors of Ah Sin relied on the contrast between the coarse mining families and the refined behavior of York and the Tempests for a great deal of humor, and this type of contrast is also used

by several other dramatists of the period. Horizon, a successful play written by Augustin Daly and produced in 1871, contains many of the same elements of story and setting as Ah Sin. Allan Gates Halline's introduction to the play states that there is "local color in the settings, accuracy and vividness in characterization, and a sense of the contrast between Western coarseness and Eastern civilization."²⁹ This passage describes the effect that Twain and Harte were striving for.

In Horizon the conflict of the two different societies is established by having the first act set in the elegant Van Dorp mansion. As the first act progresses, the characters express their naive views of the wild West while being served tea in the Van Dorp parlor. Rowse, a congressman who has just been given a land grant out West, states: "Well, I'm just going to take a case of dollar store jewelry out with me, and trade it for furs with the simple-minded red man."³⁰ These early dreams of the West are shattered as the next act finds these characters watching the formation of a "Vigilance Committee" in a real mining town that has little in common with their illusions of noble savages and gentleman miners. The contrast of their expectations and the reality of Western life provides both humor and suspense as the Easterners try to survive in a very wild West.

In Ah Sin the contrast between Eastern and Western civilization is established in a few lines of dialogue inserted in the first scene. Broderick describes York as a "gilt edged prig,"³¹ and the meeting between the two that immediately follows demonstrates the way Broderick's coarseness bothers York and the resentment Broderick feels for York's "airs." York, a character the authors want the audience to be sympathetic

toward, is forced to become a dandy in order to enhance the contrast.

In both plays humor is developed out of the contrast between societies by having a coarse woman try to put on the airs of a society lady. Columbia, in Horizon, is a country girl trying to show that she feels at home in Washington, D.C. and the elegant Van Dorp mansion. She remarks over tea: "You know pa never has any business with any but prominent men. Pa knows all the prominent men. All the prominent men know pa. I know as many prominent men as pa does" (p. 345). The girl chatters on in a charmingly comic way about her life among the "prominent" men of the nation's capital.

Twain and Harte strive for the same kind of comic effect by having Mrs. Plunkett impersonate the wealthy and refined Mrs. Tempest. When formally introduced to York, she responds: "I am mutually glad to say you are right, sir; and I am glad to say, too, that the mutuality of your pleasure in meeting us cannot be more mutual than the mutualness of our pleasure is in meeting you" (p. 65). The humor does not work on the same level: Mrs. Plunkett is more embarrassing than comic, and her crude attempts at playing the society woman drag on until York's arrest at the end of the scene.

The Chinaman, another source of comedy in Ah Sin, is also found in Horizon and in a Bartley Campbell play about the West, My Partner. In Horizon, the "Heathen Chineese" has a small role. He is an inoffensive victim of mob "justice," and he provides some comic effects in a card playing scene. My Partner, produced in 1879, is described by Quinn as "the drama of the frontier in its most impressive form."³² In this play the Chinaman, Wing Lee, has an important role, and he

is a sympathetic character. He takes care of the helpless Mary when she is a fugitive, and later the girl states: "But for him I would have perished."³³ My Partner, like Ah Sin, ends with a trial, and in this case Joe, an innocent miner, is accused of murdering his partner. Wing Lee brings in a shirt that he found hidden in a deep mine shaft after he was chased there by an angry mob. The shirt proves Joe innocent and condemns Scrag, who is indeed guilty of murder. Unlike Ah Sin, Wing Lee is vital to the plot of this drama.

A great deal of the comedy in Ah Sin results from exploiting the character of the Chinaman. Margaret Duckett, in Mark Twain and Bret Harte, states: "His [Ah Sin's] frequent beatings and cuffings are supposed to be comic, and crude jokes about Ah Sin because he is Chinese are clumsy antecedents of jokes on the Negroes Jim and Nat in . . . Huckleberry Finn."³⁴ Broderick introduces Ah Sin to the audience by addressing him as "You moral cancer, you unsolvable political problem" (p. 11). Twain was alluding to the political debate going on over the Chinese workers who were imported to work on the railroad and then stayed in the country, creating a surplus of cheap labor. It is an attempt at political commentary that comes out sounding only like abuse.

Ah Sin steals things throughout the play. His clumsiness is meant to provide comic relief at the trial scene. One may surmise that Twain felt that if the dramatic structure failed to sustain interest, he could count on the independent humor generated by the Chinaman to keep his audience amused. The role of Ah Sin as a clown, however, is not easily reconcilable with the part he plays in saving

the day for York and Shirley Tempest. Ah Sin's antics are too dis-associated from the plot for the play to work as a vehicle for his character.

Mark Twain and Bret Harte fail to build any suspense in their play. In the second act we learn that Plunkett is still alive, and in this way the trial scene loses its importance: there is no real danger to York. In My Partner, Joe is facing execution for the murder of a close friend, a man he had quarrelled with and then found dead when he returned to apologize. The Danites in the Sierras, a play by the Western writer Joaquin Miller, is also about a Western settle-ment in which there is an actual murder. The Danites was produced in 1877, just as Ah Sin was withdrawn, and was an immediate success.³⁵ Miller's play contains a scene in which a widow and her young child are murdered. In both The Danites and My Partner there is a certain amount of humor, but the comedy is not a substitute for a structured and suspenseful plot.

The authors of Ah Sin might have felt that an actual murder would detract from the comic mood necessary for a full appreciation of the Chinaman's buffoonery. By eliminating the murder, Twain and Harte destroyed the effectiveness of the trial scene. The play ends with the characters cheering "Hurrah for Ah Sin" (p.90). This cheer seems to be the reaction the playwrights wanted from their audience: an appreciation of the comic virtuosity of Charles T. Parsloe's Ah Sin.

Work on revisions and contract negotiations had strained the relationship between Harte and Twain, and in a cool letter to his

collaborator Harte had written: "No, Mark, I do not think it is advisable for us to write another play together."³⁶ He felt that Twain and Parsloe were excluding him from the production, and that Twain was doing too much of the job of reworking the script. The close working relationship in Hartford also had its effect on Twain, and in April 1877, after attending negotiations on the play in Baltimore, he wrote to his wife Livy from New York: "I left behind me those 2 men who have not been absent an instant from my thoughts (& my hate) for months--Raymond and Harte."³⁷ Harte owed Twain money and this situation put an additional strain on their friendship. Again Twain is concerned with sharing the credit for one his plays. The passage in the letter to Livy which associates Harte and Raymond supports the conclusion that this concern over credit was the major factor in Twain's feud with his co-author. Raymond was an actor, not a playwright, and he was not included in any way with production of Ah Sin, but in Twain's mind he was similar to Harte in that both men represented a threat to his desire to be at center stage.

After the play was revised, Twain made arrangements with J. I. Ford to have Ah Sin produced at the new National Theatre in Washington, D.C., and his feud with Harte did not prevent him from enjoying the job of getting the play ready. Being involved in rehearsals was part of his conception of the life of a playwright, and he was proud of his close working relationship with the theater. He writes Howells from Ford's Theater: "I am needed every moment during these daily rehearsals," and then he goes on to describe the busy, chaotic backstage life he now felt himself a part of.³⁹

The reviews of the Washington opening were fairly good. Although they generally condemned the dramatic construction, the critics praised some of the humorous aspects of the play.⁴⁰ The next move was to take the play to Daly's theater in New York to prepare for an opening night in late July.

Ah Sin opened to a full house on 31 July 1877, and critical response was similar to what it had been in Washington. The New York Times reported that the audience was amused during the first act, but that its attention lagged in the later scenes, with the final curtain prompting no applause. The critic gives this account of the play's deficiencies:

Its weakness lies in a paucity of striking events, in an almost invariable disregard of the absolute necessity of providing a strong tableau at the close of each act, and in a superabundance of dialogue, mainly coarse, and often inexcusably so, because it has not the excuse of being characteristic.⁴¹

The close of the third act is an example of the weakness in dramatic structure described by the critic for the Times. York has just been arrested, but instead of ending the act on this dramatic note, the authors insert the following closing action: "Ah Sin sits on Mrs. Plunkett's knee--she pushes him off and he falls against Broderick, who pushes him back to Mrs. Plunkett, who catches him by the pigtail and pounds him with fan" (p. 69). Again this is an example of plot and dramatic structure being sacrificed for the comic "business" of abusing Ah Sin.

After the play was performed, Twain could sense that Ah Sin's character was not enough to insure the success of the play. In his opening night curtain speech he made satirical comments on the

shortcomings of the play, shortcomings that he would later attribute to Harte's influence.⁴² Three days after the opening he wrote to Howells:

I have been putting in a deal of hard work on that play in New York, and have left hardly a foot-print of Harte in it anywhere. But it is full of incurable defects: to wit, Harte's deliberate thefts and plagiarisms.⁴³

Frederick Anderson, after examining the manuscripts of the play, concludes that during the months before opening night Twain was trying to change Harte's "formulated speech of the nineteenth century" into "realistic language."⁴⁴ Anderson's point concerning the author's goal in revising the play is supported by a passage in Twain's journal for May - July 1877: "That letter from Plunkett must be reduced to a single sentence -- Shant be a single long speech. Hunt them out. Cut them down."⁴⁵ In the production script of Ah Sin the only line that remains from the letter is "Only lend me this 15 dollars and take the mine; I enclose deed" (p. 11). After the play's failure to please audiences became apparent, Twain tried to make the play funnier by eliminating what he considered the weak areas -- written by Harte, of course -- in an effort to bolster sagging attendance.

As with Raymond in The Gilded Age, Twain found a scapegoat for the deficiencies in his work. His perception of these flaws did not agree with the opinion of the critic for the Times, who felt that Ah Sin was simply not a well-constructed play. Twain's failure to accept this accurate criticism caused him to waste much of his creative energies in an unrewarding pursuit of theatrical fame and fortune.

As work on Ah Sin was being completed and problems with Bret

Harte were beginning to develop, Twain began to write a play of his own. Harte refused to collaborate on another play, and "Mark set out to prove that he could write one by himself. He proved he couldn't."⁴⁶ The play Twain began in June 1877 was Cap'n Simon Wheeler, The Amateur Detective.

Twain first mentions the new play to Howells in a letter dated 27 June 1877: "To-day I am deep in a comedy which I began this morning -- principal character, that old fool detective -- I skeltoned the first act & wrote the second."⁴⁷ By July 6 Twain had a draft he felt was polished enough to show to producers and actors in New York: "I go to New York Monday . . . & take m.s. with me. Shall visit theaters for a week or ten days & see if I can find a man who can play the detective."⁴⁸ Although Twain seems to have done most of the writing during this short period of time, the character of the "old fool" detective was several years old.⁴⁹ A fragment of an earlier play, "Brummel-Arabella," also exists. This fragment was begun in 1870, and several of the plot elements in Simon Wheeler were taken from the earlier work.

The play is built around the bumbling detective Wheeler and his attempts to solve a murder case. In the first act, Hugh, a spurned lover, tries to commit suicide. An escaped convict is accidentally killed at the same time as Hugh's disappearance, and this body is discovered and believed to be Hugh's. The presumed death of a spurned lover is one of the plot elements that Twain lifted from "Brummel-Arabella." In this work the distraught Sherman takes poison and states: "The poison works. Welcome, Death, thou peerless leech,

whose medicine alone hath power to heal a broken heart."⁵⁰ After taking poison, Hugh, in Simon Wheeler, echoes: "What agony! -- This, then, is death! Farewell heartless one, farewell."⁵¹ Hugh, who like Sherman has only stunned himself, revives, and on learning of his "death" disguises himself as a tramp to observe the reaction of the townspeople. Three of the other characters believe they are unwittingly responsible for Hugh's death. These characters are ignored, although they exhibit all the signs of guilty men, while three New York detectives accuse completely innocent people and Wheeler accuses the tramp, or Hugh himself.

Twain had great hopes for his new dramatic creation and its bumbling main character. We see his hopes for financial gain and his faith in Wheeler in a letter to Howells dated 4 July 1877: "If the play is a success it is worth 50,000 or more," and "My old fool detective pervades the piece from beginning to end -- always on hand and busy."⁵² On 6 August 1877, in a letter to his friend Mrs. Fairbanks, he again mentions his faith in Wheeler and makes a whimsical allusion to his own theatrical aspirations: "I have a vast opinion of the chief character in it. I want to play it myself, in New York or London, but the madam won't allow it."⁵³ Having created what he felt was a superb leading role, Twain might have been nervous about turning over this choice role to a talented comic actor. Raymond had overshadowed his author in The Gilded Age and Twain did not want a similar situation to arise with Simon Wheeler. The letter to Mrs. Fairbanks expresses Twain's inability to accept the fact that the playwright is only one part of a successful dramatic production.

To Twain the playwright was both author and star.

One of the main reasons why Twain's hopes of financial gain were disappointed is his main character, Simon Wheeler. Twain took the name Simon Wheeler from the character of the old man who tells the story of the jumping frog in "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." This was one of Twain's most popular early sketches, and he might have been counting on Wheeler's popularity to lure people to the theater. As opposed to the "good-natured, garrulous, old" character in the short story, the Simon Wheeler of the play is a fool and an idiot.⁵⁴ During the first act he sits on the body of the man he is trailing, and he makes the statement: "This log's mighty warm" (p. 232). In the second act he sits on the lit keg of powder and wonders: "even as little thing as a kag of powder and a slow-match reposing around a man's door's got a meaning about it -- som'ers" (p. 265). He is not a well-meaning bumbler, but a man with a serious mental handicap. That Twain wants us to see him as the former is evident in Wheeler's scenes with Jake Long, a police officer. Long is a coarse bully, but Wheeler stands up to him and forces him to back down. In one scene Wheeler intereferes with Long as he is arresting a newsboy for yelling. Long draws his revolver, but Wheeler disarms him and makes him release the boy. There have been no hints in the previous conduct of this character to prepare the audience for this scene. Instead of developing Wheeler as the play progresses, Twain inserts this jarring scene to show us a good, admirable side of his character, and it is such an extreme deviation from what we have seen that it has the effect of introducing a completely new character

to the audience. The impression of Wheeler as a total incompetent remains, and these scenes are only disjointed interjections.

Simon Wheeler's one-sided character turns the play into a burlesque. Twain had an inkling he had done this when he added the following postscript to an otherwise enthusiastic letter to Howells: "I meant it for a comedy--but it is only a long farce."⁵⁵ Even the farce is unsuccessful: the series of long, overplayed detective jokes quickly becomes tedious and repetitious. Hugh comments in an aside about Wheeler: "I'm in no danger from him--I've got to keep my tongue still before everybody but detectives" (p. 243), and Lem, dispelling Tom's fear of being tracked by a detective, says "A detective, your grandmother! A detective couldn't follow it if it was eleven foot wide" (p. 236). The townspeople are unmerciful in their attacks on Wheeler's inadequacies, but they offer no contrast to the detective's simple-mindedness. Twain's characters are not distinct; he presents them as one large, unsympathetic, ignorant mass. The burlesque on Wheeler is lost against a background of stooges who do not provide the contrast of a normal code of behavior.

Twain also fails in his characterization of the two pairs of lovers in Simon Wheeler: there is no way to distinguish one set from the other. All four characters turn out lines of romantic nonsense and despairing hearts, and give the impression of being high school adolescents. In 1888 Bronson Howard wrote Shenandoah, a play with five interwoven love stories, and it was a huge success. The love scenes are balanced against each other, but they are differentiated by each lover's characterization and motivation. One comic scene

in Shenandoah has the boisterous but somewhat easily embarrassed Captain Heartsease trying once again to propose to the girl he loves:

Jenny: You told my father, and all my friends,
That you were in love with me. Whom are
you going to tell next?

Heartsease: I am in love with you.

Jenny: It was my turn.

Heartsease: Do you love me?

Jenny: (laying her head quietly on his breast). I
must take time to consider.

Heartsease: (Quietly). I assume that means "Yes."

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Jenny: It isn't the way a girl says "No."

The scene is amusing, and Howard does not turn the dialogue into an overdone melodramatic burlesque of young love, as Twain does in the following scene from Simon Wheeler:

Charley: From the very day I got here. In twenty-
four hours I was head over heels in love --
and then --

Clara: Then you imagined you saw something between
Henry and me, and --

Charley: Just so. -- My heart nearly broke. Would
have broken if I hadn't had Henry Savage to
hate.

Clara: Why you never showed a sign, Charley dear.

Charley: What was the use? I was unhappy enough;
I didn't want to spoil your happiness.

A similar scene is played between Hugh and Millicent, the other lovers. The love stories are only flat plot conventions used by Twain to set up the disappearance of Hugh, and to give Wheeler and the New York detectives suspects in the case. After their first "romantic" scenes in the opening act, the couples are not reunited until the conclusion of the fourth act.

The only character who elicits some sympathy in the play is Simon's devoted wife, Jenny, who listens with admiration to all of his crazy ideas. Jenny is a simple and pathetic character, and in making her this way Twain detracts from the burlesque on Wheeler; she is ridiculed along with him and this does not seem fair. Wheeler as a fool could still have elicited our sympathy and empathy but he is so devastatingly incompetent and ridiculous that we cannot put ourselves in his place.

With the failure of the burlesque, Twain's lines about murder and suffering seem morbid and in bad taste. In the fourth act he tries to end this burlesque with a dramatic climax. The town that viciously ridiculed Wheeler now accepts him as a hero and rewards him with money and affection. Twain is trying to keep his burlesque within the dramatic form, but the result is a confusing mixture of the two, succeeding at neither.

In Simon Wheeler Twain struggles to get around the problem of letting the audience know what a character is thinking. The contrast between the character's thoughts and what he is actually saying is an important source of humor for Mark Twain. A narrator in one of his stories can tell the reader his impression of a situation outside the actual dialogue exchanged, but in a play Twain has to replace

this narrator-reader rapport with dramatic asides. Wheeler is frequently given these asides so he can relate his questions to the other characters with his inane murder theories. On one page of the text there are twelve asides; four consecutive lines of dialogue are asides:

Capt.: -(aside) - Why damn him, he looks pleased!

Hugh.: -(aside) - O this is noble! Why I'll be
a hero.

Capt.: -(aside) - Come, this stumps me.

Hugh.: -(aside) - What a theme for a poem. I'll be hanged
if I turn up again for a year!

By trying to insert a narrator Twain disrupts character interaction, and the plot becomes a series of musings directed at the audience. His overuse of asides is a very unsuccessful attempt to adapt his storytelling technique to the theater.

In this play Twain also tries to use another of his favorite comic devices: the pause. To represent the pause in the script Twain used a dash, and the reader can see the importance of the pause in this speech by Wheeler in which he explains his theory of the events leading up to the murder:

Wheeler: Well the tramp demands money -- or Sunday
School books or something -- you can't ever
tell what a tramp'll want. Some have been
known to ask for work -- but (absently) they're
dead now.

(p. 273)

This is an example of the rambling string of incongruities Twain describes in "How to Tell a Story," and uses with great success in "The Story of the Old Ram." Wheeler's speech is only an attempt to elicit a laugh from the audience without having to rely on character or plot. When the play begins to drag Twain inserts a humorous speech that provides a laugh but disrupts the continuity of the play.

Twain tries to control the timing of the pauses in the play by using parenthetical stage directions: "listening intensely for ten seconds or more -- that is to say whatever is the limit of suspense that is effective with an audience" (p. 276). In his platform speeches Mark Twain would often speak to the audience for a while and then go into one of his timed stories. In the play Twain disrupts the action by having Wheeler recite a rambling, incoherent monologue, as in this example, when he explains to Jenny how a detective would approach a difficult case:

Now -- (tapping forehead) the great detective brain begins to work; -- the clew -- is obscure -- but never mind that. -- Did the burglar enter the house? (long impressive pause, finger on face somewhere) -- or did the house enter the burglar? A deep difficult question there -- requires thought -- Ah those villagers are observing me!

(p. 271)

The new audience inspires Wheeler to continue for another half page. At this point in the play there is a lull in the action; the "murder" has been committed and we are waiting for Hugh's "funeral." Twain

uses the rambling story to try to break up this dull section of the play.

Augustin Daly and the other producers and actors Twain approached with the play in the summer of 1877 also felt that it was lacking: they all put him off indefinitely or turned him down.⁵⁷ Twain was slow to lose faith in his play, especially his main character. In January 1878, after viewing a production of Howells's play A Counterfeit Presentment, he wrote to his friend: "Ah, if only I had my old fool of a detective mooning and meddling along through a play like that, once, his fame and fortune would be made."⁵⁸ Finally, one year later, in January 1879, he admitted to Howells that he now believed the play was "dreadfully witless and flat."⁵⁹ Twain tried to use the material for a novel, but it was never published in his lifetime.

Over the next five years Twain would not complete any dramatic projects. In August 1881 he made an unsuccessful attempt at a burlesque Hamlet. His idea was to add the character of a foster brother, named Basil Stockmar, who would be unable to communicate with anyone else on stage. Twain explains his reason for Basil's isolation in a letter to Howells dated 3 September 1881: "The added character must not be spoken to; for the sacrilegious scribbler who ventured to put words into Shakespeare's mouth would probably be hanged."⁶⁰ The draft of the first act and part of the second was completed, and it is obvious from a reading of this fragment that Twain was too limited by his respect for Shakespeare. Basil Stockmar has nothing to do on stage; he cannot converse with anyone or influence the action in any way. His only contribution to the play is a soliloquy at the

beginning of each scene. In this work Twain is limited by his choice of Hamlet as a background text, but he would later use a Basil character to great effect in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

During the next few years Twain would continue work on a manuscript he had begun in 1875; however, this play would not be completed until 1884. While this work was still unfinished, Twain, remembering the failure of Simon Wheeler, would again seek to collaborate on a drama, this time with his good friend William Dean Howells.

Twain and Howells had already discussed doing a play based on Twain's brother Orion, an unsuccessful inventor, entitled Orme's
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Motor. Later Twain substituted Jesse M. Leathers as the model for the main character. Leathers, a distant relative of Twain's, was the American claimant to the earldom of Durham and an inventor of
62
absurd devices. In a letter to Howells dated 5 September 1881 Twain suggested using Mulberry Sellers as the Leathers character in the play: "'Col. Mulberry Sellers in Age' (75) -- with that fool of a Lafayette Hawkins (aged 50) still sticking to him & believing in him, calling him 'my Lord' (S. being American earl of Durham) . . .
63
He is a 'specialist' & a 'scientist' in various ways." Sellers is the central character in The Gilded Age, and Twain was hoping to cash in on the success of that play and the memorable performance Raymond had given in the lead role. In May 1883 Twain wrote to Howells inviting him to stay in Hartford so that the play could be
64
completed. Howells arrived in November, and by the end of the month the two authors had completed Colonel Sellers as a Scientist.

In this play Sellers is an impoverished inventor who lives with

his family in Washington, D.C. He is continually inventing useless devices -- a flamethrowing fire extinguisher, wings, a table that can be turned into a lifeboat -- that he expects will make his fortune. Sellers, like Leathers, also claims to be the heir to an English earldom. He has a devoted wife and a daughter who is in love with a man she met on a sinking riverboat. It turns out that her lover is one of the people ahead of Sellers in the line of succession for the earldom.

Although Howells's influence helped refine some of the dialogue, the play is essentially Simon Wheeler, amateur detective turned scientist. That Sellers is essentially Twain's creation is evident from a comment made by Howells in a letter dated 19 November 1883:

"As soon as you have the typescript copy complete, send it to me
 & I will doctor all the dialogue except the Sellers speeches."⁶⁵

Sellers invents ludicrous devices in the same way that Wheeler advanced his ridiculous theories, and both Wheeler and Sellers exhibit a similar faith in the validity of their ideas. The following speech is typical of the character who is meant to carry the play -- along with his flamethrowing fire extinguisher -- on his back:

Fire and vaccination -- that is the strange device on my banner, Lafayette. The principle of vaccination has always existed. They're applying it now to everything in France. They're inoculating for scarletina and consumption and erysipelas -- they don't stop at smallpox. I apply the principle to fire. And when you inoculate for fire, what do you want? The strongest form of virus! You want Greek fire. That combustion, in-extinguishable by water, with which the Greeks of old Byzantium destroyed the galleys of their enemies . . . Wherever it strikes, it simply obliterates and annihilates every other form of combustion.⁶⁶

Twain and Howells rely on Sellers' continual procession of insane

antics to hold the audience's attention, but the antics quickly become tiresome and repetitive. As in Simon Wheeler, Twain inserts an overblown, burlesqued main character into a weak dramatic structure.

In both Simon Wheeler and Colonel Sellers Twain works in an attack on the press, an institution that occasionally harassed him during his career as an internationally known literary figure. Although he had an early association with the newspaper business, Twain would later speak out bitterly against the press: "through the absence of all wholesome restraint the newspaper has become in a large degree a national curse." ⁶⁷ This statement was made in 1873; and in the 1877 Simon Wheeler the author has Tom, a newspaper reporter, hide a dead body in order to have an exclusive story for the following week's edition of his newspaper. An attack on the press is also included in Colonel Sellers. In the third act a reporter -- appropriately named Suckers -- bursts into Sellers's home and demands an interview. When the Colonel protests that he has no right to invade a private home, Suckers replies: "Yes, that's the theory. But in point of fact there are no private houses in America nor private affairs. The public must and will know everything" (p. 234). Twain's commentary on the uncontrollable press, like his comment on Chinese labor in Ah Sin, is another failed attempt at inserting his own political and social opinions into the plays. In both Simon Wheeler and Colonel Sellers the action of the play is disrupted in order to make room for the denunciations of the free press. Instead of enhancing the quality and appeal of the plays, these two scenes further demonstrate Twain's inability to work within the dramatic form.

Twain and Howells try to use Sellers's absurd claim on the earldom as a source of humor, but the point is overplayed and unfunny. Clyde Fitch's successful play Beau Brummell, produced in 1890, also includes an episode concerning a claim for an earldom. Beau uses an imaginary earldom as a bribe to get Vincent, a somewhat foolish and crude merchant, to let his daughter marry Beau's nephew:

Beau: (significantly) Who is eligible for the earldom-- exactly--and I think--mind I say I think--we both have the same person in mind. But, first, I must persuade you who is eligible for your daughter.

Vincent: Gad! Zounds! An earldom. If this should be my opportunity at last. Mariana shall marry the boy
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if he wants it.

Convincing Vincent to agree to the marriage is a double sacrifice for Beau because he is in love with Mariana himself and the marriage would have solved his severe financial difficulties. Fitch uses this scene, and Beau's relationship with his nephew in general, to show a good side of a very egotistical character. Sellers's dream of the earldom shows him to be a fool -- something that was made clear enough by his inventions -- and his relationship with his nephew Lafayette consists of deluding the latter with his ideas and borrowing money.

The same type of ending that was grafted onto Simon Wheeler is used again in this play to create a neat happy ending. Sellers, through a steam valve invention, makes a great deal of money, and the lovers Mary and DeBohun are united. The steam valve is not

mentioned until the third act, and it is hard to imagine that a man who has invented a machine to record profanity for use on board ship could invent something so practical. It is a transparent gimmick used to create a satisfactory ending; Twain is trying to gain sympathy for an imbecile by making him the cause of the others' happiness.

The improbability of Sellers's steam valve can be contrasted with the successful use of an invention in Augustus Thomas's In Mizzoura (1893). Quinn states that Thomas knew "that the essence of light comedy is relief. He therefore never let it descend into mere fooling, but there was always in the structure of the play some note of sincerity." ⁶⁹ In the character of Jim, a man of intelligence and compassion, Thomas strikes this note of sincerity. Jim discovers that a clay he had used to make a cast becomes very hard upon firing, and besides using this discovery to make money he uses it to help his friend Dave get the economic security he needs to get married. His discovery is an accident, and it takes place on stage while other action and dialogue are progressing. Thomas uses this scene to develop Jim as a sympathetic character, a man we can later believe would sacrifice his own happiness by helping the man who has stolen his girl escape a posse. In comparison, Colonel Sellers and his invention are "mere fooling."

At first Twain approached Raymond with the script, but the actor was unhappy about the main character and the terms he was being offered. The Mallorys, Broadway producers, were also interested, but Twain was reluctant to sign over one-third of the profit. With Raymond undecided, Twain was trying to find another actor who would

take the role. He wrote with urgency to his publisher Charles Webster: "If the book business [publishing house] interferes with the dramatic business, drop the former -- for it doesn't pay salt; & I want the latter rushed."⁷⁰ The passage shows the author's eagerness for the financial reward of his new dramatic venture. In February 1884 Twain approached the comic actor Nat Goodwin about the Sellers role, but the negotiations were halted because Howells objected to Goodwin's character. Howell's interference prompted Twain to write to Webster: "The next time I interest myself in the play, it will be when I am armed with written authority to do exactly as I please with it."⁷¹ Twain was frustrated by the difficulty involved in getting his play produced.

In May 1884 Raymond informed the authors that he would not take the role, commenting, as Howells recalls in My Mark Twain, that:

A friend had noted to him the fact that Colonel Sellers in the play was a lunatic, and insanity was so serious a thing that it could not be represented on the stage without outraging the sensibilities of the audience.⁷²

After Raymond's refusal Twain lost interest in producing Colonel Sellers. By the fall of 1884 he considered the manuscript only as a source of material for his platform lectures.⁷³

The unenthusiastic response to Colonel Sellers in early 1884 prompted Twain to complete his Tom Sawyer: A Play. This drama had been started nine years before: Twain obtained a copyright on a synopsis in 1875.⁷⁴ It would appear that Twain wanted to take advantage of the popularity of the Sawyer character; and Walter Blair, in his introduction to the play, asserts that Twain rushed the typing

of the manuscript in order to "quickly get the play staged and start earning vast sums of money" (p. 250). Twain seems to have been even more interested in theatrical success than usual during this period. His notebook entries for early 1884 include several entries of ideas for plays: "For a play: America in 1985. The Pope here & an in-quisition" and "Make play of the £ 1,000,000 Banknote." ⁷⁵ Tom Sawyer, however, was the only dramatic project he completed in this period, and he wrote Webster on 8 February 1884: "Tom Sawyer is ⁷⁶ finished; & it is a good play -- a good acting play." Twain believed that Tom Sawyer would be acceptable to the actors and producers who had failed to show interest in Colonel Sellers.

Several of Twain's other novels, including The Gilded Age, The Prince and the Pauper, and Pudd'nhead Wilson were successfully dramatized by other writers, but Tom Sawyer, adapted by Twain himself, was an absolute failure. The cause of this failure can be traced to Twain's selection of scenes from his book and the distorted emphasis put on these scenes when they are isolated from the supporting material included in the novel.

Tom Sawyer: A Play opens with a long conversation between Gracie and Amy, two little girls, about "love" and "marriage." Walter Blair, in his introduction to Hannibal, Huck and Tom, states that ⁷⁷ Twain "delighted in setting down children's chatter at length," and later in his introduction to the play itself he concludes that ⁷⁸ this produces a "concentration upon talk at the expense of action." Twain lifted whole passages of children's chatter from the novel and inserted them as scenes in his play, and by doing this he saved

himself the trouble of rewriting these scenes or trying to put the more difficult and complex scenes into dialogue. Jackson Island and the haunted house are eliminated, while the entire conversation between Tom and the new boy, Alfred Temple, is copied into the play. This exchange of taunts and threats is only a small part of the novel; but in the play it takes up a disproportionate amount of time, and it acquires an importance not warranted by the content of the scene. The dialogue between Tom and Huck concerning the value of a dead cat is reproduced in the play and inserted in the murder scene, where it detracts from the serious nature of the other events. The spotlight is on Tom Sawyer the prankster, and the audience is meant to laugh at his ability to make a fool out of everyone else and avoid punishment.

As in the case of Simon Wheeler, the play about Tom Sawyer becomes a burlesque. In the novel Tom is a developing character: a boy who is a free spirit, but who has a need to be accepted and loved. His inner feelings are examined and contrasted with his inability to communicate them to the people around him. The guilt he feels about hurting Aunt Polly is made clear, as is the love he feels for her: "There was something about Aunt Polly's manner, when she kissed Tom, that swept away his low spirits." There are two episodes in the novel that exemplify Tom's developing emotions, and these scenes are downplayed and burlesqued in the play. The first example involves a brass andiron knob that is one of Tom's more precious possessions. During a fight with Becky, Tom gives her this brass knob as a peace offering. In the symbol of the

andiron knob we see Tom's affection for Becky and his desire to reconcile, and we also see his inability to express these sentiments. When she scorns his gift the reader can look deeper than the rejected trifle, into Tom's heartfelt despair. In the play Twain brings in the doorknob in the scene between Gracie and Amy at the beginning of the first act. Gracie boasts that Joe Harper has given her a brass doorknob. Amy replies that she is going to make Tom give her one. The symbol is reduced to the childish desire of one little girl to have what her friend has, and the deeper insight into the character is lost.

Character development is sacrificed for the burlesque in the schoolhouse scene. Tom knows that Becky -- or Amy in the play -- has done something for which she should be punished. In the novel Tom falsely tells the schoolmaster that he himself is guilty and takes Becky's punishment. It is an action which reveals a compassionate and mature side of his character. In the play Tom speaks up, but only to put the blame on Alfred Temple, the new boy, and get the satisfaction of seeing him caned. Tom's action is reduced to a prank; Tom is shown only as a boy who enjoys getting in and out of trouble and whose antics are supposed to be our main source of interest and amusement. Twain does not allow any of the characters to develop; he pushes them into the background. He refuses to establish the star role at all. Tom Sawyer is a boy prankster who could be portrayed by a number of comic actors, even a child actor. Mark Twain had already won attention for the novel Tom Sawyer, and he was not about to risk inserting a rival for this acclaim into the play.

By concentrating on Tom Sawyer the clown, Twain, as Blair states, robs "even the most pathetic scenes of pathos, even the most melodramatic scenes of suspense,"⁸⁰ and nowhere is this fault more glaring than in the final scene of the play. In the novel the cave scene shows Tom and Becky helplessly lost, watching with terror as their last candle burns out. In Tom Sawyer: A Play, Huck and Amy are added to the scene, and the atmosphere is that of a childish romp. Tom boasts of "finding" the search party that has been sent out to look for them; even in the supposedly tense climactic scene he remains the carefree "bad" boy.

Tom's role as the clown pushes the characters of Huck and Aunt Polly into the background; they are one-dimensional backdrops for his pranks. Aunt Polly, whose character in the book reveals the conflict between her love for Tom and her duty as his disciplinarian, is turned into a foolish figure of authority. In Act Three Huck is trying to remove a peg from the ground when Aunt Polly enters and, mistaking his attitude for one of prayer, kneels beside him and exhorts him to mend his ways. This burlesque of Aunt Polly's nature is designed only to show her as a fool and allow the audience to laugh at her expense. Huck, in the play, is never portrayed as the orphan alienated by a family-oriented society that considers him an outsider and a bad influence on their children. His only purpose in the play is to fill the role of companion for Tom.

The difference between the play's treatment of these two characters and the novel's is most evident in the ending of each. At the end of the novel Tom finds the runaway Huck and convinces him to return

to the Widow Douglas; the scene with Huck shows Tom's concern for his friend and his ability to use his intelligence and resourcefulness to help others. This scene also gives an insight into Huck's difficult choice between the security of being an adopted son and the freedom of his days as an outsider. Tom Sawyer: A Play ends with Aunt Polly making a speech on the essential good in Tom's nature while he does a handstand directly behind her. As a finale Twain tried to get one more laugh out of his audience at Aunt Polly's expense.

In Tom Sawyer Twain showed that he understood the emotions and motivations of children, and he gave us an insight into their world. A large part of this insight is supplied by a third-person narrator, but in the play the author is limited to expressing his ideas in dialogue -- a form of communication at which children are not very adept. When Twain does attempt to have the children explain things the words seem out of place and affected, and this effect might be the reason why Twain, in a note to Augustin Daly, suggested that adults play the children's roles. As in Simon Wheeler, Twain tries to make up for the missing narrator by giving the characters revealing asides. In the fence painting scene Tom gets Ben to trade an apple for a chance to paint: the narrator comments that Tom accepted with "reluctance in his face but alacrity in his heart" (p. 49). In the play Tom has the forced aside "Now that isn't any slouch of a trade" (p. 276). Twain's selection of events and the style with which he adapted them to the conventions of the drama combined to produce a four-act farce that no producer would risk staging.

Twain went to New York to try to get the play produced. He gave the play to Daly, but the producer replied: "I fear that Tom Sawyer would not make a success at my theater." The failure of his two plays in 1884 discouraged even Twain, and he stayed away from any dramatic ventures throughout 1885. The following year he was again peddling Colonel Sellers around, this time negotiating with A. P. Burbank, a popular elocutionist. Howells agreed to put up half the money to rent the Lyceum Theater, but later had second thoughts. On looking over the script he recognized the validity of Raymond's criticism: "It is a lunatic whom we've pictured, and while a lunatic in one act might amuse, I'm afraid that in three he would simply bore." Twain agreed to stop production, but in a letter to Howells dated 13 May 1886 he expresses his irritation about backing out of the deal and taking a loss on the theater. Twain, however, did not completely drop the play but produced it, at his own expense, for a series of one-night performances. Colonel Sellers was finally given a trial matinee in New York on 23 September 1887. The review in the Times the next day read: "'The American Claimant' [Colonel Sellers as a Scientist] produced yesterday afternoon, is as much like a play as a school exhibition dialogue." After this disastrous opening, the play closed, and it was never produced again.

Twain would never have another of his plays produced, but he did publish a three-act comedy, Meisterschaft, in 1888. Originally this play was written for a private audience, Twain's Hartford "class" made up of members of the Saturday Morning Club and his

own family. In 1887 the class began to learn German, and out of these lessons came the play. The only live performances of this play were given by this class in Hartford.

Meisterschaft is about two sisters who are sent to Germany to learn the language, and are placed under strict orders to speak nothing but German. Their two lovers follow them to Germany and place themselves under the same restriction. The title of the play is the name of a German phrase book the four characters are studying. The play is concerned with the meetings of the two couples and their struggles to get around the language barrier. They do this by mouthing the ridiculous phrases from Meisterschaft while communicating perfectly on the more basic level of their love.

The humor in this play is derived from the struggle with the difficult German language and from the use of the phrases in Meisterschaft as the basis of conversation. In "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral," Twain used the same idea of a failure to communicate; in Meisterschaft, however, German is used as a dialect which even the speaker cannot understand. The English used in the play functions as a humorous commentary on the language struggle. In this way the roles of the refined preacher and the coarse miner in "Buck Fanshaw's Funeral" are combined in each character.

In January 1888 Twain published the work in Century magazine; but he wrote the play for a select audience, and much of the humor was lost on the general public. Paine, in his Biography, praises the play for its "picturesque mixture of German and English and its unflinching humor," but he admits that a reader must have a fair

knowledge of German to enjoy it thoroughly. In any case Twain's purpose was served; his friends were amused, and whatever money he made from the play's sale was a bonus. He was satisfied enough with the work to include it in his collected works published in 1892; it was the only one of his plays to be included.

Meisterschaft marks the beginning of a change in attitude by Twain toward the theater. In the ten years between 1888 and 1898 he still had a lively interest in the institution but he was no longer attracted to the role of playwright. One reason for his change in attitude was financial. During this period his investment in the Paige typesetting machine and his faltering publishing house began to seriously drain his capital, a circumstance eventually leading to bankruptcy in 1894. Twain could not afford to risk his time and money in another theatrical venture. In 1890 James A. Herne, a well known actor and playwright, became interested in Colonel Sellers as a Scientist. Herne spoke to Howells and convinced him that by rewriting and reworking he could make a success of the play. When Twain was approached he refused to take any interest in the proposal because all his money was tied up in the Paige machine. Twain had to go back to writing fiction, a secure means of keeping up a steady cash flow.

Twain kept his contact with the theater on a personal level. In 1888 he helped found the Players, a New York club associated with the actor Edwin Booth, and he would later work at the Actor's Fund Fair. He made speeches and attended meetings, but he did not try to have his own plays produced.

Twain's interest in the theater was renewed while he was in Vienna in 1898. This was a year that saw the author's continuing return to financial security; he no longer had to turn out fiction to support himself. Writing was also a way of coping with the death of his daughter Susy (1872 - 1896), but he seemed to have a mental block about writing fiction. In a letter to Howells dated 22 January 1898, Twain explains his low creative productivity and his renewed interest in the drama:

It was because of the deadness which invaded me when Susy died. But I have made a change lately-- into dramatic work--& I find it absorbingly entertaining-- I don't know if I can write a play that will play; but no matter, I'll write half a dozen that won't anyway. Dear me, I didn't know there was so much fun in it.⁹⁰

The dramatic work that Twain was working on was the comedy Is He Dead?

Twain's comedy is based on his short story "Is He Living or Is He Dead?" published in 1892. In the play the poor painter, Millet, becomes rich after his friends fake his funeral and the paintings of the "dead" artist soar in value. Millet remains in the play disguised as his widowed sister Daisy. Eventually the painter reveals himself and is reunited with his mourning lover, Marie. Millet feels safe from full public exposure because the pride of France would never allow the swindle to be admitted.

William R. Macnaughton, in Mark Twain's Last Years as a Writer, states: "Despite its weaknesses, it is not a bad play," and added that it "contains some excellent scenes." Twain did not write Is He Dead? in order to make money and this might be one reason

it is of higher quality than his other dramatic works. He considered the play a fresh start in an unfamiliar genre. In a letter to his business advisor Henry Huttleson Rogers dated 6 February 1898 he writes:

I have written a comedy by myself, entitled 'Is He Dead?' -- I think, myself, that for an ignorant first attempt it lacks a good deal of being bad. I am learning the trade pretty fast -- I shall get the hang of it yet, I believe. I shall stick to the business right along until I either turn out something real good or find out I can't.⁹³

It is striking that in this letter Twain considers writing drama an entirely new outlet for his talent. This passage reflects the complete change in his attitude toward playwriting that took place between Tom Sawyer: A Play and Is He Dead? No longer was playwriting only a matter of profit, it now assumed an important therapeutic role in his emotional recovery. Twain wanted to make a clear distinction between his old motives and his new attitude.

At first Twain had great confidence in his new work. The Times Weekly Edition of London announced that the play would be produced simultaneously in London and New York.⁹⁴ For reasons unknown the event never took place, and Twain had a drastic change of opinion about Is He Dead? On 28 August 1898 he wrote Rogers: "Put 'Is He Dead?' in the fire. God will bless you. I too. I started in to convince myself that I could write a play or couldn't. I'm convinced. Nothing can disturb that conviction."⁹⁵ At this time Twain may have been thoroughly disillusioned with the whole idea of comic dramatizations.

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In 1898 Twain translated a "melancholy" Austrian drama. He also wrote the article "About Play-Acting." This article contains

his comments on the Austrian tragedy The Master of Palmyra, by Adolf Wilbrandt, and makes a plea for the production of this type of drama in New York. Twain warns: "You are trying to make yourself believe that life is a comedy, that its sole business is fun, that there is nothing serious in it." ⁹⁷ While acknowledging the triviality of his own plays, Twain is placing a large part of the blame for his failure as a dramatist on the demands of his audience. The playwright is a product of his age, and Twain was writing for an age that craved "mental sugar."

Twain also talks about the role of death in The Master of Palmyra, and the portrayal of death in drama may have been one of the reasons for his own change of opinion about Is He Dead? Like Plunkett in Ah Sin, Hugh in Simon Wheeler and De Bohun in Colonel Sellers, Millet is alive and on stage after his own "death." Twain had a problem portraying death in his own plays; perhaps he felt death had no place in a comedy. In "About Play-Acting" he had this to say about the character of Death in The Master of Palmyra: "To me he was always welcome, he seemed so real--the actual Death, not a play-acting artificiality" (p. 202). He came to scorn his early naive plays, especially those written in the carefree time before Susy's death and his own bankruptcy. In his first letter to Rogers about Is He Dead? he made the play seem like his first dramatic attempt, a fresh start, but he later realized that it was only a reworking of his old dramatic formula. Looking back at his life, Twain must have felt that tragedy was indeed the final act of all human experience.

Twain remained involved with the theater during the final decade

of his life. He came to place more emphasis on the theater's obligation to serve the public, and he became interested in the Children's Theater of the Educational Alliance. Twice he appeared at performances to make curtain speeches, and in these speeches he stressed the importance of the theater as a means of educating children and the public in general.

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As a summation of the critical response to Twain's plays one should turn to the review of Colonel Sellers that appeared in The New York Times on the day after Burbank's opening in the lead role:

Mr. Clemens lacks something, maybe it is patience, perhaps it is talent, that a playwright should possess. In the course of his long and eventful career he must, through the courtesy of managers, have seen plays acted, but in his own attempts at play-making he has never given evidence that he comprehends the meaning of the word "dramatic." 99

After examining Mark Twain's involvement in the theater, one can appreciate the accuracy and insight displayed by this critic in 1887. Through Twain's contact with the theater he developed a desire to become a playwright. He liked the energy and excitement of the theater, he liked writing plays, and he especially liked the idea of making money out of his plays. With his memories of the money to be made in mind, he would rush through a script; the faster it was produced, the faster he would start collecting his profit notices. Twain would often find someone to blame for his inadequacies as a playwright -- his actors, his partner, the age he was writing for -- but the truth must be the inability of his genius to adapt to the dramatic style. Such an inability most likely derives from the fact that Twain's own character would not allow

him to let go of his dramatic creations. He could not bear to give up center stage to an undeserving co-author or comic actor. The combination of his own shortcomings as a dramatist and his inability to work with others and share the credit for the production of his plays made it impossible for Mark Twain to become a successful playwright.

Notes

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For a more detailed account of the controversy surrounding the authorship of the play The Gilded Age see "The play Colonel Sellers" in French's Mark Twain and The Gilded Age, pp. 242-255; and "The Dramatic Version of The Gilded Age " in MTH, pp. 861-63.

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