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MARK TWAIN AND THE FRONTIER OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY

By

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B.A., Florida Atlantic University, 1968

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1970

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Date *Aug. 19, 1970*

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## CHAPTER I

### THE AMERICAN FRONTIER: ILLUSION AND REALITY

To the West each year stream thousands and thousands of Eastern tourists, searching. On hot summer days they trudge up and down boardwalks of restored Old West towns like Virginia City, Montana, peering into frame buildings made at some expense to appear as they were eighty or a hundred years ago. The sightseers squint against the morning sun's glare reflecting off the brochure about the vigilantes and continue the quest.

Their kids stand on the wooden sidewalk, feet planted well apart, hands hanging lightly by the sides, and stare each other down, engaging in imaginary gunfights, sometimes to the anemic pops of toy cap pistols. They are well-versed in the proper etiquette of such romantic duels,

2.

having seen Marshal Dillon once a week ever since they can remember kill his men in the street to preserve the law and order. The parents, perhaps thinking they might like a little fanciful gunplay themselves were it not for the fear of censure, smile indulgently and return to the elusive pilgrimage toward the shrine that is always just beyond understanding. They, too, know the proper manners for gunfights, having seen, before television, scores every Saturday afternoon at movie theaters in the largest and smallest of American towns.

While public ridicule might keep the grownups from having a shootout, there are opportunities for them to try the past, or, more precisely, the modern American version of it. They can drink a cold beer in the Bale of Hay Saloon, choosing either to stand at the bar or retire to a red brocade-walled room in the back where it is possible to imagine saloon patrons and women of loose morality trysting. For entertainment the Bale of Hay offers a battery of old time nickelodeon musical instruments, everything from a simple player piano to a several piece band. Watching the various contortions of the hammers and levers that make its horns blow, gongs sound, drums bang, and bow saw across an incomparable violin, is as interesting as hearing it. There are also hand-operated, girlie-movie machines, which while they might have entertained gold miners in for

3.

a spree, are considerably less daring than the modern bikini on almost any American beach.

A drive over a rutted road takes the tourist to Boot Hill where slabs of lumber painted white bear the names of Virginia City's notorious, some of whom died at the hands of the vigilantes. The vigilantes, the brochure tells, were community citizens who banded together to root out the evil men who disrupted the law and order in Montana. In Virginia City, the vigilantes were thorough; they hanged a crooked sheriff and many of his cronies for robbing stages.

In the dry and searing afternoon, a car, man and woman in front and two boys in back, rolls away from Boot Hill, down the main street out of town, heat waves rising ahead, Virginia City getting smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror. Jesus, says the driver, turning around quickly to look at the boys, you dripped your ice cream on the seat. He turns to the woman beside him and asks her how many more miles to Yellowstone. She speaks, and he says, good, we can get there tonight, hit the Tetons tomorrow afternoon, two more days to Grand Canyon and then six back to Pasaaic, five if we push it; here you guys, wipe up the ice cream. Virginia City is out of sight now, and the car rushes through the West.

Virginia City was a gold mining town, founded upon and dedicated to the idea that if the American earth was



properly dug up, it would yield unparalleled riches. When miners gouged out and exhausted the gold in one place, there was another place to be gouged, and after that still another. The West's history reveals many such towns. In Nevada there is even another Virginia City, more famous than the one in Montana. Rather than gold, the silver of the Comstock Lode was its reason for being. Mark Twain wrote extensively about the Virginia City, Nevada.

In other parts of the West are different tourists, perhaps more intellectual, and they are standing at the brink of Grand Canyon or in Dinosaur National Monument or, for that matter, any other national park, searching too. They read about people like John Wesley Powell, the first man to successfully run the Colorado River through Grand Canyon, or Clarence Dutton, a nineteenth century American geologist who explored much of the Southwest, making rich new scientific discoveries. Sometimes they gaze in awe at Mormon fruit orchards in Utah. Growing in the desert are peaches and apricots and pears, nourished by persistent irrigation. The tourists express admiration for the powers of religion, as well as the stubbornness of man.

Sometimes the travelers exclaim at scenery and go to great lengths to reach someplace where they have heard the view is spectacular. On a June day a dust plume rises

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hundreds of feet off a northern Arizona dirt road. At the base of the swirl, two people in a lone car head across 60 miles of desert toward an unpeopled rim area of Grand Canyon, Toroweap Point in the Grand Canyon National Monument. After two hours of what seems an excruciatingly slow pace for twentieth century Americans over a road which seems as if it has never been graded, the travelers arrive at the point. Cautiously approaching the rim, the seekers look into the depths. There, three thousand feet straight down, is a stretch of the Colorado River unobstructed from view, roaring and grinding deeper into the great canyon it has cut, yet looking from the top like a meandering, placid, green-blue millstream. Later, at dusk, the travelers go again to the canyon's edge and look below. On a sandbar far away the fire of a river running party is visible and perhaps a seeker's thoughts again turn to Powell.

On a morning a couple of days later, the canyon watchers pack their car and slowly traverse backwards the route they followed along the dirt road. They point the car north, looking toward some distant mountaintop, perhaps named for another famous explorer or scientist.

There is really no difference between the searches of the two groups of people represented by the family in Virginia City, and the couple at Toroweap. They are both seek-

6.

ing a sense of past adventure. Members of the first group, by their actions and choice of destinations, more or less unabashedly admit their activity. Those in the second group engage in a deception that is not difficult to pierce. While they may speak of the wonderful contributions made by the explorer-scientists, it is clearly the aura of adventure, not science, that is so attractive about Powell or Dutton; though they may speak about the dedication of the Mormons, what matters most in the achievement of those people were their hardships and privations on an almost unendurable march west; and while the tourists may marvel or stand mute at the West's almost sublime beauty, it is the sense of nature inextricably tied to the West's romantic history that lends it part of its grandeur.

What the tourists are looking for goes beyond adventure, however. Their larger quest is for a lost frontier, an America they think used to exist. Perhaps it did but very probably their vision of it--the product of a popular culture--is like a water mirage their cars never reach on a summer-heated highway of the West.

Something needs to be said now about the term popular culture. Neither perjorative connotation nor snobbery is intended. It is merely a descriptive term chosen to label what I believe to be a majority American view toward the frontier. Popular cultural views are usually in some oppo-

sition to intellectual or scholarly studies and opinions, which can be as inaccurate and misleading as any other kind of thought and in many ways more deceptive because they give the impression of offering valid proof when in fact, if fact there can ever be, they offer no such thing.

Scholarly evidence can be and is sometimes used in the manner that some churches use the Holy Bible--to support anything. Although the scholarly view of the frontier claims the greater accuracy, the popular notion is probably of larger consequence because of its wide-ranging impact on American life generally.

In 1607 the English established their first American colony at Jamestown, and the frontier process which is uniquely American began. From Jamestown settlers spread west, and when they met the barrier the Appalachian Mountains presented, they turned south. In New England, in 1620, the Pilgrims came, and the history of settlement in what would be the northern United States began to show a western movement too. Eventually, settlers crossed the Appalachian block which some historians suggest was more of a psychological barrier than a physical one.<sup>1</sup> As long as the settlers remained east of the Appalachians, there was always a creek which fed into a river which led to the sea and the link with England. Crossing the Appalachians would cut the easiest available physical links with home. So

once the mountains were crossed and blocked the view east, the settlers could direct their energies to becoming what they would be--Americans. Since they had come from the East they knew what was there; eyes looked farther and farther west.

The frontier process in America was slow, and it did not move uniformly, but it was relentless. Always on the move toward what surely must be the better life just over the next ridge, Americans advanced into unsettled country. Settlement was not always west. Sometimes it was north, sometimes south. Sometimes large bodies of land were jumped, as was the case with the great plains. At first, white men thought them uninhabitable, a nuisance to cross on the way to Oregon or California. Sometimes the frontier even moved from west to east; California miners went to Nevada and Idaho and Montana and Colorado.

People do not pack up their belongings and move without sufficient cause; in America the causes of remote travel or frontier settlement outwardly varied, but their subsurface basis was constant: wealth, or the promise of a materially better life. That was why men trapped furs, looked for gold, herded cattle or farmed the land. That was also why trappers in a twenty five year period killed most of the beaver population west of the Mississippi River; why there are scars on countless western hills that miners

abandoned; why the once great ranges across which moved vast herds of buffalo are now covered with stubby grass, if any at all, and where only an occasional herd of cattle is seen; that was why the prairies became dust bowls, the rich soil blown away in payment for the furious drive for a better life.

No frontier is closer to the imagination of Americans than the trans-Mississippi West in the last half of the nineteenth century. During this time some of the great mining frontier developed, the Indian wars were fought and the legend of the American cowboy was born. It is this frontier that lures the tourists to Virginia City, Montana, and it is this frontier that is mainly illusory. It is this frontier that has been represented daily on the television screens in millions of American homes as the mythical place where life was simple, and necessarily because of its simplicity, good. Life's lack of complications on the frontier appeals to the father from Pasaaic who is burdened by a mortgage, taxes, doctor bills and payments on several items among all those things that are generally collected into the category of modern conveniences. A false ease of moral judgement keeps television sets tuned to the westerns and before TV thrilled the kids at the Saturday afternoon matinees and before movies kept the sales of dime novels brisk and Wild West shows prosperous. Justice, for in-

stance, was a matter of the color of the hat the cowboy was wearing. White equals good, black bad. Of course most Americans sneer at such a simplistic notion, but it is just such an attitude that causes admiration for the vigilantes of Virginia City. Citizen participation in government in its highest form; a community dedicated to protecting itself by establishing rules. Restoring the law and order is one way of looking at it, but a more accurate description would be taking the law into your own hands. Lost in the admiration for the vigilantes is the suggestion that maybe their instincts for getting the criminal were not always infallible, and their rules took no account of fallibility. But that is a possibility dreadful to advocates of simplicity, for it leads to a question of moral magnitude. How many innocent men dangled from the end of a vigilante's rope?

If there has been a gap between the myth, the image, the legend, the vision of the frontier and its reality, the chasm has at times been as wide for scholars as it has been for the tourist from the East. In the twentieth century the frontier has been a constant source of study and speculation among intellectuals. The man responsible for its currency is Frederick Jackson Turner, a historian at the University of Wisconsin who in 1893, in a paper entitled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," pro-

nounced a frontier thesis for American society.<sup>2</sup> The existence of free land and the westward movement of settlers toward it explain the development of America, said Turner. The historian defined the frontier as a region of sparse settlement, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization." A core of frontier characteristics emerged from Turner's paper: democracy, individualism, freedom, coarseness, strength, acuteness, inquisitiveness, ingeniousness, materialism, lax business morals. The chief contribution of the frontier to American life, said Turner, was to make democracy workable. Democracy, he said, came "from the forest." Democracy was furthered by a frontier that stood in the way of social class development. As long as there was a frontier, those who felt held back by European or Eastern society could go West. The frontier, said Turner, was a "safety valve of abundant resources open to him who would take."

American frontier historians Robert E. Riegel and Robert G. Athearn have noted the rapidity and tenacity with which Turner's ideas spread:

Turner's influence grew rapidly, and within a generation his ideas had become thoroughly embedded, not only in historical writing, but in other fields of research and even in general literature...Turner was a teacher who had the gift of inspiring his students with a deep affection for himself and an abiding interest in the sub-



ject he taught. These students in turn carried the torch to all parts of the country and transmitted the Turner Theses, even though at times exaggerated and overly modified, to their own students.<sup>3</sup>

Turner's ideas, it would seem, were gathered up with all the speed and the same type of wistfulness that leads modern Americans to accept the myth of the cowboy and the mountain men and other western heroes uncritically.

Other historians have said that while Turner's hypothesis may appear convincing, realities suggest otherwise. Summarizing the critics, Riegel and Athearn say that Turner's insistence that westward movement resulted from a desire for liberty exhibits a lack of understanding that the chief motive force for the frontier was wealth.<sup>4</sup> Critics also point out that the idea that the West was a great innovator was false. Its political institutions were transplanted from the East. The western farmer clung to eastern farming methods even though they were shown to be inadequate. Democracy came not from the forest, but grew out of many developments traceable back to Europe. Individualism is a western myth, too. The average frontiersman believed in the general ideas of his time. If there was a belief in lack of social controls in the West, there was a similar belief elsewhere in the country. Point by point the critics show the false assumptions of the frontier

thesis. Yet false assumptions continue to bring the tourists to Virginia City today.

If one visits the West with eyes searching and critical, reality and illusion sometimes show themselves in unique ways. One arrives in Virginia City thinking how picturesque it is, how perfect for color slides to show the folks back home what the Old West was like. The paint on the sign-board of the Bale of Hay Saloon is fresh for the season as are the names on the other frontier business establishments. The town is in neat order, there is no unpleasant dust on Main Street--because it is paved. Colorfully dressed, neatly-trimmed mannikins which represent old frontiersmen and women going about their daily routine are stationed in little frame shops where one can hear a recorded message telling what it was like to live in frontier Virginia City. These mannikins represent better than anything else that what one is witnessing in Virginia City is illusory, for they are pure make-believe; there can be no reality, no pleasantness or unpleasantness of human character in plaster molded into human form. Probably the most appealing aspect of Virginia City is that when one has had enough, one can seal oneself in an air-conditioned car and ride away down the dustless street in comfort. It is all very antiseptic.

Even in modern-made-to-look-like-it-was Virginia City, however, some sense of the true grubbiness of the old life

is possible at the town's museum where on display are many artifacts from the nineteenth century. A particular exhibit is easily missed among the clutter of all the rest, but if one is especially winsome, the two wrinkled old ladies who are keepers of the museum will call attention to the prize: the clubfoot of George Lane, a shoemaker the vigilantes believed was a member of a robbery gang and hanged. When a number of years ago a suspicion developed that the man lying in Lane's grave might not be Lane, the grave was opened to inspect the tell-tale foot. The dried and shriveled foot, the foot only, now resides in the museum, a misshapen claw from the past, suspended morbidly over the present.

In the archives at the University of Montana there is a series of old photographs of Pioneer City, Montana, in the 1870s. The appearance of the town, near the site of the state's first gold discovery, suggests that life was then mean and unkempt, and suddenly one is struck that this West, while perhaps not entirely representative either, is nearer the truth than the false brightness of modern Virginia City. In Pioneer City the main street, of course, was not paved, and one imagines what it must have been like, muddy in spring, dusty in summer, snowbound in winter. The buildings, in general form and construction like those of Virginia City, are so rundown and woebegone in appearance that they seem as if they would barely keep out the weather.

One thinks not so much of men standing around the bar in jolly comradeship as of people huddled together around a stove to keep warm. And in Pioneer City a century ago, there was no road and no automobile to whisk back across the 3,000 miles that separated the settlers from home.

Another place where one may perceive illusion and reality in an instant is the Big Hole Valley of Montana. The Big Hole is a place of great beauty with wide expanses of gently rolling, treeless plains, surrounded by mountains blue and snow-capped in the distance. In the Big Hole, United States soldiers fought Nez Perce Indians in a well-known battle at the beginning of the Nez Perce Indian War. A museum overlooks the battlefield where the soldiers attacked a village of the Nez Perce. One recalls the Indian-fighting soldiers of the movies. After an all-day ride they come into town and head for the saloon. Their clothes may be dirty, but they are neatly tailored, and the men are smart looking. There is even a glamorous air about the dust as the soldier strikes it in clouds out of his clothes, complains of thirst and always has the money for a drink. At the Big Hole battlefield, however, the reality of frontier soldiering is evident in a life-size photograph in the museum. The soldier is a squat little man. His clothes are ill-fitting, not tight, but baggy. He wears a small mustache that is reminiscent of Charlie Chaplin, or

an Italian bus conductor, and indeed, judging from his build, one expects that if one could see him walking, the gait would be Chaplinesque. There is an unmistakable air of gloom in the soldier's eyes as opposed to the brightness in the eye of the movie soldier about to go out and confront the savages.

One does not have to go to the West to discover the discrepancies between the image of the frontier and the actuality. The literature and popular culture of America offers abundant evidence; personal experience in the West merely reinforces what one reads. There are accounts in literature--which ultimately claims to tell the truth--on all major frontier elements, the trappers and hunters, the miners, the cowboys, the lawmen, the farmers, and the Indians.

Of the trappers and hunters, the most renowned of all was Daniel Boone and although he existed as a real person, it is difficult to sift his actual life and feelings from the embroidered versions created by such early writers as John Filson, who began the Boone legend in The Discovery Settlement and Present State of Kentucke. If Boone was not exactly displayed as a deep philosopher himself, he was shown as a man around whom philosophies developed. So Daniel Boone, the primitive backwoodsman, the white Indian, essentially a savage, became the embodiment of philo-

sophic ideas. In his book, The Frontier Mind, Arthur K. Moore notes:

Officially, Daniel Boone made Kentucky and the West safe for the arts and industry and then out of distaste for crowded conditions retired beyond the Mississippi, but as a child of nature, leading the incomparably good life, he induced the civilized imagination to follow him deep into the forest. It is indicative of nineteenth-century thinking that Boone should have been installed in two different myths--progressivism and primitivism--which, though not in all respects antithetical, clash on several levels and ultimately point in opposite directions.<sup>5</sup>

Somehow philosophy, an effete pastime the frontiersman ostensibly eschewed, became a part of him. Somehow the idea of a noble savage, the belief that nature was automatically cleansing and purifying, was transferred from the minds of European philosophers to the backwoods of America. Why man would be automatically good in a natural state and, by implication, bad in a state of civilization was never successfully explained by either the philosophers or the frontiersmen.

A more realistic version of what the hunter and trapper was like is A.B. Guthrie's The Big Sky. The hero, Boone Caudill, is a Kentuckian who goes West in search of furs and adventure, and while he qualifies as a savage, there is nothing noble about him. He is fitted to live in a state of nature that is neither benign nor friendly.

Killing is a necessity for his survival sometimes, but even when it is not, the habit is hard to break; he deliberately and cruelly kills a bully at a trapper's rendezvous and a friend whom he suspects of sleeping with and making pregnant his Indian wife. And although Caudill later has reason to think that the slaying of the friend may not have been justified, he does not spend an inordinate amount of time grieving over it. Adaptability is a human characteristic, and Guthrie's hero adapts to the true demands of life in the wilderness.

A few seasons ago on television, there was a show called "The Road West". It purported to tell about the migration of a family from the East out to the Great Plains where after much hardship they built a sod house and planted crops. All sorts of terrible events befell them. If one week the weather was not doing its best to send them hurrying east, the local outlaws, of various sorts, were. But nevertheless the family managed to maintain its eastern gentility. The father, a widower, and the rest of the family remained humane, and though some attempt was made to show the primitiveness and hardship associated with life on the plains, there was behind it all glamor.

There is no such glamor in a book entitled Old Jules, by Mari Sandoz. Jules is the real father of Miss Sandoz

and is drawn in all his frontier cruelty. It may be argued that Jules is the opposite extreme from the father on the television show and hence no more representative of frontier temperament, but one suspects that Jules was much more suited to survival on the farming frontier of the plains than was the father in the television version. Necessity almost made cruelty a virtue.

Jules had four wives; three left him because they could not stand his brutishness; one of them later was placed in an insane asylum. Jules sent his young children out to drag wood through the snow afoot, or to find cattle wallowing in snowdrifts, when both could have been done by horse. On one ordered cattle-saving trip, Marie became snowblind; she never regained the sight of one eye. Jules did not bother to call a doctor to look at his daughter's pain-wracked eyes. Miss Sandoz tells what living in a sod house was really like, day after day, by necessity, not just for a pleasant hour's entertainment that the television network provided for millions of viewers each week. There was no glamor in settling a country where the roof dripped mud for a week after it rained, or a walk from the house to the barn in a blizzard might mean death by freezing, or where the women became insane from privation and loneliness. The demands of western settlement did not share anything in common with conditions that are respon-



sible for the creation of admirable people. Strong people, perhaps, even brave people, but not anyone one might wish to be like, not the admirable people who are so much a part of the legend. One suspects no network would consider a show with Jules as the hero.

Nowhere are popular culture frontier myths more prevalent than in attitudes toward Indians. The Indian has traditionally been seen in two ways. The first is as a savage to be exterminated. That view was frequently presented in the dime novels and indeed was the official policy of the United States government for a number of years, leading to outrageous, unprovoked attacks against Indian women and children as well as warriors. The second notion is that of the Indian as a noble savage. It refuses to accept the frontier Indian as a foe who sometimes made premeditated and unprovoked attacks on whites, and argues that all Indian attacks were provoked by white trespass. It denies the cruelty of many Indian customs. The inaccuracy of the two notions is that they both fail to see the Indian for what he really was, and for that matter is, a human being.

Few books convey the idea of the Indian as human as well as Thomas Berger's Little Big Man. A satire in part but historically accurate, the novel is in a sense a panorama of a certain period of Western settlement. The

hero, Jack Crabb, happened to be just about everywhere history was made in the West. He was raised by the Indians after they attacked the wagon train and killed his parents. But he eventually went back to a white culture. Still his experience gave him an uncommon perspective from which to view both sides of the Indian question.

No one scene sums up the realities of white-Indian conflict better than one in which he spots a blonde scalp which an Indian chief is holding. For a moment he thinks it is the hair of his wife, lost with his son during an Indian attack, and he is torn by this thought as well as those he has just felt when the chief has described the soldiers' slaughter of Indians at Sand Creek in Colorado. The chief has been a father to Crabb, yet

For a moment I was sure it come from Olga's dear head, and reckoned also he had little Gus's fine skull-cover someplace among his filthy effects, the stinking old savage, living out his life of murder, rapine and squalor, and I almost knifed him before I collected myself and realized the hair was honeyer than my Swedish wife's.

I mention this because it shows how a person's passion can reverse on the instant he is reminded of his own loss. I had just been moved by Sand Creek, and the next minute was ready to kill him.<sup>o</sup>

The passage is unusual because it embodies in one man attitudes of both white and Indian and shows the reasons

for both. It is also unusual because the Indian is shown as a person of flesh and blood against whom anger can be directed or for whom pity can be felt, and that view is at odds with both the barbaric savage or noble savage stereotypes that have characterized much of frontier literature and dramatization, live in the past and electronic today.

Noting the two views of the Good Indian and the Bad Indian, A. Irving Hallowell offers a possible explanation when he writes that

As the eastern frontier receded westward and for most Americans the contemporary Indians could be viewed at a comfortable distance, it was their decline that became a romantic theme...But it was by no means always the Noble Savage that was depicted; a double image was created--the savage as ignoble as well as noble. During this period, the first half of the nineteenth century, when the Indian was such a popular figure in American literature, it is particularly significant that most of the authors who dealt with Indian themes derived their information from written sources rather than from direct observation.

Hallowell goes on to demonstrate the humanness of Indians by telling of the experiences of some white captives:

...the captives who became "white Indians" discovered that the actual manner of life of the natives was something other than the literary images of the Noble Savage or the fiendish red man. The Indian cultures contained values which the white child could

assimilate, live by and in adulthood refuse to relinquish.<sup>8</sup>

The continuing myth of the American cowboy is best illustrated by a television and magazine advertisement that has maintained a lengthy popularity. It is the cigarette ad which extols the virtues of a mythical place called Marlboro Country. Marlboro Country is peopled by a group of tall, lean, rugged men who are galloping across the plains, tracking through snow, drinking coffee over open fires, all the while keeping their sacred trust in watching the cattle.

The glamor of the life presented by the ad writers is unmistakable, so there is naturally an avoidance of the realities of the cowboy: long dull hours under sun, wind, rain, snow; the smell of cows and their dung; the inevitable dust that permeates everything when cattle are being driven. In their book, The American Cowboy: Myth and Reality, Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr. provide insights into the actual life and it is not Marlboro Country. Rather it is

Twelve hours in the saddle, two hours' watch at night, plus interruptions which might consume most of the remainder of the night, night after night; the same unimaginative chuck to eat and the same hard ground to sleep on for weeks, or even months, on end; low pay and nothing to spend

it for except the occasional binge in some raw town--this was the cowboy's life. About the only comparable life within recent memory would be that of some rusting sailor stuck away on a destroyer in a desolate sector of MacArthur's Southwest Pacific, where there was nothing to do except work, where work seemed eternal, and where prolonged sleep was something you thought about but seldom experienced.<sup>9</sup>

One thing that is immutable in the myth of the West is the cowboy's innate fairness. He is, above all, the Good Sport no matter what the odds. Movie after movie, television shows without end and book after book suggest this as fact. In the cowboy mythology, even when he is dealing with his most hated enemy, the sheepman, he will not lower his standard. But Franz and Choate, who frankly profess admiration for the cowboy generally, have found the reality such that

Certainly the cattlemen didn't treat the sheepmen with the dignity due fellow men. They tried intimidation, and if that failed, they tried violence. Next came murder, either for the sheepmen or their flocks. As public sympathy was generally with the cattlemen, a sheepman had no recourse at law if his herder were killed or his sheep driven off the range. Although fiction tells a different story, the cowboy showed no inherent sportsmanship in dealing with his enemy, being careful usually to outnumber one herder on foot with five to ten cowboys on horseback.<sup>10</sup>

Why should cowboy mythology persist in the face of historical reality--which in its own way says something

important about the men who were cowboys? Part of the answer is attributable to the recollections of old cowboys themselves, which Frantz and Choate characterize as a refusal to remain faithful to fact for substantial lengths of time. Although the glory days of the range cattle industry which nurtured the infant myth of the cowboy only lasted fifteen or twenty years between approximately 1865-1885, the aura of that period extended considerably longer, so that well into the twentieth century ranching cowboys considered themselves cut from the same stock as their forbears of trailherd days. According to Franz and Choate, the cowboys-come-too-lately had their reveries also:

Occasionally the old cowman at the annual reunion will come back to reality long enough to deny that he ever shone in armor or indeed did anything more than eat dust on horseback because it was his job and he had no choice but to endure its demands and discomforts. But his lapse into reality is strictly temporary, and he soon rejoins his narrating brethren to spread the word of cowboys who were more gods than men, of horses that by comparison would make Pegasus limp with four clubbed feet, and of mossy-horned cattle that could surpass the combined cerebrations of the Institute of Advanced Learning. The desire to deify the cowboy seems to infect even the most normally disenchanting observer.<sup>11</sup>

Another reason for the ongoing cowboy myth is the static role of the popular chroniclers, first the writers

of books, then the scriptwriters for radio, television and movies. The writers, say Frantz and Choate, hit upon a formula three-quarters of a century ago, and its basic structure remains unchanged.

The result has been a portrait incomplete on the whole and untrue in many particulars, yet with a sufficient layer of truth to build a seemingly imperishable legend.<sup>12</sup>

That the advertisement for Marlboro Country maintains its popularity and that it avoids the unpleasantness of life--along with the obvious fact that it sells cigarettes--is not coincidental. The observations taken jointly suggest that while Americans feel the need for the frontier--one of the reasons the sponsors keep showing the advertisement--they don't want to know the realities of it. They might not have the stomach for what they would really find.

Curiously enough, and I do not think it too far-fetched to mention, for there may be some mystic process working, there is in the ad a morbid undercurrent about American attitudes toward the frontier. The commercial uses one type of false glamor--that of the cowboy--to sell another type of false glamor--smoking cigarettes. The same process by which Americans are able to accept the frontier and cowboy myths enable them to ignore the realities of cigarette

smoking, which modern medical science tells us may cause serious physical incapacitation or early death. The advertisement is not a mere minor adjustment to reality, but instead turns the truth inside out, making glamor where there is none--both for cowboy and tobacco.

Because American spend so much of their time and their money searching for their lost frontier--and because the entertainment industries spend so much of their time and money providing one kind of ending to the search--there must be some need deep within the American character for the values the frontier affirms. The reasons for the need probably cannot be discovered here.

But what, one must ask, is the value of chasing something that is eventually shown to be an Eldorado, a lie? Surely there are other pursuits with greater return. The answer lies in frontier values. They are important values, many of those humane and democratic traits Turner detected in the frontier character; and the fact that they seldom existed on frontiers subjected to historical scrutiny makes them no less important. To understand them one has to inspect the myths of the American physical frontier.

There are ways of satisfying the frontier urge, for there are alternatives to the popular and intellectual conceptions of the American western frontier. The most obvious new physical frontier is outer space, but since it is



beyond the power of any significant number of Americans to now go there, the stars are not generally suitable territories for frontier energies. Besides, pioneering has always had about it a sense of lone wills in opposition to some almost unconquerable force, and the space program, with its computers and thousands of support technicians, doesn't fit the image. There are numbers of medical frontiers, and there is the urban frontier of the American cities. There are, of course, as many technological frontiers as one might wish to define during a lifetime; and although the discovery and exploration of these frontiers may be in some cases harmful (one thinks most immediately of atomic fallout and industrial pollution) they can still absorb the frontier urge.

Then there is the ultimate frontier, which if it can be pushed back will provide access to all the non-tangible frontiers imaginable. A human frontier, a frontier of man's conduct toward his fellow man, a frontier of narrowly personal human relationship, a frontier of human possibility. Although the frontier values of American life--in human terms--have never been realized, the possibility is ever present, and has been since we were first vividly told about them. Mark Twain told us. If Twain was not the discoverer of the human frontier, he saw it through a clearer eye than those writers who had tried before, and up to his time he

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was the most honest in assessing what he found and what he reported.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FRONTIER OF HUMAN POSSIBILITY: ITS DEFINITION AND BACKGROUND

The American frontier has no solid identity. Historians are not in agreement over precisely what it was, and the disagreement extends into the popular conceptions. The elusiveness of a frontier definition is why some wanderers believe they will find it in Virginia City; some, perhaps, in Salt Lake City; a few maybe even in a large western metropolis like San Francisco, and still others in the deep forest or at the brink of some wild and barren canyon. The irony of all this travel and searching is that the frontier the tourists seek, they won't find, and while they are futilely looking, a genuine frontier with a somewhat less ephemeral identity is going undiscovered. The seekers never have to leave home to find it either, for it is as near as

their bookshelves, or the library, in the pages of an American, a distinctly American, writer: Mark Twain. If, as some historians believe, Americans truly need frontiers to satisfy basic urges, there is no necessity to mourn the loss of the past, because the possibilities in Twain are as vivid today as they were when the ink was still wet.

Twain's frontier, although on the surface a descriptive treatment of the world he knew, goes much deeper. Human relationship and human possibility are its territories. At its best, it reaches the human heart and spirit. I have said that such a frontier is less elusive than the one the tourists seek, but the suggestion is probably misleading. Certainly a frontier of human possibility has as wide a range of definitions as the mythical American frontier of cowboys and Indians. However wide its application to life, though, Mark Twain's human frontier is visible in a definite place--within the covers of his books--and can be demonstrated by examination of the words and images in those books.

In order to explain the frontier of human possibility, further specific consideration of the American physical frontier is necessary. Historian Walter Prescott Webb has tried as much and as hard as anyone to define an American physical frontier, but says with a certain justifiable frustration:

In the United States the word frontier has an entirely different meaning (from a European definition), and carries a different set of implications and connotations. It becomes a concept with such wide ramifications and so many shades of meaning that it cannot be wrapped up in a neat definition like a word whose growth has ceased and whose meaning has become frozen. It is something that lives, moves geographically, and eventually dies.<sup>1</sup>

Webb goes on to say that Americans think of a frontier as a place inside, rather than at the edge of, a nation. It is, he says, "not a line to stop at, but an area inviting entrance."<sup>2</sup> In Europe, Webb says, the frontier, usually meaning a boundary between countries, is stationary, but in America it moved.

The concept of a moving frontier is applicable where a civilized people are advancing into a wilderness, an unsettled area or one sparsely populated by a primitive people...The frontier movement is an invasion of a land assumed to be vacant as distinguished from an invasion of an occupied or civilized country, an advance against nature rather than against man.<sup>3</sup>

There is seemingly a contradiction between the first part of the statement and the second. How could a land like the interior of America be assumed vacant when frontiersmen knew a "primitive people" lived there? The Indians were outside human consideration; they were expendable things,

hence the wilderness, if not vacant at first, would be when the savage items were destroyed.

One assessment of the magnitude and impact of the American physical frontier that will have similar meaning for the frontier of human possibility is Webb's feeling of awe at the first realization of what the American continent hid.

In driving across the vast expanses of America I have often tried to visualize it as it was in the beginning, not the beginning of America, but the beginning of the European's experience with it. Even at the distance of four hundred years, more or less, I find myself caught up with the combined emotions of wonder, amazement, and awe. Here were new forests, new soil and new streams; here was new silence and immensity, too silent and extensive to be broken by a single individual or by any number then available. How small man feels in such presence.<sup>4</sup>

The frontier of human possibility is as much a frontier as the most well-defined physical wilderness or boundary line between civilization and savagery, although it is not always possible to draw parallels on a one to one basis. Certainly the frontier of the human spirit is as real as what historians call the frontier process, which is largely an attitude, a way of looking at things that lie ahead. Although ultimately metaphysical, the human frontier has some definite live and practical results and shares characteristics in common with all frontiers, particularly isola-

tion from other men and uncertainty of direction.

Consider, for example, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Twain's most adventurous and successful journey into the unknown. The frontier in the highest level of meaning of the book is the human bond between Huck and Jim in an America, or at least a Southern America, that at the time was doing everything it could to dehumanize such a relationship. When Huck, a boy from a slave state, becomes the companion and protector of a runaway slave, he is entering the unknown every bit as much as the great explorers who penetrated the awesome physical wildernesses.

Because of its isolation, the human frontier is fraught with spiritual peril and in some cases physical danger from those who would keep the status quo. So there is always the temptation to turn back. The landscape of middle-class American suburbs is littered with the bones of those who made the trip, those who turned back, and those who never began the adventure at all.

Huckleberry Finn is not the only book in which Twain explored the human unknown, but because it is the best known of his works, it is a useful book with which to look at the broad idea of a frontier of human possibility. A comparison of the relationship of Huck and Jim to the physical frontier described by Webb helps to elucidate the human frontier. The human frontier cannot be "wrapped up

in a neat definition like a word whose growth has ceased" any more than can the physical frontier. The relationship between Huck and Jim is something that continually changes, undergoing subtle and not so subtle shifts of meaning. Huck feels at different times many different emotions toward Jim; and surprisingly--for that time in American literature--Jim has a range of feelings for Huck. The scope of Jim's emotions is less than Huck's, true, but nevertheless the slave is drawn as a character with more than one manner of feeling. Jim's exploration of the wilderness of natural and benign human feeling for a white boy is remarkable; for in literature black feelings toward white men have traditionally been stereotypes too. It is easy, if one isn't careful, to think that all the discovery is by Huck.

The human frontier also fits Webb's description of a "moving frontier," that is to say one in which "a civilized people are advancing into a wilderness, an unsettled area or one sparsely populated by primitive people." Huck's realization of Jim as a human being is just such a move into the wilderness, or, more precisely, against it. The society around Huck forbids the sort of relationship he has with Jim. Human pacts of that kind, even though unspoken and not fully realized by the people involved, are in violation of law, are a step into forbidden territory. By a wonderful irony, Huck and Jim are also a "civilized people."



By superficial measurement they are merely a young, incorrigible ruffian and an illiterate, inarticulate slave. Yet if depth of human understanding and compassion are marks of civilization, the two runaways are highly civilized.

There are two ways of looking at the human area into which Huck and Jim advance; neither excludes the other, and almost by necessity they must be taken together. One view is that Jim and Huck are exploring and gradually coming to know a completely uninhabited wilderness as their understanding of each other grows. This approach, however, falls short of a consideration of the other characters in the novel. A second view is that Jim and Huck enter a region inhabited by savages. The Duke and the King, bounders willing to sell out Jim and Huck, become the primitives. They exhibit no sympathy for a true civilization's requirements of human understanding. It would not be accurate to say they are unaware of them, though, for they turn trust to their own mean ends--at the expense of Huck and Jim and anyone else they can snare. Twain also writes of primitives off the river, for example the feuding Grangerfords and Shepherdsons and finally one of his best known characters, Tom Sawyer.

Webb's sense of awe at the physical frontier which once spread across the whole of North America is applicable to Twain's frontier of human possibility also. In considering

the magnitude of the explorations of Huck and Jim, one senses, as did Webb, a "new silence and immensity, too sensitive to be broken by a single individual or by any number then available." The spiritual voyage of Huck and Jim was enormous, even by twentieth century standards, let alone those of Twain's nineteenth. And the history of the past one hundred years would suggest that spiritual pioneers have not been abundant enough to tame an emotional wilderness which is at best unthinking and at worse savage.

No American writer until Twain had realistically or successfully considered the existence of a distinctly American frontier of human possibility. Certainly other writers had made attempts, but in one way or another they failed. A representative sampling will highlight some reasons.

Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the transcendentalists looked at human possibility's edge, mostly in an abstract and philosophical way, Thoreau with more success than the others. In The Frontier in American Literature, Lucy Hazard, describing the transcendentalists, reveals unwittingly what Twain's human frontier in part is:

The spirit of the frontier is not merely the spirit that leads the pioneer to prefer the wilderness to the settlements, the chance of wealth to the assurance of comfort, "the lure that beckons in the bright eyes of danger" to the probability of dying peacefully in his bed at a ripe old age. The spirit of the frontier is the spirit of be-

ginning again, of building anew, of creating a reality after the pattern of one's dream. New England was born in a passion of spiritual pioneering which almost obscured the aspects of the actual frontier....This spirit, far more than the thrilling stories of cowboys and Indians, constitutes the significance of the frontier in American literature.<sup>5</sup>

Miss Hazard goes on to discuss an underlying materialism in the transcendentalists, Thoreau excepted. Ideals materially based and a spirit in keeping with Manifest Destiny account, I think, for the failure of the transcendentalists to adequately explore the frontier of human possibility.

After such incisive comment about the spiritual frontier, Miss Hazard fails to see it in Twain's work. She acknowledges that "in the career of Mark Twain we have the recapitulation of the successive stages of American pioneering,"<sup>6</sup> but she only considers Twain in terms of the geographic frontier.

The early life of Mark Twain is, then, one conditioned by the environment of regional pioneering. This life passes by imperceptible degrees into that of industrial pioneering.<sup>7</sup>

How unfortunate that Miss Hazard did not see that there was another passing by Twain into the spiritual frontier. But Huckleberry Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson and the other works in which Twain explored a heretofore hidden humanity are

not part of her study.

Abraham Lincoln, by anyone's account a man of vision, acknowledged the existence of a human frontier and gave it more exposure than any other American. But Lincoln's admission, in his Emancipation Proclamation and other public utterances, no matter how well-motivated, was part of a political issue, not a literary one. By its nature, politics, however well-intended, does not lead to the essence of feeling and truth of the novel. To be successful, politics must ultimately please, and what pleases is not always, or even frequently, the truth.

In an essay on the importance of the black man to American culture, novelist and critic Ralph Ellison points out that Lincoln once considered plans for moving Negroes out of America. In his judgement of Lincoln, Ellison provides insight into why politics is not the surest way to the human frontier.

In spite of his unquestioned greatness, Abraham Lincoln was a man of his times and limited by some of the less worthy thinking of his times. This is demonstrated both by his reliance upon the concept of race in his analysis of the American dilemma and by his involvement in a plan of purging the nation of blacks as a means of healing the badly shattered ideals of democratic federalism. Although benign, his motive was no less a product of fantasy. It envisaged an attempt to relieve an inevitable suffering that marked the growing pains of the youthful body politic by an operation which would have amounted to the severing of a healthy and

indispensable member.<sup>8</sup>

Ellison's appraisal shows that political solutions to human issues can leave rationalism and humanity behind, no matter how humane the leader.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and the abolitionists worked on the fringes of the human frontier, too, but their way of looking at it was polemic. There is no pejorative intent in suggesting that the abolitionists molded their thoughts for an intellectual and physical assault against a social system, for certainly in their case the motives were moral and justifiable. A good many sound American thinkers--including Thoreau--thought even the excesses of the abolitionists proper. However justified, though, excursions on the human frontier for reasons of espousing a cause can reduce humans to things, examples to hold up for argument's sake.

In his dispassionate autobiography, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Douglass touches on the necessity for twisting the human shape in the name of a cause, noting the dilemma for the man whose humanity is being used. In his early speeches for the abolitionist cause, he says a difference arose between what the abolitionist leaders wanted him to say and what he felt he should say. Douglass writes that he was urged only to narrate facts about his enslave-

ment when

It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs--I felt like denouncing them. I could not always curb my moral indignation for the perpetrators of slaveholding villany long enough for a circumstantial statement of the facts which I felt sure everybody must know. Besides, I was growing and needed room. "People won't believe you ever were a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way," said friend Foster. "Be yourself," said Collins, "and tell your story." "Better have a little of the plantation speech than not," was said to me; "it is not best that you seem too learned." These excellent friends were actuated by the best of motives and were not altogether wrong in their advice, and still I must speak just the word that seemed to me the word to be spoken by me.<sup>9</sup>

In the living, physical world, as Douglass demonstrates, part of human feeling must be subjugated for a moral movement. It can be argued, of course, that subjugation is only temporary and restraint now will eventually mean greater freedom, but the fact of the restraint remains. It does little good, for instance, to tell a human being to withhold himself now because of long term advantage. The chances are he will answer with a sure logic that when later arrives, he will be either too old to enjoy it, or dead. The novelist, however, is under no restraints, for if he is a good writer, any cause he may serve is incidental to his main purpose of stating the clearest and profoundest truth he is capable of imagining. The novelist, then, can show people as they are

and not how the polemicists--again no unpleasant connotation intended--would have them pose. The felt emotions of Huck and Jim--imaginative creations though they are--have a vivid reality which is lacking in the staged feelings and mannerisms urged upon the "real life" Frederick Douglass.

The biggest failure of all the early American writers who ventured into the actual and human frontier was James Fenimore Cooper. As in Twain's work, the geographic frontier, in name, was Cooper's literary setting, but there similarity ends. Cooper envisioned a frontier still pristine wilderness. Twain's frontier was partially settled. Cooper's best known works, the Leatherstocking Tales, are about a frontiersman who spends his life in the forest fighting Indians and helping whites who come from "the settlements." Whenever the area he is in becomes too crowded, he moves on.

In The Frontier Mind, Arthur K. Moore points out a possible cause for Cooper's failure to consider the frontier, either physical or spiritual, in realistic terms:

The creator of Leatherstocking may never have grasped the total meaning of his man, but it is safe to assert that he at no time intended him as a realistic portrayal of the frontiersman. Admittedly, Cooper had little firsthand knowledge of life in the backwoods, but he could not have used real frontier characters in romance had he known them well. It is extremely doubtful, moreover, that the ante bellum public would have tolerated

the grim and brutal West in fiction of any sort.... He erected Leatherstocking on the theoretical foundation sustaining all noble savages but then proceeded to suspend him between the city and the forest.... Under the circumstances, Cooper could not establish control over his most interesting character, who was at once progressive and regressive, superior to civilized man and yet inferior, anarchic but uncommonly orderly in behavior.<sup>10</sup>

Cooper adopts an uncompromising and illogical dual view of man and nature. Leatherstocking is progressive because he has rejected the iniquities of the settlements for the purity of nature. But he is regressive because he is of low caste. His birth has a bearing on his station, but undoubtedly what makes him forever of low class is the wilderness life. People born to high social place do not choose to leave behind civilization for the wilderness. Cooper's view of Leatherstocking is frankly admirable, but he is not willing to give his admirable--if impossible--creation an important place in the world. And Cooper does not say that the civilized world is unimportant. If it were, Leatherstocking's social status would not matter. But for Cooper, social status matters; very much.

Cooper added to the difficulties of later passage into the human frontier by his insistence on social class distinctions. In Virgin Land, an able discussion of "The American West as Symbol and Myth," Henry Nash Smith considers the class issue, centering on the inferior social status of



Leatherstocking, who began life as a servant, is illiterate, and speaks dialect. The implication is that Leatherstocking cannot have a relationship of equality with characters of his morality because they are of higher class. Smith explores this suggestion in a discussion of Leatherstocking's love for Mabel, daughter of an Army sergeant, in The Pathfinder. Cooper, Smith writes, says that Mabel is of a class no significant degree above Leatherstocking, but because of an association with an officer's widow, she has a refinement that belies her station.<sup>11</sup> But, says Smith:

Ironically enough, the novelist's care in refining Mabel creates a fresh problem for him. The modifications of her character that qualify her for the role of heroine raise her somewhat above the actual range of Leatherstocking's manners and tastes.<sup>12</sup>

After debating whether he, a "poor ignorant woodsman," is good enough for Mabel, Leatherstocking finally proposes and, says Smith:

...when the actual moment of Leatherstocking's proposal arrives, Mabel's superior refinement is so unmistakable that it decides the issue. One of Cooper's very few valid comic inventions causes her, in her confusion, to use a more and more involved rhetoric that Leatherstocking cannot follow at all. He has to resort to his characteristic query, "Anan?" The match is quite unsuitable and in the end Leatherstocking has the exquisite masochistic pleasure of giving

his blessing to her union with Jasper Western, the young, handsome and worthy Great Lakes sailor.<sup>13</sup>

This is just one example of several that Smith cites to show Cooper's insistence on an order of classes, but it is sufficient to demonstrate the novelist's literary method.

If literature exerts any cultural influence, Cooper's constant position that human relationships are governed by social class alignments would reinforce a class consciousness in America. Stress on class was responsible for the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of the type of relationship forged by Huck and Jim. The slave class did not relate to the free, white class, even if the free white was a juvenile delinquent such as Huck. Part of the reason the relationship of Jim and Huck seems such an accomplishment, then, both for them to enter into and for Twain to perceive, is because they are able to bridge that wide separation of class as well as race. Cooper, a writer whose fame came from a supposedly classless place--the frontier--did nothing to remove the boundaries between the classes.

The key to understanding Cooper, which Arthur Moore suggests, is that Cooper wrote romances, of which Nathaniel Hawthorne once said:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and

material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation.<sup>14</sup>

Romances generally, and Cooper's frontier romances specifically, swindle their readers. While they take liberties with the truth, supposedly in allegiance to a higher truth, they do not suggest their purpose to their readers. Romance narratives are frequently presented as if they are Novels--to use Hawthorne's distinctions--and so there is no reason to suspect that Cooper does not think he is giving us the true details of life on the frontier, as well as a philosophical position, which, by the way, Moore suggests is illegitimate:

Through the ambiguous Leatherstocking, Cooper unwittingly exposed the logical defects of eighteenth-century primitivism, which fundamentally is not a philosophical system but an ancient myth appareled in superficially rational weeds. The myth of man in the garden shatters under close examination but serves humanity none the less well on that account; in the child of nature, a complex structure of symbols, discrete kinds of desiring are objectified and in some part satisfied.<sup>15</sup>

Cooper did not intend his Leatherstocking to be a psycholo-

gical outlet for some sort of wilderness need of urban readers. He offered a Rousseauvian philosophy that natural man, man living in the wilderness, the noble savage, is innately pure and will remain that way unless tainted by civilization.

Mark Twain was not above an occasional foray into the brambles of literary criticism, and one of his targets was Cooper. In a hilarious essay, "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," Twain accuses Cooper of poverty of invention and gross inaccuracies of observation.

Cooper's gift in the way of invention was not a rich endowment; but such as it was he liked to work it, he was pleased with the effects, and indeed he did some quite sweet things with it. In his little box of stage-properties he kept six or eight cunning devices, tricks, artifices for his savages and woodsmen to deceive and circumvent each other with, and he was never so happy as when he was working these innocent things and seeing them go. A favorite one was to make a moccasined person tread in the tracks of the moccasined enemy, and thus hide his own trail. Cooper wore out barrels and barrels of moccasins in working that trick. Another stage-property that he pulled out of his box pretty frequently was his broken twig. He prized his broken twig above all the rest of his effects, and worked it the hardest. It is a restful chapter in any book of his when somebody doesn't step on a dry twig and alarm all the reds and whites for two hundred yards around. Every time a Cooper person is in peril, and absolute silence is worth four dollars a minute, he is sure to step on a dry twig. There may be a hundred handier things to step on, but that wouldn't satisfy Cooper. Cooper requires him to turn out and find a dry twig; and if he can't do it, go and borrow one. In fact, the Leatherstocking series ought to have

been called the Broken Twig Series.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the humor, Twain's accusations are serious and useful because they tell something about what he considered important and necessary to good writing: naturalness and fictional reality.

Twain says that had Cooper been a better observer his inventiveness might have worked more rationally.

Cooper's profoundest creations in the way of "situations" suffer noticeably from the absence of the observer's protecting gift. Cooper's eye was splendidly inaccurate. Cooper seldom saw anything correctly....Of course a man who cannot see the commonest little every day matters accurately is working at a disadvantage when he is constructing a "situation."<sup>17</sup>

Twain further charges Cooper with a failure in characterization by permitting the Deerslayer to "talk the showiest kind of book-talk sometimes, and at other times the basest of base dialects."<sup>18</sup> After citing examples of what he considers Cooper's poor use of the right word to express precisely what he is trying to say, Twain offers a summary judgement on The Deerslayer:

A work of art? It has no invention; it has no order, system, sequence, or result; it has no life-likeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality; its characters are confusedly drawn,

and by their acts and words they prove that they are not the sort of people the author claims they are; its humor is pathetic; its pathos is funny; its conversations are--oh! indescribable; its love-scenes odious; its English a crime against the language.<sup>19</sup>

Cooper presented neither the physical realities or the frontier truthfully--the Indians, not the mythical Leatherstockings won most of the time, scholars are quick to point out--nor human relationships truthfully--Leatherstocking is drawn as an almost holy presence rather than one who feels as do mortals. Cooper's works enjoyed a large popularity, but it is questionable whether they were a service to American culture. That the attitudes expressed in Cooper's books still are part of many popular conceptions of the frontier is at once an example of their efficacy and their disservice. As some of the earliest widely read frontier fiction, the Leatherstocking Tales contributed substantially to the blurring of frontier illusions and realities and, consequently, to what is probably a general American tendency to romanticize the past. Such a tendency abets a view that all of the past was always for the good. And that way of looking at the past leads to a congratulatory and myopic vision of the present morality.

Being aware of Cooper's failure in describing either the physical or the human frontier realistically, Twain had a faulty model at hand, and if he had any initial inclin-

ations toward the same thing, could avoid it. That he recognized the inaccuracies of physical description was due to his own intense observations of two widely varied American frontiers, the life on and along the shores of the Mississippi, described in Life on the Mississippi, and the life of the Wild West, pictured colorfully in Roughing It. In time he could come to see some of the illusions of actual frontier character, yet still admire what frontiersmen were supposed to be and extend in his fiction frontier principles to the human relationships most forbidden.

The creation of a frontier of human possibility was an important development in American fiction. Novelist and critic Ralph Ellison touches on the significance in a discussion of Huck Finn's decision to steal Jim back from slavery and Huck's disclosure of his plans to Tom Sawyer at the Phelps place.

We have arrived at a key point of the novel and by an ironic reversal, of American fiction, a pivotal moment announcing a change in direction in the plot, a reversal as well as a recognition scene (like that in which Oedipus discovers his true identity) wherein a new definition of necessity is being formulated. Huck Finn has struggled with the problem posed by the clash between property rights and human rights, between what the community considered to be the proper attitude toward an escaped slave and his knowledge of Jim's humanity, gained through their adventures as fugitives together.<sup>20</sup>

Ellison senses that at least Twain was trying to cope with something other American writers had passed by, for whatever their reasons.

Twentieth century American writer Langston Hughes also recognizes that Twain was doing something special. In an essay on Pudd'nhead Wilson, he says:

Mark Twain, in his presentation of Negroes as human beings, stands head and shoulders above the other Southern writers of his time, even such distinguished ones as Joel Chandler Harris, F. Hopkins Smith, and Thomas Nelson Page. It was a period when most writers who included Negro characters in their work at all, were given to presenting the slave as ignorant and happy, the freed men of color as ignorant and miserable, and all Negroes as either comic servants on the one hand or dangerous brutes on the other. That Mark Twain's characters in Pudd'nhead Wilson fall into none of these categories is a tribute to his discernment. And that he makes them neither heroes nor villains is a tribute to his understanding of human character.<sup>21</sup>

So far I have used the terms human frontier, spiritual frontier and frontier of human possibility interchangeably. The first two are merely short forms for the third, always with the word "possibility" implied if not stated. I do not mean that the spiritual frontier Twain created necessarily was ever an actual part of American life; so always the stress on possibility. Yet possibility does not preclude actual existence; it suggests something attainable.

Some of the difficulty in defining anything about Twain



is expressed by Henry Nash Smith in Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer. In attempting to explain a concept he calls Twain's "vernacular perspective," a view of life characterized by use of the vernacular, Smith offers an insight which touches on what I mean by a frontier of human possibility, but also explains why the term is elusive; because

Mark Twain himself never made fully articulate what he was trying to affirm; any explicit statement would falsify his presentational mode of thought. Provisionally, however, one might say that his highest good was freedom from stereotyped attitudes. In a society encumbered by a traditional culture that had hardened into a set of conventions having little relations to the actual experience of its members, he fell back on the integrity of the individual, the capacity to face any situation flexibly and with a minimum of preconceptions.<sup>22</sup>

Individual integrity, ingenuity in approaching problems and lack of preconceptions are all characteristics frontiersmen would apply to themselves and certain historians would grant them, though a clear view of frontier realities indicates otherwise most of the time. However, Twain could still recognize the inherent morality of the myth. The morality, without the hypocrisy, was part of his new and important frontier. He saw the crucial difference between what Americans said they believed and how they actually behaved. His frontier of human possibility reveals the

gap, and there are critics, literary and social, among us today who would argue passionately that his message, though still timely, has gone largely unheeded.

There are two major frontier theses on Mark Twain's work. Van Wyck Brooks set out the idea that the frontier stifled Twain from becoming a truly great artist, that there were urges deep within him that pulled toward something other than what he became. Because of the restraining influences of frontier America, says Brooks in The Ordeal of Mark Twain, he became bitter. Bernard DeVoto, on the other hand, furiously replies to Brooks that "the Missouri in which the infant's (Twain's) eyes opened was frontier, and that it was frontier is the whole truth about the books of Mark Twain."<sup>23</sup> DeVoto's assessment is accurate, but not in the way he states in Mark Twain's America. DeVoto sees Twain as a spokesman for the frontier, but despite excellent historical credentials, DeVoto's vision of frontier reality embraces the physical frontier qualities which were mostly chimeras. At the risk of sounding foolishly repetitious I say again this constant theme: Twain's books were set on physical frontiers possessing an external reality, but on their ultimate level his frontiers were the great human interior; his books were the produce of what the geographical frontier was not.

All of this is not to say that the geographical fron-

tier was without effect other than a convenient place for novels to happen. Without the physical frontier there would be nothing with which to contrast the frontier of human possibility. Examples for contrast are abundant, however, when one considers, as Lucy Hazard has, that

Throughout Mark Twain's writings the heroic myth of the frontier is treated with cynical contempt. His frontier towns are not democratic communities of fraternity and equality, but crude squalid villages. His frontier characters are desperadoes or fools.<sup>24</sup>

Miss Hazard's observation, by extension, also raises the possibility that before the frontier of human possibility could be created, the false frontier had to be destroyed. From its rubble could grow the new frontier which could finally keep the avowed promise of the old.

I have suggested earlier at some length distinctions between frontier illusion and reality in the Far West, which may seem remote from the work of Mark Twain because although he did have experience there, most of his books were set on frontiers other than the one West of the Mississippi. I chose the Far West to illustrate my point primarily because it is the best known frontier. The important mythical qualities which Americans have dreamed of mostly in the Far West are, however, associated with all frontiersmen, whatever their region.

Myths are generally beyond possibility; that, after all, is one of the characteristics which makes them myths. Twain dug below the surface of myth much as the miners he wrote about in Roughing It dug into the earth in search of wealth. Underlying the impossible myths, Twain found a vein of spiritual possibilities. His finest characters and attitudes and philosophies are an American possibility and so not myths.

Twain's people use the same means the American frontiersmen directed toward strictly material ends. On the frontier, ambition and determination in the quest for a better life led to standards of judging forests in board feet, rivers in trade carried, mountains in gold and silver mined and grasslands in acres farmed. Ambition and determination; these are the very traits Twain's people apply to the human relationship, and their labors yield rich spiritual results. If the real occupants of the physical frontier, those residents whose lives can be verified by documents on file in county courthouses, who owned land in fee simple and had a deed to prove it, and to whose death a cold, gray granite marker or a stained glass window in a country church attests; if they never lived up to the ideals they professed, there were others who did: the people in Mark Twain's books.

## CHAPTER III

### TWAIN SEES THE REAL FRONTIER

Mark Twain spent considerable time on the actual frontier. An examination of frontier values in his work must take into account the real experience, for in it are the beginnings of his discovery and exploration of the human frontier. Twain saw first hand two large American frontiers readily recognizable as such: the far western mining country of Nevada and California, and the Mississippi River. The westward migration of his family from Virginia to Hannibal, Missouri and his boyhood there were part of the frontier experience too. Biographer Delancy Ferguson has suggested how important in so many intangible ways the boyhood was.

For young Sam, however, the move to Hannibal brought no repinings. For an adventurous, imaginative boy it was heaven and Utopia combined, with an occasional dash of hell to give it flavor. Upstream, downstream, and behind the village were bluffs and hills, tracts of unbroken prairie and miles of virgin woodland. Fragments of the original forest still stood even within the village limits. It was a tamed and expurgated wilderness, to be sure; the Indians were gone; the larger beasts of prey were gone, and the game was going as fast as guns could slaughter it, but there was still so much left--wild turkeys, partridges, prairie chickens, quail, passenger pigeons, coons, possums and squirrels--that nobody could visualize a time when these too would go.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever the importance of his youthful experience, however, the frontier influence of Hannibal is not as specific in his work as the experiences of Nevada or the realization of his young dream to go steamboating on the Mississippi River he grew up beside. Despite a wealth of scholarly interpretation about the effect of Twain's youth on his later work, the interpreters do not have Mark Twain's planned and published visions of it as they do for the Nevada and Steamboat periods. One may argue quite correctly that Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn spring from Twain's remembrance of his childhood, but the books are of different form than the description of western life in Roughing It, or life and steamboating on the river in Old Times on the Mississippi, the general title of a series of Atlantic Monthly articles later expanded and polish-

ed into Life on the Mississippi. The use of actual past experience on the frontier in Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn is indirect. Twain's actual experience, if those two books are indeed representative of it, is only the starting point or background for a story with imaginary characters. But in Roughing It and Life on the Mississippi Twain's actual experience is the story, and he is its main character. The difference of approach between the two types of work is the customary distinction between non-fictional use of real experience and transfiguration of actual events into fictive experience. But Twain uses enough fictional elements in his non-fiction to make this distinction only technical. What is conventionally considered non-fiction may be and probably should be read fictionally when Twain builds an intuitive and imaginative vision of his life from a framework of supposed fact, as he does in Roughing It and Life on the Mississippi.

To relate Twain's childhood experience on the frontier to his writing involves considerable conjecture without any way of determining accuracy, no matter how plausible the explanation appears. But the two books with Twain's vision of himself as the central figure provide definite and specific incidents which shed light on the frontier values and recurrent themes in his later work.

Because this is Mark Twain writing about himself and

presumably telling the essential if not always the literal truth, we know with more certainty than in his other work what he, Mark Twain, believes. This knowledge aids in making statements about the intention of his more creative work. From the experiences he had in the areas covered by Roughing It and Life on the Mississippi, Twain gathered within himself materials that would fuel his continuing literary work. Ferguson speaks of the importance of the two frontiers to Twain. Discussing the beginnings of the Nevada trip, he says:

Behind him lay nearly twenty-six years of experience. He had seen more of all varieties of raw and finished human nature than the average man of sheltered and sedentary pursuits encounters in a lifetime. Whatever Hannibal had failed to exhibit, the brief, sharp schooling of the river had supplied--all the types who furnished characters for his books, as well as the gamblers, pimps and prostitutes who infested the river boats but whom he omitted from the picture. So far as the creative part of his writing was concerned, the next five years in Nevada and California completed his equipment. Every character he ever wrote about, including Joan of Arc, was either drawn from the intensive experience of his first thirty years or conceived in its spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Both the Far West of the Nevada mining boom and the Mississippi of the steamboating era had a number of vivid and unmistakable characteristics associated with the frontier of either popular conception or the more staid scholarly viewpoint. The river and the mining country also



shared in large measure two qualities indispensable to the frontier concept: a constant sense of physical danger, or at the least, hardship, and the necessity to overcome prospective as well as actual perils. Twain's knowledge of human conduct come in part from observing men who either invited danger or acted to avoid it.

In the summer of 1861, Mark Twain--who did not have that pen name yet, and was called by his given name, Samuel Clemens--left Missouri with his brother Orion for the Territory of Nevada, then in the grip of silver mining fever. The cause of the trip was political. Orion, a converted Unionist and Abolitionist, had backed Abraham Lincoln in the election campaign of 1860.<sup>3</sup> As patronage for Orion's support, Lincoln's Attorney General, Edward Bates, appointed Orion secretary of the Nevada Territory. Twain writes in Roughing It that Orion offered him a job as his private secretary, but Ferguson challenges the assertion. Twain had been briefly associated with a Confederate military unit and, says Ferguson:

Past question, Orion wanted to stop his brother's dallying with the Southern cause, but the statement in Roughing It that Orion offered Sam the position of private secretary is surely literary embroidery. Both brothers must have known that the government appropriations carried no funds for such an appointment. Most likely the chief appeal was to Sam's spirit of adventure.<sup>4</sup>

What began as a brief interlude for Twain became a major segment of his life. From Nevada he went on to California and Hawaii. He explains in the opening of Roughing It:

I only proposed to stay in Nevada three months--I had no thought of staying longer than that. I meant to see all I could that was new and strange, and then hurry home to business. I little thought that I would not see the end of that three-month pleasure excursion for six or seven uncommonly long years!<sup>5</sup>

The Western stay was actually five and a half years. Twain's inattention to that kind of unimportant detail indicates that his concern with experience was impressionistic rather than photographic. The difference between the exclusive and inclusive methods can be shown by referring to two Victorian English writers, Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope. Dickens wrote brilliant abstracts of English life, choosing the highlights which would best suit his purpose. Trollope faithfully used all the detail. While Trollope's work is valuable as information, it is pedestrian. The work of Dickens, on the other hand, is intense and inspired and says something about the human spirit which Trollope misses.

In the Nevada of Roughing It, the physical dangers of the frontier are several and arise from numerous sources, but for the purpose here an examination of two broad categories is sufficient: the people and the physical world;

that is to say two types of nature, human and physical. The two are almost invariably intricately linked by Twain either knowingly or unconsciously, both in his direct experience narratives and in his imaginative creations.

Twain shows his sensitivity to and appreciation of the strength of the physical world in an episode in which he and two companions, returning to Carson City from the Humboldt mining area, are lost in a snowstorm. When they finally decide they can make no further progress because they do not know in which direction to travel, the three men agree that a campfire is necessary for their survival. Having no matches, they decide to try to start the fire with their pistols, and the result is one of the funniest passages in the book.

Not a man in the party had ever tried to do such a thing before, but not a man in the party doubted it could be done, and without any trouble--because every man in the party had read about it in books many a time and had naturally come to believe it with trusting simplicity, just as he had long ago accepted and believed that other common book-fraud about Indians and lost hunters making a fire by rubbing two dry sticks together.

We huddled together on our knees in the deep snow, and the horses put their noses together and bowed their patient heads over us; and while the feathery flakes eddied down and turned us into a group of white statuary, we proceeded with the momentous experiment. We broke twigs from a sage-bush and piled them on a little cleared place in the shelter of our bodies. In the course of ten or fifteen min-

utes all was ready, and then, while conversation ceased and our pulses beat low with anxious suspense, Ollendorf applied his revolver, pulled the trigger and blew the pile clear out of the country! It was the flattest failure that ever was.<sup>6</sup>

The fire building failure, both with pistol and later with rubbed sticks, is the least of the party's trouble. Twain says it was his duty to hold the horses, but he became so absorbed in the fire building efforts that he unconsciously dropped the reins, and the animals wandered off. In the falling snow there was no hoofbeat or print, so it was useless to attempt tracking.

One by one the men regret their past lives. One throws away a bottle of whiskey and vows never to touch another drop whether he survives the snowstorm or not. The second companion throws away his cards. Twain, the narrator, tosses out his pipe, and with mock heroism tells his readers "the battle for life was done." There is a passage of time in which Twain does not say so precisely but implies that the travelers slept. Then, on awakening,

I rose up, and there in the gray dawn, not fifteen steps from us, were the frame buildings of a stage-station, and under a shed stood our still saddled and bridled horses!<sup>7</sup>

After breakfast, Twain says, "the zest for life soon came

back." He regrets having thrown away his pipe and sneaks off to find it, feeling ashamed that he should weaken with returning comfort.

I discovered it after a considerable search, and crept away to hide myself and enjoy it. I remained behind the barn a good while asking myself how I would feel if my braver, stronger, truer comrades should catch me in my degradation. At last I lit the pipe, and no human being can feel meaner and baser than I did then. I was ashamed of being in my own pitiful company. Still dreading discovery, I felt that perhaps the further side of the barn would be somewhat safer, and so I turned the corner. As I turned the one corner, smoking, Ollendorf turned the other with his bottle to his lips and between us sat unconscious Ballou deep in a game of "solitaire" with the old greasy cards!<sup>8</sup>

A curious mixture of frontier attitudes based on cynicism and warmth is present in the snowstorm description. First, the element of physical danger is evident. Despite Twain's humorous treatment of the incident, the humor comes after the fact. There is no jocularitv among the men at the time because clearly they do feel and indeed are in danger of freezing to death. Only in retrospect can they perceive their folly.

The myth of the frontiersman as woodsman is shattered convincingly with the recollection of the fire building. By stressing that all three men think they possess the necessary skill, the narrator calls special attention to the fail-

ure. Behind the myth of the frontiersman as woodsman is the further frontier belief that nature should be and can be overcome. The narrator demonstrates the folly of this belief by showing what fools nature makes of the men. Twain is already revealing his refusal to accept a stereotype; similar rebellion is a force in his fiction.

But despite his realization of the falseness of the stereotyped frontier beliefs, Twain is not hostile to the men, himself of course included. One laughs with them as much as at them. Fools they may be, but they are losers against which the powerful forces of nature and their own lack of skill are working. Twain liked losers, in the modern sense of the word, losers as outcasts with senses of morality and in certain cases outrage. Had he not, he could not have written his greatest books about them. The losers in the snowstorm have a characteristic--a refusal to be dominated, in this case by nature--that Twain would give to his later travelers on the human frontier. Those losers--Huck Finn, Pudd'nhead Wilson, Roxy the slave--also resist dominance, not natural but social.

Human violence is one of the threads that runs through almost all of Twain's fiction, and a developing attitude toward it surfaces in his accounts of desperadoes. His awareness of the lawless begins on the stagecoach trip to Nevada. Twain says that a number of men of dubious back-

ground worked for the stage line as handymen and hostlers around the stations and that division agents might have to back up their instructions "with a navy six-shooter."<sup>9</sup> In Chapter VII of Volume II of Roughing It, entitled "Six-Fingered Pete and the Other Killers," Twain, with some exaggeration, shows the importance of physical violence to frontiersmen. At the beginning of the chapter he says:

The first twenty-six graves in the Virginia cemetery were occupied by murdered men. So everybody said, so everybody believed, and so they will always say and believe. The reason why there was so much slaughtering done, was, that in a new mining district the rough element predominates, and a person is not respected until he has "killed his man." That was the very expression used.<sup>10</sup>

By using the sentence "So everybody said...believe" Twain, of course, indicates that the reader probably shouldn't believe what he is being told. Twain also indicates by use of that sentence that the framework of "fact" for the rest of the chapter is suspect too. But whether he is writing literal truth is not really the important matter. He believes he is writing true to the spirit of the way things were in Virginia City; and the spirit of the place, he says implicitly, was to place a premium on physical violence:

If an unknown individual arrived, they did not inquire if he was capable, honest, industrious, but--had he killed his man? If he had not, he

gravitated to his natural and proper position, that of a man of small consequence; if he had, the cordiality of his reception was graduated according to the number of his dead.<sup>11</sup>

Twain suggests that physical violence of the strongest kind is part of the social fabric:

In Nevada, for a time, the lawyer, the editor, the banker, the chief desperado, the chief gambler, and the saloon-keeper, occupied the same level in society, and it was the highest. The cheapest and easiest way to become an influential man and be looked up to by the community at large, was to stand behind a bar, wear a cluster-diamond pin, and sell whisky....It was a high favor when the chief saloon-keeper consented to serve in the legislature or the board of alderman. Youthful ambition hardly aspired so much to the honors of the law, or the army and navy as to the dignity of proprietorship in a saloon. To be a saloon-keeper and kill a man was to be illustrious.<sup>12</sup>

There seems to be a tone of sarcastic disdain in the passage, and the notion of Twain's disapproval of the physically violent aspect of frontier life is reinforced later in the chapter when he says that the murderers of the twenty-six men in the cemetery were never punished because juries acquitted them. He describes jury trials in Nevada as "sorrowful farces." Recalling one trial, Twain says that intelligent men, who had knowledge of the case, but who said they would consider it on the basis of testimony rather than their preconceived opinions, were not permitted to sit on the jury:



Ignoramuses alone could mete out unsullied justice. When the peremptory challenges were all exhausted, a jury of twelve men was impanelled--a jury who swore they had neither heard, read, talked about, nor expressed an opinion concerning a murder which the very cattle in the corrals, the Indians in the sage-brush, and the stones in the street were cognizant of! It was a jury composed of two desperadoes, two low-beer-house politicians, three bar-keepers, two ranchmen who could not read, and three dull, stupid, human donkeys! It actually came out afterward, that one of these latter thought that incest and arson were the same thing.<sup>13</sup>

In Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, Henry Nash Smith suggests a different perspective from which to view the chapter about desperadoes. Smith does not deal with it in terms of violence but rather from the standpoint of Twain's developing "vernacular perspective." He says Twain vacillates from it. Smith defines a vernacular figure as one who is against or removed from the dominant culture; he is uncultured by traditional standards. Vernacular characters reveal the falsity of accepted values, but without articulated philosophy, polemics or preaching. By the way they conduct their lives, they show the dominant culture for what it is. Smith believes that the snowstorm scene is a model of vernacular perspective. He says, however, that Twain's comments on the Virginia City roughs and the jury system represent a withdrawal from that perspective and realignment with the dominant culture. Smith says Twain identifies with the minister, the merchant, the mining super-

intendent and the quartz-mill owner who were denied seats on the jury, rather than the "ignoramuses" who composed it.

Up to a point, Smith is correct. Certainly the snowstorm scene does represent a vernacular viewpoint. Certainly in Virginia City Twain does not identify with the desperadoes or the ignorant. But it is inaccurate to suggest, as Smith does by the very nature of his definition of vernacular perspective, that Twain has identified with the dominant culture. Just the opposite is true because, as Twain recognized and shows early in the chapter, the dominant culture in Virginia City are the toughs, the gunmen and the brawlers.

By humorously recalling the conditions under which members of the marooned party give up and resume the supposed evils of whiskey, tobacco and cards, he scorns reformers and demonstrates why they must fail. He also punctures the commonly-held or dominant beliefs in frontier self-sufficiency. In the chapter about desperadoes and the jury he strips away the glamor associated with frontier badmen and shows the dominant element in society for what he believes it to be, ignorant and profane.

There is not, Smith to the contrary, an inconsistency of view between the snowstorm and the description of the jury procedure. Twain merely shows what he feels are the flaws of the most widely-held values wherever and however he finds them. The snowstorm and the jury are different

means to the same end and are early examples of Twain's lasting concern with inflated values. In a work as late as "The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg," the same issue occupies his attention.

Twain's observations about physical violence in Virginia City have meaning for the later works. In effect what he says in "Six-Fingered Pete and the Other Killers" is that violence is so deeply rooted in the life of Virginia City and the territory that it has become an immutable fact, almost as certain as the most unbreachable laws of nature. And he discovers that the violence is senseless. In Huckleberry Finn he shows the same ideas in the senseless feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons. There is no reason for them to fight and kill each other, yet fighting and killing have become a certainty. Twain's frontier experience with violence, coupled with a specific incident he reports in Life on the Mississippi, also can be linked to the scene in Huckleberry Finn when Col. Sherburn coolly kills Boggs, or the dueling episode in Pudd'nhead Wilson between Judge Driscoll and one of the Italian twins, Count Luigi.

Twain's recollections about frontier physical violence also constitute an implicit statement about American values. He suggests that nineteenth century American frontier violence wasn't as glamorous as the frontiersmen might have

wished everyone to think it, but the pioneers liked it, nevertheless. By extension, a general cultural inference can be made that people in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries who revere the frontier past also like human physical violence, at least vicariously. Proof of the contention is the stress on frontier violence in the popular culture.

Twain's perceptions about violence were not conceived vicariously. They came from first hand experiences, partially from his work as a newspaper reporter in Nevada and California frontier, but more so on the Mississippi River that occupied his body, mind and spirit through most of his life, and that he chronicled in Life on the Mississippi.

The book is an attempt to recapture his past, those days when he was learning to be a steamboat pilot. The first part of the book is mostly a repetition of a series of magazine pieces he wrote for The Atlantic. The second part of the work is a description of a more recent visit back to the river, after the heyday of steamboating. After a 21-year absence, he felt it necessary to return when he decided to expand the magazine articles into the longer book. Life on the Mississippi, from an artistic point of view, is open to much the same critical complaint that has been made about Charles Dickens' David Copperfield; that the early nostalgic but honest remembrances of his youth are superior to the

recollections of his later life; that the early part of the novel is more felt than the last, and hence more convincing. Twain's recollection of his cub piloting days has a life and force that reflect the youth's enthusiasm for his chosen vocation and growing awareness and knowledge of what was happening around him on the river. The youthful vibrance, naturally, is missing in the half of the book devoted to the return visit. While there are occasional instances of freshness, the second half has a dulling effect. It seems somehow as contrived as the first part appears natural. In comparison to the vigorous affirmation of the cub pilot's days, the return visit has a weary tone. The fatigue seems not so much to come from a heart made sore by what is gone from the river, but from an attempt to pad the first part into a much longer book. Despite the literary complaints against the second half, however, the book taken as a whole is a valuable document about the steamboat days, a colorful period of American frontier history. It has value too as a fascinating account of the staffing and operation of steamboats.

Twain's attitude toward violence was complex. While he could write with insight about the senselessness of it, he was not above a human enjoyment of it. A specific incident on the river points up the relish he could take in a violent act, in this instance to avenge a grievance.

From time to time Twain, the apprentice pilot of Horace Bixby, is loaned out to other river pilots, one of whom is a particularly obnoxious man named Brown. Pilots in the book generally seem to be hard to get along with, but Brown is especially difficult. On one trip when Twain is working for Brown, Twain's younger brother Henry yells up to the pilot house to stop at a downstream landing. Brown, who is deaf but always pretends he isn't, steams past the landing. The captain appears on deck and asks if Henry has relayed his order to stop. Brown says no. The captain asks Twain if he heard his brother give the message, and Twain says he did. Then, at Brown's order, Twain shuts up. Later, when Henry comes to the pilot house, Brown accuses him of not passing on the landing order. Henry protests that he did, and Brown calls him a liar. Twain intercedes and calls Brown a liar, and the pilot orders Henry from the pilot house:

It was pilot law, and must be obeyed. The boy started out, and even had his foot on the upper step outside the door, when Brown, with a sudden access of fury, picked up a ten-pound lump of coal and sprang after him; but I was between, with a heavy stool, and I hit Brown a good honest blow which stretched him out.

I had committed the crime of crimes--I had lifted my hand against a pilot on duty! I supposed I was booked for the penitentiary sure, and couldn't be booked any surer if I went on and squared my long account with this person while I had the chance; consequently I stuck to him and pounded him with my fist a considerable time. I do not know how long, the pleasure of

it probably made it seem longer than it really was; but in the end he struggled free and jumped up and sprang to the wheel: a very natural solicitude, for, all this time, here was this steamboat tearing down the river at the rate of fifteen miles an hour and nobody at the helm!<sup>14</sup>

Later, Twain, now fearful of his job and future on the river, is called to the captain's cabin. The captain admonishes the cub pilot about the seriousness of his offense, but then says he is "deuced glad of it" and urges him to thrash Brown again ashore.

Physical violence isn't the only kind Twain encounters on the river. There is a kind of mental violence in an exchange of words between Twain and Brown after the fight:

Perceiving at a glance that the Pennsylvania was in no danger, Brown gathered up the big spy-glass, war-club fashion, and ordered me out of the pilot house with more than Comanche bluster. But I was not afraid of him now; so, instead of going, I tarried, and criticized his grammar. I reformed his ferocious speeches for him and put them into good English, calling his attention to the advantage of pure English over the bastard dialect of the Pennsylvania collieries whence he was extracted. He could have done his part to admiration in a crossfire of mere vituperation, of course; but he was not equipped for this species of controversy; so he presently laid aside his glass and took the wheel, muttering and shaking his head; and I retired to the bench.<sup>15</sup>

Twain has switched from a physical violence in which he

meets Brown as an equal to a kind of mental bullying, by his own admission taking advantage of an opponent of lesser mental capability.

The mental violence between cub and pilot is not limited to instances where one man does not like the other. As much as he reveres Horace Bixby, Twain notes the many tongue-lashings he got for failure at something Bixby considered the responsibility of a would-be pilot. Bixby's verbal and mental harshness in an attempt to head off the greater physical violence of a possible steamboat catastrophe.

In the slave system about which Twain wrote, violence, physical and mental, is a crucial element. The threat of violence is what keeps the slave enslaved. Eventually the slave master transforms physical harm into another kind of violence; brutality to the human spirit. Twain could write about the effects of all forms of violence compassionately and with conviction because, as Life on the Mississippi makes clear, he saw the violent possibilities within himself.

There are, of course, other reasons why Life on the Mississippi is important to Twain's other work. The education that DeLancy Ferguson spoke of is underscored by Twain's own words in describing his experiences with pilots other than Bixby:



I am to this day profiting somewhat by that experience; for in that brief, sharp schooling, I got personally and familiarly acquainted with about all the different types of human nature that are to be found in fiction, biography or history. The fact is daily borne in upon me that the average shore-employment requires as much as forty years to equip a man with this sort of an education....When I find a well-drawn character in fiction or biography I generally take a warm personal interest in him, for the reason that I have known him before--met him on the river.<sup>16</sup>

Other commentators have shown the connections between certain specific episodes in Life on the Mississippi and Huckleberry Finn, so there is no need to go into them at length here. A couple, however, briefly illustrate how Twain transforms experience into fiction.

Early in Life on the Mississippi, Twain recalls a conversation with a steamboat night watchman who tearfully tells him he is the son of an English nobleman. The aged watchman says his father died and his mother dispossessed him. Before he found his place on a steamboat, he tells the neophyte, he underwent what Twain describes only as "incredible adventures" full of "personal villainies." Twain, however, is disillusioned because,

It was a sore plight to find out afterward that he was a low, vulgar, ignorant, sentimental, half-witted humbug, an untraveled native of the wilds of Illinois, who had absorbed wildcat literature and appropriated its marvels, until in

time he had woven odds and ends of the mess into this yarn, and then gone on telling it to fledglings like me, until he had come to believe it himself.<sup>17</sup>

One sees here how Twain could imagine the king and the duke, the two swindlers in Huckleberry Finn who tell Huck they are European royalty.

In chapter forty-one, entitled "Castles and Culture," Twain turns his attention to the myth of the superiority of Southern culture. At first he writes about Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and the "sham castle" that is the Capitol of the state. He goes on to say that Baton Rouge has no monopoly on phoney castles and quotes an advertisement for a Tennessee girls' school which boasts that its buildings resemble castles. The prospectus of the schools say also:

Believing the Southern to be the highest type of civilization this continent has seen, the young ladies are trained according to Southern ideas of delicacy, refinement, womanhood, religion and propriety....<sup>18</sup>

The footnote that follows the phrase "the highest type of civilization this continent has seen," is Twain's, and at the bottom of his page he provides several "illustrations of it thoughtlessly omitted by the advertiser." The illustrations are various newspaper accounts of savage shootings in several places in the South. The seeds of fiction are in

the articles; one of the killings resembles in some ways the shooting of Boggs by Col. Sherburn in Huckleberry Finn. The juxtaposition of the advertisement from the girl's school and the newspaper accounts of the killings is also another example of Twain's ability to see through myth and speak in opposition to stereotypes.

In one part of Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer, Henry Nash Smith recognizes and praises this outspoken honesty of Twain, but in another section of the critical study he faults him--incorrectly, I believe--for exercising it. Smith singles out this descriptive passage of shore life:

Behind other islands we found wretched little farms, and wretcheder little log cabins; there were crazy rail fences sticking a foot or two above the water, with one or two jeansclad, chills-racked, yellow-faced male miserables roosting on the top rail, elbows on knees, jaws in hands, grinding tobacco and discharging the results at floating chips through crevices left by lost teeth; while the rest of the family and the few farm animals were huddled together in an empty woodflat riding her moorings close at hand. In this flatboat the family would have to cook and eat and sleep for a lesser or greater number of days (or possibly weeks), until the river should fall two or three feet and let them get back to their log cabins and their chills again--chills being a merciful provision of an all-wise Providence to enable them to take exercise without exertion.<sup>19</sup>

Except at high water, the steamboats could not go behind the islands and be visible to the people he is describing.

So, he says, the floods were

...kindly dispensations, for they at least enabled the poor things to rise from the dead now and then, and look upon life when a steamboat went by. They appreciated the blessing too for they spread their mouths and eyes wide open and made the most of these occasions. Now what could these banished creatures find to do to keep from dying of the blues during the low-water season!<sup>20</sup>

Smith feels that Twain has weakened the effect he created in making himself a tenderfoot and comic butt in his early steamboating days by now adopting a tendency to "look down on people and incidents from a position of superiority."<sup>21</sup> Twain's use of the word "roosting" to describe the way the backwoods residents sit on their fence degrades people to an animal level. Smith feels it a loss that

...Mark Twain momentarily abandons the ironic perspective of a man looking back on his experiences as a callow youth. He has forgotten the cub pilot whose adventures he is supposedly relating....He not only adopts a conventionally derisive attitude toward representatives of an uncultivated and poverty-stricken lower class, but obliterates the fictive world that he had brought into being earlier in the narrative.<sup>22</sup>

Twain's tone is not derisive. At times in the passage that gives offense to Smith, he writes with a savage irony.

His references to the "kindly dispensations" of the floods and "exercise" caused by the chills might be considered what today is called black humor.

"Roost" does indeed reduce the fence sitters to the level of animals because that is the level to which they have been brought, but for some cultural reason, not because Mark Twain whimsically decided to describe them that way, as Smith implies. By use of the steamboat and the seldom seen riverside frontier backwoodsman, Twain is showing what will be a major theme in his work: that while the American technological materialistic dream glides across the frontier, human wreckage lies beside its path, largely unseen and ignored.

Near the end of Life on the Mississippi Twain again presents the belief that at the root of American society is materialism. He writes of the frontier advances based on whisky:

How solemn and beautiful is the thought that the earliest pioneer of civilization, the van-leader of civilization is never the steamboat, never the railroad, never the newspaper, never the Sabbath-school, never the missionary--but always whisky! Such is the case. Look history over; you will see. The missionary comes after the whisky--I mean he arrives after the whisky has arrived; next comes the poor immigrant, with ax and hoe and rifle; next, the gambler, the desperado, the highwayman, and all their kindred in sin of both sexes; and next, the smart chap who bought up

an old grant that covers all the land; this brings the lawyer tribe; the vigilante committee brings the undertaker. All these interests bring the newspaper; the newspaper starts up politics and a railroad; all hands turn to and build a church and a jail--and behold! Civilization is established forever in the land. But whisky, you see, was the van-leader in this beneficent work.<sup>23</sup>

Whisky represents the materialistic base for the advancing American society. Only after that foundation has been established is there a place for the American Ideal, represented by the steamboat, railroad, newspaper--which all have a materialistic as well as social purpose--Sunday school and missionary.

Secondary issues of materialism aside, however, the major contribution Twain's Life on the Mississippi makes toward understanding his later work is the view it offers of a pilot on the frontier, which includes not only the brawling and sometimes sordid life of the shore towns, but the river itself. By its continually shifting nature, the river is almost always uncharted and dangerous and consequently a constant physical frontier for the men who guide steamboats through it. Lives depend on a pilot's ability to read and forecast the fickle water and bottom. Knowledge of how Twain sees the interplay of pilot and river helps to understand what, by critical consensus, is his masterpiece, Huckleberry Finn, for the book has both its

concrete and symbolic origins in the swirling currents of the Mississippi. Later I will attempt to show how Twain, in Huckleberry Finn, brought his actual piloting and frontier experience to its ultimate artistic and fictional expression, creating his frontier of human possibility.

On the real frontier, Twain learned of the limitations on human possibility: social dominance, physical violence, materialism, stereotyping of individuals. The frontier is not, of course, the only place where such knowledge can be gained, but it is where Twain learned it, and the situations from which he drew it were uniquely frontier events. Recognizing that the limitations kept people from reaching their fullest humanity, Twain created characters who either lacked the dehumanizing restraints from the beginning or learned to remove them during the course of a work.

## CHAPTER IV

### FRONTIER VALUES IN TWO NOVELS

A frontier without frontiersmen is, quite naturally, of limited human interest. A major component in the frontier concept is how people react to their environment, which includes not only natural and geographic features but social and individual characteristics as well. The importance of the human reaction to environment is no less true for a spiritual frontier than it is for a geographical area. What follows is an effort to isolate some of Twain's characters and show how they act and react on the frontier of human possibility. The characters include Roxana, the slave, and Wilson in Pudd'nhead Wilson; and Hank Morgan in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

Pudd'nhead Wilson shows more readily visible frontier



aspects than A Connecticut Yankee. It takes place on an actual American frontier, along the Mississippi River during the first half of the nineteenth century. The frontier is not, of course, the kind popularly thought of, because its wilderness had been explored and settlers were well enough established to have erected permanent towns. The residents of Dawson's Landing, in 1830, "half a days' journey per steamboat, below St. Louis," lived in

...a snug little collection of modest one and two-story frame dwellings whose white-washed exteriors were almost concealed from sight by climbing tangles of rose vines, honeysuckles and morning-glories.<sup>1</sup>

In front of the town was the river, in back of it were hills, "inclosing the town in a half-moon curve, clothed with forests from foot to summit." While the town itself, founded 50 years before, appears tame, the land around it maintains some of its sense of frontier wildness. And if the houses seem unlike those one usually considers frontier dwellings, it is because the people of Dawson's Landing were in the frontier phase of settling in, establishing a self-sufficiency, divorcing themselves from the Eastern places they had left.

Roxy and Mrs. Percy Driscoll, the wife of Roxy's master, both give birth to baby boys on the same day. Within a week,

Mrs. Driscoll dies and Roxy assumes the care of the white child, Thomas a' Becket Driscoll, as well as her own, Valet de Chambre, shortened to Chambers, part white in blood and light in color. Later Percy Driscoll, in one of his periodic fits of meanness, threatens to sell his slaves to masters further south, and Roxy realizes that her son could grow up to be sold down the river where masters are more oppressive. To save him from the possibility of such a fate, she switches the babies in their cradles. Chambers is brought up as Tom and Tom as Chambers. The white boy lives with the slaves and adopts their language and demeanor. The Negro child is brought up with all the advantages his uncle, Judge York Leicester Driscoll, can give him after Percy Driscoll dies. The boy, petted and indulged in every whim, grows to be an odious, treacherous snob who kills his uncle for his money. Tom is finally brought to justice by David Wilson, a young lawyer who had come to town at about the time the boys were born and quickly had been given the name Pudd'nhead for what the town considered his eccentricities, one of which was taking fingerprints of all the townspeople he could. Fingerprints lead him to solve Judge Driscoll's murder, and in the process he discovers the exchange of the two boys.

Roxy and Wilson exhibit in different ways elements of rebellious character which frontier mythmakers ascribe to

the majority of frontiersmen, but which Twain demonstrates was the exception rather than the rule if Dawson's Landing is any gauge. Roxy and Wilson are the only two characters who maintain the most prized frontier attribute: individualism. The rest of the town acts and thinks collectively. Roxy and Wilson are shown in human terms, which Twain also recognized was a departure from a materialistic emphasis in frontier life. Materialism, a word sometimes used imprecisely, here means specifically a belief that the highest values lie with action which will bring material well being; it is marked by a concern with the physical aspect of things instead of and usually to the detriment of the spiritual or intellectual. Materialism might manifest itself as a total concern with money or the superfluous comforts and unnecessary items money can buy. Materialism underlies the trade in human flesh which Roxy struggles against in the only way she can.

One of the causes of frontier movements is a resistance to restraint. The first settlers arriving in America were fleeing the religious, economic or class restraints of Europe. And the westward migration of Americans followed the same pattern. The first frontiersmen left Virginia or New England because of cultural or economic restrictions. Their act of moving away represented a resistance to dominance. That they in turn might some day choose to

dominate does not alter the original reasons for their migration.

The central quality which makes Roxy a frontiersman of human conduct is her resistance to dominance. Because she is a slave she cannot be open about it; she must take whatever secret action she can. Her defiance of the accepted values of the community is the switch of the babies. Roxy then becomes a symbol of the moral strength normally associated with the frontier character. But although she has some symbolic use, Twain is careful to avoid making her a stick figure. She has both desirable and undesirable qualities, which gives her a humanity seldom allowed black characters in early American fiction. Her feelings just before she changes the babies show emotional depth:

Percy Driscoll slept well the night he saved his house-minions from going down the river, but no wink of sleep visited Roxy's eyes. A profound terror had taken possession of her. Her child could grow up and be sold down the river! The thought crazed her with horror. If she dozed and lost herself for a moment, the next moment she was on her feet flying to her child's cradle to see if it was still there. Then she would gather it to her heart and pour out her love upon it in a frenzy of kisses, moaning, crying and saying, "Dey sha'n't, oh, dey sha'n't--yo' po' mammy will kill you fust!"<sup>2</sup>

Roxy also possesses the frontiersman's skill for survival

in a wilderness. Her wilderness is human, and her craft is a subtle manipulation of the actions of anyone who would oppress her. She becomes winsome enough, for instance, after gaining her freedom to convince the crew of a steamboat on which she works to give her money when she falls on difficult times. This is a victory of no mean importance because she has succeeded in making someone care enough for her as an individual to act in sympathy with her.

In her love for her son, Roxy exhibits a frontier willingness to face danger and the unknown when, after she has gained her freedom, she permits Tom to sell her back into slavery to pay off some gambling debts. If he does not pay them, they will be revealed to Judge Driscoll, who will disinherit Tom. By this time, Roxy has told Tom that she is his mother and that he is technically black. As despicable as Tom is, Roxy pities her son. She says he may sell her to some gentle farmer in Kentucky. But he sells her instead down the river to an Arkansas cotton planter whose brutal wife forces her to work as a field hand. Roxy displays her customary ingenuity and boldness in escaping the plantation and returning to face Tom, forcing him to arrange for a bill of sale acknowledging her freedom again. In return for frontier daring, there is usually a promise of material reward, a mine, a farm, a hide. Roxy's anticipated reward is a spiritual one--relief for her profligate

son. Like many another unfortunate frontiersman, Roxy's reward is grief.

That Wilson is a frontier figure seems apparent from Twain's description of his arrival:

He had wandered to this remote region from his birthplace in the interior of the state of New York to seek his fortune. He was twenty-five years old, college-bred, and had finished a post-college course in an Eastern law school a couple of years before.<sup>3</sup>

Wilson is acting in the time-honored tradition of the Eastern neophyte going West to find the good life. This literary convention was brought to its peak with the stories of the arrival of dudes in cow country. Indeed, the treatment Wilson receives at the hands of the Missouri residents of the Mississippi's shore is similar to the reception of dudes later on the cattle frontier. The attitude is one of condescension because the new arrival does not possess a type of skill or knowledge that the frontiersman does; a knowledge which, incidentally, the frontiersman did not have when he first arrived either. Wilson lacks what has long been considered a necessity of frontier existence, ingenuity and common sense. Or so the residents of Dawson's Landing think. As it turns out, Wilson has both these qualities; the townspeople, by years of refusal to recognize them in him, are lacking.

Wilson's most readily identifiable frontier characteristic is his individualism. His insistence on maintaining it by taking fingerprints and keeping an irreverent, ironic almanac of aphorisms leads him to become an outcast. His ostracism does not take the usual form of complete severance from the town; in fact the townspeople like him. But they do not consider him seriously and so cut him off from any community with them.

Judge Driscoll is a man of some intellect and sensitivity, and he and Wilson form the Free-thinkers Society, an organization of two. Judge Driscoll appreciates what he believes is an above average philosophical talent in Wilson, and shows the almanac entries to the residents of Dawson's Landing. Because the townspeople are unable to see the irony of the writing, Wilson is further dismissed. Twain tells his readers why, revealing a community attitude:

Judge Driscoll could be a free-thinker and still hold his place in society, because he was the person of most consequence in the community, and therefore could venture to go his own way and follow out his own notions. The other member of his pet organization was allowed the like liberty because he was a cipher in the estimation of the public, and nobody attached any importance to what he thought or did. He was liked, he was welcome enough all around, but he simply didn't count for anything.<sup>4</sup>

Under subtle pressures of the type Wilson undergoes,

the need to be part of a community might force many men to acquiesce and present an outward appearance of conventional belief. But not Wilson. He continues his brand of wry conviction and by book's end is vindicated. Wilson retains the professed spiritual values of the frontier. The residents around him, as shown by their disregard for him, have lost theirs.

After Wilson has exposed Tom as a murderer, the reception of the lawyer, now in middle age, undergoes drastic change:

Troop after troop of citizens came to serenade Wilson, and require a speech, and shout themselves hoarse over every sentence that fell from his lips--for all his sentences were golden, now, all were marvelous. His long fight against hard luck and prejudice was ended; he was a made man for good. 5

The acceptance of Wilson by the townspeople is a materialistic gesture. Wilson is no different than he has always been; his values remain intact. But now he has something of substance to show for them, success by the conventional definition, fame and, one supposes, the financial reward that follows it. Wilson will not have any difficulty getting clients.

Another human frontiersman, not a character in the novel, is at work in Pudd'nhead Wilson. Mark Twain, by his



choice of subject matter, artistically explores previously unknown literary territory. Langston Hughes touches on its importance:

In this novel Twain shows how more than anything else environment shapes the man. Yet in his day behavioristic psychology was in its infancy. Likewise the science of fingerprinting. In 1894, Pudd'nhead Wilson was a "modern" novel indeed. And it still may be so classified.<sup>6</sup>

Pudd'nhead Wilson is the journal of that venture into behavioral psychology and it provides a close examination of the effects of slavery.

Twain reports his findings honestly, with the aversion to stereotypes that appears in his earliest work. That Roxy is neither totally evil nor good is testimony to Twain's understanding of human complexity. He makes it clear that while one may understand the motivation for the switch of the babies by Roxy, the act is inexcusable and what Hughes is willing to call a "grievous sin." Even being an "heir of two centuries of unatoned insult and outrage" does not permit the sacrificing of an innocent to the slave system. The tragedy of her action becomes final in the concluding chapter of the novel when Twain says of the actual Thomas a' Becket Driscoll:

The real heir suddenly found himself rich and free, but in a most embarrassing situation. He could neither read nor write, and his speech was the basest dialect of the negro quarter. His gait, his attitudes, his gestures, his bearing, his laugh--all were vulgar and uncouth; his manners were the manners of a slave. Money and fine clothes could not mend these defects or cover them up; they only made them the more glaring and the more pathetic. The poor fellow could not endure the terrors of the white man's parlor, and felt at home and at peace nowhere but in the kitchen. The family pew was a misery to him, yet he could nevermore enter into the solacing refuge of the "nigger gallery"--that was closed to him for good and all.<sup>7</sup>

With that compassionate paragraph, Mark Twain and Pudd'nhead Wilson establish that the horrors of being black are created in an environment for which there should be neither excuse nor tolerance. He leaves little doubt, however, that it will be tolerated and excused, for finally Tom, the Negro raised as a white man, is sold down the river. There is a certain eye-for-an-eye justice operating, to be sure, and one's first impulse is to applaud, until one realizes what Twain surely must have known. No justice results from Tom's sale down the river; one man's slavery becomes another's.

A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court seems an unlikely book in which to advance frontier ideas, but of all Twain's novels it perhaps deals most directly with the American frontier ideology. Admittedly the perspective is

odd--that of a nineteenth century American transported back to the sixth century in King Arthur's feudal England--but its very oddness draws heightened attention to the ideas it presents. A short look at the plot tells basically how A Connecticut Yankee, through its central character, Hank Morgan, explores frontier doctrine.

Morgan is the superintendent of the large New England Colt Arms Factory. In a fight with a worker he is knocked in the head with a crowbar. When he regains consciousness he has been transported back to sixth century England. With his knowledge of technology he becomes the most powerful man in the kingdom, the Boss, and transforms the feudal landscape into an industrial society which he can rule.

The plot illustrates the frontier doctrine of progress. As Henry Nash Smith points out, "at the outset of his career in Arthur's Britain the Yankee views the realm as a frontier of untouched resources awaiting development."<sup>8</sup> Morgan grows to like the sixth century because, he says:

Look at the opportunities here for a man of knowledge, brains, pluck and enterprise to sail in and grow up with the country.<sup>9</sup>

Morgan's attitude is vintage American frontier philosophy and typical of nineteenth century American boosterism. Although the story takes place in England, Twain is talking

about America. Morgan obviously believes in the desirability of an industrial society imposed upon a frontier. The description of his early efforts at introducing the machine into society is admiring.

I was pretty well satisfied with what I had already accomplished. In various quiet nooks and corners I had the beginnings of all sorts of industries underway--nuclei of future vast factories, the iron and steel missionaries of my future civilization. In these were gathered the brightest young minds I could find, and I kept agents out raking the country for more, all the time. I was training a crowd of ignorant folk into experts--experts in every sort of handiwork and scientific calling.<sup>10</sup>

When Morgan arrives in feudal Britain he sees what he considers human abuses of poverty, squalor and inequality. He thinks he is among savages masquerading as civilized men. After several years of industrialization, Morgan assesses his domain:

Slavery was dead and gone; all men were equal before the law; taxation had been equalized. The telegraph, the telephone, the phonograph, the typewriter, the sewing-machine, and all the thousand willing and handy servants of steam and electricity were working their way into favor. We had a steamboat or two on the Thames, we had steam war-ships; and the beginnings of a steam commercial marine; I was getting ready to send out an expedition to discover America.<sup>11</sup>

Morgan connects the abolition of slavery and the advent of legal equality with the coming of the array of machines he lists. Such a connection suggests a view that industrialization not only brings material comforts, but also human freedom, improving at the same time man's moral condition.

The frontier idea of resisting dominance is felt in A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court through opposition to and ridicule of the Aristocracy. Twain is at his comic best, for instance, during a scene in which Morgan goes to the rescue of forty-five aristocratic ladies held captive at an ogre's castle. His wife, Sandy, is with him and when she sees the captive ladies, falls tearfully upon them. The Yankee, who says he must be under some sort of enchantment sees nothing but a pigsty and a herd of swine. After he watches Sandy "fling herself upon those hogs," he says, "I was ashamed of her, ashamed of the human race." Morgan continues his opinion of the aristocracy--pigs:

We had to drive those hogs home--ten miles; and no ladies were ever more fickle-minded or contrary. They would stay in no road, no path; they broke out through the brush on all sides, and flowed away in all directions, over rocks, and hills, and the roughest places they could find. And they must not be struck, or roughly accosted; Sandy could not bear to see them treated in ways unbecoming their rank. The troublesomest old sow of the lot had to be called my Lady, and your Highness, like the rest...There was one

small countess, with an iron ring in her snout and hardly any hair on her back, that was the devil for perversity. She gave me a race of an hour, over all sorts of country, and then we were right where we had started from, having made not a rod of real progress. I seized her at last by the tail, and brought her along squealing. When I overtook Sandy she was horrified, and said it was in the last degree indelicate to drag a countess by her train.<sup>12</sup>

Resistance to authority prompts Morgan to attack the Established Church and the Monarchy as well as the Aristocracy. In one passage of invective he sums up his case against what he feels is an oppressive triumvirate:

The truth was, the nation as a body was in the world for one object, and one only: to grovel before king and Church and noble; to slave for them, sweat blood for them, starve that they might be fed, work that they might play, drink misery to the dregs that they might wear silks and jewels, pay taxes that they might be spared from paying them, be familiar all their lives with the degrading language and postures of adulation that they might walk in pride and think themselves the gods of this world.<sup>13</sup>

The Yankee's ranting again reflects the American pioneer viewpoint. The first settlers in the new world, as every school child is told, came to America in real--or imagined--flight from the oppressions of Church, monarch or class restrictions. Periodically Americans are reminded of it by the similar words of zealous patriots.

The artistic merits of Morgan's polemics are not under

discussion here because the analysis is at this point for the purpose of demonstrating not Twain's art, but rather the frontier and humane ideas behind his work. In passing, however, one must say that A Connecticut Yankee's weakest parts are Morgan's political tirades. They tend to level the high points of the book's comic aspect. Purely political novels don't, as a rule, last as "works of art." A Connecticut Yankee is probably no exception. But novels can serve many more functions than a literary one. A Connecticut Yankee has importance as an intellectual, cultural and political statement on nineteenth century America.

While Hank Morgan demolishes the aristocracy, his method creates another kind of ruling class that has its unpleasant consequences, a technocracy. The rulers, the Boss being the monarch, use the might of the machine rather than the lance. A dehumanizing process follows industrialization. Shortly after Morgan begins his mechanized planning for the transformation of feudal society, he says he also has

...started a teacher-factory and a lot of Sunday-schools the first thing; as a result, I now had an admirable system of graded schools in full blast in those places, and also a complete variety of Protestant congregations all in a prosperous and growing condition.<sup>14</sup>

"Teacher factory" prompts visions of a manufacturing process in which the mass-produced item is a human being, the

teacher. Religion follows an assembly line pattern also. Morgan is a despot, a benevolent one at first, but a despot nevertheless. Later, his benevolence disappears, he will crush anyone who seriously questions his plans for an industrial society.

Two readings of A Connecticut Yankee are suggested, then. The first view is that that book glorifies industrialism and democratic progress. The second and more subtle is that it is an indictment of the machine and its age. The balance would seem to lie with the second; for while extolling the virtues of industrialism, A Connecticut Yankee calls attention to the disadvantages mechanized society brings to individual humanity.

Three aspects of the novel lead to this conclusion: the interior title of the book, The Battle of the Sand-Belt, and a final postscript by Mark Twain. In an explanatory chapter Twain tells how he came to know the story of the Yankee. In Warwick castle on a tour he meets a stranger who has an intimate acquaintance with the trappings and customs of feudal times. The stranger--Morgan--visits Twain at his inn and briefly tells about his journey through time. Morgan gives Twain the journal he kept of his medieval experiences. The title of the manuscript is, not insignificantly, The Tale of the Lost Land. The title carries with it a sense of remorse over the loss of a past. The past is the feudal century which the Yankee disrupted, metaphorically



an unspoiled place, similar to the American frontier.

The Battle of the Sand-Belt is presented by Morgan as a just cause. In defense of his industrial society, progress and the creation of a Republic, Morgan and fifty-three technocrats kill most of the chivalry of Britain. Their weapons against the knights are the most technologically advanced, land mines, high voltage electric fences, Gatling guns, man-made floods. But when the technocrats have won the battle, they have lost. If they remain in their cave fortress, they will perish from the poisonous fumes given off by the rotting bodies of the men they have slaughtered. Yet if they flee; they will not have their technological weapons and will fall easy prey to the remaining warriors. The import of the Battle of the Sand-Belt is that industrial abandon brings chaos; finally technology traps itself.

The postscript is a continuation of Twain's contact with Morgan at the inn. Twain has read The Tale of the Lost Land all night and at dawn goes to the door of Morgan's room. Morgan is in delirium, calling for Sandy:

Yes, you are there. I lost myself a moment, and I thought you were gone....Have I been sick long? It must be so; it seems months to me. And such dreams! Such strange and awful dreams, Sandy! Dreams that were as real as reality--delirium, of course, but so real! Why, I thought the king was dead, I thought you were in Gaul and couldn't get home, I thought there was a revolution; in the fantastic frenzy of these dreams, I thought

that Clarence and I and a handful of my cadets fought and exterminated the whole chivalry of England! But even that was not the strangest. I seemed to be a creature out of a remote unborn age, centuries hence, and even that was as real as the rest! Yes, 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! It was awful-- awful.<sup>15</sup>

A shift in Morgan's perspective has taken place. He now views the world from the sixth century. The old times are where his values are. He is an alien when he returns to the nineteenth century. And he views what he did to the sixth century, in his delirium not quite realizing the full extent of his participation, as awful. In his dying vision he supposedly is telling the truth, and the truth is, he murmurs, that he belongs to the sixth century, the idyllic past, before the machine and the doctrine of progress, because that is where all he holds dear remains.

A Connecticut Yankee is a yearning to live permanently in a time impossible to recover, or a wish to change the history which made the past irrecoverable. Either way it is a novel of regret. Mark Twain has taken the Matter of Britain and made it the Matter of the American Frontier.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE ULTIMATE HUMAN EXPLORATION

Mark Twain's most penetrating expedition into the human frontier is the relationship he created between a white boy and a runaway slave. The record of the voyage, Huckleberry Finn, has become one of the cornerstones of American literature, fit to take its place beside the dignified representatives of any other national literature. Because it has such a diverse readership, the book, like its hero Huck, has a dog-eared look when put beside the tall cotton of the world's literature. Unlike books that are reverently called masterpieces, but in reality may resemble museum pieces, Huckleberry Finn has found favor with a scholarly audience while retaining its general popularity among readers whose occupation is not literature. Mark Twain and Huckleberry Finn affirm the spiritual possi-

bilities of American frontier values--and mourn that they have not been generally realized. The novel's combination of moral insight and literary skill make it one of the rare books that can provide continuing grist--and grit--for the intellectual mill yet stimulate a deep emotional response. I do not think it extravagant or inaccurate to say that in its way Huckleberry Finn, by the possible levels on which it can be read, is in the tradition of many of the works of Shakespeare or Charles Dickens.

Huckleberry Finn might be loosely called an American novel of development. It is distant kin to the German bildungsroman in which a young hero matures to some new understanding of himself or the world. The German form has some clearly defined limits while the American type follows no formula, reflecting no doubt a traditional American distaste for formality. American novels of development would include such diverse books as Thomas Wolfe's Look Homeward Angel, Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, and John Updike's The Centaur.

The novel of development is the perfect form for examining the frontier of human relationship; it may be the only form that can be used to show the entirety of the issue because if there is no development, if the hero learns nothing, conscious or unconscious, there seems little chance for an expansion of human community. So Huck Finn becomes

an appropriate hero to explore the human frontier: young Huck, wise beyond his years, fresh enough to avoid falling into the mire of approving all human slavery, which sucks in his elders, yet socially aware enough to worry that his actions go against the generally held beliefs of his day. His zestful combination of naivete and wisdom and direct manner of approaching life force all the human questions into sharp relief.

Huck's first steps into uncharted territory come after he has fled from his father's cabin and found Jim on the river island. Huck asks Jim why he is there. Jim obtains Huck's promise of secrecy and then reveals that he has run away from Miss Watson's. "Jim!" says Huck, and in that astonished exclamation is foreshadowed all the inner conflict that will bedevil the boy throughout the novel. He believes it is wrong for a slave to run away, but he has given a promise he cannot break. He sees a morality higher than mere social custom or law.

Huck's change of moods during the island sequence shows some of the inner freedom that results from his decision. When he arrives at the island, before he is aware Jim is there, he rests, alone:

I laid there in the grass and cool shade thinking about things, and feeling rested and ruther comfortable and satisfied. I could see the sun out at one or two holes, but mostly

it was big trees all about, and gloomy in there amongst them. There was freckled places on the ground where the light sifted down through the leaves, and the freckled places swapped about a little, showing there was a little breeze up there. A couple of squirrels set on a limb and jabbered at me very friendly.<sup>1</sup>

Later, after Huck has discovered Jim and spared him, a thunderstorm approaches and the two fugitives flee to a cave. Outside the thunder bellows and lightning flashes but inside:

"Jim, this is nice," I says. "I wouldn't want to be nowhere else but here. Pass me along another hunk of fish and some hot corn-bread."<sup>2</sup>

The first passage outlines a pleasant scene, a sun-dappled forest with friendly squirrels chattering. But in Huck's own lonely words, it is "gloomy". In the second passage the thunderstorm is so strong that it has forced a retreat to the protective walls and roof of a cave, but now the atmosphere is not gloomy. Despite violent weather, Huck is content. The changing atmosphere ironically reflects the beginnings of change in Huck. Before, he was alone; he is now part of a human community.

There are deeper thrusts into the human frontier as the novel develops. They are characterized by Huck's worry

over not turning Jim in, followed by the moral action of protecting the runaway slave. Such is the case when the two believe they are nearing Cairo and freedom for Jim. Once again Huck's conditioned responses and his intuitive morality conflict:

Well, I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was almost free--and who was to blame for it? Why, me...

I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead. I fidgeted up and down the raft, abusing myself to myself, and Jim was fidgeting up and down past me. We neither of us could keep still. Every time he danced around and says, "dah's Cairo!" It went through me like a shot, and I thought if it was Cairo I reckoned I would die of miserableness.

Jim talked out loud all the time while I was talking to myself. He was saying how the first thing he would do when he got to a free state he would go to saving up money and never spend a single cent, and when he got enough he would buy his wife...and then they would work to buy the two children, and if their master wouldn't sell them, they'd get an Ab'litionist to go and steal them.

It most froze me to hear such talk...Here was this nigger which I had as good as helped run away, coming right out flat-footed and saying he would steal his children--children that belonged to a man I didn't even know; a man that hadn't ever done me no harm.<sup>3</sup>

Huck, still struggling with the conscience that denies him access to the human frontier, has talked himself into turning Jim in. As the boy starts off in the canoe to find

authority, under the ruse of seeing if Cairo is nearby, Jim says that when he is free he won't ever forget that Huck made freedom possible. Huck's resolve begins to weaken. He inwardly knows something is wrong with his decision to betray Jim, while outwardly thinking it his duty, when he hears the slave say he has been the "only white genlman dat ever kep' his promise to ole Jim." Soon Huck has his chance to give up Jim when white men approach the canoe in search of a group of runaway slaves. What Huck believes is weakness, but in reality, of course, is moral strength, takes over, and he steers the men away from the raft and Jim by cleverly convincing them that his family is aboard with smallpox. Again he follows a higher morality than that of his society.

Most of the book's force grows out of Huck's continual questioning, and when he makes a choice which aids Jim, that choice is underscored by the fact that he almost decides the opposite way. And for all his explorations and increasing understanding of the human relation, Huck backslides occasionally, forgetting his hard-earned lessons in the human wilderness; yet each time he forgets, he manages to recover in time to learn something new, a deeper human truth than he has known before.

When he becomes separated from Jim on the river in the fog and tricks the black man into believing that he has



dreamed the entire separation episode, Huck is reverting to reflex ideas of the relation between slave and white man, the ideas of society. A slave is to be used for whatever purpose the white man wishes, and the less important or more frivolous the use--like being the object of a hoax--the more reinforced becomes the idea of domination by a master. A master must enforce the smallest and most meaningless tyrannies precisely because they are meaningless. He cannot hope to receive absolute obedience in important matters if he cannot exercise control over the most petty aspects of life.

After Huck has convinced Jim that their separation has been a dream, the superstitious slave feels he must interpret it. Then Huck asks him to interpret what meaning there is in the leaves and rubbish picked up by the raft during the separation. When Jim sees the reality of the debris the hoax becomes visible too. Unsmiling he says:

"What do they stan' for? I's gwine to tell you. When I got all wore out wid work, en wid de callin' for you, en went to sleep, my heart wuz mos' broke bekase you wuz los', en I didn' k'yer no' mo' what become er me en de raf'. En when I wake up en find you back ag'in, all safe en soun', de tears come en I could 'a' got down on my knees en kiss yo' foot, I's so thankful. En all you wuz thinkin' 'bout wuz how you could make a fool uv ole Jim wid a lie. Dat truck dah is trash; en trash is what people is dat puts dirt on de head er dey fren's en makes 'em ashamed."<sup>4</sup>

When Huck hears those words and realizes the human hurt he has inflicted and the feeling Jim is capable of for him, he feels genuine remorse and extends himself still deeper into the spiritual unknown.

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 afterward, neither. I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd 'a' knowed it would make him feel that way.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the book Huck shows a number of traditional frontier characteristics. He resists dominance; that is why he ran away. He also uses ingenuity in thinking up lies and masquerades to remove himself and Jim from dangerous situations. He is mentally displaying the frontier physical penchant for fixing things because of necessity and by improvising. His most successful improvisation is the lie he concocts about the smallpox. Less successful but no less inventive is his futile attempt to pose as a girl before he reaches the island during the early part of the novel. In his final commitment to Jim's freedom at the Phelps place, Huck, by going against the dictates of established society, displays frontier independence and individualism. He himself is fleeing tyranny and wants to release Jim from it.

Jim exhibits some frontier traits, too. His resistance to dominance is obvious. He also shows individualism and boldness by entering into a relationship of trust with a white person. His individuality derives from his dignity. Twain, in creating him as a superstitious slave, does not deprive him of dignity. The scene in which Jim denounces Huck for the separation hoax reveals a man of earnestness and feeling, not a buffoon in blackface; so does the passage in which Jim grieves for his children and wife. Jim's refusal to leave the wounded Tom Sawyer during the abortive escape plan displays not only Jim's dignity but his essential humanity. There is something he values more than his freedom, another human life. Refusal to leave one's wounded comrades is another professed frontier virtue. When Jim announces his decision to stay with Tom while Huck goes for a doctor, Huck says, "I knowed he was white inside."<sup>6</sup> What Huck means, of course, is not that Jim is white inside, but that he is human.

With Jim and Huck, Twain defines the outcome of adherence to frontier values, but the two fugitives are the exceptions to Twain's vision of the predominant frontier society. In contrast to Huck and Jim, Twain offers that the frontier social foundations are generally greed, senseless violence, conformity, and inhumanity.

The immediate examples of greed and inhumanity are the

two river hitchhikers, liars and cheats, the duke and the king. Shortly after they board the raft, they stop at Parkville, and the king lies to a revival meeting that he is an ex-pirate who has been converted and now wishes to return to the Indian Ocean to convert the other pirates. The "dear people in Pokeville camp-meeting"<sup>7</sup> give him a collection of \$87. Meanwhile the duke has made some dishonest money at a print shop and also has printed a handbill identifying Jim as a runaway slave. He tells Huck and Jim that with the handbill, the raft can be used during the day. If anyone questions Jim's presence, the men on the raft can produce the handbill and say they are returning Jim to his owner. The king later uses the handbill to sell Jim back into slavery. The entire time they are with Huck and Jim, the duke and the king scheme to get money by dishonest means. Their method ranges from the short-run theatrical fraud of the Royal Nonesuch trick to the elaborate deceit in which they pretend they are relatives in order to swindle the Wilks inheritance. When they are finally tarred and feathered, Twain throws their values and Huck's into relief. Despite their corruptness Huck is able to say:

Well, it made me sick to see it; and I was sorry for them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Senseless violence takes place in two major scenes of the novel, once during the feud between the Grangerfords and the Shepherdsons and then again when Col. Sherburn kills Boggs. In the Grangerford-Shepherdson incident, Huck asks Buck Grangerford what a feud is and how this one started. Buck tells Huck that a feud occurs when one man kills another and is in turn killed by the victims' relatives who are killed also. The killing continues until both families are dead. The Grangerford-Shepherdson feud started thirty years ago; when Huck asks why, Buck says no one knows. While Huck is with the Grangerfords, Sophia Grangerford and Harney Shepherdson elope. Instead of seeking the return of the lovers, who have fled to safety, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons begin killing each other. Buck Grangerford and his cousin, Joe, two young boys, are ambushed by Shepherdsons while Huck watches in a tree. The effect of the purposeless bloodshed on him is profound:

The boys jumped for the river--both of them hurt--and as they swum down the current the men run along the bank shooting at them and singing out, "kill them, kill them!" It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. I ain't going to tell all that happened--it would make me sick again if I was to do that. I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night to see such things. I ain't ever going to get shut of them--lots of times I dream about them.<sup>9</sup>

Sherburn kills Boggs for no reason except words, the insults from a drunken man. When Boggs rides into town drunk, abusing Sherburn, Sherburn tells him if he doesn't shut his mouth, after one o'clock he will be killed. Later, despite Boggs' plea and upraised hands, Sherburn coldly guns him down and walks away. A mob conforming to a group impulse--the very opposite of frontier individualism--marches against Sherburn, but he faces it down and forces it to disband. Huck's accounts of physical violence present riverside frontier life as savage.

Huck's descriptions of the town in which Boggs is killed and the people in the town suggest that hostility and ignorance reside with the inhabitants. The yards of the houses are junkpiles. The fences are in disrepair. On the main street loafers gape and yawn and stretch and scratch and constantly ask each other for chewing tobacco. What Huck sees is dismal:

All the streets and lanes was just mud; they warn't nothing else but mud as black as tar and night about a foot deep in some places. The hogs loafed and grunted everywheres. You'd see a muddy sow and a litter of pigs come lazy-ing along the street and whollop herself right down in the way, where folks had to walk around her, and she'd stretch out and shut her eyes and wave her ears whilst the pigs was milking her, and look as happy as if she was on salary.<sup>10</sup>

The loafers cruelly torment the street animals, turning dogs onto the pigs' ears or washing a stray dog with turpentine and setting it afire.

Huckleberry Finn is a novel of ever-shifting perspectives, and scenes of violence and towns are followed by a return to the symbolic force of the novel, the Mississippi River, The River. The river serves a number of technical, artistic and symbolic purposes. On a technical level it provides the isolation necessary for the story to take place. Huck and Jim could not be fugitives together long on land without being detected. The river also provides the freedom from restraint necessary for them to form their community of two.

Throughout the novel Huck describes the river's beauty, not in the conventional pastoral tradition but through his vernacular vision. Mark Twain shows the possibilities for poetic feeling by sustained use of native American prose; that aspect of Huckleberry Finn, as well as its unique point of view, is a major contribution to the literature of America. The texture of Twain's writing is the varying mood of the river; scene and prose are in constant unity. The river also works as a unifying factor for the entirety of the novel. The voyage down the river is the spine of the book.

The river is, literally, unspoiled nature. And literally, only on the river--away from the towns and their brand of progress and what the established society considers civil-

ization--can Huck and Jim form their human bond. Twain, however, is not presenting a Rousseauvian ideal that unspoiled nature creates unsullied human nature. Were that so, how could the mean river towns have formed, since the land on which they stand was once unspoiled nature? Or why wouldn't the duke and king undergo conversion under the purifying influence of the river? Twain uses the river to point out that men--unless they are uncommonly strong, which Huck is not at first--must be in a place where they are not restricted by the dominant society. That place could be in a number of locations; in Huckleberry Finn it happens to be the river. The river does have symbolic meaning, however. It represents the continuing human bond between Huck and Jim and symbolizes all places where such bonds can occur. But it is not the cause of the bond; that lies within Huck and Jim.

Twain's attitude toward nature, displayed in his earlier books, is complex. In Roughing It, for instance, he tells about a trip to Lake Tahoe, which he recalls as having great beauty. The recollection seems traditionally pastoral. A section of lakeside forest which Twain professes to be enraptured by is set afire through his careless use of a campfire. The fascination Twain expresses at the fire--and the accompanying destruction of his woods--appears more honest than the earlier idyllic remembrance. Twain



says of the fire:

Away across the water the crags and domes were lit with a ruddy glare, and the firmament above was a reflected hell!

Every feature of the spectacle was repeated in the glowing mirror of the lake! Both pictures were sublime, both were beautiful; but that lake had a bewildering richness about it that enchanted the eye and held it with the stronger satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

Wildfire, forest scientists tell us, has its place in the natural order of things, but this is not wildfire. It is destruction caused by man's encroachment on nature. Yet Twain remains fascinated by it.

In Life on the Mississippi Twain tells of a change in his attitude toward the natural beauty of the river, how intimate knowledge of it has made him see beyond its beauty to its danger. Where once a sunset in his early steam-boating days was beautiful almost beyond belief, coloring the water and objects in it, no such beauty is visible now. He reads each object for its potential danger rather than beauty. Twain considers it a loss that his attitude has shifted from the early feeling for the sunset's beauty, an emotion in keeping with a romantic ideal of benign nature, to an understanding of nature's realities through his river education.

No consideration of Huckleberry Finn can afford to avoid coming to terms with its controversial ending. It

has become a critical commonplace to say the ending weakens the book, that the real finish is when Jim is returned to captivity. A persistent complaint against the ending is that the development of Huck is arrested and reversed; at the close of the novel he is no nearer maturity than he was at the beginning. At first that appears the case. While Huck stands by, Jim is forced to lose his humanity and become a thing for Tom Sawyer to practice his intrigues with and upon. Unlike Tom, Huck does not know until after the elaborate plan is bungled that Jim is free, but Huck does indulge Tom and permit the indignities of tunnels and snakes when he knows that all it would take to free Jim would be to steal the key and let him out. Given his history of frequent worry over the consequences of freeing the slave, the constant wonder whether Jim is man or chattel, it is not surprising that he acts as he does when he is off the river in slave-holding society and under the spell of Tom Sawyer. Twain's ending, overly long and unwieldy though it may be in some places, is a final contrast of the predominant society and the exploration of the human frontier Huck and Jim made on the river. Tom Sawyer and the world of the Phelps are the antithesis of Huck and the community he has known.

When all ends well with Jim's freedom and Tom's recovery from his gunshot wound, Huck closes his story with the thought that is crucial to a full understanding of the

novel:

But I reckon I got to light out for the territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and civilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before.<sup>13</sup>

One might think that Huck, young ruffian that he is, is simply staying true to his behavior while at the Phelps; that he wants none of the superficial irritants of respectability--school, baths, hours, chores--and so decides to run away. That strictly literal view would be a denial of everything that happened on the river. The great weight of all that has gone before in the book, particularly those incidents when Huck saves Jim from capture, suggests that the action at the Phelps' is another example of temporary reversal, the result of doubt, after which Huck always moves on to a new moral vision, acting for humanity instead of property.

Huck's reason to "light out for the territory" is not the same as Tom Sawyer's, to "go for howling adventures amongst the Injuns";<sup>14</sup> nor is the idea of the territory the same for the two boys. Huck knows that civilization, the kind that Phelps family and the rest of society can offer, rejects human possibility, not only in the black slave,

free white context but others as well. As he says, "I been there before." For Huck the territory is humanity, and he wants to go not because it is someplace new but because he has been there before, too. Perhaps he sees the territory as a physical place, an area where things are freer and easier and where he will not be as subject to convention, with its continuing pressure for conformity and reversal. But he knows that the frontier is also available anywhere he may be at any given time. On the frontier of humanity, he has traveled from an ignorance conditioned by society to a self-realized moral knowledge. His decision to light out is the final commitment to humanity and at once his continuing and ultimate development.

I have in the process of this study drawn an extended frontier metaphor, connecting the real frontier and its values with something I have chosen to call the spiritual frontier, the human frontier or the frontier of human possibility. I wish to suggest now that the metaphor represents something more than the product of my own whimsey and that it has behind it as much reality as there is behind any other abstraction chosen to describe, define or account for physical action or fact.

Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, the 1936 winner of the Nobel Prize for medicine, writes that in life there are three environments: the external in which we move; the internal

which can be treated by medicine; and because of the development of the human brain, the spiritual. In the third environment, life

...has meaning only to the degree that we endow it with decency, good will, the cultivation of beauty, and moral and intellectual values.<sup>15</sup>

The third environment is the one that Twain speaks about, and his characters are in the vanguard of its exploration.

When Twain wrote Huckleberry Finn, the American geographical frontier was nearing its extinction. The nation's boundaries had been drawn, and, with the exception of Hawaii and Alaska, they were the same as they are now. While there was land that hadn't been settled yet, there was no more completely untrammelled territory left. I have insisted from the beginning of this study that Americans probably do need frontiers and; consequently, when one dies another must arise. If there is no more physical frontier by traditional definition, something else must be found, there must be some challenge. Mark Twain sounded that challenge when he told us about the frontier of human possibility. It is a place which can never become too crowded and will never cease to exist unless man does. There have been expeditions into the frontier from time to time, but nonetheless, almost a century after Twain first

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showed it to Americans, its nether regions have hardly been touched. That this should be so is odd because the terrain, although possibly frightening at first, is not difficult to cross. As with any other frontier there is safety in numbers, but probably lone travelers must show the way. On the frontier of human possibility, as Huck Finn found out, it is easy to become lost. But, as Huck also learned, the surest means of finding one's way through the wilderness is to follow the directions of the heart.

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End

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