

... and houses, roads, avenues are as fugitive, alas, as the years.

--Marcel Proust, Swann's Way.

CHAPTER XI CONCLUSION

Mark Twain is probably the most popular of all American writers; he is also one of the most outstanding. His works are of the highest rank in American literature, and in part his values belong integrally to the society that produced him. In him the literature of democracy became more robust than it had been before.²¹⁹

Twain fundamentally gained his fame and success as a humorist. However, throughout his life, he strongly wished to be taken as a serious writer:

I don't care anything about being humorous, or poetical, or eloquent, or anything of that kind -- the end and aim of my ambition is to be authentic -- is to be considered authentic.²²⁰

In fact, Twain was a humorist in a qualified, individual way and his specific qualities cannot be duplicated. Twain helped develop the modern American style. His greatest contribution to American literature was his introduction of colloquial speech. He was the first writer to use the American vernacular at the level of art. Before this time, Negro speech and rural dialect were not accepted as the medium of a serious novel. In Huck Finn, they are proved a successful instrument of art. Huck's speech reveals the vigor of

the spoken language of the American common life. The use of Huck as his narrator marks a moment of highest achievement in his career because of the profound insight Twain brought to bear on his protagonist. That is to say, the vernacular speech proves capable of the most difficult psychological effects. Jim's Negro speech is an instrument to reveal his remarkable personality and goodness. And similarly, Roxana's vitality and haughty grandeur are revealed through the degraded speech of the Negro Slave. In addition, the folk beauty of the vernacular idiom is also found in the Yankee speech of Hank Morgan.

Throughout his writing career, Twain sought for a faithful and realistic mode of expression. This enabled him to break away from the conventional rhetoric and elaborate literary formulae of 19th century popular romanticism. It is clear enough that his apprenticeship as a journalist is partly responsible for this intention. In his earlier works such as Roughing It, Twain succumbed to the influence of the literary tradition. In spite of his avowed anti-romanticism, he turns to literary formula for help when he wishes to describe the prairie landscape. His search for realism succeeds best in Huck Finn through the use of the first person-narrative technique. Huck's report of the sunrise on the Mississippi River using the colloquial idiom and rhythm displays both freshness and realism.

Twain had many devices in telling his stories. The first device he used was derived from the Southwestern humor tradition,

the oral tale in a framework. The story is related by an educated narrator using learned, bookish vocabulary and telling the story of common, ordinary men, partly to make fun of their commonness. Such device is seen in Twain's first famous narrative, "The Jumping Frog." Again, a similar device is used in Roughing It in the anecdote of Brigham Young. The whole account is related through Johnson with an enclosing framework pointing out that the whole episode is an elaborate lie. The narrative device in Huck Finn is that of Southwestern humor without the frame, as can be found in the cruel stories of George Washington Harris. In this and other ways Huck Finn is the culmination of that native literary tradition.

Although in the balance Twain did not write in the third-person very often, he knew how to use it. The Gilded Age, Tom Sawyer, and Pudd'nhead Wilson are all written in the third-person with, as we have seen, various degrees of success. He used the first-person in several different ways. The autobiographical writings such as The Innocents Abroad, Roughing It and Life on the Mississippi purport to be written in the voice of the author himself, who records his own direct, personal experience in the same way as in other travel-books. Yet, there is an obvious complexity in this use of narrative voice for it is not always the author who is speaking through the narrative voice. In The Innocents Abroad, although sometimes it is Twain himself speaking directly and frankly as a representative of the Americans as a whole, proud of his own country and at the same time tortured by the feeling of

cultural inferiority, at other times he is disguised under the mask of a typical European tourist in order to burlesque the stupidity of Americans abroad. In Roughing It there also is a complicated use of the narrative voice. There are both a real straightforward narrative voice and a voice that is writing fiction under the guise of autobiography. The objective is not only to entertain but also to teach a little lesson.

Twain's use of first-person is most interesting when autobiography is not involved. In Huck Finn he assumes the role of a socially outcast thirteen-year-old boy. In the Mysterious Stranger the author takes the role of an ordinary village boy of sixteenth-century Austria. In A Connecticut Yankee, Twain's narrator is a Gilded Age Yankee swept back in time to the land of Arthur's Britain. In writing the story of Joan of Arc, Twain lets Louis de Conte, Joan's page, secretary and friend of her childhood, report Joan's life until her martyrdom. The result of these different narrative voices are variously obtained. Of course there is a seeming versatility stands as less of an achievement when one considers his decidedly mixed success. The first-person narrative technique usually succeeds well as long as Twain is able to let the narrator's voice continue throughout the book. In Huck Finn the device works successfully. Through the mouthpiece of Huck, Twain gains the distance to maintain detachment from his material. In the same way artistic success is obtained in The Mysterious Stranger through the detachment provided by the successful first-person narrative device. On the contrary, whenever the author loses control of his material by letting himself become too involved in the book and

speaking directly for the narrator, the book crashes into disaster. The narrative voice collapses along with the novel, as in the second half of A Connecticut Yankee. The narrative device proves a failure in Joan of Arc since the narrator is simply the author's vehicle to sentimentalize and weep over his ideal saint, and there is nothing at all of interest in the narrator's personality.

Twain's greatest asset is his humor, his literary apprenticeship in the old Southwest during the days of the flowering of its humor. He emerged to prominence as a literary comedian. Throughout his works, we can trace different varieties of humor with different functions. A most important device is exaggerating or heightening the contrast between illusion and reality to the point where the contrast becomes so ridiculously extreme as to be laughable. Irony of statement is gained through such contradiction. The speaker says something different from what he actually means -- either by understatement, by overstatement or by any other conceivable degree of indirection. Another comic effect is achieved through the pretension of absolute seriousness of the speaker or through the pretended naiveté,²²¹ as we found in Roughing It and The Innocents Abroad. Comic effects are also gained through the tall tale writing Twain inherited from the South-western oral tradition. Such a story starts from one small joke and it grows bigger and bigger through exaggeration. Tall tale writing is found in almost every early work of Twain. Another device of the literary comedian is comic misquotation of the Bible or the classics, like the Sunday School episode in Tom Sawyer and the mistreatment of Shakespeare in Huck Finn.

As a whole, Twain's humorous writings can be classified into two types, innocent humor and black humor. We have seen that chronological development is involved in this classification. The buoyant humor of the early Twain -- so irrepressible that sometimes it intrudes where it shouldn't -- gives way to the unredeemed bitterness of his late "comedy." The innocent humor is intended simply for entertainment, such as the whitewashing episode in Tom Sawyer. The hilarious dialogue between Huck and Jim about King Sollerman is also a comic set-piece but also, as we have seen, has thematic significance. The black humor is a serious form of joking, attacking human weaknesses, filled with bitterness. "Psychologically it serves as an outlet through which Twain tries to keep his despair in check. Black humor appears in many satiric accounts on human shortcomings in A Connecticut Yankee and in Pudd'nhead Wilson's calendar. As we have seen, Twain's black humor often contributes to the destruction of his later works, since it tends to get out of control.

The distinguishing trait of Twain's works is the change of his point of view during his writing career; and this change can be traced successively through his works. As a young writer, Twain was immersed in an absolute optimism. He lived in a world of cheerfulness and hopefulness where good will triumphed over evil. Thus, he had a tendency to look on the bright side of things. Such an attitude is exemplified in his early works like Roughing It, The Innocents Abroad and even in a piece of social criticism like The Gilded Age. The Gilded Age resounds with the sense of greatness of America, a promised land of liberty, freedom, youth and opportunity. Roughing It records the adventurous trip of a young hopeful American

keen for danger and excitement. The Innocents Abroad shows the triumphant voyage of a young American, exuberantly storming through the cultural heritage of Europe. Such rapturous spirit is molded into successful art in Tom Sawyer, in which the world of boy-hood vibrates in a haze of remembered happiness. The evil is make-believe and easily conquered through the indomitability of purity and innocence. Only in Huck Finn does ~~the~~ evil really enter Twain's universe. Yet, Huck's fresh vision of the world and his innocent good will still victoriously reign in the book. Twain successfully retains his faith in the saving grace of his protagonist. Twain's duality comes to a point of suspension between innocence and knowledge of evil in Life on the Mississippi. And henceforth the world of jubilant innocence is progressively destroyed until nothing remains. At the end, man is a victim of the evil within himself and of the additional cruelty of mob rule when he bands together into society. He is a slave to the deterministic chain of events, deprived of all free will. Life is a sad pilgrimage through the eternities set against a backdrop of doom. At last Twain, a broken man, crushed by personal tragedy and philosophical despair, comes to doubt the world exists. We are such stuff as dreams are made of. It is interesting to note in retrospect that the Happy Valley of St. Petersburg seems almost as dreamlike as the very sad valley of Eseldorf. When Twain was no longer able to find any meaning in the good dream of boyhood, the unmitigated nightmare of the sickness unto death gained control of his spirit.

The progression from A Connecticut Yankee to Pudd 'nhead Wilson to The Mysterious Stranger and the heartbreaking fragments that were the last words Twain committed to paper is a progression from twilight to total blackness. Only Joan of Arc offers any hope along the way, and under the circumstances prevailing when Twain wrote it, that gesture was doomed to be abortive.

Like most famous American writers, Twain's reputation reached its highest peak while he was a young man. The works he produced under an optimistic, youthful, fresh mental condition are considered his best works. In the nineteenth century a large part of his popularity was no doubt due to his choice of childhood as a theme. Books like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn were based on experience gained during his childhood at Hannibal. Twain's preoccupation with the theme of childhood and innocence is understandable when seen psychologically. He, as well as his contemporaries, had gone through a period of violent change that included not only a murderous and traumatic civil war but also the great social dislocation of the Gilded Age. The adult-generation tended to look back upon their village-world of childhood as a simple time of idyllic happiness, of carefree days remote from all troubles. Thus, Twain's return to the world of childhood is an escape from the chaos of the industrial society, from fear of the treachery and false promise of technology, from the everlasting demand for money in an expanding materialistic world, from, above all, a general atmosphere of chaos and confusion in which the traditional values were left insecure. Childhood became the characteristic mask Twain wore to save himself from the confrontation of problems he could not cope with.

However, at the same time he made use of the innocent eyes of childhood as a means to satirize social evils he was disgusted with. His most complete artistic successes are achieved through use of the mask of childhood. Twain is in fact considered a champion of childhood-experience, for he had experienced it with particular intensity and successfully portrays it nostalgically and with understanding. Twain, therefore, instinctively seized upon this theme which he was able to capitalize upon through use of his direct, personal experience. His national and world-wide reputation have come predominantly through the appropriate selection of this theme and his statement of it in terms of his native Southwestern tradition.

Throughout his career, Twain sought for realism both in expression and in his view of life. He showed a strong objection to romanticism in his severe attack on Copper's romantic portrait of the Red Indians, in his criticism of the Southern addiction to Scott's novels, and in his burlesque of the hypocritical pilgrims of Europe who sentimentalize over the ruin of "The Last Supper." Twain succeeds in achieving a realistic mode of expression and breaks away from the mode of conventional literary pretensions. The depiction of sunrise in Huck Finn marks the moment of high achievement. When Hemingway said that all American literature came from The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, he meant all writing -- like his own -- which tried to pare away to excesses of rhetoric and got down to an accurate description of what is really there. Huck Finn was

Hemingway's favorite book. Yet, ironically as Twain was getting old, he was capable of abandoning this central principle in writing Joan of Arc in a romantic and idealistic way. He created a completely unreal and sentimental portrait of Joan. The paradox between his principle and his actual practice in this case can once again be explained psychologically. Twain used Joan's story of moral victory in an attempt to recapture his lost vision of childhood and innocence. But the effort was unnecessarily strained and colored by sentimentalism. Twain simply had too much at stake.

Twain's great power of imagination and his keen observation give his best characters a special vividness. His pages are rich with laughable and memorable figures who are among the finest in American literature. Tom, Huck and Jim, Colonel Sellers and Roxana, breathe the breath of life and make intimate acquaintance with the reader. His works are a summary of nineteenth century native American humor,²²² and the comic aspects of his characters are his finest comic achievement. He accomplishes a wide range of character portrayal, not achieved by earlier humorists. He transcends the nineteenth century American comic tradition at the same time he brings it to fruition.

Ultimately Twain's distinguishing characteristic is the complexity of his personality. His vision of America, for example, is difficult to summarize because it is composed of different sets of rational ideas which often contradict each other as well as subconscious yearnings underlying everything. He is a great booster of America, he is a great critic of America and, deepest down, he just wants to run away to his perfect dream of boyhood. These contradicting

attitudes were not clearly recognized by himself. Most often he was barely a conscious artist, and furthermore he was too wholly a part of the American mainstream to see it -- or himself -- at any distance. He shared a greater variety of the characteristic experiences of his countrymen than any other major American writer. He became a part of his country and spokesman of the nation.²²³ At the very least he was able to capture the spirit of his time in the most accurate way.

Twain's accomplishment in American literature is unique and incomparable. It is interesting to think about his friend Howells' comparison of him to Lincoln. Both of them spent their boyhoods in a society that was still essentially frontier; both were rivermen and were instinctively gifted with the humor of the common life. Lincoln, as well as Twain, was a skillful teller of tall-tales inherited from the Southwestern oral tradition. Both had a commitment to equality and democracy, and against injustice and oppression.²²⁴ Both were bound for great achievement. Lincoln's feeling for the continentalism of the American nation was so intense that as President he insisted that preserving the Union was his uppermost task, that the North and the South were and ought to be one. His wish was accomplished only after the country had undergone the Civil War. Twain's success lay in the literary field though the achievement can be compared to Lincoln's. Twain was a bridge between the cultures of the West and the East. He was part of the untamed frontier with its lack of refinement and with colloquial vernacular speech. He took this west with him and before he was finished he had made it

respectable and altered the course of American literature. Colloquial speech, introduced into the realm of art by Twain, proves a distinctly American language because of its compactness, simplicity and vigor of expression. Thus a continental unity in literature was accomplished through the contribution of Twain.

Though Twain gained his popularity as a humorous writer he is even more significant to the student of American civilization. He remains an important key for the study of the development of that important giant, the United States of America, from the frontier period to modern times. Twain's career stands at the heart of the American nation in literature, in history and in culture. That is why Howells called his writing "the very marrow of Americanism."²²⁵