[essay date 1963] In the following excerpt, Kaul describes Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a novel that questions the moral basis of nineteenth-century American society.

The boy [Huck] and the Negro slave form a family, a primitive community--and it is a community of saints.--Lionel Trilling, "Huckleberry Finn"

*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* marks in so many ways a turning point in the history of American fiction. Its crucial influence on subsequent writing in the country is widely recognized today. Novelists who came after Mark Twain and who recognized what he had done with his native idiom could hardly write again as Cooper and Melville had done. He may be called the George Washington of American letters because, by investing the national language with the autonomous dignity of a great work of art, he virtually created it. Since, however, even the most radical shift in literature rarely involves a total break with tradition, but is more often a regenerative development of it, to appreciate the true distinction of *Huckleberry Finn* we must see it in relation both to what came after it and to what went before. We can exaggerate matters a little and remark with Hemingway that all modern fiction derives from this single book. In doing so, however, we must not imagine it to be a sort of literary Adam, a work which miraculously begot a fruitful line of fiction but which was itself unrelated to any previous kin. Nor is it enough to see its connection with the minor frontier tradition, the tradition of Southwestern humor. Twain's masterpiece belongs in a more important sense with the major novels that preceded it in the nineteenth century. Among other things, its theme is a fresh and distinctive restatement of the theme I have been considering in this study.

It is tempting, for instance, to use Trilling's comment quoted above¹ to argue that with *Huckleberry Finn* the story has come full circle to the very terms in which William Bradford had launched it into American literature almost two and a half centuries earlier. Bradford's narrative, it is scarcely necessary to recall, had also celebrated the heroic adventure of escaping from a corrupt society in order to establish "a community of saints" in the wilderness. In reality, however, the inspiring ideals of the community on the raft, when compared with those of the Puritan fugitives, are wholly secular in character. There is nothing of the saint about Huck or Jim unless we use the term as a common figure of speech to denote the contrast between them and the general run of surrounding humanity. Quite simply they are decent human beings, and their little world is better described as "a family" or "a primitive community." In other words, both Twain's protagonists and his ideal social construct are closer to those of Cooper and Melville than of William Bradford and John Winthrop. The Puritans leaders' idealism was derived from religious inspiration alone, while the nineteenth-century writers had behind them the added ideals of the Enlightenment and political democracy. Furthermore, whereas in the Eastern novelists the former source is still operative if not vital, Twain's values are wholly social and political. *Huckleberry Finn* represents the final secularization of the society-community theme.
Of course Twain began writing after the Civil War. What he felt about the actual world of the sixties and seventies can be seen from the satirical evocation of postwar society in *The Gilded Age*—the novel in which Twain struck, according to William Dean Howells, his one and only blow in the cause of realism. Later developments, the combination of personal misfortune and a deepening sense of national tragedy, created in his mind those “symbols of despair” with which Bernard DeVoto has identified his last works. Out of this mood were born the nihilism and the ironclad mechanical determinism of such anxiety-bound phantasies as *What Is Man?* and *The Mysterious Stranger*. But somewhere in the middle period of his writing career Twain achieved the balanced vision that lies behind *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The anxiety and the criticism of social reality are present here. So is a certain deterministic coloring of the view. But this novel is informed by an idealism that belongs to an earlier period of American cultural history. As DeVoto has said: “When he [Twain] wrote fiction, he was impelled to write about the society in which his boyhood had been spent, and to write it out of the phantasies, the ecstasy, and the apprehension which he remembered from his boyhood. ... Hannibal was the master condition of his fiction, and fiction was the instinctual part of his work. His artistic creativeness, his phantasy-making, was rooted in his boyhood.” Whatever one says of his other fiction, the great “phantasy” that went into *Huckleberry Finn* is of a piece with the dream of social possibilities that had figured in the works of writers who were mature men when Twain was still a boy. The “ecstasy” and the “apprehension” which colored the world of his boyhood and out of which he fashioned his masterpiece characterized also the workings of the older novelists’ imagination. In Melville’s case, as I have pointed out, the ecstasy of the forties had already yielded to confirmed apprehension in the early fifties, and, by the time the war broke out, he realized that the era of hopefulness had ended. But Twain, in recollecting the earlier society, recaptured with it the central tension of the earlier theme.

It has been remarked often that in *Life on the Mississippi* Twain left out of account that aspect of the world in a steamboat which Melville had taken for his subject in *The Confidence-Man*. Twain’s book provides indeed a wholly idyllic picture—a beautiful, nostalgic picture of the days gone by forever. Of course Twain recognized as well as Melville the seamy side of the Mississippi Valley culture. He introduces it in full measure into *Huckleberry Finn*, coming close to Melville’s own terms in the description of the two confidence tricksters, the King and the Duke. The comparison of the two novels, however, brings out a more interesting point, for Twain’s theme includes an affirmative motif that Melville had discarded over thirty years earlier. Where *The Confidence-Man* presents an unrelieved satire, *Huckleberry Finn*, like Melville’s own early novels, balances the satire with the evocation of an alternative social construct based on radically different values than those of the surrounding society. Indeed, it is the community on the raft, and the significance of this community, that distinguish the meaning of Twain’s novel, not only from *The Confidence-Man* but from his own other works.

Mark Twain of course explored the persistent American theme of community in his own distinctive and epoch-making way. In Cooper it was intimately connected with the romance of the vanishing Indian tribes, and it involved, among other contradictions, a progression characterized by the backward reading of history. Hawthorne, with his acute historical consciousness, projected it along a more or less direct line from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth. In Melville we had the primitive community variation again, together with the added dimension of metaphysical voyaging. Twain, in his turn, stated the theme in terms of his native Southwestern tradition, clothing it with the life and substance of fresh, first-hand experience, and, above all, pressing into its service the miraculous invention of a new literary voice. The distinction of *Huckleberry Finn* lies in the double fact that it gave new vitality to an old theme and thereby also a new seriousness to the otherwise negligible tradition of frontier humor.

There is a certain deceptive simplicity about Twain’s novel which makes it peculiarly liable to misinterpretation. For a time readers more or less obeyed the author’s prefatory order to desist from searching the book for motive, moral, or plot. Lately, however, critics have been making up for lost time by reading too much—and in too many unwarranted directions—into the novel. Where all seemed childishly simple before, everything is incredibly complex now. Under the circumstances, any approach to *Huckleberry Finn* should, I believe, take note of Leo Marx’s excellent and timely warning. The issue raised by this novel, Marx rightly points out,
is not the kind of moral issue to which today's criticism readily addresses itself. Today our critics, no less than our novelists and poets, are most sensitively attuned to moral problems which arise in the sphere of individual behavior. They are deeply aware of sin, of individual infractions of our culture's Christian ethic. But my impression is that they are, possibly because of the strength of the reaction against the mechanical sociological criticism of the thirties, less sensitive to questions of what might be called social or political morality.  

To put it briefly, the question raised by *Huckleberry Finn* is one of man's conduct toward man, or, in larger terms, the moral basis on which a sane and civilized human society can be built. As in the case of the earlier novelists, so in Twain's case also the theme involves an examination of the existing social order as well as the presentation of an alternative social construct. That is to say, we have here again the familiar structural and moral polarization of civilization and community. It is necessary to emphasize, even overemphasize, this point, because to lose sight of either of the two poles between which the narrative moves is to miss the inclusiveness of its theme. Accordingly, to Marx's warning about one sort of current misinterpretation must be added a further caution against oversimplifying the social issue posed by the novel. *Huckleberry Finn* is not fundamentally a book about Negro slavery. It is a common mistake, but a mistake nevertheless, to equate too closely the meaning of Huck's journey down the Mississippi with the issue of Jim's escape from slavery. Jim's freedom is undoubtedly an important part of this meaning, but it is only a part, just as slavery itself is only one aspect of the social order which Huck has decided to repudiate in its entirety. It is often forgotten that Huck arrives at this decision independently of Jim's flight and without having given any thought whatsoever to the question of chattel slavery. Before his meeting with the runaway slave on Jackson's Island, his abolitionist sentiment extends only to things like shoes, formal clothes, domestic hygiene, regular hours, Sunday school, prayer books, and other such appurtenances of civilization. It is true that in the course of the journey down the river, as Huck grows up, his critical eye is turned on more important issues. But even in his maturest judgment of the surrounding social world, the question of slavery is overshadowed by the observation of such other endemic and equally pervasive attributes of this world as its cruelty, violence, hypocrisy, and acquisitiveness.

Huck's commitment to the slave's freedom is thus motivated by an ethic which includes but also goes beyond the disapproval of slavery. It is the product of a moral sensibility engaged with issues larger and more fundamental than those suggested by any single social institution. On the one hand, it dictates that unconscious sympathy between Huck and Jim which predates, and eventually leads up to, the boy's conscious acceptance of the abolitionist's role. On the other, it lies at the base of Huck's attitude toward the established order--an attitude that matures but does not change, since his adult experience only confirms his juvenile act of repudiation. The society which he had found merely irksome as a child he comes to judge eventually as depraved and corrupt.

Huck's choice thus involves the whole question of human society. His rejection of civilization and his acceptance of the fullest responsibility in a contrasted social order constitute the basic pattern of the novel. It is a pattern familiar enough in American literature, as crowded with echoes from Cooper and Melville as Huck's gesture of repudiation is with echoes from similar symbolic actions on the part of earlier protagonists. Huck Finn is indeed the representative American hero cast in the image of a Southwestern boy. A younger and more entertaining Natty Bumppo as well as a less embittered Ishmael, he asserts, like these two characters, the right to free himself from civilization and its imperatives. But, as in the case of the older heroes, such an assertion does not imply lawless individualism. On the contrary, it marks the beginning of a moral process which leads eventually to the recognition and acceptance of the law of human community.

This is the theme that lies at the heart of the novel's organization. As is obvious, it is a theme whose implications are broader than those involved in the subordinate story of Jim's escape. To lose sight of this fact, to forget that Jim's story is only a part of Huck's more complex adventure, is to diminish the scope and intention of Twain's achievement. Furthermore, such a restricted reading of the book's meaning leads, in its turn, to an unjust evaluation of the inspired excellence as well as the limitation of its form. On the one hand, the reader is likely to
miss the finely contrived balance of its structure, while, on the other, he faces the danger of exaggerating out of all proportion the importance of its one serious lapse. Some such weakness can be noticed indeed even in Marx's otherwise illuminating essay. Marx recognizes fully the larger focus of the novel. "The truly profound meanings of the novel," he observes, "are generated by the impingement of the actual world of slavery, feuds, lynching, murder, and a spurious Christian morality upon the ideal of the raft." But the bulk of Marx's discussion is addressed, for understandable reasons, to a less profound level of the novel's meaning, and by stressing overmuch the flight-from-slavery aspect of its theme he arrives at certain unduly harsh strictures. One of these relates to the view he takes of the novel's ending. With Marx's taking Twain to task for the reintroduction of Tom Sawyer into the narrative, and for the bad taste of such a farcical denouement, no one can quarrel seriously. All one can do is to add one's own reasons for finding the final sequence unsatisfactory, since, seen from any except the most uncritical point of view, this episode represents a disappointing anticlimax. What I find unacceptable in Marx's account is the significance he accords to the agency Twain uses in bringing Jim's story to an end: the Negro's emancipation by an act of manumission. This would be a minor point were it not connected with a more important critical issue: the adequacy or otherwise of Twain's whole theme. Marx considers Miss Watson's deathbed freeing of Jim as one of the many clues that suggest a basic failure of vision. Applying to Huckleberry Finn Santayana's general comment on American humorists, he concludes: "To say that Clemens only half escaped the genteel tradition is not to say that he failed to note any of the creed's inadequacies, but rather that he had 'nothing solid' to put in its place." For lack of an alternative conception of human society, in other words, Twain abandoned the implications of his insight. "The unhappy truth about the ending of Huckleberry Finn is that the author," as Marx says elsewhere in the essay, "having revealed the tawdry nature of the culture of the great valley, yielded to its essential complacency."

Whatever may be the case with Twain's other works, these charges, I believe, are unmerited by Huckleberry Finn. I shall have occasion later to revert to them. Here I should like to begin by pointing out that Miss Watson's will is a fictional instrumentality quite unworthy of the sociomoral significance that Marx has read into it. If one sees Jim's manumission in the context of his heroic flight, and that flight as a segment of Huck's longer and unfinished journey, one sees it for what it is: a mere literary device, far less improbable and artistically more satisfactory than half-a-dozen other tricks used by Twain to round off various episodes in the book. The very unemphatic, almost casual, manner in which the fact of Miss Watson's will is reported is enough to show that it is no more than a contrivance used to bring about a denouement toward which Jim's story has been moving but which cannot be achieved in any other way that would also be consistent with historical truth. If Twain yielded to anything here, it was only to literary convention; and that too with the greatest amount of caution against the customary complacency of happy endings. Dickens, for instance, would have found it impossible to resist the temptation of devoting a whole chapter to Miss Watson's conversion, complete with deathbed contrition, a general feeling of sweetness and amity all round, and the eventual change of heart. Twain not only spares us the shocking experience of such a scene; he does more. He leaves his young hero--the keeper of our conscience--unadopted, unconvinced, and essentially uncompromised.

To see Jim's manumission as a betrayal of the novel's central affirmation is to restrict that affirmation to the single issue of slavery. On such an assumption we should rightly reject as digressive interpolations all those portions of the book which amount to more than half its bulk but which bear no relation to the story of Jim's escape. In other words, we should judge the novel an episodic narrative barely saved from chaotic shapelessness by the often interrupted though linear thread of the journey down the river. For it is not only during the final Tom Sawyer episode that Huck neglects the urgency of Jim's situation. He does this repeatedly, in such instances as the lengthy Grangerford and Wilks episodes, not to mention other diversionary actions. In reality, however, these episodes are not narrative digressions but integral parts of the novel's meaning and form. They constitute one of the two poles which define dialectically the nature of Twain's theme.

This part of Huckleberry Finn is addressed to the investigation of actual society. Huck's periodic forays into the towns and hamlets studded along the banks of the river are like so many thrusts of discovery directed at the
heartland of the Mississippi Valley civilization. The young boy's fresh and honest eyes provide Twain with the necessary instrument of satire—the instrument that rends the obscuring veil of familiarity from this world and lays bare its organic ugliness and inhumanity. It is the same world that Huck repudiates at St. Petersburg when the genteel confinement of his life in the house of Widow Douglas erupts into brutality and violence with the return of Pap and the failure of the judge's naive attempt to reform him. Seen now at an adult level of experience, it confirms the rightness of Huck's early decision on the one hand, and, on the other, leads up to and makes so much more meaningful the reaffirmation of the same resolve in the last words of the novel.

The two gestures which thus precipitate and conclude the action are not merely literal resolutions to flee physically; more significantly they are in the nature of enacted judgments on the civilization that motivates them. They indicate a visionary attitude which, as I have attempted to show in this study, is a distinctive characteristic of the American imagination: a revolutionary attitude that looks upon the given social order as corrupt beyond the possibility of honest compromise and therefore rejects the idea of ameliorative reform. Twain's view of contemporary Western civilization is indeed not very different from that of the other writers whom I have already discussed. For instance, what he says about it in The Mysterious Stranger comes very close to Melville's indictment of a hypocritical and mercenary Christianity in Typee. During Satan's revelation of the marching spectacle of human history, as he gives Theodor a glimpse of what lies beyond his own feudal period, they see "Christianity and Civilization march hand in hand through those ages, 'leaving famine and death and desolation in their wake, and other signs of the progress of the human race,' as Satan observed." "Two or three centuries from now," Satan goes on to add, "it will be recognized that all the competent killers are Christians; then the pagan world will go to school to the Christian—not to acquire his religion, but his guns."

In this book, as I suggested earlier, Twain's view is colored by the later developments of American history. For instance, in what seems a reference to the country's imperialist adventure, Satan is made to reflect upon the spectacle of intensified bloodshed which he has prophetically revealed to Theodor. To what end, he asks, do men wage war? "Who gets a profit out of it? Nobody but a parcel of usurping little monarchs and nobilities who despise you; would feel defiled if you touched them; would shut the door in your face if you proposed to call; whom you slave for, fight for, die for, and are not ashamed of it, but proud." Basically, however, the feudal society of The Mysterious Stranger—with its superstition, ignorance, witch-hunting, compulsive conformity, intolerance, and brutality—is a satirical exposé of the familiar Southern world of Twain's childhood. Of course when he wrote this late satire, he identified these conditions as the permanent destiny of mankind in a fundamentally meaningless universe. It was intended to be a satire on the whole human race. But, as Bernard DeVoto has said: "When he wrote fiction, which is to say when the bases of his personality were finding instinctive expression, the human race was the race he had known in Hannibal." In Huckleberry Finn, which deals directly with this scene and this period, his deterministic view is flexible enough to admit the meaningfulness of human choice, and his view of human society hopeful enough to permit the evocation of an alternative possibility. With regard to the actual civilization of the time, however, his satire is as savage as the satire of The Mysterious Stranger. Only here it is infinitely more effective. Its object is not a generalized hypothesis about humanity but a social situation that is given a local habitation and a name. Likewise, its instrument is not the stale device of a "stranger"—a distant and detached observer—but the deeply engaged moral consciousness of a native son. The result is a concrete vitality which makes Huck's rejection of civilization the repudiation not of mankind but of a particular social order: a world of senseless feuds, needless cruelty, and deceitful cupidity masquerading under a false front of honor, piety, and gentility.

This is the world of actuality from which Huck returns to the raft invariably with a sense of relief. It constitutes the negative half of Twain's theme. But to say that Twain had "nothing solid" to put in its place is simply to overlook the moral and structural significance of the other half of Huckleberry Finn. Opposed to the established creed in this novel are the values represented by Jim's flight, and more than that, by Huck Finn, and still more, the community that Huck and Jim create on the raft. The raft, in Marx's own words, functions as "the symbolic locus of the novel's central affirmations." It is not often given to serious satirists to portray concretely the positive side of a
vision that constitutes the basis of their satire. The fact that Twain succeeds in doing so is one of the great features of his achievement. As such portrayals in fiction go, his richly evoked community aboard the raft is solid enough. Notwithstanding the charge of its impracticality in a given type of society, it embodies serious values of social ethics: simple fellowship, mutual kindness and consideration, and a general harmony in human relationships: "what you want, above all things, on a raft, is for everybody to be satisfied, and feel right and kind towards the others."

Here one has to realize that the raft is a created symbol, an imagined social construct, rather than a faithful transcript from some idyllic and bygone days. As described by Twain himself elsewhere, life on the Mississippi rafts was in reality as little immune from stupidity, ugliness, brutality, and knavery as that of the steamboats or the banks of the river. Even the raft in Huckleberry Finn is eventually invaded by the representatives of the surrounding world. The affirmation that it stands for thus derives not so much from its romantic picturesqueness as from the harmonious community for which it provides a symbolic locus. It is true that such harmony in human relationships presupposes a radically different social organization. That, however, is precisely the point. Of course Twain does not go into the question of how the change can be effected. But that is an irrelevant consideration, since no artist can be held accountable for not drawing up a program adequately suited to the practical realization of his vision. Artists usually work on a different plane of effectiveness. Twain's concern here is with an alternative concept of human society, and it is a concept that derives its power from the emotively charged concreteness of the presented image as well as from its projection against the background of the established order.

Stated in abstract terms, the values that govern the community on the raft sound ridiculously simple-minded. But it is not as moral abstractions that they function in the context. Their seriousness is validated in terms of the contrast, enforced at every step, with the norms and sanctions of actual society. All this is done with the insistence of a profoundly experienced vision rather than the obvious and superficial deliberateness of virtuosity. Thus in the realm of domestic relationships, where the world at large presents a picture of dislocated natural ties, Huck and Jim form a family united by spontaneous affection. Deserted and in a sense murdered by his real father, Huck finds on the raft the paternal care unknown to him previously. Jim's relatively undemonstrative but genuine concern for this orphan is thrown into further relief by the conduct of the scheming King and Duke toward their "wards" in the Wilks episode, their hypocritical effusiveness making Huck observe, "It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race." The plot of these two confidence men to rob the orphaned girls is itself an echo of Pap's designs on Huck's money earlier in the novel; while the systematic brutality to which Huck is subjected by his father, in its turn, stands in sharp contrast with Jim's remorseful recollection of having once thoughtlessly hit his deaf and dumb daughter.

As a microcosmic civil community, the raft stands likewise for simple decency and humanity. It is only here that Jim can acquire the dignity of a human being. In opposition to the mutual respect and consideration upon which the bond between Huck and Jim is based, we have, on the other hand, the thieves' honor that unites the King and the Duke: the incorporated frauds who begin by supporting each other for mutual profit and end by each trying to outwit and defraud the other. Equally spurious is the code of honor--of lynching, feuding, and bloodshed--that governs the larger social world. While Huck and Jim, members of two different races, symbolize the possibility of human harmony, the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons enact in real life the internecine feud of the Capulets and the Montagues, and the King and the Duke soon follow up the performance by actually rehearsing the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet, thereby parodying the affirmative part of the play. Thus it is not surprising that at each return from this world of hatred and violence Huck should recognize and reaffirm the contrasted values of the raft community:

I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.
The community of Huck and Jim represents the positive half of the meaning of *Huckleberry Finn*, the half that is complementary to its satire. The keystone of this social structure is the loyal fellowship of two persons who are akin in their humanity as well as in their opposition to the inhuman established order. While it assumes the existence of democratic equality, such a community aims at a social condition beyond democracy. Its relation to equality is not unlike the relation between friendship and equality as Jacques Maritain, paraphrasing St. Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Aristotle's *Ethics*, defines it:

Friendship supposes that beings are close to each other and that they have arrived at equality among themselves. It is up to friendship to put to work, in an equal manner, the equality which already exists among men. But it is up to justice to draw to equality those who are unequal: the work of justice is fulfilled when this equality has been achieved. Thus equality comes at the terminus of justice, and lies at the base and origin of friendship.\(^{10}\)

When Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, justice had already done its share of the work by proclaiming the legal freedom and equality of the slave. Whether or not it was a part of Twain's literary purpose to endorse this accomplished fact, he certainly looked beyond it. Insofar as he saw the freeing of the slave as the necessary but not the sufficient condition for the realization of the true community, his vision can provide a commentary on the development of American history since the Civil War. It is a vision which American democracy is still very far from having achieved.

Huck's commitment to Jim's freedom is a part of this deeper and more comprehensive creed. It is true that he often expresses a preference for being alone. But this avowed propensity to solitude, like his distaste for being civilized, is not a sign of misanthropy or irresponsible individualism. It is rather a reflection on the "cramped up and smothery" society which he has repudiated. These attitudes are of a piece with the general mode of satire by which Twain redefines many concepts in the pattern of our sympathies--concepts of right and wrong, home and wilderness, education and ignorance, gentility and moral uncouthness--often reversing their meaning completely. T. S. Eliot has described Huck as the most solitary character in fiction.\(^{11}\) But he is also the most desirous of human fellowship and most willing for its sake to put up with many things of which his moral sensibility disapproves, including the King and the Duke until their part in the Wilks episode and, later, their treacherous sale of Jim.

It is worth while to recall here that in the first chapters of the novel, where we are still in the world of *Tom Sawyer*, Huck returns to the house of Widow Douglas only because Tom has made this step a condition for his admission into Tom's latest band of respectable robbers--a band in whose fantastic rituals and activities Huck participates with characteristic reservations. One may thus see Huck's later development in terms of his deepening awareness of the meaning, the true necessity, and the real dangers of human fellowship. From the secret gang of Tom Sawyer he is plunged into the life of a community which must be kept equally secret but which involves real-life issues and not the fantastic projections of a schoolboy's literary imagination. The change from Tom's to Jim's company thus represents the beginning of Huck's growth: his entry into a life of increasing maturity and responsibility.

Most of the novel's subsequent raft scenes are concerned with the exploration and establishment of the values that constitute the code of this community. To take one great example, such is the concern that lies behind the memorable chapter which is called "Fooling Poor Old Jim" and which describes Huck's separation from Jim in the fog followed by their reunion several hours later. Since the implications of this scene have been commented upon extensively, it is only necessary to point out that it has nothing to do with the issue of Jim's flight. Although that issue is in a critical stage on account of the raft's proximity to Cairo, even Jim himself rises above it in the face of a more important crisis. The scene resolves itself into three parts marked respectively by the threatened destruction of the community, the violation of its code by Huck's practical joke, and finally its reaffirmation on a higher plane of mutual respect and understanding. The often quoted and magnificent end, which gathers the
threads into a single dramatic moment, can easily bear yet another quotation:

“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 fine 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.”

Then he got up slow and walked to the wigwam, and went in there without saying anything but that. But that was enough. It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back. 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.

To understand the significance of this scene fully, one should bear in mind the similar trick that Tom Sawyer plays on Jim in one of the early chapters of the novel. The difference is not that Jim is no longer gullible—because he is, and Huck’s signal success proves it. Nor is it that on the raft there is any reason for his being immune from a friendly joke. If it therefore turns out to be something worse than a practical joke, the reason lies in Huck’s misunderstanding of the situation. He realizes of course that the accident has led each of them to give the other up for lost. Knowing this, he does not deliberately ignore Jim's feelings; he is simply unaware that the event of his own death can cause any such feelings at all. In view of his previous forsaken and loveless condition, this is quite understandable. But nevertheless it involves a certain blindness to his present situation, an obliviousness to the new bond that has grown up between him and Jim. What makes this lapse particularly callous is that he perseveres with his joke even after Jim has demonstrated the strength of the bond by bursting into a fit of spontaneous, incredulous, and grateful joy at seeing him alive again. Insofar as Huck's story is one of initiation into manhood, this point may be said to mark the consummation of the process. But it also marks his final attainment of equal membership in the short-lived and foredoomed community on the raft. This single moving scene gives us an idea of the distance Huck has traveled from the elaborately silly initiation rites of Tom Sawyer's gang.

The pattern of the journey is in this manner meaningfully associated with the development of the theme of community. It is true, as Marx says, that "Huck knows that the journey will have been a failure unless it takes Jim to freedom.” But Huck also knows that it is freedom. The raft is not only a means of transportation to the promised land; in a symbolic sense it is the promised land itself. For Huck, who has rejected the social values of the great valley, it holds the only sort of society to which he can give unqualified allegiance. That Jim's primary loyalty also belongs to this community is obvious from the first sentence of his speech quoted above. Against this aspect of the novel's theme, escape from slavery is an issue that becomes, especially after they have missed Cairo, somewhat unreal to Huck and Jim themselves. For one thing, as has been pointed out, the river is against them. When they discover that they have floated below Cairo, however, they decide to buy a canoe and go back up the river. But they make no attempt to execute this scheme; and when Huck does "borrow" canoes subsequently, it is for the usual purpose of reconnoitering the shores. Indeed, considered in its entirety, the journey affirms the value of their community more than it indicates any definite goal ahead of them. This fact seems to me to help in raising the theme of Huckleberry Finn above the particularities of its time and place. The book remains an abiding document of human fellowship in a world perverted by selfishness, religious cant, hypocrisy, greed, and violence.

To sum up: the banks of the Mississippi river present the picture of the repudiated social order; the river itself, with its magnificently evoked majesty, power, and capriciousness, represents the amoral physical forces of Mark Twain's deterministic universe; while the raft, which Huck and Jim can control only partially, embodies the image of the most humane community possible in such a universe. This is the sociomoral geography of the world as projected in Huckleberry Finn. And this is the novel's essential form. That the universe is far from being wholly friendly to the human beings who live in it only enhances the tragic folly of their treatment of each other. Even in
In this process of critical affirmation all these novelists achieve a remarkable degree of success. They are not, however, equally successful in meeting another problem also implicit in a theme one of whose poles represents a visionary construct while the other investigates solid reality. This is simply the problem of connecting the two parts of the action, or, in other words, suggesting the relation between their vision and history. The difficulty becomes increasingly apparent toward the end, when the necessity of providing some sort of a resolution becomes urgent. It is usually at this point that these novels become uncertain. A few of them leave the ends unrelated and open. But in a majority of cases the ideal is at length brought into contact with the actual and, in a physical sense, made to disappear. There is nothing wrong with this course except that the novelist himself seems unaware of the implications involved in what finally, and rightly, happens. This is a charge that can be brought against Cooper and Melville with only a little less force than against Twain, for it arises basically from a common weakness: the spatial rather than temporal apprehension of the connection between social problems and social possibilities. Only Hawthorne--the supposed day-dreamer--escapes it. Although he, too, divides the two poles of his theme in
space, he does not wholly disregard the time of day. In presenting his ideal community in The Blithedale Romance he recognizes, with his acute historical understanding, that it is doomed to unreality because it is essentially a premature interpolation into the process of history. He can thus isolate from the defunct experiment its forward-looking social values and refer them explicitly to a possible future age.13

Having said all this, one can return to the ending of Huckleberry Finn. The final Tom Sawyer sequence, as Leo Marx has argued, is unsatisfactory in many ways. It is not only tedious but also quite unnecessary even as plot machinery. Unlike Hawthorne, Twain possessed no understanding of the relation between his vision and history, between the community on the raft and the society on the banks. Moreover, he did not choose to leave the two sides of his theme physically apart, nor yet was he content to bring them together and terminate his action with the dissolution of the raft community. Instead he attempted to cover up "the problem of the ending" by relapsing into the sort of burlesque which is the bane of much of his writing. While all this is true, it is difficult to agree with Marx that the final episode represents a "compromise" with the discredited river-valley civilization and that it thus "betrays" the whole meaning of the novel. Although the bulk of the action in the concluding chapters bears scarcely any perceptible relation to Twain's central concern in Huckleberry Finn, they do not endanger at any point the critical affirmation made by his theme.

Since a basic question with regard to the thematic significance of imaginative works is involved here, it would be best to illustrate the point by a concrete example. In analyzing the meaning of a novel one ought to be guided by what I have called the pattern of aroused and redistributed sympathies, for it is at this level that a novel makes its essential impact.14 The words "compromise" and "betrayal" belong properly to the judgment of works where there is a shift in the focus of sympathy itself. An example of this process that comes readily to mind is the series of Forsyte novels by John Galsworthy: a series in which the meaning is reversed to such a degree that Soames Forsyte, the central character, who begins as something of a villain in The Man of Property, ends by becoming the most sympathetic character in the concluding volumes of The Modern Comedy; the very things which he represents being seen now no longer as objects of satire but rather as solid moral virtues. Thus one can say of Galsworthy, as D. H. Lawrence did, that he was unable to see what lay beyond the Forsytes. Accordingly, after he had satirized their values, he turned to sentimentalizing them.

Surely there is neither such reversal of sympathies nor such limitation of vision in Huckleberry Finn. The community of Huck and Jim does not survive beyond the point at which it is finally overwhelmed by the massed power of the established order; but there is no repudiation of the values it embodies. Nor does Twain now accept the values of the society that has triumphed over it. As a matter of fact Tom Sawyer is nowhere else so unsympathetic, and his "heroism" nowhere so meretricious, as in the concluding chapters of this novel. It is true that Huck acquiesces in his nonsense, but he had done the same, it must be remembered, when the Duke painted Jim blue to pass him off as a combination of an Arab and King Lear. Just as Huck agrees to the Duke's stratagem because it promises to protect Jim from capture, he goes along with Tom's schemes in the hope that they will eventually lead to Jim's escape. In both cases his justification lies in his concern for Jim, for one must not forget that he is kept ignorant until the end that Jim has been free all the time. In other words, he accepts the silly machinery for the sake of what he believes to be the serious underlying motive. Nor does such acceptance preclude characteristic reservations--reservations which, in the latter case, are directed quite effectively at the Sunday-school attributes of Tom and his proceedings. One must also remember that Huck's position in the Phelps household is so precarious that it makes his dependence upon Tom's assistance virtually indispensable. Thus his acquiescence does not represent a compromise with the society he has repudiated. His judgment of it, unwavering throughout, is reaffirmed resonantly in the very last words 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 sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before."

Notes


3. Leo Marx, "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling, and *Huckleberry Finn*," *American Scholar*, 22 (1953), 435. As is evident, I am extensively indebted to this essay. My differences with Marx are merely a matter of relative emphasis.

4. Ibid., p. 431.

5. Ibid., p. 438.

6. Ibid., p. 432.


14. See above, p. 46.


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