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# *Realism, Romanticism, and Politics in Mark Twain*

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## *Mark Twain and Irving Babbitt*

*Imagination  
shapes society  
and politics.*

According to Irving Babbitt, the imagination plays an “all-important role in both literature and life.” For Babbitt, society and politics are shaped by the imagination, because it is within the context of the imagination that one’s reason and will inevitably must function. He explains that

man is cut off from immediate contact with anything abiding and therefore worthy to be called real, and condemned to live in an element of fiction or illusion, but he may . . . lay hold with the aid of the imagination on the element of oneness that is inextricably blended with the manifoldness and change and to just that extent may build up a sound model for imitation. One tends to be an individualist with true standards . . . only in so far as one understands the relation between appearance and reality—what the philosophers call the epistemological problem.<sup>1</sup>

For Babbitt, the development of a sound ethical center involves a degree of imitation and adherence to standards. What Babbitt has in mind is not slavish imitation of artificial external models but the careful building up of sound models for imitation. To accomplish this, one must be solidly anchored in reality and able to glimpse what Babbitt calls “the one in the many.” Claes Ryn has said that Babbitt’s solution to the epistemological problem is “to move closer to the truth above all by training the imagination, which is inti-

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<sup>1</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1991), lxxv-lxxvi.

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mately related to the will. This is done negatively by unmasking perversions, . . . positively by discovering and absorbing the visions of the imaginative master-minds.”<sup>2</sup> For Babbitt and Ryn, the work of artists and writers helps to shape one’s imagination and, hence, one’s will, which in turn further shapes the imagination. The shaping of the imagination may help one move closer to, or further from, truth. Works which move one toward truth are those which are anchored in reality. This does not mean that they flatly and indiscriminately portray a shallow empirical ‘reality,’ but that they possess a deep sense of the “oneness that is always changing.” Such works help men to “find . . . concrete modes of ordering their lives, individually and in social cooperation, which are directly experienced as conducive to happiness and a heightened sense of reality.”<sup>3</sup>

*Imaginative  
truth and  
error.*

If it is true that artists and writers have played, and continue to play, significant roles in shaping the American imagination, one of the most important influences must surely be that of Mark Twain. In addition to achieving enduring popularity and becoming a part of the American literary canon, Twain, and, in particular, his *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* have been the subjects of extensive discourse in many fields of study, including political philosophy. The purpose of this article is to offer a unique interpretation of Twain, one that approaches his work from a perspective informed by the thought of Irving Babbitt. Twain and Babbitt have something in common: they both viewed the romantic imagination, at least in some of its forms, as failing to move man toward truth. In *Rousseau and Romanticism* Babbitt offers an excellent account of the nature of the romantic imagination and its influence on modern thought and politics. Various literary scholars have observed that “Twain’s literary opinions have been tied to realism because they seem to be based on an ingrained hostility toward romantic literature . . . .”<sup>4</sup> Twain is typically classified as a member of the loosely defined ‘school’ of American Literary Realism associated with his friend William Dean Howells, although in recent years certain scholars have questioned the appropriateness of this classification. This

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<sup>2</sup> Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 180.

<sup>3</sup> Ryn, 178.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Davitt Bell, *The Problem of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 42.

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question will be left for others to pursue. What is important here is that Twain would have wholeheartedly agreed with Babbitt's contention that the romantic imagination is one of the "perversions" which must be "unmasked."

*Liberal  
democracy  
threatened.*

While Twain does not philosophically examine the subject of romanticism, Babbitt has written extensively in this area. Babbitt's objections to many common forms of romanticism derive from his view of man, a "classical" view which he regards as generally Aristotelian. He conceives of man's inner life as essentially a struggle between a lower and higher will; the higher will serves as an "inner check" on certain undesirable impulses of the lower will. While this higher will has a 'universal' quality, it must also be individually developed if it is to be successful in its task; the individual must find an ethical center with the aid of the imagination and sound models. Romantic literature, according to Babbitt, rejects "decorum" and, in doing so, fails to offer the reader sound models and standards, while "decorum is for the classicist the grand master-piece to observe because it is only thus he can show that he has a genuine centre set above his own ego."<sup>5</sup> Romanticism, in fact, not only fails to recognize the need to check the impulses of the lower will but, instead, exalts those expansive impulses. This unanchored romantic imagination is a danger to liberal democracy because "no amount of devotion to society and its supposed interests can take the place of this inner obeisance of the spirit to standards."<sup>6</sup> If liberal democracy is to survive, the moral imagination, which Babbitt associates with Burke and with classical (but not most neo-classical) art and literature, must prevail over the expansive Rousseauesque imagination which Babbitt associates with romanticism. According to Babbitt,

One may . . . regard the battle that has been in progress in the field of political thought since the end of the eighteenth century as being in its most significant phase a battle between the spirit of Burke and that of Rousseau. And this opposition between Burke and Rousseau will itself be found to turn, in the last analysis, on the opposition between two different types of imagination.<sup>7</sup>

A study of Twain provides an excellent opportunity to develop

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<sup>5</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 265.

<sup>6</sup> Irving Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 1979), 283.

<sup>7</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 91.

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an understanding of the nature and effects of the Rousseauesque romantic imagination identified by Babbitt. This article will both explore Twain's critical portrayal of romanticism and uncover the romantic, Rousseauesque origins of his own realism. While Twain offers valuable insight into romantic influences on human behavior, it will be shown that he nevertheless fails to possess the kind of classical or moral imagination which characterizes the "spirit of Burke" and that an uncritical reading of Twain's literature can lead the reader to a moral and philosophical dead end. In addition to offering insight into the role romanticism can play in politics, the study of Twain is important because of the likelihood that he has influenced, and continues to influence, American politics and society through the role that literature plays in shaping the imagination.

*Unreal  
realism.*

Before turning to Twain's literature it is important to make an observation about the man himself. In 1920 biographer Van Wyck Brooks remarked that "to those who are interested in American life and letters there has been no question of greater significance, during the last few years, than the pessimism of Mark Twain . . . his oft-expressed belief that man is the meanest of the animals and life a tragic mistake."<sup>8</sup> The "pessimistic cynicism" which Twain increasingly exhibited during his life has always been a problem for his biographers. Some have attributed it to personal misfortunes regarding family and finances, but, as Brooks points out, Twain experienced no more than his fair share of such troubles, and in general could be said to have led an enviable life. Moreover, despite his cynicism, Twain's personality is typically viewed as upbeat, and he described himself as a basically happy person; he certainly did not appear to suffer from anything like clinical depression. Brooks's explanation for the emergence of Twain's pessimism and misanthropy is that Twain was a frustrated artist who yearned to produce timeless, serious works of literature but ended up as a mere humorist, storyteller, businessman, and celebrity. Brooks also attempts a psychological evaluation of Twain and argues that he suffered from a kind of "arrested development." Brooks's approach to Twain is controversial, and ultimately it is not much more satisfying or convincing than more conventional views. Beyond this basic

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<sup>8</sup> Van Wyck Brooks, *The Ordeal of Mark Twain* (New York: E. Dutton & Company, Inc., 1920, Rev. 1933), 11.

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observation, this study will not attempt to analyze Twain's life or determine the relative accuracy of the various explanations offered by biographers for his cynicism and pessimism. This article will, however, argue that, regardless of whether Twain's pessimism can be viewed as psychological or circumstantial, it is also unquestionably philosophical in nature. By utilizing a 'Babbittian' approach it will be demonstrated that Twain's pessimistic misanthropy is intimately related to his particular brand of realism and to his relative success or failure in producing the kind of literature that helps develop the moral imagination and move one toward truth.

### *Tom and Huck: The Dynamics of the Romantic Imagination*

The contrast between the characters of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn is used by Twain to illustrate the romantic imagination. Tom has led a quintessential middle-class American existence. He attends school and church, is comfortable materially, and has an unexciting but stable, and certainly bearable, home life with his Aunt Polly. In contrast, Huck's life, though sometimes viewed as happy-go-lucky, has been by objective standards a nightmare. He has been raised in complete poverty by a worthless and shiftless father who is rarely present and often drunk, who sometimes treats Huck cruelly and has failed to have him educated, and who demonstrates a wide range of bad personality traits. When *Huckleberry Finn* opens Huck's situation has recently changed; he has been adopted by the Widow Douglas and has been going to school, and is adapting to his new situation. Still, Huck's personality and outlook remain basically the same as they were in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. One notable characteristic of Huck is that he seems to remain outside society, looking in. Another characteristic is his curious lack of a boyish imagination. It is as if the harsh realities of his life have forced Huck to grow up fast, and to focus exclusively on the practical concerns of the world immediately around him. Forced by necessity to live by his wits, Huck is constantly striving to work with the actual circumstances at hand. Huck's imagination actually functions remarkably well in helping him solve real-world problems; for example, he elaborately and convincingly fakes his own murder in order to escape from his father, and he is able to make up complex stories instantaneously when needed to deceive a stranger. However, Huck cannot suspend disbelief even for boyish play; he does not fantasize. In contrast, Tom is spectacularly imagi-

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native in the boyish, romantic sense. He has learned some history, geography, and religion, and, we are reminded again and again, he has filled his head with romantic adventure novels. This material has shaped Tom's worldview and feeds his fantasies, which he is constantly trying to act out.

Numerous examples exist in both *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn* of Tom's vivid imagination and Huck's corresponding flatness. Perhaps the best example is the "band of robbers" that Tom establishes at the beginning of *Huckleberry Finn*. Tom's vision for the gang is very specific, and shamelessly romantic: "We ain't burglars. That ain't no sort of style. We are highwaymen. We stop stages and carriages on the road, with masks on, and kill the people and take their watches and money." Some victims will not be killed but ransomed. Tom isn't sure what 'ransomed' means, but "I've seen it in books, and so of course that's what we've got to do." Women, of course, will not be killed but taken back to their cave, "and by-and-by they fall in love with you and never want to go home any more." An objection is made that "soon we'll have the cave so cluttered up with women, and fellows waiting to be ransomed, that there won't be no place for the robbers," but this objection, like all others, is dismissed by Tom. Such mundane practical considerations are irrelevant in Tom's imaginary universe, and in any case cannot override the authority of the romantic literature he has read. As Tom says, "Do you want to go to doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?" While Tom's imagination may be vivid, we discover that it is also slavishly imitative (26-28).<sup>9</sup>

Huck tells us that

we played robber now and then about a month, and then I resigned. All the boys did. We hadn't robbed nobody, we hadn't killed any people, but only just pretended. We used to hop out of the woods and go charging down on hod-drovers and women in carts taking garden stuff to market, but we never hived any of them. Tom Sawyer called the hogs "ingots," and he called the turnips and stuff "julery" and we would go to the cave and pow-wow over what we had done and how many people we had killed and marked. But I couldn't see no profit in it (30-31).

Huck Finn's interest is in "profit," not pretending; he decides "that all that stuff was only just one of Tom Sawyer's lies" (33). While

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<sup>9</sup> All parenthetical notes refer to Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1985).

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this lack of imagination in Huck is similar to that which he often displayed in *Tom Sawyer*, an interesting shift has occurred. In the earlier book Huck was the odd man out on issues of the imagination; the other boys welcomed the opportunity to share Tom's dreams. In this case, however, we are told that *all* the boys resigned; it is Tom who is the odd man out. The other boys are perhaps getting too old for this kind of imaginative play, but not Tom. He alone remains determined to re-enact the kinds of dramatic events he has read about in fiction. The change between the two books is significant; it signals that Mark Twain is now at war with the romantic imagination. As Babbitt and countless others have pointed out, children are romantics. Therefore, as a children's book, *Tom Sawyer* would have been a singularly inappropriate place for a vigorous attack on romanticism; Twain does address the issue there, but in limited and subtle ways. *Huckleberry Finn*, on the other hand, was written for adults, and here Twain would not hesitate to drive home his points.

The "half-educated man."

The character of Tom can be likened to the "half-educated man" employed by Babbitt to illustrate "the particular craving that is met by Rousseauistic idealism," while Huck is his foil, the "uncultivated man." According to Babbitt,

the half-educated man may be defined as the man who has acquired a degree of critical self-consciousness sufficient to detach him from the standards of his time and place, but not sufficient to acquire the new standards that come with a more thorough cultivation. It was pointed out long ago that the characteristic of the half-educated man is that he is incurably restless; that he is filled with every manner of desire. In contrast with him the uncultivated man, the peasant, let us say, and the man of high cultivation have few and simple desires. . . . But what is most noteworthy about the half-educated man is . . . that these desires are so often incompatible. He craves various good things, but is not willing to pay the price—not willing to make the necessary renunciations.<sup>10</sup>

Huck's desires are indeed remarkably few and simple. Tom, on the other hand, seems to want a great deal out of life. He wants adventure and romantic drama; he wants to be a hero, to be dashing, to be important, to have "style." Life in St. Petersburg, Missouri, does not seem to offer any of this; real adventure lies far away, among "A-rabs and elephants." But at the same time Tom remains committed to middle-American life. In fact, he requires Huck to

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<sup>10</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 194-95.

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conform to this lifestyle. Huck tells us that he originally was not going to remain with the Widow Douglas, but Tom told him he could only join the band of robbers “if I would go back to the widow and be respectable” (18). In Babbitt’s words, the half-educated man wants “to have his cake and eat it too.” If Tom were an adult, he could be called a hypocrite, and Twain had a marked distaste for hypocrisy. When considering whether to write a book about Tom Sawyer’s growing up, Twain concluded that “if I went on now and took him into manhood, he would just lie, like all the one-horse men in literature, and the reader would conceive a hearty contempt for him.”<sup>11</sup> Of course, one could argue that here Tom is only a boy, and therefore could not be expected to actually have adventures such as he imagines. Nevertheless, at the end of the book it is Huck who heads out for the Western territories, where many real-life adventures no doubt lie in store for him. While it was Tom who first talked about going out West, we end the book suspecting that he will actually head back to Aunt Polly, to “respectability,” and to the adventures of his imagination.

Twain paints an unflattering portrait of Tom and his imagination. We are all familiar with such childhood fantasies, however, and are prepared to dismiss them as harmless, even healthy. This creates a problem for Twain, for he wants to convince us that the romantic imagination is not just silly, but downright dangerous. In the latter part of the book, after Huck and the runaway slave Jim float down the Mississippi on their raft, Huck, through an unlikely coincidence, is reunited with Tom. Jim has been recaptured, and it so happens that he is being held on the farm where the boys are staying. Huck wants to free Jim, and Tom agrees to help. Of course, Tom immediately takes over. While freeing Jim could be accomplished quite easily, Tom is not about to pass up a golden opportunity to live out one of his fantasies. He has learned from his adventure books that the crude but efficient methods preferred by Huck and Jim are not suitable for a romantic hero. Tom therefore concocts a “stylish” but outlandishly elaborate scheme, prolonging Jim’s captivity. In addition to making the escape much more difficult, complicated, and dangerous than it needs to be, Tom also wants to bring Jim rats to train as pets in his “prison cell” and wants Jim to grow a flower and water it with his tears. Tom also designs for Jim a coat of arms, displaying impressive knowledge of heraldic terms

*Dreamers can  
hurt those  
around them.*

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Brooks, 25.

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and devices. Ultimately, Tom goes so far as actually to send Jim's captors anonymous warnings of the upcoming escape attempt, greatly increasing the likelihood that they will be caught.

Tom's antics mask the fact that this is deadly serious business. Jim originally ran away because he was to be sold and separated from his wife and children. His only hope to be reunited is to escape to freedom and then buy them. Although Tom professes to be helping Jim, his actual callousness is striking. For Tom, Jim's plight pales beside the imperative of attaining the romantic vision. Increasingly, it becomes evident that Tom has difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality. When the escape finally occurs, Tom gets shot, suffering a potentially serious wound. Even then, as Huck goes for a doctor, Tom tells him to "blindfold the doctor tight and fast, and make him swear to be silent as the grave, and put a purse full of gold in his hand . . ." (345). In the end, we discover that before leaving St. Petersburg Tom had learned that the Widow Douglas had set Jim free in her will; all of this was unnecessary. Tom has prolonged Jim's captivity and risked all their lives, purely for the sake of a romantic vision.

Behind the facade of boyish fun, Twain has accomplished a devastating portrayal of the dangers lurking in the romantic imagination. Tom feels compelled to be a romantic hero; of course, since Jim has technically already been set free, the best Tom can do is to be a fake hero, but even this illusion of heroism is so important to Tom that he practically becomes a villain in order to create it, forsaking the real interests of his own friends. The need to attain the romantic vision is allowed to overrule the demands of reality, resulting not only in foolishness, but in something bordering on cruelty. This latter part of *Huckleberry Finn*, full of Tom Sawyer's antics, is a jarring shift from the middle of the book, which had been dominated by Huck and Jim's trip down the river. The ending section is tiresome, and is often considered a failure. However, one commentator, Catherine Zuckert, argues that Twain had a definite purpose in mind: "he tries to separate the reader's viewpoint even further from the narrator's at the end—by making the reader sick and tired of all the boyish tricks. Failing to perceive the critical thrust of the disgust that Twain purposely engendered, however, most commentators have simply concluded that his art ran out at the end."<sup>12</sup> It is

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<sup>12</sup> Catherine H. Zuckert, *Natural Right and the American Imagination* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1990), 149.

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true that by the end of the book we begin to wish that Tom would just grow up. It can be argued, however, that it is not simply “boyish tricks” we grow sick of, but Tom’s romantic imagination which is fueling them. We recognize that the antics serve no purpose, and wish Tom would get done with them. Sandwiched between the book’s Tom Sawyer-dominated beginning and ending sections, Huck and Jim’s trip down the river, free of Tom and his romantic role-playing, is like a breath of fresh air.

Twain sees Tom Sawyer’s imagination as the shaper and driver of his will. On the one hand, Tom is hindered by his imagination, since it blurs the line between reality and fantasy and impairs both the effectiveness and morality of his actions in the real world, leading him into trouble. On the other hand, Tom’s imagination provides him with an unusual energy, spurring him to action. Adventure novels, supplemented by a romantic reading of history, have become Tom’s idealized models for life. He has become dissatisfied with his mundane life in St. Petersburg and instead wants to lead the life of an adventure novel; indeed, Tom wants to become the hero of an adventure novel. A problem exists here; the real world, at least the vast majority of the time, is not much like an adventure novel. Tom nevertheless wants to be important, special, a man with “style”; to accomplish this, he needs to re-create in the real world the romantic images that he has encountered. To re-create these images, he needs to secure the cooperation of others. Thus, Tom’s romantic imagination is manifest, in part, as a drive to dominate those around him. Tom develops a strong will. It is manifest not only in his drive to dominate but in his high level of activity and creativity, which gives him a certain charisma and makes him attractive to others. Tom is a natural leader, who achieves a certain ‘success’; but his plans end in disaster. Disaster results because the original vision was not solidly grounded in reality; the real world ultimately cannot conform to it. In fact, in putting the plans into action important real-world considerations are downplayed or ignored, because they conflict with the vision. Further, attempts to resolve the incompatibility between the romantic vision and the real world prompt Tom to take actions which are at best inconsiderate and at worst immoral.

*Visions need  
anchor in  
reality.*

What is particularly troubling is the response of Huck to Tom’s antics. For one, he does not seem to mind that Tom has deceived them. More important, Huck goes along with the elaborate, pro-

longed scheme to free Jim. Of course, Huck is unaware at that point of Tom's deception. Nevertheless, numerous opportunities exist for Jim to escape easily, but Huck encourages Jim to stick to Tom's romantic plans instead. Why does Huck do this? After all, although he is uneducated, he is clearly not stupid, and at times he demonstrates exceptional resourcefulness and good sense for a boy. Nevertheless, Huck allows Tom to dominate him; he acquiesces in Tom's romantic vision. Perhaps Huck has learned too well the art of meeting the world on its own terms. His adaptability serves him well under most circumstances, but makes him too accommodating in the face of a dominating will armed with a romantic vision. Unlike Tom, Huck himself has no delusions of grandeur, so he has little trouble deferring to others; in fact, one could say that he demonstrates an excessive level of humility. Even though Huck does not fully share in Tom's romantic vision, he is impressed by the elaborateness and drama of Tom's plan and automatically takes it to be superior to his own effective but humdrum suggestions. Obviously, one can see strong political implications in Tom's dominance, Huck's acquiescence, and the resulting disaster. It should be noted that Mark Twain was undoubtedly well aware of his friend William Dean Howells's "ideas about the connection between literary 'romanticism' and political tyranny."<sup>13</sup> Here Twain has made use of Tom Sawyer to demonstrate this connection.

Why are Huck and Tom fast friends, when they are so different? What do they see in each other? From Tom's perspective, Huck's ready submission makes it easy for Tom to live out his fantasies. Huck has no competing fantasies of his own, and serves both as supporting actor and audience for Tom. Moreover, Huck helps Tom to feel superior; not only does Huck let Tom lead, Huck plainly recognizes Tom as his social better. Also, as a romantic, Tom may be attracted to Huck's uniqueness. Unlike the other boys in town, Huck is an outsider to mainstream society and has lived a life very different from Tom's, an 'exciting' life that could be viewed romantically. Like "A-rabs and elephants," Huck is slightly exotic, and therefore worth associating with. It is a little harder to pin down what Huck sees in Tom. For one, it is certainly clear that Tom offers Huck friendship and that this is important. Huck has no family, with the exception of his terrible father, and is quite alone in the

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<sup>13</sup> Bell, 69.

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world; Tom offers a respite from Huck's aloneness. Also, Tom is entertaining. Although Huck does not really share Tom's romantic fantasies, he enjoys participating in the escapades. Anchored solely in his immediate physical world, Huck tends to get bored easily; this is seen when he is hiding on Jackson's Island. Although Huck does possess boyish curiosity and indulges it frequently, we have seen that he lacks a boyish imagination and is incapable of fantasy or reverie; this may make him more dependent on Tom for fun. Huck wants Tom's leadership. In any case, it is not Tom's romantic visions themselves, but Huck's desire to spend time with Tom, that prompts Huck to agree to assist Tom in indulging his imagination.

Babbitt has stated that "the poet who reduces poetry to the imaginative quest of strange emotional adventure, and the plain citizen who does not aspire beyond a reality that is too literal and prosaic, both suffer."<sup>14</sup> The friendship between Huck and Tom may ultimately reflect an intuitive awareness by Twain of a close relationship between these two approaches, and an understanding that neither boy is really approaching life in the right way. The uniting of Tom and Huck perhaps reflects a desire to bridge the gap between romantic and myopically utilitarian, empirical approaches to life, in the vain hope that the result will somehow be a complete person.

### *Aristocracy, Tyranny, and Complicity*

Twain further demonstrates the political implications of an excessively humble and acquiescing attitude in Huck's response to the 'duke' and the 'dauphin.' When these men join Huck and Jim on their raft, Huck lets them take over; he becomes their servant and addresses them with the various exalted titles they prefer. Of course, Huck really has little choice in this matter; he and Jim are but a boy and a runaway slave. The real significance lies in Huck's remarks to the reader:

It didn't take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it's the best way; then you don't have no quarrels, and don't get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn't no objections, 'long as it would keep peace in the family . . . . If I never learnt nothing else out of pap, I learnt that the best way to get

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<sup>14</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 88.

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along with his kind of people is to let them have their own way (166).

Huck's way is to 'go along to get along,' and he has no qualms about deferring to others if this is what is necessary to keep the peace. Resistance is not his way. He has learned this behavior through his need to deal with the capricious violence of his father; it has made Huck into a sheep. The broader implication here is that if a person with a strong will asserts himself and attempts to place himself over his fellows, the tendency is for others to simply let him have his way, even if they know better. People will not stand up for themselves, or for any democratic or egalitarian convictions; they instead take the path of least resistance and go along with whatever fiction is being perpetrated. As Twain once put it,

the universal conspiracy of the silent-assertion lie is hard at work always and everywhere, and always in the interest of a stupidity or a sham, never in the interest of a thing fine or respectable. . . . For ages and ages it has mutely labored in the interest of despotisms and aristocracies and chattel slaveries, and military slaveries, and religious slaveries, and has kept them alive . . . the silent assertion that nothing is going on which fair and intelligent men are aware of and are engaged by their duty to try to stop.<sup>15</sup>

*Noble aspiration equated with falsehood.*

Twain takes care explicitly to connect the duke and dauphin with real royalty and hereditary aristocracy. Huck tells Jim that "all kings is mostly rapscallions, as fur as I can make out," and later comments, "what was the use to tell Jim these warn't real kings and dukes. It wouldn't 'a' done no good; and, besides, it was just as I said: you couldn't tell them from the real kind" (199-201). Twain was a champion of democracy, and he saw a very strong connection between the romantic imagination and a kind of impulse which results in monarchy and in aristocratic rule. This 'aristocratic impulse' is not a desire for true self-improvement, but a desire for sham self-improvement achieved though setting oneself over others; it is an image of superiority. While Twain associates this tendency with the hereditary nobility of Europe, it is not actually confined to kings and dukes; Huck tells us plainly that his Pap is of the same type. We know, in fact, that, in addition to dominating Huck physically, Huck's Pap forbids Huck to learn to read, lest Huck be-

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Twain, "My First Lie, and How I Got Out of It," orig. pub. in New York *Sunday World*, Christmas 1899, anthologized in *Mark Twain on the Damned Human Race*, ed. Janet Smith (Clinton, MA: The Colonial Press, 1962), 30.

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come his better. He is furious to see a black who is a college professor. He also tells Huck that he was going to vote, "if I warn't too drunk to get there; but when they told me there was a State in this country where they'd let that nigger vote, I drew out. I says I'll never vote again" (50). Pap is unwilling to participate in the democratic process on an equal basis with others; he must maintain his superiority, a ridiculous requirement given his extreme poverty and complete lack of virtue. This connection of the aristocratic impulse to racial issues is another recurring theme in Twain's writings. It is primarily this impulse that prompts whites to keep blacks down; by such means they can demonstrate their superiority. In addition, it was this desire for aristocracy which engendered slavery in the first place. Moreover, the twisted desire for status prompts individuals to 'buy into' a complete social system; even if a man is not near the top, he has an incentive to preserve the power structure as long as he is superior to someone. Some people, like Huck and Jim, have no reason to support society's existing structures and conventions; they are at the bottom, view themselves as outsiders, or simply have no interest in social status. However, through oppression they have been taught meekness, and they remain passive, going along with the system "to keep peace in the family."

Twain saw a relationship between the aristocratic impulse and the latter nineteenth century's burgeoning romantic interest in the Middle Ages. *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* serves in part as Twain's vehicle to destroy romantic images of the past and make the Arthurian legends appear ridiculous. In the process, the medieval class structure is attacked, along with tradition and the Catholic Church. However, Twain is again careful not to let us think that it is only overseas nobility and old institutions that we need fear. Hank Morgan, the book's American protagonist, is no hero. He has nothing but contempt for the romantic world he has entered, so he sets himself up as "Sir Boss," takes over, and tries to remake the medieval world in a modern image. In some ways, he is Tom Sawyer grown up. This may seem unlikely, since Tom's vision was highly romantic, while Morgan's appears at first glance to be an aggressively 'modern,' anti-romantic view. His motivations, however, are closely aligned with Tom's, and not just because the boy and man both desire to dominate their surroundings. While for Tom "style" is all-important, for Morgan everything is done for "effect." It becomes evident that one of his primary motivators is a

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twisted sense of aesthetics; at the core, Morgan is just as much a romantic visionary as Tom. Morgan's drive to achieve his vision becomes increasingly violent, and this dark and depressing book culminates in an orgy of death and destruction made possible by the modern weapons that Morgan has built. Twain seems to be issuing a warning that the dangers of the romantic imagination are not receding with time, but growing, as man comes to have greater technological powers at his disposal. This parallels Babbitt's view of the dangers inherent in the modern experiment. Babbitt argues that scientific progress has given man new confidence while breaking his ties to standards of good and evil, and that "to work outwardly and in the utilitarian sense, without the inner working that can alone save from ethical anarchy is to stimulate rather than repress the most urgent of all the lusts—the lust of power."<sup>16</sup>

### *The Feud: Romanticism, Will, and Character*

In the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud episode in *Huckleberry Finn*, Twain explores the relation of the romantic imagination to the will in ways that move beyond the romanticism/tyranny formula. The Grangerfords, with whom Huck comes to stay for a few days, are a particularly 'aristocratic' southern family. The clan is large, owns several farms, and is headed by Colonel Grangerford, who

was very tall and very slim, and had a darkish-paly complexion, not a sign of red in it anywheres; he was clean-shaved every morning . . . and every day of his life he put on a clean shirt and a full suit from head to foot made out of linen so white it hurt your eyes to look at it. . . . He carried a mahogany cane with a silver head to it. There warn't no frivolishness about him, not a bit, and he warn't ever loud. He was as kind as he could be—you could feel that, you know, and so you had confidence (143-44).

The Grangerfords are embroiled with the Shepherdsons in a feud, which had begun thirty years ago over an obscure legal issue. This is a feud fought by "splendid young men" on "fine horses."

The Grangerfords have considerable respect for the Shepherdsons, and a Grangerford boy tells Huck that "there ain't a coward" among either family. The nobility of the Grangerfords isn't completely phony; in some respects one could argue that they truly are embodiments of such virtues as honor, courage, duty, kindness,

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<sup>16</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 331.

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and generosity. Their home is decorated with a mix of pictures of the American Revolution and dark, morbidly romantic charcoal drawings made by a member of the family. The effect is almost surreal when, amid the pleasant surroundings, Huck asks his new friend "Has anybody been killed this year, Buck?" and the casual reply is "Yes, we got one and they got one. 'Bout three months ago, my cousin Bud, fourteen year old . . ." (147). When Buck tells his father about shooting at a Shepherdson, the Colonel's eyes first blaze with pride, but he then gently admonishes his son for shooting from behind a bush. Eventually, we learn that a young man and woman from the two families are engaged in a secret love affair, and it happens that while Huck is visiting they run off and get married. Rather than take advantage of the opportunity to unite the families, open war breaks out, ending in the death of many family members including Colonel Grangerford and, most tragically, Huck's young friend.

Twain's treatment of the romantic imagination here is in some ways more sympathetic than in his other examples. The Grangerfords and Shepherdsons are not really trying to establish sham superiority or to dominate or 'lord it over' anyone else. Nor do they, like Tom Sawyer, spend their time in a world of fantasy. They have taken their romantic vision to heart and allowed it to shape their lives completely. Armed with their romantic ideals and with romanticized models such as the heroes of the American Revolution, the Grangerfords have developed high standards of behavior, and have in fact done quite a good job of living up to them. They certainly stand in marked contrast to the seedy and shiftless characters who tend to populate *Huckleberry Finn*. The Grangerfords, unlike Tom Sawyer, have in a sense actually become romantic heroes. They want to be noble, and understand that this requires not just surface appearances but a certain nobility of character; they have not tried to live out their romantic dreams 'on the cheap' as Tom has, with his mere illusions of heroism. The problem with the Grangerfords, of course, is the feud itself. They are knowingly and deliberately perpetuating a situation that places their lives, including the lives of young boys, at great risk, for no good reason. Why would otherwise good and reasonable people do something as shockingly foolish and immoral as this?

Something, it appears, has become more important to the Grangerfords than the lives of their family members. One possibil-

ity is that it is their hatred for the Shepherdsons, but there is no indication of this. Another possibility is that it is an exaggerated and twisted sense of honor, which stops them from coming to terms with their enemies. This may be closer to the mark, but Twain never actually brings out this point. More than anything, Twain creates the impression that the two families have made, in today's parlance, a 'lifestyle choice.' In this alternative lifestyle, neighbors shoot each other. They have chosen this life because it fits so well into their romantic vision. The feud provides a perfect opportunity for them to demonstrate virtues like courage, duty, and honor; it may even have helped them to build these virtues. Although their virtues have a certain degree of reality, something is rotten at the core. There is no compelling reason for the feud, and one cannot be truly virtuous while valuing human life so cheaply. Ultimately, the Grangerfords are living a lie; imagery has won out over reality. They are not fighting a just cause; the only 'cause' served by the feud is the re-creation of the romantic ideal. As in Twain's other examples, immorality results from the attempt to bridge the gap between impossible romantic imagery and the real world. Because the model that inspires the families is not firmly anchored in reality, it has skewed their priorities and warped their perception of reality, devaluing their lives and the lives of their children. They lack a sound ethical center, because, as Babbitt says, "there is no such thing as romantic morality"; the models upon which they have built their lives are not sound. Romanticism's potential for darkness and violence, signaled by the macabre drawings, emerges once again. By decorating their home with these drawings, the Grangerfords reveal that they have embraced death and darkness as an unavoidable component of their romantic dreams; they are willing players in the tragedy. However much the families may have benefited from the inspiration of the romantic imagination, they are ultimately its victims.

Twain has again demonstrated his belief that the romantic imagination is a powerful shaper and driver of the will. Man is inspired by romantic ideals, and the desire to realize these ideals spurs one to action in the world. In some cases, such as that of Tom Sawyer, this spurring to action is manifest in part as a drive to dominate others; this has strong negative connotations but is also an inspiration for leadership. In the case of the Grangerfords, the spurring to action is in part directed at the self, appearing as a de-

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sire to act nobly and to build sound character. Twain has shown us, however, that Tom Sawyer and even the Grangerfords are not sound models. If, then, Twain rejects those who are possessed by romantic dreams, what does he think of those who are not so possessed?

In general, Twain tends to depict the 'common folk' with contempt. Not long after the Grangerford-Shepherdson episode, Huck finds himself in a poorly kept "lazy town," where it appears that most of the men prefer to sit around idly, occasionally entertaining themselves by setting fire to a stray dog. One Colonel Sherburn, "a proud-looking man about fifty-five—and he was a heap the best dressed man in that town, too," kills an annoying but apparently harmless drunk who was threatening him (185). Eventually a mob forms outside Sherburn's house, and he addresses the crowd scornfully:

The idea of *you* lynching anybody. . . . Why, a *man's* safe in the hands of ten thousand of your kind—as long as it's day-time and you're not behind him. . . . The average man's a coward. In the North he lets anybody walk over him that wants to, and goes home and prays for a humble spirit to bear it. In the South one man, all by himself, has stopped a stage full of men, in the day-time, and robbed the lot. . . . You didn't want to come. The average man don't like trouble and danger. . . . But if only *half* a man—like Buck Harkness, there—shouts 'Lynch him, lynch him!' you're afraid to back down—afraid you'll be found out to be what you are—*cowards*—and so you raise a yell, and hang yourselves onto that half-a-man's coat tail . . . . The pitifulest thing out is a mob; that's what an army is . . . but a mob without any *man* at the head of it, is *beneath* pitifulness. . . . If any real lynching's going to be done, it will be done in the dark, Southern fashion . . . (190-91).

The crowd, of course, goes home. One cannot help but wish that a Grangerford or Shepherdson were there. They *are* men and would not hesitate to see justice served. They are *not* Twain's "average man." Tom Sawyer is not an "average man" either. Tom is of course a boy, so it is hard to place him in this situation, but he certainly likes trouble and danger, after a fashion. The townsfolk are not just cowards; they are lazy and cruel. They lack the drive to stand up to the Colonel, to make something of themselves, to cultivate virtue; they are base, passive, lifeless, and lacking in self-respect. Setting fire to a dog is not beneath them. As Sherburn indicates in his speech, the average man is not a 'real man.'

The "will to be a man," encompassing such traits as being a

*Contempt for  
"average  
man."*

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“man of action” and possessing a sense of moral responsibility as well as traditional masculine virtues, was central to the Howellsian realism with which Twain was familiar.<sup>17</sup> Is Twain putting an ironic twist on Howells and telling us that one must be a slave to the romantic imagination if one is to be anything like a ‘real man’? Twain seems to feel that without the romantic imagination spurring one on, one’s “will to be a man” is too weak to accomplish much. Are our only options then to be contemptible “average men” or to be Grangerfords and end in disaster? For Twain, it appears that one can either seek inspiration in romantic, unrealistic ideals which are unattainable, or have no ideals or inspiration at all and sink to an almost sub-human level. In neither case are we truly soundly anchored morally. But, are all models and ideals in which we can seek inspiration out of touch with reality, by definition? Is there no third way, no way in which one can learn to live one’s life in an ennobling manner, to build sound character, to make something of oneself, while remaining solidly grounded and meeting the world on its own terms, avoiding the pitfalls of romantic idealism? Is it impossible for one to perceive “the one in the many” and to move towards truth? These questions are met by Twain with a deafening silence.

### *Huck, Jim, and Morality*

*Twain’s  
Rousseauesque  
morality.*

Twain seems to distinguish quite sharply between being a ‘real man’ and being truly moral. Those inspired by romanticism may be real men, but they are nevertheless led into moral error. In contrast, Jim and Huck do not display the same kind of bravery or bravado, but, on occasion, they both behave not just particularly morally but, one could say, almost heroically. Jim abandons his escape attempt to stay with Tom when he is shot. Huck protects Jim, refuses to turn him in, and helps him to escape, even though he believes that he may go to hell for doing so, since Jim is after all the Widow Douglas’s legal property. In examining Huck’s and Jim’s actions, it is important to observe that they are unique characters in the novel; they, far more than any others, are portrayed essentially as standing outside of society looking in. There is a Rousseauesque suggestion here that man is inherently good, and that his moral instincts become corrupted in society. Another important Rousseauesque

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<sup>17</sup> Bell, 66.

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suggestion is that man's initial impulses are good, and that it is by second-guessing and controlling those impulses that one falls into error. Huck makes a better study than Jim in this respect, because we can see inside Huck's head. We see that Huck's moral actions are not the result of any effort on his part; they just come naturally. This contrasts sharply with Babbitt's "Aristotelian" view that one must work at morality. In fact, Huck's conscious efforts are actually working against moral action. Huck accepts all of society's conventions as gospel. When his own views on a particular matter conflict with those of society, Huck assumes his views are the bad ones, although he sometimes follows them anyway. Whenever Huck wrestles over the issue of helping Jim, his compassion urges him to stick by him, even though it is "wicked" to help a runaway slave and he may even go to hell. Nevertheless, he keeps trying to convince himself that he really should do the *right* thing, which is to turn Jim in. Huck, like everyone else, is participating in Twain's "universal conspiracy of the silent-assertion lie." However, Huck, living on the fringes of society, has not fully internalized the lie; as a result his better instincts sometimes win out.

What is Twain saying here about the source of moral action? Does a study of Huck's actions help equip us for life? Twain is certainly telling us that we should not blindly accept society's conventions as ultimate truth; this is helpful. What else? Perhaps that we should trust our 'gut' or follow our compassion. But Twain often casts a wary eye toward compassion, and he generally portrays common men as base, and not particularly moral. It appears that for Twain only the 'gut' of someone in something like a state of nature, one who has not been corrupted by society, is likely to be right. It is not even clear whether Twain believes that all men in a state of nature necessarily possess Huck's goodness. This question appears to be moot for Twain, since we have all presumably been corrupted by society and are not like Huck Finn. Since Huck's morality just flows naturally and does not have to be worked at, he is of limited value to us as a model. In fact, Huck is not even particularly desirable as a model for life in the real world, since, like others lacking in romantic inspiration, he suffers from meekness, passivity, and excessive humility. As a result, Huck's moral instincts do not always translate into moral action.

Does Twain suggest that one can learn, that one can improve? Huck does manage to learn some things; actually, he appears to be

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the only character in the book who learns anything. Everything Huck learns seems to center on Jim. Huck moves beyond his, and society's, stereotypical images of blacks and learns to respect and care for Jim. He discovers that Jim cares deeply for his family and comes to appreciate him as a real human being. Huck plays tricks on Jim, but then regrets it and decides not to do so again. We do see positive learning here, but it is extremely limited. Huck does not really seem to move toward any broader truths or to change as a character. He goes back to playing tricks with Tom Sawyer, and he never questions the legitimacy of slavery or of any of society's other conventions. When, in the latter part of the book, Tom tells Huck he will help him rescue Jim, Huck comments to the reader, ". . . I'm bound to say Tom Sawyer fell, considerable, in my estimation. Only I couldn't believe it. Tom Sawyer a nigger stealer!" (285). Huck never really demonstrates significant moral growth.

It is noteworthy that the only places where even hints of growth and of particularly moral behavior are demonstrated are in areas surrounding the relationship between Huck and Jim. This material is not typical of the book. While Twain is generally something like a 'realist' in style, it is widely recognized that he did not hesitate to switch to sentimentalism in special cases. This is one such case. Twain was opposed to the way blacks were treated in American society, and he wanted to drive home certain points in this regard and move the reader toward his own position. This sort of social preaching, more than a desire to get at deeper philosophical truths, was probably at the top of Twain's mind when he was writing this particular material.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it may be appropriate to discount attempts to draw broader lessons here, and to consider the lack of positive examples in the rest of the book to be more representative of Twain.

Twain's doubts about man's improvability are evident in the fact that, although he does sometimes engage in sentimentalism and in humanitarian causes, he goes out of his way to ridicule those sentimental humanitarians who believe that people are easily reformed. Early in the book, Huck's "Pap" is arrested, and the new judge, who does not really know him, decides to reform him:

So he took him to his own house, and dressed him clean and nice, and had him to breakfast and dinner and supper with the family,

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<sup>18</sup> Gregg Camfield, *Sentimental Twain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 11.

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and was just old pie to him, so to speak. And after supper he talked to him about temperance and such things till the old man cried, and said he'd been a fool, and fooled away his life; but now he was agoing to turn over a new leaf and be a man nobody wouldn't be ashamed of, and he hoped the judge would help him and not look down on him. The judge said he could hug him for them words so *he* cried, and his wife she cried again; pap said he'd been a man that had always been misunderstood before, and the judge said he believed it (42).

The scene goes on, with more earnest pledges and melodrama. Then, that very night Pap gets drunk, trashes the judge's guest room, crawls out the window, breaks his arm, and is found the next morning lying almost frozen. Huck tells us that "the judge he felt kind of sore. He said he reckoned a body could reform the ole man with a shot-gun, be he didn't know no other way" (44). One commentator writes that what Twain is showing is that "Americans generally tend to vacillate between an overly sentimentalized view of nature and the use of unadulterated force."<sup>19</sup> Reformers of humanity may begin with friendly persuasion, but end by getting the gun. It is important to expand on this analysis and understand why people "vacillate" this way—because they are suffering from another hopeless romantic vision. The reformist ideal for which they are working cannot be realized. The underlying implication here is that in Twain's view people generally cannot be changed, and, perhaps, cannot really even change themselves for the better.

*Friendly persuasion, then the gun.*

### *Twain's 'Realistic' Imagination*

As was observed in the first section of this article, the "training" of the imagination involves both a "negative" and "positive" dimension. Mark Twain has done an excellent job on the "negative" side, at least in the area of unmasking the romantic imagination and helping us understand its dangers. To the extent that Americans may have avoided some of the worst nightmares that can result from the influence of romantic visionaries, perhaps some thanks can go to Twain and to the members of the literary realism movement. Unfortunately, it is difficult to find much to applaud in Twain on the "positive" side. He offers us little in terms of role models or help in "finding concrete modes of ordering" our lives. One could say, in fact, that he doesn't even offer us hope. It appears

*No sound models to inspire reader.*

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<sup>19</sup> Zuckert, 138.

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that for Twain all men in society are essentially corrupt and only two options exist. The first option is to embrace the romantic imagination; this can help one develop a strong will, spur one to become a man of action, perhaps even inspire one to cultivate virtue and develop a kind of a noble character. It will not, however, provide one with a sound ethical center, but will end in immorality and disaster: the result of desperate attempts to make real an impossible dream. The second option is to reject the vision and become meek, passive, base. Under this model one may perhaps avoid the worst disasters, but one is not really a good person; in fact, one may be quite detestable. There appear to be no other options. Twain is very skeptical of the belief that one can really learn or change for the better. It is pointless for us to aspire to move toward truth or to rightly order our lives. If we insist on trying, perhaps Twain's characters offer us examples of what not to do, of how not to be. However, we are on our own from there. We have not been equipped for life.

Babbitt maintains that realism and romanticism are two sides of the same coin. What happens is that

the Rousseauist begins by walking through the world as though it were an enchanted garden, and then with the inevitable clash between his ideal and the real he becomes morose and embittered. Since men have turned out not to be indiscriminately good he inclines to look upon them as indiscriminately bad and to portray them as such. At the bottom of much so-called realism therefore is a special type of satire, a satire that is the product of violent emotional disillusion. . . . [W]hat lurks most often behind this pretense to a cold scientific impassiveness in observing human nature is a soured and cynical emotionalism and a distinctly romantic type of imagination. The imagination is still idealistic, still straining, that is, away from the real, only its idealism has undergone a strange inversion; instead of exaggerating the loveliness it exaggerates the ugliness of human nature . . . .<sup>20</sup>

*A disillusioned  
romantic.*

It is not difficult to recognize Twain here, or to see the philosophical origins of the cynicism and pessimism which became increasingly pronounced over the course of his life. While Mark Twain does not go quite so far as to view men as indiscriminately bad, or human nature as exclusively ugly, he comes close to such views; certainly, he expresses an attitude toward society that is quite similar to that of Rousseau. Brooks notes that Twain's "closest friends were accustomed to little notes like this: 'I have been reading the morning pa-

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<sup>20</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 105.

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per. I do it every morning, well knowing that I shall find in it the usual depravities and baseness and hypocrisies and cruelties that make up civilization and cause me to put in the rest of the day pleading for the damnation of the human race."<sup>21</sup> His misanthropy is that of the disillusioned romantic, and his 'realism' is actually a product of the romantic imagination.

According to Babbitt, "what binds together realism and romanticism is their common repudiation of decorum as something external and artificial."<sup>22</sup> Here we see the source of Twain's frustration. He is able to understand decorum only as the hackneyed romantic ideals which circulate in literature and life, or as the corrupt social conventions that derive from those ideals. Again one hears echoes of Rousseau, who complained,

*Realism,  
romanticism  
both repudiate  
decorum.*

What would I gain from changing course? If I were to adopt the teaching of my persecutors, should I also adopt their morality—the rootless and sterile morality which they expound so grandiloquently in their books or with bravado in their plays, but which never makes its way to the heart or the reason, or else the cruel secret morality, for which the other is only a mask . . .<sup>23</sup>

While Babbitt argues that one must distinguish between true decorum and artificial decorum, for Twain and Rousseau all decorum is artificial; it does not exist as something which can actually provide useful models and standards and thereby help one through life. Unlike Rousseau, however, Twain is skeptical about the universality of man's 'good' natural instincts, or at least he doubts that there is any way in which those instincts can emerge in men in society. As a result, Twain is at a dead end; self-improvement is impossible.

As Brooks observes, Twain denied free will. He compared man to a "coffee mill" and stated that man simply responds to external stimuli and "is merely a machine and entitled to no personal merit for what he does."<sup>24</sup> Brooks believes that Twain liked his mechanistic philosophy because it absolved him of responsibility for failing to develop and exploit his true artistic talents. Artistic talents aside, Babbitt would no doubt emphatically agree that a lack of personal

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<sup>21</sup> Brooks, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Babbitt, *Rousseau and Romanticism*, 105.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 60.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, 39.

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*Inner control  
not attained.*

responsibility is a big part of Twain's problem. Twain does not recognize the need to develop, or the possibility of developing, a morally anchored higher will which checks one's undesirable expansive impulses. Brooks comes close to hitting this on the head when he describes Twain as "a great genius, in short, that has never attained the inner control which makes genius great, a mind that has not found itself, a mind that does not know itself, a mind that cloaks to the end in the fantasy of its temporal power the reality of some spiritual miscarriage."<sup>25</sup> Brooks identifies a tendency toward megalomania in Twain, due to "that lack of inner control which makes one's sole criterion the magnitude of one's grasp over the outer world."<sup>26</sup> This is the great modern danger identified by Babbitt as arising from a Rousseauesque lack of "inner obeisance of the spirit to standards."

Babbitt observes that "the democratic idealist is prone to make light of the whole question of standards and leadership because of his unbounded faith in the plain people."<sup>27</sup> Twain was a political commentator from the start, and it has been said that the "first importance" of Twain is "the democratizing effect of his work."<sup>28</sup> Yet his portrayal of the common man became increasingly contemptuous throughout his career. Twain is a "democratic idealist" who has lost his "unbounded faith in the plain people." Originally blaming societal evils on would-be aristocrats and tyrants, Twain becomes increasingly aware that the common folk actually help perpetuate those evils and are in fact no better; they have failed him. Twain realizes that his faith in democracy is itself a romantic dream. Democracy aside, Twain has lost his faith in man. Able to conceive of the good only in terms of romantic ideals, Twain becomes disillusioned when they are not realized, and becomes deeply disappointed with what he habitually called "the damned human race." Building upon Babbitt's philosophy, Claes Ryn has stated that man must "cultivate, through proper willing, the kind of imaginative openness that embraces the real terms of life."<sup>29</sup> In failing to

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<sup>25</sup> Brooks, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Brooks, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Babbitt, *Democracy and Leadership*, 288.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard De Voto, "Mark Twain and the Great Valley," in *Mark Twain*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, Modern Critical Views series, 1986), 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ryn, xv.

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achieve this, Twain has failed to “build up a sound model for imitation” for himself or for those whose imaginations have been shaped by his work. A question exists as to whether the influence Twain has exerted on the American imagination and, thereby, on American political life has been a net benefit or detriment. On the one hand, Twain warned his readers of the dangers of romantic dreams; on the other, he provided them with little help in developing the “moral imagination” or in becoming equipped for life in the real world. He offered cynicism as the only alternative to romanticism, suggesting that attempts at moral self-improvement are futile. For Twain himself, it appears that his disappointment in humanity and society could lead nowhere philosophically but to despair.

*Road to  
despair.*