

Nothing remains the same. When a man goes back to look at the house of his childhood, it has always shrunk: there is no instance of such a house being as big as the picture in memory and imagination calls for... Well, that's loss.105

CHAPTER VI LIFE ON THE MISSISSIPPI

Life on the Mississippi is a work representing Twain's attitude towards the past and present of America: the idealized village society of his childhood and the emergent industrial America.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part was first written as a series of articles entitled "Old Times on the Mississippi". The articles were printed in the Atlantic Monthly, edited by Howells, in 1875. Later, Twain decided to extend "Old Times" into a book. Therefore, he made a trip down the river in 1882 in search for some materials to complete the book, which later was entitled Life on the Mississippi.¹⁰⁶ The first section of the book (chapters 3-20) is written from his reminiscences of his childhood and youth. The second half (chapters 21-60) is written from the observations of his actual trip, describing the river as it was in the 1880's. He then added two introductory chapters on the history of the river.

Twain began writing the book after he had laid aside the manuscript of Huck Finn. After his trip to the Mississippi in 1882, he started working on the second half and finished it in 1883, the same year when Huck Finn was published.¹⁰⁷

Twain's memory of childhood, of innocence, of boyish high spirits and the Happy Valley, is so deeply rooted in his mind that they provide the similar images of boyhood he puts in Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn and "Old Times". Twain begins the "Old Times" by portraying the eager fantasies of the boys -- he himself and his contemporaries -- which hint the same impulse of youthful ambition of Tom:

When I was a boy, there was but one permanent ambition among my comrades in our village on the west bank of the Mississippi River. That was, to be a steamboatman...
 When a circus came and went, it left us all burning to become clowns; the first Negro minstrel show that ever came to our section left us all suffering to try that kind of life; now and then we had a hope that, if we lived and were good, God would permit us to be pirates. ¹⁰⁰

These are wild, fantastic, boyish yearning of both Tom and Twain and his friends of boyhood. Tom's plans to gain public attention, especially Becky's by playing pirate, robber and walking in the church to attend his own funeral are exactly what Twain and his friends longed for. They envied the tub-engineer who won the hearts of all the girls in the village after his boat was laid up and he would come home

alive, renowned, and appeared in church all battered up and bandaged, a shining hero, stared at and wondered over by everybody.... ¹⁰⁹

Life on the Mississippi is first an autobiographical book relating Twain's experience as a pilot during the flush times of steamboating on the Mississippi River. The second half is a journalistic account describing his trip down the river, what he saw and how he responded to it.

Life on the Mississippi is a source-book for Huck Finn. What Twain sees along the river feeds directly into the novel he was working on and is indispensable to a reading of Huck Finn. In spite of much overlapping of material in the two books, the material is differently treated. Many incidents described in Life on the Mississippi reappear fictionalized in Huck Finn.

The obvious overlapping of the material is seen in chapter III of Life on the Mississippi. The chapter was, in fact, written for Huck Finn, but inserted in the book unchanged under the pretext of illustrating keelboat talk and manners. It is a set-piece of Southwestern humor which could be quite suitably fitted into Huck Finn. In a fog, Huck and Jim are floating down the river and pass Cairo without knowing it. When they begin to suspect the truth, Huck decides to swim down to the raft floating afar from them. He crawls aboard and hopes that the people there might talk about Cairo. Instead Huck hears tall talk and fanciful yearning of Ed Bob and the Pet Child of Calanity and others. An example of such talk is their discussion about the nutritiousness in the muddy Mississippi water. Ed says that the muddy Mississippi water is wholesomer to drink than the clear water of the Ohio. The Child of Calanity agrees with him and adds:

There is nutritiousness in the mud, and a man that drinks Mississippi water can grow corn in his stomach if he wants to... You look at the graveyards; that tells the tale. Trees won't grow worth shucks in a Cincinnati graveyard, but in a Saint Louis graveyard they grow upwards of eight hundred foot high. It's all on the account of the water the people drank before they laid up. A Cincinnati corpse don't richen a soil any. ¹¹⁰



This is prowar humorous tall talk of the frontier. It creates laughter through exaggeration. But the more significant element pointing out that the chapter should be inserted in Huck Finn is the symbol of rebirth, one of the central themes of Huck Finn. These people then discuss about the haunted barrel which they see floating towards their raft many times. Dick Allbright begins telling another tall tale of the haunted barrel. He says there is a baby lying in the barrel and it is his baby. Three years ago he choked his child which was crying. The child died, and he buried it in the barrel. The barrel kept chasing him for three years. At this time, one of these rivermen happens to come across Huck who hides himself among the shingle bundles. Thus, Huck is caught. Huck then suddenly assumes his new identity by telling them that he is Charles William Allbright, Dick's baby, whom they are talking about. They all laugh at his obvious lie, how can the baby grow this much in three years. Huck then once again changes his name to Alect James Hopkins and start telling them his life story. However, they stop him and drive him off the raft. This episode is similar to many episodes in Huck Finn. In which Huck takes

up different identities and keeps on inventing new stories to disguise the real one. Thus, it is a pity that the whole chapter is left out in Huck Finn.

The Mississippi River is the central element in both books. Twain's trip back to the river in the later chapters of Life on the Mississippi made a deep and melancholy impression on his mind. It is a trip back to the haunting river of his youth: the dignified world of pilots, a nostalgic picture of the vanished past. Huck's river is the symbol of Huck's spiritual renewal and his quest for freedom. Huck's trip down the river, like Twain's, allows him to encounter the unfortunate social order of the Southern river-towns. Both Huck and Twain feel disgust with it.

Twain's development of his narrative technique can be traced in these two books, especially the depiction of Nature. Twain's set-piece in Life on the Mississippi: the description of a "certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me"¹¹¹ is similar to the elaborate description of landscape in Roughing It:

A broad expanse of the river was turned to blood; in the middle distance the red hue brightened into gold, through which a solitary log came floating, black and conspicuous; in one place a long, slanting mark lay sparkling upon the water; in another the surface was broken by boiling, tumbling rings, that were as many-tinted as an opal; where the ruddy flush was faintest, was a smooth spot that was covered with graceful circles and radiating lines, . . . the shore on our left was densely wooded, and the somber

shadow that fell from this forest
 was broken in one place by a long,
 ruffled trail that shone like silver;
 and high above the forest wall a
 clean-stemmed dead tree waved a
 single leafy bough that glowed
 like a flame in the unobstructed
 splendor that was flowing from
 the sun.... I stood like one
 bewitched. I drank it in, in
 a speechless rapture. ¹¹²

This is not a truthful picture Twain saw with his innocent eyes when he still was a boy. In fact, it is exactly the sunset he sees in his old age when he returns ~~back~~ to the river. The feeling he expresses when he stands looking at the sunset: "I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture." is too poetic and elaborate for a small boy to express. Besides, Twain floats a log down the river and sets up a single dead tree with one bough just to compose the picture according to the false, romantic convention of landscape description. Similar to the landscape description in Roughing It, Twain inflates his language by using literary rhetoric, exactly the kind of writing Twain hated such as: "blood," "gold," "sparkling," "opal", "graceful", etc. Thus, he is still bound to the 19th century convention. His search for reality in expression is achieved in Huck Finn. Huck's description of sunrise on the river is fresher, more faithful and more realistic. Huck can smell the smell of flowers but he can smell the dead fish too. The description sounds exactly like a real boy's impressions and language.

In Life on the Mississippi, Twain's attack on the terrible

bad taste of the rich people's houses spread over both banks between Baton Rouge and St. Louis, in the chapter of "The House Beautiful" is direct and straightforward:

Every town and village along that vast stretch of double river frontage had best dwelling, finest dwelling, mansion -- the home of its wealthiest and most conspicuous citizen. It is easy to describe it:... two-story "frame" house, painted white and porticoed like a Grecian temple -- with this difference, that the imposing fluted columns and Corinthian capitals were a pathetic sham, being made of white pine, and painted;... brass door-knob-discolored, for lack of polishing.... On each end of the wooden mantel, over the fireplace, a large basket of peaches and other fruits, ... all done in plaster, rudely or in wax, and painted to resemble the originals -- which they don't.... Frantic work of art on the wall -- pious motto, done on the premises, sometimes in colored yarns, sometimes in faded grasses... spread open Daguerreo-types of din children, parents, cousins, aunts, and friends, ... all of them too much combed, too much fixed up and all of them uncomfortable in inflexible Sunday clothes of a pattern which the spectator cannot realize could ever have been in fashion;... Window-shades, of oil stuff, with milkmaids and ruined castles stencils on them in fierce colors... Bedrooms with rag carpets... Not a bathroom in the house; and no visitor likely to come along who has ever seen one. ¹¹³

Such words as "pathetic sham", "rudely", "frantic", "fierce colors" indicate directly how disgusted Twain is in seeing such a house.

Huck's account of the Grangerford living room is an ironic set-piece: Huck's ignorance makes him faithfully report their provincial taste and naively glorify their sham luxury and pseudo-culture.

In Life on the Mississippi, Twain accuses Sir Walter Scott of the destroyer of the Southern American culture. Scott's romantic works weakened the Southerners: they created reverence for rank and pride, a slave-holding society and an inflated literary style. Thus, the Southern culture was damaged beyond repair. In Huck Finn, the same account appears fictionalized in a symbolic way. The wrecked steamboat on which the thieves are trapped is named the "Walter Scott," and here Huck experiences greed, pillage and murder. The wreck sinking down into the river symbolizes the damage Southern civilization has been done by Scott's influence.

Again, the detailed description of the feuds between the Darnells and the Watsons in Life on the Mississippi is parallel to the Shepherds and the Grangerfords in Huck Finn. The former is detached description whereas in the later, Twain dramatizes the Southern aristocratic code through Huck, who has a direct experience in the fighting. It is Huck who pulls Buck's body from the river where Buck lies dead after being shot.

One of Twain's humorous devices is the mistreatment of the classics: Shakespeare's plays. In Life on the Mississippi, the Richard III swordfight and the blacksmith cub who patiently spent 30 years studying the part of Hamlet but can be only a promoted Royal soldier

are parallel to the King's and the Duke's fake shows of the Richard III swordfight scene which later reduces to the obscene performance of the "Royal Nonesuch" in order to appeal to the townspeople's low taste.

Thus, Life on the Mississippi provides rich material for Huck Finn. Twain's ability in drawing the same accounts from the travel-book and fictionalizing them into the novel marks his high achievement.

Life on the Mississippi contains the best account of steamboat piloting in American literature. Twain knows quite well the material to be put into the book since he writes from his own direct, personal experience. He feels sure he is the first one to lay open the world of steamboating glory and grandeur. Thus, he states the reason why he devotes the first section of the book to detailed account of the science of piloting:

I felt justified in enlarging upon this great science for the reason that I feel sure no one has ever yet written a paragraph about it who had piloted a steamboat himself, and so had a practical knowledge of the subject. If the theme was hackneyed, I should be obliged to deal gently with the reader; but since it is wholly new I have felt at liberty to take up a considerable degree of room with it. 114

The book is to riverboat piloting what Moby Dick is to whaling.

During the flush times of the Mississippi, every boy's strong aspiration was to be a pilot in order to meet glorious adventures. Twain, therefore, ran away from home and resolved to be a down-stream pilot. Under Bixby's guidance, Twain began to learn the science. Little by little, he knew the real nature of the job which was quite contrary to the romantic image he had imagined before. In order to be a pilot, many requirements were needed: the man had to be gifted with good memory in order to know every trivial detail of the river's physical appearance with absolute exactness, he had to possess quick judgment and decision; besides, he had to have cool, calm courage and not easily be shaken by any peril. After having learned the shape of the river, Twain begins to feel desperate for there are so many things to be remembered. He, then, decides to give up the job:

When I get so that I can do that,
 I' ll be able to raise the dead, and
 then I won't have to pilot a steam-
 boat to make a living. I want to
 retire from this business....I
 haven't got brains enough to be a
 pilot; and if I had I wouldn't have
 strength enough to carry them around.
 unless I went on crutches. 115

But Bixby cuts him short and tells the boy that he will be in charge of him:

Now drop that! When I say I' ll
 learn a man the river, I mean it.
 And you can depend on it, I' ll

learn him or kill him.

And he did keep his promise. Through him, Twain got to know the perplexities and technical knowledge of the wonderful science; and he helped to create self-confidence in the boy. Hixby's paternal care and good wishes towards Twain are the exact qualities of a father that Twain's hero searches for in Huck Finn.

Besides the detailed account of technical knowledge acquired for being a pilot, the book expresses great love for the river and for piloting. Twain, as well as other men of the same craft, takes pride in his career. Twain in his later years could not help lamenting the uniqueness of its freedom and its dignity:

I was some years a Mississippi pilot and familiarly knew all the different kinds of steamboatmen -- a race apart and not like other folk.¹¹⁷

I loved the profession far better than any I have followed since and I took a measureless pride in it. The reason is plain: a pilot, in those days, was the only unfettered and entirely independent human being that lived on the earth.... In truth, every man and woman and child has a master, and worries and frets in servitude; but, in the day I write of, the Mississippi pilot had none.¹¹⁸

Twain's trip back to the river is a traumatic experience, an expulsion from the Happy Valley. Everywhere he goes there

are changes and "improvements" in the river-towns: new contrivances in machinery on the steamboats, electric lights, the government's snag-boats to get rid of the peril from snags, naval uniforms on the Mississippi, the factory towns of Helena and Memphis with their growing populations and wealth, the ice-factory and the expanding cotton mills at Natchez, new land companies that would establish equitable relations between the planters and the Negroes, etc. Twain's vigilant eyes are ready to perceive any change that occurred anywhere. At the same time, he sighs at the traces of the vanished past of the bygone days bygone. The dignified world of pilots has passed away. With it, the profession, the power, the swell airs and graces of the river-men are gone. Only some corpses of steamboats are left along the river. Twain walking along the empty wharf, and encountering only boundless vacancy expresses his feeling: "This was melancholy, this was woeful....Here was desolation indeed."¹¹⁹ In fact, Twain feels himself a stranger when he goes to St. Genevieve, the place which he was familiar with in his childhood. He is lost to find many changes so that the place has become a new town which petrifies him:

There were no evidences of human or other animal life to be seen. I wondered if I had forgotten the river, for I had no recollection whatever of this place; the shape of the river, too, was unfamiliar; there was nothing in sight anywhere that I could remember ever having seen before.

I was surprised, disappointed, and annoyed....I couldn't remember that town; I couldn't place it, couldn't call its name. So I lost part of my temper.¹²⁰

Twain's ambiguous feeling towards the emergent industrial America is clearly seen in the book. He approves of the scientific progress. At the same time he hates it since it takes away the past, the world of childhood, the Happy Valley which he loves. Thus, the trip back to the river is a melancholy experience to him.

In Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn innocence is set up as a tool to combat evil. The innocence in Tom's world conquers all because the evil is make-believe. The book lays stress on the idyll of childhood, the Happy Valley. At the end the world of innocence is triumphant and Tom is proclaimed hero. As to Huck, he encounters real evil and is clever enough to cope with it. But Twain believes evil is part of society. At the end Huck can only remain pure and free by lighting out for the territory.

In Life on the Mississippi, innocence, experience in the pilot world are set in opposition to each other. The pilot loses his innocent romantic attitudes toward the river after he has gained experience in piloting. His fantasy world vanishes as he gradually learns the nature of the job; to read the wonderful book of the river:

The face of the water... became a

wonderful book -- a book that was a dead language to the uneducated passenger, but which told its mind to me without reserve, delivering its most cherished secrets as clearly as if it uttered them with a voice. And it was not a book to read once and thrown aside, for it had a new story to tell every day.¹²¹

To the eyes of the passenger, the river reveals beauty and charm. Whereas to the trained eyes of the pilot, "a peculiar sort of faint dimple" warns him of some approaching "hideous" dangers.¹²² After having gained such knowledge, the pilot loses his youthful romantic image of the river:

But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river. I still kept in mind a certain wonderful sunset which I witnessed when steamboating was new to me.... I stood like one bewitched. I drank it in, in a speechless rapture.... But as I have said, a day came when I began to cease from noting the glories and the charms which the moon and the sun and the twilight wrought upon the river's face.... Then, if that sunset scene had been repeated, I should have looked upon it without rapture, and should have commented upon it, inwardly.... "This sun means that we are going to have wind tomorrow; that floating log means the river is rising.... the lines and circles in the slick water over yonder are a warning that that

troublesome place is shoaling up dangerously....No, the romance and beauty were all gone from the river. All the value any feature of it had for me now was the amount of usefulness it could furnish toward compassing the safe piloting of a steamboat. Since those days, I have pitied doctors from my heart. What does the lovely flush in a beauty's cheek mean to a doctor but a "break" that ripples above some deadly disease? Are not all her visible charms sown thick with what are to him the signs and symbols of hidden decay? Does he ever see her beauty at all, or doesn't he simply view her professionally, and comment upon her unwholesome condition all to himself? And doesn't he sometimes wonder whether he has gained most or lost most by learning his trade?¹²⁵

Thus, in order to gain one thing one has to sacrifice another. Before learning the shape of the river, the pilot as well as all other passengers, was enchanted by the natural beauty of sunrise on the river. But all the charms and romantic and fanciful sides of the river ceased in his eyes as he gradually learns the terrible dangers close at hand on the river itself. Every trivial change on the surface of the river means something new to him related to the technical knowledge of piloting. Every pilot takes pride in the knowledge and career which distinguish him from other laymen for pilots see the river beyond the others. Similarly, doctors see through the flush in a beauty's cheek traces of hidden disease. Yet, deep down in their minds, there is a doubt whether they gain or lose by learning their trade. Both

doctors and pilots can't go back to their former fanciful world where every sign of beauty enchanted them. The innocence and beauty are gone forever.

In sacrificing innocence for experience, one is uncertain whether he gains or loses most. The last sentence of this passage ends with a question mark, and the question is unanswered. Twain leaves the problem in suspension. He himself is at the point in his career when there is total balance between the two and no need to choose one over the other. Something is lost, something is gained, innocence is on one hand, experience on the other. There is no need to make a choice. At the same point in his career and in an exactly analogous way in Huck Finn, Twain is able to assess American society brilliantly, remorselessly, and realistically, and yet retain his faith in the saving grace of his innocent protagonist.

And yet it is clear at this point in tracing his works that he will not be able to maintain the balance hereafter. Before this, Twain believed in goodness and innocence. He voted for them and made them victorious in Tom's world. Later in Huck Finn, he accepted the existence of evil in the world. But the evil does not affect Huck much for he has the courage and agility to circumvent it, even to emerge purer for his encounter with it (cf. his final sympathy with the Duke and the Dauphin, scoundrels if there ever were any). He manages to preserve his innocence, still triumphant at the end, but escape is his only

refuge from the evil in man and in society. In the passage in Life on the Mississippi quoted above the balance is even more sharply defined. The passage illustrates one of the central dilemmas in Twain's work. He knows well that pilots cannot go back to their former world to retain their innocence, for it is lost forever. But the confrontation between innocence and experience of evil will remain an obsessive theme for the rest of his career. His trip back down the river was a traumatic experience. It took away some of the creative vitality in his imagination of his idyllic world of childhood. Thus, the Happy Valley was exploded. The path of the later works could only be a darkening one.