

Report on one passage from the book illustrates twain's attitude toward several a...

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Analysis of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

There are a few main characters in Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Obviously, as the title character, Tom Sawyer is a main character. He is a boy living in St. Petersburg, Missouri, with his sister and half-brother, all orphaned and living with their Aunt Polly. Twain does not give much physical description of Tom, but he seems very active and physically fit, probably around 12 years old or so. He hates wearing shoes or the clothes he has to wear for church. He has no use for school or religion, preferring to play games with his friends. He is quite adept at manipulating people into doing what he wants them to do. He gets into fights with other boys at times, but can also be kind, mostly to his friends and to women or girls he likes, such as his aunt and Becky Thatcher. Huckleberry Finn is another main character, who again is not much described physically other than to note that he dresses in worn-out clothes that do not fit him because his father is a drunkard who does not provide much in the way of food, clothing, or shelter. He likes to play with the other boys but wants to be left alone by society in general. Joe Harper is the third boy who becomes a member of Tom's small gang of friends who want to become pirates or do something exciting. Joe seems a more passive personality than either Tom or Huck; he is easygoing but also wants a more adventurous life. He is the only one of the three boys who lives with his mother.

The book is set in the fictional town of St. Petersburg, Missouri, generally considered to correspond to Twain's own childhood home of Hannibal, Missouri. In the 1876 preface to the novel, Twain said the book was set 30 to 40 years previously, putting the time around 1836 to 1846, prior to the U. S.

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Civil War. The story is told through an omniscient narrator, who describes the actions of the three boys and other characters. Twain uses a narrative style of rising action, followed by falling action, followed by another sequence of rising and falling action. For example, there is the rising action when the boys observe the murder, followed by the falling action of them deciding not to tell anyone about it, the rising action of the boys running away to the island and attending their own funeral, followed by the falling action of Tom comforting his aunt, and the rising action of Tom and Becky getting lost in the cave, and so forth. However, the overall plot arc seems to revolve around the murder, because that point is not finally resolved until the climax late in the novel when Tom testifies at the trial, and then still later when Injun Joe is discovered to be dead, trapped in the cave.

Although there are many themes in the novel, one major one appears to be that some people do not thrive in the artificial institutions that society creates, such as school and religion. Tom does not do well in school and loathes church, but he is perfectly capable of reading and enjoying books and stories about pirates and robbers. Huck Finn had not attended school or church until well toward the very end of the novel, and he finds it suffocating, to the point that he runs away rather than continue attending school or church. Tom is able to convince him to return only by saying that some education is necessary for Huck to be part of their proposed gang of robbers.

As the service proceeded, the clergyman drew such pictures of the graces, the winning ways, and the rare promise of the lost lads that every soul there,

thinking he recognized these pictures, felt a pang in remembering that he had persistently blinded himself to them always before, and had as persistently seen only faults and flaws in the poor boys. The minister related many a touching incident in the lives of the departed, too, which illustrated their sweet, generous natures, and the people could easily see, now, how noble and beautiful those episodes were, and remembered with grief that at the time they occurred they had seemed rank rascalities, well deserving of the cowhide. (Twain Kindle Locations 2668-2674).

This passage is taken from the sermon given when the town believes Tom, Huck, and Joe have drowned. Twain points out how much people's attitudes toward someone changes when they believe that person to be dead, attributing positive characteristics to them that were either not really there or had been ignored. The same clergyman who had no use whatsoever for Tom now sings his praises, displaying the hypocrisy that Twain commented on in the novel.

The strengths of the novel are its insightful examination of human nature and its ability to parody some of society's conventions that Twain thought ridiculous, such as the speeches given at the end of the school year, the religious conventions of having children memorize Bible verses to get prizes, and the schoolteacher who demands perfect behavior from the children but is too hung over to draw accurately. The primary weakness, in my opinion, is that Twain described the novel as one for children, but it is really better appreciated by adults who can understand Twain's snarky tone when he does make fun of social conventions.

The title of the book is significant because it draws attention to the

adventures that occur in the book to the main character. It sets expectations that this is not, on the surface, a cerebral novel where the main character contemplates the meaning of his life. The novel focuses on boys who deliberately choose to have adventures, even when those adventures are dangerous, rather than be like the other people they perceive as sheep willingly doing what they are told to do. The boys reject the quiet life; they want to be pirates or robbers and have exciting lives.

One of the major elements of symbolism in the novel is the river. When the boys run away from home, they take a raft on the river until they come to a small island. The river represents the escape from the confines of society; it is literally their escape route. The river is wild and untamed, diametrically opposed to the rigidly enforced rules of society, such as regular baths, schedules, school, and church, that the boys want to escape. When the boys are on the island, they enjoy swimming in the river and fishing from it, even though they eventually grow tired of those activities. At that point in their lives, the river symbolizes escape from the mundane that they are not quite ready to embrace fully; they may do so when older.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is generally regarded as less important than its sequel, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, because the sequel focuses more on slavery and racism as part of the culture. However, Tom Sawyer is important because it establishes Twain's style of storytelling. It also serves as social satire, in that Twain humorously poked fun at many elements of human society, such as education and religion. It is interesting that Twain accomplishes this in a book that was supposedly aimed at children; many novels written for children might have had the boys come to a bad end

because they disobeyed their parents and were bad students, but Twain paints Tom and Huck as heroes whose ability to think for themselves and reject some societal conventions is admirable. Twain effectively uses them as anti-heroes.

According to the biographical information contained in the introduction to the novel (Twain Kindle Location 1-522), Twain worked as a printer and editor, in addition to learning to pilot boats along the Mississippi River. He is often described as a humorist, but he also opposed slavery (despite having fought on the Confederate side briefly) and was very critical of organized religion, as revealed in his autobiography and implied in many of his works, including Tom Sawyer. Twain's love of the river is revealed throughout Tom Sawyer, especially its use as a symbol of escape from society. His dislike of organized religion shows through his constant jibes at how boring the church sermons were and how foolish the very religious characters are. For example, Aunt Polly is depicted as very religious, but she believes in quack medical remedies and alternates between punishing Tom for minor infractions and overindulging him for sentimental reasons. Twain's attitude toward slavery is conveyed by the offhand derogatory comments several characters make about slaves, but this is fairly minor element in Tom Sawyer and one Twain chose to address at length in Huckleberry Finn.

Works Cited

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. New York: Cambridge World Classics, 2010. Kindle Edition.