

Literature analysis of novel "tom sawyer" by mark twain

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Mark Twain's celebrated novel *Tom Sawyer* (1876) has generally been considered by literary critics to slightly less accomplished on a technical and thematic level than its purported sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, (1885).

Although many reasons for this discrepancy in the level of critical reception of the two works may be reliably cited, one of the contributing factors to the critical reception of *Tom Sawyer* both on its initial publication in the nineteenth century and during its present status in critical estimation is the function of literary realism. In short, because *Tom Sawyer* represents to most literary critics a "less sophisticated" execution of Twain's literary technique, it also functions as a less developed example of Twain's expression by way of literary realism.

Important, also, is that fact that Twain was and is viewed by critics as one of America's foremost realist writers and Twain's realism is regarded as having had a liberating influence on American literature as a whole: "It led him to make use of the vernacular and ultimately to develop popular speech, as an instrument for character portrayal and effective narrative, to near perfection," (Long 102) which, in turn, led to the first authentically American idiom in fiction.

However, as in *Huckleberry Finn*, the aspects of realism (or verisimilitude) which permeate *Tom Sawyer*, also function as "scaffolding" for mythic ideas and iconographic expression which directly contradicts the purpose and function of literary realism itself. In essence, by regarding realism in *Tom Sawyer* not a governing principle of Twain's aesthetic, but rather as a tool or

a literary device which is used to convey a deeper theme or aesthetic -- namely romanticism -- can be identified.

In Twain's case, the romantic or idealized strains of his theme in Tom Sawyer relate directly to the myth of American expansion and prosperity which were as prevalent cultural fascinations in nineteenth century America as they are in twenty-first century America.

Before Tom Sawyer itself can be examined in light of its use of realism as a literary device, it is important to restate what the (critical) understanding of literary modernism is really all about and what literary modernism meant to the writers who comprised the movement in its earliest stages and what literary realism means to contemporary literary critics, and specifically those critics who have turned their energies to explicating Tom Sawyer.

It should also be pointed out that Twain presents special problems even for the most studious and energetic of critics because his work is founded, first and foremost upon humor, which is a very difficult literary premise to quantify and define in critical terms. Despite the fact that "criticism is notoriously helpless in the presence of writing that is really funny" (Smith 1), specific aesthetic principles and influences can be rooted out and separated to some extent from the over-riding satirical vision in Twain's work.

Any attempted critical understanding would be greatly aided in first accepting Twain as a literary realist as this designation is the most expedient as to opening a "clear window" into the purported purpose and themes of Twain's writings. Literary realism comprised an artistic response to the changing social conditions beginning in the 19th century which saw a

dominant rise of industry, science, and rationality in western culture. Realism attempted to develop a literary idiom which was able to convincingly portray the actual events and circumstances of life.

The movement toward realism can be seen as an artistic mode of grappling with changing and frightening circumstances of western culture. In addition to seeking out themes of social significance, writers such as Zola, Dos Passos, Eliot and Flaubert -- advanced a narrative technique which " jettisoned rhetoric--a stylized language of elevated expression designed to demonstrate that the writer had mastered the tradition of polite letters--for everyday speech, (Borus 22) so that highly-stylized narratives still evoked the realism of everyday speech and everyday life.

Part of the technique of literary realism involved the use of dialect, sometimes extensively, to create the sense of verisimilitude which was essential to the realist aesthetic. The combination of real-world dialect and the studies technique of the realist writers resulted in a unique blend of linguistic styles which resulted in a generating a set of readers who considered themselves " cultivated readers of dialect, " (Barrish 37). because realist writers sought to evoke in extensive detail, the living settings of their works, many realist writers were committed to regionalism -- that is, they wrote about the world they experienced directly.

Examples of this are Faulkner who wrote extensively about a fictional Southern county which was based on counties which actually existed. Realist writers desired to create fiction that felt and read as close to real life as possible in order to allow readers to " see" and experience aspects of life

which would otherwise have remained unknowable to them. With this bit of critical history in mind, one further aspect remains quite important relative to Twain and that is the fact that "realism as a guiding principle of criticism" (Smith 5) has been rigidly and thoroughly applied to Twain's work with the resulting conclusion that "shortcomings [...] have led to its gradual abandonment during the last quarter of a century on both sides of the Atlantic." (Smith 5). What are these shortcomings, specifically? The answer to that question is complex and lies in the seemingly comprehensive nature of Twain's realism. The fact that Twain's realism is distinct from naturalism or purely journalistic writing is his sophisticated employment of realism as a device, rather than as a guiding principle of theme or overall technical approach.

In other words, because "Mark Twain's realism does not stop at externals" (Smith 29) that same realism must by necessity engage emotional, psychological, and "spiritual" (or mythic) concepts and identities which are by definition elusive of any "realistic" depiction. By delving deeper than "externals" Twain must, by necessity, abandon verisimilitude as a guiding aesthetic principle and instead accept it as a device, like a single color on a painter's palette.

In order to illustrate this somewhat elusive point, it must be emphasized that Twain's external realism is devastatingly powerful and accurate, almost "photo-realistically" so. Twain is obviously quite capable of conveying "the special atmosphere of each characteristic environment" (Smith 29) and from this mastery of description of the external world, the reader is led to "trust"

that Twain's excursions into the "inner" world will be just as faithfully rendered and just as obviously based on "reality."

"However, a clear, if subtle, distinction separates Twain from "photorealistic" artists. A key aspect to Twain's particular use of realism is that "His purpose is not to say everything, nor even to present everything in an objective way" (Smith 30) but render the impression that what is described, whether it be a river, or a young boy's stream-of-consciousness inner-monologue, is a faithful representation of the actual world.

By rendering the impression of realism rather than a rote "copy" of nature, "Twain allows himself to pursue his inquiries into reality with varying intensity, to support his observations with a wider or a narrower range of evidence" (Smith 30) and, by doing so, achieves an acumen which is capable of "misleading" the reader into mistaking what is actually a mythic or romantic impression as a realistic observation.

To demonstrate this concretely, a single mythic aspect of Tom Sawyer can be isolated and compared with Twain's realistic prose-style to indicate the duality of his narrative idiom, where realism generally indicates, if at an oblique angle, a mythic undertone. For example, the "treasure-hunt" subplot of Tom Sawyer conveys the uniquely American myth of "striking it rich" through pure luck and adventure.

This is in fact a very durable American myth, the myth that anyone despite his or her stature in life can "hit pay-dirt quickly, blindly, almost accidentally" (Coulombe 16) and like Huck and Tom become "rich entirely by good luck" (Coulombe 16). Such a myth was used by Twain not only in

Tom Sawyer and in his other of his fictional works, but also as an attribute of his own author-persona.

Twain cultivated a deliberate distortion of his biography by attempting to further the notion that his accomplishments were "effortless and intuitive—a rustic genius rising naturally to the top" (Coulombe 16). In this case, literary biography plays a contributing role to thematic explication because Twain's true experience belied the myth he inserted into Tom Sawyer regarding wealth and the pursuit of adventure. In reality, Twain was a careerist "who worked diligently, even desperately, to earn success and money" (Coulombe 17).

The aforementioned biographical detail is mentioned merely to illustrate that Twain, had he been truly interested in being a literary realist and depicting the authentic world he had experienced would have obviously dismissed any mythical "treasure hunt" ending in blind, wild fortune as being over-the-top romantic, and perhaps even foolish. At this point, it is useful to examine the manner by which Twain attempts to insert verisimilitude into what is essentially a mythic fantasy.

he does so retrospectively by describing what appears to be a very convincing description of the reaction of the little town of St. Petersburg to the boys' discovery of treasure: THE reader may rest satisfied that Tom's and Huck's windfall made a mighty stir in the poor little village of St. Petersburg. So vast a sum, all in actual cash, seemed next to incredible. It was talked about, gloated over, glorified, until the reason of many of the citizens tottered under the strain of the unhealthy excitement.

Every "haunted" house in St. Petersburg and the neighboring villages was dissected, plank by plank, and its foundations dug up and ransacked for hidden treasure--and not by boys, but men--pretty grave, unromantic men, too, some of them. (Twain 285) This attempt to balance a romantic myth with a deliberately anti-romantic description of the aftermath of the discovery is thorough right down to Twain's choice of diction.

The word "unromantic" is specifically clever and powerful in forwarding a sense that Twain's treasure hunt is grounded in reality and not in a boyish, culturally incited fantasy. Every detail seems to have been accounted for right down to the observation that "The village paper published biographical sketches of the boys" (Twain 285) which made them celebrities. Here it is interesting to note that Twain's romantic urge and his urge to restrain his story in verisimilitude are operating at equal strength and simultaneously.

If Twain is capable of obscuring what are essentially romantic myths beneath a veneer of realism as was demonstrated by the preceding description of his expression of the "rags to riches" myth of America, what other myths might be discovered under the narrative surface of Tom Sawyer? Obviously, because Twain embraces the presence of violence in American as a part of his role as a realist writer, depictions of violence and of death in Twain deserve special attention in regard to the myths they may or may not express beneath the highly detailed and unusually accurate level of narrative description employed by Twain.

While it is true that -- for Twain "The sight of a pistol blazing or knife flashing, followed by the red blood gushing from a death wound, was

actuality " (Long 99) it is also conspicuously true that Twain's depiction of violence in Tom Sawyer is " not prevailing, and as in the realism of Howells," and that in Twain " happiness, not sorrow, was the general rule" (Long 99) despite the actuality of violence and death in human experience.

One might rightly ask: how is such a proposition: that violence and death do not preclude human happiness based in realism? Plainly, one does not require an observational and descriptive acumen that is equal to Twain's to readily perceive that violence and death in the real world often do preclude human happiness. Clearly, Twain's depiction of violence, like his depiction of material ambition and the attainment of wealth, partakes of a mythic rather than realistic expression.

This mythic appraisal of violence and human mortality allows Twain to establish the entire framework of Tom Sawyer on the mythic scaffolding of death and rebirth. In fact, " The Adventures of Tom Sawyer is constructed on a loose framework whose major elements include games of death and games of resurrection" (Aspiz) and these " games" are purely mythic rather than realistic both in conception and execution.

Because it is mythic violence and mythic death that Tom interacts with in the novel, he and the other characters depicted in the novel seem to " exist on the manic edge beyond which lurks the menace of destruction and the unknown" (Aspiz) but the teetering over and falling " over the edge" which is repeatedly depicted by Twain in Tom Sawyer results in " the illusion that all experience is ultimately reducible to entertainment" (Aspiz).

Imagination is stronger than the mere presence of death and its associated pains in Twain's fictional world, which is propelled in part by startlingly realistic descriptions and observational details. The result is paradoxical: Murder, grave-robbing, the withholding of life-saving evidence, impulses to suicide, simulated disasters, numerous close brushes with death, the violation of sanguinary oaths, wrenching fear and guilt, and numberless suppressions of the truth and miscarriages of justice are all transformed, through masterful orchestration and narrative control, into entertainment.

(Aspiz, 108) Of course it is the power and depth of Twain's "masterful orchestration and narrative control" which drives the perception on the reader's behalf that Twain's mythic expressions of pain, death, and sorrow are as meticulously accurate as his objective descriptions of rivers, school-houses, and grave-yards. The paradox is born out of the divergence of the mythic and realist strains of Twain's own consciousness and his narrative expression. The character of Tom Sawyer is, himself, an expression of this paradox and duality.

Tom is ultimately portrayed as heroic, but also realistically, so that his flaws can be easily spotted and used to increase the ironic impact of the novel. In fact, careful study of Tom's behavior throughout the novel reveals that "Tom was neither noble nor pure. Rather, he was often vindictive, violent, and obscure—much like the natural world to which he was linked" (Coulombe 129) and -- ironically -- it is within this construction of nature, as a character, that Twain achieves a more dour and realistic expression.

Twain's impulse to romanticize even human bigotry is evident in his depiction of Injun Joe and Muff Potter, during the trial-scene when Muff fallaciously confesses to murdering the Doctor. Historical reality dictates that it was white men who came and tricked the native American tribes out of their lands and destroyed their culture, a fact readily available to anyone, even in Twain's time, who cared to exert minimal energy doing research.

However, rather than seizing on this massive historical reality, Twain opts to facilitate the extant prejudice against racial types that existed in his time, and continue to exist, by positing a mythic "half-breed," Injun Joe, who is more cunning and diabolical than the white society he despises. During the trial scene, Muff Potter is confronted with his knife which was used by Injun Joe to slay the Doctor in the cemetery.

Potter's reaction is pitiful "Potter lifted his face and looked around him with a pathetic hopelessness in his eyes. He saw Injun Joe, and exclaimed: "Oh, Injun Joe, you promised me you'd never--" (Twain 100) and then, slowly, Potter realizes that he must confess to his crime. The reversal of historical reality is chilling. In reality, Native Americans were often controlled and victimized with liquor and in Twain's depiction, the half-breed, Injun Joe, has turned these realities on their head.

It is the Indian who is dastardly and manipulative; and it is the white man, Muff Potter, who is drunkenly victimized and falsely sentenced to death. Such reversals under the fluent realism of Twain's technique can only be considered, rightly, as propaganda. By no stretch of the imagination can propaganda ever be regarded as realistic or objective, so it is obvious that on

at least three major themes: materialism, mortality, and racial prejudice, Twain embraces a mythic, rather than realistic, mode of expression in Tom Sawyer.

Again, as in the treasure-hunt scenario, Twain attempts to balance his mythically driven conceptualization of race with what appears to be a cogent and realistic description of the court-room itself and the boys' reaction to Potter's confession: " Then Huckleberry and Tom stood dumb and staring, and heard the stony-hearted liar reel off his serene statement, they expecting every moment that the clear sky would deliver God's lightnings upon his head," (Twain 100).

This passage, in fact, only strengthens the essentially culturally chauvinistic impulse of the courtroom scene by positing the half-breed not only as a notorious murderer but as an enemy of the white man's God. Twain's romanticism may be rightly regarded as determinant in the thematic expression of Tom Sawyer. In every case, it is mythic impulse rather than natural or historical realism that drives both the conceptualization and execution of the scenes in Tom Sawyer and the associated themes which these scenes express.

Rather than solidifying the aesthetic ideas of literary realism, Twain's use of the idiom in Tom Sawyer is sublimated to his interest in forwarding culturally resonant, American myths which would ostensibly engage and entertain his audience. It is quite possible that Twain's own material ambitions, as previously mentioned, drove, at least in part, his decision to make a literary concession throughout Tom Sawyer to romantic myths, a concession which

completely eradicated any claim that might be made on Twain's behalf that the novel embodied literary realism.

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