

# Tom's bugs



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Tom Sawyer is a boy's boy. He's mischievous, he's adventure seeking, he's fascinated with bugs. Yet while much has been written about these first two personality traits, it is the third one – the unexamined territory of Tom's insectuous interactions – that intrigues me. Throughout my reading of Tom Sawyer there was a prevalent buzzing in my ear – a nipping at my neck. It became apparent to me that while the main characters in the novel may be Tom, Becky, and Huck, some of the key players in the story have no lines at all. Instead, they have wings. In this paper, I examine most of the cases where insects creep their way into Tom's story. Sometimes their presence may go unnoticed, but at others, their sting is long-lasting. The small references to Tom's insect encounters will be mentioned simply to establish that, in an example of art imitating life, the bugs are everywhere. Yet it is the cases when the symbolic message of the insect is impossible to ignore that we will deal with in the greatest detail. Prior to putting specific examples under the microscope, let us quickly attempt to get all the bugs out of the book. We will examine with an entomologist's precise eye the star bugs: the fly and the beetle in church, the doodlebug in the field, the tick at school, and Tom's equation of man to insect. Yet before doing so, we must first note the minor bugs – the cameos so to speak. You may only recall one or two instances where an insect plays a role in the book, but like the saying goes, for every cockroach you see, there a dozen more behind the walls. There's the ventriloquist cricket in Chapter Nine that “no human ingenuity could locate” (65). Later on that same page, Tom hears the ticking of deathwatch, a type of beetle, which according to superstition meant that “somebody's days were numbered.” There is the tumblebug on Jackson Island who plays dead when Tom pokes it. Here we also encounter the ants who struggle to

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carry away a spider five times their size. We also cannot forget the ladybug to whom Tom commands “ Lady-bug, lady-bug, fly away home, your house is on fire, your children’s alone” (96). Again, while insights could be drawn about the individual appearances of all these insects, at the risk of being repetitive, and quite possibly of bugging you (sorry, I couldn’t resist), I will focus on the specific cases mentioned before, beginning with the fly and beetle at church. This scene is one of the first instances that we see Tom interact with an insect. During the minister’s bottomless prayer, Tom is greeted at his pew by a common housefly. The intricate, if not intimate, description which the fly is given, is more reminiscent of a peeping Tom describing his hidden lover than of the supposed praying Tom outlining a winged guest. In the midst of the prayer a fly had lit on the back of the pew in front of him and tortured his spirit by calmly rubbing its hands together, embracing its head with its arms, and polishing it so vigorously that it seemed to almost part company with the body, and the slender thread of a neck was exposed to view; scraping its wings with its hind legs and smoothing them to its body as if they had been coattails, going through its whole toilet as tranquilly as if it knew it was perfectly safe (40). It is a significant commentary that the house fly, one of the simplest of all creatures, is more intriguing to Tom than a discussion with The Creator himself the prayer which is taking place. This is just the beginning of Twain’s intentional undermining of the Christian Church, and not the last time that he will use a bug as his messenger. A few moments after the fly departs, another insect acts as Tom’s sermon diversion. He remembers that he has in his possession a “ treasure” in that he has a pinch-bug. Upon its removal, the beetle immediately lives up to its name. The ensuing pinch causes Tom to

fling it into the aisle. Whereas with the fly before, only Tom seemed to enjoy the distraction from the prayer it provided, in this instance we see that several people “uninterested in the sermon, found relief in the beetle” (41). With this, Twain further pokes fun at the church. Not only was a boy bored by the tedious proceedings, but a good part of the congregation was as well. Again, even something as low as an insect is more interesting than the apparent height of God's message. Furthermore, the dichotomy of the serious and the playful, or the moral and the mischievous, which these interactions establish, parallels Tom's prevalent struggle between the need for adventure and his desire to be good for Aunt Polly. Twain uses a doodlebug to further demystify the Church. After his superstition regarding his lost marbles fails to yield the expected result, “Tom's whole structure of faith was shaken to its foundations.” In order to satisfy his shaken faith, Tom falls to his knees, not to pray, but to seek the prophetic advice of a bug. “Doodlebug, doodlebug, tell me what I want to know,” Tom chants as his mouth is close to the ground. Then suddenly, “the sand began to work, and presently a small black bug appeared for a second and then darted under again in fright.” To Tom's delight, his questions have been answered. “He dasn't tell! So it was a witch that done it. I just knowed it” (62, all quotes). The doodlebug tells us much more than just that Tom's failed superstition was because of a witch's curse. Before calling on it for advice, Tom doesn't say what the doodlebug is supposed to do if a witch is responsible. It is merely when it does something, presumably anything, that his faith is renewed. Twain is mocking the actions of the Christians who say, “Oh Lord, please give me a sign,” and then when a rain drop falls or a dog barks, they are certain that God has spoken. Likewise, Tom's interpretation of the

doodlebug's message shows us that you can find whatever you want if you are looking hard enough. Tom says, "Doodlebug, doodlebug, tell me what I want to know," not "tell me what you know." It's obvious that he's already made up his mind to be satisfied either way. In this sense, Twain is relating the superstition of the kids throughout the story to Christianity as a whole. Both become ridiculous when they are reduced symbolically, and literally, to a boy on his knees who is asking a bug to reveal the divine truth. This technique of questioning Christianity by lowering its traditions to childlike games is later used by Twain in *Huck Finn*. It seems childish when at the beginning of that book the boys are making their life choices based on the writings in *Robin Hood* and other adventure books. Yet when placed against the reality that adults do the same thing each day with the writings of the Bible, the reader becomes a little uneasy. In *Tom Sawyer*, placing hope in prayer is like living your life according to the Bible the doodlebug is *Robin Hood*. Another key insect encounter is when Tom and Joe choreograph the actions of the tick while at school. Tom typically finds himself bored in the schoolroom as he feels that it stifles his adventures. Drawing upon insects for a metaphor, Tom says "the drowsing murmur of the five and twenty studying scholars soothed the soul like the spell that is in the murmur of bees" (54). In order to alleviate his boredom, Tom begins playing with a tick, by orchestrating its movements with a pin. His friend Joe soon joins in, and as sharing the game becomes difficult, a fight soon follows. This scene is an obvious depiction of the little value Tom places on education. School imprisons Tom and attempts to control him much in the same way that he does the tick. The tick scene also allows some insight into the childlike nature of Tom. When things aren't going his way (i. e. the tick staying on his

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side of the slate) he changes the rules. He's willing to share the tick only as long as it remains on his side of the slate and he's the one who gets to play with it. It is this selfishness that often leads to Tom's getting into trouble. Sometimes the bugs in Tom Sawyer are not literal. In these cases, their metaphoric weight is increased tenfold. During a thunderstorm, Tom hides beneath his covers fearing that God was finally seeking his vengeance on him. It might have seemed to him [God] a waste of pomp and ammunition to kill a bug with a battery of artillery, but there seemed nothing incongruous about the getting up such an expensive thunderstorm as this to knock the turf from under an insect like himself" (144). Unlike before where Twain uses bugs to reduce themes like Christianity and education, here Tom himself is reduced to an insect. Tom's role in the world is questioned as he views himself as insignificant as a bug. Furthermore, God is portrayed as a vengeful master who conjures up a storm to squash his trivial creations, not as a loving father who offers forgiveness. The equating of man to insect appears again later in the book, this time referring to Injun Joe, not Tom. Of the water-drip which created the stalagmite near Injun Joe's dead body, Tom wonders, " Did this drop fall patiently during five thousand years to be ready for this flitting human insect's need?" (202). In a strange twist, Twain doubles Injun Joe with Tom by likening each to insects. Tom constantly struggles with feeling insignificant and contemplates his own death. Now standing before a dead man, this insignificance is reconfirmed, and man is again reduced to an insect that can be squashed at a moment's notice. After reading Tom Sawyer with the entomologist paradigm in mind, it is apparent that unless the book is fumigated before reading, insects play a large role in the story. Sometimes they merely provide comic relief, but often their role is

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more important. They are at times used as a means of demystifying the Church, and at others provide a commentary on Tom's view of education. Later, they act to reduce man's view of himself in the world to the most insignificant level. While the insects in Tom Sawyer may at first seem unimportant, once they are looked at with a critical mindset, their buzzing cannot be ignored.