

A grown-up empire: an analysis of the imperialistic relationship between children...

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Of the many puzzles and questions woven throughout Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, perhaps the most salient of all is the bizarre and often-times self-contradictory relationship between the various children of St. Petersburg and their adult counterparts. These relationships are defined by dozens upon dozens of smaller interactions between several different individuals in both groups, and come together to form a confusing skein of conflicting narratives. From truly the first word of the book, it is made clear the children and adults have a conflict-based and often adversarial relationship, where neither side is interested nor willing to give ground or capitulate, shown clearly in the first dozen lines of story, where Aunt Polly is first seen imperiously calling for Tom while threatening him under her breath (Twain 39). For his part, Tom—and the other children by extension—is not quite the humble and dutiful subject that such a tone seems to demand, tricking her less than a page later by yelling “look behind you, Aunt,” then turning tail and bolting (40). While this may seem like a relatively normal relationship to have between a child and his or her authority figure, albeit a rebellious one, this example is just a small part of a much larger dynamic that is at play. To truly see situation as a whole, it is necessary to view it through an entirely different lens. In this way, the relationship between children and adults in *Tom Sawyer* is best understood as a whole if it is taken as an analog for imperialism, with one independent society—the adults—imposing their culture and way of life onto the other—the children—who are portrayed as wild and in need of civilizing, carried out primarily by the use of physical violence and religious instruction.

Any attempt to try and define the complex relationship that exists here as merely one thing or another, or to simply slap on a blanket definition and have done with, invariably falls apart due to contradictory evidence. Throughout the book, children are routinely treated harshly and often viciously, with beating and other forms of corporal punishment dolled out with regularity. One particularly revealing example of this is during the scene when Sid breaks the sugar bowl and Tom is blamed for it, sent “ sprawling to the floor” by Aunt Polly’s “ potent palm” (54). In this brief interaction, there is not even a second taken by Aunt Polly to figure out the situation. Her first and automatic reaction is to employ violence, then, when the truth of the matter is revealed and her error made known for her, she offers no apology; quite the opposite in fact, she states that Tom must have been up to “ some other [audacious] mischief” that would have earned him the same reaction (54). The implication in all of this is quite clear: children are nuisance, always up to something, always guilty of some crime, and always deserving of some punishment. There is also a subtler, more sinister element in play here, that being the implication of infallibility in the adults, the idea that they are always one step ahead of the younger generation and are not to be argued with. This last idea becomes more and more relevant when one starts to look at the relationship as a whole, and realizes that it in fact conforms to nearly all the hallmarks of classic imperialism.

This scene with the sugar bowl also illustrates another of the important, negative factors at play: the fact that there is little to know automatic trust between children and adults. This is further shown as the book continues,

particularly in the case of Dr. Robinson's death at the hands of Injun Joe. Tom and Huck have seen murder before their very eyes, but there is not even the suggestion that they could simply tell an adult that Injun Joe killed Robinson; no one would believe them (96). At the same time as all of this mistrust and cruelty however, there is also an equally strong value placed on children, as well as a great desire to civilize them and tame their unruly way, as shown clearly by the scene in which Tom attempts to trick his teachers and claim a bible. Here, the Judge gives Tom a long-winded sermon about living a good life, but nearly all of his time is spent in self-congratulation. He gives all the credit for Tom's achievement (he is still unaware of the boy's duplicity) to the other adults, the teacher and even the Bible, propping up his own ego and sense of self-importance on the idea that he has helped a child (64). Children's worth is further demonstrated by the almost ridiculous demonstrations of misery and grief put on display when the town thinks that Tom, Huck, and Joe have drowned. Here again however, the focus is not on the children themselves, but rather on the adults' reactions to them, and the way in which the adults use the idea of the children for their own purposes (140-141). Children who are beaten then showered with false praise, told to shut up then to perform, molded to be just like adults, but still exploited by them. To try and define a relationship as multi-layered and complex as this with a single label is patently fruitless. The best way to understand this contradictory mire of confused feelings and attitudes is view the relationship in toto through an entirely different lens, one that would eventually become a very important topic for Twain himself: that of an imperialistic cultural annexation.

While this claim may seem dubious at first, deeper examination reveals that wealth of evidence extant. The primary impulse of the adults seems to be to replace the way of life the children have constructed for themselves with their own, and to do so by force under the banner of “civilizing” them, the quintessential reasoning and justification of classic imperialism. The first fundamental thing to understanding this idea is the realization that the children are not lawless, as the adults seem to assert. Huckleberry Finn, the clear “juvenile pariah” as he is labeled, is “hated...by all the mothers” and warned against explicitly because he is “bad” and “lawless” (73). This is simply not the case. In the same manner as nearly all colonialist empires who seek to assert their own way of life over another group, the adults strive to portray the children as savage and wild, but also as, most importantly, lawless and in need of a civilizing force. In classic imperialist fashion, what is ignored is the fact that the children are not lawless, as the adults seem to assert. Like all peoples who have faced external imperial threats, the children have their own way of life that is unknown to the adults, and often seen as antithetical. And, again like native peoples invaded by an imperialist society, this autonomously operating culture is quite sophisticated, with its own systems of government and religion. Despite what one might initially think, the same is true for Tom and his friend.

These same “lawless” children actually follow an incredibly complex code of rules, one that is never even written down but is automatically known by all, shown first and quite clearly when Tom and Joe Harper commanded their armies, where everyone follows the same set of rules for the highly

organized game, and cheating or breaking these rules is as unthinkable as breaking a genuine law (52). These children are not the disorganized savages that the adults, using the language of subjugation and cultural annexation, portray them as. An even more important scene in this regard is when Tom, Joe, and Huck are on the island and decided to switch from being pirates to being Indians. By this point, Tom and Joe have already had rather terrible experiences smoking, but, according to the rules of the game, the “three hostile tribes” could not make peace without smoking a peace pipe; there is “no other process that...they had ever heard of” (138). There is not even a second where any of the three boys seems to realize that what they are simply playing a game or can change the rules to suit their desires. To them, these are not just silly childhood rule; they are laws, as unbreakable as those against theft in the adult sphere of life. Religion is also not to be neglected. Tom, who is denigrated as “thick-headed” for his inability to memorize bible verses, has crammed into his head likely over a hundred different superstitions and belief, all stemming from the isolated world of the St. Petersburg children (58). This set of superstitions is no fun game for them; each one is taken as literal and unquestionable truth the same way religion is by the adults, and, again like religion, there is no clear place from whence these superstitions sprung, despite the fact that all the children seem to know them by heart. Again and again, the suggestion is clear: the adults’ drive to “civilize” the children and bring them into their world is not merely the case of those in authority teaching those who do not know, but is instead the deliberate attempt, knowingly or otherwise, to eliminate one

group's way of life and replace it with another. This could function as a primer for the quintessential imperialist drive.

Lastly, it is of extreme relevance to note the ways in which the adults respond to the children, and how here too, the imperialist suggestion is rock solid. The boys and girls of St. Petersburg are neither foolish nor lawless, following extremely complex sets of rules for even the simplest of games and remembering vast amounts of wildly specific information. Acting out the imperialist narrative, the adults seek to eradicate and replace this way of life with their own, using as their tools the hallmarks of aggressive colonialism: brutal violence coupled with religious indoctrination. The excesses of corporal punishment have already been touched on above, but the way in which the adults manipulate religion to serve their own purposes is equally noteworthy. Without even mentioning the fact the adults use Christianity as a scare tactic to force the children to behave (hell is made very real in their imaginations and they are taught to fear death), the adults, and especially those in possession of power, use religion as a system of reward and praise. When Tom tricks his teachers into thinking that he has memorized enough verses to earn a bible, the Judge's praise is extremely revealing. He states that Tom will be "a great man" when he grows up, and that this fact will be entirely owing to both "the good Superintendent" and "a splendid elegant bible" (64). These words could have been taken directly from any missionary brought in to bring a native population under the sway of the church. Contained here is praise for playing the adult's game, validation of Tom's achievements by an authority figure by means of promising that he will be "

great” when he loses his identity as a child and becomes an adult, and, most similar to imperialistic rhetoric, the credit is given back to a person or being of higher rank, reinforcing in the childrens’ minds that they are subservient beings. In all of these case and many more, the complex and difficult-to-understand relationship between adults and children in Tom Sawyer can be perhaps best understood if the entire narrative is taken as an analogy for the evils and problematic nature of classic imperialism.

Works Cited

Twain, Mark. The Adventures of Tom Sawyer. Edited by John C. Gerber et al., Berkeley, U of California P, 1980. 6 vols.