

# A Comparative Study Of The Adventures Of Tom Sawyer And The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn

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The paper is an attempt to present a deep sense of social realism in the most celebrated works of Mark Twain namely, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. His concern on the social aspects of American life was evident in both the novels which are termed as "Boy Literature". It would investigate how Twain uses his technique to interpret human nature from a realist's point of view.

**KEYWORDS:** Adventure, Realism, Civilization, Slavery, Dilemma

As a realist, Twain has presented the social structure of pre-civil war America and its consequences. Twain was known for his sharp wit, humor and critical observation on the state of the country. In his humor lies the fundamental issues of his time. In his novels, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain was more convinced of the boundless growth and energy of the age, a belief that was a characteristic of the "gilded age" in which he lived. The river became an important theme in most of his works. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* presents the escapades and misadventures of the irrepressible Tom. Whether allowing his friends to pay for the privilege of whitewashing Aunt Polly's fence or letting the town believe he's dead so he can watch his own funeral, Tom is always a rogue but always entertaining. The most appealing incident is when Tom decides to remain "dead" so he can watch his own funeral where people-

were being put into mourning, with great grief and many tears. The villagers began to gather, loitering a moment in the vestibule to converse in whispers about the sad event. But there was no whispering in the house; only the funeral rustling of dresses as the women gathered to their seats, disturbed the silence there. None could remember when the little Church had been so full before. There was finally a waiting fans, an expectant dumbness, and then Aunt Polly entered, followed by Sid and Mary, and They by the Harper Family, all in deep black, and the whole congregation, the old minister as well, rose severently and stood, until the mourners were seated in the front pew. There was another communing silence, broken at internal by muffled sobs, and then the minister spread his hands abroad and prayed. A moving hymn was sung, and the text followed: "I am the resurrection and the Life."<sup>1</sup>

It deals with the typical childhood moral dilemmas like swimming, running away from home, etc. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of Twain's best-known works. Huck and Jim floating down the Mississippi on a raft is everyone's dream of freedom. But Huck getting matured, on the journey makes the book more than just an adventure tale; it has depth and insight as well. Almost all the characters are drawn from life. Bernard De Voto characterized the "authentic" "American" theme specifically as an escape from feminine influence. The loneliness of prairie and forest suffuses American literature. He wrote, "to make our most authentic, it was not hidden from boys."<sup>2</sup>De Voto encouraged the belief that masculinity is the only authentic American theme. Lionel Trilling supported this notion in his essay, "The Greatness of

Huckleberry Finn," in which he wrote "No one, as (Twain), well knew sets a higher value on truth than a boy. Truth is the whole of a boy's conscious demand upon the world of adults."<sup>3</sup> Twain could convince the reader of the truth of the events narrated in the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and this is one feature of a great novel which could make the most tedious scene look real. Peter Stonely observes that the mode of "realism" and the form of the picaresque novel should be seen as "masculine." Masculine romanticism depends on mobility and conflict – predominantly male figures, with no tie to family or community, become the heroes of narratives featuring travel, daring exploits and adventures, in which the conflict between man and man is glorified, and unpleasant or mundane contingencies do not feature.<sup>4</sup>

As such, Jane Tompkins captures the realistic events and the nature of Twain's masculine romance. Here lies the difference between the work of Mark Twain and that of Susan Warner. Twain presents the 'realistic' features of life whereas Warner deals with the sentimental aspect. Jane Tompkins writes:

*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was for a long time stood as a benchmark of American literary realism, praised for its brilliant use of local dialects and its faithfulness to the texture of ordinary life. Twain himself is famous for his scoffing attacks on the escapism of sentimental and romantic fiction. But if one compares his handling of a child's relation to authority with Warner's, the events of *Huckleberry Finn* enact a dream of freedom and autonomy that goes beyond the bounds of the wildest romance. The scenario whereby the clever and deserving Huck repeatedly outwits his powerful adversaries along the riverbank acts out a kind of adolescent wish fulfilment that Warner's novel never even glances at.<sup>5</sup>

Twain's fiction or the realists in the nineteenth century extricates the American novel from the clutches of the sentimental novel. In this regard, Cathy Davidson has observed, seemingly with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in mind.

*The circumscription of the female characters within  
The domestic sphere constitutes the defining  
Characteristics of sentimental fiction. In contrast,  
The picaresque hero can comment upon slavery,  
Class disturbances, party politics and different  
Immigrant groups precisely because his travels  
Carry him into encounters with diverge segments  
Of the population and across those dividing lines  
That mark out the contours of society. His journey  
Is also the reader's journey, his freedom the reader's  
Freedom.<sup>6</sup>*

The picaresque form of novel therefore elevates the value of realism. Huck, as an individual does not like the restraints of civilization. Twain has seen in Huck, the excitement and the masculine aesthetic which is related to independence. The image of the flowing river and the boy, Huck denotes a quest for freedom or identity. For instance, Leslie Fielder has characterized Huck as –

*The product of no metaphysics, but of a break  
through of the under mind of America itself. In him,  
the obsessive American theme of loneliness reaches  
an ultimate level of expression, being accepted at  
last not as a blessing to be sought or a curse to be*

*flaunted or fled, but quite simply as man's fate.<sup>7</sup>*

Huck and Jim floating down the river on a raft suggests the search for independence. Huck speaks out in this manner:

*We had mountains on the Missouri shore, and channel was down the Missouri shore at that place so, we weren't afraid of anybody running across us, we laid there all day and watched the rafts and steamboats spin down the Missouri shore, and up-bound steamboats fight the big river in the middle.<sup>8</sup>*

Tom is ready to take the task of freeing Jim along with Huck's suggestion:

*Well, if that ain't just like you, Huck Finn. You can get up the infant-schooliest ways of going at a thing. Why, won't you even read any books at all? Baron Trench, nor Casanova, nor Benvenuto Chelleemy, nor Henry IV, nor none of them heroes? Whoever heard of getting a prisoner loose in such an old-maidy way as that? No; the way all the best authorities does, is to saw the bedleg in two, and leave it just so, and swallow the sawdust, so it can't be found, and put some dirt and gears around the sawed place so the very keenest seneskal can't see no sign of its being sawed, and thinks the beg-leg is perfect sound.<sup>9</sup>*

Twain did not invent the name of "nigger Jim" as an ironical tag but it was an ironic name for the one truly kind and good person in Huck's adventures. Peter Stonely suggests that:

*The language of suffering and captivity, larking Back to a fleer past, is only appropriate to the slaves, with a fantasy of romantic discourse; but Jim is the victim of social practice and could not have been expected, therefore, to have participated in its expression. Ultimately the irony is directed at the feminine aesthetic and its practitioners, who live in a world of dehumanizing and contradictory conventionalism. But their melancholy closure to an "objective" reality, dangerous to themselves and others, is nonetheless a mark of privilege.<sup>10</sup>*

Some of Mark Twain's ideas in reference to **Huckleberry Finn** serve as a kind of index to his intellectual pilgrimage. They are as follows:

*The Bricksville-Boggs-Sherburn episode, chapters 21 and 22 of **Huckleberry Finn**. An unprecedented expression of disgust with the bestiality, cruelty and cowardice in human nature, Buck's query "Why, where was you raised?" in Chapter 18 of where Huck expresses his bewilderment that Tom,*

*who is "respectable and well brung up", could stoop to stealing Jim of slavery. His first statements, though veiled, of the pessimistic side of the idea that training is everything.<sup>11</sup>*

Twain has been regarded as one of America's most questing novelists. Quoting Bernard De Voto in **Mark Twain in eruption** which was published in 1940, Sherwood wrote:

*His excursions into literary theory are incidental and modest. He gave good tips on how to tell a story but he was all diffidence in explaining his own process of writing. He was simply an "amanuensis" to his muse; he could write only when his "tank" was full, he often started a story with little sense of how it would come out, hoping somehow to find the "right form" for it; he took little credit for his novelistic ideas, since they were the result of "unconscious celebration."<sup>12</sup>*

Twain became a firm novelist only after he had written Tom Sawyer. His Huckleberry Finn has been placed as a picaresque fiction. But it is more than picaresque as it has a deeper psychology –

*the probable and credible soul that the author divines in the son of the town-drunkard is one which we might each own brother, and the art which portrays this nature at first hand in the person and language of the hero, without pose or affectation, is fine art. In the boy's history the author's fancy works realistically to an end as high as it has reached elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>*

The most genuine proof of Twain's essential attitude is to be found in his novels. The triumphs of boy literature – Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, invariably inspire us, countless vivid memories of our own childhood which we have forgotten or matured out of. We find in Twain's boy literature, a mixture of some of the best writing America has ever produced – and some of the worst. It is the contrast between the two extremes that perplexes the reader. The most likely explanation is that Twain writes on impulse entirely unconsciously with the "deeper levels of phantasy". Clemens himself called Tom Sawyer a "hymn" to boyhood and it is with a kind of reverent awe that most readers experience the clarity, skill and naturalness of this account of how it felt to grow up in a Missouri river town. Frank Baldanza says:

***The Adventures of Tom Sawyer** is a delightful book because, as Kenneth S. Lynn has remarked, it confirms the profoundest wishes of the heart. Even though it deals with grave-robbers, slow starvation, cruelty and brutality, it ultimately exonerates the values of the small town in which Clemens' generation grew up, and, by extension, the small town that each of us carries in the memory if only as a kind of historic heritage. **Adventures of Huckleberry Finn** is a sequel that soared even higher than its predecessor. It has been the subject of the most detailed critical analysis of all Clemens' books because it is certainly one of the half-dozen greatest books America has ever produced. It is superior*

*to Tom Sawyer because it is a more serious and disturbing view of the same small town; by now the violence and brutality that served a melodramatic purpose in the earlier books have been refracted through the profound moral issues of slavery and human dignity. The sensitive and suffering Huck Finn, who floats down the Mississippi isolated on his raft with the fleeing Slave Jim, serves as a conscience for an entire era and culture. And he is not reconciled to what he sees. In town after town, he undergoes traumatic revelations of human depravity that palpably sicken him. The only fault in the novel, for most readers, is towards the end, when Clemens seems to indulge in unnecessary clowning. But on a second glance, we shall see that even this almost universally maligned ending has its justification. Aside from this problem, the book is a triumph, whether considered from the point of view of historical, social and moral significance; style; characterization; or just plain good reading.<sup>14</sup>*

Twain's comparison of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn of the culture of his youth with that of the 1880s, and the culture of the South and the Southwest with that of the north –

*Results in a primary distinction between a static, backward-looking, romantic mode, which is strongly associated with Sir Walter Scott, the South and the feminine aspects of the culture, and a dynamic, progressive mode, which is designated as masculine and is associated with technology and the North.<sup>15</sup>*

Most of the significant realistic fiction explores the relations between men and society in a various ways. As an instance, Huck facing a dilemma is common in realistic fiction. When he finds that Jim has been sold back into slavery by the King, Huck is forced to decide between a fixed code of public morality and an inner ethical impulse – a conflict which he resolves at the climax of ***Huckleberry Finn***. Twain's concern with the human dilemma is clearly focused in his fiction. Ian Watt states that "the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it."<sup>16</sup> The emphasis on characters is an essential basis for the realists since the burden of narration –both in presentation and interpretation is done by the fictional characters. Harold H. Kolb comments:

*The realists concern themselves with the characters and events which are imaginatively representative of the common experience, even though the characters and events themselves may be somewhat out of the ordinary, outside the range of the statistical norm. What the realists contribute in their discussion of human values is the emphasis on the complexity of moral choice and the necessity of individual decision in a human context, unassisted by external spiritual forces.<sup>17</sup>*

**Tom Sawyer** and **Huckleberry Finn** were miracles of clarity and construction – “in Huck Finn, Twain began to focus many of the ideas that ran through his earlier work. His search for escape, his sadness at innocence lost to reality, formed the book’s core”.<sup>18</sup> Huck says, “All I wanted was to go somewhere; all I wanted was a change, I wasn’t particular”.<sup>19</sup> In these novels, Twain could take the vision of life as a whole, through the boy’s nature with the man’s perception. As such, H. Wayne Morgan says:

*Tom Sawyer was a paean of escape, not merely from An ordered world with rules and.... Responsibilities, but from adulthood and its cares and fears to the innocence of childhood. It was a book and a viewpoint seeking a lost Eden. Tom Sawyer brought a compelling charm to the readers. He voiced their mute feelings. America was still rural, oriented toward small town life, and Tom Sawyer seemed both realistic and fictional. The book’s beauty for a later generation which has left the farm for the city lies elsewhere. It is covered with nostalgia. It presented a vanished America, but it also offered a boyhood that most men like even if they did not have it. Speaking from a child’s viewpoint in an adult’s world, Tom Sawyer voiced every man’s complaints against authority, the outmoded and absurd, the insignificant and useless. He offered in their place, with the wisdom of the child-man, those things in life that seem both happy and important-freedom, irresponsibility, ease.<sup>20</sup>*

Twain’s boys fiction remains one of the marvellous gems of mind that the modern age has produced. And so, it is impossible to decide exactly when or how the writer finally came to recognize the value of Tom and Huck or of the in which they appeared. His characters, whether they are rogues, dreamers or sober towns people, has his or her own individuality and acts in his/her own way, no one is like another. Leslie A. Fielder comments:

*In **Huckleberry Finn**, the society which Huck finally rejects, his ‘civilization’, is essentially a world of the mothers, that is to say, of what Christianity has become among the females who sustain it just behind the advancing frontier. It is a sufficiency simple minded world in which one does not cuss or steal or smoke but keeps clean, wears shoes, and prays for spiritual gifts. Above all, it is a world of those who cannot lie? And the truth, too, Huck finds a virtue beyond his budget. In this world, the fathers appear generally as outcasts and scoundrels, like the Duke and Dauphin and like Pap himself. At best, the paternal is represented by the runaway nigger, the outcast who was never even offered the bait of belonging.<sup>21</sup>*

With *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain came into the enchanted territory of childhood. "You don't know about me", Huck affirms, "without you have read a book by the name of The Adventure of Tom Sawyer".<sup>22</sup> James M. Cox points out that "in the character of Tom Sawyer, however, Mark Twain fully entered the realm of fiction" he further says, "to be sure, Tom Sawyer is said to be based on real people, but he is a composite character freed from the experience in which he had his origins".<sup>23</sup> Tom has a true boyhood nature. His entertainment is the most significant human activity. He is defined through the whitewash scene as the only truly able to convert things into play; he has the imagination and the irreverence necessary to free people from their boredom and to provide them with the opportunities for acting out their secret fantasies. Most criticism of *Huckleberry Finn*, however, retires from the pleasure principle toward the relative safety of moral sentiments. This is due to the uncomfortable feeling relating to Huck's "evasion", his "escape" and finally his "rejection" of civilization. But the book moves down the Mississippi river into the deeper suppressions of slavery, enacting at every moment a conversion of morality into pleasure. Huck's "escape" is of course an escape from violence, a rejection of cruelty in the society. This has been proved by Huck's words:

*I was powerful glad to get away from the feuds, and so was Jim to get away from the swamp. We said there wasn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft.*<sup>24</sup>

*Huckleberry Finn* reflects a revulsion against viewing life from the perspective of entertainment. Literary critics have praised Twain time and again for "creating a narrative style in *Huck Finn* which uses vernacular or colloquial American English to revitalize the imaginative representation of reality."<sup>25</sup>

The book is, thus, a valuable record of an important part of the motley American civilization. It is a piece of modern realism, original, deep, and broad. In this boyhood idyll of freedom from civilization in a frontier town in *Huckleberry Finn*, we could see the symbol of absolute freedom and-

In the radically democratic anti social chronicle of Youth, we have at the climax the outcast hero who is the antithesis of all ethical, moral, social, worldly, Or financial patterns of 'maturity' of human 'betterment' or success.<sup>26</sup>

Twain was deeply and characteristically American in writing his novels and it was this inspiration that he wrote his masterpiece in the words of an ignorant river boy, looking at life with fresh uncivilized eyes and looking at the back in this manner. Twain thus established at a stroke the colloquial style which has swept American literature and indeed spelled over into world literature.<sup>27</sup>

Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn are the two best boys in the whole wide range of fiction, the most natural, genuine, and convincing. They belong to their own soil, the American society. Frederick Anderson, while speaking of Mark Twain's real creative power, says that:

*Huckleberry Finn shows a very distinct advance over Tom Sawyer in seriousness and power of composition. The real beauty of the book is the narrative of Huck's flight down the Mississippi with the runaway nigger, Jim and the successive incidents of this flight unroll for us a panorama of life on the great river in a series of pictures, whose variety, reality, humor and occasional tragic power, it is impossible to praise too highly.*<sup>28</sup>

Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are both prose epics of American life. The first is one of those books – of which *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe* are supreme examples – that are read at different periods of one's life from very different points of view; so that it is not easy to say when one enjoys them the most – before one understands their real significance or after! Almost all healthy boys enjoy reading *Tom Sawyer*, because the intrinsic interest of the story is so great and the various adventures of the hero are portrayed with such zest. Yet it is impossible to outgrow the book. The eternal boy is there, and one cannot appreciate the nature of boyhood properly until one has ceased to be a boy. The second masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn* is not a child's book at all. Children engulf it, but they do not digest it. It is a permanent picture of a certain period of American history and the picture is made complete, not so much by the vital unity of the whole composition. If one wishes to know what life on the Mississippi really was, to know and understand the peculiar social conditions of that highly exciting time, one has merely to read through this powerful narrative, and a definite, coherent, vivid impression leaves behind. By those who have lived there, and whose minds are comparatively free from prejudice, Mark Twain's pictures of life in the South before the war are regarded as on the whole, nearer the truth than those supplied by any other artist. Mark Twain's extraordinary skills in writing fiction shows “not merely keen observation, but the instinct for the specific word for it makes the picture real – it creates the illusion, which is the essence of all literary art.”<sup>29</sup>

Twain knows how to classify his novels to distinguish between the lasting, essential elements and the passing, secondary ones. It was the characteristic traits of the west, which the passage of time had allowed him to define more precisely by simplifying them that Mark Twain attempted to set down in his books. In emphasizing the most representative traits of character, he attempted to create original types of having a truth to life so specific that they would not be met with elsewhere and at the same time general enough to be admitted to the family of mankind. Huck's development in *Huckleberry Finn*, is a constant struggle. He has the task of throwing off the load of slave society conventions. Huck begins by regarding Jim very much as the white Southerner regarded a slave. Gradually, he discovers that Jim, despite the efforts of society to brutalize him, is a noble human being who deserves his protection, friendship and love. This change takes place slowly in Huck, always accompanied by an inner struggle between the ideology and mores of a slave society and the humanity of the boy. In one instance, Huck, having hurt Jim's feelings by a particularly mean trick, says:

*It was fifteen minutes before I could work myself up to go and humble myself to a nigger; but I don't it, and I warn't ever sorry for it afterwards, neither. I didn't do him no mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I 'd knowed it would make him feel that way.*<sup>30</sup>

In both the novels, *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, the description of a thoroughly masculine life has been given. In fact, all lives were 'looked at with a large and careless eye, and men were judged by the possession of primitive qualities rather than by conformity to accepted standards. Wild freedom, an exceptional flavour of adventure, picaresque figures animated by the nomadic instinct exist in all Twain's work. Twain's heroes are more at the frontiers of civilization and yearn to escape its laws. This kind of convention is the trait common to Mark Twain's realism. His realism is not the modern photographic realism of Dreiser.<sup>31</sup> He allows himself to pursue his inquiries into reality with varying intensity, to support his observations with a wider or a narrower range of evidence. He does not have his characters before his eyes while he is describing them. Since he draws from memory, he interprets reality; to a certain extent he adds some flavour to it. And in spite of his love for his western society, he does not hide the ugly aspects of it. Thus, ***Huckleberry Finn*** is, at the plot level, about a black slave who seeks freedom and a white boy who, in helping him, hopes he will not be mistaken for abolitionist. At the philosophical level, it is about everybody's enslavement – to training, to accommodation, to human nature and to a medieval disease capable of infecting modern societies. And ***Tom Sawyer*** is taken from life – of the author's past and his surroundings. Thus, the picturesque superstitions and folklore of ***Tom Sawyer*** and ***Huckleberry Finn*** are authentic. Usually



the works of art that we witness after passing of the generation that had produced them, owe their survival either to our appreciation of their artistic significance or to our belief in their historic value as sources of light upon the manners and morals of their own time. And *Huckleberry Finn* is one of these works that we preserve for both of these reasons, and for other reasons, too, our laughter being one of them. But upon its first appearance this was a book immediately recognizable as bearing “the birthmark of immorality”; many readers understood that it was an American “classic”.<sup>32</sup>In *Tom Sawyer*, Twain gave the boys the adventures that all boys, in their longing dreams, make believe they have. He made extravagant dramatic things happen to them – “boys played circus for three days afterward in tents made of rag carpeting-admissions three pins for boys, two for girls.”<sup>33</sup>He made them so real that ‘their very reality is the stimulus of the reader’s laughter; but embedded this reality in the romance of a plot as true to the conventional rules of mid-nineteenth century romantic novel writing as it was to the dreams of the boy Mark Twain himself had been. Booth Tarkington comments:

*Mark Twain, writing “Tom Sawyer” transposed himself backward through time into the boy he was in Hannibal, felt and knew again all that the boy had felt, said again what the boy had said, and then, with a masterly craft, evoked the portrait in none the less true for the unreal background of plot against which it seem, and I think the reason for this truthfulness is that the fantasia of romantic events seemed real to Mark Twain as he wrote, and that he had no doubt of its reality since it was built out of stuff fashioned in the mind of the boy. That is to say, although Mark Twain spoke of Tom Sawyer as a composite, the portrait is mainly of Mark Twain as a boy; it is essentially autobiographical, though by no means literally the record of Mark Twain’s own youthful adventure and circumstances.*<sup>34</sup>

In realistic fiction, characters tend to have mixed motives and confused consciences, and they invariably discover that life is a complicated and ambiguous affair. All of the leading characters have winding and confused struggles with the perplexities of social and moral experiences usually reaching highest point in key moments in the novels. The realists’ complexity of characterization extends to groups and also to individuals. Realistic imagery compares experiences to other concrete experience, a technique which restricts the dimensions of the fictive world to those of ordinary human existence. Romantic imagery “tends to enlarge the field of vision whereas realistic imagery sharpens the focus”.<sup>35</sup>In short, realistic imagery is “specific, concrete and mundane”.<sup>36</sup>Thus, realistic fiction or American realism is concerned with the attempt to solve the complexities and multiplicities of experience – complications of life after the Civil War caused by lingering sectional hostilities, rapid industrialization, urbanization, immigration, economic dislocation, etc. And late nineteenth century American realists especially Mark Twain expressed these complexities and multiplicities of knowledge and experience with the extensive use of ambiguity in the form of novels.

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