

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
 The earth, and every common sight
 To me did seem
 Apparell'd on celestial light,
 The glory and the freshness of a dream.

-- William Wordsworth, "The Immortality Ode"

CHAPTER IV THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

Twain's reputation is based firmly on the achievement of his books about boys. This is a rather bald statement, and it is of course qualified by the variety of boys found in his works, but it is nonetheless true. Though he was familiarly acquainted with all the different types of human nature through his pilot-experience, he was bound and haunted by the charm of boyhood for most of his life. In a letter to an unidentified person he said:

...if I confine myself to boy life at times, it is because that life had a peculiar charm for me, and not because I was unfamiliar with other phases of life.⁶⁸

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer was the first novel Twain attempted alone. The book was written from his memory of his boy-experiences in Hannibal, and partly from his imagination. Tom's boyhood idyll reveals the profoundest wish of his heart, the nostalgia for a youth's paradise.

Twain at first intended the book to be read by adults. However, Howells advised him to treat it as a boy's story so that the children would enjoy it as much as their parents. Twain had

to change some parts of the book to make it suitable to this purpose. In a letter to his brother Orion, he said:

This was splendid, & swept all labor...I reduced the boy Sunday-school speech down to the first two sentences, (leaving no suggestion of satire, since the book is for boys & girls; I tamed the various obscenities until I judged that they no longer carried offense. 69

Yet, the book is written far above the level of the ordinary boy's book. It is a mixture of nostalgia and satire. Twain confirms in the Preface that most adventures recorded in the book really happened. One or two were his own experiences, the rest his schoolmates'. Tom is a combination of the characteristics of three boys whom Twain is familiar with. He wants the book to remind adults of their childhood, how they once felt, thought and talked; it also would remind them that they sometimes engaged in "queer enterprises."⁷⁰

Twain's boyhood was very alive to him, and references to it could make him become suddenly overcome with remembered images. After receiving a letter from an old friend mentioning some incidents in the past which they had shared together, Twain suddenly called to mind memories of himself as a boy:

As you describe me I can picture myself as I was 22 years ago. The portrait is correct... a callow fool, a self-sufficient ass, a mere human tumble-bug, stern in air, heaving at his bit of dung



and imagining he is re-molding the world and is entirely capable of doing it right. Ignorance, intolerance, egotism, self-assertion, opaque perception, dense and pitiful chuckle-headedness -- and an almost pathetic unconsciousness of it all.⁷¹

This is exactly a picture of Tom Sawyer. Tom's plan to get Becky's attention and win her favor by showing off in an absurd boyish way marks his self-assertion and grotesque foolishness. His intolerance of the long, uninteresting sermon during church causes him to release a pinbug from the percussion-cap box, so that it later tortures a poodle which sits on it. The dog's wild yelp of agony breaks up the church service. The whitewashing episode in which Tom plans to get rid of his work and at the same time to dupe his innocent friends shows his clever ingenuity when there is work to be avoided. Tom's pretense to be sick as an excuse not to go to school is a common act of boyish deception. When Tom decides to play being a pirate he imagines he is remodeling the world:

He would be a pirate! That was it! Now his future lay plain before him, and glowing with unimaginable splendor. How his name would fill the world, and make people shudder.... And, at the zenith of his fame, how he would suddenly appear at the old village and stalk into church... and hear with swelling ecstasy the whispering: "It's Tom Sawyer the Pirate! the Black Avenger of the Spanish Main!"⁷²

Tom's thirst for glory forces him to encourage his fellow pirates to keep the gang together. Once he leaves the gang to find out what has happened in the town while they have been away. He enters his house, secretly and overhears in a conversation that the three dead boys funeral service is to be held on Sunday morning in church. Tom's sense of showmanship demands that he keep the secret until that morning. He must persuade his friends to walk into church on the occasion of their own funeral. Tom is a boy who demands love, pity, sympathy and attention from others. When he spies his mourning family and Joe's mother grouped together lamenting their dead boys, Tom begins to have a nobler opinion of himself than ever before; he decides that he is not a bad boy, only mischievous, and that he is good-hearted and never means any harm. Tom is even more self-satisfied when he notices the change in his family after his return from Jackson's Island. At breakfast, Aunt Polly and Mary are loving to him and very attentive to his wants.

Tom Sawyer is Twain's idyllic romance written as an escape from the pangs of adulthood. Tom's story is an idyll of boyhood created to satisfy his nostalgia for a youth's paradise, for the Happy Valley of childhood. It is a world of irresponsibility, candour, sincerity, innocence, joyfulness and wonder. The children are free of troubles, cares and worries. To Tom, the world is full of fanciful merriment, exciting adventures and childish belief in superstition. Tom's love-affair with Becky is simply pure, innocent "puppy love". Tom gains her attention by his absurd boyish showing off: cuffing boys, pulling hair, making faces, running away from

homo to play being pirate to draw the public's eye to himself. The whitewashing episode displays how rollicking and innocent the humor is in the book. The bright, fresh, dreamy, reposeful and inviting atmosphere of the summer morning distresses Tom when Aunt Polly gives him a hateful job, whitewashing the fence. His sorrow is even increased when he thinks of the fun he had planned for that day. How can he bear it if other free boys come along and make fun of him for having to work! However, "his elastic heart of youth"⁷³ cannot be kept compressed into one shape. He begins to make himself look engaged in important, serious work for the eyes of the other boys to see. His first victim is Ben who comes approaching in a boat and playing at being a steamboat-captain. Tom's mouth waters for the apple Ben has but he sticks to his work. Then Ben suddenly becomes interested in the work and asks Tom if he can try it:

Does a boy got a chance to white-wash a fence everyday?... You see, Aunt Polly's awful particular about this fence... it's got to be done very careful; I reckon there ain't one boy in a thousand, maybe two thousand, that can do it the way it's got to be done... well, Jim wanted to do it, but she won't let him. Sid wanted to do it, she wouldn't let Sid. Now, don't you see how I am fixed?⁷⁴

The more Tom speaks, the stronger is Ben's insistence upon attempting the job. Tom consents only when Ben gives him the apple. Hour after hour, Tom's plan to dupe the "innocents" succeeds well until he is wealthy, with a kite, a dead rat and a string to swing it with, twelve marbles, part of a jew's harp, a spool-cannon, a

key that won't unlock anything, a couple of tadpoles, six fire-crackers, a brass door-knob, a dog collar, the handle of a knife, and four pieces of orange-peel! To him, the world is no longer a hollow place after all.

Another significant item to be observed in charting Twain's development is that he creates a vivid sense of mystery, terror and excitement behind the innocent eye of boyhood. Besides their belief in superstitious things, ghosts, spells, omens and black magic, the boys are aware that there are some evils in the real world. During the midnight meeting in the graveyard, Huck and Tom witness Injun Joe trying to blackmail Dr. Robinson and then stab the doctor to death. Injun Joe then wakes up the drunken Muff Potter and convinces him it was he who killed the doctor. The murder and injustice horrify the boys so that they swear a blood oath never to reveal the crime.

The anatomy-book episode marks the first hint of sex in childhood. Tom is surprised to see that the picture Becky is peeking at in Mr. Dobbins' anatomy book is a human figure, stark naked. Becky in her haste and anxiety tears the page and runs out of the room in shame and fear. Tom is uneasy and muses to himself:

What a curious kind of fool a girl
is....That's just like a girl -- they'
re so thin-skinned and chicken-
hearted. Well, of course I ain't
going to tell old Dobbins on this
little fool.... 75

Sexual curiosity thus makes a brief intrusion into childhood. The

children become aware of their growth toward adulthood and certain problems of maturity. This is an element in the story that connotes more than Twain resolves. Tom's little boy innocence conquers the evil Twain conjures up to be destroyed by it -- but what of that innocence after the onset of puberty? The question is of course left unanswered, though later we will have a work of sheer pornography from Twain's pen -- 1601 -- to answer us that Twain did know the changes took place.

Twain intends the picture of the cave to symbolize evil and terror seen through the innocent eyes of Tom and Becky. This cave is particularly vivid, as bright and lurid as a horrible nightmare. It has this special vividness because it is a recurrent image in Twain's mind, something he saw with a special clarity:

Mc Dougal's cave was but a vast labyrinth of crooked aisles that ran into each other and out again and led nowhere. " ... one might wander days and nights together through its intricate tangle of rifts and chasms, and never find the end of the cave....Under the roof vast knots of bats had packed themselves together, thousands in a bunch; the light disturbs the creatures, and they came flocking down by hundreds, squeaking and darting furiously at the candles....The bats chased the children a good distance, but the fugitives plunged into every new passage that offered and at last got rid of the perilous things....Now for the first time the deep stillness of the place laid a clammy hand upon the spirits of the children....Profound silence;

silence so deep that even their breathings were conspicuous in the hush. Tom shouted. The call went echoing down the empty aisles, and died out in the distance in a faint sound that resembled a ripple of mocking laughter.⁷⁸

It is an image we shall meet again in an even more nightmarish form.

When Tom and Becky walk into an unexplored portion of the cave, they realize that they have lost their way. They become depressed and frightened:

The children groped their way back to the spring. The weary time dragged on; they slept again, and awoke famished and woe-stricken.⁷⁹

By accident, the cave is also the hiding place of Injun Joe, whom Tom is trying to escape from for fear of his revenge. Tom is paralysed when he sees

... a human hand, holding a candle, appear from behind a rock!....that hand is followed by the body it belongs to -- Injun Joe's.⁸⁰

Besides suffering from hunger, fear, mystery and other terrors, Tom at last sees Injun Joe's corpse, dead of pitiful starvation in the cave. Tom's descent into the cave is of the nature of an ordeal; it could have functioned as a ritual initiation into life if Twain had been writing a different sort of book. But when Tom emerges from the cave he is the same old Tom, unchanged by his encounter with the grim reality of evil.

In the world of Tom Sawyer, innocence triumphs over evil, effortlessly and everlastingly. Twain asserts that good shall come out of evil, that the appearance of disaster is all that hangs over a boy's life and that the ending of each episode is usually happy. Tom's dream of being a hero is satisfied after his return from Jackson's Island. The returned pirate becomes the center of public attention. Tom heroically takes the punishment for the spelling-book and later takes the second beating for tearing the anatomy book to win Becky's favor. "Tom, how could you be so noble!"⁸¹ Becky tells her hero. At the end, the whole incident of the cave is turned into nothing more dangerous than a bad dream. Injun Joe is a stock villain easily conquered when shut up in the cave, easily succumbing to the powerful innocence and goodness that are the weapons of childhood. After the discovery of Injun Joe's body, Twain lets the judge seal up the entrance of the cave, and thus symbolically ends all evil. (We shall see from Twain's subsequent works that the entrance to the cave did not remain sealed for long.) Thus, innocence in Tom Sawyer triumphs over evil at last, and the vision of innocence purifies Twain's vision of America.

The narrative voice in Tom Sawyer is Twain's own, a mixture of nostalgia and satire. Tom Sawyer is written to glorify his own youth and to speak for his nostalgic yearning for the Happy Valley. It is a romantic book compounded from realistic details recollected from his childhood. Though Twain says he is trying to leave out some suggestions of satire, he can't help letting his satiric voice be heard many times in the book. In fact he makes use of the child,

the innocent eye, as an instrument for social criticism. Twain comments on adult hypocrisy and makes fun of the false values of the Sunday School Society. The great occasion is when the judge visits the school. Everybody tries to show off and gain the notice and approval of the judge in various ways. Mr. Walters, the superintendent, seems to be engaged in his work, giving directions here and there and everywhere he can find a target. The librarian, the young lady teachers, the young gentleman teachers and the judge himself as sits and beams "a majestic judicial smile upon all the house and warms himself in the sun of his own grandeur"⁸² are all playing their roles too. This is the chance to exhibit Mr. Walters' prodigy and to deliver a Bible prize. In Sunday school class, children have to recite passages of Scripture by heart, and they receive tickets as a reward. On that day, Tom happens to have the most tickets -- gained by his cunning ways of duping his innocent friends. Therefore, the prize is given to Tom who proceeds to humiliate himself and the teacher with his stupidity. The episode has the ring of reality, and it serves to make a critical point about false values that Twain finds in organized American religion in the 19th century.

Twain also makes fun of the quack medicines popular in his day. Aunt Polly uses the patent pain-killer to wake Tom up from melancholy and indifference. In turn, Tom gives it to the cat, Peter, and it works successfully, for the cat goes tearing around the house in a frenzy of enjoyment spreading chaos and destruction in his path. Aunt Polly comes to realize that she is cruel to Tom

in giving him the patent medicine.

Twain always objects to sentimentality and artificiality in language and wants to break away from the use of conventional literary vocabulary. In his letter to J.H. Burrough, his old friend, Twain said:

There is one thing which I can't stand, and won't stand from many people. That is sham sentimentality -- the kind a school girl puts into her graduating composition; the sort that makes up the Original Poetry column of a country newspaper; the rot that deals in "the happy days of yore," "the sweet yet melancholy past," with its "blighted hopes" and its "vanished dreams" -- and all that sort of drivel.⁸³

In Tom Sawyer, Twain makes fun of such compositions written by young ladies to be read on the "Examination" day. The themes are always the same that "had been illuminated upon similar occasions by... all their ancestors in the female line clear back to the Crusades." They are "Memories of other Days," "Dream land," "Melancholy," "Filial Love," "Heart Longings," etc. Twain gives some extracts from these compositions and hopes that the readers can endure them.⁸⁴ The composition entitled "A Vision" begins:

Dark and tempestuous was the night.
Around the throne on high not a
single star quivered; but the deep
intonations of the heavy thunder
constantly vibrated upon the ear;
whilst the terrific lightning revelled
in angry mood through the cloudy
chambers of heaven, seeming to scorn
the power exerted over its terrors by
the illustrious Franklin!⁸⁵

This passage parodies the kind of writing Twain despised. The style is elaborate and uses stock literary formulas. Such words as "tempestuous," "quivered," "intonations," "revelled," "exerted," and "illustrious" in this context are the product of inflated literary pretensions. Yet, Twain points out that such a composition took the first prize. Thus the concern with writing that falsifies experience that we have seen in Twain's earlier writings continues in Tom Sawyer.

A very important element of the book is Tom's relation to the society of St. Petersburg. Though Tom has an outward tendency to rebel against social values, to break rules and go his own merry way -- running away from home, smoking, disliking church and lessons and torturing animals -- he is most deeply a very respectable boy. His rebellion, his boyish fantasies and naughtiness are harmless and even show that he is a typical American boy. They are merely innocent wild oats he sows. Tom is aware that he belongs to society and its accepted social values and religion. His running away from home is a boyish escapade dictated by his romantic impulses. We know that Tom must surely return to society. But Tom's friend Huck Finn is different, for he is a social outcast and has no place to belong to. He is a unique figure quite detached from the society:

Huckleberry come and went, at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and empty hogsheds in wet; he did not have to go to school or to church, or

call any being master or obey anybody; he could go fishing or swimming when and where he chose, and stay as long as it suited him; nobody forbade him to fight; he could sit up as late as he pleased; he was always the first boy that went barefoot in the spring and the last to resume leather in the fall; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes; he could swear wonderfully. In a word, everything that goes to make life precious, that boy had. So thought every harassed, hampered, respectable boy in St. Petersburg.⁸⁶

Of course Tom, as any other boy would, envies Huck's glorious outcast condition and his unique independence. Huck's independence marks the highest degree in Twain's creation of boys; for in his later works his other boys are gradually deprived of such independence until they become victims of condition. Tom and other boys in the village are forbidden to communicate with Huck since Huck is considered a social outcast, idle, lawless and vulgar. However, Tom is the first boy who dares to break the ban. He plays with Huck every time he gets a chance for he admires his devil-may-care attitude. He then persuades Huck to join his society. Huck is endowed with common-sense. Many times he can see clearly enough that Tom's romantic imagination is usually nonsensical. Yet, he has to comply with Tom since he prefers to be in the gang rather than to suffer his former lonely condition.

Though Twain primarily intends The Adventures of Tom Sawyer to be a children's story and to entertain boys and girls, he puts very much of himself into the book: his memory of childhood

experiences, his nostalgia for a youth's paradise and his fondly satiric accounts of a river-town. Since the book is a history of a boy, Twain knows well where to stop. If the story continues, the book shall become the history of a man. Therefore, he decides to end the book when Tomⁱs still a boy.