

ISSN 2454-1974

Registered, Indexed &
Refereed / Peer Reviewed
Online International Journal

THE RUBRICS

e-Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies
Volume 6 Issue 9, December 2024

Chief Editor
Dr. Rajesh Gore

ISSN 2454-1974



9 772454 197001



Published by
Magnus Publishing
Parbhani, MS. India

**THE RUBRICS**

Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies

Volume 6 Issue 9 December 2024

www.therubrics.in

ISSN 2454-1974



Exploring the Delineation of Nostalgia for the Pre-industrialized American Society in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the representation of the pre-industrial social order which has its effective representation in Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or popularly known as *Tom Sawyer*. The novel is among the classics of American literature despite it being a period piece of art. The social milieu and the economic structure of the American society have completely altered. The organization of society and culture of America has undergone a huge transformation after industrialization and digital evolution. Nor does the eternal conflict between good and evil have resonance with the current situations. Yet the novel is a part of the contemporary literary and popular discourse. The most important aspect of this sustained popularity and appeal of the novel mostly owes to Mark Twain's nostalgic delineation of the pre-industrialized society. The world view, the social and natural ecology described in the novel has so much to teach and seek solace in for the modern readers. This paper deals with the thematic concerns of the novel which have contemporary appeal and relevance. The novel is a living picture of the past that had a calming and soothing lifestyle; the world-order which is no longer accessible to the modern generations.

Keywords: *nostalgic delineation, pre-industrial society, transformation, etc.*

FULL PAPER

Though Mark Twain was known during his lifetime as a journalist, publisher, lecturer and entrepreneur, his reputation mostly rests today on his two great fictional works — *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* besides his witty quotes in circulation through social media. Of these, later mentioned text prequels the former mentioned text. He spent his childhood and days of youth as various places in America but the place that bore a great influence on young Samuel Langhorne Clemens was Hannibal, a frontier locale in the Mississippi region. This locale had all the qualities which later became the indispensable features of his fiction for instance, the romantic mystery, the subliminal dread, and the intimacy with nature. The location is more significant today as place where the readers can have a slice of life during the pre-industrial era and social life of the American society during those times. Through his novels the readers today can enter into “a pre-industrial society of a little river town... [where] the evils of life are the eternal cruelties, hypocrisies, and stupidity of mankind” (DeVeto 14). His works often exhibit his fondness for the alternative selves.

He casts his characters oscillating between selfhood and reality. It is often described as *Twainian Dialectic*. There are the twins and the lookalikes, the paired, and the disguised characters, the mistaken, switched, and assumed identities. His humour voiced his hatred for inequality, oppression, and injustice. His skilful portrayal of life-like characters brought in many memorable and varied characters. Such characters are altogether missing from the modern novels as the modern citizens are over –surveillanced, highly monitored, and over-watched. The pre-industrialized American society cherished the representation of such characters because the readers believed the existence of such disguised, mistaken, and switched identities. The language of the characters reflects the influence of African-American vernacular voices. His novel *Huckleberry Finn* is often counted among the best novels of American literature for its aesthetic qualities and grim and shrewd expression of the socio-cultural aspects of nineteenth century American life.

With the publication of *Innocents Abroad*, a collection of humorous travel articles, Mark Twain became a celebrity in the American reading population. With Mark Twain, the process of the separation of the American culture from the European culture was coming to a definite end. Mark Twain’s humorous writing exhibited that the influence of the European culture on

the American society was no longer prevailing. His works, thus herald the birth of the American culture as a distinct entity. Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was first published in 1876. It is the prequel to his magnum opus *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The book was reviewed negatively by the contemporary critics. However, the popularity of the book grew gradually and now it is believed to be America's most popular novel. It is also significant for being one of the first books to be written on a typewriter.

It takes its rise in Twain's memories of his boyhood in Hannibal, Missouri, in the 1840s (Ziff 64). The river town taken as a setting of the novel is described by Bernard DeVeto in these words: "A town of sun, forest shade, drowsy peace, limpid emotions, simple humanity—and eternity going by on the majestic river." (14). In comparison to its prequel, *Tom Sawyer* is a work of lighter themes. The book has its crises and conflicts, however, "*Tom Sawyer* is seldom discussed in terms of its racial politics, because Twain does not venture the racial theme as a sustained point of interest" (Stoneley xxiii). The style of the writer is humorous, and satirical. The book is set in 1840s, i.e. in the pre-industrial era in the history of America. The social, economic, and ethical structure of the southern American society was mostly altered by the fast-growing industrialization and urbanization. The older generation saw the past nostalgically. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* encapsulates this feeling. It is many times adapted into various formats and arts in popular culture.

The book is set in the pre-industrial times in the history of America. The industrial revolution brought sudden and drastic changes to the social and moral fibre of the American society. The American civilized life was in agony and felt bewilderment by the new reality around them. The peaceful, set order of things had come to an end. They had nostalgic feelings about their communal past. Peter Messent rightly notes that, "In *Tom Sawyer* generations of readers have found access not just to childhood as a realm of summertime adventures, but to a mythic 'once upon a time' in the national past, a place before the disruptions of industrialization, urbanization and immigration that were already beginning to transform the face of America even when [Mark Twain's] novel first appeared. (Messent 64-65). However, the book is not solely about the past of a society, rather, it is more about the past of any common reader. The days of childhood are often remembered with feelings of nostalgia.

The worldview represented in the book is of a boy. Yet, the book is not the writer's ideas about model or ideal boyhood. "The book is not a classic version of boyhood itself, but a classic instance of the nostalgia with which

boyhood is viewed by adults (Stoneley viii). Mark Twain did not want the book to be cast into solely children's literature; he wanted it to be read by adults too. He wrote in a preface to the book that he wrote the book in order "to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves, and of how they felt and thought and talked, and what queer enterprises they sometimes engaged in" (Twain Preface). Tom Sawyer's journey in the novel is the journey of a boy coming of age; exploring his milieu and getting the sense of his position in the world. His childhood mischiefs and funny pranks do not remain light and comic any longer. His attempts to outwit his aunt and his comrades go to the level of gaining attention and admiration from all the townsmen. He comes to grips with the evillest person in the town during his journey towards being a responsible human being.

The children in the novel are treated as if the childhood is the practice and microcosm of the adult world. Tom and his friends dream of getting into the eyes of the authoritative adults for social recognition and worth. The attempts of the children are to gain approval and acceptance into the world of the adults. 'In a world in which only adults are important Tom dreams of winning fame—and so the envy of his peers—and each of his adventures ingeniously attains that end for a glorious moment before the adult world closes in, and he must respond by devising another scheme" (Ziff 64). From a dependant boy, Tom grows into an admirable child which confronts evil and saves the lives of Muff, Widow Douglas, and his childhood infatuation Becky. One thing more of worth to mention here is that, he shows the signs of growing into a capitalist. "Tom's tumultuous but symbiotic relationship with authority can also be seen as the spirit of a model entrepreneur—bold, self-serving, charming, and skilled at manipulation" (Rasmussen 487). It has an undercurrent of the struggle between good and evil.

The evil we meet in the novel is mostly social. It comes from the external influences. Mark Twain does not show evil traits in the children per se. His half-brother Sid is enemy to Tom not because he has done anything evil to him but rather because Sid adapts to the constraints of the social order earlier in order to gain recognition and admiration. He often works as a foil to Tom by his complete assimilation to the norms of the adult world. The evils or mischiefs of Huck and Tom are deviations from the expectations of the adults. The world around Tom is not completely idyllic either. It is full of violence: murder, vengeance, robbery, and beatings abound. The places we often meet in the novel are— jail, slaughterhouse, dark cave, haunted house, and the games they play are –mock-battle, pirates, and the adventures of a dangerous kind. The children fantasise about shedding off the constraints of

the civil, codified behaviour. The episode at Jackson's Island shows Tom getting his companions "knock off being pirates, for a while, and be Indians for a change. They were attracted by this idea; so, it was not long before they were stripped, and striped from head to heel with black mud . . . they went tearing through the woods to attack an English settlement" (Twain 105). The characters, however, do not enter into a morally degenerate and decadent condition. They gain a sense of moral propriety, accountability, and altruistic care. As such, the children face the evils of the adult world during their journey into maturity. The elements of Fear and Danger are one of the major concerns in the novel to which Tom and his companions are quite often exposed.

Tom and Huck meet at midnight in a cemetery to perform a ritual to cure warts. Through the incident of Dr. Robinson's murder by Injun Joe, they witness the real fear and danger. They swear to maintain complete silence over what they saw fearing that they might lose their lives if they ever disclose to anybody what they saw. They face it again when they testify in the trial room that it was Injun Joe who killed Dr. Robinson. They live in a constant fear since then. When they go to the island, their lives are endangered by a falling tree. Their lives are further in a great jeopardy when they are trapped in the haunted house with Injun Joe. They listen to the dangerous intentions of Injun Joe of raping, mutilating, and killing Widow Douglas. Tom and Becky are almost on the verge of dying in the cave. They meet the real danger of dying by starvation. Tom confronts Injun Joe in the darkness of the cave. Horrified, he shouts out loud for his life. As such, the real romance of the novel emanates not only from his infatuation towards Becky but from the dangers he faces too. There are some incidents which bring to fore the superstitions practiced during those times. Tom and Huck decide to perform a ritual of burying a dead cat in a cemetery at midnight. They had heard that it can cure various diseases like warts. The two have a firm belief that it helps. The superstitious society around them also believes a discarded house as a haunted place. The people fear to go into it. However, neither Injun Joe and his friend nor Tom and Huck are fearful of the place. Superstitions play an important role in the sense made by the children of the world around them. The children quite often talk of witches, ghosts, graveyards, and haunted houses.

To sum up, Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* points towards that society and its harmonious social life which didn't have the perils of the post industrialized American society. The modern rush behind pleasures, the greed for material gains at the cost of peace of mind and the racial discriminations

in the cities and villages alike have made the modern human life full of sorrows unimagined a century ago. The novel is revisited by the readers to explore the times and social milieu which is found fresh and living in the novel. Mark Twain's nostalgia for his past has now widened into the nostalgia of the new generations of readers for that social life which gives a sense of unity, coherence, and attachment. The society depicted in the novel is harmoniously coexisting with the nature also. The modern exploitation and over use of natural resources is also a major concern in the contemporary life. The novel being set during the pre-industrial era, is away from this unsustainable growth which is surely leading to disaster for the mankind. The novel shows a healthy social and natural ecology. The nostalgia of the modern readers for the life depicted in the novel partly owes to the contemporary restlessness and cut-throat competition among the people and the nations.

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