Tom Sawyer: Potential President

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The young protagonists of Mark Twain's two most famous novels–*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its sequel, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*–have often been taken to be quintessentially American. Like the new nation, Tom and Huck are young, boys rather than men, adventurous and fun-loving, resourceful, inventive, and, not particularly respectful or enamored of authority. They are, in a word, what Americans most want to be–free. Like the society in which they are raised–a small town on the Mississippi River in Missouri before the Civil War, a state on the border not only between civilization and the frontier, but also between free and slave–the boys' future is undetermined. The fact that both Tom and Huck are orphans is probably not merely coincidental. Neither youth is defined by his family or background. Both represent, if from necessity, the possibility of becoming a self-made man. But is a self-made man necessarily a morally responsible individual? A good family man or fellow citizen? The stories Twain tells about Tom and Huck as they grow up give readers reason to wonder.

Although they share so much, there are also important differences between Twain's two most famous characters. Tom is and wants to remain "respectable." He does not willingly obey the orders of his elders, and he regularly seeks to evade the restraints involved in school, work, and church. But when he is caught, Tom good-naturedly takes his punishment. He is willing not merely to take risks, but even to endure pain to get what he wants. He recognizes that there are rules. He himself cares a great deal about certain of those rules as he understands them–not the rules that tell people how to get to heaven, but the rules for becoming a hero and acquiring fame or glory as he has gleaned them from novels. In other words, Tom cares very much what other

people think of him. He wants to be recognized as better than others. In all his projects, Tom thus insists on taking the lead. He regularly organizes his young friends into "gangs" of pirates or robbers. They don't recognize the law of the land–at least in theory–but they have to play by the rules of his game, rules he takes from historical novels.[1] Whereas his friend Huck merely wants to escape from the constraints of what he calls "sivilization"–clean clothes, regular hours, school, Church, and manners–Tom wants to be a leader, to give himself and others their rules.[2] In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, then, Twain depicts the character and practical education of a natural leader. As we will see, that character is definitely mixed.

In depicting the characteristic traits and development of Tom Sawyer as a natural leader, Twain speaks to a certain on-going debate in American political thought. After the Founding Generation and the passing of the "Virginia Presidents," nineteenth century critics of American democracy began asking "why great men never become President." As those of us who follow Presidential elections know, people have been asking that question ever since. In his classic analysis of *Democracy in America* Alexis de Tocqueville gives the classic answer: no self-respecting man, certainly no gentleman would do what is necessary to win a popular election.[3] A gentleman would not put himself forward as a candidate; that would involve a vulgar kind of bragging. He would wait for others to call upon him to serve. A gentleman would not lower himself to seek the favor and hence the votes of those he regards as his inferiors. As James Fenimore Cooper shows so dramatically in his novels, the gentleman's fellow citizens would, therefore, accuse him (with reason) of thinking he is better than they are. They certainly would never elect him.[4] What sort of person does seek to become a leader in a democracy? Twain shows us in his depiction of Tom Sawyer.[5] In his *Autobiography* Twain quipped, Teddy

Roosevelt is Tom Sawyer grown-up.[6] In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* Twain shows how such a potential President is born and raised.[7]

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* Twain tells the story of an obscure orphan of questionable moral character who becomes a town celebrity. At the end of the novel one of the leading citizens suggests that Tom may have an even more glorious future:

> Judge Thatcher hoped to see Tom a great lawyer or a great soldier someday. He said he meant to look to it that Tom should be admitted to the National Military Academy and afterward trained in the best law school in the country, in order that he might be ready for either career or both. (p. 181)[8]

The judge has an immediate interest in Tom's fate. The young man acquired his current celebrity, in part, by saving the life of the judge's daughter Becky. She, too, feels gratitude–and more. Since Tom acquired a fortune at the same time he saved Becky, the judge can't offer the young man merely a monetary reward. The judge can promise to help Tom in the future–not merely to get the wife of his choosing (and far superior social status to his own) but to attain a position of great public prominence. American Presidents have been drawn pre-eminently from the military–successful generals–and lawyers. Judge Thatcher proposes to provide Tom training for either or both.

Should Twain's novel, then, be regarded as an extended explication of the classic American political promise–in this country, any young man can hope to be President? Or, is there something special something about Tom Sawyer, in particular, that qualifies him to become chief of the world's first modern democracy? In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Twain shows that Tom possesses certain character traits–traits not to be found in his friend Huck, for example–

that make Tom particularly suited or apt to become a popular leader.[9] Tom is courageous; he is willing not merely to endure pain, but even to risk his own life in order to obtain status and recognition. He is ambitious and imaginative. And he is not too terribly bothered or restrained by moral scruples.

Nevertheless, Twain also shows, potential popular leaders like Tom are not simply born. They have to be practically trained and educated. Attached to his own freedom and ease, Tom recognizes how important personal liberty and comfort are to his fellows. Ambitious himself, Tom also understands how important status–not merely "keeping up with the Joneses" but looking better than their neighbors–is to his purportedly egalitarian compatriots. And, Twain shows, Tom initially uses his insight into the passions and prejudices of his peers to get the better of them, to get ahead both economically and socially. At the beginning of the novel in the famous white-washing scene, Tom thus shows himself to be a first-rate young entrepreneur. However, Twain indicates, to become a true leader of men and thus to achieve the recognition he most desires Tom has to learn that it will not suffice merely to outsmart and outmaneuver others. It is necessary truly to serve their needs and interests. Simply cheating and lying to get or do what one wants eventually results–or so we hope–in public shame. To become the man he wants to be, to exercise the freedom Americans possess by nature as their birthright, to enjoy or realize the opportunities offered by an open, democratic society, Tom has to learn to be responsible. In order to be recognized as an outstanding young man, he really and effectively has to do things that benefit others. That is the only way one really "gets ahead" oneself. American Presidents may not, indeed, will not be gentlemen, Twain suggests. They will, like most of their compatriots, be hypocritical and self-seeking or morally corrupt. But, they will not simply be

vulgar and self-seeking. They will have to learn, actually and in reality, to be public servants.

Let me then trace the education of a potential President as Twain presents it in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. That education proceeds in three stages. In the first third of the novel Twain shows how Tom tries to attain the glory he seeks not merely by physically whupping, but primarily by out-smarting--or perhaps we should say duping--his peers. What we and Tom discover from his initial "adventures" is that people may grudgingly admire or even envy people who trick them, but they do not feel gratitude, they do not love or adulate those who openly exploit them. In order to achieve the status and fame he so passionately desires, Tom has to learn to take more account of the feelings, especially the vulnerability and fears, of his associates. In the second and central third of the novel we thus see Tom display a "conscience." His "conscience" does not prevent Tom from doing what he wants or causing others pain, but it does cause Tom to suffer. Tom wants to get ahead himself, but he doesn't really want to hurt others. The most important lesson he learns in the entire novel thus appears to be that he can attain his ambitions, that he can become a hero and publicly adulated, most effectively by risking his own life to save that of another.[10] Primarily by drawing a contrast between Tom and Huck, in the last third of the novel, Twain then shows how morally ambiguous and questionable Tom's "public service" is.[11]

Let me turn now to the novel itself and some of its more famous incidents to show how Twain portrays the education of a potential President. We begin with one of the most famous scenes in all of American fiction: the white-washing of Aunt Polly's fence. A bit of background may be useful. In Chapter 1 Tom's Aunt Polly suspects him of having played hookey from school to go swimming when he arrives home with damp hair. Tom parries her suspicions by

pointing to his immaculate collar. He is caught only when his cousin Sid points out that the thread joining the collar to Tom's shirt is black rather than white. When Aunt Polly reaches for the switch, Tom diverts her attention for a moment and uses the opportunity to run away.

Twain reports that "aunt Polly stood surprised a moment, and then broke into a gentle laugh.

> "Hang the boy, can't I never learn anything? Ain't he played me tricks enough like that for me to be looking out for him by this time? . . . But . . . he never plays them alike, two days, and how is a body to know what's coming? . . . I ain't doing my duty by that boy, and that's the Lord's truth. . . Spare the rod and spile the child, as the Good Book says. . . . Every time I let him off, my conscience does hurt me so, and every time I hit him my old heart most breaks" (p. 2).

She resolves to let him off that evening, but to force him to stay home and work on Saturday when all the other boys are off. There's nothing the boy dislikes more, she thinks, than good, hard work.

Aunt Polly doesn't really understand her young charge, we see. It is not effort nearly so much as public humiliation that Tom dreads. Next day he is despondent, not so much at the prospect of having to work or at his lack of leisure and freedom as at the thought of how much fun the other boys will make of him for having to work. From the very beginning of his "adventures" we see that Tom cares more about his image in the eyes of others than he does about physical pain or comfort. That fateful Saturday morning Tom has an "inspiration." Seeing a pal of his coming down the street, ready to rag him about having to work on Saturday, Tom pretends that white-washing is a rare privilege, something a boy can't do every day. Ben Rogers and a series of boys after him have to bargain with Tom, trading snacks or other prize possessions for the privilege of giving Aunt Polly's fence not merely one but three coats of

white-wash. Twain concludes: "if [Tom] had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do" (p. 12). We readers learn even more. In the first place, we see that Aunt Polly's loosely Christian morals and conscience are not sufficient to enable her to discipline or control Tom; she has too much affectionate sympathy for his love of fun and freedom and too much admiration for his "high jinks" and clever strategems to disapprove of him thoroughly or to keep him in check. Tom's education does not, in other words, take place in his family or in church. He has to learn to take responsibility for his actions and to acquire a certain amount of self-control someplace else, in another way–if at all.

We also see that it is not effort so much as perceived inequality or lesser privilege that grates on the citizens of the new republic. Aunt Polly thinks she is punishing Tom by making him work. It is not the work per se that daunts him or his fellows, however; it is the appearance of being less free or, as it turns out, more privileged that is of most concern to them. The most successful entrepreneurs do not sell useful products or services, Twain suggests, so much as they sell status or self-esteem.

As Twain shows in the next, almost equally famous incident, however, entrepreneurship is not enough to get Tom the recognition he seeks. To encourage his young pupils to learn Scripture, the Sunday school superintendent had devised a system of rewards or incentives. For every two verses of Scripture memorized and recited, without too much coaching, each pupil received a small blue ticket with a passage of Scripture on it. "Ten blue tickets . . . could be exchanged for a red one, ten red tickets for a yellow, and for ten yellow tickets the

superintendent gave the student a very plainly bound Bible (worth forty cents in those easy times)." The narrator explains:

> Only the older pupils managed to keep their tickets and stick to their tedious work long enough to get a Bible, and so the delivery of one of these prizes was a rare and noteworthy circumstance; the successful pupil was so great and conspicuous on that day that on the spot every scholar's heart was fired with a fresh ambition that often lasted a couple of weeks. It is possible that Tom's mental stomach had never really hungered for one of those prizes, but unquestionably his entire being had for many a day longed for the glory and the eclat that came with it. (p. 21)

Hating the drudgery and boredom of mere memorization, Tom characteristically uses his wits to pursue his ambitions. He trades the various articles he acquired in exchange for the privilege of white-washing for the Biblical verse tickets. The day the county judge and his wife come to hear the recitations, Tom is thus in a position to gratify the desire not merely of the superintendent to "show off" his pupils, but similar desires of the librarian, the young lady teachers, the young gentleman teachers, the little girls and the little boys, all to "show off" before their distinguished guest, by marching up to the stage with nine yellow tickets, nine red tickets and ten blue ones in his hand to exchange for a Bible. "It was the most stunning surprise of the decade," the narrator comments. "The boys were all eaten up with envy . . . [especially] those who had contributed to this hated splendor by trading tickets to Tom for the wealth he had amassed in selling whitewashing privileges. These despised themselves, as being the dupes of a wily fraud" (p. 24). The fraud is exposed, however, when first the Judge and then his wife ask Tom (who supposedly learned two thousand verses) to say who the first two disciples were. Hesitating, hemming and

hawing in embarrassment, Tom finally blurts out “David and Goliath!” The pain of Tom’s shame is compounded by the fact that the Judge is the father of the new girl in town whom he most wants to impress!

To make sure that his readers are not too critical of Tom for his commercial approach to Biblical learning, Twain shows in the chapter following Tom’s humiliation that the congregation as a whole is as bored by church services and sermons as the young boy. All laugh when a stray dog that has wandered into the service yelps, bitten by the pinchbug with which Tom has been covertly playing. “The neighboring spectators shook with a gentle inward joy, several faces went behind fans and handkerchiefs, and Tom was entirely happy” (p. 29).[12]

It is impossible for an ambitious young man to lead a people, if he does not share many of their feelings and tastes. Merely sharing in popular frustrations and relieving them will not suffice to bring that youth the adulation and affection he desires, however. He remains simply one of the crowd.

Tom cannot attain the distinction he wants through sheer affrontery or sharp trading. Such practices may arouse the envy of others, but they also produce resentment and anger. Nor, Twain shows, can a youth attain social pre-eminence simply with physical strength and moral fortitude.

Tom faces down each new fellow who comes to town–first in word and then with his fists. Nevertheless, as the young inmates of the town school know all too well, discipline imposed by force by their larger and stronger elders feels just like that–compulsion. The children may fear the switch of the schoolmaster, but they do not love or respect him. On the contrary, they seek any and every form of distraction they can find–to escape in mind, if not

body from the confinement.

Their desire for freedom–or perhaps we should say their dislike of confinement and constriction--makes the youths of St. Petersburg look with longing at the life of the son of the town drunkard, Huckleberry Finn.

> Huckleberry came and went, at his own free will. He slept on doorsteps in fine weather and in empty hogsheads 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 . . . ; nobody forbade him to fight; he could sit up as late as he pleased. . . ; he never had to wash, nor put on clean clothes; he could swear wonderfully. (p. 34)

For the same reason–because he acts out their children's desire to be free from convention--the adults citizens of St. Petersburg heartily disapprove of Huck. He

> was cordially hated and dreaded by all the mothers of the town, because he was idle and lawless and vulgar and bad–and because all their children admired him so, and delighted in his forbidden society. . . . Tom was like the rest of the respectable boys . . . under strict order not to play with him. So he played with him every time he got a chance. (pp. 33-34)

It was a relatively mild and therefore safe form of rebellion. As Twain comments late in the novel, Tom "did not care to have Huck's company in public places" (p. 140).

Unable and ultimately unwilling to give up the affectionate care of their families, boys like Tom and his friend Joe Harper try to attain some of Huck's freedom, at least temporarily, by pretending to be outlaws. Escaping the supervision of their elders by going into the woods, they

take turns playing roles–Friar Tuck, the Sheriff of Nottingham, even Robin Hood himself-- and design their costumes literally by the book. Youthful romantics, Tom and Joe regretted "that there were no outlaws any more, and wonder[ed] what modern civilization could claim to have done to compensate for their loss." Looking for a more colorful, exciting, adventurous life, free from customary constraints and boring obligations like school and church, the boys "said they would rather be outlaws a year in Sherwood Forest than President of the United States forever" (p. 49). Tom has not learned yet how to satisfy his desire for recognition as an adult in a democracy.[13]

As Twain shows when Tom and Huck unexpectedly witness the murder of Dr. Robinson by Injun Joe at midnight in the graveyard, Tom doesn't really understand what it is to be an outlaw or how dangerous it actually is. He is, after all, just a boy trying to have fun.

Tom and Huck had gone to the cemetery to see whether the dead cat Huck has acquired would actually cure warts the way people say. As Huck explains:

> "Why, you take your cat and go and get in the graveyard 'long about midnight when somebody that was wicked has been buried; and when it's midnight a devil will come, or maybe two or three, but you can't see 'em, you can only hear something like the wind, or maybe hear 'em talk; and when they're taking that feller away, you heave your cat after 'em and say, 'Devil follow corpse, cat follow devil, warts follow cat, I'm done with ye!' (p. 36)

Standing by a fresh grave in the dark, the boys are thus startled, indeed, frightened when they hear voices. They are reassured when they recognize one as the voice of Muff Potter, the town drunk. The other voice turns out to belong to a man

worse than a devil, “that murderin’ half-breed . . . Injun Joe.” Joe takes the opportunity in the dark at night to knife the young doctor who has hired the two derelicts to dig up a corpse for him to examine and to blame the murder on Muff who falls unconscious in the fight that leads up to the knifing. Frightened of what Joe will do to them if they reveal what they have seen and heard, Tom and Huck take an oath not to tell and initial it with their own blood.

Unfortunately, the narrator informs us, the fear that keeps the boys from cooperating with the law in the apprehension of the true criminal is not limited to the young.

> The villagers had a strong desire to tar and feather Injun Joe and ride him on a rail, for body-snatching, but so formidable was his character that nobody could be found who was willing to take the lead in the matter, so it was dropped. [Joe] had been careful to begin both of his inquest statements with the fight, without confessing the grave-robbery that preceded it; therefore it was deemed wisest not to try the case in the courts at present” (p. 65)[14]

Law and justice are weak in America precisely because there are few individuals like Tom Sawyer willing to take the lead in an enterprise that promises to bring them pain, if not death–and Tom himself is not willing or prepared to take the lead in such a truly dangerous undertaking as yet. He has to develop his conscience–or to speak more precisely, he has to bring his conscience and his desire for recognition together. The story of that “reconciliation” occupies the central section of the novel.

Tom’s conscience was bothering him after the inquest; he did not rest easy with the knowledge that his remaining silent had led to the incarceration of an innocent man on the basis of false testimony by the murderer himself. As a result, Tom could not sleep nights. Trying to

mollify his conscience, Tom took every opportunity to smuggle little treats to Muff Potter through the jail-house window.[15]

However, Tom's conscience was, for a time at least, overcome not merely or even perhaps primarily by his fear of Injun Joe. Tom was depressed by a more general sense of gloom and doom. He had failed to acquire the renown or recognition he so passionately desired. His great enterprise in white-washing had been revealed to be a fraud at the Sunday school exhibition, and his courtship of Becky had fallen apart when he inadvertently let slip that he had recently been engaged to Amy Lawrence. "[N]obody loved him," he concluded. He decided, therefore, to run away. "[W]hen they found out what they had driven him to, perhaps they would be sorry." Meeting his "soul's sworn comrade, Joe Harper" whose "mother had whipped him for drinking some cream which he had never tasted," the aggrieved youths determine to leave home and move to an uninhabited island in the middle of the river, where they can live as pirates. Persuading Huck Finn to join them, they first "hook" some provisions and then take a raft. Arriving on the island, they are blissfully happy at first.

> They built a fire against the side of a great log twenty or thirty steps within the somber depths of the forest, . . . cooked some bacon . . . and used up half of the core 'pone' stock they had brought. It seemed glorious sport to be feasting in that wild free way in the virgin forest of an unexplored and uninhabited island, far from the haunts of men, and they said they never would return to civilization. (p. 73)

But, Twain shows, the boys do not take pleasure so much in the beauties of a more natural existence as in the contrast between the their current condition and that from which they

previously suffered. "What would the boys say if they could see us?" Tom asks his companions. "It's just the life for me . . . . You don't have to get up, mornings, and you don't have to go to school, and wash, and all that blame foolishness" (pp. 73-4). Huck lives free of such restraints all the time, but the joy of escaping from the discipline of their regular schedule begins to wane for Tom and Joe as night falls. Saying their prayers inwardly, Tom and Joe both have a hard time getting to sleep. "It was conscience," the narrator explains.

> They began to feel a vague fear that they had been doing wrong to run away; and next they thought of the stolen meat, and the real torture came. They tried to argue it away by reminding conscience that they had purloined sweetmeats and apples scores of times; but . . . it seemed to them, in the end, that . . . taking sweetmeats was only "hooking," while taking bacon and hams and such valuables was plain simple *stealing*–and there was a command against that in the Bible. So they inwardly resolved that so long as they remained in the business, their piracies should not again be sullied with the crime of stealing. (p. 75)

Tom and Joe think they want to be free to do what they please–more than anything else. What they discover–or what Twain shows his readers–is that they want, above all, to be seen by others to be doing what they please. These boys are by no means indifferent to the approval or disapproval of their parents and peers. On the contrary, what they most want is admiration and envy. To be admired they think they need to do something unusual, colorful, "gaudy." They believe that they will be envied not so much for their achievements, however, as for getting out of the unpleasant constraints from which others suffer. That is why they pretend to be "robbers" and "pirates." They certainly do not want to be or to be perceived as common "thieves."

Because they care so much about the opinions of others, whose moral teachings they have internalized in part in the form of conscience, the boys do not find the genuine beauties of nature and the pleasures of an easy existence satisfying for long. On the island, the narrator reports:

> They found plenty of things to be delighted with, but nothing to be astonished at. . . . They took a swim about every hour, . . . they fared sumptuously upon cold ham, and then threw themselves down in the shade to talk. But the talk soon began to drag. . . . The stillness, the solemnity that brooded in the woods, and the sense of loneliness began to tell upon the spirits of the boys. . . A sort of undefined longing crept upon them. . . . it was budding homesickness. (p. 78).

The boys get temporary relief when a ferryboat comes looking for them; people in town think they may have drowned. "They felt like heroes in an instant. Here was a gorgeous triumph; they were missed" (p. 79). But the relief does not last long. Human beings want to be surrounded by people who care about them. All three of the youths become homesick–even Huck. After his pals fall asleep, Tom thus sneaks back to town to see his family. Overhearing Aunt Polly mourning for him makes Tom feel so bad that he begins to write her a note to say that they are all fine, but then he has another, grander idea. He rushes back to the island where he convinces Joe and Huck to stay until Sunday–when they will sneak in, resurrected, as it were, to their own funeral. They march down the aisle as the minister begins to discourse on the text: "I am the Resurrection and the Life." Relieved to see that the young men are actually all right, the members of the congregation join in to "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" with unusual fervor. The narrator reports that "As the 'sold' congregation trooped out they said they would

almost be willing to be made ridiculous again to hear 'Old Hundred' sung like that once more" (p. 96). Boys will be boys, and the people were happy to see them alive and sound–at least for the moment.

Nevertheless, the next day Aunt Polly complains to Tom about his lack of consideration for the feelings of those who loved him most. Couldn't he have left some hint that they were just on the island? Tom wants people to love and admire him; for all his playing pirates and Indians, he doesn't really want to hurt others, especially the innocent who love and admire him already. He thus tells Aunt Polly about the note he wrote and then didn't leave–which, as evidence of his affection and concern, greatly relieves her when she finds it in his coat pocket. Then, by taking the whipping which by right should have gone to Becky for tearing the pages in the schoolmaster's book, Tom learns that the best way to earn the admiration and affection of another is to take on one's own shoulders the pain they fear. He puts that lesson into practice in public in a most dramatic fashion when, overcoming his own fear of retaliation by Injun Joe, Tom testifies in court to what he actually saw in the graveyard that night and thus saves the life of Muff Potter. "Tom was a glittering hero once more," the narrator concludes. He was "the pet of the old, the envy of the young. His name even went into immortal print, for the village paper magnified him. There were some that believed he would be President, yet, if he escaped hanging" (p. 124).

Tom has learned that a young man does not acquire glory so much by showing off or beating his fellows in contests–whether of fists or of wits–so much as by relieving the weak and the innocent from apprehension and suffering. Like Becky and Muff the people so benefitted greatly admire one's nobility and generosity. A young man can simultaneously satisfy the

demands of both ambition and conscience, however, only if he can overcome his own fear of pain and death. It takes courage. Tom's desire for pre-eminence can be satisfied, in other words, only to the extent to which he shares in a real and old aristocratic virtue. There is a moral core or pre-requisite for his success. As Twain suggests in two chapters depicting student recitations born out of fear of the whip and a temporary religious revival, the combination of courage and compassion represented by Tom results in more real and lasting benefits to others than moral teachings based on fear–of punishment--here on earth or in the hereafter.

It is also the courage born of ambition, of the desire, above all, to look good in the eyes of others, that distinguishes Tom from his friend Huck. Huck also had compassion for Muff Potter, but out of fear for his own hide he would never have broken the oath he and Tom solemnly swore not just once, but twice, never to reveal what they had seen. Twain brings out the moral ambiguity in the desire for distinction that leads a person like Tom Sawyer to take the lead in performing real acts of public service in the last third of the novel by emphasizing the differences between Tom and Huck.

Like all "red-blooded" American youths, Tom and Huck want to strike it rich. They decide, therefore, to go in search of buried treasure. As with the cure for warts, so with buried gold, Tom informs Huck, there is a formula for success. One has to look "in a ha'nted house or on an island, or under a dead tree that's got one limb sticking out" (p. 127). Confident that they will eventually succeed, although he admits it may take some time, Tom asks Huck what he will do with the money if they find it. And the differences in the young men's dominant desires come out in the resulting exchange. Huck says, "I'll have pie and a glass of soda every day, and I'll go to every circus that comes along." As he admitted on Jackson's Island, the homeless boy

often does not get enough to eat. His first desire is thus for food–especially for sweets. Huck is willing to sacrifice such physical comforts in order to maintain his freedom, however. As he indicates in his desire to see the circus, Huck joins or rejoins society, for example, as a "pirate" with Tom and Joe, for the sake of entertainment. Tom, on the other hand, displays his love of show and his more conventional, social desires for affection when he says that he is "going to buy a new drum, and a sure-'nough sword, and a red necktie and a bull pup, and get married" (p. 128). Huck objects: he will be "more lonesomer than ever," if Tom hooks up for life with a woman. "No you won't," Tom unrealistically responds. "You'll come and live with me." He urges Huck to "get down to business" now and dig.

After they dig under several trees without success, the boys decide to try a haunted house–but during the day to avoid ghosts. When Huck remembers it is Friday, they fear it might not be an auspicious time to disturb spirits, so they decide to play Robin Hood outside and wait to go inside to explore until Saturday. Tom tells Huck that Robin Hood "was one of the greatest men that was ever in England–and the best. He was a robber." When Huck asks who he robbed, Tom explains that Robin Hood only robbed "sheriffs and bishops and rich people and kings . . . But he never bothered the poor. He loved 'em. He always divided up with 'em perfectly square" (pp. 132-3). Robin Hood is, apparently, the model for a democratic robber baron–or a noble redistributive politician. Law-abidingness is not nearly so important as whom you hurt and whom you benefit. Laws are made, after all, by people in power. Democratic heroes help the weak, the poor and the powerless.

Next morning when the boys return to the haunted house and postpone their digging in order to explore upstairs, they are once again surprised and frightened to hear voices–especially

when they recognize one of the voices as belonging, once again, to Injun Joe. Disguised as a deaf and dumb Spaniard with a long white beard and serape, Joe has returned with a ragged companion to pick up a hoard of silver they left buried in the isolated shack. When they go to dig it up, they find another chest of gold coins left, they think, by another gang. The boys have found their buried treasure–only to see it carted away!

Having heard Joe say that they will bury the chest again under the cross at Number Two, Tom figures that Number Two must refer to a tavern that rents rooms. After Tom finds Injun Joe there lying drunk on the floor one night and no treasure in sight, the boys decide that Huck should keep a look out at night. When the robbers come back to pick up their treasure, he will notify Tom and they will trail them.

Tom gets distracted from the treasure hunt by the picnic Becky Thatcher organizes by McDougal's cave. He and Becky have gotten lost in the lower corridors of the cave the very night that Huck sees Joe and his ragged companion return to the tavern, pick up a bag of things, and take off to do the "job" Joe insisted they finish before he would let his "friend" leave–alive. It was a matter of "revenge," Joe told his companion at the haunted house. As Huck follows them up Cardiff Hill past the Welshman's house onto the grounds of the Widow Douglas, the boy realizes with a "deadly chill in his heart--

> this, then, was the 'revenge' job! His [first] thought was, to fly. Then he remembered that the Widow Douglas had been kind to him more than once, and maybe these men were going to murder her. He wished he dared venture to warn her; but he knew he didn't dare–they might come and catch him. (P. 149)

When they pause outside her house, waiting for her company to leave, he thus furtively backs down the hill til he can run to the Welshman to plead with him to help her. Knocking on the door, Huck entreats: "Please don't ever tell *I* told you. . . . I'd be killed, sure–but the widow's been good friends to me sometimes, and I want to tell–I *will* tell if you'll promise you won't ever say it was me" (p. 150). Three minutes later the old man and his sons, well armed, had marched up the hill.

Like Tom in the case of Muff Potter, Huck's compassion for the suffering of an innocent person who had been kind to him in the past overcomes enough of his fear to make him tell the authorities–or at least someone who can help. But in contrast to Tom, Huck does not want to take credit or receive public recognition for his service or bravery. He'd rather remain in obscurity. He does not want to risk his life for mere fame. Is he simply a coward? Or, does his sense of his own vulnerability make him more truly egalitarian and humane?

The contrast between the responses of the two boys becomes even clearer after Tom saves Becky from starvation in the cave and at the same time discovers where Joe actually buried the treasure. He and Huck go back to the cave and they dig up the chest. When the boys are brought to the Widow's house, where the Welshman announces that it was Huck who saved her life, Tom informs the assembled crowd that Huck does not need the Widow's support. He's rich! To the astonishment of the townspeople, the boys bring in and display the $12,000 in gold they have found.

Nevertheless, the Widow takes Huck in.

> And the fact that he was now under the Widow Douglas's protection introduced him into society–no, dragged him into it . . . and his sufferings were almost more

> than he could bear. The widow's servants kept him clean and neat, combed and brushed, and they bedded him nightly in unsympathetic sheets that had not one little spot or stain. . . . He had to eat with knife and fork; . . . he had to learn his book, he had to go to church; he had to talk so properly that speech was become insipid in his mouth; whithersoever he turned, the bars and shackles of civilization shut him in and bound him hand and foot. (p. 181)

Huck bore with it for three weeks and then showed up missing. After three days, Tom Sawyer found him sleeping in an old empty hogshead. Huck was "unkempt, uncombed, and clad in the same old ruin of rags that had made him picturesque in the days when he was free and happy." He tells Tom, that despite the widow's good intentions and affection, he just can't go back.

> The widder's good to me, and friendly; but . . . [s]he makes me git up just the same time every morning; she makes me wash . . . ; I got to go to church . . . . I got to wear shoes all Sunday. . . . [S]he wouldn't let me smoke . . . [or] yell, . . . [or] gape, or stretch, or scratch, before folks. (Pp. 181-2)

Huck has concluded that "being rich ain't what it's cracked up to be." He proposes, therefore, to give his share of the money back to Tom and to ask his friend merely to spare him a dime from time to time.

When Tom objects that everyone lives "regular" like the Widow, Huck responds, that "don't make no difference. I ain't everybody, and I can't *stand* it. It's awful to be tied up so." Huck does not want to give up the freedom he has by nature to do what he wants, when he wants, in order to live the way other people think he should. He does not want anyone to know who he is or what he does, because he does not want to live by rules or under anyone else's command

and control. He does not care what other people think. He simply does not want to be blamed–or held responsible.

Huck does want to be "one of the boys," however. He gets lonely. When Huck states his regret that just as he and Tom had found guns and a hide-out in the cave and were all ready to rob, they had been dragged back into society, Tom sees his opportunity. "Looky here," he tells Huck, "being rich ain't going to keep me back from turning robber. . . But, Huck, we can't let you into the gang if you ain't respectable." "Didn't you let me go for a pirate?" Huck reminds him. "Yes," Tom admits, "but that's different. A robber is more high-toned than what a pirate is–as a general thing. In most countries they're awful high up in the nobility." Huck pleads with Tom not to shut him out. "I wouldn't want to, and I *don't* want to," Tom assures him, "but what would people say? Why, they'd say, 'Mph! Tom Sawyer's Gang! Pretty low characters in it! They'd mean you, Huck. You wouldn't like that, and I wouldn't." Huck agrees to go back to the widder's and stay there til he rots, if Tom will let him join the pirates. If he "git[s] to be a reg'lar ripper of a robber, and everybody talking 'bout it, [he] reckon[s] she'll be proud she snaked [him] out of the wet" (p. 183).

The ending of the novel is, I believe, intentionally ambiguous. In his explicit "conclusion," Twain states that "[it] being strictly a history of a *boy*, it must stop here; the story could not go much further without becoming the history of a *man*. When one writes a novel about grown people, he knows exactly where to stop–that is, with a marriage; but when he writes of juveniles, he must stop where he best can" (p. 184).

The narrator's report of the high opinion Judge Thatcher had formed of Tom leads us to believe in the end that Tom will marry Becky, that he will attend a military academy and go to

law school, and that he will, one way or another, become a community leader. That would be the story of Tom Sawyer, grown up; Tom Sawyer as Theodore Roosevelt–or Bill Clinton, or George W. Bush, the youthful cut-up who has compassion and a conscience, who asks forgiveness for his youthful indiscretions, who has given up his noble pretensions, finds religion, and runs for office to serve his fellow Americans. Taking the lead in all his endeavors, he is or has become the potential President.

By leaving the story a tale of a boy, Twain leaves the future open–or the result undetermined. Has Tom shown in his final manipulation of Huck's desires that he has become a responsible citizen and leader, that he sees the need to lead his fellows into society, to get them to accept customary regulations and order–for their own good? As we saw initially in the case of Tom and his Aunt Polly, sermonizing and moral discipline, even when affectionately imposed, do not succeed in civilizing or taming a spirited youth. Tom gets Huck to accept the order imposed on his life by the Widow where she and her good intentions could not by appealing to Huck's love of adventure and fun. The appeal is, however, to Huck's desire to be a member of a gang of robbers, that is to be one of a gang of young men who live outside the law, getting what they want through the use of force and violence. We are led to ask whether the means Tom uses to socialize Huck do not promise to undermine the obedience to civil and domestic order he would impose. In the murderous career of Injun Joe, Twain reminds his readers how ugly and dangerous the life of a "robber," a combination of a natural attachment to one's own freedom and equality with a willingness to steal and kill to get what one wants, looks in a grown up.

In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* I have thus argued, Twain dramatizes the problem of leadership in a democracy, if not in general. Like Tom and Huck, Twain shows, human beings

are attached by nature to liberty. We do not want to be restrained by others, by customs or by laws. We want to do what we please. Moral suasion whether in the form of religious teaching or affectionate parenting is not sufficient to institute order–or to protect the weak from the strong and ruthless.[16] People tend to obey out of fear–of violent death or of public opprobrium. Only a few, like Tom Sawyer, are willing not only to risk their lives but also to endure pain and shame–at least temporarily–in order to achieve the admiration, indeed, adoration of their fellows. Because they are willing to take the lead in all enterprises, such individuals perform an essential public service. Without such daring leaders, ordinary folks are too timid to take action against the violent and rapacious. Nevertheless, Twain suggests, we should recognize the true character of the beast. People like Tom Sawyer serve others not for the sake of the others; they serve because they glory in receiving glory. And they are perfectly willing, indeed, happy to use immoral and illegal means. We should reward such people with the fame they so desire–if and when they perform real public services. But we should not trust them. We should recognize that they are always scheming to "take" us. We should regularly remind them that we do not enjoy being "sold." We should hold them–and force them to hold others–responsible.

Endnotes

1. In *Mark Twain: The Fate of Humor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), James M. Cox observes that Tom "feels the pinch of school and the discipline of Aunt Polly, but he has no sustained desire to escape and no program of rebellion. What he does have is a perennial dream of himself as the hero" (pp. 140-41).

2. Twain also contrasts Tom with Huck in *Adventures of Huckleberry.* In that novel Tom is also presented as the leader, but the picture of Tom is much more negative than it is in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, perhaps because Huck is the narrator. For the contrast from Huck's point of view, see Catherine H. Zuckert, "Twain's Comic Critique," in *Natural Right and the American Imagination: Political Philosophy in Novel Form* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), pp. 131-60.

3. Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. I, Part II, Ch. 5: "The People's Choice and the Instincts of American Democracy in Such Choices," trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 187-90. In his novel *Democracy* the scion of an American political family himself, Henry Adams, says basically the same thing about his Presidential hopeful, Senator Ratliff. In his famous explanation of why great men never become President, in *The American Commonwealth* (New York: Macmillon, 1898), pp. 57-63, James Bryce connects the low character of American leaders to the requirements of party politics; but party politics are, after all, merely expressions of the requirements of democratic electioneering.

4. Cf. especially *Home as Found* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1961), and *The American Democrat* (New York: Knopf, 1959).

5. Twain gave a devastatingly funny critique of "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offenses," *The Writings of Mark Twain* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1899), Vol. 22, pp. 78-96. He seems to have disagreed with Cooper about the character and potential of American political leadership as well.

6. Bernard De Voto, ed., *Mark Twain in Eruption* ((New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940), p. 49.

7. In the course of the novel, Tom Sawyer displays character traits associated with three, if not all four types of Presidential characters identified by James David Barber in "presidents since Theodore Roosevelt." *The Presidential Character* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1985), third edition, p. 8. Like the "active-positive" Tom seeks and enjoys exercising power; like the "active-negative" at times he tries to compensate for a negative self-image; like the "positive passive," he seeks affection. Unlike a "negative passive," Tom does not seek positions of leadership from a sense of duty, although he does have recourse to the "rules" and proper "procedures." Because he is a boy, Tom's character has not yet been set by his experiences. He

could become any of the likely political types.

8. Citations to Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 1998).

9. In a response to Barber, Erwin Hargrove pointed out that Barber's first two types were "close to Lasswell's 'democratic character' and 'political man . . . . The 'political man' seeks attention and power in order to overcome low estimates of the self. The 'democratic character' has passed through his developmental stages successfully, and has outgrown the political drives. He does not need to dominate men." "Presidential Personality and Revisionist Views of the Presidency," *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 17, No. 11 (November 1973), pp. 822-27; Harold Lasswell, "Democratic Character," in *the Political Writings of Harold Lasswell* (Glencoe, IL.: The Free Press, 1951), pp. 465-525. Lasswell's distinction could be applied to Huck and Tom. The admiration Huck displays for Tom, especially in his own book, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, raises questions about the extent to which the "democratic character" is superior to, or more mature than, the "political man."

10. In a provocative essay on "Tom Sawyer: Hero of Middle America," *Interpretation*, Vol. 2/3, No. 3 (Spring 1972): 194-225, Harry V. Jaffa pointed out Tom's Machiavellian glory-seeking. Jaffa did not see any development in Tom's character, however. Rather than trace the stages of Tom's education, Jaffa emphasized Tom's lying and his Protestant roots: "Tom is a hero of the new Calvinism, in which a new wine of worldly glory is poured into the old churchly vessel, and such success will henceforth be regarded as the hallmark of election and salvation" (p. 197).

11. Most critics have denied that there is any real plot or organization to the novel. Cf. DeLancey Ferguson, *Mark Twain: Man and Legend* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1943), p. 176, James M. Cox, "Remarks on the Sad Initiation of Huckleberry Finn*", Sewanee Review,* 62 *(*July-September 1954*): 389-405.* Most agree that it depicts a boy's growth, but they see the structure in terms merely of themes rather than in stages. Cf. Walter Blair, *Mark Twain and Huck Finn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), pp 103, 151. I see each third or stage in the story of Tom's education marked by one of the confrontations with Injun Joe: first in the graveyard and in court, second when Tom testifies against him, and third when they foil his attempt to take revenge on the widow and find the treasure buried in the cave.

12. On the service Tom performs by relieving the boredom of his fellow citizens, see Judith Fetterley, "The Sanctioned Rebel," *Studies in the Novel* 3 (Fall 1971): 293-304.

13. Cf. L. Moffitt Cecil, "Tom Sawyer: Missouri Robin Hood," *Western American Literature*, 4 (Summer 1969): 125-31**,** reprinted in Gary Scharnhorst, ed., *Critical Essays on THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1993): "Long ago Mark Twain recognized the general gap. His distrust of the establishment . . . included[d] most adults. He saw that what the world calls 'experience' tends to make people bitter or bigoted or afraid. On the other hand, he admired the vitality and honesty of the young. Uncontaminated by the world,

they are quick to recognize hypocrisy and bold to dream, to dare, and do. Mark Twain saw that there is a constant state of undeclared war in progress between adults and the young. . . . As innocent and mirth-provoking as the book may first appear, *Tom Sawyer* could well serve as a primer for those young activists and hippies who are protesting (sometimes too strenuously, it is true) against outmoded forms and attitudes" (p. 117).

14.There is a similar incident in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* when Colonel Sherburn shoots the town drunk down in cold blood in the middle of the day and then taunts the mob that gathers at his doorstep. There is no real "man" among them, willing to risk his life in order to maintain the rule of law by punishing a criminal. Afraid of retaliation, these people take vengeance only at night, hooded, and in mobs.

15.Sid noticed that Tom never played coroner at one of the inquests his schoolmates held on dead cats, "though it had been his habit to take the lead in all new enterprises; [Sid] noticed, too, that Tom never acted as a witness" (p. 65).

16.Twain indicates how skeptical he is about the effectiveness of compassion and forgiveness as the basis of public policy or law-enforcement when he comments on the funeral of Injun Joe (who died of starvation after Judge Thatcher had the mouth of the cave boarded up): "This funeral stopped the further growth of one thing–the petition to the Governor for Injun Joe's pardon. The petition had been largely signed; many tearful and eloquent meetings had been held, and a committee of sappy women had been appointed to go in deep mourning and wail around the Governor, and implore him to be a merciful ass and trample his duty underfoot. Injun Joe was believed to have killed five citizens of the village, but what of that? If he had been Satan himself there would have been plenty of weaklings ready to scribble their names to a pardon petition, and drip a tear on it from their permanently impaired and leaky waterworks" (p. 170).