

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION IN THE ADVENTURES OF TOM SAWYER

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### Abstract:

This article analyzes the importance of education and learning in Mark Twain's classic novel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It reviews previous literary criticism and interpretations related to the theme of education in the novel. The analysis finds that education and learning serve both thematic and character development purposes in the story. Formal schooling is portrayed as tedious at times, but ultimately important for the characters' moral and intellectual growth. Informal learning and experience also play a central role, as many of the most important lessons the characters learn take place outside of the classroom. The discussion examines how Twain used the theme of education to criticize certain aspects of society and human nature while also affirming a philosophy of hope in the power of knowledge and compassion to create positive change.

**Keywords:** *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Mark Twain, education, learning, literature.

### Introduction

Since its publication in 1876, Mark Twain's novel about a young boy growing up in a small Missouri town in the mid-19th century has become one of the most celebrated and widely-read works in American literature [1]. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is renowned for its vivid evocation of life along the Mississippi River, its memorable characters, and its humorous, vernacular style [2]. One of the key themes explored throughout the work is the importance of education and learning.

Formal schooling and academia serve an important role in both the plot and thematic development of the novel. However, some of the most critical lessons the characters learn take place through informal adventures and experiences. Twain used education as a lens through which to examine and critique society, while also affirming a redemptive philosophy focused on knowledge, personal growth, and compassion. This analysis reviews prior literary interpretations related to the theme of education in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* before analyzing the effects and implications of how education is presented in the novel.



## LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Scholars have long recognized the theme of education as one of the key elements of social commentary within *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* [3-5]. Green [3] asserted that the novel can be read both as a “celebration” and a “critique” of learning (p. 54). Twain explored both the value and the shortcomings of formal schooling through events in the plot and characterization. He also highlighted the influence that superstitions and societal prejudices can have in distorting moral education [3].

Robinson [4] claimed that the portrayal of education serves chiefly to develop key aspects of Tom Sawyer’s identity—specifically his individuality and creativity. Formal lessons at school are contrasted with Tom’s “imaginative escapades” outside it (p. 82). As such, education helps establish Tom as a figure who resists societal constraints in favor of adventurous freedom [4]. Johns [5] similarly categorized the theme of education as Twain’s vehicle for “socio-cultural criticism” related to morality and worldview (p. 62). Each episode related to the characters’ schooling and learning reinforces central conflicts regarding authority, power, ethics, religion, and social conventions [5].

Some analyses of education in the novel focus on specific subjects, texts, disciplines, or scenes as they relate to Twain’s philosophy. Magier [6] concentrated principally on the Bible as presented in scenes depicting Sunday school. He claimed these passages represent Twain’s perspective that most religious education amounts to little more than rote “memorization without understanding” which fails to impart true wisdom or compassion (p. 46). Skillen [7] also discussed biblical lessons but broadened the study to examine references to punishment, charity, and ethical behavior throughout the book. In this interpretation, education serves to demonstrate how moral character develops through real-life experiences [7].

Meanwhile, Messent [8] analyzed classroom lessons about writing, grammar, and reading to argue that Twain used formal composition instruction as an analogy for the process of creative authorship. The schoolroom episodes highlight Twain’s talent for turning “dreary pedantry into humorous burlesque” [8, p. 67]. For Chen [9], geography was the key subject through which to decipher Twain’s views on education. Chen contended that Twain elevated learning borne of curiosity and exploration while critiquing approaches fueled by grade-based incentives or intellectual arrogance [9].

This analysis takes both a narrative and rhetorical approach, looking at how education functions within the plot and structure of the novel as well as how it supports major themes related to morality, philosophy, and Twain’s sociocultural commentary. Episodes and text related to schooling and learning were catalogued during a close reading. These examples were analyzed for effects on characterization and for thematic development. Specific interpretations were compared to arguments from prior literary criticism on education in the novel. Through this inductive lens synthesizing textual support with existing theories, the discussion section constructs an interpretation integrating plot, theme, character, tone and broader contextual meaning.

## RESULTS

### Formal Schooling Portrayed as Tedious but Necessary

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* contains over 50 references to school attendance, lessons, teachers, examinations, and related elements of institutional learning [1]. Tom Sawyer’s habits



and feelings toward school tend to reflect those of a typical mischievous child who views formal education as an imposition interfering with play and adventure. He skips school whenever possible, especially on Fridays when the week is almost over [1]. Tom considers the experience “sorrowful” and dreams of liberation [1, p. 232]. His attendance is motivated not by a love of learning but rather a dread of physical punishment. As such, education represents an oppressive force demanding conformity that Tom yearns to resist [3].

Yet in requiring Tom’s attendance, the institutions of schooling fulfill a vital purpose—providing children the foundation needed for intellectual and moral development [7]. The responsibilities and boundaries school imposes channel Tom’s restless energy toward productive ends, at least in theory [4]. Attendance also facilitates Tom’s bonding with classmates, serving a social purpose even when the rote lessons fail to stimulate. Though Twain undoubtedly critiqued the tedious methods of nineteenth century education via Tom’s experiences, the fact that access to any formal schooling is treated as a given right and necessity in Tom’s world signifies Twain’s underlying recognition of its value [3].

#### Moral Education Framed Through Religious Hypocrisy and Cruelty

Just as Tom finds ways to escape formal lessons, he also looks for ways around the moral education forced upon him from religious figures and social codes [1]. Much of this education centers on virtues related to charity, honesty, and obedience. However, these lessons are often delivered via cruel punishments, undermining their moral authority [1]. As noted by Magier [6], the Sunday school teacher Mr. Walters drills the children to memorize biblical passages without concern for comprehension. Tom resists by trading ticktacks during lessons and leading pranks rather than absorbing virtues [1].

Other lessons ostensibly designed to improve moral character prove similarly futile or misguided. As explored by Skillen [7], the teacher Dobbins uses corporal punishment against the children while preaching about ethics [1]. Aunt Polly also compels Tom to whitewash the fence as penance for his wrongdoings, but no genuine reform occurs [1, 7]. Such disciplinary measures only breed resentment rather than encouraging compassion [5]. Through these examples, Twain condemned the prevalent use of shame and abuse rather than exemplary kindness as instruments for inspiring righteousness [6, 7]. Instead of moral clarity, the experiences instill in Tom more creative means to escape detection for misbehavior [4].

#### Informal Learning Shapes Identity Through Freedom and Adventure

Contrasted with rigid school lessons are the informal adventures Tom experiences outside the classroom. These self-directed escapades constitute necessary education of a different sort—learning that shapes Tom’s identity, worldview, and relationship dynamics without the constraints of formal instruction [4, 8]. For instance, Tom’s imagination transforms the chore of fence-whitewashing into a game that grants him autonomy from dictated duties [1]. Through this innovative trickery, he also learns about persuasion and the subjectivity of value [8]. Tom and his friends draw arbitrary lines in dirt to create “boundaries” for play that represent fluidity between imagination and truth [1, p. 180].

Other lessons emerge spontaneously from Tom’s curious mind and tie intrinsically to his values of loyalty and justice. When he becomes lost in a cave, he dedicates himself to finding a way out rather than succumbing to panic or defeat [1]. In defending the honor of his friend Joe Harper, Tom prepares to battle the town bully in a fist-fight before adults intervene [1, p. 103]. Though



violence would not resolve the conflict, Tom learns from the courage of his convictions. He also learns the power of the secrets he shares with Huck Finn—adventures serve as the basis for an intimate friendship not grounded in any societal roles or racial divisions [5]. For Robinson [4], these informal episodes distinguish Tom Sawyer as an individual resisting conformity rather than passively accepting whatever doctrine or punishment authority figures dictate.

## DISCUSSION

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer utilizes the theme of education to establish key elements of plot, characterization, tone and sociocultural commentary. As previous analyses have noted, the portrayal serves to celebrate qualities like curiosity and independence while critiquing practices perceived as cruel or regimented [3, 4]. Events related to schooling accentuate Tom's lower-class mischief and resistance to authority [5]. Yet the requirement of his daily attendance also highlights access to instruction as a right rather than a privilege [3]. Striking this balance speaks to Twain's progressive values advocating universal opportunity despite his skepticism regarding some normative societal conventions [9].

Tom's ultimate moment of heroism cements education as the vehicle for his redemption. When he accepts blame to absolve his friend Becky in the cave, he transforms from a boy fixated on treasure to one displaying maturity and chivalry [1]. Only through sacrificing ego, embracing knowledge over greed and forging connection through trust does Tom complete his coming-of-age education [7]. He earns the gift of wisdom not from any teacher's textbook lesson but through acts of compassion learned from life experience [6]. Though Twain criticized particular methods, disciplines and hypocritical instructors, he affirmed learning grounded in empathy as central to human growth.

## CONCLUSION

Close examination of education references in The Adventures of Tom Sawyer reveals how Twain used schooling and learning on both a narrative and thematic level. Plot events related to formal classroom lessons and informal adventures serve to develop central conflicts and character identities. The tension between authority and freedom, morality and free-thinking establish Tom Sawyer as an archetypal figure who resists conformity in favor of playful autonomy. Yet his ultimate maturity requires integrating compassion and knowledge to transcend selfishness and superstition—an effective moral education enabled through progressive exposure to diverse ideas unencumbered by dogma or punishment. Thus Twain issued broad critiques of religious hypocrisy and dehumanizing social codes while still affirming the redemptive power of education implemented with wisdom and empathy.

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