

# The American Past and Present: A New Historicist Approach to *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*<sup>1</sup>

(El pasado y presente estadounidenses.  
Análisis neo-historicista de  
*Las aventuras de Tom Sawyer*)

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## ABSTRACT

To clarify the relationship between a literary work and its socio-historical context, this article explores Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, from a New Historicist perspective. The voices perceived throughout the text (those of the author, the characters, the reader, and the historical and social settings) combine to discuss the reality of American culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the present. Thus, this study provides the necessary space to put New Historicism into practice, seeking a more comprehensive approach to the interpretive possibilities of Twain's work.

## RESUMEN

Para esclarecer la relación entre la obra literaria y su contexto sociohistórico, se explora *Las aventuras de Tom Sawyer*, de Mark Twain, según los principios del neohistoricismo. Las voces que se perciben en el texto (del autor, de los personajes, del lector, de los contextos histórico y social) se combinan para discutir la realidad de la cultura estadounidense del siglo

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xix y del presente. Así, el estudio proporciona un espacio para el empleo del Neo-historicismo al ofrecer una visión más integral de las posibilidades interpretativas de la obra de Twain.

**Keywords:** American literature, Mark Twain, New Historicism

**Palabras clave:** literatura estadounidense, Mark Twain, neohistoricismo

*It is not worthwhile to try to keep history from repeating itself, for man's character will always make the preventing of the repetitions impossible.*

MARK TWAIN

## Introduction

Following the tradition of Post-structuralism, which perceives the text as an intricate web of discourses, New Historicism considers the dynamic role of cultural and historical voices in the interpretation of literature.<sup>3</sup> Under the light of this critical approach, this article approaches Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, in an attempt to disclose at least some of what can be learned from it about the culture of the United States, both in its past and in the present. Tom's very particular attitudes towards himself and his surroundings suggest a great number of possibilities for the understanding of American life. His pride, his aspirations, his innocence, his fears, and his pseudo-Romantic view of the world, among other traits, will serve as stepping stones for the exploration of American identity as it was imagined by Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), and as it is constructed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This article, therefore, offers some interpretive proposals for those interested in observing American culture through the windows of literature.

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3 New Historicism was first developed theoretically and methodologically by Stephen Greenblatt in the 1980s. For a more precise understanding of its epistemological foundation and how it relates to postmodernism, see Jürgen Pieters, "New Historicism: Postmodern Historiography between Narrativism and Heterology," *History and Theory* 39, 1 (2000): 21-38. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/0018-2656.00111>.

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, like any other literary text, combines the voices of characters, narrator, author, and reader to offer a diversity of meanings. From a New Historicist point of view, this is fertile soil for analysis and negotiation, especially as we try to embrace the original context of the novel and the present-day social forces that influence our reading. “As Dixon Wecter and others have shown us,” says Seeley,<sup>4</sup> “*Tom Sawyer* is rich in autobiographical details...”; and such information is an invaluable resource for the analysis of Twain’s novel since the author’s life and his personal experiences are seen in the lives of the characters and the situations that they face. Likewise, whatever knowledge that may be acquired about the historical and cultural reality in which the novel was produced will also serve to organize criticism. For instance, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was published in 1876, soon after the American Civil War, but the events that it portrays correspond to a time before the war. This knowledge is key to understanding the various messages of the novel and its particular depictions of Romantic ideals, materialism, religion, and American values. McQuade et al. offer a useful summary of the historical context of the Twain’s work:

From the 1860s onward Darwinism and its permutations affected the way Americans came to view their economic system (competitiveness versus regulation in the marketplace), their religious beliefs (God versus chance as the master of the universe), their bodies (theirs to direct versus control by inherited “tendencies”), and their physical surroundings (a thing of spirit versus a conglomeration of geologic earth-masses).<sup>5</sup>

This and other such conceptual and philosophical transformations that came about in the late 1800s contributed to the rise of a new type

4 John Seeley, “What’s in a Name: Sounding the Depths of *Tom Sawyer*,” *The Sewanee Review*, 90, 3 (1982): 143.

5 Donald McQuade, Robert Atwan, and others, eds., *The Harper Single Volume American Literature* (London: Pearson, 1998) 1167.

of literature in the United States, and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is just one example of the plentiful sense of actuality with which American realism permeated the mentalities of the time.

In the twentieth-first century, however, the discussions about Twain's work seem to have deviated both from simplifying genre classifications and from the race-centered critiques popular in the nineteenthies and nineties. A continuous interest in Samuel Clemens' life and its intersections with his work has recently been made evident by authors like Neil Schmitz<sup>6</sup> and Joseph Church<sup>7</sup>; yet a more integrating and encompassing vision of novels like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is still sought. In William Blaker's review of the 2007 edition of *A Companion to Mark Twain*, he quotes Alan Gribben's conclusion about the state of Mark Twain Studies as follows: "Already-well-tilled terrain now calls for scholars of comprehension, courage, and ingenuity who should, above all, relish rather than begrudge this author's supremely comic vision."<sup>8</sup> It is time, it seems, to regard the work of Mark Twain with the same open and broad attitude with which he looked at his own world, so that a greater understanding of the past may lead to a more courageous, more daring approach to the present. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* renders very precise views of the United States in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless, this article aims to bring the text closer not only to the society that produced it, but also to that which receives it today, for which purpose a postmodern take on New Historicism is essential.

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6 Neil Schmitz, "Mark Twain in the Twenty-First Century," *American Literary History* 16, 1 (2004): 117-126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ALH/AJH007>.

7 Joseph Church, "The Slave Glascock's Ben in Mark Twain," *American Literary Realism* 41, 1 (2012): 78-83. DOI: 10.5406/amerlitreal.45.1.0078.

8 William Blaker, "Review of *A Companion to Mark Twain*, edited by Peter Messent and Louis J. Budd," *Reference Reviews* 21, 1 (2007): 29-30.

## A Little about New Historicism

As part of a larger current of thought within the field of literary criticism known as *Cultural Studies*, New Historicism—or Cultural Poetics, as it is also identified—intends to bridge the gap between traditional perceptions of history and the role of the literary text, its author, and its readers within their cultural and historical contexts. New Historicism, as envisioned by Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel, and Robert Weimann in its origins, rejects the idea of history as a fixed, inflexible discourse that determines the truth of human experience and of literary creation. Instead, history is viewed as subjective and as mediated by the actors that perform in it and the voices that narrate it.

Regarding literature in particular, New Historicists believe that what differentiates it from history is not much: “In literature can be found history and in history, much literature.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, they affirm, “Literature... should be read in relation to culture, history, society, and other factors that help determine a text’s meaning.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, New Historicism tries to focus on specific literary events as demonstrations and reactions to history. In other words, a literary text is considered valuable not as an absolute explication of history and society but inasmuch as it is one of many manifestations of a cultural reality. David Richter refers to New Historicism as being “about whatever is happening at the moment, rather than about a body of texts created in the past...”<sup>11</sup> Under this light, a literary text is approached following a methodology most accurately described as a reading practice, as an exercise on interpretation. Bressler lists a number of questions that may guide such practice:

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9 Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (London: Pearson, 2011) 184.

10 Bressler, 184-185.

11 Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle Labor, and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 343.

- What kinds of behavior or models of practice does this work reinforce?
- Why might readers at a particular time and place find this work compelling?
- Are there differences between your values and the values implicit in the work you are reading?
- On what social understanding does the work depend?
- Whose freedom of thought or movement might be constrained implicitly or explicitly by this work?
- What are the social structures with which these particular acts of praise or blame might be connected?
- What authorial biographical facts are relevant to the text?
- What other cultural events occurred surrounding the original production of the text? How may these events be relevant to the text under investigation?<sup>12</sup>

In trying to answer these and other questions, a New Historicist reading of any text, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, is expected to provide some insight into the workings of literature as it shapes and is shaped by a specific society, history, and culture.

To order to read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* from a New Historicist point of view, therefore, what is needed is a reconfiguration of both the past and the present as they play their corresponding roles in realizing Mark Twain's vision of Southern America before the eyes of twenty-first century readers. Following Jurg n Pieters' explication of New Historicism, historians must "take into account their own historicity . . . and the subsequent import on their research of the interference between the past which they tried to investigate and the present from which they were doing so."<sup>13</sup> The same holds true

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<sup>12</sup> Bressler, 195.

<sup>13</sup> Pieters, 22.

for New Historicist readers and critics since they need to maintain an open and honest dialogue with the text, “one which tries to take into account not only the fullness of the past in all its heterogeneity, but also the historicity of the [reader];”<sup>14</sup> thus, culture and history are not displaced but validated.

## Between Romanticism and Realism

Ever since the beginning of the novel, Tom’s aspirations are made evident. He wishes to become an adventurer and break free from social constrictions, symbolized by Aunt Polly’s white-washed fence.<sup>15</sup> As a wandering entertainer, as a soldier, as a bandit, or better still as a pirate, Tom dreams of exploring new worlds, which he shapes and reshapes through his imagination. Although it may be argued that Twain is satirizing the old-fashioned ideal of the American adventurer, he is also on the side reinforcing Romanticism in spite of its decline at the end of the century. “As the year 1900 drew nearer, a civil war of sorts continued between the literary camps of the Realists and the Romantics.”<sup>16</sup> *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* illustrates this struggle, as it attempts to portray the simple lives of simple people, yet it also tends to magnify such lives through the characters’ imagination and grand emotional responses. Tom and his friends are recurrently summoned by “the spirit of adventure” to go out in search of freedom.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, traditional Romantic models like Robin Hood play a significant role in determining the protagonist’s worldview. Seeley points out that Tom “has easily memorized the adventures of Robin Hood so he can play by the book.”<sup>18</sup> Fields agrees when he says,

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14 Pieters, 25.

15 Seeley, 413; Wayne Fields, “When the Fences are Down: Language and Order in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*,” *Journal of American Studies* 24, 3 (1990): 369. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875800033685>.

16 McQuade et al., 1152.

17 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) 76. Hereafter, all page number references to the novel will be provided in the text within parentheses.

18 Seeley, 427.

“The boy... knows whole volumes of adventure literature by heart and hold authority over his gang on the basis of this knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> Tom is sort of an expert on Romantic adventures, and he is certainly the depository of chivalry and imagination among his peers. Furthermore, in 1876, the year of publication of the novel, “Jesse James, the American Robin Hood, reached the zenith of his career by robbing a stagecoach in Texas, a train in Missouri, and a bank in Minnesota.”<sup>20</sup> Events like these influenced Twain’s depiction of Tom’s Romantic fascination with adventure.

The Romanticism of Tom Sawyer, however, is not limited to his thirst for adventure and a life outside the law; several displays of exaggerated emotion also account for it. He suffers insistently whenever he feels rejected or misunderstood. On one occasion, “He was gloomy and desperate. He was a forsaken, friendless boy, he said; nobody loved him” (88). This sort of melodramatic attitude is common in Tom’s character. He sulks and despairs constantly, either because he imagines himself abandoned by those who are supposed to care for him unconditionally or because he fails to attract the attention of those whom he has endeavored to impress. “Adolescent anxieties and volatile melodrama,” Seeley argues, “express the soul of the man who was known to his friends for his fits of rage and was called Youth by his wife. If we learn little directly of the inner workings of Tom Sawyer, we catch glimpses of those of Sam Clemens.”<sup>21</sup> According to this, Tom’s emotional Romanticism may be a projection of Twain’s own temperamental inclinations. In any event, the novel as a whole continues to shed light on the difficult transition that American literature—and the American imagination, for that matter—went through at the turn of the century as it tried to leave Romanticism behind and advance towards Realism.

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19 Fields, 271.

20 McQuade et al., 1147.

21 Seeley, 411.



The novel's attention to nature also stresses the American Romantic ideal. Nature signifies beauty, innocence, and ultimately, freedom; and its role is emphasized as it provides Tom and his friends with the appropriate setting for their adventures to unfold. In chapter XXX, for example, the narrator describes: "It was romantic and mysterious to stand here in the deep gloom and look upon the green valley shining in the sun" (176). Such beauty inspires the characters to act in ways that can only be matched by the power of their imagination. Also, nature impresses them as it is set against the turmoil and struggle that they face as part of their social reality. "It must be very peaceful, [Tom] thought, to lie and slumber and dream for ever and ever, with the wind whispering through the trees and caressing the grass and the flowers..." (60). Here, Tom daydreams about what nature can offer him that a civilized life cannot. Eventually, he and his friends decide to remove themselves to Jackson's Island and live the life of the hermit, away from everyone and everything. Once there, "it seemed glorious sport to be feasting in that wild free way in the virgin forest on an unexplored and uninhibited island, far from the haunts of men..." (93). Tom's search for freedom seems to end as he and his friends become surrounded by nature. However, reality soon meets them, and the Romantic dream finally collapses as they realize that they cannot break completely free from the bounds of society. Fields explains, "If [Tom] is irresistibly drawn to the adventures outside [the fences'] protection, to the outlawry of life beyond their restraints, he just as inevitably returns to affirm the conventions of his society and to be embraced by its symbols of authority."<sup>22</sup> Thus, nature fulfills its role by allowing Tom and his friends to experience the American Romantic landscape, the freedom and the adventures that it offers, and the emotional grandeur with which it fills their hearts, but it ultimately makes way for a more realistic take on what the lives of the characters must become.

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22 Fields, 370.

In sum, the coexistence of Realism and Romanticism in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* speaks of the painful maturation of a society that looked forward to the future yet still longed for the past. Jeffrey Steinbrink coincides with this view when he affirms, “Mark Twain was doubtless a realist, but when a story needed invigorating he was not above causing a boy or a bullet to take a lucky turn.”<sup>23</sup> The realism of Twain’s novel is undeniable insofar as it supports and sustains profound themes like death, family values, and social justice. However, “Tom’s hyper-romantic imagination”<sup>24</sup> is too strong to allow readers to disengage from a grandiose American past that survives to this day.

### **Money, Money, Money**

Set in the southern United States during the Gilded Age, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has much to say about how American society viewed and views material progress. The centrality of hard work, business, and money-making usually goes unquestioned when attempting to describe American culture. The historical success of this outlook, however, is never incontestable, and especially not in literature. Seeley describes the actual position that Twain’s novel offers in this regard:

Set against the dominant myth of success... , the story of Tom Sawyer is clearly subversive, having less to do with hard work than with good luck abetted by a quick wit.... Tom Sawyer realizes the American dream at the threshold of adolescence. He does so, moreover, by striking it rich California style, imitating in small the gold rush that Mark Twain persistently regarded as the national event that signaled an end to the old American dream of pastoral contentment.<sup>25</sup>

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23 Jeffrey Steinbrink, “Who Shot Tom Sawyer?” *American Literary Realism* 35, 1 (2002): 29.

24 Steinbrink, 30.

25 Seeley, 424.

Tom feels a strong aversion to hard work, finding it difficult to apply himself to any appointed task. Actually, “he hates work more than he hates anything else” (8). This attitude seems to be common among his peers, or at least that is what Twain suggests through the voice of the Welshman: “...the boys in this town will take more trouble and fool way more time hunting up six bits’ worth of old iron to sell to the foundry, than they would to make twice the money at regular work. But that’s human nature” (212). His last remark stresses the view that something, as Seeley suggests, has changed in American society: luck and easy money have replaced hard work and effort as the foundations of the American dream.

Tom becomes rich at the end of the novel as a result of luck and not hard work. In *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, a previous novel that he cowrote with Charles Dudley Warner, Mark Twain exploits the images of different types of Americans, “from country villagers to big city-dwellers—who were caught up in the fantasy of making an easy fortune.”<sup>26</sup> Sawyer joins these characters in the “daily race for bread, money, and status” that characterizes American culture even today but was particularly strong at the close of the nineteenth century,<sup>27</sup> when “a drive for material prosperity—an unquestioned belief in economic progress” was the rule.<sup>28</sup> The world of Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer was governed by an almost-blind faith in progress and money. The *Gilded Age* fed on the type of “social and economic mobility that made everyone a potential tycoon,”<sup>29</sup> even boys like Tom and Huck. They embrace their new situation “with gloating eyes,” forgetting “all their fears, all their miseries in an instant” (164). “Luck!” the narrator exclaims on their behalf, “the splendor of it was beyond all imagination! Six hundred dollars was money enough to make half a

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26 Robert S. Levine, Michael A. Elliott, et al. (eds.), *The Norton Anthology of American literature*, Vol. C (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017) 1.

27 McQuade et al., 1146.

28 Levine et al., 3.

29 McQuade et al., 1146.

dozen boys rich!” (164). With very little effort, Tom and Huck fulfill the American dream of financial success overnight.

The American celebration of money-making and entrepreneurial progress was as relevant in the nineteenth century as it is today. For instance, “the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific rail lines... in 1869 was a promoter’s triumph. It fulfilled vision, purpose, engineering genius, and venture capitalism.”<sup>30</sup> Tom Sawyer is a true representative of this business-oriented culture since he repeatedly proves to be a very successful tradesman among his peers. More importantly, the second chapter of the novel presents him as a clever dealer, talking other boys into not only doing but even paying him to allow them to do his work for him, and in the process taking possession of their little treasures. According to the narrator, “[Tom] had discovered a great law of human action, ... that, in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain” (19). In this way, Tom takes his first steps towards becoming a businessman, which goes along with the governing atmosphere of Twain’s time, especially considering that “the tutelary spirit for the Reconstruction era was... Benjamin Franklin... His humble origins, dedication to self-improvement, and genius for business set an example for ‘Self-Made Men’ ... determined to acquire... ‘The Art of Money-Getting.’”<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, Tom’s true business, as it turns out, was “the business of treasure-hunting” (161). Samuel Clemens himself “as a boy had been inspired by the California gold rush to dig for gold near the mouth of McDowell’s (i.e. McDougal’s) Cave...”<sup>32</sup> The motif of treasure-hunting is central both to the novel and to the historical and cultural context that envelops it. The narrator affirms, “There comes a time in every rightly constructed boy’s life when he has a raging desire to go somewhere and dig for hidden treasure,”<sup>33</sup>

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30 McQuade et al., 1144.

31 McQuade et al., 1145.

32 Seeley, 422.

33 Seeley, 152.

and ultimately, this is how Tom and Huck become rich. However, Twain does not endorse easy money as a valuable representation of American success. Levine and others say, “Throughout *Roughing It* [a semi-autobiographical travel account], which also covers... his half-hearted gold mining in the Sierra Nevada mountains, Twain debunked the idea of the West as a place where fortunes could be easily made and showed its disappointing and even brutal side.”<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the way in which Tom and Huck strike their luck is not necessarily upheld as a commendable or even effective form of success, yet it truly illustrates the American fascination with money, business, and treasure-hunting that characterized the Gilded Age.

Mark Twain infuses *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* with his own infatuation with business and money, as well as with many other details from his youth, including his major disappointments in this regard. This is in no way an isolated occurrence in the author’s narratives since, as Church affirms, he “consciously and unconsciously informed them with material.”<sup>35</sup> Still, it is almost irresistible to bring Samuel Clemens’ life experiences into the picture and use them as motivations for analysis, as it has become the norm in recent readings of his works. For New Historicists, this is not only an acceptable practice but a very productive one, considering how generous and fruitful the biographical data may prove. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Twain’s ambitions as a young man and his first-hand descriptions of the American Gilded Age should serve as powerful engines for analysis, not only of his creation but of the culture and history of the United States. After all, according to Schmitz, in twenty-first-century Mark Twain studies, the author has found a place as “the founding father of American literature.”<sup>36</sup> What this entails for a New Historicist approach to his texts is an increasing focus on his life and

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34 Levine et al., 113.

35 Church, 79.

36 Schmitz, 122.

his philosophies, including the role of material wealth, as orientation regarding how American society should be viewed and understood.

### **Religion, Superstition, and Irreligion**

It is not Tom but rather other characters in the novel who most clearly portray America's preoccupation with religion during the nineteenth century. Aunt Polly and the Widow Douglas stand out among them. However, this does not mean that Tom and the other boys do not sustain within themselves a sort of religious fervor that aptly reveals itself in times of need. On their first night on Jackson's Island, Tom and his friends "said their prayers inwardly . . . in truth they had a mind not to say them at all, but they were afraid to proceed to such lengths as that, lest they might call down a sudden and special thunder-bolt from heaven" (95). Conscience and religion are tightly linked in the minds of these characters; their Old-Testament view of God correlates with their feelings of fear and anxiety in the face of sin and cosmic retribution. In 1876, "Evangelists Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey led a nationwide crusade to eradicate sin and reduce the future population of hell."<sup>37</sup> Their case simply illustrates an epoch of religious revival which might have influenced Twain in his writing. Aunt Polly, for example, is ready to believe in Tom's spiritual awakening. "Tom!" she exclaims, "The sperrit was upon you! You was a prophesying—that's what you was doing!" (122). The Widow Douglas, likewise, firmly believes in the possibility of redemption for Huckleberry Finn: "She said she would do her best by him, because, whether he was good, bad, or indifferent, he was the Lord's and nothing that was the Lord's was a thing to be neglected" (189). Whether motivated by fear, faith, or charity, Twain's characters—the boys included—cling to religion, and in the process, offer a compelling perspective about its role in American society.

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<sup>37</sup> McQuade et al., 1147.

Religion in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* is also connected with superstition. There is a certain pagan atmosphere intertwined with the Christian tradition that informs American literature. Accordingly, “the early chapters of the book are a virtual compendium of folklore about popular enchantments, which reaches a high point with the first appearance of Huck Finn, superstition incarnate, lugging a dead cat.”<sup>38</sup> Howling souls, amulets, references to witches, spirits, and ghosts, even the fear of Fridays, are ubiquitous in the novel, showing the influence of non-Christian folklore upon the lives of the characters. The novel offers a depiction of American culture that incorporates the profane alongside the sacred. Even the distinction between Christian faith and superstition vanishes in the words and actions of Tom and his friends. Upon failing to find all his marbles in one place, which he had attempted to do by way of an incantation, “Tom’s whole structure of faith was shaken to its foundations” (62). That remark stresses the weight of superstition upon Tom’s character, who also refuses to go for a swim unless he recovers the “string of rattlesnake rattles” that he commonly wears around his ankle as a charm (107). The syncretism of religion and superstition is characteristic of local-color narratives like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and it allows for a more penetrating study of American cultural history.

One might even go so far as to say that superstition has, at least partially, replaced religion in Tom’s cosmovision. Seeley affirms, “*His* scripture is the story of Robin Hood and its dime-novel equivalents, much as his religion is associated with the greenwood, his liturgy with superstitions.”<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, and in spite of his momentary regard for it when afraid or in danger, Tom essentially rejects religion, not for ideological reasons but simply because it bores him. Even when he joins the “Cadets of Temperance,” he does it only for the emblems and decorations that we would wear accordingly (142). However, he does not remain in the order, discovering as a result that he does

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38 Seeley, 414.

39 Seeley, 428.

not want to smoke or swear as much as he did when he was in it and was forbidden to do so (142-143). Also, when he finds his friend Joe Harper reading the Testament, he deems the scene “depressing” (144), for “there had been a ‘revival’ and everybody had ‘got religion’” (144), everybody but Tom, that is. He is incapable of memorizing the Scripture or concentrating during worship at home or in church. He simply does not care about organized religion and all that it requires of him, and the only time when he actually enjoys a service is when it turns into a carnival: “Tom Sawyer went home quite cheerful, thinking to himself that there was some satisfaction about divine service when there was a bit of variety in it” (42). Through Tom’s behavior and attitudes, Twain criticizes and even ridicules religion. Actually, “His late writings... reveal a darkening worldview and an upwelling of anger against orthodoxies of every sort, including organized religious belief...”<sup>40</sup> Although *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* does not take such an ominous position on religion, behind a façade of humor and superstition, it does depict some of the complexities of honoring the Christian faith in nineteenth-century America.

The apparent contradictions that *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* poses in terms of the role of religion in the United States are symptomatic of a society that, little by little, starts to reveal its density and involvement. Steinbrink maintains that “we have been especially willing lately to overread the broad humanity and decency for which Mark Twain spoke in his day to the point of recasting him along a paradigm of social values established in our own.”<sup>41</sup> This positions the author at such a height that makes it difficult for contemporary readers to truly assess his reality and their own. An honest New Historicist reading of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* rather tends to weigh both the artist and his art with a much more realistic and comprehensive measure. Arguably, a supposed lack of religion in Twain’s main character, for instance, as well as his propensity to superstition, must simply be

40 Levine et al., 114.

41 Steinbrink, 34.



regarded as part of a world that faithfully corresponds—as it did in the nineteenth century—to the culture and history of the United States.

### **The Values of the Past**

In the post-Civil War United States, much had to be reconstructed, recovered, and rethought. This is the context in which *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* was first published. Through its characters and situations, Twain portrayed the past with nostalgia and longing, but he also envisioned hope. Then, “the name [United States] now denoted a powerful young nation supposedly at peace with itself and dedicated to binding up its wounds.”<sup>42</sup> Other subsequent novels by Twain offer “a dark and troubling view of nineteenth-century American values”;<sup>43</sup> however, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* seems rather to glorify a national past in which courage, leadership, innocence, and justice were the rule, a past to which Twain’s contemporaries would do well to return.

Tom Sawyer is definitely a trickster, but he is also the embodiment of chivalric heroism. As the American hero, he displays courage and leadership on every page of the novel. Whether hunting for treasure with Huck or rescuing himself and Becky from McDougal’s Cave, Tom shows that he is brave and daring. His motivations vary, but the result is usually the same: Untrampled by circumstances, he emerges to reassume his position as a hero. This is not to say that he does not experience fear, especially when brought about by superstition or by actual danger. He even has to rely on others’ courage to sustain his own, as when he urges his friend, “Don’t you ever weaken, Huck, and I won’t” (170). Nevertheless, he remains true to his Romantic characterization in spite of the humoristic color which Twain has infused in him. Besides, he is also a leader, a mythical representation of the position of the United States among the nations. He is persuasive

<sup>42</sup> McQuade et al., 1143.

<sup>43</sup> Levine et al., 114.

beyond measure, and other boys “delivered... eloquent admiration from their eyes” when they saw him (124). He makes all important decisions, namely what new game to play or where to dig for gold, and guides the members of his band on the way to adventure. Tom Sawyer represents the upper head, the divine right to rule, and the glory and respect that the United States, as a culture and as a country, has struggled to maintain in the world. Twain’s “Missouri boyhood, which ran deep in his memory and imagination,”<sup>44</sup> serves as the anchor that holds Tom’s heroic adventures close to the ideal of courage and leadership responsible for fueling the American Reconstruction era.

Through the characters of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Mark Twain also celebrates the lost value of innocence, an American dream of taintless pastoral freedom. Tom and Huck are clueless about the adult world, at least until they face the murder of young Dr. Robinson, but even after this event, their innocence keeps them safe from the sin and damnation that Injun Joe represents. Twain portrays “the enduring and widely shared dream of innocence and freedom, and its recording of a vanished way of life in the pre-Civil War Mississippi Valley.”<sup>45</sup> The depiction of Americanness in the novel relies heavily on the Romantic glorification of this innocent past, which Twain experienced in his childhood. For example, Tom is able to appreciate nature in a way that only a child can. When a “little green worm” came upon his leg after a long contemplation, “his whole heart was glad—for that meant that he was going to get a new suit of clothes” (96). Likewise, his untarnished idea of friendship is so pure that he imagines himself married yet giving Huck a place in his home (156). His ignorance regarding marital life is almost as humorous as his conviction that, should he and Huck start a band of robbers, they would hold “orgies” in a cave. To Huck’s question about the meaning of the word, he answers naively, “I dunno. But robbers always have orgies, and of course we have to have them too” (211). These and other examples of

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44 Levine et al., 113.

45 Levine et al., 114.

Tom and Huck's innocence account for Twain's rendering of a world governed by a dream long gone. However, a sense of hope permeates his narration as it does the history of American culture itself.

Finally, another value of the past, justice, finds its way among the characters and events narrated in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Justice continues to be greatly upheld in American society, but in Twain's novel, it is animated by a simplicity and effectuality that may seem lost in the present. Fields describes St. Petersburg as follows: "Well ordered by its fences and undergirded, like Tom's story, by the civil institutions of civil and cultural order—the court, the school, the church—it is a society where things have been assigned their proper places..."<sup>46</sup> Such order calls for a very effective sort of justice that encompasses everything and everyone at a very personal level. The basic source of justice, therefore, is conscience. Conscience is what drives Tom to give testimony of what he saw in the graveyard, even in spite of the tremendous fear that he experiences. So strong is the sense of justice that his conscience imparts on him, that he pities not only Muff Potter, the innocent party, but also Injun Joe for his horrible death. "Tom was touched," the narrator reveals, "for he knew by his own experience how this wretch had suffered" (203). Justice, conscience, and empathy are here presented as one indivisible notion, to which the ideal of truth is also added. "The truth is always respectable," the attorney tells Tom during Potter's trial (150), thus simplifying justice to a quasi-Romantic extreme. Truth is sought earnestly in St. Petersburg, yet not at the cost of justice. Ironically, even the audience at Muff Potter's trial expects the Counsel of the defense to put up a fight in favor of the accused, whom they actually believe to be guilty. "Did this attorney mean to throw away his client's life without an effort?" (149), they ask themselves. The strong sense of justice that permeates the novel speaks in favor of an American value

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46 Fields, 369.

system that may be perceived as faded, albeit the Robin-Hood-like aspect of its enforcement.

The role of Mark Twain's work in portraying and perhaps even trying to preserve traditional American values has been recognized both academically and popularly. Indira J. Mawelle maintains that the author, "in his fiction, addressed the subject of complex ethical choices and the need for human values in a distorted society..."<sup>47</sup> The burden of speaking in favor of moral accountability and stature... for Americans goes far beyond the Romantic ideals that launch Tom into adventure or Aunt Polly into despair. Twain was well aware of the weaknesses of his own society and made an effort to bring them to the attention of his readers. In *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, he does precisely this. There is a longing for the past, for a more morally committed society that subsists upon the basis of values. In this sense, Twain lights the way for many generations of Americans to judge their own culture and history, while their ideals are still upheld.

## Conclusion

New Historicists practice the reading of texts upon the basis of diversity and subjectivity, incorporating all materials, voices, and sources available as recipients of truth. For a thorough analysis of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and its historical possibilities for interpretation, probably a lifetime of study and research would be necessary. As Bressler puts it, "We can... never recover the original meaning of any event or text because we cannot hear all the voices that contributed to that event or collect and experience all the data surrounding that event or text's creation."<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, the beauty of this approach is its focus on the specific rather than the general, the here and now rather than the totality of history. It is the text or the event that must

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47 Indira J. Mawelle, "Realist Works as Landmarks in American History," *Pakistan Journal of American Studies* 26, 1-2 (2008): 110.

48 Bressler, 192.

present itself as a co-creator of meaning and a revealer of knowledge, as it is the case with Twain's novel. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* offers its characters and situations not only as representations but as actual instances of life, culture, and history.

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* acts as a window into the southern United States of the nineteenth century. The epistemic transition from Romanticism to Realism, the conflicting roles of material and entrepreneurial progress, the embracing and rejection of religious beliefs, and the examination of a declining value system are only a few of the insights into American culture and history that the novel offers. However, they serve well to illustrate how literature and history intertwine, as do all human activities in the past and in the present. As Levine and others affirm, "Twain was one of the fiercest critics of his time... His writing not only reflected the world that surrounded him, but it also played a significant role in shaping how his readers (including us) understand that world."<sup>49</sup> From this point of view, Tom and his friends speak with the voice of an American past that resounds even today, for "many of the changes sweeping through Twain's world seem to foreshadow the struggles of our own time."<sup>50</sup> His characters' concerns with justice, lost innocence, chivalric valor, religious faith, and materialism, to name a few, continue to trouble writers and readers in twenty-first century America. Perhaps, like the drop falling from a stalactite in McDougal's Cave, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, like all literature, is perennial. As the narrator describes, "it [the drop] is falling now; it will still be falling when all these things shall have sunk down the afternoon of history and the twilight of tradition, and been swallowed up in the thick night of oblivion. Has everything a purpose and a mission?" (204). To the narrator's question, this paper offers an affirmative answer, and yet formulates another question: Why else do we read, then?

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49 Levine et al., 2.

50 Levine et al., 2.

