

billiards, cigars, tall stories and bawdy jokes. He had, as his close friend Howells testified in *My Mark Twain* (1910), a character of 'wild and splendid generosity'. Small wonder, then, that his relations with the genteel and respectable world of Connecticut were always complicated and uneasy. But it was this tension that informed his greatest book, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), a marvelously unsentimental reminiscence of the small South-western community in which he had been brought up.

Soon after the publication of *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), financial troubles interrupted his writing and forced him into those inevitable lecture tours that nineteenth-century writers used as an extra source of income. As Warner Berthoff notes in his *The Ferment of Realism* (1965), the success of these tours made Twain 'the first in a still lengthening succession of American writers whose careers seem to pass altogether out of the sphere of literature into that of salesmanship and publicity'.

Yet in later life Twain still found time for serious writing. *The Tragedy of Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), his finest novel apart from *Huckleberry Finn*, introduces a note of mordant satire that was to sound increasingly loud in his work. *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (1900), *What Is Man?* (1906) and the posthumously published *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916) exude an air of savage despair. Mark Twain died in 1910.

Twain is a difficult writer to assess, if only because the reader is left with the impression of an immense talent that never found completely satisfactory expression. He was, as *Tom Sawyer* shows, a superb children's novelist; and he was, as his contemporaries recognized, a shrewd and salty humorist. But he was far more than an entertainer and professional funny man. *Huckleberry Finn* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson* show him to have been a serious novelist, exploring a vein of realism that breaks away from the earlier traditions of symbolism and allegory. Where Hawthorne and Melville had been attracted to history, romance and antiquity, Twain turns to present realities with a resolutely commonsensical

eye. Like his finest creation, Huck Finn, he stands for a peculiarly American type of shrewdness. He is nobody's fool, rejoicing in his ability to detect cant, injustice, false gentility and sentimentality. America has produced few satirists but in Twain it found one who can stand amongst the best of any language.

The Adventures of Tom Sawyer

SUMMARY Aunt Polly has a hard time trying to bring up her orphaned nephew, Tom Sawyer, for he is a highly spirited boy, charming and skilled at avoiding punishment. One summer evening, after a day spent playing truant from school to go swimming, Tom meets a new boy in the town. The stranger is well-dressed in a stylish, urban way – as well-dressed as Tom himself is shabby. They fight and Tom wins. He chases his opponent home – so finding out where he lives – but is warned off by the boy's mother. When Tom finally gets home Aunt Polly is appalled at the state of his clothes.

On Saturday morning Tom has to whitewash the fence, but manages to persuade his friends to help him finish the irksome job quickly. That afternoon he sees a new girl in Jeff Thatcher's garden and shows off in front of her; she gives him a flower. When he returns later that evening to try to see her again, he is chased off by a maidservant. Sunday is a difficult day for Tom. First he has to learn some verses from the Bible and then attend Sunday school. Here he again sees the new girl and learns that she is Jeff Thatcher's niece. To impress her he trades Bible-reading tickets with his classmates and claims the Bible that is awarded to students who have memorized 2,000 verses. The Bible is presented by Judge Thatcher, the girl's father; unfortunately the Judge also asks Tom some questions that expose his ignorance of the Scriptures.

On Monday Tom tries to avoid school by feigning illness but Aunt Polly is not deceived. At school he comes across Huckleberry (Huck) Finn, son of the town drunkard. All the

local parents disapprove of Huck and all the other boys envy him his freedom. The two boys talk so long that Tom is late for his first lesson. At last he gets a chance to meet Becky Thatcher properly, but after school they quarrel and Tom goes off alone into the woods. After luxuriating in melancholy for a while, he dreams of being a pirate. His friend Joe Harper arrives and they play at being Robin Hood together.

That night, when he is supposed to be asleep, Tom leaves the house and joins Huck Finn. The two go off to the local graveyard to perform a magic ritual for getting rid of warts. They see Doctor Robinson, together with Muff Potter and Injun Joe, robbing a grave. The three conspirators argue and fight: Potter is knocked unconscious and Injun Joe stabs the Doctor to death. Horrified, the two boys run away unseen. When Potter comes round Joe persuades him that he killed the Doctor. Huck and Tom return to the darkened village in an agony of terror lest Joe should realize that they witnessed the crime. They solemnly swear to each other to keep the matter secret. The next day the town is buzzing with the news of Robinson's murder. Muff Potter is caught in the graveyard and Injun Joe gives evidence against him. Huck and Tom are amazed but still do not offer themselves as witnesses.

Tom is upset by the murder and depressed by Becky's absence from school – so much so that Aunt Polly insists on dosing him with patent medicine. In retaliation Tom pours her favourite 'pain-killer' through a crack in the living room floor and gives some of it to the cat. Snubbed by Becky, Tom decides to run away and become a pirate; he persuades Joe Harper and Huck Finn to come with him. They go to Jackson's Island, where they enjoy themselves fishing and swimming. Yet they soon begin to feel homesick – a feeling that is intensified when they see the inhabitants of St Petersburg searching the river under the impression that the boys have drowned. That night Tom creeps home secretly and overhears Aunt Polly and Mrs Harper lamenting the supposed deaths of their boys. He steals a boat and makes his

way back to the island. By this time Huck and Joe are so homesick that Tom has great difficulty persuading them to remain. That evening Huck teaches the other two to smoke a pipe, but it makes them sick. In St Petersburg the people have given up the search and, on the following Sunday, hold a memorial service for the boys. Tom, Huck and Joe arrive in the middle of the service. Tom describes the scene he witnessed between Aunt Polly and Mrs Harper, pretending that he saw it in a dream. The town marvels at his extraordinary gifts until Joe Harper spoils the deception.

Tom is reconciled with Becky by offering to take the punishment for one of her offences at school. But she goes away during the holidays and Tom gets bored. Things become more interesting when Muff Potter is brought to trial for the murder of Doctor Robinson. Huck and Tom again agree to keep their secret for fear that Injun Joe would come after them if they spoke out. Yet they both feel guilty about not helping Potter and bring him presents in prison. At the last moment Tom yields to his conscience and gives evidence. It causes a sensation: Potter is acquitted and Injun Joe disappears immediately. Huck and Tom are the heroes of the hour, but live in fear of Joe's return.

To distract themselves, they decide to search for buried treasure at the 'haunted house' – a sinister, deserted building on the outside of town. While they are there Injun Joe (now disguised) and a fellow criminal come in. The boys hide and see the men taking money from their hiding-place in the house. They follow Joe to his room in a local hotel. Tom gives up the search temporarily to go on a picnic with Becky. Huck stays on guard and sees Joe and his comrade leaving the hotel. He follows them to the Widow Douglas' house, gathering from the conversation that Joe wants to revenge himself on the old woman for the way her husband had treated him. Huck runs off to a neighbour to give the alarm and the criminals are chased away.

During their picnic Tom and Becky wander too far into a nearby network of caves and get lost. Blundering around in the darkened tunnels they see Injun Joe; fortunately he does

not see them. When Tom and Becky finally make their way out, Judge Thatcher has the entrance blocked to prevent such accidents happening again. As soon as he hears of this Tom insists on going to look for Injun Joe; but the criminal is found dead near the cave's entrance. Huck and Tom return later and, after some searching, discover the robbers' treasure. Huck, now a rich man because of his share of this treasure, is adopted by the Widow Douglas. He remains uneasy about civilized life, however, and it is only with difficulty that Tom dissuades him from returning to his former vagrant ways.

CRITICAL COMMENTARY It is not difficult to see why *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has been, since its publication in 1876, one of the most popular of all novels about children. As he wrote, Twain drew on his own childhood memories of Hannibal, Missouri, and he managed to create with superb exactitude the feeling of life in a small town on the banks of the Mississippi. Amidst all the praise of Twain as a wit or a psychologist it is easy to forget how good is his sense of the natural environment:

After the dinner all the gang turned out to hunt for turtle eggs on the bar. They went about poking sticks into the sand, and when they found a soft place they went down on their knees and dug with their hands. Sometimes they would take fifty or sixty eggs out of one hole. They were perfectly round white things a trifle smaller than an English walnut. They had a famous fried-egg feast that night, and another on Friday morning.

At the centre of the book's success is Twain's appreciation of children. In a century whose literature commonly used children as an excuse for sentimental gushing or moralistic hectoring, Twain is almost unique. His portrait of Tom is virtually untouched by sentimentality or censoriousness and simply charms the reader by the continual truth of its observation. Tom is the living embodiment of an anarchic love of freedom and fun that Twain, the respectable adult writer, more than half envied. His character is divided

between a businesslike common sense and an incurable streak of romanticism. The business sense is apparent when, for example, Tom manages to persuade his friends to help him paint the fence or when he claims to have 'dreamt' the scene between Mrs Harper and Aunt Polly in order to impress the townspeople. On the other hand, Tom is deeply moved by the romantic books he loves to read, for they portray alternatives to the boring rhythm of life in a small provincial town. Tom develops an elaborate storehouse of knowledge about pirates, robbers and so forth: he becomes an inveterate teller of tall and extravagant stories in which he himself partly believes.

On occasion, Tom's love of romancing is used to fine effect. One such moment occurs after he and Huck have witnessed the murder of Dr Robinson in the graveyard. The crime is one of the few moments in the story (like the death of Injun Joe in the cave) when adult reality intrudes and predominates over childish games. The children are naturally terrified and their reaction is to turn to their romantic and superstitious rituals for comfort. They draw up an elaborate (and unintentionally comic) agreement signed with their own blood: 'Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer swear that they will keep mum about this and they wish they may drop down dead in their tracks if they ever tell and rot.' Twain's psychological insight here is both sound and subtle. As elsewhere in the book, he shows the sort of understanding of children's minds that one associates with Dickens.

For all this, however, *Tom Sawyer* is in general a simple enough book — far less sophisticated than its successor, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Its structure is episodic, a fault which occurs throughout Twain's fiction: the action consists of a string of separate incidents rather than the development of a continuous plot. Moreover, the book is resolutely sunny and good-tempered, and in this it is very unlike Twain's later work. Although he is never coy or sentimental in his view of Tom, Twain does look determinedly at the happy side of childhood. Significantly, the novel omits several of the subjects that *Huckleberry Finn* deliberately dwells on: the

difficulties posed for Huck by his drunken father, for example, and the hardships suffered by the slaves in St Petersburg. However, it would be churlish to end on a note of criticism. *Tom Sawyer* may belong to a limited genre in a way that *Huckleberry Finn* does not, but within its limits it could hardly be bettered.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

SUMMARY Huckleberry (Huck) Finn, the adopted son of the Widow Douglas, is bored by civilized life. One night he climbs out of the house to meet his friend Tom Sawyer; they decide to form a gang of robbers. Soon afterwards the townspeople find a body in the river and assume it to be Huck's father, a drunken layabout. But Huck himself is not convinced and still half expects his father to return to tyrannize him one day. He gets annoyed with Tom's gang: its games are far too tame for his taste.

That winter Huck's father appears, anxious to get his hands on his son's money. (See *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*.) He forces Huck to leave the town and live with him in a cabin near the woods. Huck himself is glad to get away from conventional life but resents his father's cruelty. He decides to escape. He fakes his own drowning and hides on nearby Jackson's Island. Next morning he watches the townspeople firing cannons over the water to bring the body to the surface. At first he meets nobody, but one day he comes across the ashes of a recent fire. Returning to the spot that night he finds a local slave, Nigger Jim, who has run away from his owner, Miss Watson. Huck and Jim make friends, although the boy has residual doubts about fraternizing with an escaped slave. One day a two-storey house floats by the island; it has a dead man in it, but Jim will not let Huck take a close look. Huck goes reconnoitring in the neighbourhood, disguised as a girl. He calls at a house near the edge of town and hears an account of his own murder and Jim's disappearance.

Knowing that the townspeople plan to search Jackson's

Island, Jim and Huck set off at night by raft. They make their way along the Mississippi, avoiding people and buying or stealing their food at night. They encounter a wrecked steamer, the *Walter Scott*. When they board it in search of provisions they find that it has been taken over by a group of murderous conspirators. Their raft floats away and they have to steal the men's dinghy. Yet Huck has qualms about leaving even murderers on a sinking vessel and he manages to arrange their rescue.

Thinking that they are getting near Cairo, and hence out of slave territory, Jim becomes excited. This disturbs Huck's latent guilt about helping a runaway to escape. He resolves to slip away and betray Jim; but when the time comes, he cannot bring himself to do it. A steamboat hits the raft. Although Huck makes his way safely to shore he can find no sign of Jim.

He now discovers that they have been going south instead of north, so that he is now deep in slave country. He takes refuge with the Grangerfords, whose son Buck is of Huck's own age and temperament. Colonel Grangerford is a Southern gentleman of the old school, who has for many years been conducting a feud with his neighbours, the Shepherdsons. One day a Grangerford slave finds a pretext for taking Huck to a nearby swamp, where Nigger Jim turns out to be hiding. Sophia Grangerford elopes with the son of the Shepherdson family and the fighting breaks out again with renewed ferocity. Most of the Grangerford family, including Buck, are killed. Huck takes to the river again with Nigger Jim.

They float peacefully along the Mississippi together. One day two fugitives from an angry mob seek sanctuary on the raft. They are both travelling confidence men; the younger says that he is Duke of Bridgewater and the elder, not to be outdone, that he is the exiled King of France. Huck is not deceived. The King takes Huck to a revivalist meeting, where he tells the congregation that he is a reformed pirate, gives a lurid account of his conversion and takes a collection. The Duke and the King also give various theatrical per-

