# CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN MARK TWAIN'S WORKS

**Elena MĂRĂSCU**
PhD., University of Craiova
eu1979@yahoo.com

**Abstract:**

From his recollections of boyhood days, came Mark Twain's masterpieces, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – a real social and moral record of an epoch in American history serving as a conscience for an entire era and culture – the book which together with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has attained a position of a classical in the world literature. Whether considered from the point of view of historical, social and moral significance, style or characterization, the book with its two great characters, Huck himself and Nigger Jim provides a great panorama of life along the Mississippi Valley in terms both realistic and imaginative.

A writer impressed by the peculiarity American idiom, author of a truly great novel – *Huckleberry Finn* – and a homespun philosopher Mark Twain is America's greatest humourist, not only because his humour served to point out errors in the American society, but also because he was expressing at the same time its permanent faith for a better future. In the universal literature, there are three of four whom he may be lined with, and not to begin with the ancients, we may speak in the same breath of Cervantes, Swift, Molière, Dickens among the moderns. None of these may be compared to him in humanity, except maybe Dickens, whose humanity into sentimentally and scarcely counts even more.

The remembrance of Mark Twain does not depend upon the presence of an alike property in his humour, and its absence has little to do with the question, so we are inviting the reader to join us.

**Keywords:** childhood, adolescence, adventure, freedom, moral.

It is known that Mark Twain reflects in a humouristic manner interesting aspects of the Americans' life in the 19th century, and he became famous for the presentation of childhood and adolescence. Twain wrote about childhood within a well-established literary context, which generally

BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

contrasted the inner sense goodness of children with the depravity of the adult world. Huck's voyage down the great river is not only a self-search, as he changes identities in each challenging episode, but a search for a moral and ethical foundation to his life. Mark Twain lived Hannibal boyhood with particular intensity, and relived it the rest of his life. His passionate interest in childhood matched perfectly with the literary taste of the 19th century Americans for stories about good/bad boys and innocent girls.

The panorama of his recollections of boyhood, which he sensitively evoked in later years, included – along with schoolboy pranks and idyllic rafts – some very disturbing experiences, such as the side of slave beating, of Negroes chained like animals for transportations to richer slave markets in the South. On the whole, we learned from his writing a fair amount about the living conditions in those days, about how it felt to grow up in a Missouri black country town through which the picturesque pilgrims of restlessly expanding America passed up and down its river side or across it westward to seek opportunities in newly opened lands.

Then, once more from his remembrance of boyhood days came his masterpieces, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* – social and moral record of an epoch in American history serving as a conscience for an entire era and culture – the book which together with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has attained a position of a classical in the world literature. Whether considered from the point of view of historical, social and moral significance, style or characterization, the book with its two great characters, Huck himself and Nigger Jim provides a great panorama of life along the Mississippi Valley in terms both realistic and imaginative.

A writer impressed by the peculiarity American idiom, author of a truly great novel – *Huckleberry Finn* – and a homespun philosopher Mark Twain is America's greatest humourist, not only because of his unsurpassed mastery of that essential idiom, but because his humour served to point out errors in the American society, expressing at the same time its permanent faith for a better future.

Beyond this, we should not care to go into prophecy, and in trying to guess Mark Twain's future from the past of other humorists we should not care to be comparative. These are only hree of four whom he may be lined with, and not to begin with the ancients, we may speak in the same breath of Cervantes, Swift, Molière, Dickens among the moderns. None of these may be compared to him, except Dickens alone.

The remembrance of Mark Twain does not depend upon the presence of a like property in his hunour, and its absence has little to do with the question that we have been inviting the reader to evade with us.



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

His books are instinctively treated as the prime events of the author's life.

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* describes the youthful adventures of young protagonists, who embody the ideal of America's youth during the front era that preceded Industrialization. Critics have agreed that the story is often overshadowed by the novel's sequel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*; but there is no doubt that Tom Sawyer is considered among one of the greatest characters of American fiction, particularly Twain's exceptional ability to capture the "idylls of boyhood" with such vivid and dramatic detail.

This sense of innocence and youthfulness that pervades the work is in extreme contrast with the pessimistic attitude for which Twain was known. Made popular by his sayings and anecdotes as much as his works of literature, the author often doted upon the weak nature of man, citing his inherent selfishness and his obssesion with monetary value. As an idealist who saw his ideas betrayed by a morally corrupted society, Twain seems to use Tom as a symbol of a transition between the world of adults and children, the society where justice is served versus a social network lacking all scruples. Although based on Twain's own personal experiences as a child, critics have suggested several other sources for the novel, including Southwestern humorist, George. W. Harris. However, his novel is a clear indicative of the folklore surrounding life on the Mississippi River.

Tom's adventures are closely tied with ghost lore, haunted houses, witchcraft and animal lore; this theme of the superstition and folklore is a common thread in many of Twain's works, and exhibits his first-hand knowledge of the popular beliefs of the inhabitants of the Mississippi Valley.

When the novel begins, Tom is a mischievous child who envies Huck's lazy lifestyle and freedom. As Tom adventures proceed, however, critical moments show Tom moving away from his childhood concerns and making mature responsible decisions. These moments include Tom's testimony at Moff Potter's trial, his saving from punishment and his heroic navigation out of the cave. By the end of the novel, Tom is coaxing Huck into staying at the widow Douglas's, urging his friend to accept tight collars, Sunday school and good table manners. He is no longer a disobedient character, undermining the adult order, but a defender of respectability and responsibility. In the end, for Tom, growing-up means embracing social custom and sacrificing the freedoms of childhood.

Yet, Tom's development is not totally coherent. The novel jumps back and forth among several narrative strands: Tom's general misbehavior, which climaxes in the Jackson's Island adventure, his courtship of Becky, which culminates with his acceptance of blame for the book that she rips; and his struggle with Huck, which ends with Huck's discovery of the treasure.



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

Because of the picaresque or episodic nature of the plot, Tom's character may seem inconsistent, as it varies depending upon his situation. Tom is a paradoxical figure in some respects – for example, he has no determinate age. Sometimes, Tom shows the naïveté of a smaller child, with his interests of make-believe and superstitions. On the other hand, Tom's romantic interest in Becky, and his fascination with Huck's smoking and drinking seem to be more the concerns of an adolescent.

Whether or not a single course of development characterizes Tom's adventures, a single character trait – Tom's unflagging energi and thirst for adventure – propels the novel from episode to episode. Disobedient as he may be, Tom ends up as St. Petersburg's hero. As the town gossips say, "[Tom] would be president, yet, if he escaped hanging" (Twain, 249).

*The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, with its episodes designed to pleasantly remind adults of what they once were themselves catapulted its author into fame. Twain himself called the book a "hymn" to boyhood, for being a sympathetically humorous portrayal of childhood in a Mississippi town.

Mark Twain has taken the boy of the Southwest for the hero of his new book, ad he has presented him with a fidelity to circumstance which looses no charm by being realistic in the highest degree, and which gives incomparably the best picture of life in that regions as yet known to fiction. The town where Tom Sawyer was born and brought up is some such idle, shabby little Mississippi River town, as Twain has described so well in his piloting reminiscences, but Tom belongs to the better sort of people in it, and has been bread to fear God and dread the Sunday-school, according to the strictest rite of the faiths that have characterized all the respectability of the west. His subjection in these respects does not affect so deeply his inherent tendencies, but that he makes himself a beloved burden to the poor-tender old aunt who brings him up with his orphan brother and sister, and struggles vainly with his manifold sins, actual and imaginary.

Tom is mischievous, but not vicious; he is ready for almost any degradation that involves the dangers and honors of adventure, but he knows that profanity may provoke a thunderbolt upon the heart of the blasphemer, and he almost never swears; he resorts to any stratagem to keep out of school, but he is not a downright liar, except upon terms of after shame and remorse that make his falsehood bitter to him. He is cruel, as all children are, but chiefly because he is ignorant; he is not mean, but there are definite bounds to his generosity; and his courage is the Indian sort, full of prudence and mindful of retreat, as one of the conditions of prolonged hostilities. In a word, he is a boy, and merely an exactly, an ordinary boy on the moral side. What makes him delightful to the reader is that on the imaginative side, he is very



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

much more, and though every boy has wild and fantastic dreams, this boy cannot rest until he jas somehow realized them. Till he has actually run off with two other boys in the character of buccaneer, and lived for a week on an island in the Mississippi, he has lived in vain; and his passage is but the prelude to more thrilling adventures, in which he finds hidden treasures, traces the bandits to their cave, and is himself lost in its recesses.

When the half-breed has murdered the young doctor, Tom and his friend, Huckleberry Finn, are really in then boyish terror and superstition, going to let the poor old town-drunkard be hanged for the crime till the terror of that becomes unendurable. The story is a wonderful study of the boy-mind, which inhabits a world quite distinct from that in which he is bodily present with his elders, and in this lies its great charm and its universality, for boy nature, however human nature varies, is the same everywhere. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) is Mark Twain's masterpiece, and it came from his remembrance of boyhood days. It is a social and moral record of an epoch in American history, serving as a conscience for an entire era and culture. It is a book, which together with *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* has attained the position of a classic in world literature.

Huck's intense and even complex moral qualities may possibly not appear on a first reading, for the reader may be convinced by Huck's own estimate of himself, as he brags about his lazy hedonism, his avowed preference for being alone, his dislike of civilization. In fact, he is very much "involved" (Twain, 52) in civilization.

Responsibility is the very essence of his character. Huck has indeed all the capacities of simple happiness, but the circumstances and his own moral nature make him the least carefree of boys; he is always "in a sweet" (Twain, 25) over the predicament of someone else.

He has a great sense of sadness of human life and, although he likes to be alone, the words "lonely" and "loneliness" (Twain, 20) are frequent with him.

His sympathy for other people, however, wicked or wretched, is quick and direct, but never sentimental. His tenderness for people goes along with the assumption these fellow men are likely to be dangerous and wicked. Consequently, he travels *incognito*, never telling the truth about himself and never telling the same lie twice, for he trusts no one and a lie comforts him even when it is not necessary.

Huck discovers Negro Jim to be not only a human being, but also a very admirable one. To his astonishment, he begins to have feelings of brotherhood towards him. He is, to a certain degree, aware of the contradiction between these feelings and his prejudices. He has only to consult his conscience of a South even boy in the moddle of the last century,



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

to know that he ought to return Jim to slavery. And, as soon as he mkes the decision according to his conscience and decides to inform on Jim, he has all warmly gratifying emotions of conscious virtue. And when, at last, he finds that he cannot endure his decision, and he has to change it and help Jim in his escape, it is not because he has acquired new ideas about slavery.

Huck has not run away from Miss Watson, the Widow Douglas and his bruthal father to a completely individualistic liberty, for in Jim he finds his true father, very much as Stephen Dedalus (in James Joyce's *Ulysses*) finds his true father in Leopold Bloom. The boy and the Negro slave form a "family", a primitive community. Whenever Huck stops to think rationally from a social point of view, he feels the only goodness lies in betraying Jim. That is the most dramatic metaphor, which highlights Huck's midway position between two worlds: the world of men (the shore), and the world of nature (the river and Jim), and his dilemma of being torn between inculcated morality and instinctive humanity.

Huck's intinct is to help anybody in trouble, no matter how they have been mistreated. And the display of human cruelty sickens him, no matter what the putative rights and wrongs of the matter. Huck is curiously alone, he is almost impersonally melancholic (although never self-piteous), he has a desire to wander, to leave no tracks and he reveals a premature nostalgia, as though he had intimations of paradise whose very existence is now dubious.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain has created a character who exemplifies freedom within and from American society. Huck lives on the margins of society because, as the son of the town drunk, he is pretty much an orphan. He sleeps where he pleases, provided nobody chases him off, and he eats when he pleases, provided he can find a morsel. No one requires him to attend school or church, bathe, or dress respectably. It is understandable, if not expected, that Huck smokes and swears. Years of having to fend for himself have invested Huck with a solid common sense and a practical competence that complement Tom's dreamy idealism and fantastical approach to reality (Tom creates worlds for himslef that are based on those he has read about in stories). But Huck does have two things in common with Tom: the love for adventure and the belief in superstitions.

Through Huck, Tom weighs the costs and benefits of living in a society against those who try to live independently of society. For the most part of the novel, adult society disapproves of Huck, but because Twain renders Huck such a likable boy, the adults's disapproval of him generally alienates us from them, and not from Huck himself.

After Huck saves the treasure and gets rich, the scale tips in the direction of living in society. But Huck, unlike Tom, is not convinced that the



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

exchange of freedom for stability is something worthy in itself. He has little use for the money he has found, and he is quite devoted to his rough, independent lifestyle. When the novel ends, Huck, like Tom, is still "a work in progress", and we are not sure whether the Widow Douglas's attempts to civilize him will succeed.

In *Huckleberry Finn*, the narrator is the main character. He speaks his own dialect, and relates everything that happens to him and the thoughts and ideas that cross his mind. The strategy of a naïve narrator, who is honest and unpretentious is useful in the process of gaining the audience's sympathy. The naïve-vernacular character, when allowed to speak from his point of view, with an economical and blunt vocabulary and unpretentious syntax, reveals a new way of getting the living world into words. If Twain had used the third person narrative, the story would not have been so effective; freshness and stylistic authenticity would have been lost.

Huck is a very intelligent boy and shrewd psychologist. He has achieved this not by education, but by facing life on his own. In the fragment, he knows how and when to say certain things to the two men, giving transparent hints that would make them believe his lie. He is also a skilful actor: he is able to cry, not only deceiving the two grownups, but also making them feeling sorry for him and give him money. His lie gets ven more plausible when he pretends to avoid telling them the truth about his "father's sickness" (Twain, 162). In fact, he never utters the word "smallpox" (Twain, 165), his two interlocutors come to this conclusion on their own, taking into account the boy's evasive answers and his apparent ditress.

Every child has to go through the stage of adolescence following a slow and hard transition, but one that is never forgotten; childhood is the time when "children are children all over the world", and adolescence is a developed period when a person must grow up and become a mature one.

Huck, the character created by Mark Twain goes through drastic changes, from a little boy to an independent and mature person, a real self-thinker. In his *Autobiography*, Mark Twain has stated that "a boy's life is not all comedy, much of the tragic enters into it".

Through the voices of these children, Twain sustained his complex roles as both insider and outsider, entetainer and social critic.

Childhood and adolescence were unforgettable experiences of life that helped him in becoming the first American writer to appeal to broadly democratic and international audience.



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)

**Bibliography**

Brandt, Courstius. 1968. *Introduction to the Comparative Study of Literature*. New York: Random House.
Dumitriu, Geta. 1985. *American Literature, the 19th Century*. București: TUB.
Howelles, Dean Williams. 2001. *My Mark Twain*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
Macy, John. 1983. *The Spirit of American Literature*. New York: Library Binding.
Mărăscu, Elena. 2001. *English Literature*. Craiova: Radical.
Morehead, A. H. & Bloom, Harold. 1966. *100 Great American Novels*. New York: Signet Books.
Putz, Manfred. 1970. *Essay on American Literature*. Iași: Institutul European.
Poggioli, R. 1943. *Comparative Literature/Dictionary of World Literature*. New York: Shirpley J. T.
Solomon, Petru. 1956. *La izvoarele fluviului*. București: Albatros.
Sloane, David. 1993. *Mark Twain's Humour: Critical Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing.
Twain, Mark. 1995. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Chicago: The Great Books Foundations.
Twain, Mark. 1917. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Montana: Kessinger Publishing.
Twain, Mark. 1948. *Mark Twain in Three Moods*. San Marino: C. A. Friends of the Huntington Library.
Twain, Mark. 1878. *Report from Paradise*. New York: Harper and Brothers.



BDD-V3084 © 2017 Editura Universitaria
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:53:20 UTC)